Redemption

by OberonsEarring

Summary

Resurrection isn't as easy as the X-men make it out to be.

Notes

This is going to be a long story - even longer than Shorelines. Expect a lot of drama, a lot of angst, and beware my penchant for the super dark. I hope you make it through. As always, comments and kudos are appreciated, as they let me know there are readers to my works. Updates may not be super fast as this is a huge work that I've been thinking about for a long time. I want to get it just right before posting.
The Himalayas

His dreams still speak to the pain, the terror, the anguish. The flash of red, the tearing apart of atoms and neutrons, the rebuilding of quarks and quirks, cell by cell by cell. Three seconds, he'd heard on the news some time later. But for him, it felt like years. Centuries wading inside the red agony of the wave, listening to the desperate cries for mercy and forgiveness, for an end to the punishment, for an end to self. In his head, the cries he heard were part of the mist, but in his heart, he knew that voice like the back of his hand.

Logan tugs on the bottle of cheap whiskey and lights a cigar, pulls himself out of foot-fall snow and stares at the forest around him. The Himalayas. Some miles outside Kangding. He's been here before, on some mission to save some mutant child that he can no longer remember the name or face of. How many had there been in his time with the X-men? A hundred? A thousand? Probably. Probably more. He rarely cared. Rarely had a reason to care.

There are of course those that stood out. Kitty, Jubilee, Idie, Quire. These kids. They sparked something inside of him. Fierce and protective. Instinctive, the runts of the litter, thrown out by society and left to fend for themselves. He chose to fend for them himself, to show them how to snarl, how to bite, how to protect themselves, how to grow and be right human beings. They looked to him as a father figure, a mentor, a guardian, respected and loved. They'd cried when he died, left flowers at his grave, and welcomed him back with open arms when he eventually got better.

Logan doesn't remember being dead. Doesn't remember heaven or hell, though he's pretty sure he was burning eternally for all of the crimes he'd committed through his life. Idie thought that this was his second chance to live life properly for a change, to wipe the blood from his claws and to finally become the person that he was always meant to be. Quire thought it was ridiculous. “If it had been Summers brought back, I'd have been waiting with held breath. At least he was interesting.”

Another swallow of fermented rye, and he massages blood back into his blued bare feet. His healing factor's been on overdrive for months now. He misses the momentary buzz that he could get when he drank too fast and too much all at once. Bobby had called him a liver killer on more than one occasion, and Proudstar had commented more than once that he doubted Logan was dead to begin with. “Maybe you were just finally too drunk to move,” he said one morning over coffee. “And your death was really just a hangover.”

He blames the Avengers for making a mess of things. Tony Stark for building his own damn mutant hunting machine he called Cerberus, Steve Rogers for cowtowing to the powers that be and gathering up mutants by the dozen and putting them in the Undertow. Had they just relaxed, worked with Storm and Kitty, let them help or hinder as they would, the whole damn Red Hunt could have been avoided. But, no, not a week after Sao Paulo, Tony comes out with his Cerberus technology and insists that he will hunt the responsible mutant down, and the whole world bows to his presence.

Storm was against his leaving. Kitty didn't even bother to argue. She knew better. But, Storm, she was sad. With tears in her eyes, she said goodbye to her old friend and sometimes lover, held his hand and told him that she wished he would stay, but Logan had other plans. Plans she wouldn't abide by, and he knew she wouldn't, so he didn't even bother to explain them. There were enough of them – Ororo, Kitty, Sam, Piotr, Kurt, Jean, Ali, Hank, Forge, Rogue – that they could protect the kids from Stark's Red Hunt and be okay. They didn't need him. At least that's what he tells himself as he takes a final draw from his cigar and looks up into the sky.

He prays now. Or meditates. Or wishes. Kurt would tell him that the only true prayer is that spoken to the only True God, words of graciousness and thankfulness, of need for forgiveness for
transgressions and evils that constantly plague the human soul. But, Jean would tell him differently, that a prayer is simply a desire, a force of will sent out into the cosmos with hopes that that universe will react. And, that's what he's doing, hoping the universe reacts.

Hands folded, bent at the knees, he closes his eyes and prays for the Red Wave to strike him once again, calls out for the ruby red light to peel down upon this barren landscape, to seer across him with pain and portent, to cry and wail and beg for mercy upon mercy. He has a message to deliver, one that he thinks will be of some import.

He prays until his feet are iced and black with frostbite, until knees shake with spikes of bloodlessness. He prays until his mind wanders off into the depths of the world, surmising the movements of the Red Hunt, of the mutants, of the stakes in this game that he's chosen to play. He prays until he's done, until he realizes that the Red Wave cannot hear him from here, that he's nowhere near loud enough, and for that, tears begin to fall. “Please,” he begs into the stillness of air. “Please, talk to me.”

But, nothing comes. No red. No light. No rush of pain or anguish or need. Just a push of winter wind high upon the Himalayas, some miles from Kangding. Logan pulls himself together reluctantly. He's here for a reason. A good reason. Even if the Red Wave won't speak to him directly, it's spoken here before.

SHIELD and Stark abandoned this site over a month ago, citing operational difficulties to keep it up and running. In other words, they were just afraid of the cold and the snow and the ice and the height. But Logan, such things don't bother him, so long as he can look at it. Unlike other sites – Sao Paulo, Brussels, San Francisco, Lima, Santiago, Victoria, Sheffield, and the others – there was no second flash of red, no restoration. According to rumor, it remained as it was when the Red Wave struck down – a two mile chunk of missing mountain devoid of snow, of cold, of anything that could make it distinctly Himalayan.

Though Stark had proved his nemesis, he was most disappointed in Captain America, the shining symbol of democracy and freedom. The liberty bell. The Constitution. Cap had hopped on board with the whole Red Hunt as soon as Stark cried mutant, cited all the dangerous mutants he could think of: Magneto, Emma Frost, the Summers brothers, Mystique, Quentin Quire. He swore to the public that the Avengers would put this mutant menace on ice no matter what, and within days had gotten their hands on Hope, Gambit, Bishop, Sunfire and his sister Sunpyre, Feverpitch, Avalanche, and any other energy wielding or powerful mutant that they could find.

The Undertow had been built specifically for Scott Summers – the one time mutant leader turned Phoenix host, turned terrorist upon his escape from a conventional private institution. Built in Atlantic waters, at the bottom of the ocean, it was top secret, top shelf tech provided by Stark himself, meant to house the most terrifying mutant of them all when they finally captured him again. Summer died before it's completion, but construction continued, and once Storm and Kitty figured out what they were up against, they took the mutants underground.

Hand over claw he forces his way up the mountain, ignoring the chill bite of his nose and fingers. He can deal with this, he'll heal from this, but he just needs to know, once and for all if he's right or not. Storm called him crazy, Kitty insane. Quire told him that he was old and deficient, Idie told him that he was just hopeful. Beast, though, he was oddly quiet. Suspiciously so.

In the back of his head, he'd always seen himself a martyr. The best there was at what he did, but also the one to make the tough calls, the tough decisions. The one to bring blood, and with that blood to end the ever escalating wars that tended to surround mutants on a daily basis. He figured since he was already damned, he might as well save a few by proxy, keep them from going down the rabbit
hole of darkness that he'd gone down so many years ago. Keep their hands clean, their shoulders light. It was never about the pain. Good beer, he could take pain like no other, it was more about the soul. That they didn't lose it. That they didn't wander off the sacred path of Xavier and find themselves knee deep in a swamp of blood.

He'd lost only one during his tenure as reigning hair shirt midst the X-men. And that loss he regretted more than anything else in his entire life.

Claw over claw, he paws his way up the side of the mountain, wishing that his healing factor would allow for the spurned warmth of drink as he plunges himself further. He can feel the tears in his lung, the way they knit back together as he forces them to breathe the arctic air. His arms are tired, his legs restless, but he pushes forward, ready to see, ready hear whatever song has been left behind by the Red Wave.

In many ways he blames himself. That he'd left. Summers, had after all, offered elections, offered a democratic response to leadership that in any other circumstance would have seemed extraordinary. He was willing to chalk it up to mistakes, to forcefulness, to whatever else was needed in order to ensure the survival of the species. But, Logan. He just couldn't take it anymore. Couldn't take watching the man he'd follow into hell and back coast far too fast on his downward spiral that culminated in Phoenix possession, the death of Charles Xavier, prison break, and becoming a wanted terrorist. He respected Scott too much to watch, no matter if he agreed with the decisions or not.

It was Logan's job to take the heat, to take the blood, but there was Scott taking all of the weight, and not batting an eyelash at the burden of it. No complaints, just silent resolve and ever-moving forward in his quest to keep the mutants from going extinct. In the three years that he led the mutant race, Cyclops proved more the Atlas than Logan ever was, and it was with broken pride and protective instincts that he tore the man in two and abandoned him to the will of the world.

In the pit of his stomach, the bile rises, boils over with hatred and spite as he recalls how resolute the man was, then how defeated. How death had become an option for him, a wanted option, and how he wanted Wolverine to deliver the final blow. “You're the best there is at what you do, Logan,” he'd said from behind drastic red lenses and orange prison uniform. “At least you'll make it quick.”

Claws dug deep into the side of icy mountain, the hatred spews over, boiling up throat and tongue releasing itself into the air. For long minutes after, the dry heaves of guilt and anger come, until finally he refocuses his mind and begins the climb again.

The plateau of the mountain is unnatural, carved smooth rock instead of jagged with ice and age. The snow fall here is a light dust, blown off too easily by high-altitude winds, and the goats have taken this place as a refuge from their perilous trek to forage for food. In the months since the strike, small roots have taken hold. Tender shoots of green protected by the carved rock overhead, bloom where the top mountain meets the flat, a nice juicy treat for the animals that have ventured this far. In a few years, if the goats leave well enough alone, this three mile long expanse will be a garden of delight, a haven for seeds and sherpas, a respite for animals too tired from the cold. But, for now it is still too young for that, and the song of its maker still too loud midst the rocks.

He can smell it here, the natural scent of just beginning autumn when the sap starts to rise in the trees. The sweetness of it, the earth. The will of the world to sleep and be at peace. A strange scent for something so barren.

Whiskey in hand, he lights another cigar and looks to the sky once again. He can hear it here, the pain. He can still hear the words vibrating in the stone, that death would be welcomed. Logan pours a touch of brew out onto the stone, watches as it slushes across the light dusting of snow. “I'm coming,” he says quietly to the sky. “I promise. This time, I'm gonna save your ass.”
Stark Tower

Chapter Summary

An argument.

His detractors call him a despot. But, as he tells Steve after dinner, his detractors have called him worse. A war monger, a profiteer of misery, a death bringer, a playboy. “All in all, despot isn't so bad. At least it implies that I have control over the situation, which I do.”

Out of uniform, Steve Rogers is a blue eyed, golden haired American dream, as humble as deep dish apple pie and as polite as a scoop of vanilla ice cream. The uniform changes him, makes him louder, demanding, turns him into a leader that the whole world respects. Sometimes, he wishes that he could stay in uniform, particularly when dealing with Tony Stark, who takes his clothes as armor regardless of the suit. “Polaris doesn't have energy wielding powers --”

“True,” Stark interrupts, “but she was in Ireland when the Red Wave hit Sheffield, and we know what her father is capable of --”

“Speaking of which,” a lick of lips and blue eyes cast to the window, to the cityscape of Manhattan below. “Magneto's been awfully silent, don't you think?”

A sip of ginger ale from crystal flute, and Tony laughs. A deep stomach growl of a laugh that sets Rogers' nerves on edge. “Well, this is his is dream come true, isn't it? If he finds this mutant before us, if he--”

“How do we know he hasn't already?”

“Come on, Steve. Don't be an idiot.” The words are meant to puncture. In uniform, Steve Rogers is untouchable, but outside of it, he is as vulnerable as anyone. Stark likes to remind him of that at times, just to prove himself an equal. “If Magneto had this mutant, he'd be parading him across the world like his very own nuclear arsenal. He'd be making demands by now, not still cowering in whatever bunker he's set himself up in.”

The air becomes impossible then. A bit too stuffy, a bit too cloistered. Steve knows where this conversation is going to lead, the same place where it has lead every night since Sao Paulo. “You still think the X-men are hiding the mutant.”

“I'd be an idiot, too, if I thought otherwise. It is their MO after all.” Find a mutant out of control, teach them to hone their powers over time. Cradle them with candy gloves and teach them that the world is a much better place because they're in it. “Besides, they didn't run until we asked to look at McCoy's files. They're definitely hiding something.”

They'd held the mutant thief Gambit for 45 days before Storm finally asked where he was. They'd kept Bishop for thirteen. “She didn't care that we were holding them, Steve, regardless of what she told us. She knows we're not going to hurt them. No, she cared that we asked for the files on all the mutants at that damn outreach center. Beast knows exactly who we're dealing with.”

Steve bites back a ton of words about inalienable rights and holding without charging. Abuse of
power and staining the name of the Avengers. These are words he's said before, and they garner little more than snark and spite from the man sitting across from him. In uniform, he'd say it all and Tony would be left quivering from the shock of his might. He knows this is why Tony asks for casual dress when they meet like this, so that he has a chance to win, so that he assures the win.

“Look, Steve, I know you hate the Red Hunt,” Stark softens, running his hand through thick brown hair. “And, I do, too. I've considered the X-men allies for a long time, in almost all of their iterations. But, they ran Steve. We asked, they ran, and for no reason. And, this isn't the first time they've risked the world to protect their own.”

The way things had ended with Scott Summers continued to leave a bad taste in Rogers' mouth. In uniform, he was confident that he had made the right decisions. The Phoenix was and had proven to be a danger – too chaotic, too powerful to be controlled – and had Captain America not intervened, the entire world would have been ash. Yes, it came at the cost of an ally, a dear friend - the man named Charles Xavier - and for that he grieved, but had he to do it all over again, Cap wouldn't change one decision that he made.

Steve, on the other hand, saw the shortsightedness of his actions. The mutants were endangered, yet he'd done little to help them. He'd told himself – and eventually Summers – that he was giving them space to work out their own problems, but in truth, he just simply didn't want to get involved. He didn't want to mire himself in the political turmoil that was sapien vs. superior, didn't want to speak to Congress or be thrust into crowds of population that turned their hate on him because of his opinions.

He could have shown more trust when approaching Summers. He could have come alone, out of uniform, as a friend. The long list of could haves and should haves rang through his mind, from the giant space gun to constantly provoking the Phoenix into action. Steve understood what it was to be possessed by something. In fact, he knew few heroes that had not had that experience. So why was it that the whole world excused the actions of others, but called Summers a murderer and branded him public enemy number one?

They'd intended to keep him jailed permanently in the Undertow, to never let him see the light of day again. To protect the human populace from the threat that he possessed, but he died of Mpox, his voice once again unheard over the threat to mutants and the threat to their survival as a species. And with that death came periods of self reflection that turned Steve’s stomach to waves of nausea and doubt.

“The X-men have saved the world as many times as the Avengers, Tony,” Steve answers after a long silence.

“True, but they've also endangered it,” he quips all too quickly.

“We count Hulk among our members.” The jab goes deep, causing Stark to wince at last. A rare barb that connects from the quiet man who now simmers in smile across from him. “The Red Hunt only fuels the hatred against mutants, Tony. Even you have to see that.”

And Tony does see it. Though his bravado and confidence are just as devout, he does see the widening divide and how the SHIELD sponsored Red Hunt makes that divide even greater. “Yes, but it's also drawing them out. Alex Summers came out of hiding today. That's why I called you here.”

A flick of switch, and a flat panel TV drops from the ceiling. On it, a protest, and at its helm, Alex Summers, otherwise known as Havok. He calls for the rising up of the people, warns them that if the Red Hunt is allowed to continue on it's destructive path towards mutants, that sapiens will be next. “If we don't stop them now, my fellow humans, what's to stop them from coming after you next? If
you speak out, if you voice an opinion? If you dare say that they are infringing upon your rights to live? Will they come to hunt you down next, just as they do me?”

The crowd is a solid mix of yays and neighs. Some calling for his head, others for his sainthood. There are those who remember him as the villain that sought to bring down a plague of mutant genes upon humanity, and those that see him as the righteous leader following in the footsteps of his brother. “Regardless of how you feel about me, imagine that these mutants locked in the Undertow – for no other reason than their birth – are your children, your husbands, your wives. Imagine that this is your life they are destroying?” He calls for an end to the Red Hunt, to the prejudice, the hatred. He draws a clear line in the sand, one in which he stands visibly in the center of. “If they seek to harm me and mine, then there's no choice but to return fire. But, should they leave us alone, then they shall live in peace.”

Tony flips off the recording with a wave of hand. “Turns into a riot after that. Two dozen police officers and two hundred civilians hospitalized. D.C. jails booked to capacity. And no sign of Alex and his crew. They think he's using some sort of inhibitor to make him read human.” Steve can see the idea of it roiling around in Tony's head. Fitting them all with inhibitors to block their powers. “Remind you of someone?” The question goes unanswered. “Come on, when's the last time we heard that slop of garbage he's spewing? Don't attack us and we won't attack you?”

Steve shrugs, unwilling to play along. Of course he knows who it sounds like. It was why they branded him a terrorist. Why they spent nearly a year hunting him down across the globe on some never ending goose chase where they were always three steps behind. “He has a point, Tony.”

“You do, but so do we!” The words come out loud and strong, and with the spilling of ginger ale across the plush white carpet. Abandoning his glass to the floor, Tony pokes a long, calloused finger into Rogers' chest. “Look at that hatred! They would have strung him from a tree if we hadn't let the Red Hunt step in! They would have burned him alive if they could have got their hands on him! Steve, we're not hurting the mutants in the Undertow! We're keeping them safe! No one should have to safeguard themselves against that!”

It's a change in tactics, and one that he's not even sure Cap would know how to respond to. From jailor for the sake of the world to savior from the world in one fell step, Steve can do little but blink and take in a sharp breath that stings across his teeth.

Though his voice speaks to confidence and grandeur, Tony's eyes break with doubt. Blue with the tinge of gray, thick dark brows crease with concern at the center, and then slowly settle back into his normal arrogance. Yet, the tremor in his voice betrays him. “We can't fight it, Steve. I don't care how much tech I can pull out my ass, or how many times Hulk smashes, we can't fight the Red Wave. This isn't Thanos, or some other creepy alien with a cause. This destruction is random, with no purpose, no held desire that we can rally against.” He takes a breath and settles himself back across from his teammate. “It gets bigger each time. The blast radius. Sao Paulo was three miles and took less than five minutes to restore. Brussels was ten and took over a day. Pretty soon, if my calculations are correct – and they always are – we'll be looking at half the earth and nearly a year to see it come back to life. I don't care that it's a mutant, that just makes it trackable. If this were human, I'd do the same damn thing. I'm sorry that you have your regrets, that you feel guilty over the Summers brothers and how everything bad on earth seems to happen to one or the other, but Summers be damned. I still think the world's worth saving.”

And this is how their arguments have come to end since Omaha. A diatribe over the preciousness of the earth or the monstrosity of this power. Of how small they were, how ant-like and minuscule. That if they didn't stop this now, the omens of Tony's mathematics would come to pass and the earth would be nothing more than a pile of ash in the hands of a child who would sit obstinately by until
finally lonely enough to bring the people back. Again and again and again. A circus of death and life, until the child would finally grow tired of the game, give up and go find a new world to toy with. “I don't want that, Steve. I want to die of old age with a bad memory and too many beautiful women vulterizing my fortune. Unless you've changed your mind?”

“No, Tony,” Rogers says quietly, “I haven't changed my mind.”

“Too bad, so sad,” he says with a hint of solemn smile, “This could all be yours, Steve-a-roo. Every single last unstable molecule.”

Steve shakes golden head. “It was a mistake, Tony. One I don't intend to repeat.”

“For you, it might have been a mistake,” he smiles. “But for me, it was a revelation.”

The cool night air sobers him from the swift good bye inside Avengers Tower. Hands in pocket, Rogers looks up to the starless sky of Manhattan, once again homesick for the darkened cities of his youth. The simple times, as Tony often calls them. When things – including the TV – were black and white and easy to decide upon. He was a patriot, and with that came the belief in freedom and democracy and the American way. Children learned the Constitution, the Preamble, the Bill of Rights, and those children wanted to protect those sacred thoughts as much as they wanted to protect their families, their friends, their neighbors, their country. There were no nuances in his previous life. His enemies were crystal, his mission was clear, and all he had to do was go out, shield-a-blazin', and prove that America – and her ideals - was worth fighting for.

In times like these – when the truth was as hard to discern as a grain of sand from atop a mountain – he felt like a relic. In the old days, he'd have something to punch, to kick, to bite, to lunge himself against and make the world a better place by doing so. But, the time of the super soldier had past, apparently, and more wily tempers prevailed.

It was Fury who interrupted his reveries, a call on his phone, which was not unusual. “We think we've found Strange. Be on the bridge in ten.”
The Mine

Chapter Summary

Leadership is full of choices.

Ororo Munroe hates enclosed spaces. By birth and birthright they do not agree with her. In here, in these metallic tunnels carved inside a mountain, she can feel no wind, see no sun, and that aches upon her heart. But, this is a sacrifice that she must make if the mutants are to survive.

A flat top coal mine, then turned deep into the mountain, coated with metal and machinery – all by Magneto, who was all too happy to offer them an oasis from their entrapment in the mansion. He'd come to them in secret, built tunnels under the earth to move them in secret from New York to New Jersey, and then finally a jet to the middle of nowhere West Virginia. Upon first look, Storm had been enamored with the green beneath her feet, in love with the plethora of oaks and maples and sassafras, at one with the deer and squirrels that darted away at their scent. But before she could run like a child midst the wilderness, she was plundered up the mountain and down into the metallic crevices, hidden away like a thousand diamonds from cravens and thieves.

But, there was no other choice. At least not one that she saw.

Logan saw one. Took off one morning for goddess knows where, left before breakfast with scant goodbyes. He had things to do, and he refused to explain. Omaha had changed him, and Sao Paulo before that. Everyone could see it. He hadn't been clear on what had happened, only that he'd survived the Red Wave, and inside the Red Wave he'd heard a voice. And that voice haunted him. Storm had teased him, hoping to bring him out of his stupor, but the teasing had not worked. Instead, it did the opposite, driving him further away and out of the X-men's arms and into the wide open world where Storm wishes she could go.

Havok was next, and with him Cannonball, Boom Boom, Domino, Surge, Rockslide, and Anole. She tried to stop them, all but demanded that Havok relinquish the children unto her and not drag them into some political war that he could in no way protect them from, but the children were in ways more adamant than Havok himself. “If you're not going to fight for us, Storm,” Anole had reasoned in his own quiet way, “then, I will fight for you.”

The words had stung, buried themselves inside her near-panicked heart. Grabbing Alex's arm, she demanded that he leave the younger ones, that they shouldn't be drug through yet another war, another time of violence. “This goes against everything Xavier taught us, Alex.”

“My brother was fifteen when that man made him the general of his mutant army. They're 18 'Ro, old enough to choose for themselves whether to lay down like dogs and wait to be shot, or stand up and fight like lions and protect what's rightfully theirs.”

Ororo's words of non-violence and pacifism, of waiting until the whirlwind of hatred calmed and receded, of cooler heads and warmer hearts went unheard as they made their way to the top of mine shaft. She couldn't help but wonder if Alex was serious about fighting back against the Red Hunt, or if he was merely still grieving for his brother.

Storm is glad that Cyclops is not here for this. Not because she fears his ridicule, but rather what he
would do. She could see him thrusting them into yet another fruitless war, arming the children with guns and bombs and their genetic birthright, forgoing their hearts and souls in favor of the mere essence of survival. She knows that others feel the same, including Beast who sits quietly in the med lab scouring over documents and beakers trying to wake the telepaths. “Any change?” she asks quietly.

“They'll wake eventually,” he replies. “They have so far.”

Storm looks at the still and silent bodies – Jean, Rachel, Psylocke, the Cuckoos, Chamber, Xi’an, Quire – all of them. All of the telepaths hidden in the depths of the earth down now for over a week. “You still think it's psychic backlash?”

McCoy sighs. He'd rather be undisturbed right now, to finish his work, but he also understands that Ororo has reason to check in on him here. “It's the only explanation I can think of. But, that does pose a problem for us, I'd say.”

“That the Red Wave is a telepath.”

“Exactly. The power to destroy a whole city in three seconds is fearsome enough, but add to that this psionic conundrum, it means we have no defense against it.” He pushes papers into a folder and turns to face her fully. “Logan might have survived, but he can survive nearly everything. The rest of us aren't so lucky.”

“Let the Red Hunt handle it. Once they have their mutant, then all should return to peace again so long as Alex and Cable don't interfere too much.”

“Which we need to talk about.” Opening another folder, he pulls out another set of papers and hands them to Ororo. “Tatsuya Oshiro and Arlo Taylor. We can't provide what they need, Storm. Not medically, not psychologically, not educationally.”

Storm skims the medical workup, her pale blue eyes striking on key words such as unclear medical history, autistic, severe developmental delays, psychological trauma, abuse, PTSD, among other frightening terms.

The four year old in the bunny suit was perhaps one of the youngest mutants she'd ever encountered. Non-verbal autistic, Storm knew that housing him would be a challenge, especially since neither he nor his father spoke English, but she could not turn them away. “Hisako and Kitty are working with Tatsuya and his father, and when the telepaths wake, they can hopefully download English ---”

“I can't even get near Arlo to test him, 'Ro. I'm pretty sure he's got broken bones, but the kid won't let me get close enough.” A six foot bulldog was the best way to describe the seventeen year old child, a full body mutation that left him hunched and chained by his alcoholic father for years before Cable finally rescued him. As of yet, they had no idea if he could speak, if he could comprehend what was being told to him. Lesions covered his lightly furred skin, some infested with fleas and warbles, some infected and growing black with necrosis. He limped when he walked on all fours, though Beast was pretty sure that he could walk on two legs. “From what I can see from afar, he has the skeletal structure for walking on two legs, and the four legs was beaten into him over time.”

“Perhaps when Jean wakes --”

“It's been a week, Storm. Everyday he goes untreated is another day that his condition gets worse. Someone has to deal with him, and quite frankly, he's scared to death of me.”

Cecilia Reyes is then the obvious choice to run the battery of tests, if she can get near him, that is.
Her bedside manner is often considered impeccable, if blunt at times, but she knows how to deal with trauma. If she fails, then perhaps Megan Gwynn. “I can't imagine anyone being scared of Pixie,” Storm sighs, and is ultimately glad that the young girl did not go the way of her classmates and join Alex above ground.

“You might also consider Indira Lopez.” Another new child brought in by Cable. Half Hindi, half Mexican, her parents were well-to-do professors at Cambridge before the Red Hunt came for their daughter. They sought out Cable themselves, shuffled her onto his jet, and sent a year’s worth of peanut butter and other supplies with him in order to pay for her upkeep. Open-minded almost to a fault, they taught their daughter that she was special, and because of that, she was worth saving. “Cable said that she actually touched him.”

Storm admits that she does not know the girl well enough, that girl has spent more time with Kurt discussing religion than she has with the other children. While her mother practices Hindu, her father is a devoted Catholic, she, herself, is undecided. “She's very mature for sixteen years.” It was all Ororo could think of to say, as it was the only observation she had made thus far about the young Miss Lopez. “I will keep her in mind, but only as a last resort. We don't know if Arlo is dangerous yet.”

She chokes down a tightness in her throat at her own words. Never before had she thought of a child as dangerous, but Arlo was too large, too mysterious, too abused to not be wary of. “Henry, am I making the right decision? Keeping us down here?”

Silence and a deep, focusing breath. A sip of cold, bitter coffee, and Beast adjusts his glasses. “It's a harsh time to lack confidence, Ororo.”

“Perhaps, but a good leader always doubts, yes?” Pale blue eyes study the depths of amber for long moments before turning back to the unconscious telepaths. “There's always more than one path. I just need to know if you think I'm on the right one.”

“We're safe here, Storm. Isn't that what matters?”

The embrace is brief, but heartfelt. A tender hug among friends and respected teammates. There is no right or wrong in the grand scheme of things, no black or white, just a shade of gray that must fit ones priorities.
Chapter Summary

An intriguing anomaly.

Chapter Notes

Somehow, I left out a whole page on chapter one (9/15). If you've already read chapter one, you may want to take the chance to re-read it. If you're new to the story, the problem has been fixed now and you can continue :)

There was a time in his life when he thought her the perfect woman. Intelligent and witty, beautiful and rich, their conversations about art and music, theater and food were endlessly fascinating. She danced like a dream, floating on high-heeled tip toes to the waltz in her head and wine in her blood, laughing graciously at his jokes and remarking – without irony – on his nice head of hair. If only she hadn't been evil. And then, if only she hadn't corrupted Summers.

It's been a week now, and she hasn't moved. Found slumped over in a Parisian cafe after a blood-curdling scream, the owners had cleared the shop and called the Red Hunt unsure if there had been a mutant attack or not. In fact, there had been, only some countries away in Ireland, where the Red Wave had taken out Sheffield, and had yet to bring it back.

Stark hums to himself as he checks the battery of machines – the heart monitor, the blood pressure unit, the brain wave analyzer. All are in perfect working order, yet, she does not wake up. “Come on, Ems,” he says quietly at last, “Give me the good stuff.”

He's not in love with her, not like he is Steve, but at least she gives him the time of day. In the darkest part of his mind, he can't help but think that she'd be overjoyed at what he's doing with the Red Hunt, basking in the glory of his inventions and his single mindedness. After all, isn't that why she adored Summers? His approach to the survival of his species was but one way, and he wavered not an inch in his devoutness to his cause. Tony had met such a dedicated force only one other time in his life – his father – and in his own way he'd rebelled against that very thing for most of his existence as well.

His father was a scientist, his mind so curious that he'd forgo light for days in order to see an experiment through. He was responsible for some of the most brilliant discoveries of modern times thanks to that dedication. And Summers, well, he was responsible for the rebirth of an entire species thanks to his. And what was Tony's gift to society? A suit of iron? The arc reactor? Nothing that he didn't hem and haw over and think of the three zillion ways that his technology could be misused if it fell into the wrong hands.

While he had focus, he'd always lacked the dedication, doing most of what he did for show or self-pleasure, rather than the betterment of human kind. So, this, his cause – the Red Wave, finding it and subduing it once and for all – this was his testament to a species, like his father, like Summers. This was his force to be reckoned with, and while Rogers recoiled at the thought of his devotion, he had a
feeling that Emma Frost would be just the zealot he needed to prod him further into his quest.

After all, he wasn't just trying to save humanity or mutants. He was trying to save the world.

He takes the vial of blood with care, tapping his fingers against her vein to get it to rise and show itself beneath her ivory skin. It's the third vial today, but also a necessary one if the files he scavenged on Utopia are to be believed.

He'd gone in expecting to find the ravings of madmen, the type of writings that declare people gods and goddesses, rulers of world, and bringers of hellfire. For days, he scavenged the files of both Scott Summers and the X-club, bringing what remained back to his tower to peruse at will.

The X-club's were remarkably scientific, covering everything from mutant pathogens to nannites to the effects of magic upon the X-gene. Beast's in particular were fascinating as it took Tony weeks to decrypt them, their secrets spilled out in nanobytes, half-destroyed by Utopia's destruction.

But it was Scott files at first – near intact under the water – that had caught his fancy. That neat and tiny print, how his letters were squared and sharp, how he recalled details in precise, emotionless clarity. The man had been running on fumes for so long he'd forgotten what true energy was like. He was tired, unsure, and overwhelmed, but in that, there was a strength. He understood that his decisions were unpopular, that they drove wedges between himself and the world at large. And that distance proved painful, but also necessary. He knew they would hate him, that they would leave him, that they would curse his name and call him a traitor. But, he was a willing sacrifice if it meant that mutants would once again populate the earth.

Tony understands these burned bridges. He's burned several himself in the past few months. From Daredevil to Dr. Strange, Natasha who abandoned him on a bridge with his suit at half-power. He called for her, begged her help, and in return, she called him a lunatic and said the world would be better off without his machinations. But, like Cyclops, he pushed forward into the endless pit of self-sacrifice, destroying all that he cared about in order save the world. They may hate him now, but in the end, they'll see that he was right all along.

But today, yesterday, and everyday since Omaha, it's McCoy's files that have taken his time. The data destroyed by salt and erosion, Tony has taken extra care to recreate whatever he can, running Hank's experiments until he can get the proper procedures, solutions, details down to a fault. The man is a genius, but within that genius lies something malevolent, or so Tony fears. The knowledge of the Red Wave, who it is, and what its plans are for the earth.

The files he looks at today are newly decrypted. Partial bits from a folder years in the making. It's a personal file, passworded and protected. It's taken him months to break through what is left of the security around it, and though he is less than underwhelmed by what he finds, he still intends to absorb it all, and with this information, perhaps figure out what Beast is hiding.

Jean Grey is the first among the names listed in the folder, the data being largely intact. Tony clicks on it, spreading it's pages across the room, file upon file of upgraded details. Personal things like favorite color and musician, holiday and vacation spot. McCoy describes her temperament, her mood at the time of testing, the small changes in her personality from test to test. He also writes in great detail of her power progression, from the talented telekinetic to the most powerful telepath in the world. He spares no words in talking about her Phoenix possession, the insane amount of power that she controlled with just a whisper, and in between those words of might, he describes the fearful heart of the woman in the center of it all. The days she would come to his lab in tears over her concern for the breadth of her powers, the illusions of time that came from the mind of Wyngarde. How much she wanted to protect her love, Scott Summers, how she worried about him, agonized over him. In Beast's telling, she was the perfect woman, fierce and feminine, intelligent and friendly.
If Stark didn't know better, he'd think that Beast was in love with the beauty.

The files contain numerous details that Tony laps up like a dehydrated dog, spanning the woman's life through the years. He discovers how much she wanted children, how little she cared for the music of Madonna. How she liked to dance the tango, how the complexity of spices in a chicken korma called to her twice a week, and sometimes more, after Beast took her to Kashmir Palace, not ten blocks from the mansion. She wanted to be a blonde, then a brunette, but Scott was so enamored with her head of red that she worried about dying it. She loved to read the classics, had little fondness for spy novels, and enjoyed the works of Monet more than any of them. The Impressionists lifted her spirits, how up close they seemed nothing but dots on a page, but far back, at a distance, the whole suddenly made sense. That's how her life felt at times, that each moment was a simple brush upon the canvas, but if she stood back and observed the entirety of the work, she could see the beauty in her life.

Many others are just as detailed. Bobby, Warren, Ororo, Piotr, Kurt. Their lives play across the data screens like books and biographies. Moments so intense that words do not do them justice. The loss of Illyana to the Legacy Virus. Meeting Yukio and the freedom it brought. Walking in town without an image inducer. Being taken over by Emma Frost; being transformed by Apocalypse. Hank had the ears and shoulders to carry his teammates burdens. Even the smallest of them and the ones that disappeared too soon. Blink, Pixie, Namor, John and James Proudstar. Even Xavier had a file filled with tidbits of conversations and personal reflection.

It's midnight before he takes a break, ordering up a pot of coffee and delivery through Jarvis. A double cheese pizza with a side of breadsticks and marinara, paid for by debit card along with a hefty tip for super fast service. He finds it almost amusing that these insights into the mutant populace come from the scientist rather than the leader. As a scientist himself, Stark finds emotions hard to deal with, to say the least, but here was Beast in all his poetry, expounding upon the attributes of even a child like Longneck, who never even made an X-team, and faded into obscurity long before his graduation. Summers never even mentioned Longneck in his notes. Never stopped to see the small guy. It's a mistake that Tony himself intends to remedy.

But, its Summers' file that draws the most intrigue. Between sips of coffee and bites of gooey extra cheese, he quickly notices the sparseness of it. Here, in this file, there is no favorite food or TV show, no music or movie, or word-for-word conversations. His file is mostly just a picture, a birth date, height, weight, and an odd sentence or two about his outlook on life. 'He's morose after the loss of his child.' 'He grieves for Jean Grey as if his whole life was staked on her existence.' 'He leads mutants to a precipice that they may well never recover from.' And in the left hand corner of every picture a small percentage that Tony finally notices. AL eighteen percent. AL twenty seven percent. AL thirty two percent. Scattered numbers that make no sense as they bounce back and forth between the years and times of updates.

A second look – at three a.m. - and he notices that the other pictures have the same numbers, only theirs are steady. Jean has a constant fifty-four percent. Iceman fifty-one. Sunfire is noted with an AL of thirty-three percent, and Wolverine a twenty eight. In all but Cyclops, the numbers are steady.

He asks Jarvis first. Asks him for the meaning of AL, but Jarvis comes up with only nonsensical answers. "All light? Any legume? Alternate linguistics? Applied laziness?"

"You're an ass, Jarvis," Tony responds with a sigh as he continues to scan the files for the numbers.

"No, sir, my programming has nothing in common with a donkey."

He finds it unlikely that McCoy was so childish that he assigned power levels to his teammates, and especially ones so radically understated. After all, not many mutants could survive a nuclear bomb
like Logan, or teleport like Nightcrawler - who stood at a mere nineteen percent. He wonders at first if it's protein coding, that different powers code for different proteins. Or perhaps, RNA replication, genetic markers, or even something more mundane such as nucleic size or electron numbers.

“Jarvis, put in a call to Reed Richards. I need his help.”

“Sir, it is five a.m. I'm sure that Mr. Richards is --”

“He'll wake up for this.”
Eight hours ago, a spell of electric green and glimmering gold lit up over the ruins of Sheffield, Ireland causing scanners world wide to go haywire and out of control. Maria Hill expected that he would act soon – the strange doctor – yet not there, and not with such overwhelming power.

With Illyana Rasputin and Wong at his side, he holds off the coming invasion of Red Hunt One, using force shields the size of great cities to block their progression forward, and rays of pure enchantment to beat them back. The air sizzles with magenta magic, and each hit pushes the helicarrier back further. All the while, Strange continues his archaic, melancholy words, lighting up tendrils of green gold that mix with chalk lines drawn expertly upon the ground.

From her perch so high above the fray, Maria Hill marvels at the work below her. The intricate vines and weaves of blue and red chalk, drawn out over a three mile radius, then lit with incantation in a blazing inferno of magic. At her side, Captain America calls for the stand down of the Red Hunt squads, to cease their fire if only so Dr. Strange ceases his.

“Illyana Rasputin could easily be the Red Wave, Steve,” Hill barks back, but before she can signal com, Rogers stays her hand.

“We can't fight Strange's magic,” he tells her, then reminds her of the fragility of their equipment, how much it costs, and how sore Fury would be if they broke the Red Hunt squads over a futile battle. “Strange will destroy this ship,” he says frankly, “and not blink twice at taking out our troops.”

“He's not a killer,” she argues.

“Who says he needs to kill them to waylay them for a month? The man can stop time if he wants, and we all know how that turns out.”

Hill's dark brown eyes return to the screen in frustration. Suspicion ekes into her words. “What are you suggesting then? Let him cast this spell?”

He hasn't been the same since Omaha. Since they found him at the edge of the destruction, shaking like a leaf and wrapped in a thick brown cloak. It was hours after when War Machine had spotted him, assessed him for physical damage from his fight with Logan, but other than a few cracked ribs and a fractured radius, there was nothing wrong. Still, for three whole days he wouldn't speak a word. Just lay in his bed, hands over ears, muttering delirious words under his breath.

The psychs had called it PTSD – insisted that he'd seen the destruction of Omaha and it had effected him. Still, Fury was fast to throw him back into the fight. Too fast in Hill's opinion, though these days, with the Avengers running about on her ship and Fury in her ear every ten seconds for updates, her opinion didn't count for much. “Cap, we have to stop the spell.”

“Fine. Let me try to talk to him before you send the cavalry. Maybe I can stop a needless fight.” With
a parachute on his back, Steve Rogers orders the lift doors open, and within seconds, he is gone, leaving Hill alone with her screen and her thoughts.

It was a shock to her – and the Avengers as well – when Stephen Strange walked away from them. A few blamed Tony and his smart mouth, but others said there was something else – something deeper – going on, and to give the man time, that he would come back. But, she, herself doubted it.

Rumor held that he’d been in meditation for almost a month, since Sao Paulo if not before. No food, no drink, no sleep, and he definitely looked the part of exhausted and overwrought. His neatly trimmed beard was ragged and three inches too long, the dark circles under his eyes, and the grayish tint to his skin. His hands shook when he talked and his eyes never left the floor. He said that he couldn't abide by the Red Hunt, that the being – whether mutant or not – needed help, not anger. That there was a way to save him from his torment if they just gave him time.

Stark laughed the loudest, then grew dark. “This mutant can wipe out a whole city in three seconds flat. I'm sorry, Stephen, but there are some things too powerful for this world. Some people that shouldn't survive.”

Tony's words had stung them all that day, and there were those that left the Red Hunt initiative all together over them. Black Widow, Daredevil, Spiderman. “Or maybe, you just fear being left behind, Tony,” Natasha had said three days later when once again the issue of too powerful to live had breached the otherwise tepid peace. “Your ego must be killing you.”

“It's not my ego, Nat,” he argued, “It's my life and the life of everyone on this planet. Three million people died last week. How families are in mourning for their loved ones? How many children do not get to grow up unless this mutant decides to restore the city to health? How long until this mutant tires of bringing us back to life and simply wipes out the whole planet and moves on? I don't care what kind of sympathetic goulash Strange wants to add to this, too powerful is too powerful. This mutant can't be allowed to live. Not with powers like that. I won't be blackmailed into giving a damn about a mass murder.”

Hill had honestly expected half of them to leave. Carol Danvers, Luke Cage, Hawkeye, Reed Richards. But they stayed, adamant, siding with Tony in their quest for freedom. In the end, it was only a handful that left, and for that she was thankful.

Cap hits ground four minutes after jumping. His chute open and easily ejected, he hears Hill's voice over com to watch carefully and warn him of any danger. In so many ways, he wants to destroy that com, to tell Strange of his plight, to tell him about Omaha, how he survived, how he came free of the Red Wave's destruction. But, he doesn't. He's bound by duty, by what he feels for Tony Stark. Be it love or lust, he's not sure, but he can feel the tethers upon his wrist as he considers leaving the Red Hunt once and for all.

“Stephen!” he calls over the roar of green and gold, the pulse so loud that he's sure they can hear it on the moon. “Stephen!”

He's greeted by Illyana, the child sorcerer, her blonde hair waving in the wind, bat ting against her eyes and chin as if a hurricane was about to begin. “Go, back, mortal,” she issues bearing her great sword and slamming it into the ground.

“I just want to talk,” Cap pleads, looking beyond her slender frame to the man at the center of the eruption. It's a magnificent sight, a conductor of light. With each movement of his hand, with each baritone word, the chalks light with the energy of earth and heaven. “He needs to stand down,” he says in the rush of air and pulse.
Illyana smiles, a dark, shadowy smile that eclipses her youthful face. It reminds him of the demon within her, that her soul is still half devoured by Limbo. “Not a chance, little man.”

He grasps for her midst the wind, plunges hands into shoulders, pulls himself against her. He doesn’t understand how she’s stable, how she doesn’t move midst the cyclone of air. She smiles at his imbalance, smiles at his vulnerability. “Please,” he begs, “stop this. You’re only making it worse.”

It would be easy for her to dismount him, to rip his fingers from her arms, to sweep his feet out from under him, but she doesn’t. Instead, she holds him steady, stares into his bright blue eyes and grins like the shadows of hell. “No, little man,” she speaks against the tremendous wind, “You are making it worse by coming here. Leave us alone, and we shall not bother you. But come at us with your weapons, and we’ll make you pay.”

The warning is severe, and as Steve's eyes widen with the threat, she pulls forth her sword and drives the wedge between her and him. He flies, if only for a minute. Flies outward, far away from the din uplifted by the wind. It's only when he hits a tree that he realizes what has happened, that he was brushed off like an insect, turned away and foregone. Strange is stronger than his physical might.

Upon his knees he crawls back to the edge of violence, begging and pleading for Magik to give him reprieve. “Please,” he tells her. “I heard it. I heard him. Please, don't turn me away.”

The young blonde grab his shoulder, pulls him close into embrace. “You survived?” she asks, her voice a mix of confusion and joviality. “You really survived?”

“Please, I just want to talk with him!” His voice cracks with desperation, his alto so gone with the force of wind that he's not even sure he's heard until Magik's large blue eyes widen with interest. She laughs at him, out loud and above the force of wind. Laughs and pulls him close to her chest. He doesn't know what it means as the pale blue light appears underneath him. And it's an experience that he'll never forget.

Limbo sounds like the Red Wave.

The Sanctum Sanctorum. She stuffs him in a closet, locks the door, and leaves him in the dark. He wonders if he made the right choice.
Washington D.C.

Chapter Summary

A protest.

“I stand before you as a mutant, a wanted terrorist, hunted for nothing more than my genetic difference. Even now, my time with you will be short because already the Red Hunt is on their way here to capture me and my friends, to cuff us and chain us, to lock us away in the deep dark cells of the Undertow. So, forgive me if I appear rushed or nervous. Being hunted isn't fun.

“For most of my life, I've believed that one day humans and mutants will have a peaceful coexistence. That one day, hatred will no longer plague us, that we will walk down the streets and smile and nod at each other regardless of our genetics. That our children and our children's children will learn from each other, teach other, and will work together to fight the true evils of this world, not just the ones that we make up to explain our fear of the unknown.

“And though the road has been difficult at times, and every step forward is met with rabid resistance, I still believe that those peaceful times can happen, if we stand together now and demand it from those that would see all of our work, all of our progress through the years undone.

“Last night, a thirteen year old child was taken from her home, put through a battery of tests, and then locked away in the Undertow for no other reason than being a mutant. Bereft of her very rights by the Red Hunt, she was not innocent until proven guilty. There was no trial for her. No judge, no jury. Now – for no other reason than her X-gene - she sits alone in a cell wondering if she will ever see her father again.

“Yesterday afternoon, a young man who just graduated college, was stopped on his way to work, taken out of his car, and flown here, to Washington D.C. He was hooked up to lab equipment, his blood taken, his DNA sampled. For hours he was tortured by scientists as they tested his mutant power, and when they were finally done, when he was finally broken and sobbing, they loaded him on a plane once again, then buried him beneath the sea in the Undertow for no other reason than being a mutant.

“They are not the Red Wave. Indeed, none of the mutants locked away in the ocean's depths are the Red Wave. We are accused of hiding this mutant, though there is no proof. We are accused of helping this mutant, though until the Red Hunt, the X-men and other mutant groups worked with the Avengers, with SHIELD, in hopes of finding and subduing this solitary mutant who is destroying our cities.

“They say that are trying to save us. That humanity's hatred of its genetic brethren is so poisonous, so vast, that they are locking us away to protect us from you. They lock us away to keep our innocence, to prove it to you and to the world. That without their protection, without their Red Hunt squads and the soldiers they send into our homes, our schools, our businesses, that we will die by your hands.

“My friends, they don't cage us to protect us. They cage us because they fear us. They are not trying to prove our innocence. They have decided our guilt based on our DNA. They do not hunt us and torture us to calm the fears of the populace. They hunt and torture us because they are afraid. They are afraid of what we will do if we rise up against them, take back our rights, and prove to them that
mutants are no more dangerous than the so-called heroes who have decided to imprison us.

“That's right. I said rise up against them. It's time to fight back. But, before you run and hide under your beds, before you roll your eyes and declare this a mutant problem, I tell you now that this fight is not ours alone. This is a war that we all must declare because soon, if we are not careful, if we do not stand together and demand an end to the Red Hunt and all of its machinations, what's to stop them from coming for you next?

“Nothing.

“They will come for your children in the middle of the night because their best friend got caught with drugs. They take your husbands or wives when a coworker gets caught robbing a bank. They will come for your daughters, your sons, your friends, your neighbors, for any offense, for the slightest offense. They will strip them of their rights and lock them away for no other reason than there is nothing to stop them.

“They will remind you that it's for your own good. That without their protection, without their law, that you would be in danger as the world around you is in revolt for sins that are not your own. They will hunt you; they will hunt your friends, your neighbors, your children. They will take you from your cars, your businesses, your homes. They will lock you away until the anger of someone else's crime is wiped clean from memory. They will turn your world into a living nightmare, if you do not stand with us now.

“Demand with us an end to the Red Hunt. Demand the release of innocent mutants from the Undertow. Demand the cease and desist of taking young children from their homes, family from the cars, friends and neighbors from their work. Demand a right to trial before being judged guilty. Demand that we work together – both human and mutants – to curb the destruction of the Red Wave, to heal our planet and our hearts. Above all, demand peace. Yes, demand peace.”

The crowd does not disperse when Red Hunt Six appears at the edge of the mall. Though the soldiers shout, though Thor brings down his mighty hammer, the crowds do not move. In the confusion, Alex Summers makes his escape, running through the mingling of people until he finds Sam Guthrie waiting at the far edge of the lawn. “I think it went well,” he smiles as Sam picks him up and disappears into the sky.
Chapter Summary

An answer and a question.

Chapter Notes

I had a very rough time with this chapter. Explaining science in an interesting way is difficult. I might revisit this chapter once the tome is done, maybe find a better way to write it, but I hope you enjoy it as part of the longer story.

Reed Richards has run every test he can think of. From protein structures to invariant coding, cytosine to amino acids, a full spectrum labeling of the genetic structure and coded proteins, but nothing he's done in the past three days has matched the findings of Dr. McCoy's AL percentages, and for that he is frustrated beyond belief. “We're missing something,” he says quietly as his latest round of testing comes back negative.

“Obviously,” Tony replies, still somewhat baffled by tech that is not his own. Richards' machines are foreign to him, unresponsive to his whims. They don't make coffee or answer the door. They don't input voice commands and scan information as he needs it. They are sterile, inhuman, metal. “You know, Reed, I can update this lab for you at no charge.”

“I like my lab as it is,” he snips, not even pausing to consider what he's being offered.

“You never were good with change.”

“Neither were you.” Arms stretched out to the corner of the room, he pours himself a cup of coffee and contemplates the man hovering over him. “I've run every test I can think of, Tony. Whatever Beast figured out is beyond my knowledge of genetics.”

There's been a desperation to Stark lately. Something urgent, and not just a saving the world type of emergency, but something deeper. A change in him, a fear. Perhaps it's the fear of growing old, losing his mind. Or maybe it's something less pertinent, maybe just losing his touch. As long as Reed has known him, Tony Stark has never doubted himself, his intelligence, or the truths that makes a man himself, but lately, it seems, those doubts are all he can see. “Then, like you said, we're missing something, Reed. Something important. These files, this damn AL percentage means something, and we need to know what it is.”

“Wouldn't it be more practical to focus our attention on finding the Red Wave?”

“Fury's got ten squads equipped with Cerberus out there looking for it. There's nothing more to do on that level, unless we find the X-men and they give up this monster to us.”

Reed does not reply immediately to his sudden burst, merely crooks a brow and shakes his head. After an uncomfortable silence that rocks Tony's resolve, he finally speaks. “You're on the verge of
Exhausted, his hands shaking with too much coffee and too little sleep, Tony slumps in the chair. “Steve thinks I already crossed it.”

Richards takes a deep breath, folds his arms against his chest. “Saving the world and saving yourself are two different things, Tony. One is admirable, the other is the fear.”

“I’m not afraid, Reed.” To Tony, this is a fact. He's no afraid, he's angry. He's angry that some creature has decided to hurt his planet. He's angry at the senseless violence, the panic and trauma that the destruction causes. “The first time I felt mortal, I was twelve years old, staying with my father's sister so that I'd be out of the way when he launched his latest jet that provided the world with all the bluster of an eight hour flight to Japan. He needed to be kid free for the week, so my mom packed my bags and they shipped me off to Florida, the land of oranges and theme parks, and all the wonders of the ocean, only it wasn't like that. My dad's sister hated me. In retrospect, I don't blame her. I was a smart ass, even as a kid. And a genius. Adults don't like genius kids, you know. Well, maybe you do, but my aunt sure didn't. That, and she couldn't cook, and I didn't mind telling her that.”

He tells Reed of the boredom, the doldrums of his aunt's house. How she had a light bulb out in the bathroom, and how he wanted so much to climb up into the ceiling and pluck it down from its globe and discover what made it work. But his aunt was against it. She didn't need broken glass on the floor, or the child misplacing her screwdrivers. She wanted him to sit still, to keep quiet. To keep his focus on the television or the radio, and let her clean her house in peace. Everyday she vacuumed, running the slow machine across her plush beige carpets, pulling up errant flakes of skin and hair and the kitty litter that her cat trailed across the house. She vacuumed the curtains, the edges of the ceilings where cobwebs could grow. His aunt was more than tidy, she was immaculate.

It was on the third day of his stay that boredom turned to fear. A hurricane hit the beach side neighborhood. She forced him to the attic where a single light dangled from the ceiling. Cold and stark, without the comforts that he had become accustomed to, he stared up at the door and listened to the rumblings of nature. “It was the first time I realized that I could die. As that hurricane whipped across my aunt's meager home, I realized that at any moment it could pick me up and toss me to the sky, killing me in an instant. I haven't been afraid since.”

The suit does not give him confidence. Does not make him feel more of a man, as most suspect. It is stronger than he is, to be certain, but it is not invulnerable. It is not everything that he wants it to be. “I want to save people, Reed. I want to rescue them, to make them feel safe, but Ironman can only do so much. I'm not a mutant, merely a genius.”

And when it comes to the Red Wave, when he can see himself facing down a being of immeasurable power, he can only hope that his brain comes up with something. “It's bigger than us. Stronger than us. More powerful. On a whim, it can destroy us, once and for all. We have to know who we're facing if we plan to defeat it, Reed. We have to know what we're up against.”

Reed understands the fear that comes with unquestionable power all too well. It's a common topic of conversation between Sue and himself, what they would do if Franklin – their son – ever lost control of his mutant powers. Like the Red Wave, he could unmake the world, and that thought puts sick knots in his stomach. A silence falls between them – one of both contemplation and frustration. Though remarkable men, they once again feel their futility when faced with a world that insists upon evolving.

“Evolution,” Richards says quietly, the light of epiphany upon his lips. “They used to think that the mutants were the result of radiation – that they weren't born with an X-gene, but that radiation
changed the genes after birth. Much of that theory was spurred by the experiences of my family and Dr. Banner.”

“Sure,” Tony replies, not quite following what motivated Richards rubber limbs into a frenzy of movement and testing. Blue eyes follow the hands as they trail across the various machines, resetting buttons and twisting dials. Lights glow red then green upon the panels, and Richards takes the vial of Emma Frost's blood and puts a tiny drop onto a lens before inserting it into the machine. “What did you just figure out, Reed?”

They'd been approaching their query with advanced genetics, using all of the known information to run their tests. “But, when Henry started these experiments, the field was still new. He wouldn't have tested for cytosine or protein markers.”

“What would he have tested for then?”

“Junk DNA. It was a brand new discovery, that only two percent of a human's DNA is coded for use, and knowing Hank, he'd have wanted to test that hypothesis for himself.” Impatience turns Richards' pale cheeks a bright shade of red. “What was Emma Frost's AL percentage?”

“Fifty one percent.”

“Imagine if a mutant's power was effected by how much of their coded DNA that they assimilated? That the Omega mutants, such as Jean or Xavier had over fifty percent of their DNA coded, rather than just two.”

“So, it is about power levels? But, Wolverine, his AL is so low --”

“What makes Wolverine so formidable is that his healing factor allows him to fight indefinitely, but his healing factor itself is not nearly as powerful as Emma Frost's telepathy.” The analyzer begins to print it's results and Richards is quick to pull the page from the printer. As Reed had theorized, the AL percentage noted the amount of coded DNA in the cells. “It's so simple,” he chuckled to himself. “No wonder no one noticed it before.”

It still left the question of Cyke's varying assimilation percentage. Tony has only two samples from the once X-men leader, one from his short stint in prison, and the other from his corpse. Richards, himself, has plenty available from his Legacy virus research. The samples record a varyiance in the junk matter of the cell, confounding both men. “How does someone change their DNA?” Tony marvels.

Power-wise, in these early samples, Cyclops went from weak to average, with AL's varying between eight percent and twenty four, but never above. But the sample that Tony had gathered in prison was by far a different story. “Eighty three percent? That's quite a jump, isn't it Reed?”

“Perhaps the Phoenix --”

“No,” Tony interrupts. “The Phoenix didn't effect the other hosts. Something else happened. What's his AL at the time of death?”

Reed stares at the page for long moment, then reruns the sample, and runs it again. Three times, and he's still displeased with the results. “Are you sure this is the right one?”

“Positive. I barely got a look at his corpse before the X-men booted me out.”

“This sample belongs to Jamie Maddrox, Tony. Not Scott Summers.”
Chapter Summary

A miracle.

In the back of his head, it's Idie's voice he hears. Her quiet words about forgiveness and redemption. That he has a chance to be a better man, to stay his claws, to earn his spot in Heaven. As he stares up at the sky, his blue-gray eyes glassed over in the cold, as he looks across the magnificence of stars, and feels himself but a tiny thing. Logan asks for a miracle. Anything. Anything that would get him closer, that would show him a path, that would allow him to stop the torment from the sky.

“Talk to me, Scott. Tell me where you are,” he speaks into the rush of wind. He's cold. If not for his healing factor constantly piecing himself back together, he would be dead. “I'll do whatever you want me to, just tell me where you are.”

Twice, he's survived the Red Wave. Twice, he's heard the words trapped within the light, listened to the anguish, the suffering, the pain. “Please,” it called. “Please.” Please, kill me. Please, end this. Please, stop me. Please, please, please.

It was a feeling of dread that took him to Sao Paulo that week. Sitting on the beach, he listened to the crash of waves and decided that it was the vacation that he needed. Coming back to life was never easy, and coming back to a world so changed was even less so.

Jean was not the woman she once was. Her own resurrection had left something cold inside of her. Hard, like carbon, like his claws. While her smile was warm, she no longer smelled like the traces of autumn, like Scott. She was gentle, of course, and she touched his shoulder with a healthy amount of nervousness, but as he looked at her, he realized that the flames between them had died. She was just a friend now. Nothing more than a friend.

Even Ororo had changed. No longer was she the goddess of rain and storm. No longer did her presence cause men to tremble and fall to their knees. She was just a woman, a tired, exhausted woman with far too much to deal with. Their conversations were brief, almost rote. How are you and fine, good weather, fine meal. The spark of her had diminished, her fierceness, her grandeur. She lamented her role in the war with Inhumans. Spoke poorly of her decision to seek violence against another species. “I fought against them for the survival of my species,” she'd said one night when the sweet drinks had finally run too deep. “I stopped caring that they were living beings, Logan. I fought simply for survival. I should not have done that.”

She recoiled, then. Set herself to the corner of the room and dropped to the floor, hands over face. She abhorred violence, raised tempers, and she'd thought that after all those years that Yukio's influence would have faded. “Had I just talked to them,” she cried. “So much blood could have been avoided.”

He stood useless in the center of the room, watching as her sobs shook against her shoulders. A part of him lamented for the beautiful, broken soul before him. But another part felt rage. That she cried for her own dirty hands when he'd spent years punishing others on the X-men's behalf. He feared what she was asking for, what she wanted from him. She had her enemies, and those enemies surrounded her with knives and guns, threatening the children that she swore to keep safe. “I'm not a
killer, anymore, 'Ro. I can't be,” he said.

Her tears interrupted, pale blue eyes looked up to him with horror, her soul cracking at the thought. “Logan, no. That's not-- No. I would never ask you to do that. Please, Logan.”

But it was too late. The wall had been built in the blink of an eye, and for weeks after, they were less than warm. It was nearly two months before they spoke in earnest, with Storm confessing her fears and Logan his distance. While time had changed her, it had simply stopped for him. For years, he'd been disappeared from the world, trapped in whatever darkness he could no longer remember. He came back to a place so foreign that he felt lost within the folds.

She held him. His head pressed to her shoulder, she held him as soft cries tremored across his spine. Held him until the tears that bled down her shoulders dried upon her ebony skin. He was a man out of time, displaced, and thrust into a world that he did not recognize.

Ororo did not judge him for his pain. She did not speak down to him, nor did she look at him with anything but care. “You need a vacation,” she'd told him. “Perhaps more than I do.”

Her humor tasted like sweet, sweet drops upon his tongue. A tang to it, like lime. Vibrant and beautiful. He felt warm, close, cared for, and loved. And in that moment, he kissed her, pressed his lips to hers and suckled out the last of laughs and love. “I'm sorry,” he breathed, when his head finally stopped spinning with endorphins. “I didn't mean to --”

“It's fine,” she said. “I wanted the same thing. Since you came back, actually. I miss you, Logan.”

As he looked into her crystalline eyes, peered into those sky-blue depths, he became all too aware of himself. One hand upon her shoulder, the other embracing the small of her back. In the pale blue reflection, he saw himself for what he was. An animal. An animal with a human brain who needed forgiveness for a thousand sins before he could dare tread upon the beauty that enraptured him. Storm was a gentle soul, one that he cherished. And in that, he could not go further, not unless he wanted to take her down with him. “I think you're right. I do need a vacation.”

Her disappointment was immediate. Lips open, brow creased, she knew at once that he was rejecting her. And that moment brought a chill to the room so deep and so hard that she lost her breath. “I hear Brazil's nice,” she tried. He was different now, less open, less trusting. A backwards step, but a necessary one, she supposed, in this world that was so different from the one he knew. “Sao Paulo has nice beaches.”

A midnight conversation and he revealed what he had heard inside the Red Wave, the words, the scent. “It's not Scott,” Jean said.

“I know what I heard, Jean.”

“Maybe you just heard what you wanted to hear?” Her bright green eyes became cold then, harsh. “The important thing, Logan, is stopping the Red Wave before it gets so far out of control that we can't reel it back in.”

“What do you mean, reel it back in?” Jean didn't answer him. “You know who it is, Jean?”

“Scott's dead, Logan. Leave it at that.”

After Omaha, he was sure of who he heard in the light. And with that, his trust in the X-men waned. He could feel the paranoia creep into skull, that they were watching him, waiting. He feared that they would enter his mind, erase what he'd discovered. It was that thought, and the flagging hope of finding Scott Summers before it was too late, that he left them in the flat top coal mine deep in the
wilderness of West Virginia.

The wind rush upwards, howling into the carved rock of the mountain. With it comes the flurry of snow and the upward drift of autumn scent. It's fading, as is the voice whispering from the stone. Logan pulls his blanket up to his shoulders, finally wishing for warmth instead of the torturous cold. A good fire, a good beer, and a miracle.

The pale blue light beside him is blinding at first. Jerked from his guilt, he rushes into battle stance, claws popped and ready to slice. But, a familiar voice stays his hand. “Captain America told me that you are a survivor of the Red Wave.” Dr. Stephen Strange – with Illyana Rasputin at his side – holds his hand up in a show of harmlessness. “So am I.”

“I'm not answering any questions, bub.”

“I'm not here for questions. I'm here to save Scott Summers. Would you like to join me?”
The Mine

Chapter Summary

Heavy are secrets upon the shoulders.

He knows that it's a dream. He knows this because he runs. In a field of flowers, he takes off at top speed, bounding and flying over rocks and holes, burying himself in a swathe of daisies and queen anne's lace. He marvels at the butterflies, the bunnies, the deer that come so close. They sniff him and smell him, and beat their feet against the ground, but he does not harm them. He does not chase, does not growl. He watches them, in their splendor, as they pick the good seeds from ground.

In his dreams he is free of humanity. No mother to die on him, no father to beat him. No chains or tins of dog food. No fists to the head, or feet to the groin. He is free to live, to scavenge, to be. But, as always, dreams fade, and he opens his eyes.

He watches her, her quiet movements and hand outheld. He knows that she is coming. She smells of sandalwood and musk. Of the cheese she had for dinner, and the soap on her hands. She's changed her clothes since the last time she came to him. Not a dress now, but a skirt. Long, silky, shiny.

She's not afraid of him, but for him. For some reason, that makes a difference.

“Arlo?” she whispers into midnight darkness.

Indira Gomez is a beautiful girl. Sixteen and fresh-faced, her mocha skin as smooth as glass, she walks on tiptoes, quiet in the dark halls of the West Virginia mine. “It's okay,” she soothes.

She's not here because anyone asked, because anyone noticed that she could get near him without the howls and screams of a boy scared out of his mind. She's here solely because she wants to be. “It's okay. It's just me. I was a little lonely. Thought I'd come to visit you.”

In his dreams, he can run on two legs. Unchained by metal links, he can venture out into the meadows and forests that existed solely in his imagination. He can talk to the birds that light upon his skin, snuggle with the rabbits and squirrels who teach him how to bury his hard-earned food. He can climb up into trees, feel safe within the world. In his dreams, he does not have a father who breaks him in two.

He can feel her breath upon his face, feel her lips press down upon his forehead. So gentle, so soft. She rubs her hands against his ears, and smooths the bristly fur of his back. “You're lonely too, aren't you?” she asks, easing him into sleep with her tiny fingers and tender touch.

Arlo Taylor doesn't remember how to talk. As many times as his father has kicked at his windpipe, punished him for uttering sounds that were not vaguely beastly, he's not sure that he can anymore. He's been silent for so long, years upon years, that it's easy to forget that he's human. He can forget that there was a time when his back didn't ache, or his knees didn't hurt. When he could stand upright and eat with two hands. When it wasn't kibble in his bowl, when it wasn't kicks to the groin that met him when he cried.

In his remembrance of that time when he was a human child he cries. Great tears flow down from his
gentle eyes as Indira's embrace collapses around his neck. His cries sound like whimpers, soft little noises like sighs that escape his nose and curdle against the back of his throat. “It's okay,” Indira coos. Over and over again into his felt tip ear. “No one's going to hurt you here.”

She's an intelligent girl. Smarter than most, with a mind that races with epiphany. But she also has a heart, a heart bigger than the world, and it's that heart she shows to him, and she presses her head against his. “I won't let them hurt you.”

In the darkness, woken by the howls, Hank McCoy watches as Indira tames the wild boy. There was a time when that would have been him, dripping down upon the injured, the worried, the meek. Where he would have tried to his utmost to make the boy feel comfortable, at home, safe. But, he's not that person anymore. Gone is his innocence, his joviality. Gone his lust for life and his mission to care for it.

He's merely a scientist now. Exploring the depths of knowledge on the genetic spectrum. Watching as the world falls apart from his greatest mistake.

He's a sinner, unrepentant. For if he had the chance, he'd do the same all over again.

“They're quite a pair,” Storm says from behind him. “I suppose Cable was right.”

Beast turns to look at the dark skinned beauty at his back. She rests her chin upon his shoulder and watches as Indira soothes Arlo back to dreams. “He's not scared of her.”

“No. Perhaps because she's so small.”

“Or maybe because she truly cares.”

Storm takes chagrin at the statement. Her lean, white brow narrowing, creasing against pale blue eyes. “I care,” she says, waiting for his comment.

“I guess I don't.”

It's a sledgehammer to her thoughts. “Henry?”

“Sorry,” he says and adjusts the spectacles upon his face. Head down and a sigh, he shakes his head. “I think I'm just exhausted. Perhaps Dr. Reyes wouldn't mind watching after our telepaths for a while.”

“You're thinking of leaving, aren't you?” Storm asks, her aquamarine eyes rounding out with concern and the crash of hope. He's been her ear, her shoulder. Throughout all of this turmoil, he's been her rock. “I don't want you to go.”

Beast nods. “I know, but I have something to take care of. Something I should have taken care of a long time ago.”

“Henry--”

“I'm not proud of what I have to do, Ororo, so I'd rather not talk about it. Please, let me go. This will all be over soon.”

“Does this have to do with the Red Wave?” she asks. He nods. “So, you lied to me. You do know who it is?”

Breath falters as he struggles with the words in too-moist mouth. Eyes averted to the walls, to the
floor, to anywhere but her angered glare, he rubs presses thumb and forefinger against the bridge of
his nose trying to relieve the pressure. “I need to talk to Tony Stark.”

She demands an answer. Grabs his shoulder and whips the winds of the mine into a frenzy with her
rage. “You told me this wasn't the worth the fight,” she says, her tone quiet and dark. “You told me
that my decision to run was our best option.”

“And I stand by that. Storm, I know you have little reason now, but trust me. There's nothing you
can do against this. I should have taken appropriate action years ago, but I thought it under control.
This is my mess. I will fix it.”

It's a world defeated, and with hung head and bent shoulders, he leaves the side of Ororo Munroe to
contemplate his duty. Scott Summers has to die.
The Red Dimension

Chapter Summary

Murderer.

“Murderer.”

He can't tell what's real anymore.

Hand shaking, he holds her heart in his hand. He stares – eyes wide – as the blood begins to pool against her teeth, as it flows from the hole in her chest and drips to the snow beneath her feet. “Jean. I'm – I'm sorry.”

He would howl if he could. Drop to his knees along with her, curl around her body and weep salt tears against her chest. But, he has no time to grieve, not for her. Not when she's still trying to kill him.

“Murderer.”

Unless it's the pain.

Her voice is a cacophony, a million sounded as one. He turns to them, the million of her, and begins his fight again. She claws her nails across his face, and with her mind she pummels him into the ground. He can feel his sternum crack, his lung puncture. He can feel three ribs give way and swim about his body.

“You killed me, Scott.”

The pain is always real.

Fingers gripping psychic energy, he pushes with all his strength. It shatters like glass, a bust of pink and gentle blue, swirling together in the falling snow. She screams in pain. On his feet, he grabs her head, twists her neck like a screw, and and another one falls lifeless to the ground.

“How many times will you kill me before it's enough for you?”

The pain is endless.

He runs then, hoping to give distance between himself from the rest of her. Give him time for the shattered bones to replenish before her million bodies attack again.

In the Red Dimension, he dies over and over again, every day, every hour.

She stands over top him, beside him, behind him, beneath him. She surrounds him, collapses upon him. Her teeth gnash against his shoulder, his thigh, his lips. She rips the skin from bones, tears muscles away from joints. She plucks his eyes, eats his heart, and crushes his throat so that he cannot scream.

He deserves the pain.
“You were never strong enough, my love,” she soothes quietly, her hand stroking empty bone and caverns. “Not for me.”

The anguish as his body knits itself back together is more than he can stand. The suffering as they surround him, whispering his name is more than he can take. “Murderer.”

Because he killed them.

He can feel the burning of his synapses as they light with red flame, as they spin out from under his control. Breathless, on his knees, skinless fingers wedged into the cave of his skull, he fights back the flourish of power, fights the infinite source. “You deserve this,” she says. “For what you did to me.”

As his body repairs, as she continues to whisper in his ear, as the other battles in other places continue on, as he fights on a million fields against a million foes - as he tears out the hearts of the others that he loved, that he protected – he feels the pulse of his power so frighteningly close to erupting again.

“I never loved you,” she says to his agony.

Because he killed them again.

His mind twists and turns, his memories exposed. Things that were once solid become like facets of a blood red jewel. A single memory stretches out for eons, with thousands of them, all different. Jean loves him. She hates him. She uses him. She wants him to die. She needs him. She foreseaks him. She devours him. She saves him. She defends him. She leaves him. She calls him a murderer. A single moment stretched into infinite possibilities, and in that moment, that single moment, he loses himself once again.

In all his battles, in all the fragments that he's been split, his power explodes upon them, and in an instant his millions and millions foes, his friends, they die.

He falls to the ground, his broken body useless. “You killed them, Scott,” the Phoenix says, her voice polite, gentle. Chained by spell into his mind, trapped in the Red Dimension by the Scarlet Witch, she aches to be free. “Your friends, the world. You've killed them all. Again.”

The energy flows like an open faucet, filling him up to overflowing. He clutches against his chest, head to ground, trying to physically contain the wellspring. “You know that they're dead, right?” the Phoenix chides. “Five hundred and sixty seven thousand of them, yet you use your gifts to save yourself. You're not the man I thought you were.”

But, he doesn't know. He doesn't know that he killed the city of Sheffield, Ireland. Doesn't know that an errant blast struck down and disappeared them all. Shaken, afraid, he opens red eyes to the Phoenix and her spanned flame wings. She shakes the chains around her and laughs. “Oh yes,” she says. “You killed them over a week ago.”

The panic only hastens the energy that floods his body, makes it harder to subdue. It hurts. To contain it – that infinite power – hurts. It presses into his bones and muscles, his blood, his ions. Near to bursting, he cries out at last. His mind reels, under pain of sin and too much. He feels himself split again, through the core, his essence drowning in the suffering that he's caused. He wants it to end. The battles. The destruction. Himself. He wants it all to stop, to be stripped of power and defeated once and for all.

In his mind, he can hear them. Those thousands of voices as they name him murderer and tyrant. They show him his crimes, the multitudes that died because he lost himself to the war that rages on in
his mind. They shun him, disparage him. They hate him and mock him. They want him suffer just as those whose lives he has destroyed. They want him to be punished. They want him to die.

“I-I didn't mean to,” he stutters through the shake of power within his bones.

“Doesn't matter what you meant, Scott.”

In his mind he faces the hammer of Thor, the shield of Captain America, the webs of Spiderman. He fights the claws of Wolverine, the magic of the Scarlet Witch, the plasma bursts of Dazzler. He feels their weapons crush his skull, break his bones, shred him into pieces. “How many must die so that you can live?”

“You're lying,” he cries. “You're lying again.”

“Am I?”

His thoughts race in a million directions – the control, the battles, the memories. Jessica Jones caves in his chest and beats him to a bloody pulp. Iceman grabs hold his ribs and freezes his heart to stillness. Emma Frost breaks him with her mind. A million times he dies, his suffering blinding, his control weakening.

He knows she's right. He knows he killed them. Just like the others. And what he does is dangerous. His control is too tenuous, the power too strong, but he wields it in order to fix his crimes. It hurts as he dies, those millions of deaths, as his focus shifts to the earth where he murdered five hundred and sixty seven thousand people. And, again, the energy – like a geyser – explodes within his cells, and shaking, crying, he tries to keep himself together.

He doesn't know what's real anymore. Except the pain. The pain is always real.

At 12:40 am on a Tuesday, Sheffield, Ireland is brought back to life by the Red Wave. The world does not rejoice.
Manhattan

Chapter Summary

A broken protest.

Snow fell. Knee high in some places. To his five-year-old self it was a wonderland. Snowballs and igloos, men and angels. Nearby there were tents and sleeping bags, a campfire with cocoa and roasting fish. They were survivors, here. Two against the cold, against the world. They could do anything, be anything, so long as they were together.

Their mother called them inseparable, their father joined at the hip. They built an igloo behind the stream and huddled there dreaming about the world. They wanted to be astronauts, like their dad. To go into space and explore the depths. To be the first on Mars, to find the aliens there. Or maybe to Pluto, so far away from home. They wanted to be inventors, firefighters, mountain climbers, and pirates. They wanted to be the whole world because in their igloo, their world was exactly them.

The polar swimmers in Vancouver had caught their fascination. A story their father had told the previous night over hot dogs and warm cups of tea. How they broke the ice on the English Bay, stripped to their birth, and plunged into the frigid waters. Scott swore he could last a minute, and always the challenger, Alex bet two. On the line were baseball cards, mint condition rookie cards that their grandparents had given them for Christmas. “Who ever stays the longest, wins,” Alex chimed, spit on his hand and waited for his brother to agree. With a nod and a smile, Scott accepted the deal.

Inside the igloo, they took off their clothes, knowing that if their parents knew what they were doing, there would be a stop to their fun. They laughed and giggled as they bumped their heads against the snow-bound roof, and knocked into the sides of their hovel. They hunched at the entrance, just three feet from the stream, already shivering in their nudity.

“Last one in's a rotten egg!” Alex dared, and in a flash he was off. First out the door, he ran to the creek with Scott just inches from his heels. The two barreled into the glacial stream in cannonballs and cheers.

The shock of cold got them both and with wide eyes they stared at each other. “One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. Three Mississippi,” Scott to began to count, steeling himself against the freeze. Alex followed suit, his face scrunched with determination as he sought to beat his brother at the game.

In the distance, the boys could hear their mother's worry, and their father's quick acknowledgment that they were fine, that they were just being kids and to leave them be. Knowing that his dad was watching made Alex want to win even more. He wanted his dad to be proud of him, as proud as he was of his older brother.

Scott cast a long shadow – even then. Smart and tough. He was shorter than the other kids his age, but he made up for it with his stubbornness. He protected Alex – not just from the third grade bullies who tried to steal his lunch, but also from the sixth grade girls who wanted to cuddle him on their laps. He helped him with his homework, and always let him have the rest of his ice cream. He loved his brother, often more than he loved himself, but he feared his father loved Scott more, as well.
At the minute mark, Alex's feet began to feel as if he walked on glass. Deep cracks of pain shot up into the soles of his feet and upwards into ankles. Tears rimmed his wide blue eyes as he stared up at his brother, who counted their time away without any inkling of pain.

“I'm cold,” Scott said quietly, more for his brother's sake than his own. “I'm getting out.”

“No, not yet,” Alex pleaded through chattering teeth, “Two minutes.”

“You're lips are turning blue, Alex. I'll give you the cards. Don't worry about it.”

“Please. I can't do it by myself.”

Worried, his slender brow high above brown eyes, he nodded and restarted the count. If he skipped numbers, Alex couldn't tell. He was simply happy to have his brother at his side. At the two minute mark, Scott helped Alex from the water, pushing him up on to the bank and into his mother's waiting arms. She wrapped him in a big, fluffy towel and hurried him to the fire. Scott followed shortly behind, grabbing their clothes from the igloo as their mother hurried with the cocoa to warm them up.

“I made it two minutes, Dad,” Alex chortled.

“I'm proud of you, son,” his father winked and helped get the boys dressed in warmer clothes.

In the back of his mind, as he speaks to the protesters, he wonders if his father would still be proud.

The next day their plane would crash in the mountains, and their family would be split for the rest of their lives. His mother would die somewhere in space, and his father would stay in memory of her. His brother would eventually die a hated man, leaving Alex to find his own way in the world.

“My brother once told me that there is no strength in numbers,” Alex calls above the roaring crowd. “There is only strength in unity!” The chant begins from a million mouths. Yelled at the top of lungs, fists held high in the air. Yes, he's sure his father would be proud, and so would his brother.

The first arrow takes him across the cheek. A nick right under cheekbone. Eyes narrowed and wary, he looks through the cheering crowd for assaulter. “Hawkeye, four o'clock,” Sam says into com, but a second too late. The arrow zips through the air striking Alex in the stomach. “Dammit! Rockslide! Get him out of there!”

There was no Red Hunt today. No tanks or helicarriers to give warning. Just the Avengers. The crowd disperses at the sight of Thor's hammer and his rain of lightning. They run and scream as Ms. Marvel dives through the crowd and picks Domino from the ground, dragging her into the high depths of a building. Cuffed and trussed, her guns broken with marvelous strength, she's left to the devices of Hawkeye who levels another arrow at Havok below.

Rockslide is met by the force of She-Hulk before he can reach the stage. The brawl is a frightening one, toppling the near by trees with its force. A hit to his chest earns her a sprawl of knee slapping laughter. A ram by her shoulder is stopped by his own rocky fist, and his reward is the great, green beauty going airborne and landing on the ground with a breath-stealing thud.

Cannonball races to the stage, flying as fast as he can to beat the arrow there. But Ms. Marvel and Johnny Storm have other plans. Danvers' fist hits him like a brick, flinging him half unconscious into the quickly clearing crowd below. Boom Boom and Anole are at his side in a heartbeat.

With the tic-tic of her time bomb, Tabitha tosses it high into the air where it explodes. Captain Marvel remains unaffected, but the Human Torch is flung backwards into the trees. “Get to Alex,” Anole says, his tongue flicking out to wrap around the ankles of Ms. Marvel, pulling her off balance.
He knows it's a trick, that it won't keep her down, but Alex is the priority.

Boom Boom runs full force to the stage, getting there just in time for the third arrow to strike his heart. Into the com she screams. He drops, hand to chest.

The fighting stops.

“Shit,” Danvers curses. She releases Anole's collar and flies off onto the stage. “Put pressure on the wound,” she tells Tabitha, and in her own com demands a stand down. “We need an ambulance, or a hospital. Whichever's faster.”

“Stark's got equipment,” Johnny answers. “He's closer.”

“Good, get Havok there. The rest of us will finish this.”
Chapter Summary

Dreams.

He dreams of Tony. How his skin felt pressed against his chest that morning. The weight of him.

It had all been an accident. Caught up in the mood.

Tony had started it. The cab ride back, a hand on his knee, his thumb massaging inner thigh. Steve had had one too many bourbon on the rocks. Just enough to make him tipsy and warm, and he smiled at Tony, and laughed, as if this was all he wanted.

By the time they got back to the tower, by the time Jarvis opened the door, they were all over each other. Steve's hands treading up Tony's spine, pulling him as close to his chest as humanly possible, his tongue down his throat. And he was hard. So hard it ached.

Tony's shirt easily ripped to shred in his hands, and his pants came open at the seems. Three quick tugs and he was out of his own, and the two men spent breathless moments marveling in their nakedness. There was no tenderness in their actions. Just flesh on flesh, bone on bone.

The feeling of Tony's mouth around him made his toes curl, and his voice rise up with enraptured moans. He felt himself begin to give way, to lose himself to the ecstasy that splayed over his nerves. But he wasn't ready for it to be over yet.

His fist full of dark brown hair, he pulled the man to standing, and took him in a bruising kiss. Tongues collided in that open heat, tasting and twining.

On the bed, Steve quickly got to work. Fingers covered in lube, he pulled Tony's legs around his waist, and smiled as he teased his entrance. Tony's back lurched as the finger intruded into the tight passage, quickly finding that oh-so-pleasurable gland, gliding in and out, in and out.

Steve grinned as Tony writhed in pleasure and pain. A second finger, and Tony's words became an unintelligible mash of baritone syllables and gasps. A third, just to make sure. To make sure it was comfortable.

Steve was a large lover, thick and long, and hard as a rock. He pressed himself into his partner, slowly, inch by inch, stopping for Tony to breathe, to relish the feeling of him inside. A deep-throated moan, and hands curled within the sheets, Steve smiled at his lover's pleasure, pressing further in until the hilt.

"Fuck me," Tony breathed, aching for the friction, for the closeness and rhythm. "Fuck me hard."

Steve obliged, setting a softer pace, and working up to something frantic. They did not kiss, did not touch. It was merely about the sex, the lust, the need between the two of them. Tony pushed himself against him, squeezing him upon exit, demanded a faster pace, a harder push. The rolls of curses off his tongue, breathless pants of lost to pleasure. He called Steve's name over and over again, cursed his mother, his father, his first grade teacher. The pace pounded, reddening Tony's ass, beating him into hip-born bruises. Fingers crushed against him, held him still and steady so that the pace could
ramp even further.

Tony moaned as his prostrate overloaded, sending shivers across his body. In an upward thrust and upheaval, he came, his seed lighting across his stomach in ecstatic convulsions. Steve came within minutes of Tony's own release, emptying himself inside the man who proclaimed that he loved him.

But, the next morning, for Steve, the feeling was of remorse. Looking down upon his lover's spent body, looking at how his eyes drowsed and breath shallowed. He did not love Tony Stark. He knew this. And for that, there was guilt.

In the twilight of their moment, once the lull of dreams had subsided, Steve washed away the stickiness in the bathroom sink and put on his clothes, exiting Stark tower, leaving Tony to wake up alone.

In his dreams, he remains. Lies down by his lover's side, tangles his long and calloused fingers through dark brown hair. Places a gentle kiss upon broad cheekbone, trails his hand down neck and chest and rests it upon beating heart.

He wakes to the ache of a hard-on. Closing his eyes and cursing himself, he tries to will the thing away, but it won't budge.

He's been here for days now, waiting, wondering. Three nights ago, they brought in Logan at his suggestion, but the feral mutant wanted nothing to do with him. “I saved your ass once, bub. Don't expect it again.”

Steve understands the anger. He understands that the Red Hunt is wrong, but he didn't have a choice. Not at the time. The Red Wave had to be subdued, and Tony's way was the only way he could foresee.

At the thought of Logan, his erection dims. The regret and guilt slowly making him soft. Still he rises, tucks himself into the shower stall and turns on the cold water. He can feel his dream of Tony ebb away, fall backwards in his mind, and disappear. There are more important things for him to consider anyway, the least of which is an all powerful mutant slowly losing his mind somewhere in outer space.

“His power is untold,” Strange explained after he felt he could trust Rogers. “He could remake the entire universe if he so decided.”

“No one should have that much power.” It was an honest statement, and at first he regretted it.

“No, but plenty do. I think that Scott Summers is Earth's answer to the Infinity Stones or the Celestials. Her last best defense spurred by evolution.”

“Or our greatest enemy.”

“If he doesn't gain control of himself, then yes. He will be the Earth's greatest enemy.”

Rogers dresses as he thinks about Strange's warnings, that Summers' world is a dark one, his mind shattered by years of psionic manipulation and warfare, and that he's losing grip more and more each day. “He won't last much longer. And that you survived, it means that you have a decision to make.”

“What decision?”

“Whether to kill him or let him live.”
“We're not killin' him,” Logan said quietly. “Not this time.”

“When you see the damage done, Logan,” Strange issued, “you may change your mind. He's not the man you knew. The telepathic corruption of his mind goes deep. He no longer has the solid foundation of the hero that you followed into battle. Indeed, his mind is nothing but battles anymore. Tragic ones.”

Drying his hair, he looks around the small chamber set up as a guest room. Books for days and artifacts that he's not supposed to touch. Glowing gems and hovering statues, a necklace that reflects the cosmos, a crown that gives off light. The oddities here are both numerous and dangerous. But, then, so is he.

He thinks back to Tony's words, how some things are too powerful for this world. There are things that man cannot conquer, that he cannot defeat to save this precious world. Things he is not prepared for; things he cannot comprehend. For the Earth, Cyclops is both miracle and madman, a being so powerful that he could will the universe to emptiness.

And, indeed, that power frightens him, sends a shiver down his spine and grits his teeth. Already, the world is fearful of this power. To let Scott live would be an injustice to the destruction that he's wrought against them. But to kill him, could be even worse.

He knew Summers as a hard, near emotionless man who faced tragedy with a heart of stone. A strategist that even he admired, and a leader who did everything in his power to keep his people alive. He was humorless, forthright, honest to a fault. And what he believed in, he would do anything in his power to see it come to fruition, even if it meant going to war with the world.

But, he was never that powerful.

His threat was his mind, his way that he conducted himself and his team in battle. How he could pick apart his enemies, expose their weaknesses, and train his team to take advantage of them. He knew how to motivate, how to speak so that he would be listened to. Logan had said that Apocalypse had changed him, broke him in ways that he couldn't count. That he saw the world as a darker place, and he became more fierce in order to protect it.

He tried to kill that very man once, when the Phoenix was approaching the earth. But, Cyclops was too smart for the battle, strategized his way into a win. And, then, on the moon, when Phoenix possessed and out of control, Steve tried to kill him again. They all did. The whole world. It drove him mad, drove him to anger and rage, and in that maelstrom, he destroyed the utopia that he had created. Wiped it away from sight and mind, burned it into ash.

He's seen Summers out of control before, and with only a small fraction of his abilities. Now that he can disrupt reality, form it to his will; now that he can destroy whole cities or even the Earth, itself, with the blink of an eye; Steve wonders if letting him live is the right thing to do.
Stark Tower

Chapter Summary

Emma confesses.

The first time she tasted that power, she was in love. It filled her up, satiated her need, made her feel safe, perhaps for the first time in her life. She was whole, and in that wholeness, she could gain whatever she desired.

Jean Grey and Charles Xavier had fought over that mind for years, twisting memories into nightmarish shades, planting seeds of doubt and haunted loyalty. They filled him to the brim with hatred for each other, with distrust, with melancholy. They isolated him, forced his silence, and kept him separate from those he cared about. So, Emma Frost wreaked her own kind of havoc.

She warred with Jean over the man's extreme devotion. She turned his love to fear, and Jean in turn, twisted it into fear of abandonment. From abandonment rose a stoic man, afraid to give his heart. And from that, Xavier gave him a cause.

Simple memories became the turning points for traps and psychic mines. A flower given to his one true love became a flower destroyed under her foot, a flower devoured by her endless need for control; a flower tucked away in the pages of a book, dried and remembered forever. Others, when they could, they would erase – the first time Jean smiled at him; the first time Xavier said he was proud, Emma tormenting him as a member of the Hellfire Club. More were added – Jean wiping tears of anguish from his eyes; Emma begging for forgiveness for her wrongs; Xavier tucking his child self into bed and reading him a story.

There were others that joined, installing their own whispers into his mind, flickering across other memories, changing them, so that they, too, could grab that power. Scott Summers' mind became a battlefield of the highest order as the telepaths fought for control of a strength so vast that it could change the world. And Jean, as she held his heart in her hands, continued to wield that power against them all, forcing them back into the dark corners of his mind, and taking the power for herself.

At times, there were alliances – especially when possessed. The Shadow King, Onslaught, Apocalypse. They held his mind in check, kept the villains from stealing the power that they'd fought so hard to win. But, despite the tenuous threads that pulled them together, they'd soon split apart and return to the fight that would win them their glorious prize.

It was after Genosha that Emma had changed her strategy.

She'd witnessed the destruction of all she held dear, the deaths of her student, and the decimation of an entire population that sought no harm against the world. For the first time in many years, even with the small amount of power that she had gained from Cyclops' mind, she felt the futility of herself. She needed more – the power to protect, to defend, to assure herself and those like her that this would never happen again.

She decided to take Scott Summers for herself.

At first, the battle was sneaky. A therapist, there to help him work through the remnants of
Apocalypse that still threaded through his mind. He talked of his distrust, how he felt betrayed, how something had happened that he couldn't remember. That Jean didn't love him, that Xavier felt no kindness for him. He talked of a curtain in his mind, one that held back the truth of himself, that Apocalypse had revealed it to him, and pulled it back and made him aware that things were not what they seemed. But, now, he couldn't remember. The memories were gone, and no matter how much he searched for them, he couldn't find them, nor could he ease his mind.

It wasn't hard to gain his trust. To speak casually in his ear, his mind, that she was there for him. That there were no judgments, no harshness. Jean was too busy too notice, too assured of her own holdings that she ignored the battles being waged within. He could speak at will, and that Emma would listen. And what she found within his words – the thing she never expected – was a broken man, but not by Apocalypse, but by the fear that he would never be good enough, never be strong enough, that for all of his training, his strategy, that he would let them all down when they most needed him. He revealed the whispers they'd implanted in his mind and the damage that they had done. “Sometimes, I can't tell what's real, Emma” he said, his visor to the floor. “I don't know what really happened and what I've made up.”

It was the first time she saw him as a human being, as something worth more than the mess inside of his head. “It's not your fault,” she said. “Apocalypse hurt you a lot.”

He hated himself, doubted himself. He was unloved and unwanted, a solitary human being clinging to the dream of being cared for. There was something inside of him that didn't trust Jean, not with himself. He'd pulled away from her, and it hurt, as his entire self proclaimed that he was devoted. “I can't tell if she loves me.”

Elegant hands cupped his chin. “That's the thing, isn't it,” Emma lied. “The affliction of the universe. Trying to figure out if you are loved or simply a waste of space.”

When she kissed him, there were sparks. They lit against her spine, her fingers, her toes. She surrounded him with graceful arms, pulled him into her mouth and sucked at his lips. He broke the kiss quickly, unnerved and afraid. “I don't want this,” he said, proclaiming, again, his love for Jean. “I thought—I thought--”

“Of course you want this,” she smiled, a tender hand down his cheek. “I'm all you ever dreamed of.”

It was so easy to plant the seeds. So easy to make him blush with heat and shallow his breath. Lust was ever an easy thing to make him feel. From Madelyne to Lee, Jean to Betsy, he'd felt it plenty enough. But for Emma, it was more than the simple feeling of desire, it was her way in. Her way to make sure that she could protect the world, the mutants, from harm called upon them.

She didn't mean to fall in love.

“I tried to fix him,” she admits to her listeners. Staring down into the fiberglass capsule that holds the mortally injured Alex Summers, her eyes rim with tears. “I tried to help him, to put things right. But the damage was too severe. I couldn't contain him anymore. Even using his own power, the damage was simply too much.”

Beast looks away, ashamed and trodden. He doesn't want to hear the ills of Scott Summers, doesn't want to hear how he overlooked decades of transgressions against his one-time-friend's mind. He's a scientist. He's merely after a solution, a fix, a solvent theory to finally rid the world of the problem.

Tony Stark, on the other hand, is a bit more mystified. “You held his powers in check?” he asks. “For all those years?”
“I wasn't the only one, but at the end of his life, I was the primary holder. I took Jean's place, covered her paths, made him seem as sane as possible.”

“Sane?” Tony nearly doubles over in laughter at the word, slapping his knee and tearing up with a face-hurting smile. “He was a monster!”

Emma quickly counters, “He was saving his species!”

“What do you want, Emma?” Reed Richards brooks no laughter or inanity.

“I want to wipe his mind. A do-over. His power is still needed, and I can control it.”

“No, no, your boyfriend's going down, White Queen,” Stark tuts. “If his mind is as bad as you say it is, then we, as the world, can't risk this. He needs to be put out of his misery.”

“Tony's right, Emma.” Beast's words are mumbled, barely heard midst the chorus of machines keeping Alex alive. “I should have done this years ago, but I thought he could overcome. I was wrong. He's not strong enough for this. No one is.”

Emma's perfect lips part in shock. Brows low against her light eyes, her heart beats fast within her chest. “You knew?” McCoy nods. “And you did nothing?”

A thousand excuses in his head – from not being powerful enough to thinking that Xavier knew what he was doing – Beast nods and looks away once again. With a sigh, he looks at Tony, then at Alex. “We have healers in our compound. We can heal him.”

“Not a chance, fuzzy one. I don't need him under thumb.” Tony makes a quick check of blood bags and various tests. “Once we have his brother, I'll think about it. But, until then, broham stays under.”

She's not sure if it's a matter of love or power. She's not sure, now, which her heart desires most. Both are sacred, both are needed. “If I tell you where he is, you'll take me with you? I would like to see him one last time.”

“Aw, how sweet,” Tony smirks. “You really did love him, didn't you?”

“I need your word, Tony. Your unbreakable word.”

“Fine. Get me in range, and I'll take you with me. You can fondle him all you want, but he's still going to die.”
The Sanctum Sanctorum

Chapter Summary

A realization.

Logan knows why he survived the Red Wave, why he's immune to Scott's powers. And it's a reason that drives guilt deep down into his soul.

Cyclops had tried once, baited the feral mutant into such a rage that Logan attacked. Knocked him out of his prison chair, banged his upon the tile floor and drove claws to the sides of his neck, the third one threatening. He stared into that ridiculous prison visor, a growl low in his throat, and watched as the man gave up. “You want to die,” he realized in the moment. “You want me to kill you.”

They were going to kill him anyway, he explained. There was no way the world they would let him live after killing Xavier, after going Dark Phoenix. And Logan was the best at what did, so why not? It was a flippant exchange that left Wolverine feeling both filled with rage and remorse.

Summers was not his best friend. Half the time, he didn't even like the guy. But Scott always had his back, no matter how deep in the shit pens of their relationship they got. He would be there at a moments notice, ready to do battle beside his teammate. He was like that with all of them. Never friendly, but always steadfast. Quiet, solitary, but the one they could all turn to when things needed saving.

He watched them all from a distance, avoiding the daily hellos and goodbyes, the laughter and the tears. He would meet them for breakfast – oatmeal and apples, tasteless and boring – and return to work afterwards. He kept them organized and trained, spared no words when it came to their mistakes in the Danger Room, expounding upon the purpose of listening to instructions. He was saving their lives and the lives of everyone around them, and they needed to pay attention. “Put away your personal grudges when on the field. We work as one, or we are defeated.”

Scott was a presence that he'd come to rely on in his years with the X-men. He was the man with the plan and a mission, and he trusted his teammates to feel the same. And though Apocalypse had changed him, Jean's death and Scarlet Witch’s spell had decimated him. Endless nights of worrying and planning, scheming and plotting saw him withdraw even further from his teammates and fellow mutants. His strategies became more dangerous, less forgiving. Injuries could be healed, but extinction was irreversible. They could all see his obsession, the madness slowly taking him.

But in all that time, no one stopped to talk to him.

He was their figurehead, the one who spoke for them, fought for them, planned for them. He took care of their very existence, managing Utopia by himself. He knew that they talked about him, that there were those who took issue with his actions, but they never spoke to him directly. He asked them endlessly for their ideas and input, held meetings where they were all free to speak their mind and voice their opinions. But no one ever did. Not once. Not even Logan.

They abandoned him, slowly, one by one, they left his side and called him enemy.
Logan stares at adamantium claws, the gleam of light that streaks across razor's edge. He was close. So close to killing him. A breath away, maybe less. “I'm not killing you, Scotty,” he whispers.

No one killed Thanos or Onslaught, Galactus or the Celestials. All of those world ending threats and the heroes of Earth met those challenges without ever calling for blood. Yet one mutant gets his head strung out by a bunch of lazy telepaths, and the world goes ballistic. To Logan, it didn't make sense.

The knock at his door is quiet and unwelcome. “Steve,” he says.

“Logan.” Hand on the door frame, his foot keeping the door ajar, he asks to come in, to talk, to be reasonable with one another. Logan pops a claw and leads him into the room. A bed, a chair, a small writing desk, shelves filled with Strange's magical menagerie, Steve nervously finds a seat and scratches his head. “About Scott--”

“You kill him and I'll destroy everything you ever loved.”

In uniform, Steve would have been able to bite back against those words. Call Logan a selfish creature, self righteous and infuriating. But his uniform is in his room along with his shield. “Logan...” A long pause and he drops his defenses, his shoulders rounding out, his eyes staring at the floor. “Why?”

The anger in Wolverine softens. In the back of his head, he hears Idie telling him that he can be a better man, now. “It's easy to kill things, Steve. Whole lot harder to save 'em.”

“But if we can't --”

“Then I'll do the deed myself. No need for anyone else to step in. I know why I survived.”

It's something that Steve had never thought about, why Scott had allowed him to live. In all, he'd never been truly close to the man. He respected him, even went so far as to get the president to honor his efforts, but they'd never been friends. “You think he chose us?”

Logan nods. “There's only two people I've known to be immune to his powers, and those were his brothers. But, now, we're immune too.”

“You think Alex is a survivor?”

“Maybe the first of us.” In Wolverine's mind, there was no way that Scott's powers had not erupted before. Maybe not on this scale, but surely, they'd have exploded at some point. “Sinister had them both for a while. There's no telling what that asshole did to them.”

“Then maybe we need to rescue Alex.”

Logan smiles. “Maybe you're right.”
The Baxter Building

Chapter Summary

A portal in the works.

Chapter Notes

There are two songs that I listen to while I write this: Bon Iver's Holocene and Little Lion Man by Mumford and Sons. I don't know if this helpful getting into the story, but it's what I hear as I write the chapters.

The image was a striking one. Small for his years, covered in bruises and burns, large gashes across his forehead and visible ribs. “Jack Winters,” Xavier had told him. “He beat the boy for nearly a year before I found him.”

“That doesn't explain why you are inside his mind--”

The child refused to sleep. Hunched to corners, his tiny hands balled into fists, he stared at the strange bald man in a wheelchair willing to fight if he had to. “You understand, I couldn't read his mind. It was the first time since my mutation came to light that a mind was closed to me. Horrible things had happened to that boy, and I couldn't help him unless I knew what they were.”

Trust was paramount, and it took all of Xavier's might to force the boy to look at him with something less than suspicion and fear. Days to get him to accept proffered food, days more to get him to sleep. The nightmares were horrendous with the child screaming out at the top of his lungs, but no matter what the professor did, he couldn't see the dreams himself, only the power that exploded from him. “I rebuilt that wing three times in a month because of his display. He had no recollection of it, and for his own personal well-being, I chose to keep that from him.”

“You broke into his mind, Professor. You crushed his defenses and changed his thoughts --”

“I had no choice, Henry. Either I controlled that power, or he was going to destroy the world.”

Amber eyes stare down to the bottom floor of the warehouse, watching as SHIELD scientists build the base for a large apparatus that will take them to the Red Dimension. Reed Richards understands enough about dimensional rifts that he concocted the plans for a portal generator in the space of three days. “Can you imagine creating your own dimension?” Reed awes as he watches the workers below him. “That much power. It's impressive.”

“Are you positive the ship will last until a landing site is found?” Henry McCoy does not feel that scientific pull of the unknown.

“That's why I'm sending in a telescope first,” he replies, and pulls out the blueprints. “It's a long range telescope hooked up to a radio wave transmitter, so not only will I get pictures, but sound as well. It should not only tell us if we're safe going in, but also find his exact coordinates or at least a
place to land. According to my calculations, the Red Dimension is mostly energy, but there should be several small islands in its midst that are comprised of solid ground.”

Yellow eyes widen with surprise. “You've been able to discern a lot about this dimension.”

“With Emma's help,” he adds quickly. “It's not all pure calculation. She actually shared the images of his thoughts. There's definitely land mass there, and if the telescope survives, I'll find it.” Patience is key, however. Even with Frost's images, there is no way to calculate how large the Red Dimension actually is. “It could be immeasurable.”

Dark brown eyes finally flicker to his right to look at the beastly man at his side. Holding his spectacles in his hand, casually wiping the lens, he stares down at the construction of the wormhole, his eyes narrowed and his blue lips pressed together in thought. “You're having doubts, aren't you?”

“There is always doubt when it comes to death, Reed.”

“Were this my son, I'd fight tooth and nail for him.”

“But not for Scott?”

“Not if what Emma says is true, no. A mind that fractured will never be fully healed.”

“If Emma had done this to your son--”

“I would have noticed, and I would have put a stop to it.” The admonition does not go unheeded. “To let that go on for so many years is a travesty.”

Beast takes a deep, calming breath, puts the glasses back to the tip of his nose. “I was young, Reed. I believed in the words of a man who I thought would rescue us all from hatred and spite. We all did. How was I supposed to know--”

“Because he was your friend!” The words come out far louder, far harsher than Reed intends. Casting a glance to the floor, he waves the workers on in their duties. With a sigh and slumped shoulders, he pats the blue furry back beside him. “Sorry. That was uncalled for.”

Reed Richards is a practical man, believing in science over faith and the power of the mind over that of heart. He is logical, to a fault. And, for all intents and purposes, Tony Stark's plan to kill Scott Summers is the most practical, efficient way to go about their problem. It's an instant solution. No more fear, no more worry. There can be no further breakdowns, no more destroyed cities. Just peace. “I can't help but feel that this is wrong, Hank.”

“Be glad it does.” Beast stares absently at the blueprints, tracing the lines with a single claw. “Heroes don't kill, Reed. No matter how desperate they are.”
Chapter Summary

Jean and Emma discuss.

Like a map, Jean follows them, these tendrils – bright red and heavy. Upward into thought and memory. Up until she forgets to breathe, to think, to be herself. She can feel it, that bright red burn against the back of her mind. So sad, so beautiful, so alive.

He tasted like chapstick and apples, his lips. Soft and trembling, they pressed against hers, nervous. As if he'd been fighting a wall his entire life. Hands collapsed around her waist, pulled her close, into the warmth and the beating heart within his chest. He held her there for too many moments, until she was breathless and flushed, and her knees quaked. He caught her, by the arm, then the shoulder, held her up and smiled. It was the first time she'd ever seen him smile, and oh, how warm it was.

She could no longer imagine breathing without him.

His silence spoke tomes. The way his ruby lenses angled towards her hands, the way he held his head low. Just beyond the glimpse of red and nose, she could see the shy flash of his teeth, so slight, a gleam of light. He licked his lips and looked at her, asked if she was okay. All she could do was nod.

She knew even then that she loved him. Her entire heart pouring out into nerve-damp hands and breathless gaze. He was strong, courageous, everything that she wasn't. He wanted to save the world, to change it, to make it better for them all. He wanted more than she ever dreamed.

He said her name, a ghost upon his lips. Too unreal, too close, too warm to be anything but a figment of her imagination. He cupped her chin with one hand, the other on the small of her back. Long moments he stared into bright green, wondrous eyes. “I love you,” he said. She swallowed and nodded, eked out her own admission, and then reached up to take his lips again.

She calls to him. His name, then hers. She tells him that she's here, waiting for him to come back, to hold her once again. She'll protect him this time, from everything.

She kept it. Even after she'd promised to let him go, to let the others try to heal his mind, she kept herself inside of him. Though weakened by the Phoenix, left to die by Magneto, she retained just enough strength to piece herself back together.

She swore she wouldn't do this again. Wouldn't reach out and grab that power, that she'd let him go, let everything go. But in the evening, as she listens to the hushed breaths of the other telepaths, as her head swoons with too much sleep, and his screams still echo in her ears, she reaches out for him. “I'm here, Scott,” she says into the ether. “Come back to me.”

But he cannot hear her.

She stretches further into the astral plane. Her love like pink petals on the wind, her sadness pale blue drops of sweet, sweet sugar. In the astral plane, her need tastes like deep, golden honey, and her strength like rich, dark coffee, black and bitter with hints of cocoa at the edge. She floods herself
with his armor as she travels upwards still, into the blackness, the space between.

Jean can see him. So far out, his body wrenched in pain, hands splayed upon the red, his breath heaving. He's injured, broken. Turned into a million pieces that float upon the air. He grasps at them, grabs them, tries to pull himself together, to feel reality, to feel anything other than pain of being ripped apart again and again.

He doesn't cry for her. Doesn't say her name. He cries for no one, for the whispers in his head tell him that no one is coming. “Scott!” she cries out, reaching a hand against the barrier that separates them. So close, yet so far, divided by a distance that she just cannot breach. If he hears her, if he links to their one time connection, he doesn't show it, doesn't acknowledge that she's here. “Scott!”

The pain that ripples through him is palpable, a blast of red that rips him in two. He clutches at his head, his heart, screams at the top of broken lungs. His voice harsh, grated by years of endless torment. He's died so many times, each death a pall upon him, another weakness, a doubt.

Tears on the astral plane float like pearls upon candy-coated water.

“I'm going to wipe his mind,” Emma says, her lithe form dressed in pure white armor, the lines speckled with diamonds. “Start from scratch.”

“I take it that you mean to control the shell?” It's a challenge, or so Jean thinks. Her own armor is fast, red and green, shiny like fresh polish and oil. “I won't let you do that.”

“This isn't the time for fighting, Jean. We both know what happens if he dies.” In his head, there is a prison. A collection of adversaries that he's fought. Onslaught, the Shadow King, D'Spayr and Apocalypse. All of his battles, those he needs to defeat. “Already the prisons are breaking down. If he loses any more control, we'll have to face them all at once. A clean slate will keep his power intact without the emotional damage we've done to him.”

Jean looks back at the broken visage once again, squints her eyes to focus. Indeed, he's fighting, a million battles all at once. “That's only a theory, Emma. Xavier was the only one --”

“I found the switch, Jean. After you died. It's mine, now, and with it I can shut him down.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I don't want another war. I just want the man I love.”

Suspicion raises her lean auburn brow. “If you wipe his mind, he's no longer the man you loved.”

“I plan to piece him back together.”

“Minus the part where he loved me?”

“Of course.” It's a wicked smile that clips her lips, but it slowly fades into ache. “The further he is away from you, the better.” Blue eyes turn both cold and sad. “There was not a day that went by when he didn't think of you. When our love wasn't interrupted by the devotion you instilled in him. I deserve my time, Jean. Without you.”

The sentiment makes Jean uncomfortable, defensive. The White Queen was no better than herself. Power corrupts, regardless of the intention behind it. For years, Jean watched as the White Queen pasted herself into thought, overwrote the twisted paths and narratives they'd all given to Scott. “You hurt him worse than I did, Emma.”
“I gave him freedom.”

“You left him with no choice.” She'd revoked his own decisions, accepted only those that she approved of. Used his tactics to solidify her place at his side, driving away those would have corrupted her work. “You made him a soldier, not a leader.”

“He saved the mutants from extinction.”

“He never deserved their hatred, Emma, but that's all you let him have!” It's an outburst that sends black birds and midnight shadows into the surround. A dangerous thing, as it could call the Shadow King. Jean calms herself, puts her weapon on the ground and crosses arms over chest. “It's time we let him go, Emma.” She points to the hazy red figure in the distance. “Look at what we've done. Let him be free of pain. Let the Red Hunt handle this --”

A diamond tipped sneer, Emma snaps, “You're just afraid that they'll find out. Saint Jean will lose her ever precious halo.” It was ever the contest between them, who was better, who was worse. For years, Jean retained the crown of empathy, forging a path of trust and belief, gaining the loyalty of those that walked in her footsteps. While Emma, poor Emma, she always knew of the red-head's treachery, but kept her mouth shut out of respect. “If they knew what you did to him--”

“Emma, we both made mistakes --”

“Of course we did, but at least I don't run from them like a fox from hounds.” A deep breath and the relaxing of armor. She is herself again, lean and perfect with slender hips and elegant hands. Platinum hair feathers across her high cheekbones. “I don't want him to die, Jean. Not when there's hope. Please, give this to me. Don't fight me on it.”

In truth, Jean doesn't want his death either. Though easier, thought permanent, she still loves him, more than her heart is willing to admit. With him – even without his mutant abilities – she was stronger, braver, a complete human being. “I never want to see his face again,” she says, her mouth a grim visage of loss. “If you do this, if you clear his mind, I can never see him again. He'll be on your shoulders, Emma.”

Her nod is slight, hesitant. “I love him, Jean.”

“So do I. That's why I have to let him go.”
Strange's message is finally heard.

A lullaby. Soft, sweet, soothing. Sung gently with words he doesn't understand. It glimmers green and gold, a light midst the swarm of red. It's difficult to focus on it. He just died again, a thousand times, a million times left. His lungs are ripped through the small of his back, drug down and out, pulled cord by cord from the cage of his ribs.

He would scream. Let loose his bloody mouth, his absent voice. But the lights, the rarity, a peace in the mist. As he dies another thousand times, he feels it swell across him.

“I'm coming,” it says, an alto he does not recognize. As it lights upon his skin, there is relief, or something akin to it. Calm, like a winter stream, slow and glittering, shined with ice and bright red cardinals. Fascinated, he reaches for it, dips his fingers into earth and heavens, cradles it in the palm of his hand. It reminds him of spring, of renewal. The rebirth of the world after being frozen for days on end.

He feels a calm for the first time in years. A doldrum to the battles that wage within his mind, to the whispers that plague his self. As he holds the magic to his chest, he aches.

He'd spent days picking it out, that little pocket knife. Wood carved with razor sharp blades, a can opener and wire cutter. It was a blade for the outdoorsman, a small thing that could fit in the back pocket, be ignored until needed. Xavier had suggested candy and gum, an action figure, a model. But, Scott knew his brother. Knew what he wanted, what he needed to survive.

He wrapped it up in bright orange paper dotted with floating balloons. A wheel of fishing line, some excellent bait, a ball cap. So carefully, he attended them, stuck on bright gold bows. The packages looked perfect. His brother would love them.

It had been years since they'd seen each other. His brother was so small the last time he'd seen him, barely beginning to read and recite the alphabet. The Blandings had loved him at first sight, remarked how he looked like their dead son. They imagined he'd be a football player like Todd, a valedictorian, a winner. Scott had always thought him a dogsled racer or an astronaut, something adventurous. Maybe he'd sail to Antarctica, or Reunion Island. Explore the places not known to man, those places still being written about in the great books of history.

It was a gift, the money he'd been given, for good work and good behavior. The professor patted his autumn hair and smiled at the carefully wrapped packages. “You're excited to see him.”

Scott nodded. It had been seven years. He was fifteen, now, far older than the last time they'd met. “I wonder how tall he is.”

“Not as tall as you, I'm sure.” Scott had grown like weed under Xavier's care. Well-fed and nourished, he was by far above the average height, though still skinny. Training had made him muscular – akido and judo and other martial arts. He was lithe and ready for whatever came for him.
Scott couldn't remember what his brother looked like, only that he had blonde hair and a toothless smile. Fred Duncan had found Alex, traced trail after trail until he located the lost Summers brother. “He's safe, Scott,” the man had told him. “He's cared for, but don't expect a lot, okay?”

Nerves got the best of him. His stomach fluttered with butterflies that caused them to pull over again and again. It was seven o'clock by the time they'd made it to the Blandings. Too late for supper or tea. Far off the schedule that Xavier had promised, but they knocked anyway.

Alex stood in the center of the doorway, arms over chest, his face a frown. “You missed dinner,” he said before looking at the bag of gifts that Scott had in tow. Unlike Scott, he didn't earn an allowance. The Blandings considered him still too young for such comforts. “You brought presents! A CD player?”

Scott bit his lip and followed his brother into the living room where he tore open the carefully wrapped presents. “I hope you like them,” he said, watching as Alex inspected the reel of fishing line.

“I don't fish anymore,” he said bluntly. Scott's heart fell to his knees. Each present was worse than the last, the grimace on Alex's face become more severe as the minutes ticked on. Finally, he got to the knife, the gift that Scott was most excited for.

A hand to the box, Scott looked into his brother's blue eyes. “It's not what you want,” he said calmly. “Not now. But, when we were together, you would have smiled.”

Alex realized the harsh expression he was wearing. At fourteen, harsh was common. “Sorry, Scott,” he said. “I'll like this one, I promise.” Though he lied, he smiled anyway at the small pocket knife. “Thank you,” he said. “This will come in handy.”

Scott was never easily fooled. Intuitive and instinct driven, he stared at his brother for long silent moments. “You don't have to like it, Alex. You're different now. I have to know you again.”

“No, it's great. The wire cutters will work super well.”

Scott feigned a smile knowing that he'd disappointed his brother, but grinned all the same. “I'm glad you came,” Alex said, grabbing his brother's hand. “And I like the gifts. Maybe now, the Blandings will take me fishing.”

He knows that there is more. He knows that for years Alex refused to speak with him. He remembers the names that his brother called him, the hatred that he spewed. He hated his life with the Blandings, blamed Scott for his predicament. But for those few minutes, all he could see was the humongous smile that eclipsed his brother's face.

He dies again. The pain rending upward from the bottom of spine through the tip of skull. His eyes bulging, his breath fleeting. He holds to the gold, green ornament with hands that still move. Clutches it to his chest as if his very breath depended on it.

It was Logan who held him. Kept him stable and still, stopped him from attacking the Shi'ar. Under his breath he cursed, swore great oaths to avenge her. But in Logan's arms he couldn't move. “She's gone, Cyke,” Logan breathed. “Don't kill yourself over the dead.”

Vodka was his drink of choice. Vast bottles of it, lightened by tears. He sat by her grave, too drunk to move, as the world span circles around him. “C'mon, kid,” Logan had prodded. “Let's get you cleaned up.”

The arm under his shoulder was strong. Short, but able to heft his weight. “No,” Scott cried. “No!”
“She ain't comin' back, Cyke. You need to get over this. We need a leader.”

Three days he spent in slumber or in heaves. The alcohol left him shaking, wanting more, but Logan's guard made it impossible. “Please,” he begged. “I need to talk to her. I need to hear her voice.”

“You ain't hearin' nothing out there but your own thoughts, kiddo. You need to let her go.”

The embrace was near painful. A crush of lungs and heart pulled up against metal chest. Logan was warmer than he thought. Softer. He awoke in tears, the grief dripping out onto pant leg and floor. In shame, he jerked himself awake. “Careful, punkin'” Logan whispered. “You're not ready yet.”

Inside the man's arms, Scott found solace. Something warm, bright in the absence of Jean. Something that allowed him rest. Gatorade and hashbrowns, anything to soak up the vodka followed. “Storm wants to know that you're okay.”

He breathes it in, the spell. His breath held to absorb the last of the glimmer. It flows throughout him. Cradling him, making him tired. Though he dies a million times in the space of that second, the pain is less than the ease that he feels.

It was the way she touched him. So soft, so careful. Her hand slid down from temple to jaw, her long nails barely a scratch on the surface. “Jean's gone my dear.”

In her arms, he sobbed. A rare occurrence. His tears were heavy and fat, wet upon her shoulder and then her lap. His voice was but a phantom, vacant sighs and existential growls, withheld grief and the grunt of frustration. He buried himself within her chest, his head against her shoulder. There was no solace for his grief, no soothing for his guilt. His love was gone. Again. She'd left him, alone. But he'd hurt her this time. Cut out her heart with a thousand daggers. “Jean,” he sobbed, over and over again.

“Shhhh,” Emma hushed. “She loves you, Scott. She always will.”

Her embrace was tender, cold, diamond. She held him next to breast and heart, her facets steeling herself from the outcome of emotion. “Don't cry, my love. Don't cry.”

At best, she was jealous, seeing herself as beneath the dead. At worst, she was anxious that she'd lose him to another beating heart. She turned flesh on purpose, cradled him in her elegant arms. She held him for hours as he grieved, swearing that he'd come to no harm.

He awoke at sunrise, the pale pastels glittering off of her jeweled self. With the back of his hand, he smoothed her cheek, the tip of her chin, the length of her neck. She wanted to feel it, to know his touch, and in an instant, she was flesh again. “Scott?” she questioned, not sure if her paths had taken hold.

“Emma?” he asked, not sure of her surprise. She embraced him, around his neck, her hands dipping down to shoulder blades. “Don't leave me,” she said, her cheeks wet with worry. “Don't leave me.”

As Hawkeye delivers an arrow to his left eye, he rises in pain. A death grip on the gold and green, he concentrates on the battles again. They'll come for him. They'll save him.

They'll kill him.
Stark Tower

Chapter Summary

Steve carries out a plan.

He knows what he's doing is wrong. Knows that he's taking advantage of someone he once considered friend. That this is irreparable. It will hurt. It will scar.

Steve kisses him with a bruising might, tugging hands under his shirt to access the skin underneath. He can feel Tony warm at the touch, hear him lose his breath. He wants this. More than anything he wants this. But, he will come to regret it.

“That's a pretty cold thing to do, Rogers,” Logan had said. “A little too wily for you, ain't it.”

And it is. Already he is sick with nerves and regret. But there are some things more important, or so he tells himself as he pushes Tony against the wall. “I can't do this again,” he breathes into Tony's ear, “not with Jarvis watching.”

“Jarvis is a computer,” Tony laughs, pulling Steve close and taking his mouth once again. A break for air, “He takes no joy in this.”

“We don't need Fury trying to hack the mainframe to see if you've been lying to him.” To further the point, he unbuttons charcoal slacks, slipping his hand under waistband to slide long fingers around the hardening length. “Twenty minutes,” he says. “Surely, the great Ironman can survive twenty minutes without his personal assistant.”

But Jarvis is more than just a personal assistant. He's the automation of this building, the security, the lights, the air conditioning. He keeps things in perfect order. But, Tony isn't thinking about perfect right now. No, he's thinking about the gentle friction that rubs against him, the tongue invading his mouth, the hand tangled in his dark brown hair. “Twenty minutes,” he laughs, “Is that all I get?”

“I can give you more, if that's what you want.”

“Oh, I want that, yes. I want that.”

With a press of button, Tony puts Jarvis – and his security system – off line. Though the back up security will kick in, it's slower, less organized. Drones that cycle five minutes over the floor, cameras that will record. Without Jarvis, Stark Tower is just another building waiting to be invaded.

Taking a deep breath to settle his nerves, Steve turns off the light and leads a panting Tony to the bedroom.

A hundred stories below, on the street looking up, Logan can see the flickering of lights at the top of the spire. Steve's done it. To Magik he looks, “Your ready, kiddo?”

She's not impressed with the nickname, tells him so in her most demonic voice. But, she is on mission, and draws her great sword from her back, plunging it into the ground. Around her forms the teleportation disc – light blue and wispy. With Logan at her side, they disappear into the depths of Limbo, coming out at the other end inside the lobby of the building. Steve's target time is twenty
minutes. They have to search fast.

“Can you smell him?” Magik asks as they stand in the first floor stairwell. Logan shakes his head, and they move to the second floor. Easy as pie, so long as Jarvis doesn't kick back in and alert Tony to his visitors.

Up the stairs, in the magnificent suite at the top of the tower, Steve finishes peeling the clothes from his mark. Naked and hard, his face flushed red with heightened desire, Tony writhes as Steve's tongue flicks out to the tip of his length. Like a lollipop, he swirls around the aching desire, clockwise than reverse, driving the dark headed man into thrusts and moans of pure need. “I want you inside of me,” he finally breathes, a panted hush of syllables that take far too long to speak.

Like a soldier, he carries on with his singular mission, crossing to bedside table to retrieve the lube. Tony watches him, his dark blue eyes half-lidded and wanting. “You're beautiful. Do you know that?” he says, reaching out a hand to skim the length of hip bone. “Absolutely beautiful.”

The compliment cuts into Steve's resolve. Knowing that Tony will suss him out, he turns his head away, pretends that concentrating on the bottle. Stark strokes him again, a feather light touch down his spine. The touch sparkles inside of him, makes him harder, more needy.

Steve looks down at his naked lover, his eyes spanning the length of abdomen then down below. He's greedy. So greedy, and Tony moans for the look. Without a word between them, Tony flips onto his stomach, his knees on the bed, and his hands braced on the headboard. “I'm all yours,” he smiles, looking back at the grinning blonde.

He takes his time, kneading the taut muscles and teasing the entrance. Tony is impatient, his obscenities begging for a grander approach, to take him whole and raw. He can take the pain, he just wants the closure, the closeness. As Steve presses soft lips to buttock, Tony begs for more, and Steve teases the passage again with lubed finger. It's easy to make him cry out.

Easier still to make him moan. A finger slipped into barrier, hooked and plunging, he finds the prostate quickly and Tony juts forward in both shock and love. A second finger in, and Tony's back arches with the stretch. “Fuck. Fuck me. Please, fuck me.”

Steve says not a word. Slow as he can, ticking away the minutes that they're together, he eases Tony open before taking his place behind him. On his knees, positioned just right, he presses to tip to entrance and slowly pushes his way in. He loves the part, the way he fills Tony up, the way the man groans with relief. Hands gripping hips, he starts a slow pace, though Tony tries to hasten him with words and movement of his own. “Patience, grasshopper,” Steve soothes. “Patience.”

Tony Stark is not a patient man, but the honey-sweet words calm him, and for the first time in his life, he gives up his control, allows Steve to set the pace. The build inside of him is incredible, the slow tingling of nerves up spine, through brain. His whole body feels electric and wonderful, as if at any moment he could burst at the seams, and flow through the wind like the Valentine wish. He's in love.

On the twenty eighth floor, Logan picks up the scent. Something bloody, something that reminds him of late spring. To the right, they stalk, the smell becoming stronger as they walk. It's easy enough to avoid the drones. Duck into an empty room, watch as they float by. Also easy to avoid the cameras after a hushed spell from Illyana. It's in the last room on the left, at the end of a long, clinical hallway. A capsule, the size of a body, hooked up to a dozen machines. Alex Summers is being kept alive.

Wolverine inspects the wires and electrodes before opening the fiberglass case. “Shit,” he curses,
gray eyes looking to Magik. “Can you heal things?” She can't, but Strange can. If they get him back, Strange can cast a spell, the walk through Hell won't take long. “Yeah, but we don't know if he'll stay alive that long.”

Illyana shrugs. “This was your idea,” she reminds him. “We either grab him and run, or we let him die here. Either way, if he's a survivor, he can't be left in Stark's care.” She can levitate him, take him to the Sanctum Sanctorum in an instant, and then teleport back for Logan and Rogers. “It will be faster that way,” she explains. “The demons of Limbo will leave me alone, regardless of the scent of blood.”

After disconnecting the tubes stuck inside his chest, Logan wraps Alex tightly, hoping the loss of blood won't cause immediate death. He works quickly, just like Cyke taught him too. The machines go haywire, their sound calling a dozen drones to the medlab door. “Don't worry about me,” he says. “Get Alex to Strange.” And, in an instant, Alex Summers is gone.

The jarring of nerves as Steve leans across his back - holds him at the chest, drawing one hand down to excite his erection - drives Tony over the edge. The fullness, the friction, he calls out Steve's name again and again, along with a few select curses. He cums in an instant, his seed spraying out across sweat-damp bedding, his entire self giving into the undulation of his pleasure. The euphoria only spans further as Steve releases inside of him, filling him up with warmth. After moments on shaky arms and knees, he collapses to the bed in a heap of wonder. “I love you,” he says quietly, half-asleep from the exertion.

The alarms that sound are not from Jarvis. They're the old alarms, the ones installed before the AI was perfected. Dark blue eyes suddenly bolt in terror, and then, watching as Steve gets dressed, the truth slowly dawns on him. He jumps from the bed, his nakedness suddenly making him feel vulnerable. Astounded, in grief, his brow knits low and his mouth becomes dry and speechless. “You- This – A distraction?”

Buttoning up his shirt, cold as ice for his own heart's protection, Steve turns away from his would-be lover and continues getting dressed.

“Since when does Captain America lie?” Tony questions, his eyes burning with deep down tears. He covers himself as the man turns around.

“Since I realized how cruel this was, Tony.” Tucking his arms into jacket sleeves, he feels armored against the dark headed man struggling to find his clothes. “The Red Hunt is wrong, Tony. You know this, and it's only your pride that keeps it going. You want a legacy? You've got one that persecutes innocent people, unless you call this off.”

“You used me.” His face flushes with pain.

It's hurts to hear those words, to see that face. Steve Rogers bites against his lower lip, sucking in the sudden sadness that he feels. If he could, he'd take it all back. Leave Jarvis and Tony alone, find another way to rescue the Summers brother from captivity. But his decision was made days ago. Too much talking, too much need. He thought he'd be okay, but he's not. “I hope you have a good life, Tony,” he whispers, pale blue eyes looking at the floor. “I think maybe that I loved you too.”

Silence as he exits, travels down the hall to the elevator. Though safer to take the stairs, he wants out of there and fast. Wants to be done with his dirty endeavor. He finds Logan on the twenty eighth floor, battling it out against drones and robots. He's having an easy time of it, until Stark turns Jarvis back on. “Where's Illyana?” he asks.

“She'll be back,” he says. “Just fight them off until she gets here.”
As if on cue, she appears, her mutant gift providing two extra teleportation discs. “Gentlemen,” she says with mischievous smile, “if you’ll board.”

In the blink of an eye, they are back at the Sanctum Sanctorum, their hearts racing, and looking down at Alex Summers. Defib, quickly corrected by a lightning bolt from Dr. Strange. “Oxygen,” he says. “He needs oxygen.”

There is no medical equipment in the tiny room, just magic and spells. Illyana is quick to summon a storm inside of her hand, tiny and compact, but with enough wind to heighten the oxygen in blood red cells. To Steve he hands the needle and fiber, pushes him down low with a magnifying spell over his eyes. “I'm sure you've done field medic work in your long career.”

Steve nods and sets to work, sewing up the hole in heart while Strange feeds him a constant supply of blood. Standing in the corner is Logan, more butcher than healer. He watches as they fret over the man's body, calling out instructions and quick spells to lessen the load upon Steve as he stitches. One hand, two hands, Strange calls them out in perfect pitch, the spells that keep Alex alive.

The pumping of heart, the flowing of blood, the recovery of damaged tissue. Spell by spell, well into the wee hours of the night, Strange casts while Magik keeps him breathing. By two a.m., Steve is beyond exhausted – not just for his earlier excursion, but also for the focus and constant instruction by Strange. The stitches he makes are tiny, three hundred to cover the hole, then more to reconnect bone and flesh to make him hole again.

Magic can only do so much. Rebuild, regurgitate, but it takes a master to make a whole from disparate parts. As Steve stitches, Strange heals, erasing the fibrous twine and making tissue as good as new. By five a.m., Alex is healed, a good eight hours after the surgery began. Weary and ready to drop, Steve stumbles backwards, only to be caught by Logan. A chair pulled forward and a cup of tea, he's still shaky and worried. He looks to Strange for confirmation. “I can take it from here,” he says, waving Rogers on to sleep and dream.

Logan leads him to the bedroom, opens the door and makes sure he's crawled down into covers. “Thank you,” he whispers. “For everything.”

“I didn't do it for you,” Steve answers, his tiredness making him cranky.

“I know. You did it for Scott. You won't regret it.”

But, he will. He knows he will. Everything that happened tonight just separated him from the man he could come to love.
Stark Tower

Chapter Summary

Tony's resolve.

Alarms blaring, he stands center room, half naked and stunned. An hour ago, Steve Rogers left this room, escaping with Alex Summers. Yet, Tony still hasn't managed to move. Already, SHIELD agents swarm the place, looking for viable threats and possible hacks. They move soundlessly through the corridors and hallways, the rooms and chambers, seeking out bombs and weapons, or anything else that could be used to waylay their progress with the Red Hunt.

An hour ago, Maria Hill asked to see him. He's yet to answer her summons. She wants to know why Steve Rogers wasn't arrested on the spot, why there are no security feeds for her to examine to determine how Rogers made his daring rescue. She thinks that Wolverine was involved, based on the damage to the drones. “If Wolverine has decided to side with Strange, we're in terrible danger.”

He has nothing to say to her, or Fury, or Henry McCoy. They look at him with confusion, asking themselves how he could let this happen. They ask what possessed him to let Rogers in, to turn off Jarvis and the security feeds. The knot in his throat grows tighter as they interrogate him, his mouth watering up where his eyes refuse to. He wants to yell, scream, throw them out of his living quarters, but he can't. He can't even put on his shirt to hide the evidence of what he's done.

“Let me speak with him.” Emma Frost stands in the doorway of the room, her icy eyes glaring at those who beg him with questions. “He's obviously traumatized, and you are by no means helping the situation.” They look at her with disgust. “If you don't leave, I'll make you leave. And if I make you leave, then you will also be forced to share your innermost secrets every time you hear the word doorknob. And, as a spy, Ms. Hill, I'm sure that's the last thing you want.”

The threat is taken seriously. Unlike the other X-men psions, the White Queen has no qualms about carrying through with her threats. With arms across her chest, she waits for them to file out of the room, telling them to carry on with their security sweep but to leave Stark alone, that he'll deal with them when he's ready.

She hands him a crumpled shirt from the floor and tells him to get dressed. “It's quite rude to receive company in your underwear,” she says, meaning it to be funny, but it only drives the embarrassment he feels even deeper. “Darling, some part of you had have known,” she says.

“I thought I could trust him,” he quiets. For the first time in an hour, he feels the breath in his lungs. He looks to the White Queen who admits that she's calming him down telepathically. He wants to cry, and for that, she wraps her perfect arms around him.

“Love hurts, doesn't it?” she coos in his ear, smoothing elegant hand up and down his spine. She understands the pain of it, the difference between desire and outcome. No matter what she did, she could never make Scott love her like he did Jean, her memory a chasm between them. “I used to hate him sometimes, the fact that he still cared for her, and that he would always admit to it. Just once, I wanted him to lie, to tell me that he loved me more, but he was too honest for his own good. An aggravating trait that I both loved and hated him for.”
“Steve lied—” he starts, only to be eased back to calmness. He dips his head to her shoulder, allowing her to smooth chestnut hair.

“I know he did,” she soothes. “But what makes it even harder is that you left him no other choice. And you know this.” Though the words sound brutal in meaning, she says them in the softest possible way. “You're a very headstrong man, Tony. And headstrong men must get used to people hurting them.” It's what she used to tell Scott, especially after Wolverine abandoned him on Utopia. “It's a sign that you're making a difference.”

He doesn't sense the calculation in her words, the way she's gaining his trust so that she can swipe Scott Summers out from underneath him. She will betray him in the end, so she's preparing him for the heartache. “I can't believe he lied to me,” Tony weeps.

She tells him of Sebastian Shaw, how Shaw knew the second one of the Inner Circle told a lie, but never said a word to let them know. “It was how he caught them,” she explained. “He kept his heart buttoned so closely to his chest, allowing them to think that they were getting away with something, when in truth, he was planning to stab them in the back.” She recalls the day she left him, the first time Shaw's dark eyes ever widened with surprise. “I'd kept my secret for months as I planned. And when I was finally ready, I made my move.”

“You think Steve planned this?”

Of course she thinks he planned it. From beginning to end, she thinks it was his idea. “Logan doesn't have the wits for such a devious scheme. Smash and bash are his specialties, not complicated maneuvers like this.”

“I loved him,” he cries. “I loved him so much.” Steve had called him a mistake, that they'd only hurt each other in the long run, and because of that, they shouldn't be together.

“When a man tells you that he's going to hurt you, darling, then it's best to believe him.” The tears run hot then as his heart breaks all over again. Emma hushes him with soft words of support and gentle hands. “I know, darling. I know.”

It's an hour later before he moves again. Wiping the tears from his puffy eyes, he takes a deep breath and puts himself back together. From Jarvis he orders both a pot of coffee and a diagnostic scan. “Even without the security, I can tell if they hacked the database.”

“You think they're after the portal?” Emma asks, taking a sip of the rich, brown liquid.

“If not, then they don't know about it. Which could give us an advantage.” They can speed up the construction of the wormhole, and send in the telescope early to ensure their survival. “They want to bring Scott Summers home, but we can't allow that to happen.” He looks at her briefly, tries to judge her reaction. “At least you'll get to say goodbye to him, Ems,” he whispers. “That's more than most of us get.”

She nods, covering herself in cold hard diamond. He knows that it's an instinct now, that she doesn't want her resolve to break. He continues to look through their plans, ordering both additional security and personnel to the Baxter Building, and then makes a rather terse call to Fury. “We need to focus on finding the missing mutants,” he says. “Wolverine isn't going to stop unless we make him. He was minutes away from discovering our plan, so jack up the juice and find the X-men. Give him something else to protect.”

Fury agrees with the assessment, and for his part, orders another nine Cerberus units to hunt for the X-men. He's still disappointed in Tony, finding the whole debacle unfathomable. He wants to yell,
but as soon as he opens his mouth, Tony interrupts with more orders. He wants the formation of another airborne unit, and for Red Hunt Two to station on Bleaker Street. “If we find just one of them – Strange, Cap, Wolverine, Magik – this will end that much more smoothly.”

He's going to find them. Each and every one of them. He will find them and make sure that each of them feels the heartache that he feels tonight.

Closer to himself now, but not satisfied, he turns to Emma one last time. “Once this is over, what would you say to a week in Bali? Sun, surf, exquisiteness?”

“My dear, I would only hurt you,” she confesses with a smile. And indeed, she plans on it.
Alex remembers.

He was two months shy of seven years old when the Blandings adopted him. He remembers screaming for his brother, crying and trying to hold on to the eight year old's arms, but Dr. Milbury and his new parents were stronger than he was. “Scott! No! Not without you!”

Before that, there's a web, a haze over thoughts and mind. He remembers the lady that taught him how to read. She was brunette, with dark brown eyes, her long hair piled atop her head. She wore cat-eye glasses and had short stubby fingers with wide knuckles. Her voice was deep and demanding for a woman, but her smile was like a rainbow. All Alex wanted was to see her smile.

There were other children there at times as Alex waited for his brother to wake from his year-long coma. They were nice children. Some would stay for months, others for just days. He was told that they were loved by new parents and that soon he would be, too. But, first, he had to wait for his brother.

He remembers the talks that Dr. Milbury would have with the parents. They didn't want to separate the brothers, but Scott's medical situation was dire. “He'll have to have MRI's every six months due to brain damage from the accident,” he'd explain in his normal, dreary tone. “He's still having headaches and possible hallucinations. A neurologist will have to keep a close eye on him as the damage may not fully present itself for years.” He lists the possible effects – from physical disabilities to cognitive, educational, retaining memories. “He may need special classes at school, extra help in order to learn, and it's really hard to tell yet if the accident affected his growth cycle.”

Most memories are hazy after that. The accident, the days at the orphanage. They come at times in sparkling clarity, like a light suddenly shining down on him. Scott giving him his dessert, or his father teaching him to cast his fishing line. He can remember the smell of his grandfather's pipe – cherry and tobacco, earthy and fruity. How he'd sit by the fire and tell them stories of the time when he was a child. His grandmother's cheery laugh. His mother's face.

Strange asks him to think of Scott, the times when his brother seemed powerful. The memories splay across the wall like film on water, smooth images of smiling faces and happy thoughts. They played with toy soldiers in the backyard, creating elaborate scenes with sand dunes and high mountains, lakes and ponds, and leaf-bound traps. Scott sharing the last of his Halloween candy with his little brother after Alex ate all his. Teaching his brother how to tie his shoe, over and over again, until Alex finally made the loops and smiled. So many things paraded across the walls that Alex had to hold back tears.

But, it is the accident that Strange is the most interested in, the day his mother threw them from the plane. “Perhaps the orphanage, as well.” Mutant powers could appear in times of great stress, and though he knows little of the boys' history, he has long heard the rumors of what had happened to them.

He is cognizant, also, that Mr. Sinister is a telepath, and that he had long manipulated the brothers' fortunes in the world. He assures Alex that his own intentions are pure. “I have no reason to taint
your memories.”

Hesitant, unsure of what Strange will find, he tries to remember the accident, but there are no memories of that time. Just glimpses of his teacher, of the children that he'd met. He's not sure why has them, when they took place. They don't fit with his knowledge of his own timeline. “The Blandings told me I'd been in the orphanage for two weeks when they adopted me. But, Scott was in a coma for over a year, and I know he was there.”

He knows because it was the reason why he hated his brother for so many years.

He has no memories of the accident. No memories after being thrown from the plane, or at least none that he recognizes. It's further on in his memories – the shadowy scapes of nightmares and trauma – that Strange finds the memories that he's looking for. Alex had always thought them dreams, powerful, sinister dreams that flooded him at night. He'd wake up in a sweat, his face flushed and heart pounding in his chest. So frightening, so real, but in those disparate images, there was little sense or circumstance.

The rush of wind against him, his brother's arms wrapped around his waist. A pool of blood. The terrorized checking of pulse and breath. Running from an unknown assailant. A flash of red. It's only the completion of the cycle that Alex can piece together the sequence of events. That he can watch as his brother – clumsy and sick from concussion – fell to the ground behind him. The hands that grabbed at them, attempted to pull them from the leaves where they hid. The voices, the darkness, the hunger and cold.

Alex watches the memories play out on the walls, asking Strange to play them again, each time, his mind adding more details to the horror. The hands belonged to emergency workers who'd combed the mountains for bodies. The coyotes had scented Scott's blood and hunted them. Broken ribs and a fractured ankle, Scott was in pain as he scoured the forest for food to feed them, failing three nights in a row. How Alex would lay awake at night afraid that his brother was going to quit breathing.

As many memories as blank spots in the sudden flood that tremors through Alex. By the end, he is undone, his breath faltering and eyes red. He bites his lower lip, nostrils flaring, angry at what he's witnessed. Not just at Sinister, or even and Xavier or Jean, but at himself. “I should have been there for him.”

“You didn't know, Alex,” Steve soothes, “None of us did.”

“But we should've.” Logan's voice is low, nearly a snarl. With even breath and downcast eyes, he takes a swig of beer. “There were clues, from both of you.” The brothers are known for their repression, though Scott is by far the worst of the two. “We all joked that it was genetic between the two of you, but really, your minds got screwed over by a bunch of assholes.”

“Logan--” Steve tries to interrupt.

“I'm not talking sideways, Cap. We should have noticed.” They knew that the boys had been in Sinister's clutches for some indeterminate amount of time. But instead of sitting down and talking to them, trying to figure out what he'd exactly done to them, the burden of leadership was cast upon them. “Granted, they're both good leaders, but that doesn't excuse what we done to them.”

Alex swallows the knot in his throat. “Our concentration should be on rescuing Scott, not should haves that no longer matter. So, Doctor Strange, what's the plan? How are we going to save my brother.”

Strange's answer is simple, direct, allowing for no arguments from the others. “Magik will open a
portal for us in two weeks time. From there, we must somehow figure out away to snap him to reality and calm him down. If we can't do this, then all is lost, and others measures will have to be taken.”

Strange, himself, knows little about the Red Dimension, other than what he's found in Scott's errant thoughts. He knows about the Phoenix caged inside his mind, how it's locked there due to Wanda's spell. “Which means he's not to immune to magic, and that could be an advantage.” He's readied several spells, and in the coming weeks, will have more. “Calming spells, mainly, but also a spell of control that will be useful in case his powers explode.”

“And what do we do?” Steve asks.

“That all depends on you,” the doctor replies abruptly. “I know why I survived. Why did you?”
The Mine

Chapter Summary

Kitty gets a shock.

She stares at the dog-boy in the corner, not knowing his name or where he's from. She wants to get close to him, to tell him that she understands because Sarah Goodwind doesn't look like anyone else either.

Small for her thirteen years, with wings and iridescent skin that looks like ink submerged in oil, the blues and greens and purples floating around as if she's made of nothing more than liquid – she understands what it's like to be afraid. She wants him to know that it will be okay, that here, he can fit in. Just like she does. For the first time in her life.

Sarah never knew her mother. Her father barely did. It was a one night stand, pregnancy, and Sarah being left on the doorstep with a note. He didn't need a paternity test to know if Sarah was his or not because Sarah had wings, just like her mother. She was a beautiful woman, he would tell her when she asked- with golden brown hair and deep brown eyes. She told him in the wee hours of the morning that she wasn't from Earth, that she was from somewhere else far away. He didn't believe her until she spread her wings. He asked if she was a mutant, like his brother; she said that was an alien.

But it was through her father's DNA that she gained the X-gene that kept her sick for nearly a month and changed the color of her skin. She wasn't allowed in school anymore, not after that. Sarah could hide her wings, but not her entire body.

“It's okay,” Indira eases from behind her, “He's just really shy.”

Sarah's eyes also change colors. They turn purple when she's happy, blue when she's sad, green when she's angry. She thinks she looks like a lava lamp, and is surprised that the people here don't care. “They're very nice here,” she says, looking quickly to the floor.

Ever cheerful, Indira smiles. “Yes, they are. Now, come on. I could use some help.” Under her arm, she carries a first aid kid and two peanut butter sandwiches.

Alcohol swabs and bandaids, clean water and salve, Indira sets about cleaning the infested, infected wounds on Arlo's skin. He whimpers at the touch, hides his face under broken hands as she trims away necrotic skin. Sarah soothes behind his large, felt-like ears hoping to ease the pain and loneliness. “Where did you learn how to do this?” she asks quietly, still nervous about speaking to the girl.

“My parents sent me to first aid classes every year. Three weeks of being a first responder. They thought it would come in handy in my future profession.”

“What are you going to be?”

“A super hero.”

She stares at Indira for long moments, not sure how to respond. “That's scary.”
“Maybe,” the girl shrugs. “But, it's worth it if it means I get to help people.”

A long silence as Indira continues to clean and bandage Arlo's wounds. Sarah helps by unrolling the gauze and holding it still as long, dark fingers tape it down. And, when finished, Arlo nuzzles her hand in thanks. “It's okay, big guy. You did well.” She pets the boy's head and grins. “Maybe you'll trust Dr. Reyes to take a look at you now?” He shrinks to the corner. “Okay, okay!” Hands up to show no harm, dark eyes again pierce with smile. “I thought you might be hungry, so I brought you food.”

As Indira holds the sandwich for Arlo to eat, Sarah watches her with admiration. She's never met someone so confident and willing before, someone so kind. For the first time since her body changed, she wants to be friends with someone, and maybe two people, as she thinks that Arlo doesn't care what she looks like either. “My name's Sarah,” she says.

A hand held out for a shake, “I'm Indira, and this is Arlo. Glad to meet you.”

Kitty Pryde has watched the exchange for long, hopeful moments. It's the first time she's seen either Arlo or Sarah interact with another child, and she feels obliged to Indira for bringing them together. “Maybe in a couple of days,” she tells Cecilia Reyes, “he'll let you take a look at him.”

“I'm surprised she got that close to either one of them,” Reyes remarks. She no longer goes by a code name, no longer feels the need to be in the field. She's a doctor, and a good one, and the X-men give her plenty of work. And lately, far too much. “We can't keep this up, Kitty. There are too many kids with too many needs. We can't supply them all.”

Kitty knows that what she's saying is true. Already they are strained to keep the kids fed and calm, much less educated and occupied. The arts supplies that Cable had brought are wearing out quick, and the older kids need something more than crayons and coloring books. “Even a radio would be good,” she answers. “It would give them something to do.”

“And news of the outside world. For all we know, the Red Wave's been captured by now.”

“No, he hasn't.” They turn towards the voice of Rachel Gray, her hair mussed from her days long sleep. She's angry, her face red with held back fumes. “We have a problem. A big one.” Just awake from her eleven days under, she stumbles with lack of food and nourishment. “I'm going to kill my mother.”

The silence is stunning as Kitty tries to process what she just heard. She looks to Dr. Reyes who is just as mystified. “Okay,” she stalls. “Maybe we should talk to Storm first before we take any drastic actions.”

“You can talk to Storm. I'm talking to you.”

She ushers the angry red head down the hall, away from the children and Dr. Reyes. “Okay. Now you can tell me what's going on.”

Rage becomes something like pain on Rachel's face, her green eyes becoming wide like moons and her breath stuttered and heavy. “I followed her Kitty, on the astral plane. I followed my mom.”

“The astral plane? Are you sure this wasn't a dream?” Rachel shakes her head no. Kitty sighs. “Okay, so what did you see?”

“My dad.” She lets the words drop Kitty's jaw and crease her dark brow in shock. “He's alive, Kitty. He's the Red Wave.” She'd seen the whole thing, from her father's agony to the argument between her mother and the White Queen. She recounts their speech word by word, her disgust so prominent
that Kitty takes a step back. “They did this to him,” she hisses. “They drove him mad.”

Kitty knows better than to call Rachel a liar. No matter how astounding the words, she knows that Rachel is honest. “You really believe you saw this?”

Rachel nods. “They twisted him into nightmares, Kitty. They filled his head with traps and psychic mines. And when he finally broke, they threw him away like garbage.”

“This is a heavy accusation, Rachel. Storm will want to investigate it before we take action. So, right now, I need you to just remain calm, okay? Keep this to yourself, let us figure things out.”

Disheartened, but understanding, Rachel nods. “I will kill her, Kitty. If he dies, I will kill her.”
The Baxter Building

Chapter Summary

A party and a portal.

Nick Fury walks like a man. His shoulders broad, his chin strong, there is no one that can look at him and say that he does not deserve to be commander of SHIELD. There are those that call him harsh, others say that he is fair, and still others that believe he's secretly in control of the government. He doesn't deny any of these things, nor does he call them truth. In fact, Nick Fury says very little unless he absolutely has to.

Maria Hill on the hand is a much more open person. Just as hard, as those under her command will say, but she smiles sometimes and shows her frustration, especially when it comes to things that go well over her head. Like the portal.

She doesn't know why she's here, why she's been asked to watch this so-called event. She'd much rather be out on the field, looking for Logan or the X-men, or anyone that could threaten their mission to bring down the Red Wave once and for all. But Fury called her here, and she does not refuse orders, no matter how much she may hate them.

Girls with bunny ears pass around trays of champagne and sparkling cider, crusty bread topped with shrimp and other expensive things. Reporters ran amok midst the Red Hunt agents, asking severely personal questions for various expose's and articles that would determine them all heroes. They were the little guys in all of those, risking their lives for the good of the nation.

Trundled in corners, trying to avoid the flash of cameras and waving of microphones, the Avengers talked quietly among themselves, still unsure about Tony's plan to bridge the great beyond. They were the back-up plan, the just-in-case now that Tony is about to launch his telescope.

He brings the crowd to attention, reminds them why they're here, that a mutant threatens the earth, and it's up to the Red Hunt to save the world once again. To this end, he mentions Reed Richards, and the work he put into designing the dimensional portal that will allow them to finally capture the Red Wave.

“Does this mean that you've identified the Red Wave?” another reporter asks from the crowd.

A nod and a smile, “Yes, with the help of both Dr. Henry McCoy and Emma Frost, we've been able to identify the Red Wave.” A hush falls over the crowd. “And this is why I'm confident that we'll win this war because we've defeated him before.” He makes sure that all eyes are on him before continuing. “The mutant known as Cyclops – Scott Summers – is the Red Wave, and because of
that, we will win. After all, we've defeated him before."

Cameras flash like fireworks and a hundred voices rise up with a thousand questions, but Tony refuses to answer them. Instead, he gestures towards the wormhole. “It's time, ladies and gentlemen, to witness our progress. This telescope will find Scott Summers for us, and we will finally be free of his threat to us.”

Dressed in lab coats, the portal technicians swarm the dashboard above the fray, and the crowd takes the stairs to viewing balconies, each with cameras ready. Below, the Red Hunt takes their positions around the stage, weapons at ready as the countdown begins. Their orders are shoot to kill if anyone or anything should try to escape the wormhole.

Maria Hill holds her breath without realizing it. She knows Scott Summers. She hunted him for years, fought with him, warred with him. And though she cringes at the thought of it, there was always something about him that she found attractive. If Fury notices her reddening face as she recalls her last words with Summers, then he doesn't say so, but he does look at her before returning his attention to the portal.

It was just after Logan's death. There were reports of a mutant with red lenses causing trouble in a Candian bar. She knew it was him. After several weeks of laying low, with no glimpses of him in the wider world, he'd come out of his hiding place with a bang. This time, she was going to arrest him.

The place was a wreck by the time she got there, broken bottles and busted chairs, banged up tables and a battered jukebox – not to mention the piles of bodies aching and groaning from the beat down that they took. “You from the police?” the barkeep asked. She nodded. It wasn't exactly a lie, but it wasn't wholly truth either. At the time, she was head of SHIELD, and Cyclops had made her tenure almost unbearable. “He's on foot, should be able to follow the tracks in the snow.”

And so she did, trailing after the long-paced footprints that carried over the yard and up into the hills. Cold, with the sun beginning to dip in the afternoon, she regretted not bringing her coat. She walked for an hour, also regretting that she didn't ask for back up. Scott Summers was a dangerous man, if for no other reason than how unhinged he was after he'd killed Charles Xavier. He was wanted for murder in the first degree, and he needed to be tried for the destruction left in the wake of the Phoenix. He deserved to be in jail.

It was nearly six o'clock by the time she found him. Quiet and serene, he stood on the edge of an open hill overlooking the town below him, the twinkling lights and church bells. He noticed her right away, and went back to his visage.

She was guarded in her approach, keeping her hand on her gun and her steps slow. “Scott Summers,” she called out, “You're under arrest for the murder of Charles Xavier.” He didn't turn towards her, didn't run, didn't even flinch at her words. He just stood there, silent as stone, staring out at the silhouette of a quaint little town. She continued towards him, extra heedful of small movements. “Knees on the ground and hands behind your head.”

She finally came to his side, leveled the gun at his heart. She was tempted to grab his hand, put him in cuffs, but something about him made her stall. A long silence cast between them before he spoke. “I can't sleep,” was all he said, his voice barely audible.

She didn't expect the sudden knot in her throat, not over Summers, not over the mutant who tried to destroy the world. It was then, she noticed the tears. Behind the ruby red visor, Cyclops was crying. “I'm sorry for your loss,” she soothed, putting her gun away. He was in mourning for a friend that he’d lost twice now – once on Utopia, and once for good.
Shaking hands wiped away the tears. “I can't go with you today, Ms. Hill. I have goals to accomplish.”

“And just what are those goals, Mr. Summers?”

“There's just one, really. To make sure my people are safe. To make sure my friends are safe.”

Had the mood been even slightly less morose, she would have asked him what friends. All of the people that he once considered friends hated him now, and that made her realize how lonely he was. “You're going to have to pay for the damage,” she told him. He nodded. “You really should think about turning yourself in, Cyclops. It would make things a lot easier on you.”

“Things have never been easy on me, Commander. That's the life of an X-man.”

She left him there, on the hilltop. Left him to grieve in his own silent way. She felt sorry for him as she walked away. The most hated man on earth, and for no other reason than trying to save his people.

A bright flash of blue-white light, and the engines of the portal begin to whirl. Around they go in concentric circles, weaving in and out of each other, as a thin, pinkish film begins to fade into existence. The crowd in the surround ooh and ah at the creation of the wormhole. The scientists chatter among themselves, with Reed at the helm calling out the action sequences in a quiet, firm voice.

As the portal widens, the audience can see into its the depths – the clouds of red and the swirling of energy. “It looks like dust,” someone comments midst the quiet. The Red Hunt below steadies themselves around the corners of the oval portal, daring to take steps forward in case of an attack, but after several minutes of watching the doorway grow, they begin to relax. “Nothing but dust.”

A push of a button, and the giant telescope is wheeled onto the gateway path. Its lights blinking with communication, the techs perform a final systems check before a great crane lifts it to the light. A small engine at the rear fires up, and the crane lets go. Slowly, the monster lens floats into the wormhole to the applause of all.

It doesn't take long for the machine to begin sending back long range pictures which are displayed on an overhead screen. The crowd marvels at the vastness of this dimension, with some comparing it to an earth gone supernova. Pieces of material float aimlessly through air, both large and small, but easy enough for the techs to avoid. They call out coordinates in the surround, directing the telescope to gain a three hundred and sixty degree view.

The panorama is more than impressive. Structures – obelisks and orbs, crushed and broken – are scattered about in the distance, their decay spreading out to the edges of sight. The telescope begins to move then, straight from the door, capturing even more of the stellar view. Drifting glass and shards of crystals, a shattered door and a crumbled stairwell. All of these things can be seen, and then finally, far into the distance, perhaps days away from the telescope's current position, a landmass.

And with a flick of switch, Tony turns it all off. “And, that concludes our presentation today, folks,” he says with a clap of hands. “We don't want Summers' allies finding out what we know, right?” He leaps from the stage and motions for the girls to begin showing people out.

“Quite a production,” Fury sneers.

“We have to take every advantage we can, Nick,” Stark replies. “We need public sentiment on our side, especially if you still intend to arrest Captain America.”
“Next time, don't expect my men to protect your gaggle of reporters.”

“Hopefully, there won't be a next time.”

Fury calls out instructions to the Red Hunt – one hour shift changes, a one day rotation cycle before the next crew is called in. “I want all eyes on that portal day and night. Something comes through, kill it where it stands.” And with barely a nod, he excuses himself, with Hill following close behind.
The Sanctum Sanctorum

Chapter Summary

Logan doubts.

It's midnight when she finishes chalking her spell, a great circle across Ayers rock. Already, her sorcerer eyes can see the flush of magic light across the horizon. She's connected them all, the great ley lines, filled them to brim with ancient tongues and ritual spells. The influx is sheer, pale orange power. Like a sunset or sunrise drawn in darkness. Months she's taken to carve out her enchantment, and already the results are astounding. By morning, she'll have collected enough energy to open a door to the Red Dimension.

Stepping onto a teleportation disc, Magik disappears into the depths of Limbo, coming out the other end at the Sanctum Sanctorum. Exhausted, but still able, she taps at the door and waits for Dr. Strange to answer. “It's done,” she tells him. He nods.

“Tomorrow then,” he tells her. There is an urgency to him then, small movements that betray his anxiousness. Though he's sure that he can survive the journey, he's not sure about the rest of the world. “I need the Book of Mer Serval.”

Blue eyes widen. “That is a dangerous book,” she says cautiously. She was told at the beginning of her tutelage to do as he said, not to question, but still, hearing that book's name made her wonder.

“And these are dangerous times.” The Mer Serval is an unnatural tome, dealing with the spirit realm, and all those places in between. It is a book that speaks to the dead, or creates them. But it is not the death that he's after, nor the conversation. He looks for a different spell altogether.

Magik returns post haste, the large volume carried with both hands. Being a child of Limbo and the student of Belasco, she knows intimately the feel of dark magic. “There are demon spells in here,” she warns him, holding tight to the book. More than anyone, she knows what happens when one casts a demon spell.

He nods and takes the book. “We'll leave in the morning. Please let the others know.”

This is not a book he's studied before, simply one that he knows is powerful. It was Wong who let him in on the secrets of it, captured it from their teacher's library and stored it here in the Sanctum. In the wrong hands, these spells could do terrible, terrible things. The book, perhaps more than any other in his library needs guarding, specifically for the spell that he needs to learn.

Magik seeks out Logan first, knocking politely on his door before bursting in. “The rift will be ready in the morning.”

She wants to leave, fulfill her duty and go to bed, but even her half-tarnished soul quiets at the sight of the Wolverine. In a daze, he stares at adamantium claws, rubbing his fingertips against them, watching them bleed then heal. A puddle of blood pools at his feet signifying that he's been doing this for some hours. “Logan?”

He jolts from his haze, stabbing claws towards the source of sound, and pulls back just in time to
avoid gutting the young blonde who called to him. “Why are you here?” he asks, his tone gruff and angry.

“I'm opening the portal tomorrow. I came to let you know.” She swears that she can see his heart sink to his toes. She watches him for some moments, then takes a seat on the small stool in the corner. “Not interrupting, am I?” He doesn't answer.

She talks about the mission ahead of them, about the ley lines and their significance. The Malvern Hills and the Great Pyramids of Giza, the Nazca Lines, and the great energies that run between them all. Three dozen circles across the globe, each as intricate as the next, calling out for the Earth's great energies. She tells him how long she studied the circles, how long she had to practice. Strange corrected her formations for days, scouring the details with an eagle eye and intention. “If he really is Earth's defense against a cosmic assault, then it will answer the call to rescue him.”

He knows that she's trying to distract him, keep him occupied until he's comfortable enough with her to speak. She's a wily one, more intuitive than she lets on. “I'll be okay--”

“Of course you will. You aren't the problem. Cyclops is.”

The statement hits him hard, stops his heart and stutters his breath. “I don't want to kill him,” he says quietly.

“Then don't.”

While it seems simple, he hearkens back to Strange's words about survival. “He asked me once to kill him. I said no.”

“Then say no again.”

“It ain't that simple. If he brought me back to--”

“You know, he never spoke poorly of you,” she says. “Not after you left Utopia, not when you threatened to kill him. He respected you and your decisions, swore to keep you safe even though you hated him. So, if you say no, then he'll respect that, too.”

Guilt stings his eyes, makes him wince. “If not a killer, then I don't know what he wants me to be.”

“I'm sure you'll figure it out.” She leaves him then, exits his small chamber and goes down the hall to inform the others of their mission time.

It's a solemn thing to watch her leave, as he's alone again with his too many thoughts. He thinks back to simpler times, when the rivalry between them had brought them to blows. Over Jean, over orders. There was a time when it didn't matter. Whatever Cyclops told him to do, he wanted to do the opposite. He told himself it was because Cyclops was a prick, that he made the wrong decisions, that he was too stoic, too distant. He remembered looking into red visor, staring at the man's emotionless face, and spitting back at him with all of the rage that he could muster.

But he also remembers the same man rushing into danger to save him.

Time and again – though he had no healing factor or super strength – Scott stood front and center, pulling his teammates out of harm's way, keeping them as safe as he could. His plans were devised according to the strengths and weaknesses of his team, keeping them alive was always a priority. “I'm restarting X-force,” he said quietly one evening at the Eyrie. He'd been awake for weeks mulling over this decision, a last resort in desperate times. Already, Logan could see the decision eating away at him. For the first time, he was ordering death. “There's too many forces trying to kill
us. We can’t keep them all at bay.”

It was the first step off the path of Xavier, but not one that Wolverine disagreed with. He'd long thought the boy scout was too easy on their enemies, too upright and uptight. And that first step was a doozy.

He took the deaths personally, with each one a burden upon him, and they piled up quickly. If he was stoic before, he became steel after, with nothing – not even Emma Frost – coming close to touching him. He became a solitary man, fighting a never-ending battle to protect them all, sacrificing himself, his ideals, the very core of his nature to keep them from going extinct.

This is not a man he wants to kill.

“I’ve never been good at obeying orders,” he speaks into the air. “But, you should be used to that by now.”
The Baxter Building

Chapter Summary

The telescope gets closer.

A hundred pictures over a twenty mile radius every minute, and the scientists devour them. Hunked down with magnifying glasses and refractive lenses, they scour the pictures for signs of the Red Wave.

They are mesmerized by the fragments, the floating pieces that seem to come to life at times, hosting moving images like a thought played over glass. They try to match the sequences together, to figure out what is being shown, but they are just as quickly put back to work by the calm words of Hank McCoy.

Hank McCoy knows what this is. He's seen the images before. He's lived through them. He knows that what he's seeing are memories – millions of them, played out over shattered surface. He knows that he's witnessing the broken mind of Cyclops.

With each new picture, there is hope of finding the X-men leader. As the telescope journeys closer to the coordinates calculated by Reed Richards – a complicated mix of red shift and cosmic geometry that Beast is still mesmerized by – the scientists become more excited. The structures begin to grow bigger, have more substance, their breaking points more easily sussed out and obvious. And endless heave of stairwells and mighty obelisks piecing apart at the seams; half chewed hallways and chambers, the remnants of hallways and writing desks. “It's like a palace,” one of the scientists remarks, quickly drawing up a rendition of what the place should look like. “One that's imploded.”

On the fragments, Beast sees himself in an earlier stage of mutancy. Dark hair and wide feet, hands that could surround a football. He was young then, barely seventeen, the oldest of the original team, and possibly the smartest. He was not an arrogant boy, and his curiosity had not yet been dimmed by the constant battles and plights that life constantly threw at them.

He was happy then, jovial. He enjoyed the conversations at Harry's Hide Away, the open lab for him to explore, the mansion, his teammates – even Scott. While Bobby thought him a stick in the mud, and Warren felt that he should be in charge, Beast found Scott to be an intriguing subject. Quiet – except in their frequent training sessions – and calm, stoic even as a fifteen year old child, he was perhaps the only one that he could speak to on an adult level. The only one who didn't shrug him off when he had his epiphanies.

Scott stayed busy most of the day, between maintenance on the Danger Room, ordering supplies, filling out assessments and reports, he had the job of three people, but he did it without question. It was Scott who took care of their daily living, assuring that they had enough food and drink to last them between orders, toothpaste, clean sheets. He did this between classes, and in his free time, he would work on the Blackbird.

The Blackbird was his own design, refurbished from and built from spare parts from stealth planes. He had a vast knowledge of planes and space engines, and all of their accouterments. From detection shields to vertical thrusters, he’d built it all from scratch, but was still not happy. It took too much fuel, wasn't fast enough, was too slow on the take off, too wobbly in its landing. It was his pet
project, his hobby, but the mechanics of what he wanted had gone far beyond his knowledge. He read voraciously, found technical manuals, blue prints, whatever he could get his hands on, and constantly updated his systems.

Though Hank wasn't necessarily interested in jet propulsion systems, he was interested in understanding their fearless leader. The kid was quiet, unnervingly so at times. He shared nothing of his childhood, his personal thoughts. He was closed off and distant, preferring to work instead of celebrate. But Henry knew that it took more than just a head for missions to keep the team together, it also took friendship, and so that was why he took helping Scott in the evenings.

At first, the time was quiet, with mostly Beast chattering about this or that, but weeks later, the boy began to speak, ask questions, prove that he had listened all that time. Though details of his personal life, his thoughts, and dreams were scant, he showed interest in his comrade, and that in turn lent trust to the others.

Henry McCoy misses those days, when they were young. Like a thorn, it aches inside of him.

“Sir,” one of the technicians calls him over. “Look at this.”

He shows him a picture of the landmass that Richards had foretold. A bright red white light some hundreds of miles away, exactly where Reed said he should be. “That's it,” Beast says. “That's what we're looking for.” In a matter of moments, he calls into coms, stations everyone at the coordinates for the light. “Let's get close enough to that thing to make sure that the Red Hunt can survive it.”

And, after, he contacts Tony Stark, who will lead the team into the Red Dimension, and put his friend out of his misery.

It doesn't take long for Tony and Reed to arrive. Both harried and fresh out of bed, they are not yet dressed to their normal standards. They spy the picture, and then watch as the telescope gets closer to their target. It's a phenomenal thing to see the chaos of the Red Dimension. As they near, they have to navigate, making sure to avoid the failing structures and debris. The light grows brighter as they close in on their mark, less a twinkling star in the night sky and more a torrent of out of control energy. “Shit,” Stark awes as the telescope begins to pick up on clearer pictures.

What they see then are bombs, thousands upon thousands of them. Some piled as high as they can see, leaving little room for maneuvering. “That's not fun,” Tony says.

“We're in his mindscape.” All eyes turn to Emma Frost. “This is what we did to him.” Her walk is far more casual than what should be appropriate, the glimmer of her sadness hung at the corner of her mouth. “I can fix him, Tony.”

“I can't trust you with that, Emma. If this is indeed what his mind looks like, you shouldn't be trusted with anything ever again.” In the corners of the masses, there are nightmares, living and whole. They run amok midst the debris, dancing over thoughts and memories. Tony sees himself on one of the fragments, a great battle that he is losing. In it, he is a million of himself, all propelling down upon a singular Cyclops. He opens up his optic beams, taking them out by the hundreds, destroying them, disintegrating them. Stark feels the loss. “Is he threatening us?”

Reed shakes his head, more concerned with the wealth of bombs and his telescope than he is Ironman's imaginary deaths. “We can't get closer,” he says. “Not without risking the telescope.” He assumes that entering the Red Dimension will be safe, as the telescope has been here for days without even a hint of threat, but he can't guarantee their lives once they finally find their query.

Stark knows that there's no guarantee of the Red Hunt team coming back alive. Be it himself or Emma, Reed or the mighty Thor, he knows that they could all die here as soon as Summers
unleashes another blast. “I don't think he wants to kill us,” he admits. “We can use that. Get to him first.”

Emma agrees with the assessment. “He doesn't want to hurt anyone,” she says quietly. “That's why we need to stop him.” Only Beast notices the sideways glance she casts at Stark, though he's not sure what it means.

“Well, I suppose we're going to have to take our chances for the good of the Earth,” Stark calls. “We leave in the morning.”
The Mine

Chapter Summary

Fists and doubt.

It's not a trial, but it feels like one. The news of Jean's treachery spreads through the mine like wildfire, from the mouths of babes who overheard to the adults who catch the whispers. The trouble only escalates when Cable shows up with a newspaper in his hand declaring that Cyclops is still alive.

Storm leads the damage control, declares that this is all a trick of the Shadow King, that Tony Stark is trying to defame the mutants further so that he can gather control, but even she accedes once Jean confesses. She says that she was young, that she's sorry, that she didn't understand at first, not until she was too immersed to pull herself free.

Cable hears no excuse. Gun at level, he's ready to kill her on site, regardless of how much he loves her, but Rachel intervenes, her last second compassion overcoming her own threat to do the same.

In the hallways, the children cry, scared of the sudden tumult that surrounds them. Kitty tries to shield them, to tear them away from the arguments and hide them in the tiny chambers, but she is unsuccessful with Tatsuya. Pocket sits in the corner of the common room, hands over his ears, feet kicking. He refuses to move, even at his father's behest. He shrugs them off, gnashes his teeth, fights them with everything he has, never once vocalizing his desire to remain put.

Warren, perhaps, is the most disturbed by the commotion, his skin turning evening blue and his blonde brow low against his eyes. It's Psylocke that he is most hurt by, that she would lie to him for all of these years. That she - of all people - who believed in independence, would dare to take another's power for herself. He calls out Jean's flimsy excuses of wanting to protect them all, her desire for strength, and calls her selfish. He wants them gone, all of them – the telepaths – anyone who had a hand in destroying the mind of his friend, but Storm is against it.

She needs Jean, the Cuckoos, Psylocke, Xi'an, Dani Moonstar, and all of the others. She needs their abilities to keep their small enclave calm, for there is too much fear, too much trauma locked up in one place. They are a small community here – just 200 – she can't handle it all on her own.

Cable shakes his head. “How the mighty of fallen.” The disdain in his eyes is obvious. With a clenched jaw and white-knuckled fist, he admonishes her for her weakness. “This isn't leadership, this hiding. This is fucking fear.”

Storm cracks lightning in response, threatens the man with it, threatens them all. But, it's Rogue who throws the first punch when Cable says that those in the Undertow can rot for all he cares. She reacts with a fist to steel jaw. She is countered by Rachel, who has no qualms in using her telekinesis to throw the southern belle into a far wall.

Bobby slides in with an ice wall, hoping to cool down the situation before it gets worse, but Warren calls him out quickly, yelling that he's betraying their friend by siding with the telepaths. Also hoping to subdue the fight, Kitty thrusts a phased hand through Angel's chest, threatening to pull out his heart, but Nightcrawler senses her hesitation and ports the blue-skinned mutant out of the way.
The Cuckoos are unapologetic, feeling that they had a right to the power that Cyclops wasn't using. Joining with Jean, they use their hive mind to scramble Cable's senses, thus temporarily ending his onslaught against a near-raging Storm.

Colossus protects Kitty from a sudden lunge by Hellion who is disturbed that the X-men are letting one of their own die. Dust interferes with a sand blast, blinding the young man with a swirling storm so that Piotr can get his love clear.

Armor attempts to disrupt the hive mind of the Cuckoos with a desperate kick at Phoebe. It gives enough of a break for Cable to jolt back into action. Grabbing one of the young blondes by the arm, he wrestles her into a sleeper hold, choking her just long enough to make her fall unconscious. Storm reviles him for the maneuver, calling the Frost clones innocent children that should be protected, and she unleashes her own tactics against the older psion.

Storm doesn't consider the metallic chamber that they're in. All she thinks about is the rage as she watches this battle progress. Drawing long ebony arms above her head, she calls down a mass of lightning into the center of the room. It snaps and cracks, electrifying floors and walls, so brilliant in its light that even the airborne mutants are struck. En masse they fall unconscious, their blood heated and their bodies quivering.

Hovering just outside the room, her little wings fluttering, Sarah Goodwind – with tears in her eyes - holds Pocket out of harm's way. She looks to Pixie, who floats at her side, scared of what has just happened. “It's okay,” Megan Gwynn soothes. She's only seen this much anger once – at the reading of Charles Xavier's will. She ushers Sarah on, tells her to make the kids some sandwiches, that she'll handle things from here.

Pixie is not a brave girl. While she has her moments, she doesn't feel herself a hero. Including now. As the electric storm draws to a close, she checks pulses and life signs, teleporting Mindee Cuckoo and Hellion to the med lab for Dr. Reyes, and then waits for the others to wake up.

It's Storm who wakes first, her body most unaffected by the travesty. She sits at first, with Megan's help, and finally gains her bearings enough to stand. Cable wakes next, still displeased with Ororo's defense of her friend. “My father sacrificed himself so that you could live. I find it ironic, now, that you use that life to hide yourself away and do nothing.”

She watches him walk away, her old doubts now coming back to haunt her. She feels the weariness in her soul. Many years ago, she would have stood her ground against the Red Hunt, but time has culled her fury. She's no longer the fighter that she once was. “What would you have me do? Kill Jean Grey?”

“At the very least, I didn't expect you to protect her.” It was so easy to disavow Cyclops, yet she's willing to stand for Jean. “Good luck, Ororo. I hope you find your peace.”
The Red Dimension

Chapter Summary

Stark and his team enter the Red Dimension.

“You are weak.”

Emma Frost knows how to get there, to reach him. Through the psionic mines and horrible shades, she knows the paths and where they lead. A dozen paths, and she knows them by all heart. For she used to live here, used to hold her strength here, used to keep him from falling apart.

“You don't deserve love.”

The whispers are louder than they ever were. Their echoes vibrating over the caverns left to ruin. They're creepy, or so Stark says as he tilts his head to the phantom voices. He can finally understand why the man went crazy, if this is what they did to him.

“No one wants you.”

It's the nightmares that they have to watch for. They'll attack anything that enters here. Twisted versions of friends and family, armed to the teeth with psionic weaponry. They'll sever the synapses, cut through thoughts. They are not here to protect, they are here to destroy.

“You are a fool.”

Emma's favorite shadow, however, is that of Jean Grey, and she can be seen hovering over the bombs. She watches them, her green eyes grown black, her fingers long and spindled, covered in decay. Dressed in Phoenix wear, she's everything that Scott ever wanted, now twisted to show the true reality. He dreams of this nightmare almost daily. She attacks him in his sleep, digs her claws down his spine, cuts him into shreds. Still, he never got over her. Her whispers were too many.

“Control. You need to stay in control.”

Tony asks again about the mines, what they're for, what they do. Emma rolls crystal blue eyes, her mind already occupied with trying to keep the shade of Grey at bay. The spirit was made too strong. Psylocke had buffed it some years ago, as did Xavier in an effort to toss Frost from her throne. But Emma was the one who created it. She knew the inner workings, how easy it was to subdue her. Though it takes great effort, she manages to oust the thing from their path, send her further on into the mind, make her look for other prey. She knows this prey will be Scott, it always is, but she has hope that Scott will soon be free of it.

“How many times will you let her die in order to save yourself?”

Stark tires of being ignored. He has no care of her psychic battles as she fends off the nightmares, so he keeps his attention on the giant orbs of destruction before them. Glowing and ominous, they are smooth or jagged, lining walls and ceiling. To count them would take years. Three times he attempts to touch them, only to be batted away by Reed. He reminds the man of Emma's warnings, that these are not to be trifled with.
“She doesn’t love you.”

Emma calls them to yet another stop as she stares down the nightmare of Xavier. This was his creation, his own self turned to shadow. He used it many times to beat them back – Emma, Jean, the other telepaths. It's powerful and frightening, imbued with psychic energy, with teeth that gnash and gnarled legs. It floats above them, blasting them with psionic waves, taking them each to their knees.

“They will all abandon you.”

In diamond form, Emma can save herself the pain, but she’s unable to fight and free them of the telepathic hold. She stands, her diamond fist drawn back, but the apparition floats upward out of her reach. With a thunderous yell, Thor breaks free of the psychic pain and lobs his hammer towards the ghost. It passes freely through the nightmare, bashing into several mines behind it.

“Everyone hates you.”

A whorl of energy escapes the bombs, a host of shadows and a flood of new whispers. Memories fly like shards of glass, piercing already stained walls with traps and snares. A pained scream in the distance and the shaking of ground, Emma's eyes widen, realizing that her love could easily veer out of control.

“You're worthless.”

A diamond glare from Emma and Thor shrinks back suddenly wondering why he's here. This is not a fight of brute force, this is a battle of the mind, and he doesn't have the ability to wage it. The nightmares surround them, images of Alex and Kurt, Piotr and Rogue. They are monstrous things, tall and ragged. As the White Queen holds them off, she makes sure to admonish the Norseman at her rear.

“You're better off dead.”

Sage and Elias Bogan held their own little war within Scott's mind, trumping each other with phantasms and bombs, digging into precious memories in order to turn the wealth of power against each other. Their bombs are often the most devastating, and though Emma doesn't know which one created Alex, she knows she is to be wary.

“They'll always mock you.”

Alex's blast curves through them all, knocking them backwards and to the ground. Emma grows to diamond, blocks the pain of searing synapses and quickly becomes flesh again to connect her team to the astral plane. She arms them each with shields and weapons, and warns them that if she is unconscious, their ability to fight here is damned.

“You deserve to die.”

Their effort is mighty, with Thor flushing his hammer to Rogue's skull, slamming her back into a far wall. He can feel the energy of the Red Dimension, feel it burn within his blood, but Emma cautions him. Drawing up on it will have dire consequences.

“Control, Scott. Or, you'll kill them all.”

Stark lunges for an airborne Xavier, dragging the phantom to the ground, his astral suit largely like his own. A repulsor to the head, he attempts to boil the brains of the ghost, but close is exactly where the spirit wants him to be. For it's up close that his power is amplified by touch. Two hands to the head, a blood grip on temples, Xavier pounds Stark with psychic waves, rummaging through his life,
tearing apart those things he holds most dear. It's Reed Richards that pulls him away from a distance. Drawing Tony back until he's clear of the monstrosity. He can feel the adrenaline surge inside of him. Mr. Fantastic is ready for a fight.

“They're afraid of you.”

A multi-front battle, Emma must not only concentrate on the nightmares in her wake, but also keeping the others connected to the astral plane. Her movements are sluggish, distracted as keen blue eyes constantly swarm the area to assure that the others are still alive. Another blitz of power by Alex, and Emma is shot backwards into another mine, releasing yet more memories and whispers, and another nightmare. A distant scream and the shaking of ground threaten her balance even further.

“She didn't choose you, Scott. She pitied you.”

Immediately to her side, Thor stops her from falling further back. They both barely avoid the rush of Proudstar, moving just in time to avoid the long, curved blades in his hands. Though she can't turn diamond, she is still a remarkable warrior in the astral plane, and she finally draws her sword, angling it to Warpath's chest, she heaves the thing through the air, piercing heart. The image of Warpath fades, goes on to haunt elsewhere, but Emma is left defenseless against the next assault.

“Relax and they all die.”

Nightcrawler ports to the sword, picking it up as easy as thread, wielding the thing like a wild knife in the jungle. He hacks at the air, driving both Emma and Thor back. Getting cut by the sword will not only render they synapses momentarily dead, but it will also cut their ties to the astral realm – something they can't afford.

“They don't trust you.”

Blocking each thrust and parry with a long white shield, Frost protects them both from the range of the sword, until Nightcrawler ports again, this time to their rear. He swipes at Thor, missing with the sword, but delivering a terrible blow to the stomach with his tail. Thor cannot bleed in astral form, but he feels the pain all the same.

“Logan's going to kill you.”

Thor falls purposefully forward, attempting to collapse upon the teleporting mutant, but Nightcrawler is too fast. He ports to the walls, bouncing across telepathic mines, laughing and dancing. He is then struck by a newly conscious Ironman who knocks him off of his pedestal and beats him into oblivion. The shade fades, and Stark smiles. He glances back at Emma to see if his heroism made it's mark.

“You're not a mutant. You're an abomination.”

She's too concentrated on Alex to pay attention, however. Another blast which she narrowly avoids by dropping to the ground, she rolls under the bevvy of mines and comes to standing just behind Reed. She can take Xavier, she's the only that can, but she needs full concentration. She needs to drop their connection.

“You're not needed here.”

She implores them to make haste with Alex to find a way to defeat him and fast. Xavier is biding his time, his psychic assaults are far more powerful than he's let on. Reed blocks Alex's energy with the blade of Emma's sword. It reels him backwards, then to the side, but he stays on his feet and in astral form.
“You're a puppet, not a leader.”

Stark comes at him from behind, propelling himself forwards, while Reed battles from the front. He attempts to wrap his arms around the nightmare's legs, pull him down, and keep him still, but Tony bashes in far too fast.

“They don't respect you.”

Alex tumbles forward, knocked to his knees, and with a bellowing voice, he screams out his intent. He will kill them all. The power unleashed is remarkable in its scope, pushing outward to cover the area. Thrown to the ground and in incredible pain, they can do nothing but wait for the barrage to stop.

“You doubt yourself because you're a fool.”

Xavier takes the torment to add his own powers to the table. His psychic wave curls across their minds, a bloody grip into thought and memory. He intends to make them pay for the disturbance, for being here, for trying to conquer the mind that he so rightfully deserves.

“There's a reason you're all alone.”

Emma fights her way through the psionic pain, stabbing her fingers into her scalp to force herself to concentrate. She's better than this, tougher than this, and she can be stronger. She finds the nearest memory – a Christmas star hung in an icy window, sweet, humble, smelling of nutmeg and cinnamon, displaced in time and space – and in her hands it becomes the harbinger of Armageddon. She threads the fear through light and sound, darkens it, hampers it. It smells of death, the dead, rot.

“Keep your distance or you'll hurt them, too.”

She can feel it. For the first time in years, she can feel him inside her mind, his power pushing against the boundaries of her strength, filling her up and making her feel whole once again. It's in this push, this simple twist of memory, that she splays her hands in the air and lashes out with a telepathic bolt of her own. Xavier is banished in an instant, but Alex is another story.

“You deserve the punishment.”

Another memory – the moment he saw Jean standing outside on the sidewalk, the nerve-struck boy and his beating heart, at once enamored and in love. She hates him, she devours him, she wakes him in the night and stabs him with her cold, hard claws. She wants to destroy him. She's a monster.

“All you'll ever know is pain.”

Another boost of power, enough to project a shield to protect them all from the next wave of concentric energies. She strengthens her armor, the white of it shining like a star, blinding the younger Summers. His head turned, she forms a lance – diamond tipped and deadly. She rushes him, propels herself forward and stabs the nightmare through the neck. He disappears to some other part of the mind, waiting for his chance to fight them again.

“You're nothing special.”

Blazing with power, she quickly begins to work on the others, slowly reconnecting thoughts to mind, mind to body, reforming their memories from the traces. If only this could have worked with Scott, but too many traps and snares, too many bombs and psychic mines, each connected to a pathway in his mind. Fixing even one of his memories meant destroying a dozen more.
“You're only worth is in your sacrifice.”

She's tempted now to take from him further. To regain the hold she once had. She could do it. She could take it all now that the others have abandoned him. Turn him to ash and take everything she could ever want, a whole dimension of power.

“Even your own father couldn't stand you.”

But, just as she reaches out into the ether, searches for memories and former paths, she gets a glimpse of the pain that he's in and withdraws. She loves him more than the power that he holds and because of that she keeps only the power that she's gained. With it, she'll wipe him clean, start from scratch, rebuild her love from the nothingness that she will make of him. And with his power, she'll bring peace to the world and happiness to him.

“No one will ever love you.”
The Red Dimension

Chapter Summary

An uninvited guest.

It's not supposed to be like this. This mind. This space. It's supposed to be a better mind, strict, controlled, organized, not bleeding and embattled. This is the mind of Scott Summers, and he walked into it knowing that things would be bad, but he never imagined this. Not in a million years.

Logan wonders how much strength it took to ignore the whispers that are never silent; how often he had to push past the discrepancies of a thousand memories to make the decisions that he did; when he started fighting them in the back his mind; how many times they'd killed him.

He watches as he stabs Scott Summers in the gut, rips his claws upward through chin and hair, killing the man on sight, and then stood over top as his body pieces itself back together again. In the distance, he can hear the pain of death, how haunting and sad. The breath of barely-in-control, heaved and rasped, his voice broken by yet another stab to body, one that takes out his lungs.

He fights a never ending battle against millions of foes, all of them splayed out on screens that looks like glass. They make the walls, the ceiling, the floor of this place. And again, Logan kills him. The Red Dimension shakes in his death.

Steve Rogers is as equally disturbed as Logan and Alex by the visuals surrounding them. He's sickened by the blood, near nauseous with the violence. “He's destroying us,” he says quietly, choking back bile and tension.

“No. He's destroying himself.” Alex recognizes this because it's in his own mind as well. A place of tactics, of strategy, the place where Scott goes in order to train them for missions. It was Scott who taught him how to lead a team, how to best find the weaknesses of his enemies, to stay a step ahead. But, this – this is out of control.

They can feel the tension in this mind, the pain, the fear. They can hear the whispers and see the psionic mines. They can sense the traps and the dangers of the lurking nightmares. “We really should have known,” Logan mumbles as he looks around at the broken thoughts and debris of memory.

In hindsight, he can see them, all those little clues and hints that something wasn't right. He can remember those hushed conversations, the psychic tension in the air. “We never asked if he was okay.”

He'd cradled a child in his arms, knelt down to soothe a woman's tears, gave his rations to a man half-starved. He talked to them all, became their confidante, their rock. He wasn't the same.

Logan kept asking him if he was okay, and Scott kept replying that he was fine. He plugged him about Apocalypse, that last fight with Jean, his weekend with his father. But Scott kept his mouth shut, saying nothing, revealing nothing. But he'd changed, became a different man, broken somehow, though he acted as if he were whole. “You should get some sleep, Cyke.”

Ruby red visor turned. “If I sleep, I'll disappear completely.”
At the time, he reckoned it to Apocalypse. The man had been given a single weekend before being pushed back onto the field leading the massive rescue operation in Genosha. Wolverine had been against it, told them all that it was madness, but Jean said that he was fine, that Apocalypse was gone, all remnants of him. Xavier agreed. He'd filtered through Scott's mind himself, there were no more traces of Apocalypse.

But there was. “He showed me things, Logan,” Scott said some days later. “Things I never thought possible.” He was cold, distant. Logan didn't press him then, figuring the man had a right to his privacy.

He regrets that now, and times before and after. Dozens of cryptic conversations between himself and Scott, times where Summers had revealed just a touch too much. The telepaths counted on the ignorance of the rest of them, how easy it was to turn a blind eye to him. “We really should have known.”

“Don't blame yourself,” Steve says. “Blame those that did this to him.”

They continue on, past the miles of battles flashed in screens, through the tunnels that are near to collapsing. They make their way past bombs and nightmares, blinded to the shades by Strange's spells. He walks them to a crossroads, a path to the right and to the left. “It's not safe,” he says, his hand upon the walls. “Something's wrong here.”

“This whole place is something wrong,” Logan barks.

“No, there's something dark down here. Something evil.”

“Apocalypse.” They all turn to look at Alex. “Can't you feel him?”

Logan shivers at the mention, his heart racing. “Can't be,” he says. “Jean and Nathan, they separated him --”

“You were the Horseman of Death, Logan. I know you can feel him, just as I can having been the Living Monolith.” Alex wants to see it, to see the madman who had ruined his brother's life, destroyed everything he'd held dear. He wants to kill him.

The tunnel is small, barely tall enough for Logan to stand with his head hunched down. The others crawl on their knees, straining at points when the ceiling gets lower. Down they go, into the den of shadows. They come to a large cavern, deep within the recesses of the subconscious, a place uncontrolled by thought or deed, but even here, the whispers follow and the trails of the telepaths. The walls here are jagged with missing pieces and added entries. Sharp and dangerous. And all around them, hundreds of doors with iron bars, three stories up and sometimes higher. They've come to the prison. And their presence here does not go unnoticed.

They call out to them – the prisoners – bashing against the wrought iron doors, banging their heads against psionic walls. They scream and yell, threaten to tear them to pieces, to rip out their lungs and spines and bones. “What the hell?” Gray eyes can't hide their shock. “Did they – Did they do this to him, too?” Logan asks as he looks into the prison cells. He recognizes these creatures, these villains, these things that Scott spent his whole life fighting against. He can pick out the horrendous tone of Onslaught, the words of Apocalypse, the threat of the Void.

“No,” Strange surmises running a smooth hand over the cage doors. “No, I don't think they did. I think he did this himself.” The psychic energy is far different from the telepaths. It's unformed, not made from conscious thought. They are strong cells, impervious, though the creatures inside of them
howl. Except for one – except for Apocalypse. Broken, barely locked, En Sabah Nur drags his sharpened nails across the red-light planks. He screeches and yells, calls Scott his own, a piece of his flesh.

“If he escapes --” Alex cuts himself short and looks to Strange for answers.

But, Strange has none. He reminds them again that he is not a master of this mind, and that understanding will take much time. The blush of spell falls over him, and he places a hand upon the iron bars and is suddenly bolted back through the air. He lands on the ground with a thud, and stares wide eyed at the flickering light of iron bars. “And, that's why the telepaths haven't messed with it,” he says. “Quite a defense he has, even if he doesn't know this exists.”

Strange assumes that Cyclops – and his infinite energy – once had telepathic powers, powers that were broken sometime in his childhood. It's the only way he could make such a prison and not reason out it's existence. “He has no thought here. Nothing that makes me think he's aware of it.”

As for the prisoners escaping, there's only one thing he knows for sure – if they escape, they will attack. And that could be detrimental to them all, especially if one of the more nefarious creatures that he's locked away manages to possess him. “Can you imagine this much power in the hands of the Phoenix?”

All eyes float upward to the screeching bird so far above them. She's magnificent and dark, angry with her captivity. But, she's not the only one here, or so Steven realizes when he touches the jagged walls. “These weren't done by a telepath,” he says of the cut marks and breaks. “These were done by the Phoenix. Another one. Trying to free herself.”

“What do you mean another Phoenix?” The news makes Steve's heart jump inside of his chest.

“The one he created and the one Wanda trapped here with her spell.”
Chapter Summary

An impossible battle.

Like a wound inside of his mind, he can feel them. Treading closer, step by step. They're tired, weary, outside of themselves within the maddening spin of his thoughts. Sometimes they disappear into parts of his mind hidden to him, parts he's never seen, parts the telepaths blocked from him.

The spell he cradled for so long has shattered, its green and gold slowly dusting upwards. It will start again, his lack of control. He can feel it already. He can feel the build of energy behind his eyes, in his hands, in his feet. His mind burns as he tries to contain it, as it fights against his will.

His own mind betrays him.

The Phoenix bows her fiery beak to his ear, whispering her words of logic and despair. She speaks inside of his mind, her cool voice echoing out over snowy landscape. She can take this, all of it, his power. She can punish those that did this to him, crush their minds, their souls. She can avenge him, she can take revenge against those who tried to punish her. All he has to do is let go, give her back control, finish what he started all those years ago. “No one will hurt you ever again, Scott. No one. All you have to do is let go.”

Deep inside his mind, he can feel her, the warmth of her. She's enticing.

He stares at the crevice, sees the flames as they boil up, and in his moment of distraction, he's killed by Gambit. The explosion rockets through his spine, spurring pain down arms and legs, wrecks against his synapses and neural waves. He can feel it – his power – just behind it, filling up the spaces between his harried thoughts.

“Let me help you, Scott,” she whispers in his ear. “Stop fighting, let me take this burden from you.” She loves him. She always has. He just needs to trust her, that she'll take it all away. And for a moment, she does. The pain, the suffering, the endless maze of a mind, the burgeoning energy inside of him. Stroking his face with flaming talon, she takes it all away, leaving him in peace. “Let go, Scott.”

It floods him. When she removes her talon from his cheek, it builds inside of him so quickly that he struggles to hang on. He yells in his effort. Pulls at hair with pale, sunless fingers, claws at the pain behind his eyes, stabs his arms. On the ground, knees to chest, he fights himself to not let it swallow him, just in time for the battles to once again equal his loss. As the pain of death shreds across him, his body contorts, his arms and legs flail.

She smiles. She knows that he is close. Close to giving up; close to giving her the freedom that she so desires.

She loves him and she hates him. She hates him for forgetting her. For not remembering the promise she made, the one that she's kept all these years. That he blames her, that he thinks her an enemy.

She remembers him as that tiny thing, that small creature that begged her company. His hands as they
curled around her feathers, the way she cradled him through the pain. He's forgotten it all, thinks her a consort of Jean Grey, not his protector, his defender, his pulse.

She watches as he writhes against the mind fall of energy and battles. To watch his anguish is beautiful, as magnificent as swallowing a star whole, inhaling its brilliance and its life. She pushes him further, lights even more of his war within. More battles, more foes. If he breaks against them, then she is free, and with his power, she can remake the universe as many times as she likes.

She'd pushed him to the edge then, when she possessed him. Absorbed it all, cracked apart the shell of his mind to expose the wounds within. She drank from his power, let it fill her up. So much, so much. But he was still too strong, his will indomitable. He begged them for death, pushed back against her, against himself, nearly overwhelmed by the dual force of their strength. And in the end, it was Jean who grasped the overload of power. From the ashes of her death, the weakness that came from her humanly demise, she wrested it away from him, pulled the Phoenix towards herself, and left him scattered in a million pieces.

In the ashes of his mind, he tells her that they are coming, that they'll end him. She tells him that they'll betray him. “Have you learned nothing?” The flames roar across his winter memory. They flash against him, tempting him with warmth and ease. “But if you let me, I can make them pay.”

There's a comfort in her, something that soothes, that reminds him of love. He can feel its lull, its calm. Indeed, he could end it all, as he wants. Take no more care, no more responsibility, be nothing more than a beating heart and absent mind. It could all go away. Sewing himself back together, he peers down into the crevice of flames. “You'll kill them?”

“If you wish.”

“And if I don't?”

“Well, that won't matter once you give me control.”

They're closing in on him. He can feel Emma slip her fingers into his mind, test the waters, try to hold him back. She grabs onto the pieces of him, those old pieces that she used to own. It hurts. He's going to lose control.

Also getting closer is his brother, Logan, the sorcerer and the one who can't decide if he should live or die. He can feel it, the back and forth, how he awes at the damage, the strength, and inside he quakes. “Logan will kill me.”

“Logan will try to save you.” She presses down on him with talon and wing. “But, he shouldn't. You're too broken, Scott. Only I can fix you.” As she pierces him, he cries out, the life slowly bleeding out of him.

The nightmares come to his pained call, surrounding him, feeding from him. They bite at his neck, his arms, this legs. They plunge themselves into his memories, devouring what little is left. He begs them for mercy, tries to pull himself away, to fight out from underneath their grasps. But he's lost. He can't tell which battle's which. A part of him severs, undone by dual images and too many fronts.

The energy rises up from within him, spilling forth in sharpened spines and frenetic blasts. He tries to pull it back in, but there are too many deaths, too much pain, too much doubt. He begs the Phoenix for mercy, calls to her, cries for her. But, she refuses. “You're going to kill them, Scott.”

Clinging to the edge of his sanity, to the razor of that massive power, he begins the fight for their
lives – those that are coming, that will finally see his end. He kicks and punches, grabs and breaks.
He snaps their necks, severs their spines, bludgeons them to the ground. He's not sure which are real
and which are fake, if anything is real in this bright red world, but he fights them anyway, refusing to
give in. He can't kill them now, not again. Not when they're so close.
Breath heavy, body broken, Cyclops lands a kick to Jean Grey's chin, balancing himself on the palm of hand. She's beaten back by the sudden surge of energy as he loses his fine grasp on his control, hitting the wall behind her. Just in time, he dodges Rogue's fists, hitting the ground. Rolling back, he kicks both legs against her hips and knocks her flat and breathless.

An orb around him, the energy swirls, jabbing out at enemies. He's stronger now, faster, floating on empty air. He lunges at the shade of Alex, grabbing his brother's neck and chokes the life from his nightmare form. But, always, it's the concentration, the millions of fronts that hurts him. Somewhere, deep in his mind, the shadow of Ironman propels towards him, and he reacts. A fist to air, he let's go his brother and yells at the empty space, and in the snow-covered depths of his thought, he does the same.

A blast of red from uncovered eyes, battling forth through nightmare and simulation, he strikes against his own wall of memory, breaking it into pieces.

Reed Richards pushes them all to the ground, narrowly avoiding the optic beam that flies through the air. They are close now, close enough to hear the battle that rages on in the center of the mind. “Is that Cyc--” his voice trails off as another wild blast filters through the air.

Their pace is careful, slow, inching forward through tunnels, wary of red beams and the sounds of battle. They can feel the strain as Scott tries to hold himself together, the rips and tears as he pulls himself apart. “He's losing control,” Emma whispers. She fears that he will strike again, gush with energy and destroy them all in the process. “We have to hurry.”

They come, finally, to the center of his mind. Once grand and elegant, it is tarnished now, and black. The structures here had once expanded into the entire area – a massive geodesic dome of thought and logic in the center, marble halls and oaken doors. The paths were ordered, organized, a perfect mind in an imperfect shell.

Scott's power blazes as he continues his fight both here and in the depths. He growls as the ghost of Wolverine digs claws into his back, and pulls the shade over his shoulder and bashes him into the ground below. As he pounds away into the spirit flesh, he's tackled by Black Panther, who claws at his eyes and braces him on the floor. Thing takes over then, a bloody punch to the jaw that breaks teeth and nose, and crushes sharp cheekbones into matter.

Cyke fights back, a knee to the Panther's chest, and a quick twist of arm that spurns the shade onto its stomach. Breaking the arm, he pulls the body up again to block the incoming punch from Grimm, and uses the shocked distraction to escape them both and find his breath.

Maddened by the too many fights, he yells into the foray, his energy splicing out in waves, slicing through several of the nightmares. He sees them in the archway, his eyes narrowing in disgust. He dares them to come at him, to fight him. He'll take them all on. He'll destroy them.
A lightning strike by Thor clears their entrance. Emma hoists herself to a shadowed corner, seeking those tendrils of thoughts that will allow her to take control. The others, they move forward, battle-ready and aiming to kill.

The nightmares reel at the prospect of fresh minds to ruin. Hundreds of them converging all at once, angry and starved. They swarm the living, these denizens of ruin, clawing and biting whatever flesh and memory that they can find.

Still posed in astral form, Tony strikes forward, bashing himself into the spirit of Rogue. She's a dangerous one, her touch ominous, and he means to use that to his advantage. Zipping in and out between the phantoms, he leads her on a desperate chase, clinging himself to corners and edges, chortling her on with his own special brand of sarcasm. He waits until she's near before chasing off again, her hand held out waiting for touch. He zooms towards Cyclops, his speed much slower and her anger more riled, and at the last second, he avoids her, and she collapses into Summers at top speed.

She rips him apart from chest to hips, the whole of him falling back in pain and wounds. But, he doesn't die. Not even close. Tony watches in amazement as the man begins to heal, the slow rebuild of muscle and bone, the repair of vessels and organs. He knits himself back together inch by inch, and his entire focus is now upon the Ironman. Stark tells them all, “New plan, guys. New plan! Fucker's got a healing factor! Emma, we can use some help here!”

Grabbing onto the nearest nightmare, Reed pops a neck and throws it to the wall. He avoids an errant optic blast, and scrambles himself to the outer edge of the battle. He needs time to strategize, to plan, to watch the surroundings.

At the center of the display, he watches as Scott fights both himself and the shades. He watches as Cyke veers off and fights the air, punishing walls and floor. He jumps too high for his normal self, hits too hard for his human strength. The energy spirals off in moments of lost concentration, pillages his surroundings of both ghost and self. And after those moments, he stops, physically holds on to what few threads keep him together. “We need to stop this,” Reed says. “We need to stop fighting him.”

Thor casts a questioning look in Richards' direction. “He's not trying to hurt us, but we're pushing him to the edge.”

Above the fray - putting his astral repulsors to the head of Ms. Marvel – Ironman flashes his anger. “We can't let him live, Reed. He'll destroy us all.”

“He's not trying to destroying us, Tony! He's trying to stop it!”

“Too late,” he replies as the ghost of Carol Danvers becomes a nothingness in his hands. “He's toast.”

Reed looks to his right, towards Emma Frost. Quiet, focused, she keeps the gnawing nightmares away with telepathic shield. He can see the small movements of her hands and fingers, the pinkish glow of psionic power. In an instant, he realizes what she's doing. She didn't come here to say goodbye to the love of her life, she came here to take him over.

She searches for the switch, the one Xavier built, the one she stole from him and hid from prying minds. It will turn him off, give her time to erase his essence and insert herself in command. Many of the paths are blocked to her, obstructed and demolished by the rampant ghosts of friends and enemies, destroyed by the Phoenix who hovers in the distance.

Reed calls out to warn them all of the betrayal, but is targeted by Hulk before he can. The Great
Green Rage rumbles towards him, his fists bared and his teeth clenched. He means to do harm, and in astral form, Richards worries what that harm can be. He manages to thin himself out enough to miss the first few hits that come his way, but Hulk changes direction and focuses on the floor beneath his feet.

Mr. Fantastic takes the first punch, and he can feel it inside his head. Like a migraine, it makes him nauseous and sick, his movements sluggish and ill defined. And even though he can see the danger as Hulk levels his hands on both sides of his head, though he knows that at any minute he will be crushed by that strength, he's too swirled to move.

In the distance, he can hear the belly laugh of Thor, and then the blur of hammer as it swings past and wallops Hulk in the chest. The Angry Green Giant flies through the nest of nightmares, breaking the far wall on impact. “He's mine,” Thor growls and runs in the same direction.

Taking moments to recover himself, Reed looks to Scott again. On the floor, knees to chest, his rage is palpable and his energy furious. His face bleeds as he strives to keep the energy inside himself, but still it spills out destroying the phantoms that bombard him. He remembers Sue's words, the look on her face, the disappointment. If this were his son, he'd fight tooth and nail to protect him.

His heart bogged down, but his actions swift, Reed stretches arms out over the canvas of battle and twists them around Ironman's flying form. He plucks the Avenger out of the air, pulling him to ground beside him. “We're not killing him,” he says, releasing one tangled arm from the astral form and stretching it wide and thin. He creates a shield so that he can talk.

“Bullshit. Don't do this to me now, Reed. I need you --”

“The more we battle here, the worse we make it. Defeat the nightmares, but don't touch him. We need to help him.”

Nostrils flaring, immobile within the knot of Mr. Fantastic's arm, Tony's eyes darken with fury. “Don't do this, Reed,” he says again, his voice a whisper. “We're trying to save the Earth, remember.”

“By killing a friend? That's not like you, Tony.” He tells Stark to watch the man, how he struggles to contain it. Bright red energy whorls around the battlefield, sparking against his hundreds of opponents. It would be so easy to let go, to kill them all, but here he is, trying to protect them.

“He can't control it, Reed. He'll never be able to control this. There's too much power here.” He reminds Richards that they should have had this discussion long ago, before the portal rift, before they even found him. “You have really bad timing to announce that you're a coward.”

Reed doesn't expect the repulsor. As the plasma burst boils his skin, he retracts his arms, skids back away from the danger. Wild-eyed he looks at Stark. “Tony?”

“Keep out of this,” he said. “I'll handle it myself.”

Thor defeats Hulk with a well-timed lightning strike to heart. Grinning with pride, he tackles the phantom of Alex Summers, hoping to finish their previous battle. He shields himself against the energy wave, pushing forward on the strength of his mind alone. Out of the corner of his eye, however, he sees the glimmer of red, and jumps out of the way.

Alex head bursts, and at the sight of killing his brother once again, Scott loses even more ground. The energy pulses outward, growing in size, pushing them all to the far walls of the chamber. In its midst, the dregs of structures begin to crumble further, dissipate and dust. In a desperate moment of
clarity, he begs them for death. “Please, kill me.”

In the distance, the Phoenix laughs. One way or another, she's nearly free.
The Red Dimension

Chapter Summary

The battle continues.

The words turn Logan's eyes to glass. “Please, kill me.” He watches, slack limbed and suddenly cold from the inside out, as the man pleads to his attackers. Logan moves in, ready to fight, ready to push them all away, but he is stalled be the sudden burst of power.

The world becomes a bright red blur and at the center Scott's moment of clarity comes to an abrupt end as the nightmares pull him down into their shackles and claws and biting teeth. The fury is tremendous, a biting wind filled with heat and voice and pain. The battles, so many, they all lead to death, and before their very eyes, he dies a thousand times only to come back to life.

There is no call of warning, no shout of heeding, nothing but the sparks of red that tip into the air become more solid, spike out through the hundreds of nightmares, catching them all on the tip of glass and thought and frantic confusion. He fights the air, the battles that still rage on inside his head. And he fights them.

“Get them out of here!” Alex yells, indicating the non-survivors. And to Scott – whose inferno lashes out at random – he begs him to calm down. “I don't want to hurt you,” he says, moving through the bright red wash around him.

He reaches out for his brother, only to be rebuffed in return.

Scott's moves are swift and deadly, an arm locked behind his brother's back, he tosses the blonde to the ground pressing knee on neck. There is no sanity in his eyes, nothing but the madness of finally being broken. The shades surround him, and he abandons his brotherly prey to the visage of Jean Grey, whom he thrashes with a flurry of hits to stomach and neck, breaking her ghostly bones and pinning her to the wall. It's in this rage that he unleashes his optic blast, more powerful than they've ever seen. It erases her, banishes her, depletes her into nothingness.

He slams himself against his wall of thought, crushing the words and memories that play between. He fights against an unknown foe, dragging it to the ground, snapping its neck. His yells of victory and loss are drowned out by the incoming nightmares. They pile on top of him, drinking of the uncontrolled energy that surrounds him, seeking memories to fill their empty stomachs.

Logan pounds the distance between himself and the central battle, once again ripping claws into shades. He meets himself within the swarm and shows no mercy. Claws swing wild, striking against distracted participants as the two Wolverines roll across the floor in a tooth on claw fight. The nightmare is a darkened, snarling thing, a being absent the humanity that Logan has learned over the years. He fights an animal, a beast, a predator without a heart. It makes it easy to kill him, to banish him to other parts of the mind and refocus himself on the battle in front of him.

While the others battle in their separate corners of the mind, the flush of magic befalls them. Light blues and greens, the crest of white that rolls over top of them. It soothes the battle-hungry apparitions for just a moment, just enough time for Dr. Strange to turn his attention to Emma Frost.

Like Richards, he knows what she's doing. His telepathy enacted, he can feel her sift through the broken paths inside Scott's mind, twisting and turning to gain control. She's getting closer to the
switch, to the mind wipe that she so desires, and he intends to stop her.

The spell collapses upon her psionic shield with a hush of barest blush of pink. It swarms like a winter breeze filled with snowdrops and ice, cordonning around the circumference. He pulls the threads of his spell tight, cracking it against her concentration. She suffers with the pressure, her elegant fingers dawning to platinum hair in an effort to keep her focus intact. He pulls even tighter, latching on another spell to pull her out of meditation.

Her blue eyes snap open, angered at the intrusion. “You fool! You're going to kill us all!” she says, and forms herself to diamond. Immediately, the astral wear of the others fades away, and Emma Frost goes in for the kill. Strange takes a diamond boot to the groin, unable to move in time. She pounces on top of him, ready to break him once and for all, but the hands that surround her pull her away.

Kicking and screaming, she is lobbed in the air by Reed Richards who keeps her busy while the sorcerer casts yet another spell. Black, this one is, and cold. It freezes her form, prevents her from changing back to flesh for the near future. He knows it's dangerous to trap her like this, that she's now vulnerable to the nightmares, but he feels it a necessary sacrifice. “Leave this place, now,” he bellows as he returns his attention to the shades.

He calls for Alex to use his powers, to topple down the nightmare forms. The doctor turns them into astral spells that parade across the ghosts. They cry in agony as the power pulses through them. The apparitions come at him, with Scott just seconds behind. A funnel of red, and he obliterates those in his path, and puts his hand to his brother's neck.

Alex holds up his hands in forefeit. “Scott, I'm real,” he says as he feels the wind stolen from his lungs. “Please, Scott, don't do this.”

His words only make the elder Summers more crazed. He shakes his head, unable to tell the difference. The Phoenix has tricked him before. Made the nightmares real. They hurt him; they speak to him; they proclaim their innocence before him, swearing that they are real. They beg him for mercy, on hands and knees they cry for his forgiveness, and seconds later, they break his spine, eat the flesh from his face, destroy what little he has left.

Great pieces of the ceiling come crashing down as the doubt wrenches in Scott's mind. More breaks, more shatters, more insanity. The quakes knocks them off balance, and he yells again as Alex begs him to stop. “I'm not going to hurt you, Scott.”

From the side, Logan lunges, his claws popped. He rams them into ribs and flesh, tears at Scott, knows him down. “Kill you're brother, and you'll regret it.”

Scott reels back, staring at the blood. The pain is tremendous, so much so that he loses himself, and the outpour of power is shocking. It billows up like a cloud, bright and white-red, glistening and hushed. It pours into the cosmos, knocking back everything in it's path.

Logan sees the threat, heads to Stark lying prone on the floor. He covers him, instructs the others to do the same. Strange guards Richards and Frost, Steve throws himself on top of Thor. All around them, the mind dismantles, coming apart at the seams.

The Phoenix sees her chance. Flapping her flaming wings, she lights the furnace inside his mind. “You destroyed the earth, my child. Let me fix it for you.”

Grabbing his sides, trembling as the power fills him back to the brim, as the battles restart in the back of his mind, he calls the Phoenix a liar. But the doubt is there, at the edge of his voice. It tugs him
back down into the madness, a place less painful.

“Let me talk to him,” Logan pleads to Strange. “Put me in his head.”

“It's too dangerous. The slightest misstep --”

“We have to get to him before the Phoenix does.”
The Red Dimension

Chapter Summary

The fight for sanity.

“He dreams in layers,” Jean had once told him, “in order to hide things from me. Hundreds of puzzles for me to work through in order to find out what he's actually thinking about. Sometimes, it makes me feel lonely.”

She curled against him, holding her hands to the small fire that he'd lit. She always enjoyed the physical touch of him, how he strong he was, how loyal. But, it was Scott who had her heart. “I'd never let you feel lonely,” he said, tipping her chin up towards him. She shivered at the touch, her head against his chest, listening to his fast paced heartbeat.

She pulled away in an instant. “Logan.” There was nothing more to be said. He'd gone too far, and he blamed One-eye for her unhappiness.

He dogged the man for days after, asking why he wasn't with his woman, why he would leave her so alone. “She's never alone, Logan,” he said, tapping the side of his head. “I'm always here for her.”

He knows this place. Not intimately, but he's seen it. In a picture. This small holiday cabin with a stream passing through its yard. He'd asked Alex about it after finding it among his things. It was always easy to forget that either of the brothers were actually children at some point, and to see a small glimpse of their childhood had fascinated him.

Alex had few memories of the place, but the ones he'd managed keep through time and manipulation were pure and innocent. He described the igloos that the boys had built, the smell of hot chocolate cooking over the campfire, their snowball fights, and playing hide and seek. In the spring, they would search the woods for mushrooms and edible roots, bringing them back to their father to prove that they had studied like they'd promised. The fall brought the joyous wonder of a spit roasted turkey and the entire family gathered round with mugs of nog and thick sweet drinks. He remembered his mother's laugh, how she would take the hungry boys into the small living area, snug them by the fireplace, and promise them a special treat if they would behave. “Scott never wants to talk about our childhood,” he revealed with a sigh. “I think he's afraid that he was once happy.”

There are no memories here, just the shell of the cabin and the nightmares in the distance. There are no kids playing in the yard, no swimming in the stream, or the crackling of fires. No laughter, no sadness. He opens the door to find an empty place. There is neither furniture nor walls, nothing that would speak of love or joy, nothing that would show the fondness the boys had carried for this cabin. “Where are you, Scott?”

He wanders the grounds, then down into the snow filled plains beyond the stream. Vast fields of nothingness and debris. Pieces of memory that he picks up to inspect. The day Jean asked him to marry her – once sunny and hopeful – is now tragedy, marred by too many tears. He sees the first time he met his brother after the accident, his wonder and relief dashed by a door slammed in his face, the angry words of a twelve year old child echoing in his ears.

In the Red Dimension, Cyke and Logan come to blows, a fierce battle that sees them both bloodied.
and failing in control. While Scott's energy bursts at the seams once again, Wolverine can feel the growl of the animal inside of him. Claws come out, heaving at jagged limbs, slicing through vessels to bring the man to a standstill, but the elder Summers doesn't cave. Matching the beast that comes for him, he lets loose with a growl of his own, cracking fist against adamantium skull, throwing the shorter mutant against the wall. Logan curses, pricks his skin on broken glass, and lunges into the air. He hits Cyclops with all his fury, breaking his neck over and over again, screaming out his name at the top of his lungs.

In the snow-filled depths of the mind, he wanders still, towards the nightmares that roam the flats. The red light catches his eye. He takes off at a run.

The energy flows free now, with Stark and his team huddled behind a magic spell. But, Strange is weakening. He can't keep this up forever. “He doesn't know you're real, Logan!” The predator doesn't hear him.

Lost to blood and pain, Wolverine fights on, grabbing hold of Summers' heart and pulling it free from his chest. Scott falls back, crushes hand over the gaping wound in his chest. Life pours from his mouth and wound, and his growl is gurgled and fierce. Havok burns Logan to the ground, while Steve pulls Scott back in hopes that the sudden space will cool their heads.

An eyebeam to the shades and sky, bright and long. Logan watches as it hits the clouds, the sky, cracking it into pieces. A thousand of them, these nightmares, hovering on the edges of broken thoughts. They attack at will, without hesitation, pulling Scott apart. He struggles to maintain himself, to heal, to keep him under control, and he loses the desperate battle in the snow becoming nothing less than a shadow himself.

“He doesn't know you're real!” the sorcerer calls again, holding back as much power as he can.

Pulled out of the fray by Alex, Logan finally begins to breathe, and he realizes what he's done.

He can see the crevice from here, the flames as they shoot up into the sky, and the voice of the Phoenix at its center. She can take away his suffering. The pain. The loneliness. The confusion. In her there is nothing but the beginning and end, the knowledge of birth and death, and she can share that ancient wisdom with him. “Scott!” he yells. “Scott!”

Heart in his hand, he drops it on the ground, ashamed by his temper, by the animal that has not yet been tempered. Gray eyes look up at Scott, now facing off against his brother. It's an unequal fight, and one far too dangerous for Steve or Alex to take on, no matter how much they're willing to sacrifice themselves.

Over the rage of nightmares, Cyclops cannot hear his name, but he can feel the heat of flames, the promise of the Phoenix. He could end it, all of it. It would be so easy to give in. The hand that grasps at him, pulls him from the snow is warm.

Glowing red eyes open with fear. He struggles, fights to get away, but Logan holds him down, his breath steady and even. “I'm not here to hurt you.” Summers lashes out with desperate red – optic beams and wild energy that pushes off hands and feet. He thrashes against the hold. “Scott, I'm not going to hurt you.”

The small movements of the doctor's hands indicate another spell in the works. Eyes closed, humming words never spoken by human mouths, he is no longer a part of the battle, trusting the others to take care of things.

Alex knocks his brother to his feet, away from Logan and the hole he's burrowing into adamantium
chest. He places hands on either side of jaw. “Scott, please stop this.” But the words do little but rile him further. A deft shove that flies him across the room, he's up on feet in a second ready to run after him, but Logan grabs his ankles, and he falls face first to the ground. A snarl, a growl, the taint of madness pushing red in deep red bars across the chamber, he twists himself to front, knocking a knee to Logan's head.

Wolverine's ears ring from the hit, and though nauseous from the rattle to his brain, he stabs his claws into Cyke's shoulders, pinning him to the ground. “Calm down,” he orders, only to be ignored. Over and under, they wrestle for control, with Scott's long limbs wrapping around his waist, flipping him over into harmlessness. He presses down on legs, putting pressure on hips. Logan can hear the joints begin to pop, to hear them separate from the bones. Wrenching at his own ribs, he turns, plunging more claws into soft flesh. Scott barely lets go enough for Logan to climb to his knees.

Logan can hear the Phoenix as she brandishes her flames in the deep of mind. She calls to Scott, tells him to give in, that they're going to kill him. “I can make it stop. I can make it all go away.”

Hypnotized by her gentle lull, to finally be free, he turns red eyes to the crevice where the Phoenix waits. “I'm tired,” he whispers as he turns his focus to Logan above him. He wants the claws. “Please, kill me.”

Logan traces psionic fingers over cheek and jaw, staring into hazed red eyes. It's the first time he's ever noticed how beautiful the man is. “Scott,” he says, cupping chin and cheek. “I'm not going to hurt you.” The touch is soft, the first time in years that something hasn't hurt. Red eyes widen with sudden confusion and disreality.

He crawls to him, strokes high cheekbone with bloody hand. He tilts chin up, tenders fingers over jaw, scraping lip with thumb. “I'm sorry,” Logan says. “I won't kill you.” Scott coughs up blood and matter, tensing up for another battle. He makes a grab for Logan's shoulders, but his hands fall uselessly to the ground. “I'm real, Scott.”

It's the only way he can think of to prove it. Both inside and outside the mind, he grips chin and jaw, tilts the head up so that eyes finally look into his own. It feels like forever, the distance between them, cold and lonely. He presses his lips to Scott's, pulling him into the warmth of his chest, holding him still and firm. He tastes of tears, desperation, pain, and sadness. Years of solitude, of anguish, threaded through lips and heartless pulse.

Sunless hands claw at spine, afraid to lose this moment, afraid to lose this contact, this something real that he's finally found. And in his wonder, his powers smooth out across the chamber, expanding throughout the world, the universe, healing those things that he's destroyed, setting things to right, returning them to what they should be.

In the depths of winter, Scott finally breathes, the first time years that air has expanded within his chest. “Logan?” he asks quietly, his eyes round and crystalline, his body shaking with too much. Logan sweeps in again, harder this time, to prove without a doubt that he's real. He treads hand through hair, holding Scott by the back of his head, leaning forward to take the man's weight.

But there is no second breath, no delight or joy. There's the push of power, refilling him, recharging him. Head to knees, he crumbles with the onslaught of his mutancy, cries out against the sudden rush that he can't control. Logan holds him tighter, begs him to relax, to breathe. “Come on, Scotty, you got this,” he whispers in his ear. “Just hold on. You're okay.” But his moment unguarded was a moment too much. The energy begins to orb around him, spiral and stab the air. “Scott, you can control this! Come on!”

“Er dogren.”
Two words of a mystic language, and Scott falls unconscious against Logan's shoulders. Wild eyed, he turns to look at Strange who is now exhausted with his efforts. "Sorry," he says. "It takes a while to cast the first time around. From now on it will be easier."
Canada

Chapter Summary

A brief respite.

He didn't mourn the children. Not like the others, anyway. No tears, no cries of grief. Just silence.

Victor called him cold; Noriko called him an asshole. He dug the graves anyway, all 42 of them, just in case the families didn't come to claim what was left of the bodies, and some of them did not. Even though the children had lost their mutant powers, the hatred so tainted their families' views that they couldn't even bother to be sad for their loss.

The funerals took place in the southern graveyard, a mass service that Santo and Megan felt inappropriate. They thought it should be one by one, but Cyclops said that they didn't have time. He'd been an X-man since the age of fifteen, he knew that time was something precious.

At night, he'd wander through the graves, plucking the small bits of dandelions and sneezeweed from the fresh dug dirt. In their place, he'd put begonias, hearty plants that would shield the corpses from the sun. Sometimes he'd stand there for hours, looking over the plots. Sometimes, he'd spend just minutes, rush back in and lock himself in the Danger Room.

Logan watched him from the trees, the doorways, spying on the man and his too tense shoulders. He waited for the cracks in his facade, for something to give, for the man to finally feel, but it never came. He'd once told Emma that Cyke was a bomb waiting to go off. There would come a day when all of those tragedies fell upon his burdened shoulders and exploded him from the inside out. They would all burn for his downfall. If only he'd known how true that was.

The Aurora Borealis paints the midnight sky with ribbons of green and blue and the blush of white. The lights shimmer across the Canadian snow, lighting up their exhaustion. They'd come here in a rush, trying to hit the portal before Magik was too exhausted to keep it open. Strange had warned them that it would be in a different place according to the tilt of the earth, and after three days, the portal had moved from Australia to the frozen wilds of Canada. “She greets us warmly,” the doctor had smiled before collapsing upon the snow. Captain America did his best to make the sorcerer more comfortable, dragging him to the flames of the small fire, propping him up off the ground with logs. They couldn't have him freezing to death, not before he keyed the spell to their voices.

The spell itself had once been used to torture those who spoke against Ellacianus, the dark wizard who'd written the Mer Serval. “It rips the spirit from his body, shreds it into hundreds of pieces, and locks those pieces away inside puzzles. The spell is nothing but pain.” But, as Strange explained, it would enable them to keep Scott from losing what tenuous control he had over his powers.

Something that both Alex and Steve agree is necessary.

He looks so peaceful resting in the snow, even with the hole in his chest and battered body. Logan can still feel the fingers dig into his back, the way they pulled at shoulder blades, the desperation that came from something less than suffering. “We were close to losing him,” he tells Alex. He can't imagine the years of anguish that Scott has undergone, how much time he spent inside his broken mind wishing for an escape. “She offered him one. He nearly took it.”
“He'll need his visor,” Havok says, an abrupt end to the quiet conversation. Like his brother, he fares better with problems that he can solve rather than emotional weavings. He pauses, turns to look at Logan one last time. “Be careful with him.”

Logan can still taste Scott on his lips.

In the distance, Alex and Steve discuss what needs to happen. Where Scott will go, who will watch over him. Steve wants to turn him over to SHIELD – those not involved in the Red Hunt. They have scientists there. They can possibly find a way to help. “They're going to keep hunting him. Might be best to announce where he is to lessen the burden on the rest of you.”

But, for Alex, his brother is not a burden, nor will he hand him over to mutant haters. While Steve still has faith that the system works, that they'll protect him, Alex has never held that trust. “These are the same people that built machines to hunt us down, Steve. Imagine what they'd do to Scott.”

The argument is quiet, aware of those that are not quite well. Strange and Magik, Cyclops off in the distance. “You are not a mutant. You can't possibly understand the danger you will put him in.”

“And putting him in with the mutants worked out well, I see?” The comment is beyond sarcastic, a moment of strength out of uniform, but instantly regretted. Softening his tone, Rogers stares into the flames of their fire pit. “It's not just Scott that we have to look after, Alex. It's also the world. Twenty four hour monitoring isn't easy, regardless of what spell the doctor gives us.”

“You say us as if you mean to follow --”

And, he does mean to follow them. Cyclops is too much to handle, and considering the kiss that he witnessed, he's not sure if Logan is up to the task. “If it comes down to Scott or the Earth, I'm going to choose the Earth. I don't think either one of you are capable of that.” Alex wants to argue, but he can't. In the end, he knows that Steve is right.

So does Logan, who takes the pause in their argument to wash the scrape the blood from his hands. He worries about infection, illness, how the cold will effect Cyclops. He's healing, but slowly. “We need bandages,” he says just loud enough for the others to hear him. “And antiseptic.” Packing the wounds with snow has helped, but he needs better treatment than this. “I don't want him to wake up here.”

He never explained the emptiness that he saw in Cyke's mind. The endless fields where memories should have been. There was a loneliness to it all, a sadness. In the end, Alex was wrong. Scott wasn't afraid that he'd once been happy, he was afraid that hadn't. He had no childhood, no loving parents, no brother to tag his footsteps and keep him up at night. His childhood was a blank, and the rest of him was destroyed. To wake up here would only further the confusion, the land of nightmares would continue on. “I'll talk to Storm.”

It's not ideal. The telepaths will have to be evacuated and inhibitors set up to prevent further intrusion into his mind. But, and Logan accentuates the point, they don't have any other options. “The whole world knows who he is. We have to keep him out of sight until he has some semblance of control.”

Logan knows that she'll be displeased with the askance. The mere mention of Scott's name has been enough to grit her jaw and rub her temples. His legacy is a frustrating one, both savior and condemnner, hero and foe. If not for him, they'd all be dead, but because of him the man they treated like a father died. “She'll listen to me. They all will.”
There is no comfort in defeat. But they are soldiers, they need no comfort, or at least that's what Stark tells them as he stands upon the stage overlooking the Red Hunt. He reminds them that one of their own had betrayed them, and that Reed Richards is now in the Undertow. “Finding Scott Summers is our top priority. There is nothing more important than this singular mission. We must refocus our efforts and turn this world upside down in order to finally bring peace to the earth.”

Fury says nothing when he steps off the stage, can't even stand to look at him. He addresses the Red Hunt himself while Tony wanders off to the greenroom some halls away. Emma waits, her precious form spread out on the small sofa. She wants wine and foie gras and offers him dinner in Italy. “On me, of course.”

Stark slumps into the chair, lets her coy hands put pressure on tense shoulders. “What were you doing when Strange attacked you?”

“I told you, darling, I had to keep you in astral form so that you could fight--”

“Reed seems to think that you were going to wipe his mind.”

She smiles, releases a knot in Tony's back. “Reed would say anything to avoid --”

“You still love him, don't you?”

She stops, settles herself to sofa, stares off into the distance. For long moments, she is quiet, thoughtful. “Of course, I do,” she replies. “He's the only man that ever believed I was worth more than my body or fortune. He believed I could be my better self, that I could--”

“But, you weren't your better self.” She avoids the blue-eyed gaze, lights up to the small screen on the wall and watches Fury berate the soldiers into passion. “You destroyed him.”

“What happened when Thor lost his hammer?”

“He worked to make himself worthy again and got it back. What you did --”

“Without that hammer, he was lost.” She takes a sip of wine and corners her gaze on him. “He felt a lesser man, one that could not protect his people, the things that he loved. Without that hammer, Thor is just another man with good intentions. Much like you and your suit.”

For her, it was much the same. Without that power, she felt defenseless, weak, unable to right the world and save her people. “Genosha. I could feel it, you know. All those thoughts running incomplete. One second there were thousand of voices in the air, planning, hoping, wishing. And then in an instant, there was nothing. The world had gone quiet, all those voices, all those lives, just gone.”

“That's no excuse, Emma.” Her selfishness has caused a crisis, one that could potentially destroy the
universe. “If I'd known what you were doing to him—”

“Don't act like your sins are less than mine, Tony. I know you. I know the things you've done.”

Another sip of wine, and she smiles through the tension. “Right now, we need to focus on finding Scott. We need to make sure—”

Stark shakes his head. “I don't trust you, Ems.”

She's used to this. This rejection. From her father to Shaw, to the X-men, she knows what this feels like. It doesn't make it hurt any less. “So, you want me to go.”

“I think that would be both our best interests.” He has a hunt to lead, she has a soul to repair.

The click of her heels signals her exit, and Tony is left alone, once again.

“You disgust me,” Pepper had said all those years ago. She'd discovered those secret meetings of the Illuminati, their purpose, their methods. Bloodless and without mercy, they punished their enemies and those things deemed dangerous. From destroying universes to shooting Hulk into space to rid the world of his threat, they had become a defiant judge, jury, and executioner, bending the acts of heroism to their will and saving the earth at any cost.

Pepper could no longer stand to look at him. She called him murderer and villain, vile and selfish. Her tears ran hot, and her cheeks were red. “I can't do this anymore,” she cried. “I can't be with you.”

It confounds him now that Steve had become so dead set against the Red Hunt when he had been more enthusiastic then. He understood the needs of their world and took those steps to protect it.

Stark cringes at the thought of him, that sly look on his face when his plot was discovered, how quickly he'd dressed himself, how cold his voice became. If there was anything in the world that had ever shattered him, it was that moment. He'd never imagined that kind of betrayal from the great patriot. Never imagined that he'd hurt him like that.

“Someone's not playing hero today.” Maria Hill stands over him, her smile more amused than pleasant. It's not often that she catches one of the great Avengers unaware. “Get your head in the game, Stark. We're rolling out in ten.”

It's just the push of a button on his watch, and within moments he is Ironman, hidden from the world behind brilliance and technology. He misses the weight of his first suit sometimes, how protected he felt. His newer suits are lighter, more agile, easier to control, and though they are far advanced, harder to destroy, they don't feel the same.

Hill is not surprised by the sudden shielding, nor is she impressed. She's seen this display a thousand times, and it no longer marks her interest. “You'll command Red Hunt Three,” she says of the airborne squadron. “From what we gather, Dr. Strange used ley lines to cast his spell, so we're hitting all major markers from Nazca to Ayers Rock.”

The map she displays is detailed. Pale pink lines traverse the distance between the major formations and bright green lines mark the travel paths of the various squadrons. “It's possible that he's still—”

“We're not invading the Sanctum?” It had been the plan this morning, over coffee and cronuts. He had honestly looked forward to showing up on Strange's doorstep.

“Change of plans,” she says. “We sent Wanda there this morning. The place is empty.”
“Then, we're not looking for Strange. We're still looking for the X-men.” With a press of button, the armor disengages, and Tony's pale eyes scatter across the floor in thought. “Where's McCoy?”

“Still in the--”

“Doesn't matter. Get him, bring him here. We're going to war with the X-men.”
Logans speaks with Jean.

She avoids gray gaze. Staring down at the ground just beyond the mine. She'd come to stop him, to turn him around, make him leave, even if by force, but as she clawed her way into his mind, saw the visage of her husband – the hole in his chest, the madness abated by spell – her will depleted.

Logan's heart still paces at the sight of her. Her long red hair, her bright green eyes. Those old feelings of warmth and adoration, his marvel at her strength, his safety in the tenderness of her smile. There was a time when he would have given her the moon, the stars, and all else to follow in her shadow, but those days have dimmed. “Did you mess with my mind, too?”

He takes note of her refusal to answer. For long moments, her eyes flinch across the ground from right to left, before a quiver of jaw lifts her head. “I loved him. Please make sure he knows that.”

He doesn't want this conversation, not with her. He can feel the build of animal in his veins, the pull to slice her in two. “I'm here to talk to Storm.”

“She won't allow him here. Not around the kids. He's too dangerous, Logan. A bomb that's seconds away from going off.” She knows the damage to his mind more intimately than he does. “He's too far gone. You can't help him.”

Nerves wrench at his stomach – both with worry and with rage. A part of him feels that same hopelessness, that the breaks in his mind have decimated a once great man. There is an ache to this thought, one that clenches his jaw trap tight and makes him wince. Strange had said as much this morning, that the damage was excessive, that the battle had taken its toll. He doesn't want to believe it, doesn't want to fall prey to these sentiments. But, he can see it in her eyes. “Why'd you do it, Jeannie?”

She shrugs, ashamed of herself. Her defiance towards her daughter, towards her son, faded against the gray eyed gaze. “I wanted to protect him.” It's a simple answer, and one that speaks barely a partial truth. But Logan can see it, can sense the lie. She relents. “Once I tasted it, I couldn't help myself.”

“You need to leave,” he tells her. “All of you. Scott needs this place more than you.”

“Storm--”

“Ro will listen to you, Red. You tell her what's right, and she'll do it. But, so long as you claim that you deserve to be here, she'll listen to you and believe every word.”

“I do deserve to be --”

He is adamant now, frustration blushing against his cheeks and the back of his neck. “You walked on clouds, Jeannie. You were everything I wanted the world to be. But, you lied. To me, to him, to everyone. I blamed him for it all. Everything. Your life, your death. I blamed him for it all.”
The funeral was quiet, a small affair. They'd asked him to speak, but he refused. He'd let her down, hurt her, broken her. He stood at the edge of the grave, staring down into an unfilled pit, the sheen of coffin striking prisms upon the hollow ground. He wanted it to rain, to pour down so hard that it would gray out the surroundings. Maybe then he could cry.

Logan watched him from the trees. He could smell the heartbreak, even from there. The guilt, the shame, the should have dones and should have beens. He deserved it. Every last second of it. Jean had died protecting them all, preventing Magneto from destroying what fragile peace they had built. She was a hero, and Cyclops was the man who had taken advantage of her love and consorted with the enemy behind her back.

Like salt to wounds, Logan let his distaste for his affair be known. “You're a worthless piece of shit, Summers,” he'd said. Cyclops didn't flinch. “She loved you. You betrayed her.”

“I went back to kill him,” he reveals to Jean, his eyes averted to the sky. “He asked me to come. So, I went, but not to join the team, but to murder him cold.” But, he couldn't bring himself to do it. No matter how many times he tried, he lost the will just before the act. “I suppose that was Emma's doing.”

He is no longer sure what choices were his, and what were those of the telepaths. There was a time when he once believed them to be pure in their power, but now – after witnessing the madness first hand – he wonders how many of his decisions were made for him. “I can only imagine how Scott's gonna feel.” And it is a truth that he isn't going to gloss over. “He's gonna wonder if he even loved you or if it was something that you made him feel.”

“He loved me, Logan. He really --”

“And I'm supposed to trust that?” He can see the guilt at the edges of her mouth, the way they turn down just slightly. She ruffles fingers through her long red hair. “He needs to be here, Jean. You know this. You know what's right.”

“I have no place to go, Logan. This is my home. This is my family.”

“This is my family,” he said, red visor clicking off to the side to finally look at Logan. He was a puzzle. Neither sad nor happy, resplendent or despondent. There was simply a firmness, a deep-held belief, and he would bow to nothing else. “I will do anything to protect it.”

His tactics had been below the belt, low blows and subterfuge. They'd worked – they'd absolutely worked – but, to Logan, there was no pride in their victory over the Skrulls. “You got a brilliant mind up there, One eye, but when you do shit like this, people start looking at you funny.”

“They've always looked at me funny, Logan. That's part of being a mutant.”

No one had spoken up about the use of the Legacy virus, how Cyke had demanded it engineered to Skrull physiology. At least not his face. But, Logan was sure that he had heard the whispers. How devious the whole plan was, how dangerous. “What if the cure hadn't worked? Or if they'd stalled - -”

“They'd all be dead.” He was not apologetic. There was doubt in him, no recall of action that made him tremor. “But, we'd still be alive.”

“You're a heartless bastard sometimes, Slim. You know that, right?”

The barest of flinches scraped across the corner of mouth. So fast another person would have missed it. He hated these decisions, these calls he was constantly being forced to make. They wore on him,
grated against his essence, but they were necessary if they were to retain hope of staying alive. “There is no place where we belong, Logan, not since our birth. But here, we've carved out the closest thing to assurance that we'll ever feel. For my family, I'll do anything to make sure it stays that way.”

“We have a lot of redeeming to do, Red. You and I both. If there was ever even an ounce of love for him, you'll help me talk to Storm. Set it to right. He needs his family right now, more than you.”

She wants to argue further, stand her ground, prove that she is still worthy of those dreams that he once had of her. But she can't. There are no words for what she did, no excuses that she can make. And to make things worse, she knows that she would do it all over again if given the chance. “I still dream of him sometimes. His power. His love. But there is no hope.”

“There ain't hope if you've already given up.” Scott never gave up on her, that she’d remake herself, that she’d come back. Whether it was his decision or not, he'd never let her go, no matter how much it broke Emma's heart. “And, he deserves better than that. We can be better than that.”
Chapter Summary

Xavier remembers.

It was his greatest temptation, his greatest sin, and still he can feel the lure of that power hovering on the horizon. How easy it would be to reach out and take it – those old familiar paths, burrowing through frantic thought and hideous whispers. He could be powerful again, strong, a leader among men. He could remove their doubts, their lack of faith, and bring them again to his feet, bowing in reverence at his sage words and peaceful thoughts.

The child was barely thirteen, covered head to toe in bruises and burns, switch marks crisscrossed his back, deep gashes on his hands. It took all his mental might to get the child to trust him, to take a step forward and reveal his name. His defenses were so strong then, a mind so used to psychic battle that even he could not break through. “My name is Charles Xavier. I'm a mutant, like you. I'm here to help.”

The child was wary, like a soldier caught in crossfire. Small hands shook as he was again forced to take another step forward, to come out of the shadows and show himself. “I don't want to hurt anyone,” he said, his voice almost overcome by the noises within the building.

“You saved their lives. All of them.” Their crime spree had gone from the wilds of Nebraska all the way to New York, as Jack Winters robbed bank after bank in order to fund his trip eastward. “Do you know what he wants?”

A long silence, and another mental push to get the child to speak. “Power,” Scott said, his instincts fighting back against the intrusion. Every step had to be mentally commanded, every bit of trust had to be threaded into current thought.

The boy came to his side, his head turning to the right to view the miasma of nuclear energy starting to leak from the reactor. “We have to stop him, Scott. We have to stop him from hurting other people.”

Three times, the child spoke up, told Charles that he didn't want to hurt anyone, but someone had to helm the vibration gun. Someone had to put an end to the man's treachery. It was hard to control the boy, difficult to keep his hands steady and mind focused upon the task. “You're not going to hurt him,” Xavier promised. “But there's no other way.” But Charles knew better. He knew what the vibration gun would do to the near fully-diamond Winters. He knew that it would shake his ions apart, explode him into glittering bits of jewels, and when it did, the child cried out in terror.

Sitting among the remains, tears streaming down dirt-caked cheeks, he looked to the man who had forced his trust, and deemed himself a murderer. “Self defense isn't murder, Scott.”

Charles Xavier stands at the ocean's edge. The Greek Isles suit his new body – the one taken from Phantom X – the sun, the salt air. His body basks in the luxuriousness. He has a house here, a large estate filled with treasures stolen from various entities. He lives well here, on Samos, away from the pressure and stress of the X-men. Away from his corruption.
There had been love there for the boy, though hidden away at times behind commands and his driving need for power. He imagined himself the boy's father, and so when he finally crushed the shield inside his mind, he positioned himself as such. He never imagined having a child of his own, and in that respect, he came to care for Scott like no other in his life.

Those first few months – before he'd broken in – there was the constant push to make him trust, to make him speak, to make him react. Xavier hoped that the boy would feel normalcy in this, but he was wary, and, as Moira said, for good reason.

The nosebleeds and the headaches were constant as Xavier tried to pry at his massive defenses, plucking away at the small threads of psionic shield, trying to break in and find out the boy's secrets. If Scott understood what was going on, he never said, but in many ways, he treated Charles as the enemy.

He told himself – and Moira – that he was doing it for Jean. That their meeting – though Xavier had sought him out after reports of their crime spree – was too coincidental, that his defenses were too strong, and that someone could have planted the child in his life in order to get closer to Jean.

Jean was thirteen, and brilliant. A talented telekinetic, and would-be-telepath had Xavier not blocked her powers in order to drag her from her year long stupor some time ago. She was vibrant and sweet, innocent in all respects, and he couldn't risk harm to her. She was his student, his protege, someone whom he could see himself depending on, that she would be a part of his dream.

Moira often scoffed at his reasoning, claiming that the boy needed him and his protection far more than Jean, but Xavier couldn't shake that tremor of fear for her. Nor could he escape that sense of looming power beneath the surface of his mind. He discovered that he craved it, even before he could take it, he wanted that power for himself.

He wants for nothing here on Samos, a lazy life filled with sun and salt, food and drink. There are ladies who talk to him now – ladies not flung into the far reaches of space. Oh, how he misses Lilandra. The touch of her hand upon his skin – it was always cool to the touch, and he wanted nothing more than to warm her. She was beautiful, exotic, everything he'd ever wanted from a lover. She was his heart, and with her death, with her madness, his heart was broken.

It would be easy to bring her back, especially now that Scott was in the full wellspring of his power. Easy to twist that power and bring breath to her corpse. He could do so many things with it, things he should have done before. He could cure the world of all its ills, make life peaceful for the mutants. He could be a hero again, one of the greatest minds of the centuries.

The child fought them, hands and feet and teeth, as they propped him up on the med lab table. They needed to check his vitals, to gain some knowledge of his health. He was beaten and bruised, underweight and small. They could see the infection, smell it even, and though they tried to keep him calm, kept telling him that they weren't going to hurt him, the fear in the boy was just too much.

They fought with him over clothes, the removal of them. Angry, he growled at them as they tugged off the filthy blue cotton shirt, cut it away from his tiny body. It was worse with the pants. And once they got him free of it all, he froze, stone silent, his little hands balled up to protect himself, to keep them from looking at him.

Blood caked over old wounds, turned black with age and neglect. Deep gashes across his spine, down his ribs, the remnants of sticks and belts and fists. Burns lit infected holes up and down his arms and hands, their blisters busted, and oozing now. But, the boy didn't cry, didn't say a word, just flinched as Moira MacTaggert got close enough to clean him.
A cloth soaked in alcohol, she carefully dabbed at dirty skin and pain, cleaning out the gashes and
burns, bandaging them tightly. He had broken ribs, a fracture in his upper arm, another at his ankle.
Bruises were swollen, huge knots all over his body. She whispered her ease to him, kept her tone
soft and light as Xavier watched from the corner. He'd never met such a frightened child, and it
turned his stomach to witness such a thing. If it weren't the mind that was so closed to him – the one
that gave him chills – he would have been too angry to speak.

Dressed in Charles' old clothes, the clothes kept from when he was a child – clothes too big for the
boy's small frame – the boy wandered the hallways, double checking escape routes and windows.
Moira noted his tendency before Charles, and that gave her great pause. “He needs you, Charles.
You have to be here for him.” And, then, she showed him to his bedroom, explained all of the exits
and entrances, and where they would be sleeping if he needed anything.

Charles doesn't know if the child slept that night or not. Or the next night. Or the next. For months, it
was Moira who cared for him, with Charles working on education plans and physical fitness, training
the boy to be his better self. Moira fought with him on every decision, claiming the child needed a
chance to be a kid, and that Charles' methods were raising him a soldier.

Eric was also against his method of raising the boy.

He smiles at the young lady who brings him another martini. Feet in the sand, he raises up off chair
to greet her. Green eyed and brunette, her olive skin darkened by the sun, he finds her a refreshing
companion when she serves him. He can tell – even without using his powers – that she's infatuated
with him, his new body. She tries to ask him out on a date, but she stumbles over her words, too
nervous to ask him clearly. He smiles and talks about the weather – their normal conversation. How
bright it is, how warm, and disappointed in herself, she walks away.

Eric came to his memories, a byproduct of near-death and awakening. It was why he'd come to
Utopia, why he knelt at the feet of Scott Summers. He remembered that small, silent child, and also
what Xavier had done to him.

They played chess – the only game Charles would allow in his stuffy old mansion. A game tactics
and strategy, something to keep the boy's head roiling with thought.

Neglect had produced a boy behind in education. A third grade reading level, second grade writing.
He didn't know science or history, health or literature. Mathematics was the only thing the boy
excelled at, that and mechanics.

Like Moira, Eric had come to help with the child, as Xavier was often too busy with Jean and other
projects to be there for him, spending weeks away at times. He needed a male presence, and his old
friend was a willing participant. Also like Moira, Eric felt that Charles' schedule was too strict, that it
didn't give the boy time to explore and discover himself outside of his abusive past. And, he, too,
called out the professor for trying to shove himself into the boy's mind.

The first time Scott smiled was for Eric.

He brought with him a chess board – marble and metal – beautifully detailed and designed. The boy
tendered the finally carved pieces between delicate fingers. “It's yours,” he said. “Do you know how
to play?”

Xavier forced the answer. “I don't remember.”

There were many things that Scott didn't remember. His mother's face, his childhood home. The taste
of cake, the sound of the ocean. What he did remember he did not talk about it – those years of abuse
by Winters and another. Kept locked within his trap of a mind, he never mentioned his life before the mansion.

Scott caught on quickly to the game, learning the names of the pieces and how they moved. In the study, they sat, with Moira bringing them hot tea and little sandwiches. In the end, Eric won the game, but the boy was enthused by the battle, and smiled for the first time. “Can we play again?” he asked, even without a push from Xavier. Moira was overjoyed; Charles was suspect.

He laments now the distance he'd given the child. Lilandra had once accused him of the same, that his distance made him cold, unreachable. But it was his worries, his thoughts, his hopes, his fears that caused such a thing. He'd explained as much to Lilandra, that there were times he simply needed his private thoughts, and she accepted it as such. Yet, the child was too young to understand such complicated measures. He took the distance and the constant pushing at his mind as something devious, as a lack of esteem.

He really could raise her from the dead. All it would take is a thought, to pull her corpse from the depth of space, to return her to the living. Surely, Cyclops has enough memories left to twist her back into being.

It's evening by the time he leaves the ocean side, winds himself through the narrow roads and up the hill. His home sits at the top of it all, a view of where the ocean meets the sky. In his heart, he feels the ache of loneliness, his separation from all that he's ever cared about. It would be so easy to take it all back. Just a thought, just a nightmare. It would be so easy.
Storm makes a decision.

“He has no place to go, Ororo.” Jean's word echo in her head as she stares down at the frozen body. His fingers are turning black from the cold, the hole in chest, the jagged ribs. He looks dead already, but somehow he's still alive.

If she turns her head to the side, she can just make out the flicker of bright red energy that keeps a pulse inside his broken veins. It's a dangerous energy, one that has them hunted and degraded, kept trapped within a closed off mine, away from sun and trees and wind.

She wants to fly. To propel herself into the sky, catch the polar winds and soar into the sun and clouds. She wants to be free of it all, to escape those chains that have held her down for so long. But, she's the leader of the X-men. She has duties, responsibilities, people who need her to take care of them. People she must protect. “He's too dangerous,” she breathes, her warm breath a fog around her. Her eyes are sympathetic, but her voice is firm.

She's not like Scott. She is not single-minded in her intent. She sees the many paths that she can take, the outcomes, the consequences. She questions herself constantly – her ability, her rule. And she's compassionate, a quality that Summers lost long ago, when Jean died at the hands of Magneto. That death had changed him, made him more solid, more focused, filled him with seething rage that leaked out between his otherwise banal words.

For years, she watched his spiral, and she regretted every second of it. The burden on him – as he ran Utopia – had been great, but she had her own duties as Queen of Wakanda. She could not be there as much as she liked, but he never admonished her for finding loyalty to her kingdom and her husband.

“Focus, people,” he said, his voice rising above the fray. They were low on food, on storage for their potable water. He asked for ideas, solutions, and all that he got in return was an argument about boxed macaroni and cheese. He pounded on the desk, and then blasted the center of the table with his optic beams. Quiet ensued as the table broke apart beneath them.

“That's going to cost a lot to replace,” Bobby quipped, staring at the wreckage with round blue eyes. “Good thing your girlfriend's made of diamond.”

Storm could see his frustration, the lack of ideas from his chosen head table. He'd implemented all that he could, mostly without direction from the rest of them. It was because of him that Drake made ice every morning, collected in jugs throughout the day, but there were complaints about the wait for it to melt, and how there were times when there was no water available. He'd started up greenhouses, filled to the brim with vegetables and citrus, but they were at least a month from harvest. He worried that the children would get sick from the lack of fresh fruits and vegetables, and also the lack of variety in their current menu. “Donations will only get us so far,” he reminded them all. “We need more ideas, better ideas.”

He returned to his seat, drumming fingers upon the table. It was the first time she noticed the dark
circles under red lenses, his lack of sleep, his constant fretting. Like her, he was leading a nation, but unlike her, he had little support. “I can bring fruit from Wakanda,” she said. “And what vegetables are left from the daily harvest.”

A flicker of smile and he nodded. “Thank you. That would be much appreciated.”

It was the only time – in all the years that she had known him – that he asked for help, and she is suddenly disappointed that so little was given. In hindsight, she could have done more for the mutant nation. Wakanda was filled with technology, and she could have convinced T’challa to share it with the burgeoning island, to help it in its settlement, it’s future growth. In fact, she could have used her pull as queen of that most respected country to garner more favor from the UN and other allied nations. In many ways, she feels like she let him down.

But things were not always so easy. His penchant for darkness, for the grim, quickly caught up with him. From X-force to the modified Legacy virus, his desperation at seeing the mutants restored made his decisions rash and his fanaticism overboard. She wasn’t the only one to inch away from his leadership, to call him out behind his back, to question his morals and vision. But, perhaps, she was the only one to see how his steely facade wasn’t as strong as he pretended it to be.

His face was brave at Nightcrawler’s funeral. He said not a word when chastised by Beast and Logan. Like everything, he took it and buried their words deep in soul, refusing to steer himself away from the mission at hand. But, that night, in the War Room, as the lights of Utopia clicked off for slumber, she saw a very different man. One that was haunted, overwhelmed, fraught. “Don’t shut us away,” she told him quietly from the doorway.

She’d told him this before, when Jean died on the moon. She’d been clear about how he needed to reach out, to talk to them. He hadn’t listened then. She wasn’t sure he would listen now. Pale blue eyes studied him for long tense moments. “You didn’t kill Kurt,” she said, taking a seat across from him. He swallowed in response, bit against the inside of lower lip. “Scott, talk to me.”

“His sacrifice won’t be in vain,” he said after minutes of silence. Fists clenched, he rose from the table and left her, abandoned her to the shoreline of the asteroid. His pain was always private, a deep-held secret that he never revealed. She wonders now if it was his choice to be so distant.

She hates him, for his distance, the things he did, how easy it was to acclimate them to war. But, she cares for him as well, for the sheer fact that he’s a fellow human being, and someone she once respected. “I don’t want him near the children,” she concedes with a sigh.

Logan’s slight nod edges her on. “He makes no decisions as far the X-men or our fellow mutants are concerned. And, neither do any of you. You will move him as soon as you find a suitable place, as I will not have our friends cast to the cold in favor of keeping him safe.”

Alex rises up to argue, his face harsh and his teeth clenched, but Steve is quick to move in. “Agreed,” he says, though the others are not as willing. “She’s given us a place,” he reminds them. “That’s all we asked for.”

In all, Steve agrees with her rules. Cyclops shouldn’t be communicating with the children or making decisions for the team. He’s too damaged, too broken, and he makes his point clear with the others. “We’ll institute a 24 hour watch,” he assures Ororo. “He will never be left alone.”
The tiniest flicker of movement under jaw. It catches Alex's eye, makes him look closer. Hoping, waiting, he takes the visor from the small stand, places it over his brother's eyes.

The touch of skin to skin awakens him, frightens him. In a jolt, he sits atop the small bed, ripping and tearing at tubes and bandages. He kicks at covers, at his brother, at the world. An angry snarl, Scott fights back at the man who hovers over top of him, trying to subdue him, to stop the flailing limbs and the nightmare that ensues. “Scott,” he says, as calm as he can. “Scott.” He grabs at shoulders, at hands, at legs. He presses down near broken bones, trying to get his brother to stay still. “Calm down, Scott.” He warns Cecilia away, keeps her on the other side of the room as he continues to struggle with his brother. “It's just me. I'm not going to hurt you.”

But his words fall on too-frantic ears. Kicking himself off the bed, he drops to the floor on broken bones, his power beginning to spur out of control. Alex quickly jumps the bed, hands in the air to show his harmlessness, grabbing up scalpels and keeping them out of his brother's hands. “Scott. Calm down! You're safe now! Calm down!”

Across the room, Cecilia Reyes prepares a tranquilizer, but Alex is adamant that she keep away. The energy roiling off of him is dangerous, destructive, and she could very well lose her life to it.

Scott backs himself against the wall and then into the corner, a single scalpel have escaped his brother's grasp. Hands over head to protect himself, he wields the knife in the air, pointing it at the blonde before him. He growls in protest of furthers steps, yells obscenities at the further approach. There are no words, no looks of doubt, just anger and fear and a reality he doesn't realize that he's in.

Alex kneels to the ground, again, showing Scott the palms of his hands. “I'm not going to hurt you, brother,” he says quietly. “But, you need to put the scalpel down.”

It's a desperate action, to press the blade against his own neck. The tiny pearls of blood trickle down the line. Scott swears he'll do it if Alex comes closer, touches him, reaches for him. He's tired of pain, of battles. He wants it to stop. He'll do anything for it to stop.

Alex relaxes his posture, dropping hands to floor. “See, Scott, I'm not going to hurt you.”

“It's a trick,” he whimpers, the doubt suddenly crashing down upon rock tense shoulders. “It's a trick.” He pounds against the plaster on his leg, tries to break it, to crack it, to free himself from its confines. He can't fight like this, can't protect himself. “It's a trick.”

As his desperation boils over into a flood of tears, Alex takes the chance to grab his brother's wrists. “Calm down, Scott,” he says, struggling to keep his hold. “You're safe now. You don't have to fight anymore.”

There's a pause – a small one – which gives Alex just enough time to place his hands on the sides of his brother's face. “You're safe now,” he repeats himself, calm, soothing. “You're safe, Scott.”
Hands to visor, Scott presses fingers into skin, unsure, not yet ready for more pain if it is a lie. Alex smooths sweat damp hair from his forehead, a soft, tender touch that makes his brother doubt himself even further. “A-alex?” he stutters, his hope so fragile, already near to shattering. He flinches as the younger Summers reaches out for shaking hand, twines his fingers between visor and flesh, and holds himself there for long moments.

There is no pain in this touch, no attempt to hurt him. Still suspicious, still concerned, he allows his brother to pull his hand to his chest. “I'm real, Scott. I'm not going to hurt you.” The gasp of relief is audible, wrenching. Scott shakes his head repeating his brother's name again and again, still questioning what part of his reality this is.

Wrapping his arms around his brother's shaking body, he pulls him into a hug, a soothing circle over spine, and gentle whispers that it's all okay. Soon, the energy around him begins to calm, his frenzy settled into stoic silence. He pushes back from his brother and looks up to Storm in the doorway. Lean brows creased with wariness, her pale blue eyes do not dismiss the scene as something to merely be forgotten. Beside her is Steve Rogers, who is also concerned about the display. “You should have knocked him out,” he says to Alex.

Alex looks around at the destruction in his surround, the broken bed and side table, the half chewed monitors and machines. The wall has been melted, the floor pounded to dust. He hadn't realized it had gotten so far. “He's fine now,” he assures them, lifting himself from the rubble. He reaches out a strong hand for his brother, but still nervous, still confused, he refuses it. He mumbles under his breath, a series of numbers in his discomfort. One million, six hundred thousand, four hundred and thirty four. Six million, two hundred thousand, nine hundred and three. Four million, eight hundred and sixty thousand, five hundred and forty three. He buries head in hands as the world overwhelms him. “Er dogren.” Steve's words knock him out instantly, and Scott slumps to the floor. The spell was tuned to their voices, the three of them. It's a safety net, their chance to save themselves.

The immediacy of his anger shocks all of them. He lunges for the Avenger, his fists a fury against jaw and cheek. Steve stumbles backwards into the far wall, and Alex pummels him some more. “He was fine,” he charges, his words echoing down the halls. In the distance, there is the sound of children crying. “He wasn't going to hurt anyone!”

It's Dr. Reyes who breaks up the fight, shoving herself past Storm, and admonishing the two men in the hallway. “This is the medical lab,” she tells them both. “I will not have this fighting here.” Crossing the room, she pushes away the broken bed and bends down to check Scott's pulse. He did deserve more time, she says while pulling his arm over her shoulder, but she's not disappointed that he's once again unconscious. She's strong enough to lift him and soon beckons for Alex's help.

“I want him out of the med lab,” Storm directs, much to Cecilia's dismay. “I can't bring the children here until he's gone.” She suggests to make room in Logan's quarters, as it was his idea to bring the man here in the first place. Alex's room was long given away to a child in need of a bed. “I'll give you the hour to clear him out of here.”

The echo of her footsteps can be heard in the distance. It's then that Alex finally decides to speak. He thanks Reyes for her care, for watching out for brother. “He doesn't mean to be so frightening,” he explains. “He doesn't mean to hurt things.”

She was there when Jean made her confession. She understands that he's not in a good frame of
mind, but she's like Ororo. She can't condone the violence that he's committed. “I care for him because it's my job. But, having him here makes it hard on everyone else.” She reminds him of the Red Hunt, how the soldiers came for her at her family's home. “They pointed a gun at my father's head. He's eighty years old, a veteran, and a good man. But, they threatened to kill him in order to find me.” She'd come to X-men in tears. “Kurt checked on my family for me, made sure that they were okay.”

“The Red Hunt isn't his fault--”

“They were searching for him, therefore it is.” She retells his brother's crimes – from the Phoenix to the prison break, the countless people hurt in the Sentinel attacks when he chose to be a renegade mutant and threaten society. “He needs to stand trial for his actions. It's my job to make sure that he's healthy enough to do so.”

“We don't even know which of those decisions were his and which --”

“Which is why he needs to stand trial.”

Steve nods with approval, having said as much himself three days ago. “If he's found innocent, then he's a free man, Alex. No one should be allowed to escape justice, regardless of who they are.”

“Escape justice?” his tone is dark, rabid. “You saw his mind, Steve. You saw what they did to him. Hasn't he suffered enough?”

Steve understands Alex's sentiment. He agrees that Cyclops has endured more than humanly possible. “But the world, Alex. The world needs a resolution, a conclusion. They'll never feel safe so long as he is hidden.”

“My brother's saved the world more times than the world knows. He deserves better than being treated like an enemy.”

“But, to the world – to all of those people out there not blessed with gifts like we are – he is the enemy.” Steve hold Alex's gaze for some moments before going to wake Logan and getting the room prepared. He's sorry that he has to be the voice of reason in this, the one that cares about the world more than a solitary man. He hopes that Alex forgives him for his advice, his hope that soon, they'll turn Scott in so that he can face a final justice. “I'm sorry for what they did to him, but that doesn't mean he's innocent.”

“You feel the same?” Alex growls to Cecilia.

She nods. “I'll continue to treat him like any other patient. But, please, consider getting his name cleared and get us all out of hiding.”
He runs. Through hallways and corridors, propelling himself over furniture and through the laser guided aim of soldiers.

“It's one thing to hunt Cyclops,” he'd told them. “But Storm is a different matter.”

The reaction was almost immediate. A flood of soldiers into the room. With Ironman on one side, Nick Fury on the other, he threw himself out of the upper story window, landing on a balcony below. Glass shattered as he broke through the large glass door, scurrying himself across the floor and through the rooms. The elevators were already in motion, so he hit the stairs, bouncing down landing by landing, using his mutant gift to keep himself moving forward.

An arrow nicks his shoulder, a trickle of red blood over blue fur. Wide amber eyes look to the left where Hawkeye aims his bow. A shiver in his spine, Henry barely avoids the next volley, crawling under a high table to shield himself from the hit. At his rear he can hear the plasma burst of Ironman and the gunmen in his wake. “Why are you doing this?” he calls out. He considers the Avengers his friends, his allies. To be attacked by them boggles his mind.

“Cyclops needs to die,” Hawkeye replies, a harshness to his tone that drives worry into Beast's veins. “And you know where he is.”

Another volley of arrows blocked by the rear of a sofa. Beast can smell the gunpowder from here, and the small flame that sparks it to light. The subsequent explosion throws him backwards, singes the tips of blue fur, and crushes the air from lungs. “Thought you wanted him dead, too, McCoy. Isn't that why you came to us?”

Dazed with concussion, amber eyes half-lidded with dizziness and nausea, he can barely focus as the man with the arrows comes towards him. Grabbing him by the scruff of fur upon his neck, Hawkeye pulls him up along the wall, shaking him just enough to grab his attention. “Don't betray us now, Hank. We need to put an end to this.”

The sudden drop to the floor gives Beast just enough time to recover his wits, but the attack he expects does not come. Stiff as stone, Clint Barton stands unmoving, a shadow hovering over top of him. Hands splayed at his side, bow now on the ground, it's only his eyes that dart back and forth across the room.

In the distance, just down the hall, McCoy makes out the silhouettes of Ironman and the infantry, also paused in movement, like statues in the dark. Quick to his feet, Beast turns on heel to stare out the window. “Magneto?”

He strains to hold them all, but manages a coy smile in return. “Have you reconsidered your allegiance, Beast?”

“I won't join you,” he replies, but like the others, the iron in his blood is now magnetized, freezing
him in place.

“You may not have a choice.” A snap of fingers, and Beast can feel the sting of taser against his neck, and the world goes black before him.

He awakens some hours later to a world of shadows and thick metal chains around his wrists and ankles. The air is chilly here and moist, a draft from above weaving the scents of earth and ozone into the large underground facility used by Magneto.

Unlike the mine, this place is comprised of cut stone – a natural cave filled with the sounds of trickling water and the wings of bats. There are no comforts here, just the flashing lights of giant computers and small open-air beds in the corner of the cavern.

“You're finally awake,” Magneto says, with Sabretooth and Toad at his side. “Good. Now we can talk.” He's disappointed in the furry blue X-man. It's one thing for Emma Frost to play the game, but for Beast – a student of Xavier himself – to find that he had allied himself with the Red Hunt was near enough to start a war. “They imprisoned us, Henry. Made us into enemies. And yet, you curried their favor, put the needs of self above that of your brethren.”

Beast glares, struggles against the chains that keep him immobile. “They are trying to save the world --”

“From mutants?”

“From the Red Wave.”

“Scott Summers is a gift to us all,” he says quietly, sending his henchman to busy themselves with other projects. “If we play our cards right, Henry, he will make sure that mutants are never hunted again.”

It takes only moments for him to realize Eric's angle. “He's not a weapon,” Beast pleads. “He's a sick man that needs--”

“Help, not death? What a grand sentiment for a man of his power. He's a weapon, McCoy. Nothing more, nothing less. Xavier wielded him for years, and now it's my turn.”

“Even were his mind whole, he'd never bow to you.” Regardless of his resentment towards the man, no matter how many times he accused Scott of becoming their greatest enemy, he never once mentioned a world where humans were less than mutants. “He still believes in Xavier's dream.”

“A dream that perished long before the man.” Eric cannot see peace between the species. Not now, not ever. “They will always hunt us. They will always blame us.”

Magneto's plans are simple, really. To rescue those in the Undertow, to tear down that prison beneath the water and demand mutant autonomy once again. “If Cyclops will lead us, the world will listen. They'll have no choice but to listen.”

Beast reiterates the broken mind, how Scott is incapable of rationale and logic. How even strategy will be beyond him right now. “There is no hope in him. He's too far gone to make a difference.”

“Then why was he rescued? Someone must believe in him.”

Stark had been more than sparse about the details concerning Summers' escape from the Red Dimension, just that they had been betrayed by Dr. Strange and Steve Rogers. There had been the briefest mention of Havok and Wolverine, and that Mr. Fantastic had switched sides. He spoke
Emma and her intentions, and of the horrors he had seen. But he never explained what actually happened. “He tried to kill us,” was the bigger part of the explanation. “He was out of control.”

“If you let him loose upon the world, Eric, the world will perish. Tell me that you want to rule a kingdom ashes?”

Magneto smiles at the poetry. He knew the boy once, long before the X-men were brought together. “Charles never told you, did he? Another of his dirty little secrets.” He was a bright thing, that young child, clever, and observant. “He was more a man then, at thirteen, then I ever was.” His memories – recovered when his own death seemed imminent – are happy ones, not quite comfortable, but then who could be comfortable in the presence of such a power. “He told you it was for Scott's own good, did he not?” Beast nods. “And, you know that to be a lie. It was his own ego that broke that mind. He feared being overshadowed by a child, and so instead, turned him into a weapon that he threw against me for years. Now, it's my turn. And you, dear Henry, are going to help me.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because I know exactly where Storm and her little mutants are. If you want them to live, you'll do exactly as I say.”
A fine webwork of pale white lines crisscross themselves creating a map upon the skin. Gray eyes trace the roads of his many battles, from gunshots to knife wounds, energy burns and too-gashed skin. The bandages are fresh, bloodied already from reopened wounds and broken scabs. “I can't do much for him anyway,” Reyes had explained, “and we need the med lab to be open to everyone.

Outside in the hall, he could hear the shuffling of children trying to peek through the cracks in the metallic door. They whispered of their fear, their awe, wondering if they should knock or disturb their former teacher. They shoved at each other to peer inside the door lock, counting down the seconds for each one's turns. Sometimes, they would chant of their victory, that they had seen the Red Wave, and that he was hideous. A man burnt by energy, so ugly that it was no wonder the world turned their back on him. Others saw an angel, bathed in light and glory, hovering over Logan with words of kindness and destruction. The sparse few – the ones that told the truth – complained that they couldn't see him. “I can see Professor Logan,” one whispered too near the door knob, “and he doesn't look happy.”

To the children, Scott is an enigma. A puzzle, a boogeyman, a danger. He is a thing of nightmares and threat, something that thrills their little hearts into racing beats and fear-dried mouths. “Pocket gets a chance, too,” he could hear one of them say.

“Then he has to ask for it,” said another.

“He can't talk.”

“Can't or won't?”

“Does it matter?”

There is movement outside the door, another shoving match, on that leads to feet and fists and the blast of mutant power. He can hear the rattling of metallic walls, and then the solid footsteps of Kitty Pryde. She yells at them, reminds them that they are not to be in the hallway, orders them back to the common room. “If I catch you here again,” she warns them, “I'll take away the board games.”

The kids had created them in his absence, with marker on paper. They drew out their remembrances of Monopoly and Sorry, made decks of cards, and other games to keep themselves occupied. Never did they imagine that their creativity would be used against them in punishment. “You, too, Tatsuya. You can't be here. He needs his privacy.” The doorknob jiggles, and the door ekes in its hinges. “No, that doesn't mean look through the lock. Pocket! Go to your room, now!” Padded footsteps in the hallway signal the child's retreat, and then a gentle knock.

Kitty Pryde – so much older than the young girl he'd first met all those years ago – greets him with a sympathetic smile. She carries with her a plate of sandwiches and cold noodle salad. “It's not much, but I'm guessing that you're hungry?”
Logan nods and moves just enough to let her in. A peak out in the hallway and he sees young Pocket – still in his bunny suit – stare back at him. “Kid’s a curious one,” he mumbles, watching as Kitty takes a seat on the other side of the bed.

“A little trouble maker,” Kitty smiles. “That one will make a fine X-man one day.” She divvies out the sparse meal, apologizing for its meagerness. “Since Cable quit coming, we have to be super strict rations so that they'll last.”

“How much longer can you last?”

“End of the month, maybe. We're hoping that when Jean returns --” She cuts herself off, her dark brown eyes jetting down to Scott then back up to Logan. “Sorry,” she whispers. “Probably not the time to talk about that, eh?”

Logan shakes his head, turns his gaze back to Scott, still unconscious on the bed. He wants to be alone right now, to watch over him, to be fully aware of the moment when he wakes up. “He was lost,” Alex had told him. “He didn't know where he was, who I was. We have to keep watch on him.”

Gray eyes glance over at the young woman across from him. With a smile, she offers him a peanut butter sandwich, and explains that she brought enough for the three of them. “He'll probably be hungry, too,” she says, and places the plate on the table. She is sure that the bread will go stale, so if he's not up in a few hours, Logan should go ahead and eat it so that it doesn't go to waste. “If anyone complains about rations, come talk to me.”

“You're not afraid of him like the others?”

“I trust you, Logan,” she says. “If you say that you can help him, then I believe that.” Fear is a choice. That's one of the many things that she learned from him. That one can choose to allow fear to dictate their actions, or they can find the courage to face it, see ways to change it. “I learned that from Scott, too. He never let fear control him.”

That doesn't mean that he doesn't intimidate her. He always has, though. Made her feel smaller than herself. It wasn't intentional, she's sure of that, but there was always something about him – the way he held himself, how sure he was of his decisions, that it made her feel like a lesser leader. “I'm good at what I do,” she explains. “But, Scott made me realize that I could be better.”

She makes no excuses for their behavior, but she also makes no excuses for Scott's either. He is dangerous, contentious. If even half of what Jean said is true, then there is a great reason to want him far away from them, isolated, alone. “He needs time to recollect himself, and here may not be the place to do that.” The quarters are cramped, the kids are loud. There are fights among them everyday. The mutants here are angry, sweltering at times, with no outlet for their rage. She wonders if this is the best place for him. “He's going to be the focal point for a lot of that hatred because there are many who feel that he's the cause of their current predicament. Again. If anything, Logan, he deserves peace.”

Kitty does not believe Scott a bad man. His intentions were sound – wanting to protect those who could not protect themselves. And, he did a lot of good for his students, as much as he did the rest of them. “In a lot of ways, he was misunderstood. Even by myself.”

Logan doesn't bring up the telepaths, how easily they have been forgiven for their wrongs; how justified they seem to Storm and the others. Though he thinks it, though he seethes at what they did to him, he can't take that out on Kitty. Instead, he stares down at the unconscious man, wishing again that he could be alone and fully focused. He's worried about his awakening, that he'll lash out again
with powers he can't control, be afraid, be lost.

Kitty – for all of her awkwardness – is a perceptive one. In silence, she finishes her sandwich and gives Logan a final smile. “He's a stubborn one, Logan. He'll make it through this.”

In the quiet of her exit, Logan brushes chestnut hair back from forehead. He's surprised at himself, that he wants to be this close to the man, that he wants to help him, cure him, touch him. In the back of his mind, he remembers that kiss, how terrified Scott was, how he melted into his embrace. In his gut, he feels the feathering of nerves at the memory. His breath halts, his mouth runs dry.

It's an odd feeling, one that he's not quite sure what to do with.

As if on cue, autumn brow creases in a jolt of wakefulness, a full forty eight hours after being spelled under a second time. Head jolts to the side, fingers roll to fists. Logan is fast to steady him, his fingers intertwined in hand, his thumb under chin. He calls Cyke's name, pulls his focus to himself. “Scott?”

There is a spur of movement, fast and strong. A kick at sheets, a sudden fear jolting down spine. In seconds Cyclops is ready to fight. Logan quickly grabs shoulders, climbing up onto his lap. Deft hands push him back to mattress. “It's okay, Scott. It's just me. You're safe, okay?” In this closeness, he feels the whir of his stomach once again. That crisp winter scent, the pump of sweet adrenaline, the earthiness of fear.

Scott is warm to the touch, his muscles tense. “Relax, Scott,” Logan eases. “I'm not going to hurt you.” His hands move back to face, cupping chin and forcing the man's focus. “I'm not going to hurt you.” He listens as the thrump of heartbeat begins to slow, as breath begins to smooth. Stroking thumb against high cheekbone, he smiles at red lenses, slowly backs himself off of the bed, allowing Cyclops to gain his bearings.

“Logan?” Scott asks at last, his voice harsh with lack of drink. The crease of brow shows his worry – a rare thing to witness. Hand to head, he pulls at light brown hair, wrestling with power and confusion, with a world that he doesn't recognize. The sound he makes – that small grunt of a sound – is weak, desperate.

“You're safe, Scott. No one's going to hurt you here.” Hand to bare shoulder, he soothes at tensed up muscles. He wants to hold him, to drag him into embrace, let the man quake inside of his arms, but he doesn't. There's still too much fear, too much pain, too much need for control. “Just breathe. It'll be okay. Just breathe.”

He mimics the sound of Logan's breath, deep inhales and slow exhales, in and out as gnarled hands light over his bare chest. “Logan?”

“I'm here.”

“Please kill me.”
The Mine

Chapter Summary

A phone call.

“I don't trust you.”

“I know.”

It was so easy to sneak past their defenses. With Rogue and Drake busy lamenting their love lives, and Pixie too bored to pay attention, he was able to crawl right up the ladder and out into the open. He doesn't worry about Cerberus. It only track mutants, and he has no X-gene.

He's useless among them. His leadership skills ignored, his ability to plan for contingencies. Like Cyclops, Storm doesn't want him here. He was part of the Red Hunt, and though he's changed his mind on the benefits of it, she still sees him as an enemy. Most of them do, except for Alex and Logan. They are merely distant, worried about what he might do to Scott.

“He needs rest,” Alex reminded him sometime after they moved Cyclops to Scott's room, shooing him away in case he decided to use the spell again. He was exasperated, his ego still bruised from their fight.

Yet, Steve saw the fear in Storm's eyes. “She's trying to keep people safe,” he replied. “And, Cyclops is just another burden that she doesn't need.” It was not only safer, but there was also assurance in that spell. Keeping him under meant that he couldn't accidentally harm someone.

The voice on the other end of the phone is ragged, exhausted, pained. With each word, Steve can hear the consequences of his deception. He's dreamed about this voice, the soft moans and pants that coursed through midnight air. The touch of skin upon skin, the ripples of muscles, the sweet curses of a man coming undone. He can taste him, in his memories, smell him. Right now, he wants nothing more than to close the distance between them, to gain back trust, to repair what should never have been broken. “Tony--”

“Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice isn't going to happen.”

“Be reasonable.”

“I am being reasonable.”

Perhaps if he were treated with more kindness by the mutants, he wouldn't feel so out of place among them. He wouldn't crave what he'd already broken, wouldn't be trying to make amends. “I'm sorry, Tony.”

“I can't do this right now, Steve.”

The knot in his throat feels like an entire world shoved into his esophagus. Hard and tight, it makes his hands tremble and his voice go quiet. “I just want to help. Please, Tony. Let me help.”

“Seems to me you've helped enough.”
“I’m trying to negotiate his surrender, Tony. Isn’t that what you want?”

A sudden flare of anger in otherwise thorn-pricked voice, “What makes you think the mutants will give him up after all of this?”

“They’re running out of time, Tony. They have few supplies left. Maybe two weeks, if they’re careful, and no antibiotics. Someone gets sick in here and the whole place is going down. The children are in chaos, and the burden on them has just increased a thousand fold. All they want is to go home, to be safe again. Can you give them that?”

He knows that though Stark pretends to be a callous, arrogant man, he's actually more compassionate than given credit for. It's simply a matter of appealing to the compassion, something Steve fears he'll never be able to do again. Even in costume, he's at a loss. “Dealing with Scott Summers once and for all is the final goal of everyone. Let's talk about this.

“I don't believe you.”

The words cause Steve's words to shake. It's not what he wanted to hear, but there's little he can do now. It was his choice, after all, to take advantage of that miraculous moment. “I'm sorry, Tony,” he repeats himself. He can feel the heat of tears sting against his eyes.

“Don’t start whining now. You made your bed, Steve. What else do they want?”

“All charges dropped and the prisoners released from the Undertow.”

“They're not prisoners.”

“Semantics, Tony. They go home without charges against them, in exchange, they give you Scott Summers.”

“And, they're not going to revolt when I put the axe to Cyclops' neck?”

“You can't kill him, Tony.”

“Why not?”

“Killing him could end the world.” He tells Stark of the prison in Scott's mind, how it's likely that if he dies, the prisoners he keeps will escape. “There are hundreds of them, bits and pieces of these things. And there's the Phoenix. Two of them. You can't risk it.”

“So, what am I supposed to do with him?”

“Put him on trial, let the courts decide.”

“And should they find him innocent?”

A long pause as Steve tries to balance the needs of the mutants and his sudden sympathy for Summers. But, he's already in foot deep of his own accord. Backing out now would be detrimental to everything. “Do you really think that would happen?”

In Tony's voice, he hears the man of iron, the strength of a hero, but he also hears the sad, lonely edge to that was once overjoyed to hear him. “From what I saw, he could plead insanity.”

Steve knows that it's possible. That he could get off on an insanity plea. But, he also knows the resourcefulness of Nick Fury and SHIELD, how even being bat shit crazy won't stop them from assessing and dealing with the threat. “There's a difference between insanity and world ending
“I'll agree to it on a probationary return. They hand over Summers, and until he is dealt with, they will be monitored day and night by the Hunt. No one sets foot off that campus without permission.” It was the same set up the government used after Wanda's spell, a plan to keep them safe and to keep them from going bat shit crazy on the world around them. “If Cyclops agreed to it, then I'm sure Storm will as well.”

“I'll give her your terms,” Steve says quietly. His stomach shirks at his own words, his agreement, his role. “And you're not going to kill him, right?”

“Does it matter?”

“It does.”


A part of him knows that Tony is not above lying, never has been, never will be. But, he also knows that through the years, the man has changed. He chooses, in the end, to have faith in him. “Thank you.”

“One last thing,” Stark calls out. “Why are you doing this?”

A long, insufferable pause. Reason upon reason floats throughout his mind. The mutants, the fear, the world. But none are as important as the real reason why he's doing this. “Because I love you.”
The Baxter Building

Chapter Summary

Fury is in charge.

The red flash and blare of sirens rock the soldiers and scientific personnel to life. Fast and harried, positions are taken within seconds of the alarm, guns pointed and glasses on.

The rip in the dimensional fabric glows hot orange and green, like flames on stone, it burns into a wide, open circle.

“What the hell is happening?” Nick Fury stands above the fray, looking down from warehouse balcony. He calls to operation commanders and scientists, his voice an echo over them all.

“We don't know sir. The portal generator just kicked on.”

Below him, the scientists scurry to find the reason for the sudden flare, checking screens and machines. On lightboards behind them, they draw out the complicated mathematics that determine where the opening points while others begin diagnostic checks. “Sorry, sir,” a lead scientist approaches. “This machine is still a mystery to us. We only know what Richards showed us.”

Dimensional space is not something they arbitrarily dabble in. They lack the funding for it. “The machine jumped to life on its own. We're still trying to figure out why.”

Maria Hill arrives with little fanfare save for a flurry of salutes from gun-toting guards. She hurries to the platform where Nick Fury keeps his one good eye on both the portal and the fray. “I've a bad feeling about this,” he tells her, instructing her to pull two SHIELD patrols and bring them here.

“No, sir?”

“He doesn't want to waste what morale is left in his soldiers. Too many failed missions and a flagging leader, he worries about their long-term success if things get worse.

“Just SHIELD for now.” Dark eyes narrow when she realizes that Fury hasn't been told this news. “Cap is with the mutants. They're ready to hand Cyclops over.”

Another gut feeling. “Keep Red Hunt where they're at,” he commands again. “Just SHIELD here for now.”

Fury is not a stupid man, and it is rare that people treat him like one. But, Stark is an arrogant bastard, and often feels himself above the rest of them. When Hill questions him again, he is quick to reprimand her. He knows full well what went on the night of Havok's escape from Stark Tower. And, though he demands that this intel be kept just between the two of them – in case this information is needed to keep Stark under thumb at a later date – he doesn't trust Roger's motives in suddenly coming to them, especially after his actions in the Red Dimension.

“The Undertow.” It's Maria Hill's only thought, only idea. “What else could they be after?” A distraction that would draw the attention of both SHIELD and Red Hunt forces would give the mutants an opening to finally bust their friends out of prison. “Illyana Rasputin worked with them in the Red Dimension. Why wouldn't she work with them again?” Plus, the disappearance of Hank...
McCoy, the sudden appearance of Magneto, and Cable's attack on the military base some days ago. "They're planning an attack."

A string of quiet curses, Fury sneers and pounds his fist against the railing. "Damn it." A pause for epiphany. "Do you think he planned it?"

Fury knows little of Scott Summers, just a few interactions throughout the years, but one thing he did know about the man was his sense of strategy. He prided himself on always being ten steps ahead of the enemy, of planning for every contingency. Manipulative when he had to be, powerful when there was no other choice, the X-men leader could dig his way out of Hell and no one would know how he did it.

"Unknown, sir," Hill answered. "But, from the way Ironman talked, it doesn't seem likely. Cyclops lost his mind. I doubt he'd be capable of --"

"Unless it was a feint." His one blue eye glances again at the portal and it's slowly widening rift. Since this morning, it's grown an arm's length, and its diameter keeps increasing. Fury has long been accused of being paranoid, a term he takes as a compliment, and one that more often than not, keeps the world safe from those who would do it harm. "Think about it, Hill. Mutants are no better off than when he 'died' all those years ago. What if he's after revenge?"

It's a chilling thought, and one that could be true, if she didn't know the man in question. Quietly, she shakes her head. "It's not his style," she says. "He's bold, sure, and he's said a lot of bold things, but I highly doubt that the Red Wave was intentional."

It's a difference of opinion, considering neither one of them have hard proof to make their point. Fury has instinct; Hill has her basic knowledge of the enemy. "Time will tell, Hill. Time will tell."

She nods her understanding of commands, and works her way back towards the exit. Fury watches as she leaves, before hollering out a list of instructions for the men below. He wants data, hard data. He wants to know why the machine is still on, where it's pointed, and why the hell Reed Richards hasn't been brought here yet. "I've waited all fucking day!" he yells. "I want answers, people. Answers!"

Fear is a driving force for many under Fury's command. In an instant, the scientists below pick up their pace, scribbling even more equations on lightboards and stringing out raw data feeds. Within minutes, Fury is approached with an update.

"It's a neighboring dimension," he's told. "As big as the Red Dimension from initial analysis, but this one seems to be populated."

"Populated by who?"

"We don't know, sir. We've barely just begun to calculate red shift and land mass."

"Why's the machine still on?"

"We don't know that either, sir. Everything seems to be functioning normally, except we're not able to input all commands."

Fury balks. "What do you mean you can't input all commands?"

"The machine isn't exactly easy to operate, sir. We need a specialist--"

"Screw the specialist and give me a list of commands you can't input." The engineers gathered below
are supposed to be the brightest of them all, and so he shakes his head at their sudden incompetence. “Give me a theory, something to work with instead of an 'I don't know'.

“We can't input operational commands, sir. We can't be sure yet, but we think the dimensional portal has been hijacked by another user. We think they are using it to open a rift to another dimension.”

Finally, something that he can work with. “Inside job or outside?”

“I don't-- It's unlikely that someone on Earth has hijacked operational status, sir, considering the signals that it's sending are foreign to us, which is why we're having such a rough time—”

A cold look from Fury cuts him off. “Get your coders down here. See if they can decipher the inputs. Pull everyone you can from other sites. This gets top priority.” He pauses, looks around the room and points to a group of guards keeping watch on the widening doorway. "And someone get me Stark!"
The Mine

Chapter Summary

Morning shift.

He doesn't remember a world that isn't red. Though he knows that once he saw a blue sky and green grass, he doesn't remember what they look like. As he stares at the bedspread, he tries to guess what color it could be. A darker shade of red, so therefore not pink or white, not gray – unless it was a dark gray. It's not yellow or orange. Green maybe. Brown or blue. Violet, maybe black. There's a chance that it's red in tone, a deep dark red like the color of his mother's lipstick. He wishes he could remember his mother's face, her voice, the way she hugged him.

Alex wants him to sleep. Thinks it would be good for him. But, he's afraid. The last time he went to sleep, he woke up in Hell. It's a place he doesn't want to return to.

On the small table to his right is a bowl of canned tomato soup and half a sandwich. Alex urges him to eat something. That, too, would be good. It's been years. Surely he's hungry. But the idea of sustaining himself, of carrying on, of losing himself once again begs him off.

The blanket smells of Logan.

“You know why you're still alive, right?” Jean is always harsh with him. She loathes him, berates him. She feels betrayed by his relationship with Emma, swears that she died because of him.

Emma is no better. Saint Jean casts too big a shadow, and no matter what she does, she can never climb out from underneath it. “They're going to use you as a weapon.”

From behind visor, he peers up at them. There's moments where they shimmer in their redness, like a fog. But, otherwise, they are as substantial as Alex who talks to him from the corner.

Alex speaks of spring, their time at some park near their home in Anchorage. He remembers a green slide and rubber swings, how the boys used to play on the monkey bars and dare each other to leap from the top. Alex broke his arm once on one of these dares. Scott does not remember this.

“You're no use to them,” Xavier tells him from the opposite corner. “They don't want you here.”

They surround him, the shades of his nightmares. Each with their own condescension, their own tales of loathing. He's not good enough; he's too weak; he should be alone; he should die. He looks at them one by one, taking in their deep-seeded hatred. He understands them; he believes them. More than he does Alex.

He hasn't spoken since he woke up. He watched the changing of the guards with some chagrin. They're going to babysit him, watch him twenty four seven. Alex in the mornings. Steve in the evenings. Logan at night. “Go away, Jean.”

Alex's blue eyes narrow with concern. “Jean isn't here, Scott.”

He's going to kill his brother, she warns. He's too weak to control himself. He's going to explode and kill his only brother, just like he did her, Xavier, so many more. “Murderer.”
“I'm going to kill you,” Scott whispers, his tone as dazed as stone still face.

Alex leans back quickly, holding his hands in the air, until he realizes that Scott isn't paying attention to him. “Who are you talking to, Scotty?”

There's an innocence about him, something worried and pure. His words come out in a slow drone, hesitating between each word as he tries to keep up with her continued cautions. “I'm going to kill you.”

“You're not going to kill me, Scott.”

A crack in the haze, he flinches, looks at his brother from behind red visor. He knows that Alex's hair is blonde, that his eyes are blue, that his skin is tanned from the sun. The look on his face is one of worry – raised golden brows, slightly parted lips. His tone is soft, and the hand that reaches for him shakes ever so slightly. “Alex?”

“I'm here, Scott,” he replies, taking the hand upon the bed. Intertwining his fingers with Scott's, he gives him a gentle squeeze. “I'm here.”

The room is red. A red that glints under electric light. There are no bodies. No Jean. No Emma. No Pixie or Dazzler. Confusion grits jaw and sprawls a worried scowl over his right cheek. “Alex?”

“It's okay, bro.” Another squeeze, and the center of his brow creases further. “It's just me in here. Only me.” A long pause as he watches Scott come to grips with this reality. “Are you hungry yet?” Alex fusses with the half stale sandwich, pulls it apart and tries to give his brother a portion of it.

“Twenty six million, two hundred eighty one thousand, four hundred fifty three.” He mumbles them, these numbers, starting low and going higher. He stares at the proffered sandwich, the numbers escaping his lips in whispers. They're reminders – of himself, of what he's capable of.

Alex puts the sandwich down, watches as his brother dips head to raised knees. He cradles himself, long, muscular arms wrapped around legs. He doesn't know what to do, doesn't know how to help. He places his hand on t-shirted shoulder and gives it a gentle nudge before leaning back in his chair with a sigh.

“I'm not a murderer,” he said quietly, staring into blue eyes. Such sadness, even across his steely features. “It wasn't me that killed him. I didn't--”

“I believe you, bud.”

It was the first time since the death of Xavier that someone had said that to him. In it, there was relief, that at least one person believed him. “So, about that pizza parlor...”

“What do you want, Scott?” It wasn't an easy question, no matter how lightly he intoned it. With a patient smile, he watched the thoughts flow across his brother's face like a great river suddenly undammed. “For your revolution I mean. What do you want from it?”

A shrug and shake of head, red visor looked up to cloudy gray sky. It was going to snow soon. “I don't know,” he answered after a long silence. “I just want to go to sleep.” He hadn't slept in months, not since Logan died. “I don't know why, but I close my eyes, and I think of him. I could have helped him, Alex. I could have saved him, if he would've let me.”

“I didn't realize you were friends.”

“We weren't. I mean, not since he left.” Scott didn't know why he left. He knew that Logan told him
why, but he couldn't remember the reason. “It's like a hole in my memory.”

“Another one?”

Scott nodded, as close to a smile that Alex had seen him come to in years and years. It was also the most open. “Where's Emma?”

“Left her at the Jean Grey school. She's better off there. They all are.”

“How come?”

“I'll just end up getting them killed. I seem to kill everything.”

“You're not a killer, Scott.” But, he could tell that his brother didn't believe him. “You know you can talk to me, right?” A pause. “But you're not going to, are you?”

A shake of laughter rippled across broad shoulders then a seriousness that stalled breath and hunched Cyclops forward. “I've never hated you, Alex.”

“I know. I've never hated you, either. Been disappointed, but I think you understand why.”

“I made the decisions no one else would make.”

The words came out too harshly. “Because they were bad decisions to make.”

The openness suddenly closed off. Stoic, now, distant, Scott stared off in the distance, his hands folded in his lap. He shivered in the cold, that they were sitting in the snow, staring off the edge of the plateau into snowbound sky and the tiny town on the horizon. “I'm sorry you feel that way.”

“I'm sorry I said that.” Poison was by far easier to accept than the bittersweet that came with thought. He'd protected them, saw them through their darkest years, and they survived because of him. “I should have been there to help.”

“You had your own duties, brother. No one can fault you for that.”

He'd always been the forgiving sort. Quick to overlook wrongs and betrayals. From the Shi'ar to Magneto, Emma Frost to Rogue. He was always willing to move forward, start anew, look past troubled times. Alex wasn't nearly so flexible, holding onto grudges for years if he had to. “You should, though, Scott. That was an awful lot of weight you carried all by yourself.”

It's what he was raised to do. His whole life, he'd wanted nothing else except to lead the team. “When Bobby, Warren, and Jean went off to college, there was a part of me that wanted to go to for a while. I felt like I was missing out on life, but I had too many responsibilities as team leader. I realized, it was the only place in the world that I belonged.”

“Not the only place, Scott.” Though, it must not have seemed like it, there was more to him than the X-men. “You're a father. A brother. A son. Those are all roles you've played--”

“I want peace, Alex. At the end of all of this, I want peace.”

“Then show them all how peaceful you are.”

As Scott struggles with the coiled up energy that glows around him, he continues to murmur his jumble of numbers quietly into his knees. “Breathe, Scotty. Just breathe through it. You can do this.” It was hard to watch him, hard to watch him shake and sputter, to be less than his reserved self. “It's going to be okay, brother. I got you.”
The Mine

Chapter Summary

Ororo and Warren talk.

His wings ache from lack of use. Deep, scratched up pain that ratchets down his spine and splays out over shoulders. Gripping shoulder blade with pale blue fingers, he massages sore muscles and attempts to stretch his wings in the cramped chamber. “You gave your word, Ororo.”

Pale blue eyes cast down to floor. “It could be our best chance, Warren.” They're running out of food, out of supplies, and from what she's seen, Cyclops is more dangerous than they originally thought. “The children can't sleep for his nightmares.”

“One nightmare.”

“One nightmare with disastrous consequences.” She speaks of the uncontrolled energy in his sleep, how it disintegrated the door to the room, the bed, the tiny footlocker. “Imagine had the children been nearby.”

“But they weren't nearby. You've warned them all away.” The whole wing was cleared out this morning, leaving nothing but Logan's room and the medlab up the hall. “Logan knows to be more watchful now, as does Alex.”

“And Steve.”

Angel shakes his head. “I doubt they'll ask for Steve's help anymore. Not after this.” He doesn't blame them for being upset. It's a betrayal and one that neither Alex or Logan will easily forgive. “They have hope for him, Ororo. Perhaps you should, too.”

It feels like years since she had hope. “It's a way out, Warren. A way to get our lives back. Our freedom.”

But, trust in the Red Hunt, in SHIELD, in Tony Stark is a foolish thing. “We trusted him before. And instead of returning our friends, he put them in prison. Do you really want to put your trust in him again?”

“Ironman does not hate mutants. He's worked with us in the past to--”

“Like the rest of the world, Ororo, he's frightened of us, our capabilities. He's merely a man. He fears that we're superior.”

She's said as much herself in the past. Many of them had. The Avengers, the Fantastic Four – they always kept their distance, touting their support for the beleaguered species, yet keeping a far distance between them. There were many times when they could have used their ‘allies’ help, only to be ignored. Scott was perhaps most incensed over their actions, though the professor would always calm him down. “He wanted nothing more than to be a super hero,” she remembers. “And instead, he became a villain.”

There was a time when she looked fondly upon the red-spectacled mutant. His values, his leadership,
his ability to think through any situation and determine the safest course. “Do you feel guilt, Warren?”

“Of course, I do. He’s one of my oldest friends, and yet, I never bothered to look close enough to see his pain.” A small, sad smile lights across his face. “It wouldn’t have taken much, you know. To see what was going on. A bit of patience, a bit of prying. A few questions, and all their plots would have unraveled. I could have saved him.”

“Is it guilt that makes you protect him now?”

He laughs, a quiet little chuckle that makes Storm’s eyebrows quirk. “Perhaps to a point. But, mostly, it’s because I know Scott and how strong he is. I know he can overcome this.”

“If I turn him over to the Red Hunt, what will you do?”

“If you abandon him, I’ll leave.” And he’s sure that others will come with him. They trust her word, her promise to them that they will have a safe haven, a place to recover. If she denies him that, if she is truly lacking hope and no longer has the heart to fight for them, then he’ll leave and make the world a better place on his own.

Rubbing elfin chin, she mulls over his words with much chagrin. She’s tired of losing people. Tired of the threats. “If I allow him to stay here, then Bobby will leave. As will Rogue, and plenty of others. They feel that he’s too much a wild card to keep here.”

He has no sympathy for her, as much as he would like to. She could have done much to help herself by being open to Scott to begin with. “But, you kept hold of your spite towards him, which gives the others plenty of excuse to revel in their own bile.”

“And you kept your faith in him, even though it’s undue.”

Another slight smile. More than Storm, Angel understands the torture that comes with having your mind messed with. Even now, as he sits here talking to her, he can feel the call of Apocalypse in the back of his head, a drone of a whisper that wants to lash out and bloody her. “It’s taken me a long time to gain control of myself, and never once did Scott threaten to abandon me.” It took the support of Cyclops and the entire team to give him the courage and strength to find himself again. “If he’d cast me out for my darker instincts, I would have killed the world by now. It would be the Age of Apocalypse, and I would be his finest harbinger.”

“You also have Jean and Psylocke to thank for your current level of control. Without them--”

“Of course. But, that doesn’t mean that I can forgive them for what they did to Cyclops. They tore apart his mind, Ororo. For power. They laid waste to him so that they could be stronger. Tell me your defense of that.” There is no bile in his tone, just a firm smoothness, but his dark blue eyes speak volumes as the rage behind them builds. She can see the flicker of anger in his flesh, the blushing of cheeks and neck, how it rises up into the golden waves of his hair. He breathes deep, now, trying to contain the rush of himself, the darkness. “No one abandoned me,” he says again when he finally calms down. “And I’m far more of a monster than he ever was.”

She shakes her head. She’s never viewed Angel as a monster, even when the call of Apocalypse took him to the darkest reaches of his self. He’s a friend, a trusted adviser. Calm, logical. She needs his input, his ability to solve problems. “I need everyone. We can’t afford to be divided.”

“Then don’t divide us. You’re a queen, Ororo, a goddess, a leader. If anyone is strong enough to make the right decision and keep us all together, then that’s you. Have faith in yourself. The rest of us
She watches him exit the tiny chamber with a sudden sense of loneliness. And, for a moment, she wonders if this is how Scott felt during his time on Utopia. An entire world upon his shoulders, but no one to help carry the burden. “Warren?” she calls right before he closes the door. “I can trust you to speak with Bobby? Keep him calmed down?” He nods. “Very well. Scott can stay, but on a trial basis. If he continues to endanger us, I'll have no choice but to hand him over. The children come first.” He nods again and with a soft grin, he thanks her for keeping her word.
For three days they've kept him in the room, tied up and collared. Like a lab rat, they draw his blood and inject him with chemicals. He's a powerful one, indestructible times, they want to find out what makes him tick. Humiliated and naked, all Sam Guthrie can do is mumble his protests as they fill his lungs with liquid oxygen and deluge him with water.

It's a special ionized water, one that could transform his mutation, or possibly turn it off. They've been working on this for years – in the private reaches of SHIELD – a deterrent to mutants who choose to go evil. As the water rushes over Sam's body, a host of screens at the rear and sides spew out a wealth of information. From vital signs to oxygen levels, cellular degradation to the small changes in DNA, prints run crazy with the constant readouts.

“No change, sir. The ionization process is not going as theorized.” The woman is small, with dark olive skin and hazel eyes. On her elegant face is a smile, something coy and alarming.

“It worked in the mice,” Dr. Alan Helmut says.

“Perhaps a higher dose of radiation is required.”

It was a thought. At times past, it was theorized that radiation was responsible for the genetic mutations. Though this was later proven false, it didn't mean that those initial findings didn't entirely jump the shark. “If we increase the radiation further, we could chance disintegrating his cellular structure all together.”

“Is that a problem, sir?” Gillian Pryce was new to the lab, and already there were those who refused to work with her. Behind her back, she was called brutal and bloodthirsty. But she came with the highest recommendations from MIT and Johns Hopkins, a geneticist of the highest order.

It wasn't necessarily a problem, but it did mean one less test subject in which to work with. They had many more tests and methods to go on their way to finding a cure for Scott Summers.

Nick Fury had theorized that Summers was invulnerable, otherwise he would have starved to death at some point during the past few years. “It's not like he grew a garden in that damn dimension of his,” he'd said. “And considering his new found healing factor, we may be looking at yet another mutant who is too hard to kill. I want options. Lots of them.”

“Up the dosage by one hundred parts per liter. Go to five hundred max. This one's not scheduled to die.”

In other rooms, there were other experiments to watch after, including those dealing with ruby quartz, stem cell therapies, and DNA rewriting. They repeated tests that had worked in the past, from the electric pulse collars that kept the mutants from utilizing their powers, to Dr. Kavita Rao's work some years ago. She'd actually found a partial cure, but with the research they'd managed to find, it only worked five percent of the time, and only on those few mutants who had not yet reached
puberty when their powers manifested. Scott Summers was long past puberty, as were most of the other X-men, which rendered Rao's cure useless.

In another room, there is Gambit, an energy manipulator, strapped by chest and arms to dozens of machines. Using an electric current that targets the bonds between cells, they attempt to measure the increase and decrease of his power usage – the size of explosions that he's able to create. He looks pained and pale, but if it means stopping the Red Wave from destroying more cities, then it is worth it.

Another lab find Rockslide – his break apart self currently in a dozen pieces across the floor. A cloud of synthetic viruses – much like the nanosentinels – are released in an attempt to delay his reforming. They've had success with this, but what they really need is a mutant with a healing factor – one of the ferals or even Angel. It's possible that they could delay Summer's own healing long enough that they could keep him in stasis for years and years until another solution is found.

On the last door to the right, at the very end of the hall, Dr. Rao is less than pleased with her accommodations. The Red Hunt had scooped her up the minute they found out that Scott Summers could heal, but thus far, even with her system full of sodium pentathol, she refused to give voice to her past research.

There were inexplicable details in her years of files, things that didn't make sense. Granted, he knew that part of her research was based on Breakworld technology and science, but even in an earthly sense, there should have been some commonality, some way for him to decipher it. All he can think of is that she went back and doctored her reports so that her research would be unproducible.

"You will release me --"

"As soon as you can explain what you did." They've reversed engineered what was left of her products, samples that were labeled with year and month. None were the formula that she later claimed to have. "Kavita, we're friends here, comrades. Surely, you can see the benefit --"

"There is no benefit in the cure. Especially not in your hands." The Red Hunt is a disgrace to everything the mutants fought for. She will not see them on the brink of extinction again.

"I only need one vial, Kavita. Just one. You don't even have to tell me how you made it. One vial and we'll release you and everyone else in the Undertow. We'll never bother you again."

Kavita Rao is not a fool. A single vial could equal a million 'cures' after Dr. Helmut is finished with his tests. She says as much and garners a frustrated glare from her peer. He's on a deadline, and if he misses it, he could be in very deep trouble with his Nick Fury. "We're trying to save the world, Dr. Rao. Surely you want to be a part of that."

She doesn't and she never will. She lived with the X-men long enough to understand that they have no disease that needed be cured, but rather need a world that doesn't shun them. "I lost my daughter to the Red Wave," he tells her. She was in Paris, on her honeymoon. With all of the horrific events going on, she moved up her wedding, thinking that we all needed something beautiful. She died for that.

"She's been brought back--"

"I still grieved her, and my heart still knows that loss. Half the world knows that loss, and right now, there's not one thing that prevents us from having to know that loss again."

Kavita Rao understands grief. She lost most of her family when a bomb struck outside their small
house in the suburbs. And she's sorry that he had to experience that. She's never had a child of her own, but she had nieces and nephews that she cared for, so in a way, she does understand his pain. But, that doesn't account for what he's doing here. These mutants are people, and they are being subjected to torturous experiments in hopes of changing who they fundamentally are. “There are many mutants who would give anything for a cure, but there are also many who see that cure as a way of degrading them, of controlling them. How easy it would be for you to stick a needle in their arms and wish away the powers that you fear.”

“You don't fear Scott Summers?”

“Of course, I do. But, that doesn't mean I have the change what nature made of him.”

“Not even for the sake of the world?”

“Not even for the sake of the world.”

He calls her a fool and questions her audacity. “You're a scientist, Kavita. You're supposed to make the world a better place.”

“And I will, but not like that.” There are plenty of real diseases that they should be working on; diseases that harm the populace and rip the futures from innocent children. That's how I will change the world, Alan. Not by taking away the genetic birthright of someone who is proud to be himself.”

Once again, their argument ends in a stalemate. Another vial of sodium pentathol in hopes of gaining the truth of her research, and Helmut leaves her in the care of the agent sent here to gain their much needed information.

Maria Hill greets him at the end of the hall, her face bland and her tone demanding. She's here only for an update on the dozens of experiments under his lead. He gives her what he can. “The ruby quartz bullets produce enough shrapnel that even a veteran surgeon would have a hard time removing it all, but it's still not aerodynamic enough to be used at a safe distance. We are attempting to make it lighter, but then we'll have to run experiments on the mutant directly to see if an altered structure would still prevent his powers.”

“S H I E L D is more worried about curing him, Doctor, rather than just delaying--”

“I realize that, and I'm after the same thing. But, without Rao's aid, we're having to retrace many years of research and fill in the blanks. Perhaps if Stark were more willing to share the information he retrieved from Utopia, we could re-engineer the sentinels that were used by Sublime, make them more useful, more permanent.

“He's capable of destroying whole cities. Nothing short of turning off his X-gene is going to --”

“I agree, but the sentinels could possibly aid with that.” According to Rao's notes, the sentinels cause a mass sickness among the mutants, preventing them from using their abilities. Even those with healing factors were unable to replenish their cells. “That, combined with Rao's cure could possibly be enough to turn off his X-gene for good.” Of course, he can't promise anything yet. With a mutant that powerful, enough that he can shape reality to his will, it's very hard to tell what will actually work.

“I'll talk to Stark,” she assures him. One way or another, they will get those files.
“Scott, you need to sleep.” But, Scott doesn't move. Head in hands, a red glow about him, he sits in the metallic chair – as he's done all day – struggling with things that Logan can't see. From his mouth, the mumbled numbers, a constant stream of murmured syllables that don't make sense. It's a fearful thing to watch, a man on the verge. “Scotty, you need to sleep.”

It's been two days since he tried to rest, since the nightmare that blew a hole in the wall and had him screaming at the top of his lungs. Logan had to turn him off to get it all to stop, and then watch as the children hurried up the hallway to see what was happening. Many of them were in tears, afraid for their lives. Others – like Indira – were fascinated by the man who was thus far hidden from them. She wandered close to him, too close, and was chased off by an angry Bobby Drake. He froze down molten metal, cooled it to the touch and shook his head. “He's too dangerous to be here.”

Logan crosses the small chamber, places a hand on trembling shoulder. “Did you hear me?” he asks softly. If he could see the eyes that suddenly peer up at him, they would be wild and crazed. Dazed with lack of sleep and nourishment, hazed with whispers and too much power. He's pale, his lips dry, his hair a mess. He's so far from himself that it steals Logan's breath.

Behind red lenses, battles flash. A hundred, a million. Old replays of past deaths that haunt him still, the claws to his stomach, hands gripping his heart. The arrows, the swords, the blasts of energy that burned off his face and broke his bones. Energy begins to spiral, lashing out at his would-be attackers, he calls their names as he jumps from the chair. He threatens from between clenched teeth, that he'll win this time, just as he's done before.

Logan is quick to stifle his angry words. Tackling him to the floor so that he cannot run on still broken bones, he grabs at shoulders and head, resting himself across torso. “Scott! It's just me,” he says, hoping to break the sudden fright. “Scott! Come on, pull out of it!”

He grabs the man behind the ears, holding thumb against high cheekbones. “Scotty,” he softens, his dark brow bent with worry and fear, “It's just me.” Holding his head steady, he strokes thumb against cheek, keeping him still, hoping to calm him.

There is a breath then, and confusion. It ripples across face like tear drops in the rain, autumn brow raising with realization and mouth stammering out its words. “L-Logan?” Another lash of energy. Like a whip, it coils across adamantium body, doing no harm to its indestructible host. “No, no, no, no --”

He presses himself into the palm of Logan's hand, hand to head as the fog of his disreality parses with what's real. He curls himself, again, into a ball, the numbers falling from trembling lips. “No, no, Scott. Come on. Don't fall apart on me now. Come back.” He pulls the crazed man from the floor and sits him against the bed. Still gripping his face, Logan tries to peer behind red lenses. “Slim?” But, there's nothing there but mumbled numbers and fear.

Drawing back to haunches, Logan watches as the power bubbles in an out like haggard breath. A fog around him, it swirls, thick at times, thin at others. Like this, with so much intent behind iron jaw and red lenses, it's harmless, just a cloud that follows him and makes him miserable. Right now, it's stable, under as much control as the broken mind can lend to it. But any disruption is deadly.

He's careful with the covers that he tucks behind Cyclops' shoulders, pooling it around him to keep him warm, to give him something reminiscent of comfort. He realizes that for the horrors Scott faces, this comfort is very little, but he's not sure what else to do. Hand to head, he brushes the stray wisps of autumn hair away from Scott's face, traces the line of jaw down to stubbled chin. In his head, he remembers their kiss, how warm and needy it was, how those hands collapsed upon his spine and pulled him closer, as if trying to drink the tenderness from his mouth.

An inward curse, he pulls himself away, grabs onto bed for pillow that he pushes behind Scott's head. It's wrong to think such things, especially when the man is in such dire straits. Sudden lust has no place here, not when Slim is barely clinging to the edges of his own sanity.

His heart had stopped. Hit by a beam of massive energy, it flung him backwards into the cliffs where his body thudded off the side, causing enough damage to bring rubble down atop his head. The Reavers had followed them for days, haunted their footsteps after the plane crash, and Cyke kept them moving until that blast. The blood flowed from open wounds, and Wolverine pounded against his chest willing his heart back to life. Knowing the Reavers would be back, he pulled Cyclops around his shoulders, wading through knee deep snow in order to get some distance between them and the maniacal cyborgs. It was a cave, a cold one, but the only thing he could see through the blizzard for miles.

Fires were easy to start – at least now, with age. High up twigs where the snow had yet to settle, a few sparks from adamantium against rock, and he was in business, even if Cyke wasn't. He undressed the man, got him out of icy clothes and placed the articles by the fire to dry. The scars were horrendous. There wasn't an inch of his body not covered in the fine white lines of old scars. Burns and breaks, gashes and slashes, he could see the decades of wear and tear the man had gone through, and with that came even more respect for the ailing leader.

Warm fingers traced against this map burned into his skin, the path of his dedication and loyalty since childhood. Beneath him, Scott trembled in cold and dream, and the name Logan escaped his lips. For long moments, the feral mutant stared at visor, wondering if he was awake, watching him, but the soft patter of breath that clouded into the air revealed that he wasn't.

It took hours for the clothes to dry, several more trips out into the pines to bring back the high branches. The fire was large and toasty, and though Logan's stomach growled for food, he didn't dare venture outside for a hunt. He didn't fear getting lost, he feared being to enticed to make this place too comfortable.

By nighttime, Scott was awake and delirious with cold. He rambled on about the Reavers and Magneto, Sabretooth, and Sinister. How they were coming, how he wasn't strong enough to stop them. Logan laid him back down on the stone floor of the cave, bringing him as close to the fire as
he dared. “Calm down, Slim,” he soothed, afraid that the voiced shock would alert the Reavers to their whereabouts, and Logan worried that he couldn't take them all on his own.

He pulled the frantic mutant's head to his chest in hopes of stifling the sounds, and wrapped himself around the freezing body. As he absently carded fingers through autumn hair, he could sense Scott begin to relax from his frenzy. “It's okay,” Logan whispered. “I got you.”

“Logan,” the words came softly, “Don't leave me.”

There was no fear in the words, no derision, no command. They were warm, placated, serene. Logan blinked twice as Scott pressed hard against his chest, inching himself into comfort. “I ain't gonna leave, Scott,” he stuttered before deciding it was the delirium of cold that brought it on. “I promise.”

But, he did leave. Maybe not then, but later. After Jean died, after Scott moved them to San Francisco. He broke a promise that he'd meant to keep. “Scotty?” he says softly, once again stroking thumb down jaw. There is no response save for the jumble of numbers that don't make sense. They blend together, one into the other, hundreds becoming thousands becoming millions upon millions. He doesn't move, doesn't cringe or flinch, just speaks those numbers to himself.

He's going to make it up to him, breaking that promise. “Don't leave me, okay? Not now. Not when I just got you back.”
“Did you know, Tony?” Gun to his back, his children looking down from the viewing platforms above, Reed Richards does not make a sudden move. Brown eyes glare to the side where Ironman averts his gaze first to upper reaches of the warehouse where Sue and her children watch and then to the continually expanding portal. “Did you know?” he repeats, louder this time, with such rancor in his voice that the guards shove the tips of guns against his shoulders and push him forward. He pauses, waits for the familiar press of metal to spine before he walks again, his eyes still on Stark to his right.

The silence then is deafening. “There are children in those cells, Tony.” Reed wishes that he could see Stark's face. Behind that iron mask, he hopes that there is revulsion, the knowledge that his quest to subdue Cyclops has taken an evil turn.

From above, he hears the word Daddy, and the soft whimpers of his children. A peek above, and both Franklin and Valeria cower in their mother's arms. The flicker of gold around their necks calls attention to the collars that prevent their powers. They, too, are under threat by armed guards. “They're kids, Nick,” a dual meaning that Fury fully understands.

“We cut the power to your machine two days ago and the thing's still running,” Fury commands, his voice hard and black like pavement. “There's an alien language in the controls, prevents operating commands from being inputted. We need this thing fixed.”

“Have you sent in the telescope?” Reed asks, his curiosity peaked.

“We just want the damn thing shut down before some squid comes crawling out the other side trying to threaten us with tech we don't understand.”

It takes the push of gun under shoulder blade to get him to move. Three faltered steps forwards, then up the stairs, he stands midst the machinery staring at the portal. Big enough for two tanks, it blazes orange and red, as if set on fire from the inside. Beyond is blackness, the twinkling of a thousand stars, the glistening red and blue hues of exotic planets yet to be explored.

He wonders at the discoveries beyond. The life forms, the precious metals, the elements, the air. His mind swirls with scientific endeavor – a whole dimension of uncharted knowledge. He craves it.

“Snap out of it and get to work.” Fury's words are hot and angry.
Jumped to attention, he settles down at the machine and filters through the various tests and statistics
the SHIELD scientists have been working on. Indeed, it is an alien language, thus far indecipherable.
He glances to the code breakers, still working their magic on the exotic symbols printed out on plain
paper. Like a swarm, their conversation buzzes over the constant tics and beeps of the portal
generator, but Richards has a feeling that they won't find their answers soon.

He pulls up the input center, reads across the various commands that have been thus far rejected.
They even tried creating a back door into the OS, but the alien language had beaten them to the
punch. By the time they intervened, ninety percent of the system was overwritten. “The question is,”
he says more to himself than Stark who stands beside him, “if you cut the power, then where's the
power coming from?”

Fingers fly furious across the floating teledisplays. He traces paths through circuitry and telemetry,
leading him down into the core of the processing station. He looks for the strings of code that he
desires, his eyes flickering through a thousand processes at once. He jots down what's useful, ignores
what isn't. His equations are slower than usual, completed three times before he's sure himself. And,
then, his eyes concerned, he turns to Tony. “You need to end the mutant experiments in the
Undertow.”

“Not my jurisdiction, Reed. Where's the fuel coming from?”

“End the experiments.”

From above the click of guns and the soft cry of Sue. She pleads with them to let her children go.
That if they must kill, to choose her, not her son and daughter. She's a strong woman, rarely brought
to tears, but without the ability to protect her children, she fears her uselessness. “Where's the fuel
coming from, Reed?” Though intoned through metal and technology, Richards can hear the soft
wavering in Stark's voice. “Please.”

His stomach turns with nausea. A trembling sneer upon his lips, his eyes glass-stung and red, he is
absolutely mollified and disgusted with the man he once considered a hero. Above, Sue's pleas grow
louder, more intense as the men ready their weapons down upon the childrens' heads. Having no
choice, the words come out soft and spiteful. “The Red Dimension. Someone is siphoning energy
from the Red Dimension and rerouting it through the portal.”

“Summers--”

“No,” Reed is quick to interrupt. “Someone else.” He points to the portal, and shows Stark his
findings. “Someone from a neighboring dimension.”

“So, how do stop it? How do we close the portal?”

Matter-of-factly, “You don't.” A glimpse of smile creaks across angular jaw. A sideways glance to
Fury and he can see the temper that turns him red and frustrated. “You prepare.”

A string of orders from black-top lungs and Reed Richards is grabbed away from the console, forced
to his knees with a gun leveled atop his head. He can hear the screams of his family, their cries and
sobs. He pushed too far, too fast. He knows too much, he cares too much.

He doesn't feel the bullet. Doesn't feel it enter his skull, divide his brain into pieces. He doesn't feel
the shrapnel as it burst forth through ears and tongue. The blood. No, he definitely doesn't feel the
blood. But, he can hear. He hears their screams before his eyes close and he hits the floor in a lifeless
slump.
“Stark!”

Tony forgets how to breathe.

“Stark!”

He forgets how to speak.

“Stark! Damn it!”

Encased in metallic suit, protected by gears and circuits and things that pulse into his neurons, he forgets the world around him except for the man lying dead on the floor. He kneels, puts his hand over lifeless brown eyes and closes the lids.

“I'm five seconds away from blowing your brains out, too.”

“You killed him.”

“He's a traitor, Stark. He set us up.”

“He was my friend.” He's pulled to his feet by several soldiers, steadied, when Fury pushes a button near his com and the metal parts begin to dismantle. Tony's not surprised that Fury did this, built a way to get him out of his suit. Contingencies are the man's passion, a result of his need for control. Blue eyes blank with grief and fear, he meets Nick's angry gaze as the cuffs are placed around his wrists.

Sue curses, a rare thing for the mild woman. A string of rants that get buckled to the floor, and her children in a hurry to protect their mother. Their small bodies draped over her lithe form, they huddle together through the hits and kicks and attempts to pull them away.

In his head, he prays for them. Something – since he is a man of science – he rarely does. He is not ashamed of this prayer, as it's not for himself. It's for a family that will grieve the loss of one of the greatest men he's ever known.
It took eighteen days and over a hundred search and rescue workers to find them. By that time, they were searching for bodies, and were surprised that the boys were actually alive. The youngest – Alex – was near hypothermic and covered in lacerations, frightened and screaming when the men finally came to him. It took a tranquilizer and a warm blanket to calm him down.

The oldest – Scott – was unconscious, his cracked skull wrapped in tattered parachute and still bleeding. Near to death, he was easier to secure, and the one they worried about the most.

The search continued, however, even after the boys were found. The search for the parents, as there were no bodies in the plane, and the search for Carl Williamson and his six member crew. Williamson knew these mountains backwards and forwards, had been the first to make contact with the children, but soon after, he disappeared, as did all of his friends.

Mr. Sinister remembers how small they were then, how afraid. They struggled with the doctors and nurses, gnashed their teeth against arms and fingers, kicked their chests and torsos as the nurses tried to subdue them. They were fighters, even if they didn't know what they were fighting for. It had been so easy to control them all.

He knows this mind. Backwards and forwards. He knows the tricks and traps, the false memories and the real ones. He knows the debris – those memories too crushed and too broken to use anymore. He knows the hallways and the staircases, the grand rooms of this once mighty mind.

It was too easy to incite them all to war. A few twisted memories to show them the way, and they destroyed this imperfect mind – one too prone to excess dopamine, bringing on hallucinations when under intense stress.

He'd followed the boy from birth, had tracked the mind and the thoughts that made it. It was a mind he was both afraid of and jealous of, for even with its imperfections, it was glorious and beautiful. Twelve perfect geodesic domes set inside one another like little Russian dolls, and he was never able to see inside them, to get the core, the thing that made the man. But they did their job well, the telepaths. Tearing away at the fabric of self, ripping it to shreds and breaking him down. Out of twelve, there is but one left that covers the core, the only thing keeping him together.

Sinister marvels at this piece of mind, the wonders it must contain. Even without the telepathic interference, the boy was a driven one, prone to the need for lofty goals and heroic pursuits. He believed – like his father before him – that the world was something to protect, to make better. The telepaths easily took advantage of his very nature, his trust, his hope, his loyalty.

Just like he'd planned.

Scott was small for his age, his growth spurt to the 6'3” man he would later come to face still many years off. And delirious with concussion and brain swelling. The few words he spoke were slurred, his body bruised, and his grip on his brother's hand was weak and fragile. It was so easy to tear them
apart. Though Alex fought mightily for the six year old that he was, his seven year old brother was often too weak to put up resistance. “Alex,” he said quietly, and mumbled something about the Summers brothers being together forever.

The first cut was the easiest. The kid was too drowsy, too sick to react. He lay in the underground lab some miles away from the orphanage, unreactive to the slice down his arm. Peeling back the skin, Sinister could see the glints of the child’s power. It was a power he suspected, that he’d been warned about over a hundred years ago – this was the body never meant for Apocalypse. This was a body meant to end him.

And when his brain did finally heal, when his sluggish healing factor did finally kick in, he would warn the child not to make a sound, preferring to work in blissful silence. No matter how heartless and cruel Victor Creed accused him of being, he still shunned the screams of his experiments. They broke his concentration, made his perfect lines just a touch jagged. “Remember, Scott, if you make a sound, you will never see your brother again.”

Nathaniel Essex is not a mutant. Transformed by Apocalypse into an immortal creature with amazing powers, he is human by birth. Like Stephen Strange, he has no desire to absorb the powers of Scott Summers. But, unlike the good doctor, he wants to recreate those powers for himself, and since his apocalyptic transformation, he’s done just that. Well, until the child left him for those that eventually destroyed him.

“Who are you?”

Sinister smiles. A pale, malicious grin. With the wave of hand, he pulls up the astral illusions of Scott Summers, bends them until they resemble a table and two chairs. A decanter of fruity red wine, and he invites the Sorcerer Supreme to take a seat and talk for a while.

“No until you tell me who you are.”

“I'm someone who can help you.”

There’s a reason that Strange can’t fix this mind. It's so broken and bent, so filled with false memories that there’s no way to discern the truth behind it all. As an example he pulls up a single moment in time – a simple vision of a vase with flowers. In some of these memories, the vase is filled with red roses, all tilted at different angles, the vase moved to and from the wall. Some have sunlight beaming down, others the moon, and some have rain just outside the window. Sometimes, the telepaths got creative, changed the flowers completely – to asters and daisies – and other times, the flowers were wilted or all together dead. Hundreds of images blur across the space. “Tell me which one is real, Mr. Strange.”

“Dr. Strange,” he corrects. “And what should I call you?”

“You can call me Dr. Essex if you prefer to keep things professional. Mr. Sinister if you don't.”

The name rings alarm in the back of Strange’s mind. Though he’s never met the maniacal scientist himself, he’s heard tales of his capabilities. Spells glimmer against his hands. “I suggest you vacate this mind before I force you out.”

Sinister laughs. “I'm merely here to help, Dr. Strange. After all, what good is an earth if there is nothing left to inhabit it?”

Unnerved, wary, Strange takes a seat if only to find the motive behind this visit. That Essex is here to begin with is something he takes great caution in, but to do battle here, so soon, could make things
worse. “Very well. Speak.”

“You can't tell which one is real, can you?” Strange shakes his head, his blue eyes still narrowed with suspicion. “Well, it's this one,” he says, pulling out a memory of a vase of sneezeweed and black-eyed susans sitting on a kitchen table behind a sunny window. “The boys had picked that for their mother the autumn before the accident. The others are fakes, implanted memories used to gain access to the thoughts behind it. Of course, destroying the others destroys a thousand traps—”

“I'm well aware of the cruelty attached to the memories. I know to be careful—”

“Ah, that might be so, but you don't know this mind well enough to fix it.” Essex taps the side of his head and smiles. “I do. I know this mind as well as I do my own.” He sips at the wine and snaps his fingers again, pulling up millions of memories now twisted beyond repair. “You need me, Dr. Strange. If only to determine what's real and what's not.”

“And what do you want for this help, Sinister?”

“A blood sample.” He smiles once again. “For now.” He stands, waving his hand to disappear the furniture. “I'll give you time to think about it,” he says over his shoulder. “Until then, good luck.”

Strange watches him disappear from the mind completely, and then at the memories floating in abundance. A part of him realizes that Sinister is right, that he doesn't know Scott Summers well enough to heal this shattered mind. But another part – the part he relies on – knows that there is something else behind this, and he hasn't figured out what.
Magneto's Base

Chapter Summary

Dreams and memories.

She likes the way he looks at her – whether in this body or another. The lust in his eyes, his desire so prominent. Gillian Pryce beckons him closer, her olive hand twisting into blonde hair, pulling the beast into a snarled kiss that doesn't last nearly long enough. “Change back,” he tells her, preferring her own thin lips to these plump ones, her golden eyes, her blue skin.

If Victor Creed was ever anything as a lover, he was real. So many men and women had been fooled by her shapeshifting, but Sabretooth was never one of them. “I want to see you,” he says again, his hand gently caressing sharp cheekbone. ‘The real you.”

They were lovers once, so long ago, and from that love was birthed a hideous child hellbent on mutant destruction. And now, they're lovers again. “How have your dreams been?” Mystique asks, slowly shifting back to her true form. Like a taunt, she does so slowly, watching how his eyes ripple with satisfaction as she becomes herself again.

The question gets the reaction she expects, a single shrugged shoulder and a sneered lip before he turns his ravenous attention back to her reveal. He strokes her cheek again, following down across neck and shoulder before caressing the side of her breast. “I've missed you,” he growls and dips forward to collapse upon her in a kiss, but she staves him off with a hand to his chest.

“You told Eric, right?” Another shrug, this one aggravated, less bound by attraction. “I told you that you need to talk to him.”

“What's the old man going to do about a nightmare or two. I'd be better off talking to the Beasty boy tied to the chair. He probably studied that shit.”

Her mouth poised in one serious long line, she tuts her tongue against her teeth. “That's no way to speak about our bargaining chip.” She smiles gently, touching long, blue finger upon his lip. “Was it the same dream?”

He sighs. It was always the same dream. A scalpel and blood. A child's hand, and a pale vicious smile. Raven swears that they're memories. He doesn't deny it. He just fears what they mean.

Victor Creed is a murderous man. Man, woman, child, he doesn't care, so long as it gets the job done and he can work out some of his natural aggression. But his dreams, what Mystique thinks are memories come back to the surface, speak to a time when he did care. “What if this is a memory that I don't want?”

For long moments, amber eyes grace across him, staring at suddenly solemn features. His eyes are large and round, brows crooked above in a sad lilt. He bites at bottom lip to stop it from trembling. He's vulnerable, a rare thing for the animal before her. “Then we'll deal with it when the time comes. But, first, you have to get the memories back.”

He doesn't want someone messing around in his mind. Not again. He's had enough of that. Between
the X-men trying to quell his murderous impulses to the fools at Weapon X, he's had enough of all that. He doesn't trust the telepaths to restore him. “Eric restored his own memories,” Mystique tells him. “Maybe he can help you restore yours.” After all, it's why they're here, why they came to work with Magneto. They couldn't care less about the Red Wave and this whole Summers fiasco. They're here to put Sabretooth back together so that they can move on with their lives, to evacuate the world and find their a peace that's eluded them thus far in their long years.

She makes him promise to talk to the man, to which he reluctantly agrees. Before pouncing off to finish whatever task Magneto had set for him. It takes her a while after to find Eric in the very back of the caverns conversing with Henry McCoy. Slipping into shadow, hiding herself between the folds of rock, she listens as they discuss the mutant experimentation in the Undertow.

“Ignorance does not suit you, Mr. McCoy. Nor does undying loyalty in an antiquated system that proposes to protect the earth by any means necessary.” There is after all only way to protect the earth, and that's to let mutants finally be free and assume their place at the center of it all. “They fear us because we are born superior to them. They will attempt to take us down by any means necessary.”

It's not hard to imagine that the experiments that they are running in the Undertow will make their way to the general populace. One toe over their constantly moving line, and their innate powers will be stripped away, their birthright, their only means of defense against a world that hates them. “If we let them continue these atrocities, the mutants will have more to fear than just the Red Hunt, Henry. They'll fear losing themselves all together.”

“Scott's not a weapon,” Beast submits.

Eric laughs at the attempt, slapping his knee and shaking his head. “He's always been a weapon, Henry. That's all he was ever used for.”

There was a power inside of him. An immense power. “He's going to use it against us,” Charles surmised, staring through doorways to the parlor where the boy suffered through a book he did not understand. “He's been placed in my life in order to destroy it.”

“And you call me paranoid.” He'd admonished Xavier some moments earlier for once again trying to break through the child's defenses, causing his nose to bleed and a massive headache. Moira had been quick to wipe up the blood from the boy's books, to glare at Charles and motion for Eric to wheel him from the room.

This particular parlor had once been a music room, though now, the piano was long out of tune, and the paper beginning to peel from the walls. There had once been happiness here, when Charles was a child, before he'd secluded himself from the world to guard the secret of his powers. He meant to have it redone, one day, the music room. New wall paper, new carpet. Perhaps even the purchase of an oboe and violin in case his future students decide to take up music as a hobby.

“This obsession you have is unlike you.” And, indeed, it had become an obsession. Night and day, the man focused his powers trying to chip away at the boy's defenses. “You will lose any trust that he's afforded you if continue, Charles. He will run.”

He stayed because of Moira. Because she smiled at him, treated him with kindness. “She means to protect him, even if it that's from you.” He had already seen the designs, the machines that she was building in order to stop the constant intrusion into the boy's mind. If she could get them to work, these inhibitors would block Xavier's power all together.

“She wouldn't do such a thing,” Charles sneered, his anger cool and cold, like a winter fog on a high
mountain.

“If it means protecting Scott, yes, she would.” He took a pause then, his blue gray eyes mirroring the grim crease of brow in his friend. “What you're doing is wrong, Charles. You need to leave that child alone.”

“You're trying to take him from me,” the man accused. Puffed up in his wheelchair, leaning forward, he pushed himself into Eric's mind, searching for thoughts to back up his claim.

But, Scott was not the only one with good defenses. Eric had been around Charles for many years, and had learned how to guard himself. A tick of finger in the air and tongue to upper teeth, he cautions the man to leave his mind, to not be so foolish as to think him weak. “You mean to use this child in your little army, don't you?” By changing the subject, he avoided a rather loud confrontation that would probably disturb the boy even further.

“It's not an army,” Xavier defended himself. “I will train these children to use their powers for the good of the world, teach them the difference between self-serving and --”

“How will you teach them the difference when you don't recognize it yourself?” After all, what he was doing to Scott wasn't out of fear, but out of his very need for control. “You're afraid that he will make you obsolete.” The child was a natural strategist, something evident in their evening chess games over hot chocolate and sandwiches. “He thinks ten steps ahead, and thinks of every possible outcome. You've seen it yourself, I'm sure. He's meant to lead us, Charles. He's meant to bring us to our right place atop humanity.”

Another ideological difference. “We're no better than the humans, Eric. I will never teach him that.”

“Instead, you'll teach him to fear his own kind, both in words and practice.”

It's rare that Magneto talks about his memories of that time, of the young Scott Summers and what came to pass. She is surprised that Eric doesn't speak of the time he did try to take the child, and was nearly killed for the effort. His memories, along with MacTaggert's, were erased, as both were forced to forget about the boy.

She wonders, then, what he's up to, what he's planning. If he's just trying to make Beast feel guilty for once again being a traitor to mutantkind, or if he has something else up his sleeve. “Magneto,” she says, stepping out of the shadows. McCoy is not surprised to see her. “I have an update for you, on the experiments in the Undertow. They've taken a drastic turn.”

He nods his understanding, checks the binds on Beast's chair. “He never wanted peace, Henry. He wanted power, and he destroyed a young man in order to get it.”
Chapter Summary

Flames and freezing cold.

She stands at the heart of the world, surrounded by molten core and the crests of lava. She laughs, a hideous, charred laugh that echoes out into blackened sky and billowing mountains. She reaches for him, her talon-like fingers crooked and bent and large. He tells her no. Begs her to stop the madness, pleads with her to let them live. But, Jean Grey cannot hear the pleas of mortals any longer. Drunk on power and flame, she wraps her talons around him, lifting him into the air. “I never loved you.”

It burns. Her hold on him and her words. It burns him from the inside out, but there is no death for him. His body energized by a cloud of red energy that bursts forth from uncovered eyes and hands and feet, he heals just enough to keep breath in his lungs and a pulse in his chest before being burned again. Over and over, a funeral pyre within her hand, she singes against his flesh, melting it away, dripping it down into the oceans of lava below, only to smile as the flesh reforms. “Who could ever love you?”

“Scott, wake up.”

It hurts. His body, his mind. There is not a place in him that doesn't suffer as the burn over takes him, as her words crash down into his mind, breaking and tearing and ripping his thoughts to shreds. “You're a fool, Scott Summers. To think you were anything but a tool.”

He doesn't want to believe her. Doesn't want think that all of their years together were lies. He loved her, with all his heart and soul. She was the thing he curled up against when the world went to dark, the thing he protected, the thing he feared most to lose. He loved her like no one else. “You gave me this power,” she speaks into his bellowing screams of pain. “You cursed me with the Phoenix.”

Great wings form behind her, wings of flame and burning. She beats them upon the blackened win, fanning up the great fires at her feet. She holds him over the heat of them, letting him turn to ash in her claw-like hands, let him melt and singe, only to rebuild himself again. “How many times will you fall apart before you let me go?”

“Come on, Slim, you're burning up. Shit.”

She tugs at roasted joint, plucking arm from rebuilt body. The muscles that grow back are dark and black, the color of death and pain. It's painful, this regrowth, and she laughs as he yells in his suffering, waits those longs moments for the arm to be new again, and then pulls it away again. “You're too broken to love.”

He's powerless to stop her. Helpless. Unwanted. Arms and legs, like a spider in the hands of a curious child, she plucks away his useless limbs and laughs as they regrow. Such torment, such hatred. He loved her once. A part of him still does. He tells her that she isn't Jean, that she isn't herself, that something's happened, that she has more control than this. He begs her to stop, pleads his love for her, his undying affection. “You're incapable of love, little one, as one without a heart.”

“Shit, shit, shit. Scott you're on fire. Wake up, damn it.”
The tread of talons across his chest, they seep into skin little by little, inch by inch. He knows this feeling. So familiar, so painful. She cuts across his chest, through muscle and bone, the flames near-killing him as she punctures through his shoulder, and in seconds, she grabs his still beating heart. The blood that drips from her hand is black and burnt, and with a gasp and a sob, he watches his heart die within her hands.

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He screams her name at the top of his lungs, and then for the bird that controls her. He begs the Phoenix to let her go, to take flight and leave them all. But she can't, not while he holds her prisoner to his mind; not while the Scarlet Witch's spell keeps her bound. “Give yourself over to me,” she breathes her blames into him once again, “And I'll leave this world forever.”

It's a temptation. To give himself to her, to lose himself to flame and ash. No more pain, no more anguish. No more thoughts or feelings or need to control. Within her, there is no need for love, just the primitive want of beginning and end, destruction and rebirth. It would be so easy to let go, to give her the last shreds of his mind and allow her the freedom she so desperately craves.

“Damn it, Scott!”

But it's the pounding in the back of his mind that stops him in the moment. Something fearful and dreaded, an ancient language that he doesn't understand, the creaking of iron bars and the pounding of wood. He can hear it, another temptation, another lulling the calls to him from the deep. There's a strength in that cry, one that calls to his heartless self, one that reminds him that another wants this power just as badly.

The need to protect the world wells up inside of him, rails against the darkness in the depth of his mind. He is punished for this, flaming talon poking down into head, splitting spine in half. In his ear, she whispers once again of her demand, that in letting go, there will be no more pain. No more suffering. He can drown inside the flames once again, revel in the spirit of her self, and never again feel the lack that his humanity has caused.

The heat overwhelms him, drags his lungs into fits of coughing and sobbing. He feels the burn inside of him, the melting point of lungs and spine, he feels himself drip away into the fiery ether that surrounds him.

But, then, there is a sudden coldness against his flesh, something that hardens him, makes him whole again. The Phoenix rails in this interference, pokes talons into flesh that no longer falls to flame, no longer ashes at her touch. With bleary eyes, he watches as the flames of her wings becomes smoldering ash, and the ground below harden into volcanic glass. Obsidian greets her talons, turning the tips that dig into flesh black as moonless night, and she screams in her retreat. Drops him to ground, in a shuddering heap, too pained to move from broken bones and heartless chest.

“Damn it, Scott, wake up.”

The shaking of his body, the convulsions rock against his consciousness. He can feel the fingers that grip his shoulders, the cold spray of water that drips down shielded eyes and clothless chest. He hears it again, that voice that calls to him, pleads with him to wake up. It's with exhaustion that he finally wakes from the flaming nightmare inside his mind, crawls back into the world that may or may not exist.

Logan watches him carefully, looks for the signs of wakening behind visor. The small movements of jaw and brow, imperceptible, almost, to those who do not know this face and where to look. The twitch of lips and the sudden gasping of breath pulls Scott forward from blackened shower wall. He bows his head to the water, letting the coolness slip over burning spine.
“You're okay,” Logan soothes and draws the shaking man into an embrace. “I got you. You're okay. It was just a nightmare.”

“L-Logan?”

“I'm here,” he says quietly. In the quiet, he massages too tense muscles, splays hands over shirtless spine, pressing soothing circles into back. There's a warmth in his stomach, a completion, something that sates him, some part of him. “I'm real.”

“Kill me. Please.”

It's the first time he's spoken in three days, save for the litany of numbers that rolls off his tongue. The first time he's had any sense of clarity. Logan's heart hurts for the askance. “I ain't gonna kill you, Slim.”

“I'm tired.”

“I know.”

“I'm really tired,” he says, the tremble in his voice garnering tighter arms around him.

“I know.”

He can't sleep for the nightmares, those things that heighten his emotions and spurn his powers out of control. “She wants out,” he says, pulling himself back into the spray, letting the cold water rush across his broken body. A long silence. “I can't stop her.”

He's a beautiful man. The muscular planes that cut across his athletic build, so well kept and trained. He'd honed this body from scratch, from a slender, awkward teen into a machine built just for the fight. It's an absentminded touch that brings Logan's hand to cheek and strokes it to the center of neck. He would have gone further had he not recalled himself, reminded himself that Cyclops was in no shape for the hunger that pooled within his stomach. “You're stronger than you think, Scott.”

There's a glow about him, a light red fog. It's small now, in control. There are times when it's gone completely, a sign of his mastery over the influx of energy from the Red Dimension, and other times when it's wild and careless and lashes out against a world that has harmed him in more ways than Logan can count. “You've always been strong enough for this,” he eases into the silence.

Scott doesn't answer, his head against the shower stall, his breath evened out into a soft in and out. Logan realizes that he's fallen back asleep, and for that a fear settles in the pit of his stomach. The Phoenix dreams have been getting worse. They burn him, his clothes, the bed. He gets so hot that he can melt these metallic walls and crack the tile at his back. In those dreams, he can burn the world, turn it to ash and melt the moon.

But there's also something else behind it all. Something even more frightening. Apocalypse. He heard, just moments ago before Scott finally dug himself from dream. A call that shivers against spine, recalls the evil that still rests within his soul.

He was Death once. Some time ago. A hideous incarnation that he's never truly evacuated from his soul. As Scott's mouth begins to move, as it speaks that ancient language half-forgotten by the world, as his skin turns dark, and his face shifts into nightmares, Logan can feel the stirring of Apocalypse inside of him. The shadows, the craving, the blood, the need. It roils inside of him, spilling out, and forcing his claws. He jams the adamantium into the floor to prevent himself from striking out at the changing flesh of Cyclops before him. “Scott!”
The call of Apocalypse is a maddening thing, and his will, his stubbornness, his need to be himself and only himself, is cracked down by the continued punctuations of primal song into the air. Red energy fans out, pushing Logan back onto his side, and the flames of the Phoenix spill forth to burn the world.

Barely gripping to his sanity, Logan stares at the renewed dream state that stands before him. Half Apocalypse, half Phoenix, power spews forth like a broken fountain gushing streams of water. Behind the visor, behind the dream, Scott smiles. “It's time to end this.”

“Fuck!”

The lunge comes from the side, as frenzied claws pierce against mending ribs and heartless chest. He swings his heft into the man before him, the roar of blood-thirst pounding in his ears. Scott fights back, grabbing wrist and arms, throwing the feral mutant into the wall of urinals to the left. Ceramic cracks, a flood of water, and Logan pushes forth again, claws extended, aiming for the soft of neck and the breath of lungs.

But he's fast, too fast, always has been. He sees it coming, and with hand to visor, he shoots forth an optic beam that plunges him through shower stalls and cracks the walls behind him. The world turns red and frightening, the use of power filling him up even more, the flames of the Phoenix a melting point for dripping metal and the blackening of walls. In his dream-filled madness he laughs and taunts. He is stronger than all of them, only he should survive.

Dragging himself from the floor, the crack of head pulling him back to some semblance of sanity, Logan flies through the air, tumbling into flaming red chest, banging Scott's head into metallic floor. Blood spews forth, and brain matter. It runs in rivulets down his nose and from his mouth, but he is not stopped, is not knocked unconscious. His strength is befuddling to the Wolverine, as deft hands pierce the flesh under shoulders and swings them both around until Scott is finally on top, bleeding and laughing with the exertion.

Logan can feel the warmth of blood as Scott – still lost to dream – pounds against his face, banging against adamantium skull, breaking nose and bursting eyes. Temporarily blinded, he manages to kick the sprawling mutant to the side of him, slipping over flooding water to gain distance and a chance to heal. The ancient call spews forth from mouth, the red power a hurricane of destruction, winding and spinning and piecing to nothingness everything it touches.

Back to himself, thanks to fear and time, steeled against apocalyptic words, he tries again to call to Scott, to reason, to wake him up from the shadows of nightmares. But Scott is long gone, too tired to answer, to exhausted to once again pull himself free of the shadows that have destroyed his mind. Apocalypse and the Phoenix fight for their control, wrestle against each other to heave themselves free of the mind that they are trapped within.

Bloodied and frightened at the power that rages forth, and the damage done in less than a minute, Logan remembers that he can control this, that he can put a stop to it. “Er dogren,” he says quietly, and immediately, the dreaming mutant falls to the floor.

Scrambling across water and debris, he comes to Scott's sides, looks at fresh wounds and the skin that slowly fades back to flesh. His heart still beating a marathon in his chest, his hands still trembling, he pulls the naked man from the floor, cradling him and smoothing blood soaked hair from forehead.

But, he's no longer alone.

Storm, Kitty, Steve Rogers, they stand in the doorway to the bathroom, their eyes wide with fear. He
doesn't know how much of this fight they witnessed, but he knows they've seen enough to turn their hearts even colder. Possessive, worried, Logan pulls Scott's head to his chest, his brow crooked as he returns Storm's emotionless gaze. He knows what she's going to say before she says it, know the words before they become a fully formed thought in the back of her mind. “He can't stay here,” she says quietly, shaking her head. There is disappointment and sadness to her tone, one that Logan recognizes as defeat. Long ebon fingers grip Steve's arm. “Come with me,” she whispers, and Logan watches silently as they turn their backs to him.

Kitty doesn't say a word as she cross the room and shuts off the water. Barefoot, her pajamas hiked to knees, she kneels down on the floor, her eyes glancing over the cracked and bleeding skull of Cyclops. “We need to get him to the medlab.”

“It's not his fault, Kitty.”

“I know.”

“Please, please, please, don't throw him away again.”

Large brown eyes look around the destruction of the bathroom. Cracked toilets and stalls, broken urinals and pipes. “I don't think it's up to me anymore.” She will fight for him, that much she can promise, but she doubts it will do much good. “You should've have turned him off earlier,” she says with a shake of her head. That he let it get this far, that he let so much be destroyed, it's a painful thing to admit, but maybe Storm is right, and that he's too dangerous to be around them.
“And why should I help you?”

“Because I can give you what you want.”

She's an unexpected guest in his domain beneath the earth. The old sewers and cities that run beneath the heart of London. And, for that, he is surprised. Usually, he's so much better at predicting what they'll do, so to see her here, in her finest dress that exposes her shapely hips and ample bosom, he is cordial in his welcome. “And what is that you think I want, Ms. Frost?”


He calls them Madelyne, the lot of them. The dozen red-haired women that usher in a plush seat and a glass of red wine. Emma prefers white, but she'll let it go for now, considering it has been a while since she's had such a rich Bordeaux. The Madelynes wait beside the chairs, decanters resting on large silver platters. Sinister begs them off to prepare a meal, as he thinks his guest will be staying for sometime. There is no challenge in them, no fire or spirit that would cause them to disobey. They are perfect in their own way, at least for what he needs.

He turns his attention back to his platinum haired guest, a cruel smile upon his face. “It's not the X-men that I am so fond of, my dear.” If he wanted, he could end them at any time, but he considers their entertainment value a notch above watching grass grow. “When you have lived as long as I have, you must find something to look forward to.”

“The airs are unlike you,” she says, calling them prideful and arrogant. “You're a scientist, bound by theories and facts not emotions and a false attitude.”

“They're telepathic, you realize,” he says, speaking of the Madelynes that hone in and out of room, constantly checking on their well-being. “Very powerful telepaths, with a hive mind very much like your three little clones. You can feel them, can't you? Gnawing at the edge of your thoughts.” It's a threat, and he means it to be one. Nathaniel Essex will not be dictated by mere mortals. “What do you want from me, Ms. Frost?”

“To be loved again. To feel whole.”

“I doubt that you and I --”

“Not by you, you arrogant ass. By Scott Summers, or at least some piece of him.”

The laugh starts slow, leaks out into air like thick liquid. “My dear, you will never get your grimy little hands on him ever again.”

“I told you, I wanted to be loved again. To feel whole. To that end, we both have the same goal.”
She lays out her plans to the rapt attention of Essex. “So, my role is to protect you?”

“At the least the Madelynes,” she answers matter-of-factly. “You have plenty of them, and once the X-men figure out my plans, they will be out for blood.”

“And what do I get in exchange for my services?”

“Genetic samples, of course. Your prime passion.”

“You would trade yourself for this?”

“At this point, darling, I'd trade the world for this.”

It’s with a sweeping bow that he bids her into the hands of his Madelynes – those perfect, beautiful Madelynes. “Plans have changed,” he tells the single clone that remains. She fills his goblet with amber liquid and takes a seat across from him.

“Do you trust her word?” she asks, mirroring his thoughts.

“No, but that's what makes this little venture so exciting. Just how will she betray me?”

His realm is less than what it was. Once a massive engine to produce endless clones, it's now merely a mirage of that once great city that he'd built. There are clones left – a sporadic few. The Marauders are by far his most prevalent, with their copies taking up most of the heavy labor. It's not easy to construct an entire realm from ashes, but he has the time and the patience to do so.

There are also his chosen X-men that he has made somewhat subpar copies of. For some reason - and he thinks it has to do with the telepaths running rampant through his experiments - they were never as adept as he wished them to be.

Wandering through the tubes and tunnels of his underground kingdom, he comes upon the cloning mill. Once bright and fully active, the Phoenix five destroyed it in their attempt to control the world. He'd fully expected it, counted on it actually. The kingdom itself had been a test, a prototype. Not only was there the need to seek out flaws in his process, but also the flaws within himself. After all, what good was measuring the flaws of Cyclops if he could not provide the perfect control himself.

It also had the added bonus of providing him with a new sample of Summers’ DNA, one with the Phoenix embedded within. Unfortunately, he had yet to have success with the fiery version of Cyclops. He could not attain the perfection that he so sought after – which had always been the case. Regardless of how many skeletons of the man he kept hidden away in secret labs all across England, no matter how many tests he had performed, he could not produce a single worthy clone of Scott Summers.

“It's a testament to his power,” he tells the Madelyne who follows dutifully behind him. “It is a power that I cannot comprehend, not as is it. And, though I was able to diminish it for some time, gain some knowledge about those miracle bits of protein, I cannot bend it to my will. He's not like you, my dear,” he says stroking her elfin chin, “so lovely and malleable. He resists, and because he resists, I must push my experiments even further in order to attain what I desire.”

“And what is it you do desire?” she asks,

“Perfection.” It's as a simple of that. He will construct the perfect clone, a clone of perfect power with his perfect intellect, a perfect mind, a perfect body. “And, I want him to know that I am perfect. I want him to understand the affront to existence that he actually is.”
“So you mean to hurt him?”

“Of course, I do. There is nothing more splendid than crushing that man over and over again. Tear him to pieces and watch him rebuild. He is my antithesis, my mortal enemy. The only being in the world – other than En Sabah Nur – that attests to be perfection.”

Madelyne smiles out of habit, plucking at the hem of her long black dress for some moments before responding. She has no care for Scott Summers, nor Essex for that matter. She is merely a tool, a means to an end. If he wills her death, then she will die. If he needs her life, then she has it. She is slave and assistant, a mirror of his own thoughts that plug through their hive mind, directing them all at various tasks. “So you will combine his DNA again?”

“I won’t need to, this time. Ms. Frost will do that for us.”

There is a long silence as he tracks his Sabretooth clones, each one tunneling away at the disaster at the edge of the city. Green eyes peer up at him, suddenly curious. “You should have them build another lab,” she says softly. “A grander area for your grander work.”

It’s an idea that of course he thought of first, but he likes the act of conversation, and so he makes her say it. “Wonderful idea, my dear Maddie. Perhaps it’s time to consolidate?”

“That would be a wise idea, master.” Putting all of the samples within easy reach would enable him to work much faster.

He agrees with his own assessment, ordering out the Madelyne's to the far reaches of his world to gather the blood and bones, the hair and skin that he has collected over the years. Never before has Scott Summers expressed one hundred percent of his power. Even as a child, the most he accepted was eighty five percent, and for long years he’s wondered if that has been the problem. He also orders the gathering of the other DNA samples as well – from Inhumans to X-men, there’s no telling where this research will take him. “Do you miss him?” he asks, knowing full well that she will shake her head and cringe. She's learned a heavy distaste for him over the years, not just for her memories as a human, but also for the conditioning that she's undergone. “I do,” he muses in her silence. “In many ways, I feel like he's my son.”

It's a surprising admission, one that widens greens eyes and stutters perfect lips. He's obviously surprised that he said it too. He recovers with a smile, one that Maddie shares with him.
The Graveyard

Chapter Summary

A funeral for Reed Richards.

The world doesn't mourn Mr. Fantastic. In fact, due to SHIELD's involvement, his death is kept secret. No obituary, no half-mast flags. The world remembers him as a traitor, now locked in the Undertow with others who threatened the sanctity of life with no chance for redemption.

Franklin Richards is not as powerful as he once was. His ability to warp and mold the universe into his own liking has diminished greatly – an effect, or so he discovered, of the return of Scott Summers and the command of all of his powers. Emma had spoken of it to his father and McCoy and Ironman, and though for a while he was relieved by this, he now grieves for it. He cannot bring his father back.

Behind him stands Ben Grimm, the preeminent tough guy, dressed in an oversized black suit, his rocky blue eyes melting with tears. He's the pall bearer, an honor he told Sue, and with that comes the weight of death. As the preacher continues his litany, his quiet-voiced diatribe about the celebration of life and the accomplishments of this great man, Ben looks to Sue and her hardened jaw. She is not weeping, but he didn't expect as much, not since he discovered her secret.

Sue knows things, knows the world, has contacts and hope. She's a smart woman, and with that comes a cunning and ferocity to protect the things she loves – her family, her place in this world. Her harsh glare settles upon Maria Hill, the SHIELD attendee for the funeral. Hill is there to assure her commander that things stay quiet, that these super powered beings don't throw themselves into riot or start a war over the death of a single man. Hill can feel this glare, but like many things that she encounters, she shrugs it off.

Beside her stands Johnny Storm, flame off and repentant. Hill already eyes him for the Undertow, especially since he quit the Red Hunt the moment that he learned of Reed's death. Johnny is Sue's brother, and like her, he is hardened to the tears. He stares down at the casket in the ground with something less than grief and sorrow – a look that Hill does not expect, as Johnny's temper tends to be as fiery as his powers.

She looks then to Valeria, hands over face, bent to knees with tears. She's the only one that cries, unless Hill counts Grimm, which she doesn't. And it's with that knowledge, that nerves begin to creep within her stomach. Something's not right.

She catches Sue's harsh gaze once again, let's the anger of the blonde swim over her. Yes, they've done something, pulled some trick. It was a closed casket affair, due to the injuries sustained by bullet wound to the head. Hill was respectful and didn't request the casket opened, deciding that the family had been through enough – with both the collars around their necks and the death of their patriarch. She'd been sympathetic, dropped her guards down to a simple three instead of the dozens that Fury had tried to send along with her. She's been tricked, and with that knowledge, she sends a burning gaze back to Sue. Sue's face doesn't change, but she shifts in her stance.

It's a long wait until the end of the funeral, when Sue crumbles the first handful of dirt over the oaken sheathe. The children follow, their tear soaked clumps of mud hitting the top of the casket with thuds.
and sudden sobs. Ben and Johnny, and then the few others that Fury has allowed to attend this affair.

The exit from the graveyard is slow, with Sue grasping both her children's hands and consoling their tears with motherly hugs and a glimpse of smile. “It's okay,” she says softly, holding them both in her arms. “Just let it all out.”

She sees Maria Hill's approach, and with it, she calls for Ben to take Franklin and Valeria to the car. “I'll be there shortly,” she explains softly before straightening herself to hard and angry to face off against her enemy.

“I'll just dig him up,” Hill says sourly.

“Go right ahead,” Sue replies, her tone as malicious as the look she casts upon the brunette.

There's a pause, a moment of softening, intended manipulation. Hill looks to the ground, then back up to blue eyes. “He shouldn't have died.”

“Been murdered, you mean.”

Another pause, and switch of tactics. Sympathy will not work on the woman, but perhaps reasoning will. “Your children shouldn't have witnessed that.”

A lump in throat swallowed down, and the small cracks within the granite demeanor. “No, they shouldn't have.”

“What Fury did wasn't right.”

“No, it wasn't.”

Agreement. The first step to rapport. She needs to know if Sue is dangerous, if the rest of the Fantastic Four will pose problems to the Red Hunt and Fury's plans. “Do you or your family need anything?”

“My husband alive again would be nice.”

Shut out, but not yet desperate. She understands the anger, it's the same anger that she also feels. She searches blue eyes for long, intense moments. There's a sadness beneath them – which is also expected, but something more as well. Beneath it all, beneath the stone and rain, there is a hope behind blue eyes. A hope that shouldn't be there. “You're taking him to the mutants, aren't you?”

She remembers the young Christopher Muse, his ability to heal, to bring people back from the dead. She encountered him under Cyclops' care, when the man was considered as much a terrorist as he is now. “You're looking for Triage.”

The wavering of blonde brow clues her in to the accuracy of her prediction. “Sue, it would behoove you not to do such a thing.” She reminds the Invisible Woman of her children, her responsibilities to her brother, to Ben, to those under employ at the Baxter building. “I don't want you to face the same fate as your husband.”

Red faced and suddenly raging, Sue bites her tongue against the curses that she wishes to express. “What gives you the right?” she finally ekes into the silence. “What gives you the right to do any of this?”

“We're trying to save the world.”
“By killing my husband?”

There is no answer to her question. Not a good one anyway. Fury felt that the show of strength was needed, that betrayal would be met with death. The stakes were that high. “We need to find and subdue Scott Summers, to make the world safe again. The world cannot afford traitors. Not this time.”

A snap of her fingers, and the guards come closer. They know now that Sue Richards cannot be trusted. Out of sight by her children, large shackles are placed upon Sue's arms. Like the collar around her neck that prevents her powers, the arm length cuffs blink with electronic impulse. “I'm sorry, Sue,” Hill says. “We can't let you contact the mutants. Not until Scott Summers is dead.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Ben Grimm sees the arrest and smiles. Her plan had worked, and now all eyes would be on the remaining members of the Fantastic Four. It was so easy to slip under their defenses, just like Magneto had said it would be.

He ushers the children into the waiting limousine, hiding their faces as their mother is carried away to the Undertow. They, too, understand what they need to do. Eric Lehnsherr had been clear about their involvement. Collars or not, they could very well still play a role in the freedom of all of those mutants locked away inside the ocean prison, and revive their father as well.
The Undertow

Chapter Summary

Tony gets a phone call.

He won't talk to anyone but Tony. He's made that clear. More than clear. A dozen different phones, he hangs up every thirty seconds. Steve knows the limitations of SHIELD's tracking, and he can tell that Fury is getting frustrated with him.

It's with that in mind that he hands the phone to Gillian Pryce, the SHIELD scientist and second in command of the scientific wing of the Undertow. Unlike Dr. Alan Helmut, she's trained – an avid martial artist and an expert in firearms, Fury has a great amount of faith in her capabilities, even if he does find her suspicious.

She rose too fast in the ranks for his liking; was too adept at too many things. No one's perfect, but Gillian Pryce is as damn near close as one gets, and for that, he keeps an extra watchful eye on her. Two guards accompany her to the holding cells, each armed with top notch rifles and their own sense of paranoia when it comes to the woman. Their coms are active, picking up every trace of conversation within a 30 foot perimeter. If they grunt, if they swoon, if they swallow too fast or too hard, Fury will hear it, and it will be all hands on deck.

If Pryce is aware of the growing agitation towards her presence, she doesn't show it. Long and lean and olive skinned, she saunters through the halls, phone in hand, a pleasant smile upon her face. She doesn't bother to make conversations with the guards. They're not important, and in all likelihood they'll be dead soon – either through combat or drowning. She doesn't really care, nor does Magneto. Humans are always expendable.

Well, save a few.

Tony Stark. She heard that he was brought in the other day, and though she couldn't care less about his well-being, Sue was adamant that he be saved, along with everyone else. Magneto refused to make that promise, but she still thought he would make the right decision. “He's a brilliant inventor,” she reminded him over cold tea and com static. On the other end, with a portable teledisplay in her hand, Mystique – in the guise of an old, harmless friend swiped from the pages of a yearbook – shook her head. Magneto was brilliant as well, only no one knew this because he was mutant rather than a human.

“If you're meaning to save Cyclops, Mr. Stark will be of great help. Imagine what he can do to tame that power. Make it safer, make it more controllable.”

Like others before her, she understood that the Summers' expendable power was horrifying in it's current state. But, after talking to her husband for long hours, she also understood that his current level of nightmare was not his fault. “Tony's created inhibitor collars before, and he's developed plans for more. He can even fit me with one, if he so chooses. Don't you think that would be a boon?” Magneto could not fix this torn apart mind, nor could he control the very essence of that world ending power. He needed boosts, mechanical, technological marvels in order to help him on his quest.
“You do realize that his primary purpose is to threaten humanity?” He wanted everything up front, clear, understandable to prevent backstabbing down the road. He wanted to trust to her, but he had misgivings about her true intent.

“T do,” she answered. “I don't agree with you. I think it would be better to leave him alone and let him heal, but I will help you rescue those in the Undertow and put an end to that threat. What happens after all depends on how much of a threat you become.”

She didn't agree with it the first time – much like her husband – when the world rallied against Scott Summers and called him a terrorist. He did nothing that others hadn't done before, and because of that, she considered him a fine leader, and one that would protect her children with his life. “But, if he decides – on his own – to keep mutants safe, I will agree to that.” The man's mind should be left alone.

Magneto smiled. Yes, he understood her. And, like Summers before him, he planned to become a beacon for those mutants who struggled in the wide, open world that hated them. While he knew that his tolerance for violence was well above hers, he could assuage some of her doubt and keep the violence to a minimum. “I can't guarantee the lives of the guards, but I will try to rescue all of the prisoners – both human and mutant.”

“Including Tony?”

“Perhaps. If he shows the inclination.”

Gillian Pryce eyes the billionaire playboy with a coy smile. She beckons him to the edge of the energized cell where the small window used for food trays and other sundries is located. With a press of button, she pops open the small window, placing the phone inside the tray and then closes it once again. “A bit cramped for you, isn't it?” she asks wryly, her eyes gracing the cell edge to edge. The cell houses a bed, a toilet, and a sink, but there is room for little else. “They gave you the biggest one.”

Tony is unnerved by the woman, though he isn't sure why. She looks like the type of woman that he would bring to a lavish party celebrating some philanthropic donation or the opening of a new library. He would toast her with excellent champagne, wink at her during speeches, but all the while, he would be thinking of Steve, as was often the case. Especially now since Steve confessed himself.

It's Steve now that he waits on. And though Pryce's almond shaped eyes curve in smile, he is more anxious for the phone to finally ring. He shuffles through leg chains to the small bed, glancing at her suddenly dismissive demeanor. He can't quite place what is off about her, but that all goes to the wayside when it rings. “Steve?”

The voice on the other end of the phone is both elated and haggard, a mixture of relief and worry. “What's going on?”

Tony pauses just long enough for Steve to realize that they're being listened to, that there is a sense of danger here. “A few complications,” he says casually trusting that Steve is clued into his predicament. “Have you spoken to Reed Richards lately?” He watches Pryce's face for recognition of what he's just done, but rather than the anger that he hopes to see, her face is placid and perfect.

“No. Should I?”

“Yes.”

Steve winces at the darkness in that tone, his stomach pulling up to heaves. He knows what has
happened, that Richards is dead and that Tony is now in danger. “I have a plan. I can get you out.”

“Oh really?” Tony pipes up, his whole face lilting to smile as if he’d just heard the funniest joke. “That would be some amazing news.”

“The mutants are ready to hand Scott Summers over. We can use that as a bargaining chip to secure your freedom.”

“Sound nice, Steve-o. So what kind time table are you thinking?” Casual again, so as not to cause alarm.

“It has to be the same deal as before, Tony. If the prisoners are not released, if the X-men are threatened in the slightest, they will go to war.”

“That makes sense,” he hums. “So, a week, you think?”

“You want to wait that long?”

“Well, if you want to start something of this magnitude, some preparation is needed. A week should be enough.”

“At the mansion then. I can trust you to work everything out?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Without a goodbye, or any hint of emotion, he hangs up the phone and places it back in the tray. “I need to speak with Fury,” he tells Pryce. “Sooner rather than later.”

“You're still gung-ho for the Red Hunt, I take it?” she says, a question that makes Stark highly uncomfortable.

“The world still has to be saved,” he replies after his nerves simmer back down.

“Indeed.”

He watches her take the phone and saunter back up the hallway, all of his instincts telling him that he has revealed too much to her. That whatever she gleaned from his conversation will somehow come to haunt him.

He lays back on the bed, Steve's voice fresh in his head. He can hear that timbre wash over him, pulling up tingles across his skin. His breath becomes a bit heavier, and he can feel a sudden warmth and jolt below his belt. With it, comes an ache deep in the pit of his chest, one that tells him that no matter what Steve feels now, it will not end well between them.

Rogers – the ultimate boy scout – wants him to change, thinks that just with love and hope and faith, that the world can be put to right, and some utopic vision in the back of his head will come to fruition. He thinks that Tony is a good man, that he will learn and grow and become something beyond himself. But Stark, himself, realizes the foolishness of that.

Watching the murder of Reed Richards has haunted his nightmares for nights now. His inability to change it, or do something to stop it. He feels the guilt of it, that he was the one to drag Richards inside of this nest of vipers, and it gnaws at him like a dog to fresh bone.

However, he still sees the rightness of his actions. Even locked up in this most expensive place, torn away from the initiative that he led, he still sees himself as savior, and wants to see Cyclops dead.

He tells himself that it's not stubbornness, that all of this – all of it – is not just some show of
arrogance and deep-felt fear. It's not a man stung by pride, it's a man exhausted of the world constantly being put in turmoil over beings who cannot – or will not – control themselves. The mutants are not dominant, regardless of how superior they pretend to be, so he's not upset, does not feel he's wrong, but Steve Rogers will.

Tony is a man who believes in the strength of will, that if one pushes himself hard enough, tries hard enough, then good things will come. Though his father – that illustrious man – often thought it a foolhardy outlook, in recent years, he has come to believe that his father was much the same way. There was no dominance, only blood and sweat, the willingness to achieve.

It doesn't matter if someone is born with 'extra' or not.

“He's out of control,” he'd said those years ago. Reed looked at him patiently, his lips tucked in towards teeth. More than anyone, Reed knew what power was. His son was one of the most powerful beings alive. He knew what to fear, how to teach, how to cull the child into mild actions.

“Is he?” The question came after a long pause. “He seems pretty centered to me.” He referred then to running through a hornet's nest, that all was peaceful until you stomped on it. “He wants to fix the world, but in this new world, you're a relic, as am I. Maybe that's your problem.”

Relic. It caused a shiver down his spine, made him cringe. His old man had been a relic, a scientist hellbent on all things science fiction and 2070. He dreamed about flying cars and holographic communication, and though he was able to bring some of those things into the world, a good majority of it stayed sidelined, driven down by the significant weight of change. By the time he died, his father's dreams were bigger than his accomplishments.

Tony doesn't want to die like that, his head so stuck in the clouds that he can't see the changing of the world around him. The ability to adapt; to become something greater than the world had always been was what he considered his greatest gift, but this... This... that someone so powerful could change the world in a blink of an eye, without the blood, sweat, and tears that came with constant experimentation and the calloused hands of hard work... This shouldn't be.

Things should never be so easy. Not if they're worth it.

In the back of his mind, he can hear Steve – oh, lovely Steve, with those muscular legs and short golden hair – and his arguments. That Tony, for all of his adaptive nature, feared change. Perhaps, in the end, he did, but that didn't mean that Cyclops wasn't too powerful to live. There had to be a boundary, somewhere in all of this. A line that shouldn't be crossed. And, no matter how looked at it – from Brazil to Belgium, Spain to Nebraska, that line had been crossed a thousand times over.

And because of that – because of that boundary that can't be adhered to – he must do what it takes to restore the proper balance.
He didn't want to be touched. The bruises, the gashes, the burns. He pushed them all away, never explaining why.

For days, he wandered the empty corridors of the mansion, keeping his eyes on the exits and entrances, keeping himself quiet and undisturbing. Xavier was sure that he could hear their conversations, that he was just outside the door listening as the he spoke with Moira. But, Moira would check, and Scott would not be there.

He didn't sleep well. His dreams were filled with frantic images of fists and knives and cigarettes. There were scalpels in his dreams, men that laughed, and an ache that he couldn't quite understand. It was the only time that he projected, that Charles could read his thoughts. And, each and every one of those thoughts proved to be dangerous.

Moira took him shopping. It was her way of getting him out of the house and away from Xavier's prying mind. He needed new clothes – clothes that actually fit, rather than the too-big hand me downs that Charles had swamped him with. Together they went – all three of them – into town. She cautioned him to behave and to leave the child alone.

Scott was quiet during that drive, his eyes focused on the roving scenery outside of the window. He looked at trees and houses, curtains, and benches, until they finally came to a red light near a park. “Do ye want to play with them?” Moira asked quietly, ready to open the door and let the child be free for an afternoon, but he shook his head no. Scott Summers didn't know how to play, didn't remember what that was like, and though he didn't tell her such, she could feel it in her bones.

They talked telepathically, something that she was averse to. It meant that Charles was using his powers, but assured her several times that he was simply observing the boy, as she did. He was still surprised that she didn't see him as dangerous.

He couldn't see colors, those ruby quartz lenses of his prevented such a thing. To him, all of the clothes looked the same, so he wasn't sure how to pick out what she'd asked him to. “Look for the fit and the style,” she told him, pulling out a nice little sweater vest. “Isn't this a smart little piece?” He tugged it on over his overgrown button-down, allowing her just near enough to tug down one corner and marvel at him with a whistle. “We're a right, proper man, now, aren't we?”

Somewhere in the background, a young boy called him a loser.

Scott peered at the older boy, his face silent and breath even. With a swallow, he pulled the vest off and hung it over his arm. “You don't have to get it if you don't like it, Scott,” she soothed, knowing full well that her vision of style was far from the norm. But, the child simply shrugged. To him, it didn't matter. He was humoring them, playing dress-up for those that sought to care for him.

He was a lonely child, purposefully, intentionally. He worked to please to them, so long as pleasing them meant that he wasn't touched, wasn't asked, wasn't delved into like a novel. It was the same
with Xavier – even through the migraines and nosebleeds – a child's hope that the man would eventually leave him alone.

Seven pairs of pants and seven shirts, along with the sweater vest that he refused to let go of, enough for each of the day of the week. Enough for now, enough for him. They would come back out another weekend, do this again, but for now, Moira was hungry, and if she didn't eat something soon, she was going to get sick.

It was a burger joint, a place that Xavier had rallied against. Scott was taking akido and judo, he was in training for something special. High fat, high calorie food went against the very dream he was trying to create. He ordered the boy a garden salad with a boiled egg for protein; Moira ordered him a double cheeseburger and dared him to eat the whole thing. Looking back and forth between them, he ate none of it, waiting for them to decide whom he should obey.

Obedience was intrinsic to the boy, which unnerved Moira and made Charles pleased as punch. In the mornings, he would leave a list of things to accomplish for the day, and the child would do them without question or failure. Even if he did have troubles in his studies – thanks to a lack of education in his formative years – Xavier could see the attempt. Though he chided the boy for his mistakes, he was sure that those criticisms would become goals within Scott's mind.

“And then you broke him,” Jean says. She doesn't know all of the details, Xavier's never told the whole story, but she knows enough to understand that the small child did not become so pliant of his own free will.

“I had to,” Charles says quietly through gritted teeth. “For your sake.”

He didn't expect to be found. In his new body, his brainwaves are by far different than before. He's a younger man, with more stamina and hair. He's energized with life, belaying old regrets. So, when she showed, he was surprised. “You shouldn't have come here,” he says, draining his small glass of scotch dry, the burn of it making him wince and sigh.

“Where else was I to go?” She blames him. For her loss, her life, the destruction of a man she dearly loved.

“You still believe that you're innocent?”

She doesn't. No matter how much she argues the fact, no matter how much she accuses him of wrongdoing, it was still her choice, a choice that she made willingly. “I can still feel him,” Jean says quietly, staring up into sun and sky.

“So can I.” That's why he's here, to avoid the temptation of once again crawling inside of Summers' mind, of taking that uncontrollable power and using it to thwart those he sees as enemies. “He's not doing well.”

“No, he isn't.” The shreds of him ply across the ether, screaming and in turmoil. She knows that pain; she knows how to dull it, how to force his eyes blind to it. But, she doesn't know how to heal it. If she concentrates too hard, or lets her focus slip, she can feel the energy rise up within her, the taste of it, the want of it. With that power she can change the world, and she often did. Sometimes, not for the better. “He's more powerful than we ever imagined.”

It's Onslaught that Charles feels when he closes his eyes and lets his mind drift towards the shattered energy upon the horizon. That overwhelming power that could have molded the universe into something dark and dreary, his mind melded with Magneto's and the constant war that they waged to see the mutants atop the food change. “Indeed.”
There are few words between them now, unlike before when they shared their thoughts readily. Be it the bickering over power or the reconnaissance of missions, they once flooded each others minds with both empathy and hatred. They were once allies and bitter foes. Now, however, they are little more than strangers attempting to overcome their guilt.

Jean recalls Rachel, and her shock at what they had done. Rachel was another that benefited from the grand display of power-sharing, her energy mingled with that of Scott's so that she could control the Phoenix. “She cried when we left.”

“Is that abnormal?”

Jean shrugs. It is and it isn't. She cried for her father, that she could not be near him upon his return, that she wasn't allowed to delve into that broken mind and piece the thing back together. “I fear that she hates me.”

“Do you blame her?” His smirk is coy. In many ways, he hates her, too. If it hadn't been for her need of the Phoenix, her addiction to that fiery bird and her constant pulling it from the cosmos to fill her aching desire for power, it's quite possible that Scott's mind would still be stable enough to use.

Jean rolls her eyes, their rivalry a wall between them. To her, this is a time to mend fences, to once again come together to end a world threat. “I don’t,” she sighs. She watches him pour another glass of scotch, clinks finger against glass to call attention to the emptiness. “She doesn't understand what I did for her, but one day she will. The Phoenix would have eaten her alive. She's not nearly strong enough of mind to wield it.”

“Neither were you.” It's a cold reminder of her youth, when he had blocked those powers from her. Against all of his warnings, all of his insights, she wielded it anyway. He knows that she called upon it to save the lives of her friends, and while that's admirable enough, that she kept it, that she refused to let it go was her own undoing. “Scott wasn't either.”

“Well, he might have been, had we not destroyed him.”

“The Phoenix was not meant to be wielded as a tool. It's a primal force, and for whatever reason it chose to protect his wishes, but that will was not meant to be bent by mere mortals.”

“Are you still positive that he's mortal?” It's a question that had been raised between them time and again.

Charles shrugs. “If Wolverine is, then certainly Scott is.”

Jean is not so sure. While she knows that the majority of his power was blocked from him, that for years, he existed with just the sole use of what they considered 'leakage' from his eyes, the idea that he could die, that they could lose him was still a thought she couldn't comprehend. No one was sure what the entirety of his power was like, not in truth, not in full. They assumed. They theorized. But, now, feeling it on the horizon, knowing that the blocks that had been in place since before Xavier found him were gone, she was sure that the man would be considered immortal. “In Logan's thoughts, he was missing his heart,” she says. “But, he still had a pulse.”

It doesn't shock Xavier to hear that Scott has a healing factor. In fact, there's little that would shock him as far as those powers went. But, still, to consider him immortal is a bit far fetched. “Cut off his head, and he dies. That's not immortality.” Immortality was Onslaught, a culmination of drastic powers and warring minds. There was nothing that could harm the creature. If Charles hadn't realized his error and withdrew himself from Summers' mind, hadn't poured that energy into Franklin Richards, then the world would have been destroyed.
It's a matter of semantics, then, Jean muses. “Did I truly love him or did you make me?”

Xavier takes his glass of scotch in full, pouring another before his blue eyes come to rest on her. She shouldn't have to ask this question, not if she truly believed in his want for the world. “You loved him. But, the question is, did he love you?” He was never sure about it. He knows that the boy was anxious to be around her, that for years his nerves had stayed his tongue. But a crush is a crush is a crush -- no matter how profound -- doesn't mean love. “Would he have chosen you? Would either of them have chosen you?”

“You mean over each other?”

“Yes. That's exactly what I mean.”

She runs slender finger across the rim of her glass before swallowing down the amber liquid herself. She's not a drinker, so already she can feel the buzz of alcohol in her veins. She nods towards her glass, receiving a refill in return. “It was easy to turn Logan away, wasn't it?”

It had been their own devising, keeping Scott's heart in the hands of the telepaths. It made for easier loyalty, devotion, threads into the slowly decaying mind. Logan was a hitch, a hiccup, and too easily solved. “It was his scent on you,” Xavier explains. “That you always smelled like Scott. It confused his senses.”

“But, still. His love for me was fierce.”

“Because we made him that way.”

There's a part of her that still doubts his esteem was so easily manipulated. From Scott to her in the blink of an eye. But, it was safer, they decided. Safer for the Wolverine -- that animal and predator, that being who lacked control over his most basic instincts -- to stay far removed from Cyclops. At first, it was an easy thing, with the two butting heads over the smallest of things, but in later years, it became much harder. There was a trust between them, respect, and all that remained unspoken, or rather unable to be spoken.

It was Emma's choice to push them apart for good, their inexplicable bond becoming more magnetic as time went on. Even from her grave, pushed down underneath the heavy weight of the Phoenix, Jean could feel them becoming harder to separate. “There were moments where I was sure they were going to break through it all, that even Emma wasn't strong enough to keep them apart.”

Charles nods. He, too, had felt the same way. Those stolen glances and private moments, their secrets, their longings. They took each other at face value, thankfully, never questioning the shimmer in their hearts when the other entered a room. “Logan was happy to follow wherever Scott went,” he remarks upon that trepidatious time for them all. It wouldn't have taken much at all to unravel their doings. A simple word from the feral mutant, and it would have all come undone. “Thankfully, Emma was smart enough to push them apart for good.”

“Or perhaps foolish enough. Had we just let them be --”

“Then we'd both be dead, trapped by the Phoenix and the Shadow King, watching the world implode, instead of standing on the precipice of saving it.”

“Saving it?” she scoffs. “Just how much have you had to drink?” They are no longer prophets and saviors, the harbingers of peace and melody. They are the shadows at the edges of humanity, disgusting things that turned the world to black for their own selfish purposes.

Charles smiles. “They're going to need us soon, Jean. We just need be patient. And, then, we'll have
“Come to me, Scott.” But the boy – in his first display of disobedience – shook his head. Standing at the other end of the hall, still gripping his books, he stared at the professor, refusing to step forward. “Come to me.”

Perhaps it was the way he said it, his polite command. Or, as Moira would explain moments later, it was possible that the boy had finally discerned what Charles was doing to him. That all of the nosebleeds and headaches were because of him, and that he no longer doubted that he was being attacked.

There was a rage in him – a deep felt thorn that pierced against his heart. He called out for Moira, for Eric, and by the time they arrived, he was a red-faced madman yelling at the top of his lungs. The child cowered at the other end of the hall, bent to knees and shaking. He couldn't move. He couldn't remove himself from the line of direct fire. “You're turning him against me!” he accused them both, but they both denied it, offering up their agreed upon explanation. “Liars!” he continued, and flashed his power against the boy's brain.

It come as a surprise, that first little crack. A tiny fracture in the boy's defenses, and oh, how glorious it felt. Wide blue eyes stared at the boy and all the things locked up in his brain. “You won't take him from me,” Charles seethed, using his gift to send the boy's caretakers into head-held screams. “He's mine! Do you hear me! He's mine!”

Keeping his focus upon the child, upon the sudden crack in his composure, Xavier wheeled himself forward, putting psychic pressure upon the break. “You're mine, Scott,” he said, his psionic fingers trying to rip into the skull, pull out the mysteries and treasures – and oh, that power – from underneath the shield.

He could sense the blocks already, how much of the child's power had already been walled off from him. They were large, immense, unbreakable. He could see the blacked out memories – both those taken from him and those that were lost to injury. So many memories, so many horrible memories – the abuse, the pain, the fear. But, even then, it was the power that called to him, how to take it, how to use it, how to control it.

Eric fought back, toppling the wheelchair with a last-minute burst of magnetic wave. Latching onto the iron in the man's system, he choked it, coagulated it right next to heart, and threatened the man with death if he continued his assault.

The boy would be free from this, that much Eric assured him, but Charles already knew his real plans. “You mean to take him from me, and use him against the humans.” Their age old argument had finally come to head, and with a massive spike of energy, Xavier drilled into his friend's brain, ripping and shredding at sanity. He did the same to Moira, fearing that she would come next to take the boy from him, this unlimited source of untapped power. He erased the child from both their minds, sent them on their way into the wilds of the world where they would question for years to come what had happened that day, and why so many months of their time was unaccounted for.

It was the flagging of that spike that he put his hands on the side of Scott's head, continued his ambush of energy, of finally crumbling the walls that separated him from the boy's thoughts. The rush of power was unbelievable, and with it, he could protect Jean forever.
Logan watches Arlo Taylor with worry. He knows that the boy is scared and injured, that the dreams he has are as real to him as the memories that they're based on. He knows because he's been there. He, too, had dreams, but Xavier took them away.

As he nears the dog-faced boy whimpering in the corner, he holds his hand out and softly calls his name, afraid for him to wake suddenly if touched. On haunches, he waits as the dreams shiver across the trembling body, as feet scurry in the air, and when Arlo finally does wake, he does so with a howl of pain that echoes through the mine.

“It's okay,” Logan says calmly, inching forward to the scared teenager. “It's okay.”

Wide eyes blink in terror at the shifting movement. Arlo knows to be afraid of the Wolverine. Indira has said so, that he's strong and fast, and that he has claws that come out of his wrists. She's read all about him in the newspaper, followed his career. He has a temper, and Arlo hides his face under large, broken hands hoping that the man goes away. When he doesn't, when Wolverine creeps closer once again, his bladder releases in the fear of being hurt once again – a yellow puddle that drenches his thread-bare pants and metallic floor and fills the air with a strong, acidic odor.

Logan calls his name again, tells him that it's okay, that no ones mad at him, that he'll clean it up. To prove his point, he goes to the nearby supply closet and grabs some towels, once again hunkering down in the same position as earlier. Arlo eyes him warily and whimpers. Another inch, another helpless whimper. Again and again.

Arlo has claws, too. They are short things – like a dog's – but he can't wield them, not with his fingers broken and forced under his palms. They don't come out like they once did. But, he does have a growl, and his instincts tell him to make himself appear mighty and big. And so he does, pulls himself onto busted hands and feet, riles up his chest and shoulders until he appears much bigger than he feels. On two legs, he's just over seven feet tall. On all fours, heaved up like he is, he can make himself appear to be five, which is nearly as tall as the man who approaches him. He bares his teeth – long, shiny fangs meant to pierce and shred – and from his throat comes a deep voiced growl that vibrates in his chest.

“Big man, now, are we?” Logan asks with a smile. He's not scared of the boy, and his scent proves it. He inches forward again, sops up the yellow puddle, and shows Arlo both his palms so as to prove he's harmless. “Good. I like to see that fight in you.” The boy's cowered long enough, shown no real life in him, so to see this sudden energy, to hear it, shows that he's not completely destroyed by the abuse.
Arlo sniffs the palms of hands, and watches – terrified – as Logan brings one hand to his jaw. He flinches as the hand settles upon the bristly, short fur, waiting for the pain. But, there is no pain, and for that, Arlo is shocked. Logan smiles, brings hand softly behind ear. “You okay, now?” he asks, but Arlo still doesn’t remember how to speak.

His body still in fight or flight, Arlo releases another quiet growl, still unsure about the man who has approached him. Wolverine answers that show of force with another soft pet that goes from stubbed nose to the top of head. “I ain't gonna hurt you,” he promises. “Just came to check on you. See if you were okay?”

The news of leaving the mine had spread like wildfire throughout the small underground population. And while most were elated, there were some – like Arlo – who found it hard to take. “He's not going to come after you,” Logan said quietly. “Not here, not at the mansion. You're safe with us. No one's going to hurt you like that again.”

Wide brown eyes shuttered with the sting of tears. Paw-like hand to the tip of nose, Arlo wipes away the water, at once undone by those words. Logan wraps his arms around the child, a soothing circle on his spine.

There was a time when an embrace like this was beyond him; when talking to a boy so abused and tormented would have equaled nothing less than a challenge and heated rage. He's changed. The X-men changed him, but now, looking at this boy, thinking of Scott, he wonders if it was for the better.

In the past, he would have hunted down Arlo's father, tracked Jean Grey and the other telepaths to the ends of the earth. He would have made them bleed for their treachery. But, now, he finds himself held back, waiting, trying to decide the right thing to do. In his head, he hears Scott's voice tell him to forgive, reminding him that people grow and change, and that it was their responsibility to allow that. He wants to be that man, and in many ways he is, but it doesn't stop the rage completely. Just tames it.

Arlo cries into Logan's shoulder, releases years worth of tears and trembling. He bawls and sobs, his entire self reaching out, hoping that the man's words are true. Logan continues to soothe him and shush him, telling him that everything will be alright. He tells the boy to let it all out. To cry.

He remembers what it's like – that first rush of release when the floodgates finally break. When all of the fear and self-hatred, all of the rage and doubt suddenly break past defenses, destroying what meager amount of broiling calm that had been created.

Jean.

She smelled like Summers, winter crisp and hard iron edges. But the way she walked, the way she smiled, she seemed more like a petal, so soft and tender, pink and pale blue. He remembers the first time he heard her voice, how she said hello to him, and how in that moment he realized that he was in love.

It's a blur now, that moment. Once crystal clear, the edges of it have faded and burned, become something fairy tale, something regrettable.

“This is Jean. She's my girlfriend.”

“So, I finally get to meet you, Logan. Scott's told me everything about you.”

Her hand was warm to the touch, as if an inner fire threaded through her veins.

Then it's months before he remembers again, another visit from college. Scott was busy with
paperwork, she was bored. She knocked on his door. “Thought I'd come say hi,” she said, her smile like a midafternoon sun, bright and orange and blaring. He let her into his meager quarters. Though large – as all the mansion rooms were – it was unfurnished, its space unfilled by lock boxes and memories. He had a few books that he’d collected, old western novels and a history of exploration – books he couldn't find in the expansive library.

She looked around, her bright green eyes dismayed at the emptiness. “No family photos?” she asked, stating that she was hoping to see them. He shook his head, his tongue still fumbling with her presence in his room. “That's a shame,” she sighed.

She sat on the edge of his bed and beckoned him closer. He sat beside her, the two of them staring out to pine green walls, and in the silence, she smiled again. “You don't remember them, do you?”

“Probably for the best,” he replied a touch too sharply.

She winced at the comment and took his hand into her own. “Scott doesn't remember his either. Head trauma when he was a child. But yours isn't natural is it?”

“What do you want, Red?”

“I want to help you. I want to help you find your past.”

It was a shock to him that she knew about his missing past. He picked himself up off the bed and she followed in his steps around the room. Scott was worried about him, worried that he'd leave, or that his constant rage was founded by his lack of stable roots. He'd said that the professor had tried, but was too busy to follow through. “So, he asked me to help you in Xavier's stead.”

“One-Eye was worried about me?”

“He wants you to be a functioning part of the team instead of an outsider looking in.”

“He's one to talk.”

“He has to keep his distance in order to make clear decisions.”

Already, before he even agreed, he could feel her fingers inside his head, rummaging through his briar patch of a memory. He watched her beautiful face as it flickered between agony and pity. Memory after memory she brought to the forefront of his mind. The deaths, the betrayals, his fear that he would never be anything more than animal. That the predator inside of him would remain always dangerous and never allow him to be close to another living soul. She found in his memories Silver Fox and Itsu, long dead and buried, and the loneliness in him, his inability to protect them, to keep them safe, simmered just underneath his skin.

She concentrated on these women, how they smelled – Silver Fox like a deep earthy sandalwood, and Itsu like cherry blossoms in the spring wind. How they looked at him, how they smiled. She showed him memory after memory of how happy they were, and their eyes when he failed them. “They loved you very much,” she said quietly, reaching out to touch his shoulder.

He fell to his knees in that moment, the skimming of her fingers too much, causing him to burst from within. She fell with him, wrapping her long, slender arms around his neck, pulling him in tight and telling that was okay to let it go. That it was safe here, that nothing would happen to him.

He wonders now if the memories are true, or if they were implanted. It's a sick feeling that washes over him then, quickly dispelled by focus upon the young boy growing tired in his arms. He runs thick fingers through the tags of hair upon his head and soothes him back to sitting. “Let's get you
cleaned up,” he says, straightening himself on the floor. He thinks that McCoy should have some wearable clothes, they should be about the right size. “And then we'll go see the doc.”

Arlo shakes his head. He wants to see no one. “You need to, kiddo. It'll keep being scary if you hole yourself up here in the corner.”

As the boy gathers his courage, Logan makes a promise that he intends to keep. “I'll come with you. I'll keep you safe.”
“So, have you considered my offer?” Sinister stands at the edge of disturbing thoughts, watching as the shades of Jean Grey and Emma Frost attempt to devour each other. It’s a masterwork of horror, the things he sees in the surround. He pulls up the Scott-shaped furniture and pours a glass of wine.

Stephen Strange can’t chase him out of here. Quite honestly he doesn’t know how. He doesn’t know if the man has some sort of hold in here – a trap, a bomb – if something more will crash if he wreaks his own style of havoc upon the telepath.

“If I detonate the bombs one by one—”

“Then the nightmares that are stuffed within will ravage his mind even further. Do you truly think that there’s enough of him left to warrant more damage?” He offers the good doctor his own goblet of red, and he takes it, if only to calm his nerves. They both know that this is not real wine; it’s an astral projection, but when in the mind, when as practiced in the art of psionics as they are, all it takes is belief for the liquid to have the desired effect. “If you take me up on my proposal, however, there would be enough to remove some of the bombs or fumble at disarming the traps.”

Essex knows that Cyclops is out of control. He’s listened and watched and gathered his information with care. “Why do you think I put blocks on him to begin with? The child was a maelstrom. The world would not have survived without me.”

He applauds himself as a hero in those early days, his tireless efforts to save the world. But, what he doesn’t speak of – what he does not tell Strange – are the gruesome experiments that he conducted upon the boy. Live vivisections in order to collect and measure the boy’s growth – in both self and power – to an accurate degree, not to mention his attempts to decode Scott’s enormous strength and replicate it in order to produce a more perfect body for his own usage.

But, there is no need to tell him of such things. This deal that he has offered has a purpose, and one purpose only. He could easily collect the sample by himself. One trip to the arctic, and he could collect the snow upon which the man lay for those days as they waited for Storm to make up her mind. So, it’s not the sample he needs, but rather the bargain with Strange himself. It’s a game, one that Sinister is sure he will win.

“Can you block his powers again?” Dark blue eyes are not hesitant in their questioning. Strange can see the advantage of the blocks, at least partially, until Summers’ mind can be repaired.

Sinister shrugs. “Perhaps. But, I refuse to do so.” There’s too much entertainment to be had, too many ways to crush that desperate soul.

Aggravated, Strange sits back against the image of Cyclops, folds his arms against his chest. “Then what exactly are you proposing if this is not to block his powers?”

“Simply returning his mind to some state of functioning. We can’t have him destroying the world like
this. Not when he's unaware of what he's doing.”

It's not hard to pick up on the maliciousness in the man's tone. So blatant and blunt, Essex sneers in his contempt for the mind he proposing to fix. And Strange realizes all too quickly that this bargaining between them will go on and on for as long as Sinister feels like dragging it out. “You don't know this mind,” Essex reminds him. “You can't fix it. And it will only worsen with time. I recommend acting now.”

“Can you stop the hallucinations.”

Sinister smiles and shakes his head. “Alas, that is why he is not fit for the power that he wields. Those hallucinations are part of his genetic make-up. They are what makes him imperfect.”

He knew that one of the brothers would fall to the scourge of dopamine – either Alex or Scott. It came from Katherine's side of the family – her dearly departed sister had been a schizophrenic, and killed herself by the time she was sixteen. Her uncle before that, a grandmother, a great grandmother. “There was a time when I thought he would be free of it, but then Xavier broke his mind, and after that there was no hope.”

“You put him in the path of Xavier. You planned it.”

A slick laughter oozes out into the nightmarish darkness. As if to amplify the fright that is Sinister, the shades howl in their delight at the find of a new memory to devour. Strange watches with trepidation as Cannonball and Sunspot war over the tiny thing – the memory of a small kitten caught out in the rain, unloved and unwanted, something a young Scott had taken solace in; for if he cared for that kitten, then someone would care for him. With their teeth and gnarled hands they rip and shred the memory apart, turn it to fine silt powder. “I warned you,” Essex says. “You don't have much time.”

“You'll restore his memories with it?”

“For a blood sample that I could easily procure myself? No. But, he will wake with clarity.”

With reluctance, Strange agrees to the demand. He cautions the man before him that he is watching and that he is powerful.

“As am I, good doctor. As am I.” It's with a flourish of hands that the shades disappear into the depth of mind, their howl a far distant echo. Placing his cup on the Cyclops-shaped table, he stands and presses finger to head, searching the mind for the particles that he desires. A wind whips up, flowing through the dust-like debris, slowly forming into large pieces of glass-like structure.

He places them at the core – that glowing core that has yet to move. Though Sinister is curious about it, wants to know what's inside, what drives it, what makes the man protect it so, he has other plans. He positions the hand-wide piece at the base of the light, and then slowly begins to form another.

Time passes as more of Scott's self forms inside the hands of Sinister, and with each placement, Strange can feel the mind getting stronger. “He needs control,” he says quietly, watching in earnest as the monster does his work.

“Be careful what you wish for good doctor,” Sinister chuckles, but complies anyway. He gathers up the dust of dreams and lengthens a piece along the core. It becomes wider than the others, taller, and it sticks out with sharp edges. “That's enough for today,” he yawns, stretching arms long above him. “Have little Illyana deliver my sample to me. If she doesn't arrive by day's end, I'll destroy this mind all over again.”
The numbers – that constant murmur from quiet lips – ceases, and all around the small room, eyes grow wide. At bedside, on knees and fumbling his hand up onto the covers, Logan threads fingers in between Scott's, a breathless hope upon his lips. He watches as Scott – for the first time in days – tries to sit of his own volition.

But recognition is still far off. “Where am I?”

“Try to keep still, Slim,” Logan says quietly. “You've been through -”

With a worrying build to his voice, Scott asks again, “Where am I?”

“Scott, it's okay. You're fine. You just need time to--”

“I shouldn't be here,” he gasps as red visor finds both Storm and Steve and his brother. He looks then to Strange, his jaw trembling. “I shouldn't be here.”

“Scott,” Logan soothes. “You're not in danger --”

“But you are.”

The struggle for control, for keeping it, for dimming emotions and keeping calm is lost in an instant. Red energy spills forth from frightened mind, lashing out into the air to push all those around him away. He yells in torment, grips fingers into hair and bends forward to knees.

“I'm supposed to be dead,” he cries out and screams again.

“Er dogren.” All eyes to Steve Rogers as he's once again shut the man down. And another fight as Alex pushes him up against metallic wall.

“He would've been fine.”

“How many people have to get hurt before you realize how dangerous he is?”

“Just you, bub.” The scratch of metal in the air, and Storm throws herself in front of Steve. Pale blue eyes glisten with a sudden hatred. “Move 'Ro.”

But, she doesn't move. She's tired of this, the bickering and fighting. The fear that Scott will kill them all, and also of Logan. She's waited for him. For months she's waited for him to come back to her, waited for him to fall asleep beside her, to be the man that she knew before his death. But, he's not anymore. He's not even close.

Sheathing his claws, he stares back at her, the same hard edge to his glare as she gives him. He's not going to do this now, not with all of these people in the room. And if she wants to be a drama queen, then she's better off finding Jean. “At least you'll protect her .”

She winces at the jab, raises electric arms in the air and holds lightning in her hands. She dares him to strike her, for if does, he will feel the pain that he's put her through since his return. “You died once, Wolverine,” she ekes into the flush of silence, “Let's see if you can do it again.”

The door creaks open, just a touch, and just inside the tiny crack, they can see the wide, black eyes of Pocket. Hands in bunny suit, he pushes the door again and walks through them all to stand at the side of Cyclops. One finger raised into the air, he takes a deep breath, jabs the man in the arm, and takes off at speed into the hallway.

It's an odd thing, but it eases the tension in the room, for a moment anyway. “I want him kept unconscious the duration of his stay,” Storm commands. With a glance at Steve, she nods and exits.
The Undertow

Chapter Summary

Plans upon plans.

The lab is just as Mystique told her – stainless steel and stark white. In the center, a large tank of water and diodes that connect to the human experiment. Machines print out a stream of steady stats, as Gillian Pryce begins pasting the medpads to Sue's temples.

It has to look clean, for the cameras at least. It has to look clinical and precise. Gillian fluffs the long blonde hair over the back of the collar and turns Sue to the wall. “We'll be done in a moment,” she says, and with a click of some inner mechanism – brought on by a star shaped claw where the bolts connect – Richards can feel the release of the collar and the return of her power.

She knows what to do now.

The shield she wears is as thin as skin, barely glistening in the light, and so long as she keeps her back turned to camera, they'll never see that the collar is now turned off. Pryce forces open her mouth and drops in the liquid oxygen pill, which Sue immediately begins to struggle in order to spit the pill into her hand. A bit of a push, and the pill is hidden between her fingers and invisible shield. “This is going to hurt,” Gillian warns her. “But if you scream, you'll throw off the stats. So, please, keep quiet.”

The machines hook up underneath Sue's arms, pulling her up from the seat. She puts on the show of a fight, kicking her legs and flailing her arms, but in reality, she's not trying to escape. There's an hour's worth of oxygen in that little pill, and she means to save it for the destruction of the Undertow. Wide blue eyes peer over at Pryce when the machines finally dip her down in the frigid water. She has to act cold now, as if the water is so cold it burns. Otherwise, they'll know that her powers are awakened, that she has shielded herself to all things that could harm her.

Mystique sits by the controls, checking the continual feed of paper and screens. She waits for Sue to settle into a feigned hypothermic state – sluggish limbs and drowsy eyes, the water is just warm enough to keep from freezing the victims all together – before crunching her fingers down onto a series of buttons and starting the ionized water spray.

It hurts like hell. Even through her invisible shield, Sue can feel the charge and snap of water, the spray coursing over skin and leaving it red and raw. But, not only that, she can feel it inside of her, the decay of cells as protons and neutrons are ripped asunder by the invading free-floating electrons. They piece apart her cellular makeup, knocking loose her stable cells, and changing them into something else. The cells die, unable to link the form to function, and she can feel it inside of her.

Four hours she'll remain here, a symptom of Helmut's wonder about the woman. Her DNA was already changed once, he knows it can happen, but SHIELD is too wary of gamma rays. She knows – if only for the sake of her children and her dead husband locked away in a cryo-freeze, that she has to do this. It's the only way to free them all from this Underwater prison.

But, four hours is slower than she'd hoped, and for a meager four pills, it's not enough to give her hope to freeing the hundreds of mutants within these walls. She'll do this tomorrow as well, and the
day after, and the day after that. By the end of the week, she'll have twenty-eight pills, all of which will be dispersed to those mutants who can help save the others. It's still not enough to ensure the safety of everyone here, and with that in mind, she taps forefinger against her leg, hoping that Pryce notices her message.

It's not an easy message to decode, but Mystique knows Morse code well enough to get the gist. Two times a day she wants to be dunked into this hellpit of pain. That would give her fifty-six pills, but the only drawback to that is Sam Guthrie would also have to live through it. “If you're sure,” Pryce says, pretending that she's talking into com. She positive that Sam can take it, though her vision of being able to withstand is probably far different than his own imaginings.

There are certain expendable pieces among them, and though Magneto would disagree and swear that all mutant lives should be saved, Mystique holds no worry over a few missing X-men. Though she bears no grudge particularly against Guthrie, or Blaire, the only mutant she's truly worried about saving is Remy LeBeaux, her daughter's husband. That's why she agreed to this, to break her covert actions within the SHIELD research department in order to do this. Someone had to save him for the sake of her daughter, and the X-men certainly weren't lifting a finger.

Mystique pockets the pill once the experiment's over and Sue Richards is dug from the tank by mechanical arms. This will be given to Gambit during one of her long sojourns through the cells to seek out suitable test subjects. He will be confused, but utterly grateful.

She will do this twice a day now for the next week, until Magneto is ready to storm the castle, so to speak. And then, she'll have to devise a new cover – perhaps a male this time, older, with a beard.

“And?” Dr. Alan Helmut asks, peeking through the door way.

“Cellular degradation is higher on her than the mutants,” she says quietly, her tone smokey and delicious. “It could be from her previous experience with the gamma rays. I certainly wish you’d let me use Stark as a control. His data could clear up many of our questions.”

“Stark is to be left alone. I told you that this morning.”

“‘And do you so easily become teacher’s pet?’ she asks, though she already knows the answer. Stark is their way to finally capture the mutant of the hour – Scott Summers. Helmut shrugs. He cares little for the daily operations and back door deals that come with this organization. He's a scientist, and as a scientist, he cares for little else other than results. “I would like to double my efforts, though,” she says. “Perhaps they need more of a push from the ionization than we are currently giving them.” She holds up a clip board that plots the results of the experiments thus far, including Sue's. “We could have an answer to the entire mutant genome, if we play our cards right.”

With a nod and his signature in black ink at the bottom, Helmut gives permission for the doubling of the experiments. He learned a long time ago not to question Pryce. As forceful as she is beautiful, she knows both her goals and her intent. “Very well,” he says, “but, remember, there is no overtime pay.”

“Who needs overtime pay when there's science in the air?”

Helmut chuckles at the barely-there joke and steps out of the room, leaving Mystique to reignite the collar and wish Sue good luck. She watches callously as the guards come to drag her back to her tiny cell in another hallway.

Mystique is no hero. She doesn't pretend to be, nor does she desire to be one. There are too many limitations to heroics. Nor does she consider herself a villain. While the X-men would argue at the
way she conducts herself, she sees her efforts on behalf of not only herself – but also of mutant kind – as a way forward, progress, something different than Xavier's long-stagnant path that achieved nothing in its hay day. She's her own person - and though that own person can sometimes mean a dozen people, complete with their own personalities and demeanors – she's not ashamed of being such.

A text message from an unknown number reveals that Creed is on the surface waiting to take her to lunch. He's a lot sweeter than he used to be, humbler now that nightmares and jagged memories are floating about his head. He needs her, her stability, her sharp mind that keeps him from playing henchman to the more notorious villains that they know of. And in return for that solidity, he treats her well, at least as well as any man has ever treated her.

She trots down the hall, catching up with Helmut on his daily rounds and asks if she can be excused for a few hours so that she can meet up with her brother. Alan, of course, agrees, as it will be some time before Sue is ready for another round in the chamber. “As long as you're caught up with your work, I'm fine with it.” And she is, so she goes.

The Undertow is far larger than most people realize. With seven floors of cells and the labs at the bottom in their own wing, it's comprised of hallways and corridors that stretch out for miles in the ocean. She is always surprised at the lack of safety protocols. Not once has there been an evacuation test, and there is nothing here to account for the crushing weight of ocean depths. No dive suits or oxygen masks, no tanks or flotation devices. It's simply a large box in the water, a mile above the ocean floor, and several from the surface.

Stark and SHIELD were undoubtedly confident that this metallic structure would hold.

There are multiple checkpoints on every floor, complete with armed guards and patrols. They are surly men and women, obviously upset over their constant attention to duty. There are no screens for them to follow as the cameras feed directly into SHIELD headquarters itself, so they must constantly walk the mile long hallways every ten minutes in pairs of two.

They know her by now, so they don't stop her, don't look twice as she presses the elevator button. Up one floor, down a hallway, up another. It's a maze of a system, meant to keep the mutants occupied should there ever be a breakout. But, she's memorized it by now, and soon – like the pills – she'll render this information to the rescue team that she is so carefully organizing.

Victor Creed waits at the car, his large, furry self bundled up in trench coat and gloves. He waits outside of the parking lot, not wishing to go further than he absolutely needs to. Just at the side of his hairline, there is a small microchip – much like the ones that make Magneto's helmet – that make him oblivious to Cerberus scans. With it comes a small buzzing sound that drives him crazy when things are too quiet.

He looks at her with relief and fondness, a smile revealing sharp fangs and love. Like usual, they drive to the beach a few miles down, and partake of whatever he's brought for lunch in the safety of the car. A baguette sandwich picked up from the Italian deli on the pier, some greasy croquettes, and two bottles of beer. “You need to learn to cook,” she smirks, planting a kiss on the side of his head.

She studies him then, his delayed reaction to her happiness. “You had another dream, didn’t you?”

He nods, stuffing his mouth full of sandwich to avoid speaking for the moment. But Mystique is patient – a trait she's learned from years of long cons and organized mayhem. She waits him out as he chews the enormous lump of bread in his mouth, and stops him from taking another. Blue eyes look into her current hazel, begging for just the silence and togetherness of their union here in the car. But, she is adamant, and so he spills. “Little boy,” he begins, a sad growl to the words. “Cut all to
pieces. His whole body like someone just scooped out the organs and left him for dead.”

“And you think you did this?”

“I don't know. Just got a real creepy feelin' about it. Like I was watching this against my will.”

“So, someone was controlling you?”

“Maybe.”

Considering how many times Sabretooth had been controlled in his life, it wasn't impossible that someone was. But to control him and then erase the memories, there were only two people that could do that to him: Department H and Nathaniel Essex. “Did you get a look at the boy?”

“Sort of. Brown hair, little tyke. Maybe five, maybe seven years old. Couldn't see his face though, it was all bandaged up.”

“Sinister,” she says quietly, and the name makes him perk. “Alright, so he had you kill a little kid. What do you want to about it?”

“I want my memories back.”

“So, when this is done, let's go get them.”

A wide toothy grin, and he takes another bite sandwich, pleased now that they have a plan.
The Mine

Chapter Summary

Puzzles.

He wishes to be nothing.

He would stay here in this nothingness if it didn't hurt so much. If the threads of his soul weren't torn to tatters, placing him in a never-ending scream of pain. He would stay here with the locks and puzzles and let his soul remain torn asunder for an eternity if he thought for a second that his body wouldn't find some way to cope, and once again he'd destroy the earth.

He doesn't want to hurt anyone.

It's in this pain – that ratchets through his ghost of a mind, that shell of torture and powdered thoughts – that he stares at the puzzles. A thousand of them, and behind them, the nightmares all waiting to devour him. If he makes a mistake – just one tiny error – he's locked away again, trapped within the glass cages, his soul shattered once more. He has to be careful, have patience, have focus. All of which are difficult in the face of the shades that haunt him.

They tell him that he's evil. He believes them.

The things inside of him, the thoughts, the blurred apart memories, the powers. These things are not meant for good. They are too big for him, too much. They don't understand how hard it is to keep these things buried. If they did they would have killed him like he wanted. Or maybe they do understand.

Maybe this is their way of punishing him. This constant push into this strange place between reality and the astral plane. This place of suffering that they cast him into so constantly. Perhaps they do see the darkness that courses throughout his mind, and that's why they do this to him. Better he be in pain than them. Better they banish him before he banishes them. He doesn't blame them.

No, he doesn't blame them at all. Not for things he's done. Of course, he can't remember all of his crimes, but he remembers enough to know that they are not at fault for the way they are treating him.

He killed Charles Xavier.

A man that was more of a father to him than his own; who brought him up from a blank and listless past that is too far gone for him to remember. Xavier made him something, made him heroic – the one thing he always wanted to be. He didn't want to kill him.

For what seemed like centuries – in that single moment – he fought against the Phoenix, with everything. But, the Phoenix was too powerful for him. Just like he's too powerful for himself. There is no controlling the Phoenix. Especially now that it's inside of him.

Even in this place, this limbo between reality and the astral plane, he can feel the Phoenix's flaming claws dig throughout his brain. He's afraid to sleep, though he's so tired. He's afraid to lose that focus for a single second because she is there burning against his brain. She wants to devour him, take his power and reshape the world into a blazing cacophony of rebirth. She cares nothing for the tiny lives,
those specks of dust, that crawl across the universe, for it is only in rebirth that she feels truly free. With his power, that monstrosity inside of him, unchecked and unbalanced, she could have her every desire.

Though the temptation to let her have it is immense.

To banish himself to the ashen thought, to be nothing, it's what he wants. She could make it happen. No longer would there be pain, just the exultation of constant resurrection.

In the silence of this strange and ghastly world, he works his puzzles, hoping and praying that the thousand pieces come to right. The pain is too much for him to bear. It saps at his control, his desire to keep his power out of the wrong hands. The shades, they watch with hunger, ready to pounce and devour as he unlocks the box before him, taking out his heart. It's a fast thing, to save his heart, to stop it from being eaten by the darkness in his mind. But, he does it, and looks at all the rest of him, and how it hurts that he's pieced apart.

He doesn't know how long he spends here in this place. It could be hours or minutes or years. But, when the last of the puzzles is finally complete, when he sees his handiwork come to fruition, and he himself is as whole as he can be with the swarm inside his mind, he is jolted back to what passes as some sort of reality. That haze of a thing where he can't tell what's real and what's not.

He knows now not to move. If he moves, they'll banish him again to that place of pain, and he still recovering from the weight of it. It will take hours before his soul stops aching and finally stitches itself together.

A maddening thing these voices. So many of them. He opens his eyes behind red visor and looks at the shape of people that stand before him. A dozen, two dozen, all there against the wall to this tiny chamber. Crowded in to touching shoulders, some on the floor, Jubilee on the chair. One by one, they call him dangerous, a monster, a creature that should not exist. It hurts him to hear these words, and hurts him worse to believe it.

In his head there is Apocalypse and the Shadow King, the remnants of Phoenix flame, and the creature De'spayr. So many inside, and it takes a lot to keep them quelled, to keep them from taking over and doing harm with his powers. It's enough to make him scream, this pressure to keep everything in, but he doesn't. He doesn't want to be ripped apart again.

"Scott."

The voice is familiar. Quiet, with a roughened edge, it speaks in his ear, a whisper. His eyes flutter open once again to see Logan standing over him. He reaches out into the air, hoping that he finds a truth here. That it's something real and not another trick of mind.

There is immense relief when Logan threads fingers through his own. "Steve's asleep," he quiets, sliding in beside him on the bed.

"It hurts, Logan."

"I know, hon. I'm sorry."

A red fog clouds around him as Logan pulls him against his chest. "I'm tired."

"I know."

There are no more words between them, just the gentle press of hand to back of head, a soothing circle between his shoulder blades. He's afraid to sleep, afraid that if he closes his eyes, this reality
will disappear. This calm.

He fears the next storm.
Angel and Nightcrawler talk.

The place has been ransacked. There's not an inch of the mansion that hasn't been scoured for copper wires or irreplaceable antiques. Graffiti on the walls, busted windows. It's like a place out of some post-apocalyptic nightmare, a place they've seen before in dreams and visions and alternate futures where the mutants are dead and Sentinels roam the earth. With it, comes a heightened sense of danger, goosebumps on their arms, and furrows in their brows.

They walk through the parlors in silence for long moments, staring at what's left of the life they once knew. A life where they were hidden, but with far more freedom than they have now. There are memories in this place, living and heavy. Memories of first meetings and friends, celebrations and losses. It is a place they both grieve for now that they are inside wandering the empty classrooms and hallways in order to survey the damage more closely.

Angel picks a frame from the floor. A time when he was younger, when it was just the five of them. In the picture, they are smiling, but he wonders, now, how real those smiles were. Scott, Jean, Hank, Bobby. And, of course, himself. He wonders how many more skeletons are going to come out of the closet and destroy what little idealism he has left about his youth. “I'll call my personal electrician,” he tells Kurt, who stands silently next to him. “And my decorator.”

“But if you pay for it, they'll know we were here.”

“It won't matter,” he sighs. “Ororo's turning him in anyway. Why not go with him?”

“You mean be arrested?”

Angel shrugs and begins walking the house to view the rest of the damage. Kurt follows in his footsteps. He knows that Warren doesn't mean to stay with them. That after they are resettled in the mansion, he will leave. He doesn't believe in this exchange, and because of that, he refuses to take more orders from Storm. “She doesn't see another way,” Nightcrawler offers, his voice slight. He, too, wonders about remaining with the X-men after this, but he still feels some responsibility for the children.

“Doesn't matter,” Angel replies. “Scott needs us, and she's abandoning him. I won't be a part of it.”

“But, you're helping with the mansion?”

“That's my duty to the children. Not Ororo.” There's a hint of anger in his voice, one that he chokes down quickly in case the beast inside him tries to appear. The Archangel, ever hard to control, to keep it under wraps.

He felt it those few nights ago when Scott came undone in the bathroom. He could feel it calling to him. He could feel the terror and the rage, the need for blood and death broil inside of him. It was the first time in many years that he'd faced the monster without Betsy, and surprisingly, he won. But, not without consequence.
It was the young Sarah Goodwind – that little fairy of a creature – that first met his wrath. She screamed as he burst down his door and trapped her in the hallway, his hand to her neck, and tears flooding the floor beneath her. The child couldn't fight, and everything inside of him called her weak. And with that weakness, he wanted cull her, to kill her, to stab her in the throat and let her bleed out all over the floor. He wondered what color blood she would have, if it would smell differently, dry differently. The desire to see it was nearly insatiable.

“Mr. Worthington?” Opal Johnson. A seventeen year old from Chicago who had one of the nastier attitudes among the children, but no one blamed her, not after what she'd been through. She'd watched her father die from a bullet to his head, and then her brother not two days later. It was a gang war, over a corner stop two blocks away, and her brother had been caught selling on the sidewalk.

Her mother cried for days then shut down for years after, leaving an eight year old Opal to care for them both. From school to meals, to finding some way to pay the rent and the utilities. She'd spent many a Chicagoan winter without electric to make things warm, and spent many days without enough money to put food in her stomach. She learned early on to ingratiate herself to those more powerful than she was, to hope that her pitiful persona would be rewarded with some measure of charity.

But more often than not, it didn't happen. And then, on the day of her fourteenth birthday, she discovered that she was a mutant. She'd been sick for days, unable to go to school, to work, to beg. Her arms and legs hurt like hell, and all the while she called for her mother who sat vacantly staring at the front door. When she woke on the fifth day of this illness, she discovered that she had changed.

From wrist to elbow and ankle to knee, her skin had become hard as a rock, shiny and ebon, like an exoskeleton. And along with that exoskeleton were long sharp blades with serrated edges that protruded from her bones. She could jump to the ceiling, along the shelves, and discovered that if she rubbed these blades together, she could produce an ear piercing sound that knock her mother from her chair.

It was frightening enough that her mother woke from her years-long stupor, and staring at her mutant daughter she cried – not only because her daughter had missed out on her childhood, but now she would miss out on adulthood as well.

When the Red Hunt came for her, she thought she saw relief in her mother's eyes.

She asked him what he was doing, bared her blades and readied herself for a fight. He laughed at her, dropped the inky little fairy to the ground and rushed at her with razor wings. She jumped to avoid him, screaming out for help when she realized that she wasn't nearly as skilled as she thought she was.

Thankfully, Bobby had come to the rescue, flashing ice across him, freezing his feet to the ground. He'd broken it of course, but in the process he'd also come back to himself. The cold had a way of doing that, slowing down the rampant mind, preventing it from being lost. It's something that Betsy had discovered some years ago- that method of keeping Death from taking over.

Storm had said little about his loss of control. For Warren, it was an expected thing that he would have problems keeping himself under those tight bonds. She made sure the children were okay, but that was as far as she went.

“I'm going to fight for him, Kurt.” His words are small, distant, but his eyes gleam with a hard edge and spite.
Nightcrawler is not surprised to hear this. There'd been rumblings anyway, an underground current that started with Alex and weaved its way through the mine. It makes sense that Warren is a part of it. What doesn't make sense was that he isn't.

While he understands that Ororo is doing all that she can to keep them safe, he does feel that she is betraying Scott, Logan, and Alex. He remembers the look on Logan's face when he found out that she had changed her mind. He hadn't seen the man so wounded since the death of Jean Grey. There is a silence between them as Nightcrawler stares at the mutant-hating graffiti. "It's never gotten better has it?"

Warren shrugs. He is one of the originals, one of the dreamers, one of those whose whole life has been dedicated to making things right between humans and mutants. But, no, for all of his blood, sweat, and tears, it's never gotten better. The last time he felt that mutants had any hope was before the split between Cyclops and Wolverine; before the Phoenix; before the whole world came crashing down on top of them. "One day," he says as matter of rote rather than belief.

It will take time to rebuild the mansion to completion, but they can have it ready enough for the children in a couple of days if Warren says makes it so. "You know that we're being monitored, right?" Nightcrawler nods. "They'll be checking to see when the rest of the mutants return."

"You really don't mean to come back here, do you?"

"Not without Scott." Had he had his mind the first time they abandoned him, it would have been the same. While he and Summers had grown up as rivals for Jean's affections, he'd learned to respect Cyke's leadership far more than he realized.

"Where will you take him?"

"I'm a billionaire. I have plenty of places where I can hide him."

"Why didn't you take him there before?"

"I wanted to see what kind of leader Storm was." The weather witch had changed drastically over the years. He wanted to see if she still had courage, and he found her lacking. "I understood her hiding us," he explains. "But the rest... I'm surprised that you stand beside her, Kurt. For all of your talk about forgiveness and moving forward --"

"Don't bring my beliefs into this," he warns Angel, "or I shall have to speak about yours."

A bright smile and hands in the air, he forfeits the point with a laugh. "There's a lot of things to fix, I suppose." He intends the double meaning, and Kurt quickly picks up on it.

After an uncomfortable silence, Nightcrawler finally speaks again. "I'll fight with you."

"Kurt, you don't have--"

"I want to." It's not a matter of forgiveness, it's a matter of faith. That Scott will get better, that the world will get better. If he gives up on the man who trained him, who taught him how to use his powers to better the world; if he gives up on the man who's faith restored the mutant species, then what good is faith, he asks. "Besides, he needs a fuzzy elf more now than ever."

Warren smiles for a second time. "He'll appreciate that when the time comes."

"I'm sure he will."
The Baxter Building

Chapter Summary

Fury decides.

There is no trace of evidence that Reed Richards died here. No blood or matter. The whole platform bleached to solid chrome and whatever else it's made of. There are no flowers or RIP's, no memorial or candles. There's nothing at all to signify that one of Earth's greatest minds met his end on this very spot.

And that another one is close to it.

The plan is a ramshackle one, and Tony Stark worries for his safety. He could very well end his life here, just like Reed. In the same spot as Reed. Without the fanfare and glory deserved by a life spent in the service of the world. Just like Reed. With that in mind, he takes a deep breath, his dark blue eyes looking across the men and women of SHIELD, and exhales hoping to calm his nerves.

It's not the first time he's faced a firing squad, but usually he's in his armor when he does so. And he laughs, or mocks, or charms his way into a dialogue without fear for his physical safety. But he's cowed now. His wrists and ankles linked by metal chains, sore and chaffed from the ride over here. He made sure to look in the cameras, to show them how wounded he was, how undone the world's favorite billionaire was by Nick Fury. They know he's here; they know where he's been, and in that, he takes some comfort. It makes him harder to kill. Well, at least harder to sweep his death under the rug like they did with Reed.

He counts at least three dozen guns, all of which are now pointed at him instead of the ever expanding portal which now takes up at least half the room. It's an odd thing, the portal, open on one end, closed on the other, as if space itself had ripped apart, which it literally had when the plot to keep tabs on Scott Summers had backfired on them all. It buzzes, unlike before. Perhaps the stretch of it making it louder. It's an eerie sound, one that he doesn't appreciate, especially in this unnerving silence.

The portal itself is dangerous – more dangerous now that it's been hijacked for some nefarious purpose, or at least that's the thought behind having all of these soldiers here. Nice aliens don't scramble computer interfaces. They bring cookies. Whoever is behind this is not bringing cookies. He imagines armadas flying towards the hole in space and time. Giant ships with cannons and lasers and all things destructive. Pods, perhaps, pods that hit the earth and expand. That grow with the touch of soil. He thinks of aliens, and how gruesome they probably are - as ugly as they are malicious. No wonder Fury was reluctant to meet him here. He's standing in the scope of SHIELD's biggest failure.

But, that all pales in comparison to their issue with Cyclops – a problem that Tony has a solution for, if Fury hears him out and doesn't shoot him in the head first. Something he hopes for from the bottom of his heart.

Tony Stark does not want to die. Someday, he will be ready to give up the ghost, but not now. Not when he's so close to happiness, or what could be happiness. With Steve. If being with the mutants has finally taught the love of his life how much danger they're all in, and he's sure it has, what with
that recent phone call. He has too many things left unfinished. Too many things he has yet to do. He could name them all, if Fury asked him, but Nick won't. The commander of SHIELD doesn't care about last wishes, only results.

“They want to hand him over,” he tells Nick Fury. Fury is not surprised, or at least if he is, he doesn't show it. All concrete and hard steel beams, the preeminent spy shows little at any given time. He can only imagine the man's birthdays and how droll the parties must be. Oh, look socks, with no hint of disappointment or surprise either way. “But, they'll only hand him over to me.”

“You couldn't tell me this at the prison?” Nick asks calmly.

“I wanted to make sure that enough people heard me.” He can't be killed now, not without ruining Fury's reputation. If he dies, someone will leak the fact that the Red Wave could have been captured, and Nick ignored it. Not to mention, the hundreds of paparazzi outside snapping pictures as they transported him over. “They'll listen to me,” he says quietly. “They'll let me have him.”

The commander, however, is suspicious. Nick Fury doesn't like easy solutions. More often than not, those things that are too easy come back to bite him in the ass. “What's to say that they're not going to kill you because of your involvement in the Red Hunt?”

“Then two birds, one stone, right?” He takes another deep breath, the thought of dying wrangling his nerves into a frenzy. “I want him to pay for what he's done. We both do. I don't see why we can't work together on this. Let bygones be bygones. Become allies again.”

Fury glances up at the portal – the situation that's demanded most of his attention up until now. Tony's follow his gaze, and in the fright of the thing, he winces. It's truly out of hand. Something's coming for them. He can feel it in his gut.

“What are the terms?” Nick's voice is gruff and impatient, but Stark doesn't take it to heart.

“Simple ones really. I go free. Steve Rogers goes free. And the X-men go free, including those in the Undertow. Just call it a reset on the whole damnable sitch. We get Cyclops, and everything goes back to normal.”

It's not an acceptable deal, especially considering those in the Undertow, but there's little choice in the matter. They've sought the X-men for months, using vast amounts of resources with no results to show for it. Fury has so many people breathing down his neck that if he doesn't provide some measure of resolution soon, he'll be the one waiting for execution.

Silent thus far, Maria Hill glances up at Fury, and then towards the dozens of guns pointed at Tony Stark. With a wave of her hand, the guns are lowered, but the soldiers are still on ready, nervous over each twitch of Tony's hands. “You don't seem to think that this is a trap.”

“It's not,” Tony breathes, thankful for the sudden easing of the situation. “They're frightened of him. He's too out of control for them to handle, especially being in hiding. They barely have the resources to keep themselves safe as it is. Adding Summers into the mix makes things far too volatile.”

In many ways, Maria Hill is disappointed to hear such a thing. That they're abandoning him once again. Though she had sworn long ago to bring Cyclops to justice, inside, she felt for the man. Once a hero, once respected, the whole world had turned their backs on him, and he was left flailing in the outcome. This, of course, remains unsaid. For Fury to hear that she has empathy for the man would be her undoing.

Instead, she talks of semantics. How releasing those in the Undertow could have dire consequences.
That they've been experimenting on mutants in an attempt to find someway to rid Summers of his power – to let those mutants go could start one of the harshest wars ever known to man.

“Storm doesn't want to fight,” Stark assures her. “She wants safety and peace. She wants this whole thing behind her.”

But, Storm isn't who Hill is worried about. There are others among them – including in the Undertow – that would see the arrest of Summers and the experiments as an affront to the mutant species. “Wolverine and Havok,” she reminds him. Havok had already led a revolt against them, and garnered much support within the population. “And Logan is a killing machine. We'd be hard pressed to take him down if he was truly adamant.”

“That's why you send me,” he says softly. “If he's going to go berserk, there will be no losses on your side. Just me.”

Hill isn't nearly as convinced as Fury, if only because she sees his self-sacrifice as more of a hitch in the system rather than something noble. Of course, he knows that if they do this, he won't be going alone. That there will be teams upon teams behind him, wherever this exchange takes place. That the operation will be bigger than the Red Hunt all together. She can already see the logistics of the mission floating across Fury's face, those little twitches of jaw and crease of brow. She wonders what he'll do.

She's not surprised when he nods. When he agrees to both terms and application. He has caveats, however, those things that he demands in return – including that Steve Rogers – though not a prisoner – will be held for questioning and debriefing. Tony agrees without express permission from his would-be lover. “Steve wants an end to this as much as the rest of us do.”

The soldiers return to their stations around the portal, and Stark is released from his binds. He is escorted back to Stark Tower, away from the rift, away from the goings-on of SHIELD, and he is not disappointed.

His home is a lavish one, full of comforts and ginger ale. He spends too little time here, as noted by the machine full of messages. He makes sure to call Pepper first, to let her know that he's okay, that sending the paparazzi after him was indeed a helpful maneuver.

She isn't so happy to hear from him. She's got a lot of issues with what he's been up to, and that he's been avoiding her once again. But, he doesn't want to fight with her, not now. He's tired, sore, his nerves still shaken from his parlay earlier. “It's going to come back to bite you in the ass, Tony,” she clarifies. “All this Red Hunt chaos? It's going to hurt you.”

“It already has, Pep. More than you know.”

It's then he Sneaks into the bedroom, hides himself inside of the large walk-in closet, a place he knows that there are no cameras or listening devices. He speaks to Jarvis, asks him to run a sweep for bugs. While there are plenty in the home itself, there are none in this walk-in, and Stark is relieved. He pulls out a burner phone, dials in the number that Steve had him commit to memory. He's patient then, more than patient, and then elated when Steve finally answers. "It worked," he tells him. "I'm free. And, so are you."

"All terms are met?" he asks quietly, obviously hiding himself to enjoy the call.

"Yes. They're going to debrief you, though. And after, we're going to Venice."

"Venice?"
"I want to make love to you on a gondola in the moonlight, Steve. It's all I can think about."

"It may have to wait. For a while." The news does not bode well for them. Steve can control Summers, can keep him unconscious. And, until they figure out what to do with him, find some way to block his power, he'll have to stay by Cyclops' side to keep him harmless. "The world's at stake, Tony. Our own plans will have to be put on hold."

"That's exactly why Pepper left me," he says sadly. "I was too busy to maintain--"

"We're heroes, Tony. We have duties and responsibilities. You won't leave me over this."

The phone call is all too short, and when it's over, it leaves Stark with a sick feeling in his stomach. He wonders if he's been used again.

XXXX
Calm before the storm.

It's not like she imagined, the mansion. This is a place that she's dreamed about since she was but a child, but it's cold and empty. The children are assured that things will get better, that there will be furniture and full electric, food in the kitchen, a functioning banquet hall. They're ushered up to the sleeping quarters on the second floor – it all goes too quickly for Indira Gomez. There's no time to look, no time to figure out why her dreams don't match reality.

She'd seen the brochures. The pool out back, the baseball field. She knows that somewhere on the lawn that there are tennis and basketball courts, and the forest has a lake. But, from her window perch on the second floor, she can see none of it. It's an overgrown mess. No lawn care, no opulence. In many ways, it breaks her heart to see it like this.

Behind her, her nervous little fingers twitching, Sarah Goodwind notices her friend's disillusionment, and is saddened by the heavy heart. For her, Indira has been a shoulder to lean on, has been the one thing that keeps her from panic. She relies on her friend, as do several others. Indira is a force of hope, of positive thinking, of all the things that Sarah wishes she could be. She doesn't want to see her friend so downhearted. “I'm thinking Flicker,” she says quietly, and waits as Indira's large brown eyes turn to her.

“Flicker?”

“My superhero name. What's yours?”

“Maybe Opal's right? Maybe I'm not cut out to be an X-man.”

“I think you'd make a great X-man.”

Indira smiles softly and returns her gaze to the window. None of this is as she expected, from the Red Hunt to hiding in the mine for so many weeks, to sneaking back into this mess of a mansion. She was supposed to be saving the world, impressing her peers, and making a difference in the lives of mutants. But, in reality, she's just a little girl with hope that is slowly dimming.

Sarah rests sits upon her blankets, knees tucked to chin. She concentrates on her fingers – the ones on the floor. Sometimes, if she thinks hard enough, she can make them flat, spread them out like liquid. She idly wonders if her whole body can do that, but to find out would mean that she is more different than she already is. Sarah doesn't want to be different. She doesn't want to look this way or feel so outside of everyone else. She simply wants to be a normal kid, go to a normal school, have normal friends. Her tears are a pale, shimmering blue.

“What about Sliver?” Indira asks, hoping to pull Sarah out of her own thoughts. Questioning, Sarah looks up. “For my super hero name. What about Sliver?”

“That's a nice name,” she replies. “It's better than Flicker.”

“No, Flicker's a great name. It makes it sound like you're fast.”
“I can be fast. I think.”

“You'll have plenty of time to figure that out, now that we're here.” Indira pauses, looks at her friend with a bright smile. “I wonder what Arlo's name would be?”

“Maybe we should go ask him?” With a giggle between them, the girls gather themselves and wander out into the hallway, only to freeze right outside the door.

He's not supposed to be alone. He's not supposed to be anywhere near them. Indira looks to the left and to the right, but Captain America is nowhere in sight. Beside her, she can hear the muffled whimpers of Sarah Goodwind.

He stumbles. Falls to the floor on broken bones. She can tell that they're broken, by the way they're all bruised and swollen. She wonders what happened to his cast. “Cy-Cyclops?”

Red visor turns towards the sound of her voice. His chest heaving, tiny drops of blood at the edge of his mouth, he tries to shake his head, but ends up collapsing instead.

His ribs on the right side are completely gone, as if someone took a bite out of him. A gigantic bite. She can see the swirl of his energy, how wild it is, how solid in the places where his organs are gone. She looks at Sarah, and Sarah looks at her. They are both afraid, both frozen stone and still in shock.

It takes only seconds for Indira to recover and rush into action, gathering up their blankets from the floor and rushing to Cyclops' side. She directs Sarah to action, having her put pressure on the wounds, and then looks around from someone to help her. She knocks frantically on Opal's door, and calls out for the adults. Logan is the one to find her. “Fuck,” he says upon seeing the man fallen on the floor. He scoops him up over his shoulder and takes him to the basement's second floor. Sarah and Indira follow.

Cecilia Reyes is far too busy and focused upon the return of her patient to shoo the girls away, and wide eyed they watch as the doctor goes to work. Stitches first to seal up the blood, she orders Logan in every direction. “His lung's gone, his kidney, his heart, half his bones....” her voice trails off as the damage piles up. She asks Logan what happened, but he doesn't know.

“Steve said he just disappeared. One minute he was there, the next he was gone. That's all I know.”

“Well, someone beat the hell out of him. How on Earth is he still alive?” She fears his silence, that he's asleep. She can't afford a Phoenix dream in the middle of all of this, not with this much damage, not in their barely functioning medlab. “We have to keep him awake.”

“What's your name, kid?” Logan asks.

“Indira.”

“Good. Indira, I want you to come over here, right beside me, and shake him a little. Talk to him. Keep him awake.”

“O-okay.” It's not hard to wake him up. She hears him moan in pain. She looks up at Logan who nods her on as he continues to help Reyes with suctioning the blood from the wound.

It's not an easy conversation, not with all the nerves. For years, she'd wanted to meet the great Cyclops. Like Wolverine, she'd read all about him, both the good and the bad. She considered him a hero, and in many ways, thinks that handing him over to the Red Hunt is unfair, especially after everything he'd done for the X-men.
She speaks to him in pleasant tones, shakes him again when necessary. She tells him of the things that she's read, asks his opinion on her superhero name. "Sliver...good...name," he ekes out through pained breaths. His large hand grips against hers, and he tenses when the needles are driven into him. Through clenched teeth, he tries to talk, tries to stay awake for her, but it's hard. The loss of blood, the incredible pain.

"Indira?" Reyes calls her name. "In the drawer behind me, there's a small bottle and some needles. I need you to grab them."

She recognizes the pain killer for what it is, and it makes her nervous. "Won't it make him sleep?"

"I can't have him moving around right now. He's only making things worse."

Indira knows how to give a shot. She's read medical books for years, learning everything she could about field medicine and its applications. Cecilia barely notices her as she injects Cyclops with the liquid. "I still need you to stay awake," she says quietly, smoothing autumn hair back from brow. "So you have to keep talking to me."

She tells him about her parents, her life before this, how she wanted to be a superhero, and now that she's a mutant she can be. Sarah joins in, asking questions, giggling when they speak of something funny. Flicker's not sure about being a superhero. The whole thing sounds pretty scary to her. She's just glad that people don't make fun of her here, except for Opal. But, Opal makes fun of everyone.

They tell him about Arlo, the strides he's taken to finally fit. About Pocket and Phinneus Washington – the boy that Sarah has a crush on. They can't tell if he's listening to them, if he's actually hearing what they're saying, but he moans softly at the appropriate moments, and takes deep breaths when the needles pinch into him once again.

As the pain medicine seeps into his system, he becomes more and more delirious. He refers to them as Jubilee and Kitty, Megan and Illyana. All the names that he can think of, including Jean and Emma. He mentions how dark space is, how cold. How he couldn't breathe. They look to Logan then, wondering if that was where he'd been. Logan shrugs, not sure of anything at this point.

It's not long before Storm joins them. Like Logan, she works at keeping the blood from overflowing from the giant cavity in his chest. The girls continue to keep him awake, sometimes losing him for minutes on end to his drug induced haze. He tells Ororo that he's sorry. For everything. That she should let him die. That they all should let him die. And not for the first time, Storm feels the weight of her decision. "The girls shouldn't have to see this," she tells Logan. "You should shut him down."

"He's not hurting anyone."

"We don't need to traumatize the students--"

"He's not as scary as you made him out to be." Large brown eyes peer up to pale blue, their earnestness striking. She looks at Cyclops' hand, its weak hold on her own. He's pale, sunless, calloused. His nails are embedded with blood and matter, and the look on his face struck and sad. "He doesn't want to hurt us, Ms. Munroe. I don't think he wants to hurt anyone."

The red energy around him does no harm, not as it is - low and soft. There are no coils, no lashes, now whips. He is as calm as he can be under this much pain, though Logan swears his mind isn't there. "Pain meds got him," he says quietly. "Calmed him down." And then, he, too, looks at Ororo. "We can't abandon him."

"I can't have him here, Logan."
“Then give us time. Angel's got a place in mind.”

“I don't want to lose Warren.” Her words are sincere. “I need him here.”

“Ain't your choice on where he goes, darlin', but it is your choice on whether we protect Scott.”

A solemnness overcomes her. She looks at the children, those young things with their wide eyes and hopeful hearts. She wonders if she was ever like that, so innocent and caring. A thief in Cairo and later worshiped as a goddess. She always knew that she was special, and that she deserved special treatment. She earned her place, she earned this place, her role as leader. “I'm begging you not to fight them, Logan.”

“I'm begging the opposite.” He wants her to believe in something again, to feel the duty to mutankind, to keeping them safe regardless of their danger. “He needs hope, too, 'Ro. He needs to know that we will do whatever we can to help him.”

In their room, much later in the evening, the blood is cleansed from their hands and clothes. The girls are quiet and thoughtful, recalling the events of today. Neither one is ready to sleep regardless of how exhausted they feel. “I'd be a good hero,” Indira muses into the silence.

“You would be,” Sarah smiles. “So would Arlo. And even Opal.”

“Opal's going to make a team for sure. She's tough.”

“I think Phin will, too. And maybe even Pocket.”

“Pocket's too cute not to be on a team. No villain could hurt him.”

“He'd be our secret weapon.”

“We still have to find out Arlo's hero name,” Indira smiles.

“Maybe he should just be Arlo. It's a good name, especially for a hero.”
Chapter Summary

Magneto takes action.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for such a short chapter. I hope it's good enough to keep your interest.

When at war, expect casualties. Expect the dead and the blood and the scattered remains of life. For when at war, there is only violence.

For as long as he's warned them, the humans have not listened. Time and again, he's proven his superiority over the flatscans, shown them how gnat-like they are in the scope of his great power. But, alas, they do not hear him. Humans, they never learn. Falsely believing in their own ability to come together and defend, that they are the most righteous protectors of Earth. When it simply isn't so.

He warned them of the attack today, watched idly as their helicarriers and military vessels crowded the ocean floor, each one armed to the brim with deluxe weapons meant to bring him down. But, as always, the humans forgot that he is better than they are. Their foolishness abound, they sent to him the one thing in this world that he hoped for.

They brought metal, the one thing which he can control. Metal hulls and sterns, flight blades and guns. Those lucky few that were blessed with ceramic bullets and that plastic nightmare they called armor were quickly dispatched by the predator in the forefront of the bloodshed. Alas, how he's missed the dance of Sabretooth and all that he can accomplish.

He means to show them once and for all that their meager contraptions are at best their grave sites, if not the means of their own destruction. Ship after ship goes down in the bay, their bellies cracked my magnetic might. And jet after jet falls from the sky, crashes into the boats below, and barely a human escapes.

He does not see this massacre as punishment or revenge. No, indeed, the punishment will come later when the mutants have finally escaped that prison in the ocean. And, then it will spread. His words, his army. They will fight for him at last, and he will show the world why his brethren should never be harmed. He shall place Cyclops once again at the head of them and watch the world bury their heads and hope that he does not remember how they treated him. Overflowing with power, few will disobey him. The world will be entirely his hands, and with that, the mutants will flourish.

The water swirls around capsized ships, and he can feel himself weakened by the force. In his younger years this would not have been a problem. The ships, the prison, he would have lifted them out of the water and brought them all to safety. But, he is an old man now, and effort presses breath from his chest. His bones hurt, his blood, the power of magnetism drawing out the warm, red liquid from open pores. He reminds himself that this is necessary - the first step in finally taking what is
rightfully theirs by birthright and fortitude. No matter the pain, he will see this through.

He can feel it breaking in his grasp, the metallic prison. He can feel the small holes become wider with the rush of water pouring in. The walls creak. The floors bend. Even from here, he can hear the alarms going haywire inside. He wonders how long he'll last now, how long it will take for Victor Creed to find him passed out in a pool of his own blood. If indeed they will care for him like they've promised. In his younger days, he wouldn't have needed them.

He does not weep for his loss of time, for the aging of his body. For, with it, has come wisdom, strategy, thought. Though his physical self is weaker, his mind is by far stronger, no longer prone to the madness that Xavier wrought when he cracked his mind in half.

Guards scramble to their death, meeting door and then the claws of Victor Creed. A predator, he is, licking the blood from his claws, and then venturing inside to find more. Magneto would warn him against entering, but it would be futile to do so. He's looking for Mystique, and no one – or their guns – will stop him.

It's an odd relationship the two of them have. Long ago lovers returned to each others' arms. They have yet to tell him why they've come, but he thinks he already knows. The nightmares that Creed has been having reeks of lost memories, and they think that Magneto can help him recover them.

He magnetizes the air around the latest Red Hunt vessel to arrive – a smaller plane launched from the carrier in the clouds. Though mostly made of hardened silicone, there are some mechanisms that cannot be replaced by non-metallic substances. The bearings, for instance, trundled just inside the blade barrel. One little jolt of magnetism, one little twitch, and the smooth round balls crack under the weight of force. Eric takes out all four of the blades before guiding the chopper and it's few pieces of metal over to the destroyers approaching in the ocean.

He doesn't care that the pilot escapes. In the water, he is useless, a nothing. And even though he is now prone to ceramic, thanks to the disappearance of Creed, he doubts the flyboy will make it to shore anytime soon.

Flames and black smoke roll upwards into graying sky when the aircraft hits the most recent bevvy of ships. Lit fuel burns quickly across the metallic deck, and the calls through coms from the nearby dead demand a swift retreat of all metal-bearing craft – but not because him. Not because of his threat – which stings his pride – but, for some other emergency at the Baxter Building. Once again, they ignore their rightful leaders, think the mutants all to easily controlled.

Magneto knows nothing of the dimensional rift and the hijacked computers. If he did, he would laugh aloud for the audacity of the humans in attempting to destroy one of the greatest powers on Earth.

“While you've been obsessing over Ms. Grey, I've been caring for the boy, Charles. Do you understand how powerful he is? What he can become?”

“Until I can read his thoughts, Eric, we should keep that child at a distance. Who knows who he's working for.” In the boy's dreams, there is a man with a pale face and red eyes. He's a monster, and he could very well be behind the boy's sudden appearance in the national media. “They knew I would help him. They knew I would do everything in my power to save the boy from the clutches of Jack Winters ---”

“Including have the child kill him?”

Long dark brows settled heavy upon blue eyes. It is a shock to him that the boy actually spoke about
the trauma, and worse, that he trusted Eric enough to tell him. “He did what was necessary--”

“You could have pulled the trigger yourself, Charles.”

“I've never known you to be sympathetic to the humans.”

“I've never known you to want to kill them.”

“It was an accident, Eric. The frequency of the vibration gun shook him apart.”

“And you turned a thirteen year old boy into a murderer.”

Another com call, and another emergency – this one at the Xavier Institute for Gifted Youngsters. The name shocks him into attention. An uprising, it would seem, and something that would finally swell his heart with pride. For too long, the X-men had cowered in their self-imposed imprisonment, stop fighting against the world that sought to draw them under. Finally, they had had enough. They were going to take back the world that was rightfully theirs, and it was about damn time.
The Baxter Building

Chapter Summary

Bad karma for Nick Fury.

He's not worried about Magneto or the prison break. He's got protocol for that. More than just ceramic bullets and silicone hulls. He's got a whole fucking squadron of soldiers equipped and trained to deal with the magnetic threat.

He can even manage the portal and the armada flying towards that rift at light speed. They've dealt with other-earthly threats like this before, and he knows his men are trained well enough to handle it.

He can even deal with the fucking mutant riot at Xavier's.

But, all three? At the same damn time? He's wracked up some bad karma somewhere and it's coming back to bite him in the ass.

Like a chess board, he watches the movements of his various pieces. The Avengers to Xavier's, equipped with power dampening collars and cuffs; the rubber bullet brigade to the Undertow to finally put Magneto down and quell the uprising within the prison walls, and finally SHIELD to the Baxter Building, complete with SWORD tech and a quick call to Abigail Brand to warn her of an impending attack. She won't be able to make it in time, she's said as much, but she's dispatching her troops anyway. If he can hold off the attack, her troops will eventually get there.

Nick Fury is an impatient man, and watching as the blips on his screen move closer to their targets, he can feel the urge to yell and curse and pound at things because they are moving too slow. “Hill, report in,” he says into com.

Stationed at the mansion, she already has her troops on the move. “They've got Stark,” she says, “and Rogers. And, Storm is fighting us. We need Thor.”

The Avengers – what is left of them – are already on their way. As much as Fury needs them at the Baxter Building to deal with armada swifiting to the portal, he knows that only supers can deal with supers. That's just the way it is. “As soon as they get there, pull your men, send them here. We'll need all the firepower that we can get.”

It's easier said then done for Hill. Already the casualties are piling up with Carol Danvers transferring the injured into the bay and attempting to bring an end to the fight below. On her monitors, she can see the battle for herself, how unprepared her soldiers are for an all out fight against Ororo Munroe. They get zapped by the dozen, fall to the ground, their bodies shaken and overheated with electric exhaustion. Thor arrives on scene only moments after she demanded him, matching lightning with lightning, he's a good deterrent for Storm's continued attacks upon the human soldiers. Goddess versus god, and the snap flash of powers is mesmerizing.

But, it's not even Storm that Maria's worried about. As powerful as she is, there are others that garner more concern. The omega mutant Iceman and the indestructible Wolverine, for instance, have her on the edge of her seat. Logan will kill them all if it means protecting what he holds dear, and Iceman, though he's often been considered the slacker of the group, when he's focused, he's nearly impossible
to defeat.

But that's why the Avengers are here. She-Hulk guards herself against the icy plummet that encapsulates her. Though Iceman is careful not to freeze her solid – as he very well could – his ice still burns against her jade skin, making her angry, making her lose control. Overhead, his position just above the fray in a circling helicopter, Hawkeye takes aim at Drake, hoping that once again, he'll succeed just as he did against Havok some weeks ago.

Closer to the ground, Wasp flies after Rogue. Too small to do much damage against the heavy hitter, she is just the right size to keep tabs on her, and to make sure that both Iron Fist and Luke Cage are at the other end of her flight. Rogue goes flying backwards after a dual hit to chest and jaw, ramming into the parked cars in the drive. She's angry, but, then, so is Rand. Danny Rand wants this senselessness to end, this fighting. They've done this before, and the Avengers came out on top, so why press their luck again.

Hill scouts the ground for Wolverine and Havok, two of the ones they are most watchful for. Logan for his claws and Havok for a mind nearly as strategic as his brother's. “They must be inside,” she tells Captain Marvel. “They must be protecting him.”

“Why does he need protected?” she asks, suddenly unsure of this whole situation.

“You'll see once you're in there. You need to free Rogers first. He can keep Summers under control.”

She exits the carrier in a swarm of lightning attacks that ionize the air and sends bumps down her arms. It's a spectacular fight, with neither Storm nor Thor getting the upper hand. Thor throws his hammer, but a whirlwind captures it, stops it from hitting its mark, only to be called back to its owner.

Further down, she is stopped by Janet VanDyne, the tiny creature who buzzes in her ear. Hank Pym has been hurt, she needs her help to get him to the safety of the hellicarrier. “Archangel paralyzed him. He can't move.”

Through the battle, she watches Black Panther move in towards an adamant Armor. Like Pixie, who is shaking at her side, she doesn't want this fight, but she's willing to stand to it since the Avengers have once again decided to invade their home. In the distance, Surge sends her own brand of lightning into the mix, burning the ground between T'challa and Hisako. She angry, and she's not afraid that they know it. She takes off the special cuffs that keep her powers in check and runs full force into the battle. But T'challa is not phased. He knows well enough how to handle himself. Dodging the first lunge is easy, so is the second, but Noriko is not adept enough at either strategy or maneuvers to miss the punch to the gut. Air robbed, she hacks against the onslaught, doubled over to her knees watching as Armor tries to protect her.

Hank Pym is an easy save, his larger than usual body easily lifted by Danver's strength. As soon as she assures Janet that he'll be fine, the Wasp zooms off in search of more prey.

Kitty Pryde phases Colossus through a left hook thrown by Jessica Jones, only to get hijacked from behind by an incoming War Machine. Piotr lands face down in the overgrown lawn, but before he can react, Vision lands with a phase of his own. Sinking into the ground, he pushes hand through dirt to solidify around Colossus' ankle, keeping him pinned so that War Machine can pound away while Kitty recovers. It's a risky maneuver, especially if Vision loses control of his atoms. He will be lost to the ground forever, but he apparently thinks it's worth the risk.

Danvers flies into the thunderous clouds, gets soaked by large drops of rain and pelts of ice. She
leaves Pym inside the ship before returning to the mansion at top speed. She has to do this, break into the place.

According to Hill, Rogers is kept trapped in the second basement near the Danger Room, and Danvers knows exactly where that is. Breaking through Drake's ice shield, throwing Rogue way off course, she hits the front door at top speed and stops on a dime just inside the entrance. They're waiting for her. They're waiting for all of them. Nightcrawler, Wolverine, Havok. She knows they're here and she knows they haven't yet come for the attack.

It's a careful thing as she goes down the steps. Unlike her cohorts in the Avengers, she actually stayed here for some time, gained access to the basement rooms, where the majority of the technological marvels are. Sh'iar tech glistens from all corners of the place – from security that she can pass through due to being considered friend, to the lab instruments and medical bays. She opens the door to the second basement, surprised at first to hear the crying of children.

It's a startling thing to hear them, to know that they are somehow witness to the battles. That by breaking in here, she's endangering them. Behind her, she hears Thor. “Where's the Danger Room?” he asks, and she points to the end of the hallway. “Then, they're in here somewhere.”

There are multiple doors to check behind. Darkened labs and science bays, ready rooms and shower stalls. There's a gym and classrooms, a few rooms for the scientists to do their pondering, and a small kitchen for midnight snacks. They find the children huddled in one of the rooms, act like they're not seen and close the door behind them.

It's the locker room where they find their members – both Steve Rogers and Tony Stark. “It's a trap,” Steve says as soon as the cloth around his mouth is loosened, but before Danvers can react, Nightcrawler ports in and out of the room with her in tow. He locks her inside the Danger Room, where a war scenario against the Avengers is already taking place.

“You shouldn't be here.” It's an alarming thing to watch Kitty Pryde descend from the ceiling, meaning even the attack in the yard had been planned out. “You shouldn't be attacking us.”

Danvers is not afraid of Kitty Pryde. She knows the woman as a friend, an ally. She knows that Kitty is reasonable, perhaps even more so than most of the mutants she follows. But, this is not normal, logical Kitty Pryde. This is a young woman feeling the weight of betrayal. “You were our friend once, Carol. I see where our friendship has gotten us.”

“You can't hurt me, Kitty. Your powers won't allow --”

“Maybe I can't,” she laughs. “But she can.” The woman is tall and metallic, with gears as organs and bones. “Meet Danger.”

“At last,” Danger speaks. They'd been scenarios against the Avengers for days now, and the robotic lifeform has learned everything she can from the memories of others. It's time to put her knowledge to the test.

Kitty walks through air to the other side of the wall, wishes Danvers good luck. She's off to stop that foolish man who thinks himself a god. She will show him, without a doubt, what power truly is.
The Undertow

Chapter Summary

The prison break.

He's not breathing. Even with the pill plunged into his lungs, Sam Guthrie cannot breathe. "It's the water," Mystique says, pounding on his chest to force pulse back into his heart. "He couldn't take it anymore."

"We have to evacuate him."

"He was a major part of the plan."

"We'll just have to form another one without him." Sue Richards isn't about to let him die, especially knowing that she was in part responsible for this.

Mystique works on him until breath returns, and Sue wraps an invisible shield around his body, eyeing the necrosis with displeasure. "This can be reversed, right?" she asks, thinking of her children, her husband.

"Triage should be able to heal him." That they know where Christopher Muse is, that they know he's not with the X-men, still boggles Sue. Likewise, she takes issue that they have been using him as a bargaining chip, but now is not the time to argue the point, not with the water suddenly leaking through the walls. "We've got about ten minutes," Mystique explains quietly. "Grab as many as you can, I'll see you up top."

Her invisible shield does nothing to lighten the weight of Sam Guthrie, but Sue Richards is not a weak woman, despite her outward appearance. Lugging him into the hallway, she finds James Proudstar waiting just outside. "You can give us air?" he asks, tugging Cannonball's body across his shoulders. She nods. "Good, then I'll make us a path."

Behind him are a dozen children – those he rescued from the cells. They are frightened, nervous. They want nothing more than to finally go home and see their parents. "They can run?" she asks, glancing over each of them. Warpath nods. "Good," she says, expanding her shield around them. "Let's do this?"

They come across Dazzler and Gambit and their rescues a short ways up the hall, then Domino and Boom Boom with theirs. It's hard for her to focus like this – to move and keep up such a large shield – especially with the water flooding in. It took only minutes for the water to reach their knees, and with the guards begging them for help, she must expand her shield again.

It's been ages since the Fantastic Four fought as a team. They'd become content in their most recent queries – scientific extrapolations and discoveries. Reed had imagined himself an explorer in space, and Sue a mother of two darling children. Johnny, of course, had joined with other teams, as did Ben at times, but Sue was happy out of the field, and with it, her ability to precisely fluctuate her powers.

The shield flickers around them all, the water flooding in across hips. Her lapse of focus a dangerous one, as part of their oxygen is now depleted, and they can all feel the crush of ocean depths. Though
just a momentary struggle, the children break out in tears, scared for their lives and what will become of them. Warpath unloads Sam Guthrie to Rockslide, who is sure that they’re going to die. “Just hold on,” he says, picking her up from the floor. He’s a strong man, stronger than she imagined. “You concentrate, let us do the rest.”

They were a team once – X-force – and with that came a silent understanding between them all. They knew exactly what to do to plow their way out. Tabitha, with her bombs, blows through doors and walls, creating a path for them midst the churning water, and Nina – always the lucky one – always finds the path of least resistance. Their progress through the corridors is slow due to all of the children and civilians locked inside the giant shield. They're frightened of the water, which is now shoulder height, and they don't tread as well as the X-men.

Anole is the first to leave the shield behind. He carries the time bombs up the walls, makes holes in the ceiling under Domino's direction. Higher floors mean less water, and one by one he carries the young ones up the wall and puts them onto the floor above. A quick meander through the nearby guard station, provides them with ropes in which to pull the heavier ones up – and the Invisible woman somehow manages to split her shield into pieces and maintain it. She regrets her lack of training now. For her, this should have been easy enough. They had counted on it. But, as Warpath clutches his fingers against her spine, and begins to tread the water upward in order to reach the ropes.

Metal creaks under the weight of magnetism. All of them feel the charge in the air, and metal pulls from the floor and into the air above. And then suddenly, it stops. Just like that, it all stops.

They can hear it, even so far under the ocean. The hum of motor, and the sudden click of guns. Nick Fury's contingency plan has arrived.

“Get the kids out of here,” Mystique tells them all. She's a whole floor above them with her dozens of children. “We'll have to fight.”

Without Cannonball, they must rely on Anole to pass the kids from one floor to the other. Meanwhile, the others make a perimeter, each wrapped in invisible shields. They will make their stand – not just to save the children, but to see freedom themselves.

Raven wants to leave the human guards, figuring they can deal with things themselves, but the others are adamant. All will be saved from this broken prison, and so she grits her teeth and follows suit.

The first of Tabitha's bombs explode – a small sound considering the rush of heavy water all around them. She sees them first.

Dressed in silicone, weighted down with plastic air tanks built to withstand the crushing depths of the ocean, the men are trained in underwater combat. Sue shields her from the bullets, but to do so, she leaves the others without protection.

It's a scramble then, to get Rockslide and Cannonball to the next floor while keeping the troops busy enough to allow for escape. Dazzler blasts plasma in streaks across the water, turning sound to light, and burning the plastic holds on their oxygen. But, she discovers the futility in doing so. Like themselves, they've been armed with liquid oxygen pills, and so the disappearance of their tanks means little but make them more maneuverable.

As Ali is next to climb the rope, Nina wrestles under neck deep water to grab the gun from one of the soldiers. She turns it on him, shooting out both of his knee caps, before diving under to bring to surface. She floats him in the direction of Tabitha, who readies another bomb in her capable hands.
Sue does what she can to throw her shields and swim at the same time. She marvels at what the team is capable of – and how cutthroat they are. They have no qualms in bashing them unconscious and handing them up to Santo, or cutting them free of their suits so that they are no longer able to fight. Ten soldiers go down all too easily, and it makes Sue cringe. “They're waiting for us,” she tells them all as she gulps for air.

Gambit grabs her by the collar of her shirt, drags her from the water and onto dry land. Already, Mystique is running the children through the maze of hallways to get to the next checkpoint. It would have been far easier had Sam been well. He could have just made the path go straight up, but it's too wet, too late to worry about that now.

The team catches up to her as fast they can. Raven worries for Magneto, that he's no longer pulling the prison apart at the seams. She believes they sent more than just one squadron, and like Sue she requests that they remain vigilant for what's ahead.

Up above them, Mystique's worries prove correct, and Magneto is in the fight for his life. Already bleeding from bullet wounds, the men and women are trained for the sole purpose of bringing Magneto down should the heroes of the world fail in their endeavor. They shoot glass hollow point bullets that shatter inside the body. They nick against arteries and veins, damage organs and break bones. They know where to hit, how to keep the man down and powerless, and after only a few minutes of battle, they are able to collar him and make him completely defenseless.

Still, he laughs. He's an eighty year old man, and it's taken this many soldiers to bring him to heel. He calls them weaklings, taunts them with reminders that he is superior regardless of how pained he is right now. And as they punch and kick against him to release their anger upon him, Sabretooth approaches.

He's a silent killer when he wants to be. The ultimate predator and the top of the food chain. He strikes first before they realize that he's there, ripping the head off one of the silicone soldiers, and smiling as the blood sprays into the air and moistens his thick, golden hair. Licking his lips, he laughs and drools over the taste of blood. “Human. My favorite.”

The soldiers erupt into a solid sheet of bullets, trying to fill the beast full of holes, but glass cannot penetrate adamantium, and the glass bullets that were so effective on Eric Lehnsherr become useless against Victor Creed. A call to com and they're begging for back up, of which there isn't any. Not now, not with so much going on.

The fight is bloody and over all too quickly, with bits and pieces of soldiers strewn about the narrow walkway. Creed helps a badly injured Magneto from the ground, winces slightly at the man's unsteady breath. He's not a doctor, or a field medic. His job has always been to kill, not to heal.

Magneto had prepared a grand speech for this event. He wanted to teach these mutant children who burst through the doors some minutes later that they were indeed better than their jailors, but he's too weak now, and so merely watches as they finally find daylight, and then worry and the rivers of blood left in the wake of Sabretooth. He's in no position to defend himself when Sue reaches him and reminds him of their deal. “They weren't supposed to die.”

Mystique clicks tongue to teeth and shakes her head. “It was either them or the rest of us. The deal was a rescue, if I remember correctly. Now you can get your precious husband back.”

“Reed's dead?” Gambit asks. “How?”

“SHIELD killed him,” Mystique reveals. “If Magneto hadn't played decoy for your lives, all of you would've been dead. You should be thanking him instead of reviling him.”
Her words have weight, and she can see the settling of shoulders in the surround. It's not the magnificence that Eric had wanted, but perhaps this was by far better. The X-men were always prone to parading their guilt, and this was no exception.

A quick call, and Toad arrives with a jet. Mystique promises to see the children to safety and to contact them all later—especially Sue. “But, until then, stay hidden. You’re on their watch list now. You’ll be lucky to survive.”
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

The attack commences.

They're supposed to be better than this. They're supposed to be fierce and deadly. Sharpshooters and assassins. High-tech weapons that obliterate on sight. But, they're overwhelmed, undone by a thousand single-man ships zooming light speed through the portal. They can't lock onto them, they can't shoot, they can do nothing but stare as the ships fly overhead, their communications filled with strange alien language that is too sharp, too guttural for the decoders to understand.

Tall and gray and bulky, with large eyes like fish and small pinched mouths that barely move when they speak. They are something otherworldly, unlike the alien presence here on Earth. They don't fire back, not against the Earthlings, they simply leave the Baxter Building in one long row of ships. They feel no threat towards these weapons, these soldiers, Fury's marvelous planning, and once again, he finds himself inwardly lamenting the portal and what it's wrought. “Find them,” is all he says, and the soldiers are at once on their feet and running for the door.

He, of course, knows where they are going. Call it an instinct honed from years of fighting, but he knows that they are heading for the mansion. Like him, their prey is Scott Summers, though he thinks for entirely different reasons.

Quickly, he calls off the tracking squad on Magneto, save for the blessed few that are needed to fly the small ship on Magneto's tail. He needs to know where the old man is stationed so he can better deal with the threat he poses. He calls them to the mansion, back up, post haste, and then calls Hill to warn her what's coming her way.

She doesn't argue, doesn't whine. She's a good woman like that. She takes the information and readies her troops, making her own flurry of calls to squad and Avengers. “I don't care what happens to the others,” she says, “but, Summers is ours. They will not have him.”

By chance – still dazed from her fight with Thor – Storm hears the call through enemy com. Wrought with worry, she quickly abandons her station on the lawn, and enters the mansion. It's the children that she's after – stuck in the second and third floor basements, hovering in corners and crying for the sounds of battle outside their door. She needs to save them because no one else will.

What she doesn't know is that Pixie is already on the move. She's transporting the kids away from the second floor basement, down to the fourth where Scott lies unconscious in the hangar. Logan will protect them far better than she can, that much she's sure of. One by one, starting with little Pocket, she blips down the floors and into emergency lab to the side. She grimaces at the chewed up Cyclops, and tells Logan that they're being invaded.

He follows her up the floors to help her lead the kids to the safety of the lab. Steel doors and fireproof, the lab was created for emergency medical situations, and every ounce of safety protocol was used in its construction. The whole mansion could blow sky high and that lab would still be stable. “What about Danvers?” he asks, but Pixie shrugs. She reveals that they were spotted by Thor and Captain Marvel, but they did nothing to intervene.
Pixie is not a fighter. She doesn't like battle; she doesn't like blood. But, she's strong in the face of it, especially when her friends are in danger. It's Arlo that she takes next, the poor, whimpering thing. The noises that he hears above – the gunshots and crashes, the pounds upon the ceiling – they remind him all too much of his drunken father, and in flashbacks of his childhood trauma, he quakes at the sound. She tells the others that she'll return for them, that she'll keep them safe, that Logan is coming and he'll watch over them as well, and then she disappears into Limbo, that horrific place that haunts her dreams.

Though heavy with adamantium, Logan is fast and silent. He makes not a noise as he slips just inside the door and ushers the children behind them. Pixie continues to teleport them to safety while Logan suddenly makes a stand against Carol Danvers fresh from the Danger Room.

She's bloodied, bruised, her hand gnarled with a nasty break. She's by far stronger than him, but she doesn't have cruelty when it comes to battle. They square off against each other, with Captain Marvel demanding that Scott Summers be released to her for trial, and Logan declares that a trial isn't what they want. “They're going to fucking kill him, Carol. I can't let that happen.”

They'd been lovers once, Danvers and Wolverine. Just briefly. An infatuation, she had called it, with a bad boy to match her state of unrest and need for excitement. He fulfilled that temporary need in her, the one that wanted to live without the boundaries that she had placed upon herself, and Wolverine. Well, he was always up for a tumble.

More importantly, they had been friends, allies, and to see him now, the disgust snarled on his face, made her heart sink. “Lady, you best leave before I gut you.” The snkt of adamantium, and he behind him the children cried. It was too much for them to take. “And these kids been through enough. They don't need to see disemboweled.”

“Logan --” her quiet voice was punctuated sharply at the end as she barely missed the swing of calls. She hovers near the ceiling, out of the shorter man's reach. Proud of herself for her cunning, she stays there, watches him frustrate himself as he tries again to claw through her. “They don't think he can be killed,” she says. “They just want to help him get under control.”

“Then leave him alone. I'll watch out for him.”

“Logan, you can't protect him. Not from the world. Not like we can.”

“I've seen what your protection does to people. So have they.” She glances to the children, their large, round eyes filled with tears. “Pretty villainous, aren't they?”

“Logan, that's not --” Her voice trails off in sudden doubt. It's so easy to believe in this when surrounded by Hill and Fury and the others, but staring into the eyes of those affected, those hunted, she no longer feels the steadfastness of this mission. “They want to keep the world safe.”

“By killing Scott. Since when has that been a choice that you get to make?’’

“Seems like a choice you get to make all the time.”

He turns red with repressed rage, growls at the woman above him. He loathes himself for being a killer, for that being all that people see. She knows this, which only makes the cut deeper. She thinks to go on at first, remind him of his cruelty, his mercilessness, but seeing the addled look on his face, she decides not to chance it. He really would kill her right now, and if she pressed him further, she wouldn't be able to stop him.

Berserker rage heated through well-worn flesh and across adamantium bones. The children, they
could smell it, and for it they only howled louder, begging when Pixie appeared to take them next. Arms outstretched, she grabbed Sarah Goodwind and Indira, realizing that things were getting dangerous. “Don’t come back,” Logan warns her and hits the wall with all his might. Metal crushes upon impact, and he digs his claws deep into the cracks, forcing himself to ceiling, and smiling at his wit. “I'm giving you one last chance, darlin’,” he says, watching as Phinneus Washington pushes the kids to the far corner of the room, far away from the battle.

He's a speedster, Phin is. Fast on his feet. And he was nearly caught by the Red Hunt because of it. He was on the basketball court, sick as a dog, when his powers first manifested, and he went so fast that he barreled through the walls of the gymnasium and out the other side. Broken and battered, he was arrested on sight, checked for performance enhancing drugs. The Red Hunt was only minutes away when Cable stormed the place and rescued him. His parents have no idea that he's still alive.

He looks to Opal, who for the life of her, cannot look away from the battle at hand. She's always considered herself tough, but she's nowhere near this. However, she wants to be. “Cricket,” Phin calls, gesturing for her to move. He doesn't want to touch her. Opal Johnson does not like to be touched.

Danvers lunges herself into the frozen girl, knocking her to the left so that Phin can pull her into the corner. And just in time, too, considering the blood-bound spell that Wolverine is under. He'd sooner behead the girl in his massive adrenaline rush than let her go free. “You owe me one, Logan,” she says.

Pixie reappears just as a claw swipes right. She cries out and avoids it with a quick flutter of wings, and takes Opal down below to the medlab. The strain of her ports is getting to her, and Alex begs her to slow down, but she refuses. The fight upstairs is a bloodless one, and she fears for the children’s safety. “I'll get them,” he assures her, and takes off at speed through the door. Half-sick from her constant ports, she doesn't think about the noise from above, or the shaking of the walls. But Indira does.

She's quick to run the children through an earthquake drill, ordering them to the sides of the room before trying to drag Cyclops off the bed for his own protection. He hits the floor with a thud, and stirs just slightly from the spell. Indira drops her hands to the floor, her heart beating a mile a minute. “I-I'm sorry,” she stutters, and backs away from him on hands and knees.

Instantly, the energy forms around him. In part from pain, in part from the cacophony above. He grabs his chest – or rather, what's of it – and listens closely to the battle above. His visor turns slowly around the room, grabbing the attention of each of the children, then finally to Pixie. The words sound harsh in his arid throat, his tongue thick from days without water. “Where am I?”
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

The fight continues.

Chapter Notes

I think I set myself up for a bit of failure when I tried to update daily - that's not necessarily the best for the brewing of creative juices. So, I apologize for the bad writing in so many of these chapters. I'm hoping that you're still with me, as I think the slower schedule is better for quality output.

She hears the ships before she sees them, on the wind like a chainsaw slicing through air. Pale blue eyes look up to the clouds to see their specks, thousands of them. In that instant, she calls for Rachel in a psionic plea – an instinct and a habit. Reach the telepaths and warn the others of danger are her only thoughts, that and running. Through the mansion halls she glides, heading down towards basement doors.

The first level is flooded by the Red Hunt and their anti-mutant weaponry. The collars hang from their belts, small things to be expanded and placed around the mutants' necks. Their sight seethes against her insides. Her nostrils flare, her eyes go white like a winter sky. The electric confounds them, the sudden jolts that sizzle up their spines and lurches them forward than down to knees. The human body can only take 20 amps of voltage before passing out from lack of breath, a meager offering from the goddess of weather. She calls it down from the heavens and lights them to unconsciousness.

She can smell their cooked flesh, the burns that they will now suffer for having the audacity to invade her home, to come at her with guns and collars, and things that will put end to her freedom. They won't die from their shock, but they will certainly remember it for the rest of their days.

It's in the hallway that she sees Kitty, collared and shot, a bullet hole in her shoulder. She's in shock, shivering and muttering from the pain. Why she didn't phase, Ororo doesn't know, but somehow she was caught off guard. One arm around her back, the other under her legs, she picks the young woman up and carries her through the hall, avoiding the Red Hunt where she can, and into one of Henry's labs.

It's dark in here, and cold and sterile. The shelves are lined with tiny jars of genetic material – blood samples and flakes of skin, swabs and other matters. The place has been raided, its computers removed, its microscopes and Bunson burners. It was rare for anyone to come in here during their days at the mansion, and she understands why. Even broken, it's a clinical place, one of pure science, but also one that reminds a great many of the mansion's inhabitants of a time when they nearly went extinct.

"You've been down here for days, Henry." After Decimation, the mutants were gathered at the mansion, put under 'guard' by Sentinels that were supposed to protect them. But all knew it was to
protect the world from a violent outburst should the mutants wish to fight back. Cyclops had said it was temporary, until he could put another plan in place, something that would see their freedom from this forsaken place.

Beast barely nodded at her words. Looking through a microscope, he adjusted the lenses and squinted large yellow eyes. She tells him that he needs a break, that perhaps he actually needs to go outside to get some fresh air, maybe walk with her to the coffee shop for a latte or take a jog in the park. “This will all resolve itself in time. Things like this always do.”

“You don’t know Wanda and her magic like I do, Ororo. What we're facing --”

“Is cataclysmic. Scott's said the same thing, but even he knows when its time to take a break.”

That he was more worried than Summers bothered him. No one gnatted over possibilities like Cyclops, certainly not him, no matter how devastating he thought things were. “He's with Emma, isn't he?”

“Probably. But, he's not in his office or the War Room.”

“He's at Jean's grave, then.”

It was a startling conclusion, and one that felt right. Of course, Scott wouldn't take a break, which meant that he couldn't either. He was one of the founding members of the X-men, and one of their prime principles was protecting mutants from harm. He had to work just as hard, if not harder. “He's counting on me, Storm. They all are.”

She peered around the room, at all of the strange little bottles lined up on glass shelves. She went to touch one, to lift it up and inspect it, but he stopped her. “Those are organized to my liking. Please don't disturb them.”

“Do you have these for all of us?” She knew the answer to that, even before his harumphed yes. It was known by all of them that he had access to their genetic samples. For science's sake, or so he told them. There were days when she imagined him like his dark counterpart, a mad scientist bent on dominating the world. Days like today, when his logical mind couldn't see the need for rest. She wondered what he found in them. Perhaps the keys to the secondary mutations, or perhaps the history of the world. Either way, he took no joy in his results. Anymore, they seemed more a burden than a fascination – a cold, clinical thing, much like the room, much like him.

“Perhaps a light lunch then?”

“Storm, I really can't --”

“There's a large difference between can't and won't, Henry.” It was always easy to make him feel guilty, to make him feel obliged. With a huff, he finally turns amber eyes upon her and sighs. She smiles. “If you stay in this hole too long, I fear it will eat you alive.”

“I think it already has.”

Wounds dressed, and Kitty stashed safely under the table, out of sight, but not out of mind, Storm returns to the hallways, stalking her prey like a cat – silent and steady, her fingers twitching with the sudden need for combat. She reviles this part of herself, but she also takes glee in it. It's a rush of freedom, of adrenaline, of some primal urge so deep inside of her. The ability to control, to be in control, to defeat and mar. She thinks this is why she fell in love with Wolverine. He fed this itch inside of her soul, and she never had to lift a finger.
It's on the stairwell to the second floor that she see Thor, the god of thunder, and a man she faked defeat to not ten minutes ago. Outstretched fingers twist the ions in the air, sparking up static and thick, heavy fog. The weather is her domain, and she intends to prove it.

Thor feels the shiver of electricity even before she casts it through the air. His hammer up, he guards himself against the sudden flux of voltage, calling upon his own birthright as a shield against hers. His eyes mad with ire, he perks his lip in disgust. “How darest thou play tricks upon me,” he seethes and readies his hammer for battle.

The noise then is striking. The breaking of eves and rafters, of floorboards and metal plating. Both of them – the deities – look up to the ceiling and hear the crash that pelts upon the floor. “They are breaking your home,” he tells her and smiles. She has a choice now, continue on her futile quest to prove herself above him, or save the mansion before it's once again obliterated. “How can you protect those children if you have no roof to keep them from your rain?”

“Storm,” her name comes from around the corner. “I'll handle this.” Angel stands at the bottom of the stairwell, calm, confident. His metallic wings – partially spread – scrape the metal walls with a screech that makes Thor cringe. “He thinks himself a god among men. I will show him what that truly means.”

Thor watches as Storm departs, going back up the stairs to head off the alien incursion. He turns his attention back to Warren. “You're out of your league, winged one. You cannot fly here.”

“Whoever said that I need to fly?” He pummels the air with paralytic darts. They strike so fast against the gods ankles and legs, and in an instant he falls to his knees. “You will leave my friend alone. You will not take him.”

There is no fear in Thor's rough hewn features. No regret, no worry. Instead, there is a glimmer of smile and a sudden ferocity. The hammer is thrown low, at Angel's waist – low enough that he can't simply dodge, but high enough that he can't jump over it either. Warren quickly realizes his folly, and with a deft move, tries to sidestep the flung Asgardian steel, but he isn't fast enough. It pounds into his stomach, cracking against hips and ribs and bashes him into the wall behind.

But, Angel knows pain. His very life is pain, and has been since Apocalypse's touch. The pain of never knowing satiation, of always drowning in the shadows that the monster had put into his mind. His hollow bones are too easy to shatter, but the thunder god underestimates him. He calls the hammer back, lets the winged mutant fall to the floor in a heap. His laughter is high-throated and chortled out into the wreckage in the air. “Never think yourself above me, mutant. You may be superior to these mortals, but I am something far better.”

The swift of dagger blade comes from behind, plunges down against the god's spine, and then the smell of sulfur and brimstone, a stench that makes him cough and spew his guts due to its suddenness and proximity. Kurt Wagner pulls Angel from the floor, checks that he's all right before lifting up his blade again and challenging the thunderous man to a dual. “If I win, you leave this place and never return.”

“And if I win?”

“You won't.” It's rare for Nightcrawler to be so unabashedly confident. But, he's been trained for this. They all have.

“You don't realize how disorienting your ports are, Kurt.” Cyclops stood at the center of the Danger Room, the scenario failed, and the lot of them beaten to a pulp. “Hit from behind, then the front--”
“Hitting from behind is not very chivalrous--”

“In war, chivalry means little.”

The strategy was an easy one, to say the least, and something Cyclops employed time and again after Wanda's spell. It was simply a matter of keeping the field open enough that Kurt could maneuver. “You'll never take the hammer,” he explained. “So ignore it. It's too slow to catch you.”

“Why are we training to take down the Avengers?” Storm asked, unhappy with this regime.

“Why do we train to take down ourselves?” Scott snapped back. He was tired of the constant bickering between himself and Ororo. “Because we never know what shape our enemy will take, and friend or foe, we must be prepared to fight.”

He'd meant it for himself as well. Each of them had gotten one on one training on disabling Cyclops and his magnificent mind, and each of them had been cowed by the strength of his optic blasts. He refused to use full power; refused to unleash it all upon them, but he used more than stunning blast he usually portrayed, and with it, came his gift for strategy. They learned over time, that he could take them all out if he wished – even without employing tricks and little treats. He knew them too well, and because of that, thought it necessary that they learn how to defeat him, too. “It's simply a matter of being prepared,” he continued. “We don't want to get caught in a situation where this knowledge is needed.”

It's not the first time that the X-men have been thankful for his thoroughness, but today, Kurt is extra grateful. There is no ready, set, go; no blaring trumpets, or fanfare to speak of. There is simply the smoky purple cloud and the swift of air as Nightcrawler disappears and reappears to the thunder god's right. A kick to the face and the Asgardian is knocked off balance, keeling over to the left, his hand gripping tightly to the banister. There is silence then, an eerie silence punctuated by nothing but the scrape of metal wings against the walls. Thor's blue eyes widen as he sees the raising of Angel's wings, their paralytic razors glinting in the overhead florescent light.

Another bamf and a kick from behind, just where the wound was just delivered. It's followed by a knife to the neck, just edged into the soft of chin. Between the two of them – Nightcrawler and Angel – the Asgardian is trapped. He slowly drops his hammer to the ground and raises his hands in forfeit. “Scott Summers is a threat to all of us, including you,” he tells them. “We're just trying to tame that threat.”

“You've said that before,” Angel rasps, the internal bleeding staining his teeth bright red, “But you weren't needed then, either.”

“I shall keep my promise to you and leave this place,” he tells them. “Upon the honor of my father, I shall not return to this place, but be aware, if he steps out of line and threatens the world once more, I will fight in earnest and defeat you.”

He leaves then, hammer in hand. Swinging it at high speed, he barrels up through ceiling, only to be brought crashing back down, his body covered in a thin, silken web that has paralyzed him. Both Nightcrawler and Angel look up then to see six alien guns pointing down at them.
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

The fight continues.

His world is red. It has been for years. Though he has vague memories of blue and green and other kaleidoscopic colors, red is what he remembers the most. Sometimes, he can differentiate his single spectrum of color, decide that something's yellow or brown, but more often than he not, he doesn't bother, simply letting the world float by in a stream of Valentine's and blood, no longer puzzling it through.

He thinks Arlo might be gray. Or some form of light colored fur. Sarah is an amalgam, her colors floating like suspended oil beneath her skin. She's every color, he decides. Emma wears white. Crisp and pink to the eyes behind the visor. And Hank, he knows is blue. He's been told that a dozen times. He remembers when Hank was made of flesh, and his skin shown a deep ruddy brown. But now, he looks purple. Blue, he reminds himself. Hank is blue.

It's Pixie that speaks to him. She's pink, he thinks, or white. He could never tell, and he never bothered to ask. She tells him that they're under attack by the Avengers and someone else. She heard it over their coms. That they've come for him, and they'll do anything to capture him. Hank simply tells him that he's a worthless asshole who should have died years ago.

Hank's words hurt. Pixie's makes him angry.

He can feel it grow inside of him. The anger, the power. He can feel it begin to seep from his pores, from his skin. He has to control it. More than anything, he has to keep control. Proudstar says as much from the corner. “Keep it under control, leader-man.” As do Surge and Hellion. He wonders what color Noriko's hair is.

“Those children will die because of you.” Ororo is stern, cold, her face as full of hatred as he's ever seen.

He counts the children. At first there is four, and then seven, and then forty two. And then they're dead. Burning inside a bus. “I can't save them.”

“You could never save anyone.” She kneels, better to look him in the eye. He tells her that they're already dead, but she insists that they returned from that solemn state. Just like he did. “They'll die again, all because you're too weak to protect them.”

He looks at the small fairy creature and her mentor. He knows Pixie. Knows how timid she is, how afraid. He remembers her, he thinks. The day she stabbed him with her soul knife. The day some bully broke her wings. He remembers wanting to save her. He remembers ripping off her head and eating both her eyes. “Two million, eight hundred seventy eight thousand, two hundred and fifty three,” he mumbles quietly, drawing odd looks from all of those in the surround. “Two million, three hundred and two thousand, nine hundred and seventy eight.” The numbers fall from his mouth in decreasing order. “You were easy to kill,” he tells her rubbing his eyes at the memory of blowing her apart with his eye beams. Her body had exploded, and from the remains, a rainbow formed.
Dark eyes light with fright, and Megan pulls Sarah Goodwind to her rear, trying to protect her from the madman in the corner. “I didn't kill you though,” he says to Indira. “Thank goodness. I've never killed you.”

Indira sees the fright on his face then the relief in his reaction. Though Pixie tries to warn her back, she crawls to him on hands and knees, wrapping her hand with his own. She's seen them do this – Alex and Logan – and she tells him that she's real. A long silence – interrupted only by the crash on the floors overhead. “It's okay. You didn't hurt anyone.”

He strokes long fingers down her cheek, and then looks up at the ceiling. “We have to get you out of here,” he tells her, squeezing her hand for reassurance. “Before I do.”

“Because you will,” Rogue reminds him. “You kill everyone.” Control. He needs control. Hand etched through hair and gritted jaw, he swallows back the fear that tries to overwhelm him. He tries to focus, maintain the thrum of his power behind a steel hard wall. It's so close, at the brim. He has to control it.

“You're not well,” Indira says, noticing that his attention has to turned to the left, the empty wall near the door. “You need to stay here for medical attention.”

He hadn't noticed that he was missing half his body. He wondered why it hurt. He slips his hands across the bloody carriage of his ribs, the parts of his body that are still missing. Then checks his chest to feel the thump of his heart. He has his heart. That means Jean didn't consume it and Logan didn't rip it from his chest. Or maybe they did, and they somehow gave it back to him. He gave Jean's back some time ago, laid it upon her corpse and buried her in the snow. He sang a hymn that day, and then she killed him again. “Yeah,” Indira says slowly, tightening her grip on his hand. “It was worse before, but you've healed a lot.”

But, the pain. The pain is good. Physical pain – not that soul rending pain of that other world, or the emotional pain of every world. It's a wound, a big one. It helps him focus. Lets him look at her and hear her words above the din of those who call him a murderer. It gives him something to control, something to work past and keep the power from raging from beneath his skin. “Is the exit clear?” he asks with a lackluster gesture towards the door. He doesn't think he can walk, not with part of his spine missing.

Indira understands his meaning, a small thrill jolting through her when she realizes that Cyclops actually remembered her power. Just like she said she could, she plucks off one of her fingers, journeys towards the door, and places it just outside. In it's place, another one grows almost instantaneously. It takes her some time to concentrate, to move past the room and out into the hangar. There, she can see the Blackbird and the other air crafts, the long empty halls, the rubble from the fight upstairs. “It's clear,” she speaks.

There's a shimmer of red light about him, makes her keep her distance, but Pocket does not know this fear. The little boy in the bunny suit crawls across the room and snugs himself against Cyclops' undamaged side. “I think he feels protected,” Sarah surmises, as Tatsuya cannot speak for himself. She looks at Pixie who is still horrified by her former teacher, and then joins Indira at Summers' feet.

The booming above them finally shows against the ceiling. A long, black crack appears, and with it the dust of insulation and shards of metal. Indira's eyes grow wide and glassy. She looks to Sarah behind her, then back to Cyclops, her voice shaken. “They're here.”

Only she can see them, the alien monsters who have invaded this world and her new home. They are the breakers of her dreams with their ashen skin and complex weaponry. They speak in tones she does not understand; they look and point and split themselves into small groups.
She describes their movements as best she can – a group of three to the back of the hangar, a group of two standing watch to the right, another to the left, and then the single alien standing in front of the door. There is chatter, then, squalid syllables from mouths that don't move. More like screeching, or creaking, like a dog's maw stuck inside a peanut butter jar. They listen closely, their ear holes pressed against the door, and then take out a tiny rod about the size of Indira's fist. “It's a laser,” she says aloud. “They're going to burn through the door.”

“I told you that they're going to die, Scott,” Xavier says. “You can't stop it.”

“I can.” He doesn't see the looks of the children; doesn't see those wild eyes and sudden speechlessness wrangle across their mouths like fish – open and close, open and close. “I'll save them.”

“How? You can't even move.”

“I'll find a way.”

It's Sarah this time who grabs his hand, calling his attention back to those things that are real. She is shocked that she has done this, but they need him. According to Indira, he's saved the X-men more times than anyone can count. “Stay with us, okay?” she asks.

Scott's flashes pale in a moment of horror. “You're not real,” he tells the wall. “I killed you. I remember.” And with recognition comes the overflow of power. Pocket quickly scrambles over Cyclops' outstretched legs, pushing Indira and Sarah back from Summers' bare feet. Dark eyes as blank as his words, he stares at the flux of red energy that suddenly swarms over the bed. Long fingers grip autumn hair, and chin to chest, Scott tries to bring himself back under control.

The litany of numbers is an unsettling thing as he counts the times that he's killed his friends in the Red Dimension. Millions upon millions of times, divided off into singular battles and team-ups, the flashes of the blood and matter causing him to hiss wildly into the air. He wants it to stop, all of it, everything. He can't do this. He can't control this.

There's nothing to do, save for pray that the red energy does not expand further into the room. They have no choice but to wait for Alex or Logan. Pixie laments her earlier ports, still too sick and too weak to perform them. Had she just taken more time then she could get them all clear. “We have to get Mr. Logan,” she says, standing on shaky feet. She's afraid to take them with her, afraid that she'll get lost in Limbo or take too long, so she leaves them and begs them to stay out of the way.

“Don't worry,” Opal says, flexing the blades upon her arms, “I can fight.”
He can't find Steve. Somewhere, in the midst of battle, he has lost the man he loves, and his mind swarms with thoughts of death and pestilence and other things that make his stomach twist into knots. He can't lose the man, not now. Not when he's so close to having the life he's dreamed of.

Their wedding would be in Spain – the endless bars and tapas, the flamenco and the pianos on the street. They would drink coffee in the mornings, out on the hillside, watching over the orchards and olives, the lazy sheep and the sleepy traffic. Then they'd return to bed, a little mid-morning pick me up that would see Captain America begging for release. Tony would be on top. Yeah, he would wear the pants, at least in the mornings.

They'd spend the days wandering the picturesque streets and alleys, their feet clacking upon the laid stones, searching for a pearl midst the swine. A little cafe, a far off antique shop with incredible treasures. They'd furnish the penthouse with their finds – these rustic things that Steve liked so much. They'd find a place for coffee, for lunch, and then back to the hotel for something more than a nap.

In the evenings, when the air cooled down, and the condensation settled in over their naked skin, they'd rise and hit the bars – Tony's scene. The raucous laughter and constant chatter, the bodies bumping into each other. The music, the liquor, the endless parade of olive oil and delicious food. They'd drink until their heads swam, until the moon shone like two perfect diamonds in the sky, and they'd talk to each other about their dreams, their wants, their fantasies.

He'd finally tell Steve that he'd always fancied himself a father, a good father, unlike his own. That he'd take the kid fishing, or flying, or to the Eiffel Tower so that he could paint the sunset. He'd have no expectations of his son, no pressure, just nudges in whatever direction the child wanted to go. And Steve, Steve could take him to the baseball games, or camping, or self defense. Steve was always the better fighter. Tony had the brains.

He fears the loss. Even as the aliens come at him, their guns blaring nets and lasers and other things to heat through his metal suit, it's the loss of Steve that drives him forward. To the stairs, then down, fighting the whole way. His suit is damaged, has been now for some moments. He can feel the catch in his left arm where the bearings have slipped. It causes issues with the propulsion system – flying and the energy blast. He could fix it, easily fix it, but he doesn't have time, not with Steve missing.

Down the stairs to the third floor, barely glancing at Thor's body, frozen in that thin web-like net. He should do something for him, help him, tear the net away, but Steve is without his shield – his most formidable weapon – and the god of thunder can take care of himself.

The third floor is nearly crushed from floor to ceiling in at least a dozen places. The crashing of the airships, burnt blast radius' from explosions. They're trying to find Summers. Like Fury, he's sure of it. The rest of them are just ants crawling about the place. Nothing too hard for them to deal with; nothing to bat an eyelash over. Not even the Thor, one of the strongest men he knows.

As he bashes in the needled jaw of the next alien he finds, he wonders where the Hulk is, why Fury
hasn't sent him yet. Banner would have a field day here – aliens and mutants, a hint of Wolverine somewhere midst the rubble. There was nothing more that the great green behemoth could ask for. A year's worth of pent up anger, and a whole day of smashing. It would make things go a lot easier for the rest of them. Especially knowing that Summers has not yet been found.

Through the halls, his suit flashing with recognition of mutants and mayhem. He sees Hawkeye in the shadows, pounding away at aliens with his arrows. They're mostly useless, bouncing off the hardened skin. Like stone they are, hardened and impenetrable. And their fingers wrap like talons around Barton's neck, lifting him up into the air, depriving him of oxygen. Stark could stop them, could fly full force into the alien's side, but those precious seconds could mean Steve's death. He couldn't live with himself if he lets Steve die.

Down the stairs to the fourth floor basement, down into the hangar, where he already sees the aliens at work. He can hear voices from inside the room – muffled, but frightened.

Heat instruments, long rods that melt into the metal wall, and he fears that Steve has barricaded himself inside the room, Stark lets loose. He barrels into the aliens, his repulsion ray blasting at their tiny mouths and overly large eyes. They careen back, smashed into walls, their deep-throated sounds seemingly vicious and angry. He can hear them, those small pilot groups that went to scout the hangars. And in an instant, he is swarmed by electrifying nets and the heat of guns against his suit.

Thanks to ratcheted arm, he fumbles a dodge, the heat guns burning against his right eye, blacking out the sights around him, limiting his vision. He ducks to the ground, missing a swipe to his left eye, and deals out a shocking blow to one of the creature's knees, which does little more than anger them even more.

A blow to the head, and he feels the world begin to fade away, and then suddenly, the battle moves elsewhere.

Opal Johnston is not a trained fighter, but she's tough and brash, and she knows the streets. She knows how to walk like she owns the place, how to stand her ground, and how to use the blades upon her hands and knees. To her rear, still cowering in the doorway, Indira Gomez tells her to swing right, and then kick left. Unlike Opal and her limited vision, Sliver can tell her when to duck, when to roll, when to push up and take the alien by the neck and pull him to the ground. She cuts them. Unlike Tony with his repulsor ray, the exoskeleton wrapped around her wrists and ankles are harder than their skin, and though it takes great effort – evidenced by the beads of sweat trailing down the edge of her thick, black hair – she can defeat them if she lasts long enough. She knows this, and with the thought in the back of her head, she grits her teeth and swings again, slicing one of the creatures across its chest.

It bleeds blue, and it screams in its insanity, hauling back on haunches and holding the open wound. She swings again, tearing it across the hole where an ear should be, piercing it's giant left eye. The creatures twitter their sudden fear, and redouble their efforts against the seventeen year old, hoping to take her down for good.

At her side is Arlo Taylor – poor, timid Arlo in the shape of a bulldog. The aliens avoid him, mostly for his size. He's never fought a day in his life, never bit or gnashed, clawed or pawed. But he can take pain like no other. He doesn't flinch with the alien rod pierces his side, burning a long thin line from navel to sternum. He takes it in stride, listening to Sliver's instructions to ignite a right hook into his jaw.

Sarah Goodwind also does her part, flying across the spectrum of aliens, taking away their guns, kicking loose their grip.
And in the background, in the medlab, he can see the turmoiled visage of Cyclops struggling to contain the power that is quickly enveloping him, and little Pocket just outside the room. “Where's Logan?” Tony yells, hoping that one of these children will answer him, but they do not. They're here for the fight, and their whole concentration is upon Indira's words.

Flicker grabs one of the heat guns and drops it in Tony's hands, her own decision, and one that she dearly pays for when she's snatched from the air by one three clawed hand and tied up in a net. She whimpers as she struggles, cries as the pain circulates through her body. She's not made for this, for battle, for hurt. Her whole life she's feared it, and now there's no avoiding it.

Cricket doesn't fare much better. For all of her ferocity, for all of her attention to Sliver's instructions, she can't avoid being overwhelmed by the aliens. They shoot her down first, gather her up in a net, and then follow suit with Stark and the other children. And, finally, they have what they are looking for.

The red energy floats around him like a thread-bare cowl. His breath is stuttered and soft, like feathers floating upon the red. He doesn't move at their approach, doesn't dare to move. He needs to control it, to control the power that roils up inside of him, keep it distant, keep it under.

In the background he can hear Ironman call his name, tell him to move, tell him to fight back. But Stark doesn't understand, if he fights those who have come for him, then there will be no one to fight himself, to keep him from killing them all. To keep him from destroying the world. “Kill me,” he rasps as the aliens grab his arms and lift his spineless body from the ground. “Please.”
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

Fury inspects the damage.

They had to put him under. They didn't have a choice. He'd gone berserk, attacked Steve Rogers, bashed his head into the wall, threatened him with claws to his eyes. It took nine of them to separate the two, to pull him off of the unconscious Captain America, to pull him away and tranq him into oblivion, at least for a few hours.

He healed slower now. They all noticed it. They noticed it in themselves, too – that without Cyke's powers bolstering their own, they were no longer capable of past feats. Storm, perhaps, felt the lack most of all. Her winds and weather no longer a song to the Earth, but rather a distant melody that played upon the Earth's own winds. She wonders how far she has fallen.

She looks at Wolverine, draws her dark hand through his and whispers a gentle prayer that he wakes without his previous turmoil. The violence they witnessed – from SHIELD, from the Avengers, from the aliens - was quite enough to sate that fury inside of her. She can't handle anymore, not without giving over to that primal part of herself completely.

He'd held her tight, her shaking body, her trembling jaw. She could feel it begin to take over, the mention of Summers' name still in the back of her mind. Her logic was lost behind that overwhelming need to banish him from the world, to turn him to ash and see him dead. Pale blue eyes looked to Logan. He was quiet, his own feral animosity barely hidden behind gritted jaw and clenched fists. “You let me deal with Cyke,” he told her. “You have enough on your plate.”

In those moments – unlike with Forge or T'Challa – she felt protected, safe, as if she was a treasure to be kept and shined. She pushed herself further into his embrace, snuggled white hair under the soft of his chin. She couldn't recall ever feeling so warm, not even in the scope of the skies and their boundless freedom. “I love you,” she said quietly, knowing full well that he wouldn't answer her.

His silence no longer broke her heart. She had become accustomed to his show not tells. His love was in the way he held her, the way he looked at her, the way he woke her up from dream to kiss along her lovely neck, enjoying the way she cooed at his touch. Even more than the whip of wind and the scurry of rain, he made her feel wild and undone.

She looks at him now with sadness in her eyes. To lose him like this – to that man – it boggled her, made her angry. She was better than Scott, or so she'd always told herself. She had heart where he had distance; force where he had control. And even now, with this power now threatening the world, she could call herself cool to his craze. She wonders how it happened, when his thoughts turned from hatred to love, when Summers had become so important.

“No one made him angrier than Scott Summers,” Kurt says, his amber eyes so observant, so quick to understand. He's an empathetic one, and though it breaks his own heart, he understands how much Logan meant to her. “It was only a matter of time before he realized how much he loved him, too.”

The words cut her deep, and worse, she can see his own ache glistening in golden eyes. It was a brief fling that they had had. A night of dancing of love-making, followed by breakfast the next
morning, and every morning for the next week. But, Logan had entranced her, and fulfilled her, and it was with a heavy heart that she made her choice.

The infirmary is full, most bodies in critical condition. Warren, Hawkeye, Thor, Piotr, Kitty, Pixie. “Fury is on his way.”

“Is he here to assess the damage that he's caused, or to pick up his men?”

“Both, I think. Alex said he'll handle it.”

“I don't want Alex handling--”

“Do you really think you can handle Fury right now?”

And, she doesn't. She is exhausted, both physically and emotionally. She wants nothing more than to crawl into Logan's arms and weep the night away. “We need to save the children.”

“And Scott.”

The mention of his name turns her cheeks a deep shade of angry red. Slowly, as calmly as she can, she reluctantly answers, “And Scott.”

He avoids the subject then, lending himself to Dr. Reyes and her too many patients. Bandages and alcohol swabs, drawing blood, and replacing it. Angel wakes in the corner, his pale blue skin flushed with pain and dabbed with sweat. He can heal himself, eventually. At least they think he still can.

No one knows what Scott's powers were responsible for, how far the mutants were pushed to the extremes of their abilities. They would have to retrain themselves, get used to the lack, become accustomed to the way they were meant to be.

Reyes keeps Kurt busy for long hours in the med lab, sending him often out into the hall to deal with the patients out there. It takes Fury that long to arrive, and that long to survey the damage he has wrought. “We've treated your soldiers,” Alex says, noting the amount of supplies they've had to go through in order to save the lives that they could. “I expect that you'll remember this.”

“I'll also remembered that you betrayed us,” he snips. Alex sees the collar on his belt, knows exactly what it's for. He knows that he's still labeled a terrorist, that there's a call for his arrest under the laws of the Red Hunt, especially now after saving his brother from the depths of the Red Dimension. The guns are fast, pointed in every direction but at him, their way of forcing the deal. They will shoot the wounded, if necessary. Kill them.

“You try to take me in, and you'll have a riot on your hands,” he assures the man beside him. He keeps his voice quiet, low, on the side. “I'll destroy you and everything you've ever hoped to achieve.”

The soft words sit in striking contrast to the severely creased blonde brow and snarl of disgust.

Though his heart pounds a marathon inside of his chest, Fury doesn't bat an eyelash at the threat. He's too trained for that, too cold. The tips of his fingers brush across the cool metal of the collar, his own little threat to stack on top of Havok's. “When I decide to bring you in, no one will even know what happened to you, son.”

“I'm not your son.”

“You're not anything to me except an obstacle in keeping the world safe.”
He picks up one of the heating rods – arm length and sharp at the end, its power source is a small red crystal tucked inside the thick metal shell. Neither man is science minded, but Forge is, and he's already collecting the technology at hand. “What do you make of it?” Fury asks.

“I don't report to you,” Forge replies, his eyes never turning away from the guns and lasers and ships that he's now gotten his hands on.

“No, but you did once, and you owe me the respect --”

“You imprisoned my kind, Nick.” His words calm, betraying not an ounce of the fervor that turns his neck red with rage. “You hunted the rest of us down like dogs. No, I don't owe you respect. I owe you nothing.”

Alex smirks and shrugs, more than happy with Forge's answer. Fury attempts to claim the wreckage for himself, for SHIELD, and the purposes beset them, but Alex is quick to remind him that he's trespassing on private property. “As much as you might want this tech, Commander, it belongs to the X-men. Though, I think we can reach a deal.”

“What kind of deal?”

“The kind that lets my team through the portal so we can save our people.”

“Son, you have no idea what's --”

“I'm not your son.”

He isn't like his brother – all trap jaw and steel edge. No, Alex is more flagrant with his emotions, tiny pops of anger, bursts of green and gray within the blue of his eyes. The vein on his neck stands out; his mouth a deadpan line of sheer held-back rage that threatens to overload if Fury isn't careful.

Most consider Nick Fury a smart man, observant, wise. Some think him a mind-reader with the way he can dig up a person's secrets in as few a words as don't, hurt, me, and please. And he knows right now that he's in deep shit. A house full of angry mutants, and half his soldiers are down for the count, not that guns would do them any good anyway. Not against supers; not against mutants.

“What kind of deal are you offering, so-Summers?”

“We split the tech evenly, SHIELD and the X-men. We run our separate tests, and the kicker is that you let us through that portal of yours.”

“You seem fairly certain that I'm not going to set a trap.”

“You won't. Because once again, I will destroy you and everything you've ever hoped to achieve.” He speaks in earnest, his brow low, and mouth shaped into one long frown. The pulse of his power glows, tentative circles on arms and chest. It's his show of force, that at any second, he can follow up on his threat. “Don't mistake me for my brother,” he says after a long silence. “My threats aren't hollow.”

Cyclops had made a mockery of them all. That debacle in Australia. And, Fury – holed up in some tree-shorn shack in the middle of the Ecuadorian jungle – couldn't help but laugh at their misery. Summers was making fools of all of them – both Hill and the Avengers, all those people who set him up, threatened his life, the lives of those he cared for. They'd installed Maria as the figure head, but he knew who was really pulling the strings. And right now, those puppeteers were in hot water considering how many missions to capture the terrorist mutant had been botched.
He'd always warned them that Summers was a threat, but they didn't listen. He wasn't the man who raised him; he was no Xavier. His cool head lasted only so long as there were facts and logic to keep him fueled. But for the most part, and the reason Fury had always resented him, was that his secrets remained secrets. He knew the basics – that Summers grew up in an orphanage run by Nathaniel Essex, then fell in with Jack Winters before being saved by Xavier. But there were no details otherwise, nothing for him to use, nothing for him to hold against that level head of his. And he'd warned them. For years he'd warned them that they would one day have to deal with the man on a more permanent level, but no one listened. They saw him as harmless, under the thumb of Xavier. But, then he killed Xavier and was left to fly free of his own accord.

But Alex... He'd never considered the man a threat. He was the lesser of the Summers brothers. Not nearly as smart, as calculated, and he realizes now that it is a great misstep on his part. Alex's strength isn't in his stoicism, but in the fact that he isn't stoic at all. “How do I know you won't betray me this time?”

“You don't.”

In truth, he has little choice in the matter. “The portal's still active. We can't shut it down,” he reveals.

“I'll get Forge to take a look at it,” he says quietly. Like Fury, he has little choice but to make a deal. He's quite sure that Storm will rage over it, but it's the only way he's going to save his brother and the kids. “In the meantime, I want your men to stand down. Let the X-men take it from here.”
Cyclops' Mind

Chapter Summary

Memories of the Phoenix.

“Are you a dragon?”

He was a small little creature, half real, half dream. A million life times had she lived, and she had never once seen this look of wonder. It amused her, made her curious. “I'm am Phoenix, fire and life incarnate. I can eat you whole.”

He smiled at her, that little boy. He was an Earthling, a place she'd been to once in the beginning, at it's birth, but had never again gone back. And he was bleeding. “What's happening to you?” she asked, her flaming wing tipped towards the blood down his arm.

He shrugged at her, refusing to say, mumbling something about his brother, and how he had to save him. “You're a real Phoenix then? Like in my stories?”

“I am the only Phoenix.”

“That's really cool. Do you want to play a game?”

“A game?”

He nodded and held his hand out flat. “Paper.”

“Paper?”

Another smile and another nod. He closed his hand into a fist. “Rock.” Then held two fingers out. “Scissors.”

“Scissors? What is a scissors?”

Eyes bright, he looked upwards into the belt of stars, his eyes twinkling with their light. “Mmmmm... You cut things with them. Like a knife.” And he made the motion of cutting something with scissors.

“A curious thing, to be sure.”

“If you ever come to Earth, I'll show you a pair.” He repeated the motions of the game, making sure that she understood, and explained the rules. “Paper beats rock. Rock beats scissors. Scissors beats paper.”

On the count of three, Scott threw paper and she threw rock. “Good game,” he cheered. “You'll win next time for sure.”

“Maybe I do not like to play games,” she sighed, betraying cosmic boredom.

“What do you like to do then?”

“Eat little boys.”
He laughed, then cringed as the cut upon his arm become longer, wider. She stared at the sudden wound, at the matter being removed – muscles and bundles of nerves, the skin flayed open, removed bit by bit. “Someone's hurting you,” she spoke.

“It's okay,” he replied. “They're going to let me see my brother, I think. This time for sure.” A pause and then a question. “Do you like to fly?”

She batted her wings in the still black air. “Of course,” she said.

“Would you like to fly to Mars?”

“Mars?” Like Earth, it had been millennia since she had been there. It was a dust ball of planet, lacking life, lacking vibrancy.

“My dad was going to go there one day. He was going to be an astronaut.”

“Was?”

A slight pause, and the beautiful smile fell away. A moment to collect himself, “I think he's dead.”

“Oh.” She studied him for several moments, the muscles that were being lifted from his arm, the slash of nerves, and then the quiet face, her own fiery reflection in light brown eyes. “I can take you to Mars,” she said, “so long as you can hang on.”

The smile lit his face like red hot embers. She enjoyed this look upon him, much better than the quiet one. He climbed upon her neck, his one good hand desperately hanging onto fiery feathers, and she spread her wings out full, so that he could ooh and ahh and marvel at her grace. She could be there with but a thought, go so fast that the universe would be a blur about him, but she could tell already that he would rather see this universe for what it is. The stars and planets, the comets and black holes. She took her time – or at least for her what taking her time meant – letting him gape at the sights around him.

“Phoenix look!” he shortlented at the slow birth of a new star, the interstellar gasses mingling and hardening. She stopped then, floated just outside the gaseous center and lifted her wing. “I am birth and rebirth, the beginning and the end,” she explained, lifting her wing, and at her touch, the baby star winked into existence. He is exulted at the sight, his glee such a palpable thing. “You're amazing, Phoenix,” but then suddenly he falls silent.

Slumped against her head, his breath coming out in short shocks of air. She turned just enough so that she could watch as the pain spread across his face, wrinkling at brow. She watches as his arm is disconnected from the elbow down, how the thing begins to shimmer and disappear. “Don't cry,” she warned him softly. “They won't let you see your brother.”

He tried to be strong against it, even as the bone was pulled from flesh, he tried to be brave and courageous and all things he believed that he should be now that his parents were dead. His tiny hand gripped against her feathers, and she could see him flicker in the light of the new star. His form, so tenuous and tired. “Perhaps I will take you to Mars another time. I think you need rest.”

Large brown eyes looked at her with hope. “We can play again?” he said, his voice a mirror of exhaustion.

“Yes,” she said. “If you call my name, I'll come for you.”

His smile was timid, afraid of what he was returning to, but he went anyway. Disappeared from her shoulders and returned to his solid form somewhere on Earth, and for the first time in her existence,
Phoenix understood loneliness.

The time she waited for the young boy to return felt like lifetimes to her. She stayed there, near the hatchling star, somewhere out in the vastness of space. She listened to the emptiness, the sounds of it. The births and deaths, the whorls of cosmic winds and the subtle movements of the planets. But nothing – not anything – compared to the sound of the child's laughter.

When he finally appeared again, his the remains of his arm were wrapped and there was cut down his face, exposing the bones from forehead to jaw. “Can we play today?” he asked quietly, his face drawn into the shape of pain. “But, if I don't do this --”

“Then you won't see your brother.” Today, they were taking his eye. For what purpose, he didn't know. But, soon, he would be allowed to see Alex, and that's all that mattered. “Alex? That is what you call your brother?” He nodded. “What should I call you?”

“My name's Scott,” he said, his tiny hand gripping against her giant talon. “Scott Summers. Pleased to meet you.”

“Do you still want to go to Mars, Scott?”

“More than anything.”

Phoenix never knew that she was capable of smiling.

There were days that he was in too much pain for their adventures, and he would lay atop her wings, talking about his dreams. He was a wistful little boy, ever focused, ever hoping. He never talked of the pain, never mentioned the missing eye or the missing arm. He didn't complain when they took his lungs, or his spine, he merely hoped that this would be the last time, and that he would finally be reunited with his brother.

“I love you, Phoenix,” he came to say on one of those days when he was in too much pain to enjoy the scope of the beautiful universe. Snuggled into her flaming feathers as they drilled through his skull to remove his ear, his words were quiet, but meaningful.

“Love?” she asked. “What is love?”

He thought for long moments, his child mind not knowing how to explain it. He pressed his hand against his chest, over his heart, and jolted in the pain of his movement. He smiled, though, weakly, warmly. “It's what you feel in your heart,” he said, “when you care about someone.”

“I want to feel love,” she replied, stroking her beak across his forehead as they set the saw down upon his skull.

“Maybe you do,” he said, his body too exhausted and already flickering from his lack of concentration. The pain was too much for the child, and already, she could see the glimmer of tears along his dark eyelashes.

“Don't cry, Scott,” she reminded him. “They won't let you see your brother if you cry.”

He's conscious, barely hanging onto the threads he's so exhausted. He strains himself to keep control, to keep his eyes shut, to keep the world safe from his threat.

She pities him. Even in her hatred of him – the man that he's become, so lost, so cold – she pities him. She offers once again to take it all away. To relieve him of the burden his powers. She would keep him warm, safe. No one would ever hurt him again. She would kill them if they even thought it.
“We could be beautiful together, Scott.”

But, he doesn't answer her, his every thought so bent on control that he blocks out all else – the whispers and nightmares, the fragments of memories, the pain. “We were beautiful together.”

It saddens her that he thinks her an enemy now, that he no longer loves her. She would give anything for the return of the warmth, a reprieve from her loneliness. She would give anything for him to remember her once again.

Somewhere on an alien ship, his breath is like cool puffs of wind against the frigid cosmic air. He's close, so close to losing himself to the dearth of power that boils underneath his skin. So close to killing them. The pain is immense, but he doesn't cry, doesn't call out. He knows better.

Screaming will only make it worse, hasten his loss of control.

“Scott?”

He can hear her in his head, and he can feel the pain of burns on his chest and torso.

“I'll stop them from hurting you.”

But, it's not the pain he worries about, it's the shift in his energy, the way it swirls around him. He worries for whoever is doing this to him. He worries for his captors.

They're embedding something in his skin, in the wound left by his mysterious disappearance. They're burning him, melting the skin around something cold, perhaps it's metal. And in his soundless pain, all Phoenix can think about is that small child shimmering in her arms. “Please, Scott,” she responds to his silence. “Let me save you once again.”

His words are eked into the dullness of his thoughts, a risk considering the dearth of power that threatens to overflow. “I won't let you hurt anyone. Ever again.”

This is why she hates him now. His punishment for protecting him. For constantly giving him the world, only for him to revoke his warmth, to chide her, to make her into a foe. Silently – like a surly child - she returns to her corner of his mind, watches as the broken pieces of his life crumble even more. In her hatred, she pities him, but wishes him pain as well. “Damn you, Scott Summers. Damn you to hell.”
Aboard the alien ship, plans are made.

He speaks first to his son, apologizes for killing him, for sending him into such danger that he died for the sake of them. If he could take it back, he would die in Nathan's place, shut down the sentinels from the future on his own, stop treating his own child like a simple soldier. He apologizes again to the man who isn't there, understands if his son hates him, but hopes that somehow, he'll find the space to forgive him. “I killed you millions of times,” he speaks, “and I each time was a nail through my heart. I should have been there for you Nathan. I should have been better.”

They try to reach him. Try to poke their small hands through the bars of their cage to grab him, to settle him, to let him know that they're here and that they're real. But they fail, miserably. It takes a lot of concentration for Flicker to flatten herself, and even with the encouragement of both Sliver and Cricket, and Arlo's gentle nuzzle against her shoulder, she fails. “We have to bring him back before he falls asleep,” Opal says, reminding them all of the Phoenix dreams and the destruction that they cause. If they don't, if they can't reach him, keep him conscious and keep him hemmed into reality, then they're in trouble. “It took him seconds to kill whole cities. Imagine what he'll do to us if he loses control.”

It's a worrying thought, and again Sarah Goodwind tries to reach out through the bars, willing herself flatter and longer, trying desperately to reach him. She fails again, and with sad peacock eyes, she finally looks to Tony Stark hovering by himself in the corner. “Your arms are longer,” she says, “You should try.”

“Try what?”

“Letting him know that you're real,” Indira speaks, her voice intending to be harsh and degrading, but coming out sad and scared. “It helps keep him focused.” They don't want to be locked in here with their mortal enemy, the man who hunted them down for months on end, separated them from their families, but they need is help, especially if they're going to survive this. “Bring him back, and he'll help us make a plan.”

She's read about Scott Summers enough to know that he's a master strategist, and even when half crazy like he is now, she has no doubt that his plans will be thorough. He'll find a way to get them off this ship, to get them home, and she won't let Ironman tell her any different. “Do it,” she demands, and watches as he slips his arm out of the armor and reaches through the bars.

He makes contact easily, grabbing hold of those cold fingers welded into some mainframe of the ship. He hypothesizes that they've somehow figured out how to harness his power, much like the telepaths, only instead of powering up mutants, they're using him to power the ship instead. “I'm real,” he tells the man before him and looks across the wires and circuits, the blood and carnage of their too-quick surgery. Hung like an ornament, a wide metal circle of microchips melted into his chest, Tony can't imagine the pain that he's in, or even why he's still alive. “Scott, I'm real, man. Come on.”

“Be nice to him,” Indira chides.
“Scott, I'm real,” he repeats, his tone like honey, and with a squeeze of fingers, he gets the man's attention. “There you are. Glad you're back.”

“Stark?” A long pause as Tony nods, watching the man carefully. “You found me?”

“No. No, not really. No hunt today, pal.”

The recognition of where he is dawns on him, lifting his brows and stuttering his words. And, then he notices the children locked up in the cage in front of him. “Shit.”

“Yeah, you got that right,” Tony laughs. “But, maybe not in front of the kiddos, okay? You need to teach them right and proper things.”

“The ship's real?”

Indira nods. “It's real, Mr. Summers.”

“The engines,” he says, his mind spinning a thousand directions at once. “The escape pods. You have to get there.”

“Relax, Scott,” Tony urges, once again squeezing the man's fingers to get his attention. He's bleeding bad, the red liquid dripping down over the host of circuitry in his chest. He's melted into this machine, tied in with thousands of wires and cables. Even if they could escape the cage to the pods, it would take hours to undo the mechanisms holding him into the mainframe. “I'm sure someone's on their way. Someone will save us.”

“No from me,” he says, and quickly expounds. “I killed you three million, six hundred and forty eight times already. How many more times will you die before you finally end it all?”

“Scott!” He shakes against the hand he holds, calming down the sudden burst of frenetic energy. Looking deep into ruby red lenses, he hopes that he's holding the mutant's gaze, hopes that he is being listened to. “I need your help,” he says calmly, steadfastly, “We need to get out of here.”

Summers' mind swirls like a hurricane with escape plans and war. The fight in his mind is strenuous, so much so that the red fog bursts from the wires holding him in check, clouding about them all with a thus far harmless bit of red energy. It's a worrisome thing, and Opal Johnston – otherwise known as Cricket – is fast to pull Tony's hands away and square off against him in their tiny cage. “You do that again and we all die.”

She's serious. More than serious. At 17 years old, Cricket is more adult than child, already experienced with the world and all of its pitfalls. Unlike the others – who still retain that youthful hope, she knows better. “I will fucking kill you if you agitate him,” she says, having witnessed the aftermath of his explosions first hand.

Tony's not used to such talk from kids. He's much more accustomed to adulation and fanfare, the signing of autographs and the selling of t-shirts. He has his own line of Ironman cards, from his first suit to his twenty-eighth, and has hand-signed one set in ten thousand for the lucky kid who draws the right pack. But Opal Johnston doesn't care who he is, none of the mutants do, in fact. They see him as the enemy, and he very well knows why. “I'm sorry,” he says, though not going into details. No sense in letting the kids keep him at arm's length – not when their lives are at stake.

“You need to get out of here.” Cyclops repeats, his blood stained teeth only adding horror to his words. “I can't control this. I can't save you.”

In Ironman's memories, Cyclops was always cool and controlled, vicious at times, when his friends
or his world were at stake. But never vulnerable. No, Scott Summers was never vulnerable. Not like now. “He's right,” he says, turning his dark blue eyes to the children. “We have to get out of here.”

“We're not leaving him behind,” Indira argues. “The X-men take care of their own--”

“But, I'm not an X-man, and neither are you.” His tone is sharp and it sets the girl's teeth on edge. “And besides, pretty sure that the only thing keeping him from taking this scrap heap out is the fact that we're hanging here. He doesn't want to hurt us, and so we need to go.” Then, his attention goes back to Cyclops, who is relieved at the conversation. “You know where the escape pods are?”

“The engine room, then right.”

“And how are we supposed to get there?”

But the brunt of pain as the electronics welded into his chest sizzles removes his concentration once again. A squeeze of hand, and Tony tries to bring him back, to keep him awake, but the red fog only thickens as the mutant scrambles to keep himself under control. “Is he ever okay?” Tony asks. The children shrug.

Indira Gomez is a smart little girl, and with that intelligence, she formulates a plan for them all to survive. “The heat guns,” she says. “If we can find one, we can use it to melt the bars and all of the wires. We can all be free.”

“But then we'll be lost in space,” Opal is quick to counter. She reminds them all that none of them know how to fly this alien mechanism.

“Maybe I can find out.” Indira dares a grin, one that is both confident and defiant. They watch as she pulls her index finger free from her hand and asks Pocket for a paper and crayon, which the boy pulls out of his pocket dimension and hands it to her. “We just need to decipher the interface, right? Figure out what it's saying?” Large brown eyes look to Stark for confirmation.

“Yeah,” he answers. “If I can see it, I should be able to figure it out."

Carefully, she drops her finger onto the floor by the wall of monitors. Now offered a 360 degree view of the room, she begins detailed drawings that map out the keys as well as the commands on the screens.

She's a powerful thing, this little mutant. With just the drop of a finger, she can gather so much information, store it, utilize it. This is the kind of power that can take down whole governments and top secret operations. It can cause so much damage if the girl is not taught properly, but can also help so many more if she stays in the hands of the X-men.

He looks at them all – Indira, Sarah, Arlo, Opal and Pocket – and wonders what they're capable of, what they could become, and he fears that they will turn evil. It is, however, the same with most mutants, if he really thinks about it – including Summers. That their goodwill towards man will eventually run out and they will run roughshod over the world and remake it in their own image. They'd seen a glimmer of that with Cyclops, but even Tony knows that he was pulling his punches, even before he had the full wealth of his power.

He looks at the drawings, the way she's plotted them out, and his mind begins to swirl with his innate curiosity. In the back of his mind, he can hear his father's voice as he begins to decipher the strange symbols and what they do. He can time the power ups and power downs to the cycle of circuits melted into Cyclops' chest and abdomen, and he eventually figures out what it all does. “They're taking us to war,” he says, noting the schematics that she has drawn.
“It's a weapons interface. They're going to use the Red Dimension to blow their enemy sky high.” And, he knows well enough that Cyke can't take it. Using his powers pushes him to the brink of his control. “They're going to destroy the dimension.”

“The heat rods.” Cricket runs her fingers over Arlo's bristly fur, burnt now from the strange instruments that they used in their battles. “Would they melt through the wires?”

“Possibly,” Tony says, then looks to Scott who is mumbling numbers to himself – his mantra of calm; his way of keeping himself reasonable. “But how would we even --”

Before he can finish his sentence, he feels suddenly so strange and small, and then the world is white around him. A moldy peanut butter sandwich and broken crayons. Stuffed bunnies with their ears bent and chewed, crumpled pieces of paper and odd bits of shiny things. Glitter and bows, nuts and bolts, a wedding ring and a fake diamond earring. He is surrounded by the world of a child – a child that does not fit so neatly into the world at large, and he realizes quickly that this must be Tatsuya's power.

Before he can delve into the world of this young mutant, he is again pulled by the ankle and suddenly, the world hums with sound. Outside of the cage, he stares wide-eyed at the young boy who leans back against the bars, his black eyes still staring at a wounded Cyclops. “Okay then,” Stark says, again taken aback by these children's powers. “I'll go find one of those heat guns.”

The children wish him luck, and to hurry back in case Scott falls asleep again. “Don't get caught,” timid Sarah says, her hand wound into Arlo's fur. She smiles at him so softly that he can't help but nod in return.
Nathan Christopher Summers stands at the window looking out over the city. It's quiet here, disturbingly so. If he could – if he felt like he stood a chance – he'd raid them now, spill himself out over their weaponry and armor, take their lives for what they've done. Then, he'd go after the others – the telepaths and those who protected them. He'd destroy them all, and finally, finally he would greet his father again with the thoughts of vengeance long outside of his mind.

“Dad?”

Her voice is quiet, a little over a whisper. She brings with her green tea and small snacks in the shapes of autumn leaves. This is why she likes Japan. This is why he hasn't left. “Thanks, dear,” he says and takes his seat.

Hope’s life here is forcibly normal, far away from mutants and their battles. It’s what she wanted, what she’s always wanted, and she’s content. He knows this, and he hates to disrupt the niche that she's carved out for herself here. She goes shopping with friends, karaoke, lunch and dinner on the weekends. She plays volleyball at school, and makes good grades. “You’re leaving aren’t you?” she says, almost sadly.

“I don’t know yet,” he says, his eyes glancing towards the door of Rachel's impromptu bedroom – the room that used to be his until she showed up hysterical and delirious at their front door some weeks ago. They’d both listened to her explain what had happened to their father, how he was saved, and how he was doomed.

In truth, Cable wants blood. He wants to hunt down Jean and Emma and the other telepaths, make them pay for what they've done. But, it is realizing his own ignorance that staves him off, realizing that his avoidance of his father's mind had caused part of the problem. “I should have known,” he says quietly over a sip of tea. Even then, as a child, he'd been more fascinated with his mother and adoptive mother to see the turmoil inside his father's head. He'd held the red heads on a pedestal, and his father a step below.

“You couldn't have known,” Hope replies, nibbling on the red bean cake. She wears barrettes in her long red hair – shiny silver things that glitter in the light. “I soaked up his power and I didn't know.” She's not attached to her adoptive grandfather, though he sought to train her and keep her safe from harm. She simply remembers the craze, the loudness, the pulling-hair moments, his obsession with saving the mutants from extinction. She was not a tool or an object to be used, but somewhere in his mania, he forgot as such.

Though now she wonders how much of that was him, and how much was the telepathic disturbance, she's still not ready to forgive him for all that he'd done to her. “You can't punish yourself.”

Cable stares down at the tiny treats. They're not his style. They're not dried meats and field rations. These things are luxurious to him, outside of his comfort zone, but he eats them to please his daughter. She's always wondered about the world outside of their frantic trips through time, about a
world that was safe and easy. He wonders if she's satisfied with it, but he doesn't ask. He's afraid that she'll say no, and that she wants to return to the life of a soldier. That she wants the action and the weapons and the blood upon her hands. Those things are addictive, as well he knows, and he's afraid that she'll never overcome it. “I can do what I want,” he finally answers, sticking one of the autumn-leaf cakes into his mouth. He'll suffer this for her; it's the least he can do.

His father didn't have that choice, so for this, he feels lucky.

“Always boil the water first,” Slym Dayspring said – his father, though in a body unlike his own. Suffering from bad knees and headaches, he was not the bastion of fortitude that he would come to know in later years. “This prevents bacteria.”

He'd been so young then. Five, maybe six. Slym and Redd had cared for him for as long as he could remember. He wouldn't know until much later that they were his real parents, come from the past to raise him. They'd spent the day making water skins from a deer they had caught, carving up the beast to reveal the precious hide and meat. He'd let Nathan make the incisions, talking him through the different parts of the animal, and of course, sharing with the rest of the caravan.

The people were starved there, hunted down by Apocalypse and going from city to city hoping to find solace. Slym's skills were greatly appreciated – and there were many who relied on him. From finding water, to keeping them warm at night when fires were impossible, he had taught them all a great deal, even if he didn't share his thoughts with the boy or anyone else. He was an intensely private man, but generous with his knowledge and abilities.

While the others feasted on deer, he stood by himself, combing the hide with lye in order to remove the hair. Afterwards, it would be boiled down, then hardened. “It makes it more durable,” he'd explained under starlight.

The boy was torn between Slym and the feast, not wanting to seem ungrateful, but also wanting to be a part of the crowd. In the end, he chose Slym, settling himself against the drying rack and peering up at the moon. “Don't you get tired of this?”

“Tired of what?”

“Always taking care of people. They don't even notice what you do.”

His tone was soft. “Or perhaps, you don't notice what they do. Your clothes are patched because of Mendel. I asked him yesterday morning. And they're clean because of Lila and Temeena. They've been washing everyone's clothes for a week. Dorian has been keeping the children occupied during the trek, and Sylla keeps us entertained at night. I don't do more than they do, I just do different things.”

“But if it wasn't for you, we wouldn't be eating venison tonight.”

“If it wasn't for Byron I wouldn't have had the arrows to shoot the deer to begin with.” He studied the boy for some moments, his eyes creased with concentration. “A good man doesn't do the work to get a pat on the back. He does it because it needs to be done. That's an important lesson to learn.”

And it was one that Nathan still carries with him to this day. Through all that he's been through, he's remembered that bit of wisdom, kept it close to his heart. Hope gathers her things – her backpack and lunchbox, a handful of coins so she can go play the cranes after school with her friends. She wants to win a banana plushie, one that she's been eyeing for weeks. “I'll be home by four,” she says, and after a quick I love you, she trounces out the door.
He doesn't want to leave her. Not again. But, he has to. For his father's sake.

By the time Rachel wakes, he's knee deep in blueprints and security plans. A dozen facilities and lock downs, plus the original plans for the Baxter Building warehouse. In the back of his head, he hears his father telling him to attack the smaller locations first, create a buzz, take out as much weaponry as possible before hitting the bigger places, and that's where the Baxter Building comes in. Rumor has it that Fury's been using it as a base of operations since Stark's announcement, and it's shored up with hundreds of soldiers – soldiers that are packed into that place like sardines, meaning if he's smart enough and quick enough, he can blast the whole thing sky-high, and then work on the rest. But, it's not a job he's comfortable doing on his own. He wants a team, and the X-men are sorely lacking in those that want to fight.

“You're really going through with this?” Rachel asks, cup of coffee in hand. She takes hers with cream and sugar, unlike Nathan who takes his black and muddy.

“They destroyed the mansion to get to him, so I'll destroy them to get him back.”

“And what about Jean?”

“I'll deal with her later, once Dad's safe.”

“I don't want her dead.”

“Doesn't matter what you want; it's a matter of what needs to be done.” He fears that she'll attack him again; that she'll once again try to take his powers for herself. “If she stays away, then I'll let her go. But, if she comes after him --”

“Why don't you let me deal with her?”

“A slap on the wrist?” he grunts.

“No. A taste of her own medicine.” It's rare that her green eyes go vicious with intent, and so seeing it, lifts gray brow and snicks a smirk across his cheek. She takes a deep breath, another sip of coffee, and returns to studying the blue prints.

She wants to come with him, to help him destroy SHIELD, but he refuses to leave Hope alone again, not with the mutants in such disarray. He needs her to take care of his daughter, just in case he doesn't come back. “She doesn't like fried rice,” he tells Rachel, making sure that she understands his daughter's inclinations. “She'll eat bowl fulls of it steamed, but if it's fried, she'll barely touch it.”

“You're going to make it back, Nathan. I know you --”

“She'll fight over her bedtime, but if she doesn't get nine hours of sleep, she does poorly at school. And once volleyball's done, she needs to find another outlet for her energy. I was thinking about Akido, like Dad. It will teach her that violence isn't always the answer. I think she needs that.”

Rachel listens dutifully to the instructions, every once in a while trying to soothe his suddenly scattered thoughts. “I just need to make sure that she's taken care of – the way she deserves.”

Rachel asks if he's going to find Sam or Tabitha or even Neena, the rest of his team, and he tells her no. There is no need to put the kids in any more danger than they've already been through. “Magneto's going to want something from them. They'll have enough to deal with.”

“At least he was on the side of angels for a moment,” she sighs. “At least they're free.”
“At least now, the X-men might fight back.”

“You'll learn one day the difference between pointless violence and a worthy battle,” Slym said. “Just because one is your enemy doesn't mean you always need to fight them. A good leader avoids battle when he can, saves his strength for those things that will truly make a difference in the future.”

“Is that why you're not fighting Apocalypse?”

“I am fighting him,” he said, “Everyday that this caravan is alive, Apocalypse is thwarted another day.” He looked at him then, his eyes squinted for the sun. “Not every battle is about violence, Nathan. Sometimes, the best way to fight is to simply stand your ground. You'll learn that too, one day.”

“You always act like I'm some sort of hero.”

“You are. It's in your blood.”

Rachel hates the sudden silence between them, the regret of her inaction. But, at the time, she truly believed that what she was doing was right. “Don't you ever get tired of fighting?”

In all honesty, he did at times. His bones were weary, even. Like now, looking over these plans. But, then, he can't imagine what he would do if there were no more wars, no more battles. He's known nothing but, just like Rachel, just like Scott. “Do you?”

“Sometimes,” she says. “I think that there's a whole world out there of people who have jobs and dates and things that don't involve defying death everyday. Some days, I feel like I want a cat and job at some retail store and an apartment with day old pizza in the fridge. Then other days, I think I would be bored to tears.”

He smiles softly, his gray eyes pouring over the blueprints once again. He'd never imagined this kind of life for himself, sedate and simple. He finds it difficult to fit into a life of t-shirts and jeans. He worries that this is why he's going to war with SHIELD. Fear that a normal life has no place for him.

“You should talk to Alex,” Rachel says, the idea of it burning in green eyes. “He'd go to war with you. He hates --”

“I don't want to get others involved.”

“He's already involved. At least as far as protecting Dad is concerned.”

It's an idea, and one that doesn't settle bad in the pit of his stomach. “Can you contact him telepathically?”

“I can get a message to Warren,” she says. “He has penthouse a few blocks from here. He'd pass it along. I'm guessing, if they took Scott, Logan will come too.” She tells him of the strangeness that's passed over Logan, the utter protectiveness for the man. She thinks it love, and she's not sure how she feels about it.

“At least he's not a telepath,” Cable smiles.
“You can clone him?”

Sinister sighs and smiles. “I came close once, combining his DNA with the Inhumans, but alas, the experiment fell far short of my expectations. It's very difficult to duplicate what is constantly in flux.”

She's unimpressed by the admission. Brow lowered and blue eyes filled with spite, she shakes her head. “You said that he would love me.”

“Correction,” he admonishes with a finger in the air. “I said a part of him would love you. Tell me, Ms. Frost, how well do you like children?”

“You mean for me to have his baby?”

The Madelynes stop in their procession around the banquet table. Placing their utilities on the table – the wine, the food, the clean silverware and napkins – they put hands on hips and shake their head. Sinister gives them all a wide grin. “Oh, my little crumpets. We're not jealous now, are we?”

She's a mindless thing, doing tasks at his whim, but there are certain things ingrained in her genetics. Certain things that are unavoidable since her creation – and one of those being her need to bear Scott Summers' children. “Hmmm,” he muses, lifting the bold glass of red wine to his lips. “How unexpected.”

“You can fix that right?” Emma asks, unnerved by the dozen of clones suddenly angry over the mention of Cyclops.

“So, I take it that you are okay with the proposition?”

“I do like children,” she answers slowly, waiting for Sinister to send the Madelynes back to work, which he does in order to give himself breathing room. “And if it is a piece of Scott --”

Sinister's grin softens. Leaning forward, his elbow propped on the table, he speaks in a low, disquieting tone, one that sends shivers up her spine. “I can only imagine how powerful your progeny will be now that Mr. Summers is in the full scope of his powers. I must have a sample of its DNA as part of our bargain.”

For years, he's looked for suitable partners for that golden DNA, his hopes of mapping and correlating in order to prove himself a better, more perfect being. “And with Jean out of the picture, you're the next best thing.”

She doesn't like being compared to Jean, doesn't like that she's constantly second place. He's quick to remind her that it doesn't matter in the long run. “All that matters, my dear, is that you feel loved. And a child will love you unconditionally. And, who knows, maybe in the long run, he'll appreciate the lengths that you're willing to go for him. This could very well be the salvo that your relationship needs. After all, you were only trying to help him. You kept him patched together for years, and he
should know that."

"It's like you're reading my thoughts."

"Perhaps I am."

A snap of fingers and the Madelynes return, filling wine glasses and taking up the dirty napkins. Their dance is immaculate as they swirl around each other keeping the feast glorious and succulent. They bring venison to the table, and a rich cream sauce, wild rice, and stewed greens. They are perfect, save for the glint in their eyes when they take Emma's plate. These Madelynes are not prone to forget the little bargain that she's made with Sinister.

"I wouldn't drink the wine," Sinister says with a smile, tipping his own glass to his lips. He motions for one of the Madelynes to come forward, and when she does, he wrests the small packet of rat poison out of her hand. "Curious."

It's only at night that the guilt creeps in. Snuggled under thick blankets, still awake and alert for the presence of the Madelynes outside her door, she feels the weight of her decisions deep in the part of her soul that she'd like once again to forget.

For most of her life, this soul of hers had lain dormant, crushed down by ambition, greed, and the snarls of men who wished to do her harm. It was Scott who reminded her that it was there, and the thoughts of him that scarred across it. She would cry now, if not for the sound of it rousting the Madelynes back to wakefulness.

Somewhere in the distance, the Creed clones howl. A deer, a rabbit, some manner of creature that they've decided to hunt. She wonders how many he has now, how many mutants he's managed to clone, keep mindless, keep under thumb for nothing other than his own pleasure. She's seen the Gambits – all resting in their cages, but there are fewer now than when the Phoenix had possessed them. She's also witnessed a McCoy and a Drake, but only one, and both seemed utterly oblivious to the world around them.

In her midnight haze of sleeplessness, she wonders if she can wake them up – the McCoy and the Drake. If she can bring them to life, make them into human beings. She wonders what they'd do should they have their memories returned to them, or at least their minds. If they'd pound this city to ash, or if they'd flourish inside of it. She wonders the same about the Madelynes, how they would react if they had their own will again. How much like Jean they would become, or perhaps, how much like Scott.

Pryor had done significant damage to Summers' mind – whether a directive by Sinister or of her own accord, Emma doesn't know. While, she too sipped at that power, she barely thought twice about the man and his condition. What the telepaths did was their choice, and it did not behoove her to interfere. It wasn't until after Apocalypse possessed him that Emma began to take notice.

For months, he fought back against the beast, his mind in turmoil, and the love of his life did precious little to help him. They simply kept up the war until the moment they were exposed. It was then – the utter heartbreak of seeing them inside his mind, of learning what they were doing to him, that singular moment when he was too stunned to fight back against them that Emma realized how wrong they were. And it was also the moment when she decided to help the man instead of punish him further.

She'd never loved someone before, not without some motive behind it, some need. And, she'd never been loved before.
“You don't want marriage?” he'd asked. It was so soon into their courtship, before the mutants were decimated by the Scarlet Witch's spell, and several months after Jean's death. He was shocked – a momentary glimmer upon his otherwise unreadable face.

“And share half of my fortune with whatever dullard decided to divorce me? Never. That money goes to a good cause,” she laughed, putting her hands on her hips to accentuate the perfect figure underneath her nightgown. “No, darling. Marriage is not for me. Men are too deceptive to trust --”

“I'm not deceptive.”

“You're suggesting I marry you?” The comment came out as more of a scoff than she intended. He blushed in his embarrassment, turned his head to the floor. Realizing that she'd hurt him, she sat down on the bed next to him, arms around his shoulders. “I'm not Jean, Scott. I don't need such things. Just knowing that you love me is enough.”

His face was rarely expressive, so when he looked at her, his autumn brows just perked and a soft smile creasing the left side of his face, she felt warm inside, she felt loved. She pulled him into a deep kiss, her hand upon his heart, and let him show her how much she was loved.

But even then, she wondered how much of it was real. “You'll never know how much I love you, Scott Summers. You can't even imagine it.”

He laughed, pulled her head to his chest and embraced her slim shoulders. “If it's even half of how much I love you, then I think we'll manage somehow.” She didn't judge him for things he couldn't control after being possessed – not the dark thoughts, not the boredom or restlessness, not the punishing way he felt the world was turned against him, or his lack of trust in those he thought were friends. She didn't pry, didn't heave expectations upon him. She accepted him – warts and all – and for that, he could never repay her. “As long I don't screw it up, right?”

She would laugh now over that conversation, and that he did screw it up when he took the Phoenix Force from her. But even so, she understood the drive to do it. The Phoenix had long been his, serving his interests from afar. If it weren't for him, the giant fire bird would never have returned to bring them back from extinction. Unfortunately, no one saw it that way.

And, then, he killed Xavier, and she couldn't stop the cracks in his psyche after that. Her patch job had already come undone, and if she lost telepathic focus for even a second, he would have exploded on the spot. The day he disappeared, she felt relieved, if she were honest with herself. That he was gone to somewhere unknown. To that dimension that he created to house his power. She could finally relax, and she was suddenly alone.

Outside she can hear the rustling of hoop skirts and corsets. There's six of them, she counts, entering each of their minds and feeling Sinister's presence in each. Either he's asleep and unmindful of their shenanigans, or he's spying on her. In the door lock, she can see the bright green eye staring at her, watching as she tosses and turns in her bed. She considers blasting across each of them, giving them the worst headache of their lives, but then she remembers that they're just like her.

All they wanted was Scott's love, his child, and Sinister took both away from them, and now they are mere shells of beings bent to his wishes and accords. Pryor was once whole and beloved, a special thing inside his heart, but when Jean returned, her world was ripped out from underneath of her. She's heard the rumors, that Sinister meant for her to force Scott away once she had his child, but Jean was far more powerful of a telepath, and it seemed more likely to Emma that Jean had pulled him out of his lackluster marriage and back into her arms.

She hated Jean Grey, but she didn't hate Madelyn Pryor. “You can come in, if you like,” she calls
into the darkness. “I'm completely and utterly awake.”

More rustling outside of her door, and then the slow turn of knob. Madelyne Pryor stands in the doorway, with another five behind her. “He's asleep,” she tells the woman slowly rousting from her bed. “Can we talk?” She offers Emma a cup of coffee

Emma yawns and stretches, setting the coffee on the dresser, wary. “Of course. So long as you stop trying to poison me.”

Madelyne blushes. Her words are a struggle against her innate programming, against the will of Essex. “I want to leave here.” And they are also a surprise. Emma jolts straight up in her bed, staring wide-eyed at the clone. “We all want to leave here.”

“You want to find Scott,” she decides. Madelyne nods. “I'm sorry, dear, but that's impossible. I won't let you have Scott again. Once is enough for your meddling--”

Rage creeps across the clone's features – slowly disfiguring the full lips and red brow, until Madelyne is something unrecognizable. No longer the prim little waitress that sits at the foot of Sinister, she is herself, though with a struggle to resist the programming that keeps her compliant. “I want out.”

“Then find a way to escape, but you can't expect me to help you.”

“I will punish you for this.”

“You can try, but I doubt anything you can do will hurt me, my poor, dear clone. And you have Essex to thank for that.”

It is with but a thought that she turns the Madelyne off, much to the shock of the other five. “Come on, ladies, I'm a telepath,” she sighs, hefting the clone up by the shoulders to drag her out of the room. “Threaten me again and I will drop each and everyone of you just like this. I'm not here to play around.” As she sets the Madelyne outside her door, the others scurry off like little rodents, twittering and huffing, upset that their clone-sister was defeated. “I'm telling Sinister on you!” she calls out after them, hoping to goodness that Essex hears her, though she doubts it. She's not sure where his room is in this vast castle, but she's sure it's nowhere near hers.

For hours she waits – slumped against wall and floor, fighting sleep – for the cruel Madelyne to wake from her slumber. The clone is shocked to be outside and self-aware. “He'll surely scrap you in the morning when he hears of what you've done – because I do plan to tell him. So, I would take this moment of clarity to escape if I were you. It's your only chance because I'm not helping you any further than this.”

The Madelyne nods slowly, and takes off her impossibly high heels and runs down the hall. It's not long after that Emma hears the howls of the Creeds, and she wonders if they ended up catching the Madelyne after all.
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

Someone will lead them.

He doesn't dream of her anymore, though he can feel her reaching out with her psychic tendrils. He can feel her poke and prod at certain memories, trying to wake him up, trying to cause a reaction. She misses his attention, his undying love, his willingness to protect her above all else.

But, anymore, there is simply hatred. “How often you fool around in here, Jeannie?” She doesn't answer, not at first anyway. She's weakened now, both by the absence of Scott's powers and distance. She's a pixie, a gnat, a flying thing to bat away. “Haven't you learned to leave people's heads alone?”

“Just making sure he's okay, Logan.” The words chime inside of his mind, her voice like a distant memory.

In his head he curses at her, asks her if she thought of that while she was destroying his mind. He tells her that Scott's not okay, and he wonders if he'll ever be okay again. “Seven years bad luck and more I hope you get for breaking that man's mind.”

“I loved him, Logan.”

“You loved his power more, apparently.” He knows that she's hardening herself to his punishment, to the string of telepathic curses that continue to roll inside his mind. He pulls up his rage, his hatred, his vehemence, let's her feel it full force, no sugar coating or worry about the tears he feels inside his mind. “You never answered my question.”

She steels herself just a little more, enough so that her words don't tremble in the depth of his thoughts. “What question was that, Logan?”

“You ever mess around in my mind, too?” Again, she doesn't answer, and the rage within him becomes an animal in his veins. Claws come out involuntarily at the sudden surge in his adrenaline, and if she were here, he would rip to her shreds. But, she's not here – in his tent, out on the lawn waiting for the sun to rise so they can get back to planning Scott's rescue. She's nowhere near here, nowhere that he can touch. “Fuck you.” The words ring clear inside his mind, and he can feel the bend of her resolve.

“I'm sorry, Logan,” she mutters, her distant voice muddled with sadness. “I'm sorry about all of it. I wish I could make it up to you.”

“Was it all a lie?”

“Not all of it.” But, she neglects to explain which parts are and which parts aren't.

He could feel her weariness then, how exhausted connecting to his mind over such a distance has made her, but it dawns on him that she can reach this far, even though the connection is bad. “He's not here, darlin', and the next time you try this, I will hunt you down and put an end to you for good.”
“It's habit, Logan. That's all.” Her headache is beginning to become unbearable, and so she leaves with him with final words. “I really did love him. Make sure he knows that.”

The connection closed, he finally opens his eyes and stares at the top of his dewed up tent. It's cool in the early mornings, before the sun has risen. And beyond the shallow green fabric, he can see the carving of the moon in the pale night sky. Unblissfully awake, he crawls from the tent and out onto the grounds to find that he's not the only one who's risen.

“You look like shit,” he tells Alex, who stands guard over the campfire. Even from this distance, he can smell the percolation of coffee. Alex barely stirs, not surprised that the feral mutant is up and out of his den. “She messed around with your head, too, didn't she?”

He answers with a shrug of brow and then pouring the coffee into two mugs. They sit in silence, looking over the reams of tents and the nighttime yard. The disappointment still wrangles across Alex's face – that so few would join him to rescue Scott from the aliens, and some of them – like Angel – were too injured to be of use. They speak for a while about Forge and their hopes that he can create devices to block telepathy. In the end, if he can, they could bring the telepaths back, as they can feel the strategic lack of them at the moment. Had they had the telepaths during the battle, perhaps things would not have gone as they did.

Their conversation settles into a heavy silence. Alex doles out the coffee, stares up at the stars in the sky. So much has gone wrong in such a short amount of time, but still, the X-men are playing hide and seek with the world. “When did we become such cowards?” Summers asks, not really expecting an answer.

“We're not cowards, bub. Just damn tired of the world always being so screwed up that we've finally lost track of what we're fighting for.” It's been hard on Storm to protect the innocence of the children, but even in that, she appears to have given up. “She'll get it back,” he promises, “She always does.”

“You're surprisingly optimistic. You sure Jean didn't mess around in your head too much?”

Logan smiles. “Ain't optimism. It's hope. Maybe all this shit going down at once is the kick in the ass the X-men need in order to rebuild themselves again. 'Cause right now, they're as demolished as the mansion.”

Kurt would go with them. That much Logan knew for sure. And if the prisoners finally come back, he is sure that Proudstar will go, too. “We'll have to talk to Petey,” Wolverine continued. “Might just need a push in the right direction.”

“And you're the one to push him?”

“That's your job, bub.”

“My job? Why--”

“You're the leader.” It had been a long time since he'd called anyone that, not since his death, not since he left Scott's side. While he was sure he did a fine job leading the pack himself, he'd always felt more comfortable from the back seat, away from all the tacs and strats and everything else that made the Summers boys so damn great at what they did. Storm was once that way, and were she again, he'd bow to her, too, but her resolve had dwindled, and the goddess of weather needed time to collect herself.

Being called a leader again – especially by Logan – does not fill Alex with pride, but rather fear. He has a lot to live up to in terms of that moniker, especially considering that Logan followed Scott for
decades. “I'll mess up,” he says quietly, sipping at his coffee to hide the lump in his throat.

“We all do,” Logan replies. “I did, your brother did, Storm did. All that matters is how you pick yourself from those mistakes and make yourself a better person.”

Alex can hear the years in Logan's words; the mantra of a soul that's lived a life far longer than any soul should. And, for it, he is thankful. Now he knows why his brother trusted this man so much and for so long. “If they set us up --”

“They will. Nick has a job to do, and knowing the man, I can guarantee you that he's not finished with Scott yet.” Fury doesn't make the rules, he just follows them, and as always, there are people above him who dictate his actions. “He isn't some autonomous fucker who does what he feels is right. He heads the biggest spy organization in the world, and carries out black ops all over the place. His orders come from above. If he doesn't do the job they set for him, they'll find someone else who will.”

“So I should feel pity for the man?”

“Fuck no. He's an asshole, but he's not the only asshole out there, that's all I'm saying. The world's going to hunt Scott for a long while, so we need a strong leader, someone that can plan their way through things.”

“I'm not as strategic as Scott.”

“You need to stop comparing yourself to your brother.” The tone is stern, and so is Logan's face – lips pressed flat, dark brow low against gray eyes. “He needs you too much for your little pity party right now.”

Lorna had told him as much before he left, before she was captured. She would go with them, if she were here. She would fight for Scott, if only because she, too, had committed actions against her will when under the spell of Malice. But, more than that, she would fight because he asked her, too. “Where do you think they are?” he asks Logan, looking out over the night time sky. “I thought they'd return by now.”

Logan shrugs. There's been too much going on for him to even think about their friends broken out of the Undertow. “One situation at a time, and right now, we need to rescue Scott before those aliens push him to the brink and he explodes.”

“I'll talk to Forge when he wakes up, see if he can outfit the Blackbird for the portal and come up with some sort of telepathy-blocking device. In the meantime, you talk to Kitty. See if we can pull our team together to go rescue our friends.”
The Alien Ship

Chapter Summary

Cyclops' plan in action.

He knows the plan. Backwards and forwards, he recites it over and over again. A mantra against the ebbing flow of fear in the back of his head.

He watches them below – the children, save Pocket and Sliver. He watches them gnash and fight and punch and kick. He watches them take on a dozen aliens at once, wrenching through their heat rods and laser guns. He watches them chew their way through bones and purple-fluid-blood. They're spectacular. They're frightening.

Above them all, Tony Stark uses his repulsor ray to hide the cameras that watch them. He blacks them out, crushes them with iron fist and watches for the rest of the aliens to come forth with their weaponry. These children, he thinks, are untrained, yet they fight with all of their might.

They will get captured, drug to the belly of the ship where Cyclops thinks the prison is. There's no way these aliens don't have a prison aboard. The ship is too massive to not have a dungeon. He thinks it's a replacement planet, this ship. A place for this species to board and fly free, their own planet destroyed by a dimensional war that they intend to win by hooking him up to their machines. Scott can't let that happen – not only for those they intend to evade, but for the dimension and his world itself.

He'll destroy them all if he's not careful.

One nap, one blissful moment of sleep and the whole thing will go sky high since Logan and Alex are not here to shut him off. He fears it, more than anything, the uncontrollable taking of lives. He's already a murderer. A million times over. In his dreams, in the dimension he created to house his intense power. He's killed them all a million, billion times. And each time, he brought them back, with tears, with effort, only to kill them all over again.

In the cooling ducts, Tony's insulated from sight. A single man – with a heating rod tucked under the arm of suit – against a million of them, or so he exaggerates. Captured, they'll be brought closer to the escape pods, to the engine room, and Tony will be able to map their progress – be it through sight, or through Sliver's finger that he carries tucked into the crook of his neck. It's odd having her finger there – the tip bulbous, with its own pupil and iris. She swears that she can see in the dark like this, that she can see better with her finger than she can in real life, but Ironman doesn't know how much stock he puts into that. All he knows is that she's a fearsome child, and he dreads the day that she turns evil.

Cricket brings more blood than the rest. At seventeen, she's a helluva fighter, using the blades along her wrists and ankles to deliver cutting blow after cutting blow. She's untrained, that much Tony can see, but what she has is an uncanny sense of where her opponents are. She knows when to hit and when to kick, when to duck and when to jump. Raised in the streets, she is used to being wary, and that proves her boon when it comes to action down below.

Arlo – as big as he is – isn't nearly so effective. His broken hands still cause pain, and he's too big to
be lithe. Strength, however, is his best attribute. A heavy hitter to be sure. It's nothing for him to pick up one of the aliens and toss them into the metallic walls of the navigation room. He's busted seven of the computer displays already. Three left, and he's done the job that Cyclops has set out for him. Tony prays that he can make it. If even one of those displays survive, then the plan is sunk.

Swarming the hold is Flicker, her prismatic body floating through the scene fighting the aliens over weapons and kicking them in the face. She works well with Arlo, blinding his opponents so that he can wrestle them to the ground and continue on his mission. She's a soft thing, this Sarah, but adamant enough about their instructions that she's vowed to see this through.

Any minute now, Tony reminds himself, and they'll be overrun and captured. No need to cheer for them, no need to wish them good luck, because the whole plan hinges on Cyclops' insistence that they're wanted alive. He hopes it's so – these kids are fighting too hard for Summers to have lied to them.

And so they come, the droves. At least fifty of them, guns at ready, pressing the nodules to heads and hearts and lungs. The kids act surprised. They struggle against the heavy binds latched around their wrists and ankles. Curse and spit as they are paraded further down into the depths of the ship – leaving Tony alone with Sliver's finger and the navigation room at ready.

Though the screens are busted, he can make out the keys based on Sliver's previous patterns and the slight scuff marks left behind by too many fingers. He can discern the numbers from the letters, and with that in mind, he can set the course back to the portal. It's Cyke's hope that they can get far enough through space that the pods will make it back before their energy runs out.

He follows them through the ducts – checking vents in large chambers – seeing where they take the children. The ducts are thick and heavy, wrapped with a spongy gray material that apparently keeps things cool. It's a remarkable system they have, one that could not be replicated on earth, but also one that keeps his movements quiet as he twists and turns around the sharp corners following the prisoners deep into the depths of the ship.

He passes over the engine room – run by a core that looks to be similar to the arc reactor, only it's bright and red, with a haze of fog around it. He rumbles over long hallways that extend to sleeping quarters and cafeterias, weapons rooms, medical bays, and small computer rooms that are probably placed for emergency use. Finally, he sees the escape pods which are closer to the prison than he imagined.

"The locks are magnetized," Summers had wheezed, trying his best to keep his focus against the millions of demons haunting the back of his brain. "Heat them up and they'll--"

"I understand magnetic properties," he'd interrupted. "What do I do after?"

"Retrieve the children from the cage, then the cells, and escape."

"Not without you," Indira had demanded.

But Cyke couldn't be aboard the small escape pod. It would put him too close to the children. He'd kill them all.

Heat gun in hand, Stark leaves Sliver's finger overlooking the cells. The children are indeed safe here, and thus he makes his way back to free Pocket from the cage.

"We're not leaving without you," Indira says from the cage floor. Barely concentrating on the prison cells, her wide, brown eyes stare warily at the hallucinating Cyclops just beyond her reach. He
speaks to Nightcrawler, begs his forgiveness for killing him. He speaks to his brother, he speaks to James Proudstar. His heart is heavy with the deaths he caused in the Red Dimension, with the deaths he caused on earth. He's a murderer, a hideous thing, and he doesn't know how to earn forgiveness.

“Mr. Summers?” Her small hand reaches through the bar, but he remains just out of her reach. She looks at Pocket, who is absorbed in the bunny pictures crumpled up in his pocket. “Mr. Summers?” she says again, but still he doesn't hear her.

Fading back from the world, she looks at the cells down below her finger. Her friends are there, shackled into small cages. She watches as an alien brings them water, shoves it into a small passage in the door. She wonders if it's real water – like on earth – or if it's saline or some other chemical that's been liquefied. She worries that it's poison, that Scott's hunches are wrong, and that they do intend to kill them.

They are a violent species, these aliens. All of their weapons and guns, their technology that traps the essence of Scott's powers into glowing red crystals that feed their war machine. To stop their fight or save themselves, only one of those sounds like a superhero to her.

She sees the glint of gold and red armor several minutes before Tony appears before them. She still doesn't trust the man, doesn't like that she has to work with him, but Cyclops has insisted, just as he insists that they leave him there hooked up to the giant machine. She realizes, then, how powerless she is in the scope of such minds, that her age and lack of training mean that she's not the hero that she wants to be. If she were, she'd not only find a way to save Mr. Summers, but she'd also figure out a way to dismantle the many weapons aboard the ship.

“They're going to destroy a planet,” he'd told her. “They're going to use my power to do so. You can't be here when that happens.” For, after, he would probably end up destroying the entire dimension. “You have to keep Pocket safe,” he'd instructed her, as she was one of the few that the autistic child had warmed up to. “You have to get him home.”

She hates this. She hates how trapped she feels. Even as Ironman begins to melt the bars of the cage, she argues that they also needed to save Cyclops, that it isn't right, this isn't what heroes do. “He's not going to hurt us,” she says, grabbing onto armored wrist. “He's not going to hurt anyone.”

“He doesn't believe that,” Tony argues back, wresting himself free of her child's-grip. “He knows his powers better than anyone, and if he says that we're in danger, we need to listen to him.”

“But it's not fair --”

“Life isn't fair, kiddo. As you grow up, you'll realize that.”

Pocket struggles against Tony's arms, kicks and hits and bites as Stark pulls him under shoulder, and then makes a grab for Sliver. Indira decides to fight him too, for if he won't listen to her, then the least she can do is make things more difficult for him. “I'm trying to save you,” he tells her.

“Save Mr. Summers.”

“We can't. We unhook him, he explodes, just like he's said.”

“Then we need to find Mr. Logan --”

“Which we can't do until we're out of here.” Cyclops had made these plans carefully in order to free them from danger. “He's not going to die, sweetheart.”

“How do you know --”
“Because I do.” He floats to the ceiling, hiding himself from the sudden entrance of more aliens. “Look, once we find the others on Earth, we'll come back for him, okay. Now please stop struggling. This is dangerous enough as it is.”

“Promise?” Indira's large brown eyes widen with hope.

“Promise.”
Magneto's plans are revealed.

There's not much she can do for Sam Guthrie. Not here, in this old bunker. His skin sloughs off at a touch, blackened and moist, as if it absorbed the ocean. It smells like ozone and rot, and other than keep him alive, she's at a loss on how to fix him.

She knows the pain he went through, how debilitating it felt, but unlike him, she had her invisible shield to stay intact during the experiments. In many ways, its guilt that keeps her at the man's side, that she doubled the experiments in order to get the pills and he paid the price.

Blue eyes meet red when she finally looks to Gambit. Outside this room, there are hundreds of mutants begging to go back home. Children and adults, a few X-men, but mostly civilians who want to go back their lives. They're bankers and bakers, janitors and vacuum cleaner salesmen. They're teachers, students, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers. They are loud, frightened, adamant. “We need Triage,” she says quietly, nearly mouthing the words. There was no need to alarm those outside the small door. It would only make things more chaotic.

Gambit shook his head, not knowing where Christopher Muse had hidden himself. “De boy's good at layin' low, Sue” he replies. “Always has been.” All of the healers are good at hiding, in fact. They're powers are too precious, too wanted, and even mutant haters tended to protect them. Joshua Foley was the same way.

“Magneto promised --”

“He's not always a man of his word, cher,” he cuts in. “Besides, if he knows where Triage is, den likely, he's a prisoner.” He hates to see it drain from her, all of the on-edge-hope, but it's necessary. Magneto is not as altruistic as he makes himself out to be. He's no more a leader for mutantkind than he, himself. “Don't make deals with de devil,” he tells her quietly as she stares down at Sam Guthrie on the table. “Because there's always something behind it dat you can't imagine.”

Out in the halls, he can hear the fear, the wonder, and finally, the gratefulness for their sudden rescue from that hideous prison. And it's then that Gambit realizes what Eric Lehnsherr has accomplished. “You know he's a villain, right?” he asks one of the men who brags about seeing the mutant in action. “He wants mutants to rule the world--”

“And what's wrong with that?” The man shows him the long red scars on his arms. “They cut me open everyday for a month. No idea what they were looking for, but I'll have these for life now. Maybe I want to repay the favor.” There's a hardness in the man's eyes that Remy doesn't expect. The man is not a powerful mutant. He can detect poisons, and that's about it. He makes his living on a Hazmat team, seeking the stuff out to keep humans from harm. “Yet, this is what they do to me? I spend half my life keeping them safe, and they stuff me in a prison and experiment on me?” He's got a wife, four kids, and a bird. He'd never hurt a soul in his entire life. He was one of the good guys, like the X-men. “But where were they when we were being hunted down?”
The man isn't the only one to feel this way, and several more join in on his adamant refrains. The X-men abandoned them, let the humans destroy what little bit of lives they'd carved out for themselves. Let them be prodded and poked and tested. “They were supposed to protect us,” a woman says from the back of the crowd. “Seems to me that they only protected themselves.” She says the name first – Magneto. Says it loud and clear and declares him the leader of mutantkind. The chorus of his name rings out in the underground passageways, and builds as more and more join in.

Gambit escapes the halls out into the wide open of the forest around the bunker. They're not far from where they've escaped, and even now, he can see the sirens flash red and blue against the evening sky. Choppers overhead, smoke and flames. No wonder Magneto left them. He knew that there was a high chance of getting caught again, of being rounded up and put in another SHIELD hold.

“You'd best put a cork in all that racket, or they'll find you,” a voice calls from the shadows of trees. Gambit slowly turns to see Sabretooth and Christopher Muse clearing the thicket. “Not sure Mags is up for breaking you out again.”

“What are you doing here, Creed?”

“Delivering on a promise.” He turns to Triage, his eyes stern to the boy. “She's inside. Just do what she says.”

He hasn't seen Remy in years, not since the war over Hope. “I'm not here to hurt you, Cajun,” he says, his voice softer. For a second he wonders, if the young boy from his memories could be this man, but his heart tells him he isn't. No, that little boy died a gruesome death, torn apart and dismembered bit by bit. Or, that's what he's decided after too many dreams and too much guilt. “I'm here to make sure Sam Guthrie and Reed Richards are put back in proper order.”

Gambit squares off against the beast, secretly tendering a finger over the button of his shirt. Without his staff, without his cards, he figures the button will do in a snap. He doesn't mind going underdressed when the fate of mutants are at stake. “I already figured out your plan,” he says quietly. He can take Creed, he's sure of it.

Victor puts two hands in the air. “I already told you, Lebeau, I ain't here for a fight. I'm here to make sure that Mags lives up to his word.”

“He's going to recruit dem --”

“He ain't doing nothing but lying in bed right now. Lifting the Undertow up from the water took it all out of him. He ain't no spring chicken anymore.” There's a laugh that comes after, slow and wheezy, a half snarl mixed with enjoyment. “Bet your wife's missing you right now, especially since she ain't got no home no more.” Remy's eyes narrow as he waits for the punchline. Creed laughs. “You're behind on the times, boyo.”

He explains the destruction of the mansion – once again. The reports of aliens and the portal in the Baxter Building. “World's all worried about the Red Wave again. Thirty countries have declared martial law already, and here you are trying to unravel some geezer's plot to keep mutants safe. My, oh my, how the mighty X-men have fallen.”

But, there is no delight in the gloating, just habit and exhaustion, things that Remy is quick to notice. “You ain't been sleepin' well. Must be your conscience finally catching up to you.” Sabretooth would have laughed if it weren't true. “Why are you working with Magneto again? What'd he promise you?”

“Nothin' you need to worry about.” Creed decides that it's time to check on Triage, to make sure the
boy is following Sue's orders like they'd planned. “I don't want to spend another month tracking him down in some podunk village in a heap of squalor. First time was bad enough.”

The bunker is quieter now, the people lined up in the halls, cautiously watching as the dark young man works his mutant magic. He doesn't know if there will be scars, but the wounds themselves will be closed and free of infection. “She tell you to do this?” Muse nods. He glances to Sue then, who stands beside a still shaken Cannonball. He's healed now, his skin a light peach, and there is color in his cheeks, but nearly dying has taken its toll on his psyche. “You got Magneto to thank for your safety,” he tells the crowd, and especially Sam. “I want you guys to remember that.”

“And where is Magneto?” Sue asks, but Sabretooth gives her a shrug in return. “After my husband is healed --”

“I know, I know, the bargain's done, and I walk out of your life. A promise is a promise. Kid's yours until that happens.”

She wonders then about how to return to the Baxter Building where her husband lies dead, but Creed's got that all taken care of. “We can leave anytime you're ready.”

There's an acceptance of Creed that Gambit is suddenly aware of. The looks of wonder, the adulation, the thankfulness. Many of the mutants remember him from the Undertow – how he rushed inside the place and pulled them free, or swam them to the top. They know his accomplishments, and that he works for Magneto is to their advantage.

“I want to come with you,” says a woman in her mid-20's. “I want to help. I want to keep mutants safe.”

The smile that crosses Sabretooth's face is both delicious and devious. This was all going according to Magneto's plan. “What's your power?”

“I'm not very strong,” she says, looking down at the floor. “I'm not a superhero.”

“Strength ain't just liftin' trucks over your head. What's your power?”

“I can see through stuff. Like X-ray vision, I guess. I'm a doctor. I use it to help my patients--”

“That's a plenty useful gift you got,” he tells her, and stretches out his hand. “Be glad if you came along.”

“I want to come to,” says the man from earlier, the poison-detector. “I just need to see my family first, let them know that I'm safe.”

“I just want to go home,” says a young boy.

Creed shushes the shouts with a wave of his hand. “Those who want to fight will be readily accepted. Those who want to go home, are free to go home. There's no pressure here. I'll take everyone where they want to go.”

“And what about those ready to kill?” The voice comes from Sam Guthrie. “What about those who want to destroy SHIELD and everything they stand for?”

A fanged grin snips the side of Victor's cheeks. “Well, you'll be welcome, too.”
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

Bobby and Kitty talk.

“You need me,” Cable says, unloading his wealth of weapons and guns on the grounds outside the mansion. He looks over the tents, the small fires, the wounded and the weak. He sees the fear in their eyes, and the tremors that shake their bodies when faced down with the militant mutant.

Alex can't deny that Cable's help would be appreciated, but he worries about the telepathic abilities. Forge has too much on his plate between retooling the Blackbird for the dimensional rift and keeping up with the needs of rebuilding mansion. He hasn't yet had time to create devices that will block telepathy. Nathan, of course, scoffs at the idea, reminding them all that he's never entered his father's mind, and if he had, he would have made it his mission to destroy anyone and everyone who warred within those confines, and the only reason he doesn't do it now is because of his daughter. “She doesn't need to grieve anymore than she already has.”

Alex wants to believe him. He wants there to be a divide between Nathan and his father, that indeed his actions aren't fueled by the temptation to enter that mind and devour it. “I'll have to discuss it with Logan.”

“No,” he argues. “You'll make up your mind right now. Either you trust me or you don't. I want no lingering doubts either way.”

“You have to understand, Nathan. This isn't --”

“My father and a group of kids were kidnapped by aliens. I have the means to help get them back.” Cable will leave again, if he's really that unwanted. He has a daughter to raise and care for. He doesn't have to be here. “I cut ties with the X-men once already. I can do it again if you don't trust me.”

“It's not a matter of trust, Nathan. It's a matter of control. Your own self-control. I don't want my brother harmed anymore.”

“Then let me help you bring him back.” He's already got intel to share – on Fury and the trap lying in wait at the Baxter Building. “He plans to blow you sky-high to keep you out of that dimension. He's under orders to bring the bodies.”

Alex suspected that there would be a trap. “I already knew --”

“I know another way in.”

It's Forge who is the key to it all, that and his knowledge of technology. The red stones – the solidification of Scott's infinite power – and how to use them. “They can power the Blackbird through the rift, so long as you can get in there.” He's been getting his own intel from an anonymous source, the calculations used by Reed Richards to program the portal to begin with. “I can set a tracker for the ship, get you guys in and out with ease.”

“Are you sure it isn't a trap?” Logan questions, feeling ill at ease with Forge's connection to this
Forge shrugs. “There's a possibility, but I doubt it. It's coming through secure channels. I'm assuming it's Reed –”

“Reed's dead, Forge.” Cable immediately notices their shock. “He was killed for being a traitor. His body's under watch. They're afraid Magneto will somehow come for it.”

“But he's not a mutant,” Nightcrawler seeps in before the others.

“He's children are.” Cable's sure that it's not Reed sending the messages, but he's not sure who would be giving them such valuable info. “The entire place is guarded by Red Hunt and SHIELD. They're ready for a mutant attack. Their last resort is an H-bomb that will blow the place sky high, kill a thousand soldiers and anyone in the tower. To them, it's worth it, so long as Cyclops is contained, and as far as they're concerned, with the weapons you gave Fury, his power is manageable.”

“But that's not true,” Forge was quick to interject. “The crystals we've seen are solidifications of his power, but they can't control him. If his power is truly infinite, then there's no way to truly contain –”

“That's why we need to find him,” Alex interrupts. Though his face is still pale from the news of Reed, he knows that there are other things – just as important - that he has to deal with. “If they attack Earth with their weapons as they are, they will destroy us. None of our tech meets these standards.”


“We have to get into the portal first, and for that we need all of the intel, Nathan.” Alex gives a cryptic smile as he draws out a map in the dirt. He lets Cable have the stick, and then Forge next, and together, he, Logan, Cable, Nightcrawler, and Colossus come up with their plan of daring do that will take down SHIELD and the aliens.

Across the lawn Bobby Drake watches with some consternation. He's not a cranky guy, or so he tells himself. He's a good team supporter, but watching them as they discuss their plans gets under his skin like nothing else. “He's too dangerous to bring back here,” he tells Kitty.

Sweating, tired from a day without coffee and under the pressure of rebuild, Kitty has few words for him other than to let it go, or let them do what they will. She's not in the mood for his antics right now. Especially not his jealousy.

“I'm not jealous,” he argues, his sights set on the roof where Pixie and Rogue nail in replacement rafters. It's a slow process, but a necessary one that they hope is finished before the next rain comes. “I just don't think he should be here. I think we should let him go, like we did before.”

“You mean when we thought he died?”

Though the funeral had been full, there had been few mourners at Cyclops' funerals. No tears, and other than the eulogy, no words of regrets or reminders of what the man had done for them. Instead, they was anger. Anger that he'd killed Professor Charles Xavier; anger that he'd started a war with the Avengers; anger that he'd started a war with the Inhumans. No matter what they did, they couldn't overlook his crimes, his past, how far off the path that he'd deviated. He was a villain, a monster, and no matter what he did – no matter how hard he 'fought for them' there was no forgiveness. Yet now – even after he'd killed half the world in some maniacal binge on power – attitudes had softened for him. Even Storm was beginning to regret her vow of peacefulness in the
face of the atrocities that he caused.

“He didn't have a choice,” Kitty glowers.

“Everyone has a choice.”

“Did you?”

It was the Death Seed that sent him over the edge. The need to kill, the need to prove. Of course he didn't have a choice, but Scott Summers was stronger than that, always had been, always will be. He was the first of them, the best trained, the most looked after. He was their leader – through thick and thin. He was the penultimate X-man, until he wasn't, and for that Bobby cried fowl. “I will quit the team if they bring him back here. I'm tired of staying up all night wondering when he's going to attack.”

“He wasn't attacking. He was --”

“We had to empty out the entire wing, Kitty. I consider that an attack.”

“When did you become so cold, Bobby?”

“Is that a pun?”

They worked together in silence after that, spreading grout and placing tiles. The entire place would be refueled with bright white marble flooring – the look of the original mansion and all of its glory. Though there are few that remember that look, how it spread out midst the rooms and parlors, the libraries and kitchens, Warren did remember and insisted on the flooring.

Bobby also remembered it, how grand it seemed when he was a kid. How beautiful, how luxurious. Years later, it would be replaced by hardwood and laminate, easier things to install and keep up with. But Warren was tired of the decay, of the continual diminishing of his childhood home. He wanted more than fake wood, he wanted what it was.

In other rooms, mutants worked with pale peach grass cloth, pasting its warm colors on walls. In other rooms, it was vibrant chevron wall paper, or coats of arms. There was paint and primer, things that recalled those early days when the X-men were unified and one in their mission – to fight for equality and peace.

Bobby misses those days, if he's honest with himself. There was a unity that he hasn't felt for years. Faction against faction, the constant strife between warring groups. To kill or not to kill. To banish or to keep sacred. It's harder now, the mission, since their split. Harder to keep track of who he's supposed to mad at and who he's supposed to accept wholeheartedly. But, Scott's never changed in that. He's never apologized, never admitted his guilt, never seemed upset over what he did.

He killed their dream. And yet, there are those that love him for it all the same.

Bobby Drake has never been in love. Never felt it. Never gave it. His life is one of hiding. For years and years, he kept up with the trends, tried to force himself into situations that would reek of normalcy. Lorna and Pearl, all those other women that his father should have been proud of. But, never in his life has someone looked at him the way that so many have looked at Scott Summers. Jean. Madelyne. Emma. Logan. Probably more than he knows, if he thinks about it. Probably a lot more.

The world loved Scott Summers as much as it hated him. And why? Bobby couldn't imagine.
He was a hard man to get to know, even as a kid. He was quiet, awkward, too ready with condescension or some rule that would show his authority. He avoided parties, chats, time away from responsibilities. As Logan had said so many times, he had a stick up his ass so far that he couldn't breathe without bending over. Yet, here Logan was fawning over him like he was the last man on Earth.

Since when was Logan gay? Or bi. Whatever the word was now. As much as Bobby had immersed himself in the lingo, there were still things he questioned.

Logan loved Jean. Mariko. Dozens of other women. His tales of mastery over the feminine sex were renowned. But here he was, more worried about Cyclops than he was a group of innocent children.

It made Bobby sick.

It made him envious.

Scott Summers had had enough love in his life. Enough people who saw through his stoic demeanor, tried to reach out to him, tried to make him feel loved and comfortable. There was no one like that for Bobby. Not one person every reached inside to delve out the truth about himself. If they had, then maybe he wouldn't have spent years in hiding. Maybe he wouldn't have wasted half of his life trying to appease those he thought normal.

“He's not gay,” he says in a fit of frustration.

One brow arched, Kitty looks at him with confusion. “What?”

“Scott,” he says. “Scott's not gay. Logan's wasting his time.”

“What's that got to do with you?”

“Everything.” It was just another reason to hate him. If the leader-man actually did return Logan's feelings, then it was just another notch in the hate tree. “If he hid himself--”

“Cyclops always hid himself--”

“From me--”

“From everyone.” Brows arched to center, Kitty looks at him with concern.

“It's not fair, Kitty,” he says with a sigh. “How come everyone loves him, but no one loves me?”

She cried when he finally confessed himself. For hours, days. She felt invaded, lied to, used. She'd slept with Bobby Drake – only the third man in her life. She took it seriously, but he'd been using her to hide himself, as he had all of his other women. But, she got over it. Her day and a half of Ben and Jerry's mixed with rom-coms and a few boo-hoos, and she left it behind, deciding that he needed her support, more than he needed her ire. She'd been there for him, as his friend, his confidant, but today, hearing this, she wants to simply slap him. “Love takes time, Bobby, and you tend to be impatient.”

He understands what she's saying, and indeed, in his heart, he knows that she speaks the truth. But still - “Scott Summers? I thought Logan hated him.”

“People change.”

“That much?”

“That much.”
It's not what he wants to hear. Whether it be the truth or not, Kitty's words does not soothe his soul. He'd rather she share his anger at their one-time leader; rather she curse and mumble about how the mutant is worth the genes he's printed on. But she doesn't. Instead, there is a grudging respect there. Be it her time listening to Rachel groan about her father's treatment, or her own thoughts, it doesn't matter. She's on Scott's side, not his. “He's wasting his time,” he repeats, hoping she agrees with him this time.

“It's his time to waste.”

He sees the pain in her eyes then, how they drift across the floor, her cheeks reddened, her eyes narrow. “I'm sorry,” he says at last, watching as she does anything to avoid eye contact with him.

“Don't be,” she says, still avoiding his gaze. “Your truth is yours. Let Logan's be his.”

Another long silence settles over them as they graze across the grout. Yes, he hurt her more than he realized. “You never looked at me like Logan does Scott,” he says quietly, looking up from his work.

“You never looked at me like that either.”

Swallowing down his anger and rage, he returns to his focus, and they work in silence until evening meal. Alex and his team are gone, off to save Cyclops and the kids, leaving him here to deal with things that he'd rather forget.

He hates Scott Summers. He wants Scott Summers to disappear.
The Savage Land

Chapter Summary

The mired Beast.

The scent of blood. Copper and wet. The kid was always bleeding. Wounded. So weak and eyeless, he lay on the bed, a simpering mess doing his best not to cry, not to shout out his pain. He was a stoic little fuck, never mentioning the pain, or the promise. It was a chore to get him to eat. Sabretooth had to shove the spoon in his mouth, make sure he swallowed after each bite. It hurt too much to eat, especially when they took his stomach, replaced it with a piece of plexiglass so they could watch it grow back, take measurements. They same they did with his lungs, his bones.

Observation. The word comes to him in his nightmare. Under observation. For observation. With observation. Along with the blood, the jars lined up on shelves filled with formaldehyde and the child's organs. The bones in the corner, standing up straight and tall into skeletons. The swathes of skin and hair – dried and leathered – all trapped in deep red jars.

“Eat or I'll shove it down your throat.” He held the kid's throat, that eyeless form, and forces open the child's jaws. There was blood on those claws. Anger in the words. He's going to kill him.

He wakes with a start, his fists pounding into the air and a growl within his chest. He wakes angry and tired – tired of these memories that act like dreams that keep him awake at night and interrupt his sleep. Mystique says that they're getting worse, that he howls in his sleep now, that he rips up the bedding. “We'll talk to Magneto this afternoon,” she said quietly as she picked up the remains of the blanket from the floor.

Coming back to his surroundings, he spies upon Beast still cowering in the corner of his cell. The blue behemoth lets out a mocking laugh before leaning back against the wall. “You deserve more than nightmares for all you've done,” he says and closes amber eyes.

It started with a hunch on Sabretooth's part, that the mutant captive was simply too at ease with captivity. He watched them too closely, hung upon their words. It was with that hunch that he unlocked the cell door two days ago, and yet the Beast remains their prisoner. “And yet here you are, free and clear, after everything you've done.”

Beast had committed his crimes – be it for the betterment of mutants or not, he had his follies. Messing with the time stream, his experiments upon the mutant genome as he tried to unlock the Scarlet Witch's spell. During dark times, he'd gone to dark places, and to Sabretooth, some of those places were worse than murder. “You could've destroyed the world,” he says, his blue eyes piercing the heart of amber.

He watches him carefully, those small movements of muscles – from the taut fingers that refuse to ball into fists, to the shudder of nerves over spine – Beast is any easy one to read. Mix that with Creed's enhanced senses – the rapid fire heartbeat, and the acrid stench of anxiety – and he knows without a doubt that Beast is worried about getting caught. “So, who are you working for?”

Heartbeat stalls completely, then jump starts into sporadic beats that dry out Beast's mouth. For just a moment, eyes widen and pupils dilate – a sign of shock. The moment fades quickly into the practiced
demeanor of the scientist, all facts and logic. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

Victor smiles. “You're no Cyclops,” he says. “That man is hard to read, but you? You stink like a thousand lies. So, who are you working for?”

Calmer now, more stern, “I told you. I have no idea what you're talking about.”

Creed's laugh is low, throaty, harsh, a snarl mixed up with some sort of malevolent glee. “You want to be here,” he says. “You're gathering info.”

An aggravated sigh, and Beast shrugs his shoulders. “If I had a choice --”

“You've had a choice for days, McCoy.” He crosses the room and touches finger to cell door. It opens without pressure. “So, tell me, who are you working for?”

In the distance, he can smell gardenia and sandalwood, Mystique's scent. She's listening to this interrogation, gathering up her own amount of info. Like Creed, she's observant. She's watching for clues, for tell tale signs of lies. “I'm working for no one --”

“Not one escape attempt since you've been here. Which means that you're exactly where you want to be, and what I want to know is why?” He can hear the heartbeat quicken again, along with another bout of anxiety. He's close to panic, barely keeping himself together. He stammers his answer, makes excuses for his lack of escape. He knows Magneto – knows that he'd never let him go until he got what he wanted. Hence, there was no reason to try the cage. He cites worries for the X-men, for the mutants of the Undertow. But, Creed shakes his head. “Mansion got destroyed two days ago. You would know that if you were in contact with them.”

Sabretooth should have expected the sudden kick to the jaw that he receives. Should have guessed that Beast – as docile as he seems – was an animal at heart. He grabs hold of blonde main and slings Creed's body into the wall, taking off at speed towards the exit. Creed yells for someone to stop him, warns Mystique that the behemoth is on his way, and then fades out of consciousness.

Beast is surprised when Mystique doesn't attack him, even more surprised when Magneto simply lets him go. There's something to it, something that they've done. A tracker or something, meaning that they're going to follow him. “I've been compromised,” he says into the small com hidden in the fur on his wrist. “No, don't come get me. I'm returning to the mansion. I'll figure things out from there.”

Through the Savage Land he runs, looking for a ship, a way out. There are plenty here – these ships. There's a whole grave yard full of Blackbirds somewhere on the western seaboard as much as the X-men have crashed here over the years. It won't take him long to get to them, and thank goodness, he's sure he can fix them.

Behind him he's positive that Creed follows, tracking his scent through the thick underbrush. Like himself, the feral mutant knows the Savage Land from experience, knows what lay at the edge of the mountains – those magnetized mountains that pull down ships from the sky and buries their carcasses in the rich deep earth. He wonders aloud of Sabretooth knows the shortcuts to get there, that way to surpass the rope bridges over the deep cut river, or evade the pterodactyl nests upon the eerie.

Cutting a path through the jungle, through the orchids and vines, he plunges himself into the deep waters of the river that slashes through the land. Cold for the year, it's waters spun from the snow of the mountains and the cooling, constant rain, he dives underneath the flow and out of sight, coming up some feet from where he entered. Again and again, he does this, not knowing if Creed is following or not, and not taking the time to look back.
He's weary – more from the constant loss of oxygen then from strain, but still he swims until he's miles and miles from the bunker. It's only then, when he feels that he's lost the feral mutant to the wilds that he stops and checks himself. Like a marsupial checking for bugs, he scans his fur for tracking devices, but he finds nothing other than the com.

McCoy does not remember being unconscious at any given time. No strange taste in his food, no dark liquids. If he were poisoned or drugged, he would know about it, and if he were beaten into submission there would be marks to prove it. “I have to lay low for a while,” he says into com. “Don't contact me. I'll contact you.” And with that, he breaks the tiny device and begins his trek again.

A day a half he walks to the edge of this strange land, and he finally finds the remains of the jets. There are eight in all, most still in good condition save for some engine repairs. He feels thankful, all of a sudden, that he'd spent those long hours with Scott learning to repair the jet. If he hadn't, then he'd be up a creek right now.

What he doesn't notice is the watcher on the hill, some feet up above him, glaring down through binoculars. Toad hates the silence that he's forced into, hates that he's out here in the snow, but it's better than being torn to shreds by Sabretooth. He listens to the quiet com chatter, and answers them in turn. “Yeah, he's here, and doing exactly what you thought he would.”

“Good,” Magneto replies. “Let the plan play out like we expect.”

Toad yawns and slinks his back to the rock, hunkering down and staying out of sight. It'll be a day or two before Beast will have the engines repaired, so in the meantime, he's simply stuck on guard duty. It's times like this that he wishes he had a cooler power – or at least a warmer one. Amphibians and cold air were never meant to mix.

It's evening before Beast stops his toilings, feels confident enough to build a small fire to warm himself up to. He snacks on berries and nuts, tinkers with the engine some more before hefting himself into the branches to sleep. If he's aware of Mystique and Creed watching him, he doesn't show it, but that's the problem with the animal-like mutants, they're mostly aware of everything.

“Tell me if he moves,” Mystique whispers into com, and Toad perks up, putting the binoculars to his eyes. He can see her shadow move through the camp – a deft, adept thing that trickles over spare parts and busted engines. It's a beautiful sight, not that he'd ever say so lest Creed bite his throat out, but from here, from this distance, he allows himself time to admire it before returning his focus to Beast.

“He's awake,” he says. “I think he smells Victor.”


It's hard to tell where Beast is looking from this far away, even through the binoculars. “He's looking straight at you. I think.”

“Creed, move in.”

It's only seconds before the sounds of a skirmish kill the silence of the night, as Beast pushes himself out of the tree and lunges towards Sabretooth beneath him. “Remember, he has to win, Creed,” Toad calls into com and then is greeted by the static of battle. And though he's supposed to go down, Victor refuses to make it easy on McCoy.

He swipes upward with adamantium claws, misses heart and chest by a hair's breadth. He gets
moved to the side by a mighty kick that breaks across his jaw, makes him sore, makes him angry. He can see the blood – his blood – that trickles out across the ground. “Let's have some fun,” he growls as Beast evades backwards, turns flips until he's safely out of reach. He takes up a mounting rod from one of the many engines that he's stripped and swings it wildly in the air. Sabretooth catches the free end of it, and pulls the Beast to the ground. “I guess there's a reason the X-men quit fighting, eh? If they're anything like you, they're full of sh--”

The foot to his face knocks him black.

“Best get out of there, Raven. Blue boy's done won the fight.”

He watches through the binoculars as Beast secures the feral mutant with metal cords and binds. He ties him up tight by both ankles and wrists, drags him to the far end of the field, which gives Raven enough time to escape. She quickly runs into the cover of trees, hoping that her scent is dulled by that of Creed's and disappears. Toad follows suit with a jump of his own, hopping back over the cliff and down into the warmth of the jungle where he belongs.

It'll be a long night for Creed, but Toad doesn't mind a bit.
Gun shots at ten a.m. It's a helluva sound. Rings out through morning Manhattan traffic, makes those cars stop in their tracks, look around for the guns, for the attack, for the next super villain that's come to take their city, drive them from their homes in a panic. They pull off the road, get out of their cars, flee to the safety of indoors, those little shops and cafes, banks and bail bondsmen. Sirens follow soon after – the police, the firemen, the medics. They race across morning rush hour traffic, barrel through red lights and green, seeking out the source of the trouble, of where the violence is happening.

They seek out Wolverine.

The grin on his face is a wild one, filled with seething and seeping. The blood on his claws drips down upheld wrists and splatters across the flesh of those he cuts. There is no stopping him from plunging his way inside the Baxter Building. Not by gun, not by knife, not fucking missile. He's ready to take the pain and dish it out in return.

Somewhere on the other side of the building, near the public entrance, he can hear the shouts and hollers of another dozen men scrambling to avoid the plague of Cable and his arsenal. He can hear the flash bombs explode and see the billowing rise of gray smoke as it climbs itself towards the sky. “I'd run if I were you,” he tells the young woman, her rifle raised and shaking in the air.

He can hear the Blackbird engines hovering somewhere above him, near silent to the masses, but with his enhanced senses, it sounds like the beating of hummingbird wings. “They're here,” he tells her, lunges forward and knocks her to the ground. The single shot she fires in her imbalances lodges between his ribs. It hurts like a bitch, but it doesn't stop him. “I told you to run,” he says before bludgeoning her with adamantium fist, knocking her out cold.

He moves onto the newcomers – a few dozen soldiers, fresh from breaks and outfitted with vibranium kevlar. Even those suits can't stop his claws, nor can the tasers that pierce his flesh and send jolts of electric through his bones. He's a good conductor, his skeleton made of metal, but he's used to pain. He thrives on it.

As they continue to beat him back with voltage and bullet holes, he can feel himself begin to slip underneath it all. The burgeoning of the animal. It floods across his senses, highlighting the threads of anger, of rage, that burst through veins and nerves, that steal away his self and his hope, and those things that make him steady. He fights it, this animal, this raging wolverine. He fights it and fights it, and as they clamor on top of him, as they kick at his face, his ribs, as they pierce him with bullets and spurn him with electricity, he loses himself to the manic pulse of the beast that looms within.

Crawling up from the busted concrete at the warehouse entrance, a low snarl pierces the air. Like bloody gravel, it gurgles inside his throat as his flesh begins to piece back together. Claws out, he whirls on heel, striking out at guns and weapons, lunging into the circle around him, forcing the soldiers to break their lines. He tumbles across one of the men, stabs him in the shoulder and with sharp teeth, bites down into cheekbone, ripping the skin from bone.
Wild eyed and rambling, his movements are drunk on the power that he feels, on the blood that cools across his face. He leaps one to another, knocking them down and tasting their flesh. Rabid, he laughs at their weakness, at their sheer stupidity in attacking him. He’ll kill them all. He’ll destroy them, if only for their own hubris. The soldiers, they scream as he tears them asunder, dislodges arms from shoulders, skin from muscle. He bites and claws and stabs and thrusts, and soon, they give him a wide berth, and bring out the big guns.

“Wolverine.”

A hydro-bomb, a powerful thing, developed some years ago, but never deployed. It’s a bomb with pinpoint accuracy, the power of a nuke condensed into but a few yards of damage. The men will die with him here, give their lives to stop the beast, to blow him to shreds. But they have to keep him here, keep him steady, make sure that he’s targeted, and with that in mind, they loom forward again, ready for another round.

“Wolverine, stand down.”

He hears the voice, but it doesn’t register. All he sees is the blood in his eyes, and the taste of it on his lips. He feels the pain as they burn him with alien guns, and shoot him full of shrapnel.

“I've got this, Wolverine. Stand down.”

Alex doesn’t have a choice but to mix Logan up in his destruction. He's well aware of the bomb, thanks to Nathan, and is more than aware of what they intend to do with it. A force like – targeted just on his friend – could kill him, or at least maim him for life, and that's not a risk Alex is willing to take.

The first blast of plasma heats across the soldiers, burning against their vibranium suits. It's a light burst, a warning to them to back off and leave well enough alone. The second blast is a targeted one, going for the mechanism of Wolverine's destruction. It curves across the metal base, piecing the cradle apart at the seams, and dislodging the bomb to the ground. It hits with a thud, and the soldiers drop to the ground, hands over head. “Target acquired. Nightcrawler, do your thing.”

A sulfur bamf, and Kurt Wagner ports from the heavens, and then returns above, the bomb in his hands. Cable can dismantle it, make it safe, proving their billion dollar idea nothing but a waste. But the beast does not diminish so easily. Setting his sights on the alpha, the most powerful among those on the ground, Wolverine squares off against Alex, watches his movements, sizes him up.

“Wolverine, this isn't what you want.” Alex had heard the tales of the animal within, had learned from his brother on how to deal with it.

“Make no sudden moves,” Cyclops told him. “He's looking to dominate you, to prove that he's the alpha of the pack. Any quick movements will give him cause to attack.”

“So, I submit?”

“No. Never submit. You do that, you lose his respect. He'll tear you limb from limb.”

“So, then what do I do?”

“Keep still. Remind him of who he is, bring back his self. He doesn't want to be an animal. That's the most important thing to remember. But when he's overwhelmed, he often doesn't have a choice. So just remind him of who he is, what he wants.”

Which was all easier said than done. Havok takes a slow, even breath, wills his heart to stop beating
so fast. He chokes down the fear, the bile, that comes from facing a killing machine, and speaks with a cool, controlled tone. “You're not an animal, Logan.”

He doesn't step back when Logan moves forward. Doesn't betray the fear that roils inside of him. Dry mouthed, he watches the beast slowly circle him, taking tender footsteps closer to the center of the circle. Gray eyes blister across the landscape of blood, taking in the scent of the feral breeze. He cocks his head to the right, pops his claws and puts his hand on the ground still trying to decide whether to fight or not. “You were never an animal.”

As the words sink in, Logan relaxes the tension in his hands and legs, eases upon his haunches, stares up to the much taller Havok, his focus solely on blue eyes. “I know you, Logan. You don't want to kill anyone.”

The words are foreign to his ears, but the tone – that calmness, that control – he recognizes it. He respects it. He knows that he's not the leader of the pack, that there's someone above him. He hears the words calm down. He knows those words. They quake against his furious thoughts, barrel deep into his nerves, clicking at switches. “You're not going to fight me.” He could though. He could kill, become the leader, become the head. He could pull them into directions that they've never sought. He could disappear them to the wilds, to the hunt, to track down those that would harm. “You don't want to fight anyone. Not like this.”

Healing wounds taste like copper in his mouth. A reminder of the damage, of the blood that's been spilled. “We're going to rescue Scott.”

Scott. The name pounds against his heart. “Yeah, that's right. Scott. We have to help him. We need you to do that.” In his head, he repeats the name, a sad little melody that plays out over the frantic race of his heart.

Alex kneels to the ground, holds out a hand so that Logan can see that he's unarmed. “We need you, buddy, so we can save him. We need to save Scott.” Wolverine sniffs at the proffered hand, the slow cooling of his senses at the scent. “Come on. Come back to us.”

“Scott,” he growls.

“That's right. We're going to see him.”

The dissipation of the beast is something slow, like a fog being separated by a cool morning breeze. It tingles down his spine, splashes out over his limbs. And when it breaks, when that fog finally concedes defeat, Logan comes back to himself. Gray eyes peer around the unconscious bodies in his surround, and then find Havok's grateful smile. “Thank goodness.”

He wants to apologize, but there is no time, not according to the renewed sound of gunfire. “Back to the plan,” Havok tells him, and the two rush forth into the mayhem.
Sue makes it home.

She sees the smoke first from far away, in the back of a cab, arm out the window. Then the rush of sirens, the police, the fire engines, the ambulances. Dozens of them, all heading west, towards the center of the small island. All heading to her home, where her children are.

“Ms. Richards?” Christopher Muse has seen the worst of humanity since he discovered he was a mutant. From bigotry to war, threats and actions, he knows that evil does lurk in the hearts of men, but he has also seen the goodness in them, and he sees the goodness in Sue Richards. So seeing her pale, seeing her jaw drop and her eyes widen as they drive closer to the smoking gun on the horizon makes him uneasy. “I can heal them, too,” he says with a lack of bravado.

“Might want to rethink your travel plans,” the cabbie says, eyeing the two in the mirror. “Heard the mutants are revolting, and the Avengers are on the scene. It's an all out war over there.” He's used to such things by now, living in Manhattan as he does. His life is filled with tales of run-ins with villains and super heroes. He knows all the names, all the costumes, and he doesn't live in fear of these things. “If I die, I die,” he chuckles. “But, that doesn't mean I can get you in the parking lot. Have a feeling it's going to be full.”

“As close as you can will be fine,” Triage replies, taking a glance at a still worried Sue. “And I'll pay double the fare if you get us there quickly.” The cabbie smiles and steps on the gas.

It still amazes the young Christopher Muse to see the superheroes in action. From the rampage of She-Hulk barreling across the road to wreck across a stalwart Colossus to the webs of Spiderman who keeps an angry Thor busy. He sees Daredevil and Black Widow, both rushing against soldiers armed with guns and alien lasers, and Cable with the arsenal on his back, holding his own against the onslaught of Hawkeye and Wasp. To him, they are figures out of stories, out of pages he read as a child. To realize that they are real, to realize that he has a stake in all of this makes him shudder with fear.

It wasn't too long ago that he was just a normal kid more worried about getting grounded for missing curfew than he was the world of heroics, but then his mutant power appeared, and since then, he's felt the weight of responsibility upon him. He's traveled the world, keeping the barest contact with Magneto – one of his mentors – healing those who find themselves in the midst of slaughter and disease. Which is why this still amazes him, this battle of heroes. Those that are supposed to stand as the examples to society, who should carry the moral burden that most of humanity refuses to shoulder. It makes him angry. It makes him sad.

Sue knows a way in that will avoid the battle. One of the mole man's tunnels leads to the basement of the Baxter Building. A few floors up and she should find her children and her dead husband. The entrance is an old manhole that leads down into the sewers. She apologizes for the smell, but Triage reminds her that he's seen worse, smelled worse, and that he's fine. He'll do whatever it takes to help her.

She regards him for long moments, the steel of his jaw and the sternness of his eyes. In her heart, she
thinks of Franklin and Valeria, hopes that she never sees that look upon them. Hopes that they're never so cold to death that it no longer phases them. “If you can't bring him back--”

“I tend to let death be death, as it should be. But, I owe Magneto a great deal, so I will do as he asks.”

She gives a slight, uneasy nod before pushing forth through the sewers. The tunnel is massive, bricked up and steadied by great pylons Reed built decades ago to keep the city from breaking apart. She can still see the tracks of the monsters that used to roam these corridors – giant things with claws and pads, bigger than the Fantastic Four put together. She remembers fighting these things, too, how long it took to forge a peace with Moleman, how in love he was with his creations.

Even from here, in the depths, she can hear the battle rage on. There are bombs above that shake the ground and send loose mortar plunking down into the stench of the water here. There are moments where the earth shakes, and she must stand still, lest she lose her balance completely and fall into the rancid flow. Triage – with his long legs and bulkier build – is having no better of a time than she is. He uses his staff to keep himself from falling face first into the sewage, but keeps his silence as they walk.

She reaches the end of the tunnel where a series of small metal rungs are pounded into the rock. Here, the pylons are the strongest, beneath the Baxter Building itself, as the equipment within made it one of the heaviest structures in the city. The sounds of fighting intensified, with the earth beneath their feet a dull rumble of shocks and quakes. “I'm sorry to put you through this,” Sue says, turning to look at the young man one final time before ascending. “But I need my husband, and so does the world.”

He nods his understanding, wishing to waste no more words or talk. They'll have to run once they breach the surface. Run, hide, fight. It has been years since Christopher Muse lifted a fist towards anyone, not since his training under Cyclops. He does not relish doing so again.

The brawl is worse than they had imagined while beneath the floor. Hundreds of soldiers have stormed the Baxter Building – Red Hunt, SHIELD, military. And scattered between them, fighting among each other are the Avengers and the X-men. “This way,” Sue says, beckoning Muse to the stairs where Ironfist battles a teleporting Nightcrawler. Kurt sees them, is surprised, but knows that they are not here for the fight. The gentleman that he is, he bamfs away taking Rand with him.

“Why must they always fight?” Triage asks, his bones weary.

“Because some things are worth fighting for,” Sue is fast to reply. They are fighting for the abducted children, their missing leader. They are fighting for freedom from the Red Hunt and a return to their way of life. “If they don't fight, then nothing changes. And right now, they need things to change.”

He knows as much. Even as he watches the Human Torch swoop down from the ceiling to tackle Luke Cage in a fit of flames and ash, he understands why they fight. He just thinks it's a shame that there is no other solution.

Using the brawl as a cover, they make their way to the fifth floor. A retinal lock guards the private quarters of the Fantastic Four, one that she easily passes. With a click of the door, she is home for the first time in weeks, and Ben Grimm is all too happy to see her. Lowering his fists, he scoops her up into a gigantic hug and quietly calls for the children.

Christopher Muse has seen reunions such as this before – a brother, sister, mother or father thought lost to the world suddenly up and walking again. It's reunions like this that make him glad for his powers, no matter how heavy a burden they are.
Chattering excitedly, relieved to see their mother alive, it takes the force of Grimm to usher Franklin and Valeria out from their mother's arms. He knows why Triage is here, what Sue is hoping for. So, slowly, with the kids perched upon his rocky shoulders, he leads the way to the sixth floor where the cryo-freeze capsule is waiting.

“Only three percent tissue degradation,” Sue says looking at the reports. “That's better than expected.”

“Zat mean he's frostbit?” Thing asks.

“No, just really cold,” she smiles. “It means his organs are still healthy and viable.” Taking a deep breath, she opens the chamber where her dead husband lay. The room fills with a cloud of chilled air, and with wide blue eyes, she looks to Triage. “He's all yours,” she says quietly and follows Ben and the children outside of the room.

It's like seeking a thread midst straw, a single piece of life, of hope. Closing his eyes, Triage places his hands upon the frozen skin of Reed Richards. For long moments, he studies the angular features – the slender jaw, the proud nose, the vacancy behind brown eyes.

The first time he realized the extent of his powers he had brought Cyclops back to life after a massive coronary seizure. The man had died on the ground, in the snow, but he'd found the thread – that sliver of life, and he made it grow. He wondered what kind of monster he was.

The last time he used his powers like this had been on a father of eight who had been the victim of biological warfare – a virus unleashed into the wilds of Africa, killing off half a village, including this father of whom the emergency workers relied on for translations. They begged him to help, and against his intuition, he did what they asked and brought the man back. He was shunned by his village, considered a pariah, a demon, and though it was his blood that created the vaccine the villagers took to avoid getting sick, he was cast out into the plains alone.

It wasn't the first time that life didn't bring what he imagined; how the end result of resurrection wasn't a happy and grateful family. And, he knows himself well enough to know that it won't be the last. Magneto calls him soft-hearted, he calls himself awake.

He immerses himself into the darkness of death, seeking out the damaged brain. The flow of blood and electrons, the waves of energy that supply the body with thought and oxygen. He repairs it, forces it to become whole again, and with a breath, he forces its function. He can feel it against his fingertips, the zing of neural pathways as they thrum back to life.

Tracing fingers down head to chest, he feels for the heart, how it's withered and cold. He sparks within it a warmth that carries through muscles and frozen veins, and with the power of his thoughts, he shocks it back to life. It's easy after that to find the necrotic tissue, make it pliable and bendable. To fix him, to return him to a state of function.

Exhausted, Christopher Muse falls to the floor, a heap of tired bones and wary thoughts. With large brown eyes, he looks to the cryo-chamber and then to the surrounding machinery, all blinking and green. For good or ill, he's done it. He's brought Reed Richards back to life.

Hours have passed since he sent Sue and the others away, since he began his journey into the heart and mind of Mr. Fantastic. He knows that he should tell them, but his head still spins with the effort, so he keeps himself still and just watches.

He'll walk soon. And talk. He'll have no memory of the afterlife, of the time after death. He'll remember the pain, though. How much that bullet to the head hurt. And, he'll remember the cries of
his family as they watched him put down. Those are things he'll never forget, even as he ages, even as he becomes old and decrepit, he'll never forget the sound his children made when he died.

He hears the door open, just a crack, and he turns to see Sue impatient in the doorway. “The machines,” she says as an excuse for her curiosity. “They're louder, steady.” She helps Triage from the floor and into a chair beside the monitoring station.

Quiet relief flushes against her features when she finally checks the readouts. Heart and brain function normal. Blood flow and body temperature normal. She looks at her husband and then to Christopher Muse with tears in her eyes. “I don't know how to thank you for this,” she sniffs. “What you've done today is a mira--”

“Don't make them fight on their own,” he interrupts. She tilts her head in confusion. “If the fight is really worth it, if saving the kids and Mr. Summers is truly worth that violence, then don't make them fight on their own.” He'd heard enough of the tale from Mystique, how the Fantastic Four had turned a blind eye to the plight of the mutants; how they'd worked with the Red Hunt to capture Scott Summers. “You've been given a second chance. Make sure you use it wisely.”
The battle goes on.

Chapter Notes

I've had the flu, so this chapter may not be up to par, but I'm seriously out of energy and can't seem to fix what's wrong, so here it is.

A week ago, Charles Xavier was murdered.

“We all know how bloody things can get when he's in a bad mood. I want teams on his tail twenty four seven. The first time he seems half cocked for battle, call it in, and get him back here.”

Daredevil had trailed him to Hong Kong. The Hand ran a shanty town there, fueled by illegal boxing matches and the sex trade. It was nothing compared to their other enterprises, but there were reasons the Hand refused to invest much here. Largely, it had to do with counterfeit drugs being run out of China. Every time the Hand put out a product, lo and behold, the product showed up in Beijing at three times the weight and less than half the cost. Their own drugs were being seized by the law, then cut with milk powder and other such things, then sold back to the public at a cheaper rate. The process was so rampant that the Hand couldn't keep up, so sold out most of it's drug leanings in the area, and stuck with the entertainment side of their ventures instead.

Logan knew he was there. As silent as he was, Murdock couldn't hide his scent. The older mutant just shook his head and rolled his eyes, waited those agonizing minutes for Matt to finally come forward. “Cap's worried about you. Afraid you're going to do something stupid.”

“Tell Cap to shove it up his ass. Ain't got nothin’ to do with him.”

“You're looking for a fight --”

“I'm looking for a fifteen year old girl named Ellie. She was kidnapped last night, and her mother didn't know who else to call.”

“Is she a mutant?”

“Does it matter?”

The battle was short and sweet, and the Hand was quickly overrun. The fifty boys and girls that they rescued were handed over to Hong Kong authorities for medical care and treatment, leaving Logan with nothing else to do but drink himself silly. “I'm sorry he's gone,” Matt said, hoping that breaking the silence would urge Logan to talk.

“He wants me to kill him,” Logan eventually said when three beers in. He switched to the hard stuff after that, drinking far too much but never showing the signs of drunkeness.
“Cyclops?”

“But, I want him to suffer. Long and hard. I want him to hate himself as much as I hate him. More even. More than the world. He can’t die until then.”

“We've all done our fair share of harm to others, Logan --”

“Xavier treated him like a son. He trusted him with everything. If I'd had a father even half so decent... He killed him, Matt. Xavier's gone.”

Logan didn't cry, just pushed himself further into the whiskey. “I thought I could trust him,” his voice rasped at the edges, barely escaping his pain-tightened throat. “I thought...”

“Logan, you can't think he meant to kill him. You can't think he's that vicious.”

“Scott Summers doesn't make mistakes, bub. He's told me that for years.”

He'd gone to Logan two days ago, gathered up those who had left the Hunt, offered themselves as fodder for whatever was needed. Of course, the mutants were suspicious – it was rare that the Avengers risked their public face to aid the mutants in their most troubled times. It was something they'd all expected, and something eventually overcome when Storm started putting them to work on the mansion. She needed all of the extra hands she could get, especially with the team leaving for space.

It took hours before they were trusted enough to be let in on the planning, and that was largely thanks to Natasha and her quick assessments about her teammates. Logan held her in an easier light than the rest, and once she proved trustworthy, the meeting opened up to the others as well. “You're really going to take on SHIELD? With just five of you?” Spiderman asked, half incredulous, have amazed.

“They have a solid plan, Spidey,” Natasha was quick to interrupt. “But, it'd be a little selfish to keep all the fun to yourselves. I owe Fury a face full of fist or two, if you don't mind a few tag-alongs.”

Daredevil offered to return to the mansion when the portal was freed, feeling that the children – still sleeping in tents on the lawn – needed extra protection. “I can make myself scarce,” he said. “Keep out of everyone's way.” The others also agreed, afraid now to interfere too much with the daily lives of their friends. And, perhaps that was for the best. Distrust still rang heavily in the quiet conversations around the sight, with the children afraid, and the adults angry at their sudden appearance.

“All this time, and they show up now?” Bobby had argued, wanting them thrown out. “This isn't fair, Storm.”

“Bobby, we need all the help we can get --”

“Not from them. Not from those traitors.”

“You're a traitor.” The words belong to Danny Rand, the Immortal Ironfist. He stands in the doorway of the warehouse, his fist lit up, and his body in fighting stance. He's a strong opponent for Daredevil, fast, agile. And he's angry, which means he'll be prone to mistakes.

Murdock listens to the surround, to hear the other battles being waged. Cable continues his assault on the front entrance, blasting away at those soldiers still loyal enough to come after him. Further on in the warehouse, within the perimeter of the portal, he can hear Alex threatening to use his mutant powers, and the slice and dice of Wolverine's claws. Nightcrawler clears a pathway for the
Blackbird, currently under Forge’s control, and Colossus takes on She Hulk in a never ending display of ridiculous strength.

“He killed Colleen. When he struck Manhattan, he killed her. She was gone, D. Completely gone.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” Matt says quietly, remaining very aware of Ironfist’s every move.

“She didn’t believe that it was him. No matter what anyone told her, she didn't believe it. She dated him, you know. Yeah, a big secret that was. Said he was too nice to kill people like he did. She defended him.”

“She's back now, right? She's okay?”

“Doesn’t matter if she's okay now. She died, and he could kill her again at any moment. He could kill any of us without even a thought. We're gnats to him, little insects to bat around and do with as he pleases. And yet, you're choosing to help him?”

“The Red Hunt is wrong, Danny. Surely, you've got to see that.”

The movement is sudden enough that it caught Matt off guard. Though he dodges the full force of it, he is still caught in the shoulder. The hit knocks him back several feet and to the ground. He lands with a thud, and is quick to scrape himself up from the tile floor and refocus his energies. Rand is in a fighting mood now, the blows will come quick. He has to be extra careful.

He blocks the flurry that follows, taking his own jabs when lack of defense allows. One to the stomach, one to the chin. He can tell that Danny is bleeding, though from this battle or a previous one, he isn't quite sure. “We don't have to fight,” Matt says quietly, hoping to gain at least a pause between the hits, but none come. Fueled by rage and adrenaline, Ironfist's assault rages on.

The gunshot comes from the right, a misstep on Daredevil's part, for not paying attention. He hears the hammer click and rolls himself to the floor, covering vitals with the thicker bones of his arms and legs. And though he avoids being hit, Ironfist does not. The bullet strikes between the ribs, the shrapnel shredding the veins and bones inside. He curses and falls to the ground.

Matthew is quick to lay Danny flat on his back, putting pressure on the wound while still under threat of gunfire. “Don't just stand there, get help,” he yells to the soldier. The young man simpers away, not sure what to do in the heat of battle. “I got him,” a voice says from behind.

He does not recognize Triage’s voice, having never met the young mutant before. He listens close to the boy's heartbeat, how calm it is midst the craze of battle. “You're a mutant, aren't you?” he asks.

Muse laughs in return, but does not give a direct answer. He can hear the soft whisper of the young man's power, how skilled his hands are as they weave through the energy, knitting together flesh and bone. “He's going to be fine,” he says. “I'll take him with me, maybe talk him into a cooler head.”

“Just be careful. He's not a big fan of your species right now.”

“Story of my life.” He can hear the smile in those words.

Taking a deep breath, he plunges himself back into the heat of battle, picking up soldiers that try to interfere with Colossus and She hulk. They’re easy to put down, unaccustomed to fighting superheroes as it is.

Muse watches for some time before putting Danny over his shoulder and carrying him off to the
elevator. The second floor med labs will be far more comfortable for the injured than the floor, and Sue is already waiting on him. “I don't know how many more we can fit,” she says, holding open the door.

“We'll fit as many as we can and then use the hallway, I guess.”

Already some of the soldiers are waking up from their stupors. Once armless or legless, they’ve been healed and are whole, but still, they want to fight. Thankfully, one look at Ben Grimm, and they grow quiet again. “You boys and girls are going to behave, right?” he asks, looking around the room for any sign of movement. “Told ya, Sue. They're gonna be good for ya. Ain't a one gonna make a sound.”

She knows that any minute, her husband will wake up. That he'll run a scan and search for her, that he'll find her here with the wounded. And though she would rather be at his side, with everything that's happened, she doesn't feel comfortable just letting it slide anymore. Yes, the road will be harder, but she can't let the mutants fight their own battles by themselves. She means to be their ally.
The Baxter Building

Chapter Summary

The battle continues.

“What—what was she like? Our mom.” He looked at the ground when he spoke, his body so still save for the slight tremor in his fingers that betrayed his nervousness.

The moon was out overhead, full and bright, crowding out the stars in the sky, but it offered no warmth on the chilly spring night. Not the like the fire which Alex stoked. “You've never asked about her before.”

He didn't take his focus from the ground. Though, to be honest, with his visor on, Alex couldn't really tell where he was looking. All he knew is that his brother seemed so small in the moment, vulnerable, that even a shift in the wind could knock him out of his seat. “I've only got a few memories of her myself, really.” He paused, studied his brother once again. “She liked pearls. We got her a strand for Christmas one year. Saved up our allowances and then Dad paid the rest. She was really happy. Never took them off.”

Scott listened to the small treasures, not interrupting once. She was a happy woman, with a quiet voice. Stern when she had to be with two energetic boys and a dreamer of a father. She was the organizer, the heart of the family, the pinnacle around which they turned. She was there to ground them when they acted up, to tell them stories when they lay to sleep. She took care of them when they were sick and cheered them on when reaching out for the stars. “She loved that plane almost as much as Dad did, I think. But, I think she just liked the idea that the two of you worked on it together.”

“I worked on the plane?”

“Yeah. You were out there everyday begging to help him with it, so he finally let you do some of the sanding and varnishing work. Mom was really proud of you.”

The words seem to strike him. For the first time, he looked over at Alex, his face drawn in wonder. “Really? She was proud?” His voice sounded too close to disbelief.

“Yeah, bro. She was always proud of you.” His brother looked back to the ground, his jaw clenched, his brow drawn tight to red lenses. “What's wrong, Scott?” He shook his head in reply. “Well, something's wrong. You're not this tense for nothing.”

“Just overthinking things,” he answered, a slip of smile spreading across his face. It was the ultimate leave-me-alone gesture. No more conversation would be had unless the subject was changed, to which Alex obliged, as he always did. “So, you and Jean are finally tying the knot, eh? Do I get to be your best man?”

He stands at the foot of Thor, and he knows doubt. As lightning crashes down from the ceiling, as the thunder god winds his hammers in order to strike, Alex Summers doubts his reason for being here, that he's good enough to lead these men and women. That he's as good as his brother. That he can do what he'd promised. But for his brother, he will try.
“Little man,” Thor speaks, his voice booming across the warehouse, “thou shalt feel my wrath if thou dost not move.”

He's not meant to avoid the hammer. He knows that he can't dodge it, and he knows – without a doubt – that the hammer can kill him. What he's counting on is the god not wanting to kill him. “There's a difference between capture and kill,” Natasha explained. “He's okay for the capture, as long as that's all it is. But the death – he won't stand for it. Unless its Summers. I think he's willing to kill your brother.”

“Half the world is,” Alex shrugged and went back to the plan.

He moves to the right, hoping that when Thor does pull his punch, that the errant shot takes some pricey machinery with it.

Above, on the platform overlooking the portal, Fury watches his chance of winning the battle slowly fade away. The attack was simply too well organized, splitting his forces into three fronts – the front entrance, the warehouse entrance, and the field where the Blackbird cordoned off those meant to support his already tired troops. He glares at Alex knowing that he's the one who planned this.

Thor throws his hammer. It effortlessly glides over Summers' shoulder, crashing into air guns in the rear. Twenty million dollars of research and development, another thirty million on production, and the air rifle is about as useless as a soda can. To make matters worse, the errant throw gives Havok plenty of reasons to not be afraid. He moves in, arms and chest glowing with his mutant power. He aims for the small ship that they mean to take beyond the void, destroying it outright before turning his plasma blasts upon Thor.

Thor is shocked to be attacked, that he left himself open for such a blow. To make matters worse, he struggles now with the telepathic involvement of Cable, who forces the god of thunder to his knees. “Just give up, Thor. Walk away from this,” Cable taunts, finally close enough to reveal the strength of his telekinesis on top of everything else. The god folds himself to the floor, hands splayed and digging into the tile, his nose touching rubble.

“Never,” he manages, but that is all he can do. That is all Cable will allow him to do.

It's time now, to finish the plan, and with a call into com, Alex brings the Blackbird forth, and the X-men quickly get on board. Before Fury can blink, the ship is gone, flying blind through the portal. “Get me a ship!” the Commander yells, “Get me a fucking ship and Carol fucking Danvers!”

“Sir,” a wounded soldier approaches. “Maria Hill.” He hands Fury a cell phone.

“This is a traceable line, Lieutenant. You better --”

“It's Magneto,” she said. “He took out our com relay. This is the only way I have to reach--”

“You've been attacked?”

“Not just us, sir. Six of our bases are running at half power. The casualties are in the hundreds. Magneto's raised himself an army.”

“Shit.”

“Your orders, Commander?”

Nick shakes his head and once again looks over the destruction of the warehouse. Today just isn't his day. “Get cleaned up. Send any extra personnel to the warehouse. We've got a situation to deal with
here as well. And send Danvers down here. We need her piloting skills.”

“Over and out.”

He turns to the scientists, somehow unharmed midst the fray. He orders them to pilot the telescope back into the dimensional rift, to find where the X-men have gone. “Track them. Keep me posted.” And then it's to the troops who have suffered a fantastic loss against the mutants and the heroes that are now clamoring out of the building and off to unknown places. “I want that mansion under watch twenty four seven. I want to know exactly who’s there at any given time. If Storm and her crew have anything to do with this, I want them arrested on the spot.” He also orders ONE to be contacted and any other government agency that's had it's fill of the mutant species. “I want to know what they're planning next.” To the rest, he simply wants this mess cleaned up. He's tired of losing. He's tired of being behind, and he's damn tired of looking at this waste of good material.

At the controls of the ship, Forge types in their course through the dimension, the ship swerving right in hopes of soon catching up with the kidnappers. “Everyone buckle up,” he says, quickly turning over his shoulder to make sure the team is listening to him. “I'm hitting the boosters.”

Wolverine lights his cigar and gives Forge the nod. “The faster we get there, the sooner we get everyone home,” he says just as the inventor hits the button. The ship jolts forward, pushing them all back into their seats. Forge laughs at the speed, exhilarated as the stars become long white lines in the windows around them. He looks to Logan who does not share his enthusiasm.

The ship soon settles into a rhythmic speed. Between that and the automatic sensors, it adjusts its path to avoid collisions from stars and meteors, space junk and the like. Forge settles back with a beer that he pulls from under his seat. Logan gives him a raised brow. “Cyke never would have allowed this,” he says, “So, I figure, we'll have at least a go at it until he's back.” He passes the beers around, lifts up a toast for Alex and a plan well thought out. “Always knew you had it in you.”

Alex says nothing, just takes a sip of beer and focus on the speeding space outside the windows.

He rarely dug into his brother's childhood, the mess of memories that even Xavier couldn't fix or the nightmares that went along with it. And he'd heard them, in the middle of the night, his brother begging a wraith of an assailant to stop and leave him alone. By morning, though, there was no fear left. No reminder that his brother was as human as anyone. “Coffee?” he asked, holding up the fire-brewed pot.

“Sure,” Alex nodded, climbing out of his tent and across the snow dusted ground. “Did you know it was going to snow?” he shivered.

“Why do you think I picked this weekend?” Scott took a long sip of the brew. “Last snow of the season. Figured we'd better get our kicks in while we could.”

“Our kicks?”

“Ice fishing. We used to do that, right?”

“We also trained for polar bear swimming. That doesn't mean I'm going to strip naked and plunge myself into the frigid river.” Scott smiled – a rare thing that took Alex aback. “You remember that, don't you? You remember polar bear swimming!”

“I'm not sure,” he replied. “Maybe. Just us in the water. Your lips were blue.”

“Hey, so were yours.”
“We were happy.”

“Yeah. We were happy.” Alex takes another sip, still smiling. “I'm glad you remember that. It's one of my favorite memories.”

“It's a good memory to have.”

“Us Summers brothers have to stick together. I still believe that, you know.”

“So do I, Alex. So do I.”
The Blackbird

Chapter Summary

A rescue mission.

The rescue is fraught – a broken ship and a teleporter jaunting back and forth between the escape pod and the Blackbird. Kurt doesn't like porting where he can't see. It's too easy to get trapped inside walls or doors or somewhere else. He especially doesn't like taking the risk with others in his arms, but he has no choice. They're running out of oxygen, and the children are unresponsive.

One by one, he takes them to the Blackbird where he refills his lungs and jaunts back for another one. He considers, for a moment, on breaking his vows to never take a life, to let Tony Stark suffer here and die, but his beliefs are too strong and they win out in the end – much to Logan's chagrin.

They were shot at, their engines ruptured and their life support on minimum. It was all Tony could do to send out a distress signal on that alien panel before he fell unconscious like the children. There is worry that they're hypoxic, that their brains have suffered with lack of oxygen, and certainly, they are cold.

Stretching them each out on the floor of the Blackbird, they are wrapped in emergency blankets and between the six of them, they are oxygenated by mask and tank – at least until Alex is sure that they are breathing on their own. “I can't believe they escaped,” he says quietly.

“But Scott is not with them.”

To save the children was half the goal, and that's something that Alex has to appreciate regardless of where his brother is at the moment. And, he allows himself to briefly feel the relief of their safety, taking a deep breath and exhaling. “Your brother never would have done that,” Logan muses, a half smile clipped across his cheek.

“What?”

“Let himself relax. I think it shows how much more centered you are.”

For someone to actually realize that he's not his brother is a compliment on its own, in a way. For them to applaud him for something he does differently sends a shiver of nerves down his spine. Sometimes, for Alex, that shadow is a comfortable place to be, and stepping outside of it – for someone to acknowledge that he's different – makes him feel as if he's on display. “Yeah, well, Scott always was wound tightly. Even as a kid.”

Logan can't imagine the mighty Cyclops as a child, though he's sure that the kid ate all of his broccoli. Alex shakes his head, his memories of the time fuzzy, but yes, he's quite sure that Scott ate his vegetables. “Anything to be stronger,” he said. “Anything to prove that he was strong.”

Stark stirs under the crinkling weight of foil cover. Alex is quick to put a hand against his shoulder to keep him laying down and out of the way. “We got you,” he says. “Your safe now.”

“Scott,” Tony groans. “He's going to explode. We have to get out of here.”
Alex and Logan eye each other for long, tense moments, both believing and not believing Tony's words. They know it's possible, but he'd been so much more grounded in recent days, so much more controlled. “He's going to fight it as long as he can,” Alex eases and shoves a thermometer in Stark's mouth. “Besides, there aren't any places to run. He can wipe it all out according to Strange.”

Another attempt to rise is thwarted, this time by Logan who bares a single claw pointed towards his forehead. “I'd lie still if I were you, bub, and start telling us what's going on and why the hell you left him behind.”

“It was his plan,” Tony coughs, hoping that Logan truly doesn't stab him. “He wanted us to leave without him. He's having a hard time controlling his power.” He explains the hole in his chest, the wires and cables that are welded onto bone, how they plugged him into the mainframe. “I think it's his power that runs the ship, maybe an entire fleet.”

Forge isn't surprised by Ironman's revelations. He'd posited as much when he studied the weapons. “He's an infinite source of energy, and this dimension appears to know how to use it.”

“No.” He caught glimpses of their war machine, of the ships and weapons and other things that sent chills down his spine, but no concrete proof that Scott is powering an arsenal of any kind. “But I have a feeling that's what he suspected. He wanted us out of there.” Stuffed into the plate armor on his chest are Sliver's drawings – the relays, the screens, the maps. He marks a few more things himself before finally shaking his head. “If you plan on invading, you need more guns than this. You're not nearly strong enough to take them down.”

“All we need to do is get on that ship, get my brother, go home, and then figure out how to close the portal behind us.”

“You see, that's the thing. They're controlling the rift. They can close you inside if they wish. Keep you trapped here forever.”

“Yeah, but we're X-men. It's hard to keep us trapped anywhere for long.” If anything, Cable can bodyslide them out of the dimension, back to their proper place and time. “Can you reach out to him yet?”

Cable closes his eyes with concentration. The strain of seeking out his father in the vastness of space draws gray brows down and tenses his mouth into a long, tight line. It's a tenuous thing to concentrate like this, to expend so much energy in the search. A drop too much and he'll be eaten alive by the techno-organic virus that threatens him every minute of every day. A drop too little, and he'll simply overlook the mutant somewhere in the depths. It's like an echo of a seed, dwindling and twining. It wraps itself around his thoughts, pushing back against his interference. “We must be close,” he says at last. “I can feel his pain and his wavering control.”

“He was hallucinating the whole time,” Stark reveals. “I'm surprised he had the wherewithal to come up with a plan, much less one that worked.”

Logan knows it's dangerous for Cable to be so near to Cyke's mind – the draw of his power being what it is, but he also knows that things can't be left as they are. “Can you calm him down from here?”

“I can try.” He admits that he'll be able to do very little, but if he can offer even an ounce of solace, then he will. If he feels the tug of the power, he'll withdraw, but otherwise, he'll stick with his father until they reach the ship in a matter of hours. Until then, it's up to Alex to plan their way into and out
of the ship, hoping they don’t get caught up in a fire fight like the escape pod did.
Chapter Summary

Jean and Xavier discuss their greatest mistake.

He placed his hand upon the wall, his body so weak and limp with pain. Gone were his lungs, and in their place, a large piece of clear glass that stifled the regrowth of skin and bone. It was all for science – his missing ribs and organs, the hole in his chest, the absent ear and left eye. He was still bleeding. Days into it, the blood still gushed from the wounds, and his bandages constantly had to be refreshed.

“Jean?” his tiny voice eked into the darkness. He was little more than seven now, and all he endured, he endured for his brother so that he could be reunited, so that his brother would stay safe. “Jean?”

Right on cue, she answered his call, leaning her head against her bedroom wall. “Hello, Scott. How are you today?”

“How are you?” Her child's mind didn't notice the lack of answer, instead embarking on her day's journey from her mushy cereal this morning to the playground after lunch. Today, she read a big kid's book all by herself, and Darren Woback pulled her hair on the bus. “Boys,” she grumbled. “The world would be a lot better without them.” Realizing what she said, she quickly backtracked, “Except for you. You're a nice boy.”

“You're a nice girl,” he breathed, containing a bout of biting pain between clenched teeth. She asked him what was wrong, if he was okay. He sounded like he was hurt. “I'm okay,” he told her and asked her about dinner with her family.

She spared him no detail – from how good the lasagna was to the chocolate cake for dessert. “Chocolate's my favorite,” she said. “What's yours?”

He thought for long moments. “I don't remember cake.”

“How can you not remember cake?” she giggled, but it was the way with him. So many things he didn't remember. She asked to see him, thinking that maybe they could go to the playground together. She'd bring him a piece of cake. He laughed politely in response – more of a chuckle than a guffaw – and asked her about her homework.

Jean could chat for hours to the wall, something her parents were increasingly disturbed by. Though she told them a million times that she was talking to Scott, they just didn't believe her. Not even Professor Xavier – the man in the wheelchair who came to visit her once a month to check on her 'progress' or so he called it – believed her. He insisted that the imaginary friend would go away in time and that her parents shouldn't worry. She tried dozens of times to convince him that her friend was real – even go so far as to tell them about the orphanage where he was being kept – but to no avail.

“I thought he was simply the product of an overactive imagination,” Xavier says as they walk along the beach. “It was years before I realized he was real.”
“You took my memories?” Jean asks.

Xavier nods. Something had happened, something that had scared her. “You were frantic, talking about ghosts and werewolves. I feared permanent damage to your psyche, something I wasn't willing to afford.”

“Because I was like you?”

“Because you were like me.” He admits it now, his fascination with her. That there was another with talents like his. He felt a kinship with her, far more than he did with his other students. “It's an incredible thing to realize that you're not alone in the world.”

They talk like this now, as if their lives have come to end. As if there is nothing left for them in this world, and it makes Jean sad. She used to feel so vibrant, so full of life, even when she was dead. “He has every right to hate us,” she speaks quietly while looking down at the coming tide.

“Yes.”

And in a sense, their lives are over, at least what they knew of them. They are no longer those enviable heroes with a clear sense of right and wrong. Their names have been tarnished, and their merit called into question. Their need for power has brought the world to its knees.

Jean knows that if she asks, that if she talks to Ororo, she'll be allowed back with the X-men. Storm, Iceman, Beast – they'll forgive her anything. They will understand her need to protect, to do whatever it takes to keep friends and family alive. But Logan won't. She could wait a thousand lifetimes, and his trust in her will never return. “It's better if he dies,” she says, darkly, with remorse.

Blue eyes look up from the white-washed sand for the first time in an hour. He looks to her first, studies her bright green eyes before looking up to the clouds in the sky. “Logan's not going to kill him,” he replies matter-of-factly. “Neither will Alex.”

“Captain America might, if he's pushed hard enough.”

“And you're going to push him?”

“I thought we both could.”

He smiles, a broad, toothy grin that is near reminiscent of his former self than he'd like to admit. It's a smile out of place on Phantom X's smooth jaw, but one right at home on the former headmaster's face. “And tarnish one of the world's greatest heroes? He'd never forgive himself.”

“The world's in danger, Charles. It's our job to save it.”

“When did we lose our faith, Jean?” he asks, staring out at the waves. They're slow, but rising with the morning tide. They'll have to go soon, evacuate this part of the beach, clamor back up to the house on the hill, sip their brandy from glass tumblers and watch the rest of the morning float by. He's not opposed to abandoning this conversation, but Jean is intent. “When did we choose to give up?”

“When we realized how powerless we are in the scope of things.” For all their might, singular or combined, the two are nothing in comparison to Cyclops. “We're just specks,” she continues, her green eyes cast to the damp sand at her feet. “But we want to be more. We want to be enough to protect the world.”

“I don't think we need to worry for long,” he says quietly. “The Phoenix will destroy him, as is her
wont.”

“The Phoenix is in love with him. She'd rather --”

“You felt it just as I did. It's trapped inside his mind. It will do whatever it takes to be free again, even if it means tearing him to shreds.”

Wincing at the thought, Jean bends down to pick up a piece sea glass from the beach. Opaque violet, it's scratched white surface is smooth and chunky, its sharpened facade dulled by years tumbling within the turmoil of the ocean. In many ways, it reminds her of her husband, how the years of psychic manipulation had left him cold and distant, not nearly as sharp for human contact as he had been as a child. “Logan will save him,” she says, stuffing the glass into the pocket of her jeans.

“You always did have too much faith in him.”

“That faith comes from love.”

“Oh, so you were in love with him? You finally believe me?”

She smiles. “Of course, I was in love with him, just as I was Scott. Though the choice between the two was easy.”

“Would you have still chosen Scott if he were powerless?”

She doesn't have the answer to that. She likes to think that her love of Cyclops came from how well they knew each other. They were, after all, best friends, and she could tell him anything without fearing his judgment. But she'll never truly know if he would have chosen her in return. Not now. Not with Logan in the mix.

Back up to the house they silently walk. Each one contemplating the things that must be done. Over brandy they discuss the weight of the world a little more before once again returning to the subject of Scott's death. “If Logan fails, then it will be up to us. You realize that, right?” Xavier's gaze is harsh.

“Doesn't Emma control the switch? The failsafes that can turn him off?”

“She left her mark on it, yes, but with the two of us together, we can override her.” Charles sips at his brandy, relishing the burn of alcohol. He was never allowed to indulge like this when he was leading the X-men, so to do so now is something that he takes great pleasure in.

Jean, however, is more concerned about their plans. She gulps her drink down to steady her nerves. “Emma might be willing to cooperate now that he's out of control.”

“Emma has gone the way of Sinister.” Jean raises a brow to Xavier's admission. “She has other plans for dear old Scott, plans that don't include death.”

“Well, that's an interesting turn of events. She'll cause problems for us then, if Logan can't keep him under control.” Jean thinks back to her nemesis, how hard she fought to keep the telepaths at bay when she finally got Cyclops under her wing. For years, Jean had to hide her presence in that mind until she finally had the strength to come back. “And what do you know of Sinister's plans?”

“Not much, I'm afraid. The man is as mysterious as ever, but it can't be good.”

“No, it can't be good. One of us will have to go back if he decides to interfere.”

“You will have to go back, you mean. My days of superheroing are over, Jean. The world is no
longer mine to save. Unless it comes to fixing my greatest mistake, then I will make an appearance.”

That both of them consider Scott to be their greatest mistake is very telling, or so Jean thinks. That, for as much as they both came to care for him, their need to damage him for the sake of power had always been paramount. “I don’t know if I can handle Sinister on my own.”

“You'll have to try, my dear. You'll have to try.”
The Alien Ship

Chapter Summary

The rescue in progress.

Mimicking the alien language was no small feat for Forge, but he managed to convert the Blackbird's system into something akin to the other ship's, and before long, the X-men are docked inside the belly of the beast trying to remember their way around. Sliver's maps are of great use, but they're not complete, so the team must still stumble their way through the long corridors and hope that they don't get caught.

His senses on overdrive, Wolverine crouches at the edge of the doorway, his head tilted to the right and his claws almost fully extended. They're here, the aliens. They know that they've been invaded. They know that they're here to rescue Scott.

At the mansion, they'd been overwhelmed by the techniques and weaponry of the aliens – from the heat guns to the lasers, they'd been unable to cope. But Forge had been fast in adapting the weaponry for their own personal use. From heated spears to uncanny guns, the X-men are outfitted for war.

Logan motions for the rest to stay quiet as he counts out the enemies waiting outside the door. He counts at least eight – which isn't many considering how many are on the ship. The X-men take their positions to either side of the wall, their weapons drawn, their breath held. Slowly, Logan tips his hand against the door, letting it creak open to reveal their waiting enemies.

The fight is immediate, with the aliens blasting their heat guns into the air, trying to burn and solder the waiting fighters. Kurt bamfs from one place to the next, sending the aliens into a flurry of nonsensical movements. They twitch their guns to the right and left, aiming and misfiring again and again. It sets Alex up for a take down as he brandishes his own heat gun against the belly of an alien, while Colossus pins another to the wall, choking the oxygen from his system. Cable – front and center with his futuristic guns blazing – plows through any number of knees and elbows, trying to keep his violence to a minimum.

Logan stabs one through the guts – his claws coming out blood red and purple with ooze. The alien staggers back on haphazard feet, falling against an array of buttons. Taking a deep breath before he falls unconscious, he hits an alarm, and suddenly the whole room is lit yellow and red. “Shit,” Logan curses and wide-eyed turns to Alex.

“Nightcrawler!” Alex calls into the sudden roar of footsteps out in the hall. “You and Logan go find him! Cable, it's your turn, bro.”

Sometimes they forget that they are family – uncle and nephew. So different they are, raised so far apart that it's hard not to see Nathan as the grizzled warrior and Alex as the upstart. But, here he is acquiescing to the younger one's commands and hefting a missile launcher onto his shoulder.

Forge had the good fortune to look at the thing before they left. His few experiments on the crystallized crimson energy from the Red Dimension had yielded promising results as far as weapon deployment went. Rather than just a heating rod, he managed to create an energy launcher that would burn a hole in damn near anything it hit. It's only drawback was the kick, something Forge
swore would send Cable flying through the air if not properly grounded by Colossus.

Piotr steadies himself, pushes his steeled arms into Cable's back and holds on tight to the vest he wears. As the room fills up with aliens the others are pushed back to the sides, leaving Nathan plenty of open space to pull the trigger. The missile shoots out with an incredible boom, heaving forward through the air, melting the stone-hard flesh of the aliens. They scream and writhe in pain, drop to the floor in their agony before passing out. Dayspring smiles, a wicked, crooked smile. He likes this gun very much.

Scrambling through the door on purple smoke and sulfur, Nightcrawler bamfs into the hallway with Logan in his arms. The feral mutant is too heavy to teleport for long chains, so the fuzzy elf drops him to the floor, and together they enlist their own battle against the rushing aliens.

Wolverine – though his claws are sharp enough to cut through the stone-thick alien hide – does not go for the kill, much to Kurt's admiration. From the ceiling, latched onto the grates that that they will soon crawl into, he watches as Logan pierces the skin in non-vital areas, injuring but not maiming.

White gloved hands work quickly to dislodge the metal cage on the oversized duct work, twisting and prodding the screws that keep it together. “Wolverine,” he says, porting down to the ground with a mighty kick to alien stomach. “You'll have to cut it open.”

Logan looks up to the grating, so high above his head and smirks. A rush of claws to alien shoulder, spun down to cut at ribs, and he waits for Kurt to port him up to the ceiling where he rams his claws into the metalwork overhead. Three swipes it takes for him to cut open the cage, and with a final smile down to Kurt, he crawls into the ducts on hands and knees.

They know their way from here – through the maze of cooling vents. A right up ahead, and then another, brings them to the emptied navigation room now ablaze with red and yellow sirens. Through the slats, they can see the rush of aliens and their weapons down the corridor, and though it's tempting to dislodge themselves from the ducts, Nightcrawler reminds his friend that they have other work to do. “We have to rescue Scott,” he says quietly and motions for Logan to continue on.

They don't know what to expect, what they'll see. From the last memories Cable was able to share from Stark's mind, Cyke looked like shit – the dearth of his energy a red fog emanating around him, his mind in turmoil. Logan's stomach turns at the thought of it, that once again, Scott is drowning inside his shattered mind, seeing the ghosts of things that aren't there.

It had been a quiet mission. The two had barely spoken during the forty five minute trek through the forest, just walking and listening for the sounds of vehicles and the click-click of guns. Mutant experimentation. That was the rumor surrounding the old compound once used for Basic Training and other military activities. The place had been rented out by Yurin Enterprises, paid up for a year according to intel, and the authorities seemed to look the other way.

They were approaching from the surround in teams of two – Jean and Jubilee, Gambit and Rogue, Scott and Logan. Cyke was strict on com silence unless evidence was found, and forty five minutes in, nothing untoward was seen. “We need to get in there,” Scott said quietly staring at the line of supply trucks filtering in through the front gates. “We won't find anything out here.” And before Logan knew it – before he could grapple the guy and put a stop to his inane plans, Cyclops was on the move, hiding himself underneath one of the stalled trucks. Wolverine followed suit, climbing up into the engine rack, a white-knuckled death grip on the spinning axles. In all, it was an impetuous move, but a genius one at that. Even the dogs couldn't smell them over the stench of engine grease and whatever else they carried in the back of the trucks.

Once parked, Cyke slithered off into the shadows and waved for Wolverine to follow him. The
hallways were long and dark, filled with the offense of anesthetic and the quiet, muffled sounds of
mutants being operated on. Opening one of the doors, Summers froze in place, his mouth open, his
breathing stuttered. An entire workshop of mutilated mutant parts – arms and legs, jarred organs and
skeletons. His hands began to shake; his jaw began to tremble.

“Slim?”

There had been no answer, then, but a psychic call to Jean – who was still outside the compound
waiting to get in – and Scott was back to himself within moments. “You okay there, big guy?” His
question was once again met with silence. “Hey, bub, what happened to you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You freaked out back there.”

“Where?”

At the time he thought that Scott was being an ass, playing up his stoicism and unbreakable facade.
Acting like perfection. He’d growled, shook his head, moved forward in their efforts to rescue the
mutants, and they never spoke of it again. It's only in hindsight that he realizes it was yet another clue
in a long line of them that pointed to the man being attacked from the inside out.

It takes time – more time than the two would like – but they eventually come to the mainframe room
where Summers is being held prisoner. Just like in Stark's memories, Scott hangs from the machine,
connected to the host of blinking lights and rhythmic sounds by wires and cables welded through his
bones and into a giant metallic ring at the center of his chest. His forehead sweat damp from
concentration, a fog of red energy emanates around him signaling that he is indeed losing the battle to
the hurricane in his head.

Nightcrawler ports them to the cage and hangs to the back so that Wolverine – immune to Cyclops'
vast powers – can get close enough to calm him down. “Slim?” There is no reaction at first, merely
the mumbling of numbers and the pleas for it to stop.

It's a hard thing to know that he still wants to die, that he plans on dying, that his whole mind is bent
towards that single fact. He reaches out through cut bars, grabs the hand that hangs limp inside of the
machine. His skin is hot, burning up with the Phoenix who longs to be free of the nightmare.

“Scott?”

His hand seizes upon Logan's, the long fingers curling around his own, squeezing tightly at the
sudden intrusion upon his addled dreams. “Logan?” he sobs, his voice cracking with fear.

“I'm here, Scott. I'm real.”

“No, no, no, no, no,” he rushes, his face a picture of agony and defeat. “You can't be here. You can't
do this.”

“We're here to rescue you, Cyke.”

“No. They're going to kill me. I can't control it. I can't stop it. Please, let them kill me.”

Wolverine's soft smile fades into worry. Gray eyes glance back to Nightcrawler who whispers a
gentle prayer, crossing himself with pinched fingers. “Scott, they're going to use you to kill others,”
he explains. “They're going to use your power to go to war.”

Scott inhales – a deep, sharp breath that cuts across his ragged sob with searing pain and fear. The
ache is all that keeps him in check, the only thing that stops him from losing himself to the storm inside his head. “Please, Logan. Make it stop.”

The red energy puffs out, corroding across the mainframe. It eats away at wires and cables and the steel ring welded into his chest. He's immobile, for the most part, his spine cut away to make room for the metal in his chest, so when it bursts, when the shackles that chain him to the machine breaks, he falls uselessly to the floor in a heap of red fog and pain.

Logan calls his name, then looks to Nightcrawler once again. The fuzzy elf grabs hold of his shoulders and ports him a safe distance from the madness, and Wolverine slowly stalks forward. “Scott, I need you to calm down.”

“Make it stop, Logan,” he pleads, the red energy beginning to wear away at the floor beneath him. “I can't control it. I can't do this.”

As the red energy begins to spur out of control, Logan does the only thing he knows. “Er dogren,” and instantly, Scott is out like a light, the red energy suddenly dissipated. Sadly, he picks his friend from the floor, inspects the damage. He's not free of the mainframe completely, of the the things that connect him to the machine. Still, there are long metal spools that run between his broken ribs and spineless chest and into the crevices of the giant computer. Wolverine cuts away at them, slashes open what he needs to in order to free the man, and stares for long moments at the silent form. Picking him up from the floor, he hands the taller mutant to Nightcrawler who ports them both up to the ducts, and slowly they make their way back to the ship.
The Alien Ship

Chapter Summary

Mission accomplished, or is it?

A plasma blast strikes against a hoard of aliens pushing them back against the walls and singeing across gray skin. An elbow to the soft of jaw, hands under shoulders to throw another across the room. Alex realizes that even with their improved weaponry, they are overwhelmed. Into com, he tells Forge to start the ship – they won't be able to hold out much longer, and he just prays that Nightcrawler and Logan make it back in time with his brother.

The missile launcher lays in shambles on the floor, destroyed by a clever alien tactic that burned holes in the barrel, but Cable isn't out of the game yet. He telekinetically holds the aliens in the door, keeping them from progressing forward while Colossus uses a heat spear to take out their legs and arms. If they can't walk, they can't fight, and soon the bodies pile up, making it harder for the aliens to enter.

But, the aliens are crafty and they know their ship. A blast through the rear wall opens up another front in the battle. “Fall back!” Alex calls, beckoning them to the previous room, one that's still defensible. One by one he ushers them through the door and watches the hallway carefully for purple smoke and the smell of sulfur. When there is none, he fights his way into the other room, sending out a plasma blast that nearly wipes out his energy. Without the sun, he's wearing out fast, but luckily, Cable came equipped with his arsenal and throws Havok a rifle equipped with a red crystal and plenty of energy.

The feel of a gun in his hand is odd and not something he wants to get used to. He feels violent, enraged, a killer. It's so easy to pull the trigger, to not think of the consequences, as if the battle had somehow become impersonal. He continues to blast away, however, despite the disgust that he feels in his actions. “Cable, can you find Nightcrawler?”

Practiced telepathic tendrils reach out through the chaos seeking the threads of Nightcrawler's consciousness. It's a placid mind that Nathan looks for, a place of temperance and warmth. It's rare that he touches this mind, rarer still that he wants to as he fears the elf shunning him for his more egregious tendencies towards violence. When he finds him, he is quick to take a peak inside the mutant's mind to see how far away they are. “They're coming up on the room now,” he calls back to Alex, and adds just as fast that his father is unconscious.

“We have to clear out that room,” Alex yells over the din of battle. “We have to clear a path for them.”

It's a telekinetic push - one so strong that it threatens to let go the techno-organic virus that ravages his body – and Cable is exhausting himself in the process. His entire focus, his entire being, pushing at the aliens, forcing them back and back until finally the room around them is clear. With wide-eyes, Tony Stark stares at the empty room, and not a one of them say a word out of fear of interrupting Nathan's concentration.

It's in that silence that Nightcrawler appears on purple smoke and sulfur. Between himself and Logan, they manage to easily carry Scott from the empty room and into the next, both showing signs
of battle fatigue. “Sorry,” Kurt says quietly. “The ducts couldn't hold all three of us.”

Alex nods and waves them onto the ship. “Nathan,” he says, “Let's go.” He waits for his nephew to go before him before running mad like the rest of them.

The ship is ready to go, it's doors open and waiting for the team. The kids are anxious to see them return, to see that Scott is rescued. Stark sits quietly, guilt and shame rounding his shoulders and dipping his head. The children won't even look at him now, and he doesn't blame them.

Today, he witnessed heroes. Not mutants, not activists, but heroes. Men that would give their lives to right an injustice, to rescue one that could not rescue themselves. It didn't matter how powerful Summers was, how insane, all that mattered was that he was safe and sound in the back of the Blackbird and they were rushing home.

He listens to their chatter, watches as Logan wipes blood away from the half-dissolved steel ring in Cyclops' chest. It will take days to remove the bones from that, days more for him to heal. And even longer than that for forgiveness, and goodness knows, Stark needs a whole heap of that right now.

His legacy would be one of stern hatred and intolerance if he wasn't careful, if he didn't patch burned bridges while he had the chance. Certainly, he could stand up to Fury, revoke his riches from the Red Hunt, find technology to counteract what he'd built for them. That would be an easy task. Much harder would be to talk to Storm once again, to re-earn her trust. And harder than that would be finding the gall to look Alex in the eyes and apologize.

As if reading his thoughts, Alex turns to him. “Thank you for getting the children out of there,” he says, his tone hushed in hopes of not interrupting the children's gleeful chatter. Their fear is replaced by wonder as they stare out the windows of the Blackbird looking at the fast display of planets and stars. They are fickle creatures like that – going from agitation to wonderment at the drop of a hat. “Without you, this rescue would have been far more difficult.” He reaches out his hand, but Tony doesn't take it.

His stubbornness abides in the face of camaraderie. “There's such a thing as too much power,” he says, glancing at Cyclops. “What are you going to do when he decides to take over the world?”

“He would never do that.”

“He's done it before.” It's too easy for him to impose his idea of a utopia upon the rest of the world, to force a peace and feign prosperity. Free energy, plentiful food was one thing, but to disarm the world of weapons, to threaten those in conflict with violence was quite another. “There was a reason the Avengers fought against him and his imposed rule. It wasn't right.”

“You fought him out of sheer hurt pride,” Alex is quick to scold. “He brought peace to the world and you were no longer needed. That's why you fought him. Don't disguise it as something else.”

In part, Tony knows that he's right. There was an arrogance to their actions when Cyclops was possessed by the Phoenix. Mr. Fantastic had made sure to point that out to them, accusing them outright of poking at him to make him lose control and prove themselves right. But, another part is still worried that Cyclops will come to blows with the world once again. “I can't argue that he wants peace, but to achieve that through force --”

“He's not going to take over the world, Tony, but if you continue to throw stones at him in an attempt to provoke him, you will start another war, and this time, the X-men will win.” They learned enough about the Avengers the last go around, enough to stop them in their tracks should the world explode around them. “I'll make sure of it myself.”
Tony takes the threat as he should – a warning against further attacks on the X-men and the need to change the subject. He regards the man for long moments – his stern stare and clenched jaw. He's very much like his brother in that respect. A mutant who knows his own capabilities and that of his team. “I'm sorry,” he finally says. “I should have asked for your help.”

“I doubt the help you sought would have been given. At least not from me.”

“Come on, you hated what your brother was doing as much as I did.”

“But, I didn't need to see a war start over it. There were other ways, Tony. You just didn't seek them out.” Violence has long been the easiest path for the world's heroes, whether they liked to admit it or not.

“So, you would have just talked to him? You realize that he was unreasonable.”

“Did you tried to reason with him?” As far as he knew – in the tales that had come after – no one had tried talking to him, not Tony, not Storm, not Captain fucking America. The heroes of the world had simply banded together to take him down, and not one person tried to reason with him. “No wonder he went crazy. Imagine the entire world turning against you all at once, and not one person has the guts to tell you why. My brother's not who you think he is, Tony. He's not an unfeeling asshole who doesn't consider others' opinions.”

“I never said he was –”

“But, you treated him like that. We all did.” Alex blames himself, too, like a good Summers brother should. Always the weight, the guilt, the burden of conscience on their too heavy shoulders. He makes no bones about the way he reacted to his brother and his breakdown. He was in the wrong, too. “And now it's time to make it up to him.” He looks to Logan, who has been listening quietly to their conversation. “Somehow.”

“You can't change the past,” Logan says. “But you can certainly learn from it. Cyke was right. We were wrong. And because of that, we put him in a bad way for a long time. Won't happen again. Trust me on that.”

“We've got a problem,” Forge calls from pilot seat. He taps the radar on the dashboard. “We've got fighters on our tail. Everyone buckle in. This ride's going to get bumpy.”

Alex double checks that everyone is strapped in before he takes a seat at the front beside Forge. Slipping on the head gear, he pulls up the weapons display and seeks out his targets. Four ships – light fighters with plenty of energy to run on. “Can you outfly them?”

“We're going to try.”
Chapter Summary

The Battle for the Earth.

They stand at the apex of battle, caught between the alien hoard and Fury's fleet. Hundreds of ships lined up and primed for battle, and at the center of it all, Scott Summers. A pariah, a commodity, the man that Logan wants to save.

He smelled like juniper and rain. A simple mix of shampoo and aftershave, just a hint of citrus behind it all. “Cyke?” Jean was dead. Her funeral near two weeks ago, and Cyclops was finally sober. “You still look like shit,” he said when the man looked up at him and shoved the plate of food under his nose. Five pounds, ten. He'd lost weight during his sojourn into the bottle. He looked pale.

Scott stared down at the chicken and potatoes, his stomach grumbling for relief from it's starvation. “I'm not hungry,” he lied and pushed the plate back across the table.

“To hell you're not.” It had been trying times as Logan fought with the younger mutant tooth and nail to get him healthy again – in both mind and body. He dreamed every night, woke from a sound sleep sweating and screaming, ready to fight. Twice, he'd let loose with his optic blasts, blowing through the mansion walls, and once, he'd attacked Wolverine. If not for the adamantium in his skeleton, Logan's sure that Cyke would have broken his bones that morning.

“Look, kid –”

“I'm not a kid.”

“Fine. Slim. You're not the only one who cared about her. You're not the only one who blames himself.”

“You didn't promise her, Logan. I did. I told her that we'd get through it. That everything would be okay.”

“You still need to eat.”

“I lied to her, Logan.”

He didn't cry, not like when he was juiced up on vodka. Not one tear cascaded down his cheek, but Logan could hear it in his voice – the pain, the grief. He could hear the ache that shredded across the man's soul. “Jeannie made her own choice, just like you have to make yours. But, beer help me, if you don't eat, I'm going to stuff it down your throat.”

He didn't know why he suddenly cared so much. At first, he thought it was just the loss of Jean, but now he knows there was more to it. “Come on, Slim. Wake up. Let me know you're okay.”

At the helm of the Blackbird, Forge and Alex pilot the jet through a host of battle-tuned lasers. Swerving right, left, swifting upside down and right side up, they keep the jet clear of the laser fire and try to make their way to the portal.
“Hav-chchchchc – Hail-chch -vok.” The com sparked to life, and with it a familiar, if broken voice on the other end. It was Reed Richards – Mr. Fantastic. “Haili-chch Havo-chchc.”

“You're breaking up, Reed,” Alex said smoothly into com, keeping his eyes on the battle around him. Like Forge, he kept watch on the missiles and lasers, the debris from exploding ships and the bodies of the pilots forever lost to the fight. “Speak again.”

Alex can hear the adjustment on the other end, the easing of the crackling. “Havok?”

“Speak quick, Reed. We've got a helluva battle to avoid.”

“I'm closing the portal as we speak. If you don't get out of there, you'll be lost to the other dimension for good.”

“What about Fury and his fleet?”

“I gave him the same warning. Get out of there now before you're lost forever.”

A deft turn and a barrel roll, and Forge manages to swerve just in time to avoid a head on collision with a Fury-sent missile heading for their engines. “We need get out of here,” Alex says before sighting another missile to the right. The missile smacks the side of the hull, jolts them all and sends them careening down through space until Forge manages to re-take control of the jet. Systems running haywire, Alex does his best to get them back, pressing in loge sequences and overrides while Cable works his way through the wiring in the back.

At the side of the ship, the kids whimper in their fear. Colossus does his best to keep them calm, reminding them all that the X-men have been off-world multiple times, and that Alex knows what he's doing. Beside him, Kurt says his quiet prayers, his fingers coursing over beads. Indira – in her state of anxiousness – joins him in the prayers.

The portal looms in front of them, still guarded by a dozen of Fury's ships. Behind them, the aliens continue their scourge across the armada, firing lasers and other advanced weaponry at the fighters. Ships continue to explode, their flames deftly put out by the lack of oxygen, and soon their field of vision is littered by the rubble, debris, and the burned bodies of pilots. Behind the pilot's seat, Logan curses, heading to the back to help Cable with the wiring.

He's not good at this, the technical aspects of the ship. He's not a pilot, not a mechanic. He's always relied on others to do this part. He's simply the killer, the one that gets tossed through the air, his claws out and his rage on high. He rips things apart, not pieces them back together. But, in this case, he must do something – the damage is getting too extensive, and without an extra set of hands, Cable is falling behind on repairs.

He listens to Nathan's directions, coats the wires in foam that douse the electrical sparks, puts out the fires that threaten to deplete their oxygen, then slowly detangles them from the wreckage. He splices them together, color by color, fixing the damage piece by piece. “Targeting telemetry's in the can,” Alex calls from the front. “Get it fixed.”

It's a risky tactic, firing the photon cannon at this range to the other ships. But, he's not trying to hit the ships, no. Alex wants the kickback, the sudden jolt forward that will propel them faster to the portal, giving them extra time to make it out before Reed closes it for good. He needs the targeting to make sure he's not killing anyone in the process.

“You sure you want to waste a blast?” Forge asks, rolling the ship once again in order to avoid an alien laser blast. “We only have three before energy's depleted.”
“We don’t have a choice. We need through that portal.”

“It’s not difficult,” Cyclops said, laying the schematics on the table. He’d worked on the Blackbird since he was a kid. He knew the thing backwards and forwards, knew it’s systems, knew it’s mechanics. Half of it was his own design – the engines, the life support systems, the anti-detection systems. It was Forge who’d added the weapons and space capabilities, and it was time for Scott to learn them. And Logan, too, considering he’d gone on several missions now and was considered part of the team. “It's better for all of us to learn them.”

“Ain't no good at fixing things, One-eye. Ain't mechanically inclined --”

“You fix your bike all the time.”

“Bike ain’t some complicated piece of shit that could explode if you put a wire in the wrong place.” Summers sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Look, we need someone else who understands the ship. You can't rely on just Forge, Beast, and myself for repairs. If you're on a mission--”

“Then teach someone else. Someone who knows what the fuck they're doing.”

It was the way they were then, always on the verge. Always scattered away from each other. Keeping each other at arm's length. As the years open up behind him, as the telepathic manipulation unravels, he sees it. How hard the telepaths worked to keep them apart. The jealousy, the fear of discovery and the loss of power. Had he been allowed to keep close, had he been able to remain at Cyke's side as he truly wanted, then none of this would have happened.

“You have to fix the green ones first,” Cable instructs as he works on a lower panel. Nightcrawler has come to help, as has Colossus, leaving the children in the care of Cricket, the calmest of the children. She sings to them, her melancholy voice a whisper over the sparks and destruction of the panels. It is the only thing she was ever good at – these little gospel songs her mother taught her. The only thing that made her feel safe in the urban areas of Chicago. At night, when she was walking home, wary of too many eyes and too many feet, on the look out for guns and mutant haters, she would sing to herself, and she does so now.

Her faith stopped burning so brightly when her mutation appeared, when her mother finally woke up from her years-long stupor and realized that her daughter needed her. But, the calmness of these songs, the warmth they bring, and the bravery – those are things that Opal Johnston will never forget, even in the face of the danger that they are now presented with.

As she sings, Pocket stares up at her, stuffing his crayons back in his bunny suit. Folding himself in the corner, keeping a distance between himself and the rest, he listens to her sing and bobs his head in time with the music. It's rare for him to pay attention so intently to another person, so Opal smiles and hopes that this is a break through, that the child will finally open up and talk.

Out of the corner of her eye, far outside the window where the main battle takes place, she watches the explosion of another ship from Fury's armada. She watches the alien laser pinpoint its hull and fire, breaking the thing into a thousand pieces and body parts. She knows that they are close to death here, something not foreign to her. She's used to this feeling. Used to the shake within her bones as the fear of that sudden moment weighs over top of her. She continues to sing, louder now in order to soften her nerves, to pull herself together for the sake of the younger ones. She's not ready to die. Even throughout it all – those years begging for food and money for electricity, of being hungry, of being threatened – she's not ready to let loose her life. She knows that it can only get better. She knows, without a doubt, that it will get better.
We're breaching portal in ten. Nine. Eight...” Forge calls from the front of the jet.

Breaking from her song, she watches as the other ships follow suit. Turn on thrusters and propulsion and turn from their battle with the aliens to follow the Blackbird through the dimensional rift. The aliens are also in pursuit, their light fighters as well as their main ships zooming forth to catch up.

Through the portal they go, and then up at top speed, breaking through the warehouse ceiling in a hale of gunfire and battle. “They're on your tail,” Richards warns them, “You have to shake them.”

The Blackbird is a stealth jet, made for fine maneuvers and speed. On Earth, it's one of the fastest air transports in the world, but the aliens are faster. No sooner do they reach open sky, then the first of the light fighters break forth from the larger ships, firing non-rhythmically into the air. “They're not even bothering to target,” Alex says, checking the still malfunctioning systems. “We have to go faster, Forge, if we're going to lose them.”

“Approaching Mach Five,” Forge warns them all as the jet starts to shake with the force. “Better buckle up we'll hit the stratosphere in fifteen.”

It wasn't their plan to go back into orbit, but they have no choice. With both Fury and the aliens behind them, catching up with ease, they have to go higher and faster and hope that someone doesn't follow. To Alex, it comes down to a matter of heat shielding, flying to the sun. “Can the Blackbird take the heat, hersel?!” Forge thinks she can, at least for a while, and with that, he changes course and heads for blackness of space. The ships follow them at their fastest speed, some overtaking him, some trying to block their path.

The light fighters hit the stratosphere first. Outside of the Earth, they form a long line, preventing the escape of the Blackbird, and behind them, Fury's men line up. “Surrender, Havok,” Fury calls. “Surrender before you and everyone else is blown sky high.” He's armed his fleet with nuclear devices. He'll kill everyone out here, melt the aliens, destroy the X-men. He'll do whatever it takes to see them safe.

To prove his point, he launches one from the command ship. The nuclear bomb propels through space, striking against the fighters. The explosion is massive, and the radiation shields go wild with use. Alex curses and reminds them all that there are other enemies to deal with right now. That if they don't stop the aliens, the world's going to pay. To answer him, another nuclear missile is launched through the air, destroying yet another alien ship, and then the battle begins in earnest, light fighters against Fury's fleet with the Blackbird in the center trying to avoid it all.

What they don't expect is the arrival of the motherships. Three large and looming vessels that sit at the edge of the battle. Thought to be just transport by Fury, Alex knows better, especially when the ships turn, great cannons opening up from their bellies, pointing towards earth. Though he doesn't understand the language, he knows very well what they want. They want his brother, and they'll destroy his home to get him. Even Fury sees the threat and orders his fleet to provide a buffer against the attack.

“You have to surrender him,” Fury calls, hoping that Alex listens to reason. “One man against the Earth. It's a non-question. You have to surrender Summers.”

“The portal's closed, Nick,” Alex reminds him. “They're going to hook him up to that weapon, and where do you think they're going to point it? Surrendering him will endanger the entire universe.”

They look like tiny stars, these cannons. Blindingly bright, and they buzz with energy, vibrating across the ships, destroying those that are barely held together. Turned away from it all, his eyes closed, he doesn't see his brother wake. He doesn't see his brother phase through the straps, or from
the ship. All he knows is that blast lets loose, and hears the explosion in the distance.

Scott floats at the center of the battle, his arms shielding his face, the alien fleet destroyed. Tendrils of red energy flare out from his body, growing bigger and bigger as the rush of power begins to fill the void. He yells as the pain fills him, as the energy becomes a maelstrom around him. “Er dogren,” Logan says for the second time in less than a day, and knocks the man unconscious.
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

Sinister has a solution.

He knows the other man is here. He can feel the sick slithers of thought coil through his mind, testing and probing. But, he does not speak the name. Does not give Sinister the glory of a welcome. A side-eyed glance as the man enters, once again creating Summers' themed furniture to sit upon, a glass of deep burgundy wine in his hand. Essex smiles – a slick, cruel smile – as he takes his place upon the chair. “Seems you're in a right mess,” he says quietly, looking at the mindscape projected around them.

It's been three days, and Summers' mind is a torrent of guilt and shame. Though he says nothing, doesn't cry or gasp, the energy is flurried and out of control. The X-men have turned to Strange for help. “I assume you're here with a solution?”

Strange looks at the memory once again. Replays the roots and the fallout. The miraculous phasing through the hull of the ship, the arms outstretched as lasers and missiles bounced uselessly away, and then finally, the blinding white light of a star cascading forth against red shield. The force of that blast propelled backwards once it met the crimson shroud of Cyclops' energy. The aliens died at the speed of light. Tens of thousands of them in a matter of seconds. Yet, to Strange, there was nothing that Cyclops could have done, especially without control of his powers. Those deaths led to the saving of the entire world – nay, the entire universe. Even Strange would not reverse the outcome.

“Perhaps,” Essex grins once again. He sips at the goblet, putting his feet up on the Cyclops' shaped table in front of him. He finds this enjoyable, the conundrum of this falling apart mind. Fascinating. Splendid.

“And how much of this damage was caused by you?” Strange makes no secret of his disdain for the ageless man, his lips curled upward in disgust and a side-eye glance with lowered brow.

“Not much in the scope of the things. All I did was protect the world from his blossoming. I allowed the world to survive by blocking his powers.” He toasts, glass in the air, a tip of his head. Indeed, he knows more about this mind than anyone on Earth – the upstart Xavier included. “That makes me a hero, does it not?”

He wants something. Something devious and malicious. Strange can feel it in his bones. He won't erase the memory. That's been done too many times. That's why this mind is in such a mess. The erasure, the manipulation. He won't be like Xavier and Grey. He won't assume to control this mind. A distance, he thinks. A fade. From immediate to something in the past, something he can deal with. “If I fog the memory enough, it will seem like years between its passing and the present day,” he explains. He looks to Sinister who wiggles his brow in response. “I can make the memory distant, make it less of a weight.”

Sinister considers the plan. Long moments of silence as he searches his logic for drawbacks and explosions. “Indeed,” he says at last. “Putting a distance between himself and the murder of tens of thousands. That will make him feel better.”
“You advocate the erasure of the memory?”

“I advocate nothing more than the destruction of Scott Summers. Again and again and again.” He's not an ally, that much he makes clear. “If you delete the memory, you, too, could have a stake in the power at hand.”

“I'm not a mutant,” Strange says warily. “I can't use this power.”

“Nonsense. Your spell is telepathic in nature. A few twists and turns and you can have him all too yourself. You could be the puppet master. Rule the world in his stead.”

“You think he was meant to rule the world?”

“I think he was meant to destroy it.” Sinister pauses, refills his glass, snugs down in the Cyclops shaped chair. “He was such a frightened child.”

“You abused him.”

“I saved the world,” Sinister reminds him. His powers would have gone out of control had it not been for Essex's intervention. They would have eaten the world at its core. “Xavier never realized the beauty of what I did. Never understood the blocks and stoppages I put on his power. He was far too greedy. He was a madman.”

That he fashions himself a savior is not beyond the humor of Stephen Strange. The laugh is subtle, fused with the irony of the destruction that he has wrought. “You're no hero. None of us would count you among our numbers.”

“And to your malaise, dear Dr. Strange.” He smiles again, though this time it is softer, more hesitant. “Had you seen him when those powers erupted, you would have done the same. If not for me, the world would have died some years ago with no one the wiser as to why.”

There's a fear in Sinister, an unexpected one. Strange turns, looks at him full on. “You feared him,” he says quietly as the memories of the alien destruction play out behind him. “You knew that he could destroy you.”

Of course that was part of it. The power, the threat. There were few that could withstand the ultimate manipulations of Apocalypse, but Summers was one of them, even with that broken mind. Sinister knew it, had always known it, but he'd also known something deeper. Scott Summers was the universe itself. He was the power that fueled it; the power that could end it. He was the Earth's best and last defense against a universe that would see its end. “Natural selection,” he explains. “The evolution of a species. Only in Summers, it wasn't complete. Almost, but not quite.”

He intends to be the finished product, the perfection. Years and years of genetic manipulation, of cloning, of pushing the limits of genetic mutation, he sees himself as the best there is. “But, there is no endgame if he kills the world, is there?” It was as simple as that, at first anyway. Protecting the world so that one day he could rule it. So that he could become more powerful than Apocalypse, free himself from that tyranny.

A child. That's all he was. Seven years old and too small for his bones. Bright eyed and trusting. For a year at least, maybe longer. “To block that power was a feat I should be lauded for,” he sneers and sips the wine. It wasn't easy – his sweat and tears, his mind-grinding work to figure out how to force that power back. Yet, the X-men consider him a villain, someone who is against their goals. “What good is an Earth that is dust?” he asks. “What good is something already destroyed?”

Strange can't deny his contributions. The years it took for him to block the immensity of that power,
but he also understands the maliciousness behind it. “You gave him to Xavier. You knew what Xavier would do with that power.”

“I was bored,” Essex shrugs. “As long as I’ve lived, I need entertainment, and Summers provides it without a thought. In the end, I will always win against him, despite his most ardent plans.”

“So, that’s what this is?” Strange asks, arms outstretched to indicate the disheveled mindscape around them. “Entertainment?”

“It's a game, indeed. His perfect power versus my perfect mind.”

“You mean to rule the Earth --”

“No. I mean to rule him. I want him to bow at my feet and recognize my superiority. Why is that so hard for you to understand?” He protects the Earth simply out of convenience. “It would be challenging to find another place to live, wouldn't you say?” A chuckle lights across the silence. “Distance, eh? Is there truly distance for an idle mind?”

“An idle mind?”

Sinister shrugs. “He has no mission. No focus. He was always easier to deal with when he had a focus. Saving his brother, saving the world. It gives him something to pour his energy into. Something to obsess over. Better than his failings.”

It's something that Strange had not thought of. “What kind of mission would you give him?”

“He can come up with a mission on his own. With the right pieces in place, that is.”

“And what would be the cost of putting those pieces into place?”

“A bone sample.” Sinister pauses, looks square at Stephen with a wily grin. “He's already cut open. I'm sure you can find an excuse to get the sample.”

“He would seek out his own mission? Allow the deaths to be put behind him?”

“Possibly.”

“And what about his control?”

“You want me to increase his need for control? That will be two bone samples. Viable ones from the ribs. At least an inch wide.”

Telepathic meditation is not exciting to watch. The stillness of body, the shallowness of breath. Like a person is asleep, but awake at the same time. Giving off signs of both. The increased heartbeat, the slow dip of chest. It's confusing. It's boring. But Logan keeps his eyes on it all.

He doesn't trust Strange. Not completely anyway. That he works in secret, in private, that he spends so much time with his eyes closed bothers Logan. But, he understands it's necessary. There are things about the psychic plane that he can't begin to comprehend. Things that only Jeannie understood, that Xavier knew about, that Strange can bend to his will. It's a place that he knows little of, thankfully, in the end.

He's a man of action. Blood and guts and the sheer rush of adrenaline. These calm things, these moments spent as a statue, these long hours without whiskey or beer or cigars or murder, they don't appeal to him. He doesn't have the fortitude for them, the stamina. He needs things to be fast, to be
rushed. The feel of getting something done.

Scott doesn't move. Hasn't for hours. His entire self trapped within the puzzle of Strange's creation. That spell, such a haggard one, a painful one. Each time he wakes, he can smell the pain waft from the man's body – a dry, acrid scent. Wet sand and dead wood. A long night lit by moon and the sound of crickets and frogs, bellowing out for the end of their world as the waters dry beneath them. A bog. A swamp. Pain is an unpleasant scent, and it comes off of Cyke in waves even before the spell is broken.

Hours pass before Strange finally twitches in his wakefulness. Drawing himself from that long telepathic motionless. There's a glow to him – a slight golden aura as he comes back to himself, to reality. It lasts until he finally lifts his hand to the back of his neck, massages the stiff muscles underneath. "Logan," he greets the other man, suspicious now that he knows he's been watched.

"Stephen."

"I need a bone sample. Two of them."

"What for?"

"What do you know of a man named Nathaniel Essex?" he dodges, hoping to catch more of the story and get his sample.

But Logan doesn't veer. He can sense it – the animal within him driving forth with that preternatural prediction of danger. He knows something's wrong. "He owned the orphanage where Scott grew up. Manipulated half his life. Why?"

"It was in Scott's memories. I don't know much about him. I was hoping that someone could fill in the details."

"Scott never spoke much about his childhood, especially the orphanage. Reckon that was one of those things wiped away by Jean and Xavier."

"He's a driving force of Scott's anxiousness."

"I bet he's more than that."

Strange looks at the still carved up Cyclops on the bed. Reyes has managed to remove the metal ring in his chest, but not without the hefty cost of blood and organs. It took her days to clean him up, and he doesn't heal well when unconscious. "I've put a distance between himself and the aliens," Strange explains, hoping that the more forthright he is, the less suspicious Logan will be. It works. To a point. "The memory will feel ten years old instead of three days ago. It will, perhaps, give him time to process it and understand that he did nothing wrong."

But, as Logan is quick to correct, this is Cyke they're talking about. "Everything he does is wrong. It's what makes him a good leader."

"Odd to hear you say that."

"Yeah, well," Logan pauses, staring down at the rib bones Strange touches. "Apparently I was manipulated, too." He regards the sorcerer with some wariness before moving close to Summers' body. "You need an organ sample, too?" he asks, popping his claws with a quiet snikt.

There are files in the mansion. That much Strange knows. McCoy kept them; Tony had them. Files about the X-men's history, and within those files, there are – perhaps – some relating to Scott
Summers and his childhood. The thoughts of Xavier or the O5, his growth, his progress, the pieces of himself he left behind. Mostly, he wants to know more about Sinister – that dastardly man that haunts that fragmented mind, that always seems to know what's best, what solution is being called for. Stephen wants to know who he's making these deals with. “No,” he says. “But I would like any information you have on Summers' childhood. It will make it easier when the time comes to restore his memories. Private files, anecdotes. Whatever you have on hand. The more I learn about him, the better.”

Logan knows nothing about files and whatnot, but Storm might. In all honesty, he simply wants to know what the bone samples are for. “Cutting off his ribs is going to make the healing process last all that much longer. Mind telling me what they're for?”

“Do you trust me Logan?”

“No, not really.”

“Then I'll gather the sample myself.” An incredulous look from Logan. “I was a doctor before I was a hero.” He picks up the bone saw Cecilia used for scraping metal fragments from the bones. With a final glance to Wolverine, he begins taking the samples.
Chapter Summary

The effects of Sinister's manipulations.

It's the weight he feels in the sudden absence of pain. Pressed up against his chest, small and warm. A child. Tatsuya. Pocket, he decides before opening his eyes behind the visors, waiting for his body to unclench, to let him free.

The child plays a video game – some handheld thing that he'd kept inside his bunny suit. He likes the sounds it makes, the animation. Running, jumping, the way his character falls through the cracks of the world with whomp-whomp sound. He doesn't smile, but his focus is unrelenting.

Focus. The word sends shivers down Scott's spine. A chorus of whispers behind his thoughts. Focus and control. Two things he doesn't have. Two thing he doubts he'll ever have again. And then death. The memory hits him like a brick, sends waves of nausea flooding over him, and in his loss of focus, the red energy comes. He can feel it seep from his pours, a miasma of too much and not enough.

He killed them all.

And for it, they called him a hero.

Pocket turns his head only slightly to view the awakening Cyclops. Stiff from being under for days at a time, he groans as he sits up, giving time for the kid to reposition himself upon the bed. He curls up to Scott's healing chest, and with large black eyes, stares in wonder at the risen X-man. There is no telling what he thinks, what he wants, but he's not afraid. Scott thinks he should be.

“Slim.” The moniker comes the corner, a low husk of half-dazed growl. Logan stretches his arms far above his head. “Bout damn time.” He's been worried. A nightly watch, barely sleeping, as evidenced by the dark circles under his eyes. “Thought you'd never wake up.”

Summers says nothing, merely inspects the damage his body has gone through. The hole in his chest, the bloody bandages. Casts on his legs, his arm. Finally, after long, silent moments, he turns back to Logan. “I'm a murderer.”

Wolverine indicates the child snuggled against Cyke's chest. “First person he's touched since he got here, apparently.”

Looking back down at the mop of black hair, then back to Logan, he shakes his head. “Why don't you hate me?”

Ignoring the question, Logan continues, “He's been in here everyday waiting for you to wake up. A few of us have.” He reaches out for young Pocket, only to be avoided at the last second. “Sorry, kid, adults got to speak for a bit.” The child shoves the game into his bunny suit and places his hand upon Scott's. For long moments, he simply watches the man and the slight shift of red that pours over him. Then, he jumps from the bed and disappears. “He likes you.”
From under the chair in the corner, Logan drags out a bag of gauze and the first aid kit. “Every four hours,” he explains. “Doc Reyes says it's necessary to prevent infection.”

Quietly, “Can I get infected?”

Logan shrugs. “Don't know, but I'd rather not find out.” As he ushers Cyclops back against the bed and readies the gauze, he stares at the younger man, noticing the blankness of features, how practiced that unreadable face is. His whole life has been one war after another, yet the scars seem so faded. Tiny silvered lines that trace across high cheekbone, trail down neck. On the outside, he heals, all scabs and reminders. But on the inside, he's vulnerable to attack.

Gentle fingers trail across shoulder, up to neck. Tracing the lines of muscle into jaw. He inhales, sharply. Fast. And open-mouthed, Scott accepts the trail of fingers over his jaw. “Logan.”

“Slim.”

He knows what he's doing, his hands as they ravage the broken body. His ministrations are nothing short of sunlight and bright summer mornings as they cloud against jaw and the edge of neck. Scott responds with an inhaled breath and lowered visor. Cheeks blushed, he avoids gazing into gray eyes as the red cloud begins to seep from his skin. Like water, it drips across his body. And the heat. The heat of it as his skin flares with sensitivity.

Logan swarms down to damp bandages, red with blood and damage. It's with careful fingers that he removes them, skimming whole skin, leaving his indelible mark. Claws out, he pricks the gauze free, throws it to the hard wood floor below. “Don't move around too much,” he instructs. “Whatever you need, you just tell someone. We'll get it for you.”

“I'm not worth this, Logan,” Scott says quietly.

Logan doesn't respond, just splashes alcohol onto a pad and begins to clean the gaping wound. “Doc figures you'll grow your heart back within the week.”

“My heart is gone?” His voice is distant, as is his attention. He looks to the corner of the room. “No wonder,” he continues with no relief.

Logan considers him for some time before continuing with the bandages. “Can you feel this?” he says, pressing his hand along the collar bone. Cyke nods. “That's all that matters, then. That you can still feel the real world.”

“Are you real?”

“I'm real.”

“That's what she says, too. She tells me she's real, and then she sets me on fire. She likes to watch me burn.”

“I'm real, Slim. Trust me on that.” He wonders what he's seeing. What hallucination is traveling across his mind. He wonders how to soothe it, to take it away. But, he's always wondered that. The Boy Scout and his unrelenting pain, how he chose to avoid it, to ignore it. “Is the Phoenix here now?” he asks, tilting red visor to himself. “Is she talking to you?”

He shakes his head, glances back over his shoulder. “Alex is.”

“What's he saying?”
“That you should kill me.”

“I'm not going to kill you, Cyke.”

“For the sake of the world.”

“Still not going to happen.”

“Then I have to find another way.”

The determination in his words sends shivers down Logan spine. He's been told by Strange to find him a mission, that he needs something to distract him. “What about training the kids? Don't you want to train them?”

“The kids hate me.”

“Indira idolizes you. You're the only one that can see her true potential.”

“It's not safe for me to be around them.”

“It's not safe for you to be around anyone so long as you're like this,” Logan bites, frustrated with the continued distance in Cyke's voice. “You have to control this, Slim. You have to beat this.” He tells him of the kids in space, how well they did when given a solid plan, how they fell apart when the deeds were done. “Without direction, they just sat in the corner --”

“They're kids.”

“They're kids who need to know how to handle themselves.” It was an argument they'd had before, only on opposite sides. And Logan feels shame for bringing it up. “They're mutants, Cyke. Things are going to happen to them. They need someone to prepare them for it.”

“Then, they'll just be killers. Like Idie.”

Idie never wanted to kill anyone. Never wanted to fight. But her genetics, the scope of her blood, made it impossible not to. Attacked from all angles, a constant fight for survival and the survival of others, she killed in the sake of peace, of safety, in orders for others to live. She regrets these deaths, but she no longer sees herself as a monster. Rather a soldier. And no kid should have to be a soldier – regardless of what genes they carry. Still, life is not so kind and logical. These kids, these mutant children who have come to them for care and education, they will be hunted. They will be subjected to things that most children can only imagine. They need to be trained for the eventuality of their genes, whether Logan agrees with it or not. “They'll be safe. Like Idie.”

“I didn't know what else to do,” he confesses softly. He places his hand upon Logan's, looks at him full on. “They were going to die,” he says. “Emma was going to die.”

“She did what she was thought was right.” His hand graces jaw and high cheekbone. “For me to call her a killer was unfair. She was a hero, and I should have treated her like one.”

“But, I'm a killer.”

“You couldn't help what happened--”

“If you won't save the world,” he says, “I will.”

Logan hushes him. Places forefinger to lips. Gray eyes penetrate red visor, looking deep into thought, into soul. “You already saved the world,” he husks, “Now it's time for you to heal.” He
notices the dip in Adam's apple, the nervous swallow as Wolverine places both hands upon Scott's cheek. “Whatever happens, I'm not going to leave you again,” he promises. “I'm here until the end.”

He finishes the bandages in silence, cleans the wounds, checks for infection. Scott suffers it, his visor looking off towards the door. He mumbles at times, the hallucinations so strong that he can't help but talk back to them. Numbers and words, blending together. Then finally, “Where's my heart?” The younger mutant looks at Logan, his hand upon his chest, “I lost my heart.”

Taken aback, Wolverine takes a deep breath, looks at the way Scott's hand curl into the bloody cavity. He can feel the thump of pulse inside veins, the flow of blood, the beat of heart, but the organ was cut out some time ago. “It'll heal, Slim. You'll grow it back.”

“No wonder I killed them,” he says quietly. “I had no heart.”

He wants to tell him that he had no choice, to make him see that the aliens were going to destroy the world and he saved it. That he's a hero, just like Idie. That he knows the other man didn't mean to take a life. That it's all okay. But he can't bring himself to do it. Not while looking at those paled features and the scent of drowning pain.

He pulls Scott against his chest, holds him close, tangles his fingers into autumn hair and watches as the red cloud becomes thick and destructive. “Calm down, Scotty,” he whispers. “I don't want to shut you off right now, but you got to focus. Pull it all back. You can't afford a breakdown.”

Hands against his shoulder blades, they would draw blood if Logan was shirtless. Scott holds onto him as if he's the only thing in the world. “Calm down, hon,” he repeats, gently as the red energy begins to eat at bloody sheets. “You can do this. You can stop this. Just focus.”

“Focus,” Scott whimpers. “Control. Focus. Focus. Control.” The words run across his tongue, and a deep breath sees the unleashing of his hands, the pulling back of emotions, and with it, the depletion of the red energy. Logan smiles, but Scott does not. “Focus,” he says again, his entire demeanor shifted into one of coldness.

“Slim?”

He picks up the bandages and begins to wrap himself, fastening the gauze at his side. “You should eat,” Scott tells the older mutant. “You haven't eaten in days.”

“Neither have you.”

“I'm not hungry.”

“Take it from me, you'll heal faster if you eat.”

“Will I get back my heart?” His focus. His control.

“Yeah. You'll heal.”

“Then I should eat.”

Logan watches him for long moments, unsure of the sudden lack of pain, of sadness. Like a steel wall, Scott leans back against the bed, staring down at the bandages, his entire self suddenly emotionless and still. “It's okay to grieve, Scott. It's okay to let it out.”

“We should eat,” he responds quietly, not looking at the other man.
Logan nods. “I’ll send Alex in while I rustle up some grub.”

“I’ll be fine,” he says.

Another nod and Logan exits, still unnerved and worried. “Just look in on him,” he tells Alex. “I’ll be about an hour.”

The same cold distance greets his brother. Unflappable, unfeeling. As if his entire self was suddenly bottled up inside of him. Uncomfortable in the silence, Alex flips on the television.

“We’re asking that the X-men do what is right and hand Scott Summers over to authorities. He is a danger to this world and many others. We promise immunity for any crimes committed during the Red Wave in exchange for having him in custody. We can’t afford another mutant war. One of side of it will not survive.”

“Don’t listen to him, Scott,” Alex says, flipping on the TV in his own disgust. “We’re not handing you over. Not a chance.” Scott says nothing, merely stares at the blank screen. “We’re going to keep you safe. Promise.”
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

Tony and Steve discuss their plans.

They've forgiven Steve Rogers. SHIELD has. Fury has. They asked him to return to the fold, to once again take up the mantle of Captain America and lead the Avengers. “The Red Hunt is over,” Fury explained over telescreen. “That's what you rebelled against, right? Well, it's done. So no reason to stay away.”

They are a tangle of limbs, their eyes half-lidded, their thoughts hazy. There is no world outside this bedroom, one just completed in the nick of time last night. It's just the two of them, as it should be. Still in a daze, Steve leans forward and lets his lips linger upon Tony's, slowly pressing harder into that softness, tongue begging entrance. Tony responds with a moan, runs his hands over shoulder blades, pulling the great Captain America closer.

If he could, Steve would never leave this room.

The kiss melts away, and Tony begins a new one, his lips dragged across earlobe and pulse. Licking and sucking at tender flesh, sending static jolts down his spine and into his groin. Steve moans with the pressure, dragging Tony across his chest and holding him still. “This is nice,” he says, lifting up to peck those kiss-red lips.

“It could be nicer,” Tony slithers, trailing tongue from pulse to collar bone, then to hardening nipple. A gentle tip of teeth and Steve bucks into the movement, his body lifting from the mattress. He calls Tony's name. “And even nicer than that,” a slick trail down abdomen to already nude groin. Steve awakens splendidly, grows hard as Tony sucks at inner thigh, his hand upon the man's shaft. “Come back with me,” he says, his eyes hooded with lust. “Come back with me and we can have this every night.”

He cools to the touch. The words. They weigh heavily upon him. Tony notices his sudden hesitation, the sudden dousing of the fires. “Too soon?” he asks, placing a gentle kiss to the tip of Steve's manhood. “Ignore it. I'll make it go away.” His tongue upon shaft and head makes Steve quiver. If only it could disappear the comment completely. He could rise up, abandon himself to the sensations.

“I can't go back.”

Steve sits – pulls himself away from that warm tongue and mouth. Defends himself with hands across his crotch, “I can't go back,” he reiterates, brows lowered. He pulls himself from that abyss of pleasure, sits against the headboard and snugs blankets over his nudity. “What they did was wrong.”

Suddenly frustrated, Tony sighs. “I'm going back,” he says, hedging upon on knees, his hands roaming the naked chest before him. “It'll be good to get paid again.” Health insurance, subsidies for his wild experiments. The government can pay for his expertise, as far as he's concerned.

“But the mutants,” Steve says, pulling the blankets over top of himself. “They don't deserve this.”

In a huff, Tony sits at the edge of the bed reaching out for the nudity underneath the blanket. He's
unhappy that his time is interrupted by this sordid thought, even more unhappy that once again its the plight of the mutants that separates them. “Tell me truthfully,” he begins, “you don't think that Summers is too powerful?”

“You think he deserves to die because of that?”

Tony rolls dark blue eyes to the ceiling, getting up out of their nest to shuffle himself into boxers. He can't have this conversation nude, now matter how much he wants to. Steve sighs, reaches out for the other man. “We don't have to talk about this now,” he says quietly, pressing lips to knuckles. “We have more important things to do.” He runs his fingers along the edge of waistband, tracing the jut of hips down to the slight bulge within. He licks his lips, wanting nothing more than to once again be caught up in bliss.

“You're staying with the mutants, aren't you?” Tony scoffs.

“At least until the situation with Summers is resolved.” A pause as he leans back in the bed, draws covers up over top of him. “They need help, Tony.”

“So do the Avengers. The team is a mess. They're not going to trust me--”

“What makes you think they'll trust me?” They are tarnished beings now. Their reputation, their shining images. They have to re-earn their place among the heroes after what they've done. “And sticking around to help Storm until things are more normalized is the best way --”

“And what about me?” Tony asks with a glare. “Was this,” he says, gesturing to the bed, “just some way to placate me until your plan could be put in to place? Was this another sneak attack?”

“It's not what you're thinking, Tony,” Steve pleads. “Please, calm down. It's not forever. It's just until things settle down for them.” He'll talk to Fury at a later time, explain himself, his plans. “They're in a fragile place and they need our help. Isn't that what heroes are supposed to do?”

“And, here I thought we were supposed to save the world.” Tony rubs against his eyes and sighs, slumping into the bedside chair. “I think I can help him,” he says. “In time anyway. Come up with some machine to put a cork on his power. But, I need him in custody, first. I need to run tests.”

“They're not going to hand him over. Not after everything we've done.”

“You didn't see him, Steve. You weren't there. He obliterated those aliens in seconds. These were weapons that we still barely understand, and he killed them all without a thought. He needs – no, the world needs – for that power to be controlled.”

“By you.”

“By anyone with a sense of responsibility about them. Logan and Alex are too lenient with him. They don't see the danger that he poses, but I do. I know that he saved the world. I recognize that, but at the cost of tens of thousands of lives. We can't let a power like that go unchecked.”

Steve agrees, but doesn't think the mutants need to pay the price for that any longer. Their species has been ravaged enough, and as disparate as they are, they need unity. Something to believe in.

“Storm wants peace. I need to help her achieve that.”

“And what about Summers?”

“I'll talk to her.” He holds out his arms for the other man, waits for him to crawl into bed beside him.

“She's hesitant to trust the outside world right now, and for good reason. It may take time, but she'll
do what's right.” He kisses over Tony's jaw, his hand once again skimming across the waistband. “And so will we.”

It's enveloping, the way they kiss. Warm, powerful. Lips to lips, tongues beg entrance in teasing swipes. Hands roam across heating skin, down ribs, to stomach, out over hips. Widening his legs, Tony waits for Steve to crawl across him before pulling him back into another needy kiss, his arms collapsing against spine, as if his skin isn't enough. As if the only way he can feel one with the world is for Steve to be inside of him.

Steve pulls down, takes command of those boxers. “You won't be needing these,” he laughs, removing the offense and throwing them on the floor. Lips and tongue work their magic upon hardening manhood, sucking and licking, taking pleasure in the moans and thrusts. Tony takes the ride with lusty moans and curses, his eyes tightly closed, his hand wrangled in hair guiding Steve's movements. He's close, so close, but he doesn't want it to end this way. He wants to feel the other man inside of him again, wants to come on Steve's dick alone.

Pulling away, Steve reaches for the drawers, grabs the lube. A swathe on his fingers, he slowly works his way into that tightness, watching as Tony throws his head back with the entrance. A string of curses as Steve works in a second finger, opens him up even more, and heads for the prostate. “Fuck me,” Tony breathes. “Fuck me hard.”

It is electric, the way he slurs into the movements, his body bucking against his hand, begging to be filled. A third finger, and Steve runs light kisses over the small trail of hair leading up to his chest, exhilarated at the stuttered breath and tiny moans. Sucking hard at the nipple as he works down below, Tony arches his back again, begs for more. His name caught between lusty curses once again, Tony's hand rifles through his hair, absentmindedly tugging at the stray strands, unable to concentrate on a single movement.

“How do you feel?” Steve asks, turning to kiss Tony hard, nipping at the edges of his lips, and growling as Steve meets his need. He can feel it, deep in his stomach as the Boy Scout hits his gland again and again, leaves sloppy kisses across his chest. He can feel it rise, that state of exultation. He calls out Steve's name again, let's it billow out from his lips as the sudden bliss explodes across him. In his pleasure he clamps down on Steve, making the passage even tighter, sending Steve over the edge as well.

Sweat-damp and sated, they curl up into each other, dragging soothing fingers over still-sensitive skin. They lay like this for some time, staring into each others' eyes, their silence an agreement between them of peace no matter what happens now.

Tony can no longer imagine a life without him. His every thought of the future includes Steve, from his latest inventions to the quieter moments. A meal, a shopping trip. They'll grow old together, retire to a porch swing with lemonade. A nice little house in some suburb where they can grow a cute little
flower garden and invite the neighbors over for dinner. There will be those that they consider their children – the young Avengers that come to them for advice, for help. And they'll learn from them. They'll become a part of the family. His family.

In a way, the thought makes him sad. That this could all be ripped away from him – this whole dream of his – in the blink of an eye gives him pause. “Good night, Tony,” Steve says with a gentle peck. No longer able to keep his eyes open, he drifts off to sleep, leaving Tony with his unsettled thoughts.

That the world could stop this – that Summers could end this – only makes things worse. His fear for the world, for losing the one thing that he cherishes. There has to be a way to control that massive power, and he has to find it.
A House in Michigan

Chapter Summary

Mystique and Sabretooth seek answers to the dream-like memories plaguing Creed.

Magneto had given him a single name to track down. Gary Bennet of Deerborne, Michigan. “He'll have answers for you, if you dig hard enough.” Mystique had argued with him then, said that if he knew something he should dish. But, Magneto was firm. “I don't know the whole story, Raven. But, I do know that he's at the beginning of it.”

The house they pull up to is as small and unassuming as the man himself. A cute little yard with boxwood bushes trimmed into square hedging, some out of bloom day lilies, and a seldom used porch swing, judging by the weathered look of the seating pads. Victor would much rather go inside with her – 'The guy could be a serial killer for all Mags told us.' - but Mystique trusts her own instincts on this, and thinks the introduction of the big and burly Sabretooth would prove a little too intimidating.

There had been little information about Mr. Bennet online – a birthdate and a credit report. He'd held a job at the local sawmill for the couple of decades, but before that, Mystique couldn't find anything, which led her to believe that Bennet was an alias, and whatever he'd been caught up in before was something worth checking out.

Bennet is a hearty man with broad shoulders and tattooed arms. His dark brown hair is receding, and his teeth a little crooked. Guessing by the ink, she assumes him to be a man of nature – the type that enjoys camping and fishing, and all those things that outdoorsmen do. Things that she's not quite fond of herself. She greets him with a smile. “Mr. Bennet? Macy Tremaine. We spoke on the phone?”

With a wave of hand he gestures for her to come into his home. The place isn't so messy as it is just cluttered. Newspaper clippings and pictures line the walls. Whatever he's researching is extensive. He clears a pile of scrapbooks from a wooden chair against the wall, and then disappears into the kitchen, leaving Raven alone to peruse the various articles. “You like coffee?” he yells from the kitchen.

“I love coffee.”

“Good, ain't no tea drinkers around here. Only brew is the fresh stuff.”

Most of the articles revolve around mysterious disappearances and alien abductions. The spark of hoaxes as people returned to life after being thought dead for years. Kidnapping, amnesia, even reincarnation. A fanciful bit of research, scattered for the most part, but it gave Raven something more to go on than simply knowing about an alter ego. “You're very thorough,” she says, giving a nod to the walls and settles back into her chair.

“You said on the phone that you thought I could help you?” He takes a seat in an old worn recliner, lifting the cup to his lips. “Not sure I ever helped much of anyone, but if you're here for the reason I think you are, there's not much I can tell you other than what I've already told everyone else.”
“And what reason do you think I'm here?”

“You sure you ain't some reporter?”

“I'm here as a favor to a friend, investigating the disappearance of a child. I have reason to believe that you have information about him.”

Gary Bennet pales at the thought, leans back into his recliners and stares at the blonde-haired woman in front of him. Prim and pretty, she's easy on the eyes, but she can't hide the predator's glare that sneaks out from behind those baby blues. That's simply in her nature. “You know my whole life was ruined?”

“I'm sorry to hear that. Can I ask what happened? In your own words?”

He digs around in his old scrapbooks for nearly thirty minutes, opening and shutting them, complaining that he used to be better organized than this. He used to have a system for these things, used to know the dates just by looking at the cover. But the flood. Oh, the flood. Five years ago. It nearly wiped him out of his home. “To lose two homes in a lifetime would have been too much,” he says, hefting up another stack. “Taught me to pray though. Taught me to have faith in the Good Lord and even if something does screw up, at least I still have Him.” Mystique smiles softly, understanding more about Heaven and Hell than she would like. “Ah, here it is. It's all I got left from my first life.”

“Your first life?”

“When I was Dirk Williamson. Name I was born with. You're really not here about all that, are you?”

She shakes her head no. “That's a first.” He was a rescue worker near Anchorage, a mountain guide. “Word came out about a plane being shot at by some strange looking ship, and then witnesses said they saw a parachute, meaning that there were survivors.” They pinpointed the crash quickly enough thanks to the excessive smoke. “An old d'Havilland. A wooden plane. Someone'd put a lot of care into restoring that baby, only to have it shot at by some freaky aliens.”

“Were there survivors?”

“Not at the site,” but, as he explained, the survivors would be with the chute, and that had deployed some minutes before the crash. “Spread out our search over three mountains with hourly updates from all of the crews. It was my crew that finally spotted the prints.” Judging by the size of the prints, they were looking for kids, two of them, and based on the blood they found, they were looking for injured kids. “Lots of things up in those mountains. Bears, coyotes. It gives you a real sick feeling when a kid's in danger like that.”

It had taken them days to track down the boys, and then only from a distance. They were running scared and afraid, and getting near them only caused a lot of commotion. “Soon as we'd get the equipment close, they'd be off an running. They wouldn't even fall for our traps.”

“Your traps?”

“Left food out for them almost every night – sandwiches, waters. But those boys were wily. They knew how to survive, but the one. The one was in real bad shape. Looked like a head injury, and he was getting worse.”

At the edge of her seat already, Mystique leans forward in interest. She listens quietly as the man recounts those days of trying to find the boys again. “They even walked down the streams to hide
their footprints. Don't know who they thought we were, but they weren't going to be caught easily.” But, four days in, and the older boy was dragging tail. He was bleeding too much, and was woozy on his feet. “We watched them the entire day, afraid to spook them again, and he was on his last legs as far as we could tell.” The boys had curled up in the trunk of a tree, trying to get out of the cold. Their clothes were in tatters, and the oldest one looked to be hypothermic along with the injuries. “Probably had some other broken bones, too. Kid was in bad shape.”

All he remembers is waiting until evening for the kids to finally go to sleep. “Youngest one spotted us and started screaming at the top of his lungs trying to wake his brother up, but the boy was too sick. Kept right on sleeping. I woke up on that same patch of mountain six years later with the rest of my crew. My wife was remarried, my kids grown up, and not a single person in town wanted anything to do with me. Either I was a liar or I was touched by the Devil, and they made sure to let me know how unwanted I was. As you can see, the press at the time was ugly.”

And, indeed, she did see that. He was called a hoax, a dead-beat dad. There were rumors of another family, or attention seeking. All of this because he woke up with no idea where he'd been for so long. “You think the aliens took you?”

He shrugs. “Most plausible explanation yet. There were sightings of that ship. So maybe they beamed me up.”

“Well, can you tell me anything else about the kids? Did they ever contact you, or did you check up on them?”

“Nah, had too much else to worry about when I came back, like reporters knocking at my door at three in the morning or people lighting crosses in front of my house. No, the best person to talk to about the boys would be Jeremiah Hanover. Don't know where he's at now, but he was the park ranger on duty that night and might have an inkling what happened to them. Why? Did they come up missing, too?”

She shakes her head. “I'm sure their fine. No need for milk cartons.”

“No, I mean, if they disappeared, let me know. Maybe the same thing happened to them. Maybe we can help each other figure it out.” It was a solemn request, his heart on his sleeve. Mystique found herself reaching out and touching the human's shoulder, trying to comfort him from the confusion that he woke up to everyday.

“I will,” she says quietly. “I'll let you know what I find out.”

“Well, damn time,” Victor says when she makes it back to the car. Snarled and cranky, he watches as she buckles in, her look more contemplative than he expected. “We have to go to Anchorage,” she says, explaining that they need to find Jeremiah Hanover, ask him about the kids.

“Kids?”

“Yeah. There were two of them. Brothers most likely. You ever dream about another kid?”

“Just once. He was behind glass walls screaming his head off. All scared like. There was blood in the floor?”

“Do you think you killed him, too?”

Sabretooth shrugs. All he knows is that the dreams are getting worse. Last night, the boy had his eyes and ears cut out, his tongue and nose sliced off. “I mutilated that kid, only I don't know why.”
“Have you ever thought that it wasn't you who hurt him like that?”

“Can't think of anyone crueller than me, babe. Only, I'd like to know the whole story.”

Silence befalls them as he starts the engine. A full tank of gas and a three day's drive that neither are looking forward to lays ahead of them, along with nights full of dreams that neither one understand.
“Where's my keeper?” Beast asks as Magneto enters the small prison area. A communicator was left on overnight, just for the purposes of tempting McCoy out of his cage, but the behemoth is more than cozy and hasn't moved an inch.

Eric quirks a long gray brow at the continued presence in his cells before smiling and taking a seat against the wall. With a flick of fingers, he opens the door to the unlocked cell, thereby completely freeing the other man. “You used to be such a trustworthy fellow, doctor.”

“You have an army now, Eric. I presumed this to be the safest place in the world for a mutant like me.”

“A mutant like you?"

“They will oppose your arming of the masses, Eric. Even Storm won't sit this one out.”

“If, indeed it does get out,” Lehnsherr cautions him. “This is SHIELD we're talking about.”

“They're crafty. They'll find a way to frame you for something.” As a member of the Avengers, Beast understands SHIELD like no X-man ever has. He knows Fury, has operated under that anonymity for years when he was needed. “Trust me on that. They will not go down so easily.” Then, blue brow raises. “But, that's why you're here, isn't it?”

“You're after SHIELD's destruction, so why not help me?”

“What makes you think --”

“You knew about our assault on the Denver base this morning. I made sure of it. I even left the communications open, yet you didn't warn them. That leads me to believe that your employer and myself might have common goals. Why not work together? Bring this world to its knees. Put mutants in their rightful place.”

Beast is a student of Xavier, ever the idealist for a new world order. Superior and sapien – they are bred from the same cloth, neither better than the other. “Peace can only happen when both human and mutant realize that they are equals in this world. Neither should be lord and master, but both rightfully and justly treating each other with respect.”

“You sound just like him,” Eric sneers, folding arms across his chest. He's on the defensive now, angered by the words of his one-time friend. “Ever the learned student, aren't you?” A smile snicks across his cheek. “But, you knew, didn't you? You knew that he was siphoning Summers' power?”

The arrogance fades from Beast's blue face, his cheeks become hollow with guilt, his shoulders round, his hands clench. “I was told it was necessary, and I believed him.”

“You believed everything he ever told you. What damage he has done to such a fantastic mind. To
both your minds.” He smiles knowingly at McCoy, the door swinging back and forth on invisible magnetic strings. “And you believe he's dead, too, do you not?”

Breath stalled, Beast carefully examines the man outside the cell for truth or lies. Indeed, it has always been difficult to tell the two apart, but Henry is practiced at this art through his years and years of observation. “You only think he's alive. Some hoax has led you to believe --”

“He's been alive for quite some time. Before the Red Wave even.” An angry grin. “Why do you think he hides himself? Do you think it's shame?”

“Xavier would have been front and center during the Red Wave. As the architect of that mind--”

“I can take you to where he is. Both himself and Jean Grey.”

The mention of the two names together gives him pause. That Jean knew as well. That they didn't try to end the chaos that happened upon Scott's awakening. In many ways, it makes him angry, but in other ways, he's simply just tired. “For what price?”

“The name of your employer. I wish to speak to them directly.”

“I have no employer.”

A snap of his fingers, and Sam Guthrie enters the room. A shell of his former self, his face is pale and gaunt, his hands still shaking with the fright of his near-death experience. There is also anger. Immense anger as his blue eyes flicker towards Beast. “Relax, Henry. He's not going to hurt you. Sam's not going to hurt another mutant.” He takes a long pause, beckons the mutant to sit. Blue eyes drill holes in amber. “He's still not recovered, as you can plainly see. They tried to kill him. Tried to remove the mutant gene from his DNA. It turns out that it's your research that led them down that path.”

“My research?” Eric nods. “I've never --”

“Of course not. Of course not. You would never do anything untoward in the name of science, would you? All of those years of faking data in order to hide Charles' nasty little secret? You may have left them some very valuable clues that will eventually eliminate the X-gene in our codes.”

It's a faulty science, at best, Beast explains. Whatever they're trying to glean from those early days of research will prove futile because he'd already looked down that avenue after Wanda's spell. “If it can't unlock the genome,” he says, “then it can't lock it. My research and theories were sound, but there is nothing--”

“Your research may be futile, but their research is killing mutants.” He takes a long pause, looks to Sam who has yet to move his gaze. He touches the young man on the shoulder, gains his attention. “Is there something you'd like to say to him?” Cannonball shakes his head, the glass of his eyes becoming more pronounced. “You see, Dr. McCoy, to him you are a traitor.”

“What I did, I did for the world.” It's a weak defense now, especially looking at Sam's hollow cheeks. “How long's it been since he slept?”

Magneto shakes his head. “You don't get to change the subject.”

“I'm sorry about what happened to you, Sam. I didn't know about the Undertow. I didn't know what they were doing.” His words are genuine, shamed, but Guthrie doesn't move, doesn't angle his angry glare away from him. To Cannonball, all that matters is that he sided with those that tried to kill him. “If I could change it--” He stops short, knowing that the rest would be a falsehood. “I was only
trying to save the world. Scott Summers is a danger to us all. He needs to be stopped, not used as a weapon, not put at the forefront of mutant rights.”

Sam finally speaks. “So you still want him dead?”

In truth, Beast doesn't know what he wants anymore. He fears Cyclops and that explosive power, especially now that there is no one controlling it. But if Xavier is indeed alive, then perhaps his fears will be assuaged. “If I can just talk to him, I can convince him to—”

“Tell me who you're working for, and I'll give you his location.” Henry refuses once again. “Very well then. You are free to leave whenever you would like. You're not needed here, nor are you wanted. My army is quite angry with you, so it may not be as safe as you think. I will not stop them from committing violence upon you, nor will they stop you from evacuating your cell.” And, with that, he taps Sam upon the shoulder and they leave the good doctor alone.

Outside the cell, he can hear the rumblings of the mutants. They want his blood, his soul. They want to subject him to the horrors that they faced in the Undertow. He doesn't blame them. He, too, has been a victim of mutant experimentation, thanks to his dark counterpart. He knows what it feels like. He knows what it does to the mind.

But, this is not why he leaves. It's the news of Xavier that draws him forth out into the hallways of the bunker.

The mutants pull and tug at his fur, bump his shoulders, slam themselves against his wide ribs. A chair hits him from behind, shatters over his head, and he falls to the ground in a wailing of punches and kicks. It's Magneto who stops them, forces them back against the walls and enables a clear path for Beast to leave. He reminds them that they are not animals, that they will not act as such. They're an army, and together, they will make sure that the horrors they have been through will never happen again.

McCoy picks himself up from the floor and drags his bleeding body out into the sunlight, and on shaky legs he runs. And runs. And runs. There is no single direction to his movements, no clear path. He only runs until his lungs fail and his stomach churns violently out onto the ground. It's evening now, and he stares at the bile on the ground, dizzy with the need to calm his nerves. Xavier's alive. He must warn them all.
He returns to them, his arm half gone, his mind a wreck. He convulses, a seizure overtaking his body, and Logan turns him onto his side and calls for someone to help him. Within minutes, the room is filled with onlookers and the scent of fear. “He disappeared again,” Logan rushes as Dr. Reyes administers a sedative to calm Scott down. “He was gone, maybe ten minutes.”

She's tired, wary. Dark circles rim her deep, brown eyes, and she continues to examine her favorite patient. Other than the missing half of his arm, he has chunks of flesh removed from his sides and legs, as if eaten by an animal. “No further broken bones,” she assesses with relief. “No further organ damage. His arm needs bandaged to contain the blood, but he'll be okay.” The skin will heal, much faster than the previous damage, or at least that is what she's observed thus far.

He smells like burned rubber and iron. A light scent, quickly fading, but it's still there. Logan watches as flailing limbs slowly calm, and the haze of thoughts slowly settles. Scott says nothing when the seizure finally ends, simply puts hand on head and curls into a ball, the cloud of red solidifying around him, a brief shimmer of a crystalline structure before it shatters into nothingness. “Get away from me,” Scott hisses struggling with his control. “Please.”

With a gesture, Logan waves the onlookers away, waiting until they're alone in the room once again. “Just breathe, Scotty,” he says quietly, kneeling down to feather fingers through autumn hair. “Big, deep breaths.”

He tries, and fails, the need to control himself so pertinent, so necessary that he can't relax. Logan lays down on the floor beside him, runs thumb down cheek in slow, soothing strokes. “It's okay. You're safe now. Just breathe.” He inhales loudly and exhales through parted lips. “Just breathe.”

Scott tries again to mimic the breaths, to follow Logan's lead. A frustrating process that mashes his teeth into a tight, harsh hold, but Logan continues, twining his fingers up into hair, smoothing it back from forehead. Again, he tells Summers to breathe, to allow himself to relax, and slowly, painstakingly, he finally does. The cloud of red settles into every-so-often wisps, breath evens out.

It's a moment of peace, Logan realizes, afraid to break the spell. He continues to soothe his fingers through hair and down jaw, afraid that if he stops, then Scott will disappear again. There is no world outside of this, this moment. No pain, no fear. It's simply breath and touch, and slow, languid movements that speak to days they hope to come.

“Where were you?” Logan asks, sitting up and grabbing the first aid kit. He carefully removes the tattered clothing from Scott's form, urging him to lay back on the floor so that he can work. He doesn't like being nude, but the wounds have to be cleaned. “Scott, where were you?”

“I don't know.” His voice cracks with the admission.

The fear becomes an overwhelming scent, and the red miasma begins to hover over Scott's body once again. “It's okay, Slim,” Logan eases, pressing a hand to his stomach, a slow back and forth
meant to calm the troubled mutant. He takes a deep breath, hoping that Summers follows his lead. Whatever he's going through must be frightening, enough that his jaw would tremble at the thought of it. “No need to rush it. Just breathe.”

Scott hides himself behind bloody hand, even as Logan strips him of pants and underwear and parts his legs to get access to the wounds. Logan bends his leg to dab alcohol upon the wounds that runs mid-thigh to just at the crease of legs. The gashes are deep, to the bone, piercing veins and arteries, but it's not that which surprises Logan. It's the scent of arousal and a thickening red cloud. Strong and heady, he looks at Scott who apologizes quickly and tries to hide himself further. “No shame in it,” Logan says, looking away quickly. “Must have been a long time for you.” Scott doesn't reply, so Logan tries his best not to focus in on the scent no matter how hard it is to do so.

Wounds cleaned of gravel and dirt, he proceeds to tape long pieces of gauze over the wounds, making sure that they are tight and firm. Still aware of Scott's growing need – and the miasma that surrounds him – he helps Scott back into a fresh set of loose clothing, and into the chair. “You must be hungry, too,” he said, still not able to look the other mutant in the eye. As much as he's thought about it lately, he is sure that it is an involuntary reaction, and that the other man can't help it. “You probably haven't eaten for years either.”

“I'm fine,” Scott says weakly, turning towards the window, red tendrils still seeping out over him. “Maybe, but you'll heal faster with some food in your stomach. Trust me on that.” He can feel the distance between them, how silent and cold the other man has become in the moments following his release from first aid. The scent of lust dissipates under the nothingness that the room suddenly becomes. “Don't get worked up while I'm gone,” he says quietly, his thoughts heavy.

Most of the construction is complete. A few odds and ends on the grounds and the finishing touches – tile, paint, carpet. Storm spent the morning picking out wallpaper and helping the students with their new schedules. She plans to re-open the school as soon as Scott is squared away regardless of the President's warning on television. She doubts it will come to another war, in fact she knows it. Her confidence makes Logan wince, as if she knows something that she's not telling him.

The kitchen isn't as well stocked as Logan's used to. Leftover red beans and rice – Rogue's attempt to wish the Cajun back into these walls – and a vegetarian lasagna seem the most interesting things left in the staff fridge. A side of cornbread, some stewed zucchini. Stuffed in the microwave, the smell hits Logan hard, making his stomach jerk and jolt with pangs. He heaps the plates full of the mouth watering goodness.

“You don't have to baby him.” Storm stands in the doorway. Dressed in black skinny jeans and a loose cotton top, she looks as beautiful as she is comfortable. Logan can't help but admire her. “He is allowed to get his own food.”

“He needs time to collect himself,” Logan grunts. He's tired of her picking at him. She's heard about the disappearance earlier, and it worries her. Just like the stories that she's now heard about the ship. “Logan, are you sure you can control him?”

“He'll be fine, 'Ro,” he mutters, taking up his plates. But, she's not done with him. Stretching out across the door, she blocks his progress. She tells him that she's on his side, that she wants what's best for him. Regardless of his feelings for her, she still loves him, and she wants him to be happy. “You don't have to worry about me, darlin'. I'll be fine. I know what I'm getting myself into.”

“He's not staying,” she says, her blue eyed gaze suddenly upon the floor. “He's turning himself in.” She draws back, waits for the sudden flare of temper. When shock overlays it, when she knows she's
safe, she continues, “Steve is taking him to SHIELD headquarters the day after tomorrow. He'll be put on trial for his acts.”

Still speechless, it takes Wolverine long moments to reply. “What'd you say to him?” She shakes her head. It was his own plan. He went to her with it. “And you thought it was a good idea?”

“I didn't have a choice. He called us together, brought Steve in on it.”

“But you didn't try to talk him out of it, did you?”

“No.” Before the rage catches up to him, she places a tender hand on his shoulder. “A trial will clear him, Logan. He's not in his right mind --”

He knocks her hand away. “You really think Fury is going to let this go to trial? You just signed him up for an execution.”

“It was his idea.”

“Of course it was. Ever since he came back, all he's been doing is trying to die. And you just gave him the go ahead.”

It's an astounding revelation for Storm, one that parts her lips in a sudden gasp. “I thought – But we were standing behind him. I thought that he wanted us to be free.”

Logan shoves past her, plates in hand, and barrels up to his room. Calmer now, but not completely rid of the red sheathe, Scott doesn't acknowledge his stormy entrance or the plate thrust into his lap. “I thought we were past this,” Logan says, sitting on the bed. The words cool the atmosphere even further. “I thought you wanted to get better.”

The flick of visor, just the barest edging towards the sound of Logan's voice. Scott cools even further, reacting to the rage with a calmness that has been rare since his return from the Red Dimension. The fog around him becomes a slow pulse that sticks close to skin, the barest leaking of his power. “There is no getting better,” he replies coolly. “But, this way, there are no further deaths.”

“Scott, what happened wasn't your fault. They shot at you. They--”

“Tell me that you're not frightened of what I can do.” He places the plate on the bedside table, folds his hands upon his lap. “You can't, can you?”

“There's a lot of mutants out there with frightening powers--”

“I don't want to destroy the world.”

“Then don't.”

“I don't know how to stop it.” Visor to the floor, he speaks in a hushed tone, frail, vulnerable. “I'm barely hanging on, Logan. I don't want to hurt anyone else.” That fragility disappears as soon as the words are but an echo. That cold resolve returns, forcing visor back to the window, and the miasma back into skin. He looks so much like his old self now, the same grit to his jaw, the same distance. He's Cyclops through and through, the leader of the X-men.

Logan wants to rage and scream and throw a mighty fit. He wants to push Cyke against the wall, bury his tongue deep within the depths of that mouth, prove to him that there are things yet worth living for. But he's been tempered by that attitude. Years of following orders, of watching the man's back, of second guessing and picking fights. It stays him, makes him hesitant. He picks through his
food, the taste of it unpleasant with the bile in his throat, with the wave of nausea that overtakes him. “You should eat,” he finally says, staring at the untouched plate. Dryly, “Maybe your heart will grow back faster if you eat.”

The words sting against that frigid resolve, bring forth that pulse of red from skin. His heart. That absent thing. Scott's head jerks slightly down to view the bandaged hole in his chest, and the slow progression of numbers starts eking from trembling lips. Logan watches with some amazement as a single word nearly rips him apart. “Come on, Scott. Don't make me force it on you. Just eat.”

Frustrated at the sudden mumbling of words, at the conversations with the corner, Logan loses his appetite completely, puts his plate down on the floor. He climbs across the bed, takes a seat near the chair. “Please,” he says, placing his hand over the heartless wound, “You need to eat. It will help.”

Scott shakes his head, a sudden fear coming over him. “Which one of you is real?” he asks.

Logan takes his hand, twines their fingers together. “I'm real, Scott.” He can't tell where Scott is looking, what he's focusing on. All he can see is the fury of his powers slowly beginning to spur out of control. He curses for his temper, for his words, that he broke the slim margin of control that Summers had managed. “Fuck,” he says, before rolling over and hoping that Scott pulls himself together on his own.

It's like a splinter. How it works its way out of the skin. How the skin pushes and pushes until the offense is gone, until the skin can heal, become whole again, become something new and perfect. Except, for Logan, the guilt doesn't go away. As much as his mind pushes at it, as much as he rationalizes and tries to talk himself down, the grief and guilt well up inside of him, stings across his eyes, and curls him onto the bed.

Hands to eyes to push back on the tears that threaten to spill, nails digging into forehead. Logan's frustration boils over into a primal snarl that fills the room with the dangerous scent of rage. A deep down murkiness, damp at the edges, the scent is nothing less than the need to rip something apart, iron rich with blood and need.

Stauching fingers into fists, he opens gray eyes to watch the one he loves quietly mumble to the corner about his heart and its lack. He doesn't blame his father for abandoning his boys for the adventures of space. Doesn't blame him for their loveless relationship. He has no heart. He can't be loved without a heart. Someone told him that once. He just can't remember who. It's on the tip of his tongue, somewhere buried in a box. He wishes he could remember.

Logan pulls the chair to the bed and edges out a bite of food onto the fork. He gently squeezes Scott's hand. “Hey bub,” he tenders. “Look at me. I'm real. Look at me. I'm the only one that's real.” He watches as the flash of recognition filters over normally stoic features, tugging at the corners of mouth, creasing brow. Once again, there's fear as red visor turns corner to corner in the room before settling upon Logan once again. “I'm the only one that's real.”

With his only hand, Scott grabs at his chest, pulls at the bandages covering the wound. “I lost it,” he says. “I lost my heart.”

“I'll help you find it,” Logan humors him, hoping to calm him down. “But you gotta eat first. Okay? We need to keep you strong.” He puts a spoonful of red beans and rice to Scott's mouth, urging him once again to take a bite, and when he does, Logan is quick with another unsure how long this clarity will last.

“My father hates me.”
“Your father doesn't know you.” He says this knowing that there is no comprehension at the moment, that thoughts are too blurred to understand. “It's okay, Scott. Just eat.”

It takes an hour to finish the plate, and Scott is more than tired by then. Between the delirium and the food, he's on sensory overload, but there is no rest for him, not with the Phoenix daring him to dream. He fears to sleep, even in his oblivion. He fears the sudden wrenching of what little control he has. He fears Apocalypse, the prison in his head. He fears himself and the act of letting go. But, it's a necessary function. Even for one such as Summers, one that heals, one that can warp reality. It aids the mind, the body, the heart. And so, Logan lays him down upon the bed, keeps him still, fingers threaded through hair trying to keep him calm.

He tells him that maybe in the morning his heart will return, and Scott hopes so. He doesn't want to be hated. He doesn't want to hurt anyone. Not again. Not ever again.
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

Logan and Kitty have a heart to heart.

The office is much bigger than Alex imagined for Hell's Kitchen. Two private rooms with desks, a greeting area, a phone station. Uncomfortable chairs next to the door. A coffee pot. There was nothing extra here. No lavishness or plush carpeting. Nothing to speak of expected largess or even success. But Logan insisted they were in the right place, and his nose rarely lied.

The man that approaches them is a bland chap, with a chubby face and chubbier middle. Dressed in a dour tweed of charcoals and slates, he looks every bit a sheister, rather than part of the team that Logan swore he would trust with his life. “Foggy Nelson,” the man says, extending his hand to Alex first and then to Logan. “How can I help you?”

“We're here to see Murdock,” Logan spits out, unintentionally sounding angry.

Nelson smiles and shakes his head. “Mr. Murdock isn't in right now. He'll be back around--”

“We'll wait then.”

Alex shrugs politely, a nervous smile breaking his tightly pressed lips. “Sorry. It's a difficult situation.”

An uneasy smile. “As long as you can pay, that's not a problem.”

“We can pay,” Wolverine issued, pulling a wad of bills from his pocket. “So long as Murdock can get results.”

Foggy disappears into his office, returning with a clipboard of paperwork. “Might as well get started while you wait then. Basic forms. Name, address, blood type.” He laughs at his own joke before his eyes narrow in sudden recognition. “You're Alex Summers.” The name is said with trepidation. Nelson takes a step back and regards Logan with the same anxiety as he does Alex. “You're Wolverine.” A pause, he nearly drops the clipboard. “You're here about Scott Summers.”

Eyes go wide, and a large toothy grin. Thrill splashes up Nelson's spine. “Holy shit! You're here about Scott Summers!” In a rush, Foggy zooms around the office collecting papers and books, ushering them both inside his office. “I've been following the events closely,” Foggy reveals. “It's not your average civil rights case, especially after the President's warning on television.” The two men take their seat and continue to watch the buzz of activity around them. “Do what we command or we hurt your family. That's a clear violation of civil rights, not to mention the threat of the Red Hunt.” He stops in his chatter, looks at them, his eyes still wide with disbelief. “I can't you're believe here. Do you know how many lawyers would love to take up your case? This is a legacy case. People would kill for it, you know.”

His flurry to gather his things done, Foggy takes his own seat at the desk. Leaning forward, he taps a pen against his cheek. “This could go to the Supreme Court--”

“It'll never get that far,” Logan snarls.
“And that's why we're here,” Alex cuts in before Logan's anger boils over. “We need to make sure there is a trial or at least the possibility of one, and not just an execution.”

Foggy's excitement dims. “An execution? You mean Death Row?”

“No, I mean an execution.” Logan leans forward, elbows on knees and takes a real deep breath that's meant to calm his growing frustration. “No trial, no nothing. Just flat out murder.”

The world is scared of Scott Summers, his powers, and rightfully so. Even Alex understands the worry. He has the same anxiety himself, that his brother will overload with power and destroy everything. “But, we can help him,” he explains. “That's what the X-men do. We help people learn to control their powers, and my brother is no exception.” He would be safe with them, out of the way, but it's going to take time before his mind is truly healed, before he can be a semblance of himself again.

Foggy Nelson scribbles as he listens, capturing key words in messy black squares and red underlines. He comments on an insanity plea, to which both mutants immediately refuse. “Call a man with that much power insane, and that will only hasten his death,” Alex explains. “It's the very thing we're trying to stop.”

“But he was the Red Wave?” Foggy clarifies. He gets two nods as his answer. “I doubt a jury will find him innocent. Insanity is your best--”

“The case isn't going to court.” Matthew Murdock stands in the doorway to Nelson's office. “They'll never allow it to get that far, not with SHIELD involved.” He walks across the room, the tap, tap of his cane a rhythmic sound in the silence. He takes a chair and pulls it to the side of Foggy's desk. “You need us to bluff our way inside to make sure Scott's still alive.” A pause, then to Logan, “How did you know?”

Logan grins and touches finger to nose. “Hardly ever lies.”

Murdock promises to meet them in the morning at the mansion, prepared and ready for a fight. “I'm going to give a call to Ben Ulrich, too,” he explains. “The more witnesses the better. They won't be able to disappear him so easily if the whole world knows that he's been captured.” He leaves them then, for the books on the shelves, running his fingers across the bindings to gather the ones they need.

Once in the car, Alex takes in a lungful of air, breathing out slowly through his nose. “It's probably not my brightest plan,” he admits to Logan.

“Only plan we got, bub. No use in doubting yourself now.” He's like his brother in that respect, that same thread of doubt coursing through the both of them. “You did what you could, now let's pray that it's enough.”

Silence settles between them, puts them in their heads to face their wants and their fears. The worst case scenarios and unrealized miracles. It isn't until Westchester that they finally speak again. “What happens if he doesn't love you back, Logan?”

That thought alone churns dread into the pit of Wolverine's stomach. “I don't know,” he answers honestly. For him, it's not so easy to just pick up and leave as his younger self would have done. There are too many connections, too much responsibility to simply go his own way. He's needed. More than needed, he's welcomed. “Act like nothing's wrong, I guess.” And he's good at that. He understands unrequited love.
“Are you still going to stand by him?”

“Love don't fade just because it's unwanted,” Logan surmises. “If he needs me, I'll be there.”

Alex stops the car right outside the gates of the mansion. The damage done is still evident, the scattered bricks and pieces of stone. Roofing shingles laying in the once dense gardens, and patches of rubble lining the driveway. Alex never felt at home here, not like Scott did. Not like Logan does. To him, this place will always be something unattainable, a family that never quite clicks. “If it gets too much for you,” he tells Logan, “I'll understand if you need to leave.”

“Who said I'm leaving?” Logan growls.

“I just don't want to see you get hurt.”

“It's not easy to hurt me, Alex. I heal real fast.” Logan flashes a sarcastic grin, but he's thankful that Havok is so attuned to him. “Besides, I leave, you're stuck with Steve being the other babysitter. I'm sure you don't want that.”

They are greeted by Kitty Pryde, a less than happy scowl on her face. She complains about Steve, and how he wouldn't let Pocket in to see Scott. “Poor little bunny has been outside the door since breakfast, hasn't moved an inch, but Steve won't let him inside. He won't even let me inside.” Even Tatsuya’s father is shocked about the boy and his sudden need to be around Scott. “It's amazing,” she says. “It's almost like they're bonded.”

Alex volunteers to talk to Steve, leaving Logan and Kitty alone in the kitchen. Logan digs through the fridge until he finds the rest of the vegetarian lasagna from the night before. He pops it in the microwave and takes a seat at the counter. “You okay, Logan?” Kitty asks, taking a seat opposite him. She knows the look on his face, this mood. It's a ponderous one, one that speaks of covered up worry.

He nods, taking a bite of the lasagna. “Yeah, punkin. I'm okay.”

She knows that he's lying, but she doesn't force the point. “Pretty amazing, don't you think? Even Tatsuya's father is amazed at how quickly he's become attached to Scott.”

“How long's the old man going to stick around?”

“Probably until the school opens and he's sure that Pocket is doing well. He says that his son has problems with change, that he'll need someone familiar for a while. It makes sense, really. I sort of wish more parents would take that kind of interest.”

“Be glad they don't,” he mutters, “You don't need a bunch of parents complaining about how their kid isn't an X-man yet.”

Kitty laughs before realizing that she hadn't laughed in ages. Curling fist under chin, she picks a clump of spinach from Logan's plate. “He's going to be okay, right? I mean, with this whole going to prison thing. He's going to survive it, right?”

It's not something that Logan can answer. There are too many what variables, too many what ifs. Even with a looming court case, SHIELD could easily bury it under mountains of paper work, make it take years for the case to go to trial, and by then, it also be easy enough for them to disappear Scott, to hide the body, to hide their treachery. “Fury's not above deceit, especially when it comes to national security.”

“They've been calling him a terrorist on the news.”
“They've called him that for years,” Logan reminds her, hearkening back to the days before his supposed death. “It's a label that won't easily go away.”

“But, he saved the world, Logan. How can they --”

“No one knows about that damn space battle, and even if they did, all they would see is that he killed tens of thousands of aliens to protect this planet. That kind of massacre doesn't go down well, regardless of whether it was his fault or not. It's just plain scary.” And, he admits that it even scares himself. “He was trying to kill himself,” he says. “Only it didn't work.”

“It's like he's on a mission,” Kitty says, snagging a piece of zucchini from the plate opposite her. “He's so focused on it that he can't see past it.” She's seen him like this before – they all have – when voices and opinions stopped mattering, when he pushed himself to the brink to bring about a resolution. “And when he's on a mission, there's no stopping him.”

It's one of the things that made him such an excellent leader, one of the reasons why he'd garnered so much respect from the X-men. He had a do or die attitude when it came to their field work, and though every one else had learned to compartmentalize their downtime, Scott was constantly working in order to keep the mutants safe. “He never learned to relax,” Kitty adds. “He never learned to have a life outside of the team.”

Logan wonders if the telepaths were responsible for that, too. If they'd gone into his head and given him such a steeled focus. Though it's hard to imagine that the Xavier they all knew and loved had stooped so low as to force a child's hand, in light of everything they've learned, he now questions it. “What if he never wanted to be an X-man?”

Bringing up Xavier causes conflicting emotions in Kitty. Xavier treated her like a daughter, and in many ways, she was closer to Charles than her own father. That relationship grew even further after her father's death on Genosha. “I could go to him with anything. He never judged me, never thought poorly of me, even if I did make a bad decision. He taught me everything I know about leadership and responsibility.”

Like most of the X-men, she took the revelations of his deceit hard. To find out that he'd been destroying Scott's mind for years in order to gain power had shaken her, made her question her very motivations for being here. “To see your surrogate father fall so low, it changes your world,” she says quietly.

Having lost his appetite, Logan pushes the plate to her, lets her finish the few scraps that are left. He's tired of thinking about Xavier and what he did, how he'd treated Scott and lied to everyone else. Of course, he's angry, rageful even. But, the man is dead, and it does no good to drag him through the dirt when he's not here to defend himself.

“People come back,” Kitty says, picking through the leftover lasagna. “They come back all the time.”

She doesn't know how long Storm will keep the telepaths away, how long until they're part of the school again. “She's got Psylocke on the schedule for both European history and self defense.”

“Self defense? That's usually my class.”

“She doesn't think you'll stay. Once Scott is in custody, she thinks you'll take off. She thinks Warren is going to leave, too.”

“Warren, eh?”
“He's not happy with her leadership. He's not happy with how she's treated Scott.”

“Who else is leaving?”

She's not sure, but she thinks Kurt is dissatisfied as well. And the kids. “Opal Johnston and Indira Gomez had some words with Storm this morning. They're pissed off that she allowed Scott to turn himself in. I think we're looking at another schism.”

“This ain't the time to be squabbling amongst ourselves. We don't show a united front, the world's going to take us down without batting an eyelash.”

“It's hard to be united when you disagree with leadership decisions.”

“You sound like you're itching for a fight.”

Kitty shakes her head. She's loyal to the school, to Xavier's dream, regardless of the pain the man inflicted. Like Storm, she's too weary to fight anymore, too enamored with the idea of normal days and schedules. She agreed with Storm, that hiding was the best solution to the problem, but if it hadn't been for Cable, then all those kids would have been in the Undertow. “I sort of miss being out on the field,” she reveals. “I miss making a difference.”

“You're going to make a difference here, Kitty. At the school, and that means a lot.” He's seen the way the kids react to her, and she makes a damn good teacher. “They look up to you. You're a good example of what they can become.” She's level headed, speaks her mind. She's a great field leader, from what he's heard. “I'm not expecting you to give all this up for Scott Summers. Not when Alex and I can take care of him.” He doesn't expect anyone to give it all up. So, there's no need for her to feel guilty over not coming with them.

Relief brings a soft smile to her face. “Thank you,” she says quietly, reaching out to grip his hand. A gentle squeeze, and she returns to the half-eaten lasagna. “If there's anything I can do, let me know.”

“Will do, punkin.” It's a short-lived smile, but still one that lifts Kitty's spirits. “And, the same goes for you.”
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

Custody.

The mansion still looks like a war zone. Though largely rebuilt – and with an entirely new roof to boot – Ben Ulrich can still see the remnants of battle here. “Impressive how fast they worked,” he comments, brown eyes then focused on Matthew Murdock to his right.

Already there are protesters here. Dozens of them, soon to be hundreds. Spreading out across the street, trying to climb the fence that protects this building from the masses, they scream and yell and pelt the car with eggs and tomatoes, doing everything they can to discourage these mutant sympathizers from their visit. “Rough crowd,” Ben says taking pictures from inside the car.

“It will only get worse from here,” Foggy Nelson says from the driver's seat. Making it through the gate and onto the driveway, they are followed by a lucky few protesters who manage to sneak through. They run across the lawn, shouting their obscenities at the top of their lungs. They find the debris in the mansion yard, picking up bricks and stones and anything else that can smash through the mansion windows.

“Where are the police? Why aren't they out here to keep the peace?” Ben prays silently that these violent creatures don't turn their stones on him.

“This is mutant territory,” Foggy explains. “Cops decided that they can take care of their own.”

As they pull into the gate, they see the beginnings of a press junket. A crowd of reporters swarm around the mansion taking photos of the destruction and graffiti that's yet to be repaired. They knock on the door, peer through windows. They flash cameras when a mutant is spotted within the depths, with each one hoping for an interview.

As they exit the car, Foggy leads them to the front door, and already Ulrich can feel those dangerous eyes upon him. Both the protesters and the press, they are jealous that he's here. “You can't go in there,” one reporter exclaims. “No way you're getting that exclusive.”

But, before the fight can heat up, the lawn is suddenly drenched by a downpour of rain, sending protesters and reporters under cover for a brief time. Ben watches them with a laugh as they cower under clipboards and plastic bags. It's then that he notices the mutants – Piotr Rasputin in his flesh form and Rogue. He snaps pictures as they reel back the crowds outside of the gates, claiming it's private property. “They're only making things worse,” Ben says, noticing how angry the crowds are as they are pushed out. “They'll start throwing fire soon.”

“We're on private property. The X-men have a right to defend it,” Murdock answers.

Ben isn't accustomed to mutants. Though he's covered capes for most of his career – including the X-men – he's still a bit wary of them. The world hates them, and it's hard to deny such fervency, especially after the Red Wave. “So, he's really not well? In the head, I mean?”

“You'll see for yourself,” Matthew promises as the door opens. Storm looks out across the lawn,
watches as Rogue and Piotr get the gate closed again. She apologizes for the delay, but there are children here. Children that she's trying to keep safe. “It's not a problem,” Murdock tells her. “We're here to help.”

She gives them a small tour of the mansion – mostly the rooms that have been finished already. A few parlors, the rec room where the kids are watching a movie and kept out of the way. She allows pictures of these places, the emptiness of them. “Most will become classrooms,” she speaks of the parlors, “where the children will learn about everything from English to math. “It's a well-rounded curriculum. I can show you the schedules if you like.”

“Don't you train them to become X-men?” Ben asks.

“Only if they wish to be so, but most of the children that graduate go on to lead very normal lives. They have families and jobs, and want nothing more than to just feel safe.” She's good at this, these interviews. Having done thousands of them between her time as an X-man as well as queen of Wakanda. “We do teach them self defense,” she admits, “But, as you can see outside, that's often necessary in the life of a mutant. Just being born garners much hatred, and it only worsens as the children age.”

There are rooms here that still show signs of the destruction. Rubble and broken ceilings, graffiti and yet to be replaced windows. He photographs these places, the remnants of the battle that took place here. “How many died?” he asks, looking up and into pale blue eyes. She's a beautiful creature, and deadly, he supposes. That she can control the weather is a mighty gift, and he is surprised that she doesn't use her powers more often. The things she could do – bring rain to the desert, snow to the tropics. He admires her self control. “When SHIELD attacked, how many died?”

“None that I know of,” she answers. “Many were wounded on both sides, but as far as I know, no one died.”

“Would you be sad if they did?”

She nods. “All life is precious, regardless of genetics.”

“Is that why you're harboring this menace? The Red Wave?” She is surprised at the question, quickly glancing to Nelson and Murdock for some clarification. The interview was supposed to be an easy one. “He destroyed entire cities, yet you're keeping him here. Why is that?”

Foggy gives her the nod that she should answer. “He wasn't aware of what he was doing. He's barely aware now.”

“Are you saying he's insane?”

“No. Just very confused.” Her long legs carry her to the stairs leading to the upper levels. “His mind was severely damaged, and it will take time to heal.”

“But you are scared of him. I can see it in your eyes,” Ben presses.

“I am scared of many things, Mr. Ulrich,” she sighs, “but Scott Summers is not one of them. We have taken measures that help keep him under control while his mind is healed. He will never become the Red Wave again, so long as he stays with the X-men.”

“That sounds like a threat, Ms. Munroe.”

“It is not meant to be taken as such. We simply know how to handle him. SHIELD does not.”
Ben scribbles on his note pad, taking down Storm's words with a hurried pen. “You're doing very well,” he applauds her. “Most people would have avoided those questions completely.”

Storm shrugs a shoulder. “I wish they were questions that didn't have to be asked. You'll see that he's a broken man right now, but he trying at least to recover himself. He doesn't want to hurt anyone.”

Nelson and Murdock had explained the telepathic damage. “Greed,” Murdock had called it. “They siphoned his power to bolster their own. And, in the end, he lost his reality.” He also warned him that an interview may not go smoothly.

Storm knocks politely on the upstairs room, waits those seconds for Alex to answer. It's necessary for him to be here, another thing that the attorneys had warned him about. The younger Summers is their safety net, their best chance to keep the immensity of Cyclops' powers under control.

It's a wonderful thing to meet Scott Summers. Ulrich had followed his career as a superhero for many years. He was well known as a master strategist and tactician, as well as a premiere voice in the struggle for mutant rights. He'd scared the world first as the Dark Phoenix, and then again as a renegade mutant, but he was an honest rebel, and one that did no harm. He just wanted to protect his species.

“Alex Summers,” he says and proffers his hand for a shake. “I'm a big fan of your work, Mr. Ulrich. Thank you for coming.”

“I know who you are,” Ben says with a smile. “What you did during the Red Hunt was pretty impressive. You got people to listen.”

“Just not the right people, eh?”

Scott sits facing the window, the slow seeping tendrils low against his skin. He's a ghost of himself, that proud man who fought for his species, his family. “Scott, this is Mr. Ben Ulrich. He wants to ask you some questions.”

Though is face denies emotion, the sudden fog of red energy betrays his stoic features. “You shouldn't be here,” he tells the writer. “I deserve what's going to happen to me.”

Ulrich sets his tape recorder on the bed side table and takes his seat opposite the chair. He looks to the lawyers, then to Alex and Ororo before continuing on. “Do you mind telling me what you think they're going to do to you?”

“They're going to save the world.”

“From you?”

“From me.”

Red visor drops its visage to the floor. “I didn't mean to hurt them,” he says quietly. “I tried to fix it.”

Ben is careful now. Careful not to press to hard against the man's answers. Indeed, he is not himself. In all of the interviews, in all of the aftermath of battles, Scott Summers had been a paragon of self control and bravery. Often the voice of the X-men, he never wavered in his beliefs that mutants and humans could get along. “You did fix it, in the end. You put the world to right.”

“I don't blame them for being scared,” he says. “I deserve their hatred.”

He presses stop on the recorder, looks to Nelson and Murdock. “It was his decision to turn himself
“The President's speech spooked him,” Alex says. “He's trying to save the world from another war.”

He presses record once again, turning back to Scott. “Mr. Summers, how many people are in this room, right now?”

“Twelve.”

“Can you tell which ones are real?” There is no answer to the question. Scott turns his focus back to the window and to the lawn where even more reporters have crossed over the gate. “Do you think that they're going to kill you?”

A soft nod at the question. “They're going to save the world.”

Ben walks to the window so that he can see the man himself. His chest is covered in bloody bandages, remnants of the battle with the aliens. Half an arm, his legs chewed up. Ben snaps a picture of him, of his wounds. “Can you actually die?” he asks.

“I hope so.”

Ben switches off the recorder once again and leads the others into the hallway. “If I do this, then you have to give me license to tell the truth.”

“And what truth is that?” Murdock asks.

“That he's not well. I want to know what happened to him.”

“We won’t drag a dead man’s name through the mud,” Storm replies.

“You're going to have to if you want this trial.”

Steve Rogers appears at the end of the hallway. Dressed in full uniform, he is commanding, his very presence drawing their stares. “It's time,” he says. “They’re landing now.” Even from here, the rear of the mansion, they can hear the thrum of helicopters landing in the lawn. The X-men don’t move for him, forcing him to hedge his shoulders between them and the bedroom door. “I'm sorry,” he says, “But this has to be done.”

“Do you think Scott Summers deserves death?” Ulrich is quick to ask.

“Who said anything about death?” he answers just as quickly. “He deserves a trial for his crimes.”

“And the Avengers will make sure that he gets one?” Steve nods. “I can quote you on that?”

The Avengers believe in the right to a fair trial, no matter the person, no matter the species. “He won't be harmed while in custody, that much I can assure you. But, this step must be taken in order to allow the public to feel safe and protected. And yes, you can quote me on that.”

Steve opens the door to the flash of another camera, tells Scott that it's time. Like a shadow, Scott rises from his chair exposing to everyone the wounds he has suffered. There's blood on his shirt, on his beige slacks that are just a tad too short. He wears Alex's clothes as all of his things were discarded upon his death. He walks silently down the hall, saying nothing save for an askance for the whereabouts of Logan.

“He's asleep,” Alex replies. “But, we'll come see you soon.”
“Don't,” Scott cautions him. “I need to do this alone.”

The children – those trapped in space – gather in the hallway. Indira is in tears, Sarah a nervous wreck. Arlo howls his sadness while Cricket smooths his forehead hoping to calm him down. And, then there's Pocket who stands in the center of the corridor, his hands stuffed into his bunny suit, his eyes on the floor. Nearby is his father who watches his son carefully.

“I have to go,” Scott tells the young child. Kneeling down, he stretches out his arms, reaching for the boy. Tatsuya collapses upon him in a tight embrace. “It'll be okay,” Scott soothes. “You'll be fine here.” The flash of camera draws Cyclops back. “The X-men will take care of you.” Pocket hangs onto Scott for dear life, kicking and fighting when he's released from the embrace.

His father comes to the rescue, pulling the boy into another hug. There are tears in his eyes, both happy and sad. “Arrigato,” he says, thanking the man, “I have hope for him now. That he may fit into this world after all.”

The crowd that follows him down the stairs is a quiet one. A death march, as Ulrich's been told. The end of Cyclops, the death of a hero. He can see it in their faces, how solemn they are, how outraged. He takes pictures as he can, stopping to jot down notes when the crowd closes in upon them. “He's very admired,” he tells Alex.

Blocking the door is Logan, his body still lacking rest. “I didn't rescue you so that you could throw your life away, One-eye.”

“You should have killed me first.”

Logan takes a deep breath, watches as Ulrich continues to write stuff down. There's so much more that he wants to say, but he can't, not with the reporter watching. “I'll see you soon,” is all he says after, though even Ulrich can tell that the conversation wasn't finished.”

Out into the sunlight, the reporters beg their questions while the protesters beyond the gate swell in their anti-mutant chorus. Rocks are thrown, flaming bottles of alcohol. Steve holds up his shield, protecting them from the projectiles as he leads Cyclops to the edge of the driveway where the black van awaits. The reporters swarm the van then, making it hard for them to get through.

Hand on Scott's head, Captain America helps the mutant terror into the backseat and shuts the door. He ignores the many questions thrown out into the air, opening the opposite door and getting inside. “That was fast,” Ulrich says. “They didn't even handcuff him.”

“Wouldn't matter if they did,” Logan grumbles. “He'd just break out of them.”

“What makes them think, then, that a cell would hold him?”

“They don't. They're going to find a way to kill him. For good this time.”
He envies her. Her death. It was a quick one, the Creeds made sure of it, biting into her neck first, then puncturing lungs with their claws. He finds her – the pieces of her – strewn about the rolling hills of his underground estate. Her arms first, over by the forest, then her head dumped into the small stream, a fleshless skull with hollowed eyes.

He says no prayer as another Madelyne is buried by the Gambits. No words of well wishing, none for grief. He simply watches her torn apart body disappear under the mounds of dirt. “‘Tis a shame,” he says. “She was a magnificent piece of work.”

“She tried to kill me,” Emma retorts, phasing from diamond to flesh in a mere instance. “I have a right to defend myself.”

“So do,” Essex smiles. He hates seeing his work wasted like this, but he’s still fascinated by the Madelynes behaviors. “To think, that such a singular thought can lead them to their deaths. It’s a fascinating thing to watch.”

He leads Emma down the grassy hills, over his corrals of Creeds. They howl at him, beg for his attention, for food, for freedom. “Such an animal,” Essex shakes his head, reaching beyond the wooden fence to scratch behind one of their ears. “Nothing but instinct and pride. It's so easy to force them into such a rabid state.” He looks at her then, “Be thankful it's not your scent that they're trained to catch.

Beyond the pens is a stable where the horses are kept. It's what Essex enjoys most about the country, the freedom to ride these majestic beasts whenever he chooses. A Gambit cleans out the stalls, raking the hay from the bottom of the floor and shoveling it into a pile just outside. He bows to his master, a mon ami upon his tongue. He's not capable of conversation, his mind controlled as such. But Sinister speaks to him anyway. “We'll be taking the white ones today,” he says, “And don't forget my guns.”

Today is a hunting day, a time for Nathaniel to relax as his plans are delayed thanks to Summers' imprisonment. “Have you ever hunted, Ms. Frost?”

She hasn't, but she's been around hunting parties in her youth. Her father was a crack shot when it came to ducks; her brother not so much. It was a sport unfit for ladies of her breeding. And once she discovered she was a mutant, she'd lost the taste for it all together. “That's too bad,” Sinister sighs. “It's a good way to clear your head, to relax. There's nothing like fresh blood on your hands.”

Everything here was created by Sinister, from the growing green grass to the large trees in the distance. The foxes, the birds, the deer. It's a whole microcosm, down to the very clouds that shift in and out of the makeshift sky. Celestial technology, or so he'd explained the evening before last. “It's not so hard to manipulate as one would think. It's reminiscent of Apocalypse's machines, how they work. It was all too easy to adapt it to the underground.”

It's also what he uses in his cloning process. “Always looking for perfection,” he smiles, “And one
day I will achieve it.” Sinister is not a mutant, which causes him great anxiety, especially when it comes to Scott Summers, that perfect power in an imperfect mind. He admits to jealousy of the child, but also an obligation. “What good is a world destroyed?”

“You think he's safe now that he's in SHIELD custody?”

“Oh no, far from it.”

“Then why don't we rescue him?”

“Because there's thrill in the wonderment.” He looks at her, one brow raised, “Don't you feel it? The will he, won't he? How far will the Avengers go before they realize that they're in over their collective heads?”

The Creeds howl in the chase, cornering a fox just up ahead, clinging to the trees. It runs, buries itself in a long ago hole while the beasts surround it and growl. Sinister lines up his shot and pulls the trigger, scattering the Sabretooths into forest out of fear. “That one's a nice size,” he says. “It's pelt will hang well in the second floor parlor.”

“You act as if you planned on this.”

“It was one of my contingencies, yes. But, I am surprised that he turned himself in. I expected the others to force it upon him.”

“He was always a martyr.”

“Perhaps, but I expected more fear in the X-men than what they've shown. I suppose Alex is to be blamed for that.” But even though the younger Summers had surprised him on occasion, he is still not his brother. “Poor Alex must always live in the shadows of his brother's feats. He'll never rise above it.”

“You can't clone him either, can you?”

Sinister smiles. “You are very observant, Ms. Frost. I like that about you.” Over the course of weeks, he's come to enjoy their witty banter. “Talking with poor Maddie is a dim conversation. Nothing like you.”

“You're not cloning me --”

“Of course not. One of you is enough for this world. For now, anyway.”

They ride in silence for sometime, staying on Creed's trail through the woods. She shifts to diamond when the Sabretooths track down another fox, trapping it in the hollow of a tree. The poor thing is frightened, and obviously nursing judging by the swell of her belly. “You're going to kill a mother,” she says.

“Indeed I am.” It's a quick death as the bullet pierces her heart, explodes blood across the forest floor. “But, she's mine to kill. I created her after all.”

“Is that what you're going to do to my child?”

Essex laughs, turning to see the diamond chill behind him. “I'm a man of my word, Ms. Frost. I merely want a blood sample and a swab, and after that, I will leave your precious infant alone.”

His smile leaves her cold, makes her wary. She realizes that deep down she does not trust this man.
Though he promises her the world, he can easily rip it away. She has her plans, though, to get past the Creeds and Gambits, to leave this place once she's pregnant. And the Madelynes play a key role. Already, she's mapped out what paths they've taken in their escape, giving her an idea of the traps that the man has laid on these grounds.

As if sensing her plans, Sinister smirks. “The Creeds are constantly hungry,” he warns her, throwing the peltless carcass to the ground. They fight over the thing, growling and snarling, ripping the tiny fox to shreds. In the end, it's too small of a meal for them, and for that, they only fight more. “Calm down, my beasts. Calm down.”

His telepathic control over the Sabretooths are far more advanced than his hold over the Madelynes. They are mindless creatures, driven by pure instinct and telepathic suggestions. They hold no thoughts of their own other than the need to kill. Piling the fur into the saddlebag, Sinister looks to Emma once again. “But, at least they are loyal.”

“Only so long as you wield your power over them,” she snubs in return, turning her head away from the devouring of the fox.

“You're upset that I killed a mother?”

“I'm upset because your plan is taking too long. We've had days to--”

“Patience, Emma,” he eases. “All good things come to those who wait, and our plot is not yet ready to be sprung upon them.”

“He's in prison, which means he's far out of my reach --”

“Do you really think they can hold him?” His words give her pause. “It's merely a delay. You know the man and how he struggles with his demons. Once he tires of being kept in their cells, he'll leave. And, that's when we strike.”

There's a sense danger about the smile that snips across his face. Something cruel and malicious.

“You're going to break him.”

“He's already broken, dear.” His grin widens. “Well most of him. There is a part that is still as strong as ever.”

She knows of what he speaks, that small kernel of glimmer, the last of the layers. Emma had marvelled at that small breath of mind for years, never understanding what lay beneath it. She'd tried once to crack it herself, to break open, but like with Sinister, this little piece of his mind resisted her prowess. She'd turned a blind eye to it then, ignored it's presence as she kept that mind together. “That little piece is all that's left of his sanity. Are you sure it's wise to break it when he's so unstable?”

“Another part of the game. I want to see what it is that drives him forward, despite the things you have done to him.” He boards his horse again, sounds a whistle that alerts the Creeds to the continued hunt. “You don't like me much, do you?”

“I don't have to like someone in order to work with them.”

“Other than those few renegade Madelynes, have I not treated you as a welcomed guest in my home?”

“Your courtesy is astounding. All this for a bit of blood and bile? It seems to small a price.”
“That's the crux of your anger then,” he says, kicking at his horse to run. Already the Sabretooths are on another trail. “You think that I have been lying to you about my plans.” A quick glance back to watch Emma’s nod. “You see, Ms. Frost, you are also part of the game. Though a minor piece right now, in the end you will help me conquer that man's mind. And willingly so.”

Even in diamond form, his threat sends shivers down her spine. She avoids the gaze from up ahead, focuses on the trees and the howls in the distance. She realizes now that she shouldn't have come here. That this is all an elaborate trap that he's laid out for her. “What happens if I don't produce a child?” she asks, knowing the answer already.

“Then I will have no further use for you.” He pauses, stops his horse. “And neither will the world.” The Avengers aren't the only ones in over their heads.
SHIELD Headquarters

Chapter Summary

A compromise.

“Er dogren.” The nightmares are horrendous. The screaming, the burning. He's already caught a lab on fire, forced the evacuation of an entire floor. It's easier to knock him out. To walk into the midnight lab that still sparkles with experiments and tests, and shut him down before the dreams begin. “You should stop giving him sedatives,” Steve tells Dr. Alan Helmut, but the man just shakes his head.

Steve knows what they're doing. All of those blood and skin samples that dot the place. They're trying to stop his healing factor. Trying to kill him. “He deserves a trial,” he tells Maria Hill who stands in the doorway. “Not this.”

He looks across the freakish ruby quartz helmet fastened to his head. A device that is meant to keep him from lashing back at the scientists with his optic blasts then down to the bruises on his neck where they'd tried to hang him this morning. Further down were the burns caused by electrocution, and then bullet holes where they shot him.

For three days they've tried to kill the man, and for his protest, Steve Rogers has become a prisoner, too.

Maria Hill has little sympathy for Rogers. A turncoat twice, and his conscience overloaded. “We're going to save the world,” she says, “Isn't that what you told me when you brought him in?” He avoids her dark eyes, settling upon Cyclops once again. He's surprised at how easily Helmut takes all of this – from cleaning the many wounds, to taking small pieces of that destroyed flesh.

“They'll be here any moment,” she urges the doctor to hurry himself. “He needs to look presentable.” She doesn't care for Helmut. She finds him unethical, not that SHIELD is doing much better at the moment. The uneasy feeling in her stomach isn't relieved when the doctor chuckles under his breath.

“Just a few more samples,” Helmut hums, clipping away at shrapnel embedded in the lungs. “And then we'll patch him up. To be honest, most of this was done--”

“I'm not worried about your honesty, doctor. I'm worried that his lawyers are going cite us for mistreatment if they see him like this.”

Ulrich’s article had been a smash with those willing to overlook the danger Cyclops presented to the world. They marched on the capital, demanding a trial, while others stood by and called for his death. There were riots in Manhattan, the outcome of a swift and necessary trial that saw Nelson and Murdock being allowed to see their client. “We fear for his safety,” Murdock had said, “And will continue to fear for him so long as he is in their custody.”

It was enough to cause a riot in downtown Manhattan. A riot that threatened the Avengers and the Fantastic Four. And Magneto – damn the man – chose to strike again at a SHIELD base in Philly. “How close is he to dying?” General Griggs had asked – a panel member who oversees Fury's actions.
“He survived a hanging yesterday, being drowned this morning. The only thing left is burning the man alive.”

“We've got federal judges breathing down our necks here, Nick. Will setting him on fire work?” A broad shouldered, short tempered man, of the panel he seemed the most interested in the welfare of Cyclops, asking three times a day for updates.

“I doubt it. A fire will only stink up the place. We've got to be missing something.”

“How is Alan's research going?”

Helmut's nano-sentinels were still a long way off, though he swore up and down that they were functioning as intended. “The ionization worked better, if you ask me.”

“But, I'm not asking you.” Fury wasn't paid to think brilliant thoughts. He was merely a tool in the shed when it came to national security.

“What does he need to complete the sentinels?”

Nick shrugs. “No idea, but I will find out.”

“Good,” Griggs agreed. “I'm glad to see you're being reasonable for a change.” He took a pause, “And those lawyers. They're not going to shut up. They've filed forty lawsuits this morning, and we can't have SHIELD exposed to the general public like this. Therefore, you're going to let them in. Both the lawyers and the X-men, and you will keep letting them in until you finally figure out how to kill Summers once and for all.”

Fury stands in the entrance to the facility – a large boxy place, nondescript, easily ignored in this landscape of factories and shipping offices. It's one of their oldest bases, and also the most secure. There's not a door here that doesn't have a secret behind it, and not a soldier that wouldn't die before giving those secrets out. He hears the movement of the outside door, then the slow peep of sunlight as it opens. Blindfolded to protect SHIELD's secrecy, they are led into the hallway for a fast debriefing.

Fury makes eye contact with Nelson first, watches him shrivel under his one-eyed intensity. And then to Alex and Matt who don't react. Finally, he looks to Logan, who entreats that stare with one of his own. “Fury,” the feral mutant growls.

“Fury.”

Fury leads them down the corridor with all those doors locked tight. They are surrounded by soldiers, their fingers on the triggers of their guns. Up the stairs, and then a left, he leads them to a brightly lit laboratory where Maria Hill steps out of the way. He leaves them alone, treks down the hall to give them privacy. “Not sure he's going to be very responsive,” he says before disappearing.

The smell of blood is overwhelming.

Dr. Helmut gestures for them to move back as he takes a final sample by clipping the fingernail down to the nub. “He's still alive,” he tells them, placing the clipping nearby his microscope. He exits the room leaving Steve to fend for himself. “For what it's worth.”

“You were right,” Steve says, huddling in the corner. “They don't want a trial.”

Wolverine stares down at the still form on the bed. The burn marks, the bruises. His face is grim, his hands pulled into fists. He wants to rage, to cut at Steve, this lab. He wants to bury SHIELD and everything else along with it. “Why are you still here?” he asks.
“They won’t let me go,” he answers quietly.

Foggy begins to take pictures, focusing in on the burns on his wrist, the bruises on his neck. He lifts the sheet from over his body surprised to find the bullet holes and further signs of struggle. “Those are close range,” he says, focusing in on the apparent shrapnel in the cavity of his wound. He unfastens the ruby quartz helmet that protects the world from Cyke's optic blasts, and is visibly shaken when he discovers that Cyke's eyes have been stapled shut.

An audible gasp, they look to Steve. “I didn't know,” he says. “I didn't know they did this to him.”

A primal yell and Logan lunges across the room, capturing Steve between adamantium claws. “Fuck you,” he growls. “You put him here. You brought him here. We told you --”

“He didn't know. It's an adamantium bullet in the gun, and she won't hesitate to use it if Wolverine doesn't relax.

A peace accord. That's what he called for in the wake of Logan's death. A temporary cease fire so that Wolverine could be mourned. She'd agreed, but only because of how broken he seemed.

“I didn't know,” she offers, lowering her gun once the claws are retracted. “They want an end to this. And his death equals that end.” She's not happy with it herself, but orders are orders, no matter how despicable she thinks they are.

“Then you don't know me very well.”

“It had been a week now since Logan's death, and he was still angry, still grieving. He shrugged, swallowed his shot in a single gulp and refilled his glass. She could see the ache, how he clenched his jaw, lowered his brow behind red lenses. “Don't know,” he finally answered. “How long are you going to keep threatening me?”

“We're not threatening you, Scott. We're trying to --”

“End me.” He reminded her of the prison, the reason why he escaped. He was not a violent man, he assured her, but he was tired of meeting fire with paper. “You should be protecting mutants,” he said, swishing his glass before downing the next shot.

“We are protecting mutants --”

“Bull shit.” A wry laugh. “Everyday, mutants are out there being arrested, being accused, being beaten and murdered, all for being different. Your organization has a habit of looking away.” Half-drunk, he smiled. “If their rescue means my end, then so be it. Someone has to fight for them.”

She sipped at her glass, staring straight into those lenses. “Scott, can I call you Scott?” He shrugged. “Scott, you're not this person. You're not this angry rebel that --”

“It was the passion that she was attracted to, his self sacrifice, his need to protect. “Logan's death effected us all,” she admitted, stretching out a single hand to entwine in his. He jerked his hand
away. “You're hurting.”

“No, Commander. I'm done with hurting. I'm done with watching the world throw mutants over the grenade. I'm angry.”

“Logan--”

“Stop making this about Logan. He's gone. Dead. And the world is no better for it.” Then quietly, almost unheard. “It should've been me.”

The man was a fortress, all of those overwhelming emotions trapped behind his stoic facade. That he didn't cry then had surprised Maria Hill. And, then she wondered if he'd just run out of tears. They sat in silence, drinking down half the bottle before Cyke was noticeably drunk. “You're not driving, are you?” she asked, offering to take him across the street to grab a motel room. He denied her offering, stating that he was fine enough to walk over there himself.

“It's impossible to find,” she explains. “It's equipped with all manner of radar jammers and high tech shielding that makes it impossible to see.” It's on an island, away from the world. “Nearest town's an old Inuit fishing village. It's an hour's boat ride over the channel if you need supplies. And, of course, we'll be dropping supplies ourselves on a weekly basis.”

“You're not driving, are you?” she asked, offering to take him across the street to grab a motel room. He denied her offering, stating that he was fine enough to walk over there himself.

“You're a hero, Scott,” she finally said, slipping the bottle off the table and into the hands of a passing waitress. “Don't forget that.”

She looks at Logan, her face purposefully bland. “He killed thousands, Logan.”

“He didn't know what he was doing --”

“Believe me when I say that Fury doesn't like it either.”

She admits that Scott is better off with the X-men, or at least some part of them. Hidden away until he could learn control over his powers. “But Fury's not willing to go to jail over him. He's not willing to break those orders.” But the panel is getting frustrated with lack of results. Between the alien encounter and Scott's ability to survive, we may have to strike a compromise.

“Partially yes.”

“So, what's the hitch?” he asks.

“Cyclops can't leave without our say so. He'll be a prisoner on the island for the foreseeable future.”

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“Partially yes.”

“So, what's the hitch?” he asks.
Alex picks up on it first. “The panel doesn't know about this, do they?”

She shakes her head. “And there's no need for them to find out either. This way, both sides get what they want.”

“How are we supposed to trust you?” Alex asks. “You've lied to us --”

Hill closes the door shut, giving them extra privacy. “Something's rotten in SHIELD. Neither Fury nor myself can find out what it is, but there's something wrong. I advise you to play along with this until we at least figure it out.”

“That's still no reason to trust you,” Alex points out.

“Perhaps,” she says, “but its your brother's best chance of getting out of here alive. Sooner or later, they will find some way to kill him. Be it science or sheer force. There's been talk of burning him at the stake. I'm sure you don't want that. And, the other caveat. You must drop your lawsuits.”

She can have the place ready by the end of the day, if they agree to their terms. “He'll be safe there and out of the way.” And tomorrow, they'll deliver Cyclops to the island. “And again, no one is to know about this. We must keep this secret.”
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

The children make their choice.

It's an evening announcement. The death of Cyclops. The Red Wave. “He died of natural causes,” the President says, “and thus ends his reign of terror.” Many throughout the world rejoice. But there are others who grieve.

Indira Gomez has cried herself sick since the announcement, neither Sarah nor Arlo being able to console her. He put his faith in her, and she let him down. She blames herself for not being more vocal when they took him into custody. She blames herself for not concocting some plan that would have freed him from their clutches. She blames herself for all of it, and then cries some more.

Storm has tried to comfort her and the others. Arlo and Opal, Sarah and Phin. And then there's Pocket who stands apart from them all, holding onto his father's hand as silent as a mouse. Ororo didn't realize how quickly the children had bonded with Scott, nor did Alex.

Kneeling on the floor, Havok wraps his arms around Indira's slender frame, holding her close, trying to calm her tears. But, her sobs only get worse. “You're leaving, too,” she says, pulling back just enough to look him in the eye. “You're all leaving.”

“No, no, no,” Alex shushes. “There's just a few of us --”

“I want to leave, too.” She doesn't want to be here, not in this place that let Scott Summers walk away to be murdered. “She could have stopped him,” Indira cries. “He would still be alive if it wasn't for her.” She rails against his chest even harder, trying to push him away, but he is stronger than her might. “There isn't even a funeral for him!”

It's heartbreaking to see her like this, unable to be comforted, so filled with anger. She wants to fight SHIELD, the world. She wants to make them pay for what they did to him. “It wasn't his fault!” she repeats over and over again between her sobs.

Alex looks to Logan and Warren who shake their heads. No one was expecting this. “Come on, punkin',” Logan finally says. “It'll be okay.” He roughs her long dark hair, his tone soothing. “It's all going to be okay.” He lifts her in the air, pulls her to his chest and holds her there. “It's all going to be all right.” He rocks her gently back and forth, hoping the motion will put her to sleep, but she's still adamant about leaving.

“If my parents say yes, I can go with you?” she asks, her voice still wracked by her sobs. “You'll let me come with you if they say okay?”

“It doesn't work that way, sweetheart,” Logan says. “Where we're going ain't safe.”

“I don't care if it's safe—”

“You need to stay at the school,” Ororo interrupts. “This is the best place for you.”

“He's not dead, is he?” Jin Oshiro asks, his eyes on his son. Tatsuya keeps his eyes on the floor.
“That's why it's not safe.” It was no secret that others were leaving with Alex and Logan. Kurt, Piotr, Warren. They were all packing their things.

Surprise lights Indira's features with a deep red blush and a wide-eyed gasp. “Is it true?” she begs, pushing herself out of Logan's arms and back down on the floor. “He's not dead?” She wants to see him, wants to apologize.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Alex explains to her. “He's not angry with you. You did a good job up there. You handled yourself well --”

“I want to go with you,” she says, firmly this time. She has her reasons, and the first being that Cyclops can teach her about her powers. He spent most of his life training the X-men, be it on the field or in Danger Room scenarios. She knows this, she's read about it. She wants to learn from the best.

“I want Tatsuya to go with you, too,” Jin says. He cannot stay in America. He has no visa, no passport. Things had happened too quickly at the hospital for him to gather his things. But, he trusts Alex to take care of him. “My son does not make connections easily, but he made one with Cyclops. I don't want that connection to be broken. He needs to be around someone he feels comfortable with.”

The chorus rises as the other children chime in with their own pleas of going with Alex. They have their reasons – be it learning to protect themselves or learning to protect the world, or simply the bond of friendship, they want to follow Havok and Wolverine to the arctic isle. “We don't have the facilities to educate you,” Alex tries to explain, but his caution only fuels their fires.

Hopelessly, Alex looks to Logan who shrugs. “Could give Scott something to do,” the feral mutant says. “A different kind of mission than the one he's on now.”

“It could, couldn't it.” Scott was always good with children. Though he usually taught the harder subjects, he was very patient with his classes, if a little dry at times. He understood his students' strengths and weaknesses despite the subject at hand.

“The parents may not agree to this,” Storm interjects, put off by the change in tone. “They may not want their children housed within reach of the Red Wave.”

It's an easily remedied question for most of the kids – Indira, Sarah, and Phinneus. But for Arlo and Opal, there is no way to gain that permission. Arlo slinks near Logan, his large brown eyes searching the mutant for some sort of acceptance, some sort of confidence. He doesn't want to be left alone here, without Indira, without Sarah. They have become his only friends, and he needs those friends, whether he can vocalize it or not. Slowly, his mouth takes the shape of a word. “Pls,” he whispers, his voice shattered by the effort. It's a momentous occasion, those small sounds that escape the boy's throat.

“I won't allow it,” Storm says, and she watches the crestfallen children curl up into themselves. How easy was to dim their hopes, and for that, she feels a lump in her throat. The weight of it hangs heavy on her head.

Warren, however, is keen to the idea. “They'll be safe with us, 'Ro.” A slick smile. He was fifteen when Xavier recruited him to the X-men. “They handled themselves well, both in the attack and in space. They deserve to be trained. Unless you think us incapable.”

“I don't think you are incapable. I don't want the children need to be--”
“Around Scott. You've made that clear. But what you're not realizing is it's probably what he needs more than anything.” Warren's clear blue eyes look at the others one by one. “I've known Scott for half of my life, and he's always been one to do for others before he does for himself. He can handle classes. If not, I'll teach them myself.”

“I'll have no part of this,” she says, her brows sharp against her eyes. “If I find they're in danger, then they're coming back.”

“Of course,” Warren says with a nod. Tired of the conversation, of not being listened to, she stomps off towards the headmaster's office, leaving Alex in a bind.

“Thank you,” Indira says, smiling brightly for the first time since the announcement.

Still wary of taking the children with him, he gives a gentle nod and tells the children to pack. “We leave in an hour.” he says to the glee of the kids. And to Warren, after the kids are out of earshot, “This is a bad idea,” he says. “We can't take care of five kids --”

“Of course we can. Once we find Lorna, at least.” He's aware of the defection, that there are others who may leave as well. “A lot of people have lost faith in Storm, but they've found it in you.” Or, that is what Piotr and Kurt have told him. “We're meant to be heroes, Alex. We can't do that here.”

Guilt turns his eyes to the floor. “I'm not my brother;” he says quietly.

“No, but you have --”

“He would have figured a way out of this.”

Alex waits at the entrance to the hangar, his single bag in hand. Like the others, he doesn't have much to take with him, but unlike the others, he doesn't many goodbyes to say. Just a few here and there, and he's done. He is shocked when Rogue comes down the stairs, parking her bag just beside the door. “You have room for one more?” she asks.

“I thought you hated Scott.”

“Hate may be a bit strong of a word, sugar.”

Though suspicious of her intentions, he knows that he needs her. Taking care of both Scott and five kids is going to be difficult. “You didn't see Forge, did you?”

“Is he coming, too?”

“Just for a few days. Anti-telepathy devices, more shielding, check out what spying devices they have. I think he's going to install a Danger Room for us to train with.” To Alex, she is too eager to nod and smile. She's hiding something. He just doesn't know what.

It's on the hour mark that he receives the coordinates to the small, frozen island, and everyone is loaded on board one of the jets. There are few words, fewer goodbyes as Alex sets out with his team. Scott will be delivered in the morning, leaving one last night of freedom. Logan cracks open a beer in celebration, gulping it down in a single chug. “Careful, Logan,” Nightcrawler warns him. “You don't heal like you used to.” The feral mutant only smiles.

The island is much larger than Alex anticipated, as are the facilities. Living quarters, a greenhouse, an animal pen, the place is very much self-sufficient, including it's electric which is a mixture of photovoltaic cells, wind, and hydro. A small fishing dock sits to one side of the island, and a larger dock for boat outings sits nearby.
Maria Hill greets them upon landing. The island used to be a research facility before its budget failed, and SHIELD picked it up. “The structure was too intact to let it go to waste,” she explains and shows them into the living quarters. “It was set up for long term residence,” which meant that most human needs – food, water, and entertainment – were built into the place. Though she isn't sure how well the children will cope with the environment.

Forge journeys down to the basement where the science lab and computers are kept, while the kids check out the rec room. “How many know?” she asks sternly.

“Storm, Kitty. Everyone here.”

“Can I trust Storm and Kitty?”

“With your life.”

She hopes she can count on that. “We've all put our jobs on the line to make this happen.”

“It shouldn't have happened to begin with,” he bites back.

“We'll know if he tries to leave,” Hill warns him. “He goes outside of the shielded area and things will get hot and heavy really quick.”

“You've got more nukes to hit him with?”

“Exactly. Just lay low, keep him inside the barriers, and you won't hear from us outside of our supply route.” She leaves shortly after, offering up a final present to Logan. “With Fury's compliments,” she says, handing him a bottle of bourbon. They wait until she's gone before they speak again.

“Bet every damn computer in here is tagged to watch us,” Logan suspicions. Forge agrees. They fall quiet at the realization, their eyes darting back and forth, looking for cameras, spots for hidden recorders. “Kids are gonna have fun playing hide and seek.”

“So are we,” Alex says, pointing to a camera in the kitchen. “Must have been an isolation unit.” He can only imagine the experiments that took place here considering the equipment.

Logan pours the bourbon into shots, beckoning the five of them to drink. Rogue is unwilling at first, but she soon joins in on the third round. “Kids are in bed,” Logan says, “Might as well have fun.”

It's been years since he could feel drunk. Decades, even. It washes over him like silk, such smoothness and softness. He can feel the smile at the edges of his mouth, the stumbling of his tongue. He could drink forever to feel this, relaxed yet purposeful. He's glad the kids are here, even if they are a pain in the ass. It's their laughter that makes this palatable. Their innocence. He wants to preserve that as much as he can.

“They need to learn, Logan,” Alex says, taking his own shot down the gullet with ease. He's stressed, uncomfortable. There are too many loose ends for him to be satisfied. “They have to be able to protect themselves.”

“I left him because of this.” Logan swallows down his shot, pours another. “Training kids to fight.”

“I need you, Logan,” Alex says quietly as he watches the older mutant pour his glass. “It's too much without you.”

“I don't like that they want to fight,” Wolverine says.
“I don't either.” He gulps down the drink, signals for more. “But what are we supposed to do? If hadn't been for Scott --”

“They could've been killed. I know.” He doesn't like it. He barely remembers his own childhood, and what he can see of it, it was a nightmare. “We have to understand their limits.”

But, that's something Scott's good at. He understands limits, knows how hard to push. Knows what his students are capable of. “How's Idie?”

She's still a sore point for him. The little girl who killed a dozen men. Wolverine shrugs. “Didn't get a chance to tell her goodbye.”

“She must miss you.”

“Or she's glad to be rid of me.” The girl has grown, become comfortable in her own skin. She doesn't need Logan to look out for her, to baby her, to decide for her. None of them do. He's not their teacher. He's not their mentor.

“What about Arlo?”

Though seventeen, he's but a ghost of a teenager. All bulk and brawn, Logan can see why the world will fear him. But, he's a soft thing. Barely able to talk. “He wouldn't hurt a fly.”

“He would if it came to Indira.” The boy's fascination with the young girl has not gone unnoticed. He would follow her anywhere, even if that anywhere was a deserted island off the coast of Canada.

Logan smiles. Puppy love. It's such a wondrous thing. He wonders if he ever felt that way. A casual esteem. Something that makes him smile. “Seems we feel deeply, if we feel at all.”
The Island

Chapter Summary

Theory or paranoia?

The screams echo throughout the room. The tightfisted agony of a Phoenix dream. He's fighting, that force buried inside his head. Coming to blows with the nightmares that she brings to the forefront of his mind. “We need ice,” Logan says, hoping to cool him down so that the place doesn't catch on fire. “As much as you can find.”

As Scott writhes under the pressure of the Phoenix, the children come back with a tub and fistfuls of snow. Nightcrawler teleports to the kitchen, grabs what ice he can find and ports back. But it's not enough.

As the snow meets skin, it steams from the heat. “Keep it coming,” Logan tells them all, and then the brigade begins. Buckets of snow and water come into the room, emptied into the tub, then refilled again.

His hand already singed, Alex smooths damp hair back from Scott's forehead. “Come on, Scott,” he says, ladling the frigid water over his brother's head. It's the memory he brings up then, how they'd been polar bear swimmers that winter afternoon. How they raced to the creek and stayed in the cold water. “Last one in's a rotten egg,” he said with a slight chuckle, only to be answered by a sudden count.

“One Mississippi,” Scott slurred in his dreams. Though barely audible, Alex knew exactly what he was counting for.

“He remembers,” Alex says. “He remembers.”

The memory of that day, of standing there in the freezing water, of being a family calms the flailing Scott. Alex deepens the memory, recalling the conversations that they had, how Scott looked out for him, how Scott saved him by leaving the water first. And Scott falls headlong into it, the conversation a mumbled but meaningful display. Alex continues to splash the water over him, unworried about the blisters that come from the heat. And slowly, Scott – sitting in a tub of frigid water – actually sleeps.

It's the first time in years, Logan imagines, that the man has gotten rest. Though he shivers from the cold, though Logan has brought his body temperature down to sixty eight degrees, he pushes even further, hoping that the cold will keep him under, will let him sleep dreamlessly. The children are sent back to bed, as are the others, leaving Logan and Alex to keep wishing him into sleep.

Alex repeats the memory over and over until Scott stops responding. And, soon, even he is in need of sleep. “Go on,” Logan says, “I'm the night shift, remember?”

“But--”

“Kids'll need looking after in the morning. That's your job.” Wolverine's only here for Scott, to keep him calm, to help with him. “You'll need your rest.”
Logan picks a sleeping Scott from the bathtub and hoists him to the bed as everyone leaves. Half naked thanks to the fire of the Phoenix, Logan wraps him up in blankets and lays down beside him.

It's been three days since Scott was delivered to the arctic base, and he's barely said a word. He asked to use the computer, scoping out various companies for reasons that no one understands and typing his thoughts out into a code that can't be deciphered. Scott stirs in his winter dreams, calls out Alex's name before returning to sleep. Logan continues to push wet hair back from forehead, tendering his fingers to the large dark circles under visor, down jaw, over ears. He's a beautiful man, Scott is. So pretty and broken.

Pouring himself a shot of bourbon, Logan retreats to the chair and prepares for his long night of watching. He hopes that Scott sleeps the night through – his head dancing with memories of polar bear swimming and his brother – but he doubts that will happen. The Phoenix is too adamant, the nightmares too close. He dreads the silence that will come in the morning. The lack of words, the lack of anything resembling emotions.

Rogue thinks its eerie the way he walks through the facility, that he spends so much time on the computer. She thinks he's planning his escape, but Alex thinks he just needs time to settle in. In the meantime, they are searching for Lorna and Gambit, the other X-men that did not make it back from the Undertow. Already there are whispers that Sam is involved in Magneto's attacks on SHIELD, and Logan hopes it isn't so. The X-men have been through the wringer, and a mutant uprising will only make things worse.

Scott doesn't sleep long. An hour, maybe two, and then he jolts up in the bed swinging fists at the monster in his dreams. Logan is there to calm him down. “Easy, Slim,” he says. “You're safe.”

It takes several minutes for clarity to wash away the sleep-imbued darkness, to realize his surroundings. With a deep breath, he lowers head to hands in an attempt to recall himself, to pull the spirals of red energy back into his body. He rises on shaky legs, stumbling forward and catching himself on the back of Logan's chair. He looks at the burns and bandages on his arms and chest, touching gently.

"I've got ointment for that,” Logan says, reaching under his chair to pull out the first aid kit. He can see the shame in the other man's face, his cheeks reddening, his jaw clenched tight. He pushes Scott back down on the bed, snikts his claws and begins cutting away at the bloody gauze. His chest and legs are still wounded, but worse his pride. The older mutant is careful with the salve he places over the burns, and also about the cuts.

Scott keeps his visor to the floor, his hands still covering himself, but this time, there is no reaction as Logan tapes the gauze to his hip and thigh. “It's going to be okay, Slim,” he eases. “You're going to heal.”

“I can do this myself,” Scott says, breaking his three day silence. He doesn't sound angry, just exhausted. Logan pours him a glass of bourbon, hoping that it helps him relax.

“Kids are looking forward to class tomorrow. They want to spend time with you.”

“I shouldn't be teaching them.”

“Yes, you should.” Logan has seen the way the children adore him. “They idolize you.”

“They shouldn't be around me.”

Storm had said as much multiple times when he was at the mansion. Logan can't help but wonder if
he's taken her words verbatim or if it's own thoughts that say this. “I'll be with you,” he says. “So will Alex.”

Logan can sense the discomfort as he dresses himself. A pair of jogging pants and a T-shirt. “You shouldn't have to do this,” Scott says, palms up and on his knees. Guilt hangs his head, shame grits his jaw. “You should have let me die.”

“They couldn't kill you, Scott.”

“In time, they would have figured it out.” Visor lifts from floor, looks to Logan. “It's too much, Logan.”

Logan sits on the bed beside him, puts a hand on his back. A soothing circle over spine. “We'll get through this, Scott. We'll find a way.”

Red energy pours over skin, a waterfall of what lays beneath the stoic surface. Once again, head to hands as he tries to cull it back in. Logan tells him to relax, pulls him against his chest. He smells good. Like rain. Fresh, clean. The red cloud spurs out further onto the bed, tickling against the fabric of sheets and blankets. It's not yet destructive, but Logan remains wary. “Just relax, Slim,” he says. “Ain't nothing going to hurt you here.”

And he means it. The safety of this place. He's sure that SHIELD is watching their every move, has cameras placed in every secretive corner, but that also means no one's going to attack them. No one's going to come after Scott with knives and pitchforks out of fear for the Red Wave. “They think you're dead,” Logan explains. “And we're going to keep it that way.”

Scott pulls away from the embrace, sets himself at the corner of the bed. He struggles with his innate power, breathes in and out for something like calmness to overtake him. Logan threads finger through his hair, touches down cheek. “I have to go,” Scott says, standing in the suddenness of his words. He reaches for the door. Logan stops him.

“You need your rest.” Logan is adamant.

“I need the computer.”

“Whatever you're researching --”

“Please, it's not time yet.”

Stuffing a cigar between his teeth, he grabs his bottle of bourbon and follows Scott into the computer lab. This is a place Logan knows little about. He knows that Forge has made a direct line to the mansion, but how it can be accessed, he has no clue. But, Scott does. He spends his early morning hours researching dry cleaners in mid New York. “If you need your clothes cleaned--”

“It's a theory,” Scott says, the energy rolling off of him in tight, rhythmic waves. “I can't tell if it's real.”

It's a hopeless statement, one that shakes his hands and draws his mouth into a lean, long line of worry. “You'll get it figured out, Scotty.” Mussing his hair, he lets Cyclops go.

In the computer room - the place where Scott has spent his time configuring Danger Room scenarios and researching his theory – there is calm. He writes in code, an amalgam of letters and numbers that Wolverine doesn't understand. A code that he doubts that SHIELD will be able to break. It's meant for Alex, that much he is positive of, though Alex has been too busy to look through it. Scott is patient however, never complaining, never frustrated. These things, he knows, will cause him to
spiral out of control, so instead of anxiousness, he chooses to feel nothing. “Gambit's at the Fantastic Four tower,” he says quietly. “So are Dazzler and Polaris.” He knows this because of the energy usage. It's too much for the family. That and Reed Richards is being monitored by SHIELD.

He wants to see Reed Richards. Wants to be sneaked into Manhattan. He wants Reed to run his tests, an in-depth analysis. “We'd have to get SHIELD permission for that, Slim,” Logan reminds him. “And I seriously doubt they're going to allow it.” When SHIELD pronounced him dead, they meant it.

“Then he can come to us. Like Strange. They can come here.” He's positive that Reed will come up with a mechanism to help him. He's the smartest man that Wolverine's ever met. Giving him access to the power within Scott's genes could be just the thing they're looking for.

Scott doesn't reply to that hope, doesn't let it lift his spirits. He has his doubts, just like he did with Jean's Phoenix all those years ago. An anti-telepathy band only worked for a few moments. And, even if Reed is the smartest person he's ever met, he thinks his own power is more capable.

Wolverine watches the scant emotion cross Scott's face. The tug at his lips, the slight red of cheeks. It's in his body language, the displeasure, the worry. Though he's good at hiding it, years have taught Logan the tells. “Just promise me that you'll stop them,” Scott says before rising from his seat. He has no idea what Scott's talking about, and Cyke doesn't bother to explain. He changes computers, goes to work on a Danger Room scenario for the children. It's an easy one. Logan can see the flashes of it down below in the cordoned off lab. A sentinel. Just a single one, but enough to give the kids powers a work out. “Arlo can speak,” he says, visor turning towards Logan. “A little,” he replies. “He'll get better at it.”

Scott has analyzed their strengths and weaknesses long before anyone else ever dreamed of doing so. He knows what will throw them off their game, what they'll excel at. To the Sentinel he adds Toad, as he'll be a good workout for Cricket. “I want Sliver to lead them,” he says of the fourteen year old. Though young, she will prove to be a major asset to the X-men.

“What about Cricket?” Logan asks. “She's older. She has more experience--”

“She's too angry. She'll make too many rash decisions.”

It's a truth that Logan hasn't thought of. To him, she seemed the most reliable, given her age. But One-eye is right. Her anger is paramount. Her childhood, the Red Wave. She would sooner go super nova on them rather than bring things to a peaceful resolve. “Do you think she's ready to be a team leader?”

“Not yet,” Cyke replies. “But she will be. Once she figures out the scope of her power.” The X-men are used to telepathic spies. Those that can journey into the mind and pluck out its secrets. “She's telepathic in nature,” Cyclops explains. “She just doesn't know it yet.”

“Then she's not safe to be around you.”

“She can't alter memories. She can only share them.” She reminds him of Artie, that small child who could only project his words. “She can't alter anything.”

“That you know of.” He is uneasy of Scott's analysis. “She's dangerous,” he tells him.
But, Scott doesn't agree. Her powers are passive, better for recon and team leading than even his own. “She can't hold herself in battle yet.” But, she will soon. He'll make sure of it. He'll teach her judo and akido, the martial arts that he's best at.

It's the most he's spoken since returning from the Red Dimension. Full sentences and focus. Logan is taken aback by his analysis from just the few moments that he's had with the child. But, it's more complicated than it seems, especially for Logan who loathes the idea of children fighting in their war. “She's too young, Slim.”

Scott doesn't feel the same. “She needs to learn to defend herself. She needs to learn to protect her team.” Like Warren, he was fifteen when he became an X-man, and that was after two years of training. “Every waking hour was spent bettering me to become leader of the team.” He doesn't launch into monologues about Xavier, or wonder at what could have been. He was the field leader, the one that oversaw the fight. He imagines Sliver being the same. “She's young, but talented.” He speaks in a professional tone, the tone expected of the X-men leader. There is no emotion in it, no sorrow, no grief. “She'll do well once she's trained.”

Scott was a child soldier. Recruited and trained to be a part of a mutant paramilitary group. Even though Logan loathes the ideas that he divulges, he understands the necessity, or rather, he understands them now. “You're going to treat her like Idie?”

Summers didn't know Idie. Hadn't spent enough time around her to figure out her persona. And he admits as much. “It was unfortunate,” he says. “What she went through. The decision she made. Sliver will be more prepared.” They'll all be more prepared.

He works in silence for nearly an hour before Pocket shows up and lingers in the doorway. It's breakfast time, his alone time with Scott, and Wolverine indulges it. “Kid wants pancakes this morning.” It's what he always wants according to his father. He follows the wordless ones into the kitchen, sits at one end of the island while Scott fixes breakfast. Logan smiles at the easy domestication of the task. How normal it all seems. It's a moment of peace, for them. A simple breakfast together.

Logan leaves them to their time together to seek out Alex who is just getting out of bed. Groggily, the younger mutant opens the door to his room. “Am I late?” he asks, exhausted from being up most of the night.

“Nah, you're fine.” But, there is something that they need to discuss, and that is the coded search that he's doing. “You looked at that thing yet?”

Alex shakes his head. “Haven't had time,” he says. “Looking for Lorna and --”

“She's at the Baxter building. A couple of them are. You should check that out today, too.” Logan knows it will mean he has to stay awake through Scott's classes, but he can handle a day or two of sleep deprivation. “He was looking at dry cleaners this morning,” Logan explains.

“Did he say why?”

“It was a theory. He couldn't tell what was real.”

Alex shakes his head. “In other words, whatever he's trying to find could just be paranoia? That's hopeful.” He stifles a yawn. “At least he's not trying to get himself killed.”

“For now.”

“Yes, for now.”
Sinister's City

Chapter Summary

The Madelynes rebel.

She can hear them in the distance, the Creeds, getting closer. They howl in their hunger, the taste of blood in their mouths a craving so overwhelming that they think of nothing else. They are getting closer, and she is out of breath. Kicking off her shoes, throwing them as far as she can in hopes of diverging her trail she runs into the stable, washing off the scent of her run by emptying a trough of water.

North. The trail is north from here. She knows this from the others. The ones who died. How many sacrifices were made so that she could get this far – to the stables, on the black horse that rides the fastest? She lost count a long time ago, but kept those memories. Shares them with her clone sisters.

The Gambit in the corner is not a threat. He's not programmed for battle. He is nothing more than a stable hand who will muck around in the wet hay getting himself dirty as he tries to clean the mess. He looks at her with something akin to admiration, that she's brave enough to do this. That out of all of them, it was a Madelyne who would finally escape those sinister clutches.

Up the hill beyond the stables, galloping at full speed, she hears the single gun shot and roars of the Sabretooths. Even the master is joining the hunt tonight, and she shares her thrill with those Madelynes still waiting inside. Each death gets them closer to escape, back to Scott Summers. Topping the hill and then over it, she finally sees the path that her predecessor found. That small worn thing, moss covered and littered with leaves. It was the old path, before Essex founded his castle. The one they walked near everyday to check for intruders. At the end of this, is the exit the door to the great world beyond. The place where Sinister has no hold over her.

A second gunshot rings out, closer than the one before. Sinister is riding his own horse, the pure white one most likely. The one he made. It's slower than the stallion, but his speed is still greater than hers. He knows the layout of the land. He knows the shortcuts, and by the sounds of things, he's bringing the Victors with him and quite possibly the Gambits in the cloning chamber. They are fighters, disposable bombs, charging themselves up and throwing themselves into danger. She's seen them do this. She's seen many things.

Into the forest she goes, her horse tripping on upturned roots as she follows the faded path north east. This is the furthest they've gotten. And this Madelyne will get further. She flashes her memories to the clones gathered in the house. The third gunshot, the howling Creeds, the path that washes out into a gentle stream. She crosses it, heads north, beyond the rocks and pines that make up this area of the world. There is life here – life that he didn't create, life that came here of its own accord. Squirrels and rats, small birds and snakes. These little things that he doesn't control. She wants to be like that too.

She loses both time and distance as she seeks the path beyond the stream. Briars and thorns scratch at her pale skin, make her bleed, adding to the frenzy of the Sabretooths. They want her, and badly. They want to chew out her eyes, strip her of her skin, her flesh, her muscles. But she remains focused on the task at hand, finding the path.
It's in the northeast, beyond broken rocks and a great maple tree that she picks it up again, and kicks her horse hard to pick up its speed. An hour through more underbrush that trips the horse up, and she finally sees it. The end. The door. Up ahead, high up, more than she can reach.

She climbs off the horse, pats it, tells it to go home, and takes hold of the small rung, that metal ladder drilled into the side of the concrete wall. The fourth gunshot is close, it nips her shoulder, and she can hear the Creeds gathering beneath her, barking and howling, scraping against stone to get at her.

“Never bring a musket to a hunt,” Sinister says quietly to Emma. He struggles to load the thing, especially now that the horse is nervous. With a smile, he shoves the ramrod into the barrel, packing down the powder. He raises the gun to his shoulder, sights her with a target.

“Let her go,” Emma says, knocking her hand against the gun, causing the bullet to stray out into the forest. In her thoughts, she can hear the Madelyne say thank you before opening up the tunnel and disappearing.

Essex laughs at Emma's defense of the Madelyne. “I'm surprised at you. To have such feelings for your rival.”

Emma understands the game that he's playing, that he's trying to create enmity between the clones and herself. It keeps him entertained, much like this hunt. “She's not my rival. She's a prisoner.”

Tongue to teeth, he tuts at her with the glimmer of a smile, “When did the White Queen of the Hellfire Club get so sentimental?” She's a clone, and a faulty one at that with her gene-gifted powers never fully blooming. Her telepathy and telekinesis are both dim compared to Jean Grey's. “Some of them are even powerless.

“You told them where he is, didn't you?” Emma deduces, blue eyes narrowing with disgust. “You told the Madelynes that he's on that island.” A devious smirk nips at Essex' right cheek. “That's why you brought that musket. You had no intention of killing her.”

Sinister snaps his finger to calm the Sabretooths and the few Gambits that he's brought with him. He orders them back to their cages, and without grievance, they follow. “Always remember, Ms. Frost, my game is with Scott Summers, and you are just a pawn in that game.”

Guilt lowers her head, and she gently pats at her horse to begin the slow trot home. She reaches out on telepathic threads, seeking out Madelyne Pryor. She's in the world now, a fearsome place where she loses her way quite quickly. It's the next part of the test, Emma decides, to see how far this clone can actually make it before she dies. If she can even make it to the island. The clone is frightened of the world above with its cars and busy sidewalks. The noise is astounding, having lived only in Sinister's kingdom. “She won't make it far,” Emma says. “She's too naive --”

“You will be surprised at how far she makes it, Ms. Frost. My Madelynes are not delicate creatures.” Another one will escape tonight, and another the night after that. They'll wait for each other, each stealing needed things from the household to bring to the surface. “They understand the need for money,” he shares.

“Why don't you stop them?”

“I want to see what they're capable of. Even I don't know their limits or how far they'll go. I can only guess at what they'll do, and I'd rather see if my predictions are accurate.” They'll make it to the island, he's pretty sure of that. If they don't, then the experiment as a whole is a failure. “Besides,” he says, “We have to see what we're up against before I can let you go there. We have to make sure that
you're safe.”

It will be easy enough to distract the X-men, but he's not sure about SHIELD. “We don't know their capabilities yet, and I can't let you go until we figure them out.” She's precious to him, in that respect. Part of the cog in the wheel. “No one else loved him like you did. He needed no one more than you.”

She forms to diamond, careful of the heartache still settled in her bones. The anger. That she was never enough. All those years she cared for him, fought for the sanctity of his mind, and she has nothing to show for it in return.

“A little touchy, are we?” Sinister asks with a hearty kick to his steed's side. He barrels down the path, leaving Emma to follow him. She does follow, but at her own pace, refusing to let go of the diamond. It keeps her cold, collected, let's her face down the knowledge of Sinister's plan without the emotional peril that it represents.

There are days that she wants to back out of their deal, and then other days, like today, where she's angry at Cyclops, so hurt, that all she wants is revenge. She wants him to miss her, to beg her, to love her once again. And then she remembers that he never loved her at all.

Sinister waits for her at the stables, hands her horse off to the Gambit before leading her back to the house. She's still a careful diamond, and of that he's mindful, or at least appears so. The Madelynes inside the manor are extra quiet today, and they are actually nice to Emma – taking her coat, bringing her hot coffee in the parlor. “They are now enamored of you,” Sinsiter explains with a hint of grin. “You saved their sister.”

Emma shrugs, turns back to flesh so that she can enjoy the hot brew. The Madelynes bring in snacks, something to wet their appetite before breakfast, each one purposefully taking her time crossing back and forth across the room. They are gathering information, spying, stalking. “She'll have to take care of who she hires thanks to SHIELD.” He is fully aware that he is being listened to. “I'd say she'll be back within a week.”

He doesn't mind losing the Madelynes since they are so easy to create. “I have enough of Ms. Grey's DNA to make thousands more of them if I wish.”

“Sounds like you can create an army.”

“Oh, I can, but I've never found enough of a cause to go through the fuss.” He tips back the coffee and snaps his finger for a nice Bordeaux to be brought out. “Wars aren't entertainment, they're simply power grabs. And, I have all the power I need right here,” he says pointing to his head. There's only one mind in the world that could challenge his foresight and capability, “And we're going to watch him destroy himself. Again.”

“He's his own worst enemy,” she says quietly. “He always was.”

“No, my dear, his own worst enemy was Charles Xavier. And Jean Grey. Yourself.” He could name all of the telepaths that dueled over that mind.

She can feel the Madelyne at the back of her thoughts, and blue eyes turn to look at green. A brief flicker of recognition before Emma closes off the connection with a warning smirk. She'll talk to them later, plan with them. They won't be beholden to this monster ever again. “I was trying to hold him together,” Emma responds. “And I did for as long as I could --"
“Pity does not suit you,” he laughs. “You were as vicious as the rest.” For years he watched them, all of them, steal that power, wreck those thoughts. To him, it was a brilliant battle, and he was constantly surprised at the level they would stoop to in order to win a bigger share of the power. “What you did to poor Wolverine to assure yourself that Cyclops was yours alone.”

Even now, she feels that anger over Logan and Scott. “It was one of the few times that Jean and I worked together,” she reveals. It took the two of them to turn that growing love between them and turn it into hate. “Logan was usually easy to manipulate, but that took some doing.” She doesn't smile at the memory. “But, even then, when I was all that was left, I knew that Scott didn't fully trust me. He doubted my reasons for staying with him.”

Which was of her own doing, Sinister points out. The telepaths had made him doubt everything, especially his own complicated feelings towards people. It made it easier to siphon that energy, to solidify a path through his mind. “You were very thorough.”

Later that night, Emma hears the howling of the Creeds, and she knows that another Madelyne is attempting to escape. She waits for Sinister's polite tap on her door before rising. The longer she takes to get ready, the further the Madelyne will go before they catch up to her. “Why not just let her go?” she asks with a yawn.

“There's nothing to learn by just letting her go, Ms. Frost. But by hunting her, we can glean much information.” He gives her ten minutes to be ready, and she makes sure she takes all of it. The Madelynes inside the house eye their master warily, knowing that they'll be punished for their sisters' rebellion sooner or later. But to Emma, they smile and nod, giving her space where earlier they'd crowded her. They know she's an ally, now, someone who will help them.

As predicted, the second Madelyne escaped, and long before the Creeds caught up with her trail. Sinister laughs heartily at his loss, enamored at how quickly they've grown. He calls the chase more than splendid. “They will go far,” he says. “Very far.”
The Arctic

Chapter Summary

Lorna and Gambit join the team.

Lorna Dane sits on the window sill looking out over the city. They've taken respite here, after their imprisonment in the Undertow, after the experiments. She's not yet visited Triage, and thinks she might not in the end. He's had so many to work on, to heal just enough to keep them alive. Level five trauma patients, people almost dead, barely hanging on. Both heroes and soldiers.

Besides, she thinks she likes the scars, those long ribbons down her arms and legs where they injected their drugs into her system. They cut her. Took samples of her flesh. Left her bound and blindfolded, her ears plugged. The scars are a reminder of that fear, of what lay in the darkness. It's not like Malice who left her with scars that couldn't be seen. Scars that no one else could understand.

“I'm sorry I couldn't protect you.” The words belong to Alex, his blue gaze cast to floor. He loves her. Always has. But, now he feels the distance of her trauma.

She smiles softly, shakes her head. “It's not your fault.” she replies, her attention never leaving the traffic far below her. “It's the world we live.” She's heard of her father's army, how they are attacking military bases. “I think I want to join him.”

His heart lurches at the words, beats too fast. “You're not your father,” he says quietly. “You don't want to rule the world.”

“Maybe it's time we did.” She absently traces the still scabbed wounds, the small injection sites, the angry stitches. “I'm tired of backing down from hatred. I want to stand up to it. Like my dad.”

“Punish the world for the mistakes of a few?”

“Punish the world for being the world.”

Those days in isolation, not seeing, not hearing. How they would grab her arms and cause her pain. How the drugs filtered into her system, burning her from the inside out, and then the knife that took her skin. She remembers being freed by Mystique on Magneto's orders. How the mutant had led her and others through the halls. “The X-men. They didn't care.”

Alex can't make excuses for Ororo, but he tried to set her free. He protested, got the world to listen, until he was captured himself. “I thought I was going to die,” he said.

“Your brother is dead,” she continues. “Do you have anything to fight for now?”

“You.” He takes her hand and covers it between his own. “I have you to fight for. And my team.”

Green eyes spark interest at the sound of a team. “You're leading the X-men?”

“No. Just a team.”

“And what does this team propose to do.”
“What we've always done, Lorna. Protect those that hate and fear us.”

“My father will kill you,” she warns him. “He's too close to his goals.” She knows how many bases have been destroyed. She knows how much turmoil he's causing. “He's posing your brother as a martyr to the cause. If you don't stop him--”

Alex shrugs, takes a step backwards. He's not used to such coldness from her, meaning the experiments also left a psychological mark. “Right now, Lorna, I just want to get you home.”

Home. It strikes some sort of nerve in her, rounds out her eyes, parts plush lips. “The mesa?” she asks, hopeful.

“The arctic.” It's quiet there, even with the kids. “Come help me, Lorna. Help me put things right.” He wants to give her peace, time to collect herself, time to be with him. He reaches out and touches her shoulder, his blue eyes warm against her distance. “I won't make you fight.”

She's surprised. Leaning back against the window, she searches his face for the lie, the dishonesty. But it's not there. “You want to be with me?” They've been star crossed for so long, that she can't imagine he would still hold onto her. “Fate will only tear us apart again--”

“My love for you is stronger than fate.” He places a tender kiss to her forehead, smooths fingers through her wild green hair. “It always will be.”

Alex Summers was never one for big romantic gestures or poetry, so his words shiver down her spine with small jolts of surprised electric. She can feel the blush in her cheeks, the way her body warms as he strokes her cheek with his thumb. Lorna wants to embrace him, to wrap herself around him and hold onto him for dear life, but something strikes her, removes her from the mood. “Why aren't you grieving your brother?”

“Come with me, Lorna.”

“He's alive? He's--” He stops her with a finger pressed to her lips. He looks into her eyes, now grown wide with epiphany.

He looks around the room for cameras, for idle bugs, then back to her. “Come with me, Lorna. I need your help.”

“My father will--”

“Please.”

Her heart beating furiously in her chest, she nods slowly. “I'll help you,” she says quietly. “I'll come.”

“I'm not interrupting, am I?” Triage clicks the door shut behind him, crossing the room to stand in front of Lorna. “I'd like to heal you,” he says.

She looks at the raw red marks upon her arms and legs. “You don't have to,” she replies.

Alex watches her carefully, the hesitation upon her features. To her, in this state, it's like covering up the harm that was done. The need for vengeance. Like his brother, she needs time to recover.

By the time Christopher is done, her arms and legs are restored without scarring, without the tragic marks. The weight – that coldness – lifts from her shoulders as she stares at that perfect skin. “Thank you,” she says as he heads for the door. He shrugs as he exits.
“It’s an amazing thing he does,” Alex says, reaching out his hand to help Lorna from the window sill. They meet up with Gambit in the kitchen, discuss their plans a little further. Sue entreats them to stay for as long as they need to, but Alex refuses. There are things they need to do, reasons they need to get home. They say their goodbyes to the Fantastic Four, Dazzler, and the other mutants that have followed Sue here, and into the jet they go.

Setting auto pilot, Alex briefs them on the situation, that they’re teaching, that they’re a team, that his brother is alive. He admits that where they’re going is monitored by SHIELD, “So, be very careful of what you say and do. We are under watch.”

Gambit smiles, just a touch too greedily. “Dey’ve been watching me for years, homme. Still ain’t found nothing to accuse me of.”

Lorna is still in shock that Scott’s alive. “They said he died during imprisonment.”

“It was the only way to get him back,” Alex explains, “and into our custody. We can take care of him, but beware, he has a rough time.”

Lorna had read Ulrich’s article, as had Gambit. They both knew what was at stake, but both also had their reasons for joining the X-men in the arctic. It surprised Remy that Rogue had joined Alex’s team, especially since she was not all that fond of Scott. She hated that he’d killed Xavier, and Gambit doubted if she’d ever forgive One-eye for that.

“What happened to him?” Lorna asks.

“That’s a long story,” Alex replies. “Maybe too much for right now. All you need to know is that he’s not well. We’ll talk about the events later, once the two of you are settled in.”

The flight is afterwards uneventful, and they touch down next to Maria Hill’s small fighter. “Damn it,” Alex curses under his breath. Two days in a row of her and he’s already sick of her. Maria Hill is none too enthused that Alex has brought more people into what is supposed to be a secret, but Alex swears that it’s the last time. Gambit and Lorna are needed here, to help watch the children. “And to join your team?” the commander asks. She knows better than to think that the X-men gathered here aren’t going to go full cape on her. She’s here to make sure that they’ve settled in, to gather a preliminary list of what they need. “So far, the only thing that you seem to be missing is the bourbon,” she laughs. But Alex doesn’t share in the joke, neither do Lorna and Gambit. She realizes that she’s in chilly company. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I know this is difficult. We’ll learn to work together in time.”

She follows them into the house and then takes a seat in the small parlor up front. The children veer away from her, disappearing into the house’s depths to the levels below where they can continue whatever adventure they had cooked up in Alex’s absence. “How safe are you from telepaths?” she asks. She knows that Forge had come up with machines to block telepathy, but she needs to make sure they work.

Alex shrugs. He’s not sure of all of the technical elements, but Forge tends to be a man of his word. “If he says they work, then they work.”

“But you’re not sure how well?”

“What’s this all about, Commander?”
“It's come to our attention that Charles Xavier is alive.”

Alex's heart stops beating all at once as the news catches up to him. He swallows, shakes his head. “That's impossible. He died. Scott killed him.”

“And, supposedly, Scott was dead, too. But, wallah, he's here.”

“Yet, you won't reveal your source.” Scott stands in the doorway to the parlor, one foot in, one foot out, the energy a small glow about him. Visor to the floor, his body still covered in bandages, he waits for an answer.

“You can come in, Scott,” Alex says, helping his brother to a chair. “You don't have to ask permission.”

“She won't tell us the source,” he repeats, scrounging fingers through his own hair in hopes of calming the wave of energy.

“Which reminds me, why are you looking into old SHIELD bases? Is this one not good enough?” They've been through his search history, uploaded his coded messages, those things he's deemed important. SHIELD hasn't yet figured out what he's looking for, but they will. It's only a matter of time before the code is broken.

It almost turns their attention away from the news, her argument against him. “What's your source?” Alex asks, knowing that his brother is interested for a reason.

“That's top secret.”

It's too easy of an answer, especially when it concerns the possible return of Xavier. Logan says so as he, too, steps into the room. “If that bastard's still alive, we deserve to know who told you.” He can feel the rage rile up within his blood.

“We're not targeting Xavier,” Hill warns them. “We have too many other things to watch for --”

“You're deeming it a mutant problem, aren't you?” Polaris says. She watches the sudden widening of Hill's eyes. “You want the X-men to take care of it.”

Indeed, SHIELD and the Avengers have often felt that way. If it's a mutant, then it's a mutant problem, unless it's someone like Scott who comes undone. It's impossible to count how many battles they've fought against Magneto, the Right, the Purifiers, the Sapien League while the premiere forces of the world bowed out and let the X-men take the blows. “You want us to kill him,” Lorna finishes.

Hill takes a pause to choose her words. “We don't want him dead,” she explains, “but we also want him to stay clear of Cyclops' mind. Don't get me wrong here, Summers is our first priority. We can't afford him losing control again.”

“We'd still like to know your source,” Alex argues. “We want to make sure this isn't a trap.”

“In exchange for Scott's coded messages, I might actually think about it.”

Scott shakes his head. “It's nothing for you to worry about.”

“Then why code it?”

“Because it's nothing for you to worry about.” He's clear and crystal. His focus unwavering and his attitude an arctic distance. He has no intention of helping them.
She fears arguing with the one-time leader of the X-men, afraid of setting him off, making him feel more than he can handle. She's seen the destructive nature of the miasma first hand in Helmut's lab. “Thought you guys deserved a head's up,” she finally says, turning her gaze from Scott to Alex. “We need to protect him, we need to make sure.”

Alex says that he'll talk to Forge, make sure the devices can handle Xavier's intensity, and says that he'll have a list of what they need in the next few days.

“I'm not the enemy, Havok,” she shares.

“Nor is my brother,” he replies. Though, he's not sure how Charles is going to feel about that.
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

Beast returns.

He's welcomed back with open arms, his lab semi-intact, the mansion almost complete. They offer him coffee – his favorite – and small sandwiches that they made earlier this afternoon. “The kids like their snacks,” Ororo explains. “We try to provide.” The X-men crowd around him like a long lost brother who's finally returned home.

They still need staff, now that part of the team has left. They need their civilian staff, too – the lunch ladies and the secretaries, the janitors, the bus drivers. But they're getting there, and now, with Henry back to teach the science classes, Storm is more than pleased with their progress. “Jean should be coming back soon as well,” she reveals. “As soon as she located.” With the telepaths returned, the school will feel more like home.

She walks him through the changes that have been made – mainly to the aesthetics of the mansion, though he will notice a coffee bar inside of his lab. “We converted a small shelving unit. We thought it befitting.”

Storm leads him to the kitchen where several of the children are still sloughing over their lunch. Kitty calls them the picky eaters, and until their lunch is finished, they can't go outside for recess. They don't like the soy replacement for their normal peanut butter, but, as always, the school is more than aware of allergies. “They'll get used to it,” she assures Storm, “and they'll like it even better.”

“What about Scott?” he asks, having heard little news about the situation since he was captured by Magneto.

A solemn look and a shake of head. “He's dead.”

Indeed, Beast has heard that, but he doesn't believe it. Not for a second. “Where are Alex and Logan?”

“He's dead, Henry. Leave it at that.”

Shooing the children outside – with their lunches only partially finished – Storm and Beast sit down for long overdue coffee alone. “Where were you?” she asks him. “You disappeared on us.”

“Magneto,” he say solemnly, “I was captured.”

“How did you escape?”

“I didn't. He let me go.”

Storm winces at the thought. “For what reason?” she asks. But Beast doesn't know, or rather won't tell her. “There's a rumor that he's raised an army.” Which is true, or so McCoy reveals. Sam Guthrie has joined him, as have other mutants that once led private lives. “My inaction --”

“Your inaction has nothing to do with it,” he grunts. “He simply outmaneuvered us this time.” He
means what he says, citing that the children here could have died or been tortured if not for her passive stance.

Her mind is not eased by his words. She doubts herself too much, the situations, her ability to keep the school safe. Since Jean was evicted, she's had few people to talk to. Of course, Storm hopes for Jean's return, especially now that news of Scott's death has flooded the world. “All of the telepaths should return.”

He can see the weight of the world on her heavy shoulders, that goddess that should be as free as the wind. She's been trapped by her decisions, and even though they sit in the midst of a peaceful moment between long time friends, that moment is all too easily broken.

After coffee, he follows her to his lab. “You'll be teaching chemistry, of course, biology and elementary science,” she tells him and settles onto one of the stools. “I'd also like you to cover a gym class or two until Rogue returns.”

“Where is Rogue?” he asks, surprised that the southern belle has left the mansion.

“She's on a mission, but she'll be back soon.”

The lab is a wreck. His genetic samples shattered upon the ground or laying piled in a corner. He can still see the remnants of a ceiling in the floor, and blood from the various fights. “We weren't sure how to organize it,” she says, shame turning her eyes to the floor. “I never paid enough attention to your work in here. I've been oblivious --”

“Ro, stop punishing yourself. You're not Scott. You don't need to do that.” Brow lowered in seriousness, he busies himself with the broom, sweeping broken plaster and sheet rock off into the corner. “How did they kill him?” he asks, keeping his focus on his actions.

Storm shrugs. She doesn't know the fine details of his death, only what was reported on the television. She can see Beast's skepticism, how is eyes narrow and lips tug down into a frown. Though his senses aren't as accurate as Wolverine's, he can still scent the lie about her, the nervousness and perspiration. He hears how her heart beats too fast for her calm demeanor. “Who did you lose when they went with him?”

Dry mouth, licking her lips for moisture, she takes a deep breath. She explains the split between them, that Alex plans to run a team out of wherever they had gone, and that she'd sent Rogue with them to assure that things were safe. “Several children went with them, but I don't think it's safe there, not with the nightmares.”

He wasn't there when Scott was returned to Earth. Doesn't know the extent of the damage, but Storm tells him everything. “He's barely lucid,” she explains, “And in those moments that he is, he wants to die.” He's far removed from the man they once followed.

“He has been for a long time,” Henry reminds her, bringing up the Phoenix, his threats against the world. He doesn't blame her for abandoning him, as he did the same thing. “There's only so much forgiveness that one can give,” he cites. “There's only so far that a person can be pushed.”

“You still hate him?”

“No. I pity him. I pity that he sees violence at every corner, that he's forgotten what peace actually feels like.” In his maze of a mind, there is only turmoil and chaos. “He's forgotten what it is to be an X-man.”

“Then shouldn't we remind him?” Storm asks, feeling the weight of her decisions once again.
“Shouldn't we --”

“Do you really think that he can gain control of himself?” She shakes her head in answer. Beast puts a hand on her shoulder. “You're doing the right thing. We can't afford another war. Our peace is too fragile.” And, indeed that's what this is. Peace. This time with no missions, no anger beyond the protesters at the gates. “Let the world take care of itself for a change. Heavens knows that our efforts haven't made a difference.”

He smiles then, a bright thing midst the gloom. “There's still the school, Ororo. There's still our duty to these children. Let's count that as a victory.”

It's easy after that to fall into a familiar dialogue of children and their aptitudes. Already, Storm can tell the trouble makers and class clowns, those that she'll have to keep a close eye on in case of shenanigans. She can also tell those that are afraid of themselves, who haven't yet come to grips that they are a mutant. It will be a long road with them, to teach them acceptance of who they are and what they can become.

Eventually, the conversation turns back to Jean and the other telepaths, how soon they are expected, if they will come back at all. Storm needs them here, especially for the telepathic students. “There's only so much that Kitty and I can do when it comes to training them. They need the expertise of those who share that power.”

“Like Xavier?”

Tension roils up on her shoulders. “Like Xavier,” she says quietly.

Beast shakes his head. “Magneto seems to think he's alive.”

She feels sick at the revelation, her stomach churning up bile in her throat. “Then why didn't he--”

“I don't know. I asked the same question.”

She takes a deep breath, a sudden breeze cooling the room, the heat of worry on her skin. It betrays her lack of calm, an anger deep within. “We must find him,” she says once she gathers herself together again.

“We should leave him alone.” Had he wanted to be involved, he would have reached out, he would have contacted them. “He may fear rejection over his actions towards Scott.”

“But the world thinks Scott is dead.”

“They also think that Charles is dead. We can't be myopic, not at this time, not when there's so much riding on our every decision.” Magneto is waging his own war against the world, and the X-men must prove that not all mutants are destructive. “We must prove ourselves better. We must prove that we are peaceful.”

She leaves him in the lab, to pick up the pieces where he left off. Outside, she can see the children engaged in a game of soccer. They laugh and cheer, chasing the ball down the yard. It's been a long time since this house was filled with such laughter. A very long time. Her thoughts are once again drawn to Xavier, and the fact that he's alive.

In many ways, she feels betrayed by this. That he didn't contact them, that he let the world run over them without a word. But, then, she doesn't blame him. What he did to Scott was terrible – the same with Jean – but, at least Jean and the other telepaths were willing to own up to their decisions. She wonders if that's why he's stayed hidden from them, the guilt of what he's done.
“Would we forgive him?” she asks Kitty who comes to stand beside her. “Charles. Can we forgive him?”

Kitty shrugs, unsure as to what has brought this on. “You seemed to forgive Jean pretty easily.”

“You didn't?”

“She destroyed him, 'Ro. Right in front of our eyes, she ate away at him. That's a hard thing to forgive, regardless of how guilty she feels.”

“Should we fight Magneto?” Storm asks. “Should we stop his madness?”

Kitty nods. “We're heroes, Storm. And, heroes fight for those who cannot fight for themselves.”
The Arctic

Chapter Summary

A fragile peace.

He stares at the basin, that large metal thing still filled with water. Polaris will take it out later, using her magnetic abilities to empty it and stage in the center of the room once again. She's good like that. Helpful, even though she has her own nightmares to deal with.

In the morning, once she awakens for her stack of cold pancakes and home made syrup, she'll tell him that it's okay, that she doesn't mind. They all say that, that it's okay, and that they don't mind. They smile at him, act like everything's normal. He still wonders which of them are real.

But right now, he finds it hard to dread the morning, the moment when Pocket comes to get him, hungry for his breakfast. He finds it hard to think period.

Beside him, Logan lays half asleep, staring into red visor, his fingers feathering through his still damp hair. He hums this quiet little tune that Scott doesn't recognize. So peaceful, so soothing. He smells like cigars and bourbon, and half lidded eyes watch him for wakefulness. “You're awake,” he says drowsily. Pulls himself up from the bed, and Cyke immediately regrets the absence of him. “You should go back to sleep,” he says quietly, stretching arms above his head. He's tired. Exhausted, even, but he doesn't complain.

It takes all of his will, all of his strength to not fall into those arms. To keep himself at a distance, to focus on those missions that he has. The search, the kids. Protecting the world from himself. He puts those feelings – that need, that desire – into the back of his mind, locks it up in a tiny box, afraid to bring it out. He could lose control if he's not careful.

Scott says nothing as he rises from the bed, merely checks out his clothes, how much of them are left. Apparently they rip and burn while he's asleep, while he's screaming at the top of his lungs waking the entire house. No one says anything to him about it. They don't complain, or wish him ill. They don't mention even a peep of the terror that he puts them through. It embarrasses him, fills him with guilt.

“He doesn't love you,” Jean says from the corner, her bright green eyes on Wolverine. She traces paths across the room as the shorter mutant gathers up their clothes. He tosses a fresh set into Cyke's lap, knowing full well that Scott won't be going back to sleep. He then offers to start the coffee and to bring it to the computer lab, as has been their habit.

“You're dead,” he says softly after Logan has shut the door. “I killed you.”

“I'm more alive than you ever were,” she snarks, turning up her nose and crossing her chest. “You were such a trite lover.”

“I'm sorry,” he replies, staring at the clothes in his lap. He shuffles them on, very aware that they are watching him. Jean and Charles. His brother. His thoughts turn to the computer lab.

“Your being paranoid,” Alex's nightmare chides. He bares his fangs. “None of it's actually real.”
The smell of coffee gives him reason to move. “I have to meet Logan downstairs,” he tells them.

“You're going to start another war,” Xavier adds. “Or maybe that's what you want.”

But he doesn't. That's why he's being so careful. He doesn't want to cause more death, but if he's right, if his doubts are true, then the world is facing something far more devastating than the rise of Magneto.

Turning the corner into the living area, then down the stairs, he enters the small computer lab overlooking the Danger Room. Logan is already there, coffee in hand. “Took your time this morning.”

There is no quiet for him as the shades appear, each one whispering of his death, of the destruction that waits if he continues on this path. “Are you real?” he asks Logan, trying to figure out which one to listen to. They both vouch for their reality, but only one takes his hand. He can feel those fingers press into his palm, the warmth and strength of them.

Scott's breath scatters at the touch, the realization, once again, that he can't tell what's real. He feels himself letting go, his concentration breaking, so he quickly shoves it back, takes away that gentle contact and returns to the computers.

His mission frees him from further mistakes, keeps him culled away, the red energy under control. So long as he maintains focus, he can work. So long as he doesn't feel, he can keep coding his notes, and eventually build them into the Danger Room below.

There is a pain in his heart, Logan realizes of himself. When Scott turns cold, it hurts. When he turns back to the computers, when he leaves the world behind in favor of codes and scenarios. In earlier days, he would have simply left rather than face the pain. He would have packed his needed belongings, found some old vehicle for cheap, and took off for the wilds. To California or Canada, Texas or Alabama. It wouldn't have mattered, so long as he was gone and away from the pain.

But, those days are long past, and in his stay, he's earned a family that would fight thick or thin for him. He's off to the kitchen to get them more coffee. An excuse, really, to be away from the distance, away from the ache. He takes a deep breath as he shuts the door, and another when he pours the cups.

Alex stands in the doorway. “It'll get easier,” he says with a yawn. “We'll get used to this.”

“It's like we're not even here,” Logan complains.

Havok nods. “If you need to back out—”

“I'm not leaving,” he's quick to interject. “I just wish I knew how to reach him.” Scott's always been on the quiet side of things, unless he was training or leading a mission. So, the silence is nothing new. They've seen this part of him again and again, locking himself away in order to concentrate on whatever work needed to be done. But, this time it's different. “He asked if I was real again.”

“Maybe SHIELD will give clearance for Reed to come here, take a look at him. Surely there's something that can be done,” Alex says and takes a proffered cup of coffee. It's another morning routine, the divvying out of coffee, lamenting over Scott and his frozen state.

Wolverine wishes that he could reach the man. Make him open up, tell him what's going on. Alex, on the other hand, is worried about his searches, the codes. Wonders what they are, what kind of disaster Scott's planning for. Hill is breathing down his neck over the messages, afraid that he's using this time to concoct some magnificent plan that will see the end of the spy agency. Havok, however,
thinks something else is going on. “He must have heard something during his imprisonment.”

Logan peers upwards to the ceiling, to the camera that watches them. It's a cautionary gaze that stays Alex's tongue. “Or maybe he's just looking for real estate.”

“Somewhere warmer?” Alex smiles. It's a slight joke, one that makes Logan grin. “At least the kids love it.” Their afternoons are usually spent outdoors making snowmen or having a snowball fight. “A whole island of snow, and they're making the most of it.”

“They're going to fuss when classes start tomorrow,” Logan surmises.

It will be yet another change that they will have to face. Alex isn't sure that they're ready. Even with just five kids in their care, balancing both the team and a class schedule is going to be difficult, especially since Scott isn't ready to be in the classroom. Havok wants to contact Dr. Strange, but is wary of Hill. “She's not easy to get along with,” he says, making sure to eye the camera above them.

Logan agrees, but also points out that things could be much worse. “He could still be on that table with his eyes stapled shut. I'm just glad that they saw reason enough to let us take care of him.” And even though Scott is a prisoner here, he's got enough freedom to try and recover from his vast ordeals.

Scott and Pocket enter the kitchen, the child first and Scott just behind. It's a wordless exchange then. Scott opens the refrigerator, and Tatsuya picks out his breakfast. Cheese, eggs, spinach, and pancake mix. Alex is shocked that the young boy is actually trying something different, and Logan is surprised that Scott knows how to make omelets.

As Scott busies himself at the stove, they brew another pot of coffee which awakens Rogue and Remy, and soon the kitchen is crammed with the X-men and their students. The talk is quiet, yet frenetic, with laughter and guffaws. It's a feel good morning that all but Scott and Pocket join in on.

Gambit shows the young boy a card trick that he is fascinated by, watching as Remy hides the card again and again, yet it always shows up behind the boy's ear. Set up at the small kitchen table, they wait patiently for the fluffy omelets and stacks of pancakes. And though the haze of red surrounds Scott in the effort, it stays at a low level that is not destructive.

It's a peaceful morning, and a deserved one after what they'd all been through, with laughter and cheer. The kids are happy here, as are the adults. They finally feel like a family. A large, happy family.

They don't notice when Scott disappears, with Gambit behind him. They meet in the hallway outside the computer room, a small alcove where the cameras don't reach.

He hid it in his coat, the computer tablet. Garnered from Forge and made of Shi'ar tech, it has a firewall that can't be breached. With the red fog more substantial in his nervousness, he tells Remy that he'll need another one that can be breached by SHIELD.

“My wife's going to wonder why I keep leaving,” Gambit reveals. Rogue's already suspicious of his outings, and thus far has managed to placate her with flowers and chocolates and other such gifts. “You ever going to tell me what this is for?”

“No.”

Remy shrugs, a half grin on his face. “Good to see you back,” he says. “I'll get it done.”

“And this,” he says, handing the Cajun an address scribbled on it. “I need to know what's inside.”
“Dat's near the mansion.” He takes a pause. “You sure you ain't gonna tell me what this is for?”

Scott nods. Turning on heel, he enters the computer room, a sign that Remy's now on his own to figure things out. He takes a deep breath, stuffs the address into his pocket, and returns to the kitchen. His entrance sparks worry over Scott and where he's gone. “Did he even eat breakfast?” Angel asks.

“He's still on the computer. Working on a scenario, I think.” Which makes sense to all of them. He's written over a dozen programs the past few days – from easy ones for the children, to harder ones for the team. “Got a lead on a new boat,” he says. “A nice fishing trawler. Maybe worth a check.”

“A fishing boat would be nice,” Alex says. It's been a long time since he's been on the water. He doesn't question how Gambit gets his news, as the Cajun has ways that none of them understand. “That mean you need the jet again, today?”

Gambit nods. “If no one minds.” He doesn't glance at Rogue. He knows that she's wary of his outings, regardless of the gifts. She knows that he's lying. But, she won't question him in front of the others. She'll wait until they're alone to ask if this is another mission given to him by Cyclops. And of course, he'll say no. It's the mystery that intrigues him, what Cyke's doing, and that he's doing right under the nose of SHIELD.

But it also means that he'll have to find a fishing boat, or maybe just borrow one.
She doesn't actually like coffee, but it's warm, and the cream and sugar add weight to it, make it palatable. And it was free. Purchased for her by some passing gentlemen who noticed her empty table. “You look like you could use a smile today,” he said and then elaborated on the morning fog and how chilly it was outside. He bought her the cup, gave her a couple of dollars from his wallet and told her to have a good morning.

It's rare to find someone so generous here in Omaha. But those extra few bucks will break her sobriety, so she's not sure if that generosity was worth it. She's tried to kick her addiction – the methadone clinic, cold turkey, jail, but nothing works. Not when she has money in her pocket. The need is just too strong.

They called her. The first time in years that someone had rang that phone of hers. She'd considered selling it time and again, but now she's glad she didn't. For the first time in years, she feels hopeful. Feels that at least something in the world could turn right.

It's late morning, long after her coffee has gone cold when she's approached by an oversized man and a petite woman. The man intimidates her, but the woman has a pleasant smile and she smells like lilies. “Julie Smith?” she asks, holding out her hand. “I'm Macy Tremaine. We spoke on the phone.”

They'd been everywhere, Mystique and Sabretooth. A wild goose chase through a list of names and personnel involved in the crash site. Gary Bennet, Carl Williamson, Jeremiah Hanover, Pearl Weatherford. All over the country, up along the Canadian border, and now finally to Nebraska.

Julie attempts a smile and shows the nice, clean lady the dirt on her palms. “Sorry,” she says. “They don't have showers under the bridge.” She doesn't want to get her dirty. Doesn't want to rub off on her.

They take their seats across from her, Victor scooting his back to get away from the smell. He can tell that Mystique feels sorry for the young woman, he can see it in her eyes, but in him, it merely brings out a bloody instinct that he's tried to ignore for the past month. Too many people, too much frustration. He wants to rip all of these memory-gone mother fuckers into pieces.

“I don't know how much help I can be,” Julie says quietly as another cup of creamy coffee is set under nose, along with a pastry that will go a long way into filling her empty stomach. “I probably came across the same dead ends as you. There's no record of the orphanage, of what happened to us.”

“We're just here about the boy,” Mystique cuts in as politely as possible. She doesn't want another life story. She simply wants the information that can lead to identifying the young boy in Victor's dreams.

Julie takes the cut as she should, a caution to keep her own misery out of the telling. “I'll need to get paid,” she says. “Maybe a hotel room for the night.” How she longs for the comfort of an actual bed.
It's a long shot, and she knows it, so when Macy pulls out a roll of bills and places it on the table, Julie is visibly shocked.

“That should cover any information you have,” Raven replies. The money in her hands feels like gold. She can rent a room for an entire week, invite her friends, fill her addiction. It's in her mind to flee, to get out of there as fast as she can, but then she looks at Sabretooth on the edge of his chair, ready to pounce. “So, what do you want to know?”

“I think we're looking for the same person,” Raven begins and orders up another round of coffees for the three of them. “A young boy with a head injury that was sent to an orphanage somewhere in Nebraska.”

“You talked to Mr. Hanover.”

“He's the one that gave us your name.”

She can't remember his name, if he finally got adopted, or what happened to him. She only remembers the bruises and bandages, that he refused to eat because his food was poisoned. “They would throw him in solitary because of that, make him stay there for weeks at a time, and when he got out, he wouldn't look anyone in the eye.”

A bunch of the older kids made fun of him, especially because of his classes. He could barely read, yet he was in the fourth grade class. Didn't know science or health. “But he was really good at math. Some sort of genius at it. They had him learning trigonometry, and he was breezing through it like it was nothing.”

Rumor had it that he had a brother that got adopted out, but he was left because of his medical history. No one wanted a kid that was injured, at least not there at the State Home for Foundlings. “There were a couple of kids with permanent disabilities, but this kid, he was different. He saw families every weekend, and every weekend he was told he wasn't wanted. He was a sad little boy. “It's like if I can find him, find out who he is, and look at his life... I wonder if it's just me, or if it was all of us there.” Her brown eyes watch the traffic passing by, afraid to look at Mystique. “Out of all of those kids that I met there, he had the worst of it. But, if he has a house and a two car garage, a steady job, and food in his stomach, then I'm alone, you know? This whole screwed up life, and I'm alone.”

She clears her throat, Macy's narrowed eyes reminding her of the payment and what it is for.

He'd been in solitary for over a week. No one ever got punished that long, but he did, and all of the time. He'd come out of it with bruises and gashes all over. She'd asked him once if one of the guards was hurting him, but he just dropped his head and made his way to the nurse's office. Ruth Kendall was the nurse at the time. Julie only remembered her name because the woman would sneak them lollipops and little candies when they went to visit her. She was the only nice adult in the bunch. The rest were stern, driven, task masters.

That, and she died.

The boy found her body, cut open and bleeding. He'd screamed.

Some of the older kids thought that he had killed her. Even the police had questioned him, but they ruled it a suicide after a note was found among her things. “I don't think he ever got over seeing that dead body,” Julie says. “He stopped sleeping after that, or at least that was the rumor. Said he dreamed of fire and blood and all sorts of things.” She sips at her fresh coffee and turns her gaze back to Macy. “He was always alone.”
At the time though, it was his refusal to eat that had sparked her interest. More than once he’d gotten sick in the cafeteria, emptying his stomach out onto the floor. He said it was poisoned. Swore up and down that someone was poisoning him. But, no one else ever got sick.

There were also rumors that it was the guards that were poisoning his food, that they were getting him confined to solitary on purpose. “It was so they could do things to him,” she says, air quoting things. “I didn't put it past them. They were assholes, lording over a building full of children, turning it into a prison.” She knew first hand that the guards had no problems backhanding the kids across the face, or beating them with their clubs, so she didn't disregard the rumors.

She'd tried to talk to him once. He had headaches all time. Nurse chalked it up to his head injury. But, he'd be stuck inside while the rest of them played. He didn't say very much. Didn't talk about himself or his world before coming to the orphanage. “But, I told him everything. How my parents died in a car accident, how my grandparents didn't want me. They didn't want to raise another child, and so I was--” she stops herself, takes a deep breath. “Sorry,” she says, sipping again at her now cold coffee. “Been so long since anyone actually listened to me that I got carried away.”

“Do you remember anything about the owner of the orphanage, where it was, anything?” Raven says in a soothing tone. She understands the ache of too many years, of too much grief, and this girl has lived through it all.

“I don't remember the owner, but I remember the doctor who ran everything. His name was Milbury, and he hated kids.”

The name strikes something in Mystique's mind. “Milbury,” she repeats, then giving Victor a concerned look. “Can you tell us where the orphanage was?”

“Just a few miles outside of Omaha. I can draw you a map if you like.”

Macy hands her a paper and pen, and then abruptly, “You're a mutant, aren't you?” Julie drops the pen, looks ready to run. “So am I,” she says, indicating that Julie should look under the table. There, she transforms her pale, porcelain hand back to its original blue. “I'm a shape-shifter.”

For the first time in years and years, Julie feels a weight lifted from her shoulders. “I can tell when someone lies.”

“That's a useful gift,” Mystique smirks.

“Not when the world is this full of them. It-it makes it hard to trust people.”

Raven nods in understanding. “Is that why you dope yourself up?”

Shame turns Julies dirty cheeks a shade of red. “It makes it hurt less.”

“There are other far healthier ways to deal with your anxiety. Aerobics, for instance.”

Julie smiles. “You're a shape-shifter. What do you need aerobics for?”

“Oh, you'd be surprised.” She tells Julie to spend that money on a hotel for a few nights and skip feeding her addiction for a while. “No one's going to save you. You're not a battle that someone's going to fight for. You have to rely on yourself. I'll call you when I find out something,” she promises.

“Thank you,” Julie says. “For listening.”
“Thank you for the information.”

Back in the car, Creed looks at his lover. “What'd you figure out?”

Raven sighs, easing her head back and looking at the ceiling. “Nothing good,” she says, then turns an amber eyed gaze towards him. “I think we might be in over our heads.”

“Us? Never,” Creed smiles and taps his claws on the steering wheel.

“The name Milbury doesn't mean anything to you?” Creed shakes his head. “Think about it for a second. Wild experiments, a bunch of mutant children, an orphanage. Victor, we're dealing with Mister Sinister.”
Samos

Chapter Summary

A time for goodbyes.

She still can't let it go. Her wedding ring.

Standing at the edge of the ocean, letting the waves lap at her feet, she stands arm outstretched, the ring in the palm of her hand.

She can't reach him. Can't find him. Not on Earth, not in the ether. It's why the world suddenly seems disconnected, ruined, demolished. She cannot imagine a life without him. Even if they're not together, her world is empty. “He's dead,” Jean says quietly.

Charles nods, watching her struggle with the ring. She'd meant to throw it in the ocean, her last goodbye to the love of her life, to the man she destroyed. She thought it would be a graceful ceremony, to finally lay him at rest. “It's okay to keep mementos,” he finally says when the tears trickle down her cheeks. “It's okay to remember him.”

She breaks down then, drops to her knees in the sand, covering the ring with her fist, the flood of emotions finally too much. She grieves for her loss, for the man she loved, for the fact that she ruined him, twisted him, that she was too weak to stop herself.

“It had to be done,” Xavier says once her sobs grow silent. “If not by them, then by us.” Right now, he's just thankful that someone else pulled the trigger.

They wander slowly back to the large house on top of the hill, settle on the veranda with a variety of wines and cheeses. He's spoiling her today because he knows that soon she will leave, and though he resented her arrival, he now doesn't want to see her go. She's been a good conversation partner, someone mired in the same web that he, himself, was caught in for those long years. She understands his decisions, his addiction, and doesn't judge him for it. “You can stay,” he says, his eyes still focused upon the sheathe of ocean below.

“You can come. You would be welcomed --”

“We both know that won't happen now that he's dead.” The world has no need of him, and he has no need of the world. He plans to spend the rest of years here, taking in the beauty of both the environment and the ease of his life. “It wasn't an easy decision to keep myself secret,” he explains, “To abandon my children to their fates.”

“We were never children to you. We were your warriors.”

In his younger years he would have railed at the comment. He would expounded upon the great lengths he went through to keep them safe. But the years have dulled that fiery part of him, that indignant side. Wisdom shows his mistakes in perfect clarity. It's not just the destruction of Scott's mind that forces him to nod his head, but also training the five of them to be an elite battle team. “I saved your lives,” he eventually says, though calmly and in control. “I gave you purpose.”

Without him, those five young mutants would have been alone in the world, abused and disregarded
once their powers became known. It was only through him, and his training that the X-men were able to rise above humanity's hatred and vehemence in order to realize the sacredness of the world. “But it was never enough for you,” he says quietly. “Nothing was ever enough for you.”

“No. No it wasn’t.” She wanted her family to be safe. Her friends to be happy. The man she loved to love her without doubt. She accomplished none of it. Her family is dead, her friends in pain, and the man she loved now a memory, his last seconds on Earth filled with love for another.

She wonders what they would have become had Xavier left them to their childhoods. But even then, she can't imagine her husband being happy. “The world would have abandoned him anyway,” she says quietly, staring, again, at the ring on her finger. “He was too fragile for this place.”

“We made him too fragile.”

He grew like a weed when his stomach was filled on a daily basis, from a young boy too short for his age to a long spindly teenager. The name Slim had stuck with him, thanks to Sensei Sasaki who spent his hours in the evening teaching the child Akido and Judo. He commented more than once how adamant the child was and that he was flourishing.

He was a lonely child, his days spent in solitude as he struggled with the classes the professor taught him, trying to catch him up on his years spent in the orphanage. He rarely smiled, never laughed, but he met expectations. That was his only goal, and the only goal that Charles had given him. He was to be the best and brightest of them. He was to be the pinnacle of what mutants could achieve.

It was a heavy burden for the boy, but one he had no choice but to fulfill.

He no longer dreamed at night, at least not nightmares. Those memories had been removed, the things he’d been through, the violence, the terror. All of it was gone, replaced by small glimpses that were used to access that wellspring of power within. He trusted absolutely. He was obedient. He was serious. He was everything that Xavier wanted in a son, respectful, polite, quiet.

“I was a harsh father,” he admits, taking a long sip of wine. He could fill it bubble up within him, that regret. It wasn't until later years, once he'd finished forming his team that he began to relax with the boy, when he was firmly under control. “The more you fought me, the harder it was to keep him stable.”

“I was angry at first,” Jean confesses. “That you would do that to his memories. Erase them, change them. Half his mind was blank. His mother, his father. So many memories gone. I'd always felt it unfair.”

“No child should have gone through what he went through. It was my only way to soothe him. To make him feel safe.”

She hates it when he plays the altruistic card. When he sees himself a saint for his wrongs. There was nothing necessary about breaking that mind, and certainly not what they did to him. “Sooner or later, you will realize that you were a villain in the guise of a hero.”

“Is that how you feel about yourself?”

Jean nods. Indeed, she was a villain when it came to Scott Summers. She was wrong, and between the two of them, between all of the telepaths, they had created a monster. She stares down at the ring on her hand once again. The tears are warm, glistening in the mid morning sun. “I will never forgive myself for what I did.”

“You mustn't stop yourself from moving forward, Jean,” he says quietly. And though it means a loss
of company for him, he knows that she is meant for better things. “There's a dream yet to fulfill,” he explains, “A dream that is still on the horizon.”

“Of course you would say that,” she sniffs. “It's always back to Xavier's dream. How many of us have to die before you realize it's futile?”

“Perhaps you've had too much wine,” Charles says, chinking his finger against her empty glass. A gentle probe within her mind to calm her sudden anger, and remind her that the dream is worth fighting for.

She can feel him, those ethereal pokes and prods, swirling around her mind, soothing her rage. It's an instinct to do this, and she with him. Those years of siphoning Scott's power, when anger was dangerous, they'd come to this habit. It's become a reflex. Jean sighs, lets the lightness of thoughts overtake her. “It's a good dream,” she finally says, relieved now of her anger. “But it's still so far away. I doubt we'll ever achieve it.”

“Only time will tell,” Charles replies.

By mid afternoon, she is packed, her suitcases sitting beside the door. Charles asks for one last meal before she leaves, a remembrance of the island and all of its beauty. They talk of lighter things, memories of when she was young and he was bolder. They talk of the classes, birthdays, surprises. Mostly, they talk of Scott, his white glove way of organizing his room, his penchant for fast engines, his dourness when it came to the holidays. “He never got used to them, the parties and the presents. He was too wary to be comfortable.” Ever vigilant, he couldn't relax like the others, not when danger could strike at any moment.

“We didn't help those matters any,” Charles reminds her. “We needed him to stay on guard.”

“Yes, but it would have been nice if just once he could have enjoyed himself.”

“There was always your wedding.”

“It was all I could do to keep Logan away from him,” she sighs. “I pity him now.”

“Logan?”

“He was finally allowed to have his love, and his love is gone.”

“He's been heartbroken before,” Charles says. “More times than most. He'll find another love.”

But, Jean doubts it. She's felt his passion, his heart, and she knows how it works. “I think this is the one that he doesn't recover from.” That love was simply too strong, too ingrained, too desperate. “He's never loved anyone like he did Scott.”

They switch to brandy after dinner. Smooth, slow sips. It's a gorgeous sunset, one that lights the ocean with dazzling pinks and purples. The smell of night blooming cerise in the air, and this heaven makes them drowsy. “I should go,” Jean says. “I'll miss my flight.”

A gentle hug between the two, a driver to take her to the airport, and Jean says goodbye to Xavier, ready to return home to the mansion.
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

A funeral.

She says the words, though hollow as they are, with graciousness. Her calm, fluid voice spreading out over the crowd. She talks of his courage, his patience, and his care. He'd looked after them on their darkest days, rose them from the ashes and made them whole again. He united them. He fought for them.

These words she means, though there are those who would say otherwise. They would call her a liar, that she never liked the man. But, in truth, she often admired him more than Xavier himself. “He wanted us to be free,” she voices. “He wanted us to be safe.”

He'd imagined a world where there was no hatred for those born different, a dream he will never get to see. A dream that they still must achieve, if not in their lifetime, then the next. “Our children, our grandchildren, let them walk beside their sapien brethren and hold no ounce over their heads or wear chains around their feet.” That is the best way to avenge the death of Cyclops. To prove that peaceful heads will prevail.”

The applause is as expected, quiet and sad. The faces that she looks upon – even those who came to despise him – are filled with the airs of grief and loss. Rachel, perhaps takes it the hardest, her sobs echoing across the lawn reminding them all what Summers had meant to her. He was her father. And through him, she gained a family that she never could have dreamed of. Beside her is Cable, his head dipped to ground, his arm around her heaving shoulders. He buries her against his chest, pulls her close and lets her cry even harder.

Then there are the telepaths, taking up the final row of grievers. Quiet, shamed, they bow their heads and whisper their prayers, hoping that Scott had at last found peace. She watches them carefully for signs or clues that they are intruding inside her mind. Already they've asked after Rogue and Warren, wondering why their friends are no longer at the school. It's a question that she's not allowed to answer, not if Scott's need for rest is to be preserved. They also question the circlet on her head.

“I need to keep them out of my head,” she'd told Forge after Alex and Logan had left. “Could you make one of these for me?” The machines were telepathy blockers. They scrambled the outpouring of theta waves making it impossible to breach the mind. It was what Magneto had used for so many years, and knowing that, putting the circlet on had made her feel dangerous.

She made no excuses for the small silver band around her head. And, they each in turn took it as punishment for their actions. Kitty also wears the circlet, another mind that knows the dire secret of Cyclops’ survival. And though she fusses over it, she understands the need to wear it.

Storm unveils the obelisk that honors Cyclops' sacrifice. Sleek black with ribbons of ruby quartz, it is much darker than the one they'd dedicated to Jean all those years ago. And in the ground around it, they will grow deep red roses as a reminder of how he saw the world.

Rachel asks her why she doesn't cry, if hatred for her father runs so deep that she can't even shed a tear. “I may disagree with many of his decisions, but hate is too strong a word for what I feel for your
father.” He scared her, frightened her. He was bold and courageous, but also calculative and unbendable. “The rigor in which he conducted himself did not always sit well with me.”

She doesn't reveal that he's still alive.

They journey to the tents to grab the catered feast, and take their places at the tables or on the lawn. The talk goes from quiet and subdued to bright and cheery thanks to evening wine that comes in abundance. Even Ororo takes a sip too many, a sudden burst of happiness bubbling up into the sun, framing the clouds to give them all a spectacular sunset.

There are many that will stay the night, taking up space in their old rooms, or sleeping in the parlors. Many are too drunk to take the trip home, others stay for the nostalgia. He'd trained so many of them, put them through their paces in the Danger Room or in practice, and though a great many are simply content to lead civilian lives, they will never forget the lessons that he taught.

They venture into the house once Storm's sunset recedes, and there they bring out the brandy and scotch, and sit around the fireplace in the great room to continue their conversations. Time passes all too fast, with evening becoming night, and then midnight and beyond. Tipsy, they journey upstairs one by one until Storm is left on her own with the exception of Cable whom she's avoided the entire night.

“Where is he?” he asks.

Storm shakes her head. “He's dead.”

“You're lying.”

She takes a breath, long and deep, holding it for just a second to let her nerves calm down. “He's dead,” she says again.

“You're still lying.”

Tension coils up her shoulders, spreads to down-turned lips. She wears her indignation like a cowl, her eyes going dangerously white. “He's dead, Nathan,” she says again for the final time.

He could rid her of that small golden crown. His telekinesis would make it easy. But, he's choosing to let her tell the truth, to unburden herself of the lie that she's carrying around. He can see the way it wears on her, the way she raises her shoulder, the way she balls up her fists. “You gave a eulogy for a man that still lives.” He knows that the missing mutants – as well as the children – didn't leave to simply form a team. They left because they disagreed with how she was treating his father. “To let them back here after all they did to him is an affront to everything the X-men stand for.”

“I am doing what is necessary to keep us unified,” she says. “I am trying to keep us safe.”

“You've abandoned him once again,” Cable's voice runs cold.

She hates this. This part of being a leader. Taking blame for things beyond her control. “I haven't abandoned him. Truth be told, I don't know where he is. I'm not allowed to know where he is.”

Alex and Logan had struck a deal with SHIELD, and they took him to a safe house where they could keep watch over him. “That's all I know.” But, she's not disappointed in that deal. “I can't have him here, Nathan. He's far too dangerous. It's too easy for him to hurt someone on accident.” She recalls the nightmares in the bunker, the Phoenix dreams and how destructive they were. “And, I don't want him involved in decisions. He needs to rest, to get back on his feet before he attempts to lead a team once again. With his delusions, right now, he can't be trusted to make safe decisions.”
Contrary to popular belief, she doesn't hate him. Not anymore, anyway. She pities him, what he's been through, but he's not her first priority. The children are, the students. They need to be taught, to be cared for, to be prepared for the world at large and all that comes with it. Scott Summers is not in a position to play a role in that. "If he were okay, I would hand all of this over to him in a heartbeat," she adds quietly. "There is much more freedom in being a follower."

He doesn't believe her. Just like her inaction against the Red Hunt and to the Undertow, she's once again letting others dictate her actions. "You make us look weak."

"No," she counters, "I make us looks peaceful."

Cable finds Hope in the rec room, dozed off on one of the couches. She knows that there's something troubling her father, but she knows better than to ask what it is. Like her grandfather, Cable keeps his own counsel when it comes to agitations. "You seen Rachel?" he asks.

Hope shakes her head. The last time she saw her alternate reality aunt was at the service. She's been in here ever since. "Can we get a DVD player?" she asks, thumbing through all of these movies that she's not yet watched.

"TV will rot your brain," is Nathan's gut reply, but after a small pout from Hope he agrees to it. "If you help me find Rachel."

"Is she moving in with us?"

"For the time being."

They find her upstairs in the living quarters, at the far end of the hall where her father's room used to be. Newly built, it looks different than she remembers. Empty. "There used to be a dresser in the corner," she says quietly, "and it was covered with pictures of all of us. You, me, Jean, Alex. Even one of Corsair." He'd treasured those things, the happy smiles captured on film. "Sometimes, it was all he had to remember us by."

She walks through the room, pointing out where the bed was, his nightstand, how he always kept his visor with in arm's reach of the bed, and an extra pair of lenses on his desk. "He'd stay up all hours of the night finishing work and reports. And, he was always up early in the morning, ready to face another day." She admired him. His work ethic. His readiness. "And with all of that, he still had time to talk to me."

She regrets now, leaving Utopia to return to the mansion with Logan. She regretted it then, even, knowing that her father was in a tight spot. That's why she worked with him, under cover, gathering information that he needed. She never understood the hatred that others railed against him. "He wasn't dangerous," she says. "He wasn't out of control."

She wishes that she could see him a final time, that she could have talked to him, been with him. That she could have apologized and told him how much she loved him. "That's something I never said to him, you know? I never told him that I loved him."

"I don't think any of us did," Cable replies. It was something that was not required of them, to express their esteem for him. He was awkward that way, unused to praise and adulation. He was happy just being near them. "But, he knew how we felt."

Rachel takes a deep breath and nods. "Still, it would have been nice to tell him."

Kitty waits outside of the room, her hands shoved deep in the pockets of her slacks. "I'm sorry for your loss," she tells them as they exit. "But, I wish you'd reconsider staying with us. This isn't a time
“Storm made her choice,” Rachel replies. “And so have I.”

There’s not much that Kitty can say about it. She understands Rachel’s anger. She's angry, too, but she also knows that the mutants must show a united front, especially now when things are so dire. But, Rachel is unconvinced. “I'm sorry, Kitty, but I don't belong here. Not with them.”
The Arctic

Chapter Summary

A mission.

He remembers how scared he was standing there in the doorway. Still plugged up to machines, Scott didn't notice him, his attention pointed up to the doctor and nurses that messed with the wires monitoring his vitals. He was shaky, weak. A husk of himself.

Alex had been told that his brother lost his memory. That there was a chance he wouldn't be recognized. “There's no use for fear,” Mr. Milbury told him.

“What if he doesn't remember me?” the child asked, staring up into dark eyes. He didn't like Mr. Milbury. He was a frightening man, intimidating. His deep, solid voice able to send shivers down his spine. “What if he's forgotten all about me?”

“Then, that's something you'll have to live with.”

It didn't occur to Alex that his own memory of the past year was vacant. He had certain memories – his teacher – Ms. Helen – a tall, leggy blonde that smiled all of the time – and a classroom where they taught him to read and write and other things. He knew his ABC's and a bunch about dinosaurs, but he couldn't remember his home, his bed, other children.

Milbury nudged him to take another step forward, to cross the threshold and enter the room. Another nudge, another step, and with his heart beating so fast within his chest, he finally met his brother's eyes, and the wait began. “Scott?”

Brown eyes narrowed, then lit with excitement. “Alex?!” He tried to rush himself out of bed, to scurry out from the machines, but he was too slow, too weak, and the doctor pushed him back down.

“Easy there, kiddo,” the doctor laughed, watching as Alex took another step forward. “Don't be rough with him,” he told Alex. “He's still got some recovering to do.”

He took it slow, getting help climbing up into the bed so that he could hug his brother. He was elated - no, more than elated - that Scott was okay, that the worst was finally over.

“You survived,” Scott said.

“So did you,” Alex smiled. There was so much to catch up on, how he'd grown, the new things he learned. He made a volcano in science class and could read fifth grade books now. He could even tie his shoes all by himself. “And I bet you anything that I'm taller than you.”

The boys giggled as they spoke, with Scott trying to keep up with the frantic conversation and wiping the tears out of Alex's eyes when he spoke of their parents. “We're orphans now. We live at the orphanage.” Crying, he curled up against his brother's chest, letting out all of his fear and tension. For the first time in a long time, he felt safe and whole. He felt like something good would finally happen to them if only because there had been so much bad stuff.

But, the good stuff never came. Not then, not now. Their lives have been tragedy after tragedy. It
makes it hard to hold onto hope. Especially now that things have gone so horribly wrong.

He's not settled here, not yet. Though it's been nearly a week since coming to the arctic isle, it doesn't feel like a permanent place. The mesa felt permanent. Sometimes the mansion did. But the orphanage, the Blandings? They felt as much of a home as this place does. This place feels like a prison.

Head down, Scott enters the living room and takes a seat across from his brother. “We need to wake up Logan,” he says. “You have a mission.”

His brief is short. A possible mutant smuggling ring. Slavery. Kidnapping and abduction. The buyers are people of high wealth. Those who think their largess equal immunity.

“Are you sure about this?” Alex asks. Scott shakes his head no, states that he's not sure it's real, but hopes that it's worth investigating. “If I do this, and it's not real, you realize what the consequences will be?”

He does. Scott knows that Rogue is not here of her own volition. He knows that she's here to spy on him, to tell on him, when he's clear, when he's not. He's sure that she tells Storm of the Phoenix dreams, which then she tells to the Avengers. “I think it's real,” he tells his brother, scratching at the back of his ear. He's unsettled, this pressure mounting quickly into a red fog that stretches out into the living room.

“Hey, hey,” Alex soothes, “Calm down, bro.” He takes Cyclops' hand, a signal that he is real, that he is listening. “We'll check it out. Don't you worry.”

But, Scott is worried. The proof is so little, it's mostly gut instinct. He knows very well that this could violate SHIELD's rules for his detainment. He walks away after that, returns to the computer room.

Alex continues to thumb through the information – the adjacent points between kidnapping and sales, a drop in current annuity and savings, correlating a great degree of money spent. He can see why Scott thinks the way he does. So much money lost in some of America's wealthiest families and businesses, and the missing mutants just days before. A once a month operation, and a police force that refuses to investigate because mutants are involved.

Angel, Nightcrawler, Colossus, and Rogue. Only Wolverine, Gambit, and Lorna will remain in the house, each taking care of the children and watching over Scott. At first Gambit is upset at the posting, preferring to go on the mission, but he's quickly reminded of Scott's inability to keep himself calm and his innate charm. If worse comes to worse, and Logan returns to sleep, the Cajun has a chance of keeping Scott under control. “And the children,” Alex says. “The children adore you.”

They dress in fancy duds. Leftovers from weddings and events, special celebrations. Tuxes and an evening gown. They haven't worn anything like this in a long time. Rogue fears being touched. “I need gloves,” she says, “I need to cover my arms.”

She's awarded with a thin veil of fabric pulled from Lorna's closet, a pair of gloves that run to her elbow. “You look beautiful,” she tells the southern belle. “As long as you don't get it wrinkled.”

Rogue wears a menagerie of green and gray, the perfect combination to show off her auburn hair and green eyes. Gambit adores her, kisses her, touches those hidden parts of her body. “I wish I was comin' with you, petit.” He wants her, more than anything.

She smiles at his tease, pushes his hand down from breast to waist. “Another time,” she whispers, a goddess in her gown. “With the collar on.”
He takes it mildly, pulling in at her shoulders, telling her how much he loves her. Even with her shoulders and arms covered, she's wary of the touch. Gambit understands her worry, has been through it before. He won't take risks at the sake of her happiness.

Letting go, he admires her from a distance. The elbow length gloves, the long green dress. She looks like a dream come to life. A princess in a fairy tale. “Just tell me when you let down your hair,” he says, watching as she twirls. He can think of nothing else so perfect as her twirl. How buoyant she seems, how full of life.

The fraught tension between them disappears as she moves again to his chest. That Cyclops is sending him on secret missions, that she can't report his doings to Storm. But, she doesn't ask, doesn't beg. Instead, she just enjoys the feel of him as he presses his fingers into fabric. “You'll be the belle of the ball,” he says, holding onto her.

She wishes that he could undress her, take off the second skin that she's donned. But, she's without the inhibitor, and she knows it's unsafe. “S'okay, petit. I'll see you when you get home.”

“By then, I may be tired.”

“Then I'll just have to wake you up.” He'll drink plenty of coffee tonight, just to make sure that he can relish what's left of her costume.

She disappears out the door, into the living area. Alex gives no acknowledgment of her dress, or her style. He simply waits for the others to show. Ever impatient, he taps fingers against his hip, glaring at doorways, and breathing deeply. “If this were Scott, we'd be ready by now.”

She isn't sure about this mission. But she knows better than to speak it out loud. Alex and Logan are by far too defensive when it comes to Scott's actions – be they real or unreal. His obsession is looked upon with a grain of salt, taken with the chance of failure, but still believed. “What if he's wrong?” she asks. “What if this is nothing?”

She can see the nervousness in the younger Summers brother. The way he breathes just a touch too deep to calm his nerves, how his eyes narrow, and the grit to his jaw. He's not as good as Scott in keeping his emotions under cover. “Then it's nothing,” he replies. “It doesn't hurt us to investigate.” Rogue can feel his tension, how heated he becomes as the time ticks away. “Remind me that we need to practice our readiness.”

It's twenty minutes before Kurt appears in the doorway, the image inducer making him look olive skinned with jet black hair. It's his tribute to Errol Flynn, an actor that he long admired. He gives Rogue a wide smile, tells her that she's beautiful, and sweeps her up into a short waltz. “We don't have time for this,” Alex says, “The auction is starting in three hours, and we're not even ready yet.”

“Calm down,” Warren chuckles as he enters the room. Colossus is right behind him. “Petey had a bit of trouble with his tie, but we're all ready now.”

Alex hands out the fake invites that Scott had managed to find and replicate. “We spread out,” he says. “We check every inch of that boat for missing mutants and buyers. We don't have a telepath with us, so we're stuck with coms. Don't be caught talking to yourself.”

He's a strict leader, and inventive, marking up the blueprints of the auction vessel for each of them to search. He doesn't allow questions until they're in the air, flying at top speed to reach their destination in time. “You think there are two auctions then?” Kurt asks.

Alex nods, keeping his focus on piloting the ship. “Scott thinks the art auction is a disguise for what
they're really selling. He thinks the art is fake, and that a bid on a canvas is actually a bid for a slave.”

Warren perks blonde brow in interest. Out of all of them, he has the most dealings with expensive art, owning a Rembrandt, a Monet and several Picasso's for his offices. He knows what to look for, how forgers work. If he can get close to the paintings, he'll know for sure.

Rogue however thinks that it's a lot of coincidence, making her even more uneasy with this mission. “I think he made this whole thing up.”

No one questions their invitations. Not a second glance as the team files through the cordoned off entrance. Inside there is much chatter, people toasting with champagne, laughing and mingling. Compared to their little island, the place is almost overwhelming.

“Relax,” Angel whispers in Rogue's ear and takes her hand. “If you tense up, people are going to ask what's wrong.” He knows people like this, the way they interact with each other thanks to Worthington Industries. “All they want to do is brag. They want your praise and admiration. If you're stopped, just hear the story out, smile and nod where appropriate, and tell them how wonderful they are.”

She nods her understanding, making her way to the right side of the ship while Warren seeks to get an up close look at the paintings. She listens closely to the conversations in her surround, grabbing a glass of champagne to look more normal. “Everything looks clean on this side,” she says into com, shielding her mouth with her drink. “Going downstairs.”

There are no guards at the stairs going down into the living quarters. No one standing by to protect any secrets, if there are any. And, like above, everything seems kosher. A few candid conversations about extramarital affairs, or drunken laughter over a game of cards. Nothing seems out of sorts until she reaches the next set of stairs going down into the engine room.

The guards are armed, watchful. A full six of them with automatic rifles and kevlar uniforms. “Can't get past the guards without making noise,” she says into com.

“I'm stuck on this side, too,” Alex replies.

“The paintings are real,” Warren reveals, his voice heavy with worry. “I think this auction is legitimate.”

Alex is still not convinced. The auction may be real, but this many guards protecting the engine room is uncalled for. “There's something down there,” he says, and we have to find out what.”

They reform their group at the edge of upstairs dance floor, talking quietly among themselves. If Kurt could see the floor below, he could teleport down the stairs, and see what's going on there, but Alex tells him no. “We can't risk creating chaos here. There's too many guards, and too many secrets.”

“You need to win a painting,” Alex tells Warren. “We need to find out what they're hiding.”

Warren smiles. He's got his eye on a Van Gogh that would fit perfectly in his Hong Kong office. And so huddled together, they wait for the auction to start. Angel bids on several of the paintings, winning a Pollock and later the Van Gogh. At auction's end, he's approached by the host of the event. “Mr. Worthington, it's very nice to see you here. I didn't realize you'd gotten an invite.”

Warren smiles. “I have my ways, as you well know, Mr. Turner.” He's only met the man briefly, one of his father's old associates, but knows him well enough to be suspicious. “I didn't realize you were hosting the auction or I would have said hello.”
“I have a lot of ducks in a row now,” he explains. High end real estate isn't as prosperous as it once was, so in order to make ends meet, he's been running auctions for his wealthy clients who are quite deep in debt thanks to the housing crisis.

“The boat's yours?” Angel asks, trying to keep him talking. The more familiar he becomes with the man, the more info he will gain.

Turner nods, holding his hands up in the air in triumph. “Bought her last month, figured I'd break her in.”

“I would love a tour of it,” Warren replies, and talks of getting his own yacht in the near future. “This one has inspired me.”

“Business before pleasure, my friend,” he reminds the tall blonde. He takes a peak at the team, making eye contact with each one and shaking their hands. “Right now, we need to settle up over what you bought.”

An angelic smile from Warren, and Frank Turner leads them into a large formal dining room on the upper floor where the rest of the buyers are gathered. They take their seats at the waitress' behest, nibbling on the goodies they've placed on the table, their pleasure at peak having just purchased some of the worlds most beautiful masterpieces.

Warren takes out his wallet, swiping his card to pay for the near half a million he bid on the paintings. They're well above their normal price range, and he knows it. He's assured by the waitress that the rest will be coming soon.

Alex shuffles off returns to the downstairs living quarters to watch the guards. There are fewer now that the auction's over and the guest rooms have largely been emptied. Only two remain on each side guarding the way into the engine room. “I think I can get past them,” he says into com.

“It may be empty,” Warren reveals, repeating what the waitress told him. But, Alex thinks he can do this without a fuss, to really see what's in the room below. A chokehold on the first guard, a slam to the larynx for the other one, he journeys downstairs to get a full view of the engine room.

The children cry at his entrance. Banging their fists against the bars, they seek help, escape, their mothers and fathers. “We've got a problem.” He hurries back upstairs to his waiting seat in the dining room, his features tense, his mouth dry. Scott was right. This is a mutant smuggling ring, and Warren just bought a slave.

Warren had questioned the outlandish prices for such art. Bidding up to three hundred thousand on each of the canvases. But, now he understands. So do the rest. “We have to set them free,” Alex says. “We have to fight.”

It is a glorious thing, their teamwork. Trained by Scott's Danger Room sessions, they know each other backwards and forwards. Rogue and Kurt teaming up for one onslaught after another, Angel and Colossus; Havok at the rear calling out battle codes. “T1 formation,” he yells, his bands of energy collapsing across the incoming guards. They tie up the buyers and the security team, binding Turner to the main column in the center of the dining room.

In all the battle took mere minutes before they went downstairs to rescue the captured mutants. Scared and starved, they thank their rescuers. And then – only when the rescued mutants are in the safety of the Blackbird – does Alex call the SHIELD to pick up where they left off.

Hill surveys the damage and the results of their labor. There's enough evidence to convict Turner for
the next fifteen years, and the buyers for the next seven, but she doesn't buy that this is a happened upon incident. Though she doesn't ask, she knows that Cyclops had something to do with this. “We'll investigate,” she says, “Find out who's behind it.”

“We'll investigate,” Alex tells her, reciting information from Scott's initial work up. “You'll see that they're behind the art and the smuggling.”

She gives him the benefit of the doubt, tells her tech team to dig up any info on the up and coming business. High end realty, art, antiques. They have their fingers in a lot of pots, and even to her, just glancing over the statistics, there is something heinous about them. “We'll look into it,” she says. “In the meantime, you should be at home taking care of your brother.” She doesn't want the X-men out and about, doesn't want them raising ire and chaos for the masses. She just wants things to be quiet and easy for once. “And please don't fight me on this.”

“The mission's over,” Alex says. “Nothing else for us to do here if you're going to look into things.”

“Good,” she replies, taking a deep breath and watching as her soldiers tear the yacht apart looking for evidence. “Thank you for handing this over to us. We'll do our best.”
Chapter Summary

A damsel in distress.

She stands at the edge of the ocean, staring down into the tide. With psychic tendrils she reaches out to the minds around her, pushes at them, nudges them. One of them will come to her, these fishermen. They will come to her rescue, be her knight in shining armor, and take her where she wants to go.

She's been here for three days, crawling up under the boardwalk at night to avoid being seen in her sleep, digging through dumpsters for her meals. She misses the opulence of Sinister's city. She misses her sisters, misses the warmth of the manor, the comfort of her bed.

Madelyne Pryor is not as powerful as she once was. Bereft of her demon magic, her telepathic gifts weak in comparison to the original, she can do nothing but to succumb to her fate. She will die out here before she reaches him, die and be tossed into the waves, unless she can crack these minds. Unless she can force them to save her.

It's the child that comes to her first, hands outstretched, he offers her a boardwalk meal, a greasy thing that she doesn't care for, but devours anyway. It will fuel her journey, sate her stomach temporarily. The child sits next to her and offers up the story of his day, that he's here with his father and they're supposed to be fishing. Spending time together. But, all he's done is argue with his mother. “At least they gave me money to play the boardwalk games.”

“You have money?” she asks the boy.

“Twenty pounds!” he answers, and hands her the folded up bills.

She smiles and asks the boy to show her his parents. He points them out in the crowd, the tall blond man and his petite brunette ex-wife. Their showdown is quiet, but still intense. It takes a bit of concentration, her eyes closed, her hands at either temple. She stretches herself into the ether around them, finds the thread of their rage, their hurt. And, slowly, she begins to break it down. It's more than her mettle, she realizes as the argument between them cools a touch. They look around at the wondering eyes, then look for the boy that they sent off to play games. They are worried about him, but even that comes to an end, and soon they are smiling. “You made a friend,” his father says, reaching out to shake Madelyne's hand, and with it, he gives her another hundred pounds. “Thank you for watching him.”

She watches as they stroll off into the crowds, the mother still confused by what's just happened. She's a smart one, she knows to be wary of the red headed clone. A smile and a nod, and she, too, disappears.

Madelyne strolls the boardwalk, touching upon every mind, looking for the weaker ones, the ones that could offer her more. A gap tooth man who reeks of fish offers her his entire wallet, tells her that she's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. She could live with him. They could have wonderful children together. She stymies at the contact, his hand upon her arm, warns him to remove it, to take it off before she hurts him. He follows her request, takes a step back, and with a tear in his eye, he
nods and leaves her alone.

Continuing to gather money, she comes upon a sea-going vessel, large enough for several families. She inquires about it to those around her, wants to meet the owner. She waits an hour before someone finally comes to talk to her. He describes it as a private cruise ship, that everything's provided during the voyage, that he's already filled up. “You're going to America?” she asks him.

“To the Carribbean.”

“But you can go to Canada, right?” She feels inside of his mind, pushes her words deeper down, ingrains them to his thoughts. He wants to save her, wants to her hero. He wants to take her to Canada, to see her safely on foreign shores. He thinks of his wife – an automatic defense. He's much stronger than she expected. “I don't want romance,” she says, taking her hand off of his arm. “I just want passage.” She pulls out the money that she's collected along the boardwalk, several hundred pounds and a few wallets. “This should be enough,” she adds, watching his eyes glean over the money.

It's easier to then to force his hand as greed becomes an undeniable thought.

“I think we can make a deal,” he says, “I just have to restock.

He takes the money and buys her new clothes, things that she looks beautiful in. A new dress, a new pair of jeans. He spends his money on shirts and shoes, nice bottles of wine and a blanket. He treats her well, spending nearly half of what she's collected, before returning to the ship and setting her up in his very own suite. He'll make do with the navigation room, putting himself on the floor while she takes the king-size bed in the cabin. Anything for the money she offers.

Finally aboard and settled, she reaches out to her sister clones, explains her bargained passage. It will be the last time they hear from her as soon she'll be too far away. “He's going to love me,” she tells them, “And then I'll destroy him.”

They are spread along the coast, each looking for their own passage to that small island off the coast of Canada. They'd taken the information from Sinister's mind in a moment where he was unguarded. He showed them the dome shaped house painted white like the snow, the security systems that kept the place hidden from radars and telepaths. And that glimpse was all they needed to set forth upon their mission.

They praise Madelyne for her inventiveness, for finally figuring out the transportation they needed, and they aim to do the same themselves. Six ships and six Madelynes will soon make their way overseas, and they'll meet upon the island where they will exact their vengeance.

Relaxing in the Captain's cabin, she orders up a lush meal – the type that Sinister would have them make, a glass of wine, and then another – all the while keeping her hold on the captain. The guests complain about the change in course, want their money back, and she tries her best to control them too. There was a time when these multiple minds would have been easy for her to sweep and change and coerce, but Sinister has made them weaker on purpose. He didn't want them to rebel.

Out of all of his clones, he'd loved Madelyne the best and hated her the most. She was a failure, an experiment gone wrong as she couldn't keep hold of Cyclops' mind once Jean Grey reappeared. Jean was stronger, sparked by the Phoenix, and Maddie was just a dull comparison. She was a puppet, dutiful, beautiful, with no mind of her own outside of what Sinister had bestowed upon her.

She wonders what has changed, when they found their independence.

Wine stung eyes glance out over the water, the great window offering up little views save for waves
and the occasional whale. She wonders if she'll ever be free of him, of Essex. If this is just another of his games, an experiment to see what they would do. It's a chilling thought, one that hovers over her like a dark cloud on a winter morning.

She shakes it off, pouring her focus back into the passengers, sending them each to sleep without their supper. It's not an easy task, especially under the influence of wine, but it's all she can muster for now. At least the Captain will have some peace as he pushes the post further through the waters.
The Island

Chapter Summary

A visit from Dr. Strange.

The snow of memories, fresh fallen and flurried. This part of the mind – the subconscious - shouldn't be this desolate.

What memories are here are incomplete – a cabin still in the distance, a creek, sometimes the laughter of children. A plane, a fire. A parachute drifting off into the wind.

Across the crevice where the Phoenix is trapped, the nightmares roam, angry and hungry, looking for what's left of this life to devour it. Strange casts a spell of calm, dipping down the wind so that he can see better. There is no silence here, as within the rest of the mind. The whispers are too prominent, cajoling Cyclops into nothingness. Not even his spell works on them, and in the silence of the memories, the whispers only seem louder.

And then there's Scott, his form shifting in and out of reality. He limps as he walks, his leg torn to shreds by the apparitions that haunt him. His clothes are torn, his visage ready for battle. He knows why Strange is here, and if he has to, he will fight to the death.

"I'm trying to help you, Scott," the doctor says. If he understands, Strange can't tell. His silence is intimidating.

Through the snow, they clamber, exhausting themselves with the effort. Scott leaves a trail of blood where he goes, and latching on are the nightmares. He fends them off with fists and fury while Strange casts his spell upon them. He's not well, this subconscious figment that's come to watch him, and there are no enchantments to be cast to make him whole again. Nothing to be done save unlocking the mines in his consciousness and hoping for the best.

He could easily outpace Scott's subconscious self. Outwalk him, outrun him. He could be up the hill and to the far cabin that Logan had described to him. But, he doesn't. He waits on Scott, lets him catch up before slowing his pace even more. "You should be resting," he finally says. Summers shakes his head and continues walking.

He knows that Stephen is after the cabin and the memory that takes place there. Like Logan, he means to enter it, but unlike Logan, the doctor can actually destroy it if it so pleases him. He doesn't trust the telepaths; he doesn't trust Stephen Strange.

As they come across the cabin, the shield is malleable to their touch. And though it's the cabin that he's interested in, he can't help but marvel at the beauty of this shield. Pale red walls laced with shimmering ruby lines, twisted and curled like Celtic knots. A strength emanates within the pulse, strong, capable. "I won't hurt the memory," he promises Summers who takes a step forward and into the memory.

Inside here, this bubble in time, there are no whispers, just the gentle flow of half-frozen stream and two little boys running and jumping into the water. In here, Scott's parents have no faces, no scent, as if this memory was attacked once before, that he'd managed to shield it just in time before it
Dissipated like the others.

Around the fire, there are s'mores to be made and hotdogs on sticks. There's hot chocolate and thick, warm blankets. It's amazing to see the young Summers brothers, so innocent, without the weight of the world. They are free, and they laugh. They smile. They encourage each other, are bonded to each other. It's a wonderful memory, and one that replays again and again in the depths of Scott's mind.

Summers regards the image of the brothers with the same contemplation as he does the nightmares, a questioning look as he tries to decide what's real. His conscious mind barely remembers this day – the day before the accident. “Scott,” Strange says, nudging the man's arm. “It's real. This actually happened.”

It makes him sad, this place. That life used to be so simple and untouched by tragedy. That he was strong and capable. That he was safe.

Strange leaves him to watch as the boys scramble up onto the bank of the stream and race towards the waiting towels and blankets their parents have waiting for them. He leaves him to try to remember his mother's face, what his father said that night at their last fire together. These things are beyond him now, and his subconscious grieves.

The cabin inside is empty, save for the piles of clothes that the boys left beside the door. There are no signs of holiday or home. Some of the structure is missing, some is scratched out, chewed up. Another sign that this has been attacked before.

All around the cabin – through its windows and doors – Strange can see the nightmares pound themselves against the shielding, scratching and clawing, trying to work their way through. But the barricade is solid, intricate, a feat that even the great Sorcerer Supreme must marvel at. He wonders if it was Xavier or Grey, or Essex that made him bury the memory so deep, so deep that it could only be accessed in dreams.

Eventually, Scott enters the cabin, too. Quiet, morose. There's nothing here to see, save for the emptiness. “What happens if I move it, Scott? If I bring this to your consciousness?”

The figment shakes his head and shrugs. “Please,” he says, “Don't destroy what little I have left.” It's the first time he's spoken since Strange arrived. His quiet words hitting like anvils on Strange's shoulders. And, Stephen realizes how precious this memory is. Scott doesn't know how to recreate this shield, how to guard his memories.

Strange holds up his hands in forfeit, unaccustomed to seeing the other man so visibly struck. “Okay,” he says, “So, we leave it here, then. We find another memory--”

“There are no other memories.”

“There is,” Stephen assures him. “We just have to find them.”

He leaves Scott in the peacefulness of this memory, heading once again to conscious mind where the bombs are set and waiting to go off. He's nowhere close to cleaning up this space, and is very wary of setting off too many at a time. Scott's control is little enough, and each bomb chips away at what he has. New whispers and ghosts, new memories and traps.

In the world, outside of the ether, Cyclops heaves over in pain, grabbing at the sides of his head to control the onslaught.

Wolverine is immediately on his knees trying to soothe and calm. He tells Scott to breathe, to relax, mimics the deep breaths as Summers continues to spurn out of control. He can't turn Scott off, not
with Strange still inside his mind. To do so would trap the sorcerer in the in-between realm that hurts worse than Limbo. “C'mon, Slim,” he says, “Calm down, bub. Pull it together.”

It's frightening how quickly the red fog begins to cloud over Scott, eating away at the floor, red tendrils seeping out to destroy whatever it can touch. The wait is too long, from the destruction of the bombs until Strange pulls himself back into the world. By the time he makes it and says those magic words, half the room is destroyed.

“Guess I'll need a new bed,” Logan sighs, looking around at the debris. He stares down at the unconscious Scott, his eyes wrinkled with worry. “Any luck?” he asks, his face already dim with doubt.

Strange shakes his head no. “If I move it to his consciousness, it could break the shielding, leave it exposed to the nightmares. For now, it's better to leave it where it's at.”

Wolverine feels the hopelessness settle in the pit of stomach. A harsh, heavy feeling that slumps his shoulders and shakes his head. Scott barely speaks to him, to anyone, unless it's mission bound, and Logan doesn't go on missions. “He's so cold,” he explains. “Colder than he was before. It's as if nothing matters except the mission.”

Strange understands Logan's worries. But, right now, it's either hard-fought-for-control or the fear of Cyclops becoming the Red Wave again. And, like others, the doctor thinks that protecting the world is a priority. “That's why I'm trying to heal his mind. It's not just for him. It's not just for you. It's so the world doesn't get caught in the crossfire of his madness.”

Logan shakes his head again, clearing out the beleaguer ing thoughts. “I guess it's time to check on Arlo.”

It was Lorna's idea to talk to Stephen about the boy and his hands, to figure out a way to make them useful again. They're field medics here, able to bandage and treat battle wounds, but the complexities of severely maimed hands escape them. And, Strange is an expert in such things.

Arlo hides himself in the corner of the medlab, scared and nervous, his eyes glassy with tears. Beside him is Indira, taking a break from her studies to stay with him until the adults get here. Her arms are wrapped around his neck and her forehead pressed to his, she talks him down from the fright, telling him about all of the good things that can happen if he lets them work on him. From snowball fights to helping with lunch. She even thinks that Cyclops will let him work on the jet with him if his hands are mobile. “It's worth it,” she tells him, scratching at the bristly fur behind his ear. “You'll be able to color with Pocket and do all kinds of stuff.”

He knows that what she says is true, but its the pain he fears and the backlash of memories. Those months spent with his hands taped together, how bad it hurt when he went to his kibble, how hard it was to sleep for the pain. And, then he overloads with memories of his father – the yells and screams, the kicks and tire irons. It scares him, makes him cry even harder.

Logan kneels before the boy, placing both hands on his shoulders. “It's okay, kiddo,” he soothes. “We're going to be as gentle as possible.”

“I can take the pain away,” Strange says, hoping that the boy will perk up at the mention of it. “I can make it not hurt.” He has spells for that, spells that will work on him, even if they don't on Cyclops. “I can also make you sleep through the procedures if that will help.”

Arlo isn't used to the tall sorcerer, having only seen him a handful of times at the mansion. He doesn't trust him, shies away from the proffered hand that only wants to help. Logan pulls his attention back.
“You fought so well in space,” he tells the boy, “I know you have courage. I want to see that courage again.”

“You can be on my team during the snowball fight,” Indira chimes in with a bright smile. “We’ll beat ’em all!” One hand in the air for victory, she giggles at her own exuberance, and Arlo tries to laugh with her.

Carefully, they guide the boy through the X-rays, having him turn this way and that, getting pictures of his hands, his legs, his feet, his ribs. There's atrophied muscles in his back from where he's been forced to crawl on all fours for so many years, fused bones in his hands and feet. Wolverine takes deep breath after deep breath as the damage is revealed. He wants to kill the man that did this to him.

Strange puts Arlo to sleep and walks Logan through the procedures, what he'll have to do to set the bones correctly. “He'll have limited movement until the muscles are strengthened, but if we're careful and do this right, he'll have his hands and feet back.”

They decide to do one at a time, so as not to hinder him further than he already is. “How long's it been since he's walked?” Stephen asks, but Logan doesn't know. The boy can barely talk, and he's got a long way to go before they can consider him recovered from the abuse.

It's with great care that they break the bones of Arlo's right hand, putting splints upon his fingers and bandaging them. They won't do more today. They don't want him impaired. He wakes soon after, the lifting of the spell, and watch as he looks at his spread out fingers. He hasn't seen them in so long, not like this, not flat and straight. “Does it hurt?” Logan asks, and the boy shakes his head. “Good. We'll let this heal, and do the other in a couple of weeks.”

If Arlo remembered how to smile, he would. To have hope is a long time in coming for him. For the first time since his mother died, he feels safe in the world and loved.
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

Distrust and secrets.

They call him a traitor. All over the news, the papers, the magazines. They demean him and maim him. They call for justice, for revenge. They want his head on a platter, thrown in jail, deported to another country. They hate him, revile him, accuse him of crimes that he never committed.

Captain America is the good guy. He's not used to such things.

“It grows on you,” Jean says wryly and with a smile. “Pretty soon, you won't call it a good day unless someone's protested your very existence.”

“This is everyday for you, isn't it?” Steve asks, staring out the window at the protesters at the gate.

“No, not everyday,” she smiles again, “There are days when we're trying to save the world or keep our species from being wiped off the map. But, I'm sure you understand the feeling.” Jean offers him a cup of tea. “You're afraid of us, aren't you?”

“No,” he says a touch too quickly, “You lead different lives than I expected. You're very capable.”

“I should take that as a compliment?” Her green eyes leave the window and stare directly at him. “Or did you always think us incapable?”

She doesn't trust him. Actually, very few of them do. He's pretty sure that Jean has been sent to regard his mind and the reason why he's still here.

“I'm here to help you,” he says. “I want to make up for the Red Hunt. I want to make things right.”

“So you've said.”

“You don't believe me.”

“You're a hard person to believe.” She smiles again, this time politely. “Steve, we know what we're doing. I realize that Storm has come to rely on your advice, but the rest of us, all we see is one of the men who tried to hunt us down.” Jean takes a deep breath, green eyes to the window where she can see the children playing. It's a thoughtful gaze, tear stung at the edges. “Was he in pain when he died?”

“I don't know,” he answers quietly. “I'm not privy to such information.” Though his voice is soft, he makes no move to comfort her as the tears overwhelm her. “The others seem to have forgiven you,” he says.

She's not angry at the statement, which surprises him. She wipes the tears from her eyes. “I know.” There's guilt in her words, thick and disappointed. She can't explain why it was so easy for her to slip back in to the routines at the school after what she did to Scott. It was an abuse of power, it was devastating to the man she loved. But, here she is, teaching social studies and sociology, psychology, and training the telepathic students who've come. “My daughter hates me,” she says. “My son, too. I'd say that that's enough punishment, wouldn't you?”
Steve shrugs. He knows that she's reading his mind. He also knows that he can't stop her. She's making sure that the mutants are safe within his presence, that he has nothing left to do with SHIELD or the Avengers, so he puts those thoughts forward. His conversation with Fury when he decided not to return. His talk with Tony on the front lawn. His disappointment with the Red Hunt. His time with Cyclops. He shows her the nightmares, the destruction, the pain, the suffering. He makes sure that she sees this too, that she knows the consequences of her actions.

“You're a smart man, Steve,” she says, backing away from the telepathic probe.

“Next time, you should ask,” he says. He's not a stranger to mind readers. He knows what it feels like.

“Touche,” she replies. “I guess we both have a reputation to fix.”

“Yeah, you do.” Kitty Pryde is not so lenient as Storm. Though she has accepted Jean back at head table, she's very suspicious and wary of the telepath, hence the circlet that she continues to wear. She's here for Steve, to go over the press conference later this afternoon. “They're going to pound us with questions about Cyclops' death, and we need to be ready.”

The interviewers will try to peg Scott as a villain, that he was dangerous and out of control. That he meant to harm the cities that he disappeared, that he was a threat to the world. The X-men are going to stand against such slander. “Cyclops was a hero. He saved the world, and we're going to make sure that everyone knows it.”

Steve wasn't there for the big space battle that Tony told him about. He was still on Earth, dealing with the fallout of the invasion. He takes the list of talking points from Kitty, reads through them. “This is a pretty strong stance, Ms. Pryde. Are you sure you want to be so bold?”

“The world is always bold when it comes to mutants. It's time we started being bold back.” It's a tough as nails stance, one that lauds Cyclops as a hero, a protector of the world. It brooks no misgivings that the world is more at risk now that he is gone. “They killed him without a trial, without a jury. And if they can do that to a single person, imagine how that will spread. See a threat? Wipe it out, without mercy, without a thought. No chance to be proven innocent. This is a travesty of civil rights.”

Steve is surprised at her anger, and so is Jean. The child she used to know is now an adult, and a very keen one at that. “I'm proud of you, Kitty.”

“I don't need your pride,” she snips back. “I just need you to behave while you're here.”

Jean nods, sits back in her chair. She's a fallen angel, the girl next door with a mind-crushing secret. There is no amount of apologies that will fix this for her. There is only time and the carefulness that she must now employ to regain Kitty's trust. “I plan to,” she answers.

Kitty leaves them both to their doubts, to their admonishments. She's not a fan of either one, but she's bound and determined to keep what's left of the X-men united under Storm's leadership. And, the mutants need this unity, this routine of a life. Without it, they are scattered to the wind and more vulnerable than ever.

She checks in with Henry, giving him the same list of questions and answers, and the same attitude about his betrayal. She understands why Ororo needs him, but she doesn't trust him yet, a fact that he is very aware of. She asks about his current experiments, the beakers and Bunsen burners, what he's working on. But he offers nothing. “My lab was quite a mess when I returned.”
Kitty wants to ask him why he abandoned them, why he worked with the Red Hunt. He's another that has yet to earn her forgiveness, but unlike Jean and Captain America, Henry McCoy doesn't care. He has own mind, his own right to make decisions. He refuses to go along with the press conference, tells Pryde that she'd best be left without him.

"You were a public face of the Red Hunt," she explains. "You need to be there--"

"I'll talk to Ororo later," he says. "Right now, I have work to do."

"You were his friend," she accuses.

"Not for a long time, Kitty. Not for a long time." There is a vacancy in his words, a hollowness. "He was too powerful. He was out of control."

"You don't sound convinced of that."

"I don't regret my decisions, if that is what you're implying."

"He didn't have to die--"

"Now, now. You and both know that he's still alive." Beast smiles at Kitty's shock. "I've known you and Ororo long enough to know when you're lying." Which, means only one thing, that SHIELD couldn't kill him, so they have now put him somewhere isolated to keep his threat low. "Please remember that I am a genius, too, Ms. Pryde. I can figure some things out for myself."

"You still want him dead."

"I want him under control, Kitty. I want to know that the world isn't going to parish because he got a paper cut, and from what I've heard, that's going to be a long time in coming."

He turns off one of the burners, transfers the contents of a beaker into three different test tubes. From these samples, he will collect genetic data that could waylay Scott's imperceivable powers. "If I can find a way to limit him, through his genetics--"

Kitty is speechless, her eyes wide, her jaw dropped. "You're seeking a mutant cure?" she stammers. "Does Storm know--"

"Not a cure, but a limiter. Something to make his powers not so heavy."

Kitty's imagination goes wild. "They will turn it against us all. You know this!"

"That's why this stays secret. Only you, me, and Storm know about what I'm doing in here. And when it's done, Scott will be the only mutant to partake of it."

"What you're doing is wrong," Kitty is quick to point out. "He needs healing time, not genetic robbery."

Beast understands the moral implications, but he also knows that Scott will never be truly healed. In many ways, this is an apology to Scott as he turned a blind eye to the man's torment for years. This is the only way to help him.

She feels like there's a knife in her back. That Storm and Beast would come up with such a plan bothers her immensely. That they would even think about using it makes her wary of them both. "X-men protect their own," she says at last, "and Scott needs us now more than ever."
The State Home for Foundlings

Chapter Summary

Mystique and Sabretooth explore the orphanage.

Victor Creed stands on the lawn looking out over a vast Nebraska prairie. Rolling hills and too-long grass, a rusted old swing set and soccer goals. He doesn't remember this place, this State Home for Foundlings. He doesn't remember the old derelict building or the barbed wire fence surrounding the property. “Sinister ran this place?” he asks his lover who stands at his side.

“Maybe,” she answers. “We should check out the inside. See if it spurs any memories.” He's hesitant to go, afraid that he will remember something, that he'll finally figure out what happened. “Look,” Raven says, “No matter what happened, I still love you.” She entwines his fingers in hers and walks him to the building.

Once a sunny yellow with a bright white door and window trim, the place is nothing more than rot now. Its siding graffitied and green with mold, the brass door knocker splotched with weather stains. The door pulls open far too easily, the locking mechanism broken by a crow bar, the roof in need of extensive repair. The smell of mold is overwhelming as Mystique and Sabretooth enter.

The place has been stripped of copper wire and other such sellable metals, with holes in the drywall that follow the path of electric. The casings for the florescent lighting, door knobs and hinges. The place is a scavengers dream – or was, until weather and age did their damage.

Off to the right is a large, glass encased office. The files within have been rifled through, its chairs and desk stolen by thieves. Mystique means to look through the mess and sends Sabretooth off to explore the orphanage on his own.

Underneath the noxious smell of decay is the scent of dozens of children – their pain, their fear, their hope. It's faint, trapped in the old rotten carpet and the walls. There is no memory here, in the foyer, up the stairs. No pictures on the wall to recall a thought, or coat of paint that stirs the mind to action. The weather beaten stairs creak upon Victor's movement, soft in some places where the rain has soaked in too much. He has to be careful – check each step – lest he fall through.

The bedrooms are all the same with two sets of bunk beds on either side of the room. The dressers are gone, the small foot lockers for their things, but he can still see their shape along the wall. Just like outside, there is nothing here that he remembers, nothing that stands out, save for a single room at the end of the hallway that is still locked. He makes short work of the deadbolts that bar the door from entry and is shocked by what he sees.

The room is empty – no bed, no cabinets, no paper – save for a skeleton in the corner. It's the size of a child, the bones bleached and strung together with thick wire and a metal rod. A memory flash curdles over him, drops him to his knees. A saw covered in blood, burning its way through sternum and flesh. He held the child down preventing the boy from struggling.

“You?” Mystique's voice comes from behind. He turns to her, frightened by the flash. “You've been up here for an hour. Just making sure that you're okay.” She takes a wide eyed glance at the skeleton. “Do you know who it is?”
He shakes his head, still stunned by the memory. “This isn't the only skeleton,” he says quietly.

She isn't surprised to hear it. Both of them are too acutely aware of Sinister's obsession with scientific exploration. “There's something I want to check out in the basement, she says.

“The files amount to anything?”

“I think so.” The files are mostly personnel files, those who worked here throughout the years. Teachers, janitors, doctors, cooks. Though the children's files are mostly empty, there's still a partial incident report attached to one of the files.

The basement is a series of small, cold rooms. Concrete floors, a small bed, a sink and toilet. These were the isolation rooms when the orphanage was still running. The place where unruly children were sent in punishment. “This is a prison,” Mystique says, a shiver running down her spine.

“Lab rats,” Victor adds. “Just like the Morlocks.” He remembers the Morlock massacre, how defenseless they were, how much he reveled in their blood. He wonders if the same thing happened here.

It's the blood stain on the floor that she's come to see, to show Victor. Brown against the concrete, pooled out to the edges of the wall, a guard was killed in this room, in front of one of the children. “No one knows who killed him, but his head was bashed in, first against the door frame and then on the floor.”

“They blame the kid?”

“Surprisingly not. Police determined the child was not strong enough to cause such an injury, so someone else must have been in here with them.”

The basement rooms have held up better than those above, with blankets barely smelling of mildew. Creed grabs the small threadbare blanket and inhales deeply. The scent is familiar, achingly so, but he can't place it. Again and again, he puts his nose to blanket and pillow, that clean summer scent filled with sadness. He tugs the blanket over his shoulder, telling Mystique that it's a clue, and they continue on with their exploration.

The medical ward has been ransacked by thieves, painted over, discarded. They can see the remnants of an X-ray room, a dental chair, and a heart monitor. Not big enough to house many students, they both imagine that it was just big enough to address the children's daily woes. The scent lingers here, too, on the beds that have yet to be taken. “Any clues in the office about who this was?” Victor asks.

“No,” she says quietly, “not yet. I wanted to see if you remembered this.” It was Julie's story that had taken her here, the child that she mentioned. The little boy. The fact that the scent is familiar makes Mystique feel that she is right. That these memories are somehow wrapped up in this orphanage.

“I wasn't here,” he says quietly. “I was in a lab.”

“A lab?”

“Yeah.” He takes the blanket and inhales that scent again, the torrent of it sparking new thoughts. “I couldn't escape.”

Mystique settles on the floor as the memory continues to glaze across Creed's face. A distant, dreamy look that has his eyes downcast and focused on nothing.

Something had happened. Something bad. And he tried – he took the boy from his room, carried him
down hallways until he reached a glass enclosure where another child screamed in fear. He was shot in the back of the head, his brains gushing out from the wound, while the boys begged for Essex to stop.

“What happened after that?” Raven asks.

“I don't know.” Worry lowers his head, digs deep into his stomach. “But I wasn't here.”

At the end of the hall, they find a small laboratory, its contents mostly dried up or damaged. Jars of organs, shelves of folders and data. Unlike the office, these are not redacted or covered in mold. The pages here are crisp, yellowed with age, but readable. It's no surprise to find a genetic map in the lab and the details of other experiments. Clones, mutates, turning humans into mutants, making a super mutant, all of these things and more were explored in the basement laboratory. Also outlined are several social experiments, ones that separated the children from their peers, made them targets, made them dependent on him for their well-being.

Sabretooth mills around the broken jars and beakers, the posters still on the wall, the desk. The boy is on the edge of his thoughts – a hammer against water as the memories remain stuck behind his amnesia. “He took the boy's stomach. Put glass over the wound so he could watch it regrow. He did the same with the lungs.”

“He took the boy's lungs?”

“He took everything.” The memory flash brings him to his knees. The memory of carrying the boy into the lab, placing him down on the table and reminding him not to cry. “You be good now, and you'll see your brother soon.” Everyday it was the same quest, the same request, that he not show suffering regardless of what was done to him. He was to remain quiet, silent. “He was a telepath. Sinister said he left his body, traveled out somewhere so he could lessen the pain.”

Over and over again, for an entire year, the boy was deconstructed and Sabretooth could do nothing but watch, promising the boy again and again that soon he'd see his brother. “He took his heart.” The boy was defeated, coming back to the world a broken thing. “He lost something out there. Wherever he went, whoever he was talking to, he lost them. He wouldn't even talk to Jean.”

“Jean?” Mystique's eyes widen with shock. “Jean Grey?” It clicks into place then, the boys, the terror. They both know Essex's obsession with the brothers. It all makes sense now, with what the world had come to know. “He was experimenting on Scott Summers.”

The flood of memories is overwhelming, and Victor screams in pain for the sudden wellspring. Bowed over and head upon the floor, the memories that Sinister had locked away break through the barrier, pound against his thoughts before he finally passes out for the pain. Horrified, Raven goes to her lover's side, hand upon his head. She pulls him into her lap and waits for him to wake again.
The Arctic

Chapter Summary

Storm has words with Logan.

“You can’t love without a heart.”

The words echo in his dreams, in the whispers. And he feels it, the flame that burns him from the inside out, that makes him scream. Absent from the waking world, he clutches at his chest, draws blood by fingernails scraping down. He fights her. The Phoenix. Jean. Madelyne. He fights against the force, and finds himself bankrupt of will. She will burn him alive. She will make him pay.

The dreams have started early tonight. Nine pm. It had been eight days since Scott slept, keeping his hours at the computer, researching, sending the X-men on missions that were both real and unreal.

As always, the large metal basin comes first, drug in by Gambit and Angel, hefting the thing into the bedroom. And then comes the ice that evaporates upon on touching him. Alex is warned away, to not touch his brother as he's still too hot. Wolverine shows the flesh melting from his bones. More ice, more snow, and Havok sits on the sidelines trying to jump start the memory that will bring calm to his brother.

Scott yells for his son. Calls for him over and over again. The memory of the Askani taking Nathan playing havoc within the Phoenix's whims. His voice is broken and wracked with sobs, coarse and desperate. “He's my son,” he begs in dream. “He's my son.” Red energy bolts up and out, with only Alex and Logan nearby. “Please. He's my son.”

Kitty Pryde can't watch the ice brigade, can't listen to the pleading inside the dream. She steps out of the room and into the hallway where Storm stands against the wall, arms over her chest. “It would be far safer to turn him off. We can't let the children stay here, Kitten.”

Struck by the comment, angered even, Kitty's scowl catches Storm off guard. “That man's in pain, and that's your answer?”

He didn't tell them what had happened, why he wasn't with his child. Jean did, but Scott never spoke of it. For Cyclops, it was business as usual – running the team, training, teaching. His life was as it ever was, and many thought him cold for it. But, that was how he dealt with pain. Shoving it back, acting as if it didn't exist. Though he'd faced many tragedies in his life, it was rare that he cried or reacted to them. “He needs sleep, 'Ro.”

“He needs to be kept under a stricter watch. They give him too much freedom.” She reminds Kitty of the false missions that he sent them on. The warehouse on the Jersey docks, the coffee bar in Milan, the museum in Belfast. Rogue reported that there was nothing in them. No traffickers, no evil doers. Just legitimate businesses. “Mutants are in a tight spot right now. We can't afford any slip ups. His paranoia will land us all in trouble.”

Kitty shakes her head and watches as Pocket and Flicker make their way into the room with a bucket of ice. The bunny child knows not to get near, as does Sarah. They stand in the doorway until Alex or Logan takes the bucket and wait for them to return. Sarah's not afraid of the dreams. The yelling,
the begging. But, they do make her sad. “He doesn't talk about his son in real life,” she says quietly, waiting for the bucket. “Maybe if he did, it could be better?”

Kitty can see the change in the girl. Once so shy that she would hide her face if someone looked at her, she's become much bolder with the support of the X-men. She smiles more, shakes less. She has opinions, and she thinks them worthy. She's also much braver. In fact, all the kids have changed, and in such a short time.

It's ten pm before the pleading stops, for Cyclops to be drawn back into memory. His hands black and burnt, Wolverine finally tells the kids that it's over for now and to go back to bed. Clean up takes time, with the adults brushing away the mess left in the wake of the nightmares. They sweep and carry the carnage out into the snow. Above, the Northern Lights glimmer.

“He barely talked to you all day,” Storm says to Logan once they're outside alone. She feels cold now that Scott's powers aren't bolstering her own. She's not used to this part of her power.

Logan shrugs, “Yeah, well. Most days he barely talks to anyone.”

“You can't be happy here, Logan. You're worth far more than a glorified babysitter.” She asks him to come back with her, to teach again, rather than his routine of staying up all night to watch Cyclops fall into his delusions. “He doesn't even know when you're real.”

It's nights like this - when frustration boils through his veins - that thoughts of the mansion become golden. “He needs me. He needs me to be here --”

“Are you sure of that? Are you that convinced that he loves you in return?” She reminds him that there's a big difference between love and need, a babysitter and a partner. “Are you sure that he's capable of love?” He looks at her in surrender, his eyes becoming round, his lips turned down at the corners. “Are you sure he even wants you here?”

She can tell that her comments have stung him, but she's trying to spare him the pain of unrequited esteem. “I know what it feels like,” she says, hand over her heart. Wolverine knows that she's referring to him, that her feelings for him still run deep. “I'm sorry,” she quiets. “It's none of my business, is it?”

A part of him fears that she's right, and that part of him churns his stomach. “I can't leave him, 'Ro. Not again.”

“He has Alex, and we can station Steve here. You need your space, too, Logan. And right now, you're dedicated to a man who won't even talk to you. You deserve better.”

Logan shakes his head. He can't listen to this anymore, her arguments calling upon the doubts in the bottom of his soul. “You should get some sleep,” he tells her. “Scott gets up early in the morning to cook breakfast with Pocket. You'll want to see him interact with the kids.”

He leaves her there, in the cold. Journeys back inside and into the bedroom. Alex waits on him. “Don't let her get to you,” he soothes, clasping Logan's shoulder. “You're important to us, to me. We need you.”

Logan shakes his head, takes a seat at the side of the bed. He's used to these nights now, how long and quiet they are until Scott wakes. And even then, there is the silence. But tonight, doubt gnaws at him in those dark hours, trembles his hand as he watches Cyke mumble in his dream.

He tells himself that she's just angry that his heart had changed, that she is still trying to win him back. He tells himself a lot of things in those few hours, each one making it harder and harder to
ignore the sick feeling in his stomach. He begins to wonder if she's right, that he's incapable of what Logan wants from him.

He feathers calloused fingers over Scott's hair, a tender gesture that eases the beginning of a dream. “Last one in,” he says, mimicking Alex. And Scott responds, walking through the ease of the memory, calming back down for another hour. When he finally wakes, it's with a start, rising up out of the bed, throwing a fist into the air. Logan can see the battle upon him, the way he remembers his fights in the Red Dimension. Years of constant fighting, of killing and dying still weigh on him.

He adjusts his glasses, looks to Logan and begins to shuffle out of bed. A shower, clean clothes, he does all of this wordlessly. Makes the bed, looks around the room, at the things now lacking. He knows that he fell into nightmare, even if Logan has hidden the evidence. He gives Logan a glance before heading to the door.

“Do you even want me here?” Logan asks, hoping to relieve the doubt.

There is no emotion on Cyke's face as he turns around. He stands in the doorway, awkward and speechless. Logan repeats his question, standing up and crossing the room. “You don't talk to me. You don't tell me what you're doing. You act as if I'm invisible. It's a simple question, bub. If you don't want me here, then you need to--”

The kiss is sudden, hot and bruising. Bending low, cupping Logan's head in his hands, Scott pulls him in further and deepens the kiss until their tongues are entwined and hands roam down to shoulders, then spine. The want is thick with scent, an aphrodisiac that pulls moans from Logan's chest. And it all ends too suddenly.

Pulling back viciously, his body fogged by churning energy, Scott drops to the floor, his hands on his head. Logan realizes what's going on. He kneels beside the younger mutant, hand on shoulder blades, reminding him over and over again to breathe, to relax, but the energy continues to grow out of control. “I'm sorry,” he says. “I shouldn't have... I shouldn't have done that. Just breathe, Scotty. Please, just breathe.” But it doesn't work. The lust and need from the kiss too overwhelming and Logan has no choice. “Er dogren.”
Bogota

Chapter Summary

Suspicions at SHIELD.

General Greg Griggs is a tall man, and broad, with graying brown hair and narrowed brown eyes. He's intimidating in his silence and fearsome in his ability to command. He's part of the panel that decides SHIELD's exploits, and he's come here today as a very unhappy man.

Bogota, Columbia was a small base of operations, the SHIELD agents stationed here were mainly informants, uncovering corrupt cops and keeping tabs on the drug trade. A dozen soldiers, no more, no less, but with highly sensitive information kept within. Last night, it was attacked by Magneto, the fourth such base he's attacked in South America without warning or mercy.

"We've got a leak," Fury surmises. "Someone's feeding him the base locations." If they weren't sure before, they are now.

Looking at the dead bodies, Griggs frowns even further. On the panel that dictates SHIELD's actions, he is partially responsible for the tirade that continues to ravage their outposts. "He needs to be stopped. Magneto and his entire army."

"Then give me permission to fight--"

"No. You've done enough damage, Commander. SHIELD needs to regain its strength, and you can't do that with an all out war against Magneto."

"Then what do you suggest we do? We can't keep this up."

Griggs doesn't answer right away, and then asks about the death of Cyclops, how they finally did it.

"We cut off his head," Fury answers, his poker face unreadable. He's practiced at this, keeping his face in check. Griggs' scrutiny is unwavering as Fury fills in the rest of the details. That he's buried in a secret place so that the mutants won't figure out a way to resurrect him again. Personally, he's tired of the mutants always coming back to life.

Fury's only known Griggs for about a year or so when he joined the panel that dictates SHIELD's actions. Twice, he's encountered the man in public – once at a fundraiser, and the other time at the office. He can't say the man is pleasant, as silent as he is, or even capable. But, Nick has no choice but to follow his commands.

Helen Nguyen is already waiting in the small office used by the soldiers. Like Griggs, she's come here to discuss SHIELD's recent spate of failed missions. He's more familiar with Nguyen than Griggs, and knows her to be tough as nails when it comes to getting what she wants. "Since when have you started following orders?" she asks him. "This should have been taken care of as soon as it started."

"You've neglected to give me the weapons that will stop him," Fury explains. Three times he's asked for the prototype plastic weapons, the ones designed specifically for an encounter with Magneto. "We can't go in there with ceramics again, not with the army he has on hand."
“Why aren’t the X-men dealing with him, then?” she asks, “Don’t they follow mutant affairs?”

“They’ve just lost one of their primary leaders—”

“Oh, come on,” she snaps. “They’d been without him for years, and the way I hear it, he was bat shit crazy. This was a mercy kill.”

Nick shrugs. He doesn’t care either way, whether the X-men return to fighting or not, so long as they stay out of his hair. “We can deal with Magneto, if we're given the proper procurements.”

Griggs and Nguyen look at each other, both pondering what the other is thinking. “How quick can we get the panel on screen?”

“Hour, maybe less,” Griggs replies.

“Do it then. I want this massacre to stop.”

Outside the small compound, Fury comes upon Maria Hill who was here to give the tour to the Senator. She respects Helen, knows her determination, but she also fears that the sole woman on the panel is being ignored by the others. “She wants results,” Hill explains, “but she's not getting them.” Hill understands how hard it is for women that have a stake in homeland security. As a woman herself, she can't count the time that her orders were questioned simply because of her gender. “It's like they're shutting her out.”

Fury agrees that Nguyen is being overlooked, as she is one of the primary reasons why they enter battle. She's a warrior, the Senator. But, more than Helen's frozen opinion, it's Griggs that bothers him. “There's something off about him,” the Commander says. “He doesn't sit right with me.”

SHIELD is dealing with a leak of massive proportions, yet the General doesn't seem to care. Nor does he seem to think that stopping Magneto should be their goal. “He's hiding something.”

“Do you think he's the leak?”

“I'm unsure, but it's a definite possibility.” Griggs hadn't batted an eyelash at the thought of a leak within their company. He didn't even acknowledge the comment, which for a spy organization is a dangerous thing. "He was more interested in the mutants than he was the leak.”

There's enough suspicion for the two of them to be cautious, to be careful of their own actions. And, perhaps most importantly, they have to figure out some way to keep Cyclops' whereabouts unknown. “I'm not sure that Griggs believes Summers is dead,” Fury explains. Yet another caution that they have to worry about. The last thing they need is for the world to come knocking on Summers' door and cause him to go Red Wave again.

“What about the Senator?” Hill asks.

“I think she's safe.” There is no digital footprint on the mutant's whereabouts. No paper trail other than the invoices from the supplies. They both know that sooner or later, someone will question the receipts and where these supplies are going, but until then, they will keep to their schedule. “The panel may not even look at it. They're used to funding personal supplies to the Avengers.”

“So, basically we're going to make the panel think that Stark's hitting the bottle again?” Hill is rather unhappy with this plan.

“There's always Thor to blame the bourbon on.”

“I didn't know you had a sense of humor, Sir,” Hill says with a smile and the slightest edge of a
giggle.

They'll have to be careful for now and keep their eyes open for anything suspicious, regarding Griggs, the Senator, and everyone else on the panel. There's something at work here, something devious. They have to get to the bottom of it before SHIELD is too compromised to function.
Storm still doesn't trust Cyclops.

Something's changed. She can see it. In the way Logan walks, in the relief that carries across his shoulders, his eyes. There's a confidence that wasn't there before, and a die-hard belief. “Logan?” Storm asks, stopping him as he walks down the long hallway. He pities her, that much she can see. “What happened?”

“Had a long night,” he says, “Going to get some coffee.”

Throughout the compound, they can smell breakfast already being prepared. Scott woke early, venturing off with Pocket to choose the ingredients for today. Omelets and pancakes again, the kid's favorite breakfast, though this time, he's adding broccoli to the eggs and blueberries to the pancakes. “He's getting adventurous, isn't he?” Logan asks Cyclops as he pours his coffee. Scott nods.

They sit in silence, watching as Cyke prepares their meals. The compound wakes slowly, one at a time, with each of them venturing into the kitchen to break their fast. Alex and Lorna first, then Arlo. The children wake next, with Phin rushing to his favorite bar stool so that he can watch Scott cook. Kurt, then Piotr and Warren, with Gambit and Rogue taking up the rear. It's a silent morning, with the team and the students taking their time to wake up and into conversation.

It's Akido day. A hard light simulation in the Danger Room, something to get their blood pumping and give them focus before classes start. Scott spent days designing the simulation modeled after his own teacher when he was fresh at the mansion. He wants them to learn to defend themselves, regardless of how passive or aggressive their powers are, or so Alex explains as he digs into his pancakes.

Kitty is very interested in the session, asking to even join them. While she knows a great deal of martial arts, she doesn't consider herself able to teach it. Not in the proper way. “It would be nice to have a self defense class that can be revisited.” Storm isn't so sure about taking on Scott's training scenarios, even the Akido session. She wants to see them first before she makes a decision.

After breakfast, Logan retires to his room, his night shift finally over and Alex's turn to watch over Scott. On mission days, it's quite different, with Logan staying awake until Havok returns. Storm follows him down the hallway, wanting to talk to him in private.

The room shows the scars of Scott's lack of control. The dome shaped walls scratched, and the floor creaking under Logan's weight. The bed, the closet door, the whole room has felt Cyclops' pain. “I can see why you're happy here,” she tells him. “It feels like a family.”

Logan takes a seat on the edge of the bed, allowing Storm to take the chair. It's not a comfortable chair, but it's not supposed to be. It's too easy to doze off in a nice one. “I just want you to be happy, my friend,” she continues. “I want to know that you're taken care of, instead of just giving care.” He's a self sacrificer, giving all he can to various people and groups, leaving little time for himself. He's been through his share of traumas, nightmares that wreak havoc on him in the middle of the night. “It's too easy to take advantage of you.”
“Just like it was Scott?” he quips. In his eyes, Scott gave more to the X-men than anyone else did. “He cared about the team, and here you come to question his efforts.”

“He’s paranoid, Logan. Sending Alex on false missions --”

“He has reasons for what he’s doing.”

“And what are those reasons? Does he tell you?”

“No, but he doesn’t have to.” He trusts Scott, his vision, his capabilities. Even if he is delusional right now, there’s a truth that he’s seeking, and Logan will do anything to help him find it.

Storm shakes her head. “You're blinded, Logan. Your feelings for him--” She sighs, takes a pause. “I would feel better about this if at least one of you knew what he was working on. Maria Hill is tracking him and she's not happy about the silence on our end.”

“Hill can go to hell, as far as I'm concerned,” Wolverine barks back. “So can Fury. The only reason we're here is because it keeps Scott out of the public eye. Gives him time to recover.”

“Is he actually recovering, or is he just making up missions?” Her harsh words carry over Logan, washing him with an angry red. But, Storm isn't afraid. “We're not at war, my friend. But, I fear that Scott might be taking us there. Again.”

“He's not going to start a war, 'Ro. I won't let him.”

Left by himself, Logan sprawls across the bed, the scent of Scott deep in the covers and pillows. It's a scent that makes him warm, makes him want, but also reminds him of something he can't have. His thoughts become a burden then – that burning kiss, Cyclops' predilection for battle and keeping the world at bay.

He understands Storm's worries. He and Alex had had the same conversation multiple times now, but he also believes that there was a reason One-eye was being so secretive. “He doesn't want us to get hurt,” Logan had surmised, and Alex agreed. Cyke was trying to protect them, until he, himself, had decided if the information he was gathering was real or not.

He can still taste him on his lips. Feel those hands upon his spine. It's the only memory he wants to have right now, but too many others are intruding.

They fought the Avengers, an unexpected scenario. There was no time to question him, to criticize his morality, his decisions. The action happened way too fast, with Cap slinging his shield to try and knock Rogue out, while Thor brought down the lightning trying to incapacitate Storm. It took a eight hours to defeat them. “And that was on easy,” Scott warned them. “We need to be better than this. We need to be prepared.”

“Don't see much point in fighting our allies, bub,” Wolverine had growled, his complaint shared by the rest of the team.

“People go evil all the time, Logan,” Scott replied, not budging one bit on the necessity of this scenario. “Today's allies might be tomorrow's enemies.”

His words had shocked them all, bringing many of the X-men to rally against such a fight, but Scott insisted. “We can't predict the future,” he explained with his normal stoicism. “The only thing we can do is to prepare ourselves for possibilities.”

In the end, it was the Professor who shut such scenarios down. There would be no match against the
Fantastic Four or the Defenders. No program that touched on the various heroes of the world. Xavier had called him a war monger at the height of his temper. And though Scott didn't waver in his beliefs, he was bound by Xavier's denial, and therefore stopped.

Logan had noticed it though – the sneaky way that Scott disguised his preparations. A Reaver that would throw a shield, a Purifier that would shoot arrows. The common traits of the Hulk and the Wasp thrown into other villains. In its own way, it was a brilliant maneuver, but in another, it was frightening that Scott could be so coy.

With fresh worries in his head, Logan is unable to sleep. A cup of coffee in hand, he enters the computer lab to find Cyclops, Storm, Havok, Arlo, and Pocket watching the Akido lesson below. The sensei moves in slow motion, demonstrating the lock and throw. “Remember, lock the wrist first,” he says, demonstrating his hand upon the hard light wrist. The children practice on their own manifestations, locking the wrist and then twisting the arm back again and again as the teacher walks through them, inspecting their form.

“The teacher's tweaked to notice their movements,” Alex explains. “He's looking for exact copies. If he doesn't find them, he'll correct the kids and show the group the movement.”

Out of all of the children, it's Phinneas that is catching onto the lesson the fastest. Already experienced in karate, he understands how to lock wrists, and he, too helps the children correct their form – especially Sarah. She giggles as he talks to her, put his hand on hers to show the proper movement. And, soon, even she starts to get it right. Once they've practiced efficiently, they throw their hard light partners to the ground as the teacher watches. “Very good,” he says, and then starts to review the throws they've already learned.

Kitty is pleased with the session. “The kids will love it!” she says. She likes the attention it gives each single student, the praise it doles out for perfect moves. “And, no one gets hurt,” she adds, noting that the hard light partners make the kids less fearful of doing something wrong. It's a genius scenario, but, then, so is the mysterious code that she sees on the computer screen.

Kitty keeps her silence, but Logan has already seen her surprise. A slight shake of head that goes unnoticed by the others is enough to keep her from revealing what she knows.

It's not until later in the afternoon – after classes and a long nap – that he catches up with her outside in the snow. She watches the children play, building up snow ramps for them to slide down. Even Arlo joins in, his cast covered in plastic and duct tape. “You know what it means,” he says.

Kitty takes a quick breath, her smile coming undone in an instant. “I don't know,” she says. “I'm not sure what cypher he's using.”

He doesn't believe her. “What's he hiding?”

“I only saw a portion of it, a very, very small portion.” But, in that portion, was something scared her. “Some grand conspiracy,” she explains. “I don't blame him for keeping it under wraps.”

“So, it's not real?”

“I don't know,” she says, “but if it is, he's preparing everyone for war.”
The Phoenix

Chapter Summary

The Phoenix and memories.

It hurt. To wait for him. Those silent days that took place outside of his presence. She could feel it in her chest, the pain of it. In her heart, or so the little boy had told her. She'd questioned him often about love, about what it felt like, and unabashed he would always explain. A hug, he would say and then wrap his arms around her neck, squeezing her tight. “It's what you feel in your heart,” he would explain at other times, and pat his chest. Sometimes, he would explain it as a cup of hot chocolate, but he could never quite make her understand what that was.

There were days when she thought she understood it. That she could feel it. Those days when Scott clung to her fiery feathers and together they whooshed through the cosmos exploring the beauty of the stars. Her heart would feel warm when he smiled, at his constant chatter, and it would ache when he was in pain, when that happiness disappeared.

It was by the rings of Saturn that he called for her, his tiny voice stretching out over the galaxy. “Phoenix.”

She went to him in an instant, her wings spread and beautiful. He smiled at her weakly, his body so torn apart that had it not been for his voice, she wouldn't have recognized him. One eye, one ear, an arm a leg. There was a hole where his stomach should have been, and deep gashes down his chest indicating the beginning of a new surgery. Pain. She felt pain.

Cradling him in her wings, she reminded him not to cry or he wouldn't see his brother again. “What are they taking from you, Scott?” she asked as he grabbed at chest.

“My heart,” he answered, a pained moan falling from his lips as a whole was sawed into his chest.

She could see it, the heart. Red and beating. The place where love came from, the place that hurt so much inside of her. She finally knew what it was. “Does that mean you won't be able to love?”

The child didn't answer, the pain too much. He curled his hand around fiery feathers, as they continued to cut a bigger hole in his chest.

“Will you love me without a heart?” she asked again watching as the child struggled for breath when his lungs were deflated. She felt her own heart twist painfully. She felt her eyes grow watery, and her breath go shallow. “Scott? Why does it hurt so badly?” And though the child didn't speak, she knew the answer. Love hurt. Love was suffering. And knowing that he couldn't love her back once he lost his heart, she panicked. “I can't do this, Scott. I can't love you anymore.”

She left him. The child in his pain. She left him at the edge of Saturn, and listened as he called out to her, frightened and broken. She could hear his ache as he cried. And then all too soon, he went silent.

He didn't come the next day, or the day after. As much as she wanted to hear his voice again, the boy just didn't come. It was then, that she understood betrayal. That what she had done was wrong.
Four days she waited at the edge of the galaxy, listened for his voice to peak out among the stars. And each day that passed, her heart felt heavier.

It was on the fifth day that he finally cried out for her. He was frantic, afraid. “They're going to hurt Jean. Please, Phoenix, protect Jean!” She could see the hole where his heart used to be, and could see the pain on his face. “Please, Phoenix. Help Jean.” And then he disappeared, dragged back across the galaxy and back to his body. She could see the hands that tore at him, ripped his ethereal body to shreds as he begged the cosmic fire bird to protect his friend.

“You can't love her,” Phoenix said. “You don't have a heart.”

To Earth she went, and there found the little girl that he spoke of. She was frantic, but otherwise unharmed. They were killing him, she told her parents. Breaking him into pieces. They had to do something to help him. They had to rescue him.

There was no rescue for the little boy who could no longer hear her voice, but Phoenix lived up to her promise that she would protect Jean Grey. She watched the little girl for years, watched her grow, watched her fall in love with the man that Scott became.

For the first time in her long life, Phoenix understood jealousy.

She burns him from the inside out, turns his dreams to pain. She will make him pay for all that he's done, for all the suffering that she's endured. Her heart beats fast as she brings his too-many battles in the Red Dimension to the front of his mind, watches him die over and over again as he's outnumbered by too-many enemies. His friends, his loves, those that he knew by acquaintance.

It's Jean who tears out his heart, turns it to ash in flaming hands. It's Emma Frost who drinks the still warm blood from his wounds. Madelyne Pryor, Wolverine. They eat him alive. And, in that she has her vengeance.

The memory that comes is one that even she – as powerful as she is – cannot touch. A pleasant thing, cold and happy. In it, is his brother, as they slip beyond the frozen stream and dip down into the water. It's a powerful memory, more powerful than the ones she drags from the depths. She's drawn to the little boys, their chatter, their freedom. She can't help but watch, to feel warmth and peace. It lulls her to sleep as the memory replays, makes her too at peace to keep up her attack.

It's hours later when Scott wakes, his quiet footsteps across the room almost unheard by a drowsy Logan. He grabs the man's elbow before he can leave, a red fog culminating from the contact. “Is it true?” Wolverine asks. “Are you planning a war?”

Scott nods his head and indicates the camera above him. “We're being recorded,” he says softly.

Logan peers up to the light, suddenly unnerved. It was easy to forget that SHIELD was watching and listening to everything they said. He realized then that he made a drastic mistake by questioning him out loud. SHIELD would come now, question him, make things worse.
Manhattan

Chapter Summary

Gambit doesn't steal anything.

Gambit's been watching them for days – Karen and William Underwood. Following them to work and back, taking a back seat while they live their lives. Bio-technicians, they work for Ki-Yun Industries, an upstart innovation company that has been getting some serious street cred among the scientifically minded. They're social climbers, the Underwoods are. Members of country clubs and golf courses, season tickets to the opera and the symphony. They follow the money, earning extra research dollars for those they charm, as well as invites to feasts and dances and other charity events.

Scott said they were millionaires, and so they act like it, with their fast cars and fancy house. It's the third night in a row that he's broken into the place while they sleep. Carefully punching in the security code and slipping directly into the shadows of the darkened house. He makes his way upstairs and to the right, returning to the office that's adjacent to the bedroom. Here, he takes extra care to keep silent so as not to wake the couple up.

It's the files that he's after, or rather Scott's after. Hundreds of files to photograph and then put back on the shelf. And, though Gambit is unsure of what he's looking for midst the information, he didn't question the askance either.

After all, last week when the X-men came to this same house, the place was empty.

Ki-Yun largely deals in nuclear energy, but it also has its fingers in other pots as well. It's biotech division is gaining great notoriety for its off-the-path research such as using mutant genes to target cancer cells, or gamma radiation to treat several auto immune diseases. Its R&D division proposes to make the first car that can go the speed of sound. And its agriculture division has recently boasted that their rice produces twice the crop with half the water of current rice stock. It's enough of a diversity that even Gambit thinks that there's something wrong with the company – too many good things happening all at once, and not one government funded program within its walls.

And though those things spur speculation, it's the purchase of the docks in Hong Kong that make him the most leery of Ki-Yun and the Underwoods. If there were a proposed annex, it would be one thing, but there isn't. The company has no holdings in China, nothing planned, and those docks appear to have gone unused for several months. He can't find a single shipping receipt.

The sound of a door closing just outside of the office puts Gambit on alert. Hunkering down in the shadows, he turns off his pocket flash light and waits to hear the sound of running water or a flushing toilet. Escape is not an easy thing from the office. No windows and a single door, a blocked path if the Underwoods stay in the doorway. The moments pass by like ticking bombs, each one pounding against his heart and held breath. And, finally, the toilet flushes and seconds later, he hears the closing of the bedroom door.

Shaking out his nerves, he returns to the stacks of papers, photographing them as fast as he can so he can finally get out of here and return home. Medical research, genetic research, projects that were shut down and others newly opened. He doesn't spend much time perusing them, but he reads enough to understand that Ki-Yun is no friend to the mutants.
They've backed the most ardently anti-mutant legislators, financing several campaigns that seek to out mutants in civilian life. It's been speculated that they're buying mutants from overseas, using them in their experiments, using them as guinea pigs for new medications and procedures. That information mixed with the unused docks pits in Gambit's stomach when he realizes what those docks are truly for.

Shipping mutant slaves from overseas is becoming a more common practice now that the Red Wave has soured mutant/human relations once again. Sold to big companies or rich owners, the mutants have very little protection under the law as politicians are increasingly wary of their genetic cousins and law enforcement is told to turn a blind eye. It's a harrowing time for homo superior, and companies like Ki-Yun are taking advantage.

When he's done with the photographs, he turns to the computers, copying them onto a small hard drive. He's done now, and though his thief's blood is aching to explore this house and all of its largess even more, he knows that he has to return to the island.

The Blackbird is cloaked at the end of the cul-de-sac, unseen by the nighttime sleepers, but with plenty of room to take off. It's a fancy neighborhood. He imagines the parties that go on here. The dinners, the holiday celebrations. It's the type of place that he's always wanted, but never felt important enough to have. “We're thieves,” his old man had told him. “And a good thief never lives in luxury. Because luxury only invites more thieves through the doors.”

As he approaches the Blackbird, he notices a solitary figure standing just where the nose of the jet should be. Shorter than he is, with black hair, it doesn't take him long to identify Maria Hill, and in that recognition, he takes a measured breath. Turning on the charm, he approaches her with a smile. “Mon ami,” he says. “What brings you out here tonight?”

Never one for idle talk, she gets directly to the point. “You're doing missions for Cyclops,” she says. “I want to know what they are.” Dark eyes scour red and black, watching carefully for sleight of hand or other tricks. She doesn't trust the Cajun, especially not with the truth.

“Cherie,” he says, holding out both hands in forfeit, “I have no idea what you're talking about. I was here to see a friend.” He can see the gun on her hip, the one she tenders at with a touch of her fingers. He shakes his head. “You don’t wanna pull dat here. Dese are good folk.”

“Who are you watching?” she asks, less nervous than he hoped she would be.

“I told you. I'm here to see a friend.” He pulls out a cell phone and gestures for her to take it. “You can call. Dey'll tell you I been here.”

“How do I know this number goes to one of these houses?”

“You won't until you go back to your carrier and look it up.” He knows full well that she can easily discover his lie once she has access to SHIELD computers. But, it would buy him time to return to the island and deliver the information, which is all he's after.

He has a duty to Scott, or at least he feels like he does. For all of his sins, Cyclops forgave him, welcomed him to Utopia. “You're an X-man and a mutant. You belong here,” he'd said. Not everyone agreed with his decision, Storm and Rogue among them, but Scott was adamant. “We can't afford to treat each other this way. There are too few of us left.”

Gambit is sure that most of the arguments took place behind closed doors, but no one questioned his presence on the asteroid again. In the end, he abandoned Scott, like all the others. He wanted to be with Rogue, the one good thing in his life, the one thing he had to work for and treat with esteem or
lose her all together. And even now, he feels that pull. Rogue despises these missions and their 
secrecy, that he's loyal to Scott even though he's half mad.

But, she isn't the only one who loathes Scott's secrets. At least based on Hill's reaction. She asks for 
the contents of his pockets, asks that they be turned inside out so that she can see they're clean. He 
hands her his wallet which she promptly goes through, the deck of cards, the various little nubs that 
he carries with him. He smiles as she looks at the diamond ring that he obviously pilfered from some 
unsuspecting fool. A gold watch. A silver bracelet. “Does your wife know you stole this stuff?”

“Dey's not stolen, cherie. Just lost and yet to be returned.”

She studies him, his demeanor. Ever one to play the jokester, he's a charming man, but also highly 
secretive. “How many pockets did I miss?” she asks, staring at the four empty ones on the outside of 
his trench. He smiles. “What did Scott ask you to do?”

“Nothing. I told you. I'm here visiting a friend.”

“He's dangerous right now. You know that, right? You understand that he's preparing you for a 
war.” They’ve been watching him closely, monitoring his words – and the words of the others 
including Kitty Pryde and Logan. “Look,” she says, trying a different approach, “He needs help, 
Gambit. Let me try to help him.”

“Don't know what you're talking about, Commander. I'm just here visiting a friend.”

“At least tell me if it's real. That this isn't just madness.”

Gambit shrugs. “Told you twice now, chere, I'm here visiting friends.” He can sense the exhaustion 
that surrounds her, the worry, that she's keeping her own secrets. “Why are you alone?” He catches 
the faint surprise upon her lips. “SHIELD don't know you're here, do they?”

It's a remarkable thing to catch her off guard, and though she's trained furiously to reveal no emotion, 
she can't help the widening of her eyes in shock. “You need to be more careful,” she says quietly. “If 
I can track you out here, so can they. You're a thief, Gambit, you should be better than this.” She 
taps the back of her hand against the still cloaked Blackbird. “If you truly mean to protect him, that 
is.”

Turning on heel, she disappears into the darkness of early morning, leaving him alone with the 
Blackbird and a head full of suspicion.
An attack.

The old man hasn't been out this way in years. Not since the research station was shut down the first time. “Can't believe they reopened it,” he says to his passenger. “Not after what happened.”

There were rumors of a murder the first time around, the craze of loneliness finally getting at the science team. Though, others balked at the notion, citing that it was just a failed experiment, of which he was one. “They were trying to simulate life on a cold planet. See if it could be done,” he explained. “Had a good thing going for a while, but they came to town too often, I guess.” He gives her a smile. “They missed their liquor.”

Madelyne Pryor isn't interested in his tales, but she stomachs them for the sake of her journey. It's been a long one. From the shores of England to the cold of Canada, and now in her final leg to the island. Though she reaches out with her dimmed psychic powers, she can feel nothing on the island. It's as if there's a hole in the world, an inaccessible pit where her powers can't go. “And you're sure they're there?” she asks.

“Yeah, seen 'em a couple of times in town. A couple of ladies – come in to get fresh fruit once a week. A lady with green hair, and the other with a white stripe. Heard tell of a tall blonde man, too, but I haven't seen him myself.”

She knows who they are, the visitors. In her memories – those distant dreams from when she thought she was real – Polaris and Rogue and Archangel. That they're here means that Scott is not alone as she'd hoped. That he's being protected, and that she must be careful.

It takes over an hour to get to the edge of the island where the fishing trawler is docked. She gives the boat captain her thank yous, and sends him on his way. From here, she can see the gardens set under geodesic domes that capture the light and warmth of the sun, the Blackbird, and the far away fishing dock on the other side of the island. She can see the living quarters, but still, as hard as she tries, her telepathic powers can find no mind inside.

She hides herself on the trawler's deck, peeking out between the aluminum bars, and keeps her attention on the house. She sees the movement as the occupants move from one room to the other, and eventually, she even sees Lorna and the kids exit the compound for recess, stepping just beyond the limits of the telepathic shield inside.

Madelyne scours Lorna's memory, learning of Scott's nightmares and his quiet demeanor. She pinpoints his room, his routine, as well as the knowledge of the anti-telepathy devices implanted in the house. Then, she targets the children, learning more and more about the X-men that live here and how best to hide from them. She sends her thoughts out to her sisters, hoping that they can get those small glimpses of life here. Just in case she fails.

It's midnight when she makes her move, clamors out of the trawler and across the icy lawn. Through the shields and up to the window she goes, sneaking around the building until she reaches the door. Thanks to Lorna, she knows the code, and quickly punches it in, allowing herself inside the house.
It's Logan she's most worried about. Not his temper, not his claws, but rather his sense of smell. He can find her, figure out that she's here before she can find the man that she loves and hates with equal fury. She wants to see him, wants to hold him, wants to make him suffer.

Down the hall, she finds the bedrooms, and heads for the last one on the left with its door wide open – Scott's bedroom. The furniture is scant – a bed, a chair, a closet of meager clothes. It's nothing like the bedroom she shared with him, that place where she once felt loved. There are no pictures, no reminders of time spent. It's just the bare necessities. She wonders if it's true. If Scott is betraying her once again, if he cares for Logan as Logan cares for him. If he is, she'll have to take out Logan, too.

She picks up the blanket from the bed, throws it over her shoulders. Thinking it enough to disguise her scent as she wanders through the compound looking for the computer room.

She imagines herself in this place, in the kitchen making dinner, in the living room reading a book. She imagines Scott is with her, his arms around her waist, kissing her neck as she washes dishes, telling her that he loves her, that he can't live without her. She also imagines taking a knife that she's been scrubbing and plunging into his stomach, carving out his flesh so that he never again thinks to take advantage of her love for him.

The idea now in her head, she takes a knife from the dish sink, holding it in her hand along with a plate.

Madelyne knows that Logan is in the computer room. Though she can't feel him out through her telepathy, Lorna's mind had shown him there with Scott. That this was the routine. But, for that, she's got a plan. She throws the plate down the hall, and ducks into the small med lab across from the computer lab. The plate shatters into pieces, and seconds later, Wolverine appears, claws bared, ready to attack their intruder. With baited breath, she waits until he disappears before slipping inside.

Scott doesn't notice her right away, doesn't see that she's not Logan. Focused, controlled, he pounds away on the keyboard, as he looks through the documents provided by Gambit. It's easy then to slip the knife around his neck, forcing him to stop. A red fog eclipses over him as the knife puts pressure on his windpipe. “Scott,” she growls.

“Jean?”

She screams then, at the mention of the other woman's name. “No, your other wife. The one you abandoned.” She plunges the knife into his neck, spins him around to see the blood that she's drawn, only to start crying in her mania. She clings to him, to the blood that pours out and over everything. She stops the blood with her hands, sobbing her apologies. “I'm sorry,” she cries. “Please, don't hate me.”

Her cries draw Logan back into the room, his claws bared. He gives her no chance to turn upon him, pushing his claws low and through her stomach. He butchers the clone, leaves her in a bleeding mess upon the floor as he turns to Scott.

The clamor wakes up the house, with Logan calling out for bandages and wraps and help dealing with Pryor. The flurry of questions that come are not answered, only the actions of wrapping up the wounds and calming Scott down are important. “It's okay, Scott,” Alex tells him. “We'll take care of this. Just breathe, bro. Just breathe.”

 Barely alive, Madelyne looks up at her former lover. “I love you,” she says, before Logan drags her into the hallway and then the med lab. While all the X-men here are able field medics, they don't have a doctor that can survey the damage done. They don't know how to patch the clone up, don't know how to save her, and before long it doesn't matter. She bleeds out on the med lab table, the last
word upon her lips being Scott.

It takes hours to clean up the mess and to keep the children away from all of the spilled blood. Lorna takes them back to their bedrooms, tries to goad them back to sleep, but they won't go. At least not until they've seen that Cyclops is all right. “He's unconscious right now,” she tells them, turned off by the spell, “but he's fine. You don't need to worry about him.”

She understands their curiosity, but doesn't want them to be exposed to so much violence. Not yet, not now. They are still innocent, and she wants them to stay that way for as long as possible. In the end, she sits with them in hallway, telling them a story as the rest of the adults keep cleaning.

Alex wants to know how she got in here. How she bypassed security, how the shielding didn't catch her presence. He wants to call SHIELD, but Gambit warns him not too. “Dey ain't our allies, homme. We have to figure dis out on our own.” He doesn't tell Alex about his meeting with Hill.

Luckily, Alex doesn't need a reason to distrust Hill and her crew. “Reach out to Forge,” he says quietly. “See if he can figure it out.”

It's early morning when they're done. Lorna and the kids are asleep in the hallway, and Cyclops finally wakes, a sparse cloud of red hanging about him. Pocket follows him through the house, expressing displeasure when Scott doesn't enter the kitchen. Yet the child keeps up on his heels, and with a quiet gesture, he sits down against the wall outside the medlab.

It's been years since he's seen her – that clone that looks just like Jean. He remembers her death, that he killed her in the Red Dimension, that she hated him. That he was the cause of her madness, and she paid the price for his mistakes. The fog increasing in depth, he hears Logan in the hallway. Scott turns to look at him, and then back to the cold, dead body on the table. Tentative fingers brush red hair back from forehead, tucks it just behind her ear.

“I'm sorry, Slim.” He could go on with his apology, explain how he didn't mean to kill her, that being a killer is in his blood, but he doesn't. He takes the silence as condemnation, and shrinks away from the man he loves. He stays in the room, watching as the red fog ebbs and wains. As the thoughts pour through Cyclops' mind, drawing down full lips into a tight scowl and finally creasing his brow. Even anger looks beautiful on him.

“Sinister did this to her,” Scott says, carefully rubbing the bandage on his neck. He takes a deep breath, holding it as anger fades into logic. “And he'll do it again.”

“You think this was a warning?”

“I think this was a test.”
Stark Tower

Chapter Summary

Tony and Steve have a conversation.

They fit. Perfectly. Their muscles, their contours. The way they move. Together, they are one.

A deep throated moan and Steve thrusts upward, an involuntary movement of his hips. The feel of Tony over top of him is enough to drive him crazy. He speaks in his bliss, words of esteem, moans of love. He could feel this forever and never get tired of it. This is his heaven.

Tony takes it all in stride, proud that he can bring his lover to such states of inattention. He's a master of this, or so he likes to think of himself. Of knowing his lover. Of what will drive him crazy.

Fingers drift from shaft to crease, pressuring the tight opening of the rear. It's a new experience for Steve, one that burns like stars behind his eyes, and one that Tony wants to understands, wants to feel. The first plunge is an uncomfortable one, a single finger meant to stretch. But on his lover's face he sees the torment of his actions. The stretch, the hooked kneading. A sharp creased brow, a bit lip. He knows that this is painful to his lover, no matter how much lubricant he uses.

Tony's careful, timing the distance between the first and second finger. Adding more lube, adding more lust. He bites at Steve's neck, drawing the barest amount of blood from the sensitive area along his pulse. He scratches and purrs, running his hand up and down the pliant body before him. Tony feels it all, his moans echoing off plastered walls, his fingernails digging into shoulders and spine.

Three fingers and Tony is sure that Steve can accept him, can take his girth and lust. Pressing into the tight passage, he breaches Rogers like no one has before, claiming him, marking him as Tony's own. He listens to the passion that escapes ragged breaths, as Tony's name fills the tip of tongue.

Tony revels in the heat and tightness of the opening. Lifts his head to ceiling, eyes closed, he releases a bass tone of his own. It fulfills him, sates him, makes him think of nothing else than the tight warmth that surrounds him. He hears his name over and over again, a mantra of pleasure as he begins to pump his length in and out. “That feels so good,” Steve says, priding his lover.

Tony pumps faster, in and out, encourage by his lover's words. Steve's legs wrapped around his abdomen, he rushes against the sensation that lurches Rogers upwards, that makes him groan with ecstasy. Knees on bed, he keeps a tight grip on Steve's hips, keeping him steady against his hard length, as he pounds in and out.

“Tony,” Steve moans again, enraptured by the feeling culminating in his groin. There's no need to touch him, no need to run calloused hands over length. He'll cum on Tony's dick alone. On the exertion of his lover's need. Mouths bash together again, wet and sloppy. A steady rhythm of thrusts building up the pleasure between them.

He feels electric, Steve does. His entire body is awake and buzzing with the growing need for release. His thoughts scatter, his only focus on Tony and the way he makes him feel. His breath jagged, he begs Tony to push harder, faster. To turn his world inside out and make him fly. And Tony responds, his hands gripping hips tighter as he pounds a furious rhythm that pulls moan after
moan from Steve's chest. “So close,” he pants between his broken thoughts. “So close.”

Tony doesn't stop, continues to drive himself into that tightness and warmth. He's lost to it now, his whole focus on the building to release. Steve climaxes first, his seed spilling out over bed and stomach, the shudders of pleasure bringing him up off the bed forcing Tony over the edge as well.

Spent and boneless, Tony collapses on the mattress next to his lover, twirling fingers into Steve's blonde hair. “Damn,” he says, his voice cracking with euphoria. Lazy-eyed, Steve smiles and presses himself against Tony's chest. “I need to sneak you in more often.”

They're not supposed to be here. Not together, anyway. Not Steve. He's still with the mutants, and the mutants are still considered a problem. Fury would have a field day if he knew about their reunion, possibly put him in jail again for being a traitor, but right now, Tony doesn't care.

All he needs is right here in his arms, half asleep on his chest. A lazy morning with half-eaten breakfasts and silence. He doesn't want this to end, but he knows it will, and soon. Their days together are short and sparse. Renting out rooms by the hour between missions and orders. There is neither time nor place for them. Not yet. Not right now.

Steve stirs from the quiet embrace, sits on the bed. He has to go. “I have a meeting with Storm,” he says. “She's worried about security.”

“The Red Hunt's over with,” Tony grumbles, upset over losing his lover rather than the topic of conversation. “We're not going to attack her.”

“She still doesn't trust SHIELD, and I don't blame her. What we did to her was wrong.” The comment bristles across Tony's face and Steve looks away. “They're in danger, Tony. And we caused that.” He tells him of the press stationed outside the mansion door, how the children are afraid to go outside. Everyday there are threats to their safety; everyday there are enemies at their doorstep. “When we turned against them, the whole world did, too.”

The silence that falls between them is heavy with the weight of their actions. While Tony still believes that what he did was necessary, Steve has his regrets. Being at the mansion with them, seeing their daily lives, it's changed him profoundly. “I don't know how they live with such hatred.”

Guilt creeps up Tony's spine, lowers his head and clenches his jaw. That Cyclops is now dead, the damage done to the mutants is all the more prevalent. “It'll calm down,” he says. “It always does.” They've seen anti-mutant hysteria before. They've seen the rallies, the protests, the marches. They've seen the violence and beat downs. The mutants have always come through it, and stronger than they were before. “This isn't unusual for them.”

“Tony, this shouldn't be usual for anyone.”

Tony nods. “You're right.” He takes a deep breath and stares at his lover. He's getting ready to leave, searching for his clothes within the piles on the floor. With a sad smile, Steve disappears into the bathroom, leaving Stark to contemplate his wrongs.

It's easy to blame the mutants for their predicament. They've always been separate from the other super hero teams, stepping up to the plate when the world's on the line, but never asking for help in between. It's too easy to be blinded to their plight, to the woes that come from being born different. And, not to mention those like Magneto who attempt to take over world every other Friday.

They considered it respect, letting the mutants take care of their own. Staying out of the way, trusting the X-men to do their superhero jobs. They thought it a mutual trust, a trust dimmed by the all out
war on Cyclops and his Utopia, and the later war against the Inhumans. The Avengers stuck by their allies, letting the mutants struggle to keep themselves a viable species.

Steve exits the bathroom, fresh washed with his rumpled clothes. “I have to get back,” he says sadly. Deep blues eyes search Tony's face for long moments, hoping to find mirrored heartbreak. “I'll miss you,” he says, his fingers brushing across his lover's cheek.

It's tempting to go with him, to follow on his heels, leave SHIELD behind. But, he doubts the mutants will accept him, especially now that Cyclops is dead. “Tell them I'm sorry for their loss,” Stark says, his head bowed.

“They're taking it in stride,” Steve explains. “Just like they do everything else.” He tells Tony of Alex's team, that they left in rebellion over the treatment of Scott. “They took it really hard, but Storm assures us that they're not looking for revenge.”

“And if they did seek revenge?”

“Scott's dead. There's not another among them that would want war.”

Ill at ease now that the subject of battle has come up, Tony takes a deep breath. “I wouldn't put it past Alex,” he says. “Or Logan.”

“Storm's got a handle on this,” Steve reminds him. “She's still the leader of the X-men. They still follow her lead.” He's adamant that there is no trouble brewing, but Tony is still very wary of it, feeling that Rogers is always too optimistic when it comes to threats. “You worry too much, Tony. They may be upset, but they're still good people. They don't want to fight anymore.”

“If you say so,” Tony sighs, giving his partner a quick peck on the cheek.

“Is that all I get?” Steve asks with a smile. “That won't even last me until lunch.”

Tony smiles back, pulling his lover into his arms with a greedy kiss. It's sad to say goodbye, to watch Rogers walk out the door and back into the world. He feels alone in his tower, bereaved. But, also worried about Steve's news of the splinter team. SHIELD already has its hands full with Magneto, and with the Avengers still down for the count, there's not much they could do against Havok should he choose to rebel against the cooler head of Storm.

Rebuilding the Avengers comes as a top priority, if only to protect the mutants from themselves.
Sam and Magneto argue.

Sam Guthrie is not a murderer. “It's cold-blooded,” he says, his blue eyes staring holes in Eric Lensherr. “I won’t be a part of an assassination.” Self defense he can handle for the most part, but killing the President of the United States is quite another.

“They killed our leader,” Magneto reminds him. “So, we kill theirs.” It's such a simple plan, and Eric delights in such non-tedious maneuvers. “Blood for blood, if you will. It's time the humans started to feel the weight of their actions upon us.”

“No. I won’t be apart of it.”

“Xavier filled your mind with such frivolities. The only way to win a war is to fight it, Mr. Guthrie.”

This argument is a dangerous one, and Sam chooses his words wisely. Going against Magneto at this point could have dire consequences. “Immobilizing SHIELD and the Red Hunt is one thing. To stop them from imprisoning and torturing us is something I understand. But, an outright assassination is not what I signed up for.”

Eric takes a slow and easy breath, in and out. A calming thing as he feels the muscles in his jaws begin to tighten with temper and his hands balled into fists. “This is quite unexpected.”

Sam doesn't avoid the glare that he's given. Doesn't look away no matter how intimidated he feels at the moment. “I can't let you go through with it either,” he says at last, the slightest hint of fear upon his tongue.

“I see,” Magneto says with sigh, feigning boredom as he plans what he will do with his renegade soldier. “The only reason I'm doing this is because the X-men refuse to fight. They've looked the other way for so long now that humans have forgotten how powerful we really are. The humans have culled the battle from the mutants, killed them on whims, experimented on them. The world needs to change, Sam, and without the X-men, it is up to us to do so.”

“Cold blooded murder is cold blooded murder. It doesn't matter what cause you wrap it up in, it's wrong.”

“And killing Scott wasn't?”

“Of course it was. But that doesn’t mean we hit them back. It means we need to regroup, find a different plan.”

Magneto shakes his head, another long drawn out breath. “Cyclops believed in a different plan for a time, but even he realized that this world will only destroy you unless you fight back--”

“And we are fighting back against those who seek to imprison us again.”

“You're a very naive boy,” Magneto says quietly.
“I'm not--”

“And here, all of this time, I thought you were above Charles' sentimental drivel. I guess I was wrong.”

The silence between them is heavy and fraught with tension. “It's too bad I was unaware of your weakness before telling you my plan. Because now, I can't let you leave.”

The metal comes from behind, strikes his head, knocks him forward onto his knees. Before Sam can react, the metal twists and knots around his legs, and then cuffing his hands. “I won't let you warn them,” Magneto says, wrapping the metal around him until only his face can be seen. “I won't let your pathetic excuses for passivity prevent me from finishing this.”

Sam smiles, an act that catches Magneto off guard. “You've forgotten who I am, haven't you? You've forgotten what I can do.” It's humbling to watch as Cannonball's energy seeps across his skin, pushing at the metal and lifting him from the ground. It takes but seconds for him to free of the metal cage. “I won't let you do this, Eric. For the sake of the world, I will stop you.”

He rushes through the room from ceiling to floor, bashing himself against Magneto's chest. They fly through the wall, breaking it into hundreds of metallic shards scattered across the room. The sound brings the army to the forefront. It's a harrowing thing for the mutants to see their leaders fight among each other. Tooth and nail they dig into each other, blow after blow, until an uppercut with energized hand throws Magneto against the far wall and knocks him momentarily unconscious. “Don't do this, Eric,” Sam warns when his eyelids begin to flutter with wakefulness. “You do not want this fight with me.”

“On the contrary, it's exactly what I want. That instinct of yours, to fight and be victorious, that's what I want. I want you to stay with me.”

“I've told you already, I won't be a part of this.”

“And I won't let you stop me.”

Sam expects the chunk of metal from behind, and flies above it's reach. Once again, he speeds down towards the floor and rams himself and Eric through another wall as the other mutants look on. The children here are scared, the adults disheveled. It's a battle like none they've seen so far – two mutants going to war against each other. It's enough of a fright that several seek a way to escape, not wanting to get caught up in the fight themselves. But, it's also enough that several of them move closer, hoping to put Sam out of commission.

“Magneto's done more for mutants than the X-men ever did,” one calls out. “And now you're trying to kill him?” He's a flame manipulator, and he catches Sam around the neck from behind and attempts to set him fire.

It's an easy enough hold for Sam to break, and once again he's in the air looking down at those who want to fight him. “Idiots!” Magneto yells from across the room, “Don't let him escape!”

He's attacked, all at once – the projectiles, the rocks, the shards of broken metal. A pair of arms stretches up into the ceiling, pulls him down into the thick of the crowd. Boots and barefeet kick at him until his power thrusts them all backwards in a magnificent burst of energy. Pained, Sam flies up to the ceiling once again, but this time he doesn't stay. This time he escapes.

He flies for miles and miles before he finally stops for air, before he finally feels safe. Hovering over a thick tree line, he takes a deep breath and bows his head. A silent prayer, and then he moves forward once again, needing to reach the mansion before Eric can finish formulating his plans.
It's going to be hard going back to the school, especially after the Undertow, after nearly dying in their experiments. Too many times he felt betrayed by Storm's directive to stay out of the fight. Too many times did he plead for a rescue which never came. It was no wonder that so many joined Magneto, that so many believed in him, but what he's planning now will kill them all.

Izzy. It's the first time in weeks that he's thought about her and his son, Josiah. Safe with the Shi'ar, they were lucky to avoid the Red Hunt, to not be stuck in those labs and tortured. It's that thought that brings him some measure of peace, makes him finally glad for the separation between them.

He doesn't think Izzy would be disappointed in him for his actions with Magneto – both attacking SHIELD and abandoning the cause. She's a warrior herself, she understands the violent means are sometimes the only means. It's a sentiment that Storm would highly disagree with, and one that may bring them into another argument. But, something has to be done, and if not by the X-men, then by who?
A coffee shop

Chapter Summary

Beast makes plans.

Jebediah Rose. A portly man, with coke bottle glasses and a weaselly mustache. Skin legs and a big, round stomach. He looks like a tea drinker in his suit with a red bow tie, but he orders coffee instead. A double latte with a single shot of hazelnut syrup, and a flaky croissant with deep red berry jam. He promises to leave a big tip if his waitress leaves them alone for a spell. “A very big one,” he says, and shows her a hundred dollar bill.

And regardless of the bright, toothy smile that crosses his face as he sits down, Hank McCoy is still cowed by the man's presence. “Beautiful weather today,” he says, taking a sip of his own double Americano. The image inducer makes him appear as a man instead of a beast. A thing he normally despises, but it's necessary with all of the mutant resentment in the world. It's a look that at once he's fond of, but he also hates. It's not himself, but it's also what he should have grown up to be.

“Indeed.” Beady brown eyes glance around the bakery, seeking out possible spies and followers. “Are we clean?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” They have much to discuss, from Cyclops' faked death, to the reformation of the Avengers with Tony Stark as the leader. “He'll not have an easy time of it,” Rose says. “There are many who still loathe his choices during the Red Hunt.”

Rose is a visionary. A man who sees the world as it should be instead of as it is. For years, he's made plans, invested his resources in various enterprises from magazines to movies, art to fashion. He rules the counter cultures of the world, bringing them fast fads and billion dollar trends, and keeps the rest of the world sated and in their places. He believes in a government relegated by the select few instead of the ignorant masses, a one-world government that will see the wars of the Earth at an end, and an acceptance for each of its species. Economy, climatology, authors, painters, geneticists, he's scoured the world for the best and brightest, the ones that will ultimately lead the world into a peace like it's never seen before.

To Jebediah, the world has a surplus of heroes – those people that humans rely on to bring them peace and comfort. They long ago gave up hope in their government, in the elected officials that were supposed to bring them prosperity. That attitude needs to change. Heroes should be chosen, should be public officials, dictated by the state, to bring them under control. They make too many decisions on their own, often forgetting about who they are supposed to protect. Breaking the heroes in half will make it easier for Rose to bring about his rule, or rather the rule of the think tank that he's been developing for well over a decade.

“Let them hate,” Beast says. “It will be easier to bring them to war.” The war is a necessary step in the evolution towards a one world government. A time for people to really see where their heroes stand, that their actions are not always about protection. That sometimes, even the world's mightiest people are as selfish as they come. “The world will lose faith in them, save those who stay out of the battle.”
“Are you certain that Storm will stay out of it?”

“Positive. She doesn't want to fight anymore, and most of the X-men will follow her lead.”

“What about the splinter team that is with Cyclops?”

“They'll go to war, just like we planned.” Beast feels guilt, a tremendous amount of it. Scott was at one time his closest friend, his leader. But, his sacrifice is needed now in order to bring the world to peace. The mutants deserve it. An easier world, acceptance, a lack of hatred. Storm, Rogue, Bobby - all of them, they deserve a time when they're not seen as the enemy. He thinks that Jebediah Rose can bring about such a cataclysmic change.

“So, what about Xavier?” The change in topic is unnerving to Hank. A quick gulp of coffee and he takes a deep breath. “Do you really believe that he's still alive?”

Henry nods. “If he chooses to take Scott's power again, then we may have issues.” He no longer trusts Xavier even though he believes in Charles' ultimate mission. “And, I wouldn't put it past him to do so, especially if he feels the world is changing without his interference.”

Though Rose is still skeptical about his being alive, he's willing to listen to the ideas of McCoy, as he is all of those in his think tank. He wants to know if the serum that Beast has been working on will work on Xavier or not.

The serum hasn't gone to patient trials yet, but according to his work with the samples, it seems like it may work. “There is a definite conversion to junk DNA, which should be able to dim mutant powers.”

“But, you haven't sampled this on a live host?”

“Right. My fear is that it works too fast, and instead of adjusting to the mutation, I worry that it will kill the host.” DNA changes, especially those that work as fast as his serum, could be dangerous to the mutant population. “I need a subject that can withstand the change.”

“What about Sam Guthrie?” Rose asks. Sam, after all, was rumored to be an External – a select group of mutants who were thought to be immortal.

“I haven't heard tell of him since he was arrested--”

“He's on his way back to the mansion,” Jeb reveals. “My spy in Magneto's army has said as such.”

It's the first time that Beast has heard of another spy in Eric's group. He raises an eyebrow. “Then why did you --”

“Because I needed to test your loyalty. I'm sure you understand.”

“You worried because I was a mutant.”

“No, because you are a genius. I will admit though I wasn't sure how much you'd embrace the future that I have planned for us all. I expected some arguments.”

The silence between them is uncomfortable, but Beast soon acquiesces. “There are always compromises to be made – Xavier's dream, Syrntech's strategy. But, so long as it works. So long as there is finally peace, that's what matters the most.”

“But your loyalty to the X-men--”
“Is sullied, to say the least. So many secrets, so much damage. What are the X-men but the broken
dream of a power-hungry man who still refuses to reveal that he's alive.” He takes a pause, his
features softening. “The school is what's important now. Training these children to control their
powers and giving them a world-class education. That's what we should be focused on, not
fighting.”

Rose can hear the exhaustion in Hank's voice, the weariness, the lack of hope. Though his face is
still, the image inducer making him look younger than his years, he can tell that McCoy is struggling
to keep himself in check. “We're taking logical steps, Henry, making sure that every angle is
covered. We have contingencies for almost everything, including if Cyclops lives through this.” For
the first time McCoy winces. “You have truly come to despise him, haven't you?”

“Despise is a strong word,” he replies, head down. “He's just a reminder of how the X-men have
failed this world and how I failed him.”

Rose puts the hundred dollar bill underneath the napkin dispenser, standing and giving Beast a pat on
the back. “Don't worry, my friend. It will all come together, and soon, this world will be perfect.”
The Arctic

Chapter Summary

Hill visits the X-men.

Chapter Notes

Sorry about posting the same chapter twice. It's been remedied now!

“Talk to me,” Hill says, cornering Logan outside of the mansion. She knows where the cameras are, their blind spots, and she picks the area where they are hidden. “Is he really planning a war?”

Logan shrugs. He's not sure of anything. Scott won't answer him no matter how many times he's asked.

“I thought he trusted you,” she says.

“He does. He trusts me to stay out of it.” He takes a pause, watching Hill tense up all over again. She hates the dead ends – Kitty, Scott – she had hoped that Logan would have at least been partial to helping, but he's as silent as the others. “Commander, I don't know what he's working on, but even if I did, I wouldn't tell you.”

“Logan, if he leads the world into another war--”

“Then I'll put a stop to it. So will Alex.” He wants to tell her that he's worried about the same thing. That Summers' silence on the matter has been grating on him for days. “You have to trust us.”

Hill laughs, a dark, sardonic tone that forces Logan's gaze to her. “Trust isn't the issue, Logan. It's a matter of how blind you are when it comes to Scott Summers. All these missions that Gambit goes on, and the X-men. How do you not see it as terrifying?”

It's a word that's rarely used to describe Scott Summers. Bull-headed, stubborn, stoic, dependable, loyal. Those words, Logan's heard before. But, terrifying? It's an eye opener. “It's not just his powers,” Hill explains. “The biggest threat comes from his mind.” Fury had long kept an eye on the leader of the X-men, largely because his tactics were so astounding. “And right now, his mind is not reliable.”

“It's not going to come war, Commander. We'll make sure of that.”

From the cold, they journey back into the complex. The children are still unpacking the supplies that Hill brought with her. Plenty of bourbon for Logan, a deck of cards, board games. Groceries, hygiene supplies. The kids greet her with a curious eye, unsure whether to call her friend or not. After all, she was part of the Red Hunt, and had turned their lives upside down. But, now, she smiles at them. A friendly smile. “Did I forget anything?” she asks them. They shake their heads no after Logan says it's okay to speak with her.
Alex is not shy about his lack of faith in Hill. That he doesn't want her here. They have the capability to get their own supplies, but Maria is quick to remind him that the more they are seen in town, the more suspicion they will draw. “And that will lead to the world discovering where your brother is.” The purpose of all of this is to keep him hidden and out of harm's way. “That goes for LeBeau as well. He needs to stay inside and out of the way.”

In the computer room, Scott sits with Warren, going over the design of the latest Danger Room scenario as Nightcrawler and Colossus fight below. It's an easy design, one that makes sure is challenging to the kids. They don't acknowledge Hill's entrance.

She watches the proceedings for long silent moments as Alex and Logan crowd in behind her. Scott – his visor never leaving the floor below, makes notes on a pad of paper in very much the same script as his research. Her eyes wide, she tries to decode the language itself, but even with her expertise in coding, she can't understand it. “I need to speak to Scott alone,” she says quietly.

“Not a chance,” Warren says, leaning back into his chair.

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“The last time you were alone with him, SHIELD tried to kill him. That's not happening again.” No one is shocked by Warren's words. It's a sentiment they all share. “I think it's wiser if you stay out of mutant affairs for a while--”

“Now look,” Hill interrupts, “We came up with a solution, a compromise. This deal was in all of your best interests, and especially Cyclops. I'm not your enemy--”

“Yes, you are,” Scott's quiet voice drones underneath Hill's heightened temper. The room falls silent, and with baited breath they wait for explanation. “You always have been.” He turns his visor back to the floor where Kurt and Piotr continue bashing their way through Factor Three in an early incarnation. They were villains he fought as a child – Vanisher, Blob, Unus the Untouchable, and Mastermind – and thinks the experience helpful for the students. “Sarah doesn't know how powerful she is,” he says to Angel. “She needs to understand that pain goes away.”

Another shocking statement that has the room cowed into silence. But, Scott doesn't back down, just continues to tally his mistakes in the scenario below. “Scott?” his brother asks, a horrified look to Warren who shrugs. “What do you mean?”

“She's invulnerable,” he replies, “in certain states. Once she stops being afraid.” He puts the scenario below on pause, tells the men below that they'll pick this up later and pulls up the video of the children's last session. They watch it for several minutes, seeing nothing but the kids awkwardly plowing through the Sentinels. “Did you see it?” he asks. But no one did.

Cyke puts a magnifier on Sarah's battle, pulls the replay up close and tight. In the midst of battle, as she's struggling to pull the wires free from the Sentinel's neck, there's a brief moment where Sarah flattens out – her whole body and not just her hand. “She can avoid damage to her internal organs,” he explains. She can move them wherever she needs. It could make her invulnerable if she learns how to fight with her mutation.”

Warren has watched the kids fight in these scenarios a dozen times, and never noticed Sarah's power. Like him, he viewed her as more of an assist, getting her teammates out of trouble by flying them above the fray. “That's pretty amazing,” he says, watching the replay again and again.

“I thought you weren't training these kids to fight,” Hill counters. “If you're making them into soldiers--”
“We all have to learn to fight,” Alex says, “if only to defend ourselves.” And with someone like Sarah who looks utterly different than anyone else, learning self-defense is essential. “She can't hide herself, and that puts her in danger.”

She can't argue with the logic, though she is surprised to see Logan going along with such a thing. After all, that was the very reason why he abandoned Scott on Utopia all those years ago.

“World still isn't safe for them,” he replies. “And until it is, these kids have to learn to use their powers wisely.”

A deep sigh, he looks to Cyclops. “Just promise me, Scott, that you're not going to start a war.”

Smooth-voiced and emotionless, “I'm not going to start a war.”

Alex is the only one that realizes his brother is lying.
Chapter Summary

It's a matter of curiosity that draws him into the computer lab. Late night, his eyes begging for sleep. His voice is husky, his fingers trembling. The message was meant for Kitty – that much he is sure of. Hebrew maybe. Aramaic. He doesn't know what languages that Scott has learned over the years. No one does.

He tries first with a Jewish cipher, one that denotes Kitty's most beloved verse of the Tenakh. The one she translated to each of them. The one she used to defile him after his famous speech about the word mutant.

He'd thought it a groundbreaking speech, but the mutants – those that actually lived with the genetic condition - hated him for it. “I'm not afraid of being a mutant,” she had said. “I'm not ashamed of being genetically different.”

In truth, he wasn't either. But his brother.... His brother was before his time. An advocate, a warrior. He saw the mutants as a separate race that deserved to be protected by the powers at be. Kids and young adults, the fully grown and those who were on the verge of maturation. He fought for them – against his brother – he was their hero, regardless of the Avengers.

Steve Rogers had thought them separatists – those that had fallen under Cyclops' spell. Those few mutants that felt themselves willing to stand up against the perpetual villainization of the mutant species. “They shouldn't be so bold,” he'd said. “Shouldn't be so active.” He wanted them to be quiet, to prove themselves a peaceful people, but Scott would have none of that.

It seemed so easy at the time. Put the mutants under his spell, pour out the appreciation for those humans willing to defend. It seemed so right, so real. Until Alex had worn out his welcome. The Uncanny Avengers left a bad – almost poisonous – taste in his mouth.

He sees it again, the push and pull of the mutant species. Scott or Alex. The Avengers or the X-men. While Steve fully fought on the side of the Avengers, a whisperer of power and righteousness, Alex fought on the side of the underdog, swearing up and down that the mutants were beleaguered.

“What are you doing in here?” Scott asks, with Logan right behind him. He looks at the screen, then back to his brother. “You should be asleep.” Scott's gaze remains on the camera up above him, that tiny little green light that signals they are being recorded.

“Yeah. A bit of insomnia. Thought I'd try a Danger Room session.” He hopes that Scott can see through his lie. “Any one you recommend?”

Scott is quiet for long moments, a tip of his head to the right. He ushers Alex out of his seat and pulls up the program list. “This one,” he says, pulling up the strange code. He taps at the screen three times, a different word with every touch – rock, basis, hallow. “Magneto.” The way he says it, the way he touches the screen, Alex knows that there's a clue in there, but he doesn't quite get it. Neither does Logan. “I think you both should try it.”
The light red glow around him makes them nervous, but it also betrays the tension that otherwise wouldn't be seen. “You can keep calm up here?” Alex asks, knowing that Scott has a reason for this particular scenario. Scott nods, looking at Alex first and then Logan. “Okay. Let's go fight some insomnia.”

Hard light forms the shape of Magneto, his hand out front directing his magnetic powers and those shards of metal that come with it. Logan can't get close – his metal skeleton a bane in this scenario – but, he can keep the path clear for Havok who blasts away at the villain.

“I will rule this world,” the figment says, heaving a car across the landscape. Wolverine manages to cut it in two, deflecting the halves away from his team leader. “If you do not submit, then you shall be destroyed.” It's the blades that surprises them. Magnetic blades, shimmering with broken metal. He smiles, cuts through the air, sending shock waves across the arena.

Wolverine lunges across the floor, pulls Alex down before the blade reaches. “Pause scenario,” he calls out, looking up to where Scott watches above. “What kind of bull shit is this?” he yells. “You almost killed him!”

“Logan,” Alex replies, grabbing hold of the mutant's arm. “I'm okay. I just wasn't prepared for it.”

“Like hell.”

Quietly, “That's not meant to be Magneto. That's supposed to be a gun.” Worried blue eyes peer up to the control room where Scott watches them. “We're fighting soldiers.”

“Whose soldiers?”

Alex doesn't know. Taking a deep breath, he resumes the scenario, taking down Magneto with his blasts, only for him to rise again. He leads them on a chase through various buildings – upscale offices, a factory, a warehouse. And each time he falls, he only rises again.

“We're getting quicker at this,” Logan says as he stabs Eric through the eye and steps back, waiting for him to rise. Alex and Logan have barely fought together on the battlefield, but this scenario is written to test their ability to work together, to work faster and smarter. It becomes almost routine the way they move in tandem with Alex aiming high and Wolverine coming in from behind.

To Logan, it feels like fighting beside Cyclops again, that instinctive thread between the two, how they always had each others backs. Alex has that same laser focus and a good command of tactics as they brush through the program. “Stay back, Logan,” Alex calls, stopping the shorter mutant from barreling forward. Blue light and concentric circles, Havok holds both arms in the air and knocks their new Magneto for a loop. The figment falls upon the floor, and does not rise.

They have won the scenario, and they’re both exhausted for it.

It's in the aftermath, that Alex tries to piece together the various clues – from Magneto's words to the various buildings that they fought through. There were homes in the mix, a theater, retail shops, and busy city streets. The office buildings were luxurious, rich, powerful. “So, what does it mean?” he asks Logan quietly as they shuffle to the showers.

“Dunno,” Logan replies. Though he knows that it means something, figuring out Scott's cryptic mind was never his forte. “He's your brother. You should know how his mind works.”

A sad smile on Alex's face and a quiet chuckle, “I think you know him better than I ever did.” He winces, stops his progress. “I don't know how to help him, Logan.”
“None of us do,” Logan replies. “We can only go by what we think is right.”

It's a long night for Logan as Alex finally decides to go to bed. Fresh-showered, a bottle of bourbon in his hand, he settles down in his chair near Scott, and watches as he builds another scenario from scratch. He offers Cyke a drink, pours the bourbon into a cup. “Just sip on it,” he says, “No need to get drunk.”

“The last time I drank is when you died,” he says.

“Then definitely take it slow.” He nudges the cup forward, waits for Scott to take it.

The sip burns down his throat, makes him hold his breath as the alcohol comes to settle in his stomach. “Strong stuff.”

It's rare that he's so clear. That he isn't talking to his hallucinations, that he's not scared of exploding, or imploding, or whatever else that mass of power wants to do to him. Calm, emotionless, all business. It's Cyke as Logan remembers him. “Yeah.” And in that, there is hope.

“I'm sorry, Logan,” Scott says, his visor still on the screen.

“What do you have to apologize for?”

“You shouldn't have to do this.”

“Do what?”

“I wish you hadn't been dragged into all of this. You don't deserve --” The soft red glow returns.

Logan shakes his head. “Don't go all self-loathing now, One-eye. We've been having a good night.” As harsh as it sounds, he means it. “You aren't the burden you think you are.”

Sometimes, Logan hates that visor, or the glasses, or anything that Cyke wears over his eyes. He remembers them, like a distant dream, on their mission to the Breakworld – how even though his face was still, his eyes would burn with emotion. Fear, anger, sadness – he could see it all in those beautiful eyes. “What if I always loved you?” he asks, his voice wavering though he tried to prove strength.

A light red glow envelops Scott. This isn't the best topic of conversation, but it's unavoidable. “Then you always loved me,” he answers, trying to keep a fraction of himself under control. The red fog grows thicker, begins to eat away at metal and leather. A soft push, out into the air, centralized on a heavy breathing Cyclops. “I can't be what you want me to be,” he says softly, an ache to his words that pierce Logan's heart. “I can't be what you need.”

“Just breathe, Scotty,” Logan replies, swifiting his hand upon Cyke's shoulders. “Bring it in. Don't let it rule you.”

Head bowed, Scott measures his breath by the deep ins and outs of Logan. He hates this. This lack of control. His whole life, he struggled for it, only to have it pushed further and further away. “You shouldn't have to be here,” he says, feeling the burn of energy behind his eyes.

“I want to be here.” Wolverine's tone is full, believable, but still Scott doesn't calm down. Logan wants to ask him about the program, what it means, the ghosts that he's been chasing. With the team, with Gambit, he wants to know what's going on. He wants to know why Summers doesn't trust him enough to tell him. “I want to be here,” he repeats, hoping that the fog dies down, but Cyclops is stuck. Self-hatred, self-doubt, those things roll around in his head, make it impossible for him to gain
that strict control. And once again, Logan is forced to say those magic words that knocks him out.

In silence, he turns off the computers and carries Scott's prone body to the bedroom. He'll be out for hours now, if Logan is lucky. Time to drink, time to collect himself. Time to rehash the Danger Room program and pluck it for clues. He wonders if Kitty received the same programs, if what she saw was the secret script that coded Magneto for a soldier.

A glass of bourbon down his throat, he feels the warmth of alcohol slowly seep into his veins. It's a nice feeling – calm, relaxed. He feels like he's ready for anything.

Except for the bomb that explodes on their doorstep.
The Arctic

Chapter Summary

Emma.

Chapter Notes

This chapter may be triggering to some.

Alarms blare throughout the complex, red lights of warning. They rush from their rooms, pulling on clothes and coats, making their way to the front door to see what has happened. They can see the fire from here, out on the edge, near the trawler. The orders come quickly, from Alex's mouth to those of the X-men. Wolverine and Gambit on scout, Angel and Nightcrawler out towards the edge to put out the flame. Rogue and Colossus stand by to protect the kids and the complex. He reminds them that outside of the shield, they are prone to telepathic attacks, to not be lulled into a false sense of safety. “Guard your minds,” he tells them. “This could be another one of Sinister's tricks.

And no sooner do they disperse than Madelyne Pryor shows herself in the shadows. There's a dozen of the clones, on the horizon, but another explosion to the south split them once again. “Rogue go find that bomber,” Havok says, his eyes not leaving the long row of red headed-clones. “Steel up, Colossus. This is going to be one heckuva fight.”

Still inside the shield, they are protected from the telepathic barrage that the Madelynes are capable of, but not the twist of telekinesis that sends projectiles through the shield, nearly hitting Colossus. Harpoons and arrow, it's a dangerous mix, and both men struggle to find cover, leaving the entrance unguarded.

Alex curses himself for such a lack of preparedness. He should have guessed that Sinister would attack again, and this soon. He should have had a plan for it. Creeping out from the side of the main house, he engages in a cutthroat battle, plasma blasts going full force against the clones. On the other side, Colossus flexes steeled muscles taking the arrow hits without damage.

A fierce yell and Colossus breaks forth through the shield, pummeling himself into a Madelyne, knocking her to the ground. The physical struggle is one-sided, with Piotr completely overtaking her. A punch the face, then one to the head, and one Madelyne is down, but unfortunately not all of them. It's a telepathic attack by the others that put him to sleep, leaving Alex alone to deal with the army.

He yells for help as another explosion rocks the island. Full force, Havok spreads his beams, knocking out another two. They taunt him, mock him for staying behind the shield. They call him a coward among other things, accuse him of being too weak to deal with them. Another blast sees another one down, and then all of a sudden, the Madelyne's begin to run in all different directions.

Taking off at a run to the back of the house, he leaves the front door completely unguarded, fearing that they will try to break in through another entrance. He calls for Rogue and Wolverine, tells them to get back to the house, but he doesn't know if he's heard.
Emma Frost stand in the shadows, her breath shaky, fingers trembling. Another explosion in the distance, her signal to enter the complex.

The children watch her as she enters the compound. Wide eyed and scared, they threaten her with what little courage they can muster. Cricket hits first, her exoblades scraping across the sudden diamond form of Emma Frost, and Phinneus next, hoping that his speed will propel her outside, but she's too smart for this. “I'm not here to fight you,” she tells them, offering Opal a diamond punch to her jaw. “You can walk away and be safe.”

The children don't listen.

“If you insist,” Emma quips, and begins throwing punches again. She's more experienced than they are, and she knows Cyclops' training regiment by heart. It doesn't take her long to knock them all unconscious, which leaves her plenty of time to make it to the computer room before they wake up.

A video feed in the first Madelyne's eye had given Sinister all the information he needed to start this attack. Which buttons to push, the layout of the home. She knows their powers, their weaknesses, and with the shield disabled, she's able to put them all to sleep – the Madelynes and the X-men. No need for battles, when a telepath is on the loose.

She takes her time, now. Settles her nerves. A part of her knows that what she's doing is wrong, that it will devastate the love of her life. In her dreams, she imagines them coming back together, she imagines forgiveness and understanding. A way forward. That he'll understand her desperation, her need.

He's looks so calm, rested. Lying on the bed, his shoes pulled off and put in the corner, his sleep lenses strapped around his eyes, she can't help but marvel at him. She tenders fingers down his jaw, stroking thumb over his lips. He moves, just a flicker of it, as if still stuck in dream. With telepathic thought, she enters his mind, finds the old paths that she used to keep, that old power that made her crazy.

“Emma?” he says with a start, bolting up out of the bed, a red glow beginning to eat away at sheets and blanket.

“Calm down, Scott,” she whispers, using her mind to dim his fright. “I'm not here to hurt you.” She waits for the red energy to calm before cupping his face with her elegant hands. “I'm only here to love you.” Wrapped inside his mind, she doesn't let him speak, doesn't give him freedom of movement.

In her heart, she feels the ache of losing him all over again, a polite sob and tears down her eye. She hugs him, holds onto him for dear life. “I need to know if you ever loved me,” she says, unbuttoning his shirt. He still can't speak, can't struggle, his movement blocked by her mind.

She undresses him in silence, laying him upon the bed. It won't take long, not with pulling up feelings of lust and the idea of Wolverine. She has to be careful though of the red energy, make sure that she holds him tight, to not waver in her concentration. She forces herself upon him, tears streaming down her eyes, muddying the makeup that she wears. And, when she's finished, she puts him to sleep and erases his memory, to ease her own mind. Perhaps with the memory gone, he'll still look at her with love.

She can feel the X-men waking up – the kids inside, the adults outside. She can feel the rage of the Madelynes begin to percolate as they grasp inside her mind to see what she has done. This was their prey to mangle, not hers. She quickly forces them to calm down, to travel back with her to the boat, before they're caught, before they're killed. “Logan will wake soon, and he'll kill us all,” she reminds
“Then we should kill him,” the Madelynes argue.

“That’s not the plan,” Emma replies. “The plan is, we return home, or do you really want to go against your master.” The Madelynes know what happens when they are errant.

She pushes the guilt of her actions deep down, walking towards the ship. Sinister is there, his mind going wild with possibilities. What the child will become, how powerful, how fortunate. He's a maze with his thoughts, redirecting the excitement of procreation into the formation of another being. “You'll be amazing,” he says, taking the chance to touch her stomach. “You'll be all that the world needs.”

Wolverine wakes not moments after she's boarded the ship. Wild eyed and crazed. Still in berzerker mode, he knows that something's happened, that they've been defeated. He can feel the ache from here, the way it cascades across the compound.

His thoughts on Scott, he rushes forth towards the house, claws out and the blood in his veins boiling. If they hurt him, he will seek them out, make them pay. He'll track them to the ends of the earth if he has too. He reaches the doorway, sees Alex still unconscious nearby. And then he catches – that scent. That scent that puts ice in his veins.

From here, though rooms away, he can smell Emma Frost, her winter scent, so cold and hated. Mint and rose, a perfect frozen heart. The scent leads him to Scott.

He follows the scent to the bedroom where Scott lay naked on the bed. He's asleep, dreams forcing the jerking of his arms, his legs. Soon, the Phoenix will come, pour herself out over the visage, make herself known. Without Emma to solidify his dreams, the Phoenix will take over, will make herself the harbinger of what is to come.

Gentle hands tug on his clothes – the pants, the t-shirt. Logan tries to waylay the dreams. But it doesn't work, not without Alex's call to peace. Not without recognition of the multiple layers of Phoenix dreams. Past, present, future, the Phoenix dreams will accentuate all that is wrong with this psyche, all that is broken.

It smells like sex in here. A secondary realization. One that frightens him. “Scott,” he says quietly. “Scott I need you to wake up.” But, the mutant doesn't stir, save for the heating up of skin. Quickly, Logan carts him to the shower, pours the ice cold water over his head. “Scott, come on. Wake up.” The scent of them suddenly intermingled, he wonders if Scott gave in, if he allowed it, if he wanted it. He wonders if it was forced.

Wakefulness soon takes Cyke, and Logan watches him carefully. “You okay?”

Scott looks up at the shower head, then down at his wet clothes. Confusion pinches against what little Logan can see of his eyes. “We got attacked,” Logan explains, looking for recognition. “Do you remember?” A sick feeling pits in Logan's stomach as Scott shakes his head. “Let's get you cleaned up,” he says quietly, avoiding red gaze.

“Did I get hurt?” he asks, feeling no pain.

“No. No they didn't cut you or make bleed.”

“Then why?” he says, questioning the need for a shower at this precise moment.

“Because you smell like Emma.”
He sits in the shower, wet, cold, visor pointed towards the floor. He doesn't speak, doesn't look up. He can tell that Logan's angry, even without looking at him. Though he has no memory of it, he's pieced together what happened. That Emma was here, and what she did. It didn't take long, not with Logan refusing to let him out of the stall until her scent was gone. He scrubbed and scrubbed, sometimes to blood, trying to erase the scent of her from his body, but even now, Logan says that he can still smell her on him. “I'm cold, Logan,” he says quietly, the hot water having run out a while ago.

His eyes glass-stung and red, Logan shakes his head. “She's still there,” he replies. “She's still all over you.”

Scott handles himself well, even if Logan doesn't. Stepping out of the shower he wraps a towel around his waist, and lights a hand on Logan's shoulder. “It's all in your head,” he says. “Her scent is gone.”

The mattress has been removed from the room, propped up outside to let the weather rid it of the scent. Scott stares at the empty bed frame, his head still down, Logan walking behind him. “Why don't you grab some bourbon?” Scott invites him, hoping for some time to himself to deal with his thoughts, and the sudden burgeoning of hallucinations.

“I'm not leaving you,” Logan says, stepping forward and into Cyclops' space. “I can't let this happen to you again.”

Calm, near stoic save for the slight downturn of his mouth, Scott shakes his head. “Please,” he says, taking a needed step back should his energy go out of control. “I'd like a moment to myself.” He's not sure what to feel right now. He feels like this is someone else's story, that it wasn't he who was just violated. He feels numb to it, cold. As if all of this is some dream that he hasn't woken up from.

Logan hesitates, especially since the soft red glow returns. “I'll be right back then.”

Scott watches him leave, the pit in his stomach twisting tighter in Logan's absence. His stomach churns, pulling up bile, and he runs to the bathroom. On hands and knees he empties his nervousness into the toilet, before finally sitting back against the wall. He tells himself to breathe, to calm down, but his mind keeps racing through the absent scenario.

He knows what Sinister wants – his child. And that thought spins him out of control. “Knew I shouldn't leave you alone,” Logan says, putting his arm around Scott's form. Grabbing his head, trying to keep himself from piecing apart as this new realization roils through his brain, he falls against Logan's chest, presses hard against heartbeat. “Just breathe, Scotty,” Logan whispers, the taste of whiskey still upon his breath. “Just breathe.”

“They're going to take my child,” Scott speaks, his voice trembling. “We have to save it.”
It was a consequence that neither he nor Alex had thought of. Pregnancy. That this wasn't simple revenge against Scott, that she had a deeper, more dire purpose. “Shit,” he curses quietly, wrapping his arms more tightly around Cyclops' body. “We'll find her,” he promises. “We'll bring your child back.”

In Logan's arms, Scott manages to calm down, to stop the energy from spinning. Their heart beats matched, they sit there in silence, Logan coaxing a soft sigh from his would-be lover as he threads fingers through the other man's hair. “We'll get through this,” he says, aware of what effect he has on the energy and nudges Scott to sit back against the wall.

A shot of bourbon goes down like fire. “I make a lousy father,” Scott says quietly as the energy still licks outwards towards walls and floor. It's still light enough that it's not destructive, but he's on the verge.

Logan can tell that he's hallucinating again – the small flicker of his visor to the right and the left – the Whispers come into visualization. “No, you just didn't have a chance to be one.”

He did though, for twelve years. He took care of his son, taught him how to survive, how to run, how to hide. He taught his son how to fight, how to be a good man, but then he disappeared in the time stream, leaving his son to fend for himself. “Nathan must hate me.”

“He respects you more than he does most. Your choices, your sacrifices, he understands them.” Logan knows this for fact. Though Scott missed out on most of Nathan's growth, his son still loves him. “And so does your daughter.”

The silence between becomes a weight of words unsaid. Fears, worries. The emptiness inside Scott, the rage inside Logan. Steel jawed and quiet, they each take another shot of bourbon, letting it ease inside their blood, with Scott feeling it far more than his would-be lover. “You should have killed me, Logan.”

“I destroy everything I love.”

“For a long time, Scott doesn't speak, the red energy vibrating and threatening, with just a thread of control left. There's sadness around his eyes, a creased brow, pinched lips. “I destroy everything I love.”

“Calm down, Slim,” Logan says, “Don't lose yourself.” But, that's easier said than done, especially as the weight of what has happened settles down upon Cyclops' shoulders. Curled up into himself, his head resting on knees, he releases a near-silent scream, air and voice, a pain-wracked sob. “Come on, Scott. Control it.” But the energy becomes too much – eating away at tile and wall. There is no choice. “Er dogren.”

Scott falls silently to the floor, his soul pushed from his body and imprisoned in cells between the realms. Logan takes a deep breath, trying to contain his own anger. He can feel it buzz at the back of his head, feel it feed the animal within his veins.
In the bedroom, her scent still lingers – in the clothes, in the floor. It makes him vicious.

“Logan?” Rogue knocks on the door. “I'm coming in, sugah.”

They're going to burn the mattress and the blankets. Wanted to know if he wanted to come out and join them. “Can't imagine that Scott would want to sleep on them again, really. It's what I'd want.”

“Don't tell Storm about this,” he says. “Tell her about being attacked, but not about what happened. Scott deserves at least a little privacy.”

Rogue nods. “Is he okay?”

“Knocked out in the bathroom.”

“Ah'd figured as much.” She wraps her arms around Logan, pulls him into a tight, sympathetic embrace. “Ah'm sorry this happened. If I'd only stayed at the door --”

“It ain't your fault, darlin'. Only one here at fault is Emma fucking Frost.”

“That's not going to do Scott any good,” she says of the sudden burst of anger. “You can't go all bloodlust on him. He needs you to support him, not pop your top every time her name comes up.” A gentle smile, and a sigh. “I can't imagine what he's going through right now. He's tried so hard to keep control – even I can see it. But, that kind of rage ain't gonna go well. Not with him teetering on the edge all the time.”

Hopelessness makes his legs quiver, and a soft sob lights in the back of his throat. He wants to fix this so badly, wants to make Scott okay, but he keeps failing. Rogue presses into him further, keeping him upright with her tremendous strength. She soothes him, hand on spine, soft circles up and down. She's never seen him like this before, not even after the death of Jean Grey. “You must really, really love him,” she whispers.

The burst of emotion fading, he pulls back from Rogue's embrace. “I do. More than I think I even realize.”

“Let's get Scott out of the bathroom,” she says, “and find you somewhere to sleep tonight.”
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

Sam returns.

His injuries speak volumes as to his trouble to get here. The broken ribs, the fractured skull. He's struggled, come across too many enemies to make it here, to make it home. “You have to believe me,” Sam Guthrie says, gripping hard at Storm's wrist. “He's going to kill the President.”

She doesn't doubt him. She doesn't think less of his worry, but she does order him put to sleep so that Cecilia Reyes can examine him in peace and quiet. A heavy dose of propofol, and Sam is out like a light. “He's supposed to be invulnerable,” she remarks as Cecilia begins taking stock of his injuries.

“There's internal bleeding,” Reyes says as she presses on a dark bruise right beneath Sam's ribcage. It's a wide bruise, pooling up over the bones, a sign of something far worse beneath the skin. With Storm's help, she loads him into the MRI machine, taking a picture of his insides. “It looks like a ruptured spleen,” she explains, pointing out the plethora of blood on the ghostly image. “He'll need surgery.”

She enlists the help of Beast – probably the only one among them other than herself that understands the weight of medicine. That can help keep Sam alive while she sews the organ back together. “Suction,” she says, wanting to gain a better view of the stitches. Beast complies, soaking up the blood from the cavity.

He notices the sweat bead on her forehead, the effort that she's putting forth. Were his hands free, he'd wipe her head for her, but he can't. “Storm, can you --”

Storm knows what he's going to ask. Taking a towel, she dabs Reyes' forehead, keeping the sweat from her brow and eyes. Like most of the X-men, seeing this type of surgery is not foreign to her. “Just keep him alive,” she says softly, taking another dab at mocha skin.

An hour later – her hands aching from such tight stitching, Cecilia is finally ready to sew him up, relying on machines to monitor his vitals. “He's out of the danger zone,” she says. “We'll just have to watch for infection.” A deep breath and she slumps forward, hands resting on the table. She wasn't ready for this today, the peace between them making her soft in her duties. Had this been a year ago, she would have been ready for it, this emergency. “I'm out of practice,” Reyes says with an apologetic smile.

Beast hands her a cold glass of water, lets her rest in the leather bound chair. “You did fine,” he remarks, settling back in his own chair. “That wasn't an easy surgery.”

“He said that Eric was going to attack the President,” Storm recalls, her face harsh with thought. She looks to them with permission, her nerves on end, her worry near out of control. “We have to stop him.”

“Wouldn't it be better to let Havok handle this?” Beast asks. “I don't think we're prepared for a fight, not of this magnitude.”
Reyes is of a different mindset, however. Arguing that the warning came to them, and they should be the ones to deal with it. She doesn't relish the idea of fighting, their peacefulness since the Red Hunt suiting her just fine, but she also sees how the world will take their quietness. “We'll be blamed for what he does,” she says. “Just by the virtue of genetics. We need to fight this one.”

“Alex can do the job,” Henry repeats, his tone harsh. “It's better if we stay out of this. We need time to regroup before we can handle Magneto. Ororo, we need time to recuperate.”

Hesitant, she nods and sighs. “I'll call head table. See where everyone stands.”

Beast follows her out into the hallway, grabs her arm to get her attention. “Tell me you're thinking about fighting him.”

“Alex has a lot on his plate,” she explains. “It doesn't seem fair to ask --”

“It's what they want, Storm. They want to fight. You don't.”

And, she doesn't. Despite the press on the doorstep, she's enjoyed these peaceful days of classes and students. No call to action, no lives hanging by threads. “I would still like to call head table,” she says. “I would like to gain everyone's view.”

“You can't do this, Storm.”

Suspicions raised, she eyes him for long, tense moments. “What aren't you telling me, Henry?”

Realizing his missteps, he runs his hand through the thick blue fur on his head and sighs. “Nothing,” he replies. “I just want you to be safe. Magneto has a whole army behind him. We're not enough to stop him.”

“And you think Alex would fare better?”

“Yes. Yes, I do. Scott's there. That's their advantage.”

The comment strikes sour against Storm's demeanor, lowering her brow, a twist of down turned lips. “You think I'm incapable--”

“No. I think you're very capable. But, Scott has a penchant for war that you do not. And against Magneto, this will be a war. You are a prized leader, 'Ro, but you don't have the head for such a long and tedious battle. You need to stay here, prove to the world that we are peaceful.”

Still wary of him, of his motives, she nods her head. “You are right. Scott is better at war than myself. Time has proven that, but it also puts undue pressure on him to come up with a plan while keeping himself secret. I saw what he was like, Henry. I saw his struggle. I don't want to do that to him, not unless head table agrees that Alex should handle this.”

Beast smiles at her strength, a resilience she hasn't shown in many years. Even-headed, cool under pressure. Though reluctant to admit it, he's missed this part of Storm. “As you say,” he replies as she walks away.

Back in the medlab, Dr. Reyes continues to monitor Sam and his injuries. It was just as Rose said, that Sam would come back to the mansion, only, he hadn't guessed in what shape he would be in. “Have you checked for brain swelling?” he asks, and Cecilia nods. She shows him the MRI scan, points to the various broken bones and the fracture in his head. “Should be easy enough to deal with,” he assures her, “putting a shunt in his spine.” She agrees with his findings with a curt nod. “Would you like some coffee, my dear?”
“That sounds nice, actually. I've a feeling I'll be in here all night.”

Down the hall, and into his lab, he takes a cell phone out of the desk drawer. He swallows hard, looks out into the hallway to make sure he isn't being watched. “Sam is not a viable subject,” he says after the answering machine signals readiness. “Moving onto plan B.”

He knows what chaos will come, what it will do to the world, but there's no other way. If there's a chance to halve Scott's powers, if he can do something that will keep the world safe from another explosion, he has to take it. Not just for the world, but also for Cyclops himself.

Back down the hallway – two cups of coffee in hand – he returns to the medlab. Reyes watches the blips and bleeps of the computer, takes the coffee with a smile. “Do you miss the fight?”

“No. Never,” he says. “I've been an X-man since I was a child, and even then our penchant for violence always struck me.”

“It's odd to hear someone call Xavier's dream violent.”

Beast nods, sighs. He doesn't say this lightly, not without the weight behind it. “It always was though. From our first mission to our last, we were the soldiers in his army. Fighting a war that was never ending. We just never realized it. Never knew when to lay down our arms.”

“But now's the time?”

“No time like the present.” The mutants had been through to much these past months. Too much mayhem, too much fear. If they were going to prove themselves peaceful, they need to start now. “There's always option of choosing no battle.”

Though Reyes prefers to be in the medlab rather than on the battle field, she does see moments where they should stand their ground. “We know Magneto better than anyone. We know how to stop him --”

“And there are plenty more that are very capable of doing that. SHIELD created this army, it's their job to put it down.”

She'd heard tale of the Undertow and the experiments that went on there – from Dazzler, from others that sought sanctuary inside the mansions. Civilians, the mutants that were afraid to go home in case the Hunt started again. They'd come to the X-men for protection, and she wondered if they regretted that now. “If we roll over and play dead, then they will come to kill us.”

“I thought you wanted peace, Cecilia?”

“I do,” she says, “but how can we lead the mutants if we won't protect them?”

“Perhaps it's time that someone else led them. Led the world into a brighter place.”

“Like who? The Avengers? They would have us --”

“Not the Avengers. Someone new. Someone who's ideas will keep the whole world peaceful.” The doctor laughs, calling it a fantasy. Beast takes it in stride, taking another sip of his coffee. “You never know, Cece. Stranger things have happened.”
Samos

Chapter Summary

Xavier's plans.

The lapse was momentary. A flicker on the horizon. There, he felt Emma Frost, and also Cyclops. Scott Summers was still alive, and he could feel that ache to regain what he had lost. A night he spent searching the ether for his student's presence, growing more frustrated by the hour. An obsession. He believed it a hallucination, a mental breakdown of sorts as his mind was still processing the absence of that power inside his veins. It took a single phone call to find out the truth.

“You promised to stay out of it,” Jebediah Rose speaks into the silence. Irish coffee in both hands, he offers a mug of steaming brew to the man on his left. “Surely, you're not making a liar of yourself.”

The only reason Xavier listens to the man is because he thinks that his plan for the world has a shot. It could give the mutants the fighting chance they need to survive. “It would be easier this way,” Charles explains. “Taking his power, I could force the war, make them all participate.”

“But, that's not what we've agreed to,” he chides, clicking his tongue on the roof of his mouth. “By the way, Henry knows you're alive.”

“And, how did he find out?”

Rose smiles, tenders a touch against the silver ring that he wears. It's a telepathic scrambler, and it makes Charles very frustrated. “Apparently, Magneto told him.” The smile becomes something more dangerous, something that threatens hostility. “Would you like to explain to me how he knew that?”

“You think I'm going to betray you?”

“Why wouldn't I? You're an addict, Charles. Addicts are rarely trustworthy.” Perturbed by the man, Xavier crosses arms over his chest and stares out at the turquoise waters. “That power is hard to live without, is it not?” Charles doesn't acknowledge the comment with a reply, and Jebediah leans back in his chair and takes a hefty sip of coffee. “But, don't fret. It will all be over soon.”

There are days when Xavier doubts the totality of Rose's plans. That he sees the cracks in the paint, so to speak. Then there are other days when it all makes sense. Sating the world, keeping them distracted with art and trends, movies, radio. A one-world government – the very few governing the needs of the many, compliance, safe keeping. Only those qualified should have positions that will speak for the masses, only those able. “It will be hard at first,” Rose reveals, “but, slowly, people will let go their old prejudices, their fear and come to rely on a government that actually works for them instead of despite them. We will make them happy. We will give them freedom.”

Xavier has seen the plans. He's been to Symtech, invited there to participate in the think tank that proposes to take over the world. To make it better. From all walks of life, they are the brightest and best at what they do – from churning out top ten radio hits to leading armies, it's a group that is focused on the happiness of the Earth – lifting people out of poverty, giving them employment, food, clean water, medical care. It's a group that believes people should be able to walk down the street safely at night, that education is vital, and that people should have the right to follow their dreams.
People could become actors or writers, farmers and doctors, that there is a place for all of them within the system, even if the government has to create that place. “Just imagine being fulfilled with your job,” Rose sighs, his eyes gone dreamlike as he stares up at the cloudy blue sky. “Or, having time to travel, explore new hobbies, all without the guilt of leaving work behind. It would be a good world, Charles.”

“Are you sure about Scott?”

“That he'll start the war? Yes, I'm quite sure. He's already onto us, probably already thinking up some grand plan to deal with our world-wide take over.”

There is a pang of guilt over Rose's confidence. His student, slowly driven mad over the years by the telepaths, once again being thrust into the spotlight where the fight is inevitable. “Don't underestimate him. He has a brilliant mind for strategy.”

“Beast said the same thing. But, what is one mind against fifty?”

A slip of a smile, and Xavier shakes his head. “Yes, you are definitely underestimating him.”

A dark bushy brow arches, as those beady brown eyes turn to look at Xavier. “Or maybe you're underestimating me.”

They move onto other subjects – the beauty of Greece, Charles' growing art collection, Magneto. Eric Lensherr is an easy man to manipulate. A few well-placed comments here and there, and he is ready to assassinate the President. “I'm trying to hold him off for at least week, let the news reach the X-men first. That's proving incredibly hard.”

“I thought Storm was sitting out of the fights?”

“Not those X-men, the others. Havok's team.”

“So, this is how the war begins?”

“Not quite. But, it is a primary event that will lead up to it.”

Xavier wonders how far ahead Rose has planned. How thorough he's actually been. “Alex will be considered a hero --”

“Yes, for a few days. But not forever. This war is unavoidable, and with the slate wiped clean, we can rebuild this world as it should be.”

Xavier is not part of Jebediah's cabal for its insistence on this war, but he is not opposed to it either. He understands that sometimes hard choices need to be made, even if it does mean miring New York in a war that it will never recover from. “You swear you'll kill him instead of turning him into a weapon? Because if you don't, then I'll be forced to step in.” Rose nods. “Very well, then. So long as I am left alone, I will not interfere in Syrntech's plans.”

“That's good to hear, but I do expect a good bit more discretion from you. First Jean Grey, then Magneto? How many more know that you're alive and well?”

“None that I know of.”

“Let's keep it that way then. I'd hate for you to miss this new world order.”

As casually as he approached, Jebediah Rose slinks off into the morning waves, a slight hum in the
air. Xavier watches him carefully, at once despising him, but also admiring him. To have the wisdom to understand change was something Charles never had. Even with the X-men, the idea of them living peaceful lives outside of the mansion always sat uncomfortable with him. But, now, here he was acquiescing to the calm demands of a man who understands that super heroes often bring with them their own brand of destruction. “It's good to have them around,” he said those months ago, “in case of a planetary emergency, but in having them around comes many consequences. They attract our enemies, Charles. Be it villains or prejudice, our heroes bring the suffering with them.”

It was an epiphany, that the more the heroes fought, the more trouble would fall on Earth’s shoulders. They attracted the attention of mighty villains from both the Earth and far beyond. It was the first time that he'd ever thought the X-men were a mistake. “I wanted to protect mutants,” he explained. “I wanted them to feel safe.”

“And are they safer?”

The answer was a resounding no, and Charles hung his head. “So without the X-men--”

“Mutants would have been accepted long ago. Your X-men scared the world, Mr. Xavier. They made the world angry. Think of how many deaths could have been avoided had you not raised those children to fight. And in that count, remember to include your own death. Had you not shared your violent ideas with Scott Summers, it is likely that you would still have your own body right now.”

It was a damning statement, and though at first reluctant to see the sense in it, the more he thought about it, the truer the statement became. “I'm a man of peace, Mr. Rose,” he'd said. “I don't want to be a part of your war.”

“Then don't be. I can protect you from that, but in return, I ask that you stay out of my way, too. The world needs this change, Mr. Xavier. It needs to be freed from the binds that holds it hostage. We can do that, so long as you don't interfere.”
A visit from Dr. Strange.

Looks of hope and held breath, they surround him in the medlab. Lorna, Alex, Logan, the children. Warren, Kurt, Piotr, Rogue, and Gambit. Three steps back, the nervous biting of lips as Dr. Stephen Strange cuts through the first cast on Arlo's hands. He tears away at the protective material, cracking it and placing it on a silver tray to his left, and soon reveals the shape of healed hands. They shake, these hands, atrophied muscles and lack of use. As scarred as they might be, Arlo is still amazed.

Across his jowls spreads a smile, a sharp inhale as he turns the hand over to see the palm. With Strange's help, he bends his fingers, flexes them up and down. “Thnk, thnk,” he pants, his eyes teary with hope. Marveling at his fingers, he waits impatiently for Stephen to break the other cast and remind the boy of his own humanity. “Hmn,” he says. “I hmn.”

“Yes,” Strange smiles revealing the second hand. “You're human.”

Arlo's throaty laugh peels out over the room as the X-men crowd in to see the wonders of medicine. Finally, breaths are released and the silence is broken by cheers and joyful hugs. The boy can feel their esteem, their care for him, and for that he is thankful. For the first time in years, he feels safe. He feels that he belongs. He shows them his shaky hands, his jowls spread with an awkward smile. The young man cries with relief.

Indira is the first to hug him. Wrapping her mocha arms around his neck, she holds him as tightly as she can. Sarah joins in, while Opal and Phin scratch behind his ears. Off to the side, Pocket stays away from the group, but his dark eyes keep their gaze on Arlo's hands.

Strange walks the adults through the exercises that Arlo will need to recover fully – from the creation of a fist to help grasping at objects and picking them up. “Anything that lengthens and strengthens the muscles is good for him right now. I imagine he'll have some trouble walking for a time, but the more you encourage him, the quicker and more fully he'll recover.”

He also wants to talk about the rest of his rehabilitation. “He is capable of standing on two feet. The musculature is there, as is the framing of his bones. He's not meant to be on all fours.” Again, he prescribes exercises to lengthen and strengthen the muscles, to help lift the boy up off the floor. “There will be pain,” he says, “but, keep encouraging him. I believe in his recovery.”

It's a moment of hope for the mutants, that the boy can recover from those years of abuse. “Thnk,” Arlo says, his voice a little stronger. Strange smiles.

But, then a realization hits. “Where's Scott?” he asks, and that moment of hope is suddenly over. Looking at their faces, he can see the concern and worry. “What happened?”

“He's not well,” Alex says, and nods for Strange to join him in the hallway. The door shut behind them, Havok sneaks a small thumb drive into the doctor's hand, eyes gesturing up towards the cameras.
“What happened here, Alex?”

“We got attacked by Emma Frost. We’re still on edge about it.” Shocked, Stephen says nothing. “She messed with his head. I need to know how badly.”

It's in the way he says it, the way his eyes flicker down to his hands that Strange knows he's not talking about Scott, but rather the drive. “I'll do my best,” he says with a slow nod, and secrets the drive into a pocket.

Through the hallways, they reach the sleeping quarters. The last room on the left is where Scott lies unconscious, a morning blow-up that he couldn't control, or so he is told by Alex. “He was programming a Danger Room session for Kitty Pryde,” he says continuing the conversation.

“That's his mission?”

Alex nods, pulls the chair next to the bed. Stephen takes the seat and places his hands on Scott's temples, closing his eyes for concentration. Within moments of whispering the spell, he's drawn inside the shards and dust of memories. Again, he goes to the core of Summers' self, that snowy valley devoid of memory, where the pieces of himself roam through the wilds, attacked by nightmares. Soulless, this place should be empty – just the bare bones of a mind in turmoil.

“Dr. Strange.” He appears at the edge of a thought, his form bloody and broken. He has waited here for some time, barely keeping himself together.

“Alex said --”

“That I was unconscious, but this is just a ruse to fool the cameras. I've been waiting for you.”

Throughout this valley, the wraiths catch his scent. It doesn't take long to surround the two, and Scott prepares himself for a fight. He can't risk his powers in here, just like in the outside world, so he raises his hands ready for a strike.

“I can take care of this,” Strange says, spinning a light blue enchantment through the air. It hits the wraiths one at a time, banishing them to other parts of the mind.

Scott falls to the ground, exhausted and hurt. “I wasn't sure I could do this. I wasn't sure that I'd be coherent.”

Another spell upon Stephen's fingers and he shields them all from the wraiths. They can talk now, unafraid of another attack. “Tell me what's going on. Are you dragging us into war, Scott?”

“Yes,” he replies shamefully. “I didn't start it,” he quickly adds, runs his gnarled hand through his hair. It's odd to see him disheveled like this, so unsure. “But, I have plans that can finish it, to keep everyone safe.”

“Are you sure it's real? Whatever conspiracy you've dug up?”

“The proof is on the thumb drive, along with everything that I'll need from you and Illyana.”

“Scott--”

“Lives are in danger. Many lives. We have to stop it.”

The doctor nods, unsure and hesitant. Though he has doubts, Cyclops certainly believes in what he's saying, and that in and of itself is compelling. “I'm supposed to talk to Kitty Pryde.”
“Yes. I need things from her, too.”

“Does Alex know what's on this?”

“Not yet. I can't find a way to tell him. There are too many cameras, too many eyes.”

“Those cameras belong to SHIELD—”

“You can't trust SHIELD right now. You can't even trust the X-men. They have operatives everywhere.” It's a grave accusation, and it doesn't sit well with Stephen, but before he can speak, Scott adds, “The proof is on the drive. Please Doctor Strange. I can't do this on my own.”

Stephen promises that he'll talk to Kitty and read through the drive.

Scott wakes from the telepathic trance, sits on the bed. He excuses himself without a word, stumbles into the hallway, his mission still yet incomplete.

“Forgive him,” Alex says of his brother's manners. “He's been quiet since the attack.”

He wonders when the brothers set this up, how they managed it with the cameras around. “I'll come back soon,” he says, much to Alex's relief. “To check on him.”

He leaves the way he came, by a portal of his own. Back to Bleaker Street. Back to his home. The house is quiet, much more so than usual, other than the odd wisp of magic that flows through the air. Wong is running errands; Illyana is studying, and in his pocket is the thumb drive.

Loading it into the office computer, he breaks the code right away with a spell. Before him, those odd jumbles of letters and symbols become something recognizable – a three layer cipher, and three paths to war. The photos, the missions that he's sent Gambit and the X-men on, missing children, an expanse of businesses, and at the center of it all is Syrntech – a global company with its hand in too many directions to not be suspicious.

Scott maps out Syrntech's reach with precision, how a chemical manufacturer in New York holds docks on every port coast to coast and abroad. He lists hundred of businesses as subsidiaries, proves it with documents and linked bank accounts. From travel agencies to dry cleaners, there isn't a market that Syrntech is not a part of, and Strange feels the dread peak in his stomach.

Pictures of their warehouses on three continents, the movement of weapons and missiles, nerve gas, and bombs. Indeed, they are planning a war, one that will envelope the entire world. “Illyana!” he calls out and waits for the teenager to arrive. “I need you to bring Kitty Pryde here,” he says, “And then, I want you to bring me Alex Summers.”
The Arctic

Chapter Summary

Plan B.

The night is quiet. The kids asleep, most of the adults. Warren and Logan sit in Scott's room sharing a bottle of bourbon reminiscing about the good old days. Scott disappeared from the complex earlier in the evening, came back with a missing eye and a deep gouge in his stomach. Bandaged now, forced to unconsciousness by spell, he is sprawled on the bed as his mind works out the puzzle that will release his soul.

“Yeah, that first dose was hard to take. Even as a kid, he was so fucking serious all the time that it was easy to forget he was fifteen and not thirty,” Warren says with a smile.

“So, you got a bad first impression, too?’”

“I wouldn't call it bad,” he needles, “but I wouldn't call it good either. He was the only kid I knew of that preferred broccoli to pizza. Of course now, I wonder how much of that was him, and how much was Xavier.”

“Same here,” Logan sympathizes.

“Before Jean came, we'd have to threaten him to come out with us. We'd hide his visors, freeze his shoes, all kinds of stuff, but the kid just carried on as if nothing was wrong. I think in those early months, it was Hank who bonded with him the most over the Blackbird.”

“And now Hank wants him dead.”

Warren nods, takes a sip of bourbon. He relaxes his wings, leans back into the chair. The community they had growing up, even after the new recruits appeared is strikingly absent now. Years of turmoil has called for an end to the unity they once shared, has separated them at last. “If things were different…”

“Then it could be worse,” Logan finishes. “He could be locked up in some SHIELD hole, or still in the Red Dimension. Consider us lucky that we at least have moments of peace.”

“Since when did you become the optimist?”

“I'm not, but this is the only way that this becomes tolerable.”

Angel watches the man to his left carefully, seeks out signs of rage and anger. He knows that it comes easy to Logan, that animal instinct, and to hear him speak in such growled tones gives him pause. “Will you fight in his war?”

Logan nods. “You?”

Angel smiles. “I can't imagine doing anything less.”

It's the sound that alerts him, a small touch against the outer walls, near the door. Claws out, and
wordless, he rushes to the living area, with a buzzed Angel behind him. “Someone's here,” he growls, waiting in the shadows by the front door. It's late into the night, the arctic rim is still dark and sleeping. “Is Alex back yet?”

“No idea,” Angel whispers. Wings tucked in to lessen his expanse, he ducks down behind the couch and tries to get a look out of the window. “I count twenty of them.”

“Twenty of who?”

“I don't know, but they're not Madelynes.”

They can hear the code being inputted, the click-release of the alarm, the magnetic bolts on the door pulling back. They enter one by one, unaware that they're being watched. Logan makes the first move, jumps up from the floor and slices his claws across the gun, while Angel treats the rest like bowling pins, knocking them over and to the floor.

Hearing the ruckus, the kids rise from sleep, with Indira crawling down the hallway to watch the bloodshed in the living room. Carefully, she places a finger against the wall where it can't be seen and retreats to the hallway where she tells the others what's going on. “All these men with guns,” she says. “They've invaded us.”

Fired up and worried about their mentors, Phin and Opal race into the room ready to do some fighting of their own, though Logan tries to get them to retreat. He yells at them, tells them to get back, but no sooner does he say it than the soldiers break through the door en masse and take the children hostage. Sliver, Flicker, and Pocket, held to the floor with guns to their heads. “Drop your weapons,” a soldier warns Wolverine. “Sheathe those claws or we will kill them.”

There's no time to coordinate a rescue, no time to think about how things went wrong. So, Logan does what he's told, as do Cricket and Swift. Phinneus tries to bargain with them, tells them to take him instead of Pocket, to leave the little bunny boy alone, but it only aggravates the situation more, and Arlo is drug into the living space.

The rest of the adults enter the room to find the children in line for execution. It would be easy enough for them to defeat these soldiers, but with the children at risk, the adults stand their ground. “Where is Scott Summers?” one of the men finally speak, as the rest are gathered and settled onto the ground. Gerald Hitch is the squad leader, a mean, no nonsense kind of man, and a cruel one at that. He motions for the others to bring Lorna Dane to him at threat of shooting Sarah, and he snaps a collar around her neck that cancels her mutant gifts. “One by one,” he says, motioning for the others to be lined up.

Logan is dead set on causing another melee, but Kurt calms him out of it. “We can't risk the children,” he says, his own collar activated. “Just do what they say.”

It's then that Wolverine picks up Hill's scent on the soldiers. “You're with SHIELD,” he growls, his anger pulsating and turning him red along his neck. “You mother fuckers --”

The butt of a gun along the back of Indira's head knocks her out cold. Hitch places the gun against the girl's ear. “It doesn't have to be this way,” he says, and directs the men to search the place.

It doesn't take them long to find Scott Summers, his body broken and unconscious. He's drug by the arms into the living space, into the center of the racket. Logan's anger takes over and he spins on heel, plastering a clawed fist into the stomach of one of his captors. That's when he hears the gunshot. Wide eyed, he turns back around, startled and afraid, and there is relief when he discovers that Hitch has shot into the ceiling and not into Indira's head. “Strike three,” the man says, “The next
one, you're out.”

Forced to his knees, a collar is placed around his neck. While it won't effect his claws, it will effect his healing factor, and in seconds, he can feel the burn of adamantium poisoning washing through his veins. They pick Wolverine up by the arms and muscle him out the door where Maria Hill waits beside the ship. “You strike at us,” she says, “and we'll be forced to strike back. Don't kill your friends, Logan.”

Logan watches helplessly as Scott is drug onto the ship, his bandages coming undone, his clothes in tatters. He looks like a battlefield, and even Hill remarks as much. “What the hell happened to him?” Wolverine shrugs.

The first hint of sympathy scrapes across Hill's eyes, a sign that she doesn't want to do this. That she doesn't want to take the X-men hostage, that she doesn't want this invasion. “You always follow orders, Maria?” he asks, “or just when it disrupts the lives of mutants?”

“You know full well that I don't hate mutants.”

“Your actions would speak otherwise.” He rocks himself back against the walls of the jet, the slow poison blurring his vision and making him dizzy. He worries about his collared friends and itchy trigger fingers. “Where are we going?”

“You'll see,” she says as the jet lifts off. It's a silent ride, with Scott's blood spilling out over the floor, across his tattered clothes. Logan begs that they bandage him, but orders from the front of the jet stops Hill's hands. A deep breath, she closes her eyes. “I'm sorry,” she mouths to Wolverine. “I'm sorry.”

It isn't until the ride ends that Scott becomes conscious again. He wakes with a start, the red energy billowing out. And Logan is right by his side begging him to calm down. “They're not going to hurt us,” he says with uncertainty. “Just calm down. They're not going to hurt us.”

With shackled hands, Wolverine cups Scott's face, his thumbs gently stroking high cheekbones. “It's okay,” he says. “Everything's going to be fine. I'm right here with you.”

Like Logan, they put the shackles on his wrists and ankles, throwing a blanket over bloodied shoulders. The blanket slips off and onto the floor, once again exposing wounded skin. Looking down at the towel, he notices the gashes over his chest, a burst of red that skitters dangerously over the floor and up the walls. “Logan?”

“It's okay,” the mutant eases. “It's still there. You've got your heart.” He presses Scott's hand over the wound. “See, you can still feel it. You're okay, but you need to calm down.” He intertwines his fingers within Scott's, forces his attention on himself. “It's going to be okay.”

The blanket his once again wrapped around his shoulders, tied this time to prevent slippage. Hill watches them closely, a look of dissatisfaction on her face. “This is for your own good, Scott,” she says quietly. “We're only trying to help you.”

The jet lands in the middle of a forest, a familiar forest. “Shit,” Logan says, recognizing the scent. “We're at the mansion.”

Dragging Scott off the ship, guns to his back, head, chest. Hill walks at his side expecting the trip from the forest to the rear of the mansion to be quiet and secret. She doesn't expect the sudden snapping of pictures, the throngs that race to meet them. Rotten tomatoes and eggs are thrown into the air, splattering upon Cyclops and his broken form. They rip and tear at the blanket, what's left of
his clothing and bandages. They are rabid, this crowd, fierce, and gray. It takes a bullet in the air to get them to back off and another bullet to stifle their cries of traitor and monster. Once again, Hill apologizes. She swears to Logan that she didn't plan this.

It's the red energy that Logan's most worried about, however, and the fact that Scott is in turmoil trying to keep himself under control. He instructs the wounded mutant to breathe, to focus on him, reminding him again and again that he is real, and those things outside of this are not. “Come on, Slim. You can do this.”

The crowds follow them to the mansion where even more throngs await. Protesters and press, microphones and homemade signs are used to poke and prod at the SHIELD soldiers surrounding Cyke and Wolverine. The crowds call out the mutants within, threaten them with clubs and sticks and anything else they carry. “You protected him!” one person calls from the crowd. “He killed us over and over again, and you protected him!” The press take their pictures of a pitiful Cyclops and the tamed Wolverine.

At the door, watching over the proceedings as SHIELD forces their way into the crowd stands General Greg Griggs, a scowl on his face. “This was supposed to be kept secret,” he yells at Hill. She shrugs as she's pushed into the doorway and down the hallway along with Scott and Logan.

Head down, Scott walks with measured steps, keeping one pace away from the guard in front. “You don't behave,” he's told, “and we'll kill your friends up in the compound.”

Logan is split from him, forced down a different hall. He struggles to rejoin his would be lover, pushes back against the guards, and for his effort, he's shot in the knee, and without his healing factor, he struggles to walk. “No go, lover boy,” Hitch says. “You're coming with me.”

Logan's led down into the basements to the surround of the Danger Room. Here, he can see the telepathic arrays that dim the psychic's power, and also Jean Grey who stares wide-eyed at him as she realizes what is going on. Her step towards Logan however is met with a gun to her back. “No one goes anywhere,” the guard says from behind her. “Especially not you, Ms. Grey.”

All around them – the kids, the adults – are guns and heavy weapons keeping them all stationary while the proceedings happen below. An unhappy Steve Rogers enters first, his keen eye spotting Logan up above him. Angered by seeing his one-time friend held prisoner, he argues with Hill. Near to punching her, the soldiers lift their guns aim them at him, threaten to kill the whole group unless he cooperates. “Why did you bring him here?” he asks of Hill. “He didn't have to see this.”

“We weren't sure you'd be available,” she snarks back, hinting to him that she knows of his days with Tony Stark. “You're usually gone on Mondays.”

A glance at Storm, her visage displeased, he looks to the floor and shakes his head. “You shouldn't be doing this, Commander,” he says to Hill. “You should just leave him alone.”

Before she can retort, the audience gasps as Scott Summers is led into the Danger Room and beneath the protective shields that will protect his mind from the many telepaths here. He doesn't look up, doesn't seek the audience. Instead, head down, ashamed that he's so underclothed, that he's scarred, that his death was lied about, he takes the seat center stage.

As soon as he sits, he's chained to the chair with ruby quartz links and binds, made to suffer the vigilance of the crowd above. The red cloud is soft around him, not destructive, but a reminder of the dangerous power that lies within.

“At least give the man his dignity,” Beast growls as he enters the room. He tells the soldiers to cover
him, arms and shoulders, the tatters of his pants. “Treat him like he's human.”

Logan's eyes widen at the sight of Beast below. On his knees, he keeps a close eye on the furry blue mutant, a rage building up inside of him. “I swear, if he hurts him, I'll cut you all down.”

“Quiet little mutie,” Hitch says. “Just watch. That man is going to save the world.”

“I knew what they were doing to you, Scott.” Beast confesses. “I figured it out when we were kids, but I also trusted the Professor and Jean. I thought they knew what was best for you. Maybe, if they'd left you alone, your powers would be more controllable now. But they didn't. And now, science must step in and fix the problems that greed caused.”

The needle is long, the barrel filled with amber liquid. “This, Scott, will lessen the extent of your powers. It will make them more controllable, maybe even nix them for good.”

Up in the viewing area, he can hear the cries of Kitty Pryde as she bangs on the window. She begs Beast not to do it, to leave Scott alone, that it is wrong. The gun to her head, and that of the children that stand beside her is enough to silence her.

But it's Storm that nearly takes his breath. Her pale blue eyes staring down, the shame turning red upon her cheeks. Beast had told her it was the only way, and she had listened to his advice. But taking away Scott's power is something that haunts her now, a regrettable choice – another in her line of leadership.

Calm, quiet, Cyke studies his friend. “Don't do this,” he says.

“I have no choice, Scott. You're a threat to life as we know it.”

“And they're not?”

Beast glances up to the gallery, making sure that Scott's quiet words aren't heard above. “I don't know what you're talking about,” he says.

“How many will die for their cause?”

“Once again, I don't know what you're talking about.”

Wolverine barely picks up on their conversation, keeping his breath held, his ear nearly pressed to the glass. It doesn't take him long to figure out that Beast is working for someone else. Claws out, he stabs through the glass, pounding away with bloody fists until the gun locks onto one of the students. “I will kill her,” Hitch growls. “Have no doubts.”

Below, his head turned up towards the noise and then back, General Griggs gives Beast the nod. And with half-reluctant steps – especially after Logan's outburst – Hank moves to the chair. It takes mere seconds for the serum to be injected into Scott's veins.

It starts with a burning sensation, then turns to pain. In his arm, down through his leg, then up again and to the chest. It spreads out from there like wildfire, crisscrossing his body until all of his nerves are lit and burning him from the inside out. Scott bounds forward, lifting himself from the chair for the pain, a cry upon his lips as he bursts from the shackles and falls to the floor. He starts seizing then, his entire body convulsing from the agony.

To make matters worse, the energy billows out like smoke, eating everything in it's path – Beast's dropped glasses, the floor, the chair. “Rogers!” Griggs calls. “Turn him off!”
Out of shock, Captain America hesitates, but eventually gathers his wits. “Er dogren.”

Scott's body becomes deathly still and the red energy dissipates.

“What the hell did you just do to him?!” Logan calls from above. “You asshole. I will hunt you down!”

Beast tosses the needle into a small plastic bag and puts it in the pocket of his lab coat. He doesn't answer Logan, doesn't answer any of them. Tears or not, he did what had to be done. He did what no one else was brave enough to do – put Scott Summers out of his misery.
Emma and Sinister.

She can feel it. A mind within herself. A mind that's not hers. Free, open, curious. It connects to her, feeds off the gentle knowledge that she is willing to bestow. The feel of silk upon one's fingertips, the scent of a rose, the taste of chocolate. She shows her growing baby what it's like to be hugged, to be loved. A kiss on the cheek. A pat on the head. Her baby, her child, will know love, deep, abiding, and forever.

Sinister draws a vial of her blood, tests it for changes and nutrition. He sends a Madelyne to get vitamin D from the pharmacy, as there's not enough sunlight to produce it here in the underground. “And prenatal vitamins on top of that,” he says, handing her several bills. “Is there anything else you need, dear? Pickles? Ice cream? What are you craving?”

“Hot peppers,” she says without thinking. She's not a fan of spicy food, but the urge to eat hot peppers is almost overwhelming.

Sinister smiles and nods the Madelyne away to procure the supplies. “They've been very quiet since our return, don't you think?”

“They're biding their time,” she says drolly. “They'll try to kill me again. Soon.”

Essex lays his hand on Emma's stomach. “It's going to be a beautiful child,” he says, his eyes nothing but amusement and curiosity. “We should run our tests today. To make sure it's healthy.”

His lab is a crazed network of bio-organic machines, black and sometimes bulbous, mixed with red and green tubes that run between the various cloning chambers and monitors. It's intimidating, and Emma swears she can hear the walls beat with pulse. “You don't like this place, do you?” he asks, offering her a seat in a small computer chair that he wheels from against the wall. “This is where the Madelynes are born. And the other clones.”

The lab extends at least as far as the manor overhead. A gigantic basement transformed into a sprawling room of computers and mesh. She can see remnants of his experiments – shelves filled with glass jars and creepy amber liquid, bones, skeletons. There are white boards in various places, filled with mathematical equations and too-hurried words. What's more is the equipment – MRIs, CT scanners, machines for tracking vitals, and of course the sonogram that he wheels from the left and to her side.

He rubs a clear jelly over her still-flat stomach. She questions him, wonders what they can see so early on in the pregnancy. “You'd be surprised, my dear. There is much we can discern.” In small, tight circles, he moves the want over her flesh, watching the monitor with express interest. “There,” he says, pointing to a small white dot on the screen. “That's your child.”

He produces several needles from the shelves to test her blood and the progression of her amniotic fluid. Her stomach sinks as the man does his tests, reminding her that she's relinquished her care to such a villain. “If you hurt my child--”
Essex smiles wide, a grin that eats away at her confidence. “My dear, why would I do such a thing? After all I've done for you, you still don't trust me.”

The way he looks at her makes her skin crawl. “No, but you don't trust me, either.”

She sits in silence watching him work. Centrifuges and droppers, microscopes and glass holder. He types this information into the computer, along with a copy of the sonogram. “Things are progressing well,” he tells her. “Both you and the child are healthy.” He hands her a large yellow pill and a glass of water. “Take this,” he says. “It will help the baby.”

He escorts her out of the lab and into the great garden around the manor. He reminds her that she needs exercise, and walking at a leisurely pace will grant that. Not to mention that he's set up another picnic for her on the hill.

Down below she can see the toiling of the Gambits, how they brush the horses and water the Creeds. Here, he controls everything, except the Madelynes who have somehow sparked independence within themselves. Sinister calls it a flaw, that interacting with Emma's mind had given them a push towards their own memories, those of Pryor when he sent her out into the world. That they've realized their powers, their identities, and have learned to hide their minds from him. “I'll have to make new ones,” he says, especially now that they know where Summers is. But, he's in no hurry to do the deed, laying them out in front of the Sabretooths. He finds it interesting that they are exerting themselves, and wants to see what they'll do.

“I think it's dangerous,” Emma argues. “If this child is to be born --”

“Aren't you the least bit mesmerized by their chatter, Ms. Frost? The way that they're awakening to themselves. Don't you want to see what they'll become?”

She's not in the mood for such philosophical conversations. She's tired, hungry, thirsty, but at the same time nauseous and light headed. She feels as if she hasn't eaten in weeks. “There's plenty of food,” Essex reminds her, his hands wisping over the charcuterie and sandwiches, the tea and biscuits. “Don't be shy. You're eating for two now.”

A bowl of soup and two sandwiches later, she picks at the meats and cheeses, wishing for wine, but sticking to tea. The Madelynes carry a cake up the hill along with fresh milk. They supply her with her prenatal vitamins and Vitamin D, their faces envious at her feast. They don't talk to Emma, merely wait some feet behind the two of them in order to refill the beverages.

Emma can feel them try to wheedle into her head, their tiny thoughts trying to break through her defenses. But, Emma's too powerful for them, too well trained. She shoots them back with a tenth of her might, knocks them to the ground with sudden pain. Essex laughs at their antics. “I've never seen them so jealous.”

Another walk around the garden, and Emma nearly doubles over from the dizziness. Sinister explains that this is normal for new mothers and that there is no reason to worry, though he is intent on checking her blood pressure. “Your body will acclimate,” he says, “but perhaps we should retire inside for dinner.”

Emma's stomach growls at the thought of more food, hoping for something more substantial than the light lunch on the lawn. She craves meat and thick, rich sauces, candied fruit, fresh salad. And the Madelynes have outdone themselves by order of Essex. A rack of lamb in a hunter's gravy, stewed beets, and a creamy parmesan soup.

She eats her fill, surprised at how much she has consumed. As the Madelynes clear her plates from
the table, Sinister gives her a round of pills. She takes them without thought, without wonder, and retires to her room to sleep off the mass in her stomach.

It's midnight when she hears the Madelynes outside her door. Their little whispers and the ruffling of their skirts. Like sheep, they crowd themselves in the hallway, introducing the newest of them to their greatest enemy. “She's in there,” they explain in unison. “The woman who stole Scott from us.”

They don't touch the doorknob or attempt to open the door. Rather, they reach out with their minds, trying to grasp out for old memories of when she and Scott were together. It's hard to fight them all off when they act as one, and Emma can feel their prying minds delve into head. She fights them, as she can. Brings the pain that makes them squeal in high pitched tones, punishes them for their onslaught of her defenses. One by one, she takes them out, until only the new one is left.

“You will do best to forget this,” she psionically tells the Madelyne. “For if you continue, I will destroy all of you.”

She can hear the click of heels outside in the hall, the sound disappearing with retreat. One by one, she reaches into the unconscious Madelynes minds and erases everything that reminds them of Scott.
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

The aftermath.

Down in the Danger Room, McCoy has set up his lab. A chain of machines set up on the floor, the hard light shields turning everything into a shade of pink. From here, Logan can only watch as Beast takes blood sample after blood sample, runs them through a centrifuge, puts them under microscope.

He wants to scream at the blue behemoth down below, to fight him, to do anything but stand here watching, but there is nothing to be done. Not with SHIELD still aiming their guns at the weakest of them – the children and the adults that can't heal like he does.

Across the walkway, Jean Grey watches him intently, her green eyes rounded with sympathy and regret. She had hoped he was dead, her husband. Had grieved for him, had emptied out the tears in her heart and said her goodbyes. But, she was lied to. The whole world was, and in that, she finds such disappointment and anger.

She crosses the path, moves between the onlookers and bystanders to this frightening event – that one of their own has created a serum that could remove their mutant gifts, it keeps them enthralled. It keeps them ruminating over the possibility that they could be next.

Logan sees her coming. Looks back at Hitch and tells him that if she comes near him, he'll go full berzerker on her. “I'll kill her, and won't be nothing you can do.”

“We don't want any violence now, Wolverine,” the man says quietly, tipping the barrel of his gun to a child to his right. “You just need to keep yourself calm and orderly, like a good little hero.”

Logan understands the threat, and bites his tongue in order to comply.

There is a silence as Jean comes to stand next to him. Temporarily stripped of her mutant gifts by telepathic inhibitors, she watches the scene down below. She can't read the heart monitor from here, but if she concentrates hard enough in the silence, she can hear the steady pulse of Scott's heart. “I'm sorry this is happening,” she says quietly. “Had I known --”

“You would have sanctioned it, just like Storm did.” He knows the truth now, thanks to Hitch. He knows that McCoy has been working on this serum for months, right underneath everyone's noses. “He wants Scott dead,” he reminds her.

“He's dangerous, Logan.”

“Thanks to you.”

He has no sweet words for her, no tomes of love and adoration. Not like before, and not ever again. “He could have been happy --”

“With you?” she asks with some amount of displeasure.

“With me.” He looks at her then for the first time, notices the lines of weariness on her face. The
down turned lips, the way her eyes skip across the scene below, she is beyond overwhelmed with the flood of emotions that she's experiencing. But, he feels no pity for her. His heart is hard, angry, filled with rage. “You destroyed him.”

Jean knows exactly what she did to him. She makes no excuses this time, does not try to reason herself out of this. She understands Logan's vehemence, his cold exterior. “I'm sorry,” she says.

“Apologies don't do shit,” he says. “Not after what you did.”

If she could, if there were no inhibitors, she would reach into his mind, calm him, force him to listen to reason. But, without her mutant gifts, she can only stare into the fire in his eyes, watch as that anger turns him a deep shade of red. “No, they don't,” she replies. “But, it's all that I can do.”

She doesn't tell him about her plans with Xavier, that she needs to protect the world from the damage the telepaths had wrought. “He'll never get better, Logan,” she says quietly.

Logan swings a punch towards the red head – a punch that is caught by Hitch and nearly knocks him to the ground. He recovers quickly, presses the barrel of his gun to the child's head. “What did I tell you?” he yells loud enough that Beast looks up into the balconies to spot the disturbance.

He's betraying them, Hank is. And, as he searches above for friends and family, as he looks across them, he can plainly pick out the fear that he has spread between them. That his miracle cure is a painful thing, and it will be used against them all in time.

His tests complete, he can see the slow rise in junk DNA, but it wavers from one test to the next. Down to eighty percent, then back to one hundred. The next lowers his mutant powers to fifty percent, but the fourth approaches ninety. The numbers aren't stable, and because of that, neither is his safety.

General Greg Griggs watches the tests with a heavy dose of curiosity, asking questions about what Beast is looking for. But, Henry doesn't tell him. As per his bargain with Jebediah Rose, the research is destroyed already, leaving it up to Beast alone to recreate the next syringe of serum and inject Cyclops once again.

Unconscious, he doesn't heave this time, but his body reacts all the same – a thin red cloud that starts to billow over his body. Hank steps back and looks at Steve Rogers who shrugs out his animosity. While he agrees with the decision to cull Scott's powers, he didn't agree to the audience that would witness the terror. He finds it cruel, and within that, he has become reluctant.

“You're a wild card,” Grigg tells him with a lopsided smile. “You're a very hard man to rationalize.” The general had thought Steve would be completely on board with limiting the mutant's powers. “I didn't realize you'd object to the scenery.”

“You're threatening them,” he replies. He knows Griggs only through Fury, having met the intimidating man only once at a gala. He barely spoke to anyone, preferring to keep to himself. Fury had called him an observer, someone with too many secrets, and too much information.

“Of course, they would take it like that. But, I rather think they would find hope in this. A cure. Something that would integrate them into society rather than keep them as outcasts.”

Blonde brow creases over blue eyes, a sudden flash of anger. “They're heroes. They deserve --”

“Better than this, yes. But right now, this is all we can offer. A way out. If it works, and by the look on Dr. McCoy's face, that doesn't seem to be the case.” It's a surprising thing to hear, and Steve studies the broad shouldered man at his side. “I'm very aware of their contributions, Captain. But, I
also know that his power is too great, and we either find a way to cull it, or we have to end him.”

“You knew he was alive, didn't you?”

“I had my suspicions about it. Mutants with healing factors are incredibly difficult to kill. That, and there was no body in that casket.”

It's then that Steve realizes that this whole thing was a plan to draw Cyke out into the open. A possible cure, something that could let him lead a normal life, or at least make his power less burdensome. It didn't matter if the cure worked, it only mattered that he was proven to be alive. Keeping his face still, holding back all emotions, he calmly nods. “If you can't kill him?”

“No one is immortal, Captain. Not Scott Summers, not anyone. There is always a way. It's just a matter of being creative.”

He's a manipulator, Rogers realizes. A puppet master with too many strings, pulling them one by one to set off a chain reaction. He wonders what the end goal is, what the general is really trying to do. “Why did you bring in SHIELD?” he asks. “Why the spectacle?”

Griggs smiles and pats Steve on the shoulder. A small laugh, and he walks away, returns to his stance across the room, his eyes never leaving the makeshift lab. And, Rogers feels sick to his stomach as the weight of his unanswered question heaves over him.
Chapter Summary

Scott wakes up.

The first time he felt butterflies in his stomach he was fifteen and awkwardly staring out the window at the red-head below. His hands moist and shaking, he stuffed them deep down in his pockets to avoid the others finding him out. And as the others reached out for the girl, Scott stood at the rear trying to collect himself by offering her a chair.

The second time was waking in a dark room with Logan nowhere to be found. He wonders if he made a mistake, allowing his capture. Allowing SHIELD to proclaim that he was still alive. If somehow he misunderstood the information that he'd found, if he'd underestimated the enemy. If they'd taken Logan away from him for good. He feels the lack, the worry, the doubt.

He can feel his powers underneath his skin, can imagine the red cloud that seeps out from his body polluting the air. And he also imagines controlling it, calming himself down, willing his heartbeat to slow down and keep the power safely inside. “Logan?” he says quietly, hopeful that the other man is nearby, but he receives no answer in return. Just the darkness and the blips and bleeps of the machines that monitor his vitals. It's only then that he recognizes this place, even in the dark. He's been here before – the mansion's medical lab. And relief allows him to release his breath.

If he's still in the mansion, then that means X-men survived his capture. “Logan?” he calls again, a little louder this time.

“You're awake,” Dr. Reyes says, flipping on the lights. She's exhausted, overworked judging by the large bags under her deep brown eyes. “Good. How do you feel?”

“Fine.”

She drops her brows in frustration. “You could have a bullet in your head, and you'd still give me that answer, wouldn't you?” she jokes, but the joke falls flat. She presses her stethoscope to his chest, listening for his heart beat and any congestion in his lungs. Checking his blood pressure and pulse, she tries for conversation once again. “You had us worried,” she said. “We expected you to come out from the spell a little sooner. Three days is a long time.”

“Three days?”

“Yeah, three days.”

“Where's Logan?”

“I sent him to grab us some dinner. He'll be back soon.”

Cyclops nods, leans back on the bed as she finishes her check-up. “Did they... Did they hurt anyone?” he asks, afraid of the answer.

Cecilia smiles softly. “No. As long as we cooperate, everyone's safe.”
In the pit of his stomach, guilt churns against him, making ill. A dry heave, and then another, that he has done this to them, that he's put them in danger. They are but pawns in this game he's playing with Syrntech. Afterthoughts. “I'm sorry,” he says quietly, avoiding her gaze.

“It's not your fault,” she replies, but Cyclops only shakes his head.

His face grows grim, and his voice heavy. “You should be frightened of me, Dr. Reyes. The whole world should.”

Unnerved by his words she leans back in her chair, studying those stoic features. “You shouldn't say stuff like that, Scott. Especially not with SHIELD pointing guns at the children's heads.” Her bout of anger clenches her jaws tight, teeth grinding, her hands held to fists. “Why would you even say that? I'm trying to help you, but that --”

“The cure didn't work, Cecilia. I can feel them.”

She settles after the stark confession, her eyes rounding out with sympathy. “I know,” she says. “Henry already informed us.” She can see the worry around his red-shaded eyes. The small crow's feet at the corners, the lowering of brow. “He thinks your healing factor has something to do with that, though he's not sure. Kitty wouldn't let him run any more tests on you.” She retakes her seat beside the bed, wraps her hand around his. “It was a harrowing that happened to you. He should have been more forthright with all of us about what he was doing. And the same goes for you. I've heard the rumors, Scott. Tell me their not true.”

“What rumors?”

“That you're starting a war.” Maria Hill believes it, so does Fury. They'd spent the past three days questioning everyone in the mansion, trying to figure out who he's talking to or what he's doing. “They even searched the computers, but everything came up clean.”

He is saved by the appearance of Logan in the doorway, two dinner plates in his hands. Seeing Scott awake, he takes a deep, relieving breath and sets the plates down. “Damn you,” he says, “Don't you ever do that again. Three days, you asshole. Three fucking days.”

A small smile, and the return of those guilty pangs. Again, he dry heaves, and Reyes shakes her head. “The ‘cure’ is still working its way through your system,” she explains. “You really need to take it easy.”

She takes her dinner plate to another part of the lab, leaving Logan and Scott alone. Logan takes his hand, threads their fingers together, and takes another deep breath. “How do you feel?”

“I'm fine,” he replies as expected. “Ready to go back home.”

“About that,” Logan says. “They want to hand you over to Reed Richards for an examination.”

“Why?”

“They think he can help.”

He nods quietly. “Will they leave the mansion alone?”

Logan shrugs. “Don't know, bub, but that's the hope.” It was Kitty's idea to send him to the Fantastic Four, in part to keep him out of SHIELD's hands. “But, she also thinks he can help you.”

“Help me how?”
“By limiting your powers. Maybe make them not so hard to live with.”

“Do you want my powers limited?”

Logan runs his hands through his thick black hair, and shakes his head. “I don't know. When Beast said he had a cure for you, I wanted to rip his guts out. But, these past three days, getting a chance to think about it, how much easier it would be for you...” His voice trails off, and after a moment, he speaks again. “But, at the same time, I feel that it's wrong. That you aren't something to be fixed. You're not a problem, or a burden. And I think the world can just shove it up its collective ass.”

It's the first time in ages that he's heard Scott laugh. A remarkable sound, and so rare. “You should laugh more often,” Logan tells him. “It's good for the soul.”

“I'll talk to Reed if they leave the mansion alone,” he offers.

“You don't have to,” Logan explains. “I'll talk to Fury. He owes me some favors.”

“It's okay. It doesn't hurt to find out what he has to say.”

The one flaw in his plan was getting himself to the Baxter Building – a feat that Kitty Pryde fixed for him, and one that he will take full advantage of. From scoping out Syntech's mole inside of the headquarters, it also means that he can gauge Reed and Sue, to see where they stand midst the chaos. Whether or not they've been tainted like Beast. He must remember to thank her for figuring it out.

“Are you hungry?” Logan asks, still concerned about his well-being. Scott shakes his head no, feeling too much guilt to contemplate a meal. He watches Scott for long moments, once again studies his face for those too-tiny marks of emotion. He knows that something's wrong. “Whatever you're planning, Scott, I will stand beside you.”

Cyclops shakes his head. “I don't want you to get hurt,” he husks, his arms cradling his knees.

“I won't get hurt, Scott. Let me in.”

“You'll hate me.”

“Never again.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”
Chapter Summary

A memory.

The bed was small. A cot. Uncomfortable. Cotton tarp with legs. But, the boy never complained. Not about anything, which unnerved Victor.

The latest round of mutilation was difficult on the boy. An arm, a lung, his ear. Vertigo and nausea from the missing ear, and pain from the still firing nerves. The lab was now full of skeletons, Scott's bones pieced back together with wire and hangers. From pieces of his skull all the way down to his toes, Sinister had carved out at least a dozen of them, complete with the jars filled with his organs. “Genetic research,” he'd explained at some point, but not any further.

All Creed knew was that like the boy, he couldn't escape. Not from Nathaniel Essex, not from someone who could control his mind. Three times he'd tried to leave the lab, and three times Sinister only laughed and forced him back into the tiny room with the bleeding boy on the bed. For days, Victor would remain under his control, zombified and all too obedient. But, then he'd let him go. Let him make his own decisions once again, reminding him that he had signed a contract, and half of that contract had already been paid.

Sabretooth considered himself a master of violence. Conducting it, watching, but even with the first few weeks of his detainment, he found himself cursing Sinister for the damage that he was doing the child. The endless promise that Scott would see his brother soon if he behaved became a heart-wrenching mantra that the boy used to keep up his courage, his strength. And, it was one that Sabretooth himself had picked up in order to cheer the boy on.

“He can't hold the food down,” he told Sinister upon his evening check-up. Looking at the garbage can and then the seven year old on the bed, Essex clicked his tongue on the roof his mouth. “He never can when you take his ears.”

“Then keep trying until he does. If he doesn't eat, he doesn't heal as fast, and I still have more research to do.”

“Come on, kiddo,” Sabretooth eased after Sinister left the room. “It'll be easier on you if we just get this over with.” He spoons his hand under Scott's head and carefully lifts him up. The child is weak from the surgeries, still in too much pain, but he doesn't cry as he's moved into a sitting position, just heaves onto the blanket again and again.

Victor cleans him up, lets him rest for a second before tipping the spoon to his mouth. He urges Scott to take a bite, to try again to finish the broth, but the child is just too sick. “What if I tell you a story? Maybe one about your brother?”

“My brother?” It's the first words he's said since this morning, the first time he'd seemed interested in the world around him.

“Yeah. I saw your brother a few hours ago.”
“Is he okay?”

“Take a bite first.” Scott takes the broth, his still good brown eye searching Creed for hope. “He's fine. Growing like a weed. Take a bite, and I'll tell you more.”

Though Scott lost his battle to keep the food down several times, Victor continued with his stories – how he was learning to read, to do simple math. That he liked his teacher, was well behaved, and liked to play games. He was warm, well-fed, and no one was hurting him.

For Scott, to hear those things were a relief, a visible one, his scarred features relaxing, and even a hint of smile. The boy was grateful for so little. “We'll try to eating again in a couple of hours,” Creed told him and helped him lay back down in the bed. He was careful with him, gentle, even, and before long Scott was asleep.

He was a killer through and through, or at least that's what he's always thought of himself. An animal. A predator. But, even he was sickened by the amount of cruelty that Sinister had unleashed upon the boy.

Down the hall, into the other wing of the lab, Alex Summers played with cars while his nurses watched television. Like Creed, they were also under contract, but they had no complaints about their jobs. The young kid was a joy to work with, they told him. That he was reading at a fifth grade level, that he could write out his ABC's. He's a happy child with a bright future. The conversation with them was short, as always. Neither party could deny their duties for too long.

The days went on much the same, with Nathaniel continuing his experiments. Creed understood little of what he was doing, only that he was seeking a way to release the pressure of the boy's powers. “He's very strong,” he told Victor. “Strong enough to wipe this earth clean of life. No child should have that kind of a burden.”

It was six months into his year long sojourn that Sinister took his heart for the first time. Skeletons and organs aplenty, but not yet the heart. And Scott was distraught at the loss of it. Seven year old hands traipsed across the plexiglass on his chest, and he asked why they did it, why they took it from him. It was closest he'd come to crying. “It'll grow back,” Creed promised him, but the sadness didn't fade.

He'd lost something. His courage, his hope. Victor couldn't quite put his finger on it, but something was lost that day. “Scott, you need to eat.” But, the boy didn't want to. He didn't ask about his brother, didn't bargain with the stories that Creed could tell. Scott Summers – that seven year old child – out of the blue, gave up. And Creed had no idea why.

For three days, the boy didn't move. Victor reminded him that Jean would be searching for him, that he could find her in the wall. Told him that he was disappointing her. That she needed him. But, he wouldn't listen. He was afraid. Afraid that something bad would happen to her, but Creed wouldn't have it.

It came down to a threat, low throated, gargled. His voice an etching of his normal tone, angry and vicious. He put the boy's nub against the wall. “You talk to her, or I'll fucking slice Alex's throat.”

It was fear that drove him to contact Jean. His brother's life, the one person out of all that he wanted to save from the torture that he was undergoing. His hand to the wall, he called her name. “Jean?”

It was moments before she answered, her tone worried. “Scott?”

“I'm sorry,” he said, “But, I have to save Alex.”
Hearing her through the wall, Sabretooth reached out and touched Scott's hand, begging Jean to call the authorities. “He's going to die unless you do something. You have to save him.” He described the lab, it's location. “If you ever felt friendship with him, you have to come and save him.”

He gave her the address, explained how the lab was hidden from view. The exact coordinates. But, she was a child, too young to understand the urgency of his askings. She cried at the sound of another voice, a deeper voice, a more terrified voice. “Get him out of here, or he's going to die.”

“I'll tell my parents,” she promised, calling out for her Mom at the top of her lungs. He could hear her cry, that impatient prodding that echoed across her home. “Mom, help me! Please help!”

But, before her mother could answer back, Sinister was already in the room, demanding that Creed let go of his prize prisoner. Touching his hand to the wall, he was able to extract the spirit of Jean Grey, able to take her astral form and press his hands around her neck. For long moments, Scott watched it happen before he, too, became a projection – his spirit working against Sinister to free his friend and reclaim his mind.

Fighting with the man, however, was difficult. Though he dropped Jean to the ground, her astral form cracked from exertion, Scott couldn't defend himself against such an avid opponent. Smashing him into the wall, cracking fists across his chest, he laughed as the boy began to shatter, as his body began to give way to the force that he offered.

He choked Scott, beat him into a thousand pieces, destroyed his astral form, and with it, his telepathic powers. “You're mine,” he claimed to the young boy. “You'll always be mine.”

Jean faded back into her own body, unable to maintain the form without Scott's powers.

“Learn this lesson, Victor,” he warned the blonde man. “I will kill him if you try something like this again. I will kill you both.”

The boy drowned in grief after that. And though he held on for Alex's sake, he had been ultimately defeated by Sinister.
Tokyo, Japan

Chapter Summary

Cable and Rachel.

“He's alive.”

The hoarse words carry across the small apartment as Cable and Rachel turn on the news. They watch as their father is pelted with rotten vegetables and stones, how he's lead into the mansion, and that they intend to cure the Red Wave of his mutantcy. Stunned, they say nothing to each other, just watch the reporter as she describes the scene outside of the mansion.

Nathan is the first to speak. “I should go to him.”

“Yes, you should.”

They know that they're not allowed to be near him. That decades of psychic warfare has left him hobbled, and having psionic gifts they could prove a bane to him. But, there's also the fact that he's their dad, and that he's in trouble. “You'll stay here with Hope?”

“Yes,” she answers. “Just keep him safe.”

Those in the mansion don't expect him. From Fury to Griggs, Hill to Hitch, his early morning presence at the mansion's door does no one any favors. “This is a tough time,” Storm tells him, waving back SHIELD and their weapons. But, Nathan Summers doesn't care. He's here to see his father, and there's nothing they can do about it.

He's a powerful being, Cyclops' son. Telepathic and telekinetic. He knows the limits of his powers, and the limits of those that suddenly surround him. “Your powers are blocked,” Hill explains before Cable can get any bright ideas. “You can't jump into his mind.”

“I don't want in his mind,” he retorts. “I want to make sure he's safe.” He doesn't trust Storm, who has been all too willing to hand him over to those not invested in his safety. Nor does he trust Kitty Pryde who has said very little if his innocence. “Let me talk to Alex.”

“Alex isn't here,” Storm tells him.

“Then Logan. Let me speak to him.”

She's hesitant. With guns pointed at her head, with SHIELD inhabiting each of the classrooms, he doesn't want to let him in. She knows how violent he can be, how unforgiving. “Nathan,” she speaks, “If I let you in, you have to promise--”

“That I won't hurt anyone,” he finishes, understanding her worry. “I won't. But, I need to make sure that they're not hurting my father.”

He looks lightly armed. A gun or two on his waste, a pulsar on his chest. He's brought no bombs, no fodder for war against so many soldiers. In that she trusts, that he really is here just to see his father. And, for that, she doesn't blame him. She wonders how Rachel reacted to both his death and his life.
How Hope dealt with it. But Cable is not conversational. His anger perched into reddened ears and lowered brow, she knows not about to bring any of this up.

Scott is awake when they get to the med lab. Still terribly injured from his disappearance, still unwell from Beast’s supposed cure, he doesn’t light up when Cable enters the room. “You shouldn’t be here,” he tells his son, embarrassed at his lack. “You need to protect Hope —”

“Rachel’s with my daughter,” he explains. “She wanted to come, but she feared breaching your mind.”

Rachel, after all, had held the Phoenix for years. She’s not sure if the will to do so came from herself or her father. If they had transferred his power to her, and with the Phoenix in his head, she fears the outcome. “She’ll protect Hope with her life, just like I'll protect you.”

Sentimentality between father and son is rarely spoken of. Their grim countenances and stoic facades, they don't share words like this, even when they mean to. But, Hope has changed Cable, taught him that speaking of such things is not a weakness, but rather a strength. To speak of protection, of the bond that these humans share is what makes the world a place worth living in.

“I thought you’d died,” he speaks again and watches as Scott bows his head in guilt. “I wanted to wreck the world for killing you, but your daughter talked me out of it. She said it wasn’t what you wanted.”

“I'm sorry,” Scott replies. “I didn't mean —”

“You did what was needed,” Cable interrupts before his father can shame himself further. “You needed time to heal.”

He gets a brief update from Logan about the guards and the island. That they intend to transfer him back there when they find out once and for all that the cure didn't work. “They don't know how to kill him. The only they can do is hide him.”

“Why bring him out of hiding to begin with then? Why make a public spectacle—”

“That's where the kicker comes in. It was supposed to be secret. Someone leaked it to the press.”

“So, there's a mole in SHIELD?”

“Maybe.” Logan pauses, looks over his shoulder to make sure no one's in earshot. “I need you to do me a favor,” he says. “Or actually do your father a favor.”

“What does he need?”

“He needs you to find Gambit.”

“And?”

Logan shrugs. He doesn't know. “That's all he told me. Gambit must know the rest.” Still in secret, he gives the coordinates of the island to Nathan. “He should be there, waiting on you.”

“Did my father plan this?”

Logan shakes his head. “No, but I think he's trying to take advantage of the confusion.” He doesn't know what Scott's planning, but he's sure there's a lot at stake. “He's being really careful with the dissemination of info.”
Cable understands the way his father's mind works when it comes to threats. After all, everything he knows about strategy came from Scott.

His visit at the mansion does not go unnoticed. The guards watch every step he makes, and so does Jean Grey. Standing at the bottom of the stairs, she waits for her adopted son to reach her before she speaks. “I'm glad you're here,” she says. “I wanted to talk--” Cable moves past her, forcing her to follow him up the steps. “Nathan, please. Just five minutes. Please, just give me five minutes.”

In a huff, he turns to her, his blue eyes piercing and angry. “I'm not here to alleviate your guilt,” he tells her. “What you did to him was wrong, and the fact that you've been given shelter here is a disservice for everything my father has done for this world.”

Jean takes the anger well, nodding, trying to hold back her tears. “I've lost everything, Nathan. Your father, you, your sister. My whole family. I think that's enough punishment, don't you?”

“No,” he says. “It's not. That man lost his entire mind, thanks to your greed. And yet here you are, your mind stable, and taken care of --”

“What do you want from me, Cable? What else can I lose so that you'll forgive me?”

“Nothing,” he speaks in a harsh tone. “I don't think I'm capable of forgiving you.”

He sees the tears in her eyes, and though he feels a sudden pang of guilt for her pain, he doesn't feel enough to relent. “I haven't tried to kill you, Jean,” he says. “That should be good enough for now.”

He walks away, leaving the mansion without goodbyes, while Jean goes back down the hall.

They won't let her in the med lab. Won't let her near her husband. By order of SHIELD or of Logan, she's not sure. But, she can still see him behind the glass enclosure. Cyclops, her husband, the one she betrayed for power. He doesn't see her, doesn't look up. Instead he focuses on Logan and their quiet conversation. “You shouldn't be down here,” Fury says.

“I know,” she replies. “I just want to know if he's better.”

“The cure, you mean? It didn't work. McCoy figures it's his healing factor.”

She wishes that Charles were here. He would be merciless where she is weak. He would remind her of the danger that Scott poses to the world, the threat that they only made worse by destroying his mind. He would know how to shut him off permanently, how to obliterate his mind so that he would never wake up.

Yes, she wishes that Charles were here because she doesn't think she can do it by herself.
“This can’t be real.” Alex Summers shakes his head. “This – This is insane!” Overwhelmed, he stares at the screen and the translated code, reading on with hand to his blonde hair and his words stuttered. “Th-the Avengers?” Kitty nods, as does Dr. Strange. “You can't be serious.”

“It's the only way to save the world, Alex.” Stephen's voice is quiet and calm, resilient and unburdened. “We have to force them out into the open.”

“And k-- I can't even say it.”

“His plans are very thorough. And everything written has come to pass so far. Including Beast's attempt at curing your brother,” Kitty reveals which only stuns Alex further.

“He did what?” He takes a second for the words to really sink in, that McCoy had tried to cure his brother. “And you allowed it?!”

“It's in his notes. A probability of eighty nine percent that Beast would seek a way to --”

“Holy shit. Where is he? Where's my brother?!” Frantic, he rises from his chair and means to escape to the doorway, but the sudden appearance of Illyana with her soul sword brandished, stops him. He turns his gaze to Strange. “You can't keep me here.”

“I'm certain that I can,” Strange smiles, sure of himself. He tells Illyana to sheathe her blade, that no harm will come to Alex. “But, I need you here for a bit longer.”

“Why? Because my crazy brother --”

“Yes. Because of your crazy brother. You need to finish reading his notes. His plans for you are very specific and you must follow through with them.” Kitty agrees with Strange's plea.

“I won't be a part of murder.”

“Alex, he's trying to save the world.” Kitty admits that it is all too much to digest. That the plans are overwhelming, that there are back up plans to Scott's back up plans, too many percentages, too many enemies. “Syntech has been planning this coup for years. Cyclops' has only had months to prepare his counter strategy. He needs your help.”

“How can you believe --”

“I didn't at first,” Kitty reveals. “But, you haven't read all of the evidence yet. He's been very avid about collecting proof.”

“What proof?”

She produces a photo – a single photo that Alex's team had taken at a warehouse in Hong Kong.
“The place was empty, right?” Havok nods. “That same night, he sent Gambit to the same location. She pulls up the photo on screen, pointing out boxes and crates, a whole wealth of workers. “Arms,” Pryde explains. “Enough to bolster an entire army. All sitting in what should have been an empty warehouse.”

The villains were organized, and they had operatives everywhere. In SHIELD, the Avengers, the Fantastic Four. They'd infiltrated as civilians, keeping track of the heroes for years, becoming prized employees and friends. They worked as receptionists tracking phone calls, doctors weighing in on experiments. They were scientists, engineers, janitors, waiters and waitresses. “Imagine how much information they have gleaned over the years, sending it back to the company so that they can wage their war,” she dares, pulling up new photos. “Each of those failed missions were visited again by Gambit on the same night. And each one is filled to the brim.”

Thus far, he's discovered three gun depots, warehouses filled with drugs, and a fleet of ships trafficking mutants from overseas. “They're sold into slavery, kept by the rich as maids and butlers, gardeners, servers. Life will not be pretty for mutants if Syrntech accomplishes their plans. But,” she takes a pause, “he needs your help. Without you, the plan fails.”

“I'll hear him out,” Alex promises, “But, I don't promise anything.”

“That's fine,” she agrees. “I think by the end, you'll see what we see.”

By the end of the night, Alex is bone weary and skeptical. Though he's been shown tons of proof, he still doubts his brother's plans. There are too many contingencies, too many things pieced together inside of a broken mind. “This goes too far,” he says at last, his voice quiet and filled with exhaustion. “This can't be--”

“I thought you believed in your brother,” Illyana scolds him.

Startled, Alex turns around to face her. “Where are the others?”

She shrugs. “Eating. They tried to invite you, but you were too engrossed in all of that to hear them.”

“I want to see him, Illyana.”

“That's not a bright idea,” she sighs. The mansion is a mess right now. Too many protesters, too many soldiers. They're on lock down right now, with no visitors going in or out save for Cable who disappeared this morning. “You'll just make things worse.”

“How--”

“Because you're a Summers. And with your temper all in a knot like it is, you're going to say the wrong thing to the wrong people, and you're going to blow Scott's plan sky high.”

He knows that she's right. He's always had a shorter fuse than his brother. But, he also needs to hear it from Scott that this is the right course of action. “I need to talk to him.”

“Too bad,” the teen sighs and shakes her head. “I don't think they're going to let him go again.”

“What do you mean?”

“SHIELD's going to take him into custody. Probably keep him there until this is all resolved.” She's well-informed, as she should be having looked through everything herself. “In the meantime, I'm bringing the rest of your team down here to show them the plan. You'll have a couple of days to ponder this before shit blows up. Maybe then, you'll see how essential you really are.”
With just time enough for goodbyes, Magik teleports him back to the island and asks the rest of the team to follow her, leaving Alex alone with the children. They ask him about Scott, if he's okay, if he's coming back, and though Havok is unsure, he tells them all that his brother's fine and will be back soon. “He's just gone to visit some friends.”

Hours later, when they've finally gone to bed, he sneaks into the computer room and pulls up the files that Cyclops had coded. He knows the cipher now, and the words read like doom all over again.
A street

Chapter Summary

Gambit, Cable, Rachel.

Adrianna Swift got here the night before last. Her tent and sleeping bag, small camp stove and coffee. It's a three day wait for the newest XLR XS smartphone, and she wants to be one of the first to hold it. The pictures, the apps, the speed, she took her vacation to come here, to wait with the crowd and spend her hard earned wages.

The man that speaks to her has a funny accent, one that she can't quite place, but she knows it's part southern. He asks to see her phone – the XLR T3 – last year's creation. He admits that it's a nice phone, that the tech is good, but wonders why she needs another. “It's a better phone,” she answers, explaining that it's supposed to be able to handle more, and she needs that more.

They all do. Everyone in this line – a line that stretches for hours beyond the store – wants it. And there's no convincing them otherwise. Their phones light up the night, those bright screens in cold-shook hands. And, for as many people as are here, there are very few dialogues. They're slaves to their screens, sated, unaware. Here, they chat with far off friends, ignoring the world around them. They play their games, take their selfies. They connect to people they've never met, wishing their three day wait was over, and count the upvotes on their social media outlets as they order tacos from the waiting food truck.

Enthralled by their tiny screens, they don't notice the man with a gun just outside the perimeter of light, or the fact that he appears out of nowhere with a young redhead who listens closely to his tale. “We're fighting telephones?” Rachel asks, misunderstanding the situation. Hope is spending the next two nights at a friend's house, and though Gambit had asked him not to bring Rachel into the loop, he refused to abide by that. She had a right to know what their father was up against, and if he truly was wanted for his strategy, then bringing his half-sister into this was imperative.

“No the telephones themselves,” he answers, “but the company that's making them.”

Watching as the people lean back against brick walls, their eyes focused on those insatiable screens, a dread pulls at her stomach. “They're addicted,” she says quietly after a soft psionic sweep of their minds.

“Too sated to notice how much danger dey're in,” Gambit adds, finally finished with his stroll through the crowd. “Dey won't fight back. Dey won't even realize that they need to fight.”

“So what do we do?” she asks.

“We wake them up. We show them a world in peril.” Gambit knows their mission. He knows what needs to happen. And, if Cable really thinks that Rachel is necessary, then he needs to fill her in on what they do next.

It's a psychic transference, the plans, their mission. From Nathan's mind to his sister's, with Gambit linked in for more detail. She is horrified by their mission tonight, speechless. “We're blowing up Avenger's tower?” she says a little too loud, but the crowd doesn't hear her.
“Not yet,” Gambit says, a finger in the air to quiet her down. “Tonight, we just setting de bombs.”

“But, all those people -”

“It's necessary,” Cable responds. He shares with Rachel the wealth of information that he gleaned from his father's notes. Those days in the computer room on the island. With the help of Gambit, he was able to decode them, and like the others, he knows what his father his planning.

Rachel takes a deep breath as she sorts through the massive amount of her father's cunning. “Are you sure this is real?” she asks, giving tentative looks to both Gambit and her brother. “You're positive that all of this,” she says with a wave of her hand over the crowd, “is something sinister and not just coincidence?”

“I've seen too much,” Gambit responds, “not to believe it.”

“You don't have to do this, Rach, but I thought you'd want to be involved --”

“Of course, I want to help, Nathan. It's just a lot to consider all at once.”

He nods. “We're setting the bombs tonight – underneath both buildings.”

“Are you sure this is the only way?”

Cable and Gambit both nod. “It's a good plan, chere. Cyclops is going to save a lot of people.”

“And maybe kill just as many?”

“Sometimes losses are worth it.” Cable's a veteran of too many wars – in this time, in the future. He's learned to calculate loss and reward. He's learned that death cannot be avoided, no matter how precious life actually is. He scans the crowd once again, his gray brow narrowing over the plethora of screens. “If the chain is broken, if Syrntech is put down, we'll be helping to save the world.”

Rachel decides that it's her softer side that her father feared, her years as a hound that left her with too-deep knowledge of what it's like to kill. That's why he didn't want her included in his plans. He didn't want to see her suffer. “He was trying to keep me away from this,” she says, realizing now how frightened she is of the coming war.

Cable repeats his earlier sentiment, that she doesn't have to fight in this. She doesn't have to be involved. “But, you deserve the chance to decide on your own, rather then let Dad decide for you. You've earned that much for all of the years you've spent fighting for the X-men.”

She sees the proof of Cyclops' allegations. The photos in her head, the crowd in front of her. She sees why her father is adamant about this war, why he finds these drastic measures necessary. But, she also sees something her brother doesn't. “He's going to take the blame on himself, isn't he?”

It's something that neither the Cajun or Nathan had thought about, the consequences of these actions. How the world will once again come to curse his name. “He knows what he's doing,” Nathan assures his sister. “He knows how the world will react.”

“Of course he does,” she counters, “but that doesn't mean it's right.” She worries for her father's well-being. She was there when the world hated him the first time, how anxious it made him, how willing he was to let the world focus on him and let Logan save the mutants. She felt for him then, how undeserved it all was. “It's not good for him.”

“Maybe not, but it's all we've got.” Gambit can think of no one else who could wrap their head
around Syrntech and its machinations. Not even Cable could handle this undertaking, especially in so short a time. “We'll have to deal with that after the war is over.”

Rachel returns her attention to the crowd, their phones lit up like stars, their attention unwavering. They don't realize what's coming, that in a few short days, their entire lives will be shaken up by a war that no one saw coming. They'll blame the mutants, her father, their protests will grow loud in the streets. They won't understand what they're being saved from; they won't understand how close they are to enslavement by this powerful think tank. “They'll never forgive him.”

“Maybe,” Cable offers with a slight sigh. “But, what other choice do we have?”

“To tell the truth. That when this is all over, they'll know that Dad's a hero --”

“We're mutants, they won't believe us.”

She knows that her brother's right, and for that she is saddened.

A body slide by three, and they enter an underground bunker in New Jersey. The place is already stocked with food and water. It's safe house- one of Cable's. And here, he stores his bombs. These are the bombs that will be planted under the Avengers Tower and the Baxter Building, down in the Moleman's tunnels, the great pylons that hold these buildings up.

They go over the blueprints of the buildings and the structures beneath, pinpointing stress points and joints, the places where they'll plant the bombs. They want an easy implosion, one that rocks the buildings down instead of off to the sides. And Gambit, being their local blow-things-up-guy, understands the placement of each. He's studied this for weeks now, and Cable agrees with his positioning. Rachel still has her doubts. “It'll be clean, chere,” Remy promises her. “Straight down. The civilian buildings won't get harmed.”

“Are you ready?” Cable asks her, gauging her for doubts, but she is firm in her stance.

“Do you think we'll get to see him?” she asks.

Cable shakes his head. “I don't know, Rachel. It depends on how all of this turns out.” Plans could go bad. As many contingencies that he's written into his code, despite how well prepared his plans are, this whole thing could go south at any time. “Let's just hope he survives it for now, with his mental faculties intact.”

She gives him a soft smile, on that contains worry and hope, and together, they set out for the tunnels beneath the Baxter Building first.
The Baxter Building

Chapter Summary

Guinea pigs.

He's not afraid. Though his heart beats a marathon, though the red cloud hovers around him, he's not afraid. He's beyond this, been through this. The poking and prodding, the machines and their mechanic pulses that stir their rhythm into his bones. He knows what Reed Richards will find. It will be the same as Dr. Reyes. That he's a monster and out of control. They'll think no more of him, especially when he takes the world to war.

Logan – skeptical and angry – stands off to the corner, his gray eyes darting back and forth between Cyclops on the bed and Forge and Reed Richards by the computer. They've talked quietly to each other all morning, and though Logan can easily hear them, he doesn't understand a word they say. He's not mechanical, not a scientist, so their words seem so foreign to him. Taking a stop closer to the bed, he stares down at the wire laden mutant, the experiments, the drips that enter his blood. They're trying to keep him calm and tranquilized, administering doses of anti-psychotic meds and other things. He's become what Logan fears most in this world – the object of scientific curiosity and the object of men too smart for their own good.

It's a long day for them, and a longer night as Logan pulls up a chair beside the bed. Sue brings him dinner and Johnny a couple of beers, but he's mostly quiet, not in the mood for their carefully cheerful banter.

Out in the atrium, beyond the doors of the room, SHIELD keeps their watch. Logan's vaguely aware of them, their scents, and how antsy they are that they can't see what's going on inside the room. It's midnight when Reed comes to check on them, his brown eyes flitting across the various screens. He takes a vial of blood, puts it under the microscope, and puts the rest in the centrifuge. Logan has no idea what he's looking for, what he's doing, but he's hoping that Richards is an ally now, that he can be trusted.

"You need to evacuate, Reed," Scott says quietly from the bed. His body eased by the IVs plugged into his veins, he barely has the momentum to lift his head. "The whole building. You need to shut it down."

A nervous smile and Richards turns to look at his patient. "What?"

"You need to evacuate."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to blow up the Baxter Building."

Wrangling the cords from his arms, relieving himself of the tranqs and meds, he sits on the bed, his visor towards the floor. "You have an hour," Scott says quietly standing up and moving towards Logan. "Please, heed my warning."

In the flash of a second, Cable appears in the room. He takes a quick glance towards Reed, and then
his father. He grabs hold of Logan, pulls him inside the sphere, and with the words, “Body slide by three,” he disappears as quickly as he came.

In a rush, shocked and near breathless, Richards runs from the room, yelling at the guards that Cyclops has escaped. He hits the alarms, calls for a complete evacuation of personnel.

“What the hell--” Fury begins, scratching his head in both confusion and exahustion.

Reed relays Cyclops' message with all the furor in his blood. “I have to save my family,” he says before rushing to the elevators.

It doesn't take them long to pack what they need, the few things that they want to keep. Reed stuff files into his suitcase, a change of clothes. He watches as his family drags their suitcases filled with photos and toys, things that they can't live without, things that they'll need if they intend to start over. Valeria cries against her mother's waist, scared and frightened of losing her home. Johnny takes care of Franklin, holding his hand tightly, his own face a stunning picture of worry. Down into the streets they run as Johnnny and Reed search the labs to make sure everyone is out. Ben Grimm meets them down below.

S.H.I.E.L.D cordons off the area with yellow caution tape, pushes everyone back and back until they are over a block away. They call in the bomb squad who stands at the perimeter, too late now to go search for the bombs. Too late to do anything but hope that Cyclops was not true to his word. Tanks and other armored vehicles move in close, unafraid of rubble and debris.

The explosion happens at one am on the dot. Triggered from below, the building starts to shake and quake with the absence of the pylons. The people run for cover, afraid of the leaning upper floors, screaming as they go. The building falls straight down, floor by floor crumbling into the ground below, and the sound of it echoes across Manhattan.

“I want Scott Summers' head on a platter.” Fury seethes, hand over his eyes as the building swallows in on itself.

Watching the destruction of their home, Franklin and Valeria weep silent tears, while the rest stand dumbfounded that Scott would do something like this to them. The Baxter Building contained their whole life, and now it was nothing but a heap upon the ground. “At least no one was hurt,” Ben says, patting Sue on the back. “At least he gave you time to evacuate.”

“That's not saying much,” Johnny snarks. “Did he even say why he was doing this?”

“Maybe he didn't like being a guinea pig,” Ben says with a click of tongue to teeth. “Maybe he wants to finish what he started with the Red Wave.”

Reed shakes his head. He looks around the area, looks for S.H.I.E.L.D or any other bystanders. “No. He has a reason for this. I'm sure of it.” The others didn't see him, didn't see how sad he looked, how stressed he was. It was in the way he stood, that apologetic stance, the way he looked at the floor. “He's gotten himself into something that he can't back out of.”

“No. He saved your lives.” Behind them, out of thin air, stands Illyana Rasputin. She hides from S.H.I.E.L.D, leading the family around the corner and into a darkened alleyway. All around there are spinning lights and sirens, and Illyana's voice is so small between the noises. “Cyclops needs your help.”

“He just blew up our home--” Johnny huffs.
“You were being watched,” she reveals. “We took care of that for you.”

“You were being watched? By who?” Reed asks, feeling the sickness in the pit of his stomach.

“You'll find out soon. And when you do, he needs you to be ready.”

“For what?”

“Don't know and don't care,” she says. “Ask him the next time you see him. And there will be a next time.” She grabs hold of Franklin and Valeria. “I need them to come with me,” she says, her demeanor softening as she looks upon the frightened children. “They'll be safer with me. Safer with Dr. Strange. No one will harm them there.”

Sue says no, grabs back her children and wild eyed threatens Illyana to touch them again. “My children stay with me --”

“Your children will die then. That much I can guarantee. Send them with me, and Dr. Strange will keep them safe.” Her eyes round with apology. “Please. Cyclops doesn't want them hurt.”

Sue looks to Reed, her eyes glassy and stung. She can't imagine leaving her children with this devil child, this mutant with a soul sword and the ruler of Limbo. And in shock, she watches as her husband nods and pushes their children forward and onto the teleportation disc. “Tell Cyclops, if any harm comes to my children, I will find a way to destroy him.”

“He'll thank you later for your trust in him.” And with that, she disappears, leaving the Fantastic Four alone.
Emma is afraid.

She looks eight months pregnant, though it's barely been one. Her stomach protrudes, her breasts are full. In the mirror, she looks to be glowing, but inside, she's worried. She's worried that Sinister has done something to her child, and in her heart, she knows that that wariness is real.

He injects her, everyday, in her thigh. A yellowish liquid that he calls vitamins and minerals, but still insists she takes her prenatal vitamins. She's questioned this at least a dozen times in the past month, but he's no more conversational than she is.

She lives a quiet life now, in the heart of Sinister's city. Midst the Madelynes and Gambits, the Creeds and others. She saw a Roberto Dacosta two days ago, and a Bobby Drake. So many clones, so many copies, but nothing like her or the DNA she's carrying in her stomach.

Emma wants to escape, wants to leave this place because she fears what it's doing to her child. The only thing in the world that could love her now. The only creature that could forgive her. Cyclops surely won't. Nor will Logan, or the others. To be seen now, by the X-men, would be shame, but at the same time, she doesn't know where else to go. Where else to find solace, to find rest.

“I want them gone,” she tells Essex, smoothing a graceful hand across her stomach. She's tired of the Madelynes and their plotting, tired of waking up in the middle of the night to find one of them holding a knife and ready to carve her child out of her. “They're out of control.”

He tells her that she's crazy, that there's nothing she needs to worry about. “They're under my control, dear. They won't hurt you.”

“But, you will hurt me,” she says and indicates her stomach. Round and bulbous, a departure from her perfectly sculpted abs and thighs. She doesn't look like herself. Doesn't look so well endowed. The shape of her body looks like a foreign thing to her. “You're doing something to my child.”

It's in the tea, the chemical he gives her. In her meals. In her bathwater. A growth hormone that he's purposefully created for just such an occasion. “When Maddy gave birth, I couldn't be there,” Nathan begins. “She was too far away and too far gone from me. I won't allow it to happen this time.” He wants fresh samples, to see the DNA before nature changes it.

Emma threatens to leave if he continues to treat her child like an experiment, but he reminds her that they struck a deal, and that if she were to leave, that deal would be broken. “I'm not a man to be trifled with, as you well know.” Then a flippant smile crosses his face. “Besides where would you go after what you have done?”

Her perfect face pales with guilt and shame. She looks to the floor and then at her stomach. “I did what I had to,” she says.

“Of course, you did,” Essex replies, “But, that doesn't mean they'll forgive you for it.” He's angry now, this discussion of theirs. He feels betrayed by her threats, that she would leave, and he also
adds that if she does, the baby will die. “And then, the horror you caused will be for nothing.”

“What do you mean my baby will die?”

“Exactly that,” he sneers. “Without me, your child will not live.”

“What have you done to me?”

He smiles, snaps his fingers for the nearby Madelyne. She refills his glass with wine and she takes away his plate. He leans back in his chair, burgundy in hand. A sip, another. “Nothing that you wouldn't approve of if our situations had been reversed. You're a cruel mistress, Ms. Frost. As cruel as they come.”

“What have you done to my child?” she rasps, her voice caught in the back of her throat. “Tell me!” she yells, banging her fists on the table.

“Nothing you need worry about. So long as you stay here.”

Fear sweeps across her shoulders, raises them with the need for defense. Emma can feel him gnawing at the back of her mind, looking for the memory of her greatest sin. She counters his psionic attack with one of her own, but she doesn't expect the Madelynes to protect their master, and within moments, she's knocked to the floor by a telepathic explosion.

She wakes hours later in her room, her shoes removed, her head still spinning from the dual attack. It's only then that she realizes that she's a prisoner here. That she's been a prisoner the whole time, and that Mr. Sinister will truly live up to his name. She curses as she cries, her mind trying to reach her child's, but there is no connection. It's been severed by the Madelynes.

Emma knows how to escape from this place. She knows the path to reach freedom, and she's strong enough to stave off the Creeds that will hound her progress. And, there's only one place that she can think of to go. The only place that may take her in despite her sins. The only man that she can think of that can save her little girl.

Outside her door, the Madelynes mingle, their whispered voices too loud in the midnight silence. Like gnats, they swarm, waiting to be knocked down. Emma cannot turn to diamond, or so Sinister had told her some weeks ago. It would hurt her unborn child, but Emma is stronger than the Madelynes – so long as Sinister stays out of the fight. They're uncoordinated without his mind bolstering their thoughts, leading them through the fine mesh of neuron pathways.

The Madelynes are barely practiced in defense, the bulk of it coming from the confusion of six scattered minds trying to hold back the weight of Emma's attack. They struggle, cry out, and fall to Emma's attack, knocked out for the rest of the night.

She wishes she could trust them, could use their powers to stave off the Creeds that will come for her when she steps outside. She wishes she could show them to freedom, but to do so would only put her child at risk. So, she escapes on her own. Grabs the white horse from the stables, putting the Gambit on duty to sleep, and rushes off into the forest.

The Creeds are hot on her tail, howling and growling as they make their way through the forest on all fours. They nip at her horse's ankles, and she deals them each a psychic blow that causes them to roar in pain as her powers rip apart their brains. Again and again, her mighty mind deals those painful blows when they catch up to her, sending them to their knees with pained howls quickening the pace of her heart.

At the edge of this great forest, beside the metal rung stairs that leads up into the world, stands
Sinister. With a wave of his hand, the Creeds become silent and slink back into their pit where they will be fed well for obeying his commands. “My dear Ms. Frost, you aren't trying to escape, are you?”

“I will not let you harm my baby,” she says with a shiver of fear running up her spine. She can win this. Though he's a prolific psion, so is she. She was an X-men, she reminds him. She knows how to fight.

He smiles, a vicious sneer that stops her breath for its cruelty. “You choose not to heed my warnings?”

“You can't force me to stay here,” she says fighting back against her urge to flee the man.

He shrugs, rolls his eyes and sighs. “Of course not,” he says and takes a step away from the ladder. “You were never a prisoner here, but I did not expect that you would back out of our bargain.” With another sigh, he takes another step further from the ladder. “Go ahead. If your child means so little to you, then by all means go forth into the world, and don't blame me when it dies.”

He walks away then, without looking back. One step after another, he leaves her alone to contemplate her choice. “You poisoned my child, didn't you?!” she yells after him, getting off the horse. “You tried to kill her!” But, he doesn't answer back. Feeling the weight off her decision, the fear for her child, she climbs up the metal ladder, and returns to the world above.

And in this world, she must find Henry McCoy.
The world reacts with viciousness and fear. They call him a terrorist, a villain, a threat to be killed, maimed, made to pay for the horrors that he's enacted. And, he doesn't blame them. It's what he wants them to say. It's what he needs them to say.

Half stuck in dream, half awake, Scott hears the voices in his head prodding him along to do terrible things. Reminding him of how much a waste he is. At the same time, he listens to his son and daughter, who speak of the next part of the plan, of the things he still has yet to do. He wishes that he could look at them, not through red lenses, but without. To see them for once for who they really are.

“Dad?” Cable asks, a deep sigh in the back of his throat. His father is losing the battle to keep himself sane. They can all see it.

Horrified by what Scott has done, Logan stands against the wall, arms over chest. He regrets leaving Cyclops to his own devices now. If he'd known that this was part of the plan, he would have talked the mutant out of it. “Logan?” Rachel says, placing a hand upon his shoulder. “Please?”

They tell him that it was necessary. That the building was bugged from top to bottom. Too many spies, too many plants, all reporting back to Syrntech. “And, no one was hurt,” Cable reminds him. “No one was lost.” Logan wants to know the rest of the plan, but Cable shakes his head. “We just need you to trust him, keep him calm. He's afraid to lose you.”

The children of Cyclops are earnest in their beliefs that this is the right thing to do, and are as sure as they can be of Logan's role in things. He's the rock that their father needs, the anchor. “He needs you,” Rachel says. “He needs your trust.”

Logan recognizes the look on Rachel's face. The same look she gave him when she followed him to the Jean Grey school, leaving her father to his own devices with his Extinction Team. It's a look that pleads for mercy, for understanding. She hated the anger that Logan held for her dad, hated that how the mere mention of his name could send an entire room into rage.

“I can't--” he pauses, looks across the room to Cyclops. He licks his lips and shakes his head. “I can't--”


“No, you don't,” Logan bites. His tone is aggravated, worried. “I can't watch you do this to yourself, Scott. I can't watch you implode again.”

“There's no other way, Logan. If I don't become the villain, then the world is doomed.”

A deep breath, and Logan has no idea how to handle this situation. There's nothing to stab, nothing to fight. His healing factor, his adamantium skeleton – none of it makes a difference here. Not to Scott, not to his children. Slowly, he exits the room, heads out into the hallway of Cable's bunker, far
away from the broadcasts about the mutant menace, the half-siblings and their untarnished faith, and Cyclops, still too broken to comprehend what he is doing to himself. “He thinks he deserves it,” he says to Rachel as she follows him. “He thinks he deserves that hatred.”

“It's going to get worse,” she warns him. “And it's going to be hard for him to shoulder. We need you to keep him calm, to remind him of who he is.”

“What's worse than blowing up the Baxter Building?”

“Blowing up the Avengers Tower.”

Gray eyes widen in utter disbelief. “I can't let him--”

“Yes, you can,” she insists. “You haven't seen the plans. You don't know what he's doing, but trust me, every step he's laid out is necessary. I can show them to you if you want. I can give you the plans.”

But Logan isn't sure he wants to know. “He's starting a war--”

“But the real one starts,” she interrupts. “He's in control of this, Logan. He has to keep it that way. Please, Logan. Don't leave him. It will break him if you do.”

Guilt, shame, fear. He feels it all in a matter of seconds, swirling down in his stomach, pounding against his heart. He remembers so clearly his days of hatred, watching the man spin out of control, losing his mind and his friends in a mission to keep the mutants safe. He despised Scott then, possibly a product of psionic manipulation, and that loathing ran deep, and he can feel that old flame seep into his bones. “I can't stay here, Rachel. I can't watch him fall apart again.”

“The only way he'll fall apart is if you're not here for him.”

She returns to the room, leaving Logan just outside. He slides down the wall, rests his head on his knees. He's a castle, Scott is. Full of defenses and mechanisms, always with the weight of the world on his shoulders and a never ending stream of plans to save it. And in all of that, in that castle, there is a place for him that he can't seem to reach. A long hallway, a room at the end that Scott keeps locked out of fear of losing control. He doesn't know how to do this.

The bunker is bigger than the house on the arctic isle, filled with futuristic weapons and machinery. An AI system tracks Logan as he wanders through the hallways, leads him to a small viewing area that looks out over the coastline of New Jersey.

It's the kind of place that he'd like to take Scott. A dense forest and cliff line. A beautiful place devoid of people, absent of troubles. It's a place where there are no people, no missions, no calls to arms or world to save. It's the type of place Cyclops needs. The kind of place that he, himself, needs.

Hours pass as he stares out the window, contemplating what he should or shouldn't do. Stay with Scott and let this war happen, tell the Avengers that their lives are in danger. He could kill him, pretend to kill him, and take him into hiding once again. Find some cabin in the Canadian wilderness and keep Scott all to himself, letting the world proclaim him dead once again. Or, he could actually do the deed and find some way to protect the world from an out of control mutant. He hates these thoughts, how intrusive they are, how hard they are.

“Cable can take you where ever you want to go.” The voice is soft, almost unheard. It's careful, sad. Cyclops doesn't look at him, keeps his visor to the floor. The red fog is angry, chinking out small pieces of the floor and door frame. He's trying to keep it under control. Trying to breathe through it,
but it's not working. Being here alone with Logan is making that impossible.

“Why do you want the world to hate you?”

“I don't.”

“Then why do all this? Why not just share your information --”

“Because I have to draw them out. It's the only way to stop them.”

“Who?”

“Syrntech.”

“Scott--”

“Logan.” A long silence as Scott gathers his courage to look at the man in front of him. There's a coldness to him, a familiar feeling. The walls come up, surround him, lock him inside of himself. “If you want to leave --” He stops himself, swallowing hard. “Don't... Don't leave me.”

The red energy begins to spiral around him, the depth of his emotion a radical thing about him. He breaks to his knees, gnars hands through hair as he tries to reel it all back in. That energy that he can't quite control. He whimpers at the onslaught, as the floor is destroyed, the door frame. He struggles with in, and feels the weight of Logan's hand on his spine. “Just breathe, Scotty.”

Logan curls the man into his lap, watches as the red energy eats away at the world around him. Smoothing his hand through Cyclops' hair, whispering and rocking, he keeps the taller man close to his chest, the smooth rhythm of heartbeat a practiced, soothing escape. “Don't leave me,” he repeats, his fingers pinching in to the hardened muscles of his arms. They would draw blood if they could through the fabric, a desperate move that only strengthens the swirl of ruby cloud.

Logan holds him tight, presses a kiss onto the top of his head. “I won't,” he finally says. “I won't leave you.”

He has a feeling that he'll regret this promise. That events will play out as before, but for now, he tries not to think about it. As he holds Scott in his arms, trying to bring the man some sort of solace, all he can do is tell him that it will all be okay, that he won't leave him again, that he's here until the end.

Scott falls asleep some hours later. A hard sleep. A Phoenix sleep. He rocks and rolls, his body giving in to the ultimate power trapped within his mind by the Scarlet Witch. He wants to give up, wants to bow to her power, but Logan won't let him. He stronger than she is. Stronger than a multitude of them. He's better, more intact. Though he doesn't believe it.

Scott reels in his pain, his mind split, torn, undone. The knots of his memories, the displacement of his self. There is no cure for this. No haphazard way to see beyond. It's him or the menagerie of thought. And Logan, for all the good he's worth, chooses the man behind it all, seeking out the small victories of doubt, the bare essence of self. He knows Cyclops. Knows his need, his thought. And none of it's this. The Scott he knows isn't so forgiving; isn't so pliant. “You're better than this,” he says aloud, watching as Scott struggles to remain in control. “You're better than this.”

He pulls the struggle inward, ear against chest. He holds Cyclops tight, makes sure he feels the arms around his head, the hands grasping at jaw. “You're better than this,” he repeats, feeling the shivers down spine, the quickening of heart. It's his hands around head that call for calm – the right around jaw, the left around crown. Intertwining, he grasps at things he doesn't understand – the loneliness,
the ultimate goal. “I believe in you, Scott,” he says with a gentle kiss to nape of neck.

Scott presses himself into chest, in the bundle of chin and arms. The warmth of it. The sturdiness of it. He rams himself against Logan's heart, begging for that warmth, that sturdiness. And Wolverine responds, giving him what he needs. He pulls himself down, collapses the body in his arms. Head and shoulders, arms and ribs. He holds Scott back, makes him feel as loved as he should be.

“I'm afraid of you,” Scott says quietly, pulling back. Red lenses to the torn apart floor, he takes a deep breath. “You can destroy me.”

“I won't do that to you, Scotty.”

“I hope not.”
Another riot. This one burning down a host of civilian buildings in Rhode Island. Storm watches the news amazed at what Magneto has been able to accomplish. His army, his sway. He's public enemy number one – well, two if Scott is considered. He demands the head of the President, calls him weak and a liar. He divulges the experiments in the Undertow, the enslavement of his kind throughout Europe. He will hold the whole world hostage if it means righting these wrongs. And, with the Red Wave on the loose – an ally, Eric calls him – there is no way he will back down.

“Sam was right,” she says quietly, her pale blue eyes looking over Head Table. “He's going to assassinate the President.”

There are differing opinions midst Ororo's advisers. Action and inaction, searching for Scott or fighting Magneto. They argue over who is the bigger threat, whose actions will directly effect mutants more. They are at a loss when it comes to unity in their decisions, and the arguments that break out are not surprising.

Bobby Drake thinks that bringing down Cyclops is their best course of action. If they can find him, if they can keep him under control, then Magneto's fire will surely calm down. “SHIELD can't handle him,” he says. “They have protocols for Magneto.” Ceramic weapons and plastic armor, they are more than capable of bringing Magneto and his army of mutants down, but none of them can deal with Scott. “We have Steve Rogers,” he continues. “Rogers can turn him off and keep him that way until we figure out what to do.”

“We can't ignore Magneto,” Dazzler says. “He's gaining more followers everyday. They're causing too much damage, too much chaos. We have to stop him before things get worse.”

And so the arguments start again. Storm listens carefully to the words cast among her friends. The consequences that they speak of if they let Scott run free or don't stop Magneto. But it's Kitty who loses her temper first, banging on the table for quiet. “We stop them both,” she says. “This isn't the time to stand on our heels and let the world deal with threats that we are more than capable of handling. We train for this. We are the heroes that the world needs right now. Not the Avengers. Not SHIELD. We are. The X-men. It's time we talk to Alex. It's time we put a stop to this madness.”

“All eyes turn to Jean Grey. “I can defeat him.” Beast interrupts with a shake of his head. “We can't do this. We don't have the numbers. We don't have the strength. It's time the world took care of itself. SHIELD has Magneto protocols. They, too, have trained for the day when they have to face him. And Scott? There's no way to defeat him.”

“I can defeat him.” All eyes turn to Jean Grey. “I can shut down his mind. Permanently.” Silence. “Xavier and I always knew there was a chance that Scott would lose control. We built a switch in his mind that would shut him off if things became too much for him to control. That switch still exists, and since this is my fault, it should be me who kills him.”

Stunned to silence, they all turn to her in frightened awe. The flush of red against her cheeks, the glass of her eyes, she is near to crumbling with her proclamation. “Jean...” Storm begins, but has no
words to fill the gap.

The long silence is finally broken by Steve. “It doesn't have to go that far. I can use the spell to keep him asleep until we find some other way --”

Jean shakes her head. “He blew up the Baxter Building, Steve. People could have been hurt. It's time to finish it. It's time to end his misery.”

“You would never recover, if you do this, Jean.” Beast leans forward in his chair, puts elbows on table and scruffs the soft blue fur on his head. “You would never get past it.”

“Maybe not,” she says, “but the world would be safe.”

“There are other ways to deal with Scott,” he continues. “Ways that don't include doing something unforgivable. There are others who can handle him.”

Jean is ungiving. She insists that it's her who delivers the final blow. All of the guilt, the shame, the regret – it should be hers after what she did to him. “I could have stopped,” she says. “Once the Phoenix bonded with me, once I gained her memories and access to her powers, I could have stopped. But, I didn't. Scott's powers were more intricate, more devastating. With him, I could save everyone. With just the Phoenix, I couldn't.”

Kitty Pryde leans back in her chair, her arms crossed and eyes to table. Unlike Storm, Kitty never took off the circlet that guards her thoughts from the telepaths, much to Jean's dismay. Pryde wants to fight. She wants to take a team and start showing the world that the X-men aren't cowards, that they're not going to sit back and watch as their fellow mutants hold the world hostage. “If the X-men here are not going to fight, then I'll talk to Alex. I'll make my stand with him.”

“Are you even sure that Alex is going to fight his own brother?” Beast asks.

“Of course he will,” she replies. “Alex knows right from wrong. He knows what he needs to do.”

“Then I'll go with you,” Jean says. If Alex can get her close, she can flip the switch in Scott's mind.

“You'll have to find him first,” Beast reminds them. “I've had the Cuckoos on Cerebro for days, and they've seen no sign of him.”

“Then we'll just have to smoke him out,” Kitty replies, “by dealing with Magneto first.”

It's not the news that Beast wants to hear. Amber eyes to Storm, he asks her point blank if she's going to allow this. “I can't stop them,” she says quietly. “And I won't. If this is truly what you want to do, Kitten, then you have my support. Make your choices well, my X-men. To stay or to fight. It's up to you.”

Unhappy, Beast shakes his head. “This will only make things worse,” he says. “Mutants fighting mutants. You're starting an all out war, Miss Pryde.” He can sense her distrust in him. It's in her lowered brow when she speaks, the way she guards herself with her arms. She's angry with him, his hesitation to fight. “I think it's too dangerous.”

She understands his point of view, but remarks, also, that their passivity is doing nothing to help the world. They're super heroes. This is what they do. They fight for those who can't protect themselves. They fight because it's the right thing to do. “I'm tired of doing nothing,” she says. “I'm tired of watching the world burn.”

Head Table is dismissed and the news of Kitty's team spreads like wildfire throughout the mansion.
Dazzler, Warpath, X-23, Domino, they want to go with her. They want to be heroes again. “We may not live,” she tells them all, explains that they're facing not only Magneto, but also Cyclops. They understand and they agree. She gives them the night to prepare.

Jean finds her hours later, in the Danger Room reviewing past sessions. These sessions were written by Scott. He trained them well – both the students and the staff. Made sure that they understood teamwork, the importance of being vigilant. Not a detail was left out, not a trick or twist that he didn't use. She's still awed by them, still thankful for them.

Jean is similarly impressed by the sessions, especially the way Kitty led them. “You're a fantastic team leader,” she says. “You make it look much easier than it is.”

“I've had good teachers,” Kitty responds, absently fidgeting with her circlet.

“You still don't trust me?”

Kitty shakes her head. “I'm not sure I ever will again.” She's one of the few who have not been kind to Jean upon her return.

Jean gets it. She really does. But, at the same time, they have all made mistakes. One day, she hopes that she will be forgiven for her sins. “I understand that it won't be today or tomorrow, but one day, I hope we can be friends again.”

“Are you really going to kill him?” she responds, her dark eyes narrowed. “You're just going to shut down his mind?”

“There's no other choice, Kitty. He's too badly broken.”

“He loved you.”

“He was forced to love me.” Maybe at the beginning, he'd had a choice, but over the years, by manipulating his loyalty and duty, she wasn't sure there was any love left that wasn't pushed into his mind by the telepaths. “The same with Emma, though she was honestly trying to fix him.”

“And you just couldn't let that happen, could you?”

“She stole his powers, too. Don't be fooled by that.”

Kitty's attention drifts up to the monitors that line the wall, and a long silence looms between them. It's uncomfortable, awkward. Jean knows that she's not wanted here, but she wants Kitty to understand why she's doing this. That she is trying to protect Scott as well. “If he hurts someone, kills someone, it will just break him further. It's better if I stop him outright than risk the weight of his conscience.”

“Or maybe you're just taking the easy way out,” Kitty snaps back. “Maybe you're just trying to feel like a good guy again.”

“He blew up the Baxter Building, Kitty. It's hard to tell what he'll do next.”

“No it's not,” she says, keeping her attention to a monitor up above. “He just declared war on the Avengers.”

Kitty rewinds the footage – a tired Scott Summers being filmed in some nondescript metallic room. She can tell that he hasn't been sleeping or eating. He's lost weight, most prominently in his cheeks. “If the Avengers don't surrender to me in three days, then I will seek them out myself using any
power necessary.” Short, sweet – much like the commands he used to issue on a daily basis. She flips through the channels on the monitor above, picking up the same news brief on every one.

“I told you,” Jean says. “He's a danger that has to be dealt with.”
Chapter Summary

Maria Hill asks questions.

They meet again. A dusty road, plenty of trees. He walks to the place in his high boots and trench coat, casually drawing a cigarette in and out of his mouth. He smiles – such a charming smile – one that makes him look less alien with his red black eyes. “Chere,” he says, flicking away the butt of his cigarette. It lights at the edge of trees, smoldering against the damp leaves that line the path.

“I wasn't sure you'd come,” Hill says. “I wasn't sure he'd let you come.”

“Why wouldn't he? After all you've done for us --”

“I'm still SHIELD,” she says. “My job is to still bring him down.”

“Then why you here, chere? If not to stop SHIELD, then why the meeting?” Gambit asks.

She hands him a small, square tablet loaded with coordinates and missions of various squads under SHIELD's umbrella. The ones dispatched just this morning – to cut off Magneto's snake before it grows another head. The ones sent to the mansion to once again hold the children hostage in hopes of bringing Cyclops out of hiding. The ones on the island, the ones around the Avenger's tower. “They'll do whatever it takes,” she explains, “even if it means murdering the children. Scott has to turn himself in, or they all die.”

Gambit isn't a machine person. He's not Forge or even Scott who can sit in front of the computer all day and type away. “You want me to take this to him?”

“I want you to take me to him. That's your assurance that I mean no harm.”

This isn't Scott that she sees on the news, declaring war on the Avengers. This wasn't him before, this isn't him now. Before she could see how hard keeping up the facade was on him. He has one of the most tactical minds that she's ever met, but it wasn't him. He didn't want to harm anyone. That's why she knows that this new rash of war isn't true either. “I saw him when he was imprisoned with SHIELD. Scott's not like this, and that lets me know that he has a plan. I want to be a part of it.”

Remy scratches his head and looks to the ground. “Honestly, chere, this could still be some trap that you're counting on to work. Give out the coords to his hiding place and you stack ten nuclear bombs on top of him.”

“Gambit, I'm not--”

He holds his hands for silence. “I don't know where he is, chere. I'm just playing clean-up.” He stuffs the tablet in his pocket and regards her for long, tense moments. “You have to understand, Cyke has to play it safe right now. There's too much at stake.”

“I want to help him,” she says. “There's something not right – in SHIELD, in the X-men, in the Fantastic Four. There's something going on, and I want to know what he knows. I want to know how to fix it.”
He's a good judge of character, always looking for those tiny bluffs and hidden truths. He knows when a person's lying, and looking at Hill, he's pretty sure she's not. “Meet back here in three hours,” he says tapping the tablet in his pocket. “I'll let you know then.”

She's nondescript by design. Bland, boring. Her body isn't too small or too big. Her eyes aren't too brown, her hair not too short. She speaks in a low voice – the syllables enunciated, but her words forgettable. Even in a bar like this, she can pick up a dearth of information just by keeping her eyes on the crowd.

Cyclops used to do the same. She knows this for fact. Every movement, every sound, he was hyperfocused on it, always ready for battle. And tonight, when the conversation turns to the mutants, when the words zero in on Summers' ultimatum, she's especially diligent. The fear, the hatred, all of those things that mutants have to live with on a daily basis – she hears it. She hears it all, and it sinks her stomach to her toes.

He's a terrorist, declaring war on the Avengers, but at the same time, he's doing something right. There's something wrong – underneath it all. There's a pestilence brewing, one that she can't find on her own. Something malicious, sinister, and she knows – without a doubt – that Scott Summers has figured it all out.

Beer down, she checks the time. It's still too early to meet back with Gambit. She asks for a change in channel, to get away from the President's speech, the leaders of the nation. She wants something light, airy, funny, something far away from the betrayal to the world that she's about to commit. And, it will be a betrayal. Fury still expects her allegiance, even though they both agree that SHIELD is not running properly. He expects her to do her job. But, she can't do it any longer, not with the troops heading out to the mansion to make hostages out of children. Not with the island bombarded and filled with troops.

It was SHIELD who called him out, who made his non-death known to the world. The possibility of a cure, the possibility of ending his eventual threat. They had agreed that it was the right move, but deep down, she knows it was a ploy. Bringing him back out into the open only fueled the coming war, a war that SHIELD insists is unavoidable.

It's three am when she finishes her last beer. Heavy headed and dog tired, she makes her way back through the back road paths of New York – a place outside of the city, outside of ariel focus. There are no cell towers here, no mode of contact. And she waits by the side of the dirt road, empty handed and anxious for the Cajun to arrive.

Five after and he's late. Ten after. Twenty. She takes it in stride at first, all of those minutes ticking by. But as the hour approaches, she feels like giving up. That is, until she hears the jet.

It's Cable who meets her, looks her over, decides whether she's friend or foe. She can feel him inside of her mind, plumbing the depths, looking for her allegiance. Satisfied and wordless, he issues her into the vehicle, tells her to buckle up, and within moments, they are in the air.

He throws a blindfold onto her lap, instructs her to put it on. “You understand, right?” he asks, and she does.

“Just tell me that he's up to something.”

Without pause, Cable responds, “He's up to something.” The ride is silent after that. Not a word is said until they touch down in a small swathe of forest overlooking the water. She can smell the fresh air here, how serene it is, and for a moment, she thinks he does, too.
“Nice place you got here,” Hill says. She follows him inside, down the metallic hallways until they come to a computer room ablaze with screens and channels lining the four walls, and at the center of it all, a steely grit to his jaw is the Cyclops. He doesn't acknowledge her entrance.

It's Logan who approaches her first, tells her to sit, asks her why she's here. He doesn't trust her, doesn't want her here, but Cyke had insisted. “He says that you're the leak,” he says. “That you've been helping us for weeks.”

Maria doesn't deny it, that she's sent the information to Cable, but nor does she confirm it. “I want to know what's happening. Why are you declaring war on the Avengers?”

“I need them out of the way,” Scott speaks, his attention never moving from the screens. “I'm giving them the chance to surrender.”

“You know that they're not going to,” Hill replies. “They'll fight you, tooth and nail before they do that.”

“Then so be it.”

Astonished, she watches him exit the room, leaving her alone with Cable and Logan. “He can't be serious,” she says. “He's really going to fight them?”

Cable shrugs. “He thinks it's the only way.”

“But, you don't right?” She looks between the two men, her mind still reeling with the news. “Logan, come on. You don't believe this is necessary, right?”

“If he says it is, then it is.”

She feels Cable in her head again, pushing at her thoughts, looking, seeking. Finally he looks up at Logan and shakes his head. “She can't be trusted.”

The slow slide of metal from the back of Logan's hands draws her attention away from the mind reading. Breathless, she looks up at the feral mutant, finally realizing the danger that she's in. “Logan, please,” she begs. “I won't say anything. Please. I won't say a word.”

“Yeah, and I'm going to make sure of that.”
Chapter Summary

Magneto strikes.

A pink morning. The clouds hazy overhead, the sun barely yellow in the skyline.

The swarm of people in the National Mall is massive, loud. With their signs and drums, their chants and hatred. They want the end of the mutants. They're tired of the fear. They're tired of the broken promises.

The President has come to speak today. Five full squadrons of soldiers at his employ and a helicarrier overhead. He knows the threat that Magneto poses to his life, and knows the demands of Cyclops. He's come here to speak of them, to ease the minds of the world. They will stand their ground against these terrorists. They will defeat them.

In the surround, the Avengers and SHIELD hide themselves in the crowd. A full military force up front, and the world's mightiest heroes keeping watch from the ground. Above on the rooftop, Hawkeye keeps his keen eyes on any and all movement before calling in with his fifteen minute check. “All clear,” he says into com, a notice picked up by Ironman somewhere across the lawn. One by one, their checkpoints rattle in, with each member stating no out of the ordinary action. But, they don't dare breathe yet.

Called to speak are a myriad of senators. They talk about unity, about strength. They want the best for the country, for the world, and they must not show fear in the face of such overpowering threats. “We have tried to let the mutants be free,” notes Senator Garcias, “but, they take our offers of peace and turn them into war. It's time we ended their hostility. It's time for mutants to realize the only way to peace is to remove them from society.”

The crowd roars, the protesters begin to clash. Going to the source of the fight, Ironman asks for a secure perimeter that puts the Avengers at the center of the fight. Tugging and pulling, pushing and cuffing, they bring peace to the inner crowd with several of the protesters on their way to jail for the night. But, there's more, and Tony knows it. There's more than just watching the crowd, there's also spotting the mutants.

The first mutant he sees is covered in fur from head to toe, his giant hands too big for his body. He spits acid on the ground, his long pointed tongue darting from his mouth with the action. When he sees Tony, he smiles – a broad, focused grin. “I've found one,” he says into a com plugged into his ear, and within moments, the mutants float down on magnetic waves, surrounding him, and searching for the other Avengers.

Above them all is Magneto, his arms outstretched, his voice loud. “Come with me, and we shall free ourselves from the curse of humankind! Let there only be mutants! Let us live free at last!”

The fight is immediate as Eric's army swarms the field. It's an unexpected move – that they are here, that they have already infiltrated the Mall – and the barked commands prove as much. Through com there is Fury and Stark, each giving out a different set of orders to their followers. Up on the stage, the humans are asked to evacuate, to leave the lawn clear, to let Avengers do their job.
The crowds scream as they run, with military personnel trying to careen them into orderly lines. And up on stage, the President makes true to his word, refusing to run, refusing to bow down to the threat of Magneto. “I will die before I give in to you,” he says into the microphone.

“Very well, then,” Magneto replies, his voice unheard over the screams of the crowd. But though he flies forward, he is captured by an unseen force. Turning head over shoulder, he looks behind to see Scott Summers floating in the sky.

“You do these things in my name,” he warns the older mutant. “That will stop now.” The red energy is thick and destructive. There's a craze in his voice, in his demeanor as he uses his powers to reel the master of magnetism back from the stage. The crowd watches in disbelief as two of the most powerful mutants on the planet suddenly engage in war. Cars are thrown, pieces of the cell tower—all flung with magnetic might while Cyclops stays still. Nothing hits him, nothing touches him, no matter how wily Eric's moves are. “You will die today,” he says, his voice booming out over the crowd, “for your falsehood.”

Judge, jury, and executioner, he reels Lensherr further in, a effortless action, and one that makes the crowd hold their breath. Hand outstretched, he begins to telekinetically choke the life from the mutant fiend. It takes but minutes for the mutant to fall back to the ground, landing on his back, his body broken. “Heed my warning,” Cyclops says once again as he dips to earth. “The Avengers have twenty four hours to surrender to me, else, this will be them.”

As he settles to the ground, he calls out once again – this time to the mutant army. He tells them to disperse, to go back to their homes, and warns the military that if anything happens to them, the military will pay the price.

It's a chance he has to take, as Tony moves in on the maniacal mutant. Zipping through the crowd, he pushes people out of the way, half propelled, half on the ground. He doesn't want to meet the mutant up high in the clouds, but on the ground where his repulsors might still have an effect. In com, Fury tells him to stop. They all do, but he ignores them. He won't let Cyclops get away—not with his threats, and not with the murder of Magneto.

Cyclops smiles. Such an eerie thing to see, his red energy going haywire with the madness in his thoughts. He laughs, puts a hand in the air, and stops the Avenger with a slight twist of his finger. “How dare you,” he says, his baritone hushed and barely heard.

Tony kicks at the air as he rises from the grand, held in stasis by invisible powers. He catches at his throat tries to peel through the unseen force. His air depletes all too quickly, and slowly, Tony Stark starts to die. “You can't defeat me,” Scott tells the others as they gather. “None of you can.”

They attack in a barrage. Their powers, their fists, their tech. Overhead helicopters with zoom lenses focus down on the struggle. Black Panther, She Hulk, Hawkeye and his arrows. Thor brings down the lightning, Ant-Man uses his particles to increase his size. Vision fazes through energy, coming as close as anyone to actually touching the mutant.

It takes just a flick of Cyclops' finger—that slight movement of air—and the Avengers are knocked back. Wonderman and Captain Marvel drop down from the helicarrier above, throwing out ion blasts and photons, but they do nothing to the man, save for making him angrier.

The red energy billows up, scratching across Carol Danvers' suit. She can feel it dissipate at the knees, his out-of-control power breaking apart her armor. Wonderman pulls her out of the way, forces her to the ground. “He's not acting,” he tells her in a breathless whisper. “He's losing it.”

“Scott,” Danvers says from several feet away. “Calm down, Scott. I know this isn't you.”
Scott proves otherwise. Another blast and the heroes are thrown further across the lawn. The surrounding military and SHIELD begin to pellet him with ceramic bullets, making it impossible for the Avengers to recoup. Fury – over coms – tells them to stand down, tells them not to fight. Summers is not a battle they can handle, but his orders are overridden by General Greg Griggs who orders them to press on and destroy the mutant before he can start World War Three. And so they do.

Scott turns in a circle, looking at those in the surround. It's one against the world, but even the whole world can't stand up to him. A wave of hand and they go flying back. Another and the guns are torn from their hands, turning back on those who wielded them. A hundred, a thousand, two thousand guns all clicked and ready to kill. “Foolish,” he says. He reiterates his demand. “You will surrender in twenty four hours, or else.”

He kneels to the ground, touches a hand upon both Magneto and Ironman, and with a word he disappears into the ether, leaving the heroes alone to collect their thoughts.

His mic still hot, his eyes filled with tears, the whole world hears the quiet plea of the President. “We can't beat him,” he says, his words half-choked by fear. “We can't win.”
Chapter Summary

The children react.

Indira Gomez does not know where she is. A nighttime rescue as the X-men abandoned the arctic isle, teleported by Nightcrawler, kept moving by Colossus. They all left, trailing out through the snow, away from the place that she's called home for the past months.

Somewhere in the depths of this home, she can hear Rogue and Gambit talking quietly over their morning coffee. But, it's Angel who opens the door and peeks inside. “You're awake,” he says quietly, looking over the other still-sleeping children. Bundled up in blankets, they lay in chaos on the floor, their eyes shut and their breath soft. “Do you want breakfast?”

As she nods, she looks out the window onto a vast city below. She's never seen a city so big, with its tall towers and busy streets. Blinking in surprise, she looks at Warren hoping for an answer. He waves her forward, puts a hand on her shoulder, “You'll be safe here,” he says quietly.

“Where are we?”

“Hong Kong,” he answers. “I own this building.”

The apartment near the top of the thirty-six story office building is as immaculate as it is tall. Three bedrooms, a kitchen larger than her childhood home, three luxurious bathrooms and living areas that speak to an ultimate comfort. Not even the mansion could hold a candle to the beauty of this place. “Why are we here?” she asks, running her hands over the quartz counter top, admiring the cool smoothness beneath her fingers.

“Scott wanted you to be safe, and this is the safest place I could think of.”

She doesn't remember much about the night before, only that there was a gun to her head hours prior, and then the total darkness of a blackout. She could hear the fighting, the grunts and groans of soldiers and the dropping of guns. She could hear the quiet commands of Warren as he guided the X-men through their temporary battle. But, she also remembers the news, and how Scott Summers killed Magneto and Tony Stark. “How can you listen to him after what he did?” she asks, her anger over Cyclops' actions turning her brown skin a shade of red. “How can you still believe in him?”

Warren doesn't answer her questions. A soft smile, and a hand on her head, “Eggs or cereal?” he asks.

“Eggs.”

Ms. Xu enters the suite after a polite knock on the door. She takes care of this place whether Warren is here or not. An older lady, she looks by far younger than her sixty-five years, and she's far more disciplined in her work than most. Behind her is her daughter, Fa. She's in training to take her mother's place as caretaker of this most glorious suite, a servant to the Worthington's. In quiet Mandarin, she explains to her daughter what must be done – the restocking of the shelves, the cleaning of the rooms. She is upset that she missed Warren's reappearance in the home, feeling it her
duty to feed him while he's here, but Angel thinks nothing of it. “It's okay,” he says, “I called too late.”

Ms. Xu has taken care of three generations of Worthingtons, always at their bidding. It's her job to predict the needs and wants of this family while they're here. “You need me to watch the children,” she says, looking at the young Indira and her mouthful of eggs.

“Yes,” he says. “If that's okay.”

“You can trust me with their safety here,” she answers. “Fa and I will treat them as your family.”

“You're leaving?” Indira asks, nearly spitting out her eggs in the process. Angel nods with a soft, sad smile. “Why?”

“We have to stop Scott,” he says after some hesitation, “before he hurts anymore people.”

News of Cyke's sudden turn had effected the children greatly. That he threatened war with the Avengers had made them all quake. In disbelief, Indira had called it a trick, rationalizing it as a prank pulled by SHIELD. “It's a camera trick,” she had said. “That's not really Mr. Summers. It can't be him. He wouldn't do this.” But, the truth was set in stone the moment he committed murder.

All of the children had taken it hard, but Indira was the hardest hit. She had trusted Cyclops with all of her heart. She believed in him, admired him. Even through the chaos that came with him, she could never imagine that he would stray so far from peace. And now, her heart sinks further. “Mr. Alex is going to fight him, too?”

The thought of brother against brother saddened her immensely. She liked Havok, thought him to be a very capable leader, but also a man who prided family above all else – just as her parents had raised her. Her heart breaks for him, that his brother has become a villain and must be stopped.

Ms. Xu rouses the rest of the children, coralles them into the kitchen to partake of eggs and orange juice. She'll do some shopping this afternoon, leaving Fa to watch over them. Nervous, the children take their seats as the adults wander into one of the many parlors for tea and snacks – small cakes made of nuts and honey, moist and soft – a specialty of the Xu's.

Indira thinks to spy on them, to drop her finger at the edge of the door to learn what they are discussing, but she decides against. She already knows what they're talking about – how to deal with Mr. Summers and his murderous actions. How to turn him off permanently.

Lorna will stay behind from the battle, being as her chosen place is as teacher of the children. She's grown fond of them over the time spent on the island; she thinks of them as her flesh and blood. Indira thinks it's wrong that she stays. She thinks that Lorna – and her mighty power – would be of good use in battle. “He killed your father,” she says, and the whole room gasps. “Why don't you want revenge?”

Sarah Goodwind is taken aback by her sudden burst of anger. The Indira she knows is soft, compassionate, a person that understands forgiveness and the essence of humanity. “Indira--”

“I'm serious! He tricked us all, Sarah. He's not a good person.” In her eyes, there are tears – angry ones that roll down her cheek and settle just beneath her lower lip. “He lied to us. He lied to all of us!”

Ms. Xu hears the commotion and comes quickly back to the kitchen. She looks around midst the children and sees their heartbreak. She’s a strict woman, Ms. Xu is – not just on herself and her duties here, but also on her daughter. The children can sense her annoyance at the outburst. Lorna promises
to keep them quiet, and the caretaker goes back to work.

“Indira, you mustn’t think that way,” Lorna soothes, but delves no further than that. She allows the young girl to cry in silence, her large dark eyes cast to the floor. “Alex will take care of this. I promise.”

Arlo whimpers at her side, his leg now in a cast to correct the broken bones given to him by his father. He nuzzles her elbow, still unsure of his hands. “Ohkhay,” he breathes, his forehead butted against her side. “Inda ohkhay.”

She looks to her friend, puts a hand upon his oversized head. “Yeah,” she says quietly, “I’m okay.”

Phinneus does not share her grief. He reminds them all that the Avengers had tried to imprison them, that SHIELD had run experiments on them. “They deserve it,” he says, seeing Scott as a hero for making his stance. “They came after us first.”

“He killed them, Phin,” Opal argues. “He killed them.”

Phinneus didn’t grow up like the rest of them. He grew up in a prolific household, good at sports, popular at school. His parents had money, and with that money they gave him the best education that they could buy. When they found out he was a mutant, everything came crashing down. “My parents actually called the Red Hunt to come pick me up,” he said, the first time he’d spoken of his life outside of the island. Sarah shakes her head, sad that his childhood had been interrupted like that. “They wanted a cure for me, and they were willing to pay the Red Hunt to get it. I don’t need no damn cure,” he curses, much to the chagrin of Polaris. “I’m proud of who I am, and no one can take that away from me.”

When it came to punishment, he didn’t blame Scott for any of it. “They put guns to our heads,” he reminds them. “They hurt us, we hurt them.”

Lorna is struck silent by the boy, his sudden quiet rage. Normally, a smile eclipsed his face – bright and toothy. He was ferocious in his training, hanging onto Cyclops' every last word as he gave them notes on their scenario, and was likewise adamant about his studies. Though not top of the class – thanks to dyslexia – he studied harder than Indira, worked harder than Sarah. To hear him so angry makes her sad. “Murder’s wrong,” she says. “It doesn’t matter what they did to you, no one should have the right to take a life.”

“But they take ours,” Phin argues. “Where’s the justice?”

Tangling her fingers through her thick green hair, Lorna takes pause, laying her hand on Phin's shoulder. “The justice is that one day we will find equality. The justice is when people will recognize our humanity. Not everyone’s out to harm us, Phinneus, and we have to acknowledge that.”

In his heart, he knows that she speaks the truth, but he also knows that Cyclops actions shouldn't be ignored. “It's not fair,” he says, his shoulders dipping low as the anger fades.

“No, it's not,” Dane agrees. “But, one day it will be. We have to keep fighting for that.”

Pocket waits at the table, ready for his daily assignment. He likes the routine of schoolwork in the mornings and games in the afternoon. He likes the structure of it, things that are known. Lorna can’t help but smile at his readiness. She ushers the rest of the children to the table and sets out their lessons for the day, and then journeys into the parlor to find the X-men planning their next battle.

“I can turn my brother off,” Alex says, “but we have to be wary of Logan.”
“Are you sure Logan's with him?” Kurt asks.

“Positive. He's going to come at us with everything he's got.” They don't relish the idea of fighting their friend, or even wrangling in Cyclops, but they're left with no choice. “We have to keep damage to a minimum,” Alex continues. “That's our duty.”

It's afternoon when they set out, leaving the children alone with Lorna and the Xu's. Pocket stands by the door, his dark eyes staring at the wall as they leave. “Sorry, Tatsuya,” Nightcrawler says. “You can't come with us. Where we're going is dangerous.” If the child understands, he doesn't show it. He continues to stare at the floor avoiding eye contact with Kurt. “We'll be back,” he promises the child, holding out his arms for a hug. When the boy leans in, when he allows the contact, they are all shocked. Nightcrawler holds him gently, patting the boy's back. “We'll be back,” he says again, hoping the child understands.

Lorna is choked with surprise at the embrace, a signifier of how far the autistic child has come, but it also makes her sad. His belief in Cyclops is waning.
Cable's Bunker

Chapter Summary

Worries and thoughts.

She weeps. As she pulls herself free of Strange's spell, awakens to the morning, she cries for her father. “It's going to be okay, darlin',” Logan says, a hand to Rachel's back in soothing circles. “It's going to be okay.”

It took the three of them to hold him back, to keep his powers from destroying the world around him. Three of them stuck inside his mind, taming the tempest, keeping his mind from falling apart with the outburst. They were barely successful.

Rachel pushes her head to Logan's chest, bent on knees as he embraces her. She hates her mother, that she did this to him. The nightmares, the whispers. Like a shattered mirror, he no longer knows himself, haunted by the constant thrum of worthless and unforgivable. She saw the prison in his head – the constant call of battle and strategy, how he died a thousand times and killed a thousand more. His whole mind a fight or flight, on edge, in pain.

Logan tells her again that it's going to be okay, that she did good, that he's glad she came. He's glad that she could see her father, finally. That the man needs her more than he wants to admit.

Cable comes to moments later, disturbingly quiet. He watches the Sorcerer Supreme rise from the floor, carry himself across the room on hands and knees, too exhausted to stand. “We did it,” Strange says. “We kept him from losing control.”

They saved the world this morning, the three of them. But, no one would ever thank them for it, especially not after seeing the news reports. Magneto and Tony Stark are dead. A warning given by the madman who killed them. No, they wouldn't be considered heroes for keeping Cyclops' power under control. They'd be considered villains.

Rachel hates the way they talk about him. The names they call him. The fear that they have of him. They don't see the grander plan, the necessity of his actions. Most of all, they don't see his humanity, and how much this is tearing him apart. “Rachel?” Cable touches his sister's shoulder. “Don't drown yourself in it.”

He's a cautious man, Nathan Summers, so much like his father. He knows the boundaries of emotion, how dangerous they can be. And those of his sister – much more like her mother – how deeply she feels them. He doesn't mock her for her pain, doesn't chide her. Instead, he worries for her. He felt her – while inside that mind – struggling to keep herself free of those painful pathways, to not connect to her father's power and take it from him as Jean had.

Stephen Strange shares the same worry. More than once he had to use his magic to back her away. “We need to talk about your restraint,” he tells her, his tone all business. She knows exactly what he's talking about.

The rush of power inside her father's head was overwhelming, and she could see how to envelop it, drink of it, taste of it. She's thankful for the sorcerer, that he was able to push her back. She fully
admits her temptation – yet another reason for her tears. That she could do to her father what her mother did. She can't forgive herself for that.

They hear the rusty scream from the other room, a thud to the floor. Scattered looks, and they rush into the hallway, only to see Scott awake from spell and still struggling to maintain control. The vastness of his mutant gift spirals out like a dying star, keeping him on his knees, his hands clenched to the side of his head. The bed is eaten away, destroyed by the churning of red fog, and breathless, Scott yells again.

Logan is fast to his side, kneeling down, his arms around his neck. “Breathe, Scott,” he says. “Come on. Just breathe.” Try as he might to slow his own breath, to give Cyke the cues for slowing himself down, it doesn't work. Cyclops' frenetic energy only speeds up, churns more, chokes his children from the room. “Slim, come on. You're going to hurt someone. Get it under control. Please.”

Logan can feel the tension in the other man's body, how tight and coiled the muscles are. How unforgiving the cascade of power is. He holds him tighter, hoping to beer that he's not going to have to turn him off again. “Get it under control, hon,” he speaks into Scott's ear, low and soothing. “You have to protect your children.”

Fingers dig into Logan's shoulder blades, as Cyke battles for control. And, that's when it happens, the sudden crystalization of his power. A shield around them, spherical, tangible. A beautiful red lit with dozens of smooth, bent prisms, showering light across the room. Still struggling, his power bounces off the walls of the shield, cools in on itself, rages against the mechanism of protection.

Wide eyed with wonder – that Scott was able to do this – Logan runs a calloused hand against the walls. Hard – as hard as ruby quartz – and as beautiful as the man who made it, he looks up in wonder at Dr. Strange, who can fathom this no more than he can. “That's it,” Logan eases, his attention back to Scott. “You gotta protect them. You have to save them.”

Breath heavy, Scott falls against Logan's shoulder, pressing himself against heartbeat, as he tries to slow himself down. The shorter mutant strokes circles over spine and muscles, treading into taut tendons. “That's it,” he says again as the frantic energy begins to subside. “You're going to be okay. Everything's going to be okay.”

“I killed them,” Scott sobs, his voice rasped and choked by too many thoughts. “I murdered them.”

Another look to Strange and the sorcerer shakes his head. He's at a loss as well. “I warned you this could happen,” he tells Logan, and then glances at the Cable and Rachel. “His mind can't handle this.”

“It's going to have to,” Cable says in the same cold baritone that his father uses when on mission. “We can't stop now.” He knows that Stephen has been trying to piece the mind back together and destroy the bombs that the telepaths had planted. He hopes that's enough to see his father through the end of this mission. “We're counting on you,” he tells the doctor. “You have to keep him together.”

It's hours before Scott calms down, lays his head upon Logan's lap. The shield around him begins to crack and crumble, the crystal dissipating once it hits the floor. Fingers threaded through autumn hair, Logan keeps up the gentle touch of his fingers, the soft brush of hair over ear, the absent-minded thumb stroke in time with Scott's still too-fast breath. In the other room, he hears the others discussing plans. How in the morning, Cyclops will blow up Stark Tower, how he'll punish them all for not surrendering. “We have to keep him away from news reports,” Strange warns. “That will just put further pressure on him.”

Cable doesn't agree. He thinks his dad can handle more than Stephen realizes. “Remember, this is his
“You didn't dive in there, Nathan,” Rachel says quietly. “You didn't see all of the damage.”

“And you shouldn't have either,” he scolds her. “You can't do that again.”

She takes his admonishment well. “I only wanted to see what they did to him.”

“I know,” he says softly, “but it's too dangerous. The only thing we need to do is keep his power contained. Anything else is up to Strange.”

Scott shifts in his sleep, his body heating up with the advent of the Phoenix dreams. A round, steel tub is brought into the room, filled with ice thanks to the magic of Dr. Strange. They were ready for this – his need to sleep. It had been too long, and with his exertion this morning, they all knew it was coming.

It’s not hard to draw him into the memory, even without Alex's presence. They get his temperature down to fifty-seven degrees – enough to make his body shake with hypothermia, but it will give Scott a longer rest.

Rachel can feel the Phoenix call to her, project its want into her mind. The need for freedom, the need to spread her wings. It’s a near overwhelming sensation to feel the firebird again. “She's trapped,” she tells her brother. “She wants out.”

Strange knows as much, as does Logan, but there’s little they can do. The spell cast by Wanda and Hope is unbreakable. At least for mere mortals. Strange thinks that Cyclops is the only one alive with the power to reverse the spell, but he’s in no condition to try. “As he gains control, he’ll be able to handle it.” But, control is a long ways away.

It's two p.m. when they take him from the bath and put him on a fold out cot drug from the closet. A silver foil blanket to return the warmth to his blued hands and feet, and Logan sitting quietly beside him. They immerse themselves in coffee, their words are few.

Tomorrow will be a long day for all of them. They need to save their strength.
She makes him promise to keep her secret under threat of turning his brain to mush. Beast and the White Queen, they don't trust each other to hold up their ends of the bargains.

“He should be informed of your condition.”

“You should know that I'm not his ally.”

McCoy knows not to spread the news. Emma swears him to secrecy under threat of making him nauseous to certain words. “The child is not healthy,” he tells her, the sonogram wand swifiting over her stomach. “It's mired in defects.”

“Then fix it,” she says. “Even at the cost of my own life, make my child okay.”

He thinks that she's beautiful. Her blonde hair, her plastic body. He thinks that she's a sunrise on the horizon, painted with oranges and pinks. She's perfect, unlike him, his arms and legs heavy with thick blue and nonsensical fur. If he could, he would keep her perfect – from her spread out hips to her ample chest. He would make her receive this child without fault; without need. But he sees the problems all too well. “Your child is going to die.”

She tells him of Sinister's 'vitamins', how she suspects that they contained growth hormones and other things. A sample of her blood would surely tell McCoy what she's been injected with. Afterwards, he could come up with an antidote. “I need this child,” she says, near tears. “Like the air I breathe, I need this child.”

He speaks to her cautiously, afraid to give her hope. “You have to tell Scott,” he says. “He deserves to know that he has another child.”

“Not until you fix her,” she answers. “Not until you make her healthy.”

“I'm not sure the damage can be reversed, Emma.”

“You've got to try.”

He takes her blood and other liquids, spins them in the centrifuge and dismisses her from his lab. “This will take time,” he says, “Get some rest. I'm sure the travel was hard on you.”

She's not really welcomed at the mansion, with most of the X-men not trusting her. Storm, especially, throws her a cold shoulder, has few words for her return. Rockslide is perhaps the nicest, offering to help her up the stairs and to her room, and then running downstairs to get her something to eat.

She has scant visitors during the day. A few of her students – Hellion and Anole, Pixie and Armor. But the team doesn't come, and for that she's saddened. It's not until evening that Jean comes around with a plate of food as an offering. “Thought you might be hungry,” she says. She doesn't pry into Emma's mind, doesn't steal her thoughts, or nudge away jealousy. But, she does sit down, putting the
tray onto Emma's lap. “It's his child, isn't it?”

The White Queen doesn't answer. She rubs a soft hand over her pregnant tummy and takes a bite of mashed potatoes. She was more ravenous that she thought. “As always,” she says, “you get treated like a saint, and I'm a monster.”

Jean knows that she speaks the truth. “Perhaps it's just in our attitude. If you were nicer --”

“I sacrificed just as much as you to keep mutants safe,” Frost argues. “Years, Jean. Years and years of my life. I should be welcome here.”

“You are welcome,” Jean replies patiently. “Otherwise, you would've been sent away.” She pauses, lets Emma finish her plate of food, offers to go get her another. Emma says no. “You've been watching the news, right?”

Emma knows what Jean is going to say next. With the destruction of the Baxter Building, the deaths of Tony Stark and Eric Lensherr -- she knows why Jean is here. “I can't do it, Jean,” she says, the sudden emotion crackling in her voice. “I love him too much.”

“He's hurting people, Emma. The guilt will only make things worse. We have to turn him off before he hurts anyone else.”

A shake of head, and Frost wipes her sudden sting of tears away. She tried, she tells Jean. In the Red Dimension, tried to wipe his mind clean, reboot it. She was unsuccessful, and it hurts to bad to try again.

“If we work together,” Jean says, “we can end him quickly. The two of us. We can shut him down before he becomes even more of a monster.”

“He's not a monster--”

“Yes, he is.” He has too much power, too much rage. “He's not the Scott Summers that we fell in love with, Emma. He's something else entirely.”

“And people call me cold.”

A sharp burn, and Jean glares at the White Queen. “This is our fault,” she reminds her. “We have to be the ones to stop him.”

“You did far more damage--”

“Yes. Yes, I did. But you didn't help.”

“I held him together for years.”

“You're pregnant with his child. I can only wonder what sort of maleficence you employed to get him to sleep with you.”

Guilt pales her elegant features even further. “I want him back, Jean.”

“He was never ours to begin with,” she counters.

*He'd learned how to dream in layers, hiding his subconscious thoughts in between pieces of puzzle. A psychic defense that he'd come up with unconsciously. But, still, she knew Logan was in there. She'd asked him about the feral mutant on more than one occasion, watched the sideways glances,*
heard the quickened beating of heart. It was so easy to turn that to animosity, for both of them. She never expected that Emma would do the same thing, but at the same time, Jean wasn't surprised.

“I will win this war,” Jean said, dragging the blonde into an empty room. “You stand no chance.”

“Wrong,” Frost smiled. “He is mine for the taking.” She'd already imprinted him with doubt, with a call to question his loyalty to both Jean and Professor. They’d done such a lousy job of erasing Apocalypse from his mind – a hasty, patched together job done out of necessity in order for him to lead the mission in Genosha. It had been too easy to link that into suspicion, paranoia – two things already natural to the man after his time in the orphanage. “He thinks I'm hot,” she continued, hands on hips. “Hotter than you.”

It had barely been a week since she'd arrived at the mansion, and already she had started to feed on that energy of his, to make it work to her advantage. It was constant upkeep – to make sure that he stayed loyal to her, and though outwardly, she would say that she wasn't threatened by Frost, inwardly, she knew that she was losing her hold on Scott. “He loves me.”

“For now.”

All the tricks that Jean had used over the years were suddenly being turned against her. The way she booted Psylocke out of his mind, pressured him with guilt and shame – she felt the sting of them – especially at night when they lay to sleep. For months, he hadn’t touched her, hadn’t felt the call to show her how much he loved her. And in his dreams, she found pieces of Logan and Emma Frost.

“I told you,” Emma said. “This mind is mine now. You will no longer hold his sway.”

Jean turned to Logan, hoping that by forcing Scott's animosity to the shorter mutant he would return to her. But, Wolverine proved unwilling to play a long. A desperate kiss, and he turned her away, no longer willing to get involved with the two of them. “He deserves better than that,” Logan told her, that loathing he held for Cyclops suddenly dim. “I ain't getting involved.”

Indeed, the White Queen had made her play. Forcing a grudging respect between Logan and Scott. One that threatened everything Jean had worked for. “He loves him, Emma. If you keep doing this - -”

“Then what?” she asked. “He'll turn away from you? You'll lose both of them? Or maybe for once in his fucking life, Scott Summers will be free?”

“He's always been free.”

“He's never been free.”

“You're trying to save him,” Jean realized, a sudden pang in her stomach. “Emma, he can't be fixed.”

“I don't know unless I try.”

“Emma, we have to work together. We have to stop him before anymore people die.”

Frost gently rubs her protruding stomach, a sudden pain wrenching her forward. She doesn't expect the pity of Jean Grey, nor does she get it. Green eyes stare uncaring at other the woman as she deals with the cramping. She leans back against the bed frame, drawing in a deep breath. “There is no 'we' Jean. I'm here for the baby. That's all I'm here for. Anything else is up to you.”

“Damn it, Emma --”
“You want him dead, then you kill him. And, in that moment, the whole world is going to realize that I was right all along. You're no saint, Jean. You're just another person who makes terrible, selfish decisions."
Plans falter.

“Steve? It's time.”

Kitty can tell that he's been up all night. The news of his lover's death something akin to a disaster. Dark circles under his blue eyes, he looks at her and nods. “You don't have to do this Steve,” she reminds him. “You can stay here if you want.”

“I can't let him hurt anyone else, Miss Pryde.”

“Suit up then. We leave in twenty.”

Bombs were found under Stark Tower, futuristic bombs impossible to disarm, which means that Cable is involved, and that makes everyone nervous. “I have never battled my son,” Jean had said earlier that morning, “but he is a formidable fighter. He will make it very hard to get close to Scott.”

The Blackbird is loaded twenty minutes later – a mix of a team: Kitty, Jean, Dazzler, Rockslide, Anole, X-23, and Hellion, plus himself. They say very little to each other as they board, their nerves so fraught. It's death they face; a power that they can never comprehend. Strength, distraction, none of it matters if Cyclops is in his right frame of mind. The only thing they can hope for is that he's crazed, undone, by hallucinations and whispers. Jean has explained it to them all, his fractured thoughts. It's their only way in; their only way to bring him down.

Rockslide will hit first, being the most resistant to telepathic debris, followed by Laura. She will go for the pain, hitting Cyclops across the chest, trying to dislodge his heart. It's a trick that Jean knows, a worry that he has, though she'd never delved far enough into his psyche to figure out why. She swears that removing his heart will cause great damage, will make him lose himself to memory. And that's why Laura is here. “He won't be able to handle you,” Jean reminds her in the blankness of airspace. The only conversation that goes on. “He won't be able to stop you.”

Anole will carry the heart to the outstretches of the battle. If he does show, as Kitty reminds them. There is a large chance that he won't. Being as crazed as he is, he might just blow the building and skedaddle. She wouldn't blame him for doing so.

Dazzler is a distraction, as is Hellion. Simply there to cast the focus off the main members of the team – Rockslide and Jean. If they can keep Scott occupied, there is a good chance that they will win. That they'll defeat Summers once and for all, irregardless of his power set. “We have to get in close,” Jean says. “We have to surround him with the threat of his memories.”

Steve has no part in this plan other than saying the spell that will turn Cyclops off. A brief respite – or lengthy - depending on the strength of the enchantment. It is highly possible that his two words will only trap him for minutes, but also possible that it will trap him for days on end. Jean hopes for years, but she doesn't expect it.

Kitty calls them all to order as they set the Blackbird down in the middle of downtown Manhattan.
Their jet cloaked and ordered to voice commands, it will only respond to Kitty or Jean if things come
to the worse. She sends her team onto the streets – much to the jeers of passersby and tourists. They
make their perimeter short minutes later and chase off the onlookers who want to see if the building
really does fall.

Falcon is none too pleased to see them. “We've got this handled,” he tells Steve and Kitty. “We don’t
need your help.”

“Doesn’t matter if you need us or not,” Kitty bites back, “We're here to do our jobs.”

There is nothing to say after that, at least not to Kitty's face. But in private, as Kitty goes to her
station, Wilson pulls Rogers aside. “You should come back, Steve. We need you. Especially now
that Ton--”

“Not yet,” Steve speaks quietly. “Not until the mutants are safe.”

It's a sad parting, with Sam Wilson disappointed in Rogers' decision. “You're not a mutant,” he says,
hovering in the air just above him. “They will never fully trust you.”

“You're wrong, Sam. I've earned what they give me, and will continue to do so, no matter what.”

He takes his position near the northeast corner of the building. From here, he can see the X-men and
the Avengers – both up high and down low. Across the street, on top of another high rise, he can see
Hawkeye ready his bow, and down below, he can see Jean giving mental compulsions to the tourists
who are here to see the show. Coms silent, he waits in anticipation.

There is no warning when it starts. No big speech, no Cyclops overhead. It's just a low down rumble
at their feet. Coms light up with mentions of tremors and quakes, and before the heroes know it,
Stark Tower begins to crumble. Like the Baxter Building, it's an all-too-neat-and-tidy destruction
with the floors falling down upon each other. No curve, no sway, just the plummeting of floors on
floors, and taking with it, the years worth of data and experimental projects. And there's nothing that
can be done to stop it. In a matter of seconds, the building's gone, leaving a dust cloud and ringing
ears in its wake.

“Check in everyone,” Kitty calls and waits for her team to give their okays.

“Still here,” Steve replies, “and so is Summers.”

Overhead, he flies above them all, his energy a distant thrum of chaos and maelstrom. He looks
down at the building and its ashes, and reminds them all that he gave them a chance to end this
peacefully. “Now you die,” he says, his voice booming over the waiting crowd.

He can count the cameras from here – the helicopters and those on the ground. “Let the world
witness the end of the Avengers.”

The first strike comes from Sam Wilson, his wings out, he soars above Cyclops, targeting him with
bombs and photon beams. And though the explosion seems immense, it does nothing but anger the
mutant. Arms outstretched, as if using magnets, he twists his hands and the wings of Sam Wilson,
and he goes faltering to the ground. It's Angel who rescues him – an out of the blue saving grace that
sets Wilson on the ground without harm.

“Cyclops, I won’t let you do this.” The words come from his brother, Alex. “You have to stop this
before anymore get hurt.”

“They hunted us, Havok. They jailed us, performed experiments on us. They deserve no less than
Rogue swifts through the air, landing a punch to Cyclops spine. He goes hurtling through the air, his energy sudden and crackling through the sky like lightning. “You'll pay for that,” he tells the southern belle. “Dearly.” A wave of his hand, and Rogue is slung from her height, forced down at too top speed to stop herself. She lands in the rubble of the Stark Tower, her body broken and torn. A sulfur bamph and Nightcrawler appears, disappearing the injured woman to another place.

“Scott, don't make me fight you,” Havok calls out, but his brother is no longer listening.

The battle begins in earnest then, with arrows and beams, in the air, on the ground. “Er dogren,” Alex calls out, but the spell doesn't work. Cyclops continues the fight.

Surrounded, the heroes refuse to bargain with the mutant, refuse to give him peace, especially now with the death of Rogue. They want revenge; they want to prove their anger – but it's a futile fight, one that only makes the energy of Cyclops lash out even further, slick itself across the debris, destroying it at a touch.

Rockslide goes for the heart with Laura right behind him – her sharp blades pierce flesh and bone. He grabs her by the wrist, aware of she's trying to accomplish, and tosses her through the air landing against She-Hulk who fumbles the catch. He turns his attention to Jean then, her telepathic tendrils already in his head. “I loved you once,” he says quietly, and to her amazement, he resists her attack on his mind.

“Rachel, too?” she says, suddenly realizing that he is being shielded by her children. “Scott, you can't do this to them.” She increases her attack, nipping at the defenses of Cable and Rachel. She grabs for Scott's power – a small memory, already twisted – and uses it to push the half-siblings out of their father's mind.

He bends to knees, Cyclops does, a desperate yell upon his lips. He's losing control too quickly, using too much energy to defend himself. He's flooded by the Red Dimension and it's infinite strength, undone by the fighting the world around him, and for that he looks to the sky, clutching at his hair. “Die!” he screams, loud enough that the heroes stop in their attacks. A wave of arm, and Jean Grey – a woman he once thought he loved, is erased from existence.

There's so few that can reach him now – Steve and Alex. But, even they are afraid to get closer. “Scott,” Alex says, a tentative step. “You have to calm down now. You have to let us take you into custody.”

“Never!” Scott rages. Hands into fists, he blasts his optic beam right into his brother's chest, knocking him back out of the rubble. Alex hits a nearby building, knocked unconscious by the attack, and Cyclops smiles with murderous intent. “I've had enough,” he says, his baritone dangerous and dark. “It's time to end this.”

He returns to the sky, his gaze still down below. A twist of his hands, and the energy begins to build. “Don't do this, Scott,” Angel yells. “Please, don't do this!”

It takes a mere second for the world beneath him to turn red. A flash of light that scatters across the collapsed building. And when it's over, there's no one left. The Avengers, the X-men, all are gone, disappeared to nothingness.
Rose and Griggs meet.

Humans. Those foolish creatures, their reality so contorted, confused. They look up to the sky and swear they see the stars, but in truth, they only see the satellites beaming information back down to earth. They fear things that they don't understand, hide their heads away in the sand, blame the politicians, blame the world. The world would be a better place without them – their lofty goals, their intrinsic nature to hide.

Jebediah Rose looks down upon the precipice of destruction – the gathered crowds around the demolition of Stark Tower. The flowers, the cards, the pictures, the flags. The sheer amount of memorabilia left in the wake of the heroes' demise. His plan is going just as expected.

General Greg Griggs stands beside him and Hatch to his rear. “Any word from Helmut?” he asks the taller man to his left. He keeps his head low, coke bottle glasses to the frayed ash of destruction. “Is he close?”

Griggs nods, unwilling to speak of such revelations in the midst of such a crowd. Paranoid by wariness, he sweeps gray eyes around the scene before taking a deep breath. “I can't be seen with you,” he tells the leader of Syrntech. “It could ruin everything we've worked for.”

“Then lead us somewhere else,” Rose says, still thinking the humongous crowd hides them easily.

“Fury's a smart man. He will know to look for us here.”

“You mean that he suspects you?”

Griggs nods. “He is concerned about how much time I stay at headquarters. He thinks that he's being watched over.”

“That could prove a problem, especially with the disappearance of Commander Hill.”

They wander through the hushed crowd, a vigil filled with candles lifted into the air. A moment of silence out of respect. Tears, sobs. The world is bereft their heroes, those beings that they looked up to, admired, trusted to save them. And, now, with the deed done, they don't know where to place their hope. “I honestly feel sorry for them,” Rose says. “Their entire world has just come crashing down.” He smiles.

Over coffee, they talk of the next stage of their plan – the financial take over. The crashing of stock markets and then the slow assimilation of the world. It will take about a month as they consolidate their resources. The mutant trafficking, the drug carriers. The products, the films, the one-hit wonders on the radio. “We have to keep it peaceful from here on out,” Rose says. “And, we have to stop Cyclops.”

Cyclops, thus far, had acted as divined. His temper, his cause. His powers, the fear that he creates. “I'm almost going to miss him,” Griggs says. “He's such an easy tool to manipulate.”
“Does that mean that Dr. Helmut has come up with a way to kill him?”

“Or at least waylay his powers. Possibly for good.”

“Excellent. I should like to see his progress.”

Griggs pulls a small tablet from his coat pocket and lays it on the table. “He's been experimenting with ruby red quartz, turning it into an aerosol that will harden on contact. Think of it as a bomb, exploding within Cyclops' chest and wrapping him in the stone. The theory is that he can't break free of it.”

“Interesting,” he says, handing the tablet back. “How long until it's complete?”

“Weeks at most. SHIELD has given him full access to their laboratories. He's been working night and day.”

“Good.” It's a weight lifted, knowing that soon, Syrntech will be able to handle the most powerful mutant in the world. “The world will be grateful for his defeat.” And, that defeat will take the think tank one step closer to domination. “Of course, if we could use the quartz to control him, we'll have a formidable weapon.”

“So, you don't want him dead?” Killing him had long been part of the plan, ever since Rose drug the truth about the mutant from a very addled Xavier. For years, they'd worked towards the goal of killing Scott Summers.

“If he can be killed, then we should do so, Gregory, but if can't be killed, then we need to find a way to make him our puppet.”

Griggs can see the thoughts flutter over Rose's mind. The half glimpse of smile before brown eyes narrow into more ponderous affairs. He can only imagine the scenarios wandering through Rose's brain – everything from how he will handle Syrntech's rise to power to how to make the world's most dangerous mutant a slave to them. “What should we do about Fury?”

“Let him be,” Rose says. “Even if he does find proof that you're working for me, it will be too late to do anything about it. We'll give the Panel no choice but to replace him.” He's more interested in Cyclops and the methods they will use to bring him down. “Xavier can demolish his mind.”

“But Xavier has agreed not to interfere.”

“For the advancement of mutants, he'd cull Cyclops. He'd destroyed him.” Jebediah sighs for his right hand man, that he lacks the vision of a world at peace. “And don't forget Emma Frost. She's more easily manipulated than Xavier himself.”

“Frost would never --”

“Yes, she would. If it came down to her own survival, she'd make any deal necessary.”

“Do you know where she is?” Griggs asks.

“Of course, I do.” He's a careful man, Jebediah Rose. He knows what information to give and what secrets to keep. There is little that goes unnoticed by him. “Tomorrow begins Stage two of our plans. Make sure you stay alert.”

The general nods, understanding completely what is expected of him. Tomorrow – while Rose bankrupts the world – he will be convincing the Panel to oust Fury from his position. “Tomorrow
then,” he says, “we will meet again.”
He sits in the darkness, a crystalline shield around his on-edge form. All over the world they call him a murderer, a war monger, a villain, a terrorist. He killed his own brother, his friends, his family. He killed them all.

The world mourns for the Avengers.

He watches the ticker up above, a map of the stock market, watching as shares in hero-owned businesses begin to tank. From Worthington Industries to Stark Enterprises, Frost International, to Baxter Inc. - he watches them fall, driving the world to the edge of a financial crisis. “Come on,” he whispers, his hands digging into the wooden desk before him.

“Calm down, Scott,” Logan says, reaching in through the shield to grip the man's shoulder. Scott's been unbalanced since the previous morning, talking of death and numbers, parts of the plan not yet activated. He's too tense, too worried, and Wolverine can see the cracks beginning to form.

Cable, Rachel, and Dr. Stephen Strange continue to hold him in check, but they're draining fast, the pressure of keeping his powers under control too much. “You have to get him calmed down,” Cable explains, knowing that the three of them won't last much longer.

Logan hates seeing him like this – those times when he loses his sense of reality, when he breaks. And though the telepaths look to him for help, there's not much he can do.

“I killed them all, Logan--”

“Scott, turn around --”

“For this. I killed them all for this,” he says loudly, waving a hand across the screen. “They're not reacting. They're not doing what they're supposed to do. What if I was wrong? What if I killed them for nothing?”

The crystalline shield begins to quake with a frantic wave of his power. He struggles to contain himself, to keep his powers from overloading once again. He fears killing even more.

Logan wraps his arms around Scott's shoulder, pulls him close against his chest. A peck of a kiss to the top of his head, he reminds the other man that he's real, and he's here. “Come on, Scotty, pull yourself together.”

Cable and Rachel stand to either side of the crystalline dome, several feet away, trying to tame his thoughts and get him focused, but their powers have not yet recovered from Jean's attacks, and it's up to Dr. Strange to cast another spell. “He'll work through it,” Strange says. “Faster this time.”

“Even a little stability is better than this.”

The spell comes green and placid, lighting over Cyclops' shaken form, and the sudden dimming of
his destructive powers. He's in control now, focused. Cold. And he pulls himself away from Logan's
arms, and returns to the screen.

Hours pass, and the world goes bankrupt. Whole governments and countries. The death of the heroes
has meant the massive sell-off of stocks, people trying to protect their money, and for that Scott
smiles. He'd predicted it, and he also predicted what would happen next. A single share of Stark
Enterprises is purchased, and with it, controlling interest in the company and all of it's lost tech.
“There they are,” Scott says quietly. “Tell Warren, now.”

The bidding war for the pieces of Stark Enterprises and the other businesses is hectic and fast paced.
Scott watches it from the screen as soon, his own umbrella company – CSS Inc. - buys the majority
shares in the heroes' companies, and saves them from being held by Syrntech. It takes the night for
the work to complete, and Scott's more addled than ever as Strange's spell comes undone.

Logan walks him away from the screens – takes him to the small room in the back. “You need to
rest, hon,” he tells him. “Let the others do their part.”

“I killed my brother,” he tells Logan. “I killed everyone.” As his power grows in turbulence, the
crystalline shield begins to form, enveloping both of the mutants. Numbers on his tongue, the
memories of the Red Dimension once again haunting him, Scott's sins fill the space between the two
of them.

Once again, Logan draws him into a tight embrace. He can count on one hand the times he's seen the
man cry. Twice for Jean, once for his time-displaced son, and once just a day ago when he
threatened to leave. Through all of the tragedy that he's been through, for as cold as he'd had to be in
order to remain the X-men's leader, Logan always expected a break down like this, and now that he
sees it, he can't help but feel the ache in his chest. “You didn't do anything wrong, Scotty. You have
to remember that. You did nothing wrong.”

“I killed my brother.”

“No. You saved the world.” He smooths away at autumn hair, takes tears from underneath glasses,
and then holds the younger mutant's hand. “I'm real, Scott. Just pay attention to me.”

Scott looks down at the hand intertwined into his, then slowly up to Logan's face. He can see the
want, even through ruby red lenses, Logan can see the need. Lifting Scott's hand to cup his jaw, he
presses warmly over stubbled flesh. “I'm real,” he says again, allowing the younger mutant to stroke
thumb absently down to his lips.

A wash over pale pink, Scott's breath becomes heavy and his energy more burdened. “Did I kill
you?”

“No, you didn't kill me.”

Scott studies the harsher features of Logan's face, trickles fingers down to the edge of jaw line,
smooths around the eyes, traces the slope of nose. Attentive, gentle, he seeks to memorize the reality
of that, those things that he should remember and the things that the whispers shouldn't break.

Touch-starved, Logan's body heats up as Scott continues his rapt attention which collapses over ears,
down the neck, before retreating in a sudden bout of guilt and shame. Logan grabs him by the arms
before he manages to stand. “Don't,” he says quietly. “Don't leave me.”

“I don't deserve you,” Scott says softly.

“You've got that backwards, Slim. It's me who doesn't deserve you.”
The kiss is sudden and burning, and Logan can't tell who started it. Fast, greedy, their bodies heat up and Scott powers bangs endlessly against the crystalline shell that contains his powers. From mouth to neck, Wolverine can finally taste his most desired prey as he dips tongue across the pulse point under Scott's ear.

A delicious moan, soft, needful, a release as the energy whips into a maelstrom inside the crystal shell.

Within minutes, Scott's shirt is off, lying on the floor, followed by shoes and socks. And though it feels good, and though this is all Wolverine ever wanted, the crack in the shield - that near silent river of breakage - and Logan must stop. Scott is shocked by the pullback, looks to his rear to listen to his whispers, to the right, the left, and finally back to Logan. Tugging on his shirt, he apologizes. His cheeks run red with guilt. “I'm sorry,” he says again. “I'm sorry.”

And as the shame settles in, as the feelings of rejection make him even more fraught, the shell around them shatters to the ground, and once again, Scott spirals out of control with a voiceless scream that plummets him to his knees. Logan has no choice but to turn him off. “Er dogren.” He pulls the taller mutant from the floor, drapes him in the nearby bed and places his shoes and socks neat and tidy underneath.

He wants whiskey, a cigar, a bottle of fucking bourbon. Damn, how could he mess this up again?

The knock on the door alerts him to visitors.


“And?”

“His plan worked. Cost half of my fortune, but it worked. The world's avoided a complete market collapse.” There's still the matter of smaller countries who will feel the weight of their lackluster portfolios, but they will remedy that soon enough. “We'll donate stock to them once this is over.”

“All of you?”

“Yeah. All of us. Well, the ones that are here.” Warren takes a pause, and adds quietly, “You ready to deal with her?”

Logan nods, his mind still half drenched by visions of Scott – those reddened cheekbones, that solitary moan and exposed neck. “Yeah. I'm ready.”

This is not part of the plan. Logan knows it. Warren knows it. Scott didn't want revenge; he wanted her to be left alone, but the two mutants can't just let it go.

Down into the basement of Cable's bunker, he can already smell Nathan and Rachel down here waiting on them. The telepathic blockers turn the walls a dismal shade of red, the perfect compliment to her hair.

“Jean,” he says when he comes to the cell.

“Logan?” she pipes up. “Please, you've got to let me out of here.”

“Not a chance, Red.”

He sits along the darkened corridor, hands dangling across knees. He wants to know her intention, what she'd planned on doing. “And don't forget, I can smell a lie.” He wants to know if indeed Storm and her X-men had gone rogue, agreed to a plan that would kill Scott Summers instead of saving him.

She tells him of her plight, how hard it is to stay out of his mind now that she knows he's alive. That
she's spent sleepless nights tossing and turning as she could feel the edge of his strength upon the astral plane. “He's too powerful, Logan. Even you must see that.”

“What I see is a man abused by those he cared for the most.”

“So you do realize that I do care for him.”

“No. You were trying to kill him,” Cable interrupts. “You were going to turn him off for good.”

“Because I care for him.” Green eyes span the width of those studying her. Angel's bright blue eyes to Logan's gray. Cable and Prestige. She thinks of these people as her friends, her family. She doesn't understand why she's here. “He's never wanted to hurt people.”

“He's never wanted to be controlled either, but you took that away from him, didn't you?” Rachel is all bile and spite. Behind her eyes, there are flames – the proximity to her father who is inundated with the Phoenix. More emotional than her brother Nathan, she squeals obscenities to her mother. Calls her a calculating bitch, a thief, a wretch. She wants her mother to drown in guilt, but Jean doesn't buy it.

“I kept the world safe for as long as I could,” she tells her daughter. “I made sure the world never understood the scope of his powers.”

“Bull shit,” Logan says. “You destroyed his mind to get what you wanted --”

“Which was to see all of you free and clear of the world and their plans for you.” She won't budge on this. “I could use the strength that he couldn't, and I used that strength to --”

“Eat an entire star?” Logan's bluntness stings. “How do we get rid of the switch,” he asks.

“You can't,” Jean smiles, finally understanding why she's being held prisoner. “The only thing you can do is turn him off.”

Cable doesn't buy it, nor does Rachel. She has seen the torture in her father's head, a reality stripped from him, a past that he doesn't know. She refuses to believe that the switch is permanent. “We can undo the bombs,” she tells her mother. “We can undo the memories --”

“And how do you know they're the right memories? Even I can sort through that mess.”

“Strange can do it,” she argues.

“Oh?” Jean raises a brow at the name. “That's funny. He barely knows Scott at all, yet you trust him with such an important task?” Her tone does not sit well with her captors, especially Logan. The slow slide of metal from his hands – a warning that she shouldn't be so flippant. “You don't see it do you?”

“See what?” he asks.

“The world isn't safe, Logan. How many has he killed?”

“None.” In the darkness of another cell, Magneto comes forward. “He didn't kill anyone, did he?” Like Jean, he's a prisoner and not part of the plan.

“No,” Cable says. “He didn't kill anyone.”

“You managed his powers?” Jean says in awe.
“Tell us how to get rid of the switch,” Logan repeats, harsher this time.

“Tell me how nobody died,” she counters.

It's a secret. One held despite her attacks upon her would-be children. She then realizes how unnecessary she is. They can waylay his powers – locked together, spun together. “You stopped him.”

There were three of them – Cable, Rachel, and Dr. Strange with his litany of spells that knocked himself unconscious some hours into the battle. His energy is low, but just enough to cast the spells that keeps Scott in check. “It will be harder next time,” Rachel tells her alternate dimension mother. “Cyclops learns these spells very quickly. He'll defeat it within hours.”

It is something that she'd always suspected. That magic is his bane, though she never chose to research and prove that it actually was. Magic isn't logic. Its strung together syllables and beliefs, exact motions and intrinsic devotion. It was nothing like her, nothing like the Phoenix, nothing like Scott. Cyclops was an enigma, worn down to nubs and still functioning. And though Jean Grey was prone to the belief in the cosmic universe, it didn't mean that it was real. “He won't survive.”

Her prediction does not sit well with those that are gathered, and surprisingly, it is Magneto who reacts first. “Why chase his death, when it's Summers that can give us the life that we deserve?”

“He's a madman, Eric,” Jean responds. “He's not well. He'll never be well.”

“He's perfect. A perfect power. We should be praising him.”

“You act like he's a king --”

“No, I act like he's a hero. The hero we've always needed.”

Jean laughs – a dark laugh, reminiscent of the hatred of the Dark Phoenix. The hunger, the power. She can remember it, she can feel it strike electric down her spine. And for a second, she is frightened. She looks to her alternate reality daughter who is also stung by proximity to the firebird. “The Phoenix wants out,” she says. “It will burn him alive to escape.”

“You're changing the subject,” Magneto quips.

“No, I'm warning you. All of you. The Phoenix has plans.”
He set up on the world like fire, his anger, his rage so overwhelming that he couldn't contain the bloodlessness of his actions. Big, bulky, he hired himself out as an assassin, a mercenary, looking for fights where ever he could find them. He didn't realize that he had a missing year. He didn't know where the need to kill came from, he just knew it was there.

He found Logan in the wilds of Canada, somewhere out in the boondocks of the Yukon Valley. He reviled his brother, that he had found peace. That he had lost the urge to fight. Logan had dealt with his demons, where as Victor had no idea what his demons were.

They fought, tooth and nail, bringing each other to blood and savageness. Logan had lost himself to the berzerker rage several times that week, tired of being hunted down like a dog, tired of being prey to the larger mutant, he would close his eyes and let go of that beast, hoping that his brother would stay down this time.

The battles took them through the week, before both men finally broke down, exhausted upon the snow. A fire, roasted rabbit, there were no smiles or laughter as they ate their meals, just a hard edge wall between them born out of confusion. “I don't want to fight you,” Logan had said. “I just want to be left alone.”

“You ain't ever gonna rid yourself of me.” His brother could take his rage, all that pent up anger, his cruelty. He was the only being alive that could.

Creed left that night, his wounds still gaping and bleeding. The sensation was strange, the need to go to Nebraska – it was a thought at the edge of his mind that he couldn't let go of. “What's in Nebraska?” Logan had asked, but Victor could only shrug. He'd never been to the place before, but he had no choice but to go.

He wakes with a start, his hands still quaking, his voice dry. As he blinks himself into the dawning of morning light, the images of that small boy and the damage done slowly begins to melt away.

“You okay?” She stands before him, cup of coffee in hand. She's been waiting for him to wake up for hours now. “You had quite a night last night.”

Twelve bottles of whiskey, not to mention the two bottles of wine at dinner, and Victor Creed is still recovering from the blitz of alcohol to his system. He takes the proffered coffee, the two aspirin, and sits sideways on the bed, his blue eyes looking up into Raven's amber. “Did I kill anyone?”

“No,” she says, “but Summers did.”

Drunk for two days, neither of them had turned on the news to see the fright, and though there were plenty still cheering it days later, she knew that Victor wouldn't. She flips on the television, shoves a plate of waffles in his lap and makes him absorb the events of two days ago.

His healing factor working overtime to disintegrate the poison that he's flooded his system with, he
looks upon the news with a sluggish attitude until he sees the visage of Scott Summers and the death of the heroes. “No way,” he says after rewinding it and viewing for a second time. “Got to be a lie. Summers wouldn't do that.”

“They say he's snapped.”

“He's snapped before.”

“But this time, there was no one near powerful enough to stop him.” Raven settles down on the bed next to him, a hand to his shoulder to remind him to stay calm. “He's not the little boy you knew anymore.”

Victor swipes her hand away, his face red and teeth bared. This isn't how it was supposed to happen. They'd made their own plans – finding Sinister and getting revenge for what he did to them. Making the creature pay for all of those years spent in his endless whorl of puppetry. But, this. This is only going to make things worse. “What's the bounty?”

“Twenty million.”

“That's all?”

“For now. Bids are still coming in.”

“Ain't worth it,” Creed replies, taking a bite of waffle as his hangover starts to dissipate.

“Twenty mill's a lot, Vic. It could set us up really nicely. We could finally settle --”

“It ain't worth it.”

She catches on quickly. Even a hundred million wouldn't change his mind. “He's not a boy anymore, Vic. He's our enemy.”

In his dreams – those memories that have come to haunt him – he also remembers his intentions. He wanted to escape with Scott, trudge him up to some cabin far away from the world, keep him safe, keep him whole. In all of his life, it was the only time he'd felt that paternal calling. The only time he felt like he could care for someone other than himself or Birdy, a telepath that soothed his ravenous leanings. “I won't fight him,” he says. “Not now. Not ever again.”

“Someone else will --”

“Then let someone else try. Me? I'm still going after Sinister.” They'd gone to his London hideaway – that city underground – and other than a few lost Gambit clones, the space was empty. It only meant one thing – Essex had a plan in action, and he was preparing to launch it. “We have to make him pay for what he did to us.”

Madripoor seemed like the best place to get info on him, rumors, whispers. But, thus far, other than the drinking contest he'd gotten caught up in, Sinister was as low to the ground as he could come. “That monster's done enough to us. He needs to be stopped.”

“So, you're not going to go after Summers?” She's concerned by this, by his guilt. “Vic, there was nothing you could do, but right now, Summers is dangerous. If he can kill the Avengers in one fell swoop, then--”

“You really think we would make a difference?” They're not heroes – Mystique and Sabretooth. At best, they're self-serving and selfish. “If he wiped the floor with a Norse god, then what do you think
he'll do to us?” The best way to cure his guilt is to get revenge for Scott – which means Sinister and Xavier must be dealt with. “That's how we do this, Rave. We go after those that hurt him.”

“You don't plan to tell him either, do you.”

“No. I don't plan to say a word.”

“So be it then,” Mystique says with a sigh. “Let's go find Sinister and make him pay.”

Madripoor is a lawless zone, at least as far as Hydra is concerned. Anything goes here – from blackmarket goods to slavery. And the past few months has seen a rise on the slavery front – mostly mutants that are paraded around wooden stalls, their hands cuffed and thick golden collars around their necks. A few humans get filtered in for good measure – strong ones or pretty ones. The silly ones that believed their really cheap tour guide was a good deal. And though the site of their fellow mutants in chains makes them angry, they turn a cold shoulder to the please of their genetic brethren looking for something less tangible than a slave.

It's at the end of Sake Alley – a small line of shops known for sushi and rice wine – that Raven and Sabretooth end up. Victor's been here before – once some time ago when he was looking for his half-brother. The info was good, and the price even better.

At the table, Sabretooth throws down a roll one hundred dollar bills. “Manager's Special,” he says eyeing the young girl and her attentiveness.

“Yes, sir,” she says in clipped syllables – not as accustomed to English as some of the others. She takes the roll from the table and disappears into the back of the restaurant. “You're sure about this?” Raven asks. Creed nods.

The sushi boat arrives nearly thirty minutes later – a well crafted feast of sashimi and rice, all bought this morning from the docks. “It's the best sushi outside of Japan,” Victor says, and shoves a soy soaked piece into his mouth.

“I thought we were coming for information --”

“Manners, Rave. We eat first, appreciate their delicacies, and then we get down to the hard stuff.”

“I didn't realize you were so amenable to outsiders,” she quips with a smile.

“I didn't realize you were in such a hurry.”

She knows that look in his eyes – that hungry, enraptured look. Out of all of her loves, Victor Creed was the only one to look at her that way, as if she was being devoured in his thoughts. Even Destiny – the woman she had loved for generations – couldn't match the heat of that one, single, solitary gaze. “Maybe we should put of our little trip until tomorrow,” she says with a husk. “Sinister can wait.”

Her words draw him out of spell and back into purpose. “Once this is over,” he says, “I'm going to tie you up and make love to you for days on end.”

She feels his words between her legs.

The young waitress from earlier hands him a bill, he reads it carefully, writes on the back and gives it to her along with another roll of hundreds. He gives Raven a shrug. “Price went up,” he says casually, as if expecting this to happen.
The waitress returns again, puts two desserts on the table as well as the previous check. “Milk pudding?” It has been ages since she’s had the stuff. Sabretooth nods checking the bill and a huge smile crosses his face. “Looks like we're going back home. He's in New York.”
Sinister makes another bargain.

It's not often that he entertains a merlot. He considers it rather muddy, lacking the perfection of a mouth-puckering shiraz, or a truly sweet wine like a burgundy. But here, in this mindscape, the failings of a merlot is his inspiration. He tuts the sorcerer – tongue to teeth - and smiles widely. “I warned you.”

“What do you want?” Strange asks the tall, pale man lounging on Scott-shaped furniture.

“That's the question, isn't it,” Sinister laughs. “What could I possibly want?”

Strange regards Essex for long, guarded moments. He's in too deep, and he knows it. “I can't make anymore deals with you,” he says quietly, knowing that piecing back together Scott's mind will be nearly impossible without him. “I've given you enough already.”

“You don't have to give me anything,” Nathaniel smiles. “You can simply owe me. A blind eye, that's all I ask for.”

“A blind eye towards what?”

“You'll figure it out when it happens, and when it does, you'll keep your mouth shut about my involvement. After all, we don't want the precious X-men thinking that you've made a deal with a devil in order to fix this broken mind.”

“And you're a devil?” Stephen asks.

“Well, I'm not your friend.” He takes a gulp of his ethereal wine, setting the goblet down on the Scott-shaped table. “As for devil or not, that's just in the details. Do you wish for proof?”

Strange watches as Sinister takes memories from the ashes, forms them molds them, strips away those things attached – the psychic mines, the traps within, even bars from the prison cells somewhere beneath where logic should be. He weaves these moments of the past together to form a solid memory.

He sat quietly, dutiful. Hands under legs so as not to touch anything. Moira MacTaggert smiled at him as she put the knife to the cake, serving the triangle onto his plate after he had blown out the candles. Still nervous, still with a pounding headache, Scott smiled back at her.

They didn't know his actual birthday. Scott couldn't remember and his birth certificate – along with his brother's – had both been removed from Anchorage. Xavier assumed the orphanage had taken it, but Fred Duncan couldn't find it there either. “Well, when do you want your birthday to be?” Moira had asked two days ago, but the boy was still too wary of them to answer.

“Well, when do you want your birthday to be?” he finally asked as he stared down upon the pink and blue cake – strawberry and blueberry, the best that Moira could make.
“No, deary, he's not coming.” She could have sworn she saw relief in the child's demeanor, and she understood why. Xavier was a task master when it came to Scott and his privileges in the mansion. A balanced diet, exercise, he had plans for the boy if he was going to stay here with him. Plans that didn't include cake. “But, Eric will be here shortly. He says he has a present for you.”

“A present?”

“Yes, Scott. A present just for you.” It broke her heart to see the boy's sudden fear. Even a present just for him would come under scrutiny of Charles, something that the child wanted to avoid. “It's okay,” she says. “Charles is a good man. You'll get used to him.”

She'd hoped that Scott would argue with her, that he would burst out in sobs and words, to overcome the silent shell that he'd wrapped himself in. But, he didn't. The boy merely nodded and looked to the table. He didn't eat the cake, not for Moira, not for Erik. He wasn't supposed to have it, or so the professor had told him. “Scott, it's your birthday. It's okay to celebrate.”

It was moments later that the bell rang, and Moira – frustrated – opened the door. “Charles has told him no cake,” she tells Erik on the way back to the kitchen. He's just a child. He shouldn't be kept to such high standards.”

She could tell that Scott heard her complaint, and as she re-entered the kitchen, he pushes the cake far away from him. Moira takes a deep breath, shrugging her fears off towards Lensherr. “Thank you,” Erik smiles. “I've been looking forward to Moira's cake all day!” He hefts the box onto the table and takes the cake away from the child – which also relieves the pressure of two separate commands. “Maybe later you should try this,” he smiles at the boy. “But, not before you open your present.”

Most children would be excited at the large, long box on the table, scrambling to rip off the paper and discover what's inside, but not Scott. No, the boy was as trepidatious as ever, wary of the two adults who asked him to disobey Professor Xavier. “Can you guess what's in there?” Erik asked. Scott shook his head. “You can't open it until you guess.”

The sullen child was not one for games. He wore no smile, did not delight in the least at his guess. “A chess board.”

Surprised that he guessed it, Erik crooked one eyebrow above blue eye. “Did you peek?”

“No, sir.”

“I'm positive you peaked.”

“No, sir.”

“Well, you might as well open it then. Maybe you'll like the look of it.”

The chess board was hand carved from smooth white quartz and obsidian, both glittery an elegant. Erik had spent a fortune getting the set made, and he was very proud of it.

Scott stared at the board for long, silent moments. His fingers gently roved over the skillfully carved pieces, both admiring and afraid to touch them. “I can't take this,” he said, almost inaudibly.

“Sure you can. I had this made just for you.”

“Professor Xavier wouldn't like it.”
And that's what his reluctance boiled down to. Xavier and his harsh grip on the young boy. The days spent trying to break into his mind. The efforts he put into training the child for combat, to smarten him up, to make him capable. Scott needed direction, and Xavier wouldn't allow him to veer from that chosen path. “Scott --” Moira said, her voice choked by emotion.

“It's okay, Moira,” Lehnsherr said. “We have to respect the boy’s wishes.” Upset with how the child was being treated, but not yet willing to give up on his friend, Erik tossed the boy an apple. “Tell you what, Scott. I'll keep this at my place until you feel ready to take it. Maybe once you get used to life here, you'll feel better about it, eh?”

Scott nodded again and excused himself from the table. Moira and Erik found him later in the Danger Room, practicing high kicks and throat punches. “He's gotten much stronger, hasn't he?” Erik asked.

“He's only thirteen Erik. His life should be more than this. He should be at the park with the other children. He should be excited about cake. He should be happy about gifts.”

“I'll have another talk with Xavier, see if I can get to him to be nicer to the boy.”

“Good luck with that,” Moira scoffs. “He's with Jean until the end of the week.”

“He's quite obsessed with her.”

“She has the same gift that he does. Of course he's going to go overboard with her. And, that leaves Scott bearing the brunt of his frustration. Please, talk with him, Erik. Get him to relax around Scott. Scott needs him just as much as Jean does.”

“Everyone thinks of me as the villain,” Sinister says, “but all I did was block powers that he was too young to control.”

“You took his memories --”

“Of course I did. But, I didn't destroy him.”

“You're praising yourself as a hero?” Strange asks, shocked that the pale man would take the mantle.

“No, that was Xavier. I take pride in my place in history – that I stopped Scott Summers from destroying the world by the time he was thirteen. The damage you see here, all of this comes from Xavier. Let it be known – I am not your friend, Stephen Strange, but I'm not the enemy that you should be hunting.”

“Xavier's dead.”

“Oh, is he now? Well, that's funny. I just saw him two days ago in the astral realm.” The news raised dark brow over blue eyes as the doctor fought for understanding. “Just imagine what he's going to do to dear ol’ Scotty once he figures out where he is.” Black eyes studying the sorcerer, Sinister wears no smile. “Tell me you'll turn a blind eye to certain actions, and I'll piece the first layer of his mind back together.”

“You're worried about him.”

“I told you that I'm not your friend. Therefore, don't assume how you think I feel.”

Strange nods and allows Sinister to work his magic. He watches as the memories once again flow together, the mission, the control. How it's effortless, just the wave of a hand and a long history of
recording the man's memories. He senses no danger in the act, nothing out of sorts. “What about the second layer?”

“He's not ready for that yet,” Sinister answers. “You have to destroy more of the bombs.”

“How many more?”

“All of them.”

Stephen knows it's a lie. That Essex can rebuild the whole mind if he so chooses, but he's not going to make waves. Not when Scott's recovery is reliant upon this most insidious man. It takes but moments to calm the ashes of memory, to settle Scott down, and once again, the core of his mind is solid.

Not expecting thanks, Sinister gives him a knowing wink and disappears into the ether.
Cable's Bunker

Chapter Summary

The beginning of the plan.

The blueprint laid out before him, he studies the duct work, the wires, the plumbing. For each of the buildings. Not just one. There are easy ways in and out, easier ways to spark electrical fires and hide them from the investigators. It will just be coincidence – a coincidence that will see part of Syrntech into shackles.

Tonight, they are destroying Syrntech's drug trade in Hong Kong.

Tony Stark double checks the pathways through the buildings. Teleporters will be sparse, but the electrical fires they mean to set will be zealous. They're going to destroy it all – every last ounce of heroine, cocaine, ecstasy. So many pills, powders, things that should never have been invented. He explains the plans to his onlookers – Cap and She-hulk, Gambit and Kitty Pryde. Nearly fifty heroes – including Thor – and they're dead to the world, ready to become agents in the downfall of Syrntech.

“Do not get caught!” he warns those on this specific mission. If you can't get through, radio for help. That's the only conversation I want to entertain. Anything else, reveal in your debriefing.” He's adamant, forthright. For the first time in months, he feels like he's on the right side of things, and apparently, Steve agrees.

“I miss you,” he says with a peck on Tony's cheek.

“I miss you, too, boy scout.”

Stark is supposed to stay in the bunker, an aid to those making calls according to Summers' directions. There are thousands of them, contingencies and fail safes. Cyclops has predicted what they'll do and how the heroes will react. The burning of the drug warehouses is just a small piece of the plans that Scott has laid down for them. There's plenty more to come.

The screams that echo throughout the bunker draw all eyes to the tiny bedroom on the right. One by one, they look to Cable and then to Rachel, the children of Cyclops and the bane he carries in the depths of his mind. Phoenix dreams, or so the X-men among them have deemed the nightmares. “Is he okay?” Tony asks of Cable, but Cable doesn't respond.

There’s too much to do, still, for attention to be given to the Phoenix. No matter how much she wants out, the heroes must still find their way free of Syrntech. The teams gather, each taking with them a drone as Magik and Dr. Strange teleport them to their destinations. On screen, Tony can see them land on rooftops, with the drones controlled by remote control helmed by himself. “Keep them in sight,” Maria Hill tells Stark. “Don't lose them.”

Alex Summers gives the go, calling out for all teams to hit their targets. It doesn't matter who's the fastest or whose the slowest, just so long as the flames are lit within the space of five minutes. Kitty Pryde's fire lights first, an easy phase through walls, then up into the duct work. Once she's done, she waits on Magik to take her to the next site, to help a team having trouble.
Gambit sparks his next – a rewiring of the Hvac system that sends sparks through the core of his building. And then She-Hulk, who merely beats the thing up until it catches fire. There are twelve sites in all over Hong Kong, and one by one, they all catch flame. Stark feels the thrill of it deep in his bones, especially when Steve finally gets his lit. “Magik,” Alex calls into com, “Get them out of there.”

One by one, the heroes are returned, and watch the mayhem through the lens of the drones. Police, fire trucks, ambulances – emergency services are split twelve ways across the island, and arrests of the dock workers are quickly made. “One last mission, Kitty,” Alex says, placing a folder in her hand. “Sneak that into the police station. That's proof of Syrntech's involvement.” With a smile she accepts and moments later, she and Illyana disappear.

“So what's next?” Tony asks.

“We take down SHIELD,” Alex answers.

This is the dangerous part of the plan. Hit and runs, dismantling the agency at its core. And though the Avengers, especially, are opposed to this, Alex explains the truth of it all. SHIELD is overrun with agents, much like the Fantastic Four and the Avengers. Too many eyes, too many moles. It would take months to ferret out all of the personnel, especially with the Panel and their own spies within. “Three Panel members work for Syrntech,” he explains. “We can't trust Fury to differentiate between them.” As head of SHIELD, he's beholden to the Panel's whims. Though Hill swears that he, too, thinks something's fishy, he's still in service to them.

“We start small,” Cable says, pulling up a map of SHIELD bases. “We get civilians out first --”

“And where do you plan on putting them?” Steve asks.

“In Limbo.” Strange and Magik had worked for weeks to create a magical stronghold in that hellish dimension. “They'll be safe there. So long as they don't open the doors.”

“And how do we know you're not just making this up to get revenge?” The question comes from Hawkeye, who hovers at the back of the room, his eagle eyes observing anything.

“You don't,” is Cable's answer. Though he can shower the Avengers with all of the proof Cyclops has buried in his plans, taking down SHIELD is a matter of trust. “If you can't trust us, then you've become useless to us, and we'll find a way to do this without you.”

The plan begins as soon as Scott is stable. “He'll be the distraction as a small team will evacuate the civilians from each of the locations. It will take time, but we need to make sure that the non-military workers are safe.”

“You're going to let him fight again?” Steve asks, alarmed. “You can't do that to him.”

“It's part of his plan,” Alex says. “And, it's the easiest way to do this. Dr. Strange and Illyana will head the teams. We need to do this quickly and efficiently. We need to save their lives.”

“You sound like you're going to blow the places up,” Hawkeye remarks.

“That's exactly what we're going to do,” Cable answers.

The world will hate Cyclops for these attacks, but they're necessary in order to draw out the hidden armies of Syrntech. “They have thousands and thousands of soldiers waiting for orders. We need them to react. We need them to fight.” Even with all of the powers brought here, they can't take on the global army all at once – not without far too much spilled blood, so it's essential to bring them out
a little at a time. “My father will take the brunt of the attacks, while the rest of you work in secret.”

Now, they must wait for Cyclops.

The screams of the Phoenix inside his head takes hours to finally fade into rest. Asleep for those few precious hours, Alex comes to check in on him. “I’ll take over if you want to grab some coffee,” he tells Logan.

The two men haven't slept in over a day, and Logan can see the wear and tear it has borne on the younger Summers brother. “You need more rest than I do,” he says, reminding Alex that he has a healing factor that will let him stay up longer. And, indeed, Alex doesn't argue. A nap is all he's thought about these past few hours.

Settling himself in the chair, Alex sighs in the sudden comfort. “I can't believe he did all of this,” he says. “And without us catching on.”

“I don't want him fighting again,” Logan says, knowing that it's against Scott's plans. “He can't take it.”

“He has too, Logan. It's the best plan we've got.”

“You saw him, Alex. He's still reeling from before. Cable and Rachel, they don't stand a chance of keeping him under control this time.”

“Have faith,” Havok replies. “He's stronger than any of us know.”

They settle into an uncomfortable silence. Alex stares at his brother, the exhaustion of the past few days suddenly overwhelming. “Get some sleep,” Logan says. “I'll wake you when he's up.”

Wolverine himself wanders into the small kitchen, grabs himself a beer from the fridge. The bunker is crowded now, and everyone is fighting for room to sleep. Except for Rachel who is drowning herself in coffee. “You need your rest, too, punkin’,” he tells her, but Rachel doesn't feel the need. Like Logan, she's worried about her father in the next stage of his plans. “I've never felt something so vast. Not even when I had the Phoenix within me.” Every time he used his powers, he would overload, try to reabsorb the energy within. “It was like a waterfall, it just didn't stop.” She's also unsure if she can trust herself to go near him again. “I can see why my mother was so drawn to it.”

“You're not your mother, kiddo.”

“True, but that doesn't mean I can't have some of her same inclinations.” It's the Phoenix within his mind that calls to her the most, that and the damage. So many pieces of her father, split apart and remade to the telepaths' advantage. “I want to fix him,” she says. “I want him to be whole.”

“We all do, but leave that to Strange. He knows what he's doing.”

“I hope so. I just find it odd that he knows my dad's memories better than we do. What if he gets one wrong? It could change my dad forever.”

It was something Logan had never thought of before. How changed Scott would be with his mind intact. In an unguarded moment, he wonders if Scott will still love him. “Of course he will,” Rachel smiles at his projected worry. “You're the one he's meant to be with.” And though she is confident in her thoughts, Logan isn't. The dread hits him like a ton of bricks. “Logan, he's not going to leave you.”
Though he produces a smile of his own, he still feels the knot in his throat at the thought of Scott leaving him behind. “When he's fixed, he won't need me anymore.”

“He needs you to keep him on the right path.”

“And what if I veer off the path like before.”

“You'll get it right this time. Abandoning him isn't the way to go. I think we've all learned that lesson now.” Rachel place an elegant hand on his shoulder. “He's not going to leave you, Logan. Trust me.”

If only Logan could be so sure.
“Extend.” It's the word that Strange used to filter out the extraneous points of his power. Extend. A small word, a small spell. Something easily overcome, something hidden and pointed at the depths of his powers. He can feel it, that lone word as it spreads across miss and hap. That one word that unifies all of his thoughts. “Extend.”

Reaching out across Scott's mind, he finds Cable and Prestige holding back their father's strength with their minds. So far focused, he turns his attention to the crushing waves that threaten Cyclops' control. The spells he casts turn velvet pink and gray, light up force fields to protect the world from the mutant's might. Again and again, his arms outstretched before him, he casts these spells, his mind growing tired with the effort. “Push!” he yells at the telepaths. “Push!”

He can feel the stress of their minds pushing back at the Red Dimension. He bolsters them with another spell, one that increases their mental strength. He won't let them fail.

Scott takes another hit – a bullet to his shoulder – but, he doesn't fall sway to the pain. Hand outstretched, he takes the gun from his enemy's hands, and breaks it across his knee. A snip of a smile, and he lifts the gunman up, too, breaking both legs with mental force. “I told you to run,” he says quietly, “Now you will regret your decision to stay.”

There is no stopping him. Ceramic bullets, photon cannons, light wave technology, they throw it all at Scott Summers, but nothing works. Above them he floats, his eyes invisible to the masses below. He shoots an optic blast into the crowd, knocking even more soldiers off the playing field. The beam widens, takes out the entrance to the building before they can go back inside to wait him out.

Down on the ground again, he lands a high kick to a soldier's jaw, then grabs another and throws him onto his back, breaking his arm in the process. “Please,” the man says as Cyclops drops to wrap a hand around his neck, “Please. I've got children.”

He hefts the man to his feet, holds him by the neck just long enough to knock the man out before returning to deal with the deluge of bullets. Heart, lungs, ankles, ribs. He's pierced by the shattering remnants. He can feel the shrapnel in his jaw, his gut, his hands. But, once again, he does not cry out, does not let the pain overwhelm him. Sturdy, adamant, he waits for the building to blow, signaling the end of his battle here.

Magik appears, opens a light blue portal into Limbo and Scott crosses through. He hates this dimension. In ways he feels like he belongs here for taking so many lives. All of those battles, surely someone felt them as he fought against thousands and millions of enemies. The demons do not devour him. Even they feel his power. He is stronger than they are, and unfortunately so. If they can't kill him, then no one can.

Out into Area 51 in Nevada. Another SHIELD base, another attempt at ending their threat. The security here is huge, with new weapons, weapons he does not expect. But, Scott Summers is more powerful than them all. A sprint across desert floor, a punch to the chin, and the soldiers fall down.
like bowling pins, unable to keep their balance in the rush of wind. But here, they're working with the red crystals – an unlimited energy source born of alien tech and the Red Dimension. Here, they think they can defeat him.

“Take them hostage,” Strange screams out as he comes through the portal. With him are Cable and Rachel, beginning to tire, beginning to lose their grip on his power. They weren't meant to last this long – not with his energy active and constantly needed to be filled.

Magik sends the drone up high in the air, hoping that Alex and Hill will control it. It's too much for her. Along with the spells that she casts – calming spells, barrier spells – like Strange, she is losing ground far too fast. “I can't keep this up,” she tells him, blasting through the battlefield with blue white light – an enchantment that's meant to bring them to their knees, but she's so tired, she misses. “Stephen. I can't do this.”

Like Cable and Rachel, he fills her with yellow-green strength. A spell that he's barely able to cast. “Illyana, you need to be inside his mind.” Her telepathic spells are subpar, but he doesn't care. Whatever she can do will help them. Even if it's just staving off the nightmares that have come to feed on his consciousness.

It's a brilliant move – a healing spell that she learned from the Book of Holgarth. It gives them energy, strength, courage. And she's able to add her own spells to that of the Doctor's, giving both Cable and Rachel the boost they needed to continue on with his control.

He can sense their exhaustion – their mutant minds slowly fading into the abyss. They are enlightened and enlivened by the spell, and with it – with the knowledge that his children are holding the vast majority of his powers at bay – Scott is able to turn through them all in seconds. His optic blasts bellow out from behind protective visor, a large, wide, red beam that drops them all to their knees and to their backs. They ache from the hit, their ribs broken from the impact. “Run,” he tells them. “While you still have a chance.

On the ground before him, the scientists scurry. White lab coats and glasses, long hair pulled back into pony tails, and the baldness of aged wisdom. He sees them – but they're not civilians. Like the soldiers that have been defeated, they look for safety as Kitty and Steve look for portals that will see the innocuous to safety. It's a much faster process than he imagined. “They're hiding,” he says into com. “They're waiting for me to make a mistake.”

“Keep up the distraction,” his brother says, citing nine more sites that they must hit by evening. “Even if it's just pretend, keep attacking.” And so Scott does. A blast against the gates, towards the main experimentation area, towards the bunkers still lodged in the ground. Area 51 was prepared for their own downfall, and Scott makes no bones about taking it all down.

By evening, Cable and Prestige are tired – too tired to continue their trek across the U.S. They need rest and recuperation. As does Strange and Illyana, Kitty and those others who secured the SHIELD bases. Still wired into spell, Cyclops wants to keep on going, but Logan's voice draws him back home.

“You need sleep,” he says into com. “You need fuel.” He'll be there for both, ever regretting his reluctance to join in on the mission. He could have made Scott's job easier – after all, he is one of the scariest mutants in the world. He can see the minds of Cyclops' children wear down on them – the blistering speed of Cyke's attacks, and the flourishing of his power. He can tell that they're struggling. “I think that's enough for the night,” he tells Alex, but Alex wants to push it one step forward. There's only base left.

“If we give up now, they'll just rebuild.” He knows that his niece and nephew are tiring out, and that
Strange and Illyana have limited resources left for another attack, but he trusts his brother. He trusts that his brother will come through for them and empty out the last base before the need for rest. “He can do this, Logan,” he says, blue eyes darting sideways to see the look on Wolverine's face.

“It's too much for him.”

“Yes.” But, when has the world ever not been too much for him.”

Onto the frigid base in Alaska, a large underground base hidden by a cow field on top. This is where they store the chemical weapons and biological threats. Scott has to be careful here – one wrong move and he could kill hundreds of innocent people. “Make them come to you,” Alex says into com, the drone overhead giving him a fresh view. “Blast the ground, force them out so Kitty can get inside.”

It's a tense moment as Nathan and Rachel struggle with the optic blast and the flood of energy that comes in its wake. But, it works, just like Alex had hoped. The soldiers greet him with a flood of mustard gas into the air, and napalm at his feet. “They're going to burn him alive,” Logan cautions.

“He'll survive,” Alex replies. “He'll heal.”

Logan – breathless – sits back in the chair and watches as the men light the fire, and Cyclops goes up in flames. The soldiers cheer themselves for finally putting an end to the mutant's tyranny, that is until the flames suddenly go out. He stands before them awash with blackened skin that sloughs off at a touch. The red energy goes wild around him, eating down into ground. “You shouldn't be here,” he says, a twitch of his finger forcing the men to bow in front of him. “You should have left with the rest of them.”

Another blast of mustard gas – this one from behind – and Scott summons a giant wind to safely disperse the agent into the sky. He tuts – tongue against teeth – and shakes his head. “That was wholly unwise.” With mental force, he picks the soldiers up and breaks them to the ground along with the others. “When will you learn?” An optic blast to their knees, and the soldiers are unable to follow as he picks up the trails left by the rest, trying to find out if Kitty is finished yet.

“They're almost there,” Alex tells his brother. “But you gotta keep playing the villain Scott. Don't pause. Blast something.”

And so he does just that, unleashing the nerve agents held in storage beneath the cow field. But, before they can spread, he grabs the wind, making a tiny cyclone that takes the gas up into the atmosphere where it will filter out and be used against no one.

“We've got them, Scott. It's time to come back home.”

The telepaths and sorcerers fall down almost immediately, leaving Scott with a flood of energy that is guarded by his crystalline shield. It will take hours for him to calm down, to stave off the Red Dimension, but at least – thanks to Strange and a last minute spell – he is able to retain his own defenses.

Logan takes him back to the bedroom to inspect his wounds. “Don't you do that again,” he tells Scott, indicating the severe burns. Carefully, he peels off the blackened skin, cleans the wounds, and begins the process of taking the shrapnel out. Scott stays silent as Logan works, his attention caught by things that aren't real.

Wolverine notices his attention to the corner of the room, the way his jaw grits together and releases. “Don't you listen to them,” he says. “You didn't do anything wrong.” Scott looks sideways at him,
his eyes hidden behind red visor. “I'm serious, Scott. Whatever they're telling you it isn't true.”

“They say that you're going to kill me.”

“I'm not.” He cups Scott's face in both of his hands and pulls the man's attention to himself. “I would never do that to you.”

“I'm afraid, Logan.”

“Of what?”

“Myself.” He controlled weather today. He's never done that before. So many things he can do with just a thought. “What if I make mistake? What if I get angry?”

“We'll get it figured out, hon. I promise.” Logan isn't scared of Scott, nor what he can do. And, as far as anger goes, “The only time you lost yourself to it was when the Phoenix was controlling you.”

“And what if she controls me again?”

“She won't. You won't let her.”

Scott rests his head on Logan's shoulder, lets the older man pull in tight for an embrace. “It's going to be okay, Scott. It's going to be okay.”
Chapter Summary

The world in turmoil.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Control. That's what it all boiled down to. The shield, the powers. Summoning a tornado, blasting from his eyes. He took battle well, so long as the telepaths were in his head. It was a mere week before SHIELD gave up, putting the government into a tight bind that made them call for Cyclops head on a silver platter. They were ready to kill him.

The pockets of warriors that Syrntech raised were still not much. Mercenaries and hired men who hadn't seen a battle so one sided. They ran from him when he approached, not being paid enough to risk their lives against the most powerful mutant in the world. Some of them were mutants in their own right, possessed of the X-gene and solid on the ground, but when it came to Summers, they would refuse to fight, citing that he was their own, their genetic family, and they would see no harm come to him.

It was in the second week that their defenses fell in France. Too many soldiers had abandoned their posts and left the country open to attack. It was the third week that saw both Germany and Taiwan raise they're flags of defeat. They'd been outfitted with the best that Syrntech could afford – anti-radiation and bullet proof armor, but even that couldn't stop Cyclops.

But these were just teasing attacks. Small groups of soldiers sent out to increase the fear of the population. To make the world beg for reprieve, for someone to lead them to victory. And Scott met them at every turn, disappearing whole armies in seconds, and wreaking havoc all over the world.

And now, they wait for the bulk of Syrntech's forces to arrive – take over the government of a distant country and declare themselves ruler. Like the stock market before this, the wait makes Cyclops nervous. The shield around him already cracked, his energy going wild within, Logan walks him away from the fray and into the quiet of the bedroom.

Indira Gomez watches as they disappear from sight, and turns her attention back to the chess game with Lorna Dane. She misses the island, her parents, the world outside. Over the past few weeks, her optimism has been dashed, and the reality of heroics something she questions.

All she's ever wanted to do was help people, to save the world. It never occurred to her that it meant hurting people at the same time. On the screens up above the computers, she watches yet another report on the devastation outside of Paris, how many people were now homeless, how many were still missing. “He ruined their lives,” she says, her tone bitter.

Lorna watches the young girl carefully. She's been quiet since coming here and discovering the feint of the heroes deaths. Inward and sullen, she can sense the anger. “What would you have done, Indira?”

She shrugs, looks back down at the board. “I don't know, but I wouldn't have hurt people. I wouldn't
have destroyed their homes.”

“He got the fight out of the city,” Lorna reminds her. “That would have been much worse.”

“I don't get why he's doing this at all. It's not right. It's just not right.” She's done with the game, swipes the pieces with the back of her hand, tears in her eyes. All of her frustration comes out in a silent scream to Lorna's shoulder.

“It's okay,” she eases the girl. “Let it all out. Let it all out.”

She'd idolized these people – the X-men, the Avengers. She had followed their careers, their battles. She knew everything about them, except the pain they would cause, the damage, the reality behind their deeds. Saving the world meant destroying it at the same time.

“It's not always like this,” Lorna promises her. “It's not always so difficult.”

“He's making the world hate us even more.”

It's something that Lorna's tried hard not to think about. The public reaction to Scott and the mutants. Yes, there will be more hate, but in the end, it's a sacrifice that they have to make for the safety of the world. “Sometimes being a hero is more about the sacrifice than the deeds, Indira. And that sacrifice is always hard.”

Dark brown eyes wander over the crowd of heroes as they wait for Syntech to make their move. They watch everything, look for hidden signs. A military coup, a rigged election, a general being too outspoken. They look for the fear, the protests, a populace hiding behind big guns. It will be a small nation that they take first, maybe in Asia or Africa – a place that doesn't make headlines very often, and it will expand to other parts of the world as wars are fought over borders and the maps remade.

Indira watches their expressions as news footage continues to pour over Cyclops' most recent acts. The battles on camera, the disappearing of thousands of soldiers now presumed dead. The mourning, the graves. It's all a trick. A cruel one. Their loved ones locked up in Limbo, still alive, still breathing. “He's causing so much pain,” she says quietly.

Lorna can't argue with that. Even in the end, when all of this is over, that pain will not be forgotten. Their grief will always cast a shadow over them. “In the end, though, they will feel joy again. They'll live through this. We all will.” She pulls the girl into another hug, holding her tightly. She can feel the tears wet against her shoulder.

It's a confusing time for the kids. One that breaks Lorna's heart as they struggle through what being a mutant and a hero means. Gone are the champagne days of ignorant bliss, when being a hero simply meant chasing down a criminal on the streets of New York, that their actions deserve praise and glory. Here, they've learned the reality of all who fight for the world – that choices have to be made. Hard choices.

“Arlo is scared,” Indira ekes out, her voice still hoarse by dismal thoughts. I have to go find him.”

“Okay,” Lorna says. “I'll be here if you need to talk.”

Sighing, she looks across the crowd to find Alex still watching the news screens. Every news channel they can find on full display, waiting for news of violence. It's been a long time since she's seen him this stressed and on edge. She misses their days on the mesa. Those serene days when it was just the two of them, before Xavier's fight, before the world went to hell.

Alex notices her observant gaze, takes a beat to remove himself from the chair and join her at the
chess table. She can see that he's exhausted, that he's running on old coffee and fumes. “You okay?” he asks, knowing full well that she's not.

“The kids shouldn't be here,” she says quietly. “This is too much for them.” Sarah and Arlo are terrorized by the crowds. Opal, Phin, and Indira are questioning the mission, the need for all of this violence. And Pocket is as distant as ever.

“There was nowhere else for them to go,” Alex explains. “Not with the mansion being watched by ONE.”

Lorna knows as much, but it doesn't hurt less that she's watching her students go through such a maelstrom of emotions. Flicker and Arlo were finally coming out of their shells, finally coming to grips with their mutations. And the others were excited about being trained. They wanted to change the world, but now they question their ability to do so. It isn't fair to them to have this kind of responsibility on them. They're too young to process it correctly.

For the first time in weeks, Alex wraps his arms around her, pulls her tight, lets her breathe a sigh of relief. He doesn't give false words of hope – that everything will be okay in the end, that the kids will come to understand the workings of the hero world. Their blind optimism is now tarnished. Instead, he speaks to a different subject. “I miss you.”

It's words that Lorna longs to hear. Bright green eyes look up, focuses in on the sentiment behind blue eyes. “I miss you, too,” she says.

A clumsy smile and he looks down to the floor. He was never good with sweet talk. Too blunt, forward, cutting at times, the gentler words don’t come easy for him. “I'm glad you're here,” he continues. “Not just for the children, but also for me. I need you, Lorna.”

She strokes the side of his face with gentle fingertips, and smiles softly. “You have work to do,” she says and pats his knee. “Without you, right now, we'd fall apart.”

It's midnight when Scott reappears. Calmer now, enough that his energy is well contained inside his shield. He sees Indira and Arlo in the corner, watching the news screens and computers. He can see the anger in Indira's eyes, the fear in Arlo's. “You should be sleeping,” he tells them.

“'I'm not tired,” Indira bites back. Her eyes glassing over. She wants to hate him. She wants to blame him. She wants him to hurt like those he's hurting.

Settling down beside them, a quick glance to Logan who watches him carefully, he takes a deep breath. “You think I'm a monster, don't you?”

To hear the words from his own mouth, makes her even angrier. “The whole world hates you,” she says. “And I don't blame them.” He was her idol, her inspiration. Because of him, she thought she could change the world, that she could use her powers for something better, but this isn't better. This isn't anywhere close to better.

“I'm trying to save as many lives as I can, Indira,” he says quietly.

“You're burning the world to do it,” she answers. He's become the villain that the world has always feared. And, he's dragging mutants down with him. “They hate us now more than ever.”

A long, drawn out pause as he considers his words. He's used to anger, to rage. He's used to being blamed and taking it. “I'm sorry you feel that way,” he finally speaks. “But, this was the only way through it. This was all I could do.”
“You could have left it alone. Let the world fight their own battles for a change.”

“That's not what super heroes do, Indira. We fight for those who can't, no matter the cost to self.”

The words strike her, open her eyes. “I don't want them to hate you,” she sobs, breaking down once again. “I don't want you to be a monster.” She nuzzles herself against Arlo, puts her head to his neck.

“Plz. No crs,” he tries to speak. His large eyes glassy and wet. Balancing himself, he puts a hand against her spine, pushing up on haunches. It's the best he can do to hug her.

“There was no other way, Indira. It was me or the world. I chose to save the world.” Lifting himself from the ground, he takes another glance at Logan. “I'm sorry.” He learned a long time ago that he would never make people happy. That leading a team meant taking the blame. And with that recollection, comes a steel grit to jaw, and the coldness of distance.

Logan knows this look well, having seen it too many times before. Cutting himself off from those things that hurt was always Scott's trademark. Repressing his guilt, his shame, his anger, his happiness. It's how he was taught to lead.

“Why don't you go to bed, darlin’,” Logan says to Indira. “You've had a rough day.” He watches them slowly cross to the back of the bunker, where the window opens up into the scenic view of the river. “You should get some rest, too,” he tells Alex. “I'll keep watch.” Alex agrees, leaving Scott and Logan alone at the computers to watch for Syrntech's next move.

“She's worried about you,” Logan says, peering sideways at Scott. “They all are.”

“There was no other way, Logan.”

“I know. I know. But, that doesn't make it any less scary.”

Chapter End Notes

I had a really rough time with this chapter. I apologize if it's not up to par.
Chapter Summary

Xavier and Rose strike a deal.

It started in Laos. The unexpected takeover of the government, ousted by a foreign general and his massive amount of troops. It only took hours, and the rest of the world waited with held breath for what General Simon Park would do next. The troops were too well trained and outfitted with alien tech the likes of which only a handful in the world had seen. Red crystals that could endlessly power their lasers and photon cannons, tanks and mechanized suits. Laos didn't stand a chance, nor did Myanmar later that same evening.

But, the world truly learned fear when Cyclops appeared on the border, picking off the army one by one, disappearing them from existence. There was no stopping the madman as he pushed the army back from Myanmar and saw them disappear into neighboring Cambodia and Vietnam. He stood alone on the field, the scorched earth all around him. Even with the alien weaponry, he wouldn't die.

Jebediah Rose takes his seat at the small table, ordering up a hazelnut latte and a cheese selection. “He was supposed to die,” he tells his companion. “That was part of the deal.”

Xavier leans back in his chair and regards the man for long, studious moments. Half appalled, half amused, he shakes his head. “If I recall correctly, you asked me to stay out of it.”

“Yes, but that was when Jean Grey was still alive to do the job.” The mention of Grey's death curdles Charles' stomach. Rose takes note of the swelling anger that turns the man's face red. “Without her, our deal falls through, unless you are willing to take her role in things.”

Under the agreement, the X-men at the mansion would live peaceful lives. The school would be safe, the children would be safe. In Syrntech's plan for the new world, the mutants wouldn't have to fight to be accepted, it would simply become the way the world works. “What about your slave trade?” he asks. “When does that end?”

“I've told you many times already. They're meant to rebel against their keepers – the wealthiest among us who think that the laws of the world don't apply to them. That rebellion will see them settle into peace among the populace.”

“And you'll use that largess to fund your operations. Yes, I understand, but that doesn't erase the sin.” In younger years, Xavier would not have abided by the plan, but time has changed him. “Those mutants will live in constant fear of being enslaved again.”

“But, they will also have the knowledge that they can overcome. As will the X-men. The only piece of the puzzle we need is the death of Cyclops. Something which only you can provide.”

“What happened to the weapons you were so proud of?”

Rose is stung by the bluntness of the question. “Yes, I suppose I made too much of them. Dr. Helmut's greatest feat, however, is still in the works. It just wasn't ready in time.”

“You mean that Scott beat you to the punch?”
Jebediah laughs and nods. “You still think I'm underestimating him.” Indeed, he hadn't expected the Baxter Building to go up in flames when it did, nor the attack on the Avengers so soon. It had jumped his timeline by almost a month.

“I think he knows what you're up to,” Xavier says.

“Perhaps, but again, that's where you come in. None of it will matter if you finish Grey's job.”

The crush of waves sounds in the silence between the two men. Xavier knows that Scott is dangerous, that he'll never be whole again after what the telepaths did to him. But, at the same time, he's never taken a life before. He’s come close through the years – with both Magneto and Cyclops – and a part of him dreads the task before him. “If I do this, if I get involved with your plot, what do I get out of it?”

“A seat at the table, of course.” Rose had always thought to give him one anyway – a governor of mutant affairs or some such title. After all, there was no person in the world more synonymous with the trials and tribulations of mutants than Charles Xavier. “You could help us rule the world.”

“I don't want that kind of life anymore, Mr. Rose.” He'd spent his life fighting for mutant rights, and now, in his presumed death, all he wanted was to be left alone. “There’s something refreshing about waking up with no responsibility, no duty.”

“Then what do you want?”

It's not a question that Charles immediately answers. Blue eyes tread out to the ocean, then the horizon. The morning sun, the lazy drift of birds. There’s peace there, in the gentle roll of waves and the flight of birds. “I just want the fighting to stop.”

“And we'll have that, but only with Cyclops' death.”

His hands shook as he gripped the ends of his tie, fumbling through knot after knot, unable to make it straight. He watched himself in the mirror as his calloused fingers worked over the silk into something still not right. With a sigh and a smile, he turned to his father figure and shrugged.

“Come here, Scott,” Charles said, patting the small stool. Cyclops sat down and let Xavier fix the tie. “You're nervous.”

“I feel like I'm in a dream, Professor. How can she love someone like me? How can she even think to marry me?” He was death, could cause death, his optic blasts dangerous and uncontrollable. For someone like Jean to look past his powers and the fear he had of them was something amazing.

“You're a good man, Scott, that's why.”

“I love her so much that I could burst sometimes.”

“And that's why she wants to marry you.”

The morning had been hectic – decorators and caterers, bakers and planners. There wasn't a thing left to chance – not even the weather, which Storm was kind enough to make it sunny with a touch of clouds for shade. Inside the room, Alex and Henry kept their vigil, with Angel running back and forth with messages and notices. “Ten minutes before the band starts playing. You should be making your way out right now.”

“I'm coming,” Scott said, his voice a touch too high with the onslaught of nerves. He watched as his brother and best friend left the room, exited out onto the lawn. “I guess they're waiting on me,” he
said quietly.

It was rare for him to show kind gestures. Always buttoned up, closed off, he took the Professor's hand and smiled. “Thank you,” he said. “You're more like a father to me than my own. Thank you.”

He was well in those days. Easy to control, easier to manipulate. The memory disturbances, the traps in his mind, he didn't notice them, didn't complain. They were careful – Jean and Xavier, Psylocke and the beginnings of Emma Frost. The other telepaths. The war had ended. Jean had won, and with it came her consolation prize. A Cyclops in love with her, and ready to be her husband.

The ceremony was a beautiful thing, unspoiled by surprise, by violence. Even the telepaths backed off from their chase to obtain power, let him be, let Jean have her crowning moment.

“Take care of him,” Xavier had said when Jean telekinetically lifted him from his chair to share a dance with her. “He's very special to me.”

“He's special to us all,” she reminded him. “He deserves this happiness.”

“Yes. Yes, he does.”

It had been a long time since Xavier thought of Scott as his son, and to remember that moment brings pangs of guilt shuddering across his frame. But, at the same time, Xavier knows that Rose is right. Scott must be stopped. “If I help you, I want to be left alone. I don't want the world to intrude on my peace.”

“That can be arranged,” Rose agrees.

“And I never want to see your face again.”

“Agreed.”

“Then it's settled. Take me to where he is, and I'll end it for both of us.”
Chapter Summary

Another bargain.

“You're late.” The muffled words come from the lit corner of the lab – a single light to dissipate the darkness. Hunkered down over a microscope and slides, Sinister removes the paper mask and stares at his intruders. “I expected you months ago.” In his hand, he holds a scalpel, and in the other a small needle with thread. He turns to them with a bright smile, and ushers them into the lab.

Mystique lays a hand on Creed's shoulder, a gesture meant to soothe the boiling anger in his veins. She can feel the tension – the way his muscles twitch with small movements of rage. “Easy, Vic. We came here for answers. Don't forget that.”

Sinister wanders through the shelves of formaldehyde jars and genetic samples – organs and skin, bones and muscles, some ancient, some brand new. The light casts a sickly hue upon his still smiling face as he sets down his work to attend to his guests. He explains his collection as he goes. The small splices of skin and hair, how many genetic samples he has at his disposal. Single-handedly, he can clone most of the world's mutant population from the X-men to civilians. Though, there are some that are more difficult than others. “Jamie Madrox is one of the hardest that I've worked with. His cells kept multiplying before I had a chance to properly stitch them together. But, eventually I prevailed.” His collection is his pride and joy, especially the jars that he stores here. “This,” he says, his arms out at his sides, “is Scott Summers. Every inch of him.”

“You're cloning Scott Summers?” Mystique asks with brow raised. “Isn't one enough?”

“If but I could,” he replies, somewhat glumly. “His genes are beyond my expertise. As much as I've researched and experimented on his samples, cloning him is still impossible.” The closest he ever got was combining his DNA with an Inhuman, but he doesn't qualify that clone as a success. “It was more a mindless monster, an experiment I will never repeat.”

Through the twists and turns of the caverns, they follow Essex through the hallways, finally coming to a large foyer, with multiple hallways and patterned flooring. “Do you recognize this place, Mr. Creed?”

Mouth dropped open, Sabretooth looks around at his place of his imprisonment all those years ago. The fluorescent lights, the thick glass doors. The playroom – where Alex spent most of his days – was down the hallway and to the right. And Scott's door was along the hallway to the left. “You knew we'd come.”

“I've said as much,” Sinister points out, walking them down the hallway and into the small chamber that was Scott's room. A blank concrete floor, a toilet and sink, and old blue and green blanket lopped in the corner. “Much sooner than this, however. I'm not sure what good you will be to me now.”

“You messed with my head –”

“And made you a monster. Yes, I'm of course to blame for your wild hairs and extremity of
temperament. Not your years in the military and all of those black ops missions that you went on.
There is a drift of smile on his face as he leads them back to the small lab at the end of the cavern. Like the rest of this cave, it resembles a finished room – a metal table and shiny, clean instruments strung out under fluorescent lights. There are machines on the side – monitors and blood pumpers, oxygen machines and brainwave analyzers. Posters on the wall depicting the complexity of human anatomy, photographs of cells and models of mutant DNA. “I gave you a purpose --”

“You deleted an entire year of my life,” Victor snarls, his claws out ready to pounce. But Sinister is quicker to the gun, uses his telepathy to calm the beast down. “Now, now, this isn't about us,” he says, “It's about the boy.” He shows them a small, human brain in a jar – dusty with age, slightly yellowed from disuse. “This is why you're here.”

“You gave him back his memories, didn't you?” Mystique asks, stepping in front of her lover to ward him back. “You're why he's having these dreams.”

“You were always so clever, Ms. Darkholme. It's a wonder why the X-men have thwarted your plans time and again.”

“You gave him back his memories so that he'd seek you out. So that you could use him again.”

“I gave him back his memories so that he would see that his job was ever unfinished.”

“And what job was that?”

“Protecting Scott Summers.”

“You're killing him.”

“He's impossible to kill by normal means. Surely you've seen that by now.”

“These experiments have to stop. He's just a child.”

“He's a child with power far beyond his own comprehension. You've seen it, Victor. You've seen what he can do.”

And indeed, Sabretooth had seen it. From the healing factor to the whiplash of red energy that nearly consumed the entire room from floor to ceiling, the child was powerful. Too powerful.

“If I don't block his powers,” Sinister continues, “then he'll destroy the world. He's far too young, too broken to wield them properly. What we're doing here is saving the world and the boy at the same time.”

Essex had been trying for months to find the release valve for the boy's powers. Anything but the eyes – anything to change the boy's future and the telepathic mess he would become. He'd met the man once, some trick of time travel that saw Scott and his wife come back to the past to fight with him. “He was powerful,” Nathaniel explained, “but not nearly as powerful as should have been. Summers is a genetic anomaly. A perfect power inside an imperfect mind. And the telepaths made things worse.”

“You're telling me that you're trying to save the world?”

“Is that so hard to imagine? What good is all of the curiosity that I have if there is no world to apply it to?” It was a simple answer, but disturbing all the same. A slow smile creeps across Essex' face, one that sends chills down Victor's spine. “Besides, with long lived creatures such as ourselves, we need a source of entertainment.”
“You're sick.” It's only inches before he's stopped, clawed hand out, so close to the other man's abdomen.

“And so are you, or should I remind you of those you've murdered during a long career as an assassin.” He picked Creed simply for his blood-thirsty ways. And kept him here because he found it most curious that the beast had grown fond of the boy. “You have empathy after all.”

It was then that Creed realized he was part of the experiment. It wasn't just the boy that Sinister was using to entertain himself, it was also him. “You mother fucker--” he began, but before he could finish his statement, Sinister had already walked away, leaving Victor frozen in stasis for several hours.

The memory washes over him like dirty water – a poison in his veins, and deep seeded anger. Sabretooth takes a step closer to the maniacal scientist. “You used me.”

“Come now. I use everyone. Why should you be so special?” Victor growls, a low-pitched warning that causes Sinister to back up. “Now, now, we all know how this ends up. If you attack me, I'll force you to leave this place and you'll never be at peace. My mind is by far stronger than your will.”

He knows that even now he's being controlled. He can feel the malicious man inside of his mind, poking and prodding, pulling memories to the forefront and drowning him in those memories yet to be given back. To the floor he falls as an entire year worth of memories come flooding back in. His futile escape attempts, his care for the boy, his threats against Sinister.

Mystique stands ready to attack, but like her lover, she finds herself unable to move. Frozen in space, she can do nothing but watch Creed be tortured by the withheld memories. The way he sobs, the way he begs. She's never seen him like this before, never knew that he could be so emotional, so broken. “Why are you doing this to him?”

“I told you already,” Essex huffs. “Cyclops is in grave danger. He needs Victor's help.” He sums it up in one word, “Xavier.” He knows – without a doubt – that the one time leader of the X-men has set his sights on ending Summers' terror across the world. “He broke Scott's mind. All of that work and effort, and he destroyed it for power. It's time he paid the price.”

“You want us to take out Charles Xavier?” she asks.

“Yes.”

Creed finally stands on shaky legs, the bulk of his form resting on the bed. His nose bloody, his eyes bloodshot, a scowl upon his face, and with heavy breath, he tries to steady himself from the psychic backlash. “You understand now?” Sinister asks.

“You're not his ally.”

“No.”

“You're not doing this out of esteem for the man.”

“Absolutely not.”

“You're saving the world.”

“Yes.”

In Summers' head lies a prison, that upon his death will fracture, and those locked within will escape.
“Imagine facing down the Dark Phoenix and Apocalypse at the same time. The world would be doomed.”

But, Mystique catches the side smile on his face. A coy thing, meant to be hidden. “You just want to play your game with him. That's why you're doing this. You want to prolong his life so you can have fun.” The pale man's laughter sends a wave of nausea through her.

“How did they ever win against you, Raven?”

“Why shouldn't we just kill you first?” she asks, glancing at her lover's fragile appearance. He was well enough to fight. Well enough to stab and claw Essex to death.

“Without me, he will never be whole again. I know which of his memories are real and which are fake. I know where they go. I know where everything goes.”

“If we do this,” Sabretooth jumps in, “you'll give Summers back his memories?”

“One memory yes. But not all of them. That's not how the game is played.”

“And I get to pick?” Sabretooth asks. Breath steady, his balance even, he looks to Mystique to make sure that he's asking the right questions. She gives him the nod.

“Out of two, yes. I can agree to that.”

Raven knows that they're getting played, but she also understands Victor's hopes. A life time of killing, and now he gets a chance to save someone. Someone he failed all of those years ago. It's a redemption. One that he desperately needs. “You'll leave Summers alone?”

“Perhaps.”

It wasn't the promise she was hoping for, not that a deal with Essex ever meant him living up to his side of the bargain. “Victor,” she says, “I think it's time to save the world.”
Chapter Summary

If but for dreams.

It's one am when he disappears. One moment watching the news reports of his battle in Laos, and the next moment gone. It's a massive emergency with both the X-men and the Avengers creeping through every crevice of the bunker and moving on to outside. A one mile radius turns to three, to four, to five, and finally, it's Logan who finds him, impaled with three silver spears. “I need help,” he speaks into com, waits for someone to find his coordinates.

Rachel is in tears at the sight of her father. She works with Logan to pull the spears out, lay them down on the jagged forest floor. He's immersed in that world of numbers, his fists balled up, his muscles tensed. They bring him inside, hope that Illyana and Strange can work their magic spells to make him strong for a bit, to waylay the sudden spikes in his energy.

As news of his injuries travel throughout the bunker, they worry about the scope of his plan. If he'll still be able to come through for them, for the final battle is yet to happen. “He smells like space,” Rachel says. She looks to her uncle, and then to Logan. “Why does he smell like space?”

They don't know, and they don't have time to ponder it, especially with the blood loss and the chaos of red energy. They force a worried Rachel to leave the room, let them handle it. “We can't have you hurt,” Alex explains. “We'll take care of this.”

Bandages and stitches, and all the while Scott's mind is fractured between too many battles and too much pain. Even with Strange and Magik outside the door casting their spells, it takes too long for Scott's mind to calm and focus on the present.

It's hours later when Scott comes out of the spelled trance. Dizzy from blood loss and hunger, tired for days without rest, he stumbles from the bed, hits the floor and wakes Logan up. Quick to his side, Logan helps him back into the small bed, tells him to lay down for a while, and that he'll bring him a plate of dinner.

He's surprised that Scott listened to him upon his return. Sitting by the bedside, he helps the other man up so that he can eat, maybe produce more blood, feel better by being cared for. Borsch and pelmeni, courtesy of Piotr and Cable quickly draining supplies. This safehouse was not meant to hold so many people. “Tomorrow we're back to rice and beans,” Logan explains. “It's about all your son has in here anyway.”

“I'm sorry,” he replies.

“For what?”

“For dragging everyone down with me on this. I couldn't think of another --”

“Scott, you're doing fine. We're behind you on this,” Logan says, cupping the man's face. “You're doing the right thing.” He stares into red visor, waiting for the silent facade to crack, waiting for Scott to fall into his emotions. “We believe in you.”
Scott's afraid of this belief, still worried that he's wrong, that he's just being paranoid. So many things, so many people hurt. Even though he has the evidence, even though he's predicted the entire battle thus far, a part of him still fears that he's wrong. “What if I just made it up?”

“Too many coincidences for that, Slim. You've hit the nail on the head every time.” Thumbs stroking sharp cheekbones, he presses his forehead to Scott's after snagging a soft kiss. “You should stop doubting yourself.”

It's warm here, in this silence. Heavy breath and inviting. Eyes closed, Logan pushes in for a deeper kiss, eliciting a tender moan from Cyclops. Moving slowly, he licks across Cyke's teeth, begging entrance, and Scott allows it, his hands twirled in jet black hair.

Instinctively, the red shield forms around them as Scott loses some control of his power. Too much emotion rides on this, too much want, need, desire. And though his movements would be frantic if they could, the holes in his chest – as well as his strength – demand something calmer, softer. Something that he doesn't need to be afraid of.

Logan pushes Scott back down onto the bed, takes off the man's clothes, aware of the bandages underneath. Tender fingers slide over ribs while mouth places gentle nips over the dusky buds on Cyclops' chest. He says Logan's name, a quiet mantra almost unheard with all of the blood rushing to Wolverine's ears. He's so hard he could burst, and each time Scott says his name, he comes that much closer.

Careful of the wafting energy inside the sphere, Logan takes his time kissing down chest to abdomen, savoring every taste, every scent. He wants to remember this, to dream of this. To fill himself up.

Already hard, Scott doesn't need much coaxing as Logan surrounds him with his mouth. He doubts that Scott – arched back, hands digging into bed – will last long, not with the way he's breathing. “I love you,” Logan says – an accidental admission that sees him pull away from Scott's heat.

Scott's too enthralled with Logan's tongue to have heard him. Suddenly sitting up, he causes Logan to fall from his haunches and onto the floor, Cyke's energy flashing with abandon, the dangerous cracks already leaking out into the atmosphere. Head down, hands covering face, he tries to calm himself down, tries to keep the world from tearing apart. “I'm sorry,” he mutters when Logan takes a seat beside him. Voice racked by sadness, he repeats himself. “I'm sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for, Slim,” Logan says quietly. “I should have been more careful.” He thought the spells would hold him in, would make it possible for them to be together, but he was wrong. “Just takes time,” he reminds his would-be lover. “And we got all the time in the world.”

He pulls Scott in against his shoulder, waits for the man to catch his breath. Naked together, they curl up next to each other, the younger mutant's head near to Logan's heart. “Don't you ever apologize to me,” he says. “There's no need to.”

He wishes Scott to sleep, his hand tangling through hair. Soft breath, soft embrace. He dresses them both, covering up Scott's fear and his own disappointment. He hadn't meant to push Cyclops so far, but he was too hard to resist.

The Phoenix dreams are never easy to cope with, the way his clothes catch on fire, the way his energy spirals far outside of his control. Ice is brought in – huge hunks of it dipped in liquid nitrogen in order to cool the core of the Phoenix down. But, its screams that capture their attention the most and leads both the X-men and the Avengers to linger outside the small bedroom door.
Inside it's Alex and Wolverine trying to lead him into memory while Steve and Strange haul the blocks of ice from the small freezer unit. “Last one in's a rotten egg,” Alex says softly, running a piece of ice across his forehead. “Last one in's a rotten egg.” It's a memory that works, and soon Scott's energy begins to soften, to ease back.

Not caring about his own preservation, Cable steps into the room. “Alex, it's happening,” he says. “General Park is attacking France.”

“Shit,” Logan curses. “We have to wake him up.”

“He needs sleep worse,” Alex argues, glancing over his shoulder at his nephew.

“We need him awake. We need him on the battlefield.”

“An hour,” Alex begs. “Give him an hour of rest before we wake him. It will give the rest of us a chance to get ready.”

Cable nods, exiting the room as quietly as he entered. He starts barking orders at the various teams, demanding that they change into their uniforms, and prepare themselves for saving the world. “Today,” he says, “We strike Syntech and their holdings. Today, we save the world.”
Rouen, France

Chapter Summary

The battle commences.

Rouen... A small city outside of Paris, on the coast line where Park's enormous navy has come out of the wood works to threaten France and all of its citizens. They surrender themselves to the onslaught, not ready for the bulk of his troops. At his side is General Greg Griggs, the master of the grounds forces, who pushes his way inland to assure the leadership is bowing down.

The rest of the world does not expect this onslaught, with Laos and Vietnam being so seemingly far away. They react in the only way they know how. Fighting fire with fire. And with that, comes the deaths of war. A thousand French soldiers in an hour. Two squads of Vietnamese soldiers – used as a meat shield for the better trained, better armed troops- dead not ninety minutes outside of the boat. The few soldiers captured in Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar. It was a death parade, and Parks and Griggs were winning every second of it.

The air forces above drop more men to the battlefield, crates of weapons, rations of food. Syntech is more than prepared to take over this already defeated country, and the world fears who will come next.

 Barely six hours pass before he arrives, settles himself on the coast, his red energy a frantic pull and push of his incredible power. Cyclops knows what he is doing, calling the troops back to meet him by the navy, to surround him with their alien tech, pull them back from Paris and the executions of their government.

He knows that he can't die. Not from this.

It's not so hard to take out the ships, a blink of eyes, a twist of his hand, and the metal structures are so mutilated that they fall like boulders into the ocean. The men escape on life rafts, rowing themselves to shore with a host of weapons unlike the world has seen, all powered by red crystals, all alien tech.

The first bullet breaches his lung, collapses it and makes it hard for him to breathe for a short while, but he doesn't quit, doesn't stop from disappearing these soldiers or knocking them out. He phases through the next volley, turns himself intangible, and dangerously so. He is surrounded, and those bullets must go somewhere. They call it friendly fire, but there's nothing friendly about it.

“Surrender,” he tells the soldiers. “Surrender yourself to defeat and leave here unbroken.” But, those soldiers don't listen. Like Griggs, like Park, like all of those rats that clung to the most powerful places in the world, they are set in their ways, ready to concoct a plan that will have them ruling the world.

In the air, he looks down upon all of those soldiers, raises his fist to capture the string of lightning in his hand, and with one deft moves, he crashes that bolt of captured electricity into the ground, singeing the dirt and rocks and soldiers who have ventured too near. A small fire at his feet, and the blackness of grass, and the men in flames from being too close.
They wonder what else he can do.

To the rear of them, there are tanks and missiles coming in from Griggs march. They've moved faster than Scott thought they would, their vehicles powered by the Red Dimension, and their war machines sleek by design, reminiscent of Tony Stark's weaponry. But, he's prepared for this. For all of it. This is the downfall of Syrntech and all of its machinations. He will win this battle. He'll keep Earth safe.

The first volley of aerosolized ruby red quartz comes with the return of Griggs. A bullet meant to shatter, to pierce and grow inside of his body, he can't dodge it, not with the tanks loaded up with grenades that powder the area with smoke and flung dirt. It hits his left shoulder and blooms down his arm, blocking his energy from fruition.

It's a smart weapon, but Scott was always ten steps ahead. Looking up, he spots the news drones. Too afraid to get close to the battle, they take their pictures overhead, and make their reports from far away. He wants the world to think that he's defeated, that their last chance from being overrun with these well-trained troops is the last they'll see of their freedom.

Floating higher, his left shoulder a disturbance to his fluid movements, he stares down at Griggs and the magic bullet he has aimed at the mutant. “Surrender,” Scott says. “Surrender now, and begone.”

“Never,” Griggs replies. “We own this world. It's ours to command.”

Scott smiles.

A snap of his fingers, and the first portal opens up on the ground below. As the soldiers move back, afraid of this new trick, they watch in almost horror as Colossus, Rogue, Thor, and She-hulk step out onto the battlefield. They rush into the crowds, beating back the soldiers, aiming to take down Griggs and his ruby quartz weapon.

Another snap, and another portal, and then another, and another. A million soldiers cannot stand the sudden incursion by both the X-men and the Avengers. The soldiers are knocked unconscious, chained up, flown up to the prison in the sky helmed by Maria Hill and her last ditch effort to make Fury break from the Panel. They have plenty of space here, plenty of cells, and Angel is quick to fill them.

It takes mere hours to end the battle, but for Scott, things aren't over yet. This is but one battle in the war. They still need to find the rest of the think tank so something like this can never happen again.

And, it starts with Jebediah Rose, the head of Syrntech.

The teams are set, each with a location of the missing masterminds, with Alex and Cable going after Rose. “Remember, we need them all,” Fury says, “Every last one of them.”

The world rejoices at the return of the Avengers, and even some see the return of the X-men as a boon. They feel safe, secure, and in droves, they surround the Avengers tower, celebrating with abandon.

Syrntech is chased all around the world. The spies, the plants, the leadership, and even the few soldiers that escaped during the chaos. From Bulgaria to Rome, Ecuador to Australia. The teams are on constant reconnaissance, as Scott and Rachel trace them to their final destinations, breaking up their businesses along the way. The drug trade, the massing of tech, the slave trade. The world is keen on seeing the end of this, especially with the Avengers at the forefront of the missions.

Of all of them, Jebediah Rose is the hardest to find. And something in which Xavier – revealing
himself on national television – is willing to bargain for. “I'll trade his whereabouts for Scott Summers,” he says quietly, firmly. “I will rid the world of both threats.”

And for the first time since all of this started, Scott Summers was unprepared for something. He had no plans for the return of Charles Xavier. No contingencies to deal with the public declaration. And no idea what to do.

“We're not turning you in.” The words come straight from Maria Hill's mouth. “We're not handing you over.”

“He's going to kill you,” Alex adds in, making sure that his brother is fully aware of the consequences.

“But, with Rose still out there —”

“We'll find him,” Logan promises. “We don't need Xavier's help.”

Scott's escorted to the lone bedroom in the bunker, placed down with pillow against his face. Logan does his best to pull out the bullets, stitch up flagging skin. In his heart, he doesn't relish going against Xavier, his ideals, his wonderment. In his mind, the man still has innocence to spare, but looking at the price that Cyclops has had to pay, it has turned his world on end. “Don't fight him,” he says. “Please, don't fight him.”

But Scott is fully aware of the consequences. The butting of heads. The turmoil to be had. Xavier could erase any ground he's gained during this long and arduous trek. Destroy his confidence. Erase his existence. A few months ago, he would have relished Xavier's plea to the world – to the Avengers and the X-men. He would have gone on his own, freeing the heroes from having to make such dire decisions. But, then he found Logan, and he no longer wishes for his own death. “I can't fight him, Logan.”

“No. No, you can't. But that's what we're here for. You let us take care of this one. You've done enough.”

It's in the quiet that he bandages Scott up and takes a look at the ruby red quartz on his arm. He calls in Strange who marvels at the crystals and ponders how to break them. The quartz has attached itself to muscle and bone, strung itself through the fibers of his being. “I'm not sure magic will do the trick,” he says. We might have to remove the arm itself, let Stark study it and find a way to cure it before this is used on him again.”

Removing the arm is not what Wolverine expected. He hates the idea of it, but Scott understands the need to take it. “I'll be fine Logan. I'll heal.”
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

A vote from head table.

“Fuck you, McCoy!”

The news travels quickly through the mansion. Emma Frost is in labor.

Storm runs through the main common room, then down the stairs to the medlab. Out of breath, she hinges at the door, spying Reyes and Beast inside. “Emma,” she says, “Are you okay?”

A string of curses, followed by pained moans, Emma arches her back as Reyes tries to put the medpads upon her pulse points “Stay still, Emma,” she begs, trying to get a reading on the heart monitor.

“Fuck you, too, Reyes,” Frost squeals, in obvious pain.

The blood is everywhere.

McCoy, ever the scientist, looks concerned as he rubs the sonogram wand over Frost's belly. “Give her the epidural,” he says, nodding towards the needle on the side table and then glancing at Storm.

“This isn't right!” Emma mewls, “It's not time. My baby's not ready!” She's only been pregnant for a few short months. There's no way her baby is okay, especially not with Sinister's meddling. “He did something to my baby. He's trying to kill it.”

There's nothing that Beast can say to ease her mind. At least nothing that doesn't include a falsehood of some sort, and he's not about to lie to Emma Frost. “We'll take emergency measures,” he says, directing Storm to bring in the incubator from the other lab – a small acrylic bed that would keep the baby alive.

Emma screams again, her body bathed in the blood of the burst womb. “A C-section,” Reyes says, “It would be safer,” she says, viewing the sonogram. Like Beast, she's not about to lie to Frost about the condition of her child. “Emma?”

“Just save my baby,” the blonde woman shivers as her body arches from the pain. “Just save my baby!”

Scrubbing down, Storm inquires as to the condition of the child. “Will the child be okay?”

“No,” Reyes answers honestly. “The child won't survive for very long.” And though Ororo tries to needle more information from the doctor, Cecilia isn't answering.

While Ororo watches the stats displayed on the multitude of medical screens, Dr. Reyes and Dr. McCoy work through the C-section. More blood, more carnage. They work as quickly as they can, and finally, the child is in view. There is no cry from the child, no sound. Just the tiniest of movements in the fingers and toes. Storm looks at the child in alarm.
A single eye in the middle of her face, a blunted nose, and a chest that doesn't move with breath. “Shit,” Reyes calls. “I need oxygen! Now!”

Storm stumbles through the machines until she finds a second oxygen mask. Cecilia swipes the mouth of the child for obstructions, but there the infant still doesn't cry. “You can finish?” she asks Hank, and he nods.

The child is red, even after Reyes cleans her up and places her in the incubator. Hooked up to monitors and oxygen, the machines are keeping the baby alive. There is silence as she wheels the infant to Frost's bedside.

As Emma sleeps, Storm stands by to watch the child and her tiny hands and feet. The oxygen machine inflating her lungs, and the med pads measuring her tiny heart beat – a weak, solemn rhythm that permeated the sadness in the room. There was no question now as to who the father was. Though Frost had rebuffed all questions regarding paternity, the infant's birth had made it painfully clear.

“We have to tell Scott,” she speaks to Beast who lingers in the room waiting for Emma to wake up.

“That's a bad idea,” he replies, staring down into the incubator. He reminds her of his loss of control when it came to his emotions. “He'll tear this building down.”

“He needs to know,” she argues. “He needs to know that he's a father.” She feels it then, her mother's instinct. That need to have a child, to fill that child with wisdom and love. To comfort and protect. She's always wanted to have children of her own, but her lifestyle – being a hero to a world that hates her – would not allow it.

Beast knows that his time will certainly be up soon. That they'll come after him with the same ferocity that they would with the rest of Syrntech. Perhaps even more, considering they would see him called a traitor for working with the think tank. But, on that subject, he is mute to Storm. He would rather not explain his reasoning to someone not in the know.

“She's so tiny,” Storm says, stroking the baby's hand with her long and elegant fingers. “She's priceless. Scott would want to know.”

“She's going to die,” Beast reminds her. “She can't survive like this.”

“No, but that doesn't mean she doesn't deserve to know both of her parents before she does.”

It's in the wee hours of the morning that Emma finally wakes from her surgically induced sleep. She grabs her stomach, cringing at the pain before sitting up wild-eyed looking for her baby. And when she finds it, she also finds Storm. “What will you name her?” the mocha-skinned beauty asks.

Like Ororo, Emma stretches her long fingers into the incubator to gently soothe the cyclops' skin. “Ruby,” she says with a sad smile. “I will call her Ruby.”

“Scott doesn't know, does he?”

“No. Scott doesn't know.”

“But he deserves to know. He is her father.”

Guilt turns Emma's cheeks a bright shade of red. She looks at her dying baby, and then to Storm. “Sinister said this would happen,” she chokes on her words. “He warned me that escaping him would kill my baby.”
“You planned on hiding the child from Cyclops?”

“I wanted someone to love me, Storm, and now I’ve killed her.”

She’s never seen Emma cry. She doubts that many people have. She is very much the portrait of her surname when it comes to emotions. “Emma.” A soothing hand to her shaking shoulders, the whisper of hush in her ear. “You'll live through this. Both of you will.”

“Scott can make her healthy,” Emma replies, her entire demeanor changing in less than a second. “He can make her live.”

“I don't think that Scott --”

“He can do it. He can do anything.”

Storm can see the hysteria building behind blue eyes. “You can't ask him to interfere with the laws of nature --”

“Why not? You do it all the time. Every rain cloud or lightning bolt that you conjure, you are interfering with nature. Why can't Scott do the same? For our daughter. He can do it.”

“This child's life was not meant to be,” Storm explains. “As much as it pains me --”

“You're not pained. You don't even know the definition of pain. You've never been this close to losing the one thing in the world that will love you.” It is a low blow, and one that Storm takes poorly. Emma quickly realizes her misstep. “I'm sorry,” she says quietly. “I just want my baby to live.”

“We'll see what we can do,” Ororo answers, a soothing touch to Frost's hands. As she leaves, Reyes enters, preparing another batch of tests for Emma and Ruby.

Storm has never felt so hopeless before. She knows what it's like to lose a student – they all do, the X-men – but never one from her own womb. She's not sure that she could survive it. To be so close to something, to feel that mother and child connection, to know that she produced life, she would come undone at the loss of a baby.

“Are you sure it's a good idea to bring him here with all of the students?” Beast asks, hoping to waylay the arrival of those that would surely know his secret.

“And how else should we deal with this?” Storm asks. “Scott deserves to know that his child is dying.”

“Is dead,” Beast counters harshly. “Without those machines, that baby will die.”

“He deserves the chance to see her,” Psylocke weighs in. “I would want to know.”

“You're forgetting about one thing,” Jubilee says.

“And what is that?” Beast asks with a roll of his eyes.

“Wolvie. Do you really think that Logan let Emma sleep with Scott?” It's a question that garners a lot of held breaths and shocked looks.

Silence.

Each in turn, head table understands the meaning behind her words, that the frosty telepath had
manipulated Scott into something against his will, that she breached what little trust they had for each other. “If she messed with his mind,” Jubilee continues and stops abruptly, still not able to get the words out. “If she--”

They all understood the implications. “She wouldn't do that,” Henry says. “There's no way that Emma Frost --” Even the man of science couldn’t get his mouth around the words. Amber eyes floated across the table, his fingers shaking. “No,” he says again. “She wouldn't be here if she—She wouldn't be here.”

“We were the last place for her to go,” Psylocke says quietly. “And you the last person that could cure her child.”

“We need to contact Alex,” Storm decides. “Let him make the choice --”

“We need to protect Scott,” Beast argues before she can finish. “An emotional blow like this will put the world in danger.”

For the past few weeks, as 'Ro reminds him, Scott has been generous with his power usage. The disappearing of the armies, the chasing down of the Syntech remnants. He's been all over the news – some casters presenting him as a savior and others as a dire threat. The civilians that were returned to their homes, the heroes that were never dead. He's a hero, though a troubled one. “He deserves to say goodbye to his daughter. Every father deserves that.”

“Good,” Betsy says with a nod. “I'll get a hold of Warren, he'll put us in touch with Alex.”
Jebediah Rose relaxes in the warm sun over Samos, a delectable drink in his hand and strained company. “You betrayed me,” he says, quietly steaming over Xavier's latest announcement.

“I told you that you were underestimating him.”

“Indeed you did,” but still, he didn't expect the public announcement. “If I run from here --”

“Then I'll still know how to find you.” He touches a finger to the side of his head. “A telepathic imprint. No matter where you go, I will know.” It's a trick he learned from Jean after all of those years of staving off the telepaths from Cyclops' mind.

“So, this is the end of it all? That perfect world that I dreamed of?”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” Xavier grins.

“They won't hand Summers over. You realize that, right?”

“Perhaps,” Charles sighs. “Fear is a driving force, however. And there are plenty who fear him.”

“You're talking about Fury?” Rose asks, adjusting his glasses.

“I'm talking about the world.”

Not only had he underestimated Scott Summers, but he'd also underestimated Charles Xavier. “I never thought you to be so devious. And yet the world considers you a saint.”

Again, he touches his finger to his temple. “The world is easily convinced. It's my X-men that aren't.”

“You're really going to kill him?”

“Yes.” He'd promised Jean – her whereabouts still unknown – the same thing. That if things came push to shove, that he'd take care of his first student, put him down, make sure he never harmed the world again, and in her disappearance, he knows it's up to him. “He can't go on like this.”

“Then I suppose I should do my part and hide myself from the world and await the day they turn him over.” He pauses for a moment, takes the thick glasses from his nose and cleans them with his jacket. “You're a very dangerous man, Charles.”

“I could say the same about you, Jebediah.”

A cheeky grin and Rose shakes his head. “When they came back – the heroes – I found myself smiling. All at once, my plans for the world were destroyed, and I smiled. What do you think that means?”
“It means that you met and lost to a formidable opponent.”

“Will you smile when I'm captured?”

“No. To me, you were never formidable. You're just a man who wishes for more power because he fears that he is powerless.”

“And here I thought we were friends.”

“How can I be friends with a man who sold my species into slavery and proclaimed it for the good of the world?”

“You're very adept at hiding your disgust for me,” Rose admits, taking a deep breath and taking in the ebb of the sparkling ocean in the distance.

Charles smiles. “I'm good at hiding my disgust for a lot of things, Jebediah. I've had many years of practice.”

Xavier is not the man that Rose thought he was. Indeed, he is angrier, more cynical. He's a man who has faced a world of hatred for too many years, and no longer sees the bright and silver linings that the world has to offer. “Tell me at least that you are sad to kill your student.”

A touch of emotion flickers across Xavier's face. So fast that Rose nearly misses it. Scott Summers is his only regret in this life. The way the telepaths warred over his mind, the way they stole his power. He still remembers the small child and all of those cuts and bruises when he first found him. Cigarette burns, lash marks over his spine. The boy had faced a life of mistreatment, and in the end, Charles was in no way better than those that had abused him. “If I could take it back,” he says honestly, “I would. But now, it's too late. Scott must die to save the world.”

“Or, you could use him,” Rose offers. “Take back his mind, use him as the weapon that you've always needed to win your place in society. The mutants would have no need to fear.”

Charles admits that it's something that he's thought about. He knows the pathways, the memories. He knows his way into that mind and back out. “It would be lovely, wouldn't it? If mutants had no more reason to fear.”

“It's what I would do were I in your position.”

Another dream that rushed through empty air, an optic blast, a damaged roof. The child sat heaving – his fear turned to nausea – eyes closed tight, his breath staggered. There was no touching him, not for fear of another optic blast that would take out the walls. So, Xavier stood in the doorway, filtering through the child's thoughts, looking for the remnants of the dream.

His tormentor tonight was Jack Winters. A common figure in his dreams – both for his death at the hands of Scott, and the abuse hailed upon him when he was captive. A punch to the face by diamond hand that broke the boy's jaw and sent him flying across the room. The anger, the rage, the three broken ribs and fractured ulna. The boy had allowed the hostages to escape once again. To erase the thoughts was easier than dealing with them.

Across the room, Xavier watched the boy settle down, his breath softening, his reality finally seeping in. “Professor?” he asked quietly, reaching for his ruby red glasses. Slipping them on his face, he looked up to the ceiling in disappointment.

“I told you,” Charles began, “You need to wear those to bed.”
“They’re uncomfortable.”

“It’s the only way to get used to them.”

The boy nodded and climbed out of bed. Taking the broom and dustpan from the corner of his room, he began to clean up his mess. “Never mind that tonight,” Charles said. “I’ll call a crew over here tomorrow and get it fixed.” A long pause as the boy considered what to say, but as usual, he had no words. “Come sleep downstairs tonight,” he said. “And keep your glasses on.”

It was colder downstairs than upstairs. The echoes of their footsteps as Xavier led the boy to a guest room on the lower level. They were silent, uncommunicative, as was often their way. Scott knew better than to question the man. He was loyal like that, his mind being telepathically warped into complete trust and obedience. He would never argue with Charles, and that made him important.

Scott was ever thankful for the small kindnesses that Xavier offered. Even a simple bed in one of the mansion's many, many rooms turned the child red with guilt and gratefulness. He chided himself for not doing better, and made promises to the professor that he would indeed become better. The dream, after all, was not just about one mutant. It was about them all, and he knew how much Xavier needed him.

And, oh the memories he would erase in the mornings. The wicked smile on Sinister's face as the boy was once again caught in his trap. A backhand by Winters that would drop him to the floor. The neglect, the pain, the fear. And though difficult for him to manage, Xavier began erasing those memories hoping to give the boy a clearer head, but as always more would come to fill the gap. It would be some months before he learned how to scour those memories for untold power.

“How is your breakfast?” he asked. Scott nodded. “That’s not answer, my boy. Use your voice.”

“It's fine, Professor,” he would say, timid for his admonishment. Such manners for such a young boy.

Throughout the day, there would be lessons to learn – Math, English, Science, Social Studies. The classes proved challenging for the child, as he had spent years without a formal education. His reading was at a kindergarten level, but he was very adept with math, quickly adding up angles and diameters, area, radius. But, he showed no pride in being good at the subject, his only notion being that he could do better.

Evening would be even more silent, with the boy being trained by his Aikido and Judo masters, and then later retire to the large underground parking lot where Xavier kept most of his antique cars. He would immerse himself in engines and controls, testing speed and hovering capabilities. For as difficult time he had of reading, it always amazed the professor how much he could glean from a text.

And though alone much of the time, Scott never complained. The child relished the silence, or so it would seem. The first time in a long time that he felt safe – even if that feeling came from telepathic persuasion.

“You should laugh more often,” Xavier teased the boy. “It would do your heart some good.”

“I see little to laugh at, sir. The world hates us, and your team is not yet together. Your dream needs more followers.” Always so serious Scott was. “I need more training so that I can lead your team.”

Xavier had never given him a chance. Whether taking his memories or his power, he never saw how strong his student was. “It wouldn't take much,” he says, “but I fear the mutants need a different
leader. Someone not so prone to disruption and hatred. For him to lead the mutants now that the world in its entirety hates him, would be a disgrace to the X-men.”

“You still consider them your team?”

“I will always consider them my team.”

“Well, good luck to you, my foe. We’ll see what fortunes we are granted, and what crosses we are forced to bare. May you live well. May they see the deceit that I did not.”

Xavier watches the pudgy man walk down the stairs until he disappeared. He doubted that this would be the end of Rose, but at least this would put some fear in his steps. “Good day to you, too,” he says long after the man is gone. “May it be terrifying.”
Alex looks out the window, observing the beast of nature outside the safe house windows. Speechless, overwrought, he looks to Angel – his blue skin shimmering in the burgeoning sunlight – for answers. “We can't tell him.”

“He deserves to know.” Warren folds wings behind himself, allows for the entrance of Cable and Rachel. Along with Logan, they're the nerve center of this foray into doubt, guessing at their father's wishes, denying them or supplying them. Warren spends long moments with his arms crossed against his chest, his blue eyes darting over the other mutants brought here to save them. “He deserves to say goodbye.”

They each know the dangers of taking Scott back to the mansion to see the death of his child. “I agree,” Rachel says quietly, a tear in her eye for the loss of a sister she will never know. “He deserves to say goodbye.”

“I can't promise you that Frost will survive this,” Cable growls, his fists balled up, his jaw clenched. Warren sees his father in that stance, and he isn't the only one to share the sentiment. Logan, too, is riled up about what happened to Scott.

“This could be a trap,” Logan issues. “Xavier could be waiting for us.”

“Betsy wouldn't have called me were that true.”

“Are you sure?” Logan asks. “Wasn't too long ago that they were all vying for his death.”

It's a heated discussion – Warren's trust in Braddock throwing flames at Logan's paranoia. As it builds the others jump in – Cable and Rachel and Alex. Their argument disturbs Steve Rogers who comes to check on them. He hears just enough to understand the situation, but he is no calming breeze, even as he offers to go to the mansion first to check things out. “And we're supposed to trust you now? After everything you did?” Logan bites back against his calm demeanor. He can tell instantly that his doubt in Captain America is met with heartbreak.

“I thought we were friends,” Rogers says, his brows raised.

“Yeah, so did I, until you started hunting down mutants.”

Steve deserves that, and says as much. “I was wrong, Logan. I think we all know that I was. But, that still doesn't mean that I'm going to turn Scott over to Xavier.” After all, Scott had shown tremendous leadership during the past few weeks, shutting down Syntech and keeping himself as close to controlled as he possibly could. “Let me see if Xavier's there, and then you can --”

“We don't have that kind of time,” Warren says. “They're going to take the baby off of life support this afternoon. We either trust them, or we don't.”

“Or,” the voice belongs to Tony Stark standing in the doorway, “we let Scott decide.”
“Telling him could --”

“Open up old wounds, sure. But not telling him would be worse.” Stark continues to lean in the doorway, watching as the X-men and Steve mull over their decision. “He's a grown man. And from what I've seen lately, more than capable of making his own decisions.” For the first time ever, Tony's words sound like respect. Not just for Scott, but for the rest of the X-men, too.

Still, Alex worries. His brother had not yet had time to really absorb and understand what Emma did to him, much less that a child from that very union was going to die. He feels as if it's a bad time to add more drama to his older brother's life. But, in the end, he knows that Stark and the others are right. As much as he hates to tell him, his brother does deserve to know.

“I have a child?” The small bedroom is the only private place in the bunker, a place that he's been kept in to keep him from exploding between the missions to take down Syrntech.

Alex can tell that he's not understanding the depth of the situation. Brows knit in confusion, biting his inner cheek, his brother looks lost. “I have another daughter?”

“Scott...” Alex stops, folds his hands over his older brother's. “She's dying Scott. She won't survive the night.”

Red visor glances up to Logan who nods his head. “They're turning off life support this evening.”

“Life support?” Scott shakes his head, the ribbons of red becoming a touch furious.

“I told you,” Alex says, “he can't handle it.”

“Yes, he can,” Wolverine intervenes. “Scott, you need to calm down, and stay calmed down if you want to go see her.”

“What's her name?”

“Ruby,” Logan says, “Emma named her Ruby.”

“I can see her?”

Logan nods. “Yeah, you can see her.”

“She's going to die, Scott,” Alex says, forcing his brother's focus back to him. “Are you sure you can handle it?”

“I-I don't know.” A pause and sudden alarm. “My daughter's going to die?” The push of red energy bolts between his brother and would-be lover, striking out at the door. Alex and Logan jump out of the way, an instinctive reaction to the sudden fight within him. “Why?” Scott asks. “Why is she dying?”

Alex doesn't know the whole story, only that Sinister had something to do with it. Pills or shots, experimentation on Emma, he's not sure. “We think he was there that day on the island. We think he was part of her plan all along.”

They dress in black. Those that have chosen to come along – Scott, Alex, Logan, Nathan, and Rachel. They leave Stark and Worthington in charge of the remaining missions to round up Syrntech and Jebediah Rose.

Scott is silent through the trip, his red energy soft and hazy. Cable and Rachel watch him carefully.
They know that once they're there, they'll be cut off from him telepathically. So, they do what they can now to bring him some measure of peace in his utterly chaotic mind.

They land in the mansion's yard, avoiding the protesters at the gate, the noise, the flashing of camera. Storm greets them at the door. “I wish the circumstances were better,” she says as she shows them inside. “I wish you had come for a different reason.” She gives them a hug in turn, save for Scott who refuses. His mouth drawn down into a soft frown, he instead shakes her hand as if they'd never met before. Storm takes the hint rather harshly, realizing how wrong she had treated this man who had just saved the world. “I'm sorry,” she says, her words encompassing everything that he had been through, but a simple apology wasn't enough. She'd have to regain his trust over time, and she deserves that, or so she decides.

Down the stairs and into the basement. Scott keeps his head low, eyes on the ground as they enter the large medlab on the left. It's empty of machinery, save for those machines keeping his baby alive. Cecilia Reyes greets him. “I'm sorry for your loss,” she says quietly and walks him to the center of the room.

On the other side of the room, looking in through glass is Emma Frost. Scott stops when he sees her, looks back to Logan and Alex, so many words upon his tongue that he can't get any of them out. “We decided it best to keep you apart,” Reyes explains. “We weren't sure --”

“It's her child, too.”

“Scott, we know what happened --”

“It's her child, too,” he repeats in a grim tone. “Both of us should be here.” Reyes checks with the others before nodding and letting Emma inside.

She's a tiny thing, no more than three pounds, born too early, her lungs incapable, her heart already broken. The single eye in her forehead is large and round and closed. Her tiny, red hands do not clutch back, and she makes no sound.

Scott pulls up another bed to her side, lays down so that he's facing his daughter, eclipsing her hand with his own. Emma follows suit once she's inside, her tear streaked face red and swollen. “I named her Ruby,” she tells Scott, but he doesn't answer.

Among those who watch, only Storm and Rachel cry. Rachel for the loss of a sister, Storm for the death of such a child. While they find comfort in each other, the men watch in silence, worried now that Emma's in the room. The only sounds in the room are the machines and their soft palpitations and Scott's whispering to his daughter.

“I'm sorry that we never met before now,” Scott says. “I've never been a good father, so maybe take heart in that. You can still have your dreams and think that they're real.” Sitting up on the bed, he takes the infant and all of her cords into his arms, cradles her against his chest. It's a move that brings Ororo to her knees with sympathy. “Maybe one day we'll meet again, and this time, we'll both be okay.”

He hands the child to Emma, so that she, too, can say her final words. “I love you,” is all she can manage before the tears force her to relinquish the child to Summers' arms. Taking a deep breath, he pulls the child close again and gives Reyes a silent nod. One by one, the machines are turned off, and the baby goes flatline. For long moments, he just holds her, not sure what to do with her, not sure how to handle the death of this child.

Cecilia takes the baby from his arms, places her back on the bed and lets the death soak into them all.
“You bastard,” Emma says, suddenly diamond. “You fucking bastard!” Diamond fist knocks against Scott's jaw and tears him from the bed. In seconds, Emma's on top of him throwing punch after punch to his face and ribs and chest. She curses him; she is angry at him. “Bring her back!” she yells. “Bring my baby back!”

It takes them all to rip Frost away from the defeated form of Cyclops. Nathan, Alex, and Logan, while Rachel and Storm try to drag Scott away at the other end. Her fist covered in blood, Emma careens again to fight her ex-lover, to force him to use his powers. “You brought back city after city, but not my child? How could you let her die?!?”

Her curses draw others into the waiting room – Bobby and Betsy, Alison and James. Students come when they hear the rumors of a fight, and at the center of it all is a child who was never alive.

Emma throws herself into Alex's arms, repeating her curses over and over again. That she hates Scott, that she wants her daughter. That she's sorry, that it's her own fault. She blames karma, she blames her ex-lover. If she were Jean, he would have done it. He would have made their baby healthy and happy. He wouldn't have watched her die. Reyez hits her with a tranquilizer, calming her down, putting her to sleep. She snaps her fingers at Warpath who then carries the woman back to her room.

Bloody, silent, Cyclops keeps his eyes on the child. “I don't know how to do it,” he says, his words distant and shocked. “I don't know how.”

“It's okay, Scott,” Alex says, wiping up the blood from his broken nose. “Just because you can change something, doesn't mean you should.”

Ororo offers them dinner and time to recollect themselves before they head back. She wants to know how Scott did it, how he hid this war from everyone, how he defeated them so easily. Anything to get Scott's mind off of his child and Emma's rant. But Alex turns her down. There are still things to do, and Scott needs time to process what has happened. “Maybe another day,” he says, and lets it go at that.
Cable's Bunker

Chapter Summary

The prisoner speaks.

She's tired of the darkness. Tired of the silence. But, they don't intend to let her go anytime soon – not like Magneto, who was freed the day after Syrntech failed. “I don't want you near him,” Logan says, his voice a harsh growl. He can barely contain his claws, much less his anger.

Hunched down to the floor, gray eyes peer upward in the darkness. The silky fall of red hair, the round green eyes that are bright as emeralds. Jean Gray is a beautiful, but also dangerous.

“You can't keep me locked away forever, Logan --”

“I'll keep you locked up here until I can tell that Scott's safe.”

“It's not me you should be worrying about. It's Xavier.” Yes, she’d heard the news, the bargain over prime time television. Even down here, she gets the gossip that she craves.

“He saved the world, you know.”

Jean shrugs, tosses red hair back over her shoulder. It's a move that in earlier days would have him panting and reeling with his feelings for her. But, now he knows that those feelings were manufactured. “Not all of them, Logan. You may not have loved me as much, but you definitely loved me.”

At the fringes of his thoughts, he can still feel his heart swell with her words, though he doubts their truthfulness. “I was just a tool for you,” he says quietly, his words smoldering with rage. “We were all just tools for you.”

“No. I loved you, too.”

Snarling, he pushes himself up from the floor, throws himself against the bars and slashes at her with his claws. She's powerless down here, thanks to Forge's machines, but her fighting skills and training give her the time to dodge the haphazard blows. “Best be careful,” she says, “another slash like that and you might be letting me out sooner than you thought.”

“Is there even an ounce of remorse in you?” he asks breathlessly, shaking his head. “Is there any part of you that regrets what you did?”

From coy to defeated, her body shifts to the new demeanor. Sitting down on the bench that serves as her bed, she sighs and leans back against the wall, her eyes drifting to the metallic ceiling. “I'm not a monster, Logan.”

“You sure seem like one.”

“I wanted to protect people, Logan. My family, my friends. The team. As a kid, I felt powerless compared to them. I was the one always being rescued. And then, Professor X showed me that incredible beauty of Scott's power and I knew that I needed it. I needed that power to be strong, to
“help them.”

“More excuses?” he scolds, arms across his chest. She always has a reason for her duplicity.

“Had you been in my shoes, you wouldn't have fared much better,” she snipes, her green eyes narrowing.

“I don't need someone else's power to prove myself, Red. Neither do you.”

“Maybe that's simply because I know my own limits. You tend to forget yours.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“All of those arguments with Cyclops? They weren't all manipulation. Some of those fights were real.”

“So?”

“He was trying to keep you safe. He was trying to keep everyone safe. Time and again, you through a wrench in those plans and put the whole team in danger because of it.” It wasn't always about the manufactured hatred between the two. Sometimes, it was simply a matter of Logan rebelling against authority, trying to show Cyke up, or thinking he could do better than the plan. “You always fashioned yourself as the better strategist. Make them bleed and they'll back off.”

He does admit to his earlier arrogance when it came to Cyclops' plans. Yes, of course he thought that the man was taking it too easy on their enemies, but he slowly came to respect Summers and realize that his plans were worth following. Even after Logan left him on Utopia, he could see what Scott was trying to do. Take the blame, take the heat so that the school would be left alone. He was just too angry to admit it. “If you'd left us alone --”

“He would still be a mess, Logan. His mind was twisted long before I started.”

“And that's another excuse. You didn't start it, but you were bound to finish it. That's not love, darlin'. Turning him into a cat's-paw was the very opposite of love.”

“Cat's-paw? Now that's some decent vocabulary. But, he was never just a tool to me, regardless of what you think.”

“You left the mansion to kill him,” he growls.

“I was trying to save the world, Logan.”

“And, so was he.” The only difference between them is that he actually did.

Jean's heard little about the mission and is surprised to learn that Scott didn't actually kill the Avengers. That he hid them here along with the X-men until he could expose Syrntech's plans for good. That he took out an army, that he bided his time, fought against the world with minimum force to ensure that he didn't spin out of control. “He had help,” Logan tells her. Nathan and Rachel, Dr. Strange and Illyana – they stayed inside of his mind, bolstering his control. “Strange has been fixing his mind little by little, giving him a little bit of peace.”

Scott doesn't deserve to die, to be switched off for good. “He's a hero, Jeannie. Maybe you should treat him like one.”

She takes a deep breath, head down. She didn't realize that the death of the Avengers was all a hoax,
that it was all about drawing out Syntech's troops. She still worries though, that there will come a
time that even her children will be too tempted to grab that power, and Scott will lose control
completely.

“He's still himself, Red. He's still Scott Summers.” He doesn't tell her about Ruby or Emma, about
his sudden silence on anything outside of the mission to find Jebediah Rose. He doesn't tell her that
he's again repressing his emotions, that he's not sleeping or eating. This is how Scott deals with
tragedy – the wordless days, those painful days when he quashes down anything that he could say to
relieve the pressure of his thoughts. It's no longer her problem.

“He doesn't know I'm here, does he?” she surmises from the silence. “He doesn't know that you've
locked me up.”

“No. He doesn't know you're here. Nor does he know that you were going to kill him.” And,
Logan's not about to tell him, either. “He's gone through enough,” he explains. “You trying to shut
him down will only make things worse.”

Guilt has a heavy scent, dark waters and thunder storms. Crisp, murky. And Jean smells plenty like

“So did the world, until he brought the Avengers back from the dead.”

“The world still hates him,” she offers.

“They hate all of us, Jeannie. That's never going to change.” Despite the fact that he'd saved the
world, there are few who trust in Scott and his intentions. Getting just a glimpse of his powers, what
he was able to do frightens them. “But, it makes him no less deserving of respect and the right to
live.”

She's not ready yet, or so Logan tells her. Not yet ready to be free, to be sent back to the mansion.
“You're not his judge and jury,” he says. “You're not his executioner.”

She wants to see him. To talk to him. “I have no powers down here,” she says. “So, he's safe.”

“Not a chance.”

“You're afraid of what he'll do? That he'll choose me over you?”

“No, that's not what I fear.” Logan is assured of his spot in Scott's heart. Regardless of the recent
trauma, he knows that Scott loves him. “Your betrayal. That's what I fear him finding out. I don't
want him hurt anymore.”

“You can't stop him from being hurt, Logan. You can't protect him against everything.”

“But, I can try.” He stands, brushes the dust off his pants. This was not the conversation that he
wanted. He wanted remorse, an askance for forgiveness. A promise that she would leave him alone.
“I wanted him to be safe around you, but you're not ready for that yet.”

In the darkness, he leaves her there to contemplate her actions, her statements. She can feel the pain
of heartbreak, that her husband is in love with another man – a man that used to love her more than
breath. So pertinent was her mission, and so easily it was undone. The weight of it drives her gaze to
the floor, and tears to her eyes.

Even within her own mind, she can't tell the difference between her love for Summers and the love
his powers. The two so twisted together, so much of a maelstrom, that she weeps for the loss of both.
“Please, Logan,” she etches out into the darkness. She can tell that he’s still there, just around the corner. “Let me talk to him.”

He doesn't say a word, doesn't greet her with an answer. As he walks up the stairs, she is left to herself completely and alone.
He stood before the door, his eleven year old hands curled into sweaty fists. The answer was there, behind that dark-stained door at the end of the hallway. The answers to everything led him there. He looked over his shoulder. An instinct now, especially with the sense of de ja vu that folded him in half with nausea and fear. A deep breath and he turns the door knob, and smells the scent of death.

Too many had died, or somehow had been changed. The Bogarts, the nurses, the Schmidts, and his teachers. There was something rotten at the orphanage, something horrifying, that made him break out in panicked sweats at night, made his head hurt, made him fearful. He knew to blame himself, that anyone who took pity on him, tried to help him – anyone that got close to him – disappeared in some way or another. He couldn’t go another day without finding out why.

One quiet step at a time and he looks around the room in awe. Test after medical test, the choreographing of anatomy, a skeleton hung in the corner of the room. There were so many things that he didn’t understand, but he knew they were important. He knew that this skeleton was his own from younger years, that all of these papers tacked to the wall were about him, that someone was experimenting on him.

“I didn’t expect you for another week at least. You’re getting very good at following the clues.” In the doorway, without his clone, stood Nathaniel Essex – pale, his forehead dotted with a large red gem, and his smile broad. “You’re getting very good at this little game, Scotty.”

“A hundred times he appeared at that door,” Essex says to Dr. Strange. “The paranoia was beautiful in its own right. No matter how many times I deleted his memories, he would still piece together what was wrong at the orphanage.”

“And the point of it was?”

“To isolate him. To make him suspect and to seek out the clues that would lead him to a final answer. Over the years, he got quite good at it.”

“You were training him.”

Sinister nods. “I taught him to be wary of this world, and then Xavier took it all away.”

“You terrified him.”

“To be quite frank, he terrified me.” All that time blocking the child's powers, figuring out how to keep the child from exploding upon the world. He considers himself a hero for teaching the child those vital steps to keep himself independent and alone. “His mind would be intact had he never left me.”

“He would have become another cog in your vast machine --”

“Not necessarily. Some people are just born heroic, and poor Scotty’s one of them. He rebelled
against me every day, but I was stronger then and could waylay his plans.” He sounds almost wistful
to Strange, the way he talks about Scott's nightmare years at the orphanage. The experiments, tearing
the boy into shreds. “But, Xavier took it all away, and thus, we have this.” Arms out to indicate the
dream-like memories floating around them.

Strange studies the scientist for long, wary minutes. “You're not a hero,” he finally says. “You can't
pride yourself on what you did to that child.”

“Oh, but I can. And you should be thankful, too. I saved the world from him, though no one
recognizes the pains I went through to do so.”

The migraine had come on suddenly. One minute in an English class he didn't understand to balled
up on the floor clutching at autumn hair. His teachers knew to keep his glasses on. They didn't know
why, but they had been told that the child's glasses were important. Ms. Kiegal called for the school
nurse and was unimpressed by Scott's display. She chalked it up to his attention span and the fact
that he didn't study at all. Mr. Nieman didn't bother to argue and walked the boy back to his
bedroom, slipped him a couple of aspirin and told him to sleep. “It's a migraine,” he explained,
putting a cool wet cloth over Scott's forehead. “Just try to sleep it off.”

Scott was prone to nightmares, especially nightmares that threatened to burn him from the inside
out. And as he fell asleep, he felt the flames at his feet. Normally, someone would come to wake him
up, but being out of class, the children were out for recess, and no one came to check on him.

He cried out when his power burst out of control, and then sobbed on his knees when he realized the
damage that he'd done. Four bodies and the orphanage half destroyed. Mr. Nieman was among
those dead.

Strange watches the memory, how the young Scott fell to blankness then woke up in red fury. And
the ache when he'd discovered what he'd done. “He killed them,” Strange says quietly.

“He did bring them back,” Sinister offers. “Six years later, long after he'd left the orphanage. He
brought all of them back.”

“You hid this memory from him, didn't you?”

A clip of smile on Sinister's right cheek. “You're very observant, Doctor. I hid it in a dream,
something else which Xavier took away from him. He takes a pause, sips at wine. “And those, my
friend, are the memories you have to choose from. One of these goes back to him. The other stays
with me.”

It's not an easy choice, but it was part of the bargain the two had struck in order to put Scott's mind
back together a little at a time. It would be the only untouched memory that he had, and Sinister had
given him two horrifying choices – the need to separate him from society or the murders he had
committed. He should have known that Essex would not have chosen easy memories – no birthdays
or holidays, no pets, no laughter. Just two horrific scenes that would play out endlessly in Scott's
overtaxed mind.

To isolate him again would pull him away from his family and friends. It would only reinforce those
things that had always kept him distant from the team. Not to mention increase the paranoia that
plagues the younger mutant. But, to reveal those deaths, Strange couldn't imagine Summers living
through that, not with everything else that had happened lately.

Sinister gives no preference to the memories. He sees them both as necessary, especially if Scott is
ever to control the powers that he wields. “I had reasons for what I did,” he explains, his tone
marking the tediousness of Strange’s lack of decision. “You may think me wrong, but in the end, I could block most of his powers, Xavier just let them loose.”

“Could you block them again?”

“And why would I do that?”

“To save the world.”

A thick laughter – heavy with incredulity – warps across the mindspace. “You are not a scoundrel, Doctor. Don’t try to act like one.”

It was a trick to Doctor Strange. Somehow, Sinister was experimenting on him, to see which memory he would ultimately pick to be restored. While one held background, the other held consequence. While one stood among the fragments as a solid memory, the other was fractured. But, why was it fractured? What other things could Scott glean from such a memory? The pain, the fear, the hurt, the blame. To deliver the murdered children unto him could help him control himself, but it would never be enough to keep him subdued. Cyclops would howl in pain upon knowing what he’d done, but the memory wasn’t finished. He’d never know that he brought the children back to life.

Giving him the other, however, could prove just as painful. That he knew something was wrong, that there was nothing he could do about it – it mirrors his own split memories. Xavier, Jean, Psylock, Quentin Quire. That he could not stand against him, that they overrode his mind and he let it happen. That there was nothing he could do to stop it. Not only would he feel useless, he would also feel helpless, and that was something that Scott was probably unprepared for.

“Either way,” he continues, “Summers will have a hard time with this.”

“Perhaps.”

Strange feels odd within his skin, picking out the memory to restore to Scott. He doesn't know Summers well, though he has had plenty of chances to peep into that war zone of a mind. He's learned that Scott is much more fragile than the world puts upon him, even his friends and family.

“The first one,” Strange speaks, still unsure of his choice. “Give him back the first one.”

“Are you sure?” Sinister asks, replaying the second memory in its entirety. “Maybe he needs to know that he's capable of killing people if he's not careful.”

“No. He knows that already.”

“Are you sure?”

“He thinks about it everyday.”

It takes merely a moment for Essex to restore the lost memory, vine it through his consciousness. A torrent in the mindscape at the possibility of a new memory brings forth the nightmares and whispers, already trying to rip it a part, but Sinister is firm. A mental compulsion that Strange has never seen, and the ghosts settle back into the dregs. “You never wondered why they never attacked you?”

It wasn't even something he had thought about, how he could come here and work, and never once see a nightmare or hear a whisper. No matter how long he stayed, no matter how many bombs he destroyed, the wraiths never came for him. “You did that?”

“Of course. A gentleman couldn't just leave you alone, now could he?”
“You're no gentleman.”

Sinister ticks tongue across teeth. “How sad that you think that way, especially after everything I've done for you.”

“I don't confuse your aid with gentility, Essex. It comes with far too many strings attached.”

Knee slapping laughter, and a broad, creepy smile. “You amuse me, Dr. Strange, even more than Scott at the moment. Such a droll little boy he's become, breaking his mind apart as he does. Perhaps you'd be interested in a wager?”

“The only reason I allow you here is because you can piece this mind back together. That's the only reason we play these games.”

“That hurts my heart,” Nathaniel says, a hand to his chest. “Here I thought we were friends.” A brief silence, and Essex waits for answer. When it doesn't come, he smiles again. “You're very wise to not trust me.” Holding out his hands he recalls the memory of the dead children on the lawn of the orphanage.

Strange reels back knowing what Essex intends to do. “Don't do this.”

“What will you give me to keep this one a secret for a little while longer?”

“Name your price.”

“A day with him.”

“What will you do during this day?”

“A day with him for my own purposes.” Strange, eyeing the memory, asks him again what he plans to do during that day. “Good doctor, it doesn't matter what I intend to do with him, the only thing that matters is your consent or no. Pick one.”

Backed into a corner once again, Strange agrees to the bargain in order to keep Scott safe for a little while longer. “Sooner or later,” Sinister warns him, “his memories will be given back. If not by me, then someone else. You must prepare yourself for that eventuality.” It's a final warning by Essex, and the man disappears, taking the Scott shaped furniture with him.
Chapter Summary

A visit to the cells.

He knows that she's down here. He can smell her all over Logan, her perfume, her shampoo. Since they got here, since he killed the X-men. She did this to him. She broke him. In more ways than he can count.

He stands before the door. Old memories reeking havoc on his psyche. His energy is dangerous, lapping outward towards walls and stairs. Control. He must keep control.

He's done this before. This door. Jean – behind him – tells him so. It's time for him to confront the truth. Time for him to end this cycle of abuse and cruelty. “I never loved you,” Jean says. He looks behind him, the Jean that he married. Her white dress perfectly accentuating her slender waist. She looked so beautiful then, so warm, so perfect. He sees the ring on her finger and then looks to his own.

He doesn’t know when he stopped wearing it. What he did with it after. If he'd tossed it in the ocean or put it in a box. Was it at Emma's request that he pried it from his finger, or his death?

Thoughts ablaze with rogue memories, taking him to years past and back to the present. He wonders if the futures that he sees are real, or some other trick of his shattered mind. Behind him, Jean prods him on to open the door, to face reality – that he'll always be that child, that he'll always be weak-willed and worthless.

Mr. Milbury – the head of the orphanage. He'd appeared in Scott's dreams – half rotten, flesh falling off. These weren't normal dreams. These weren't the dreams of fire and accidents. They were something else. Day time, night time, Scott couldn't avoid these delusions, as horrifying as they were.

It was sneaking into Milbury's office that had prodded him to the basement. There – in the stony surround, he witnessed the large tubes filled with different liquids that his child brain couldn't name. Green, purple, bright red and deep salt-water blue. He knew at once that he'd been in one of those – a mask and wires keeping him from drowning. He knew at once that someone was experimenting upon him.

Up the stairs, to the right, the stair case and that ebon door. It held all of the answers, the clues, the reasons why he was still here. Why the Bogarts had to die. Why Nurse Perkins had to die. Up there, where Milbury was supposed to sleep, they were all there. And with a deep breath, his hand upon the door knob, he told himself that he was ready, that he could defeat this monster, free the orphanage, free himself.

But there is no freedom from it. Not with his mind in tatters, not with the reminders of what she did to him.

The door is cold to the touch. No fires or coals burn beyond this metallic panel. Nothing that speaks to the fires of his youth – those terrible dreams that drove him from sleep. A tug at the dull silver knob, a crease of light from beyond. “Scott?” His brother's voice makes him jump.
“Scott, what are you doing here?”

“I want to see her,” he says softly, a slight tension shivering across his jaw.

“That's not a good idea,” Alex answers. Strange had warned them that his behavior might be odd, and to keep a close watch on him. “Where's Logan?”

“Asleep.”

Balancing the food tray in one hand, he waves for his older brother to follow him. “Let's go back to the computer room, then. You can help us track down Rose.”

Distant, oddly calm and head bowed, he looks back to the door. “I need answers.”

“We'll answer anything you want, okay. But leave Jean alone.”

“You don't have my answers,” Scott says, looking up the stairs to his brother.

Alex puts the tray on the steps and gallops down to stand by Scott's side. Hand on the doorknob, he tries to pull the door shut, but Cyclops is stronger than he is – another part to his power that no one has discovered yet. “I'll break down the door,” he warns Alex, his tone firm and face blank from emotion.

Alex knows this look well, and because of that, he removes his hand from the door and takes a step back. With a deep breath, he gathers up the tray and follows Scott inside the room.

Tears fall from green eyes – shocked and surprised, speechless. Even as Scott stands there motionless, merely peering into the cage, she can't gather her words or calm herself down. “S-Scott?” Like Logan those days before, he takes a seat along the wall staring into the prison. Alex watches from afar, ready to turn his brother off at the first sign of trouble.

For long moments, Cyclops simply sits there, head on knees, hands at the back of his head. He breathes slowly – in and out – just like Wolverine had taught him to do. A calming exercise, something to ease the burn inside of his head. “Why?” he finally asks, not bothering to look up.

“Because,” her words come too easily, “I wanted to protect you.”

“I don't remember what my mother looked like.”

Jean understands what he's asking. If she – herself – had deleted those memories. “Scott, that wasn't a memory I've ever seen. Maybe Xavier --”

“And our wedding. That was supposed to be the important memory in my life, but I can't remember the vows.” The way his son felt cradled in his arms. The day he lost him to the future. Even his first mission. These things – these monumental things – were gone, twisted up and shredded by the whispers in his mind. Those things that made him doubt, feel worthless, feel sick to his stomach with their overwhelming words. “You did this to me.”

“I wasn't the only one, Scott. There were others--”

“You did this to me!” he yells, suddenly breaking his calm facade. Grabbing onto the bars, he bends them in place, reaches in to the depth of the cell, gripping her neck with one hand. “You did this! You, Jean. You did this to me!” Energy spikes like a mace all around him, eroding floors and metal bars.
Alex grabs hold of his brother and pulls him back from the cell and threatens to turn him off his his energy spikes again like that. Scott takes deep breaths, angry tears still flowing out from behind his visor. From the floor, Jean looks up astonished. “I told you,” she says quietly, “I wanted to protect you.”

“That's not a good enough answer,” Alex jumps in, speaking for his brother. “He deserves to know the truth, Jean. That you got greedy, that it became more than about protecting him. It became about harnessing the powers that you would never have.”

Scott looks up at his brother, his brows questioning and his energy still fluctuating. Mistrust curdles in his stomach, and he doesn't know why. “Alex --”

“You said you wanted answers, right?” Cyclops nods. “Then we're going to get them, but not in a way that kills Jean Grey.”

She doesn't want to face them both at the same time. It's hard enough when she has to deal with Logan when he's here, or her son and daughter. For it to be Scott and Alex together, she knows it will be difficult. “I was addicted. To the rush of powers that flowed through you, to the Phoenix. But, I used those powers to protect everyone.”

“You destroyed his mind,” Alex defends his brother, only to have Scott back him off. Though he's silent, Havok understands his brother's meaning.

“Yes. We got out of control,” she responds, bringing up the other telepaths again. She wants him to know that it wasn't just her, that they all had. “It was only when Emma won the war did we realize how far we had gone.”

Scott listens to the stories that she tells, of those magnificent battles that took place in his mind. From the beginning, when Xavier first pulled her into those thoughts to the last days of his life, she spoke her tale, reminding him often that there were others who played the game too. She explains how she kept Logan away from him, made the two men hate each other in order to keep them apart. “I loved you, Scott. I was afraid to lose you. Not just your power, but also you. You have always been my rock. You always kept me grounded.”

“But you gave me no choice,” Scott speaks. “You made me love you.”

It was true, and Jean admitted as much. “I made you love me so much that you would never leave me.”

She knows that he still feels it, that loyalty and devotion. That he broke her heart when he fell into Emma's embrace. That there was nothing more painful in the world than watching him slip away. She didn't think Emma would stand a chance, but she accomplished what she set out for – systematically wiping everyone – including Jean – from his mind. “I can never forgive her for that.”

“And I can never forgive you,” he rasps, dusting himself off and standing. Blank-faced – only the red miasma giving away his deeper thoughts of pain and suffering – he looks at her. “You are not who you claim to be, Jean.”

“I never was,” she admits, though she cringes to do so.

“Let her go,” Scott tells Alex.

“Scott, she was going to kill you. That's why we --”

“She can't kill me,” he says, one brow perked above his visor. “And neither can Xavier. Sinister's made sure of that.”
He wasn't the same man. Storm could tell just by looking at him. “Professor,” she finally speaks as she opens the door to the mansion. “Professor Xavier.” His smile is broad, hinting at secrets and things untold. She'd seen him on television, just like the rest of the world. And his message was no less alarming to her than it was to Alex, she was sure of that.

“You look well, Ororo.”

“As do you.”

The silence is lingering, and the two stare at each other across the threshold. She doesn't want him here, not after what he said on television, but can find no way to kick the man out of his home, and so with reluctance, she steps back and invites him in. “I was just brewing some tea,” she says, “if you would like to join me.”

They talk of pleasantries – the weather, the biscuits, the grade of tea. Xavier is reminded of his travels when he was younger and walking the tea farms in Taiwan, how magnificent they were and how beautiful. It doesn't take long for the conversation to turn to Japan's tea ceremony and how cleansing it was to partake of.

But, the conversation takes a darker tone once the idle chatter is out of the way. “Scott isn't here,” Storm says, reminding him instantly of his announcement. “If you're looking for him, I have no idea where he is.”

“Oh, don't worry about that. He will come to me, eventually. In the meantime, I wanted to see what you had done with the school. You've done an excellent job here, Ororo.”

“You're planning on killing him, aren't you?”

“Jean obviously failed, so it's up to me now.”

“He didn't kill the Avengers.”

Charles doesn't care if he killed the Avengers or not. He doesn't care if Scott saved the world from Syrntech. All that matters is that his powers are too much for him, for anyone for that matter. And, Scott was never good with control.

“You tore apart his mind.”

“We saved the mutants from those who would destroy us. All of that power had to come from somewhere, Ororo – even your own. Tell me you don't feel the lack?”

Indeed she does. From the moment that Scott returned from the Red Dimension, she had felt the waning of her powers. “It's taken some adjustment,” she says. “But the weather is still mine to control.”
“Yet it lacks your previous finesse.”

Unwillingly, she became an accomplice in the crimes against Cyclops, and then when she went against saving him. But now – now that Kitty's back, and the whole scenario explained – she feels as if Scott should get a second chance, if only because he risked his own self in order to save the world. “I won't help you find him,” she says.

“I told you, he'll come to me.”

It's jarring to see the anger cross his face, something rare even in the worst of times. Storm tenses, her posture becoming straighter, arms across her chest. “You're here for Kitty,” she finally figures out. “You're here to question her.”

Charles smiles. “I was here to see all of you, to see the school and how well you've been doing without me. I must admit, you've done better with it than I could imagine. You should be proud of yourself for your accomplishment. But, yes, I would like to talk to Kitty, if you don't mind. It's been ages since I've seen her.”

Storm is hesitant, and Xavier takes note. “Perhaps another time then, when you're more welcoming.”

“No, no. I understand. You don't realize the danger you are in because of Cyclops. But, soon, Ororo, the world will act with vehemence against his powers. They will do terrible things to him, and in turn, he'll do terrible things to the Earth. I can't let either happen –”

“What do you mean they will do terrible things to him? How can anyone treat him worse than you or Jean?”

“The world is going to react soon. It won't be long before the mutants find themselves embroiled in yet another war over his powers, and you've seen the damage that these wars can do firsthand,” he says, gesturing to kitchen surrounding them. “Is saving a single life more important than saving the millions?”

In all her years – up until now – she has never doubted Charles Xavier. Not his words, not his dream. With him as their guidepost, there was always a path to walk upon and a path to avoid. “At one time, you would have answered yes to that question, Charles.”

“And at one time, Scott Summers did not have full access to his power.” He sees the way that she grimaces, her lean white brows creased above pale blue eyes. “You're still accusing me, aren't you? You still think that I'm at fault.”

“Yes,” she answers plainly, her nerves on fire with the sudden downfall of her world.

“Then so be it. I won't attempt to change your mind. You can accuse me all you want, but there were reasons that it had to be done.”

“You had reasons for tearing up Scott's mind?”

“Yes.”

“To bolster the powers of your X-men.”

“Yes, but oh so much more. You weren't there, Storm. You weren't there the day I brought him into this mansion. The suffering. You would have begged me to do what I did.”
“To twist his memories so that you could --”

“To erase them. All of those painful memories that he was carrying. No child deserved to go through what he went through. The power that he held was but a bonus. The real reason for breaking into his mind to begin with was to ease his troubled soul, and that's something that I shouldn't have to apologize for.” He speaks calmly, as if he's rehearsed this, as if he's stood in front of the mirror for days and planned out his speech to her. “I did the best I could.”

“And then you went overboard.”

Like Jean, he admits his actions. That like her, like all of the telepaths, they'd gone overboard, and it wasn't until years later that he realized how damaged his would-be son had become. “Yes, it is my fault he is as he is, and it's up to me to finish it.” His words quiver at the end, a sound of sadness being withheld.

Storm can see the softness in his face, how much emotion was hid behind his demeanor. He's not as stoic as he thinks, but nor is she convinced that his words are genuine. This Xavier – in this new body – is not the man she admired. “What happened to you?” she asks. “When did you change?”

“You weren't there Storm.” He looks suddenly tired, his head bowed, his hands upon his lap. She can see the years on him, the worry, the ire. “You can treat me as a villain all you like. You can call my dream rubbish, if you want. You can even call me a hypocrite. But, that doesn't change my duties. Maybe he was in control this time. Maybe he didn't kill anyone, and maybe his plans for Syrntech were incredibly insightful, but what happens the next time? What happens when someone he loves is killed in the many battles still upon him? What happens when he loses himself to the struggle with his powers?”

Scott was never a confidant man – some of that the telepaths doing, some of that his core nature. To doubt and worry was ever a part of him. “He never learned to control his optic blasts,” Xavier continues, “no matter how hard I pushed him. No matter how much he wanted to. For a while, I blamed it on Sinister and his machinations in his mind, but I was wrong. The inability was Scott's alone. He doesn't know how to cope with such strength and force.”

“You think of him as fragile.”

“Yes.”

“Well then you're wrong,” Storm says, a lean white brow arched. “After everything he's been through, after being broken thousands of times by you and the others, he's still himself. He still puts the needs of others before his own. To me, that's a mark of incredible control.”

A long silence as the pair contemplate each other's words. Their goodbyes are brief as Storm walks him to do the door. “Just one last thing,” he says. “Please ask Kitty if Jean's okay. I haven't heard from her in quite some time. I still tend to worry about my students.”

Storm's eyes narrow with some anger. “What do you mean?”

“I fear they're keeping her prisoner.”

“She knew that you were alive?”

“Yes. But, don’t blame her. I asked her to keep my life a secret. I didn't want to disturb the good work that you're doing here.”

Storm promises him nothing as they walk to the door. Though finding out that Jean was a prisoner
made her angry, that Jean hid Xavier's existence bothered her even more. Jean was her best friend, and to find out that she was hiding something so incredible bothered her immensely.

She watches as Xavier escapes into his car, and then out through the gates where the protesters wait. Her thoughts are scattered, and she wonders if she made the right decision in sticking with Scott.
A mile deep crevice in the Earth and fresh snowfall. A dangerous red miasma fogging out like a cloud. Madison Jeffries knows not to get any nearer than this, having seen the Red Wave on television.

At the center of the crater, his body still, lies Cyclops, still unconscious from his fall from the sky. Jeffries had thought it a meteorite, but as he got closer to the spot, he realized that it was human. “Yeah, I need to speak to Alex Summers.” It's his third phone call to various mutants, finally deciding to call Warren Worthington III when none of the others picked up.

There's a brief pause and soon Alex answers. “This is Alex.”

“Madison Jeffries. I think I found your brother.”

For three days, they've looked for him, using both Cerberus and Cerebro. Alex feels nothing but worry as Jeffries explains the condition that he's in. Bleeding, unconscious, still. The only reason that he knows Scott is still alive is because of the red fog.

It takes mere minutes for them to arrive at the crash site thanks to Illyana. The red energy pounds into the rocks, disappearing it from existence, making the crater wider and deeper. Alex climbs down first, leaving Logan at the top in case this is a trap of some sort.

He smells like space again. Burnt rubber. And his skin is cold thanks to the weather. Alex carefully lifts him from the ground, sees the blood from his smashed chest and the side of his head. Scott struggles against the pressure on his body, his heart going a mile a minute. “You have to go,” Cyclops pants. “You have to get out of here.”

“I'm not leaving you, brother.”

“They're coming.” It's his last words before he falls unconscious again.

There's not much choice but to turn him off as they drag him to the top of the crater. The energy is far too dangerous to go unchecked, and with Scott unconscious, there's no way for him to regain control.
But what to do with him and his omen they have no idea.

It's evening when he wakes again, his energy still not tamed. The room disintegrates at his touch until the shield appears, keeping the fog tight within the orb. Hands on head, tugging at hair, he cringes at the onslaught of his power. Strange casts his clarity spells, calming Scott, helping him breathe.

Logan curls in beside him, a soothing hand upon his back. “What happened, Scott?”

“Th-Thanos.”

The mention of the Titan's name drives worried spikes down Logan's spine. Grey eyes wide open, he looks up to Alex and then to Stephen Strange. “Scott,” he starts after regaining himself, “is he coming here? Thanos. Is he coming here?” A slight nod from Cyclops. “Why? Why is he coming here?”

“I stole the stone,” he rasps. “I stole the Infinity--” he's cut short by a choke of blood. Coughing like mad, he leans into Logan, his head on the older man's shoulder.

“Shit.” Logan looks to Strange who knows more about the Infinity stones than himself. Strange shakes his head, surprised at the admission. As Sorcerer Supreme of Earth, he should have been tracking the stones' whereabouts.

“Scott,” the doctor asks, “do you know how many he has?”

“Five. I stole the Power Stone.”

“Where'd you put it Scott? I can hide it --”

“It's in my mind,” he says and then gestures towards the shield. “It's in my mind.”

News travels fast to the back of the crowd, with both Steve and Tony coming forward to get a better view. “We can't win against his army,” Tony says. “It's too big, too well armed.”

“Then we should get busy,” Cable replies. “It won't take him long to get here.”

Logan takes Scott to the tiny bedroom in the back while the rest of them find their teams and other heroes to do battle. This time – and Logan swears it – Scott will be left in peace while the others fight. “It's just me that he wants, Logan. I should --”

“Keep that stone safe. The world doesn't need it falling into the wrong hands.”

“And I'm the right hands?”

“Yes.”

Scott isn't so sure about it, not with the stone embedded in his mind, a place swarming with nightmares and whispers. He worries that he's not strong enough for this. But, Logan assures him that he is. “You're the strongest man I know.”

Silence as Logan bandages the busted ribs and high cheekbone. Gray eyes narrow as he attempts to figure out Scott's mood. It's a solemn one at best, and at worst, it's close to a breakdown. “You're healing quicker,” Wolverine points out, noticing how the red energy creeps across his broken bones. His hands still quivering with the tremendous power trapped within his mind, Scott moves trembling fingers across Logan' jaw. The kiss is tender, a movement of lips, the slipping of hands around neck and waist. “You're using the stone, aren't you?” Logan says with some fear.
Looking at the shield and its thickness, he is surprised at the construction, how intricate and beautiful the shielding is. Calloused fingers reach out and touch the crystalline walls, and at just the touch, he can feel the power tremor through him. “You're controlling it?”

“I don't know,” Scott says wearily. “I don't know how this works.”

“Maybe it's an instinct, to stop you from hurting people.”

“Oh maybe it's something else that I just don't understand.”

Beneath the visor, there is a flicker of emotion, a break from Scott’s all too stoic face. A lowered brow, a slight nip to his lower lip, and breath heavy, he again cups Logan's face, running thumb against lips. “You're the only thing that makes sense,” he says. “Out of all of this, you're the only thing that's stable.” As hands cup jaw, Logan presses into the touch, closing his eyes, allowing himself to feel safe in the moment. A soft I love you falls from Cyclops’ lips.

Logan smiles at the words, presses his hand down on Scott's knees and leans forward for another kiss. The red miasma pounds furiously against the shield walls, but the cage is strong, bolstered by the power gem embedded in Scott's mind. Within the red fog, he can smell the scent of coming lust. Soft, it starts, nectar and good green meadows, sultry and sweet. It's a beautiful smell, one that takes Logan back to memories of less tumultuous times, times when he was free of the world and all of its problems.

Pulling Scott closer to deepen the kiss, the scent becomes stronger, near overwhelming in this small orb of shielding. He begs entrance to Scott's mouth – tongue against teeth – and marvels at the too-rare sensations as the younger mutant obliges. Tongues tangle in a war of breathless want, desperation, and need. It's been too long for both of them, so much trauma and the need to release it, to bond, to finally become one.

Logan leans Scott back onto the floor, cradles his head as he climbs between the other man’s legs, resisting the urge to push this too fast as he’d done previously. The seduction of Cyclops would be low and slow this time, something for him to remember.

Tender kisses go from lips to the pulse behind ear and then further down the neck. Gentle suction, soft breath as Scott responds to Logan's ministrations, losing himself to the feel of being loved. Hearts pound, matching pace, and the scent of lust fills the cage, driving Logan's instincts crazy. He wants to bite, to push this faster, to finally fill Scott up to the brim, but he stays himself by pulling up Scott's stained shirt up over his head. Finding fresh purchase with heated skin, calloused fingers work their magic, digging into too-tense muscle. “Relax, Slim,” he says quietly, a wolfish grin nipping across right cheek. “Let me show you how much I love you.” Leaning back in, he collapses into another kiss that leaves Scott breathless and moaning. “Let me show you how much I want you.”

Careful of plasters and bandages, he flurries kisses down neck to chest, taking a nipple in between his lips. Gentle suction, and a hand roaming dangerously close to the rim of beige slacks, Scott arches his back in pleasure. Wolverine smiles as he continues his attention to the younger mutant's body, finding all of the tastiest spots, those spots that a mere touch can buck up his hips and make him groan. Scott's a treasure chest of treats, his sounds so delicious, his wrangling hands seeking somewhere to be, to touch, to find midst Logan's search.

His ribs, the curve of his neck, the palm of his hands – all of these little places that had gone untouched by Jean and Emma, all of these things that he didn't know he was missing. Breathless, he calls out Logan's name, a rasped voice barely heard breaking through the race of hearts. A soothing hand to Scott's stomach, and Logan tells him once again to just relax, to let him do this.
His own pants uncomfortable and restraining, he feels Scott's bulge through the fabric, and decides to free him from the constrained. A slowly fumbled button, and he removes the offending clothing from Scott's body, leaving him with even more to explore. Legs for days and a tight bottom, so muscular, so lean – quite unlike his own bulky body, so beautiful.

Dipping down between those legs, he touches tongue to the tip of Scott's length, instantly receiving a bucking of slender hips in response. He traces the hardening flesh with his tongue, a subtle rhythm that brings with a cacophony of soft guttural moans that make his jeans even more uncomfortable.

Stripping off the rest of his clothing, he once again claims Scott's mouth in a bruising kiss. Hands on the younger man's shoulders, he finds the pulse at the bottom of neck, piercing it with his teeth. Small drops of blood and a pleased gasp, and Scott once again proclaims his love. "I love you too," Logan says, threading his fingers through sweat-damp hair. He's never felt such desire before as he stares into ruby red visor. He's never felt such want. "I want to be inside of you Scott," he whispers in the younger mutant's ear. "I want to feel every part of you."

Spitting into his hand, he teases a finger into Scott's tight passage, worms it into the ring of muscle. Scott tenses at the intrusion, his hips up off of the floor as he tries to adjust to the stretch. Hand in circles across his stomach, and again, a need to relax, Scott breathes through the pain, slowly feeling himself give in to this tremendous want. "I need you Logan," he gasps, his voice broken between hurt and fulfillment.

"Please, Logan."

"As you wish."

Inch by slow moving inch, Logan pushes himself into that tight passage, watching carefully for Scott to relax between each movement. "That's it, darlin'. Just relax into it, let me fill you up." Pushing in until he's at hilt, he keeps strong hands on Scott's hips and thighs, relishing how beautiful they look wrapped around his body. It takes a few minutes for the younger mutant to adjust, to finally feeling that fullness that he's been craving. "There you go, Slim."

Wolverine angles himself, plunging into Cyclops' depths to find his prostrate, and when he does, Scott shoots up from the floor, his air gone, and his mouth wide open. Logan barely contained a giggle before grabbing another kiss from his lover. "Told you," he says, pushing Scott back down onto the floor. "I'm going to make you feel good."

The rhythm is slow at first, gauging Scott's ability to control his shield under such voluptuous pressure. The red fog is thick and swirled trying to crack the cage despite the strength of the power stone.

Logan picks up the pace, his hand wrapping around the other man's engorged length, keeping the rhythm in sync with his thrusts. Scott writhes on the ground, his hands skittering across the floor, reaching out for Logan. Keeping his pace steady, he dips down to flutter kisses down neck, once again putting gentle suction on dusky nipples. His lover's breath is short and nectar sweet as he comes closer and closer to climax. He won't last much longer, and nor will Logan.

The building of stars behind his eyes, Wolverine pushes the pace even faster, bringing them both into a frenzy. Logan cums first, his seed spilling out into Scott's depths, and just a few seconds after, Scott
releases his own. Sweat damp and heavy, Logan rides the end of their euphoria before pulling out and laying beside his lover. “Feel calmer now?” he asks a sated Cyclops.

“Yes. Thank you.”

Scott falls asleep where he lays and Logan cleans them both up, and drags Scott into bed. Logan wished there were room for him on the tiny cot, but there isn't. He has to make due with a chair at his bedside. When Alex enters a few hours later, he is surprised to see that his brother is sleeping without the Phoenix dreams, but also has news. “Adam Warlock,” he says. “He's on his way here, ahead of Thanos and his army.”
Chapter Summary

Steve and Tony.

Tony Stark sits at the edge of the lake looking up at the sky. Soon, there will be hundreds of war ships blotting out the sky according to Carol Danvers. Once again, the Earth is under threat, and once again, he must don his suit in order to protect it. He wonders if he'll ever know peace like this again.

The footsteps behind him are soft, even paced. Without even looking, Tony knows that they belong to Steve Rogers, the man implanted in his mind. “You're up early,” he says, looking back over his shoulder. “You should get more rest.”

“They need you inside,” he says, finally sitting down with an arm around Tony's shoulders. “They're planning their defense.”

“They don't need me. They've got Scott.”

“Scott's out of the picture right now,” Steve explains. “The Power Gem makes him too much of a liability.” Despite the shield that holds his energy back, his efforts at concentrating on the battle to come has been sparse. “He's too powerful.”

Tony can't deny that Scott is not well. For the past hour he's been listening to the man's babbling as he tried to formulate cohesive sentences. “That's why you should be in there. Give them food for thought.”

“If they really wanted to hear from me, they would have sought me out.”

“If they knew how much of a genius you are, they would have listened to you right away.” Steve reaches out and takes his hand, placing a soft kiss on the knuckles. It's been ages since they had a moment to themselves, and Steve plans on taking advantage of it.

“To tell the truth,” Tony says with a smile on his face, “I'd rather stay out here.”

Their kiss was long overdue, a long, luscious movement of lips and tongues as stray hands found their way into hair and down the chest. They remembered this feeling, how hot they could become, how much they needed each other. They break apart, breathless now, and very much in the throws of desire. “Not here,” Rogers breathes pointing to the window. “Let's find somewhere private.”

In a meadow, they lay down in the grass, a gentle breeze bringing with it the scent of wild flowers and apples. Sweet, sensual, they kissed again, letting the sunlight warm them up. “I've missed you,” Steve says.

“Same.” Tony drags him into another long kiss, the subtle tingles down his spine pooling in his groin and deepening his desire. “Make love to me,” Tony finally says, digging around in his pants pocket for the lube that he kept there.

“Only if you promise to talk to them about defense.”
It's a bargain that he accepts, and quickly helps Steve out of his clothes. Naked and beautiful, Tony can't help but admire the sight of him – his long, lean legs, muscular torso, and of course his stunning face. “What a marvel you are,” he says to his lover. They stare each other through the blades of glass, relishing this quiet time before the storm. Fingers caressing back hair, the long drift of fingers to stomach.

And, in their silence they begin to kiss. Softly at first, lips to lips before the kiss deepened. A long, splendid movement of tongues, the lick of teeth, the suction as Steve breaks the kiss to catch his breath. He's never felt such peace, cradled against Stark's chest, the light breath upon the back of his neck, the firmness of his grip. He feels safe, secure, immortal. “I love you,” he says, and looks deep into Tony's deep blue eyes.

A soft smile creases Stark's face, all lips and no teeth – a sign that he's content like this, that the world doesn't matter. But, also worried that he will lose all of this to death. “I love you, too,” he says, a finger down strong jaw line.

Steve moves on top of his lover, taking the proffered lube from Tony's outstretched hand, and laying another deep kiss upon his mouth. “I want this to last forever,” he says, removing Tony's shirt and pants. “I want you to be my forever.”

Slicking up his fingers, he begins to ready Tony for his entrance. He wants it to be comfortable, pleasurable, something without pain, and he finds his lover obliging. Tony moans as crooked fingers massage against the prostate, the bucking of hips and arching of back as the euphoria travels through arms and legs. He breathes into the stretching of his tight passage, willing himself to relax and enjoy the fullness.

“Tell me that you're mine,” Steve says, soft kisses pelted on neck and jawline.

“I'm yours,” Tony answers, struck near silent by the positioning of Cap's penis to his hole.

The rhythm is slow at first, almost torturous, as Steve continues to watch Tony's face. He knows that look of pain, he knows the look of still adjusting to his presence. And even with the moans, and the man's request to speed things up, Steve still moves with care, afraid to hurt his partner.

Tony's legs upon his shoulders, he thrusts deeper and deeper, hitting the prostate in and out, the symphony of moans, keeping him hot and lusty. He takes Tony's dick in his hand, pumps in a jagged rhythm that has Stark arching his back and begging for Steve to hurry up. “Harder,” his partner says, desperately wanting to feel the full length of Rogers inside of him.

Skin against skin, the reddening slap of balls to buttocks, and the two of them are in a state of utopia, feeling free and real. Tony's close, and says so in a breathless pant. He wants to cum on Steve's dick alone. A faster rhythm and jutted pace, Steve cums first, spraying Tony's inside with his own semen, and Tony – driven over the edge by the warm and sticky liquid – cums next.

Together in silence they lay again, in the afterglow of their union. Sweaty, tired, they curl up together letting the breeze cool them, letting the scent of wildflowers mingle in their minds. “I want to be your forever, too,” Tony says, slipping his hand through blonde hair. “Marry me?”

It's a sudden question and at first Steve is confused by it. But, he knows Tony, and knows that he is
serious. “We need to go out on a date first,” he laughs, hoping that he doesn't take offense.

“Dating,” Stark ponders. “That could be fun. So, a long engagement then?”

“Maybe,” Rogers smiles, and dips in for a light kiss. “We should get back,” he says, reminding Tony of the battle plans being hashed out right now.

Tony knows that he's right. That they do need him, despite being mostly mutants. He's good with tech, and could invent a thousand things that would see them beating back Thanos and his armies. But, he wonders if he has time.

Captain Marvel had revealed that the armies were less than two weeks away, which didn't leave much time for Tony to come up with new weapons. “What about the alien tech?” he asks, knowing that Forge and SHIELD had kept it. “Do you think that they would give me some?”

It was an idea, and Rogers thinks that they could indeed go for it. “If you worked with Forge, there's no telling what the two of you could come up with. And don't forget about Reed.”

The idea of working with other people fills him with dread. He has a hard time of being a team player, especially when it comes to tech, but he can honestly see the benefit of working with two of the brightest technical minds on the planet. “What about Jeffries?” he asks, reminding Steve that the man could talk to machines.

“Between the four of you, there's no chance that we can lose.” His confidence is reasoned, though Tony is afraid he can't live up to it. Brushing the grass off of his knees, he begins to get dressed, much to Steve's disappointment. “We have a world to save, Steve,” he tells his lover. “Let's get to it.”
A ghostly place, the ether. That space between the realm of the living and the dead. A place where telepaths do battle, to claim their space, their peace midst the haze of trees and flowers and buildings. Here, he follows a trail – an ocher string so unlike the misty flowers and manor that he's been staring at in this timeless void.

“Be careful,” he is warned. “You'll get lost if you keep going.”

At his back stands Nathaniel Essex, his presence more spirit than solid mass. Scott isn't surprised to find him here, after all, this is why Strange sent him into the ether to begin with. In order to disable the switch, he had to agree to a meeting with Sinister on the astral plane.

“We are both laid bare now,” the villain says, a swish of his hand recreating his Cyclops-shaped furniture. “Have a seat.” He looks at the phantasmal furniture, shakes his head and takes a seat across from Essex. “Here, it's the strength of your mind that bends this realm to one's whims.”

“You asked me here so you could explain the astral plane to me?”

“No, of course not. It was small talk, but I've forgotten, you don't like small talk.”

“Tell me what you want.”

Sinister smiles, snapping his hazy fingers to produce a bottle of wine out of thin air. “You see how powerful it can be?” he says, pouring out two glasses of the foggy liquid. “Drink, Scott.”

“I don't drink.”

“Indulge me.”

Scott quietly takes a sip of the wine, surprised at how good it tastes. Aged and sweet, it has notes of cherry and elder flowers, and makes him think of summer. Sinister watches him closely for signs of his enjoyment, but Scott is careful not to show anything. “Your turn,” he says, leaning back in his chair, arms across his chest.

“You are always so guarded, but oh well. It is what it is.” Essex takes a beat to sip again at the wine. “How are you coping with the power gem?”

Scott is confused by the sudden look of worry on Sinister's face. He takes note of the hands folded in his lap, the lack of insidious smile. “What do you mean?”

“It's a lot of power to have, Scott. Two Phoenixes, the prison, your own power, plus the gem. Are you coping well?”

“I want you to stay out of my mind.”
“I can't, or rather, I refuse. For your sake, of course.”

It's the concern – both in expression and voice – that throws Scott for a loop. To hide his confusion, he takes another sip of wine, this time tasting like his mother's pearl necklace and his father's leather gloves. It's an odd sensation, pleasant, warm as it burns down his throat. He can't help but raise his brow in wonderment.

Sinister laughs, breaking the saddened features. “There is no food or drink on the astral plane. Instead, there is only the drift of emotion when you partake and consume. The thoughts of a soul, the need for reminders. It is meant to be comforting.”

“What do you want from me?”

“I told you. How are you coping with the gem? Are you overwhelmed?”

“Get to the point, Sinister. Tell me what this is about.”

“Thanos is coming, and the most you've managed to do is create a shield that doesn't crack. I'd rather not be planet-less, Scott, and you're the best hope we have of defeating him and the rest of the gems.”

Scott settles for a moment, watches Sinister sip at his wine. He wants to do the same, partake of the liquor, see what else he can taste, but he holds back. “We're not allies.”

“No, we're not allies, but for this one moment, our goals align. And it all starts with control.”

Here in the astral plane, the telepaths learn to extend their powers, hone their skills and control by creating something that is solely theirs for a moment in time. A flower, a mansion, a bird, a sword. All of these things are possible if one knows how to strengthen their mind. In Sinister's hands, it all looks too easy, the way his thoughts become ghostly matter. He creates on but a whim, a field of flowers and an evening sky. “You see, Scott. With proper control, you can create all of this.”

It starts with meditation, calming down his mind, concentrating on his breathing. A slow in and out, his muscles still stiff, he focuses his mind on the petal of a single flower laying weightless in his hand. He imagines a soft pink, the curve of a rose. But, his mind wanders away from the petal, focusing in on the whispers, those voices that he's tried to filter out. They sound so loud, so significant, that he opens his eyes and stares up at Sinister. “Don't let your thoughts go,” Essex explains. “Keep them still, keep them focused.”

In the ether, time does not tick away like it does in the plane of the living. It's endless here. Undefined. So, the days that Scott spends training his mind in the realm, equals only a few hours on Earth.

Strange sits quietly on the edge of the bed, his legs crossed, his hands relaxed upon his knees. He keeps the connection between Scott and the world, an ocher cord that extends through the plane. Beside him is Cyclops and Illyana, sitting in much the same position.

Wolverine is unnerved by the silence. “He'll be okay,” Alex promises. “Stephen and Illyana will look out for him.”

“He's with Sinister.”

“Scott's dealt with Sinister longer than any of us. He knows to be careful.” Alex clasps the shorter mutant's shoulder. “Come on, we have work to do.”
Logan reluctantly follows Alex back into the computer room where Hill and Stark are arguing over the value of SHIELD tech when it came to Thanos. “It needs an upgrade,” Tony says. “Otherwise it's just a billion dollar piece of junk.”

“You're not the only genius engineer, Tony. SHIELD's tech is unsurpassed --”

“We're talking about Thanos and his army. SHIELD tech is little more than puppy food for them.”

Carol Danvers agrees with Tony. She understands that SHIELD weapons are classified, but in this case, rapid upgrades would be needed. “You need to talk to Fury and get his ass on this before we're out of time.”

The argument erupts like a volcano between them all. The private tech of SHIELD, Wakanda's contribution, Tony's ability, Bruce Banner's presence. The army that is coming is beyond their imagination – a full six fleets of fighter drones and photon tech, not to mention the bombs and electrostatic pulses. Earth cannot fight this enemy as they are now, not without massive losses.

Alex pushes his way in through the crowd, his voice barely heard above the din. He bangs on the console, but still isn't heard. It's not until Wolverine brandishes his claws that people start to pay attention. “We're better than this, people,” Alex says as the room slowly falls silent. He notices the children at the rear of the crowd. “A lot better.” He turns to Logan. “You mind taking them out of here?”

Logan does as he's asked, taking the children to the small eat-in kitchen at the rear of the bunker. From here, the meeting is just murmurs, and slowly they visibly begin to relax. He serves them each a ham sandwich, not worried about supplies now that everyone knows where they are. “You doing alright, punkin'?” he asks a silent Indira. She shrugs, looking down at her sandwich.

Logan looks to Sarah who shakes her head and glances towards her friend. For days, she's been like this, sullen and morose. As much as the children have tried, they haven't been able to cheer her up. “She no longer wants to be a super hero.”

“That true?” he asks the young girl.

“Yes.”

“How come?”

“Super heroes don't act all that super,” she answers, her gaze still on her sandwich.

“You mean they act like humans?”

“They act like spoiled brats.”

Logan chokes down a laugh before giving her a bit smile. Confused, she finally looks up at him, her brown eyes wide. ‘Yeah. Yeah they do, darlin', at times. Everyone has their day.”

“They've been arguing for three hours.”

“And they'll probably argue for another three. Look, kid, being a hero ain't all whip cream and strawberries. It's hard work, especially when you're looking to face down a planetary threat. Things will calm down, and they'll get organized. Just give them a chance.”

She doesn't find his words funny, and says so. She's sick of being here, sick of watching the heroes tear themselves apart. “They never stop fighting.”
“No,” Logan agrees. “The heroes never stop fighting. You're right about that. I can't remember a time in a hundred years that I wasn't fighting for something – a shelter for a night or two, or the world. And, it doesn't get easier with practice. No, you become a hero, and you'll have your regrets. But I wouldn't trade my life for anything.”

“Why not? If everyone stops fighting --”

“Then the world suffers for it. Innocents, people who never did a damn thing wrong in their life – they're the ones who suffer if I stop fighting. People like your parents, your friends, your teachers. If you don't fight for them, who will?”

“I don't want the world to hate me like they do Mr. Summers.” She looks at her friends, tears in her eyes. “I couldn't live with that kind of hate.”

Logan takes a deep breath, curls his arm around the girl's shoulders. “No one's going to hate you like that, punkin. Not a soul.” Sara gives her a hug, and so does Phin, Opal, and Arlo. “Cry it out, darlin. Cry it all out.”

Wet with tears, she finally gathers herself up, eyes still closed when she feels a tug on her arm. Pocket stands beside her, arms out, ready for a hug. She nearly gasps at the sight, nearly starts crying again. She lifts the bunny-suited boy into her lap and squeezes him gently. “Friends forever, right, Pocket?” The little boy doesn't acknowledge anything save squirming to get comfortable in her lap.

“It's not always like this, Indira. Not for Scott, not for any of us. There are good times, too. And those times are precious, so we want to protect them.”

“Even Mr. Summers?”

“Especially Mr. Summers.” Logan pats her head. “He doesn't want to be hated, but it was his sacrifice that kept Syntech from taking over the world.”

“And he's going to do it again?” she asks, tears forming in her eyes once again.

“Yeah,” Logan answers quietly. “He's going to do it again. But, that's his choice, Indira. He'll always make the sacrifice if it comes down between himself and someone else. That's why I – why we all – follow his lead. We're stronger because of him.”

“I don't think I could ever do that.”

“You're too young to be thinking about that kind of stuff, darlin'. Right now, it's time for you to be a kid. Enjoy yourself. Leave that kind of stuff up to the adults. All of you,” he says, eyeing each of the children.


“And you will, no doubt. But, not this battle.” He urges them each to finish their sandwiches, watching with a smile as Arlo uses his hands to pick the sandwich up. With all of the turmoil as of late, he hasn’t paid much attention to how the children are changing. Sarah's more confident; Opal's calmer. Phinneus is more mature, and Arlo is treating himself like a human. Even Indira – so hopeful and full of energy – is discovering a different side to herself – a side that will either eat away at her, or make her stronger. They're growing up too fast, he thinks. He wishes he could slow them down.
Cable's Bunker

Chapter Summary

Xavier.

He can smell him. Just beyond the trees, down into the forest. And for that blood, he is vicious. “Calm down,” Mystique tells him. “If you think too loud, you'll give yourself up.”

It's hard to calm the rage, that deep, instinctual part of him that craves the warmth of blood on his claws, of vengeance, of losing his mind to the beast within. He's a predator, a hunter, wild and free. He could run forever in these trees, tracking down his prey, eating it raw and still warm. “He's down there,” Victor growls. “And so is Summers.” The other scents – the other heroes – he ignores. They're nothing to him but fodder meant to be plowed through to reach his goal.

“Surely, they know that Xavier is dangerous,” Mystique offers, dragging soft fingers through Victor's curly blonde mane. She's seen this look before – many times – and she knows that she has to tame him before letting him loose. “They had to have seen his television announcement.”

He reacts to her touch, his breath evening out, the relaxing of his muscles. “We need to hurry,” he says. “He's getting closer.”

Down into the forest they go, skipping over foliage and hanging vines. They wind their way through thickets and meadows, trying to catch up to his scent. But, then suddenly, they're frozen. Unable to move, not an inch. They each know that they've been caught.

From out of the forest walks a man that smells like Xavier, but looks nothing like him. Blonde hair and two working legs – no wonder they had not been able to catch him all this time. They had no idea what he looked like.

Displeased, he stalks a circle around them, touching fingers to head to remind him how powerful he is. “You have chased me from Samos to here, and I would like to know why.” He lets them know that they can speak now, but that is all they will be able to do. “Or maybe I should run terror through your minds.”

He can make them do anything he wants. He can force them to stand there in the woods until the flesh melts off their bones and skeleton disintegrates. He can force them to fight each other, Mystique's skills versus Sabretooth's claws, to tear each other up until all their blood is pooled upon the ground. He can force them to harm themselves, clawing at their own wrists until they are weak with life loss.

In reality, he doesn't need them to talk. He can just pull the images from their minds. “But,” he explains, “I'm trying to be civil.”

“You're here to kill Summers,” Victor finally growls.

“What I'm doing here is no business of yours.”

“I won't let you do it.”
“Logan is going to say the same thing,” Charles says with a smile. As psychic tendrils worm their way through Sabretooth's thoughts, he sees the path that Sinister has set them on and it makes him angry. Blonde brow lowered, blue eyes intense, he tells them both to turn back and to stay away from him. This will be their only warning.

He sends them on their way – a mental push so hard that they run through the woods at breakneck speeds, tripping over roots and rocks, and falling on damp leaves. A look of disappointment on his face and he shakes his head. He reminds himself that he's not the villain. And, he's going to prove it.

What he doesn't expect, a short distance away, is the sudden loss of his telepathic powers. He loses his control over Sabretooth and Mystique, sensing them no longer. He understands now why Jean was unable to reach her target. They have anti-telepathy shields. He regains his footing quickly, reaches out to find those errant minds he just turned away and strengthens their compulsion to leave this place alone. Before he can worry about gaining entrance to the bunker, he looks up to see a security camera in the trees. It won't be long for them to get here.

Stepping back further into the woods – to give himself room for the coming heroes – he focuses all of his mental energy on seeing them before they see him. A few compulsions, a few distractions, and he'll come out of this unscathed.

He senses Logan first, edges his mental prowess through his thick adamantium skull. His thoughts are swirling with Scott – fear that he's under attack, fear that he will come out here to join the battle. It's easy enough to delay him, to send him into beast mode as his anxiety is wont to do. Chasing off after rabbits and squirrels and other things that excite his predatory senses. It will only buy him moments, but every moment without a Wolverine in battle is a sacred one. “You always were an animal,” he says to himself, exerting more power to single out various minds. It's the combined force of Cable and Rachel that he fears the most – their psychic bonding as of late causing their powers to run smooth and in perfect synch. But they don't realize the levels that he'll go to prove to them that he was right. “Time for you to come back, my old friends.” He reaches out to violent minds, pulls them in too tight. Wolverine and Sabretooth, his defenders in this upcoming battle.

Cable is the first to feel it – that he's calling on the berzerkers – and sends a mental message to the rest to watch themselves. As Xavier continues to pillage through the minds of those intent on stopping him, he zeroes in on Alex, the leader of the group. He digs deep down, flooding the man's mind with innate lack of confidence, his doubts, his fears that he's not good enough. Even without a visual, he can tell that Alex is no longer moving forward, his movements and thoughts stuttered behind the waves of crushing incrimination, that he's a fake, a fraud. “Now, where will they go without their leader?”

Somewhere in the woods, he can hear the scuffles begin as the beasts come back for their bounty of blood. Cable and Rachel battling a more than vicious Wolverine and Captain America taking on a frenzied Sabretooth. He turns his attention then to Tony Stark and his mechanical mayhem. Last out the door thanks to his suit of iron, he flags along trying to find his friends. A mind so ripe for the plucking, Xavier pulls to the front of his thoughts the picture of his lover dying. Ribs splayed open, blood running like a river. It's all Tony can do not to scream out loud for the sudden horror. His sole thought is finding Steve in the density of the forest, and leaves Xavier unquestioningly safe.

Now all Xavier must do is wait for Cyclops.

Dr. Strange greets him first, a magical twist on telepathy that Charles can't conquer. His abilities – while strong – lack the finesse and fine tuning of Xavier's experience, but they're dangerous enough
to keep them both at a stand still. “I only want to see him,” he says.

“The switch is gone. There's no need for you to be here.” Strange whirls another magic spell into the air, one that targets Wolverine and Sabretooth – a spring green and glittering burst of magic. “Turn around and leave this forest. This is your only warning.”

Once again striking out at Sabretooth and Wolverine, he brings their blood lust closer to his position – an invisible tug of war where Strange finds himself outmatched. The intimacy that Charles has had with both minds gives him the ultimate advantage, and soon the sorcerer is staring wide eyed at the two predators and their prey. They circle the doctor, deep-throated growls upon their lips, and claws extended. “I want to talk to Scott,” Xavier repeats, deepening his hold on the pair. Up to the cameras he looks, his blue eyes narrowed. “Scott, I know you’re watching. Come talk to me and I will let them all go. I am not your enemy.”

A long silence as Cable and Rachel walk out of the thick of trees. They're beaten, their minds in the swallow of Xavier's webs. Again, he speaks upward to the camera, promises to save the younger mutant's children if he obeys this command. “I don't want to hurt them, Scott.”

Minutes pass as Charles continues his hold on the heroes that have come out to battle him. Stretched thin he may be, but he's not giving up. “I'll give you a final warning. Come talk to me, or I will break these minds in half.”

It's at the edge of his sight – off to the right – that he sees a red miasma approaching. “You look well, Scott.” Already, he reaches out trying to gain entrance into that mind, but he's not yet at the limits of the inhibitors.

Scott stops some steps before the psychic shield, looking at the host of heroes held in thrall. His brother, his lover, his children, his friends. “Why are you doing this?”

“I'm not your enemy, Scott.”

“Then stop acting like one.” There was a time when he felt this man a father figure, someone that he could trust with his life, but that feeling is long gone, and he's left with a void inside. “Let them go.”

“I can't,” he says. “They're my tactical advantage. Come forward, son.”

“I'm not your son --”

“But you will come forward anyway.”

A tentative step, and Cyclops can see the tension coursing throughout Xavier's stolen body. Clenched hands, held tight jaw, the heroes are fighting back. Another step, and then other, right up to the limits of the telepathic blockers. “Let them go,” he says quietly.

Xavier shakes his head. “I'm not your enemy, Scott. Come forward.” He extends his control on Alex, forcing the brother to kneel on the damp leaves. One by one, he forces all the heroes to do the same, save for Sabretooth and Wolverine. They growl and snarl, and fight against their bestial nature. “I just want to talk.”

Realizing the stakes, Scott speaks again. “You'll free them?”

“Of course.”

“Then I'll come forward.”
With a hesitant grin, the professor watches as Cyclops steps beyond the limits of the inhibitors. His mind calm, calculating, Xavier is surprised by the amount of control that he has, and as he digs in further, he comes across the power gem. “You didn't --” he begins, stuttering his words. “How are you controlling this?” One name crosses his thoughts. “Sinister. Sinister did this to you.”

“You said you would let them go.”

“And, I will. I just didn't say when.”

Scott fights the invisible fingers that ruffle through his mind. Staves them off with blockades and locked doors. He hasn't had this much psychic control since the Phoenix made him go haywire. Charles can't help but be impressed. “He taught you much.”

“No more than I already knew, but had forgotten.”

“Still, it's a feat.”

“Why are you here?” Scott takes another step forward and can see the worry in the professor's eyes.

“To talk. To prove to you that I had no choice to do what I did.”

“Jean said the same thing.”

“Yes, but she doesn't know what I know.” A soft grin slips into cheeks. “Had I left you alone, you would have become something dark and unreachable. You would never have learned to be a hero.”

“Twisting my mind? Taking away my memories --”

“Yes,” he interrupts. “I had a purpose. I couldn't let you live with what you remembered.”

Scott shakes his head, a scowl upon his face. “The same as when you deleted Gabe from my memories?”

Shaken a bit by the remembrance of Vulcan, Xavier pauses. He looks at the heroes in his sway, how silent they are, how still. “I wanted to erase the pain, Scott. The tragedy of it. No one should have to live through what you did. No one.”

Cyke listens to the words, but he still doesn't believe. “You destroyed my mind to access my powers.”

“To protect you, Scott. It was always to protect you.”

“You were going to kill me.”

“Because you're a danger to this world, but now I see that I was wrong. You can learn control.”

“Sinister--”

“Is lying to you,” Charles is quick to interrupt. “He may have taught you to ease the pressure on your mind, but he is no hero. Not after what he did to you.”

“I would say the same of you.”

“Of course you would. But, that's because I've protected you for years from the reality of his experiments. He is not your friend.”
“And neither are you,” Cable says, finally breaking free of the professor's mental hold. His gun out, he points it towards Charles' head. “Leave my father alone.”

Scott feels the breaking of a memory in his head, fully aware that Xavier is now stealing his powers. He shouts to Cable, tells him to beware, and falls to his knees as the professor takes enough power to once again subdue his son. But, Nathan is more than ready for the onslaught on his mind. Powerful – like his father and mother – he engages in the psychic battle, loosening Charles' hold on his half-sister.

As Rachel breaks free, she dives into her father's mind, pushing back against the professor and his psychic assault, forcing him to exert even more attention to the strength of her mental defense, and causing him to let loose the others.

The battle begins in earnest, with Logan and Creed still under his control. Cable fights for their minds while Hawkeye dips back into the forest, clings to trees, and targets the beasts. Ironman and Captain America beat back Logan from attacking Alex who is just now getting upon his feet. The chaos spreads as Black Widow hunches down on Logan's back, arms around his neck trying to suffocate him. And Strange casts his magic spells.

Xavier is not to be outdone. He turns Illyana against the Sorcerer Supreme, keeps him busy with magic of her own, and finds a new threat in Mystique who has finally returned to the forest to find her lover. She makes herself into another Logan, her mind completely controlled by Xavier's whims. But, it's not enough. Steve Rogers is aware of her mimicry, and takes her out with boot to the head.

“I am not the enemy!” Xavier cries out as Cable finally breaks Logan free of the mind control. Lunging forward, the bloodstained claws clip his ears and bring him to the ground. “You want to kill me?” he rages at the shorter mutant. “You want to destroy me? Then tell me what you would have done!”

A burst of psychic energy, and they all fall to the ground clutching their heads in pain. “This is what I saved him from!” he yells. “This is what Sinister did to him!”

The floor is cold. Concrete, and wet from the dripping plumbing. He lays there, his eight year old hands tucked under arm pits for warmth. He wishes for a blanket, even a window so he could see if it was day or night. He looks at the food once again, knowing that if he eats it, he will be sick. It's been three days since he's eaten, and though his stomach grumbles, he fears that his food is poisoned once again. Three weeks will pass before he sees the light of day again.

“This is what I saved him from!”

“I can stop your pain, Scott.”

Broken ribs, his eye swollen shut, the boy peered up at the living nightmare – his pale face bedecked by a red diamond. Night after night, he came, with the same request. One word from him, and the guard who stood outside of his cell would be dealt with permanently. “Just think, no more broken bones, no more bruises. Just two little words – kill him – and it ends.”

There was no temptation, however much it hurt. No want to kill the man who poisoned his meals and kept him in confinement. The boy shook his head. “I won't say it.”

“No one should live through this!"

Light brown hair and large dark eyes, Cynthia smiled at him, one of the only children to do so. He was a freak among them, embattled and bullied. But she was nice to him. She sat beside him on the
playground, looked at his calculus book. “That's a lot of math,” she said, surprised that the boy who was failing English and Science was in such an advanced class. “Do you like it?” Scott nodded, taking a sideways glance at the girl. He waited for her cruelty, but it didn't come. “I found a four leaf clover,” she says, placing the small green plant into his hand. “If you put it in your shoe, you'll have good luck.” She places it in his book, tells him to try it. “I picked it just for you.”

“Thank you,” he replies, unsure of what to do with the kindness.

“Go on. Try it out.” She giggles as he takes off his shoe and puts the four leaf clover at the heel. His gaze questioning, she nods happily as he puts it back on. “Maybe something good will happen to you,” she says with a bright sympathetic smile, and then pecks a kiss to his cheek.

“All of these memories,” Xavier continues. “You could not have lived with them.”

She's dead. Her skin blue, necrotic, bloodless. Laying the ground, the soil dry and fertile, but still smelling of blood. The nightmare – his smile something hideous – forces Scott to the ground, to lay next to her. “I warned you, boy,” Sinister says quietly. “You're meant to be alone. You need to be alone.”

If he were allowed to cry for Cynthia, he would. Just like the Hoffmans, just like the Jensens. But, his body is not his own right now. His movements belong to Essex, and he has no choice but to obey. “She died because of you. Just like the others.”

A maggot crawls into her nostril, her unblinking eyes speckled by small winged insects. The slit in her throat revealing the method of her death. “I'm the only one left,” he continues, “to care for you.”

The memories continue to pour into their minds, a painful process of incorporation. They all now know the fear, the isolation, the experiments. They see the boy alone in his room, his head laid against the cool window pain. They see him steel himself from the world, a self contained child who would never again find happiness in another human being. They see Mr. Milbury – the orphanage owner – tell the parents that he has medical problems, and time and again, they decide that he's not worth their effort. They see him grieve – an inward silent emotion – for those lost and murdered by Mr. Sinister.

They witness the testing of his humanity, empathy, sympathy. How he couldn't escape the intricate plots that the villain had molded. His every sense paranoid and cold.

And, then there was Jack Winters, and even more of that abuse. The child couldn't escape out of fear of Winters murdering innocents, the boy feeling responsible for their lives. Time and again, he foiled the man's plans, only to receive fresh bruises and burns.

The child did not know love when Xavier finally found him. Didn't know safety or peace. He didn't trust the professor; he didn't trust anyone. “I took this all away from him,” Xavier says. “Tell me I was wrong.”

“You were wrong.” Logan is the first to recover from the tidal wave of memories. His head still pounding, he stands on shaky legs. “You weren't trying to protect him. You were trying to protect yourself.”

Xavier is stunned by the words, angry. But, his attack upon the mutant fails, his telepathy once again cut off. He looks over the crowd to see Indira Gomez holding an anti-telepathy unit. Behind her, the children come forward, placing themselves as a barrier between Scott and Charles. “You aren't welcome here,” the girl says sternly. “Not anymore.”
Cricket takes a step forward, meant as a challenge to the older mutant. “Phin, help Arlo get the injured back into the bunker,” she says, looking around at the fallen heroes.

Timid Flicker – her wings beating a mile a minute, comes to fly just beside Opal. “Leave Mr. Summers alone,” she says.

“You're making a mistake,” he pleads, his eyes round and calm. “I gave them exactly what they wanted – Scott's memories.”

“I admired you, once,” Indira says, her dark brows heavy upon her eyes. “I thought you wanted peace. But, that was all a lie. You wanted power, and you hurt people to get it.” Opal takes a step forward, brandishing the spikes on her arms. “And now you have none.”

Cricket takes a quick swipe at Xavier, running the tips of her exoskeleton across collar bones – just enough to scratch the skin, prove her threat. And, soon, she is bolstered by Logan and Sabretooth, Rachel and Cable. Doctor Strange and Illyana provide the back up spells, and soon Xavier is on the run.

As they push Xavier away from the bunker, Indira places a soft hand on Cyke's shoulder. “I'm sorry,” she says.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” he replies, a gentle smile on his face. He slowly picks himself up off the ground, and looks down at the young girl.

She returns the smile, wrapping her arms around him to give him a hug. “I'm glad you're okay,” she says. “I'm glad you're still with us.”

“Thank you, Indira. I appreciate it.”
Chapter Summary

The Aftermath of Xavier.

There was something wrong with this place. Something insidious, sinister. From the lock down cells to the staff, all willing to turn a blind eye to suffering of the children. He bore this knowledge on his own shoulders because there was no one else to tell.

At eleven years old, he carried himself quietly among the hallways of the orphanage, observing the comings and goings of the adults and the children on the playground. The nightmares of his childhood still coming into the forefront of his thoughts. But there was no one to believe him about that nightmarish man and the subsequent deaths of those who tried to be kind to him. Those that were there are all gone now, and the new ones don't believe him.

Under his arm, he gripped several books in his unending quest to catch up with his classmates. While mathematically, he was far ahead of anyone else in the orphanage, that same fact wasn't true with his literary skills. Comprehension, vocabulary, and even spelling often outpaced the knowledge he could glean from his classes, making him feel more out of place than he already did.

He was invisible to them, the staff. Even as he walked down the hall, they didn't acknowledge him. Except for Mr. Milbury. “You should be outside for recess, Mr. Summers.” A stern, but quizzical look on his face, he grabbed one of the books. “Shouldn't you be reading Wuthering Heights instead?”

The child knew better than to look the man in the eyes or to even speak his name aloud. He would be cast into solitary for the infraction, so all he could do was nod and take the book back. This man held no esteem for him, no sense of caring, but he was adamant about keeping the boy here, discouraging parents with falsehoods about a coma and medical costs, that his brain injury from the accident had caused some behavioral issues, including a healthy sense of paranoia. But, Scott knew he wasn't paranoid. The nightmare man still lurked in these halls, and he was sure that Milbury knew it.

Out on the lawn, he spread out his books, looking carefully among the titles. A geology book which would be helpful in his science class. A book on the periodic table, which would help in chemistry. And for his own enjoyment, a geometry book. The kids on the kickball field ignored him as he plopped the geology book in his lap, flipping through the book quickly, stopping when a picture was interesting.

Here – in this sunny spot surrounded by books – he could disappear. Which, in truth, is all he really wanted. To be done with the dream-like terror that kept him awake. Those memories that his teachers said didn't really happen. There was no one who cut him into pieces. There was no one that kept him from his brother. There was no one who wanted to adopt him who died. He was paranoid, delusional, and he'd better straighten up or he would be sent back to the cells. Oh, how he hated those cells, especially the blood stain in Room One. The guard that had beat him. The nightmarish man had killed him too, gouging out his eyes, breaking his neck, the blood a slow ebb of liquid that inched towards the boy's broken frame. He had seen it, witnessed it, but the police, the staff, they told him that nothing happened. That it was all a dream, and that Mr. Halford had quit his job and
moved out of state.

The ball hit him on the side of his head, nearly knocking off the ruby quartz glasses that were supposed to keep his headaches at a minimum. He could hear the chorus of laughter from the field, the various names that they called him, the slurs. “Hey One-eye, throw it back will you?” Scott looked down at the still laughing kids and with a shrug of his shoulders, he threw the toy back.

“You should have kept it,” Nate – his roommate – said. Scott didn’t like his roommate, always feeling that he was keeping too many secrets, but within that, there was also an alliance as the kids made fun of him, too. More than once, Scott had come to the boy’s defense, which only made Nate try to befriend him even more. “So, I asked around, and no one remembers your brother being here when you woke up. They say he got adopted out right after the accident.”

“How did you know --”

“Easy. You dream about him,” Nate said, his pale skin brightening as he smiled all-too widely. “You say his name a lot.”

“But, how did you know --”

“You're easy to figure out, Scotty. You're like an open book. All those poisoned meals, the coma, the nightmares. No wonder everyone thinks you're crazy.”

His red-lensed gaze hovers to the ball field where the children laugh and play. The girls are winning the game, three whole points above the boys, and with bases loaded, they're ready to score more. “He was here,” he says quietly. “I remember him.”

He’d betrayed his brother. Weeks of sitting outside Milbury’s office listening to him explain to the parents how Scott was a costly mistake if they chose to adopt the brothers. More than once, he had tried to convince them just to adopt Alex, but the boys refused, clinging to each other for safety and sanity. They didn't want to be split up. Didn't want to be apart. But, as the weeks wore on, Scott came to understand something that poor Alex didn't. This place would swallow them, and he had to get his brother out.

When the Blandings came, they were enthused by Alex, remarking how much he looked like their dead son, Todd. So, Scott faked a headache, excused himself as the Blandings took his brother out for ice cream. Again and again, as they got to know each other, he made himself absent, hoping beyond hope that they would take Alex away from here before any harm could be done. And, it worked. In tears, in the throes of agony, his brother was dragged away while Scott remained. This wasn’t a delusion. No matter what the staff said.

Scott packed up his books, and without a word of goodbye, stepped down off of the bleachers and went inside. Nate followed him, yapping all the way about how his brother must be in a good home, and that no one wanted him, so he should just give up. “It's not so bad here,” he said as they turned the corner in the hallway. “At least you get fed.”

At the doorway to their room, Scott put his books upon the pile, picking up Wuthering Heights and sighing. He wasn't interest in the tale of Katherine and Heathcliff, anymore than he was interested in Nate's excessive talking. He wanted to be left alone with the emptiness inside of him, but that wasn’t happening. “I've got a headache,” he said quietly to his talkative roommate, but even that didn't shut him up. “Nate, please. I really don't feel well.”

“You should go to the nurse’s office then.”
“No, I just need to lie down.”

“Then I'll be here to watch your nightmare.” A lopsided grin, half cruel, half entertained crossed the boy's face. “I'll always watch your nightmares.”

He sits alone in the bedroom, looking at his feet. The memories of his childhood before Xavier rescued him still washing over him. The emptiness that he felt, the cruelty that he endured. Years of being told that he was crazy, of being told that the abuse wasn't real, and it had truly broken him. Made him cold. Made him something a child should never be.

He understood now why Xavier had taken them all away, leaving brief traces of the memories that could never be reconnected, leaving his childhood before the mansion a distant dream. But after that, from the moment he met the professor on through the rest of his life, Charles hadn't given him anything.

A quiet knock on the door and Wolverine enters, barely able to look him in the eyes. From the brutal surgeries that pieced apart his body, to the abuse, the poisonings, the time spent wanting to die, Xavier had shared Scott's memories with all of them. “They caught him,” he says softly. “Chuck, that is. Steve took him to the Raft.”

Scott looks up, his face blank. “He did what he thought was right.”

“Until he cracked your mind and took your powers. Scott, he lied to you. He hurt you.”

A tender kiss to the top of his head, and Scott falls into Logan's arms, lets him wrap himself around the younger mutant, to feel the strength of his lover. The tears don't come. So practiced he is with holding back his emotions, that they refuse to come. Heartache, heartbreak. Just like with Ruby, his now dead daughter. Just like with Xavier and Jean. The tragedies that break him again and again. “I'm okay, Logan,” he husks.

A finger under Cyclops' chin, and Logan looks into the visor. “I know you are,” he says with a sadness to his voice.

Quiet, still, the room seems all too intimate for Scott, as if he cannot hide himself from his lover. It makes it hard to suppress the deepening void inside his chest, the emptiness, the futility. Those feelings he always carried with him – the need to isolate himself, the want for silence. Now he knows where those things came from. “I'm sorry you have to live through this, too.”

Wolverine shrugs, settling on the bed beside Cyke, a soothing circle between his shoulder blades, and a false start to his words. It takes a few tries before Logan's comfortable with speaking, and can only do so when Scott looks away. “What you went through, not just at the orphanage, but at the mansion, all of this, don't you ever feel guilty. Don't you ever blame yourself.” Gray eyes stung with a rim of tears, and he slowly pulls Scott into a gentle kiss. “Don't you ever think you caused this.”

Scott looks away, his solid features frozen without emotion and his jaw clenched tight. He doesn't want their pity, their eggshells, their pins and needles. He wishes that none of this had happened – Xavier, Emma, Jean, Sinister. That all of their manipulations could disappear. It makes it hard to trust people, including his lover. “Don't shut me out,” Wolverine pleads quietly, again surrounding Scott with warmth. “Please. I don't think I could take it.”

There's a break in his voice, one that hurts Scott's heart. Hand to chest, he feels the crush of breathlessness, the starkness of the void. “Logan.” He vines his hand up chest to neck, brushes the stubble on chin with the backs of his fingers. “I don't know what to do with these memories.”
“Neither do I.”

The shield around them is thick, red. The miasma wisping around them. Logan kneels on the floor, lays his head on Scott's lap. Cyclops can feel the tears as they soak his slacks, can feel the man shake. It's an odd thing to see him cry, and a hurtful thing to realize that he's the reason.

He sinks his hands into black hair, soothing it down from it's mess of tangles, and let's the older mutant cry it out. All the worry, all of the stress. He should have seen it – the pain that he was causing his lover, and that made him feel all the more guilty. “I'm sorry,” he says.

Logan straightens, his eyes still red and glassy, and touches calloused hands to Scott's jaw. They kiss. Slowly, each taking their time to taste the other. To memorize the small movements that send jitters down spine, into hands. To the neck Scott goes, pressuring pulse points with lips and tongue. Logan reels in the attention, weak kneed and oblivious to his previous pain. “I want you,” Scott rasps into his ear.

Climbing down from the bed, folding himself around his lover, Scott leans him back onto the floor, shoulder blades against cool metal. “I want you,” he says again, a deep kiss that erases thoughts, memories, fears. Hot inside that mouth, the quickening of heart, he finds the edge of t-shirt, pulls it up over head. “I want you,” he says again, a mantra that keeps them both hungry.

The twine together, in lust, in love. Their hands threaded together like some invisible string as Scott pulls them above Logan's head, keeps them there while he once again dives into the wet of mouth. He knows the places, the twists and turns of tongue, sucking, pushing, pulling. Down chest he roams, keeping Logan's hands in stasis as he pulls the moans from the bottom of his lover's chest. Down further, he fumbles with button and jeans, too frantic to take his time, too much in need to keep his head clear. “I want you,” he says again, pulling off the rest of Logan's clothes.

Mouth to tip of overheating member, Logan bucks at the sensation bringing a smile to Scott's lips. The soft lapping over purpling skin before swallowing down, and Wolverine is in love, his hands trying to grip the metal floor. He begs for faster, his need awakened, but Cyclops keeps his own lazy rhythm, tasting the first few drops of precum. “I want you,” he says again, taking the liquid across his finger, sliding it in between Logan's muscular bottom. The older mutant hisses at the touch, his breath haggard with the ravenous hunger in his stomach.

If Scott is anything as a lover, it's methodical, setting an achingly slow pace for the excitement building in Logan's groin. He whimpers as the younger mutant once again withdraws his fingers. He tells him that he's ready, that he needs this, that this – this – is all he ever wanted. Needed.

His own heat now uncomfortable in his pants, Scott disrobes, presses his naked body against Wolverine's. He helps the older man turn onto his stomach, lift up on his knees, expose those bare, firm buttocks to his red-tinted sight. A hand on back, Scott marvels, in awe of the beauty that his lover has. He jerks himself to painful hardness, slicking his hand down below to gather the spilling seed. “I want you.”

“Then take me.” The words come out as a lustful groan.

Again, Scott smiles, pressing tip to entrance. Well stretched, Logan accepts him easily, pushing back into Cyclops to feel even more. He wants to be full, wants to be connected, wants to escape the nightmares of memories – the beatings, the isolation. He wants to overcome, know that his lover is still his own, that they belong together, that they cannot be separated.

Scott sets an even pace, a slow slide in and out as Logan rocks against him. Over spine he leans, keeping his thrusts steady and finding those oh so delicious spots upon the man's neck. Forehead to
shoulder blades, he embraces Wolverine beneath him, hands kneading, treading across shivering muscles.

The heat spreads to Logan's entire body, flashes of quickened pulse and shocks of electric, his mouth boiling for another kiss, something to drown in, something to be apart of. “I love you,” he says in breathless pants as Scott thrusts into him again and again and again.

Scott answers the call. “I love you, too.” He dips hand below belt, finding Logan's engorged body. It takes mere moments to match the pace, and Logan can no longer move. His arms weakening with coming euphoria, his whole body shaking as Scott keeps him from falling. He feels it coming, and his eyes are marked with white pinhole stars glittering across the metallic floor.

He cums. His semen – white and pure – spraying out across the floor. He cums with a stifled howl, his back arching, his toes curling. He cums and Scott catches him with both hands, steadies him, keeps him aloft as the orgasm blasts across his body. Wave after wave of pleasure and catching breath. Beautiful, complete.

A few final thrusts, and Scott follows, his own climax shuddering through him, with Logan's name upon his lips.

Tired, they both fall to the cool floor in silence, their hands intertwined, there eyes closed to more carefully listen to breath and heart.

It's hours before they wake again and to the pounding on the door. Alex wants to talk to his brother. The two men clean themselves and the floor up as best they can, both still smelling of sex and sweat. Scott wants to take a shower first, but before he can ask, he sees the all-too-real worry in his brother's eyes. “Thank you,” Havok says, his head bowed. “For getting me out of there.”

“Yeah.” Beyond the blue eyes of his brother stands the other heroes now burdened with his childhood memories. He hates the looks they wear, the pity in their eyes, their speechlessness. And, he tells them so, in a near rage that cracks his shielding. Logan pulls him back into the room and shuts the door. “Scott. No one knows what to do with your memories.”
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

Storm gets involved.

Jack Winters stood in the center of the living room, the child in a chair next to him. Already, the boy had been burned with cigarettes, and the marks across his bleeding back showed the anger the old man had for him. With his diamond hand, he struck the child across the cheek, knocking him to the floor.

Bruised, his cheekbone suffering a fracture, Scott lay there without a sound. If he could, if he were allowed to, he would run far away from this man, but instead – with Winters' mental controls locked in place – all he could do was wait out the man's temper. “You allowed them to escape,” Winters said with a deep, low growl. “That wasn't part of the plan.”

For months now, thanks to a mixture of telepathic control and guilt, the boy had been sewn into Jack’s devious web. Bank robberies and other thefts, thing that put innocent lives in danger. Scott did his best to protect those that Winters would harm, blasting holes in walls so that they could escape, arguing with the man for their lives. And, each time he showed pity, the Living Diamond would show his anger.

Scott was useful for getting into the vaults, his optic blasts being what they were. Holes through those thick metal doors were nothing to him, bending the locks until they burst, setting off alarms. “He just wants money,” the child would tell the hostages. “Give him that, and he'll leave you alone.”

They looked at him with a mixture of fear and worry. The bruises on his arms, his face, the blood stains on his back and legs. He was an accomplice – a mutant that they feared – but, he was also a little boy who couldn't escape his captivity.

Done with the boy for the night, Winters settled down on the old, moldy couch and turned on the television. The news featured their crimes, the bank robbery that resulted in no deaths. They spoke of the boy – that mutant boy – and how he should be arrested along with Jack. They held no love for him, though he saved their lives.

Defeated, exhausted, in pain, Scott listened to the news report, his heart sinking with each and every word. He struggled to get up, his back so sore, his legs still jelly. He could feel the heat on his face, the swelling of his cheek. He would have trouble seeing tomorrow. He would have trouble moving.

Giving up on making it to his bed, the child stayed in the floor for rest of the night. His dreams were frightful – dreams of the orphanage and that sinister man. And when he woke between the nightmarish images, he found himself in no better place from what he escaped, and the hopelessness that he'd long felt made him want to disappear. There was nothing in this world that loved him, and he doubted that it ever would.

It's Alex who wakes him from the memory, a soft hand to his shoulder and a gentle shake. He's concerned, as they all are. He takes note of Scott's confusion, and tells the heroes to take a break. “Thirty minutes,” he tells them.
Three days ago, they moved to the mansion, the collection of heroes come to stave off Thanos too many for the bunker. “You zoned out on me,” Havok continues as the heroes exit the Danger Room in search of refreshment. “You okay?” Scott nods, his demeanor still shaken. “If you can't do this, Scott --”

“I'm fine,” he replies quietly.

“Of course you are.”

Storm stands in the doorway, arms crossed against her chest. She's heard the rumors of his memories, those awful things that have plagued the heroes' sleep. “Scott, walk with me,” she says, beckoning with one hand, a slight smile on her face.

“I'm fine, Storm.”

“Walk with me,” she says again, taking a step forward. Her eyes soften, her smile more sympathetic. “Please.”

A nod from Alex and Scott stands up, taking Ororo's hand. She leads him silently to the attic where her garden grows. Sweet jasmine and succulents. Hanging vines and tea cup roses. He's never been here before, in her room with the skylights that open by remote. She beckons him to take a seat in the oval chair by the daisies, their soft scent nearly masked completely by the rest of the flowers. “I like to read in that chair,” she says, taking a seat on her bed. “It brings me peace.”

“You know, don't you?”

“I've heard the rumors.” She takes a moment to enter her kitchenette, putting on a pot of water to boil. “Do you like tea, Scott?” It was a question that she'd never asked him before. He shrugs, telling her that he prefers coffee. “Perhaps my tea will change your mind.” The herbs smell divine as she steeps them in the boiling water. A touch of sugar, a little splash of milk and she hands the steaming cup to Scott. “Try it,” she says, “It will help calm your nerves.”

“I'm fine, Storm.”

“Please, call me Ororo. We're not on a mission right now.” She smiles at his awkwardness, the way he dips his head, the way her name stumbles upon his lips. “How are you?” she asks and watches his blush recede, replaced by steel jaw and unreadable features.

“I'm fine,” he says in very much the same tone as before.

“I don't believe you.”

“No one does.”

Moving closer, she places a gentle hand upon his knee, her eyes so warm. A long time ago, they were friends, a notion replaced later by their rivalry. Who was right; who should lead the team. She reviled him on Utopia, believing him to be a poison to the mutants – his plans, his protection being something detrimental. She never told him to his face, but he knew about her loathing anyway, and he accepted it without question. “It's okay to talk about it, Scott. It's okay to let it go.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because you're my friend.”

“We haven't been friends in a long time.”
She bows her head and sighs, withdrawing that gentle hand. It's true what he says, but she never expected to hear that from him. “Perhaps we should remedy that.” She doesn't need to know his memories to know that his childhood was not less than horrific. Between Jean and Xavier, she learned plenty about his difficulties at the orphanage, but not once did she ask him about it. “Perhaps if I had, I would have known about your stolen memories.”

He'd always been so private, so closed off. It made it easy to forget that he had faced tragedy after tragedy in his life. She considered him stubborn, strong, all too brave in the face of such things. “I used to think you unbreakable,” she says after a sip of tea. “Even though a part of me always knew that you'd shattered a long time ago.”

Scott eyes one of the magnificent red roses, the outlines of which he can barely make out. Shadows and shards of light carve out the petals and stems, their thorns touched by sun and gentle weather. The flowers she keeps are all the same color to him – ruby like the roses. They don't feel special when they look the same. “I don't trust you,” he says, the image of a large black door in the forefront of his mind. Behind the door was a skeleton, articles ripped from newspapers and genetic tests. Sinister's room at the orphanage – Mr. Milbury – and the room was obsessed with him.

She's shocked to hear such words, disappointed, ashamed. “I am sorry you feel that way.” Taking a sip of tea, she looks up to the high ceiling and the plants above her head. “I was a peaceful goddess,” she says quietly. “The rain I brought was cool, glittering like pearls. And for that, they would bring me fruits from their orchards, animals from their stock. They would bring me spicy stews and sweet desserts. I wanted for nothing – not silks to drape across my shoulders, not wine nor company. I was special then.”

She remembers coming to the mansion, meeting the team. “Again, I realized how special I was. I had a purpose, one bigger than myself, bigger than the rain I could bring to the Savannah. And it was you who taught me such. We were the chosen ones. The ones that would bring peace. The ones that would save the world despite the overwhelming hatred the world had for us.”

There were days when that hatred was intolerable, and she wished to return to her childhood home or the streets of Cairo. There were days when the battles were too harsh, when the sacrifices were too many. “But you? You never wavered in your beliefs. Be it Xavier's control or Jean's, I don't know anymore. But, it was you who kept us going. Your heart, your courage, even when you weren't with us.”

She studies him for long, silent moments, takes a sip of tea and smiles. “Even now, you drive us forward, despite your tragedies.”

“It's my fault that Thanos is coming to Earth,” he reminds her. “It's only fair that I take part in protecting it.”

“Logan doesn't want you to fight. Nor does Alex. Especially not so soon.”

“If I don't fight, people will die.”

“If you fight, it's quite possible that more will die.” It's too easy for him to lose control, even with the training he's received at Sinister's hands, she – and everyone else – can see his turmoil, the way the red fog surrounds him, beats against its cage. He is not yet the master of his powers, and that makes the heroes and herself very afraid. “Trust in us, Scott. We will overcome.”

He repeats himself. “It's my fault that Thanos is coming to Earth. It's only right that I help protect it.” Though his voice is bland, she can sense the adamancy of his words, the need for him to prove himself.
“Then protect it by staying out of the battle. If anything were to happen to you --”

“The world will not mourn for me,” he says. “And nor will you. Your grief will be a spark before you find yourself immersed in the world that you love. You will go back to your plants, your classes, your clouds and freedom, and never shed a tear.” He knows this to be true. He watched his own funeral from above, from the Red Dimension. Her heartfelt tears having seeped into loathing. Even now, he can feel her revulsion, the way she questions him, his intentions. The way she wouldn't stand up and fight. He doesn't trust her, not now, at least.

“I intend to fight along side them,” she says, her patience thin.

“So do I.”

“Scott, please listen --”

“I've listened enough. To you, to them. I don't want your pity. I don't want your worry --”

“But, you have it anyway, Scott. You can't undo what Xavier has shown them. You can't undo our understanding of who you are.”

Scott bows his head, a breathless silence overcoming him. He recoils from her touch, moves his knee out of the way, leans back in his chair. “I'm not that child.” The child was weak, defenseless. His years of training outweighs that. Overcomes those harsh images of Winters holding him by the neck with his diamond hand, choking the oxygen from him. “I've become stronger.”

“Of course you have,” she smiles. “But, that doesn't mean you need to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders. We burdened you with that before, on Utopia and after. We were wrong to do so.”

The apology lends her brown skin a tentative blush. “We won't let it happen again.”

She wants him to rest. He's saved the world enough – from Syrntech, from vampires, from countless enemies. He's made the sacrifice – his mind, his heart. “You're not Xavier's anymore. You're allowed to have peace.” With a wisp of her hand, she brings down the gentle rain to her garden. Clouds just small enough to hover over the pots, leaving the floor dry and shiny. She takes great care here – the sun to warm the leaves, the rain to quench their thirst, the wind to carry their pollen and seeds.

“Please, don't fight.”

“I don't want them to die, Ororo. Not for me.”

She watches as he walks away, opens her door and exits, leaving her alone to contemplate the man and his drive to fight. If it were up to her, he'd never have to fight again, but it's not. It never was.

The knock on her door comes minutes later. “Didn't go well, I take it?” Alex asks. Storm shakes her head. “Thank you for trying at least.”

“Logan asked me as well, citing that he wasn't listening to anyone. And, he's still not.” She gestures for Havok to take a seat, which he does, if only to make her feel more comfortable. “He's haunted by his memories,” she says. “But, I also understand where he's coming from. He will save lives. Countless of them. Just like he always has.”

Alex nods, wishing that it wasn't true. “I know, but he's suffered enough for three lifetimes. He shouldn't have to anymore.”

“No. None of us should.” But, there's something to be said for resolve – especially Scott's resolve. It's immovable, unbreakable. “He's going to fight, regardless of his memories.” She feels almost sorry
for Charles, that he did something unspeakable to protect the child. “He wasn't right,” she continues, “but I understand where he was coming from.”

“I don't. He destroyed my brother's mind. I will never forgive him for that.”

Storm slightly nods, her pale blue eyes softening again. “I don't blame you for your anger. Or Scott, Logan. I don't blame any of you.”

“But, you don't share it, do you?”

“I've tried,” she sighs. “I even kicked him out of the mansion. But, I do not hate him. Rather, I feel sorry for him, that he stooped to such levels. In that way, he also destroyed himself.” He also gave her a purpose and a dream, and without those things, she would still be a thief struggling with the Shadow King.

“Thank you, by the way, for the telepathic inhibitors.”

“I had no choice in the matter. It was bring them online or risk another invasion into Scott's mind. Jean was insistent.”

He's forgotten about his brother's wife. “I wanted to kill her.”

“I know you did.”

“I still do.”

“I know.”

Their conversation moves on to plans for the defense of Earth, the teams of heroes, the hope that they can divert the battle to the moon. Nova thinks it possible, but Carol Danvers does not. They are not united – though they all want the same thing. “Tony thinks it's just a matter of weapons. Fury a matter of body count. Thor wants to shake the heavens to their knees, and Betsy has nothing to say.”

He needs her – her cool head and lightning powers – to calm the masses that have come. He needs help, and she gladly gives it to him.
It was the fire that he dreamed of. Hot, consuming. The orphanage in flames. He remembered this fire, from so long ago. Or, so it seemed. The staff told him that he was imagining things, that there was never a giant fire bird, or a little girl named Jean. His years within these sordid walls had him filled with doubts. It was a coma dream, they admonished him, complete with sour looks and waving him away.

He sat on the bench outside of Milbury's office, listening again as the man explained to the would-be parents that his medical bills would be outstanding. MRI's and CT scans every few months, plus the special glasses that soothed his headaches. “He has a lot of psychological problems,” he said. “He believes in things that never happened.” He also had behavioral issues that saw him often locked up in the rooms downstairs. “He's a very troubled young man.”

They didn't look at him as they left. The couples never did. Their eyes skipped right over him, heading back out to the playground to seek a different child, one not so troublesome. Their heads hung in guilt as they rounded the corner from the office. He learned to never get his hopes up.

They have but days now. Nova's report a crushing blow to their defense. Be it on the moon or still on Earth, there is no way that Stark and company will be finished with the weapons in time. They decide to concentrate on the most destructive – the cannons and bombs, outfitting them with the shards of red crystal. Some dissolve as they are inserted into the arms, out of energy. But there are still others that are solid.

“We should be focusing on the suits,” Madison Jeffries says while looking over the mechas still in stasis. “If we can arm even half of SHIELD's soldiers with them, we'll stand a better chance.”

It's been the debate all morning – the suits or the weapons. The weapons are easier, but the suits – especially with their red crystal targeting system – are by far more powerful. “We don't have time,” Stark says, a quick glance up from his work. Forge, T'Challah, Reed Richards – even with their help, they're impossibly behind. “The guns are faster.”

Box disagrees, a sing song tune to the mechas. “They're are demanding their fight.”

Tony puts down his weapon, crosses to the suits. For all of his genius, he is still struck by the man who can talk to machines. “What do you mean they want to fight?”

“Exactly that,” Jeffries answers. “They want to protect the Earth.”

“Then let them fight.” Alex wanders through the mess of parts and crystals. He is amazed at how they can work like this – so scattered and informal. But, they know what they're doing. “How many do you think you can complete before the battle?”

Jeffries shrugs. “Maybe fifty. If I'm working on my own.”

It's not a big number. For all of the humans preparing for the battle, fifty suits just isn't enough. “We
“You need more than that.”

“If I had more hands...” Box feels it's impossible – even with all of the heroes and soldiers about, there are very few that are experienced in this kind of tech. “Can't you get your brother in here to wave his hands around and make this shit happen? For that matter, can't he just disappear Thanos and his armies?”

“That's unfair,” Alex says, his voice stern and his eyes narrowed.

“It's possible, isn't it?”

“No. No, it's not possible.” His brother's powers were still circumspect, uncontrollable despite his usage of the power gem. He's seen it before – Scott's powers going out of control as the Red Dimension flowed back into him. “We can't risk it.”

Jeffries sighs, his eyes treading over the work that was yet to be done. “Get us some more help, and we'll see what we can do.”

Lorna Dane stops him in the hallway, her face paled with worry and exhaustion. For days now she's been with the children, trying to introduce them to the mansion life, but they are resistant to their classes, to the normal speed of things. They want to help, especially with the world at stake. “I found them in the Blackbird,” she explains, “They knew about the flight to the SWORD base this morning. They were intent on helping them.”

“Indira was spying, wasn't she?”

“Seems like it.”

He places a sweet kiss on her right cheek, roaming just close enough to her body that he can feel the warmth of her skin. “Maybe they can help,” he says, brushing hand across her cheek. “They need more hands in the weapons lab.”

“You want them to make instruments of war?”

“I want them to help protect the Earth.” Blue eyes stare deep into green. “They're not going to be soldiers,” he explains, “Just extra hands. It will give them something to ease their minds.” Unlike the other children, Indira, Arlo and the rest understand the battle that's coming. They've seen and heard the details, the threat. “It will make them feel like they're accomplishing something.”

Lorna nods her understanding, a wisp of blush across her cheeks. It's been too long since they've been close like this. “When this is over,” she laughs, “I want to go to Tahiti.”

Alex smiles back. “I think that can be arranged.” The grin still upon his face, he watches her walk away, and for the first time in a while, he realizes how much he misses her. So much time he's spent in battle, in caring for his brother, that he forgot about her. Forgot how much he loved her. Forgot how much he wanted to be with her. And because of that, he suddenly feels alone.

Shaking off the dread in the pit of stomach, he makes his way back to the War Room where Storm and the rest of head table are waiting. The leaders, the powerful. They want plans. They want to know how Thanos will be defeated. They want to know how dangerous Scott will be if allowed to fight.

There is no definitive answer to their questions, no way to know if his brother will become the Red Wave again, or something worse. All Alex knows is that Cyclops demands to fight, and there is no convincing him not to. “Our biggest worry right now is outfitting everyone with decent weapons.”
He explains his previous conversation with Jeffries and Stark, hoping that there will be volunteers. "Fury, we could use your help. If we could borrow your engineers, that could provide us with enough suits for your armies."

He's hesitant, Fury is, still not fully trusting the mutants after their attacks on the SHIELD bases. But, he also knows that Cyclops freed them from Syrntech's control – a control he'd never thought possible. With the capture of General Griggs, three senators, and two representatives – all of whom were on the Panel – SHIELD had gone back to normal activity. "I'll do what I can," he says, "but I can't promise anything."

Missiles and satellites, bombs and beams, the plan to defeat Thanos and his army becomes a tangled web of what-ifs. Alex's doubts come to the forefront when they again start to imagine this battle taking place on the moon. There are many who support it, taking the battle away from Earth, setting up on Mars or the moon. Keeping the mad titan away from their planet all together. There are even those who suggest placing Scott on the moon so that they can destroy Thanos' army from behind. "Imagine," Sue Storm says, "It would be a battle on two fronts. We could split his forces, making it harder for him to fight."

"That may be so, but you're forgetting something. A two-front battle in space can only work if there are enough ships," Commander Brand says. "And, as far as I know, there aren't enough ships on Earth to accommodate." SWORD only has so many, and she prefers her own soldiers using them because of their intense training. "SHIELD will be stuck on the ground taking the fire."

An air battle is what Alex had been hoping for – a way keep innocents out of the fight, but the more he listens to Brand and Fury, to Jennifer Walters and Sue Storm, the more he realizes how desperate their plans are becoming. No weapons, no ships, in-fighting, and hurried tech – he feels that he's losing control of his audience, of the war brigade that he's supposed to lead. A curious look by Warren and Alex clears his throat. "How many ships do we have in total?"

"If just mine, we have nearly four hundred ships with experienced pilots," Brand says, tapping on the metal table. "You super hero groups might be able to provide a couple more."

"We have helicarriers and fighter jets," Maria Hill offers, "but they're not space capable." She is on the side of a ground war, feeling that it would give them a better chance. "Most of the weapons that Stark is creating are meant for ground combat. We need to take advantage of that."

Alex listens again as they speak of the battles. Another argument that lightning pops hush. Unpleased with the constant bickering, Storm reminds them all that their pettiness is getting in the way of progress. "There has to be a compromise. There has to be a way to --"

"A suicide mission." Eyes turn to Alex. "A single ship with a team ready to engage. A teleporter that can get them in and out of the fleet to knock the ships out of their flight pattern. Kitty, you would be their worst nightmare." Kitty nods at the brilliance of the plan. "If we send Illyana and Laura with you, that would be a devastating team."

Alex knows the mutants – their powers, their strengths and weaknesses – but he doesn't know the extent of the humans' power, having worked with them so sparsely. His brother would have an easier time with this, but his brother isn't invited to Head Table, not while he's training to try and control his mind. "Sue, your shield, can it be sustained in space?" She nods. "Then you're back-up in case something happens to Illyana."

She's surprised at the efficiency of this destruction squad, but also worries about their viability. There's only so long that the oxygen inside of her shields will last. "That's why it's a suicide mission," Alex explains. "We may not be able to rescue you if worse come to worst."
A holographic projector at the center of the room shows the rest of Havok’s plans. The cosmic heroes forging a barrier, the space ships along side them. The helicarriers will be spread across the world loaded down with fighter jets while the troops on the ground hit every major traffic hub and try to quell the violence. “We don't know where he'll attack,” Alex tells them, so we have to be prepared for anything.”

“And what about Scott?” Steve Rogers asks.

“He'll be in space,” Alex replies, his voice low. “He wants to fight, so we're going to let him.”

“What happens if he loses control?”

“I'll be there with him.” He'll take one of the suits that Jeffries is making, stand beside his brother as Thanos unleashes hell upon them.

No one likes the idea of Alex being on the front lines, especially since he's assuming leadership for the mission, but he will not be moved. Someone needs to guard Scott, and he's the best person for the job. “Logan is also an option,” Storm points out, “and sending him to space could be more beneficial--”

“I need Logan on the ground,” he responds. “With Laura in the air, I need him with the troops.” He pushes a few buttons on the hologram projector, and pulls up a list of teams that he's decided on. “Logan's already heading a team, as are you Storm, Steve. Everyone at head table is in charge of a team. And all of those teams will answer to Fury and Hill who will stay here to keep watch on battles.”

It's not the type of plan that his brother would make – his wily strategies and unending observance – but they don't have time for Scott's plans, and Alex is doing the best he can. A round of calm questioning, Head Table dismisses with Steve pulling him aside. “You're doing the right thing,” he tells the mutant. “And the right way.”

“Thanks.”

“Win or lose, we'll give it our best.”

Alex knows that there are still questions about Scott's involvement in the battle – those that think he should be out of sight and hidden from Thanos, but he knows his brother too well, and once he sets his mind to something, he won't change it without good reason. And Alex couldn't come up with that reason, though he's had days to think about it.

Wandering down the hall, he hears Lorna talking to the children – not just the students from the arctic, but even more who are curious about the lab. A pang of guilt springs forth in his gut, but like his brother, there is nothing to do but give in and move forward.

“Ground team, eh?” Logan says, coming up just behind him.

“You heard?”

“Indira,” he says. “Came and told me a few minutes ago.” He gives Alex a cheeky smile. “You're going to have to start sweeping that room for her fingers before you speak.”

“She's come a long way.”

“Yes, she has.”
Havok doesn't expect an easy conversation, especially knowing how Logan feels about his brother. “He wants to fight.”

“I know he does.” What he doesn't say is that he understands Alex's decision. Let him sweat, let him doubt. If he's anything like Scott, it's those things that will make him a great leader.

They settle down for coffee, Alex's eyes still narrowed in thought. A thousand tactics run through his head, a thousand things that could go wrong. He doesn't feel prepared for this battle. He doesn't feel prepared for anything. “You know why I'm keeping you on the ground, right?”

He nods. He understands well enough. The only way this works is if he and Scott are separated, otherwise, Logan won't be able to concentrate on the fighting. “Gonna be a lot of blood.”

“Hopefully not ours.”

The silence that settles between them is one of too many words and too much pride. To say things, their feelings – how worried, how scared, how doubtful of leadership, how disillusioned about killing again – would only make things worse. It's a respect, or at least that's how it seems. To let the other stay quiet and keep those stinging nerves to themselves.

“You get Jeffries his extra hands?”

“Sent the kids in,” Alex reveals. He takes note of the sharp look on Logan's face. “It's the only way. We need every hand we can get to make sure we survive. No matter the age.”

“You're teaching them about war.”

“We're mutants, Logan. Our whole lives are about war.”

Logan can't disagree with that, regardless of how he feels about the children. “You sure Lorna's going to be enough to protect them?”

“Between her and the Cuckoos, it should be enough.”

“You letting them off their leashes then? You sure about that?” More than anything, Logan doesn't want to see his lover under the influence of another psychic scrambling of his brain.

“We're going to have to trust them.”

“All of them?” Logan asks. “Even Jean?”

“Even Jean.”
Francis Howard – known as Frank to those who would remember him – was a wall of muscle and steroid rage. The children quickly learned to be afraid of him, and fell to silence when he entered the cafeteria.

He ate alone at the long table, his dull green eyes observing the children as they ate. If a meal went unfinished, they received demerits. If they spoke, they would be marked. If they ran in the halls, started a fight on the playground, complained about bullies, failed their tests and other school work, Mister Howard would take them by force to the rooms below, and there they would stay until the sentence was up.

Scott was a special target of the mad man, earning a near constant rage that fractured his jaw, broke his arm, and kept him covered in bruises. “Eat your food,” Howard said, standing cross armed behind him.

The boy could smell the poison – that rank smell of vinegar and mold. To eat it would cause him to vomit, and vomiting was treated worse than not eating at all. Sooner or later, they would bring him a new plate of food, without the illness causing potion. They wanted him alive, but defeated.

Grabbing him by the back of his neck, Frank pushes his head into the goulash, breaks the bowl in the process and cuts the bottom of his chin. The food runs out onto the floor, which earns the boy even more demerits and three days in solitary. Choking, drowning, Scott flails, but isn't strong enough to wriggle free of Howard's grasp.

The children laughed.

Down into the cellar Scott went, his face still covered by stew, still trying to catch his breath from the near drowning. Howard pushes him into walls, yells and growls, his face turning red with rage. A back-hand to the child's cheeks that slams him onto the floor. A boot to the stomach, then its steel toe balanced on the boy's windpipe. He threatens Scott with death, let's him know how close he is. Just a little more pressure, and he's gone, done with the world. What he never realized is that Scott didn't care. He was a nothingness here. A problem that no one wanted to deal with. Hopeless, alone, the young mutant wouldn't have minded his end.

“I can stop him from hurting you,” the sinister man said, sneaking into his cell that night. “Just say the word and I'll stop him from hurting anyone ever again. I'll even let you watch.”

“No.”

“Scott, you know the longer you're here, the worse it becomes. He hates you, the simplest sight of you.”

“No.”

“If that's your choice, then I raised you wrong.”
Three years he suffered at the hands of Frank Howard. Three years that Essex came to him at night, offering to kill the man. For three years, Scott told him no, the beatings were getting significantly worse.

But, even Sinister had his limits. A particularly bad beating that saw Scott in the hospital for a week, and Essex had had enough. Back down in the cell almost immediately after his return, and Sinister made his nightly visit with the guard in tow. They talked to each other, about weather, about polo. Sinister laughed at the man's jokes, how poorly he treated the children here, and then about Scott.

“You like beating on him, don't you?” the mad scientist asked.

Howard shrugged. “He's eleven years old. He should have grown out of whiny by now.”

“He whines?”

“Every time someone looks at him funny. He needs to toughen up.”

“And you consider putting him in the hospital for a week toughening him up?”

The smile slowly faded from Frank's face, replaced by narrow eyed self-concern. “Been here three years, and you've never complained.”

“I told you. I want him alive.”

“So, I went a little overboard. I won't do it again.”

“You're right on that.”

Still too weak to move, Scott's voice barely spoke in warning. The glimmer of knife in Essex's hand. He saw it, told the guard to move, but his chalk-rasped voice went unheard. Before the boy could beg, Sinister had already slit his throat, letting him drop to the ground, the blood pooling on the floor. “If you'd let me do this years ago, you wouldn't have suffered so badly, my child. Hopefully, next time, you'll let me protect you.”

Scott could do little but watch the lifeblood flood across the room. Sitting up as best he could, he tried to move out of its way, but he was too slow, too broken to escape it. “Sleep well, Scott,” Essex said and shut the door.

On the bank of the pond she sits, her toe skimming across the cool water. There are no inhibitors here, no machines that blank out her powers, and for that she is thankful. The hollowness inside her head, the blindness. It drives her crazy.

However, her lazy day under the sun is cut short by a visitor. “I thought I'd find you here.” Jean Grey looks down at the blonde, taking a deep breath now that her telepathy has been restored. Immediately, she can feel Emma's guard go up, the psychic pressure buzzing across her brain. “I had no intention of reading your mind, Emma.”

“Force of habit, darling. Especially when you're around.” The spite shines in her voice.

“Mind if I sit?”

“If I do, will you leave me alone?”

Jean grins at the blonde's harshness, settling in beside her, pleased that Frost is bothered by her. Looking up to the sky, she follows the flight of a bird into the trees before turning to look at her
fellow telepath. “What you did was wrong,” she says simply, her tone condescending.

“The pot calling the kettle black?” Emma snipes, her lip turned up in disgust.

“You raped him.”

“You ate holes in his mind.”

Jean pauses, looks at the dragonflies skimming the water. She wishes she felt that light, that her sins weren't weighing her down. But her guilt is overwhelming. “No wonder they don't trust us.”

“Poor Jean Grey. She's lost her title as the most perfect mutant ever to walk the face of the Earth. How far you've fallen in recent days.” A snarky smile and Emma turns her attention back to the water. “I'm glad that they finally know of your treachery.”

“Obviously.”

“Now you're just like the rest of us. Full of faults and regrets. Never again to regain your saint hood because nothing can make up for what you've done.”

“And now who's calling the kettle black.”

“I was never a saint,” Emma snaps. “I was always the villain.”

Emma can feel the gentle nudge inside her brain. Swift fingers tugging loose at memories. Like silk, the ebb of Emma's defense falls away to the more powerful telepath, the memories of her sin unfolding in her mind. The way she touched him, the way she manipulated his mind. “He saw everything,” Jean speaks aloud. “Even if he doesn't remember, he will never love you again.”

Turning diamond, Emma cuts off the psionic waves and wipes away the tears stinging in her eyes. “He won't love you either.”

They sit in silence, the calamity of their lives too much for words. Jean places a hand on Emma's shoulder as she fades back to flesh, the tears coming on strong. Scott was all she ever wanted, needed, and she destroyed what little trust he had in her, and lost her child as well.

Jean holds her, lets her cry it all out, the White Queen now little more than a heap of pain and sorrow.

“I can't be here,” she sobs. “I can't see him.”

“Of course not. That's why we're out here.”

There is no forgiveness for them, at least none that they will accept. They are like sisters now, spiteful and ridiculous, trying to worm their way back into a society that will always see the harshness of their deeds. Jean sighs and pats Emma's back, thankful that for even these few moments, Emma seemed more human than not. “At least we're in the same boat,” she says, a quirk of a smile on her face.

Emma straightens herself, lowers her head to the pond. In her head, her actions keep replaying – a broken record that curdles in her soul. “I just wanted to be loved,” she says. “I just wanted him to love me again.”

“I was going to kill him.”

Emma is shocked by the confession, her blue eyes going wide. “Why? Why would you do that?”
“I’m afraid of him. His power. Afraid of what happens if he loses control again.”

“Is that why you’re here? To get me to help you?” Emma scoffs. “I already told you --”

“No,” Jean shakes her head. “I learned my lesson.” She recounts that day, when Scott came down to the basement of the bunker. How angry he was, how betrayed. His whole life a lie, his powers like whiplash. “I hurt him,” she says. “And, I have to live with his pain.”

Emma is uncomfortable with the openness between them. Even in diamond form, her heart aches for what she’s done. They turn their attention instead to the battle looming over their heads, how the X-men still consider them warriors. Neither of the women relish the battle to come. They will be the communication hubs, connecting teams across the world. “Alex has a lot of faith in us,” Jean says with a slight smile.

“If he had faith in us, he would have us on the field, not stuck in the mansion with Fury and Hill.”

“Maybe that's the difference between us,” Jean says. “I see hope where you see ashes.”

Emma shrugs, almost glad that they’re disagreeing again. “Or maybe, I see life how it is, and you insist on topping it with a cherry.” Her spite is offset by the tug of smile on her cheek. She feels something almost akin to a bond with the redhead sitting next to her. A rivalry, a grudging respect. “Or maybe, he’s just trying to keep us away from Scott.”

Jean nods. Indeed, that could very well be the reason for their placement. Scott will be in space with the battalion of ships and space-abled soldiers. He’ll be too hard for them to reach; too far away for them to take his powers again. “Maybe it's for the best.” Green eyes once again follow the birds overhead, a peaceful grin on her face. She wants nothing more than peace right now, the calm before the storm, but she knows that it’s impossible. “We should head back,” she says. “They'll be looking for us.”

Emma nods, shifting into diamond form as she dusts herself off. “Thank you,” she says grudgingly.

“For what?”

“For not hating me anymore than I deserve.”

“I've never hated you, Emma.”

“I've always hated you.”

“I know. I don't blame you, though. You are the only person that could see right through me, I think. The only person to hold me accountable. I always understood your spite.”

It's a confession that Emma doesn't expect. “This doesn't mean we're friends,” she adds quickly.

“No. We'll never be friends. But, we can be like family.”

“Sibling rivalry then?”

“Yeah,” Jean chuckles. “Why not?”
The scouts arrive.

He opened his eyes, red beams uncontrollable. He could hear the sound of crushing metal, and see the sparks of his efforts. Beaten down by concussive force, the metal slowly heats and tears away from hinges and frame. Hot and red, the friction destroys the doors in just minutes.

Scott apologized to the hostages, but there was no other way. Not if they wanted to live. He had seen Winters kill before, and the boy wouldn't let it happen again. Not if he could prevent it.

At twelve years old, Scott was still lanky and malnourished, his growth stunted, his skin pale and covered in bruises. The hostages didn't believe that he was trying to save them. Their eyes narrowed, and curses upon their lips, they blamed him for their capture, for the broken safe that would allow Jack to plunder all of their riches. He learned months ago to just accept it instead of trying to explain how he was trying to save them. To do so would not only earn him a severe beating, but the humans wouldn't care anyway. He was a thief, a charlatan. And, once again, Scott was alone.

“That was a haul,” Yuri Ikanovich – a particularly cruel ‘friend’ of Winters – said into the silence of the small cabin in the woods. “We can fucking buy Madripoor with all of this loot.”

Winters laughed, his diamond hand slapping down on his knee. “Not yet,” he said. “But if we keep this up, we can buy any country in the world.” He grabbed Scott by the chin, tilting the boy's head up. “So long as you keep doing your job, we'll get whatever we want.”

It was the first evening in a while that he had eaten. Marty the Shaker had picked up dinner from a diner downtown. Marty looked after the boy to some degree, as much as his mobster ties would allow. “Hey now, let the kid eat,” he chided Winters. “Gotta keep his strength up if we're going to hit First Bank tomorrow.”

Winters shrugged. “You going soft on me, Shakes?”

“Ain't going soft, just looking out for our safe buster.”

Unimpressed, Winters shook his head. “One day, we won't need him anymore.”

“Oh yeah?” Yuri perked up. He'd never liked the boy, seeing his compassion as a hindrance.

“I've got plans,” Jack said with a smile. “Big ones.” He gestures to his diamond hand. “One day, we'll find out how safes fair against a complete living diamond.” He laughed heartily, glancing at Scott.

There is nowhere to evacuate to. The people run, trying to find cover in the concrete playground of their city. Buildings shake as the first of the scout ships weaved through the interlacing highways and byways of Manhattan, their lasers zapping across windows and beams.

Aboard the airships, SHIELD’s fighters take off, culling down five of the scouts in minutes, but losing track of the other four. Lightly armored, they listen closely for instructions and whereabouts,
trusting Fury, Hill, and Dr. Strange to find the ships that they're looking for.

Up in the clouds, their long range targeting system set to burn, the scout ships plunge down to earth in a death dive, transmitting their data back to Thanos. The Earth's defenses are few, say their reports, their system hacked by Doug Ramsey who decodes the language second by second. Alex smiles, his plan working.

With SHIELD's fighters on their tail, the scout ships zoom across the sky, pitting paved roads with lasers and general chaos. They make it all the way to New Jersey before they're cut down, the wreckage of the ships free falling into forests and cities.

The death toll from their flights are minimum, but the heroes feel each and everyone of them.

“Was it worth the sacrifice?” Steve Rogers asks, his tone bitter.

Alex's smile quickly fades. “No. But, there was no other way.” They have to keep Thanos off guard. They have to show their weaknesses, to keep him unprepared. “It's a war, Captain. There are going to be deaths.”

“That’s something I’d expect your brother to say.”

“I'm surprised – with all you've been through – that you think it could turn out a different way.”

He's sees it in Alex's eyes – the grief, the mourning, the feeling of failure – but the rest of his face remains mortar and stone. Hard, harsh, an insurmountable wall. He reminds him of Scott. Alex turns away, his attention on the satellite feeds from space. So far, there is no Thanos in their line of sight, but they all know well enough that he will come soon. “Four days left,” Alex sighs and looks to Tony. “You're ready, right?”

“As we can be,” he says. With the children's help, they have been able to complete the guns and fifty suits. They hope to complete another twenty five in the next four days. “You should come check it out. The weapons are pretty outstanding.”

“I'm my own weapon, remember?” There is spite in Alex's comment, enough that Tony quickly looks away, his shame blushing against his cheeks. He apologizes once again for his reaction to the Red Wave, promises that he sees things in a different light, but Alex doesn't care. He wants the suits completed, and Ironman on the ground when the real fight comes. “That's all I need from you.”

They are allies – the humans and the mutants – in this battle. He doesn't need apologies or guilt, he just needs the troops to do their jobs and defeat Thanos. “That goes for all of you,” he says to the group that has gathered. “The only chance we have is working together.”

Tony nods, his guilt even heavier after Alex's speech. For the mutant to put all conflicts to the side like that hangs his head. For him, the telepaths, Richards, all of those that fought the battle in Scott's mind, all those that attacked the mutants in Scott's craze – all of that has gone to the wayside almost too quickly. He wonders if all the mutants feel this way.

After the meeting closes, he journeys to the kitchen for coffee and a sugary doughnut from a box on the counter. He doesn't know who they belong to, but he soon finds out when Polaris takes the box away from him with a sour look on her face. “Let's make this clear,” she says. “This is not your home. You do not have the right to make yourself comfortable.”

But, in her anger, there is relief that, yes, there are mutants who rightfully hate him for the Red Hunt. It makes him all the more ready to face Thanos and prove that he deserves their forgiveness.
“It took a while for them to trust me, too,” Steve says, a sympathetic grin on his face.

“I'm going to make it up to them.”

“There's no making it up to them, Tony. Not after what we did, but we can become more diligent in how we treat them.”

Hands at Tony's hips, a smile on his face, Steve pulls him in for a long, loving kiss. “I'm glad you're here,” he says, breathy and filled with longing. But, this isn't the time for anything other than quick kisses and greetings. Stark has too much to do, too many things to accomplish before Thanos sits down upon them. And Steve – well, he has things to do, too.

It is Scott who trains them – in the suits, out of the suits, with the weapons, with the team. He runs them hard, sometimes to the point of injury, and then sends the soldier to the med bay where Shi'ar tech will help them heal faster. Even Rogers has a hard time keeping up with the amount of work Scott is putting into training. “I don't think he's sleeping again,” he confesses to Tony.

“I don't think anyone is.” He knows for a fact that Box hasn't slept in three days, nor has Reed. The children are nervous, and so is Alex who checks in on them every three hours. “There's too much to do,” he explains. “No one can keep up with all of this.”

He feels for Alex, trying to keep everyone in sync, keep everyone from fighting. The pressure he's under is tremendous, but in true Summers brother fashion, it's hard to tell how close he is to cracking. “I didn't think he could do it,” Tony admits. “But, he's a good leader, just like his brother.”

Rogers isn't so sure after witnessing the mutant's reaction to the deaths less than ten minutes ago. Though he admits that the strategy was impeccable, that he ignored those lost in the battle made him wince. “Those people shouldn't have died.”

“He can't protect everyone, Steve. We can't protect everyone. There are going to be deaths.”

“Funny. That's what he said, too.”

Tony shrugs. “He's right. This is a war. People are going to die.”

“And you're okay with that?”

“Of course not, but I don't have another option.”

To Stark, it was simply logic. There were too many places, too many people in the world to assure themselves that all lives would stay intact. Dwelling on it would make their jobs impossible. “We can't save everyone, Steve. That's simply too much of a burden. But, we have to rejoice in those that we can.”

“I've never known you to be such an optimist,” Steve smiles.

“It's not optimism. It's reality. Alex is keeping us focused, and that's important.”

There were days when Tony amazed him with his brilliance. His observations about life stunning and understandable. These days made Steve admire the other man even more. And, it was in these moments that he could feel his heart ache for their current distance.

Noticing the dreamy look on Steve's face, Stark smiles, clasping his shoulder and giving him a gentle shake. “This will be over soon,” he tells Rogers. “And when it is, we'll have our time.” With that, Tony exits before he can get drawn into the feelings pooling in his groin. “We both have work to
Cap watches him leave, an eyebrow quirked and his smile amused. He'd never realized that he was so easily read. But, he is glad for it, so long as Tony knows how much he loves him.
The Mansion

Chapter Summary

A pep talk.

He stood in the roadway, dressed up in nice slacks and a sweater that didn't quite fit. The cars honked their horns, the drivers yelled obscenities. He wanted their anger to overflow, for them to push down on gas pedals, rev their engines, and knock him down, run over him, put him out of his misery. Instead, they swerve around him, slowing down to avoid him.

Before he could plunge himself further into the busy traffic, Mr. Gardner grabbed his arm and pulled him onto the sidewalk. His dark brow lowered, he stared at the child, his face red and boiling. “Try that again, and you'll spend the next three months in solitary.”

It was the third visit to the eye doctor in a month – the only time when he was away from the orphanage now that the parents – at ten years old – thought him too old to adopt. Years ago, they found him cute, adorable, polite, but his frame now was a little less than starvation, and his mood sullen.

It was another experiment by Dr. McNeely – a tall dark man with bright green eyes and a white smile. He wasn’t like the nurses at the State Home for Foundlings. He wasn’t stern, occupied. He spoke to Scott as he worked, told the boy about his life outside of the office. He had two dogs and a cat, three children that lived with their mother in Boise, and a brand new car that got good gas mileage. He was nice to the boy, and it made Scott afraid.

A set of red lenses is what he pulled out. Ruby red quartz, polished down to a thin, nearly unbreakable lens. “Let’s see if this helps with your headaches,” he said, slipping them onto the boy's face.

“Why are they red?” Scott asked. The world around him suddenly sapped of color, he took the glasses off and stared at them.

The man smiled. “Because they look cool.”

Scott knew it was a lie, but he said nothing. Slipping the lenses back on, he thanked the doctor, almost sad to leave, but knowing he didn’t have a choice. Mr. Gardner would be waiting on him.

As he made his way to the waiting room, the nurses all smiled and waved at him, one of them pushing a sucker into his hand, telling him to hide it away until he went to bed. She was a sweet nurse, and she worried about Scott, but the boy didn’t smile back at her, nor did he take her candy. He didn’t want her to die.

In a huff, Gardner closed his magazine and dropped it on the chair. He led Scott into the parking lot, to the car. The child had a dream about this parking lot – a chase of sorts. A battle to escape. Scott knew that if he turned around and started running that Gardner could not catch him, not with his beer belly and stumpy legs. Scott could hide, wait out the search, and then make his way back to Alaska and hope to find his parents weren’t actually dead.
But, he didn't do it. Anxiety over how to survive the world on his own plagued him. A roof over his head, food in his stomach, clothing on his back. He didn't know how to cook or do his laundry. He was too young to get a job. He wasn't ready for the world yet. Not now. Possibly not ever.

It's Logan's turn to watch over him. The deep of night, and he's still awake, pushing through another training session. There are few days left, and Cyclops does not feel like the mutants or humans are prepared.

Though the Avengers – and, indeed all of the heroes – have had battles with Thanos before, there hasn't been a battle like this one, not on Earth, and not with such a prize at stake. In two days, they'll travel to the blue side of the moon – a vast separation between the two mutants, and not one that Logan is comfortable with. While he stays on the ground, Scott will be in space – the first line of defense against the coming onslaught. He fears what will happen.

As the men and women finish up below, Logan tugs on Scott's sleeve. “Time for you to rest,” he says softly, his eyes filled with worry and care. He can tell that Summers is resisting the temptation to retire to his room – a room filled with remembrances of Jean, of Emma, of his time in their enthrall.

Scott shakes his head, citing that there is still more to do, that he isn't ready to give up yet. The Danger Room program needs updating, different skills, different teams. That Alex is trusting him to make sure that everyone is ready, but he fears they are not. “I have work to do.”

“Work that can wait until morning. You're going to wear them all out. They won't be any good in battle if you keep running them like this.”

Scott's look was bland, his tone even. “They're going to die.” He can see it in his head, the thousands of scenarios overlapping with death and defeat. He can't find a solid road – one that leads to overtaking Thanos' armies. He doesn't have time to seek out the solution.

“You just need to trust your brother,” Logan says. He longs to see Scott's eyes in the moment, to see how this statement truly effects him. The younger mutant is not accustomed to giving up control – whether of himself or a team.

“I trust Alex with my life,” he quiets into the silence, leaving just enough doubt to put Wolverine on edge. Cupping the other mutant's jaw with his burly hands, he places a tender kiss on Scott's cheek. Cyclops' view goes to the floor.

“It's okay to have your doubts,” Logan explains. “But, you have to face them. Alex has come up with a good plan. The best we have on such short notice.” Scott nods. Wolverine smiles. “Come on. Give it up for the night. Come eat dinner with me, and then you'll get some rest.”

The Phoenix has been quiet these last few days, since Scott absorbed the power gem into his mind. Perhaps it was overwhelmed by the gem's strength, or perhaps it knows that Cyclops and the others are in grave danger. Either way, Logan is thankful for the hush, and watching Cyke lie down in the bed, covers up to his ears relieves him like nothing else.

Scott soon settles into sleep, his skin warm, cheeks blushed though the Phoenix keeps herself calm. The opening of the door is unexpected. Claws out, Logan turns on the light just in time to see Pocket – in a brand new bunny suit – scurry across the floor and up into the bed. Cradling himself against Scott, he pulls out his favorite video game and begins to play. He is soon sought after by Indira who nearly yelps at the sight of Wolverine and his claws. She apologizes quickly, bows, explains that he escaped from the room. “He likes to explore the mansion,” she says. And then in a hurry, “Is Mr. Summers going to let us fight?”
Logan shakes his head. “Not your time yet, punkin’.”

“He's made some scenarios for us. We practice them everyday.”

“Doesn't mean you belong on the battle field.” His tone is a touch stern, but necessary. She's a feisty one, often the spokesperson for the arctic kids. They know the danger, and they want to prove their worth. “The adults will handle it.”

“In case they attack the mansion,” she says. “That's what the scenarios are for. How to evacuate everyone into the basement and how to fly the Blackbird.”

“That means you'll be protecting all of the students,” Logan smiles. “That's a very honorable job.”

“It's more honorable to fight the enemy.”

He likes her spirit. Her stubbornness. Her insistence. But, it also worries him. That she might go rogue, takes the others with her into more danger. “One day, you will. When the time is right and Scott and Alex feel that you're ready.”

Glum, she takes a seat on the edge of the bed, taking a passing look at Pocket's game. “Not everyone's coming back, are they?”

“No.” His honest answer lowers her head. “It's a sacrifice we're willing to make.”

Indira has thought a lot about sacrifice and what it means to be a hero. And, she admits that it frightens her. That she wonders if she's capable. Logan tells her that she's too young to think about that. Her answer will come in time, as she gets older, as she comes to understand the world. “In the meantime,” he continues, “you get the chance that most of us never did. You get to be a kid for a little while longer.”

She's heard about Scott's memories, how they have plagued the heroes, leading to most begging the telepaths to erase them. She's heard that they're horrible, nightmarish. It's a childhood that they wouldn't wish on their worst enemies. She doesn't want details; she only wants to know if it's true.

Logan takes a deep breath and nods. Like the others, he's thought about going to the telepaths, following them out to the forest and have the memories deleted. But, he hasn't. Not yet, but he doesn't know why he's hanging on to them.

Opal stands in the doorway, her exoskeleton exposed with a short sleeved shirt – something she was once ashamed of, but being here with other mutants has made her more confident. “Did you find Pocket?” Indira points at the bed. Opal smiles at the young boy and his video game. “We should get him to bed,” she continues. “Otherwise he'll be grumpy in the morning.”

As much as Indira is the leader of the group, Opal has become their mother – a far cry from the haunted, angry girl who was first rescued by Cable. She's calmer now, less angry, and Logan can see the joy on her face. It's a short lived joy, however, as Indira asks about her mysterious summons to head table earlier in the evening. “Alex put me on a team,” she says quietly, knowing that Indira will be upset. “I'm eighteen,” she says with a shrug. “That's why they're putting me on Rogue's team.”

They'd given her a choice – to stay at the mansion with the other kids, or go out on the field. It was an easy choice to make. They needed her, something she hadn't felt in a long time. “You're still here to protect the kids,” she says with a smile.

Indira shakes her head, tears swelling up in her eyes. Scott had always treated her like the leader, but now her team was split. “It'll be hard without you,” she chokes. “All of Mr. Summers plans included
“You’ll be fine without me,” she says. “You’ve got Arlo and Sarah and Phin. And of course, Pocket. Just remember your escape route into the tunnels, and remember what he said about your fingers.”

“Don’t overwhelm myself.”

“Exactly.”

Opal crosses the room and holds her arms out for Pocket. He traces the lines of her shelled skin, before offering up his own arms to be carried away from the bedroom. “You’re going to do fine,” she tells Indira, Pocket holding on to her shoulder. “You’re a great leader. They will listen to you.”

It's not long after that Indira leaves as well. With a yawn and a stretch, she says goodnight to Logan, leaving him in the peace and quiet of Scott's old bedroom. Though once destroyed, and then rebuilt, someone had found pieces of his lover's life buried in the rubble and returned them to their rightful place. Pictures of Emma and Jean, a smile on his face in each and every one. Cable. Rachel. Charles Xavier and the original five. A jacket draped over the brand new chair by the window. Books that had seen better days. His life summed up in meager belongings, dusted and scuffed. It was sad to see it this way, so empty.

Like Logan, he had so little left.
Chapter Summary

Battle preparations.

He couldn't save him. Toby. The bully. Hanging onto him for dear life as he flailed from the roof, Scott simply wasn't strong enough to hold onto him. And he died for Scott's lack.

In tears – both astonished and grieving – he looked up at the nurse beside him and shook his head. "I couldn't save him." He didn't understand why the boy jumped, and nor did Robyn. It was only when his eyes met Mr. Milbury's down below – those almost joyful eyes – that he knew the man had something to do with it.

Nurse Robyn pulled him into a long embrace as tears flowed from the boy's eyes. He blamed himself for Toby's death – that broken body lying upon the ground. It would be an image that would haunt him for years to come – that death that he couldn't stop.

Later that night, sneaking through the hallways with Nate on his tail, he quieted himself downstairs to Milbury's office, avoiding the lone security officer who was busy watching television. Scott had gotten good at picking the lock and ignoring his roommate's constant chatter. Into the office Summers went, leaving Nate as the lookout. It was the only way to get peace and quiet from the other boy – the only way he'd be left alone.

He dug through the filing cabinet drawers, looking for Toby's papers. It was riddled with marks about his behavior, his bullying of the other, smaller children. How he was failing his classes. How he'd come from an abusive home, and rather than being placed in foster care, the state had placed him at the orphanage after deeming his parents unfit. For the boy to die – especially after such a horrible childhood – was simply wrong. No child should die unloved.

Done with his mission, the boys wandered back upstairs to their bedroom. Wide awake, Nate sat at the edge of the bed, a big smile on his face. He talked about Toby, as if the dead child was something evil, something to be gotten rid of. He had threatened Scott, hurt him on occasions, so why on earth was he upset over the boy's death?

"He didn't choose to jump," Scott blurted out.

"Great. Here we go again with your conspiracy theories."

"Something's wrong with this orphanage, Nate. Someone's causing all of this."

"No one's stopping you from being adopted, Scotty. The parents just don't want the hassle that comes with giving you a home. All those headaches and bad dreams. You scare them away, roomie."

Scott eyes the boy for some moments before lying down his bed, covers up to his chin. He doesn't like the other boy, but he's the only person at the orphanage that talks to him anymore. The only person that doesn't treat him as invisible. And in that, he feels alone.

He's gotten good at faking sleep, closing his eyes and waiting for Nate to start snoring. It was his
chance to sneak back out into the hallways, to travel down the hall and stand in front of Mr. Milbury's door. He knew the answers were there. Everything that was wrong with this place started and ended right there. But that night, he was too afraid to open it. He feared what he would see as flashes of skeletons and newspaper clippings filled his mind. He’d done this before, or at least that’s what it felt like. That he’d gone through this circle again and again and again. An endless parade of obsession and antagonism. With a deep breath, he returns to his room, puzzling over his thoughts and memories.

All he knew was that he had to escape this place. Somehow.

The blue side of the moon.

Here, in this place, this exact spot, Jean Grey sacrificed her life. There was a time when the sight of this would have brought him to tears. Her martyrdom for the sake of the world, expunging those cosmic powers that had grown out of control. But now, it is a betrayal. Even as his memories of the orphanage and the strange experiments that saw him lose a year of his life, it's Jean's actions that hurt the most. Now, he's not sure whether he loved her or not.

Archangel's steps are quiet as he approaches. Scuffed just enough so that Scott will pick up on the sound, so as to not frighten him. He knows why Scott is here, why he wandered off from the mission area. He stands beside him in silence.

“I have Logan now,” Scott says quietly.

“That doesn't make it hurt less.”

“I can't think about that now. Not with Thanos on his way.” Like everything else, Scott buries it. Pushes it down to the bottom of his thoughts and sets his focus upon the mission. “You're supposed to be in your suit.” His shield is as unbreakable as the grit in his jaw.

Warren follows him back to the battlefield that Alex has chosen – some distance away from the place where Jean died. He watches as the Summers brothers direct the traffic and the set-up. From SWORD ships to space suited fighters, to the cosmic beings that need no aid other than commands – the sheer vastness of what they’re doing roils Angel's stomach.

Plasma beams powered by red crystals, canons, and guns. Heat lasers, carbon bullets, and nuclear powered bombs. It will be a massacre, though Archangel isn't sure which side will win.

The formation of their standoff is simple – the heroes before the ships, the mechs behind. It's a simple strategy at first sight, but a closer look reveals the details. Scott has trained these fighters to go up against Thanos' army, and Angel knows how well he has taught them. The key is in the mechs – those seventy five men and women who have submitted themselves to a suicide run. Red crystals powering their weaponry, the suits will have the mobility to zoom in and out of their enemy formations, knocking out their arsenal.

At the center of it all is Cyclops – whose strength is bolstered by the power gem. He is the center of this battle, and though there are many who would argue against his being here, there are even more hoping that he can save the day. It's a tall order for a man barely containing his powers, but it's a duty that he's all too willing to perform.

“Best get suited up,” Alex tells him, his entire body tense and his voice deep and commanding. He will brook no more arguments about placement or strategy. They are ready as they'll ever be.

The suit is uncomfortable, especially around the wing area where the cold press of metal digs into his
shoulder blades. As Stark adjusts the various components to the suit, Angel keeps his eyes on the sky and Scott floating within the blackness. He wonders how far the mutant can see now, how developed his senses are. If he has hearing like Logan, or if that part of him remains the same.

“Feel better?” Stark asks.

“Yeah. Thanks.” It’s not just Scott that's pressurized, but so is Tony with his too many things to do. Rushing around like a maniac, he double checks the satellite feed on his wrist – a direct connection to the mansion and Fury. He can hear the older man cussing up a storm over the instability of the feeds.

Stark shrugs, explains that Nick is always like this. “He hates not being in control.”

“Don't we all.” He has little camaraderie with the other man, and is still unsure about working with him, but Alex was explicit, telling the mutants that there wasn't time for grudges, not with the Earth at stake.

Tony picks up on the sour demeanor quite easily, but he understands it. He would do the same had their positions been reversed. “It's so easy to be afraid of you,” he says, surprising himself that the words came out so suddenly.

Warren quirks a thin, blonde brow. “I could say the same,” he replies. Tony nods, fully understanding the statement. “Maybe next time you will trust us instead of hunt us.”

Stark turns on heal, leaving Warren alone to deal with his suit. It's cumbersome – especially the helmet that keeps him oxygenated. Walking is difficult, and flying a great strain on his slender frame. As he lifts into the air, he catches Scott's attention once again.

The flight to his side is much easier than he thought it would be as his body gets accustomed to the extra weight of the suit. Broad metal wings span outward, the tips of razor wings glinting off the cast light from the work lamps below. “We won't be defeated,” Warren says, as if reading Cyclops' mind. “Not by Thanos. Not by anyone.”

But Cyke isn't convinced. He understands his brother’s plans, but there are still too many variables for him to find a clear solution. “He can take the gem,” Scott reveals, his hands balling up into fists. “The mind gem. He knows how to use it.”

“No. If I'm not here, too many will die.”

“Scott, you don't even know how to control your powers.” Warren turns to his friend, places a hand upon the red shield. “You don't even know what you're capable of.”

His training with Sinister has been a scant few days, not months, not years. He's nowhere near ready to follow Danvers into battle. “You could seriously hurt someone,” he continues. “You could kill us all.”

Scott recognizes the fear on Warren's face. It's the same look that Logan had when Alex revealed that he was allowing him to fight. Though both brothers think that Cyke will be useful in the coming battle, his lover and his friend worry that it will be too much for him. “Alex can always turn me off if something happens.”

“But what if something happens to Alex.”
“Don't say that.” He knows there's a chance that his brother will be caught up in the action, will suffer injuries or death, and it's not something he wants to think about. It causes too many emotions which makes the shield too hard to hold together. He needs to be cool, calm, collected as the battle approaches – free of anything but cold hard logic and the immensity of his power.

Warren notices the shift in his demeanor – the subtle edge to his jaw, the smooth easy breath. This was Cyclops in leader mode – impossible to penetrate, impossible to move. “I'll protect him, too,” he says. Scott looks at him, obviously surprised by his words. “It's what friends do, Scotty. You're not in this alone.”

Scott nods, a relief settling across his squared shoulders and on-edge nerves. “Thank you,” he says quietly. “Thank you.”
Earth

Chapter Summary

The battle begins.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay in updating, but I had a lot of problems with this chapter. I'm still iffy on it, but I hope you like it anyway.

Fury's voice rings clear through the coms. The army is here.

Light fighters – hundreds of them. Meant to swarm past the blockade on the moon, dig down deep into the Earth. Create chaos, destroy those who would defend against them.

And behind them, the war host – the ships of the Titan. Great spacecrafts, larger than expected, and capable of blowing the Earth in half. “This is gonna hurt,” Fury says. The blockade is a strong one, but not nearly enough to defeat the swarm of light fighters if just for the sheer numbers.

Alex holds his breath as the first of the ships come into view. Suited up in one of Box's mechs, he reminds the battalion to keep watch. “We won't defeat them all,” he says, “but we'll take out as many as we can.” They have to trust the teams on the ground to tackle the bulk of the light ships.

The first blast rockets through space – a spray of plasma cannons that burn bright white through the darkness. Scratching across one of SWORD's hulls, Brand tells her ships to remain in formation, to not let these punks scare them off.

They wait on Alex's command – breath held, jaws like steel. The heroes, the mechs, the ships. They know fear. They also know discipline. Scott turns his head to look at his brother. He can see it – the coolness, the calm. Clear-headed, Alex gives Cyclops the nod. “Go.”

Alex calls formation three, a graded line that sweeps to the edges of the scout ships' flight path. There are too many for them to defeat, but Fury on Earth is ready for their arrival. Already Alex can hear his calls to the soldiers, readying the troops for deployment.

Havok steadies the neutrino cannon built into the suit looking for his shot. A solid blast of green energy cracks against the hull of a light fighter, decompressing the ship instantly. He watches in horror at how the alien inside struggles for breath, clawing at the cracked pane before succumbing to death. It makes his stomach churn to kill these soldiers, but he has no other choice. He can't let Thanos win.

The light fighters weave in and out of the other ships, their make-up meant more for speed than fancy weapons. Photons and bullets are their primary systems, with suicide bombs to deal the most damage. It's the bombs that Alex is worried about – the devastation that would come with such a tactic.
Up ahead, his red energy flashing wild, Scott targets the bomb mechanisms, ripping out the belly of
the fighters. They avoid him – the blockade – understanding how dangerous he actually is, especially
in such a frenzy. Alex warns him to calm down, to pull away from the battle and get himself
together. They can’t lose him yet, not with the rest of the army on its way.

SWORD ships drive forward, pelting the fighter ships with lasers, while the mechs engage the
neutrino cannons on their suits. It’s a whirlwind, a maelstrom that never seems to stop. Explosions
and death on both sides, so much loss. And then it stops, the scout ships evading their blockade and
entering Earth’s atmosphere. This part of the battle will be fought below.

Alex takes assessment of his troops, counts the number of ships destroyed, the number of mechs
down. The heroes line up once again, with Scott trailing at the outer edge, meditating for control.
Havok’s hope lies in Stark’s brilliance, that the big guns he’s created will destroy the coming fleet. He
turns his attention to the moon, the outer rim of it blessed by sun. “How are we looking down there?”

“Ready as we’ll ever be,” Ironman answers.

It’s a tactic that even now Alex is unsure of – letting the light fighters go, saving the most destructive
of their weapons for the fleet. An element of surprise, but also one that leaves Earth’s forces
scrambling to reach the fighters before they can do much damage. Flipping channels, he can hear
Fury’s combat instructions, calling out team after team for location.

Magik and Strange are the main teleporters, harried and barely able to keep up with demand.
Together they spread the heroes and soldiers across the seven continents while the airships followed
those fighters still in the clouds.

Bullets rain down upon Wolverine and his team – Rogue and Warpath, Dazzler and Cannonball.
They’re a fast team, mowing through their swarms of scout ships with relative ease. Rogue and
Cannonball knock them out of the air while Logan and Ali finish them. They work exactly how
Scott had trained them, but it still leaves a knot in Logan’s stomach.

A fastball special, and Rogue throws him claws first into the bevvy of jets. Striking windows and
pilots, he aims for the bomb in the plane’s belly. The subsequent explosion knocking him away from
the jet and hurtling towards the ground. Rogue barely catches him in time, and she throws him
towards the next ship with an adrenalized smile on her face.

The eight fighters down and they make the call to Fury, and within seconds Illyana appears ready to
port them to the next battle – this time in Manhattan, where the bulk of the ships have flocked.
Zooming through the city, they pepper the ground with bullets, the buildings with lasers, and as soon
as the heroes get close to them, they hurtle themselves to the ground blowing up whatever is in their
path.

“Get the bombs,” Wolverine tells them all and watches as Rogue and Sam fly upwards into battle
leaving himself and Ali on the ground. They climb onto rooftops, targeting the ships as they fly past.
Ali’s plasma blasts sheer across the sky, blinding the pilots – a dangerous move if not for the supreme
teamwork that Scott had had them practice. As the plane begins to fall from the sky, Rogue tears the
bombs from the system and sets the plane down quietly. The SHIELD soldiers do the rest, taking the
aliens into custody.

Wolverine isn’t so careful as Rogue, not caring if the pilots die or not. He understands the price of
blood, and though Oya had had hope for him, he sees none for himself. Not in battle anyway. Not
when Scott’s up above him counting on his prowess.

He jumps on top of the jet, his claws digging into windshield and sending the ship into a spiral of
death. Cutting the bomb free, he jumps off just in time to avoid the impact and hand the bomb over to SHIELD. Fury tells him good job.

“Ain't no pup that needs that kind of talk,” Logan shoots back with a laugh. “When are we getting back up?”

“Sending in Hawkeye, Black Widow, and Vision as soon as they're done.”

“Good, because this battle's a little too much for three people.”

Fury understands his concerns, and ushers in a new host of SHIELD soldiers. Taking their aim at the bellies of the beasts, they detonate bombs mid-air, sending the planes in unplanned patterns across the city. Like an earthquake when they hit the ground, the buildings shake and seize, but so far, stay aloft.

Logan wonders if Scott's okay, if he's lost control, if the others are safe. The separation tears at his heart, but he also knows that this is for the best. He channels his worry and nerves into the heat of battle where he is thrown into the air to tackle another scout ship, destroying the bomb and sending it to earth. A crater forms in the cracked sidewalk, and a nearby shop loses its windows.

Wolverine pecks at the shattered glass above his eye and down his arm, and the first flung arrow through the sky signals the arrival of the other heroes. Already informed about the suicide bombs, the heroes launch into action, their battle plans as unique as they are. Vision fazes through the electronics, taking out the bomb as he goes. Natasha approaches the planes like himself, obscuring the pilot's sight as she works on taking out the weaponry. And Hawkeye – that eagle shot – uses his arrows like a master.

The other hot spot is Westchester where Storm, Kitty and Iceman work with Nightcrawler to face their nightmare. Here, the wounded are brought, cared for by Triage, Elixir and Beast. It's a precious place, and one that Storm will protect with her life.

Scattering lightning across the sky and carving rough winds from the stillness of the summer heat, she rains it all down on the light fighters, killing their flight paths while - with Nightcrawler's help - Kitty fazes through the machinery shutting down their weapons and disabling the bombs. Bobby follows Storm's lead and rips the ships with ice, cleverly encasing them and keeping them aloft on spires.

Around the mansion, SHIELD soldiers wield their guns, making quick work of the ships, and then watching as Jean Grey lowers them effortlessly to the ground. No explosions, no dive bombs, just her calm and battle prowess to bring this fight to a final end. She staves off the bullets that come at them, her finesse astounding.

Fury has no words for it when the battle finally calms down, but he knows there will be more – not just the scout ships, but the war ships as well. Their forces on the moon won't be able to stop them all, and so he tells his teams. “Lick your wounds now,” he says, “because you won't get another chance.”

He looks at Hill, his one good eye discerning. “This isn't going to end well,” he says with a tap to his screen. He pulls up the satellite feed and sees the massive fleet.

If she's afraid, she doesn't show it, but she's trained for that, to hide her emotions. “We haven't lost yet, Commander.”

“Yet,” he answers.
Space

Chapter Summary

Scott wakes up.

He stands taller than the others – the great Titan, Thanos. He knows the gems, how they work, and with them, he intends to prove that lady Death is wrong to have forsaken him. He will kill her followers. He will rage and murder, he will destroy and conquer, and in the end, once all of life is sucked up into the void, he will finally take her life as well. He will be alone in the universe, a sentiment that he enjoys. The peace. The quiet. It will be his for an eternity.

He lords over Scott Summers – the man who stole the power gem. His arms as thick as the mutant's waist. He could beat him to a bloody pulp, but having tried that before on multiple occasions, he knows that it doesn't work. It doesn't matter how much he rips away at Summers' body, he can't seem to kill the man.

Beside him, Ronan clears his throat. He's seen Thanos' struggles with the mutant, how powerless his leader is to kill him, and some small part of him smiles to see the great vanquisher stymied by such a puzzle. “What shall we do?” he asks, hiding his smile behind clenched teeth and bland look.

Thanos shrugs, bats his hand in the air waving Ronan the Accuser off. “I'll deal with it,” he says at last. “You have an army to lead.” He points to the console, the feeds that track the airships and the air drop of soldiers to the ground. Cyclops had cost them severely, taking out three of the warships and hundreds upon hundreds of scout ships. It's time to rally the troops and make their stand against Earth.

“You want the planet destroyed?”

“Yes.”

Ronan – though he shows his disgust – has no particular fondness for Earth that would prevent him from acting on his leader's actions. It's simply the effort that snarls his lips, especially knowing that there are heroes above and below the atmosphere that will try to stop them. At one time, he'd considered Earth to be a gnat buzzing in the galaxy's face – a backwards human tide that couldn't logically be a threat, but he learned very much the opposite of that in his years. Heroes are common on Earth, as is ingenuity when it comes to weapons of mass destruction.

Anymore, Earth is a force to be contended with, but not in the general way that he is accustomed to doling out destruction. Earth takes special planning, and an incredible observance which he doesn't want to do. He likes it when his troops can act for themselves – based, obviously, on his training and general demeanor. But, Thanos is unhappy with his lead on the attack – especially after the mutant with the power gem went haywire and destroyed three of the warships and their hundreds of thousands of troops. “If you can't lead them, Ronan, I shall find someone who can.”

His words come with an unspoken threat, one that the Accuser has seen a thousand times. Huffing, he leaves the room where the Titan has caged Cyclops and returns to the bridge where he will conduct his war.
Thanos watches as the violent red energy fogs around the mutant – an energy of taking down his ships, of destroying his army. But the wings of the Phoenix no longer surround him, and the power gem looks to be inactive. “I want what is mine,” he says.

“I'll destroy the gem before giving it to you.”

“Ah, a method you've tried before with the other gems, but that does not work, as you can see,” Thanos replies, showing Scott the Infinity Gauntlet and the gems that it holds. “The one you took from me is the only one left, and I will have it before long.” Rubbing lavender finger against chin, he settles down on his haunches to better see his prisoner. “I will trade the Earth for it.”

“What?”

“The gem. You give me the gem, and I will leave Earth intact.”

Scott listens carefully to the words and takes silent note of the missing agreement. Saving Earth doesn't mean saving its inhabitants. He leans back against the wall, focuses on the tip of his finger, then runs that finger across one of the bars on his cave. He watches as the black metal pieces apart and disappears. “You can't hold me here.”

“With these, I can,” Thanos answers, once again showing Scott the bevvy of gems he has collected.

He watches the villain exit the room, leaving him to the general thrump and buzzes of machines. He's surprised to be left alone, but he shouldn't be. Thanos’ arrogance has always been a problem. Yet, Scott can see through it. He's scared, and for good reason. At any moment, Cyke can destroy him and everything he's brought with him. Even without his intention.

He can still feel it – the power within him. The Phoenix slowly waking up from her forced slumber. The power gem lodged inside his mind. The prison and Apocalypse and the Dark Phoenix. The nightmares, the whispers. His mind is roaring with interference, like a radio turned to an A.M. station. Barely whispered words behind static. A satellite gone awry. It's his own thoughts that he struggles to hear. His thoughts of peace, of planning, of returning to his brother whole and in control, to Logan.

To Logan.

Always to Logan.

The feel of those roughened hands upon his cheek, his arms wrapped around his waist. The beautiful gray of his eyes, the softness when they kissed. He savors the connection, letting it twine around him – a mixture of excitement and comfort. Safe. Yes, safe. From everything, even from himself. In Logan, he was complete at last, but also terrified at the chance of loss. The thought seizes inside his mind – a frenzy of possibilities, of blood, of grief.

“So, this is love,” the Phoenix shimmers across his mind. “How frightening.” His control slipping at the onslaught of fear, Scott takes a deep breath and forces himself to breathe. “Happiness or fear, you're doomed either way.”

Cyclops takes note of her words, how she snarls them and folds her wings around her body. She's alone. Even in here, the depth of his mind, she's alone and doesn't want to be. “I remember you,” he says, pulling up memories of his childhood escapades. “Finally, I remember you.”

He also remembers the heart ache the day she forsook him.

As he pulls up the memories of those days spent under her wing, he also shows her the depth of loss
that he felt when she abandoned him. “You can't love me without your heart,” she says, flaming talon tapping against his chest. “And yours is gone. Your real one. The one made for me.”

He knows what she's talking about. The removal of his heart. The way it threaded fear throughout his body. The plexiglass, the fiberboard. The way his assailants pounded upon his chest to bring him back to life. Sabretooth. Avalanche. They were mutants, like him. But, they didn't have the power that he did. Until Sinister started messing with their DNA.

In many ways it was too easy. The copying of their internal essence. The way they fought. The way they perceived the world. But, even that was faulty. Their essence a copy of ancient background, forgetting the way they worked in modern times. Who could have been Cyclops – the way he rested and rebounded, the way he filtered through his genes searching for compatibility – for all of the combinations, for all of the foresights, Sinister never got it right. He never made an exact copy of Scott Summers. Instead, there were only pale comparisons.

Scott shows her the aftermath of her abandonment. How is seven year old self coped with her absence. His eight year old self. Nine years old, ten years old. He'd gotten used to the coldness, the emptiness. That he was undeserving, unwel. He blamed it on himself – all of it. From his capture to his imprisonment. From his brother being threatened to the teachers at the orphanage. It was his fault. Not hers, not Creed's, but his own.

“You loved me,” she says, surprised, her tears hot and red, boiling. “Even without your heart.”

“You were my friend.” He rights himself, looks at the chains that binds her to his mind.

Raking further through his mind, she studies the images of Jean and Emma, the telepathic compulsion to be devoted to them, the shreds of his memories. Love, or not love. She can't tell. And neither can Scott. He'll never know if they actually loved him, if he actually loved them. And the Phoenix finally comes to Logan. “I can't imagine my life without him,” he says quietly.

“You love him.”

“More than I love myself.”

“Do you even love yourself?”

“Once, I think.” He traces the giant chains to the collar around her neck. “The day I escaped the orphanage.”

With the power gem under his control, he can loosen the collar around her neck, open it up just slightly to give her more room. “This must be painful,” he says as he continues to pull at the collar.

“It is,” she answers. “I only wanted to save you.”

He doesn't answer, instead works on the chains, trying to open the links, but the power gem alone is not enough to undo the Scarlet Witch's magic. He listens to her apologize again and again, asking for forgiveness, some way to end the guilt that hangs so heavily over her. “I only wanted to love you,” she says.

“All you brought was misery.”

She doesn't need to look him in the eyes to know that he is saddened by her constant infiltration into his life – from Jean to the Cuckoos, the Phoenix five. The only thing that had ever made him happy
was the day she reversed the Witch’s spell and allowed mutants to be born again. “I'm sorry,” she repeats, but it does no good. She's done too much, interfered with his life far too often. “I just wanted you to remember me.”

Tired from trying to break the chains that keep her here, he sighs and takes a seat upon the ground of his mind. He asks her to quiet herself as he seeps into a trance. Holding onto the chain, he lets loose his own power, easily breaking the binds. “You're free now,” he tenders into the air.

“You're letting me go?”

“As you wanted.”

“But your friends, your lover. They're in the middle of a battle. I can help—”

“No. You've done enough.”

“Scott, if we work together —”

“I'm not giving you my mind.”

Stumped, unsure of her primal self, she wraps her wings against Scott's shoulders, pulling him in to her warm embrace. “You don't have to,” she says. “I already have it.”

Spreading out her wings, she burns across Scott's mind, reels him backwards and off balance. Now, without her chains, without the things that keep her stationary, she travels deep into his memories – the battles in the Red Dimension, the battles with Thanos. His love for Wolverine. The betrayal by Jean Grey.

Unlike the nightmares and whispers, she can enter that most sacred memory – the river, the ice. The young Summers brothers as they frolic naked across the snow, plunging down into the water. She can feel the parental love of these two creatures – these things so different from her. They had love. They understood love. They gave love. Something that she never did.

Drowning him in flame – despite the desperate press of the power gem – she takes over his mind, keeping his thoughts at bay as she reels herself into the fire and into battle. Thanos will never know what hit him.
It's the screams – inside his mind – that gives him pause. Just as his hand punches through metal and glass, it's the noises, the ache in his mind that gives him momentary pause. Hit by a hundred bullets, lasers, cannons, rays, he rips through the belly of the warship, taking it apart piece by piece.

They're dying, and he can't kill them fast enough.

In his ear, he hears his brother's increasingly frightened voice telling him to calm down, to pull away from the battle. He hears the warning of being turned off. But, none of it stops him. In a frenzy, he reaches out with his mind, touching every being in the war ship, touching those minds with slowly healed powers and in an instant turning them all off. Forever.

The ship spirals out of control, it's trajectory slamming into other ships until it gets caught in Earth's orbit, and as it burns, Scott reviles himself for destroying them.

The field is his, the others backing off afraid of the red energy lashing out through space.

The weapons that pierce him hurt, drive him further and further out of control. The Titan's fleet surrounds him with Thanos' heavy warships and light fighters that zoom in and out of the formation. They want him. They want him dead.

Scott can feel it – the mind gem, reaching out and curling across his thoughts. It shows him his memories, the ones that he's been avoiding. Those days of paranoia and abuse. The Titan shows him Jean's betrayal, Xavier's false endearment, Emma's lies. He pushes in further, uncovering the host of memories that do not belong, spinning Cyclops' mind out of control.

“Pull back!” Alex says again into com. Begging his brother to calm down as red energy grows jungle wild and threatens the forces waiting to attack Thanos.

But, he can't. Held in stasis by the mind gem as the Titan rips him apart, he can't move, can't escape. He becomes the liability that everyone was afraid of. “Breathe,” Alex tells him. “Breathe, Scott.”

The words remind him of someone. Of Logan. Somewhere in his frantic thoughts, he can hear Logan's voice in his ear, telling him to breathe. Calloused hands smoothing back his hair, the smell of cigar on his breath. 'Breathe.' He can hear the thrum of that husky voice shimmer across his thoughts – a voice of whiskey and broken gravel. Soft, purposeful. 'Just breathe'.

In his mind, he follows that singular thread – red like love – into a small cabin. The cabin. That long ago place, a memory that never dissipated. It's here that Logan waits for him. Shoved into the psychic world by Dr. Strange, he welcomes Scott with open arms, pulling him in tight. “Just breathe, Scotty,” he soothes, taking the man inside and resting him upon the old, brown sofa. “Nice and slow.”

Logan cradles him, pulls head to lap and lets him curl up into a shivering ball of too much as Thanos continues to use the mind gem to shred his conscious actions. “He can't hurt you in here, Scott. No
Connected to Cyclops' mind, Wolverine sees the battle above, how Scott fights, how he's breaking apart. He bares the Phoenix wings – bright orange and flame. Like the red energy, they fan out, burning whatever is in their path. He's breaking apart at the seams, the powers of the gems wreaking havoc on his weak sustainability. “Stop fighting, Scott,” Logan breathes. “Let the others take over.”

He's afraid, Cyclops is. Of himself. Of Thanos. If he stops fighting, people will die. But, if he continues to fight, they'll die anyway. It's a knot, a loop. Something he can't make sense of.

Up above, near the moon, the heroes and soldiers watch as he crumbles. The Phoenix wings a sign of his transcendence, of his breaking, fueled by the power gem lodged inside his mind. It's a frightening sight as his voice echoes off the ships – a pained howl that sends the energy forth and blasting through the hull of another warship. Alex screams into com for his brother to pull out, to leave the battle, and though he wants to turn him off, Tony is in his ear telling him to let the battle continue. “It's the only way we're going to win,” he explains. Hill and Fury, listening in on the channel agree.

“He's lost control,” Alex argues. “He's breaking apart.”

It's not a judgment that Havok wants to make. That torturing his brother like this is what the world needs. “I'm ending this,” he says quietly, and then says the fateful words: “Er dogren.”

Immediately, Scott's body slumps mid air as the ships continue to cut him up with their weapons. They break his visor, his bones, his mind. From the mighty ship floating just above the fray, the heroes and soldiers can hear Thanos laugh. “He's mine now.”

There is a rush to get to Cyclops, to grab him up and keep him safe. But as fast as they move, Thanos moves faster, capturing him in a single ship that quickly returns to the hive inside of the warship. Stunned, Alex is speechless, even as the heroes ask him for commands.


Alex takes a few seconds to reorganize his thoughts. “Ready your weapons,” he says, his voice deep and dangerous. “All teams, formation eight. I want those ships grounded.”

Beside him, he hears the hum of the blaster charging, a deep maroon energy smoking from its barrel.

Up ahead, Thor strikes down with his mighty hammer, the echo reverberating all around them. It gives them sudden pause, and then the channel is filled with the triumphant yells of cosmic heroes and the soldiers at their rear.

It's an all out attack, with Brand's ships stalking the scout ships now being dispatched from Thanos' gargantuan ride. They chase them through the atmosphere, herding them towards SHIELD vessels that range below in the clouds.

From the clouds the helicarriers find their marks, sending out planes of their own to deal with the light fighters. Bullets are sprayed across the sky, hydrogen bombs detonated in the air. And down below, on the ground, the heroes fight those who have escaped the metallic carnage and landed on the ground.

“War ship is entering orbit,” Maria Hill warns them. “Be ready. Formation eight.”

As the call comes through, Logan can feel Scott fade away, the words uttered, and his body now in pain. It's a dreadful spell. One that turns Cyclops' mind inside out as he tries to piece himself together.
again. “Logan, you're up.”

Before him stands Illyana, her soul sword brandished and a particularly grim look on her face. “You're needed up top.” They mean to teleport his team to skies, to one of the helicarriers, and then – hopefully – onto the warship that is threatening to invade. “It's chaos time.”

Logan nods, shaking off the dream of memory, and gathers his team around him. “Let's take ‘em down.” He doesn't yet know that Cyclops has been captured.

Into the skies they go, the helicarrier approaching the Titan's ship. It's bigger than Logan expected, shockingly so. It blots out the sun as it angles itself through the crowds, and just behind it, Logan can make out the shape of another just behind. He calls it in, lets Fury and Hill figure out what to do with it.

Magik sticks close by them, the way that Scott had trained her for formation eight, and Logan is somewhat relieved that she is coming with them. She's a helluva fighter, and her enchantments have become potent under Strange's tutelage. Not to mention, she'll be able to teleport them out once the ship starts to crash.

She opens the portal into the arms bridge, where the technicians manage the weapon. It's a lucky spot to hit, and the battle is immediate. The aliens are well versed in the X-men and what they can do, and though at first they’re not afraid, they soon realize that Logan is a non-stop killing machine. He rakes them through with bloody claws, losing himself to berzerker rage. The scents, the sounds. In a whirlwind, he stabs anything that moves, the animal inside him hungry for carnage.

“Logan,” Sam says, standing back and his hands in the air. “It's me, Logan. I'm not your enemy.”

Logan lunges for the blonde mutant, but Sam's reflexes are faster and before Wolverine stabs him, he's up in the air. “Rogue!” he calls out for the southern belle. “Get him under control!”

“If I do that -” she begins, slamming her fist through a nearby console, “then I might go crazy myself.”

“I'll take care of it,” Magik is quick to jump in. Throwing down a deep blue spell that surrounds the out of control mutant, she smiles as Wolverine is crumpled onto the floor by the energy net that she's cast. She covers him with a particular dust drawn from the satchel on her belt, coos the ancient words into his ear. The dust whips into a gentle wind, settles upon Logan's visible skin before soaking into his veins. There's a pause then – one of held breath – before the shorter mutant breaks free from the predator.

“All better?” the young girl asks.

“All better,” he answers and picks himself up off the floor. He eyes Illyana for several seconds, takes note of the dark circles under her eyes and her pallid complexion. The spells are taking a toll on her. “Why don't you rest up?” he says. “Let the rest of us tear this place apart.” Though she doesn't want to admit to her weakness, she agrees to rest. “It's going to be a long day,” he jokes. “We'll all need that soon.”

They attack the ship with abandon – with Dazzler turning the everyday sounds into plasma blasts and Warpath bullying the machinery. Rogue and Sam buzz overhead picking off their enemies one by one, and Logan takes them three by three as they surround him. He won’t lose himself again, not to the animal, not knowing that Magik is not there to rescue him.

The death is immeasurable.
They feel it. All of them. They feel what they are doing, and the guilt heavy upon them. But, this is war, and in war, there is no choice, and Sam – perhaps most of all – feels it. Wolverine worries for the younger mutant, his idealism, his most recent trauma. Not now, not during the fight, but after. When things are quiet. When the world is stable again.

They are careful with the ship's hull, that damaging it will release the oxygen, but anything else is fair game. The Titan's troops are well trained for ground combat, but not so organized in the air. As the ship bares down, tries to gain speed on SHIELD's jets, they are torn between two fronts – the one inside and the one outside – especially the one on the inside. Though there are injuries sustained – many of them – the team manages to take over the ship and send it barreling death dive to the ocean. They quickly run back to Magik, who teleports them away before the ship hits the water.

“That's one down,” she tells them, and points to another three coming down from space. “But, you're not done yet.”

Over com, Wolverine picks up on the chatter from space. The warships are getting past the barricade and Tony Stark's great space gun. He also learns about Scott. “Get me on that ship,” he growls, but Magik is unwilling.

They have a plan to follow – one that will protect Earth and its citizens. Alex's plan, and they're not breaking ranks now in order for Logan to fly off the handle. “We're following the plan.”

A solid snkt, and Wolverine is in a fighting stance. “Get me on that ship --”

“No.”

“I have to rescue him.”

“Plans for a rescue are already underway,” she says. “For now, we deal with ships in orbit. Earth is the priority.”
**Chapter Summary**

The Phoenix.

**Magnificence.** That's all Alex can think of as he watches those burning wings unfurl. The red, the yellow, the totality of life. The beauty.

With his eyes, she looks at the carnage of the broken ship surrounding her. She watches the bodies burn as the dead float into her flames. The wreckage, the rubble. She sees Thanos, and with his voice, she tells him to prepare for death.

The Titan smiles, a hideous thing that curdles in Alex's stomach as he watches the two face off. He orders the heroes and the soldiers to abandon their positions, to back away. To Tony Stark he looks then, tells the man to hold back on his weapons until he can figure out a way to get his brother back.

“Can't you just turn him off again?”

“And have Thanos capture him again?” It's a moot point, something that Alex refuses to consider. He can't put his brother in danger again.

Red energy pours out from Scott's body, as broad as the Phoenix wings, and dangerous. Whatever it touches, it erodes, be it ship or body. Not even the Phoenix and all of her might can keep Cyclops' powers in check, but she doesn't care. She will destroy them all if she has too, if it means keeping him safe.

“What the fuck is going on?” Logan's voice crackles over com. Alex can hear his worry, his fear. Even from Earth, in the wake of clouds and bright blue sky, Logan can see the wings of the Phoenix burn against the atmosphere. He curses across the channel, blame upon his lips – Havok, Fury, Stark. He blames them all for the capture of his lover and now the transformation.

Even from here - as the Phoenix rages above, slamming her talons and wings across the ships, drawing thick red lines across the sky in her uncontrollable rage – Logan can feel the press of Dr. Strange into his mind. “He needs you,” the sorcerer says. “He needs you to bring him back.”

**Blackness.**

Logan stares at the void, the astral plane – a place he's only seen on occasion, and not a place where he feels comfortable. He is met by Dr. Strange, his lean, long frame standing beside him, his blue eyes to the east where the tip of fire can be found. “This is the closest I can bring you,” he says. “Without her noticing, at least.”

“Where's Scott?”

Strange points off to the east, where flames meet the deep void of the ether. “It's possible that she won't see us as a threat.”

“Considering how many times I've killed her, I doubt that.” Claws out, he steps forward into the darkness. Behind him, a red thread sparks within his steps, the scent of Scott filling the air.
“He’s looking for you,” the taller man explains. “He’s been crying out for you for hours.”

“What didn’t you tell me?”

“I was hoping he would pull through on his own.” Logan gives him a dirty look. “He has to have the mental fortitude to control his powers, especially if he insists on hiding Infinity gems in his own mind.”

The doctor studies Wolverine’s expression – the lowered brow, the snarl upon his lips. “He has to be able to carry his burden.”

“He does just fine,” Logan scoffs, “when people are leaving him well enough alone.”

“The world will never leave him alone. Especially now that they know what he’s capable of.”

The sorcerer's words cut deeply at Logan's heart, and for a moment, he falls silent. He knows that the man is right, and for that his heart aches. “How do I get to him? His mind. Can't you just put me back into his mind like usual.”

“He's been pushed to the edges of his mind. You may not be able to reach him.”

“Then what am I doing here?”

“You're going to hunt him down and convince him to take back control.” Logan looks towards the flames in the distance and feels his stomach churn. “He needs you, Wolverine. Now more than ever.”

It's the connection between the two mutants that will make it possible. Logan's ease and Scott's devotion. That together, they are complete – stubborn and purposeful; devoted and anxious; cool headed and fiery rage. They are best together in those silent, stolen moments. The soft smiles, the avoidant gaze. The glee that wells up and warms them, the love that has barely been explored.

Logan's first step forward is hesitant – he doesn't know if he's ready for this, fighting the Phoenix. “You're staying with me, right?” he asks the good doctor.

Strange nods. “I will keep the Phoenix busy for as long as I can. But, as a primal force in the universe, do not expect me to fight her for long.”

As they move forward through the ether, Strange mumbles through a blue-green incantation, one that makes Wolverine's head feel funny. Dizzy, bleary-eyed, he looks at the sorcerer. “I'm sending you into Cyclops' mind,” he explains and then picks up a pale blue thread from the ground, latching it onto his belt. “In case you get lost, you are tethered to me. I'll be able to find you anywhere.”

Logan nods, feels himself begin to melt, a river without a dam – fast, churning. He feels himself being pulled towards the flame of the Phoenix, a frightening ride that he can't avoid. Here, there are secrets that the universe is unwilling to tell, lies and stories, truths and tales if one is able to look upon them, but Logan cannot. The river of him swells and moves too fast within the darkness, and within moments, he is nipped by the flames of the Phoenix. Dr. Strange takes his stance, and with a single word, “Tirabu,” he disappears Logan into the mind of Scott Summers.

He knows this place – this ice laden realm – the cold, the nightmares. At night, he dreams of this, the sheer pain of being here again, listening to those whispered doubt and faults, running from demons made of Scott's memories.

He sees them on the horizon, the nightmares. Ravenous, like dogs, they howl at the sky, standing up, kneeling down. It's then that Logan surmises that they have caught something. Something important.
Something that shouldn't be devoured. Not here, not in Scott's mind.

It's with great effort that Wolverine tramples upon the snow, sinking down in and pushing himself forward despite the hardship. As he gets closer, he sees the blood upon their faces, flesh and bone in their hands. The phantom Jean catches sight of him out of the corner of her eyes and instantly lashes forward, her long, sharp nails catching into Logan's ribs. “Die,” she husks, her eyes turning red as her blood begins to boil.

Metal through fresh, he disembowels the woman he thought he once cared for. Her screams light against the blizzard wind, and pull the attention of the others. Iceman, Rogue, Beast. They attack without mercy, their horrific forms twisted and frightening. But Logan is not without strategy. In his head, he can hear Scott – all those years ago – go through the weaknesses of the team, including himself. “And if I lose my mind, wouldn't you want to know how to stop me?”

Rogue taunts him from the air, while Iceman builds a thick, icy wall around him. Logan curses to himself for not getting the drop on Bobby's nightmare and allowing himself to be caged up. Four quick slashes to the wall of ice, and he watches it crack from the bottom, giving Rogue time enough to wrap her hands around his neck in order to choke the life from him. As she holds him in the air, he kicks and punches at the air until one frantic claw finally makes purchase. In pain, the shade of Rogue drops him to the ground and holds her stomach in while Beast and Iceman gear up for the fight.

He lands on his ass when Beast comes forward swinging and Bobby ices his feet to the ground. Beast's weaker on the left side of his body. Concentrate there, and it's harder for him to dodge. It's easier said than done, especially with Bobby coating him with never ending ice. Bobby will always shield himself if he thinks he's in danger. Take advantage of that shield by getting behind him where he can't see you coming.”

Cracking through the ice shell once again, he makes a lunge against Beast's left side. Claws between rips, he watches the furry behemoth fall to the ground. And just as Scott had said all those years ago, Bobby makes an ice shield to protect himself – one that is easily shattered by his claws. Right into the neck his fist goes, shocking the breath out of Iceman, and his ghostly form falls to the ground.

Logan is quick to his feet. And though the nightmares are dissipating, he knows they will be back, and in greater numbers, unless he can find Scott and help him regain control.

Trodding a few feet to the right, he discovers a small, bloody child, and instantly, Logan knows who it is. “Scott?” Naked, cold, the child had been drug from that cherished memory, and now barely breathing, he sinks into unconsciousness.

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