## To Rebuild a Life

**Summary**

Alex Summers didn't have the best relationship with his family. That was only to be expected, considering his parents couldn't stand mutants, and Alex is about as mutant as they come. The only bright spot had been his brother, Scott, but he had been dead for years. Or so Alex had thought, until the CIA called the X-Men for help with an illegal mutant experimentation lab run by Trask Industries.

A lab that just so happened to be holding an apparently-not-dead Scott Summers.

And now, Alex doesn't care if he has to burn all of Trask Industries to the ground. He's getting his brother back.

(Or: The Summers brothers appear to share the God-given talent of blowing stuff up. People should really begin to take that as a warning not to mess with them.)
Something you must know to understand this chapter: In the comics, the reason Cyclops could never control his power was because of a head injury he received falling out of a plane long before his mutant abilities developed. The movies seem to ignore that little detail altogether. In this fic, Scott never fell out of a plane in his tragic backstory (don't worry, he still gets an incredibly tragic backstory). Ergo, he has control - at first. There are several reasons for this. The biggest one is that I can't have him walking around with crazy jets of fire shooting out of his eyes, obviously. The only way he can contain said jets of fire are through special Ruby Quartz Ray-Bans, which he can't get unless he goes to Professor X, which doesn't happen until later in the story. There is absolutely no way that teenage Scott Summers just so happened to find glasses that magically control his laser vision (yes, I'm talking to you, X-Men Origins: Wolverine). (Well, in the comics he originally got the glasses from Mr. Sinister, but that can of worms hasn't even been addressed by the movies so I'm not going to go into that.) He's obviously going to lose control at some point, because we all know Cyclops will never be complete unless he's wearing some dorky visor or shades that really aren't as cool as he thinks they are. Also, I'm screwing with the timeline for this fic. This takes place a little bit before X-Men: Apocalypse, and while I realize that the movie takes place like, twenty years after First Class, it shall not be that way for this fic. Honestly, all the actors barely look like they aged a day; I have no idea why the directors thought it would be realistic to say that they had aged twenty years. I don't really have a specific date in mind for when this takes place, so I would appreciate if you all would ignore that little detail, and just mentally place the sequence as sometime after Days of Future Past, and sometime before Apocalypse, with no regard to actual dates.

See the end of the work for more notes.
When Alex left, Scott hadn't understood why.

Alex had been the resourceful one. He had been the one that was supposed to do something with his life. He was not supposed to suddenly rebel, arguing with his parents at all hours while Scott squeezed a pillow to his head in an attempt to smother out the screams. Their family home became like a pressure cooker, the tension boiling greater and greater until it felt like it would burst at any moment.

And it finally did, three weeks after the shouting began.

It wasn't a big explosion. It wasn't slamming doors and screamed curses.

Instead, it was Scott waking up to Alex shuffling around on his half of the room, cramming clothes into bags.

“Alex?” Scott sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “What are you doing? Are you going somewhere?”

Alex froze, not daring to look back at him. “Yeah,” he said, his voice rough. “Yeah, I'm going away.”

Scott frowned. “But when will you be back?”

Slowly, Alex resumed shoving items in his bag, still not looking at him. “I'm not coming back.”

The rusty wheels in Scott’s sleep-addled brain slowly began to churn. Alex was leaving. Alex wasn't coming back. But that was impossible, because Alex couldn't just leave him. The longest Scott had ever gone without his brother was a couple days; Alex was the most constant thing in his life. Decisively, Scott slid out of the bed and scrambled over to his closet, yanking out a bag and beginning to shove items in as well.

This time, Alex did look at him. “What are you doing?”

“I'm coming with you,” Scott informed him. In his mind, it was simple. Alex was his brother. Alex was leaving. Brothers were meant to stick together. Ergo, Scott was going with him.

“No, you're not.”

“Yes, I a-”

“No, you're not!”

Scott shrank back, surprised. Alex had never yelled at him before, not like that. Slowly, he sank back onto his bed, his eyes burning. “Yes, I am,” came out the watery protest.

Alex sighed, sitting down next to him and pulling him close. “Scott... You can't come with me.”

“Why not? Why are you leaving? You haven't even finished high school yet! Where will you go?”

“It's... complicated. But you can't come with me, Scottie. You have to stay here.”

Scott pressed his face into his brother’s side, his eyes burning. “I don't want you to leave.”
“I don't want to either. But I have to.”

“That's stupid.”

A humorless laugh escaped Alex’s throat. “Yeah, it is.”

“But you'll come back, though,” Scott said, seizing on a distant hope. “You'll come back and visit me.”

“Scott…”

“You'll come back,” he insisted.

“...I'll come back.”

“Promise,” he said stubbornly.

Scott could hear the smile in his brother's voice. “I promise. But while I'm gone, you have to promise me to be good. Use your head, do your school work.”

Scott poked his brother's side. “You're the smart one, not me.”

Alex laughed. “Don't give me that lie, Scottie. Not many kindergarteners are smart enough to know how to sneak a stray cat into the principal's office.”

“Nobody's ever proven that that was me.”

“Scott,” Alex said in warning. “You need to focus all that evil genius on your school work. You're gonna go far, kid.”

“You could go far too if you would just not go.”

“Promise me, Scott.”

Scott sighed unhappily. “I promise.”

“Alright,” Alex said, giving his shoulder one last squeeze before standing up. “I need to get going. Walk me out?”

Scott frowned. “Aren't you gonna say goodbye to Mom and Dad?”

Alex froze again. “Uh, no. We already said goodbye.”

Suddenly, all the pieces slid into place. “They're making you leave, aren't they?”

“No, no they just-”

“You're lying! They can't make you leave! I won't let them!”

“Scott, I told you, it's complicated. And right now, Mom and Dad think that it's best if I'm not here.”

“I hate them!”

“None of that,” Alex chastised, bending down to Scott's level. “They're your parents, and they love you.”

“They used to love you too.”
Alex smiled sadly. “Yeah, they did.” Suddenly, he stood up and held out his hand. “Come on; it's time to go.”

Slowly, Scott trailed behind his brother through the darkened house, reaching the front door all too soon.

Alex pulled his brother into a tight hug. “Never let anyone tell you that something's wrong with you, Scott,” he whispered into his ear. “Never let them say that what you are is wrong.”

“Alex, what…” Scott trailed off, confused.

And, just like that, the moment shattered. Alex pulled back, a fake smile on his lips. “It's nothing. I love you, Scott. Always remember that.”

“I love you too,” Scott whispered, tears dripping down his face.

And then Alex left, his bag slung over his shoulder and his brother watching helplessly by the door.

And Scott didn't understand why.

His parents found him the next day, asleep by the door, waiting for a brother that wouldn't come back. Scott refused to speak to them - to anyone - for three weeks.

Four months later, they received a call that Alex had been arrested, and sent to prison.

Scott's parents wouldn't let him visit him at the jail.

After that, Scott considered rebelling. He considered ignoring his promise of working harder, of spewing all his confusion and anger over everybody around him. But in the end, he kept his promise, because he had no doubt that the day his brother got out of prison he would come to see him, and Scott wanted to be able to show him that he had kept his promise after all. And so he worked hard. He brought his grades up and joined the cross country, baseball, and martial arts teams at school. He learned German and Spanish. He became a model student in every way possible (excepting the occasional prank Scott pulled, of course… And the occasional skipped class… And the occasional detention…Okay, he got good grades; he wasn't a teacher's pet), because maybe if he did then Alex would come back.

He tried as hard as he possibly could.

Alex didn't come back.

Then, one day, Scott was in his room reading when a pressure began to build in his head. He had been having headaches for the past few days, but this one was worse than all the others. Quickly, he put down To Kill a Mockingbird and rubbed his eyes, trying to get the burning sensation to cease.

It didn't. Instead, it grew.

Scott blinked hard, and the pressure suddenly grew and burst, his vision blurring red.

Twin streams of red exploded from between his eyelids and slammed a cup off his dresser and into the wall.

Quickly, Scott scrambled to his feet, his heart pounding. He slowly crept towards the cup and picked it up in trepidation. The entire side had warped and melted under the force of his gaze. Sprinting now, Scott rushed to the bathroom and looked in the mirror, locking the door behind him.
Red danced in his brown eyes.

“No way,” Scott breathed.

He was a mutant.

And suddenly, his brother leaving made a lot more sense.

Mutations were genetic, Scott knew that. In all likelihood, if Scott had it then so did Alex. Moreover, it unraveled the meaning behind a lot of what he had heard and seen in those hectic days when Alex was still here. The shouts of *freak* and *dangerous* made a lot more sense than they had before. Scott knew that his parents couldn’t stand mutants; when knowledge of them had become public, they had been very, very vocal about their disgust.

*(Never let anyone tell you that something's wrong with you, Scott. Never let them say that what you are is wrong.)*

Which left Scott with a problem. A very, very big problem.

If his parents found out about him, they would likely kick him out too.

Or worse.

And so Scott very quickly decided not to tell his parents.

That night at dinner, for the first time in a long time, Scott asked about his brother.

“He was sent to prison,” his mother responded, her lips pressed together as if she had eaten something sour. “You know that.”

“I know,” Scott responded quickly. “It’s just, we never talk about him anymore. It’s been awhile since he’s been arrested, and you won’t even tell me what he had done; I thought maybe he’d be out by now.”

“What’s the sudden interest in him?” his father asked stiffly.

Scott swallowed hard. “I… I was just… I was hoping that I could visit him. Talk to him.”

Silence fell at the table.

When his brother first left, Scott would stay up for hours, waiting by the window. Back then, his young mind hadn’t been able to comprehend that his brother wouldn’t be back for a long, long time. To Scott, “I’ll come back” meant a few weeks, not several *years*. And so, for *months*, Scott would fall asleep by the window, watching for a brother that never returned. And for everyday of those months, his parents would scold him for it, as if just because they no longer loved Alex *Scott* wouldn’t either. Eventually, Scott had given up the practice - much to his parents relief. It had hurt too much to continue it.

But now, Scott couldn’t afford to go back to waiting at windows. He needed help - his brother’s help - and fast. Scott could feel his abilities welling up behind his eyelids and threatening to betray his secret in a cataclysm of red. If *anyone* could help him control it, it was Alex.

“No,” his father said shortly, his lips pinched in annoyance.

“But I just wanted to-”
“No, Scott.”

“But if you would just-”

“I said no, Scott!” His father’s silverware slammed down on the table with a sense of finality.

And that, really, was the end of that.

Once, Scott had had a dog walking business.

It had been one of those things that every little kid did at one point to earn a little extra money, like lemonade stands or mowing lawns. It hadn’t been a very successful business venture; only three of his neighbors had taken him up on the offer.

The most memorable part of the work had been a Great Dane named Bruno.

Bruno had been an incredibly large, incredibly excitable dog that would take off after every new scent, yanking at the leash with fervor and threatening to tear away from Scott’s control at every moment.

Scott’s mutation reminded him a little of that.

It wasn’t like a faucet; he couldn’t simply choose to turn it on or off. Instead, it pressed at his eyes at all moments, requiring him to consciously restrain its force every second. If he even slipped up a little, his irises would bleed red and light began to form in his gaze. At the moment, if Scott relaxed his focus completely, two very powerful, very dangerous streams of force would shoot from his eyes, capable of mass property damage and bodily harm.

Hence why Scott no longer had a desk. Or a window.

So yes, Scott was a bit desperate to gain more control of his mutation.

He ended up going out and buying a woodburning kit. Which he never used.

Instead, he would burn patterns into planks of wood with his eyes.

The kit was really only for his parent’s sake; Scott certainly didn’t need it. The boy was well known for finding a random hobby and becoming completely fascinated with it for several weeks, so if Scott claimed that the sudden influx of wooden crafts was due to an inspiration to undertake woodburning as his life’s work, his parent’s wouldn’t question it.

It certainly wasn’t an attempt to gain control over the mutation that Scott absolutely did not have.

Whenever he would practice, Scott would draw a pattern onto a plank of wood, then attempt create that same pattern using his lasers.

He failed at it. Miserably.

At first, Scott would more often blast a giant hole in the plank than have created an artistic masterpiece. Slowly - very, very slowly - Scott managed to gain control over it to the point that he was able to release just enough of his power that a thin, shallow line was formed. One which shot all over the plank wildly, and created a formless, squiggly line that in no way resembled the original pattern.

But, after many, many, *many* practices, Scott was eventually able to create an image with his eyes
The act helped teach him aim and restraint, making containing his mutation almost second nature. That wasn’t the only method he used to practice. Somedays, Scott could be found traveling out to an empty field with his baseball bat, about to crack rocks high over the grass in an attempt to knock them out of the sky with his power. However, most of the time, Scott would be holed up in his room with a plank of wood, carefully etching a pattern with a gaze of fire.

Which is exactly how his mother found him one day when she walked into his room without knocking.

“You’re home early,” Scott had stuttered, jumping up from his seat with a pounding heart. He had had his Walkman on, the music covering the sound of her footsteps and the creak of the door. It hadn’t covered the startled scream that had escaped her lips when she saw the red stream escaping from his eyelids.

His mother glanced wildly between her son and the overturned block of wood that had ultimately betrayed his secret. “You’re… You’re a…”

Quickly, Scott ran through a list of desperate lies that could maybe, somehow save him. He was making a movie for school, and that had just been a special effect. She had seen incorrectly, maybe they should get her eyes checked. He had joined some weird cult, and had gained special powers from a dangerous and illegal initiation ceremony.

All of them were unrealistic, impossible scenarios that his mother would never believe.

“Mutant,” Scott sighed, picking up the still burning wood from the floor. “I’m a mutant.”

That night, Scott sat with his forehead pressed against the window, watching for a brother that wouldn’t come as he listened to his parent’s muffled arguing.

Then, he became fed up with it all. Scott was fed up of having to hide what he was; he was fed up with having to be scared of his parents; most of all, he was fed up with waiting for a brother that still hadn’t come back to rescue him.

And so Scott got up from the window, opened the door, and walked downstairs.

“Are you going to kick me out?” Scott asked, pretending he hadn’t felt a stab of pain at the way that his parents had tensed when he came into view (it didn’t hurt it didn’t hurt it didn’t hurt).

“Scott... What?” his dad floundered, staring at him in confusion.

“Are. You going. To kick. Me out?”

“Why would you think that we were going to-”

“You kicked Alex out,” Scott interrupted. “When you found out that he was a mutant, you kicked him out. I’m right, aren’t I?”

“What happened with your brother was complicated,” his mother soothed. “There were a lot of reasons why it happened the way it did.”

Scott snorted. Of course, everything was still complicated. For once, he wished that something in his life was uncomplicated. “If you’re going to kick me out, could you just do it already? I’m tired of this.” He was tired, so tired. In fact, having his parents find out about him was almost a relief. At
least the fear and paranoia was over; at least he didn’t have to spend every second scared that red had begun to burn in his eyes.

Quickly, his parents exchanged a look, an indeterminable decision passing between them. His mother stood up and walked over to him. Then, much to his surprise, she enveloped Scott into a hug.

“What happened with Alex was complicated,” his mother said evenly, pulling back. “When we first found out about him, nobody knew that mutants existed. We were scared, and confused, and a lot of things were said by both sides that we regret. If we could do it over again, we would, but it’s too late for that. What happened with him doesn’t mean that we’re going to make the same mistakes with you.” Then, with a smile that Scott told himself wasn’t fake, she continued. “We’re a family, Scott, and we love you. We’ll get through this, together.”

And God help him, he believed her.

Here’s the thing about Katherine and Christopher Summers: They weren’t bad parents.

Yes, Scott had hated them for kicking Alex out. Yes, he had tried to hide his mutant status from them.

But that was only a part of who they were.

Scott’s mom had never missed a single one of his cross-country meets. His dad had helped him with every homework assignment he had ever needed assistance with. They had baked cookies for the school bake sales; they had come to parent-teacher meetings. They weren’t abusive. They weren’t unfair in their rules. All in all, Scott thought he had pretty great parents.

(And really, nobody ever wanted to think that their parents didn’t love them.)

And so, like an idiot, Scott believed them when they said that they didn’t care that he was a mutant. He believed them when they said that they were a family.

Like a stupid, stupid idiot, he believed them when they said they loved him.

Looking back on it, Scott would wonder that maybe if they had been abusive, terrible parents, then maybe what had happened would have hurt less. Maybe then the pain wouldn’t have cut him so deeply. Of course, then he realized that if they had been horrible, it never would have happened in the first place.

Because if Scott hadn’t wanted to believe that his parents loved him just as much as he loved them, he would have run the moment he developed a mutation.

Scott’s world fell apart exactly nine days after his parents found out that he was a mutant.

It had started the moment Scott had been born, his genes damning him from the beginning. It had started with twelve words.

“We’re going to be visiting a friend of your father’s later today.”

“Which one?”

“You don’t know him yet. They met in the military, and he can't wait to meet you.”

All in all that, wasn't too unusual. While Major Christopher Summers of the US Air Force had retired
from the service, he still had friends popping up that he had met during his time there.

And so when his father had led him into the car later that day saying, “Come on, we don't want to keep Colonel Stryker waiting,” Scott hadn't been worried.

When Scott had questioned the long drive, his father's explanation that Stryker lived up in the mountains had allayed any fears he may have had.

It wasn't until he noticed the helicopter that he realized what was happening.

The road they were on was at least a half hour drive from the nearest sign of humanity. His parents hadn't spoken in at twice that time.

And there was a military grade helicopter flying towards them.

Slowly, Scott closed his eyes, his heart pounding in fear. “We're not going to see a friend of yours, are we?” he asked, his voice hoarse and hollowed out and beginning to tremor.

“Of course we are,” his father replied, not looking at him.

Liar.

“We're not out here to visit him, are we?”

His father didn't reply. It didn't matter.

Because Scott already knew the answer.

Quickly, his hands scrambled towards the door handle, jerking it in frustration.

It was locked.

Scott glared at his parents. “Open the door,” he demanded.

“Calm down, Scott,” his mother said, her hands white-knuckling her seat. “Everything's going to be okay.”

“Open the door!”

It was too late. Scott could already see the armored trucks heading towards their car.

He looked at his parents in desperation, his heart racing and his thoughts screaming and he wanted, needed to know, “How could you?”

“I'm sorry, Scott,” his father whispered.

Scott's blood turned cold. “No, you're not.”

Then, he blasted the car door off its hinges and threw himself out.

Scott Summers hit the ground at forty miles per hour.

For a moment, Scott laid there on the ground, groaning in pain. But then, he heard the trucks screeching to a stop and the soldiers running towards him, and Scott forced himself to his feet and ran as fast as he possibly could.

He could make it. He could. Somehow, he would outrun the soldiers and the trucks and the
helicopter, and he would escape. He would live on the streets if he had to, as long as he could escape, please God let him escape whatever was waiting for him if they caught him -

Two more trucks raced down the street towards him, cutting off his exit.

Scott skidded to a stop, stuck between the rapidly closing troops, a half-formed plan in his mind.

Here's the thing about his mutation: Scott had never had to put effort into it.

Well, granted he had to put effort into containing it, but releasing it had never needed any work. After all, Scott had destroyed half his room when he accidentally relaxed his focus; he had never wanted to find out what would happen if he pushed his abilities.

But now, he wondered.

If a normal blast was enough to shatter his desk, maybe at full power he could destroy a truck or two.

And maybe if the trucks were exploding, the soldiers would be distracted enough that he could at least get a head start, if not get away.

Quickly, Scott gathered all of the betrayal and fear and anguish into his mind, and he pushed.

A soldier tackled him from behind.

The shot was knocked off course, missing the truck entirely and shooting off into the distance, hitting a mountain instead.

And the mountain exploded.

Scott stared in shock as massive, flaming chunks of rock rained down around what was formerly a very large mountain, and now appeared to be a somewhat big hill. “Oh God, what have I done?” he breathed.

He was so horrified that he didn't realize there was still a soldier on top of him until he was stabbed in the back.

Scott gasped in pain as the drug was infused into his bloodstream, wrenching his arms and legs against the soldier cramming a needle in his side.

And suddenly, Scott couldn't use his mutation anymore.

It was still there; he could feel the pressure building against his eyelids, wanting release. Scott just couldn't release it; it was as if someone had put up a block in his mind, restraining his powers.

Roughly, Scott was yanked to his feet with his arms pinned behind him. Another soldier rushed forward to help contain his frantically struggling form. Around him, Scott could see men glancing between him and the burning carnage in fear.

And then someone started to laugh.

“Alright,” called a man’s voice, clapping and laughing as if he had just watched a successful football play. “That's what I'm talking about!”

Wildly, Scott jerked around towards the source of the noise. There was a man standing next to the now-landed helicopter, his dark aviator shades focused on Scott as he let out smug laughs.
Slowly, the man began to walk towards him, still laughing. “I've got to admit, I didn't see that coming,” he chuckled, coming to a stop in front of Scott. The man - Colonel Stryker? - reached up and grabbed Scott's hair in his fist, jerking his head to a sharp upward angle. “You are going to be interesting for sure.”

Scott spat in his face.

Stryker stiffened. Slowly, he wiped the spittle off of his face.

Then, he drew back his fist and punched Scott in the jaw.

Scott's head snapped backwards under the force. The burning landscape surrounding him begin to spin, and the pressure behind his eyes swelled but didn't break.

“Alright, get it on the chopper,” Stryker called to the troops. “We need to move out before people start coming in about that mountain.”

Scott felt physically sick when he realized that the it he was talking about was him.

The men holding his arms began dragging him towards the helicopter. “No,” Scott said numbly. This wasn't happening. This couldn't be happening. “No,” he repeated louder, icy panic racing through his veins. “No!” Scott thrashed against his captors, struggling with all his might, and nothing worked.

Then, he saw his parents.

They were standing away from the proceedings, next to their now-ruined car. In his father's hands was a bag that no doubt was filled with money.

Filled with the price for the life of their youngest son.

And in that moment, Scott didn't know what hurt more: The fact that his parents no longer loved him or the realization that their love had always been conditional.

And he wanted to know one thing from his mother and father.

It wasn't why. He already knew why.

“How long?” Scott screamed at them, dragging his feet in a futile effort to stop his captors. “How long have you been planning this? Since you found out I was a mutant, since yesterday, when?”

“Oh, much longer than that, Scott,” Stryker answered in their stead. “They've been planning this for years.”

Scott froze. “That's impossible.” They had only known about his mutation for nine days. There was no way that this betrayal was years in the making.

“On the contrary, it's very possible. As you well know, mutations are genetic, and if two siblings are both mutants they often display similar abilities. Now, it was your brother’s unique talent that caught our attention, but we lost track of him. After losing him, we suggested to your parents that if you ever exhibited similar traits, well…” Stryker continued with a sickening grin. “We'd make it worth their while.”

Scott felt sick, his world spinning until it no longer made sense. For years, his parents had acted like they loved him, all while planning to sell him if he ever showed a sign of a genetic fluke.

But one thing about Stryker's story didn't make sense.
How could they have lost track of his brother? Alex was in jail; it was impossible to lose track of him. “My - my brother's in prison,” Scott flustered numbly.

“Prison? Didn't you know? Your brother's been out of prison for years. After all, he only stayed there for what, seven months? Less?”

And in that moment, Scott knew what revelation had hurt the most that terrible, terrible day.

His brother had been out of prison for years. His brother had been free and hadn't once come to see him.

And Scott was a stupid, childish, naive idiot for ever believing that his family had loved him.

“And load it up!” Stryker yelled, waving his arms at the troops. “Let's get this one back to the labs before the suppressants wear off!”

Silent tears dripped down Scott's face as one of the soldiers walked up to him. When the bulky man raised his gun, he didn't even bother to struggle. Then, the pistol slammed down onto Scott's forehead.

And all he knew was darkness.
Scott Summers falls in love in quite possibly the worst place conceivable. (Or: Snapshots in the life of a lab rat.)

By the fourth change in labs, Scott was almost used to being treated worse than an animal.

Almost.

He pushed himself off of the cold metal ground, groaning as he felt the world spinning around him. As he did in any space, Scott clicked his tongue, listening carefully as the noise bounced off the walls and echoed back to him. Echolocation was a bit like detective work, he had discovered. The information you got back was always confusing as hell at first (at least to him), and as you filtered through it, you could build an idea of what it probably meant. But for him, there was never any certainty of his surroundings.

There hadn’t been for a long time.

Slowly, Scott began to shuffle around the space on his hands and knees until he reached a wall. Then, he followed the surface with his hands as far as it went, confirming his suspicions.

He was in a big metal box.

Scott clicked his tongue again to pick up any information he had missed the first time. The dull pitch signifying a small, stout object filtered back to him. Scott clicked his tongue again. It was definitely there, and probably hollow if he was interpreting things correctly. A bucket, likely. Carefully, Scott moved over towards where he had heard the echos, reaching out his hands blindly to discover an empty metal container: Definitely a bucket.

Scott could guess as to what it was meant for.

Anger welling up inside of him, Scott hurled the object across the small space, listening as it rattled and clanged against the enclosure. Tears of frustration leaked down his face as Scott contemplated the life he had been damned to since his parents had sold him all those - months? Years? How long had it been since he had been free? How long had it been since he had seen the sky? How long had it been since he had seen anything? How long had it been since he had heard his own name?

(Forever.)

When Scott had first woken in Trask Labs, he had found himself just one mutant in a metal cage in a long line of mutants in metal cages. (And he still couldn’t use his mutation.) Not long after, guards had opened the creaky steel door, bars swinging away in a pitiful facsimile of freedom. Then, Scott had been dragged off to labs for testing. For three days, Scott was subjected to endless brain scans, biopsies, cerebrospinal fluid extractions, and more. In those three days, Scott learnt more about pain than he had in his entire life leading up to that point. (Later, as he spent more time in labs and the
tests became more and more intrusive, Scott would look back to those first three days and dream of when it had been that painless.)

On the fourth day, the drug they were using to block his mutation had worn off.

The stronger the mutation, the higher the needed dose, Scott would later discover. The lab that he was being held in at the time had never had as powerful a mutant as he; they hadn’t realized that it would wear off much quicker on him than it did on the other mutants. And so, four days after he had been sent to Hell, Scott felt the shields restraining his ability drop and promptly blasted the door to his cell off its hinges. It was simple work to knock out the guards with his optic blasts, and even simpler to free his fellow mutants.

And for one moment, Scott actually thought that they would escape.

But then more guards came, and Scott was still the only one that could use his mutation. All of the other prisoners were weak, underfed, and injured, and there had been just too many guards for Scott to stop by himself. A dart had hit him early in the fight, stealing away his mutation and the little advantage they had. When the others had attempted to overwhelm the wardens physically, the dart guns disappeared and the real guns came out.

That day, Scott learnt a valuable lesson: Trask Industries didn’t care if their test subjects died.

Most of the mutants they had weren’t that powerful, and as consequence weren’t considered valuable. While many of the mutations the others had were amazing - Scott had heard of people who could manipulate light, had the ability to change the color of their eyes and hair at will, were empaths, and more - they weren't combat oriented. It wasn't the mutations themselves that had attracted Trask’s attention, but simply the fact that they were mutants. They were a dime a dozen to the scientists, merely lab rats to see how certain drugs influenced the X-gene, etcetera. To them, the only mutants valuable enough to make a concerted effort to keep alive were the ones that had the potential to be very, very dangerous.

(Mutants like Scott.)

Scott had been one of the only survivors of the bloodbath that day.

Five hours later, they moved him to a lab with better security.

There, Scott was kept apart from the other subjects, the only resident of the high-security ward. He spent his days being experimented on, abused, and completely, utterly alone.

It was in that lab that Scott lost all control of his mutation.

Most of the time, he was stopped from blasting his way out of the facility by liberal use of suppressants and the occasional electric shock. Using his mutation had never been an option since that first escape attempt, much to Scott's dismay. However, one day, after a brain operation, that changed.

Scott hadn’t known why the scientists were cutting into his head, nor did he know what information they had hoped to gain about his mutation from the operation (strangely enough, informing him, the lab rat, about the particulars of their atrocious experiments had never been high on the scientist’s list of priorities). He did know that something had gone terribly, terribly wrong during it. Afterwards, whenever he opened his eyes, Scott was unable to restrain his mutation. It had taken the guards thirteen zaps of a cattle prod and an overdose on suppressants for them to realize that no, he wasn’t just being difficult, he couldn’t contain his optic blasts anymore, and it took eleven days of nonstop
experimenting and another operation for the scientists to deem it irreparable. Not even the suppressants could stop it anymore. After that, Scott received a bulky metallic vice that wrapped completely around his head and locked over his eyes \textit{too tightly}, and was only ever unlocked when the scientists wanted to test on his eyes more (while Scott was heavily sedated, of course).

Since that day, Scott had been effectively blind.

He had taught himself echolocation out of sheer necessity, but even that didn’t make up for the sight he had been dependent on his entire life. Before the operation, Scott had - like \textit{everyone else} - taken his vision for granted. Now, he couldn’t read. He couldn’t match faces to the voices that echoed to him from the darkness. He couldn’t see colors. He had trouble navigating. (He had trouble with \textit{everything}.) His hearing had, however, greatly improved after losing his ability to see - so greatly, in fact, that Scott wondered if it was a normal reaction to becoming blind or if the scientists had altered something. Maybe losing his sight would have been \textit{a little} easier (though it would have been devastating in any scenario) if Scott had had something resembling a support system. Instead, he had indifferent and possibly psychopathic scientists testing on him and a rotating schedule of trigger-happy guards.

None of which was conducive to healing from traumatic losses.

Which left him, two more lab switches and many - weeks? months? years? - later, kneeling pitifully in a giant metal box, futilely yanking at the metal vice over his eyes and sobbing uselessly.

-ello?

Scott’s tears abruptly cut off at the noise. Quickly, he scrambled backwards in his cage, not stopping until he hit the wall. There hadn’t been anyone in the cell when he last checked; he was sure of it. And if the door had opened, Scott would have heard it; there was no way he \textit{wouldn’t} have.

But he was also sure that he had just heard someone’s voice.

Scott clicked his tongue. Empty. He was the only person inside the box.

Was this what insanity felt like? Was this what it was like to completely lose your mind? Had he gotten to the point that he was imagining voices?

hello?

The same voice again, barely a whisper. This time, Scott could tell more about it. Its owner was female, and just as tentative and scared as Scott.

“H-h-el-lo,” Scott croaked out tentatively. Shaking his head, Scott cleared his throat. His voice was rusted from disuse, hoarse and weak. Of course, that was only to be expected. After all, he hadn’t used it for anything other than screaming in a long time. Scott tried again. “Hello? Who’s there? Why can I hear you?”

\textit{I’m not in your cell}, the voice whispered, answering Scott’s unspoken question. \textit{I’m in the cell next to yours; I’m in your thoughts. I’m a telepath.}

Scott frowned. \textit{How is that possible}? He couldn’t understand why a telepath would be allowed to have unfettered powers if they were also a prisoner; it was far too big of a flight risk.

The voice - she - explained that her powers \textit{were} bound, just like Scott’s. As powerful as it was, her mutation had never reacted to the suppressants, and as such Trask Industries had been forced to take more drastic measures. If she was released from her cage for testing, she had three armed guards on
her at all times, and an electric shock bracelet that activated if she used her powers. While she was locked up, some kind of electric field around her cell kept her from using her ability to any real extent. However, even then it couldn’t fully restrain her talent (telepathy and telekinesis, she had explained. I can move things with my mind, too). She could still hear faint echoes of the surface thoughts of the people nearby, and, with effort, send out whispers of her own. Not enough to control someone, unfortunately for them and fortunately for the guards, but enough to communicate. But before Scott, she had no one to communicate to. She had been the only prisoner in the high-security wing; who could she speak to, her captors? Until she had heard Scott’s frantic, sorrow-filled thoughts, she had been just as alone as him.

What’s your name? she whispered.

Scott, he thought back. My name is Scott.

It’s nice to meet you, Scott.

Scott let loose a strangled half-laugh, half-sob. Nobody had called him by his name in a long, long time.

I’m Jean.

Do you miss your family? Jean asked one day.

Scott swallowed. I wish I didn’t. Do you?

Yes.

Scott’s relationship with Jean was unlike any other he had ever had before; there were no secrets, no unbroachable topics, and no lies. While most of this was due to the fact that it was nigh impossible to have any of those when you were solely communicating through your thoughts, a small part of it was simply because they didn’t want any of those things. It had been so long since either of them had had anyone, and, swept away upon the heady tide of comradship and belonging, they had forged a bond closer than most.

Their families were one of the more difficult topics that they had discussed, but for different reasons.

Jean’s family hadn’t sold her to Trask; they had been trying to help her (it had just backfired spectacularly). When her powers had manifested, Jean had been destroyed. Suddenly, she could hear everyone, and it was overwhelming her. She would just lie in bed for days, tossing and turning, screaming as her hands tried to plug her ears in a futile attempt to block out the noise. Doors would slam, wallpaper would peel, and water would flow from the sinks up towards the ceiling as her mutation tried to reconcile itself in her untrained mind.

Jean Grey’s mutation had been driving her insane.

And, faced with that, her parents had tried to do what any parents would do: They tried to get their daughter help.

After Magento was kicked in the head on live television a few years back, mutants received something resembling a public support center. There were helplines, council centers, and support groups for newly discovered mutants. Jean's parents had gone to all of them.
And while Jean didn't know which one had caught Trask’s attention, she did know that one had ended with her parents coming home with a man who claimed he could provide special assistance, if he could meet the girl in question. The man had taken one look at the rattling walls and floating objects before he offered Jean a place at a research facility dedicated towards helping people like her.

Her parents had said no.

They didn't want her to be dragged off to some facility to be pumped full of drugs until she could handle her mutation; they wanted her to be able to control her gifts on her own. Quickly, they had thanked the man for his offer and shown him the door. And, at the time, Jean had had so little control over her ability that she hadn't been able to get a clear read on his mind, and as consequence, didn't know what he had been planning until it already happened.

Three days later, men came to kill her parents.

By the time they were able to knock her unconscious, Jean had torn the house in half trying to protect her family. (You’re talking to the kid that accidentally tore a mountain in half trying to get away, Scott had soothed in response to her ashamed and fear-filled admission. You’re in good company.) They wouldn't have been able to overcome her at all, if it hadn't been for the team they had brought with them.

The team made up of mutants.

By the time they walked into the rapidly imploding building, the human members of Trask’s team were all down. They had come in, acting like they had been tracking Trask's actions for a while and had come to help Jean, but had simply been too late.

And at the time, Jean had been so frazzled from the attempt that she hadn't been able to focus her telepathy. They had come in, so obviously mutant and seemingly sympathetic, that Jean hadn't stopped them. (After all, who would believe they'd be helping trap their own kind?) Instead, she had cried in relief and beckoned them inside, only to be sedated as soon as one of them got within arms’ reach. Her vision had faded to black soon after that, but not before she was able to catch sight of one of them snapping her parents’ necks.

And when she woke up, she had been reduced to a lab rat.

In return, Scott told her about Alex leaving, about finding out he was a mutant and hiding it, and about his parents’ betrayal. He told her about waking up in the labs, and about losing control of his mutation and eventually his sight. He told her all the heart-wrenching, horrific details, and she did the same.

It was a strange feeling, Scott thought. He had had no one for so long that he had become used to being alone; Jean’s sudden presence conjured up an emotion that was both foreign and familiar all at once.

(It's not until years later, when they have a team and a home and a life, that Scott puts a name to the feeling.)

(Family.)

I used to have a brother, Scott told Jean one day.
Scott swallowed. *Yeah. Used to.*

Her voice came back uncertain and cautious. *What happened?*

*I don't know,* he whispered in return. *I lost him. He said he was coming back. He didn't. We - we didn't see each other again. We didn't stick together.*

In all honesty, Scott didn't know how to explain Alex. *He* still didn't understand their relationship. His thoughts on his brother were a jumble of emotions, churning until they were an indistinguishable mess. They were flashes of memories that were painful, not because they were bad but because they were good and the rest of his life was crap enough without having to compare it to those. His emotions were nostalgia and longing and painful, painful thoughts of *what could have been.*

Involuntarily, a memory flashed across the mental link. That happened often, Scott found; it was hard to regulate anything inside of your head, and often thoughts would flash from either him or Jean that had never been meant to be sent.

The memory was of Alex, one of the best Scott had. Scott had been young, three maybe, and Alex had been at that age that most brothers don't bother with their embarrassing younger siblings.

Alex did anyways.

When Scott had been young, he had been terrified of thunderstorms. The first sign of crashing thunder and flashing lightning would send him racing under the covers.

Alex would always climb under the covers with him.

At his age, hiding under the covers from thunderstorms was most certainly not socially acceptable, and only doing it because your younger brother had scrambled into your bed in fear was even less so; Alex hadn’t cared. Instead, he would break out the flashlights and comics and smuggle chocolate from the kitchen in order to make it as good as an experience for Scott as possible.

“*It'll be something to look forward to now,*” Alex had explained. “*Can't be scared of something if you look forward to it, can you?*”

But sometimes, when the storms were at their worst, no amount of pilfered sweets or old comics would calm Scott. Those nights, he would cling to his brother as if his life depended on it, clutching tighter whenever the thunder echoed outside of their thin protection of sheets.

“*There's nothing to be scared of, Scottie,*” Alex had whispered, hugging him back. “*Don't you see? I'm here to protect you; nothing's gonna hurt you while I'm here, not the thunder, not anything. And I'll always be here, Scott. If you need me, I'll be there for you.*”

And Scott, with the boundless faith of a three-year-old, had believed every last word.

*He used to hide under the sheets with me during thunderstorms,* Scott explained unnecessarily. *To protect me.*

Then, before Jean could say anything, Scott continued. *I think about that sometimes. When I'm in the lab, strapped to a table or something, I think about those thunderstorms. I miss doing that, I think.* He paused. *I - I miss him.*

(“*And I'll always be here Scott. If you need me, I'll be there for you.*”)
Scott didn’t blame his brother for what had happened - he did blame his parents, but it was actually their fault. It wasn't Alex’s. It was just… brothers were supposed to stick together. They were supposed to keep their promises. They weren’t supposed to go radio silent for almost a decade, especially when they weren't actually in prison anymore. And to Scott, the title of family meant much more than blood (especially considering his blood family sucked, and at this point Jean was the only one that met his criteria for family, and he hadn't actually met her yet). Family was actually supposed to be there, even if it was only for a little bit.

And while Scott doesn't resent Alex - he still loves him, in fact - Alex hadn't been there for a long time. And now, it looked like he would never get the chance to again.

So, in all fairness, Scott thinks it's pretty accurate to say he used to have a brother.

---

You know, you probably shouldn't be so agonistic towards the guards.

Scott groaned awake, clutching his ribs as he clicked his tongue, getting back the bouncing flashes of four thick metal walls, a ceiling, and a floor. Back in the box, then.

Scott gritted his teeth as he replied. It's my God-given talent; it'd be a shame not to use it.

Jean’s reply was part amused, part exasperated. Being annoying is your God-given talent?

Yep, along with blowing something up every time I open my eyes, apparently. I feel that the annoying thing is healthier.

That's debatable, Jean scolded. The guards wouldn't kick the crap out of you if you didn't take every opportunity to insult them.

Painfully, Scott let loose a choked, strangled laugh before it cut off with a wince. It's the small joys that make the beatings worth it. If only I could see their faces…

Jean’s Scott Summers, what am I going to do with you was almost entirely drowned out by a wave of pain that rocked over his body, almost knocking him out. Twisting in pain, Scott futilely clicked his tongue to locate the bucket. Unable to reach it in time, he retched up the pitiful contents of his stomach, panting in exertion. The cage reeked of illness and blood to Scott's sensitive nose, not that that was unusual. Most days it smelled like that, thanks to Trask Industries’ strict regimen of brutal tests.

-ott… Scott… Scott…

I'm here, Scott mumbled feebly in reply to Jean’s worried calls. I'm fine.

No, you're not.

No, I'm not, Scott agreed. But neither are you. We haven't been “fine” for a long time; let's not worry about it. Just talk about something else. Anything else.

Like what?

Maybe it was the delirium affecting his decision-making skills, but Scott felt that that was the right moment to bring up something that had been on his mind for a while. I was wondering…

What?
If we ever get out of here, the two of us... Would you be willing to go out on a date? With me?

Jean was silent, and for a moment, Scott couldn't breathe from panic. Had he just ruined the only good thing he had in his life? Had he let his feelings for Jean ruin their friendship? Jean, he frantically stammered. I didn't mean to - I didn't want to - We can just forget it, alright? I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything. Can we just pretend it never happened? Please?

Jean was silent.

Jean? he called desperately.

You're asking me out? Jean finally said. On a date?

Slowly, Scott exhaled. Yes...

A note of amusement crept into her voice. Like this?

Well, I wanted to ask you while we watched the sunset, but for some reason the wardens didn't jump for that option, Scott couldn't help but deadpan. And watching the sunset seems kind of pointless for me...

A small, dry laugh flitted through his head, and Scott grinned in success. Maybe she wouldn't hate him over this. Maybe they could forget about it.

Suddenly, Jean was serious again. But you've never even really met me. You haven't even seen me yet. You could hate me.

Well, I can't see worth shit these days, so...

Jean snorted. Be serious, Scott, she admonished.

Instantly, Scott sobered. Jean Grey, I am constitutionally incapable of hating you.

Jean was silent again. Then, If I said yes... What would we do? What epic date do you have in mind? Dinner? A movie? A moonlight walk on the beach? What's the Scott Summers Plan for Wooing Women TM?

Scott rolled his eyes at her jabs. Dancing, he replied instantly. I'd take you dancing.

Dancing? Came her surprised reply. You dance?

You don't have to sound so shocked.

Yes, I really do. How on Earth did you, of all people, learn how to dance?

My mom made all of the guys in my family take dancing lessons, Scott replied, brushing off the familiar stab of pain associated with his parents. The good memories were harder, he found. They were the ones that reminded him of how much he had loved them, how much he had thought they had loved him. They were the ones that made it hard for him to hate them.

First my dad, then my brother, and finally me, he continued.

Memories of a teenage Alex reluctantly practicing with a broom where (he thought) no one could see him, of Scott doing the same thing, of being the only boy in that horrific ballroom dance class flashed over their telepathic link, and Jean sent back a wave of sympathy. She promised that one day we'd be thankful for them. I guess she was right.
For a moment, both of them were silent, lost in the swirl of classical music and unwilling dance partners and *one two three and one two three and one two three.*

Then, suddenly, Jean spoke. *I accept.*

Scott blinked in surprise. *What?*

*I accept your proposal that we date,* she stated matter-of-factly.

Slowly, a wild, silly grin broke out over Scott's face. *Really?*

*If you think I'm going to miss a chance to see you fall all over yourself trying to dance, you're mistaken, Summers,* she teased. Then, she sobered. *Besides... I think it'd be fun. To go on a date, that is. With you. I think it'd be fun to go on a date together. As a couple. Together.*

Suddenly, Scott was struck with the realization that shoving two teenagers into boxes and never giving them any positive social interaction just meant that they were both terrible with any and all forms of relationships.

Dating should be interesting, then.

*Jean Grey, you have just made me happier than I have been in a long time.*

*Joy,* she deadpanned. *I managed to beat yelling juvenile insults while getting kicked in the face by guards.*

The laugh that burst out of Scott's mouth hurt like hell, but was worth it anyway.

Possibly the most terrifying thing about the entire situation was the silence.

Scott could deal with quiet. He *had* dealt with quiet, for an eternity in the labs before this one, when he had been entirely alone other than the scientists that never spoke to him and only ever called him *it* or *Subject A-13,* except than for that one time with - nobody. Scott had been alone, surrounded by the aching silence of having *no one,* and eventually, he had forgotten how nice it was to have someone.

But now he had Jean. He had Jean, and they had some kind of weird telepathic-link-relationship-thing going, and suddenly he remembered what it was like to *love someone* to care about someone. Every moment that they spent in their cages, they spent talking to one another. Their hopes and dreams, their pasts, embarrassing stories from said pasts, and the things they missed from the outside world all featured; it didn't matter what they talked about, as long as that damn *silence* didn't appear again.

Which meant that whenever Scott was in his cell and he couldn't hear Jean, he felt justified in his panic.

Jean was the telepath, not him. Jean was the one controlling their link; he couldn't instigate it. Which meant that whenever it was cut off, Jean had probably been dragged off for horrific and painful experiments that Scott could in no way stop.

And, just like that, his world was silent again.

Ever since he had lost his sight, Scott had depended on noise. It helped him form a forever-incomplete picture of the world around him; it gave him *something* to take away from the black
suffocating him. So, all in all, he did not enjoy the silence. Which had sucked, seeing as it was all he had.

But then Jean came, and she was like swirls of color blaring across a blank page. She was light. She was chirping laughter and dry humor and exasperated fondness, and she did not deserve to be experimented on. And sometimes, Scott thinks that he would accept the silence, accept being blind and deaf in his empty world, if it just meant that Jean was somewhere else. If it meant that she was safe and happy, and far, far away from Trask Industries and their too-sterile halls dripping with blood.

But instead, the silence only brings thoughts of his only friend being strapped down and jabbed with needles and knives just like him, and Scott prays to a God that has never answered him to just bring her back.

She doesn't come back. Not at first.

Eventually, the experiments end and she’s dumped back in her small cell, and her mind unconsciously seeks out its link with Scott the moment she's in range. And for a long time, Jean doesn’t say anything. She doesn't make a single sound. But when she eventually does, it's usually not words.

Instead, Jean lets out small, pain filled sobs that betray the reality of what had happened to her. And while Scott tries to comfort her, usually he can't. Because what had happened was simply too horrible to be fixed.

(Jean never tells him if she hates the silence as much as he does, whenever he's the one being dragged off to the labs. Scott doesn't ask.

One thing they both know: Whenever he is dumped back in his cell, tears of pain finally escaping, Jean tries to comfort him.

Another thing they both know but will never admit: It does not help.)

The silence is only possibly the worst thing about their situation, Scott believes.

Because what breaks the silence is usually pretty terrible, too.

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Sometimes, Scott remembers the color red.

He tries to remember all the colors, of course, but they always seem too washed out and unreal, and the blues in his mind’s eye never quite seem to match the blue of the sky. Red is different. Scott remembers red perfectly.

Mostly, Scott remembers the dark red of blood as it slowly snaked across the gunmetal grey of concrete.

And sometimes, Scott thinks he can almost see it. Red on grey.

He had been stupid, so stupid. He had thought that just because he had gotten out of the cage, had gotten everyone out of their cages, they would escape. Because, after all, isn't that what's supposed to happen? Isn't the bad guy supposed to lose?

Isn't the hero supposed to pull some daring escape four freaking days into his capture and save everyone before anything truly terrible happened? (Before everyone ended up deaddeaddead.)
Scott had blasted the locks off of all the doors and had helped them climb out of their cages. They had set off as a group, running as fast as their legs could carry them towards what they had imagined to be freedom.

Instead, they had found death. Death and guards. *(And it was all Scott's fault.)*

They had turned a corner to meet a hail of bullets, and they had been forced to take shelter behind the wall as quickly as they could or get shot. Scott had taken out one, two, six, eight guards with his blasts, mostly to defend the group but also because there was a little girl, no more than six, at the back of the group sobbing her too big eyes out from fear, and damn it, *little kids should not be that thin.* But then more guards came and Scott had been hit by a suppressant dart, and at that point, the fight had already been lost.

They fought anyway.

Sometimes, Scott would wonder if it had been worth it. If the others had thought that their deaths had been worth it if it meant that they could get in a few hits on the way down. If it meant that, for one moment, they were something other than the scientists’ toys to be played with and broken and quickly forgotten. If it meant that, for one moment, they were real. At the time, Scott hadn't thought so.

But at the time, he hadn't been at the labs for very long.

Not long after the suppressant hit him, another dart lodged in his neck, this one a paralytic. Scott had felt the drug creeping through his veins, leaving everything numb and senseless in its wake, and suddenly, he was on the ground. Then, a couple guards had surged into the group, beating back the others and dragging Scott out before depositing him safely behind the guards’ lines.

*(Trask Laboratories wasn't done playing with that particular toy yet.)*

After that, the real guns appeared.

Scott didn't see the massacre itself; he had been flopped carelessly on the floor away from the fighting, his head tilted downwards so that all he saw was the ground and occasionally the tips of their feet.

He heard it, though.

*(This is what Scott heard the guards say: Shoot on sight.)*

This is what Scott heard the others say: *Please stop,* and *Don't, oh God please don't* and *Go ahead, just kill me already.*

This is what Scott thought: *Oh God, please make it stop.*

Scott tried to move. He strained his body until it ached, and he *could not get off that damn floor.* At best, he could raise his arm maybe half an inch.

Not enough to help. Not enough to save anyone.

And slowly, the gunshots tapered off.

In his pitiful line of sight, there was a drain. It was just a small, filthy grate lodged in the cement, likely to make it easier to wash the floors. The floor dipped down around it so the water would flow easier to it, and Scott could see a thin trail of liquid traveling towards it in the corner of his eye.
The liquid was dark red against the dirty grey of the cement.

As Scott listened to the guards check for survivors, he watched as the blood crept closer to the drain. As they found a heavily injured few that had barely escaped death, Scott watched the blood. As they radioed back to the control room for instructions, Scott watched the blood.

And as they decided that the survivors weren't *valuable enough* to warrant expensive medical attention, and that a bullet to the brain was much cheaper, Scott watched the blood.

As he heard the guards reload their weapons, Scott didn't watch the blood. Instead, he closed his eyes and pretended that he was somewhere else, with Alex, far, far away from that dark red blood. And every time he heard the blast of a gun join the steady *drip drip drip* of red blood disappearing down a dirty drain, Scott Summers flinched.

Later, while he was strapped to a table in a lab, Scott would see the dark red of his own blood on needles or surgical tools or *drip drip dripping* down yet another drain, and he would remember the dark red of blood that wasn't his against the gunmetal grey of concrete, and wish he could forget.

(Even later, after he had lost his sight to metal vices and unwanted operations, Scott would think that the darkness he was trapped in would be worth it, if he could just forget that red on grey.)

(He doesn't forget. It's not from lack of trying.)

Jean finds out. Of course she finds out. It was impossible that she *wouldn't* find out, given their mental connection. One moment, Scott’s trapped in a nightmare of red on grey and the *drip drip drip* of blood, and the next he hears Jean’s alarmed *Scott Scott Scott* jerking him awake.

The shock and horror resounding through their link is confirmation enough of her knowledge.

(Jean tells Scott it wasn't his fault.)

(Scott does not believe her.)

Somedays, Scott has to remind himself that he is blind, because the red on grey has become so vivid that it seems real.

(What color is your hair? Scott one day asks.

*Red.*

And Scott tries to tell himself that it's the red of the sunset, of those long summer days when Alex was still there, when everything seemed tinged with the warm red of the twilight. Somehow, he can never quite remember the shade correctly.

All he sees anymore is red on grey.)

Sometimes, Scott remembers the color red.

He wishes he didn't, though.

___

*There's someone else in the high security ward, Scott.*

Scott sat up in surprise from where he had been dozing. *Really?* Nobody had ever been in the ward other than Jean and Scott in as long as they had been there. Nobody else had been deemed a big enough flight risk.
A man, older than us. They brought him in after they dragged you off for testing.

Can you speak to him? Scott was practically vibrating with anxiety. On one hand, Jean had been his entire world for so long; Scott had no idea how the addition of this man could change that. On the other hand, the idea of having someone else like them was such an exciting prospect that they could never ignore it.

No. His mind is too chaotic for me to touch. He’s… lost something. Lost himself.

Scott swallowed hard. How?

The experiments… They made him into a weapon, and the man is lost beneath.

They both know about the Trask Industries weapons program. Neither of them talk about it. It's a bit hard to ignore it now, though.

Whenever a mutant manages to survive the experiments but has outlived their usefulness, Trask auctions them off. Scott doesn't know where they go, but he does know that the dangerous ones - the ones like Jean and Scott - are sold as weapons. As killing machines.

They both know what’s coming for them. They just don’t know when.

How much time does he have left? Scott asked. How much time does he have left in the lab? How long until he’s sent to his purchaser?

A few months, maybe. A year at most. They sent him to this facility for reeducation.

“Reeducation.” The fancy name for brainwashing someone, for tearing out everything that makes you you and shoving in parts that don’t belong. Scott and Jean hadn’t had to go through the process - yet. It was expensive and time-consuming to perform, and would interfere with the experimenting schedule too much to be prudent. But they had no doubt that they would share the same fate as the man in the next cage as soon as they were sold.

It was only a matter of time.

I’m - I’m going to keep trying to reach him, Jean stammered.

Yeah, Scott flustered, pushing away the thoughts of what was to come. You should. Do that, that is.

If Scott focused, he could hear the rattle thud of someone attacking metal walls. He could hear frustrated and confused snarls and screams.

And he wondered if that was waiting for them too, when they lost what little freedom they had left to reeducation.

-ott… Scott… Scott…Scott…

“Ugh,” Scott groaned, trying and failing to turn over. Everything hurt, more so than usual. The heavy metal vice on his head clanged against the floor as he turned, weighing down his movements. I’m here, Jean.

You’re hurt.

What gave it away, Sherlock?
Scott, Jean admonished, taking on the tight tone she always adopted whenever Scott became snide. You’re hurt. And not the usual hurt you get in the labs; you’ve never come back in such bad shape before. It’s like someone tried to beat you half to death with a metal stick.

For a moment, Scott remembered the whir click of machine parts, the sour smell of motor oil and blood, and the wet slam of metal on skin. That’s actually a pretty accurate description of what happened.

Scott. Jean’s tone had taken on a rough, panicked edge. What’s happening? They’ve got you in the labs twice as long as usual, you’ve been coming back recently feeling like Hell, and you’ve been trying to block me out of some of your thoughts; don’t think I haven’t noticed. What’s going on? What are they doing to you?

Scott clutched his sore ribs tighter, biting his lip savagely. He would not cry. He would not let them make him cry, not after everything else they had done to him. He wouldn’t give them the satisfaction. I think you know.

And for a long time, Jean was silent.

Then, They sold you.

Yes.

As Jean sank into silence again, Scott wondered what he would see, if he looked at her in that moment. Would she be upset? Shocked? Or would she be stoic, just another bad thing that happened in a long line of bad things?

Are you - are - are they -

Reeducating me? No. My buyers want to do that on their own; apparently they have a different method.

How long do you have, Scott?

Scott drew his knees up to his aching chest, squeezing his eyes shut until they burned. (Don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry.) I, uh, I don’t know… Trask wants to finish up a few more experiments before I’m moved; they have an agreement with my buyer. It could be weeks from now, could be tomorrow. Until then, they get me half the day for training. They brought in some guy to do it. He’s got a weird metal arm and is making me learn Russian and everything…

Scott’s trainer confused him.

First of all, Scott hadn’t been entirely sure he was human at first. They had shoved him into a room that had at first appeared to be empty, until Scott had clicked his tongue and realized that there was a stationary object that had the same shape as a person standing in the corner, watching him. When he had sniffed for clues, Scott had smelled tinges of motor oil and blood and that strange dirty-fresh scent that came from trodden snow. When the possibly-a-person shape had begun to step towards him, Scott had heard the unusually quiet footfalls of a person but the whir click whir click scree of machines. For a moment, he had wondered if they had sent an honest to God robot to train him, until he was punched in the face by the non-metallic hand and realized that the possibly-a-person shape was a definitely-a-person shape.

To add to the confusion, Scott was never sure if the man was there by choice or if he was a slave like Scott. At one moment, he would seem the image of a dedicated, obedient, devout soldier, the next he would sound momentarily confused, and his Russian accent would disappear and an American one
would edge in, New York maybe.

Either way, they did not get along.

(The first day of training, the man told Scott to call him “Commander” or “sir.”
Scott called him Commander Douchebag.

Commander Douchebag beat Scott into unconsciousness.

Scott continued to call him Commander Douchebag.

His trainer continued to beat him into unconsciousness.

Scott felt that it was worth it.)

What... What are they training you to do?

The beginnings of a sob escaped Scott’s lips before he quickly smothered it. He couldn’t smother the vaguely hysterical edge his voice had taken on, however. Oh, you know, hand-to-hand combat, the quickest way to kill people, how to effectively use guns and knives. The usual mindless weapon stuff.

But... You can’t see, Scott. How can you do any of that?

You know, I can actually, Scott continued, a watery tinge to his voice. I just can’t contain my optic blasts. So they made goggles that do it for me. I mean, they’re still making me learn how to do it without the goggles, but having my sight helps with learning.

Scott had never thought that he’d hate the object that returned his sight to him, but he had been wrong. The lenses had painted the world a vicious red, bleeding the color over everything. (Red on grey red on grey red on grey.) At the end of the training session, Scott would always be relieved when the goggles were removed and the vice was locked back on. At least then he could try to forget the screams and the gunshots and the drip drip drip of red blood down a dirty drain.

(At least then he could try to forget that soon, he would be forced to kill and destroy and more blood would be drip drip dripping across his hands.)

They’re making you learn how to fight blind? came Jean’s horrified whisper.

It’s not as hard as you would think, Jean. Scott answered bitterly. I already know how to echolocate so figuring out where my opponent is is easy, and everyone is built pretty much the same so I know where to hit them. The hard part is dodging punches before they hit me, but, well... My trainer is making sure I learn that lesson. And I guess I know where they’re coming from. What use is a weapon if it can be neutralized just by ripping off its goggles, right?

Don’t ever say that again, Scott! Don’t you ever call yourself “it” again!

Scott flinched as Jean’s voice echoed through his head, louder than it ever had before. I’m sorry, Jean, he whispered.

You - you’re better than that. You’re better than them.

A pause. Then, Jean, I’m scared. A sob finally escaped Scott’s control, pouring over their connection and washing over his thoughts. I don’t want to do any of this. I - I don’t want to have to kill or fight or be a monster. I - I don’t - I don’t want to forget.
Jean did not tell him that everything would be okay.

Scott appreciated this.

Because no matter what she said, Scott knew that nothing would ever be okay again.

He was going to be brainwashed. He was going to have all who he was torn away and replaced with the some kind of murderous freak, a hollow puppet with no soul. He was going to kill.

And he wouldn’t even remember who he was while he did it. He would forget Scott Summers, forget that he once had a family and brother named Alex and a life.

He would forget Jean.

And that part, really, was second only to the whole ‘murder tool’ thing on the fear-inducing scale.

Scott wouldn’t remember Jean, and, once Jean was inevitably sold too, she wouldn’t remember him. They would become two entirely separate and independent tools for destruction, never suspecting that there was someone out there that had once made up their entire world. They wouldn’t remember that they had a standing date with a person they had never seen, or that they had spent hours talking about everything and nothing without uttering a single syllable.

And Scott wouldn’t remember that he had fallen completely, utterly, stupidly in love with a girl he had never actually met.

Chapter End Notes

So who wants to guess who the weird metal-armed trainer is? As you can see, I am one of those people who refuse to accept that the Avengers and X-Men Universes are separate. And as promised, Scott has not only lost control of his mutation but also his sight. Yes, I am that dork that looks up the science behind things to see how possible they are. May I just say, echolocation is awesome. The blind who use it have been known to ride bikes in traffic, ect. They have also been known to teach it to themselves. Also, according to the X-Men Wiki, Scott Summers is canonically proficient enough in fighting to beat up six guys with his eyes closed. Even in comics, he is some kind of blind ninja. And now I'm making him be trained by the Winter Soldier. He's gonna be able to fight without his sight. I figure that, based on what happened to mutants like Wolverine, there's a pretty lucrative market for powerful/dangerous mutants. Scott can blow up mountains just by looking at them; Jean can literally kill you with her brain. Insofar as evil organizations go, they would probably be worth a lot. Next chapter we finally get to see Alex! Get excited, people!
Discoveries

Chapter Summary

In which the CIA learns how difficult it is to work with someone you once tried to blow up.

Alex Summers had missed his brother the moment that he left behind his childhood home.

Unlike most siblings who had a large age gap, the Summers boys had been close. Granted, occasionally Alex did play the role of the archetypical, moody teenager embarrassed by his younger brother, and Scott certainly acted the role of annoying, embarrassing younger sibling on more than one occasion, but all in all, the pair loved each other greatly. Alex had rarely had any reserves about allowing the younger boy to trail along after him; he found that the kid often added an obnoxious but hilarious twist to the proceedings with his troublemaking antics. (“A cat, Scott? Really? Principal Jackson is allergic to cats!” “Prove I did it. You can’t, can you?”)

That all changed when Alex discovered his mutation.

At the time, he hadn't a clue about what was happening to him. All he really knew was that he had gotten upset, and suddenly the backyard was missing a tree.

Having your parents there when you discover it does not help. At all.

His parents had been scared of him; that much was obvious by their screams of dangerous and freak. And yeah, Alex could understand how having your son suddenly shooting rings of fire from his body could be startling.

What he didn't understand was how they seemed to think it was his fault.

Honestly, it wasn't like he had any idea how it had happened either; it had seemed impossible before it actually happened. The unfairness of the situation had boiled his blood right up to the point when his parents told him to get out and stay out. When they told him they didn't want him anywhere near their nice, normal son, near his brother.

After that, Alex mostly felt numb.

And then, for some reason, Scott had gotten it in his head that he was going to leave with Alex.

And Alex couldn't let him do that.

Scott was mischievous, kind, and so, so smart. Even though he preferred to put his effort towards pranks and schemes instead of actual school work, he had a good future ahead of him.

Alex didn't. Not anymore.

And so he left, disappearing with nothing but the promise of one day returning. And, at the time, Alex had been planning on keeping it. Maybe, a few months or a couple years down the road, Alex would come back and see his brother for a few hours at a time while his parents were elsewhere. Maybe then when Scott had grown up and moved away from the people that wouldn't let him near
his own brother, they could have a real relationship.

Maybe.

But then Alex had ended up on the streets, and well, that life was hard. He had gotten into fights most days and seen even more fights happen other days. (Well, fights was a bit of a misnomer. Fights implies actual fighting, and while Alex could take care of himself other people certainly couldn't, and it was mostly just one guy getting the crap kicked out of him and the other guy doing the kicking.)

And throughout it all, Alex never once used his mutation.

Well, that was a bit of a lie. Honestly, who has honest to God superpowers and never uses them? Sometimes, Alex would find an abandoned warehouse or something and just let it fly. It would be more accurate to say that he never used his mutation in the presence of another person. He never showed them off, never fought with them, nothing.

Until he did.

Living on the streets meant that Alex had to come to terms with certain realities. One of those realities was that a lot of the time, the strong preyed on the weak, and no one ever interfered.

The girl had been fifteen, sixteen at most, and she had been utterly outmatched by four guys who wanted to do God only knows what to her. And, well, it hadn't sat right with Alex.

So he violated an unspoken rule of the streets: He interfered.

What happened itself was a bit fuzzy to him, but he did remember losing his temper one moment and spirals of red slamming out the next. Alex hadn't meant to use his abilities, but it happened all the same. And then the police arrived, and Alex hadn't really known how to explain the state of the others.

When he had been sent to jail, Alex honestly hadn't minded. In fact, he was almost thankful for it. Because his parents were right. Alex Summers was dangerous; he was a horrific threat to everyone around him. What if it had been his parents that he had killed? Or, God forbid, Scott?

Maybe everyone would be better off if he was locked far, far away from them. (Including his brother.)

Alex was done interfering. People only got hurt in the end.

He requested solitary confinement at the prison; it was the only option he had. Since arriving at there, Alex had already been in more than one fight, and there had been a few close calls regarding his control. Solitary confinement made sure that he could never hurt anyone else again.

While he wouldn't say he was happy in that state - nobody was happy in jail - Alex was content. He had an empty cell where he couldn't hurt anyone, and he could brood all day. Not a good lifestyle, but a safe one (for everyone else).

And then two men named Erik Lehnsherr and Charles Xavier walked into his cell, and things became very weird very quickly.

They had walked - strutted, really - into the room, dismissed the guard, and sat down on the bunk next to a man that had pled guilty to four murders, one on each side. Then, with zero regards to
personal space, Charles Xavier leaned forward and said, “How would you like to help us save the world?”

Which had taken quite a bit of explaining.

In the end, he was offered a pardon for his crimes, a position on a new mutant task force with the CIA, the promise of having his record expunged, and help controlling his mutation, all if he did the one small thing of helping them stop a nuclear war.

Alex thought about it for a minute, then said yes.

Maybe he wasn’t done interfering after all.

With Xavier and Co., Alex had found acceptance, support, and friendship, as cliche as all of that sounded. Suddenly, he was surrounded by people like him, and, well, that made it all a hell of a lot less scary (not that Alex would ever admit that out loud).

The morning before they left for Cuba, Alex tried to call his brother.

Things had the potential of going very bad fast, and Alex hadn’t wanted to leave anything unsaid just in case he didn’t come back.

His mother had answered the phone. She wouldn’t let him talk to Scott. Instead, she had hissed fear-filled insults and told him that just because the CIA had decided that they had use for his freakish abilities it didn’t mean that they did, and warned him to stay away from her son before slamming down the receiver.

Ignoring the sting of hurt, Alex wrote a letter instead, and gave it to Raven for safe keeping. Because honestly, if any one of them was going to make it out of that mess alright, it was that crazy blue chick and her weird propensity for kicking people in the head before adopting their shape perfectly (and didn't that odd habit make sparring practice particularly strange). And besides, Alex felt that she was the one most likely to do it without teasing him for being so sentimental.

“Just, uh, give it to Scott Summers,” he had babbled. “And don’t tell my parents that I sent you, or they won’t let you in the door. Actually, it might be best if you just disguise yourself as one of Scott’s friends and get him alone -”

“Don’t worry, Alex,” she had stated firmly. “If I need to give it to him, which I won’t because you will be fine, I’ll take care of it. I promise.”

Alex nodded tensely. “Right. And, uh, could you tell him I love him? I mean, it says that in the letter but… I think it’d be best if he heard it out loud.”

“You’ll tell him yourself when you see him again,” Raven had said, her tone brokering no excuses. “Once this is all over.” Then, she had set the letter on her desk and they had all left, as a team.

And, for one moment, Alex actually thought it would last. He had thought the X-Men would last.

But then Erik killed Shaw and it all went to Hell. The Professor was paralyzed, the US government had decided that they could solve the mutant problem by killing the people that had just saved the world’s collective asses, and Raven - no Mystique - was gone.

When they finally got back to the Mansion, Alex went into Raven’s room and found the letter.

Then, he folded it up and tucked it in his pocket.
Things got better before they got worse.

They got the school started and began to find students and teachers. For a while, Alex helped. He was in no way qualified for teaching - he didn’t even have his high school diploma yet - but he did help with recruitment. Then, Xavier assisted him to get his G.E.Ds, and Alex found himself “teaching” Mechanics three times a week. Nothing fancy, more of a ‘this is a car; this is how you not break it’ sort of thing.

He didn’t go see Scott, though.

Alex meant to, of course, but… He was scared. As stupid as it was, Alex Summers was scared. Lord only knew what his parents had been telling the kid about him, and after everything else, Alex wasn’t sure if he could handle his little brother’s rejection too. The government had tried to blow them up. After they had stopped World War III from happening. Half of their team was gone, having decided to join Erik on his “we are mutants, let’s go be hypocritical terrorists” campaign. It was just Sean, Hank, Charles, and him anymore, and Alex hadn’t heard from Sean in awhile, not since he left the school to spend time with his family. He needed time to deal with all the blows. Still, Alex had every intention of going to see his little brother again; he just kept putting it off.

And then he was drafted into the Vietnam War, and seeing his brother wasn’t much of an option.

Vietnam had been strange in more than one way. Not only was it brutal, but suddenly, the government had taken a whole new tactic to blowing mutants up: By putting them on group teams and promising they would be heroes, then sending them to the front lines so that someone else would blow them up. They had clearly underestimated his ability to not die, Alex thought.

(But as the body bags piled higher and higher, he realized that not everyone had the same skill at survival as him.

So maybe their tactic worked after all.)

When Stryker showed up with files and orders for them to be moved, Alex hadn’t been surprised.

He had been seeing it coming for a long time.

He had been surprised, however, when Raven showed up and kicked him in the head. (It was a pleasant surprise, though.)

After the War, Alex drifted. He had watched as the existence of mutants was blown wide open during the Paris Peace Conference, as Magneto practically painted a big freaking target on the backs of mutants by acting like an idiot on live TV, and as Raven pleasantly surprised him yet again by kicking someone in the head. He had figured it was long past time to keep his promise to Scottie, but, yet again, he kept putting it off. At first, it was because of Trask Industries. Despite the fact that their illustrious leader was imprisoned, they still had quite a few operations against mutants going, and they had their eye on Alex. He spent a while dodging them, and eventually they gave up entirely (after a few well placed and convincing blasts on Alex’s part). Then, he worked odd jobs for a few months, trying to save up enough for a dumpy car and gas, so that he would stop having to hitchhike. But eventually, Alex ran out of excuses.

He had a promise to keep.

Walking up to his childhood home, Alex had been nervous. After all, mutants had been public for
over two years at that point, which meant that his parents had been free to spew slurs about their powers without sounding crazy. What if they made Scott believe the same thing? What if Scott hated him for being a mutant? Even if he didn’t, the boy had every reason to hate him anyway. When Alex left, Scott had been in kindergarten. Now he was what, twelve? Maybe thirteen? That was a long time wait before visiting. In the end, Alex sucked it up and forced himself to knock on the door.

His mother answered the door. And immediately tried to slam it in his face.

Alex shoved his foot in the entryway. “I know you don’t want to see me and the feeling’s mutual, so can we just skip this part? I’m here for Scott.”

“You can’t—”

Alex made the executive decision to ignore whatever she was saying, instead forcing the door open and walking inside. “Scott!” he called.

“He’s not here.” His dad was standing next to the dinner table, a napkin still shoved in the neckline of his shirt.

Alex rolled his eyes, staring at him in defiance. “Every night at seven o’clock, we all had to be seated at the dinner table; Mom was religious about it. It’s 7:13. Maybe on a weekend you would have given him a pass on it, but it’s a school night.” But even as he spoke, Alex could see that Scott wasn’t sitting at the table. Maybe if he ate quick enough, and had enough homework, they would have let him leave already. “Is he up in his room?” Not waiting for an answer, Alex turned towards the staircase.

“He’s dead, Alex.”

Alex froze, his heart almost stopping. Slowly, he turned around. “You’re lying.”

His mother stared at him, part in fear and part in something else. “He’s been dead since summer. A drunk driver hit him while he was crossing the bridge one night; Scott was knocked off the side with the impact. If the crash didn’t kill him, the fall did.” By the end of the sentence, her voice had dropped down to a whisper, an indescribable tremor in it.

“No.” Alex shook his head in denial. They were lying; they had to be lying. “No.”

“Get out,” his father said, pointing towards the door. Alex ignored him, turning back towards the staircase. “We’ll call the police!”

Quickly, Alex dashed up the staircase, taking the steps three at a time. “Scott!” he called. He took the corner at a run and shoved the door to his old room open. “Scott?” he gasped.

The room was empty.

It was worse than empty: It wasn’t being inhabited. By anyone. There were no rumpled sheets, no dog-eared books, no pile of dirty clothes.

No Scott.

Numbly, Alex sat on the bed, fisting the sheets in his hands. He was going to be sick. He was going to throw up all over the too-clean sheets and the pastel carpets. He was going to do something, because he couldn’t just sit there when his brother was dead-missing.

Alex hadn’t noticed that his mother had entered the room until she spoke. “He’s buried at Lakeview
Cemetery.”

“He always liked the water,” Alex responded dazedly.

Uncertainly, his mother placed her hand on his shoulder with caution, squeezing it in some kind of facsimile of comfort. Almost as if she cared. “You need to leave, Alex. We don’t want any trouble.”

For a moment, Alex just sat there, his eyes closed, clutching the bed like it was the only thing keeping him on the Earth. Then he nodded, got up, and walked out. He didn’t say anything to his parents as he left; they didn’t say anything to him. As he left his former home behind, Alex Summers didn’t look back.

There was nothing left for him there.

Scott would have like Lakeview insofar as final resting places went, Alex thought. The area his grave was set in was nice and sunny, with a tree nearby. If he looked off into the distance, Alex could see the sparkling waters of the lake.

“Hey Scott,” Alex greeted the bleak, gray gravestone. “You’re, uh, probably wondering what I’m doing here after so long. I never meant to break my promise it’s just that a lot of things changed and… And I was stupid.

“A lot has happened since I last saw you, Scott. I, uh, was kind of a superhero for a minute. Me and a bunch of other mutants - I’m a mutant, by the way - got together to stop these other mutants and we had code names and these terrible yellow spandex suits that you probably would have teased us for the rest of our lives over wearing.” Weakly, Alex laughed, dragging his face over his palm. “But you would have loved them. Sean, Darwin, Hank, Raven, the Professor, all of them. Even Erik. I, uh, wrote something for you. Just in case something happened. I never got to give it to you, but…” Alex’s voice cracked. Slowly, he pulled a worn, folded envelope out of his pocket and propped it against the grave.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “About everything.”

Then, he walked away.

Alex spent that night getting really, really drunk. Quite a few nights after that, too.

It was Raven that found him.

Because of course.

“You look like hell,” she observed as she plopped down on the bar stool next to him.

Alex didn’t even bother glancing up at the familiar voice, instead tightening his hand around his shot glass. “You following me or something?”

“Believe it or not, running into you here was just a coincidence.”

As Raven ordered a drink, Alex finally looked at her. “You’re not blue,” he observed.
The blonde snorted. “I find that form attracts too much attention, nowadays.”

Alex nodded in understanding. “Nice job kicking Erik in the face, by the way. He deserved it for wearing that stupid helmet in public.”

“Strangely enough, I was more focused on the fact that he was trying to kill the President,” she commented dryly. “So what happened to you?”

Quickly, Alex shut his eyes and threw his shot back. “I went to see my brother.”

Raven stilled. “Scott?”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“He’s dead,” Alex whispered. “He’s been dead for a few months.”

“Was it because he was… like us?” Raven’s voice was filled with trepidation.

Alex understood where she was coming from; in the aftermath of the Peace Conference, a fear-fueled frenzy had led to quite a few mutant deaths. She was worried she had been responsible for his brother’s demise. For a moment, Alex looked at her, thinking back to that bubbly girl he had once met that had been so full of hope and happiness at every little thing. (“We should think of code names,” she had said, practically vibrating with enthusiasm as if they were playing the world’s most exciting game. “We're government agents now; we should have secret code names.”)

And he realized that he didn’t recognize her anymore.

Alex shook his head. “No. He was normal - my parents wouldn’t have loved him otherwise. A drunk driver hit him going eighty miles per hour. Sent both of them off a bridge.”

For a while, Alex talked. He told her about the articles he had dredged up about the accident, about how it took them three days to find his body and drag it out of the river, and how by that point he had only been identifiable through dental records. He told her about the other articles he had found, from when Scott had taken silver at the State cross country meet, and how for a short time, his snarky little brother had been a local hero. Mostly, he told her about the little boy that he knew, the one that could get in more trouble than anyone he had ever met but would still fiercely defend what he believed in. He told her about Scott.

It ended with them sitting silent at the bar, long after most of the other patrons had left, staring at the peeling wood countertop as if it held all the secrets of the universe.

“I should have been there,” Alex finally said. “I should have been there when the car came.”

“And done what?” Raven scoffed. “Shielded him with your own body? Run faster than the car going eighty miles an hour and pushed him out of the way? Blasted it off the road with your mutation?”

“If that’s what it took,” Alex snapped. For a long moment, the pair was silent. “I wish I could go back,” he admitted. “I wish I could go back and change this.”

Raven tensed. “Well, if there ever is someone who could time travel, I don’t think they exist yet,” she said with an odd inflection in her voice. “I have to go.” Suddenly, she stood up, slinging her bag over her shoulder as she went.
Alex looked at her oddly. “Oh yeah? What is it you’re doing these days, anyway?”

“I’m… helping. I’m going after mutant trafficking rings, underground labs, cage fights, that sort of thing, and shutting them down.”

“Need any help with that?”

“I work alone.”

“Figures,” he muttered, staring back down towards the table. The bar had cut them off a while back, and a lot of the buzz had worn off in the meantime. Maybe it was time to find a different pub.

Raven sighed, staring at him. “Alright, here, Summers.” She reached across the bar, tearing a sheet off of a spare order pad and scribbling something across it with a nub of a pencil. Then, she folded it up and slid it across the counter to him.

Looking at her strangely, Alex picked it up and inspected it: It was a piece of paper, nothing special. Slowly, he began to unfold it.

“Don’t open it!”

Alex looked at her in alarm. “But you just -”

“That’s a number you can reach me at. If you read it, Charles can pick it out of your head and call me day and night until I come back.”

Alex set the paper back down. “You’re still on the outs with him?”

Raven shifted uncomfortably. “We’re not talking. I’m not talking to him.”

Knowingly, Alex nodded, as if he understood what she was talking about. (He didn’t.)

His companion rolled her eyes, seeing through him instantly. “If you need help, call the number. Don’t look at it otherwise.”

“Thanks, Raven. For everything.”

“You should consider it, you know,” she told him. “Going back to Charles, you should consider it. They’ve got the school back up; they could use you. You could use them.”

Alex snorted. “Yeah, right.”

Raven rolled her eyes again. “Anyways,” she said, tapping the paper in front of him. “If you ever need anything…”

She was almost to the door when he called after her. “Raven?”

“Yeah?”

“If you ever need my help, with whatever -”

“I’ll find you at Xavier’s?” she finished for him. And then she was gone.

Leaving Alex at an empty bar, thinking she didn’t know him nearly as well as she thought she did.

(Three days later, Alex pulled his dingy car up to Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters.)
Back at the school, Alex was welcomed with open arms. Hank and the Professor had been glad to see him, but dismayed to learn the reason behind his reappearance. Hank had offered him support if he needed it and space if he didn’t, and the Professor… Strangely enough, Charles took Scott’s death almost as bad as Alex did, if not worse. When he refused to speak on the subject, Alex chalked it up to a psychic thing and moved on.

And Alex did move on. He had taken up teaching Mechanics again, and started stitching his life back together. A couple years passed, and he found himself a fixture in the school again. While Scott’s death still hurt, it was a manageable pain.

He was healing. Slowly but surely, he was healing.

“So, Agent MacTaggert, huh?” Alex ribbed. His dumpy car was still rattling faithfully down the road, this time transporting himself, the Professor, and Hank.

The Englishman ignored his jibes with a practiced air. “No, I don’t know why we were called down to her office; but I assure you, it’s not for whatever asinine reason you’ve come up with.”

“But does she -”

“No,” he answered softly. “She does not remember any of us.”

“I just think it’s strange, that’s all,” Alex continued, more serious this time. “Nothing from the CIA since Cuba, and then after all this time the agent that doesn’t remember being there wants to talk with the three remaining members of the team that was there? Seems a bit convenient.”

Xavier made a discontented air. Quickly, Hank rushed in to mediate between the pair. “I’m certain that when we get there, we’ll find everything out.”

Arrival found them having to pass through several levels of security, arguing with guards that yes, Charles did need his wheelchair and no, they had not stashed weapons in it, and finally being ushered into the office of Senior Agent Moira MacTaggert.

“So, my name is -”

“Charles Xavier,” she finished for him, rising from her desk with an outstretched hand. “I know exactly who you are; I’ve read all of your papers. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. I trust you had no trouble with security. I’m Senior Agent Moira MacTaggert; I’m the head of our Mutant-Crimes Investigations Task Force. Please, take a seat.”

“Mutant Crimes? Committed by or against?” Alex questioned, sitting down.

Moira - Agent MacTaggert - glanced at him. “Both. Now -”

“You’ve got a son?” Charles interrupted, sounding strangled.

Following the Professor’s gaze, Alex glanced behind her desk to the framed picture on the wall. The boy depicted was young, no more than two, if even that.
With a bewildered smile, Moira responded, “Yes.”

“Oh. Wonderful,” Charles said, obviously flustered. “Does he - does he have a husband?” he fumbled, then closed his eyes in frustration as he corrected the sentence. “I mean, do - do you have a husband?”

“Smooth,” Alex muttered, receiving Hank’s elbow to the ribs with an unrepentant grin.

“Recently divorced,” came the confused but smooth response.

“Oh.” Charles perked noticeably. “Divorced, that's good. I'm sorry, no it's not. Divorce is bad. Terrible. I'm sorry, I just -”

“Maybe you can tell us why we were called here, Agent MacTaggert,” Hank cut in, saving the Professor from his frankly painful rambling.

For a long moment, Moira stared at the unfortunate paraplegic before shaking her head and moving on. “Right. Now, I understand you all have Level Five clearance from your involvement in Cuba -”

“I'm sorry, how did you know about Cuba?” Alex interrupted.

“I am a Senior Officer of the CIA running a division focused on mutants; the only known case of mutants collaborating with the CIA falls under my jurisdiction. The case files about the incident itself seems to have been misplaced, but I was able to dredge up your classification documents. You all helped protect this country with your abilities.” She bit her lip in anxiety, leaning forward in her chair. “And we need you to do it again.”

Alex blinked. “You guys need us. You need the X-Men.” He paused. “You want us to help after you all tried to blow us up the last time?”

“Alex-” Xavier began.

He wasn't having any more excuses, even from Charles. Especially from Charles. “No!” he rebuffed, shoving himself up from the chair in anger. “You two weren’t in Vietnam; you weren't a part of one of their elite mutant squads. You didn’t see how we were sent into one crap situation after another with zero support; you didn't see how many died! You didn't have to watch as the people you fought with - the people you - you cared about - were slaughtered one after another because they were mutants and therefore expendable. Well I did, and I sure as hell haven't forgotten.” He whipped around to face Moira in anger. “Just like I haven't forgotten that the moment we finished putting our lives on the line for this country, the government tried to ship us off to Trask to be experimented on! If Raven hadn't intervened, I'd be dead in a lab right now. Just like Sean, and Angel, and all those other people on that Cuban beach! And now, you have the audacity to come to us and ask that we help you track down some mutant that pulled your pigtails, as if none of it ever happened!”

“That's enough, Alex!”

Alex Summers whipped back to face the telepath. “No, I really don't think it is,” he coldly informed the man.

While Alex respected the Professor greatly, he wouldn't budge on this. Granted, Moira had been wonderfully accepting when they had worked on Cuba together, but she didn't remember that and her superiors had already proven themselves not to be. Just because she was the Professor’s amnesiac-sort-of-girlfriend didn't mean that they should jump for whatever idea she had.

Alex had seen too many people die for that.
“How exactly are we supposed to do anything?” he continued. “Half of the team is dead or in the wind. The rest consists of me, who is less than fond about the idea, Hank, who isn’t even blue anymore, and you, Professor, who, need I remind you, is in a wheelchair. More than that, we have the school to worry about. We can’t just run off and get killed.”

“I know that, Alex. Believe me, we’re not going to ignore any of the points you just raised; I just think we should hear Agent MacTaggert out,” the Professor reasoned.

Biting his lip, Alex spun around and stared at the stunned agent expectantly. Slowly, she looked up at him. “I must apologize for everything that has happened over the years. While I know that nothing I ever say can change what happened or make it better, I can do everything in my power to stop similar things from happening. And I would never call you here and ask this of you unless I believed that it was the utmost importance. But I’m not here to ask you to track down mutants; I’m here to ask you to help save them.”

Begrudgingly, Alex sat back down. “I’m listening.”

The files landed on the desk with a heavy thud. “I believe you are all familiar with Trask Industries.”

“Very,” murmured Hank. “But I thought mutant experimentation stopped when Bolivar Trask was imprisoned.”

“So did we,” Moria responded. “At first. But then we started picking up more and more mutant disappearances, and we could always track them back to one company: Trask.

“If you can track them back to Trask, why don’t you go after them in the legal arena, shut them down?” Alex questioned.

“That’s where it gets complicated. The problem is that a lot of this is done under the table; we suspect some of the board members don’t even know about the experiments, and as such they are able to rise credible defenses in court. What’s more, those in on it are well connected; it’s hard to make anything stick. But what we’ve found… Usually by the time we get to the labs, all the witnesses are dead. The victims end up in gas chambers and incinerators the moment Trask catches wind that we’re on their tail, and the scientists are shipped off to new locations. Every time we get close to evidence that wouldn’t be thrown out as circumstantial, it’s destroyed.

“If these labs aren’t known to all of the board members, how are they being funded?” Charles interrupted. “They can’t possibly be embezzling that much money without anyone noticing.”

“They can if it’s the labs themselves generating the majority of the funds. The… survivors of these labs are often sold. Underground cage fights, sex trafficking rings, you name it.”

“What exactly do you want us to do?” Hank asked, leaning forward. “You haven’t been clear on that.”

Moria folded her hands together, staring at them intently. Must be time for the sales pitch, Alex thought. “There’s a lab that has come on our radar recently. We need the X-Men’s help to shut it down.”

At this point, Alex had to interrupt. “What’s the catch?” Everyone stared at him. He rolled his eyes in exasperation. While he may not have the fancy degrees of the rest of the people in the room, Alex was far from stupid. “You’ve know about Trask for how long? And you’re only now calling us for help? What’s so different about this lab from all the others?”

Giving him a measured look, MacTaggert responded. “The lab itself is not the problem: It’s the
location. The site is near the border of Germany and Poland, past the Berlin Wall. USSR territory. The CIA can't interfere without declaring war. But, as an organization independent of any government agency, the X-Men can.”

In unison, the three men blinked. Suddenly, this had gotten much more complicated. It was one thing to butt heads with a corrupt organization, another thing entirely to take on the Soviet Union. “But why would the Russians allow Trask to build a lab there in the first place?” Charles asked. “Trask has American roots; America is in the middle of a Cold War with Russia. Wouldn’t they block the lab on that merit alone?”

Shortly, MacTaggert nodded. “They would, if it didn’t give them access to this,” she proclaimed, flipping to a page in the file and sliding it across the table. “They call it The Auction. Trask grades their mutant’s abilities on four levels: Gamma, Beta, Alpha, and Omega. Gammas are the least powerful, with Betas sometimes being dangerous but only on a small scale. Alphas, however, are truly powerful. They are the ones capable of large scale destruction, control, etcetera. Omegas… At this point, they’re only a rumor. We’ve picked up on whispers that Trask’s managed to bag one, but those are unsubstantiated at this time. Omegas abilities are off the charts, power-wise. There hasn’t been a validated record of one since the world discovered mutants, so no one is actually certain if they exist. Now, the world’s mutant population is mostly made up of Gammas and Betas, with less than three percent of the population qualifying as Alpha or higher. Trask’s subject pool reflects that, being mostly made up of Gammas and Betas. If they survive, these are the people being sold off to fight rings, sex trafficking, etcetera. Those Alpha powered and higher, however, get sold off in The Auction. It’s incredibly exclusive; you need an invitation just to be considered as a buyer, and the entrance fee is half a million dollars. At the moment, the customers of The Auction consist of several major warlords, world powers, and military leaders, and those are just the ones we know about. The mutants sold always suffer the same fate: They go through intensive reeducation and become the mindless weapons of their buyers. By allowing Trask to build his labs on USSR soil, the Soviet Union gets their invitation to The Auction and the entrance fee is waived.”

“So why does the CIA care if there’s a mutant lab in Russia?” Alex interrupted. Hank and Charles shot him annoyed looks, which Alex promptly ignored. If he had to play Devil’s Advocate, he would. Don’t get him wrong, he wanted to go in and bust some lab messing around with human experimentation; he probably wanted it more than anybody else in the room. And, at this point, he was willing to believe that this Moira was the same Moira that he had known, the one that would absolutely go to the ends of the Earth to shut down a mutant experimentation lab simply because it was the right thing to do. However, she wasn’t just the Moira he had known, she was Senior Agent MacTaggert of the CIA, and she had superiors to report to. And those superiors likely wouldn’t jump at the idea of calling in a team they had tried to kill off and risk them escalating the Cold War to an actual war, not without some major motivation. Alex just needed to make sure that motivation doesn’t include trying to blow them up again before he decides to cooperate.

“Alex-” Charles began again.

“No, no, it’s a valid question,” Moira calmed. “There is another reason why we are so interested in this particular lab, one I have not yet shared with you.” She flipped to yet another page in the gigantic file, pulling out a photograph and sliding it across the table. “This,” she announced, “was Mount Massive of the Colorado Rockies.”

Hank plucked the photo of what looked to be a very normal mountain and held it up to the group for inspection.

“Was?” Alex asked.

Now that he mentioned it, Alex remembered it happening. It had been a few months before he had gone to look for Scott, back when Alex had been hopping from place to place. He hadn’t paid much attention to it back then, other than a passing interest; he had been busy, and it didn’t really have anything to do with his life.

“Dr. McCoy is correct,” Moira nodded. “This,” she announced, pulling out another picture, “was what it looked like after the blast.”

Alex let out a low whistle. “That’s a lot of damage to not have answers for.”

“We considered everything,” she stated. “There’s not enough dynamite in the world to create that big of an explosion, and there wasn’t any evidence that it had been specifically targeted. We even considered mutants, but the only ones in the area were a husband and wife couple that could communicate with cows and mildly influence the growth of plants, respectively. Nothing powerful enough to cause that. It was like it just spontaneously blew for no reason. Eventually, the case grew cold and we ran out of leads. Until recently, that is.” As she began to explain, Moira leaned forward in her seat. Unconsciously, Alex copied the movement. “A few years back, one of our agents managed to infiltrate Trask’s labs. She got a position as a low-level scientist, and mostly was assigned to work on teams studying Gammas and Betas. Then, in a stroke of luck, she managed to land a place on the team focused on one of the few Alphas they had: A young boy they only called Mutant 13246 or Subject A-13. His mutation allows him to metabolize the energy of the sun to generate a massive concussive force from his eyes. While the beams don’t generate heat themselves, often the extreme friction from the force causes fires. And they received a firsthand look at how powerful those could be when Trask brought him in. When his parents sold him. -”

“I’m sorry, his parents?” Charles choked.

“Trask acquires their mutants in a variety of ways. In some cases they pull them off the streets, in some cases they kidnap them from their homes, and in some cases - like this mutant - the parents themselves sell their children to the labs.”

Alex felt sick. The idea of parents just selling their child to be experimented on was repulsive. For a moment, Alex thought of his own parents and how unwanted he had been, and he wondered if they would have ever sunk so far as to sell him if they had the chance.

No, he decided. Kicking him out aside, they hadn’t been terrible parents; they had actually been good parents before they learned he was a mutant. It was one thing to make someone leave because you were afraid of them, it was another to actually harm them. Alex’s parents had never crossed that line, and he didn’t think that they would have.

“His parents arranged the sale through a mutual third party,” Moira explained with a sympathetic look on her face. Alex wondered how she had reacted to the news that this mutant had been betrayed by his family. Had she been horrified, as a mother herself and a genuine good person? Or had she simply been resigned, having seen too many horrors in her line of work to be surprised anymore?

“They had discovered his mutation several days earlier and had been afraid. They were supposed to bring him to a drop-off zone under the pretext of visiting a family friend, but he figured out what was happening right before they reached the site. They pressed a panic button, the troops began to corner him, and he fled the car and tried to run. When his exit was cut off, he attempted to use his mutation to knock the trucks out of the way. His aim was thrown off and it hit Mount Massive instead. And, well, you can see the results of that for yourself,” she said, nodding towards the photographs. She paused. “He had been twelve years old at the time.”
“A twelve year old did that?” Hank spluttered.

“We theorize that he didn’t know his own strength at the time.”

“But to mention that mutants’ abilities increase under pressure,” the Professor hummed. “Being betrayed by your parents and trying to evade capture would provide an ample trigger.”

“We managed to seize a recording of the event from Trask; you can watch it, if you’d like. One of my division’s teams has been analyzing the video; they believe they’ve managed positively to identify the boy and his parents. They left to bring the parents in before I could get a report, but they should return soon.”

“I’d like to see that video,” Hank inserted. “I might be able to better understand his abilities from it.”

“That can wait for now, Hank,” Charles said. “Please continue, Agent MacTaggert.”

“Trask brought the boy in around three years ago. In that time, our agent has managed to rise to the head of his research team. However, several months ago, her superiors at Trask decided that they had gained enough information from him and sold him on The Auction. His buyers were… ghosts,” she explained. “We can barely find any information on them. What we do know was that he was purchased for a Soviet program called ‘Wolf Spider.’ The little that we’ve managed to dig up about it indicates that it’s an assassin training program. Our agent has managed to buy time by convincing the higher-ups to wait for her to finish a few more tests, and they managed to get the Soviets to agree to hold off on moving him as long they were able to begin the training process at the lab. From what our contact has observed, they are training him to be an assassin, a - a human weapon. But recently, the tests have been coming to an end. Our agent can’t stall them much longer, and once time runs out he will be moved permanently over to the Wolf Spider program. There he will be trained, brainwashed, and eventually forced to kill for the USSR.”

For a moment, Moira waited while that information sunk in. Then, she folded her hands in front of her and, looking directly at Alex, said, “That, Mr. Summers, is the catch. That is how I managed to get enough support to convince the CIA to call in an outside group - to call in you - to shut down this lab. Do not mistake me,” she said carefully. “I want to do this to save every last person in that lab, this boy included, and I wanted to call in the X-Men because I believe they have the best chance of succeeding. But my superiors have been clear, and the CIA cannot allow you to proceed unless you agree to make preventing the Russians from getting their hands on this boy your priority.”

“What happens to the boy?” Charles asked. “When we rescue him, what does the CIA have planned for the boy?”

Alex glanced over at the man, and in that moment, he was reminded why Professor X had always been the most terrifying of them, wheelchair or not. Erik, for all of his power, had been simple: He threw metal at your head and ranted on about the superiority of mutants while wearing a stupid costume. Hank was brilliant, and was totally beast as Beast, but he was more of the type to hang out in the labs than go and engage in combat. Alex, for his part, was pretty straightforward: Hit his enemies with his blasts and watch as they fall over. Raven had been nearly as terrifying as Charles, as you could never know if it she was there unless she wanted you to (and by that point, it would be too late to save yourself). Charles was different. He could be in your head at any moment, at any time, and he knew that you knew it. If it had been anyone else with that power - if the person wielding it hadn’t been just so good - Alex wouldn’t have gone near them with a ten-foot pole. Luckily, it was Charles Xavier, a man that prattled on about ethics and the difference between right and wrong so often that you almost forgot that he could make you completely convinced that you were a twelve year old girl named Cindy with very little effort. (Almost.)
But now, with that look on his face, you had no choice but to remember.

Moira seemed to be holding up to his I-am-reading-your-every-thought-and-there-is-nothing-you-can-do-about-it look surprisingly well, all things considered. Alex knew there was a reason Charles had been completely and utterly smitten with her all these years; the man had always liked the ones that wouldn’t fall for any of his tricks. “Obviously, a regular orphanage wouldn’t suffice for him.”

“I want him,” Professor X cut her off. “We can provide a healthy environment for him at the school, protect him from anyone that comes after him, and teach him how to control his gifts. Or, we can help him find different arrangements, if he does not wish to stay at the school; I certainly won’t keep him prisoner after all he’s been through. Either way, he is not going with the CIA.”

“I’m not certain my superiors will just allow him to disappear.”

“Let me make myself clear,” Xavier crisply enunciated, leaning forward and looking very, very dangerous. “We will not save that boy from being a weapon in Russia just so that he can suffer the same fate in America. He’s a child; he deserves a chance to be one.”

Of course, the fact that they were going to save him - save all of them - was already a given; it had been since the beginning of the conversation. For all of his grousing, Alex had been determined to help those mutants since he had discovered their existence, and he knew that Charles and Hank were in the same boat. However, that didn’t mean they were about to make nice with the CIA without certain guarantees (funny, how almost being blown up makes working together again difficult). If they had to, the X-Men would just go AWOL and save the mutants themselves, CIA be damned.

“The last thing I want is for this boy to be hurt again,” Moira soothed.

Charles gave her a tight smile, the stuttering mess that had rolled into her office gone. “Then I see we’ve come to an agreement.”

Awkwardly, Moira cleared her throat, pulling yet another file from the stack, followed by two more. It appeared that she had decided to try to avoid that particular landmine. “Our agent has managed to smuggle some of the data about A-13 from the labs,” she explained. “We thought that it might help you understand the facilities and this mutant in particular better.”

Alex grabbed his copy of the file and began to flip through it. Almost immediately, he swore. The experiments this lab were conducting on him were brutal. It wasn’t hard to figure out the real reason why they had decided to give them that file: They wanted to make it personal. They wanted the X-Men to try to save that boy in particular that much harder. They wanted to them to be so outraged that they would do anything to save him.

They were succeeding.

Suddenly, a commotion arose outside of Moira’s office. There was sobbing, and a male voice loudly protesting. There were also mutters and scornful jeers; from the agents, Alex imagined.

“They must have found the boy’s parents,” Hank observed gravely.

“That’s the team that went out to get them,” Moira agreed. “It must be them.”

A morbid curiosity to see the kind of monsters that did that to their own son suddenly seized Alex. Moira’s office had a glass window for a wall; he’d easily be able to see out of it. He glanced up from his file, looking out towards the noise.

The file fell from Alex Summers’ hands and banged against the ground.
Charles looked at him curiously. “Alex?”

Alex couldn’t breathe. He was in some kind of nightmare, where nothing made sense but everything seemed real. He felt simultaneously numb and like a live wire, sparking and spluttering but still doing nothing at all. Then, the man yelled another obscenity and Alex knew that voice, but it couldn’t, it couldn’t be him, because if it was him that meant the boy was -

Alex stood up quickly enough to knock over his chair. He stumbled over to the door, almost falling over the Professor in the process. Instantly, Alex felt Charles enter his mind.

He didn’t care.

He reached for the door handle, jerking and twisting and he couldn’t get it open -

“Alex, as satisfying as we would all find it to punch those poor excuses of humans in the face, you can’t just - Oh my God...” Charles trailed off into a horrified whisper, and Alex knew exactly what the telepath had discovered.

Finally, his frantic hands succeeded and the door jerked open, slamming into the wall with enough force to rattle its wooden frame. Alex stumbled outside of the room, his feet stuttering to a stop opposite of two people he had never thought he would see again.

And for a long moment, no one moved.

“Mom?” he finally croaked out, sounding hollow and empty and so, so confused. “Dad?”

And, just like that, silence descended upon the pool of agents.

Right, Alex thought. They were all in on the case. Which meant that they all knew exactly who his parents were, what they had done...

“Scott was like me,” Alex realized numbly.

His parents were staring at him in a mix of shock and fear. They had likely never thought that they’d see him again, let alone that he would discover what they had done.

“No,” Alex denied, shaking his head. “Scott was your son; you - you wouldn’t have done that to him. You cared about him. Mom, you - you comforted me when I found out Scott had die-

“Died,” he finished with a sickening feeling. “Is my brother dead?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

They didn’t answer him. They didn’t even look at him.

“Did he die in that car crash?” Alex growled out.

Christopher and Katherine Summers (not his parents, parents didn’t do this) still did not reply to him.

“How?” Without warning, red sparked from his hands and knocked a full filebox off a desk, sending it careening across the room.

Nobody moved.

“No,” Katherine finally whispered, shaking in fear. “Your brother did not die in that car crash.”

This couldn’t happen, not to his brother, not to Scott. “I - I saw the reports,” Alex scrambled. “They found his body; the dental records matched.”
“Faked,” she whispered.

“He was twelve,” Alex fumbled, his heart sinking as he turned around towards Moira. She was standing next to the office door, looking horrified as she covered her mouth with her hand. Charles and Hank were next to her, lost and petrified as they stared at him in sad realization. “When - when they said he die - died. The same age as that boy. That - that was three years ago.”

She didn’t respond. Alex didn’t need her to.

He looked back to the two monsters standing before him, his voice transforming into a dangerous whisper. “You sold my baby brother?”

It wasn’t a question. Not really.

He still wanted an answer.

Alex took a step forward. It was all the prompting Christopher needed.

“He was dangerous!” he defended, glancing at the agents beside him desperately.

None of them moved. It was as if everyone was transfixed, stuck watching the tragedy before them play out. If he didn’t know better, Alex would almost think that Charles had frozen everyone.

Alex stopped. “Dangerous?” he asked in disbelief. “Dangerous? Are we talking about the same Scott here? Because my brother couldn't hurt a fly! He was a good person! He - he once ran out into heavy traffic to save a freaking injured squirrel! And you think that he’s dangerous?”

They did not answer him.

Alex let out a laugh, low and fake and brimming with pain. “Oh, right, I forgot, you think all mutants are dangerous. Like Scott. Like me.” Red sparks danced from his fingertips as he clenched his fists. “Well at least you were right about one of us.”

That, of course, was the part that everyone unfroze at. Agents began to scurry around the room, trying to pull his parents away, Moira started shouting orders that everyone promptly ignored, and Charles yelled, “Hank, stop him!”

Never let it be said that Beast was slow. He was almost instantly in front of Alex, acting as a human barrier for people that didn’t deserve protection.

“Get out of my way, Hank,” Alex growled, walking forward regardless.

“Alex,” Hank started, holding up his hands in supplication. “I know how much Scott means to you, but this isn’t the answer. You don’t want to do this.”

Alex shoved at his friend’s unbudging form in irritation as he kept moving towards his former parents. “I really do.”

Alex knew that Hank had enhanced strength as part of his mutation; he had seen the scrawny scientist bench twice as much as him with little effort. However, he had never truly registered what this meant until it was used against him. Hank’s unusually strong arms began to drag him away from his targets, hoisting him backwards. “Get off of me!” Alex shouted, pounding against his frame. “Get off!”

Distantly, he could hear Charles calling, “Agent MacTaggert, we’re going to need to borrow your
conference room,” and “This way, Hank,” and “Alex, please, calm your mind,” but Alex ignored all of it. Instead, all he could focus on was the frightened figures of the people who had taken his brother away from him being shuffled out of the room, presumably far, far away from the boy who wanted nothing more than to blast them off of the face of the Earth.

“You better pray to God that Scott’s alright,” he shouted after them. “Because if he isn’t, you’ll find out just how dangerous I am!”

Then, Alex was unceremoniously shoved into an empty conference room, the door slamming shut behind him. In a strange parody of a guard, Hank stood before the door with his arms crossed, blocking his exit.

Alex had gone to prison; he had seen real guards. Hank was not intimidating in the least. “Get the hell out of my way.”

To his credit, Hank didn’t move. “No.”

Desperately, Charles spoke up. “Alex, please, I know you’ve had a shock but you need to -”

“Don’t say ‘calm my mind,’” Alex gritted out, clenching his hands into fists. “Don’t.”

“Alex,” the Professor began, his voice choked with emotion. “I am so terribly sorry for what’s happened here today. I feel your pain -”

“You think,” Alex interrupted, “that just because you can read my mind you understand my pain?” He looked at him, aghast. “No. You don’t understand. Neither of you could ever understand. Scott is my brother. And - And I was supposed to protect him. But I didn’t. And for three years, I’ve been doing nothing while he’s been in that hellhole. -”

Alex cut off, his heart stopping as he remembered that stupid, horrible file that Moira had given them to make it personal. (Mentally, Alex almost laughed. If only she had known just how personal it was.) The file that detailed the horrific, barbaric things being done to some mutant that wasn’t supposed to be Scott.

And suddenly, Alex felt very, very ill.

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” he groaned.

Quickly, Hank scrambled for a wastebasket, shoving it in Alex’s direction. No sooner was it in his hands that Alex wretched the contents of his stomach into it, doubling over and falling to his knees. Faintly, he heard the whir of a wheelchair as the Professor approached, placing his hand on Alex’s shoulder in comfort.

“I was supposed to protect him,” Alex gasped uselessly.

It was then that he realized he was crying.

Storm… Scott…. Jean…. Remember those names.

Charles hadn’t forgotten. But he had failed nonetheless.

When Logan had let him into his mind, Charles had seen much of the future X-Men, Scott included.
However, it wasn’t until he connected with his future self that he truly understood.

Storm, Scott, and Jean had comprised the first X-Men team since the original Cuban team, and they had been handpicked by Charles himself. The three had been like his own children, with Scott as his only son. They had been close; Charles had cared for them, loved them, and those feelings had leaked over from future to present. And the Professor had been determined to fulfill his promise and bring them all together, but first he wanted to give them a chance to be children first. By bringing them to the school, he would be sending them hurtling down a path fraught with danger and death; being an X-Man was hardly a safe occupation. They had time to be normal, time to be regular, carefree children.

Scott’s death had changed all that.

Charles had always known who Scott was; it would be hard not to, considering he had the same last name and a nearly identical mutation to his older brother. He had been planning to extend an invitation to the school when both his mutation had manifested and Alex had returned, feeling that it would come best from his older brother (and Charles had had no doubt that Alex would return; the Mansion had been like a home to the boy, and Alex would always be drawn back to it like a moth to a flame).

But when Alex finally returned, it was with the news of Scott’s death.

Hit by a car, he had said. His spine had been shattered, whether from the crash or the fall no one knew. He had been twelve, not even a teenager yet. Without a doubt, Scott Summers - Cyclops, leader of the X-Men, and Charles Xavier’s honorary son - was gone before he even had a true chance to live.

Charles had been wrecked.

Just because he hadn’t actually met Scott yet didn’t mean he didn’t still carry the feelings he would develop for the boy. It had been like losing a member of his own family. He had spent days dwelling on what ifs, wondering what had been done differently from the original timeline to change it so drastically. Had his other self recruited Scott to the school earlier? Or had it been a kind of butterfly effect, a thousand different small differences colliding so that either the boy or the driver had been on the bridge that fateful night?

As soon as he had been able to collect himself, Charles had gone to Cerebro to find Jean and Storm, and ensure that his remaining two children would find their way home.

No dice. WHATSOEVER.

Contrary to popular belief, Charles could not find “anyone and everyone” with Cerebro. There were limiting factors. For one thing, the world was immensely populated; the needle-in-the-haystack analogy was a gross understatement. It was easier with mutants, as they had a smaller population, but they had to have already manifested their mutation for Cerebro to register them as mutant. And while, granted, he could usually find the people he was looking for, he had to actually have the information to find them. “Storm” was not exactly a name he could find, especially considering she didn’t appear to be calling herself that just yet. He had found millions of Jeans, but without information to narrow it down to the correct one, he had been lost. It appeared that neither of them had manifested yet, as he hadn’t been able to find anyone with their specific powers. And finding them based on their memories was impossible as well, as all the memories about them that he had been able to glean from Logan had been after they had met the Professor, meaning that those memories didn’t exist yet and likely never would. Which meant he had nothing. Absolutely nothing. No way to find them at the present time; he would have to periodically check for developing mutants.
that had their abilities and hope for the best.

Then, on a whim, he looked for Scott. Scott had been the one he had had the most information on, from his full name to his abilities to his familial relationships. By all means, if Scott was somehow alive, it would be easy to find him.

And Charles Xavier, the world’s most powerful telepath, had found nothing.

Scott Summers was well and truly dead.

Of course, he couldn’t tell Alex about any of it. His friend had yet to deal with the trauma of losing his brother, and Charles wouldn’t further his pain by forcing him to dwell on what could have been. Hank knew some - not much, but enough to understand that Charles hadn’t completely lost his mind. He had been sympathetic but hadn’t understood; he couldn’t have understood. Not without having remembered Cyclops. Not without remembering Scott.

Eventually, Charles had been able to move on, having mostly come to terms with the fact that the future he had seen in both Logan and his own thoughts had completely changed, both the good and the bad. He hadn’t forgotten; he hadn’t even come close to forgetting. But he no longer dwelled on his failure every minute of every day.

Of course, he hadn’t expected to learn that Scott Summers was not, in fact, dead, but had instead been living in his own personal Hell as Charles was trying to mourn his death without alerting his brother to the fact that he was mourning his death.

Charles had failed him. He had completely, utterly failed his boy.

Alex didn’t see it the same way. In his mind, Alex was the one that failed his brother. Of course, he didn’t actually know that Charles had sworn a promise to one day bring Scott to the School, or that he sort-of knew a future version of Scott, or that his brother was Charles’s kind-of son, so he was only dealing with limited information as he attributed blame. Perhaps if he knew, he would correctly lay the blame at Charles’s feet as well.

“Alex, I swear to you, we will get him back,” Charles vowed. He would. No matter what it took, he would fix this. He wouldn’t let any more family slip between his fingers. Not like Raven had, or Erik, or Sean.

He would bring Scott Summers home, no matter what it took.

Alex staggered up from the wastebin, his face determined. “Yes, we will.”

For a moment, Charles remembered the grim teenager standing in the middle of a scorched and devastated bomb shelter, looking for all the world unsurprised at the fact that he had burned irreparable damage into something that had been built to withstand nuclear devices.

And he felt a great swell of pity for the poor fool that had taken Alex Summers’ brother away.

Then, he remembered a file filled with overly clinical descriptions about how they tore a young boy apart and stitched him back together over and over and over again, and all his pity disappeared.

“I need to see the file,” Alex stated suddenly. “To see if it has any pictures of him. I - I need to know for sure.”

Momentarily, Charles considered discouraging Alex from looking for what were certain to be horrific images, but then stopped. There would be no averting Alex, and besides, he needed to know.
“Hank,” he nodded.

Exiting the room, Hank looked a mixture of reluctant and relieved. Charles understood; he did not want to leave Alex but he was grateful to get out of emotion-choked room for a moment. The door slammed shut upon his departure, closing the pair in alone.

Alex sat on the edge of the conference table, his hands white-knuckling its surface. He closed his eyes as he sucked in jagged breaths in an attempt to remain calm. Charles skimmed the surface of his mind. Over and over, one memory was playing: The night that Alex left his childhood home, and his brother, behind.

(“I’m coming with you.” “Scott… You can’t come with me.”)

“It was not your fault, Alex.”

Alex drew in another reluctant breath. “Please don’t read my mind, Professor.”

Xavier looked at him apologetically. “I thought it was necessary, given the situation.”

“I should have taken him out of that house,” Alex eventually responded. “That night, I should have taken him away. My parents wouldn’t have noticed he was gone until the next day, and I could have had the two of us far away by that point.”

“And taken him where? The streets? That’s no place for a child.”

“Where he is now is no place for a child!” Alex exploded. “I could have figured everything else out, and Scott would have been safe! I screwed up, and now he’s paying the price!”

“Your logic is flawed, my friend,” Charles said earnestly. “You thought that by leaving him behind, he would be safer, which he would have been, by the way. You were putting his needs quite nobly ahead of yours. No one could have seen what happened coming.”

Alex shook his head in denial. “I knew that my parents’ love had always been conditional; I just didn’t want to think it applied to Scott as well. I should have been thinking; I should have realized that they would take drastic measures if both their sons turned out to be mutants.”

“You didn’t even know that other mutants existed at the time! Let alone that your brother could be one as well! Alex, there was nothing you could have done.”

Alex stared at him in grim determination. “Well, there is now.”

Abruptly, the door opened. Hank was standing hesitantly on the threshold, Moira hovering behind him uncertainly.

Charles glanced at Alex. Slowly, the blonde nodded his agreement. Turning back towards the pair, Charles said, “Come in, both of you.”

Moira spoke first. “I am so sorry,” she confessed, looking directly at Alex. “I swear, I had no idea that the boy we were looking for was your brother. If I had known, I would have never told you in such a terrible way.”

For a long moment, Alex stared at the contrite woman. Then, he replied, determined and uncompromising. “I want custody. When we get my brother back - and we will get my brother back - I want custody of him. No government machinations, no ward of the state type crap. I’m not giving him up.”
“Of course,” Moira responded, nodding earnestly. “I’ll make it happen.”

Charles had no doubt she would, too. If she was pitted against the entirety of the US Government, Charles would still bet on her. Of course, he’d be contacting his lawyers anyways to ensure there were no complications in the process, but he knew that Moira would be able to grease quite a few wheels.


“Oh, right.” The scientist stumbled forward, placing the manilla folder on the dark oak of the table.

For a moment, Alex’s hand hovered uncertainly over the cover before he drew it back. Digging in his pocket, he pulled out his wallet and retrieved two small black and white images. One was of a much happier, younger Alex, laughing at the camera with a smaller, dark-haired boy on his back: Scott. The other was a newspaper clipping of a sweaty young boy in an athletics uniform, smiling at the camera in triumph as he held a medal in his hands.

“That’s my brother,” Alex acknowledged lowly. He fingered the newspaper clipping. “He was a cross country star,” he drifted with a ghost of a smile. “Second in the state.”

Then, swallowing hard, he flipped the folder open, shuffling through the papers until a photograph fell out. The boy depicted was unconscious, his head lagging against the shiny metal surface of the table, but it was unmistakable. Subject A-13 was Scott Summers.

“Where is the exact location of this lab, Agent MacTaggert?” Charles asked, determined. They would deploy tonight if they had to, as long as those mutants didn’t spend another moment locked up in those labs.

“We - we don’t know yet,” she stammered.

Alex spun on her. “What?”

She looked at them, desperate. “We hadn’t gotten to that part of the debriefing before the Summers were brought in. One of the biggest securities these labs have is how few know its location; not even the scientists know where it is, exactly. It took months for our agent to discover what country she was in. She believes that she can find out the coordinates in the next few days, but we don’t have anything concrete yet. We were bringing you in now so that you could deploy the moment we discovered the location.”

“I think we’ll use our own methods to discover its location, Agent MacTaggert,” Charles responded, thoughtful. “Hank, pull the car around. It’s time to head back to the school.”

While the government would be limited in their abilities to find the lab, Charles wasn’t. With Cerebro, finding the correct laboratory should be no trouble at all.

“What do you mean, you can’t find the lab?” Alex hissed.

“Exactly what I mean, I’m afraid. I can’t find the lab - or any of Trask’s labs - anywhere.”

The drive to the school had been the most painful one of Alex’s life. Hank had driven his precious car, Alex much too nervous to even consider driving. At the last moment, Moira had been invited along as well, ostensibly for her knowledge of the case but really because she both had government
contacts and was trustworthy. Her help had the potential to be very, very valuable, and Alex needed all the help he could get. Her attendance had been accepted under the promise of secrecy, and if Charles wasn’t a telepath, Alex wouldn’t have believed that any government agent was truthful when saying that no, they wouldn’t tell anyone about what happened while visiting the School, friend or no. She had spent the entire ride sitting awkwardly next to Alex in the backseat, alternating between apologizing and an uncomfortable silence.

When they arrived, Moira had walked into the school awestruck, and showed her appreciation for Cerebro with a reverential, “The CIA would kill for this,” a comment the Professor dignified with a “I know they would.” He had then rolled up to headset and entered the machine while Alex hovered anxiously nearby. Usually, Charles could find someone in a few minutes, fifteen at most.

This time, he didn’t surface from Cerebro for almost forty-five minutes, and he had no idea where Scott was when he did.

“Oh people have managed to block Charles’s brain waves before,” Hank volunteered. “And the Russians built the helmet that Shaw used. If the lab’s in the USSR, they could have used the same technology to hide it, if Trask didn’t already know how.”

“Hank’s right, my friend. I’m terribly sorry, but I don’t think I’ll be much help in finding him.”

Alex groaned in frustration, shoving his hand through his hair. One step forward, two steps back. And every one of those steps just seemed to take him further from his brother.

“I still have my agent,” Moira volunteered. “She can get the lab location; we just need a little more time.

“What we need is more help,” Alex argued. They had no idea where the lab was, and even if they did, it would be just him and Hank against the entirety of Trask’s guards and the Soviet Union - they couldn’t exactly take the Professor into a combat situation anymore. If they were going to pull this off, they needed backup. “And I know where to find it.”

She had given him that phone number in case he ever needed help. Besides, wasn’t this one of the things she did nowadays?

Charles sucked in a startled breath. “You know how to contact her. And you never told me.”

Charles Xavier was a good man. This meant that he didn’t spend every moment of the day reading his friends’ minds, and as such Alex had been able to keep certain secrets safe from him.

Hank did a double take. “Wait, her? You can contact her?”

Moira glanced between them, confused, “Who’s her?”

Alex ignored them. “I need to make a phone call,” he muttered, already digging in his pockets for a folded piece of paper. He was out the door and down the hall in a few short moments, and to a phone and dialing in a few more.

She answered on the third ring. “I need your help,” Havok told Mystique.
Nina

Chapter Summary

Raven kicks Erik in the head again. It's just to calm him down, she swears.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Charles Xavier had found Raven Darkholme in his kitchen, he made her hot chocolate.

Raven had never had anyone make her anything before, at least not that she could remember. Charles had known this, of course, so he had bustled about the kitchen immediately, making a promised hot chocolate likely for the first time in his life. While she had run from cabinet to cabinet, stuffing her face as much as possible, he had carefully filled two mugs with the rich beverage, burning his hand in the process. Raven had laughed when he yelped, a tentative, slight giggle that she had smothered in terror the moment the boy looked at her.

Charles had laughed with her, and instantly, all of her fears about him melted.

Then, he had offered her a cup and she drank it as if it were life-giving medicine, gulping it down in moments. Raven had started at the bottom of the empty cup forlornly before, to her surprise, Charles gave her his cup too. She had swallowed the second cup much more sedately, watching him in interest as he weaved promises of a home and a life and a family. Uncertainty had begun to creep in then; after all, what family spontaneously took in a small blue girl that had tried to rob them just because their son wished them to? Immediately, Charles had noticed her discomfort, and made vows that he would take care of it.

Raven had found herself believing him. Charles had been contagious with his enthusiasm; you just couldn’t doubt him.

“You’re tired,” he suddenly realized. “Come on, you can sleep in my room tonight. It’s too late to speak to my parents or have your own room made up for you, but there’s enough room for both of us in mine.”

Then, he had led her up an imposing staircase into an overly posh bedroom. Charles had lent her one of his expensive, blue pinstripe pajamas and they had curled up in the silk sheets together, and for the first time in a long time, Raven Darkholme slept in a bed.

She woke up the next day to the light filtering through the drapes. Charles had already been awake, but had restrained his excitement enough to let her sleep. As soon she had sat up, however, he launched off into a medley of plans, waxing poetic about the relationship between brothers and sisters before listing all the things they could do together now that they were family. While she watched the possibly insane boy, Raven briefly wondered just what she had gotten herself into.

Charles had heard her. Of course he had heard her. She hadn't said it out loud, but he still heard her. Instantly, he had sobered, mumbled an excuse about finding Raven a robe and slippers, and run off before she could apologize.
When he returned, he didn't give her a chance to say anything. Instead, he had forced a smile and shoved the spare garments at her, before saying he needed to speak to her about something.

“How long can you hold a form?” he blurted. “It's just… My parents don't know, you see, about me or about any of it, and… And I don't think they'd particularly understand.”

Raven, however, had understood, all too well. Just because Charles had no compunctions about sharing his home and life with a little blue girl didn't mean his parents were cut from the same cloth. Wordlessly, she shifted into the shape of a little girl she had seen in the park a few weeks prior. The blue-eyed, blonde-haired girl had been surrounded by parents that loved her, siblings that cared about her, and onlookers that stopped to tell her loving family what a gorgeous, not-blue-skinned daughter they had.

Everything Raven wasn’t.

Everything Raven wanted to be.

Based on the look on his face, Charles had heard every thought that passed through her head, but thankfully, he decided not to mention it. Instead, he gave her a small smile and took her hand, squeezing it slightly before he led her out the room and down the hall. As they approached what Raven assumed to be the dining room, Charles slowed before stopping entirely.

“Do you want this?” he asked urgently, turning towards her. “I’m not just forcing this on you, am I? Honestly, do you want to live here, with me? Because if you don’t, I understand. But... I need to know now: Is this what you want?”

And Raven had looked into the big, uncertain brown eyes of a boy she had only met the night before and may not entirely be sane, and she realized, “More than anything.”

Because if Charles Xavier was crazy, Raven Darkholme didn’t care. He was the first person to have given a damn about her in a long, long time, and he had already managed to worm his way into her heart.

“Oh okay then,” he whispered nervously. “I can - I can do this.”

Then, he had squeezed her hand tightly in his own, and led her into the dining room.

“How darling,” a well-dressed woman lazily stated. She must be Charles’ mother, Raven realized; she looked exactly like the person she had impersonated the night before. She was reading a newspaper casually, sipping her tea with one hand while turning the pages with the other. At the other end of the long, dark wood table a bespectacled man was jotting notes on papers as he munches on toast. Charles’ father, she presumed.

Neither of them had even looked at their son yet. They hadn’t even realized that there was a strange little girl standing next to him. Raven could have been standing there untransformed and blue, and they still wouldn’t have noticed.

And she thought back to the comments Charles had made the night before, about a mother that only paid attention to him long enough to order the maids around, and how he had heard a suspicious noise and trusted a baseball bat instead of going to his own parents, and she realized that maybe he needed her just as much as she needed him.

With a shaky smile on his lips, Charles Xavier had looked at her one last time before raising two fingers to his temple and stating, with a voice that trembled slightly but was underlaid with a steel core of determination, “Mother, Father, look at me.”
And, like puppets drawn by strings, they obeyed.

“This is Raven,” he continued firmly. “She’s going to be living with us from now on. You’re adopting her, today. Father,” he said, turning to the man, “call your lawyers. They can draw up the paperwork. Mother, have a room made up for her, and make arrangements to get her clothes and the like. She doesn’t have anything of her own, so we’re going to get her everything she needs.

“She’s your daughter now,” he finished, a hint of desperation creeping into his voice. “She’s my sister. Treat her as you would treat me. We’re a family, the four of us.”

Then, with his hand shaking so badly that Raven was worried he had hurt himself, Charles lowered his fingers from his temple and looked at his parents expectantly.

For a moment, they appeared puzzled, before they blinked as if waking up from a dream. With a patented smile, his mother had said, “Of course, darling. I’ll have Margaret take care of her room and clothes today. Now, run on the two of you; I’m certain Agatha can get you breakfast.” Then, with a dismissive wave of her hand, she turned back to her newspaper as if nothing had happened.

Well, Charles had told her to treat Raven as she treated him, and from Raven had seen, this was the extent of the woman’s parenting.

Without speaking, Charles had led her back to the same kitchen that they had met in just that night, and, still not speaking, the new siblings had sat at the table without a glance at the other.

“I don’t do that,” Charles eventually said, looking up at her desperately. “I don’t force my parent’s to do things. I don’t force anyone to do things, not really. This was just really, really important. I - I had to do it. I… I….

“I’m not a monster,” he finished. “I’m not.”

Except Charles didn’t sound very convinced of that fact himself.

(And Raven realized she had more alike with this overprivileged, lonely boy than she ever thought she could.)

“Could you not read my mind?” Raven asked in reply, her voice small and uncertain. “It’s just… I think siblings should be able to have secrets and privacy and all that.”

For a moment, Charles’ smile grew blinding before it dimmed entirely. “I don’t know how to do that yet,” he said honestly. “Keep people out, that is. But I’ll learn,” he added quickly, reaching across the table to take her hand in his own. “For you, I’ll learn. But please stay, Raven. Please don’t leave me.”

“I won’t,” she had promised, and she didn’t need to be a telepath to know that she had just made Charles happier than his parents ever had. It was okay, she decided, that he had used his power. He had done it to help someone else; he hadn’t hurt anyone.

And just like that, it was Charles and Raven against the world.

Much later, on a Cuban beach, she would think about that promise, as Charles gasped in pain below her, and she would wonder how things had ever become so broken that she was leaving to stand with someone else. I want to go back, she had thought. I want to go back to that kitchen, when our world only consisted of each other and no one could hurt us.

But she couldn’t, because things had twisted and shattered so far that she no longer recognized them,
and she didn’t want to be that pretty, blonde-haired, blue-eyed little girl anymore. She wanted to be Raven, with her red-hair and blue-skin, and she wanted people to accept that.

She wanted them to accept it the same way a lonely little telepath had once accepted it, back when it was them against the world.

Only they didn’t.

They pitied her for her ugly blue skin and they despised her for being different, but they didn’t accept her. Even when she stopped Erik, even when she saved the President, they still didn’t accept her.

And Raven kind of ran out of plans around that point.

For three weeks, she found a place to hole up in while her leg mostly healed. During those three weeks, Raven avoided absolutely everyone else, crushed her phone just in case Charles knew the number, and cried. Most of the time she spent crying, actually (not that she would ever admit that to anyone). It was a bone-tired, aching sob for Banshee and Angel and Azazel and Emma and herself, but mostly for that little lonely telepath that she had somehow lost but didn’t know how it happened or how to fix whatever had broken between them.

Then, Raven stopped crying.

Because she wasn’t ready to try to fix whatever had happened, so she wouldn’t. It was too tangled and complicated to even begin to fix what had happened. Instead, she would fix the messes that she did understand.

She would be like that young Charles, back when the world made sense, using her ability to help instead of hurt.

Finding mutants to help had been simple, really; while it wasn’t socially acceptable to publicly scorn them, in private there was still plenty of discrimination. She shut down her first mutant trafficking ring four days after she decided to start helping, and her first lab followed two weeks after that.

Three months after that, she decided she never wanted to be Mystique again.

For some reason, mutants looked up to Mystique, in all her blue glory, as if she was a hero or something. As if she could fix a world that was ugly and twisted to the point that all you could do was stumble about in the dark, praying you didn’t fall off the edge. And for all she tried to explain that she wasn’t a hero - she was a nobody who lost her first family to her blue skin and lost her second to far-off dreams of acceptance on a Cuban beach and yet still her blue skin as well and she didn’t know how to fix any of this so why were they expecting her to lead them - Charles was the leader not her never her - they wouldn’t listen.

After seeing the awed, mindless wonder in another mutant’s eyes for the nth time, she abandoned her natural blue scales once again for that pretty, perfect, acceptable blonde girl.

Because even when they weren’t rejecting her, she still wasn’t seen as normal. Mystique would always, always be held apart, and she was sick of it.

(She had always just wanted to be Raven, anyways.)

For a while, it was good. She was making sense of her life, saving her kind one mutant at a time, and carefully avoiding her past with great success.

Leave it to Alex Summers to screw that up.
Discovering him in that bar had been a coincidence, sort of. Raven had been hearing tales of explosions and massive scorch marks in the area, and had gone to investigate the possible mutant activity. Walking into the bar on a whim, she had found one Alexander Summers instead. She had almost turned away, left before he could even see her, but at last moment, she decided to talk to him. He looked like Hell, to put it lightly, and was so far from her confident teammate that Raven had been worried.

Then, he told her about Scott.

Raven and Alex hadn’t gotten along, not at first. Some of it had been about Hank, what with Raven’s interest in him and Alex’s interest in teasing him. Most of it, however, had been the fact that they were simply too much alike.

Both of them had been hiding behind masks, every second of every day. Raven had her faces, an ever-changing kaleidoscope of people she could never be; Alex had his anger and scorn to keep everyone at arm's length, to blind them by a self-assured facade so that they never saw the real him.

Other people saw what the reality they were presented with, the lie they had weaved as their first and last defence; Alex and Raven saw nothing but fake, flimsy masks. Knowing that they had been found out by the other had driven a wedge between the two rather than bind them together.

It wasn’t until he came to her with a letter to his brother that Raven saw the real Alex.

He had cared about Scott, much more than he would have ever let on to an outsider. In that second, Raven had been touched that he had opened up to her, even if it was only for a moment.

But then she forgot all about the letter. She forgot about it all the moment she grabbed Erik’s hand. And it wasn’t until she found out that Scott Summers was dead that she remembered it.

Alex had been destroyed, completely and utterly destroyed. Honestly, Raven had been worried about what he would do. She hoped that he would go to Charles, because if anyone could help him pick up the pieces it would be her brother, but for all her assurance she was scared he wouldn't even do that. In the end, she gave him her phone number in hopes he would call her before doing something stupid. Maybe it was for old times’ sake, maybe it was just because the guy had wormed his way under her skin, maybe it was just a stupid impulse, but she gave him the only number she could be reliably pinned to.

Which was potentially a problem, if he did go back to Charles.

While she knew that he wouldn't use Cerebro to find her - that would be too close to yet again breaking his vow not to read her mind, and she didn't think Charles would do that - Raven was under no illusions that he wouldn't call her every second of every day in hopes of a reunion, if he had the number.

Months passed, and the phone never rang, from Alex or otherwise, and Raven allowed the encounter to slip to the back of her mind. She went back to fighting, back to defending her kind, as if it had never happened. Some jobs she did for profit, some she did just because they needed to be done, but she always made sure she had a job.

Over the next couple years, Raven fell into a routine of sorts: Find a problem. Fix it. Reject every offer of help. Be alone. Consider talking to Charles, of even calling him briefly, but never press that last digit into the phone, because, by that point, she was used to being alone. Find a new problem. Fix it.
Lather, rinse, repeat.

And then Erik Lehnsherr’s name came barreling into her structured world.

“Do you remember Erik Lehnsherr?” Caliban had hummed. “My girls got a flash of him in Poland. Left quite a few dead bodies in his wake.” Then, he leaned forward with a smug smile that Raven wanted to slap off his face, and said, “Including his wife.”

And Raven found herself chasing after Magneto once more.

Finding him wasn’t a problem; Erik wasn’t nearly as stealthy as he thought he was. She easily tracked him to one of his old fake names, currently residing in some rundown boarding house in Poland. Getting there before he ditched the place was more difficult; Raven had to call in a favor from a teleporter to reach him in time.

“Wait here,” she told the man, jogging into the decrepit building and up the stairs.

When she walked in his room, Erik almost took off her head with a telephone cable.

“Good to see you too,” she choked out, glaring at the man before her.

Abruptly, the line around her throat slacked. “Mystique,” he acknowledged.

“It's Raven,” she spat.

“Go away, Raven,” he replied, turning around and retreating into the room.

Raven, refusing to be deterred, followed him. “You know, I went to a lot of trouble to find you. Nothing since DC, and suddenly I hear you’ve taken out an entire metalworking factory.” She cut him off, slamming her hand between his path and the wall. “What's going on, Erik?”

For the first time, Raven noticed the red circles around his eyes and the sheer desperation in his face. He looked at her, rage and terror churning across his facade, and said, “They have my daughter.”

Trask did, to be exact. Erik had hung up the cape, fallen madly in love in some whirlwind romance, and settled down to start a family not long after DC. He and his wife had had a daughter, Nina, who had only recently turned four.

And Nina had been a mutant.

Raven hadn't managed to pry all the details out of him yet, but she did know that Erik had returned from work one day to find his wife dead, his daughter missing, and men waiting to kill him.

Of course, they hadn't expected him to be a mutant also.

From the men, he had been able to pry out the information that it had been a coworker that had ratted out his daughter’s mutant status, but no more.

And so he had returned to work, confronted his coworker, and lost control of his abilities for the first time since he was a child.

Everyone in the factory died that day.

That had been almost three weeks ago.

Which left Erik desperate and alone, scouring the country for the lab that had taken his daughter. He
had found some information about it, but no location and no way to find it. No way to find his Nina.

Immediately, Raven volunteered her services.

Tracking down labs like Trask's was what she did now; she would have a much better chance than Erik. Together, they could get Nina back.

Of course, it was that moment her phone rang.

“I need your help.”

“Now’s not a good time, Alex,” she murmured absently, glancing through the sparse documents Erik had managed to obtain.

“It's Scott, Raven,” Alex replied, his voice desperate.

Raven froze. “Your brother Scott?”

“He's alive,” he rushed to explain. “He's a mutant. My parents - they faked his death. Sold him to Trask. He's - he's in the labs now. Trask just sold him to a third party; if I don't get him back now, he'll disappear again.”

Raven’s heart plummeted. “Trask? Are you sure?” In her periphery, she could see Erik straighten at the mention of Trask.

“Yes! Moira just called in the X-Men for help taking down one of their labs. Scott is one of the mutants in their files.”

“Okay, which lab?” she demanded.

“We don’t know yet,” he admitted. “Her contact is still getting the location.”

“Trask never writes down their lab locations; that's why it's near impossible to find one with a paper trail. But for documenting purposes, each lab has a designation that's used instead. See if Moira’s found that.”

“Gimme a sec,” Alex muttered.

In the background, she could hear the rustle of papers as he flipped through files. Erik glared at her impatiently. Raven glared back. While she was well aware of the difficulty of helping both Erik and Alex find their respective family members, she couldn't just ignore Alex. Even if it was just advice, she wanted to help him get Scott back.

“Got it!” Alex exclaimed. “It's lab designation is Sierra-Echo-One-One-Tango-Zulu-Nine-Five.”

Raven’s breath caught in her throat. With an unsteady hand, she held up the data Erik had wrangled about his daughter.

The lab Nina had been sent to was designated SE11TZ95.

“Raven?”

She jerked back to reality, focusing on the phone once again. “Sierra-Echo-One-One-Tango-Zulu-Nine-Five?” she repeated. “Are you certain about that?”

Raven never heard Alex’s answer, because the moment that designation code left her lips Erik had
torn the phone from her hands.

“What do you know about that lab?” he demanded.

Alex’s surprised, “Erik?” had been loud enough that Raven heard it.

Quickly, she shot to her feet, jerking the phone back from Erik. After a brief struggle, they settled the phone between them, Raven still glaring in annoyance and Erik still radiating that pained-desperate glower.

“doing with him?” Alex spat, still managing to sound furious over the line. “What happened to ‘I work alone?’ Seriously, the last time you saw that guy you kicked him in the -”

“Alex,” Raven cut off. “It’s hard to explain.”

“What do you know about that lab?” Erik demanded again.

For a moment, Alex was silent. Then, bitterly, he said, “I know that it’s where my little brother is being held.”

No one spoke.

“They have your brother there?” Erik questioned softly.

“Why do you care about that lab?” Alex asked defensively.

Erik ignored the question. “What else do you know about it?”

“Not until you tell me what’s going on,” Alex snapped back.

The metal bed frame screeched, reflecting Erik’s frustration. Raven sighed. The least helpful thing possible for the situation was two stubborn, distraught men butting heads over information out of fear of endangering their respective loved ones. “Play nice, you two,” she ordered. “Arguing isn’t going to help anyone.” -

Erik glared at her as he clenched his jaw. Eventually, he bit out, “That lab has my daughter.”

Alex was silent. Then, “How old is she?”

“She’s four,” Erik whispered.

Alex swore. “How long?”

“Nineteen days.”

“Okay,” Alex breathed. “Okay. Erik, I don’t like you, and I don’t trust you. That’s not going to change. But you’re one hell of a fighter, and so am I. I’ve got information, but I don’t have enough manpower to take down the lab, not without risking casualties.”

“What are you proposing?”

“An alliance. We exchange information, and take down the lab together. Then - then we get my brother and your daughter back, and we go our separate ways.”

“And Moira would be willing to agree to sharing information with a fugitive?” Erik scoffed. “The CIA would?”
“The CIA doesn’t need to know everything.”

Erik paused. “And Charles?” he asked softly.

“Charles will agree,” Alex replied, determined. “I’ll make him agree.”

“What do you know about the lab?”

“Do we have a deal?”

“Yes.”

“The lab is somewhere along the border of Germany and Poland,” Alex began. “Moira’s got a mole in the lab, but they don’t have the exact location yet.”

“Why can’t Charles just find it?”

“They’re blocking his abilities somehow. Kind of like that dumbass helmet of yours.”

Raven cut in before it could descend to a squabbling match. “I’ve got contacts,” she interrupted. “I could ask around, see if anyone’s heard about it.”

“Thank you, Raven,” Alex sighed. “Thank you.”

“We’ll get Scott back,” she assured. They would, him and Nina both. She’d make sure of it.

“I’ll call if I get any new information,” Alex replied. “You do the same; you can reach me at this number. And Erik? Your daughter - what’s her name?”

“Nina,” the metal-bender whispered. “Her name is Nina.”

Erik Lehnsherr had a daughter. Magneto had a daughter.

Today was full of shocking surprises, Alex pondered. First, his brother turns out to be alive; then, freaking Magneto ended up having a daughter, who just so happened to in the exact same lab as his brother.

If the world got any smaller, they’d have to keep it in a box.

Alex did not trust Erik; he hadn’t since the man who was supposed to be their friend left them on a beach that the government had just tried to blow up. After Charles had been shot and paralyzed. It had been a long, frantic journey to get the Professor medical attention, and by the time they got to a hospital that would serve them, it had almost been too late. Even when they finally got home, the struggles didn’t end. Learning how to operate without his legs almost destroyed Charles, and Erik hadn’t been there for any of it. Instead, it was Hank and Alex and Sean who assisted their mentor, while Erik was running around Charles’ sister without so much as a damn smoke signal. No, Erik Lehnsherr - the man who had practically been joined at the hip with Charles throughout the entire time, Charles Xavier’s best friend - was too busy being a terrorist to so much as write the man he had once called a brother.

Any trust or respect Alex Summers had for him died on that Cuban beach.

That didn’t, however, mean he was going to ignore the fact the man had a daughter in the labs.
Alex knew exactly the kind of pain that came with losing a family member to that Hell; he was experiencing it at that very moment. He knew that Erik would go to the ends of the Earth to get his daughter back, just like Alex would for Scott.

And if they worked together, they would have twice the chance of saving their family.

And with the lives of a teenage boy and a four year old girl on the line, abandoning any possible advantage because of an old argument would not only be stupid, it would be selfish.

What Alex couldn’t figure out was how his alliance with Magneto and Raven had led to him sitting awkwardly on the sofa, Charles and Hank across from him looking simultaneously hurt and upset, and a confused Moira perched in the chair next to him.

Charles knew, of course, about Erik; he had picked it from Alex’s mind the moment it reached his ears. He had likely already shared the news with Hank, even if none of them had spoken it aloud. It would be best to discuss it, but they couldn’t. Not without Senior Agent Moira MacTaggert hearing, who had certainly never met the fugitive Erik Lehnsherr and absolutely would not understand cooperating with said fugitive. They couldn't even discuss it through Charles’ telepathy, because the man could not keep a secret if his life depended on it. The Professor would give away the fact that they were have secret mental conversation by facial expression alone, and the rest would come tumbling out after it. Really, it was much safer to keep silent while Moira was in the room.

Sometimes - no, actually, all the time - Alex hated that Charles had wiped her memory. When it first happened, they had gotten into a massive fight over it, but Charles wouldn’t budge. It was times like these that Alex wanted not Agent MacTaggert the CIA agent, but Moira, his friend.

“So,” Charles began. “You have Raven’s number.”

Inwardly, Alex groaned. Based on the look on Charles’ face, he heard it. “She asked me not to tell you.”

Moira glanced between them. “I'm sorry, who's Raven?”

“Blue shapeshifter that took down Magneto a few years back,” Alex elucidated. “Also his sister.”

Moira double-took. “Sister?”

“Adopted.”

“But my sister nonetheless, and she chose to seek you out and give you her phone number, but not before telling you not to tell me,” Charles said, looking hurt.

Alex shifted uncomfortably. “It's not what you think. We ran into each other by accident. It was right after Scott - after I thought Scott died, and I was pretty low. We talked, had a few drinks, she gave me her number in case of emergencies. That's it.”

“I see,” Charles nodded, not sounding convinced. “Did you sleep with her?”

Alex stared at him. “Seriously?”

“I, uh, think it's a valid question,” Hank piped up, shifting uncomfortably.

Right, he had some weird flirty thing going on with Raven. Which meant Alex would be getting zero assistance from that avenue.
“Can't you just pick any information you want out of my head? Why the third degree?”

“I'd rather not see any memories of my sister doing - that,” Charles spluttered. “Especially with you.”

What the Hell was that supposed to mean?

“No, I did not sleep with her,” Alex ground out.

Xavier relaxed visibly. Suddenly hopeful, he looked up at Alex. “And she's coming back?”

Dear God, Alex was going to die from puppy dog eyes before he ever got the chance to rescue his brother. “I don't know,” he answered honestly, feeling a wave of guilt nearly crush him when the telepath literally drooped at the news. “She said that she'd check with some contacts she had in Germany. But you may still see her; she said she'd help take down the base,” Alex tacked on in an attempt to make him stop looking so damn forlorn.

Noticeably, Charles perked. “Do you think so?”

Moira’s phone suddenly rang, saving them all from the conversation. “I should take this,” she claimed gratefully, rushing towards the door as if they were the Pearly Gates themselves.

Which left Alex alone with Hank and Charles.

Thanks, Moira, Alex groaned internally.

As soon as the door snapped shut, however, Charles straightened in his wheelchair. “You spoke to Erik.”

“Yes,” Alex nodded with a defiant tilt to his chin. “He's going to help us.”

“His daughter is in the lab,” Charles responded, subdued.

“Her name is Nina,” Alex said quietly. “She's four.”

“I'm sorry, daughter?” Hank spluttered.

Quickly, Alex filled the rest in on the conversation. Charles already knew it all, but Hank didn't, and he had to stop and restart the story more than once because of the scientist’s confusion.

When he was finished, Hank asked, “Are you sure we can trust him?”

“I don't know,” Alex answered honestly. “But I think we have to.”

Alex couldn't sleep.

Night had fallen and there had still been no word from Moira’s agent, or from Raven. Eventually, they had all filed away to their respective rooms in an attempt to get some rest, but Alex couldn't. Every time he closed his eyes, he was plagued by horrible images of Scott dying, of him being beaten and experimented on and tortured. In the end, he had fled his bed for the relative sanity of the living room, the stacks of files spread before him as he combed for more clues.

“Couldn't sleep?” he asked, not bothering to look behind him to see whoever had walked into the
“Yeah,” Moira admitted, walking into his peripheral and sitting in the armchair next to him. “You?”

“I'm wound pretty tight lately, I guess,” Alex muttered.

Moira’s gaze dropped down to the folders in front of him. “You know,” she began quietly, “I always got more information about Scott than any other person in those labs, since our agent was on his team. Sometimes, it felt like I almost knew him. I did care about him, though, even though I had never met him. It was hard not to care about him, reading his file. I - I even used to imagine that when we found him, I could take him in. Stupid, I know; I'd probably never be cleared as his foster parent, what with my job and the difficulty of adopting a child with so much government interest around him. I guess I couldn't help but hope he would have a good life once he was free, and I figured I could ensure that if I was there every step of the way. I imagined I'd take off time for a while, introduce him to my son, and help him adjust to normal life again, something like that. But I always wondered who he was before. He had been marked down as being sold by his family; I - I never imagined he would have someone out there for him.”

Alex swallowed hard past the lump in his throat. “What did you hear about him? In the labs?”

“He's smart. Resourceful. He's tried to escape six times, at last count. Some got close. After the first one, they moved him into the high security wards, away from the other mutants. They ceased for a while after he lost his sight, but recently -”

“Scott’s blind?” Alex choked.

Moira looked at him, startled. “I didn't tell you?”

“Scary. He's trying to escape six times, at last count. Some actually got close. After the first one, they moved him into the high security wards, away from the other mutants. They ceased for a while after he lost his sight, but recently -”

“I think I would have remembered that!” he snapped in panic.

The agent looked at him apologetically. “Scott isn't blind per se. He lost control of his mutation a couple years back during an experiment gone wrong; he can no longer contain his optic blasts. Theoretically, they can be contained by an outside apparatus that still allows Scott to see, but Trask didn’t concern themselves with that. Instead, they used a solid metal band that simultaneously contains his blasts and blinds him.”

Alex clenched his fists, his stomach twisting. This situation only became worse by the second. Not only has his brother been betrayed, kidnapped, tortured, and experimented on, but he had been blind while it happened.

God, he was a total failure of a big brother.

“He, uh, taught himself how to echolocate, though. He clicks with his tongue,” Moira elucidated, snapping her tongue experimentally, “and he uses the sound he gets back to figure out what his surroundings look like. I don't know how it works, exactly, but he's apparently pretty good at it.”

She was trying to make him feel better, Alex realized with surprise. Moira had never been one to sugarcoat things, but she had always been the one to try to cheer them up when she felt they were being unnecessarily hard on themselves. Suddenly, Alex felt a wistful pang for his old friend; he missed being able to talk to Moira, the real Moira.

“And Scott should love the Mansion,” she continued, oblivious. “This place will be good for him.”

“I hope so,” Alex responded, trying and failing to shake off the old memories. “If it isn't - if he needs to be somewhere else - we can go away from here. Find a different place, something peaceful.”
“Well, I hope he’s happy wherever you go. It’s strange though,” she said, an odd smile on her face. “This place… It's almost familiar to me.”

The words were like a wrench to Alex’s gut. What if the familiar surroundings were making her remember? Could she remember without Charles’ interference? And, if she could, was there a way to trigger her memories?

Would she even want him to?

“What if the memories are too much for him?” Alex blurted, watching carefully for a reaction. “What if it's too dangerous for him to remember? What if… What if we could erase it all, give him a different past?”

Moira looked at him, puzzled. “Could the Professor even do that? Wipe away all those memories without him suspecting anything?”

“Say he could, theoretically.”

“But do you think Scott would want it? Would he want to have his memories altered?”

Alex wasn't sure about Scott; he hadn't seen him in so long, and his brother had been through so much, that he wasn't sure how Scott would react to the option.

But he wasn't talking about Scott. He was talking about Moira.

And Alex knew that Moira would have never wanted to lose all those memories.

“What if it was better for him - safer for him - this way, even if he didn't want it? Even if we didn't ask him?”

“That doesn't matter,” Moira rejected with a shake of her head. “It’s his decision what he does with his life, and what risks he takes. To remove those memories without asking would be to take away that decision. It'd be saying what he wanted doesn't matter anymore. To do that - or to let Charles do it - would be a gross violation.”

Moira was right. Of course she was right. Alex had never agreed with what Charles did, but he had never tried to reverse it either.

Maybe it was time that he did.

Before he could change his mind, Alex spoke. “Moira, there's something I need to tell you, about Cuba.”

She looked at him curiously. “What do you mean?”

“You were -”

Abruptly, the door opened. Charles was sitting there, his wheelchair perched awkwardly in the passageway. “I'm sorry, have I interrupted something?”

“We were just talking,” Moira explained smoothly. “Alex, you were saying?”

“It doesn't matter,” Alex sighed in defeat. “Forget I said anything.”

MacTaggert looked at him curiously, but didn't push it. “If you're sure.” Stretching slightly, she stood. “I'm going to call my office, get an update. Goodnight, you two.”
Alex watched as she left.

Charles glanced between the pair, his face twitching when he realized what Alex had almost done. “It's for her own good, my friend.”

Alex refused to look at him, instead shuffling the folders into a semblance of order. “Do you ever wonder if maybe we don't get to decide what's for her own good?”


Alex felt the Professor enter his mind almost tentatively, as if asking for permission. Giving his consent, he opened himself up wider to the telepath, feeling as he shuffled through the conversation.

“Hank should be able to whip up something to help him regain his sight. It may be sometime before it's ready though, and he would likely need to meet Scott beforehand. We can make the School as accessible as possible, in the meantime. I'll start researching the options, and, when he gets here, we can make sure the students will stop leaving their stuff lying about; Lord knows it's hard enough to navigate without toppling over for those with their sight; it'd be infinitely harder without.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Alex answered softly. When Scott got here. When they rescued him. Not if.

Alex could only hope that their success would be so certain.

In the corner of his eye, Alex saw Charles pick up one of the many sheets of paper. Alex had already read that one; it had been one of the first files he looked over, actually. It detailed a particularly brutal experiment; Alex had retched after reading it, and had almost abandoned the files altogether, unable to bear more. Only the knowledge that he could find important information to help Scott had kept him going, and even then he had to stop frequently. As it was, Alex had still only gone through the earliest files, before Scott had apparently lost his vision.

Gently, Charles rubbed a tear from his eye, still reading the horrific file before him.

“Why,” Alex began, bewildered, “do you care so much?”

To his credit, Charles didn't pretend that he was unaware of which Alex was speaking. “It's a bit hard to explain, my friend.”

“Is it a telepath thing? Are you getting backlashes of my emotions? You've been acting almost… guilty, but that's impossible. There was no way you could have done anything, or even known Scott existed; I never mentioned him to anyone other than Raven. But, ever since I told you Scott died, you been acting as if…” Alex trailed off

Charles didn't respond. He didn't even look at Alex, his knuckles clenched tightly around the paper. Eventually, he stated, “I should have gotten to Scott before Trask did. I should have brought him to the School.”

“I was the one that should have gone to Scott, figured out he was a mutant and brought him here. Scott was - is - my responsibility -”

“No, he was mine,” Charles snapped, unable to stop himself.

Dread brew in Alex’s gut. “What do you mean by that?” he questioned, his nerves alighting.

“Charles? You - you're not responsible for every mutant under the sun.”

“No,” Charles agreed. “I'm not. But I am responsible for this one.”
Alex stared at him. “What are you talking about?”

“You wouldn't believe me even if I told you.”

“Try me.”

And Charles did.

Maybe it had been guilt. Maybe it had been sentiment. Whatever the reason, Alex found himself listening, stunned, as his mentor weaved a tale of time travel and disaster and betrayal. He listened to a vow to unite three mutants, three X-Men.

One of which had been Scott.

“You knew,” he breathed. “You knew he was a mutant. You knew before he even manifested.”

Charles didn't deny it.

“Did you know about the lab?” Alex demanded, white hot rage clouding his mind. “Did you let it happen to keep from altering too much, or some bullshit?”

“No! No, Alex, I swear to you, I thought he was dead,” Charles explained earnestly. “The other Scott had never encountered Trask Industries; I never suspected that he would in this timeline. But I didn't bring him here right away, because I wanted him to have an ordinary childhood, and I will always regret that.”

Slowly, Alex felt his anger drain away. “I can understand wanting him to have a normal childhood. What happened to the other him? Future him?”

Charles’ face turned grim. “He died. Most of us did, actually. You and Hank and Raven and so many more. But we've changed that,” he added hastily. “The future is different now.”

“Was he happy?” Alex asked anxiously.

“Yes, from what I can tell. I wasn't able to get the best read on his personality. The man whose mind I was reading, Logan, didn't like Scott very much - he had respect for him as a leader, would follow him in the field, but he didn't like him for the most part; Scott was engaged to the woman Logan was attracted to, and that exacerbated their relationship. However, I was able to tell that he had a good life. He was a good leader for the X-Men, and he was well liked by his friends and students. He was a good man.”

“Tell me about him,” Alex demanded. “About what you saw.”

For the first time, Charles shared the future he had witnessed. He told of a future that was horrific yet still held wonderful parts, about a school that had succeeded beyond their wildest dreams before it was attacked. He spoke of three friends who had still been children when they abruptly resurrected the X-Men to save their kidnapped mentor. He confessed a mistake he had committed, about a little girl who couldn't control her powers and how his foolish attempt at helping had only made things worse.

Charles Xavier, for the first time, told of Jean and Scott and Storm, and of how they could have been.

Afterwards, the pair was silent, dwelling on all that had been revealed.
“We could make it happen,” Alex said suddenly. “The right way this time. We can make the good parts real without screwing it all up.”

Charles looked at him forlornly. “It won't be that simple, Alex,” he warned. “There will be ripple effects to everything. Just look at what happened: We stopped the catastrophic future for all of mutantkind, but Scott was condemned to an even worse fate. We can't have the good without there also being bad.”

“Doesn't matter,” Alex denied. “Whatever the bad ends up being, we can handle it. We shouldn't give up on the good.”

Before Charles could respond, the door rattled open. Moira stood there, her face ashen and the phone held loosely in her hand.

Alex leapt to his feet. “What happened?” he demanded. “Do you know where the lab is?”

“The lab’s gone, Alex,” Moria blurted. “It's gone.”

When Nina developed her mutation, Erik Lehnsherr had wanted to run.

He didn't. And that decision would always haunt him.

Nina had been perfect, blessedly perfect. She had been such a kind, gentle, sweet child that no one could resist her charms, not even animals. It seemed that every creature in the forest had been drawn to her calming touch, even the most skittish of beasts.

And, at the time, Erik hadn't attributed any specific reason to that. He hadn't thought there was one.

And then Nina went missing.

At first, Erik had been in a blind panic when he arrived home to a frantic wife who couldn't find their child, his imagination forming images of his enemies finding her and hurting her and killing her and eins zwei drei -

But then, he noticed how her coat was gone and her boots were no longer lined up neatly beside the door, and logic crept in to inform him that likely, Nina had run off to the forest again to “play with her friends,” despite his repeated warnings not to travel into the tree line without either Magda or him present. His heart slowly thudding to a normal rate, Erik had traveled into the woods behind his house, calling his daughter's name before him.

She didn't answer. In fact, there was no sign of her whatsoever. The deeper he traveled, the more frantic he became, until that blind panic he had before had returned and he couldn't lose her, not Nina, not his liebling, and there was snow on the ground and the already-freezing temperature was dropping with the sun and his Nina could freeze to death, and he had been meaning to sew metal buttons on all her clothes so he could track her at all times but he had forgotten, stupid, stupid -

Half the village had come out to help him look for her. That was one thing he loved about where he lived: everyone helped one another. Erik’s footsteps had crunched in the snow, his breath had materialized in the air before him, and he had listened to his neighbors shouted calls and his wife’s sobbing pleas, while the despair had sunk down to his bones.

And then - for the first time since Shaw had counted eins zwei drei, followed by a click-bang and a
heart-wrenching thud - Erik Lehnsherr found himself praying.

He was answered by a bird to the face.

In fact, there had been many frantic birds flapping uselessly around them, but Erik’s muddled brain had chalked it up to the search party disturbing them before he continued to scan the trees for any sign of dark brown hair nestled under a dark green cap.

But by the time sun dipped below the horizon, half the forest had been worked into a frenzy, and Erik realized that there was something else at work.

Before he even registered what he was doing, Erik had been sprinting through a path of deranged animals while screaming his daughter’s name.

And, finally, he was answered with a teary “Papa!”

Nina had been nestled next to a tree, her skin a deathly white and snow caked in her hair. Her lips were that terrible blue color that Erik had only seen once before, when the doktors at the Camp (not Shaw, Shaw only had had manically-gleaming eyes for Erik anymore and didn't bother with the other lab rats) had forced some of the other “experiments” (not Erik, only Shaw, the loyal, high-ranking Party member who had enough connections to make sure he owned little 214782, was allowed to so much as look at Erik, let alone experiment on him) to sit in an ice bath all night so they could study the effects of hypothermia. Instantly, Erik had wanted to rush to her and carry her home.

The problem? A bear was between them. And no less than three wolves. One of which was curled up around his daughter.

Erik had searched his instincts for metal, his mind awash with questions of where he should hit them to kill them, and if he could be fast enough, and what if that wolf tore out her throat before Erik could kill it, when, suddenly, the bear grumbled and moved away and the wolves gave Nina a parting lick before disappearing into the trees.

Erik had been too busy pulling his daughter into his arms with a gasped cry of “my baby” to consider what it meant.

Mere moments after he had embraced his daughter Magda was there, sobbing and and kissing Nina before throwing her arms around the pair of them.

And, for one moment, their world consisted of no one but each other.

Then, a member of the search party that Erik had already forgotten had spoken the one word that could bring their world tumbling down.

“Mutant.”

They were standing maybe fifteen, thirty meters away in a half circle across from them, and they knew, they knew. Quickly, Erik took count of every ounce of metal in case there was a fight, in case he needed to let Magneto out and end everyone who threatened his family. (There were 57 pieces of metal scattered about the crowd. He only needed one to kill them all in under ten seconds.) And he could do it, too. He could have destroyed his neighbors if it meant saving his daughter.

But Nina was in his arms, and Nina didn't even know her father’s true name, let alone the fact that he was a mutant who knew thirteen different places where, if pierced, he could kill someone with an object as miniscule as a sewing needle. Nina was in his arms, and she was so good and kind, the way he used to be, and Erik knew that if he let her see blood spill over the white snow that goodness
would be destroyed as surely as a burning needle and black ink on skin, and *eins zwei drei* (*click-bang*) had destroyed him.

And so Erik Lehnsherr clenched his daughter tighter, stood up, and shielded her with his body as he walked through the crowd.

They hadn't stopped him. They hadn't made a single move against the pair. They just watched.

Erik made plans for running the entire way home.

When they reached their cottage, Erik finally discovered what had happened. A frantic Magda had been tending to her daughter, bundling her up and caring for her injuries, when Nina sobbed the story out. She hadn't meant to go that far, she claimed. She had just meant to play with her friend the rabbit close to the house, but the rabbit had scampered off and Nina had followed. She hadn't even realized how far she had gone until she lost track of the hare and saw that she was quite lost, and while stumbling about she tripped on a branch and sprained her ankle. By that time, the sun was setting and the freezing night was rapidly approaching, and Nina had panicked. That, apparently, had caused the birds to panic, as well as the deer and the hares and the squirrels. Then, new friends came, a bear and the wolves and a fox that had Erik hadn't seen, and they had helped Nina stay warm until her Papa found her. Magda had been thankful, praising God a thousand times for her daughter’s life-saving mutation. Erik had been pensive. While he wasn't upset his daughter was a mutant - he could never be upset - he was worried about how it would affect her. Mutants weren't accepted by society; they were feared. They were hated.

They were killed.

And Erik would be *damned* if his daughter went through the same thing he did.

Which is why Magda had found him later that night, after Nina had gone to sleep, staring at a pile of fake passports and planning their new life.

“Your daughter is like you, Henryk,” she had smiled, walking into the room like there was nothing to be worried about. “Henryk? What are you doing?”

“We have to leave,” he brusquely stated, shouldering past her to empty the drawers.

“Leave? Henryk, what are you talking about?”

“They know she's a mutant; it's not safe to stay.”

“Nina’s done nothing wrong. What does it matter that she's a mutant?” Magda demanded. “That's nothing to be ashamed of, they know that!”

“And I know that no matter what they say, they still won't accept us!”

“Won't accept you? *Won't accept you*?” Magda repeated. “Erik, I accepted you! I'm not a mutant, and I accepted you the first night! Why should our friends be different?”

Erik turned to her. “You're different! People aren't like you; they're not as good as you are! You are the exception, not the rule.”

“But what would we tell Nina? This is her home!”

Grabbing her shoulders, Erik stated earnestly, “*We're* her home.”
Appearing to be swayed, Magda opened her mouth to reply, when Erik suddenly stiffened.

He looked at her, gravity in his eyes. “I can feel a police badge outside.”

They had rushed to the door, jerking it open before the visitor reached the opening.

The local sheriff, Andrezej, had been standing there, his hand raised and about to knock. “Magda, Henryk,” he greeted in surprise. “I was just coming to speak with you.”

Erik stared at him, stone-faced. Seeking to cut the tension, Magda pushed on a tight smile and said, “Can we help you?”

“I’ve come to check on Nina,” he explained. “After what happened, I wanted to make sure she was okay.”

“She's sleeping,” Erik cut off rudely.

“I see.” Andrezej hesitated. “May I come in?”

“I don't think that's a good idea.” Magda glared at him, but Erik didn't relent.

Andrezej noticed. “I understand,” he soothed hastily. “But there is something I must tell you. I can do it just as well out here than in there. I've spoken to the rest of the men -”

Erik braced himself. Here it came: We don't want mutants in our town. Your daughter is no longer welcome here. Leave, or we will make you leave.

Instead, Andrezej finished, “- and we want you to know that if anyone gives your family trouble, come to us and we will take care of it.”

Erik froze, dumbfounded.

“You are a good man, Henryk,” the sheriff continued. “And you have a wonderful daughter. We won't tolerate anybody harassing your family.”

A shell shocked Erik still didn't speak. Almost painfully, Magda had interrupted, thanking Andrezej for his kindness and agreeing to pass on his regards to Nina. Then, she led her still-silent husband into their home and looked at him expectantly.

“Alright,” Erik acquiesced. “We can stay.”

Magda’s answering squeal of joy had almost been enough to make Erik ignore his fears.

Almost.

For a few weeks, not much changed. Nina recovered, spent much more time in the forest exploring her new mutation, and Erik found a lot more deer hanging out on his back porch. Thankfully, nobody had taken action against his family, and, for one moment, Erik wondered if maybe Charles had been right.

And then, one day, Erik came home for lunch, only to feel the heavy cold metal of guns in his home.

And he realized what a fool he had been not to run.

Nina was still inside, based on the soft metallic thrum of the locket Erik had given her after the forest incident, and so was Magda, based off of her wedding ring. Erik had walked in, as calm as anything,
and acted as if nothing was wrong.

The men waiting to kill him had been expecting Henryk Gursky.

They found Magneto.

It had been simple work to knock them out with a flick of the wrist, their own weapons turning against them. Erik quickly warped the kitchen sink to act as chains before he sent them flying to the corner.

Then, he went to find his family.

And Nina wasn't there.

Instead, her locket had been torn from her neck and tossed to the ground. Her room was a disaster, her carefully organized space trashed from whatever struggle had occurred. His heart pounding, Erik pocketed the necklace before following the solid thrum of his wife’s wedding rings.

He found her. He would. He just needed to get Magda first.

Erik felt the bullet before he saw it.

The sharp reek of the small projectile was poignant even before he turned the corner. The blazing feel of ammunition was familiar to Erik, having been burned into his brain since eins zwei drei and click-bang. His lungs no longer working and his heart in his throat and this didn't happen, not again, oh please God not my family, the man who was once Henryk Gursky entered his bedroom, following that solid thrum and that blazing heat.

Magda Gursky laid face down on the floor, a bullet in her brain and blood caked in her hair.

A strangled cry escaped his lips. Magda was in his arms in an instant, rocking back and forth with incomprehensible pleas.

His wife was dead.

She was dead.

They had taken her from him. Taken both of them.

And Erik had been a fool.

Magento stood up and went to the men that had taken everything from him.

And he asked them some questions.

They were just hired guns, they had claimed. They didn't know why they were supposed to kill Henryk, just that they had come with a larger group to kidnap the kid and kill the parents, and they had been the ones to stay behind for him. Nor, unfortunately, did they know where Nina had been taken.

Erik became more persuasive.

Between screams for mercy, one of them confessed that they had overheard one of the other men talk about the source of their information, a man from the steelworking mill, Gustaw, who had a cousin that worked for a company with an interest in people like Nina, and had sold the family’s location for some extra cash.
Seeing that they had no other information for him, Erik made a knife fly from the kitchen and slit their throats.

He left their bodies where they lay. He buried his wife.

Then, he went to the steelworking mill.

Lunch break had long since passed; the work day was almost over. Numbly, Erik had walked inside, ignoring the curious stares that followed him. There was blood in his clothes and tears in his eyes, and he came to a stop in front of Gustaw’s machine.

Without touching it, he made it rattle to a stop.

For a moment, Gustaw didn't look up. He flicked at the switches, imagining there was a problem with his machine, before glancing upwards, his mouth open to call to the overseer.

He stuttered to a stop when he noticed who was standing before him. “Henryk.”

“Surprised to see me?” Erik asked all-too-calmly, pain still burning in his chest. “I can only imagine you would be, seeing as you sent men to my house to kill me. Seeing as those men murdered my wife and took my Nina.”

“Henryk.”

Erik glanced over his shoulder to see the overseer, Klaudiusz, approaching him, his face ashen. He must have heard. They all must of heard.

“Please, my friend,” Klaudiusz continued, laying his hand on Erik’s shoulder. “Come with me, you've had a shock. We’ll call police, they will help you.”

Erik shook off the well-meaning hand. “Where is my daughter, Gustaw?” he growled.

Gustaw ran.

Several men moved to intercept him, but Erik didn't wait for them.

All the doors to the building slammed shut.

Gustaw stopped running. Trembling now, he turned around. “You - you're a -”

“Mutant?” Erik finished. “Just like my daughter? What do you think?”

Almost instinctively, Magneto tore and warped nearby metal, slamming it into Gustaw and twisting it through his flesh, just as he had done to that time traveler all those years ago.

And that rat screamed.

After that, Erik’s not entirely sure what happened.

When Shaw had shot his mother, it was like something else had taken over. Erik hadn't set out with the explicit designs to kill the soldiers or destroy the lab - it was as if his power had come to the forefront of his mind, rampaging through everything in its path while Erik slipped into a grief-fueled fog.

This was a little like that.
By the time Erik came out of it, all the men in the factory were dead, and Erik still didn't know where Nina was. Vaguely, he could recall Gustaw screaming, men rushing forward to try to stop him, as if the slime didn't deserve it, as if his daughter's life didn't depend on Erik getting information, and turning on them as well.

He also remembered Trask. Gustaw had claimed to have sold her to Trask.

Erik Lehnsherr left the destroyed factory and went searching. What he found had made him sick.

In all the scenarios his tortured mind had come up with when Nina was born, he never imagined her being sent to a lab, strangely enough. The reality he had endured as a child was just too brutal, too ugly, too far removed from his gorgeous daughter, to ever apply. The idea of black digits tattooed on her forearm had made him retch for days, and Erik had sworn that he would find her and take her far, far away before anything happened that she couldn't recover from.

The problem? Even Erik Lehnsherr, a man who had dedicated his life to tracking down escaped Nazi’s and people who had dedicated their life to not being found, could not find the lab.

Somehow, this had led to him working with Charles Xavier yet again. Well, he was working with Raven Darkholme, and by extension Alex Summers, and by extension of that extension Charles Xavier. At the end of the day, he was on the same team as Charles Xavier.

And he could only pray that it would all work out this time.

Erik had a complicated relationship with his old friend Charles. While they may care for one another greatly, their differing schools of thought had made all past attempts at collaboration disastrous.

And, with his daughter’s life on the line, Erik couldn't risk disaster.

Raven’s phone rang for the first time since Summers had first called, making Erik’s heart jump in anticipation. He had promised not to call again if he didn't have more information; with this call, Erik could finally have his daughter’s whereabouts.

He could get her back.

Quickly, he marched over and ripped the phone from Mystique’s grip, ignoring the glare she leveled at him. “Do you have the location yet?” he snapped.

“Erik,” Alex began, his voice hesitant. “Something’s happened.”

His gut twisted like the metal he could so easily bend. The metal bed frame shrieked and warped.

“We don't know for sure what’s happened,” Summers continued. “Moira’s contact was had. She got pulled off Scott’s case yesterday and dragged to interrogation. They figured out that if there was a mole, the lab may be compromised and they started evacuation. Some… some of the mutants were killed in the gas chambers, we don't know how many or who they were. We’re not sure what happened next but somehow… Scott got out of his cell. We don't know anything after that. Moira’s agent used the opportunity to escape and contact us, but the lab was leveled. It's all gone.”

Erik couldn't think. He couldn't breathe. Vaguely, he was aware of Raven shouting his name and every piece of metal in the room tearing itself apart, but he didn't care because Nina could already be dead.

Raven kicked him in the head.
Erik stared at her in shock, not even bothering to retaliate.

“I needed to calm you down,” she huffed.

Erik turned his attention back to the phone. “Is Nina…?”

“We don't know yet,” Havok answered quietly. “Hank is setting up Cerebro now; the Professor thinks that since the lab is gone, so are their shields. He's going to scan for Scott and Nina. If they're out there, if they're alive, he should be able to find them.”

After that, Erik stopped listening. Instead, he snapped the phone shut and spun to Raven, grabbing her arm. “Get me there,” he ordered. “Now.”

If his daughter was dead, Erik wasn't going to find out from the likes of Alex Summers over a Gott verdammt phone. He was going to be there when Charles searched the Earth for his daughter’s mind.

It was time to go back to the Mansion.

Chapter End Notes

Intro Nina. She's a lot younger than she was in the movie, obviously, because even with my jacked up timeline in know there's no way she'd be like, eight yet. Next chapter we see Scott, Jean, and Bucky again, even though no one knows it's Bucky. So I guess it'd be more precise to say that we see Commander Douchebag again.
Scott had never realized how much of yourself you could lose to the training. They're just actions, you think at first. You're just learning how to fight; it's not even reeducation. It doesn't change anything; it can't change who you are.

But then, God only knows how long later, you're covered in blood, some that's yours and some that's not, and you're in your nth training session and you've practiced the same move that can slit a throat before your victim even realizes you're there for the thousandth time, and you realize you're not human anymore. Instead you're the weapon your owners crave, a blade that's been honed too sharp and cuts if touched. Everything you had been was gone, nothing left but bloodstained glass shards scattered across the ground.

And Scott realized that somehow, he had missed himself blinking out of existence. Scott Summers was gone, and he hadn't even noticed.

It was the Knowledge, he supposed. There were somethings you just couldn't know without losing bits of yourself in return, a pound of flesh for every ounce of awareness. There were somethings that no one should ever know how to do.

Scott knew a lot of those things, now.
Scott knew how to snap someone's neck without alerting any nearby bystanders to the disturbance. He knew the *snap-crack* of bones by heart, and the *shlick* of a knife whistling through the air - and the wet *smack* of that same knife landing in flesh. He knew thirteen distinct ways to disembowel someone, four of those not requiring a knife. He knew how to dodge a blow without seeing it, and how to disassemble and reassemble seven different models of guns without his eyesight, and four additional with. He could shoot a target at a hundred yards with his vision, and manage to shoot someone at close range without. He knew a thousand different ways to take someone apart. He could maim. He could kill.

And with each thing he learned, Scott lost a little piece of himself. The space for the new information to reside in was ripped from his brain, a bloody knife carving *hurtmaimkillkillkill* in a place where Scott Summers used to be.

There was an irony to it, he supposed, that learning how to fight had managed to destroy him more than all the needles and knives and pain and *Subject A-13*’s ever did. If the scientists had known, he noted with a tired amusement, they probably would have made him deadly ages ago.

Scott had twelve hour training sessions. Everyday, like clockwork, they would drag him out of his cage and down to the training rooms, and his head doctor, Dr. Kandinsky, would deliver the key to Scott’s eye-vice (she had the only one) to Commander Douchebag. Then, Scott would spend the next twelve hours dodging and punching and cutting over and over again, until it became muscle memory, both with and without his sight. At the end of the day, Scott was exhausted and bloody, and it was only sheer stubbornness keeping him upright. Eventually, Dr. Kandinsky would come back and the key would change hands once more, and Scott would be so exhausted that he didn’t even bother to struggle when they dragged him off to the labs.

Usually, Scott was too tired to even scream when they experimented on him.

He would eventually be dumped back in his cell, where Jean would spend a few hours trying to get him to sleep or speak or do something other than curl up on his side and stare blankly into the darkness, with varying levels of success.

Then, the guards would come back, and it would start all over again.

“*Sit*,” Commander Douchebag ordered.

Before he even had a chance to comply, Scott was shoved roughly into the chair, and his arms and
legs were strapped down.

Scott hated this part.

“Open.”

For a moment, he considered keeping his mouth closed out of sheer defiance, but then reluctantly unclenched his teeth to accept the thick rubber mouth guard. Scott was stubborn, but he did not have some strange desire to bite off his own tongue; it would be better to accept the protection.

After all, it's not like refusing it would delay what was going to happen; they'd either force it in or decide that they didn't care if he had a tongue.

The needles came next.

There were multiple of them scattered across his body: two in the neck, one on each side; three in each arm; four in each leg; six in his torso. Then, Scott heard the *hiss* of pressurized air escaping, and he knew it would only be a second before the drug snaked down its respective tubes, and it began.

The first hints of the solution reached his arms.

And Scott’s blood turned to *fire*.

*(Oh please oh please no just wait just don't just stop Get Away NO don'touchme pleasepleasepleasepleasejust stopitstopit stopit)*

He bucked against his restraints, rattling in the chair and cutting shallow grooves into his arms from the leather straps. He was suffocating, his lungs gasping and choking but unable to expand past the *pain*. Distantly, Scott could hear the rapid-fire *beepbeepbeep* of the heart rate monitor, along with the undertone of approving murmurs from the observing doctors.

Suddenly, he was very, very thankful he accepted the mouth guard.

Slowly - incredibly, *excruciatingly* slowly - the pain tapered away. The *beepbeepbeeps* slowed to a
somewhat normal rate, and his rigid muscles relaxed in relief. He could breathe.

Scott really, really hated that part.

Scott had received his first “performance enhancers” before his first training session. They weren't some kind of Captain America-esque, take-this-and-you-get-super-strength, super-soldier serum; they helped him build muscle and endurance - two things which had suffered severely during his time in the labs - way faster than the average human, and jacked up his healing rate, before eventually flushing out of his system Lord only knows how many days later, at which point his trainers would inevitably pump him full of more.

Scott liked to think of them as the unholy love child of steroids and Satan.

Sataroids, if you will.

They weren't really anything special in the world of evil organizations and morally-ambiguous illegal labs - the program that had bought Scott would never risk losing trade secrets to Trask. Likely, they would siphon him full of the real stuff when he left Trask to move permanently to their base.

The second the Sataroids acclimated to his bloodstream, Scott was yanked from the chair and forced to stand at attention while Commander Douchebag barked an order at one of the guards.

Scott hated this part even more than the last one, if that was even possible.

Roughly, the Commander yanked his hand forward and guided it until it was tangled in a thick head of hair. Scott's heart dropped into his stomach. Based on the height of the person before him, they were only a little kid. His acute hearing easily picked up fear-filled whimpers, and Scott tried to look as reassuring as possible.

Which was incredibly difficult to do when your hands were tracing up the cold metal of the gun pressed to their head.

Here’s the thing about Scott: He has the mental capacity to be very clever, very resourceful, and a very quick learner - when he wants to be.
That idiot of a principal decides to subtly encourage the bullying of Paul Anderson just because he doesn't have a dad and Principal Jackson can't cope with the idea of having a “little bastard” in his school? Well - not that anyone could ever prove it - Scott may just spend three months following him around surreptitiously, figure out that he is deathly afraid (and apparently allergic) of cats, then figure out how to pickpocket the janitor so that he can steal his set of master keys and break into the principal’s office to hide Anarchy, the absolutely insane stray cat, inside his desk drawers as revenge for Paul. Scott thinks that if he becomes a good student his brother will come back quicker? Then he'll learn two languages, shoot to the top of the class, and manage to skip a grade before he figures out its not working and levels out at an A/B average. Stupid Jamie Peterson from across the street has spent the past few weeks bragging that he was destined to win the school spelling bee because he was brilliant, unlike that moronic jock Scott Summers, who only received his good grades because the school wanted to keep him on the cross country team, and was inevitably going to spend the rest of his life flipping burgers for minimum wage? Scott might spend three months straight memorizing the dictionary before entering the spelling bee himself, just to see Peterson’s face when he realizes wow, the Neanderthal does have a brain. (By the end of the competition, Peterson was so shaken that Scott was the other finalist that he flopped horribly . The winning word? Sanctimonious.) Sadistic scientists stole his sight? Scott becomes proficient in echolocation, and entirely mobile without needing to see.

So yes, when he wanted to be, Scott was a force to be reckoned with.

Of course, when he didn't, the opposite was true. If he simply didn't want to learn something, for whatever reason, Scott would apply every ounce of stubbornness he possessed to avoid learning said thing.

Needless to say, Scott did not want to become an assassin. Something which he made very, very clear to Commander Douchebag.

Said Commander quickly learnt that beating him, pointing guns at his head, or simply waiting him out did not work.

So, in the third training session, he changed tactics.

He had been trying to teach Scott how to do some terrible thing in some horribly efficient way, and Scott had been doing his damndest not to learn. Then, Commander Douchebag had pointed a gun at his head, and given him one last chance to comply.

Scott, like an idiot, had rolled his eyes behind his eye-vice and told Commander Douchebag to screw off. After all, he wasn't going to actually shoot him; Scott had figured that out ages ago. His buyers had spent a lot of money on him; they weren't going to decide to cut their losses on the third day. They would probably hurt him for his non-compliance, but they were going to do that anyway.
Eventually, Scott would be reeducated, and he would lose even the ability to resist; he would take every little freedom he still had.

At the time, he had thought that there was nothing more they could do to hurt him.

He had been wrong.

Commander Douchebag had snapped out an order in the Russian that Scott was too busy being stubborn to have even begun learning, and the guards had rushed to obey. When they returned, Scott had clicked his tongue to ‘see’ a third person between them, and, in that moment, a trickle of dread informed him that he may have miscalculated. Then, his body was grabbed from behind by the Commander and his hand was manipulated into feeling the trembling of the man’s bone-thin face, into handling the coarse jumpsuit that signified his status as a fellow lab rat.

It was in that moment, with a sinking feeling, Scott remembered a very important lesson he had learnt four days into his captivity.

Scott was not expendable.

The other mutants were.

Then, before he could figure out a way to get out of whatever mess he had gotten the two of them in, Commander Douchebag shoved the cold metal of the gun into his hand, and Scott found his finger being forced on the trigger by a metallic hand and his arm being yanked upwards until the gun touched the man’s head, and then -

_Click._

_Bang._

The body hit the ground with a thud.

A hot liquid suddenly sprayed all over him, and Scott knew it was redredred.
And, for one moment, Scott felt numb. His face went slack and his arm went limp and that didn't just happen, it didn't, *it didn't*.

(It did.)

Then, before he could react, Commander Douchebag was shoving him down and twisting his hand until it was on the mutant’s head, and blood and brain were seeping through his fingers, and, *and* -

Scott became ill.

The Commander (Scott couldn't call him Commander Douchebag anymore - not out loud at least. His mind was one of the few places that was *his* anymore, and Scott took every inch of freedom he had nowadays) left the body there while they trained. The scent of blood and death had stuck in Scott’s nose while he learned how to break a bone with a single kick, and for hours afterwards, in the lab, Scott had inhaled the sickly-clean antiseptic smell that he *hated* in an attempt to burn the memory from his brain.

(It didn’t work. The scents had only mixed together in his mind, and Scott had spent the few hours of respite he had in his cell retching up bile.

When Scott finally slept, he dreamt of red and grey and the sick, sick smell of death mixed with bleach.)

After that, the Commander Douchebag always had another, expendable lab rat standing in the corner throughout their sessions, a gun pressed to their head. The message was clear: Learn, or others will pay the price.

Scott began to learn very, very quickly.

The little girl before him was still shaking and crying when Scott was finally allowed to remove his hands. Quickly, before any punishment could be visited upon her, he acknowledged in clumsy Russian, “*Ready to comply,*” the words tasting bitter on his tongue.

All of his training sessions were in Russian, nowadays. It was one of the many languages Scott
would be “required” to learn, and the crash course he had received in it had given him a decent, if basic, understanding of the tongue.

Scott was rapidly beginning to hate the language.

The training itself had become routine: Scott would spar, kick, and punch in whichever way the Commander jerked his puppet strings, and hate himself a little bit more with each improvement. That particular training session, however, was different.

Someone was watching Scott as he sparred with the Commander. Someone different. Scott didn’t know how he knew, but he knew. Some combination of clues picked up by his acute, operational four senses had made the hairs on the back of his neck raise in apprehension, and Scott knew that he was being watched. But then, he heard the tell-tale whir click whir click of a metal arm, and he was too busy dodging a bone-cracking blow to care about the spy.

Sparring with Commander Douchebag was, quite frankly, Hell.

Recently, Scott had become quite formidable in his own right. Whenever he was pitted against whatever poor guard(s) the Commander had singled out, he won, seven out of ten times.

Whenever he was pitted against his trainer, he lost, ten out of ten times.

Scott wasn’t exaggerating when he said that him versus the Commander in a fistfight was like a goldfish versus a twenty-foot Great White in a match to the death.

If anything, it was an understatement.

He was a much better fighter when he was wearing the goggles, for obvious reasons. One of the main facets of fighting blind wasn’t dodging the hits, but rolling with them. It would be impossible to detect every last punch; instead, Scott had to learn how to use the momentum of the hit to his advantage.

Which was extremely difficult. And, oftentimes, painful.
Eventually, the Commander roughly pinned his arms to his back, his metallic limb jerking Scott’s neck into position as he shouted to the guards. They automatically complied, dragging that poor little kid to where the assassin had beckoned.

Scott knew this drill well enough.

He squeezed his eyes shut as he felt a key being roughly shoved into the opening at the side of the vice. If he didn’t, it was the little mutant that would pay the price, not him. Scott felt the thick rubber straps of the goggles being fitted over his face, and slowly opened his eyes again. Red painted over his newly-restored vision. There was a young, tear-streaked face before him, female, ready to take the bone-shattering blast that would have completely and utterly destroyed her had Scott opened his eyes. She had the not-quite-starved look of someone only recently captured, and was whimpering and trembling as the bulky men pinned her in place.

She couldn’t have been more than five years old.

Young for a mutation to develop, but certainly not impossible. If she had been under some kind of stress, it could have triggered its activation early. Or she could just be an early bloomer.

Scott attempted to give her a shaky smile, but it came out as more of a grimace. Then, before he could attempt to give her any more reassurance, she was dragged away and training began again.

That day, Scott learned exactly where to cut someone to sever their spine, and he hate hate hated himself for it.

Scott wasn’t sure what the moral grounds were for becoming a psychotic murder machine, honestly speaking. Obviously, it would be wrong if he was doing it willingly, but he was under duress. Even then, Scott wasn’t sure if what he was doing was right. Granted, he was doing it to save the little girl, but what about all the future people he was endangering because he was cooperating? What about all the people he would one day kill? Didn’t his compliance in training make him morally responsible for all the people said training would be used to harm? Wasn’t he guilty of their eventual deaths already? What if he resisted, and by some string of events that prevented their deaths at his hand? Did their collective survival outweigh the life of one?

Scott didn’t know. All he knew was that he couldn’t bear to hear that horrible click- bang again.

Training that day ended early.
Normally, Scott would have no idea if it ended early or not; it’s not like they offered him a watch or anything. The only way he knew when the training sessions ended was when the click-tap-click-tap of Dr. Kandinsky’s impractical heels became audible and the stomach churning scent of her lavender hand lotion mixed with the blood and antiseptic that stuck to her skin reached Scott’s nose. This time, however, his eye-vice was shoved back on and he was pushed into an adjacent room, the little girl and the Commander behind him.

The other guards remained outside.

Scott stumbled to a stop in the space, clicking his tongue automatically. The four walls bounced back easy enough, along with the large object before him. About waist high, and completely flat, as far as he could tell; Scott had trouble detecting anything smaller than a softball, so there could be plenty he was missing. Scott clicked his tongue again, listening carefully for more information. It was broad, and took up quite a bit of space in the small room. A desk maybe?

Whatever it was, there was a person behind it. Scott could hear their breathing, soft and careful in the silence.

Nobody spoke.

Then, an unknown man broke the quiet. “Did you know you had an enhanced spatial awareness, Scott? Part of your mutation. It’s possibly why you are so mobile despite your lack of vision.”

Involuntarily, Scott jerked. *Nobody* called him by his name anymore, other than Jean, and certainly not a scientist, or whatever this man was. If it hadn’t been for him reciting it like a prayer for all those years, he would have forgotten his name long ago. Strangely, though, Scott *hated* the sound of name leaving this man’s lips. Despite spending years craving for someone, *anyone* to call him something other than *it* or *Subject A-13*, the idea of his name leaving that man’s lips felt… wrong. It felt as though he had taken one of the last precious things Scott had left.

Ignorant, or perhaps simply uncaring, of Scott’s inner turmoil, the man continued. “Your mutation is truly a fascinating thing, Scott. Did you know that your energy expulsion has been registered at two gigawatts? That’s equivalent to the power produced by a large scale nuclear reactor.”

The slight groan of a shifting chair, followed by footsteps sharply *tap-click tap-click tap-clicking* around the might-be-a-desk, sounded from before him. Scott clicked his tongue, his eyebrows furrowed behind the visor. He got a flash of a new shape before him, melding into the maybe-desk.
He was leaning on it? Standing in front of it?

“Echolocating?” The man sounded mildly interested, as if Scott was an unusual bug he wished to study before killing, leaving nothing but an exotic shell pinned to a display behind. “I must confess, I was surprised when I learnt you had taught yourself how - surprised and pleased. I do enjoy when my assets have a modicum of intelligence; it makes things more interesting.” The voice paused, as if waiting for a reaction.

Scott did not respond.

“It seems I have yet to introduce myself. I am Dr. Essex; I am to be your handler.” The man - Dr. Essex - waited again.

Scott did not respond.

“I'd like to get a better understanding of your intelligence, of your understanding of what's happening. So tell me: Why do you think we've allowed this arrangement to continue the way it has?” He paused again, then continued when he received no response, agitation finally bleeding into his tone. “We own you, Scott. Everything you are belongs to us. Trask Industries has no claim to you, not anymore. So why do you suppose we continue to allow them to finish experiments on you, despite the fact that you are no longer theirs? Why do you suppose we have set aside your training for this?”

Scott still did not answer.

He knew the fist was coming before it landed; he had heard the creaks and shuffles as the man shifted his weight on the desk, felt the change in air as the hand whistled through it. Scott could have dodged it, easily, but didn't, because there was still that little girl in the room, shaking and trembling in the Commander's grasp, and God only knew what would happen to her if Scott did.

The blow made him stumble despite his training, despite all of his experience in resisting hits. There was something more behind the fist, something powerful.

And, in that moment, with his head spinning rapidly, Scott knew Dr. Essex was not a normal human.

The man sighed at Scott’s non-reaction. “I was mildly disappointed when I learnt you were
manipulated as easily as threatening another mutant. But, I must confess, it makes this part easier.”

Essex must have made some kind of signal that Scott couldn’t see, because a moment later the little girl was screaming. Scott’s heart clenched. “You haven’t,” he snapped.

The screams stopped. “Haven’t what?”

Scott sucked in a shaky breath. “You haven’t set aside my training. The only reason you would have accepted the deal would be if you were gaining much more than you were losing. You aren’t losing anything, or at least not much, because you’re doing exactly what you would have done anyway, just in a different location.”

There was a pause. Then, “At least you aren’t a total disappointment.” The tap-click tap-click of likely expensive shoes sounded again, this time circling Scott. Stiffening, he stared straight ahead, and pretended he was stone.

(Stone can’t feel; stone can’t hate itself; stone can’t sense the unwanted, burning gaze of a man who claimed to own it on their skin, making it feel sick and dirty and wrong.)

(Oh please, God, turn me to stone.)

“You’re right, Scott, or at least partially,” he continued. “We’re doing the exact same thing we would have done if we had taken you immediately. Why do you think that is?”

Scott bit his lip. “I don’t know,” he admitted. He didn’t, he really didn’t, despite the fact that he had been trying to figure it out for ages. He had never heard of people waiting before reeducation, let alone training the Subject and building up their strength beforehand. It made no sense; Trask had always started while the Subject - person, damn it, Scott, person - was still weak and beaten down.

An air of distaste sounded from behind Scott, and he forced himself not to flinch. “I take it you’re still basing your assumptions on what you know of Trask Industries? We’re not Trask, Scott; we’re not nearly so primitive as Trask. Trask is a convenient source of new blood, granted, but they have no vision, no sense of the future. Their reeducation tactics, for instance, are based on pain. In the end, they have nothing but fear-filled Subjects beaten and confused into submission. Effective in the short term, yes, but it leaves too much room for rebellion, too much freedom to think. No, to truly reeducate one must foster devotion. And, through certain… methods we can turn someone as unwilling as yourself into the most obedient of Assets. They are, however, taxing on the body. If we
hadn’t trained you, built up your strength, you would likely die in the process. That makes our organization flexible in the early stages. When Trask tried to postpone the sale last minute because a scientist convinced them she was on the cusp of a worthwhile breakthrough, we saw an opportunity. We could easily do our regimen here and indebt our supplier at the same time.”

Was he monologuing? Was that actually a thing now?

“You know, Scott, while brutal, our processes have rather awe-inspiring results. Take, for instance, the Soldier - the Commander, to you. Once, he was loyal American soldier: courageous resilient, faithful to the point of stupidity. Now look at him. He fights against the very thing he devoted his life to. He’s listening to this very conversation, and he’s not even twitching. Did you know he assassinated the President?” Essex’s voice trilled, nauseatingly, disgustingly delighted. “A devoted American soldier killed Kennedy, and all because I ordered him to.” He paused, obviously waiting for some kind of reaction from his captive audience.

Scott, mindful of the still-whimpering little girl behind him, decided not to annoy the man. “I thought Lee Harvey Oswald killed Kennedy.” Inwardly, it was all he could do not to vomit. Commander Doucheba - the POW who had been training him was not a willing soldier. He was like Scott, nothing but a puppet. Scott had known that it was always a possibility, but he had pushed it to the back of his mind. He had needed someone to hate, someone to blame someone other than himself, and the Commander had been an obvious choice. And the idea that he was a captive had such disturbing implications that Scott couldn’t bear thinking of it. The man had been so unflinchingly impassive to all the atrocities occurring around him that Scott couldn’t stand to consider that he could end up the same way. Now that he knew for certain, though, Scott was ashamed of himself. He had blamed and cursed someone just as innocent as he, if not more so.

And the worst part was that he couldn’t even help the man. Scott couldn’t come up with a single damn way to save any of them, not the Commander, not the little girl, not Jean.

Not even himself.

“Only the public believes that Oswald killed anyone,” Essex admonished sharply. “You are not the public any longer.”

Well, this conversation had become oddly incriminating.

“Why are you even telling me this?” Scott wondered. “What do you have to gain?”
There was a gentle clinking sound before him, followed by the soft slurp of liquid. Suddenly, Scott became aware of a smell in the air, unnatural, not coffee or alcohol - one could *never* mistake coffee or alcohol -

Was he drinking *tea* right now? Seriously?

Another clink filled the air, and then there was the subtle *sschlick* of an object being pushed across a surface. What was he sliding? Scott would guess the tea cup, but he wasn’t even all that sure it existed; it could be anything. “I enjoy meeting any Assets I function as handler for before they are wiped the first time. It makes it more interesting, comparing what they once were to what they become.” He paused. “Besides, you won’t remember this conversation in a few days. What do I have to lose?”

Essex was a psychopath, to say the least. Anyone who sounded that gleeful when talking about how their organization can take people and twist them until they’re *not right* had to be a heartless, sadist psychopath that cared about as much for human life as they did for a bug: occasionally interesting, sometimes worth sparing, but generally something to be stepped on without a care.

But Scott didn’t think he was crazy.

The man was too lucid, too in control, to be crazy. Crazy implies a malady. Crazy implies that the person is too mentally deranged to fully comprehend one’s actions.

Essex knew exactly what he was doing. He just liked it too much to stop.

The door opened. Scott flared his nostrils, ready for the scent of lavender and blood and too-clean-too-unnatural-too- *wrong* antiseptic, only to stop.

The shoes were not the *click-tap-click-tap-click* of Dr. Kandinsky. There wasn’t the invasive scent of hand lotion and death. Instead, there was the nervous *clunk-click-clack-clunk-click-clack* of someone shifting heavy shoes across the floor and the foggy smell of someone wearing way too much *Old Spice* (and of blood and bleach. Those scents clung to everyone touched by the lab, hung in the air and crawled under skin, and Scott couldn’t remember what is was like to breathe clean air anymore).

That wasn’t Dr. Kandinsky; that was her neurotic second-in-command, Dr. Brant.
Scott knew what this meant: He would never see Dr. Kandinsky again.

It had happened before, another doctor showing up in the place of the head; it was how Kandinsky assumed her place as Scott’s head butcher. All in all, it wasn’t very uncommon in the cutthroat world of Trask Industries. Granted, it had only happened once - twice, now - to Scott, but that was likely because he was ranked Alpha-level in power; Trask liked to keep those teams stable, because of how much money and resources was often invested into the mutants. The teams of scientists for the lower-leveled mutants shifted much more often, however, their butchers getting promoted and demoted and permanently terminated on a regular basis.

Once a head doctor left, they never came back; Trask didn’t give their people second chances. Before Dr. Kandinsky, there had been another head doctor: Dr. Harding. Scott didn’t know where he went, or what type of backstabbing landed Kandinsky the job, but he did know that one day he was gone and she had taken his place.

Honestly speaking, Scott couldn’t really bring himself to care much about Kandinsky’s fate. She had just been another torturer in a long line of torturers, and if Trask had decided she was a liability for whatever reason, Scott wouldn’t cry over it.

He would, however, miss her much more than he had missed Harding, however miniscule the amount was. Kandinsky had at least given him anesthesia, occasionally; her predecessor hadn’t been bothered for the same courtesy.

“It seems our time together has come to an end, Scott,” Essex observed. Then, the tone of his voice changed, from leisurely to sharp and commanding. “Soldier,” he snapped. “Your mission is to ensure the new Asset is delivered to base in an operable condition. Let nothing stand in your way.”

“Mission parameters accepted,” came the gravelly acknowledgement.

Scott’s stomach twisted.

“Dr. Essex,” Brant greeted nervously. “How are you today? It’s not giving you any trouble, is it? A-13 has always been a rather irritating subject.”

“We were just having a nice little chat,” Essex stated coolly. “Weren’t we, Scott?”
It was times like these that Scott bemoaned his inability to glare.

“Is everything in order?” Essex continued, as if Scott was no longer there. “No more delays?”

“Of course,” Brant hastened to stammer. “We just have last minute details to take care of; it will be ready for shipment tomorrow.”

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow.

Scott was out of time.

Brant ignored his obvious panic, or was unaware of it; the man had never been the most observant person, M.D. be damned. If Essex knew, he wasn’t saying anything; in all likelihood, the sadist was probably vibrating with excitement and Scott merely couldn’t see it. “I must express on the behalf of Trask Industries our d-deepest regrets about Dr. Kandinsky,” he continued. “The matter is being resolved as we speak. If - if we had known… It will not happen again .”

“See that it doesn’t,” Essex snapped, suddenly fire and blaze where ice had once resided. Then, almost instantaneously, his voice chilled once again. “My organization has always been a valuable customer to Trask Industries,” he explained frostily. “As such, we expect our purchases to be delivered without complication. If Trask cannot ensure that our property isn’t purloined by their very own scientists, we will take our business elsewhere.”

Well, that was interesting.

From the sounds of it, Kandinsky had been caught trying to make off with Scott himself. That wasn’t exactly an impossible scenario, per se, just a very, very stupid one. Trask wasn’t merciful to thieves, and even less so when they tried to make off with someone valuable. Though, if someone made her an offer big enough, the right amount of money could have knocked off a few dozen IQ points until she agreed, despite the risks.

Of course, Scott added bitterly to himself, that meant that illicit companies were still bidding on him as if he were a ticket item at an antique sale rather than teenaged boy.
“It - it won’t happen again, Dr. Essex,” Brant stammered to explain. “Kandinsky is being dealt with; we are tying up all loose ends as we speak. Trask Industries thanks you for your understanding in this matter; there will be no more comp - com - complications.”

“Of course,” Essex tightly responded, all crystalline ice and glittering frost. “I have business to take care of; a car is waiting for me now. The Soldier will remain here to oversee the transfer tomorrow.”

Scott stopped listening after that; he couldn’t bear to keep listening to them speak about what would happen tomorrow. It hurt too much.

After tomorrow, there would be no more Jean. There would be no more silent conversations with his neighbor, no more half-formed plans for a future together, as if they would have ever gotten free. After tomorrow, there would only be pain and reeducation, and he would only be whatever his owners wanted him to be. After tomorrow, there would no longer be any momentary refuges in a metal cage, his only friend in the world a presence inside his head.

A metal hand curled around his bicep, tugging him towards the door. Scott tensed, and listened. The little girl was gone, along with Brant; he had probably sent her back to the labs or her cell in the low-security ward.

“You’re not human,” he blurted before he could think it through. “At least not in the way Trask classifies humans.” No one responded. “Why are you doing this?”

Essex tsked. “Mutation,” he began, “is a gift. It’s an advancement from our baser form.” He paused. “We must advance in all ways, and some cannot understand the sacrifices we must make for advancement, for improvement. I have always had that understanding, one my company shares with me. Blood doesn't matter,” he scoffed. “These mutant supremacists, the ones that believe that, just because we share a genetic quirk, we are all ‘brothers,’ are fools. At the end of the day, all that matters is who has the most power, and who understands it the best. And your gift, Scott, your mutation, will lend itself greatly to the advancement of our goal. You’ll understand, one day. Or, you won’t,” he amended, contemplative. “It doesn’t really matter, does it?”

The metal hand was there again, tugging.
Scott resisted.

It was an incredibly stupid, boneheaded thing to antagonize an obviously sadistic person who would have a great deal of power over him in the very near future.

Scott wasn’t stupid, but that didn’t mean he didn’t do stupid things.

The man behind him, the POW that had trained him, was dead. For all intents and purposes, he was nothing but an empty, lifeless shell being yanked wherever his puppet strings pulled him.

And Scott wasn’t dead yet, but sometimes it felt that way. Compliance felt that way, the way he obeyed during training made him feel that way. (The way it made him feel like too-sharp, bloody knives and broken glass, made him feel that way.) But every second he disobeyed, every second he made them realize that he was still human, he didn’t feel that way.

When Scott Summers resisted, he was alive again.

And so Scott did something stupid.

“You’re deluded,” he scoffed. “You honestly believe they value you, share an ‘understanding’ with you, don’t you? I may not know much about your organization,” Scott mocked, “but I don’t really have to in order to know how they work, do I? They’re all really the same, in the end. The second you screw up, you’re dead. If you step out of line, make a mistake, anything, all of that ‘understanding’ will be gone: They’ll put you down like the dog you are.”

(Just like Kandinsky.)

Nobody moved.

Contrary to popular belief, Scott was afraid of his tormentors. Terrified, in fact. He was simply even more afraid of the dead-not-dead-but-dead feeling that boiled and bubbled inside him whenever he realized that he had gone days without remembering his own name. He wanted to know he was still alive, needed it, and, whenever he managed to push back, shove those surrounding him in a way that was undeniably human, he knew.
(That didn’t stop the punishment from hurting any less.)

Essex chuckled.

*He. Chuckled.*

Then, the man squeezed Scott’s shoulder just a tad too tightly, and spoke. “I’ll see you soon, Scott,” he promised.

The metal hand tugged again. Scott followed without resistance.

And when he left, he felt like broken glass and bloody knives.

Since he had arrived in the labs, Scott had made a habit of taking advantage of mistakes.

Improper dose of suppressants? Time to blast everything in sight. The guards steered him a tad too close to a control panel? Well, Scott had always wondered what that big red button did. The stupid metal vice that made it so he *couldn’t see* was entirely too heavy? Funnily enough, if you’re *wearing* a big battering ram, head butts are entirely less painful on your end and entirely more painful on the receiving end.

The absolute best mistakes, though, were the ones they didn’t even know they were making.

Like having both Jean and Scott out of their cages *at the same time*.

It had happened before, obviously. There had been plenty of occasions when both of them had been in the labs; there just hadn’t been any when they were in the *exact same lab*.

That, in all honesty, wasn’t very surprising. Scott and Jean had very different mutations, and the studies rarely overlapped.

Which made it just about a miracle that Scott was being dragged out of the MRI chamber at the same
time Jean was being dragged into it.

Scott hadn’t expected Jean’s presence to suddenly appear, so unexpected and surprising and very, very welcome.

Scott... she whispered, barely noticeable.

And she flashed a plan across their link.

Get ready.

After that, several things happened in quick succession.

Metal rattled against metal as Jean stretched out her abilities, jerking the tables around them. Moments later, the rumbling ceased, replaced by an electric *hiss* and a sharp scream as her electric shock bracelet kicked in.

At the same time, Scott doubled over in pain, falling to the ground suddenly.

“Get up,” one of the guards snapped. A sharp kick slammed into the prone figure’s side. “I said get up, you little freak!”

Scott pressed his forehead to the cold floor, gagging and gasping. The electric zap of a cattle prod pressed into his back, and Scott choked.

He got up from the floor.

Jean stopped screaming.

And when the guards dragged him from the room, a hint of a smile touched Scott Summers’ lips.
Sometimes, Scott would get headaches.

They had started not long before his mutation developed, and had gotten worse after that. As far as Scott could tell, they were the result of having too much power bottled up in his head, itching and pushing against his eyelids without release. The pain was always at its strongest whenever he had gone a long period of time without using his blasts, and, as consequence, they had increased in frequency and intensity since he had entered the labs.

Scott had one now, stronger than usual. The pressure was constant, insistent.

Almost as if it knew it was about to get release.

*Wait, Scott,* Jean warned. *We’re almost there. Just fifteen more minutes.*

Fifteen minutes until guard switch. Fifteen minutes until the four relatively alert guards, hyped up on coffee and companionship, would be replaced by two dazed guards that had just been woken from their sleep. The early hours of the morning were always the moments when the security was at its weakest, with unlucky wardens operating on little sleep, and the dwindling numbers of the security team.

A perfect time to escape.

This would be their last chance; come morning, Scott would be gone. They fed on each other’s nerves, the bond spinning anxiety back and forth until they couldn’t distinguish whose feelings were whose.

*Get started, Scott.*

Scott dragged himself into seated position before crawling over to the bucket. Unceremoniously, he began to retch.

In the labs, they couldn’t use the electric field to dampen Jean’s abilities like they did in the cage, because it tampered with their readings too much. Instead, they used an electric shock bracelet that only activated when her brainwaves spiked. It interrupted her mental processes, and, as a result, the control she had over her mutation. Whenever she had it on, she couldn’t control anyone, and the only things she would be able to muster the focus to move were small objects that she could only propel a
short distance before faltering.

Objects like, for instance, a key. And perhaps she would be able to rip said key off a certain obtuse doctor’s belt, before sliding it across the floor to a nearby mutant, who just so happened to have been struck down by ‘pain’ moments before.

And that mutant may just so happen to swallow it. Accidentally, of course.

Scott snagged the key with its teeth before it could clatter into the bucket. *Ready, Jean?*

*Almost... Almost.... They’re gone. Now, Scott!*

Quickly, he grabbed the two-pronged key from his jaws and shoved it into the slot on his vice. It turned easily, the back half separating from the front. Scott left the back part on the ground, but kept the half that covered his eyes; he still couldn’t control his mutation, and he didn’t want to accidentally hurt someone.

He could think of a few people he wanted to hurt on purpose, though.

Carefully, Scott slipped off the mask, clicked his tongue, and turned in the direction of the doorway.

The pressure burned against his closed lids.

Scott opened his eyes.

And the cage door was *obliterated.*

Scott ran.

The second he exited the gaping hole, he was greeted by the *sizzle-snap* of electricity.
DUCK! Jean screamed.

Scott was already ducking.

The cattle prod sailed harmlessly over his head, much to the dismay of the guard. Quickly, Scott slammed his elbow in the direction of the ragged breaths, getting a satisfying snap in return. Footsteps thundered behind him, and, before he could react, Scott felt himself get grabbed from behind.

Oh, so that was where the second guard went.

Using the man holding him as counterbalance, Scott kicked off the ground, lashing out with both feet at the first guard. He struck home with an omph, followed by the crashing sound of someone falling. Before the man could get back to his feet, Scott knocked his head viciously backwards, hearing the flat crunch of a broken nose in answer. He was unceremoniously dropped to the ground, and Scott wasted a moment as the breath was knocked out of him before he swung his body around and kicked the legs out from under the still-standing guard.

Scott rolled back to his feet; the two guards were up not long after him. The sizzle-snap of the cattle prods rang through the air once more, both behind him and in front of him.

Both wardens charged at the same time.

Scott tensed for a moment, then stepped to the side in a simple, lazy movement.

Based on the startled gagging and smell of burnt meat, they had succeeded in electrocuting one another.

Clicking his tongue, Scott stepped cleanly over the prone figures and searched for Jean’s cell. There were three large metal boxes in the room: one was obviously Scott’s, from the big hole and the heat still radiating from the twisted metal, but the other two were identical.

Then, the unknown man in the third cage began throwing himself against the walls again, and Scott very quickly narrowed it down to the correct echoing shape.
He staggered forward, his arm outstretched, and stopped when his hand met the cool metal of the steel door. Jean?

Yeah?

*Step away from the door.*

When Scott destroyed the door this time, he didn’t put as much power into it; he didn’t want to accidently hurt Jean. He slowly increased the pressure, felt as tendrils of his energy was deflected back towards him, reabsorbed it, and continued until the door tore away with a *scree-crash*.

Footsteps echoed from within the ruined cell.

Scott’s heart climbed into his throat.

Until now, he had never had any *real* evidence Jean was, well, real. She had literally been just a voice. Inside his head. And, well, Scott had suffered quite a bit of trauma in recent times. Hallucinations weren’t exactly *impossible* for him.

(Especially since - the voice in his head (one that Scott was completely aware was *not real*, thank you very much. It was a bit like his conscious, except for the fact that it only ever popped up to remind him of things better left *forgotten*), the one that sounded disturbingly like Stryker, began to hiss.

Scott shut it up before it could finish the sentence, because damn it, nothing that sounded anything *remotely* like Stryker had any right to so much as *think* about what had happened.)

Scott had never even *spoken* to Jean out loud; he hadn’t, technically, met her yet. Granted, she knew him better than anyone else alive, but they had never really interacted outside of their heads. It was as if she was a long distance pen pal: someone you knew pretty well from correspondence, but you couldn’t claim to have met until you’re in the same room, speaking to one another. Out loud.

The footsteps clanged to a stop a few feet away from him.
“Hello, Scott,” Jean stammered.

Scott tried to swallow against the knot in his throat. “Hello, Jean,” he greeted shakily.

Scott knew she was launching herself at him before she impacted; he had heard the quick two steps she took before they stopped again, followed by the quick *thud* of someone kicking off the ground. He had a second to brace himself before, suddenly, she was there and she was *real* and she was *hugging him*.

And Scott didn’t know what to do.

Involuntarily, he flinched when she touched him, his body anticipating the pain that always, *always* came whenever anyone touched him anymore.

But it didn’t come.

Instead, her arms wrapped around Scott, not the constraining, suffocating force of the Commander trying to teach him how to break an opponent’s hold, but something *warm* and *pleasant*, and Scott just stood there, his arms hanging limply at his sides, *like an idiot*.

He couldn’t remember the last time he had been hugged.

(That was a lie, yes, he could, but that hug had been a lie, just like the words it came with - *we’re a family* and *we love you, Scott* - were a lie, and that meant it didn’t count. It meant that all the hugs before it were a lie, *because his parents had never really loved him*, and Scott couldn’t remember a time when he had been hugged by someone not his parents.)

(That was a lie, too. He could remember being hugged by someone else before; he could remember Alex’s shaking arms encircling him the night he left, clinging like he never wanted to let go, but Alex was gone and Scott was in *Hell*, and memories of actually being loved once twisted in his gut like a knife. It was easier to forget.)

(Scott remembered. He always remembered.)
Jean kept hugging him, and eventually, Scott hugged back. It seemed like the thing to do.

But then the weight of all the beatings Scott had suffered through just to know he was alive for a little bit longer crashed down on his head, and suddenly, Scott was hugging back just as tightly as Jean was hugging him (just as tightly as Alex had once hugged him), and he realized, he remembered this feeling.

He had missed being loved, Scott decided.

It took him a moment to realize that Jean was crying. It took him an even longer moment to realize that he was crying, too.

“My name is Jean,” Jean gasped out, echoing her original thoughts to him.

Scott gave her a watery smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Jean.”

When Jean developed her mutation, she felt like a star, burning too hot and too bright until there was nothing left.

It had started slowly.

First, she got vague impressions. A couple barely audible whispers there, a few seconds of awareness there. Occasionally, the pages of a book would flutter if she focused on it for too long. Enough to give her mild concerns, but not enough for any real worry.

Then, it got worse.

It was like a forest fire under her skin, spreading and reaching and violating until there was nothing left. The whispers became shouts; the seconds of awareness became hours and hours of insight. The flutters became rumbles.

Concerns became terror.
After she shattered a window simply by glancing at it, Jean went to her parents. She told them about the shouts, showed them the way the tables shook when she let some of the fire out, tried to make them understand that she was burning burning burning.

They didn’t understand.

“Oh, Jean, that’s wonderful!” her father exclaimed. “You must be a mutant. It’s nothing to worry about, sweetheart; it’s a completely normal thing to happen.”

“But it’s wrong!” Jean protested. It wasn’t wonderful; it was dangerous; it made her want to leak the fire in her veins everywhere just to stop the burning, but she couldn’t without burning everyone else too.

“Did someone tell you that it was wrong to be a mutant?” her mother demanded with a frown. “Oh, sweetheart!” Then, she smiled her brilliant smile, all bright white teeth and dark red lips - the smile Jean would never see again. “You’re absolutely perfect the way you are, my beautiful little Jeanie.”

(Something no one thinks about when they look at stars: When you’re a million miles away, so far away that you could never begin to understand, you look up and see the stars twinkling overhead, and you think it’s beautiful.

When you are the star, so close that you could never stop understanding, you aren’t twinkling, and you aren’t beautiful.

You can’t be beautiful when you’re burning.)

Then, it got worse.

The fire was everywhere, seeping into her bones and her brain, and something dark inside of her was with it, screaming to burn brighter, hotter, burst. She could feel everyone and everything, every thought, molecule in existence was filling her up, adding fuel to the flames -

The fire kept burning.
And her parents began to notice that something was wrong.

(They tried to help. They died. Jean really doesn’t like to think about that part.)

Then, she was in a lab, and no one cared that she was burning; they just made sure she couldn’t burn them. Everything was bottled up inside her, charring her innards to a crisp, all while men and women in white coats gathered around and cooed at Subject O-1’s brain scans, all brilliant and lit up with activity.

(Another thing no one thinks about when they look at stars: Stars are light years away. That beautiful, twinkling light you see up in the sky is thousands of years old. And for those thousands of years, that star hadn’t stopped burning too hot and too bright to sustain.

Sometimes, that star you’re looking at, twinkling so bright and brilliant and alive up in the sky, is already dead.)

And then Scott came.

When Jean first felt his mind, she didn’t think he was real. She had been listening to the disjointed, disgusting whispers of scientists for ages, and something different, something like her, had been so foreign and enticing that it couldn’t possibly be real.

(But it was. Oh God, somehow it was.)

Even when she knew knew knew that Scott was real, she hesitated.

Jean didn’t want to burn him too.

But in the end, it had been too tempting not to do it. She wanted, needed something to be real again. So she had broken off tendrils of the flames and sent them away, too small to be noticed by cage, and wrapped them around the scared mind that was so close yet so far away.

And something amazing happened.
It didn’t happen right away; it didn’t happen for weeks, in fact. But, eventually, the fire inside of her calmed. It was still there, of course, but it wasn’t raging and screaming against her form.

Instead, it was almost warm. Comforting.

When Jean realized this, she cried.

(Scott asked her what was the matter when he heard her tears. Jean didn’t tell him. She didn’t know how to explain.)

There was something beautifully ironic in the fact that a human cannon was the one to calm her flames. If Jean was poetic, she would probably care a lot more about that aspect. But she wasn’t, so she didn’t. All that mattered was that the fire was no longer burning her alive.

And then Scott was sold. Then, someone tried to take him away.

And the fire came back, blazing hotter and brighter than ever before.

The second she saw him in that room, Jean knew what she had to do. She didn’t need all of the inferno, just a little flame, just enough to grab a key. Scott could take care of the rest, Jean knew that, all he needed was a way to let out the power hammering against his skull.

She had been right; he could take care of it. They could take care of it.

Reluctantly, Jean released her grip on Scott’s thin, wiry form. They had to keep going; they weren’t even close to being out of the woods yet. Quickly, she looked over at the unconscious guards. Scott was thinking about them, a jumble of worry and what if they’re dead what if I’m a monster what if what if bubbling over the bond. Jean sent back a wave of reassurance; they weren’t dead, just injured, and they would recover sooner or later. Then, she stepped closer. She didn’t need the flames for this, just the heat, the fumes could carry back what she needed to know.

Jean Grey frowned as she exited their minds, fear beginning to churn in her stomach. “They’re evacuating the labs, Scott. All of it. They’ll have the final readings done and everything destroyed in the next week.”
Confusion flashed back across from Scott. “So? What do we care if they’re moving labs?”

He had never been in a lab that had been shut down before, Jean realized. He didn’t know what it meant.

“They’ll kill everyone. That’s their protocol: When a lab’s been compromised, they ship out the one’s that they deem valuable, and kill the rest.”

Horror bubbled across Scott’s mind, followed by realization and the rolling memory of a conversation that passed too quickly for Jean to catch. “Damn it, Kandinsky,” he swore.

“We have to get everyone out of here,’ Jean wanted to say. It was on the tip of her tongue, about to fall off into the open space between them, before she stopped.

(He may not have been there herself, but she still remembered the red on grey.)

They had no idea how to save these people. They still hadn’t figured out how to save themselves.

But then the last remaining cell in the high-security ward rattled and shrieked, and Jean realized where they could start.

Taking Scott’s hand in her own, Jean stepped closer to the cage. She closed her eyes and sent out the waves of smoke and heat again, searching for new information, specific information. The man in the cell was at the lab for reeducation, but it was taking too long, because he healed from the training in seconds. Now that the lab was shutting down, his buyer had told them to send the man to his facilities, and the guards were just happy he was leaving because the man terrified him, let Stryker deal with the freak -

“They’re shipping him to Stryker,” she realized, her eyes flying open in shock.

Stryker had an unusual arrangement with Trask, Jean found. He was one of their biggest supporters, from covering up their atrocities with his government connections to capturing mutants for them. But, unlike most, he didn’t accept money for his services.
Instead, he was paid in mutants.

Occasionally, a mutant he grabbed would catch his fancy, and he would arrange to get them once Trask had finished. Scott hadn’t been one, thank God - not that Trask would have likely given Scott to Stryker, he had too much potential value for that - but this mutant was, and so had -

Jean burned the thought to a crisp before Scott could hear it. He had his own reasons for hating Stryker, and being the one to send him to Trask was the least of them.

At the name, Scott jerked as if shot, and suddenly distorted screams rang across his thoughts, followed by a gut-wrenching click- bang and a silence that was more terrifying than all the previous sounds put together. Then, with a kind of control that was enviable, he locked the memories away behind steel and buried it in an ocean.

Scott reached for the metal mask covering his eyes. “Step back, Jean.”

Jean touched his arm, then watched with a cold knot in her stomach as he flinched at the touch. “Let me.”

Tendrils of flames reached out, guiding up the massive metal pin holding the door in place. The man was out, he was free, she had done it, controlled the inferno, now she just had to -

Of course, that was the moment the alarms went off.

Jean groaned in comprehension. “I set it off when I opened the door!”

“But I opened both of our cells, and it didn’t go off then!”

“You obliterated both of our cells, Scott! There wasn’t even an alarm left to be triggered!”

And that was when the knives came out.
Neither of them had noticed the man walking out of his cell, but they did notice when twelve-inch, razor-sharp blades slid out of his knuckles. Scott jerked back, a dozen possibilities flashing rapid-fire through his head before he matched the whisper-soft *sissshhh* to knives on knives, like the Commander sharpening his blades before using them to slash at Scott’s flesh during Punishment. Jean grabbed his arm before he could do something drastic, and pulled him back.

She could feel the man’s brain, confused and scared, but still feral and ready to lash out.

Jean slipped inside on the gusts of a warm summer’s breeze.

When she opened her eyes, she saw the endless sky and the bottomless sea, but nothing else.

This was wrong: this was wrong on so many levels that Jean felt as if she were standing on an old Indian burial ground, as if the place where she stood had been desecrated and violated so many times that he was used to it.

Every mind was different, but every mind still had *something*. They had libraries of memories, castles built to protect their heart, islands formed of solitude and pain. They didn’t have this… void.

The waves beneath her feet rippled.

Jean frowned as she bent down to look at the crystal-clear sea (and the waves may crash and the water may break until it was nothing but boiling froth, but it would always, always bounce back, *heal*, and the blankness would return and *-*). There were no fish swimming in the depths, no gleaming underwater palaces that would hint at *something*.

There were sharks, though.

They were starving, feral things, circling beneath her in the waves, ready to tear and kill because it was the only thing they remembered how to do anymore.

Jean sent them away with warm current.

And then she saw it.
Down, deep within a trench, the unnatural crevice carved forcibly into the forever-healing landscape, was a gleam of silver. And, if she stretched the flames as far as she could reach, she could barely grasp a tiny fragment.

Tarnished dog tags flew up from the depths and into her fingers.

There was more down there, Jean was sure of it, but she didn’t know how to bend the flames so that it could all be retrieved. And so, instead, she offered up the dog tags as the only gift she could give.

(Logan.)

When Jean opened her eyes, it was to the sound of screams.

She spun around with a gasp. Scott was there, desperately fighting three guards, a fourth already on the ground. He had heard their feet pounding down the hall long before they arrived, and he had tried to inform Jean that it was time to go, but she hadn’t responded to any of his shakes and pleads, and neither had the man with the probably-knives, seriously, where did he even get knives anyway, they had literally just broken him out, and - the guards arrived. Scott met them at the door. He had managed to punch the first one in the neck so hard that he collapsed, and had redirected a tranq dart into another guard by grabbing the barrel when someone stupidly tried to shoot him at point blank range - amateurs - but there were too many sounds bouncing all around him and he didn’t have enough time to arrange them into a picture before it changed again, and those stupid guards would not stay down, and it would be really, really helpful if Jean would wake up soon -

The man beside her blinked, then lunged.

Jean jerked Scott out of the way with a rope of flames.

The last three guards were taken down in a flash of silver claws and a spray of red, and Jean was, for once, grateful Scott couldn’t see.

Logan paused, his breaths ragged and heavy, glanced back at the pair, then ran.
He didn’t look back.

Carefully, Jean led Scott around the bodies, making sure none of the pools of blood touched his feet. She glanced in the direction Logan had gone.

“If we follow him, we’d probably find the exit,” she informed Scott. “He’d take care of the guards, too.”

Scott nodded in agreement. “It’d be the safest route out.” Then, he turned on his heel and walked in the opposite direction. “Coming?”

Jean rolled her eyes. “Of course, dummy.”

This time, when she grabbed his hand, he didn’t flinch. They ran off together, deeper into the lab.

There were still other mutants to get out, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Remember where I said in the very first chapter note of the fic, "I'm not even going into the whole Essex thing." I lied! Meet the Big Bad. I've had to pick and choose aspects of his character to shove in, and aspects of his past, because a lot of his background doesn't fit with movie cannon. He's not going to be in much of this story; his presence is mostly just to set him up for his big role in the next story of the series, which will be an Apocalypse rewrite, by the way. Same goes for Logan: You don't see him much in this story, but he's a big part in the next. A bit of background, because I didn't explain it all that well up top, which is an necessary evil due to the fact that it's mostly from Scott's point of view, and Scott doesn't know any of this stuff. Essex is a genius mutant, who, in the comics had a super creepy thing where he stalked the Summer's bloodline because of a really convoluted plot that involved time travel and you could only find in comics. In this story, he works for Hydra, because, like in the comics, he has no respect for human life if it means "progress." And, thanks to the fact that I mashed the Avengers and X-Men Universes back together, he has a cliche evil ex-Nazi organization, Hydra, who shares his views and has infinite funding. At this time, he's managed to work his way up to handler of the Winter Soldier, and managed to use his position to influence Hydra into purchasing Scott for the Wolf Spider program - male version of the Black Widow program, which the Winter Soldier was actually a trainer for in comic-cannon. There's no time travel-related reason why he wants Scott, he's just evil and creepy and
Scott can blow up mountains, so it seems like something Hydra would jump for. Hydra, at this time, is working with the Soviets (and, you know, SHIELDRA, but no one knows that’s a thing yet). Next chapter, things go down. I’m so excited!
Chapter Summary

In which rampant dumbassery is apparently a way to break the programming on a super soldier, and Captain America still manages to screw over Hydra, despite being a patriotic popsicle at the moment.

Chapter Notes

Finally! This took forever to write - mainly because it's forty pages long. I'm not kidding: forty. Warning: There's more description's of Jean's abilities in this which, yeah, super abstract, and of Scott's echolocation, which I am piecing together from reports I've found on the internet, and from my own imagination, because I can't echolocate - though it would be awesome if I could. So, I apologize for any inaccuracies. Also, this chapter is dedicated to everyone who commented about Bucky. In a past author's note, I mentioned that I completely revamped the plot of this story. This is because some of the comments made me think about what could happen, and then I could never go back to my original vision. Trust me, this way is way better. It better ties into the overarching Marvel Cinematic Universe, and it's just way better. If you want to know more about a narrowly avoided fate for one James Buchanan Barnes, read the note at the bottom.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The flames were spiraling again.

Before, Jean never could control where they went. They were always a rampaging force, as insurmountable as a forest fire. Perhaps, with time, she would have learnt how to use them, but the lab gave her no opportunities.

But now, she had the constant beat of Scott’s mind sliding against hers, sometimes the calm hum of heartbeats and laughter, sometimes the statico of the lab machine’s electric buzzing, and sometimes the low drip drip drip of blood down a dirty drain, but always, always steady.

Jean lodged a heavy ship’s anchor in the mind next to hers, and spiralled out with the flames.

The guards were panicking, this wasn't supposed to be happening, Weapon X was out, oh God run, the Asset was compromised and must be recovered, they were short on staff because the lab was
shutting down and they weren't supposed to need this many guards, damn it, and were they supposed to go join the others or stay guarding the rest of the mutants, protocol was to stay but half the subjects were already exterminated and it was the goddamned Alphas escaping -

There.

Jean carried the thoughts back on a wave of smoke. She could see the lab’s layout better now, every curve of the walls, every molecule in the building etched into her brain by the flames. Quickly, she grasped onto the cold, heavy steel of the ship’s anchor and reeled herself back.

When she surfaced, it was to the silver sheen of Scott’s eye mask. His head was turned almost towards her face, his sightless gaze landing somewhere over her right shoulder rather than her head. He probably would look concerned, if it wasn't for that damn mask covering half his face. The flames inside her wanted to lash out, melt away that stupid mask, that symbol of the violation he had suffered through, to rip back the veil locking away his sight, concussive blasts bedamned, let it all burn anyway -

That something-dark was back, whispering searing thoughts of lettheflamesoutdestroyitallyoucansaveyourselfandScottkeephimforeverjust burnburnburn.

Smothering down the heat, Jean focused on the thrum of Scott’s mind. It was a mix of fear and hope at the moment, the drip drip drip of blood acting as the backdrop to the half-memory of Alex’s safe heartbeat on a stormy night. Jean squeezed Scott’s hand tighter. “This way.”

Jean paused at the door to the low-security wing, tugging Scott to a halt. “There are four of them,” she whispered. “They aren’t expecting company; their backs are to the door.”

Scott smiled something ugly and grim, and Jean got echoing flashes of harsh beatings and endless sparring sessions and you can do this it’s just like training just like just like training just like training over their bond.

Then, Scott took off his mask and blasted the entrance to smithereens.

Scott was the first one through the door, clicks rolling off his tongue in seconds. He crashed into the closest guard, spinning the man to the ground in a dizzying twist that made Jean’s head spin to follow.
Scott rolled to his feet barely in time to avoid the cattle prod, his head cocked to the side as he tracked the electric buzzing. The three guards quickly surrounded him, electricity crackling in their grasps.

Jean sent out the heavy, foggy waves of smoke to cloud their minds and lull them to sleep.

The three remaining guards dropped like rocks.

Scott’s eyebrow was briefly furrowed in confusion, his mind trying to categorize the heavy thumps that just occurred, before comprehension alighted on his face. “I should have let you go in first,” he conceded.

Jean smirked. “Yes, you should have.” Then, she walked forward, taking Scott’s hand in her own again. Squeezing it lightly, Jean turned her gaze to the long rows of cells before them. They were less than half occupied, and the ones that were in use were filled with bewildered, starved-looking individuals that were gaping at the pair openly.

Scott clicked his tongue. “There… there are a lot of holes in the picture. The sound’s not bouncing off of flat surfaces. The cages have bars?” he guessed.

“Yes,” Jean confirmed. Then, she sent out vicious, hateful streams of lava, ripping every last metal door to shreds. “But not anymore.”

Once, when she was eight, Jean had seen the look on Scott’s face before. Billy Brennan from across the street had made the exact same expression when Jean had managed to win a belching contest against all of the neighborhood boys. Her mother had called the look “smitten.”

Scott Summers looked (or, well, his head was turned in her direction) at her, absolutely smitten. “I can’t even see what happened, and I know it was awesome.”

“It was,” Jean confirmed, grinning. Dutifully, she ignored the warmth growing in her stomach at the
praise. Jean Grey was many things, but she was not smitten too.

She wasn’t.

Stumbling, the first of the prisoners tentatively left their cages, staring at the pair with wide eyes. The man was bone thin, had long, unwashed hair, and the lower half of his body had mutated into the hind legs and hooves of a goat, like a satyr. “You - you -”

“Are breaking everyone out,” Jean finished firmly. “Come one; we don’t have much time. They’ll send more guards soon.”

“What about the others?” a tall, beautiful woman with steely grey eyes and a thick French accent demanded.

In unison, the others began to speak up, a multitude of voices and tongues running over one another. Jean frowned. She couldn’t hear a single American accent, and most of the languages weren’t even English. “They’re all European,” she murmured. “Where are we?”

Honestly, she had never even considered the possibility that they weren’t in the States anymore; the thought hadn’t crossed her mind. During the transport to this lab, Jean had been drugged; she didn’t remember a single aspect of the trip. She knew that they had doused Scott with a paralytic and shipped him to the new lab in a coffin to evade authorities - Jean had woken up to one of his nightmares about that terrible, cramped space on more than one occasion - but he had thought that he was sent to another States’ lab. Jean didn’t even want to imagine that they could be in another country - that would make disappearing so much more difficult.

Two American teenagers in a America was normal. Two American teenagers in a foreign country was memorable.

And they would have to disappear. Jean didn’t have anyone living left to go back to - just Scott. And Scott’s living relatives were irredeemable assholes. There was still his brother, granted, but she knew that Scott wouldn’t consider going to him for a second, and neither would Jean. For one thing, Scott hadn’t seen the man since he was five. They had no way of tracking him down, and even if they managed to, what would they say? I know it’s been a decade, but I just escaped an illegal lab and I wanted to catch up? Please hide me? Remember that organization you barely managed to dodge a few years back? Well, they grabbed me, so I decided to drag them to your doorstep? Moreover, it was too dangerous, for both Alex and them. While Trask had never managed to bring in the elder Summers, they had only really stopped their pursuit when the younger provided them with all the readings they needed. If Scott went to him, they’d go searching for him with twice the manpower as
before, and probably end up taking both of them. Scott would never consent to endangering his brother, and Jean wasn’t about to march up to a total stranger and trust their protection to him, relative or no.

(She wasn’t about to trust their protection to someone who had abandoned Scott without a second thought, even if *Scott* didn’t blame him for it.)

All they had anymore was each other. And Jean wasn’t about to give up the last person she had left in the world.

Her blood seared hotter. Apparently, the *somethingdarksomethingenticingohGodwhatisthatthinginsideofme agreed.*

“I have no idea,” Scott replied. “Let’s find out.” Then, he cocked his head to the side and listened, before trailing forward and addressing one of the chattering mutants. In absolutely flawless German.

Briefly, Jean attempted to keep up with the exchange, but soon gave it up as a lost cause. Scott’s attempt at teaching her German had been only slightly less disastrous than her attempt to teach him French.

Scott stepped back with a frown. “We’re somewhere in the Soviet Union. Definitely past the Wall.”

Jean swore. This just became a lot harder.

The man that Scott had been speaking to stuttered out something. Scott nodded grimly. “Yeah, that… that sounds about right.” Then, checking himself, he repeated the sentence in German.

“What did he say?”

“That the only reason a couple of Americans would be sent so far away would be if they were such big flight risks that Trask needed the USSR forces to stop any attempted escapes.”

Jean glanced around at the destroyed room, unconscious guards, and red, flashing lights signaling a Code Red. “I don’t think it’s working.”
“What does it matter?” the French woman demanded, glaring at them as she pushed through the crowd. “What about the other mutants? There were more people here; they have been taking them all day. We have to go get them! We can’t just leave them here!”

Jean’s heart dropped down to the soles of her feet.

Whenever a lab was shutting down, protocol demanded that any patients deemed “unnecessary for further study” were terminated. This was mostly due to the fact that if a lab was being shut down, it meant that it had been compromised in some way, and that required a quick bug-out. Shepherding massive amounts of people out of one lab and finding space for them in another was time-consuming, expensive, and raised the risk of being discovered.

It was much more cost-effective to simply murder the non-valuable ones and move on.

Most likely, the other mutants were already dead.

The woman must have read the answer on her face, because she suddenly turned deathly pale and shook her head. “Non. Ils ne sont pas morts. You are wrong; they are not dead!”

“I’m - I’m so sorry –” Jean began.

“They are not dead!”

Sparks of painragedevastationohGodohnooh please drifted to Jean on a limp, dry wind. Flashes of a man rocketed out like a geyser burst, one with dark green skin and bright purple eyes and a laugh that still appeared despite the joyless surroundings. There had been hands held through the bars and whispered jokes and tentatively mumbled I love yous and -

And that same man being led away that morning, ostensibly for testing but maybe for the reason that was etched across the face of that strange, red-haired girl standing in the middle of a war zone.

Uncomfortably, Jean was reminded of Scott and the day that he told her he had been sold, reminded of that terrible realization that she was losing the only thing she had left in the world.
“I can check,” she offered suddenly. “I can look to see if I can find him - them. If I can find them.”

Gratitude burned in steel grey eyes.

Once again, Jean hooked a strand of unforgiving iron in Scott’s secure mind before spiraling out, nothing but a piece of ash on an endless ocean of lava.

*Weapon X was out weapon x was out weapon x was x weapon x was here weapon x was -*

Jean rushed backwards into the flames, far, far away from the *shiningsilverredbloodscreamspainpainpain.*

Dead bodies scattered on the ground and sirens in the air and this was *not* part of the manual and he didn’t want to be here he just wanted to go home why did he even take this job anyway and -

Not there.

It had just been a job he didn’t mean to do these things it’s not like he cared about mutants anyway would God understand that? He hadn’t thought about God for years not since he stopped going to church but his mom had been a practicing Catholic and had dragged him to mass every Sunday for his entire childhood (*andsmokyincenseandhardwoodenpewsanddroningLatinand*) and he hadn’t spoken to her since he took the job at Trask because he couldn’t bear to hear her voice bemoaning all the suffering in the world and talking about the charity work she had done with little kids because he had been working with little kids too except these little kids were screaming and dying on a cold metal table and that thought only filled him with guilt when his mom was there to remind him of how good people could be except he wished he had talked to her one last time because he never would again because a man had come around the corner with unforgiving metal claws and *pain* and he was just doing his job just doing his job just doing his job God forgive him he was just doing his job -

Jean flailed farther backwards, buried herself in heat so she couldn’t hear the thoughts spilling in from all directions.

*(She couldn’t feel the anchor anymore.)*
Jean couldn’t -


(but wait this isn’t right this isn’t me this isn’t supposed to be happening where am I what am I doing oh please, please help me, Ste-)


She couldn’t -

- and bullets and guns and firing weapons and blood on bleached white walls and -

She couldn’t find her way out again -

“-come on back, Jean.” A shake. “Come on, Jean, it’s me! Just follow my voice, just-”

– and gleaming silver tables and bloodbloodblood –

“-follow my voice-”

– and the flames were racing higher and burnburnburn –

“-Jean.”
A hand on hers. A cool, steady hand in a sea of fire, and a voice she should know.

A cold chain of steel.

Frantically, Jean ripped herself out of the inferno, grabbing onto the calm, cool knot of Scott’s mind for dear life.

She stumbled into awareness, gasping, and felt the tense hands of Scott steadying her. His face was pinched in a mixture of worry and panic.

“I’m okay,” she muttered. Then, before Scott could contradict her, she continued. “I couldn’t find anything, though. Not because it wasn’t there,” she hastened to add, glancing at the French woman. “But because there’s too much to find; I’d have to be closer to manage to sense anything.”

Jean paused. She knew were the death chambers were; the entirety of the complex was still etched into her mind. She could go looking, seek out the other mutants, but risk everything they had already gained for people that may already be dead.

Determination festered in Jean’s gut. They had already gone this far.

Reluctantly, she pried Scott’s hands from arms and passed them over to the blonde woman. “What’s your name?”

The look in the beauty’s eyes broke Jean’s heart.

She still remembered when she first asked Scott his name, remembered the shock at someone asking for it, then the bone-shaking relief at someone actually wanting it.

At someone finally treating him like a human.

The woman’s eyes reflected that exact same all-consuming, ground-shaking relief.

“Genevieve,” she whispered like a prayer. “My name is Genevieve.”
A smile prickled at the corners of Jean’s lips. “It’s a pleasure, Genevieve. My name’s Jean. We’re running out of time; the guards are distracted for now, but they may not be for much longer. I need you to start getting everyone out while I go look for the others.”

“Like Hell,” Scott snapped.

Jean frowned at him. “We need to start moving,” she snapped back. “We can’t sit here and debate this for forever.”

“Oh, I agree with that,” he replied. “What I don’t agree with is you going alone - and don’t even bother claiming to the contrary, we both know that was going to be the next words out of your mouth. I’m coming with you.”

“No. I - I forbid you to come with me.”

“You’re forbidding me?” he asked incredulously. “Can you even do that?”

“I just did!”

“Well, not very successfully, seeing as I’m not leaving you behind.”

“Scott!” Jean snapped. “Are you forgetting the part where you’re blind?”

Scott jerked as if she had slapped him. “Seriously? Are you forgetting the part where I am literally a trained assassin?”

“Which you hate!” she exclaimed back. “You hate fighting! And I know you do incredible with your echolocation and everything,” she hastened to explain, “but that doesn’t change the fact that you can’t see all the attacks coming! If they catch you off guard, you are dead, Scott! You’re dead, and I’m alone! And - and I’m not risking that. You’re going with the others.”

“No, I’m not,” Scott stated with a quiet rebellion. “That same argument goes for you too: If they
catch you off guard - and they can, Jean, I’ve known you long enough to know what sensory overload does to you - you’re gone forever. Two is safer than one. You can make me go with them,” he continued softly, and the flames throbbed with a painful awareness at his words. “But I trust you not to. And now I need you to trust me to be able to handle this.”

“This is all very heartwarming,” Genevieve interrupted. “But aren’t we supposed to be leaving right now?”

Jean made a decision. “Right,” she confirmed. “Take the others, go straight for the next two turns, take a right, then follow the bodies from there. Get as far away from here as possible; Scott and I will find you with whoever else we get.” Scott beamed in her general direction. “Does anyone have any active mutations?”

A brilliant, vindictive smile crossed Genevieve’s lips. Suddenly, her skin morphed into gleaming steel the exact same shade as her eyes. “I’ll get them out,” she promised, before crossing the room to strip the unconscious guards of their weapons. Quickly, she wrangled the rest of the crowd, forcing them into order.

Before they left, Genevieve glanced back at the pair. “Will you two be alright?”

Neither of them answered.

Genevieve hesitated. “Be careful. And - and get them back. Please.” And then they left, a gleaming silver woman leading the way.

Scott held up his hand towards where she stood. “Ready?”

Jean gave him a nervous smile despite the fact that he couldn't see it, then took his hand.

They were with each other until the end, for better or worse.

Hopefully better. Jean wasn't sure if she could handle worse.
When their feet echoed across the hard vinyl flooring, Scott got flashes.

Walls on both sides. A roof. A turn off in the hallway to the right. An open doorway.

Then, they traveled further and there were new sounds to paint pictures in his head with, and Scott started again.

Once, Jean had asked him to describe what he “saw” when he echolocated. At first, he had been confused, because she was telepathic and she could just look in his head for the information. But then she had elucidated the fact that most of her power was being blocked and she could really only pick up surface thoughts, but echolocation sounded fascinating to her so she was hoping that Scott could tell her what it was like.

Scott screwed the explanation up. Badly.

He was pretty sure that by the end of it he had implied that he basically saw the things around him whenever he clicked his tongue, which wasn't it at all. Nowadays, all he saw was black (and sometimes red, but Scott wasn't still thinking about that).

It was difficult to explain, honestly. Like, imagine you were explaining sight to someone who had never seen before, never even heard of seeing before. When they ask how you know a wall or something is there, you would just say you were seeing it. More accurately speaking, you were sensing it. The light had traveled from its source, bounced off the wall and back into your eye, where it was properly distorted by the curvature of your cornea before being sent off to brain to be decoded, which, eventually, was interpreted as the image that forms in your mind.

Echolocation was kind of like that, but the end result was different.

Scott made a noise, whether it be clicks or tapped feet or clapped hands. That noise traveled around the space surrounding him, bounced off the objects, and traveled back to his ear, where, eventually, it was sent to the brain to be decoded and interpreted.

But there was no visible picture at the end. Scott had not magically granted himself sight again. He could not see the walls or the roof of the turnoff to the left that they just passed.

Instead, he sensed them.
It really was like asking someone how they knew they could see something; they just did, but the brain had decoded it too fast for them to realize how.

Scott could sense, but he could not see.

Well, apparently he could still see if he was wearing the special goggles designed for him by a morally deficit, vaguely fascist criminal organization, but that was a whole new level of complicated that he didn't even want to think about.

Jean skittered to a stop, her grip yanking Scott back as well. “Found them,” she breathed.

“Them” being the other mutants, or at least information about them. She had been scouring for any news of them since they had left the holding area, on a more manageable level than before.

“And?” Scott prompted.

“Most are dead. They had just... gassed... a new group maybe half an hour before we escaped. They started collecting a new wave right before the alarms went off, one at a time so they wouldn’t panic the survivors into a rebellion; they had only gotten one before everything went to Hell.”

Scott tensed. “And the one?”

“She’s alive. For now. But... there’s two guards with her, Scott, and they’re debating whether or not they should kill her and go help the others or wait for the lab to get under control and just gas her with the next batch. They - they’ve been arguing about it for a while; they don’t want to kill a little kid, mutant or no. But they’re going to do it, Scott; their minds are already half made up.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Scott demanded. “Let’s go get her!”

Jean paused. “There’s more,” she rushed to say. “I can still feel the other group; they’re running into trouble. Locked doors, being tracked by the cameras, that sort of thing. If we can get access to the control room, we can end a lot of obstacles.... But the control room is in the opposite direction of the gas chambers.”
Scott carded his hand through his hair. It was a mess. They had needed to split from the main group in order to find the others - too many people made it too difficult to travel, and Scott and Jean would be the guards’ main targets, therefore drawing the most attacks - but by splitting from the rest, they also took away the two biggest powerhouses for defense. They would be able to take out doors, stop guards, and find the way out; the others would have a harder time of that.

And now, they had to make a new choice: the little kid or the entire group. Two directions, not enough time for both.

…

Two directions, two people.

“Right,” Scott stated, pulling his arm out of Jean’s grip. “There's only two guards with the kid? I can handle two guards. Which way?”

Quickly, Jean began to shuffle through Scott’s mind for the rest of his plan. “No.”

“Not enough time to debate this, Jean. We need to go both places, and we need to split up to do that. Which way?”

Jean paused. Scott could feel her mulling it over, could hear the you're blind still echoing in her head.

But he could also feel her shifting through dozens and dozens of training sessions in under a second, could sense her weighing his chances at success.

“Trust me, Jean.”

“Left,” Jean decided in a whisper. “Left first, then straight for the next two turns, then left again. You should hear their voices from there. I'll stay in your head for as long as I can and update you as the situation changes.”
“Got it,” Scott nodded, _relief anticipation fear_ bubbling over from his mind to hers. “Left, straight, straight, left.” Not wanting to delay any longer, Scott turned towards where he thought the left turn off was and took a couple steps forwards. Then, he stopped, and twisted back towards Jean. “I'll see you soon,” he promised. A sardonic smile twisted at his lips. “Or, well, you know.”

A sharp, huffed laugh. “You are an _idiot, Scott Summers._” Two steps towards him. A pause.

Some movements, Scott could sense when they happened. Footsteps, being an obvious one, along with any type of clatter. Some, he could piece together the existence of by dozens of stimuli. Occasionally, if the fighter was especially angry and untrained, they would shift and scuffle their body in a distinct way that said they were winding up for _something, _and then they would huff and growl in way that would make it impossible for Scott to _not_ figure out where their head was, and the punch would be so clumsy and projected he could usually figure out where it was coming from and duck away in time to deliver a right hook to their face. The Commander's metal arm was even easier, because it _screed_ every time it moved, and each different movement had a distinct _scree, _so - after a _lot_ of trial and error - Scott had been able to tell every attack coming just by listening to that arm.

But with most movements, Scott was blind. He couldn't hear gentle motions, nor could he feel slow movements shifting through the air. At those times, Scott’s focus was not on sensing, but _reacting_.

When he didn't sense a punch coming, he rolled with it. If he was knocked down, he got back up. If someone was attacking him, he used their momentum to his advantage. There were dozens of reactions for every surprising scenario, and Scott had used them all to great effect.

Not one of those scenarios included how to react if his best friend and maybe-sort-of girlfriend grabbed him by the front of his shirt, yanked him down, and mashed their lips together.

In the end, he decided that kissing back was _probably definitely_ the best reaction.

Definitely.

They broke apart awkwardly, remaining slightly too close for a moment. Then, Jean stepped back, and the spell was broken.

“Be careful,” she blurted.
“Uh, yeah,” Scott gulped. “You too.”

Then, Scott turned and left, and heard Jean do the same.

He promptly ran into a wall on his way out. Shaking his head, he corrected himself, and began to run.

It was just like training. And he had excelled in training, much to his chagrin. It didn’t matter that he was blind and outnumbered; he had gone over that very scenario dozens of times with the Commander. He could handle this.

Just like training.

Just like training.

Just like training.

He could do this.

Probably.

Jean had stayed in his head for as long as she could, her voice growing fainter and fainter as more stimuli separated them. Before her voice had dwindled into nothingness, Jean had helped him bypass three guards and two cameras.

But then her voice had disappeared mid sentence. Scott was on his own for this.

There were two guards just around the corner, less than three steps away. If Scott moved so much as a foot forward, they would see him. Softly, Scott clicked his tongue. While corners may have managed to block regular vision, sound was a different matter. The static shape of two big people-ish figures and a smaller person shape bounced back, matching the voices easily drifting to Scott’s hiding place.
The men were arguing in rapid-fire Russian, and Scott was struggling to keep up. He managed to catch snippets of taking too long and not waiting anymore and, most chillingly, I’ll do it.

(There was also the ragged tears and gasps of someone who knew they were about to die, but Scott refused to acknowledge it. He could do this; it was just like training anyway. It was just like training, just like training just like trainingjustliketraining -

Complete with the person who would die if Scott screwed up.)

Then, Scott clicked his tongue again, and got the rattling image of a long, thin shape - an arm? - jutting out of the human-ish blob. It pointed towards the smaller shape, around the area where the head would probably be.

Just as if you were about to shoot someone execution style.

(Just like training.)

Scott lunged.

(Just like training.)

He grabbed the maybe-probably-arm first, shoving upwards so that it was pointing towards the ceiling. The shot meant for the little kid rang out deafeningly close, dust raining on Scott’s head from where the bullet struck home. Quickly, he moved before the shock wore off and the guards started fighting back. Scott twisted the definitely-arm back until he heard a sickening snap. Russian obscenities spilled forth, only to cease when Scott slammed his fist viciously into the man’s windpipe. Snapping out a hard, sure kick to the right, he felt connection the second man’s torso, and the groan of someone stunned. Then, he grabbed the first man by the hair and rammed it backwards, brutally slamming it into the wall. Not wasting a second, Scott shoved him in the direction of the second man, and was gratified with the clatter of the pair crashing into each other, before he turned towards where he last heard the little kid.

(Just like training…)

Blindly, Scott reached out, only for his hand to meet air. Taking a stumbling step forward, he waved his arms in wider arcs, and snagged on the too-thin-but-not-as-thin-as-most arm of the terrified little
kid. Quickly, he yanked them to their feet, and shoved them harshly towards the hall; Scott would apologize later; right now, he needed them out of the way.

In movies, whenever a nameless, faceless goon gets knocked down, he doesn’t get back up. He doesn’t provide any resistance past the first futile measure. He is easily dealt with and forgotten, with very little effort on the protagonist’s (not hero - Scott hadn’t believed in heroes in a long, long time) part.

In real life, they get back up.

Scott turned to meet them.

(Just…. like….. training…..)

Whenever you’re fighting blind, you get in close.

Distance is for those who can see the attacks coming. For those that need to hear and feel every hit before they strike, you have to be close enough that you can feel the muscles shifting beneath your opponent’s skin. You have to grab on and keep hitting, and not stop until they were down.

When Scott fought, it was hard, fast, and brutal.

While he can blame part of that on the way he was trained, there’s more to it than just that. Scott’s not someone to dance around a problem; he’s too blunt to be evasive. He’s like his mutation in that respect: He rams through things like they’re paper, and he waits until afterwards to see the damage done. One of his character flaws, one that had driven his paren - Katherine and Christopher to exasperation, and had not made Scott many friends in his time.

In a fight, this was an advantage.

When he hit, he didn’t pull his punches. He rammed his fist as hard as he could, and targeted it so that its victim wouldn’t be getting back up again. They still did, a lot of the time, but they got up a lot worse than they were when they went down.
Scott was back at the guards in an instant, grabbing one around the neck and slamming his knee into the man’s gut once, twice, three times. The other guard was there then, grabbing Scott from behind. Scott slammed his elbow backwards hard enough to break his jaw, then followed it up with a solid kick to his knee, before grabbing the first guard by the hair and slamming it into the wall with enough force to crack a skull.

He’s on autopilot now, spinning and rolling and clawing and tearing without thinking about the next move he’s making. This was why the Commander had drilled even the simplest actions into his head over and over again, why muscle memory had been stressed above all else. In a fight, you didn’t have time to think.

You just had to let training take over.

(just)

One thing that Scott could never dream of sensing was a bullet. They were too quick, too sudden to be able to tell from the noise or the shift in airways or anything. Mostly, Scott had been counting on the value Trask placed on an alive him to combat that problem, but desperate guards getting their asses handed to them didn’t always care about how their bosses might react.

So it’s really only luck - or, more accurately, the fist of the second guard pounding into his side hard enough to break a rib, had it been aimed at the right area - that when the first guard pulled out his gun and shot directly for Scott’s back, he was already falling to the side in a desperate attempt to break the second guard’s hold on him. Then, that awfulterribledeaddeaddead sound of click- bang reached Scott’s ears, and the too-hot blood of the second guard was spraying across Scott’s face in that distinct manner that really only belongs to blood spurting from an artery.

Briefly, Scott wondered what it said about him that he now built the world around him from the smell of death, the sound of gunfire, and the all-too-familiar feeling of blood spray across his skin.

Then, he was spinning again, training roaring under his skin as he pushed the dying body of the second guard in front of him, blocking the first before he could get another shot off.

The guards of the lab usually kept their guns on the right side, Scott remembered distantly.

As he shot his arm out smoothly to the right side of guard’s falling body, Scott wasn’t thinking.
As he snatched the gun from the man’s side, Scott wasn’t thinking.

(like)

And as he shot the first guard, Scott wasn’t thinking.

It was all just like training, anyway.

(training)

It’s not until *click*-*bang* is ringing in his ears and there’s fresh blood splattering across his face that Scott realized his mistake.

When he had started the fight, he had been aiming to incapacitate.

But Scott had always been trained to kill.

He had fought too fast and too harsh, and he had been so lost under the scream of muscle memory and hard-learned lessons that he had done something he couldn’t take back.

Scott let the gun fall to the ground.

Numbly, he stumbled forward, his feet tumbling until he reached the supine, bloodied figure before him. He blindly reached out until his fingers were tracing over wet, warm clothing and a chest that should be moving but wasn’t.

His hands found the neck, right where the pulse point should be.

*And*

*There*
Was

No

_Pulse_.

“N- no,” Scott stuttered senselessly. “I didn't do that. I -I didn't.” Futility, he shook the _dead_ body before him. “Get up,” he ordered. The body didn't move. “Get _up_.”

The body still didn't move.

Scott scrambled backwards, a gunshot still ringing in his ears and the smell of death in his nose.

(- nononononononononononononono -)

Throughout the entirety of his training process, the thing he had feared the most was becoming a killer. Granted, people had died _because_ of him - because he had failed, because he had been such a stupid, stubborn, _idiot_, and hadn’t thought through the consequences of his actions - but nobody had ever been killed _by_ him. That had been one of the few lines Scott had yet to cross, and he had always wanted it to remain that unbreachable, untouchable boundary between him and the animal Trask Industries claimed him to be.

And he had gone and _murdered_ without even needing to be reeducated.

_Oh God, what did he do?_

And that’s when Scott heard the crying.

---

For as long as Nina Gurzsky could remember, her father had screamed himself awake.
Her papa had always been a strong, reserved man, and seeing something like nightmares shatter the very foundation of his being had been a terrifying experience for the young girl. Many nights, she had woken to the sound of his cries, only to freeze in terror. Surely, any monster that could make her father break down would have to be truly dangerous.

But by the next morning, her father was always all right.

Concerned, Nina had asked her papa what monsters were hiding under his bed to make him scream so. What could make him so afraid? Then, her papa had become very misty eyed and hugged her, before telling her that he’d explain when she was older.

This explanation had not satisfied Nina. Worried, she had crept out of bed one night and tiptoed to her parent’s room, only to be greeted to the sound of her papa’s tears. Nina pressed her ear to the door, and listened.

It was that night that she learned that a shower was not always a shower.

For weeks, Nina had been terrified of any and all bathing sites. How could you be sure that it was really a good shower? What if merely a ruse, like the showers her dziadek had been sent to?

It had all come to a head when her bewildered parents had questioned why she suddenly preferred walking about stinky and dirty, and Nina had burst into tears, confessing her eavesdropping. That night, her father sat her down and explained about a bad man named Hitler, a camp called Auschwitz, and a little boy who wore the Star of David. He showed her a tattoo of numbers burned into his arm, and explained what they meant.

And then, he promised her that he would protect Nina from the same thing happening to her.

But now her papa was dead, and so was her mama. Now, she had numbers tattooed on her arm, and while there may be no Hitler or Auschwitz, there was still pain and scientists and the same thing was happening to her.

Now, Nina Gurzsky was alone.

When they came to take her from her cell, muttering something about showers, Nina knew exactly what type of shower it was. But she was so small and the men leading her were so big, and there
were none of her animal friends nearby to help her. She didn’t know how to fight her way free.

Which apparently didn’t matter, because the boy came, and did it for her.

It was the same boy that they had dragged her to seeing not so long ago, the one with the mask on his eyes and the snarl on his lips. But there wasn’t any guards watching him warily this time; there wasn’t anybody making him practice fighting with threats of guns and death. This time, he threw Nina out of the way, and attacked the guards themselves.

He fought like a wolf, Nina realized: all quick speed and darting attacks and not stopping no matter how hard your opponent struck you.

And then he shot one of the guards, and all his likeness to the wolves disappeared.

When a wolf killed its enemy - something Nina had only seen once, before her talk-y thing (“mutation,” according to her papa) appeared, and she could make them stop hurting each other, because that was bad - they were never remorseful. They howled victory before trotting off to lick their wounds. They didn’t crawl over to their fallen foe, fear on their face and a tremble in their hands. This boy was not a wolf.

And that was what made Nina cry.

It wasn’t the showers. It wasn’t the gun that had been pressed to her head for the second time that day. It wasn’t even the brutal fight that ended with a too-familiar - mamamamamama no - noise. It was that there was a boy there that was like a wolf but wasn’t, and Nina wasn’t sure if this was a bad thing or not, because she could handle wolves - wolves were her friends - but she didn’t know if she could handle this boy, or even if he would kill her too or just leave her with the bleeding guards, and she wanted her papa papapapapapa help -

And the boy heard her.

His head darted up, the silver mask aimed in her direction. How could he see with that? Nina wondered. How could he fight? Wouldn’t it be easier if he just took it off? Why did he have it on in the first place?

“Hello?” he asked.
Nina shrank back. If he was a wolf, he’d either decide she wasn’t a threat and trot off, or decide she was and kill her. Well, if he was a wolf, he’d help her, because wolves were her friends and they never thought she was a threat. (He wasn’t a wolf.)

“Hello?” the boy asked again. Slowly, he curled out of the position he had been scrunched down in, shifting so that he was on his knees. Then, he made a strange clicking sound with his mouth, before cocking his head in concentration, and began to move towards Nina.

Nina trembled.

The boy stopped. There was blood on his knuckles and a cut on his lip, Nina noticed distractedly. There was more blood too, all over him, in fact - on the shining silver mask and the white shirt peeking out from under his dark red jumpsuit, and splattered everywhere else she could see - but Nina wasn’t sure if that was his or not. Strangely, this made him seem less terrifying. Like an animal that had finished its fight, and therefore wouldn’t fight anymore.

Nina liked animals much better than people. They made a lot more sense.

The boy spoke again, but Nina didn’t catch all that he said. He was speaking English, which Nina knew some of but not all, thanks to her papa’s lessons. I? Something like the word I, but with a strange mm sound at the end. The word “not,” definitely, followed by go-something - Nina hated conjugations, they never made sense - and a word she didn’t know, and then the word “you.” The boy sighed. “Do you speak English?” he tried. Nina knew those words; they had been the first her papa had taught her. But, before she could answer, he spoke again. “¿Español? Deutsch? Русский?”

Nina licked her lips. “English,” she answered tentatively. “A little. Und Deutsch. Ein bisschen.” Her father’s lessons had also included German, due to Nina’s insistence. She wanted to speak the same language that her papa had, when he was her age. Now, she wished she had focused on one or the other, instead of both; maybe then she would know enough to talk to the boy-who-wasn’t-a-wolf.

The boy smiled softly. “Okay,” he breathed. “[Tell? Bell?] me [if? it?] you understand,” he said slowly. “[I-with-an-m sound again, was that even a word?] here to help you.” Then, he paused.

Nina realized she was supposed to respond here. Quickly, she nodded, only to realize that the mask made it so he couldn’t see that. “I understand,” she acknowledged.
“I can [two words that Nina kind of remembered, but not what they meant, with a you tacked in between] [safe? That was like bezpieczny, right? Or was it like niebezpieczeństwo?].”

Nina frowned. What?

“Uh, safe?” the boy tried, in German this time. “I can take you [?] safe.” Then, he held out his hand towards her in obvious expectation.

Nina understood that, or at least enough to know what he meant. But how could she be sure he was telling the truth?

“You - you,” Nina frowned, trying to remember the word, “dead(?) a man.” That didn’t sound right, but it sounded close, and Nina thought the boy understood. “You dead me?”

The boy flinched, exactly like a wolf wouldn’t. “I’m sorry for that,” he promised, sounding sincere. “I did[n’t? That was like not, right? It was that weird thing that sometimes happened in English, where the words blurred together, right?] want that to [?].”

“Why?” Nina demanded, her heart pounding. “Why you dead the man?”

The boy smiled bitterly, the way he did when he looked like he wanted to cry. He had done that before, once, when the man with the metal arm had made him break a guard’s arm when they were making him fight, and the boy had hesitated until they shoved the gun against her head hard enough to make her scream. “[Sounded like train, but with an -ing. But what did trains have to do with this?]”

The boy was crying, Nina realized. It wasn’t the shuddering, aching tears that she had shed when the men came for her, when her mama had clung to her so tight as the people with guns tore Nina from her arms, before click- bang and her mama was falling in a spray of red. It was silent, practiced, as if he hadn’t had a mama or papa to scare away the monsters under his bed in a long, long time.

The boy wasn’t a wolf.

But maybe that wasn’t a bad thing.
Nina took his hand. “I come,” she promised, squeezing the hand tightly, like her papa used to do for her.

The boy smiled softly at her then, and wiped away the tears with the back of his hand. “What is your name?”

“Nina.”

“I’m Scott,” the boy greeted. “It’s time to run now, Nina.”

Scott ran back in the direction that he had came, clenching the hand of the trembling little girl all the while.

Jean wasn’t back in his head yet, but Scott didn’t expect her to be. He would have to get closer - maybe even to where they had separated - in order to show up on her overloaded radar, he suspected.

They hadn’t run into any guards yet, which was just about a miracle, in Scott’s book. He definitely wasn’t fit for another fight: his side ached from the hits of the guards, he was bleeding from a head wound that Scott really hoped hadn’t caused a concussion, and he was still shaking after what he… did. Evasion all together would better suit them, and Scott was straining to hear every spare sound he could.

Nina crying and trembling by his side.

The sound of two pairs of feet slapping against the cold tile.

Ragged breaths, from two tired sets of lungs.

whir click whir click whir click screeee

Scott skidded to a stop.
Shit.

He hadn’t forgotten about the Commander *per se*, but he definitely hadn’t been thinking about the man, nor about the final orders Essex had imparted to him.

Ensure the new Asset is delivered to base in operable condition. Let nothing stand in your way.

The one person in the entire damn *building* that Scott couldn’t beat was coming for them.

“Scott?”

Scott squeezed his hand tightly around Nina’s as he tugged her in the opposite direction, his heart thrumming in fear for the little girl beside him. What would the Commander do to her? She didn’t have any use for the man, and he wasn’t exactly the merciful type - or maybe he was, but that had been buried beneath whatever reeducation he had gone through. “Something’s happening,” he told the girl. “Someone’s coming.”

“What? I not understand,” came the heavily accented reply.

Curse language barriers, Scott thought. Freaking Nimrod and his stupid Tower of Babel.

*whir click whir click whir click screeee*

The Commander was just around the corner now, Scott thought, if even that. There wasn’t much time left.

“Someone bad is coming,” Scott told her slowly, feet pounding against the tile as hard as they could. Nina stumbled, her short legs unable to keep up. Not missing a beat, Scott swung her into his arms and kept running. “When he comes, you need to **run**,” he ordered. “I’ll protect you, but you **run**. Look for a girl named Jean, okay? Tell her I sent you.”

Nina was crying again, her arms circling around Scott’s neck tightly. She muttered something in a
language Scott didn’t know. Then, she screamed.

The Commander had entered the hallway.

They were out of time.

“Don’t be scared,” Scott reassured, setting her down. “I need you to be brave now, okay Nina? Be brave.” He pushed gently, urging her away. “Run now, Nina. Find Jean, she’ll know what to do. Now!”

Scott didn’t wait to hear if Nina followed his orders; he turned to meet his trainer. He wasn’t stupid; he knew that they would never be able to outrun the Commander. He was outclassed in every possible way.

The only thing that mattered right now was buying Nina time.

And maybe, just maybe, Jean would be able to find him again.

But that didn’t mean that Scott was giving up without a fight.

The *whir click whir click whir click screee* was even closer now, almost to him. It was David and Goliath.

And this time, Scott could use his slingshot.

Carefully, he reached up and took off the metal mask.

Scott Summers opened his eyes.

The Soldier dodged the red stream of energy, but only barely.
The New Asset was a Alpha Class Mutant: Energy Manipulator. Enhanced spatial awareness, highly intelligent, highly dangerous.

But not quite as dangerous as the Soldier.

A weakness: The New Asset was prone to sentiment. While he had been liable to bouts of vicious behavior at times, he was easily manipulated through his unwillingness to endanger innocents. Even now, he was squinting his eyes to minimize the damage to the Soldier, if he was struck by the beam.

This was a mistake.

The New Asset dodged the Soldier’s first hit, only to be hit by the his flesh arm. The New Asset managed to use the momentum of the Soldier’s punch to force him to stumble, but the man recovered quickly, grabbing the New Asset’s arms and pinning them behind his back. The New Asset kicked off the ground in retaliation, using the Soldier’s position as leverage and slamming his feet solidly into the wall, racing up the side of the hallway in order to flip backwards, over the Soldier, and landed squarely behind his trainer.

Automatically, the Soldier filed this information away for report. The New Asset had not been taught this move, and was exhibiting even further adaptability in the field than had previously been revealed in training. Further testing and training should be considered, in order to better exploit this trait.

Then, he spun out of the way, barely avoiding another of the New Asset’s bone-shattering blasts. His mutation must be neutralized, the Soldier concluded. His endurance was not as such that he could remain operable if struck by the blast; if the New Asset managed to land a hit, he would escape.

Quickly, the Soldier placed himself further down the hallway, and drew his gun. Behind him, there was a young mutant running across the space, obviously being protected by the New Asset. The Soldier fired off two shots, each landing close to the young mutant, eliciting a scream in response. The little girl cowered into the side of the hallway, curling up in fear. Immediately, the New Asset shut his eyes. Due to the Soldier’s current position, he would be unable to open them without the risk of hitting the young mutant. As the New Asset possessed an aversion to endangering the lives of others, he would realize this fact thanks to the girl’s screams, and cease the use of his blasts.

Mutation: Neutralized.

“Stand down, Asset,” the Soldier ordered.
The New Asset was standing before him, favoring his left side, as if there was an injury in the right. His head was cocked in concentration as he tracked the Soldier’s movements. Automatically, the Soldier stilled his prosthetic arm. The mutant’s enhanced spatial awareness granted him an above-average skill at echolocation; the smallest sound could reveal much. “You don’t want to do this,” the New Asset warned.

The Soldier struck.

He hit the right side first, and confirmed that the Asset was injured in that location, based on the hoarse cry that escaped his lips. The Asset managed to deliver a kick to the Soldier’s torso, only to be quickly rebuffed by his trainer. The mutant spun away, blood pouring down the side of his face anew.

“This isn’t you,” he warned. “You’re a soldier. An American soldier. They’re making you do this.”

Any statements implying that the Soldier was an unwilling Asset fell under Protocol 14.2.7B: Termination of thought. Immediately, the Soldier began to carry out the Protocol.

Except:

The Asset reminded him of someone.

Any such memories also fell under Protocol 14.2.7B, but one this occasion, the Soldier hadn’t complied. The Asset was familiar but so, so different. He had entered for training that first day, with a sickly thinness and a stubborn tilt to his chin that screamed of dirty alleys and split knuckles and why don’t you pick on someone your own size.

But it didn’t fit, not exactly.

The hair was wrong, Bucky the Soldier thought. It was supposed to be lighter. But no matter the hair, the boy was still a - a -

He had a mission to complete.

The Asset put up an admirable resistance, the Soldier noted. If his urgency could be - and it would be - realigned, so that it would be aimed towards the accomplishment of missions, he would be formidable Asset, once he completed his training.

At this moment, however, it was a mere annoyance.

The Asset ducked under the strike from his metallic arm, grabbing it and using its momentum to swing himself up, wrapping his legs around the Soldier’s neck. He leaned backwards, successfully overbalancing the pair. However, the Soldier twisted on the way down, manipulating the motion so that he landed on his feet. Quickly, he grabbed the Asset by his jumpsuit and slammed him into the ground.

Painfully, the Asset moaned, attempting to shove himself into seated position. Not allowing for further resistance, the Soldier used picked him up and swung him into the wall. The Asset impacted harshly, but not enough to cause major damage. For a moment, the Soldier considered further force, but decided against it. The Asset must be in operable condition.

Mission Status: Complete.

The young mutant was crying again.

She had yet to move from her position curled into the wall, still trembling in the corner. The Soldier pondered for a moment. Bystander Casualties: Of no importance. Protocol 89.3.3E dictated that knowledge of the Soldier was classified, and that any witnesses, unless otherwise ordered, be terminated for their knowledge.

This situation fell under Protocol 89.3.3E.

The Soldier got up, and walked over to the little girl.

But inside, he was screaming again.
(She’s just a little girl. Like Becky. Like your sister, Rebecca. You used to braid her hair, didn’t you? You used to sing her to sleep and read her stories at night, and oh God, that little girl’s like Becky. Don’t kill her, don’t kill her, please God don’t kill her-)

Protocol 14.2.7B: Engaged. The Soldier continued with his mission.

The mutant watched as he approached. “Scott,” she sobbed. “Scott!”

The Asset’s name must be Scott, the Soldier noticed. This information had no importance, and therefore should be ignored. Instead, he filed that away too. He did not know why.

“Don’t touch her!”

The Asset Scott the Asset had managed to get up despite his injuries. He crashed into the Soldier ineffectually, his attack rolling off like droplets of rain. Mission Parameters: Asset must be in operable condition.

“Stand down, Asset,” the Soldier ordered. Any further actions had the potential to compromise the Asset’s ability to operate, which would be a failed mission. The Soldier could not fail.

Except:

The Asset Scott had that stubborn tilt to his jaw again, just like a - a -

Protocol 14.2.7B: Engaged.

Except:

He had split knuckles and a bloody nose, and if he didn’t get down and stay down his asthma would kick in soon, but wait - that wasn’t right, the Asset had no history of asthma, someone else did -
He had no chance of winning this fight, *none*, but he had to jump in anyway instead of waiting for Bucky to sort the guy out, because he refused to acknowledge his own limits, that *stupid* -

He was spitting now, a red glob flying out of his blood-filled mouth, and that movement alone made him sway, about to fall over. He opened his mouth to speak, and -

“I can do this all day.”

“He was such a - such a -

“Punk,” the Soldier realized. “You’re a punk.”

The Commander was… crying.

Scott dropped his fists in confusion. He leaned against the wall, his legs almost buckling in pain. One moment, Scott had been fighting for a life - Nina’s life - and the next, the Commander had collapsed under his own weight, curled up into a ball, and sobbed.

It was more than a little unnerving, honestly.
The most terrifying man Scott had ever met was absolutely weeping with everything he had in him.

Could it be a trick? But that didn’t make any sense; the Commander had won this fight. Scott’s actions had been the desperate, completely outmatched actions of someone who knew they had already lost.

For some reason, the Commander was truly, genuinely crying.

His programming must have been broken somehow, Scott realized. Something broke through.

But that didn’t mean it would stay broken, however. They had to move, fast.

“Nina,” Scott beckoned, holding out his hand. No one came. “Nina,” he insisted.

A small, shaking hand grabbed onto Scott’s and hung on for dear life. Then, a tiny form wrapped thin arms around his middle like a vice, and there was a sobbing face pressing into his stomach as Nina babbled the language Scott did not recognize.

For a moment, Scott froze, and then returned the hug. “Shhh,” he hushed, rubbing her back in small circles. “It’s okay now,” he promised. “You’re okay.”


“I know,” Scott reassured. “You did great, Nina. You were so brave. But we need to go now, okay? It’s time to go.”

Scott only made it three steps before he stopped again. It was just...

The Commander was still crying.

And that could have been him. It could have been Jean. And if it had been Jean, he would have wanted someone to try to make sure the reeducation stayed broken. He would have wanted somebody to help.
And the Commander was someone’s Jean.

Scott took a step back towards the crying man, pausing only when Nina grabbed him.

“No,” she insisted. “He bad. We go, now.”

Scott crouched down so he was level with her. “He’s not bad, Nina. He’s… hurt.”

“Hurt?”

“Verletzt,” Scott tried in German. “Someone hurt him.”

“Like us?”

“Like us,” he confirmed. “And now, I need to make sure he doesn’t get hurt anymore.”

Nina hesitated in confusion. “Then we go?”

“Then we go.”

The little hands released him, then gave him a soft, ineffectual push. “Go. Go go. You help now.”

Scott smiled.

His smiled disappeared, however, when he got up again, almost collapsing as he stumbled to his feet. This was bad. If those sataroids didn’t kick in soon, he would be in major trouble.

“Commander Dou -” he began, then stopped himself. “Commander?”
The crying paused.

Scott wished he could see the look at the man’s face, tell somehow if he was going to attack again. Nervously, he licked his lips. “If you stay here, they will catch you. They’ll reeducate you again. It’s not safe.”

No response. Not even tears.

“We have to go,” he said firmly. “Now.”

A pause. Then:

“We?” the Commander asked, his voice rough with emotion.

Scott made a decision.

“We,” he confirmed.

There was a distinct possibility Jean would kill him.

On one hand, he had just invited the volatile, incredibly dangerous, possibly still slightly brainwashed super assassin to join their escape group. Which, you know… not exactly the safest decision Scott had ever made.

But on the other hand, Scott knew that it was the right thing to do. If he left that man there to be reeducated again, he’d be responsible for it. He was not about to abandon someone to the same fate that he was only so narrowly escaping.

The only question was if the Commander would come with them.
The boy with the too-dark hair was making the Soldier a proposal.

Escape. With him and the young mutant.

It was a tempting offer.

The Soldier’s programming was in tatters. It was as if the memory of the too-thin, light haired man had thrown a wrench into the entire works.

Or a shield, a part of him, one that spoke in Brooklyn accents and sarcastic quips, whispered. The Soldier did not understand what this part of him meant. But he did understand that he did not want to let go of the memory again. He wanted to cling to the image of a bloodied, scrawny punk in an alleyway, so clear that he could smell the garbage rotting in the sun and hear the I can do this all day.

He wanted to remember more about the man that was somehow so much more important than the mission. In order to do so, he would have to escape.

And the part of him that evaluated situations knew that the likelihood of successful escape increased exponentially with the help of the Ass - of Scott. While the Soldier was far more skilled in combat than the mutant boy, he did not possess his long-range abilities. Preventing any that came after them - and they would come after them - from getting close enough to use his triggers could mean the difference between success and failure.

A bigger part of him couldn’t get over how much of a punk the boy was.

He was still swaying on his feet, with injuries that should have already put him down but hadn’t for some reason. (Stubbornness, the Brooklyn-voice whispered. It’s their real superpower.) With a practiced eye, the Soldier ascertained that - while the enhancements the former Asset had received would assist in the healing process - he would be majorly impeded as he recovered, and the enhancements would flush out of his system before recovery was complete. Yet, he was still standing. He was still fighting. He was trying to fight for the Soldier. Which… shouldn’t be happening. Throughout the fight, the boy had fought desperately for the young mutant standing behind him. Logic dictated that he should be leaving with her.

He should not be trying to save someone that did not deserve to be saved.
For some reason, it felt like something the light-haired man would do.

In fact, the dark-haired boy almost *painfully* reminded him of the light-haired man, from the stubborn tilt to his head, to his refusal to understand when he was beat, to the fact that he was almost certainly going to run himself into the ground with his impulsive attempts to save everyone in the entire damn world.

The Brooklyn-voice thought that maybe he should stop that from happening. It thought that, maybe, he should make sure the boy doesn’t destroy himself in his pig-headed quest to help others.

It thought that, maybe, he had done that once before, for the light-haired man.

The Soldier stood up.

“You have been injured,” he observed with a pang of remorse. “You should not have gotten up again, during the fight.”

A startled smile touched the boy’s - Scott’s - lips at the realization the Soldier would not be fighting him further. He crossed his arms defensively. “I had you on the ropes,” he scoffed.

Something in the Soldier twisted. (He thought it was his heart, but he wasn’t sure.)

He wanted to cry again.

He didn’t. Instead, he turned his attention back to the dark-haired boy before him. “You need medical attention,” he insisted.

“Yeah, probably, but not right now. We have to - Nina?” he asked suddenly, twisting around and holding out his hand. Hurriedly, the young mutant behind him - Nina - latched onto his grip and darted a wary glance towards the Soldier. “You, Nina, and I need to get going. We’ve got people we need to meet up with.”

Nina frowned, darting yet another unhappy glance towards the Soldier. She tugged on Scott’s arm, and the boy obliged, crouching down so that he was level with the girl.
The Soldier frowned. He would only exacerbate his injuries if he continued to move without regards to his wounds.

(A really, really stupid punk, the Brooklyn-voice agreed.)

Scott and the girl had a clumsy, part-English, part-German exchange, punctuated by arm waving - which was another thing the injured boy should not be doing - and babbled Polish. It was not hard to determine that the Soldier was the source of their contention.

Something twisted again in the Soldier. Remorse? Fear? He couldn’t remember the name for it.

Eventually, the conversation stumbled to a stop, with the little girl seemingly agreeing to the Soldier’s company. The Soldier refused to acknowledge the relief he felt at this revelation.

Then, the little girl marched up to him, determination and fear bubbling in her eyes. She tugged on his sleeve, just as she had tugged on the boy’s.

The Soldier complied.

Nina bit her lip. She wanted to say something, but she didn’t know how to say it in English or German.

Scott said that the bad man wasn’t bad, and Nina believed him, because Scott hadn’t lied to her yet, and she didn’t think he would. But something about the not-bad man was sticking in her head, and she couldn’t let it pass.

He was wearing a muzzle. It was an ugly, black thing that wrapped all around his face, over his cheekbones, and ended just below his eyes.

Nina hated muzzles.
She had seen a dog with one once, back home. It had swung its head around madly, attempting to
shake the constraint off, before eventually sinking to the ground in defeat, whining pitifully. When
she saw it, Nina had wanted to go help the dog, but the dog wasn’t hers so her papa said she wasn’t
allowed to.

She could help the man, though.

Screwing up her bravery, Nina carefully reached up and wrapped her arms behind the man’s neck,
unhooking the straps.

“*People should not wear muzzles,*” she informed him in Polish.

The man had a pretty smile, Nina thought. It was a shame it had been covered up for so long.

Then, the man spoke back. *In Polish. “Thank you, kochaine.”*

Nina smiled, because she was tired of crying.

Her papa used to call her *kochaine.*

The Soldier had a new mission: Protect the boy with too-dark hair.

This mission had been extended: Protect the little mutant known as Nina.

Mission Parameters Accepted.

“We have to go,” Scott ordered softly. “We’re running out of time.”

His assessment was accurate. Soon, extra forces would be here. The Handler believed that the
Soldier would be retrieving the Asset, which would buy them time, but eventually he would realize
that both had fled.
Then, the entire might of Hydra would be after the both of them.

They needed as much space as possible between them and here before that happened. The Soldier stood. “The closest exit is back the way you came,” he indicated.

But Scott shook his head. “We have to go get -” Suddenly, he staggered, grabbing the side of his head in pain. “Jean.”

Then, he bolted, running down the hall with zero regard to his current injured state. Moreover, his recklessness increased with his panic. The boy even ran into a wall, fell over, then got back up again and kept running.

The Soldier scooped up Nina before following. He may have underestimated the level of difficulty of protecting the boy. This mission would not be simple.

The Brooklyn-voice barked a laugh. *With punks like this? It never is,* it agreed.

Jean was burning.

And she didn’t even care, as long as she could burn all of *them* with her.

She had made it to the control room with very little effort. The few guards she ran into were easily sent to sleep, and the fortified door to the control room had been torn apart as if it were wet paper. After that, it was a simple matter to knock out the workers, step over their unconscious bodies, and head to the control panel.

Jean didn’t even have to look in their minds for a password, since they had already been using it when she came in. She simply walked over to the computer, plucked how to use it from the guards’ heads, and took control of the building.

She shut down the cameras first. If anyone came in after her, she didn’t want them seeing which way the escapees went, and she was keeping track of the large group of mutants in her head anyway. While she knew Scott’s mind the best, it was just a small drop in an ocean of information, and it was
so much easier to keep track of the raging river that was the main escape group.

She was in the middle of unlocking all the doors when she felt it.

Most of the guards had been taken out when they released the mutant with the metal blades in his hands, but not all. Some of the remaining guards grouped together, and….

They were supposed to go after her and Scott.

They didn’t.

When Jean was opening all the doors, trying to take out the final barriers for their escape - when she was trying to save them, she felt the raging river trickle down to a stream, then a drip, then nothing.

She felt every single one of those mutants die.

A turn in the corner.

A group of guards, guns prepared.

Ready.

Aim.

Fire.

Jean screamed.

Genevieve’s mind, once a small, smooth grey pebble: crushed to dust. The gleaming marble of a man named Rodriguez: shattered. The snarling wolf of a woman called Anita: dead.
Every. Last. One of them.

And then the fire, which had been roving under her skin, contained - for once in her life it had been blessedly contained - exploded.


A beating heart: stopped.

For a moment, Jean tried to stop it, to pull the flames back, only to be bowled over by the sheer heat of it. She wanted to stop, but she couldn’t, she couldn’t, because it had been caged for so long but now it was out, it was free, and nothing could stop it, not Jean not anyone, because she had seen the red on grey in Scott’s mind but she hadn’t understood it, had claimed the guilt didn’t belong to him - and it didn’t - but this guilt belonged to her, she should have stopped them -

“Jean!”

A cool rush of wind. The statico hum of heart rate monitors and dripping blood, thrumming with fear but still constant. Two hands clenching her arms.

Scott.

“They killed them,” she stuttered. The flames roared higher. “They killed all of them.”

The hands tightened on her arms, before relaxing again. She couldn’t even see Scott; the heat and fumes were fogging her vision so that all she could see was red - but that wasn’t right, was it? The flames were just in her head. Or were they real?

She wished she could see Scott.

“I know,” he whispered, which had the ugly, rotten stench that always came with lies; he didn’t
know until she told him. “I know. But you need to stop now, Jean. This isn’t you.”

The uglydark bad thing inside of her screamed. It slammed against Scott, whispering harshly that yes, this was Jean, it was - it was - Phon -

Scott hugged her.

The flames quieted.

And, just like that, Jean began to cry.

(It was funny, she supposed, that Scott was the only one that could make her cry anymore. If she was with anyone else, the emotion was just burned to ashes.)

“You should have done that,” she sobbed into his shoulder. “I could have hurt you.”

“You wouldn’t have.”

“I could have,” she asserted. “Something’s wrong with me.”

Scott’s arms tightened around her form. A wave of guilt washed over her, followed by click- bang and the feeling of a pulse that wasn’t there. “Yeah, me too. It’ll be one of those things we figure out as we go.”

Reluctantly, Jean pulled back. “We need to go.” She stopped. Scott had two people with him, one little girl, and one -

Scott had a lot of explaining to do.

Trust you, huh? she thought at him.
Scott winced. *I'll explain later.* “Jean,” he began, “this is Nina and - well, I don’t know his name yet, and he doesn’t either. We’ll figure it out later.”

The girl - Nina - took that as an invitation to rush up to Scott, wrapping her arms around him from behind in a vice-like grip. She watched Jean warily, fear bubbling in her big doe eyes.

Jean winced. Based on the state of the room, the little girl had more than enough reasons to be afraid of Jean; her loss of control resulted in a lot of damage. Still, she pasted what she hoped was a friendly smile on her face, and bent down so that she was eye level. “Hello, Nina,” she greeted.

Nina babbled to Scott in clumsy German. It did not sound nice. Eventually, Scott managed to pry the traumatized little girl off of his waist, only to relinquish his hand to her custody.

Jean smirked. It did not look like he’d be getting that hand back for a long, long time.

“Take their shoes,” Scott’s former trainer - which, seriously Scott, what the Hell? - commanded. “You’ll need them if we are to run.”

Jean glanced around the room, flinching when she saw the guards surrounding them. When she entered the room, she had knocked them unconscious. Now, they were dead.

Fear began to churn in her stomach. In the past, whenever she lost control, property damage had been the worst thing she had ever done.

Now, she was a murderer.

Was she even safe to be around? What if it was Scott she hurt next time around?

Scott squeezed her arm slightly before he moved his attention to Nina, speaking in a mix of German and English. The little girl responded in kind, before leading him around the many obstacles in the destroyed room and to one of the downed guards. Curious, Jean watched as he kneeled down, feeling along the ground until he found the dead man’s shoes, a grimace on his face. Nina stared in rapt attention as Scott taught her how to stuff the shoes with socks so that they would fit on her feet, the makings of a hero-worship already forming on her visage.
She was going to be following Scott around like a baby duckling, Jean knew it.

Jean also knew she couldn’t leave. She and Scott were stuck together, too much having passed in this lab to ever be able to separate from one another.

Somehow, that didn’t seem like a bad fate.

They took the guard’s jackets, too, before the metal-armed man began to lead them out of the building. The entire way, Scott carried Nina, his arm looped in Jean’s for direction.

When they exited the lab for the first time in forever, Jean saw snow.

That surprised her, for some reason. It was as if her mind had expected it to be as sunny as the day Trask took her, with nothing having changed.

Time had continued, even if they were not free to enjoy it.

The lab was located at the bottom of a hill, with trees - oh God, actual trees - at the top. They paused at the top of the hill, Scott setting down Nina for a moment.

Scott’s breath puffed out of his bloody, split lips in smoky waves. There was snow in his hair and bruises peeking out from under his heavy metal mask, and he was shivering despite the thick jacket wrapped around his too-thin form.

It was the most beautiful thing Jean had ever seen.

They were free.

“Are there anymore people left in the labs? Anyone at all?” he asked.

Jean shook her head. “No one alive,” she informed him bitterly.
A plan flashed across their link. “Will you help me?”

Absolutely.

The silver mask slipped off his face. Carefully, Jean walked behind him, sliding her hands against his neck as she gently aimed his head. *Now, Scott.*

Scott Summers opened his eyes.

She had been wrong, Jean decided. *This* was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Nothing could be more amazing than the sight of that horrible, ugly lab of torments being razed to the ground.

Chapter End Notes

Bucky has joined the motley crew! Now, originally, Scott would have failed to break the programming and he would escape by blasting Bucky's metal arm off his body. That would have been the last you saw of Bucky, as the X-Men could never find him thanks to the Soviet's telepath blocking tech, until a one shot later in the series, where Steve brings his icicle friend to Xavier for help with brainwashing and lost memories, and Scott's like "oh, there's my old trainer." But then, people started speculating in the comments, and then I started speculating, and then Peggy Carter was there and I had lost all control of my story. Thanks, guys. I figured the best way to break the programming was Steve, and you just have to be a scrawny, reckless punk to resemblance to Steve, which Scott is. Also, on Jean: I know she seems really unhinged at the moment. That's because she is. The Phoenix Force has a history of screwing with her mind, and it's always at its worst at times of emotional upheaval. She's just been tortured and experimented on for years; I'd be worried if she wasn't a bit messed up at the moment.
Reality, and What it Is

Chapter Summary

Jean falls down a rabbit hole.

Chapter Notes

This is very late. I apologize for heartily for that. This chapter was a monster to write, so I hope y'all like it. I had tried to change some of the fonts and stuff, to alter the way thoughts were represented, but I couldn't figure out how to do that in the Archive. So you get italics and bold for everything. But for the record, I had some very snazzy fonts originally. Also, I know I said I wouldn't write any foreign languages, and just use italics, but I've decided to alter that so that only italics are used when the POV character can understand the language, and the actual language when they can't. That being said, words you need to know:

Masz go. A dziewczyna. To nie jest sam: You have him. And the girl. That is not alone.
A ty?: And you?
Tak. I ja: Yes. And me.
dom: home
wybacz mi, proszę pani, myślę, że jestem zagubiony: excuse me, ma’am, I think I'm lost.
uruchomić: run
kiedy twój tata wraca do domu, będziemy go zabić zbyt: when your papa comes home, we will kill him too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Things Scott can do without his sight:

Fight.
Echolocate.
Sass absolutely anyone and everyone.

Things Scott cannot do without his sight:

See.
Drive any kind of vehicle.
Run through the snow-covered woods, filled with roots and rocks and other things perfect for
tripping, that cannot be sensed no matter how hard Scott clicks his tongue.

That last one was a bit of a problem.

*Right. Your other right, Scott. What do you mean, my right? We have the same right!*

Jean’s argument, while valid, was unwelcome, as it came as Scott was yet again stumbling in agony while mentally cursing the abundance of trees in a forest. Immediately, he felt a cold metal hand curl around bicep, steadying him, and forced himself not to flinch.

Without the Commander, they wouldn't have made it ten minutes in the forest.

It wasn't due to the wildlife. It wasn't due to the guards searching to them. It wasn't even due to the cold.

It was due to the fact that the three of them, while capable and powerful in their own ways, were wholly unsuited to the challenges the forest presented.

Jean, with all her breathtaking, sublime power, had spent the past few years being brutalized in a lab. Her muscles had atrophied; her lungs were weak. She hadn't had the - benefit - of training, like Scott had. Even driven by fear and determination as she was, her body would have given out on her a few hours into their flight.

Which it had. She had gone as far and as fast as she could, granted, but the strain had eventually become too much for her abused form. One moment, Scott had heard the light *crunch crunch crunch* of her footsteps in the snow stutter and stumble, the next, they disappeared entirely. He had spent a few fear-filled moments running through possible scenarios that could be gleaned from the minute amount of stimuli at his disposal, before Jean chimed into his mind with reassurances.

Apparently, the Commander had seen her begin to fall, and had swung her up into his arms without missing a beat, carrying her easily.

(Jean’s pride had told her to protest; her body was too exhausted to care.)
The Commander continued to carry her.

Nina was brilliant with the wildlife - the few times they had been bothered, she had sent them on their way with ease, and when the lab forces that escaped destruction sent dogs after them, she forced them in the opposite direction of their path - but she was still four. She had quickly tired, clambering into Scott’s arms before drowsing off into a fitful rest. The Commander had taken her whenever Scott’s arms ached to the point of being unable to continue, before Jean fell. If he hadn't been there, Scott had no doubt that they would have been slowed to the point that the guards would have found them easily.

And Scott, well... Scott was blind.

He just couldn't see the many obstacles in his path. The trees were large enough to be obvious, granted, and the wet crunch of snow under sprinting feet sent shockwaves of insight through his mind, but there were thousands of little things too small to sense. All the echolocation, all the heightened spatial awareness in the world couldn't help him.

So the Commander did instead.

Nina and Jean assisted too, of course, but their help was somewhat limited with their mobility. In the beginning, Jean would take his arm, and so would Nina, but when they tired, their aid dwindled.

The Commander grabbed him when he fell. He jerked him out of the path of trees, and set him on the correct course again. He gave narration to the surroundings, and provided Scott with more of a picture of the world.

And still, still, they were falling behind.

The hard part wasn’t escaping; it was remaining free. If they didn’t find a way to put more distance between themselves and the lab, they would be caught.

And that couldn’t happen.

“There’s something ahead,” Jean gasped, her voice cracking. “A road. A car. A man has a flat tire. He’s fixing it; he won’t be here much longer.”
“Can you freeze him?” Scott asked, tilting his head.

“... I can try.”

“Then do it,” the Commander ordered.

And Jean did it.

“Come,” the Commander stated simply.

And they came.

Scott kept his hand looped in Jean’s as they walked, stumbling blindly, not even bothering to try to echolocate. He was too tired, and there was so much more stimuli out here than there had been in the labs; he couldn't keep track of them all. There, everything had been smooth and clear cut, all sharp edges and echoing steel. In the forest, it was a tangle of branches and roots and leaves, all overlapping and interconnecting in patterns too small and complicated to detect. He wanted to rest.

(He knew that he wouldn't.)

(Scott hadn't rested since he was twelve years old. While he didn't know how long it had been, or even how old he was, he did know that he would be even older before he got the chance to rest again.)

“Where’s the truck headed?”

“To a farm. It's awhile away. We… we could steal it,” Jean suggested. “There's nothing around for miles; the man wouldn't be able to report it right away.”

He also wouldn't be able to find help right away. Robbing him on the road meant that they could be abandoning him to death, from cold or otherwise.
Scott wasn't sure if it said more about him that he was considering the idea, or that he hadn't done it already.

“No,” the Commander ground out, voice as gravelly as ever. “Too risky; if they find him, they'll know what car to look for. Get in the back; he won't know we're there.”

Clambering up ahead of him, Jean guided Scott into the cold trailer, tugging his hand softly until they hit the back. Then, Scott finally managed to unburden himself, the still-asleep Nina falling gently from his back to rest in his lap. Scott didn't bother to track the others as they situated themselves, the only signal to their progression the jarring clang of the metal door.

Gradually, the fumbling sounds of the man resumed. The engine plitty plitty clunk grrrd to life. The floor shook, the walls rattled, and the car began to move.

Scott rested his head on the frozen wall of the trailer, and began to count the seconds of freedom.

Maybe, one day, their amount would be greater than that spent in captivity.

(But if they weren't, Scott wanted to have something to hold onto when he was (nononononononotagaincant wont diefirst) caged again.)

Jean took his hand.

There’s straw on the ground, she whispered gently. Not everywhere - in patches. The walls are grey, and its all rusty in some places. There's a big dent in the ceiling, right above where you're sitting, and -

(Beneath the timbre of her voice, Scott could hear the steady cadence of her own count.)

Nina woke up approximately 2,643 seconds of freedom later. She jolted awake, a cry on her lips, and Scott had to fumble a hand over her mouth out of fear of the farmer hearing her. Trembling, she struggled feebly against him, until she realized who was holding her.

Nina surged forward, throwing her arms around Scott and sobbing into his neck. Stunned, he held
her carefully, scared that if he moved he'd break her.

Nina cried harder, a language Scott didn't recognize falling from her lips. Scott hugged her tighter.

Eventually, she sniffled and calmed, her shivers coming in softer bursts. “Now what?”

It took a moment for Scott to realize what she was asking, what she needed to know: the plan. The next step in the long, complicated line of steps that would keep them safe (free) from Trask.

Which.

Which Scott hadn't really figured out yet.

At all.

Brushing her mind against his, Jean bluntly informed him she had no spectacular plan either, and that he should probably start coming up with one now, please and thank you. Always helpful, Jean.

“We need to get out of the USSR,” Scott decided. “All of us. Nina,” he prompted, slowing his voice and enunciating his words. “Where does your family live? We need to get them all out.”

And that's when Nina burst into tears.

Between ragged sobs, Scott gathered that her family lived nowhere, because her family was, in fact, dead. Her mama had tried to stop the bad men from taking her, but the men hadn't cared, they had just pointed their guns at her head and she had jerked and fallen in a spray of red and wouldn't get up again. Her papa had to be dead, he had to be, because the bad men had left other bad men behind to kill him - they had made that very clear to Nina Gursky, between ugly laughs and grins filled with yellow, rotted teeth.

Mama and Papa were dead, she told him, and she had no one.

Scott held her tighter.
On a level, he had known that her family was probably dead - it just hadn't registered in his mind. Jean’s family had been killed, that he knew, but Jean’s family had always been the exception in his mind, not the rule.

He had trouble, sometimes, remembering that there were parents willing to die for their children.

“I have no person,” Nina whispered clumsily. “I am alone.”

“Nie,” the Commander stated softly, yet surely.

Nina shifted against Scott’s chest, her head brushing parallel to his shoulder. He thought she was looking at the Commander.

“Masz go,” he said pointedly. “A dziewczyna. To nie jest sam.”

“A - a ty?” Nina asked, curiosity packaged with hope but wrapped in fear.

The Commander was silent.


Scott wasn’t exactly sure what they were saying - he didn't even know what language they were speaking - but he liked the way the words sounded.

(They sounded like hope. And he had had precious little of that in his life.)

In the end, they decided to ride the truck as far as it could take them. The elements were unkind, their pursuers expected them to be fleeing on foot, and only the Commander and Scott were remotely physically fit - and Scott was still recovering from his injuries.
The truck was their best option, and it ended far too soon. It *rattle rattle clatter clunked* to a stop, with the creaking *grreeee* and the shuddering shake of the man climbing out. Scott heard the *crunch crunch stomp* of boots in the snow through too-thin walls, and he sat up.

“Can you make it so he doesn't see us in here?”

Jean nodded, slowly. “I think so.”

As the *crunch crunch stomp* grew closer, the hushed sound of frightened breaths grew softer.

The stubborn *graaka ghreee screeee* of rusted metal scraping against rusted metal filled the air. Jean tensed beside him, and the metal beneath his curled fists trembled. Scott held his breath.

Then:

Screams.

Someone was yelling, the man, and Scott could make out frantic gasps of German beneath the cries.

He was saying he couldn't see.

“*Jean, you made him think he couldn't see at all!*”

“Sorry! Sorry! I can fix it!”

No. No she could not fix it.

The man’s mind was too chaotic; his thoughts were too panicked. It panicked Jean in turn, and she had trouble enough controlling her mutation without the added pressure.

*whir click scree*
Scott paused. “Guys? What just happened?”

No one answered.

“Are you seriously not going to fill in the effectively blind guy?”

No one answered.

Scott humphed, then played back the sounds.

“Did the Commander just punch that guy unconscious with his metal arm?”

No one answered.

Then: “If he did, would you be mad?”

“Jean.”

“Answer the question.”

The sad thing was that it wasn't Jean who said that last part.

Scott sighed.
A small hand tugged on his arm: Nina. Scott leaned down towards her, Nina tilting upwards until her lips brushed Scott’s ear.

“Is man okay to be hitting other man?” she whispered.

“Thank you,” Scott huffed. He paused, then listened. He could almost definitely hear that guy still breathing. “It’s fine, Nina. The man is fine. It was a smart thing.”

Slowly, they shifted out of the trailer, snow *crunch crunch squishing* beneath their boots. The air smelt fresh and crisp, like running streams and flying and *freefreefree*. (What there wasn’t: blood, death, bleach.) Scott drank it in.

Jean nudged his arm.

“What’s around us?” he asked.

“A barn,” she replied. “There’s an empty house a bit farther into the trees; he lives alone.”

“We need rest. Check if the barn is sheltered enough,” the Commander stated gruffly. “Can’t stay in the house; searchers would look there first. Can’t stay very long, anyway. We need to keep moving.”

“Jean, can you work your magic on this guy’s head?” Scott asked. “Make him think he came home drunk, or something - just make sure he doesn’t remember anything’s wrong.”

“I think so.”

Scott stood for a few moments longer, listening to the ragged breathing and shifting *crunch suuuussshhh squish* of shuffling feet over half-melted snow. Then:

“I think it worked.”

Another nudge to the arm.
Scott sighed. Right. “The Commander and I will take him up to his house, and try to find some food or something. Jean, Nina, check out the barn, see if we can stay there. We’ll come there when we're done.”

Nina’s hand tightened around his. It hesitated, then tugged.

Scott knelt down in the soft, wet snow.

“I want to go with you,” Nina whispered in German.

Scott bit his lip.

Jean had made quite a few excellent points on the ride there. After they tried to make a plan, after Nina had cried herself to sleep in the back of that shaking, stinking cab, Jean had broached the subject of the girl’s lost loved ones.

Someone needs to talk to her about it, Jean thrummed. It's tearing her apart. She misses her family.

I can try, Scott darted back. But she may not want to talk about it. It's may be too soon.

Actually, I thought I might do it.

You? Scott tried to keep the surprise out of his thoughts.

It didn’t work. You don't think I should?

It's not that, Scott defended. It's just… you haven't spoken to her alone before. Bit of a heavy topic for a first conversation. And she only speaks a little bit of English, and you don't know German.

I can use my mind, Scott. Thoughts are a lot more than words; you know that by now.
After Lord knew how long with Jean, Scott did. *She may feel more comfortable around me.*

*Probably, Jean agreed. But…*

*What?*

*I can relate to her better.*

It took a moment for Scott to realize what she meant.

*Oh. Of course. You're right, you should do it.*

A sigh. *I - I didn't mean it like that, Scott,* she protested. *I only meant that we had a few similarities, that's all. I didn't mean to - to -*

*I get it,* Scott promised, just a touch too shortly. *Both of your parents protected you. Mine didn't. You're right: you can relate better. We can find a time for you to talk in private later.*

Scott….

*It's fine, Jean.*

They didn't speak again for the rest of the drive.

*“Jean needs you, Nina,”* Scott whispered back, *“to help her. I'll be right back.”*

Reluctantly, the hand released.

Scott stumbled to the unconscious farmer, felt along his body until he found his legs, and lifted.
Nina did not like Jean.

Jean Grey was very much aware of this fact.

Really, at this point, the only one Nina liked was Scott, and even then, she was scared of the boy. She trusted him, liked him, even, but was still scared of him. Scared of what he could do.

A lot of people were scared of what Scott Summers could do. Jean knew this, had known this since the first day she felt that scared, angry flickering in a drug-induced stupor in the cage next to hers. She knew immediately that the mutant was dangerous in the same way she was dangerous, and that the very same doctors that were ripping tearing testing on him were absolutely petrified of him. After all, they wouldn't take such care with his security otherwise. They had more reason to be scared of Scott than most, and held more fear of him than almost all.

Almost.

(No one was more scared of Scott Summers than Scott Summers.)

A lot of people were scared of what Scott Summers could do.

Jean Grey was not one of them.

Nina, however, was scared of Jean in a different way than she was scared of Scott. With Scott, she was scared of what she thought he could do.

(And, in part, what he had done.
With Jean, Nina was absolutely petrified of what she had *seen* Jean do.

And Jean couldn't really blame her for this fact.

“Barn is good,” the girl declared decisively. “Cow likes. Cow says is good. Cow is…,” Nina waved her hand in the air, floundering. “…good,” she decided. “We believe cow.”

“Well, if the cow says so…” Jean muttered.

Nina looked at Jean curiously.

“Come sit for a moment, Nina,” Jean requested, tugging her towards the nearby hay bale.

Reluctantly, Nina sat.

“You know, it’s okay to feel sad about what happened to your parents,” she blurted, tucking a tangled red strand behind her ear. “I feel the same way.”

Way to jump right in, Jean, she thought furiously to herself. Maybe Scott had a point about being locked in metal boxes for years on end stunting social development. Who knew?

Nina stared at her, confused.

“You don’t understand a word I’m saying, do you?”


“Right,” Jean muttered. Tentatively, she reached a hand to Nina’s brow, telegraphing her movements clearly. For a moment, Jean was positive the girl was going to shrink away, but she didn’t. Nina allowed the touch.
On a gentle, warm wind, Jean whispered images of her parents.

It wasn't like when she communicated with Scott - that used words. With Nina, Jean didn't even know the language to find the right words.

What she said instead: woman with long red hair man with bright green eyes laughter hugs brick house with a white picket fence and a shiny black front door with a golden knocker (home) and a barking dog and a bright pink bicycle in the driveway (jeangreyitoldyoutputyourbikeaway) and lovelovelove and a

What she also said: and a shiny black front door with a golden knocker and (crack) no more front door and splintered wood and men trespassingtrespassingtresspassing there to hurtkill steal (momdad) and she was burning and (dontbescaredwereheretohelpyouhelpyouhelpyou) and

Nina blinked, long and slow. Jean could see she understood that time. Tentatively, the little girl wrapped her hand around Jean’s, and pulled it back up to her forehead. She nodded. Jean entered.

What Nina said back: bright happy woman dark brown hair eyes like honey man with flannel shirts and scratchy beard cheeks and a small cottage in a big forest with flowers growing up the side and a brown door with peeling paint (dom) and animals pitter patter creeping everywhere and laughter laughter laughter everywhere always so happy and

What she also said: knock on a brown door with peeling paint and a man with a shiny hairless head and wire rimmed spectacles and (wybacz mi, proszę pani, myślę, że jestem zagubiony) and a man with a shiny hairless head and wire rimmed spectacles sitting at a table with roses carved in the sides sipping tea and a small girl with brown hair and honey eyes creeping down the creaking stairs and

and

and he sees her and he smiles and he's fiddling with his wire rimmed spectacles now and it's like
there's a brown door with peeling paint and crack and no more door and men are coming now and there's a woman with brown hair and honey eyes and she's screaming screaming screaming and

(uruchomić Nina)

and there's a small girl with brown hair and honey eyes and a woman with brown hair with honey eyes and they're running with (thudthudthud) footsteps following them and they're fast but the footsteps are faster and there's a man with a shiny hairless head and wire rimmed spectacle and the woman with brown hair and honey eyes snarls and it's like snarlingwolfangrybeardangerdangerdanger and the man with the wire rimmed spectacles has three long red scratches across his fast and then

click

bang

and a body hits the ground

(kiedy twój tata wraca do domu, będziemy go zabić zbyt)

Jean blinked, long and slow. She understood that time.

She reached up to Nina’s forehead one last time.

What she said was: a voice with a tired laugh and warm feeling (Scott) and a dark metal box that buzzed so loud she almost couldn't hear the voice and the voice spokelaughed weeped and a girl with tangled red hair and fire thrumthrumthrumming in her chest loved the voice more than life (whatlifenolife) and the voice loved her more than life (whatlifenolife) and then there was a flash of red and a boy and he was stupidbraveidiot Scott and
he brought back with him a little girl with brown hair and honey eyes and a man with long tangled black hair and haunted eyes and

and they were all emptyemptyempty but they filled each other up just a little and

and the girl with tangled red hair and fire thrumthrumthrumming in her chest didn't want to loose this little-bit-fullness and and

(family?)

Nina cried, and buried her face in Jean’s chest.

Sometimes, you didn't need the same language to understand something.

The Commander came back lugging an armful of clothing, a bit of food, and a swearing Scott Summers.

“There are branches everywhere,” he cursed, rubbing his suspiciously red forehead. “Everywhere.”

“It is the forest,” Jean reminded him. “What did you expect?”

“I don't know,” he flailed. “I haven't been outside in a really long time. And I could see then.”

“Excuses, excuses,” Jean teased.

Nina wrinkled her nose at them both, then spouted off a stream of words in a language Jean didn't recognize. The Commander nodded sagely, a hint of a smile curling at his lips, and replied with gravity.

“What language is that?” Scott asked, cocking his head. “I don't recognize it.”
“Polski,” the assassin gruffly informed him. “Change your clothes,” he ordered the rest, lobbing articles of clothing in their direction. “We can rest and eat here for now, but we need be ready to move at a moment’s notice.”

Obeying quickly, Jean soon noticed a problem with the clothing. It had been stolen from a short, rotund man. And they were made up of starved, lanky children, and a tall, muscular assassin.

“It has to be better than the jumpsuits,” Scott huffed, blind to the catastrophic effects of the too wide, too short flannel shirt on his frame. “We’ll just have to make do.”

“What happens when he notices all this stuff is gone?”

Scott bit his lip thoughtfully. “He has a gambling problem,” he informed her seriously. “And a drinking problem. The Commander figured it out. I don't know how he did - something about the stuff in the main building or whatever - but apparently it's bad. We doused him in a bit of alcohol so that he'll think he just got drunk and dreamed the whole thing up.” A pause. “He's gambled away his truck before. He kept records of his habits. Got it back, swore he'd never do it again, but… it's been done before.”

Jean read the question in the statement. “You want to steal the truck, and have me make him think he lost it.”

“We need to get over the Wall,” Scott argued. “And we need to get to Berlin to do that. And we can't keep going through the forest the way we are; they'd catch us in a day. And - and it's not the same as on the road earlier,” he finished reluctantly. “We wouldn't be leaving him to die.”

No, it wasn't the same as on the road earlier. The circumstances had changed. That did not, however, make the action itself alright.

Justification was a funny thing. It could take a terrible thing and somehow make it less so, use an outside factor to create the illusion of something being okay. Justification lived in the minds of many, always lurking beneath their every action, tipping the balance between wrong and right.

I shouldn't beat that child, but she tried to escape and my boss is ordering me to. I know it's wrong, but it's my job. And as long as it's for my job, it's not my fault. Beating justified.
I shouldn't have this job in the first place; I don't mind mutants and I don't even want to be in this field, but Trask funded my degree and I don't have the money to pay him back. And it'd be wrong to take his money and give him nothing in return. I'd leave if I could but - well, I don't have a choice. Trask would kill me, kill my family, and my little brother just got married and my sister just had her first kid and I can't destroy all that. Besides, I'm not as bad as the rest - I don't hurt the mutants for fun like some of the guards and I don't operate without anesthesia like some of the other doctors. Comparatively, what I do isn't that bad. (And besides, they're just mutants.) Experimentation justified.

I don't believe in this, believe in kidnapping and hurting and holding people against their will, even if they are mutants. I don't believe in Trask. But I did believe in my brother - my wonderful, kind big brother, who was everything I wanted to be and so brave and smart and successful, who had wanted to be a Secret Service agent his entire life and did it, he did it, and had done his job faithfully right up to the day that a mutant came along and dropped a stadium on his head. And there were other mutants out there, just as powerful and some more so, and while they hadn't done anything yet they could, they could, and well, that's why I have to do this, work for Trask, because what Trask does could find ways to fight the bad mutants, the ones that drop stadiums on men who were protecting the President. And if that meant hurting and kidnapping and killing people that were innocent, people that hadn't done anything (but they could oh God they could) then - well, it was justified.

Jean Grey hated justification.

For her, there was no such thing as the lesser of two evils. There was merely two evils, and with one of them you hated yourself a little bit less.

For instance, they could steal the truck. They could steal the truck, and maybe escape altogether, and then Scott and the Commander wouldn't be damned to become mindless assassins and Nina wouldn't meet her likely death in the labs and Jean wouldn't have her brain picked apart for a few more years before dying or meeting a similar fate to Scott. By stealing the truck, they'd be preventing the deaths
and experiments that might result of *not* stealing the truck. There was justification.

But that didn’t change the fact that by stealing the truck, the farmer would lose something that contributed greatly to his livelihood. He would lose it, and he wouldn’t be able to get it back. And maybe, he’d lose his farm as a result of that. Maybe, he would starve. Whatever the *maybe* was, it would be their fault, because that *maybe* would have never occurred if they hadn’t done what they did. The other possible evils didn’t erase the one that they *did* choose; they just made it a little more bearable.

“Allright,” Jean acquiesced. “I’ll do it.”

They ate their stolen, justified food in silence.

“What’s your name?”

The Commander looked up.

“What’s your name?” Jean repeated. “You have to have one.”

“I don’t know,” came the rusty reply. “I don’t remember.”

Jean bit her lip. “Do you want to find out?”

A pause. Then, slowly, knowingly, the Commander nodded.

Jean closed her eyes, pressed two fingers to her temple, and slipped in on a warm summer breeze.

When she opened her eyes again, Jean could see the cold smoke of her breath bubbling through the air.

The entire room was dull and grey, forged in dirty steel and frozen solid.
Instantly, she shivered, drawing her arms closer to herself. The sharp sting of thick ice nipped at her naked feet, and when Jean looked down, all she could see was her own cloudy reflection in dark, hazy ice. The walls were metallic and grey and bitten over with frost, unnatural in its orientation. The gunmetal exterior was hammered over haphazardly yet completely, as if, as an afterthought, someone had papered over a regular wall with cold, unforgiving steel. In the ice there were words, carved deep but covered in small, frantic scratches, as if someone had tried to deface them to the point of being unreadable, with little success.

Jean crept closer to the line with the deepest slashes, thin as they may be. It read: **Protocol 89.3.3E - All knowledge of the Asset deemed Confidential. Any unauthorized party who obtains said knowledge must be Terminated.**

Jean jerked away from the wall, her feet slipping and skidding on the ice.

All around her were orders, carved deeply into the surface of the Commander’s mind.

Jean felt sick.

The fire inside her flared higher, pushing at the tips of her fingers. Instinctively, Jean placed her palms flat against the cold, sleek rink, and began to sear away at the surface.

Seconds later, she ripped her hand away; it was too much. She couldn't melt at the frozen exterior without damaging the rest. Jean almost laughed: Now, when she had finally escaped the labs, she needed a surgeon's scalpel - and all she had were sledgehammers.

*tap tap tap*

Jean looked down.

*tap tap tap*

There was something there, beneath the frosty floors, trying to get out. Something that had remained closer to the surface all this time.
Slowly, Jean pressed her cheek against the damp, frigid ice, and attempted to peer inside.

A name floated there, not belonging to the Commander, but somehow all the more significant for that. Behind, another name dogged along, a faithful shadow - but almost an afterthought.

“James,” Jean said, pulling out. “Who’s Steve? And why is his name more important than your own?”

James left soon after the announcement.

He wanted to check the perimeter, he said. He would be right back. Be careful, don’t give any sign that you’re here, but sleep while you could. They needed to rest before they kept going, or they’d never have the energy to evade Trask long enough to get to Berlin. They had time, just a little time, because Trask would have never anticipated the car, or the direction, or the farmer. They were safe, for now, and he would make sure that they would be safe long enough to sleep, just for a little bit.

At least that was what he said.

But Jean could see the barely-there shake in his hands, could see the way his lips unconsciously formed the word Steve over and over and over again.

She could feel the ache of loss screaming through him down to his very bones.

Jean let him leave. She said nothing, pinched her lips and nodded her head, and let him leave with what little dignity he had managed to reclaim for himself.

James would be back. Sooner or later, he would be back.

“You did a good thing,” Scott said.

Jean didn’t turn to look at him before replying. “Not good enough.”
Nina was already asleep. Scott and Jean hadn't gone to sleep, not even for a second. Because the moment they did, they would be back in a small, metal container, and it will all have been a dream.

And Jean wanted to hang onto this dream for a little while longer.

“He has his name again. And names are so much more important after you loose them than when you first get them.”

Once, Scott had forgotten his own name. It had been in his third lab, where no one had referred to him by his own name in ages and he had no one who cared enough to learn it. Scott had been depressed, and angry, and so, so tired, and he had started thinking about himself in terms of Subject A-13 rather than Scott Summers without realizing it. And then, one day, he simply forgot. His name slipped away without him noticing. A-13 realized that he had lost himself long after it already happened, and tortured himself trying to reclaim his name again.

His memory was useless. The doctors laughed and gagged him when he ground out the question. The guards beat and shocked him.

A-13 remained nameless.

Then, Lord knew how long later, a lab rat fell asleep, and dreamt a memory. His brother was there, Alex, a name he hadn't forgotten even when he lost his own, and he was teaching his little brother baseball, and he called him Scott. He called him Scott.

And then A-13 was Scott once more, and he promised to never forget again.

Scott had told Jean this once, painfully casual, his tone fake and light and just-barely echoing with pain and shame and anger. He repeated his name to himself everyday, a dozen times a day, even when Jean was there to remind him. He'd never forgive himself if he lost it again, he said.

Names were precious things, according to Scott Summers. Important. You just didn't know it until you didn't have one.

“I couldn't give him more.”
I couldn't give him Steve.

Granted, she could provide a name, but that was all. Jean couldn't tell you how old Steve was, or how James knew him, or even what color his eyes were. She couldn't tell you why he was so important that he had hammered against the ice coating James’s mind, almost breaking through but not quite.

She couldn't give him a single damn memory to hold onto. She couldn't give him anything past ten freaking letters.

(Steve.)

(James.)

(Now build a past. Ready. Set. Go.)

“You will be. One day.”

“How?” Jean spat. “I can't control this - this - thing!”

As if to prove her point, a metal feed bucket to her left crumpled.

“So practice,” Scott shrugged.

“Practice,” Jean deadpanned. “On what, pray tell? And how? You want me to liquidate some poor stranger’s mind?”

“On me.”

Jean stared.
“I’m not saying you should liquidate my mind,” Scott promised, a wry grin twisting his face. “Quite the contrary. It’s just a place to start. Walk around. Figure out how to find memories. That kind of thing. Start small, and don’t change anything. Just let me know if you find out anything interesting.”

“No,” Jean spluttered.

Scott tilted his head. “Why not? You need practice, and I’m consenting.”

“I’m not going to mess around with your head. I could break it.” Jean went pale. She could destroy it.

Jean could feel Scott’s eye roll, the subtle shift and pressure in the back of her mind. “You won’t break it,” he scoffed. “I trust you. Besides, you already spend quite a bit of time there.”

“That’s different,” Jean insisted.

With their thought messaging, it was just the surface. Granted, she did spend much more time in Scott’s mind than anyone else’s, but that wasn’t nearly the depth of what he was imagining. He didn’t know what he was offering her.

She could hurt him.

She could kill him.


Wouldn’t she?

And that was when Nina screamed herself awake.

Scott and Jean jumped, Scott wheeling around and Jean stumbling after him. Scott was panicked,
and as per usual, forgot to echolocate in his frenzy.

As per usual, he ran into a wall, fell over, got up, and stumbled into where Nina was located.

Nina had had a nightmare, she said, one of the night where her mama had died, and wanted a story
of something nice, something real, so she could pretend the world was still good.

She was asking quite possibly the two least qualified people on the planet for that.

Based on Scott’s thoughts, he seemed to agree.

Jean smelt fumes, felt heat, and heard whispers that he couldn't remember anymore.

All the stories in his memories ended badly. Even when they didn’t, they were marred by what the
stars of said stories did.

His parents sold him. Alex left him.

(Just one story, oh please just one story....)

And it wasn't just for Nina. Scott wanted to remember. He just wanted one damn thing that Trask
hadn't destroyed yet. He wanted one thing Trask hadn't taken yet.

(Just let me know if you find anything interesting.)

Scott wanted to help her. But his intentions weren't entirely pure, either.

Jean swallowed, closed her eyes, and felt the ground fall out beneath her just as Scott began to tell
Nina the story of the time Alex had tried to teach him how to play baseball, with a sky that had bled
red from the sunset overhead and cicadas trilling from the fields and the clumsy, short legs of much
younger Scott trying and failing to outrun his older brother.
(What he doesn't say: Scott remembers that memory in perfect, shimmering clarity despite the passage of time. This is not because he loves it. This is not because it is good.

This memory always leaves a sour taste in his mouth.

Because he remembers the grass, but not the exact shade of green. Because he remembers the sky, and how *red* it was.

Because he remembers Alex tossing an easy, underhanded pitch and Scott swinging a too-heavy bat at it, and the bat had barely *thudded* against it but Alex still cheered as if Scott had just won the World Series. And then Scott was running, running, running, with Alex running behind him, and he was squealing out of excitement instead of fear, and he can so clearly see the grass and the dust and the flowers passing under his feet in that stupid field, but the colors are all washed out except *red*.

And then comes the funny part.

Right before Scott reaches the makeshift base, arms wrap around him from behind. He feels a pit form in the center of his stomach, and he rushes up from the ground with a *swoosh*. Then, Alex has him held tightly in his arms, secure but not *caged*, and they're both laughing like the world is made from goodwill and kindness.

Isn't that a scream?

But wait: it gets even better.

Because Alex has Scott in his arms, and Scott loves Alex more than anything else in the world, and - don't laugh, now -- trusts him every ounce that he loves him. Alex can do no wrong, the very idea is inconceivable, and, for one idiotic, incandescent moment, Scott thinks that it will last forever. There will be nothing more than Scott and Alex, immortalized under a red, setting sun. Nothing could change, because nothing else matters. The only thing that matters is Scott and Alex, Alex and Scott, and as long as they're together, it will always be just as pristinely perfect.

Hilarious, isn't it?

And then comes the *really* funny part.
Because Alex leaves a few months later.)

*just one memory, oh please God give me just one memory.*

That's important, somehow.

It feels safe in a way that the Soldier (James) has never known. It feels like cold winters and smog in the air and a body so small it could fly away, but mostly, it feels like home.

That name is important, but less so.

It doesn't seem right, somehow. Well, it does, but it's not *perfect.* *It's like hand-me-down clothing,* the Brooklyn voice says. *Ours now, but hell if Cousin Mitchell's sweater is ever gonna fit us. That name was a hand-me-down too, you know.*

The girl -- Jean -- had said that it was *his.* She said that it belonged to him, that it was a *part* of him. She said he could keep it.
James didn't know if he liked belongings much. They always seemed to be taken away.

He liked this one, though.

S
T
E
V
E
J
A
M
E
S

They don't seem right alone, somehow. For some strange, immutable reason, they belong together. Alone, they seem vulnerable, easily attacked and not quite so easily defeated, but defeated nonetheless. They needed to be with one another, always.

(till the end of the line)

Something James knew: The two names must always go together, and Steve always goes first, recklessly, and James eternally follows close behind, watching Steve’s back. Someone had to.

(Sometimes I think you like getting beat up.)

And in that one immortal moment, James knows that he has lost something irreplaceable, and he can't even remember it.
Jean opens her eyes to a bedroom.

Scott's bedroom.

It had been shared between him and Alex: two tiny, twin beds shoved in opposite corners, different breeds of chaos on each side. Alex’s side was pristine but untouched, dustless but not in use.

After Alex left, Scott's parents had wanted to get of all the older boy’s things. Scott, however, had raised merry Hell every time they tried, and eventually, they had acquiesced.

The victory did not come without costs, although. His parents, who preferred to pretend Alex did not and had never existed, refused to step foot in Scott’s room after that. It had had its benefits, of course, (Scott had apparently managed to hide a shattered desk and broken window from parents who never had occasion to see them) but their persistent abstinence from so much as looking in the freaking door had been a constant reminder of how much their abhorred their eldest son.

Jean slowly sat down on Scott’s bed, and wondered what his parents did with the room after they had successfully ridded themselves of both their children.

Scuffing her foot gently against the wooden floor, Jean’s bare skin hit a rough groove.

Jean Grey looked down.

Burnt into the ground, byproduct of what Jean recognized to be her companion’s trademark beams, Jean saw the name Scott.

(I forgot my name once. Stupid, right? What kind of an idiot can't remember his own name? Couldn't remember anything but what They called me. Pathetic, I know. I figured it out again, though. Eventually. And I won't forget it again.

Never again.)

Jean looked up, and saw the name Alex etched into the ceiling.
She closed her eyes, swallowed, and walked out the bedroom door.

When she opened them again, the scene had seamlessly shifted to a car, a blue station wagon with scratched up leather seats and bad country playing on the radio, driving to nowhere. The car passed an eternally exploding mountain on an endless loop.

Jean slid across the seat and out the opposite door.

And then she fell.

Slamming to a stop, Jean felt every bone in her body rattle as she landed on a cold, hard steel table. She gasped harshly, sucking in the breath she so suddenly lost. Groaning, Jean sat up.

Her feet slid off the side of the table. She was in a lab.

There was a constant, static heartbeat monitor maintaining a jagged beep beep beep. Jean touched it.

It told her: proof of survival. Unknown if welcome.

Jean removed her hand.

There were jagged, bloody tools in the tray next to the table, with exaggerated proportions and rusty ends. Jean did not touch those.

In the corner of the room, there was a single, unobtrusive brown cabinet, sealed with a small padlock. The padlock was broken.

Cautiously, Jean crossed the room and reached the file cabinet. There were names on each set of drawers, written in red and smeared beyond comprehension. She opened the top drawer. The filing system was divided prominently in two, with a large lavender card separating the two selections. Jean picked up one from the furthest corner.
Jean Grey tumbled backwards, the file falling from her hands and the sound of a bone saw in her ears. Instantly, she knew what the filing system was based around.

On the drawers: brain, eyes, heart, miscellaneous.

Behind the lavender card: Dr. Harding.

Before the lavender card: Dr. Kandinsky.

(Scott had locked the cabinet; he had slammed it closed over and over and over again and used every means he knew to keep it shut. But every time he closed his eyes, over and over and over again, the cabinet would rattle and the locks would break and the files would all come spilling out.

And, eventually, Scott Summers became tired.

And so he locked it each night with a small, easily breakable padlock, obstinately as a boundary, but in reality because he was too exhausted to keep it but too stubborn to get rid of it.

Scott had shared his headspace with his demons for a long time. He knew which battles he could live with losing.

(And, besides, there were so many other things he needed to keep locked.))

Jean Grey picked up the folder, placed it back in the cabinet, and walked away.

She had no right to see some things, even if she didn't want to.

To the right of the lab there was a long hallway, with flickering fluorescent lights and an endless row of doors.

Jean picked a door at random, and walked in.
The room was empty.

There was nothing there, just four blank white walls and a concrete floor.

Jean heard a noise, and she followed it inside.

In the center of that blank, white room, there was a dirty grey drain with red rusting the edges.

Jean knew what this was. She knew what it was from.

She bent down anyway.

And the world turned on its head.
Jean slammed back to earth with a cry. The blank room was gone. In its place was a wide, industrial room covered in blood.

*drip*

There were no people there. Jean was alone. She could see where they had been, though.

*drip*

There were outlines in the blood, unnatural in nature but obviously human. Some were very, very small.

*drip*

The drains were everywhere, filtering blood from out of the room and to other parts of Scott’s mind. More than anything, Jean wanted to plug them, to end the mess the blood was making, but she didn't for the same reason she didn't add her own locks to that horrible cabinet of operations: This was not her mind.

*drip*

Jean Grey simply did not have the right.

*drip*

Picking a drain at random, Jean stood up, closed her eyes, and fell through the floor.

*drip*

She hit the ground in a mess of color.
Above her, there was blue, washed out and abnormal. Green swirled at her feet, with a bit too much yellow to pass as grass. There were more colors, purple and orange and everything else in between, but none were quite right.

The color red was on point, though.

It bled into everything, subtly, drip drip dripping down from the limp blue sky.

Jean couldn't stop staring at that sky.

There had been so much more effort put into the coloring. There was a hint of desperation to it, an insistence that this must be something that Scott remembers. He never got it exactly right.

Red leaked slowly from the center, spreading like a blood stain.

When Jean entered, she had promised herself that she wouldn't let the flames win. She wouldn't meddle in Scott's mind.

When Jean entered, she had promised herself she would be a silent observer, and not overstep her self-imposed boundaries.

When Jean entered, she hadn't seen that desperate, pathetic blue sky.

She meddled. Just this once, she meddled.

When Jean left, she left a brilliant blue sky behind her, the bluest she could remember, because damn it, Scott deserved the color blue.

Jean Grey walked out the door, and found herself back in the hallway.

Abruptly, the flickering lights ended. There was nothing but black.
Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the darkness.

And she could still see.

Well, she couldn't *see*. All around her, there was nothing but shadow. But she still knew where everything was. She could still *sense*.

They were like echoes, reverberating through her consciousness and bouncing against the walls of her mind. It was different from seeing, almost like how her mutation could sense the surroundings, but not quite. It wasn't sight. But it was *something*.

Jean took two steps forward, turned to the left, and reached out her hand towards the door.

It passed through nothing.

Jean frowned. Could she be mistaken? She sensed something there. Hesitantly, she took another step forward.

She phased through the door and into a large, wide room that had a roof like a setting sun and a floor like freshly-cut grass, with darkness gnawing at the edges. There were a hodgepodge of things around her, a thousand and one different, unrelated items cluttered and overlapping. The items all flickered in and out of reality. Faintly, Jean thought she could hear screaming.

In the far corner of the room, there were two cells, solid and unmistakable.

This was Jason's room, Jean realized.

She turned around, walked back through the non-real door, and left the area untouched.

Jean was close to Scott; she was, she felt, the person closest to him. There was nothing that he could ask of her that she would not give. She knew Scott felt the same.
But she also knew that she could never, ever ask him to share Jason with her. She had no right to that part of Scott’s life.

Jean kept walking, and tried to forget that distant sound of screams.

Then, she heard something that sounded like laughter.

Her laughter.

Jean opened the door and walked inside.

This was her room, she realized instantly.

When she entered, she had expected it to be as black as the hallway outside. She had expected darkness which reflected Scott’s sight-deprived perception of her. After all, Scott Summers had never so much as caught a glimpse of Jean Grey.

The room was not black.

It was blindingly, searingly white.

There was brightness everywhere, bathing the white infinity around her with light. There was not a shadow in the room.

This made Jean sad, somehow, and she didn't know why.

Around her there were whispers, each distinct and carefully categorized. They were all of her.

She found:

Jean’s past.
Jean when hurt.

Jean’s (bad) jokes.

Jean when she's mad.

Jean when she's happy.

Jean's laugh.

The last one was played the most frequently, and sang out the loudest.

In the center of the room, there was a white marble statue, almost Greek in design, of a fluid, ever-shifting figure. The only color was the red, red hair.

Jean turned around and left.

As she ventured deeper into the hallway, the blackness changed, replaced by a sporadic red light. The hallway led to a single door, criss-crossed with chains and wooden boards. Occasionally, the entrance rattled against its barricades.

Cautiously, Jean stepped forward, and placed her hand lightly on the unyielding door knob.

It told her: *This is how you cutkillstabbreak -*

Jean removed her hand.

The door has never been breached, Scott's mind informed her. Occasionally, information was trickled out through the cracks, carefully controlled and maintained, but the door has never been released. It got close, once, when a little girl was crying and two men were fighting and *click-bang*, but Scott had wrangled it shut again before it was destroyed entirely. Out of all the defenses in
Scott’s mind, this is the one that is the most carefully maintained.

Someone had tried to open it once, though.

A foreign presence had entered once, just once, and sent a spider in search of the door, red and vicious. It had reached the door and gnawed at the chains, persistent, before its presence was detected. Unable to kill it, Scott’s mind had trapped it, locking it in a hard metal cage and shuffling it away.

The damage was done, however. The defenses on the door had been weak when the little girl cried, and they were still weak now. Rebuilding as of yet needed to be completed.

Beneath the flickering red lights, Jean saw a small, rattling steel box, similar to the one she and Scott had been kept on for so long. Jean picked it up, and knew the spider was within.

It was cold and acidic and reeked of the memory of a man sitting across from a thin, angry boy who didn't want to kill didn't want to kill didn't want to kill --

Jean had promised herself she wouldn't interfere in Scott’s mind, but this wasn't from Scott’s mind. She burned the box and the spider alike to a crisp.

As she dusted the ashes from her charred palms, Jean began to understand what about Scott’s mind was so very intriguing.

Some minds, Jean knew, were harder to control than others. Some people maintained a jealous command over their mental space, and recognized any intrusions for what they were.

Scott Summers had carefully catalogued and recorded every inch of his mind, or at least the parts Jean had seen, and had learnt to recognize the things he had done from the things he hadn't. Anyone who attempted to influence him would have to be skilled, very, very skilled -- or their attempts would end as the spider’s did.

This phenomenon was highly uncommon, but not unheard of. In Jean’s experience, it happened in people who had nothing, nothing except their mind, and maintained their ownership over it with all the fervor expected. She had seen this happen, once or twice.
Jean turned away from the door, and then frowned. The hallway had reached a dead end.

But that was impossible.

In all minds, always, there was a control room, where memories were stored and decisions were made. Always, this was centrally located in the brain. Always, this was easy to find.

And she hadn’t found it.

Then, something occurred to her that she hadn’t thought of before: She could simply ask Scott where it was. It was, after all, his brain. If he had hidden it, somehow, then he would know where it was located.

(Hopefully.)

A whisper of laughter flitted around her, and a door creaked open where there wasn’t one before. Instantly, Jean knew that this door was everywhere and nowhere, that you could find it in every hallway and every room but only if you knew what to look for.

Leave it to Scott to have a *freaking secret passageway* in his *brain*.

Jean stepped inside, and, at the very entrance, she finally found Alex’s room.

This room was special.

It had the air of a museum, connotative of days long gone but long missed. The room had been visited often, in the past, but not so often lately that a sheen of dust was unable to form. There was a bed in the corner, with rumpled covers and stale dust covering the quilt. This had been Alex’s bed, once, and when he was gone Scott stayed there for the comfort of memories. But then comfort had turned to pain and Scott couldn’t remember what a bed felt like anyway, and he slowly abandoned
the cot.

There were pictures lining the wall, with faces crusted over with age and disuse. Carefully, Jean plucked one off the surface and gently wiped the grime away.

She found Alex, smiling, happy, with a deck of cards jammed in one hand and a fistful of chocolate chips (poker chips, Scott’s mind hissed) spilling past the edges in the other. Smiling, she pocketed the memory.

Looking further, Jean found another memory, one in further disuse, of just Scott. He was young, maybe ten, and had a reckless immortality that only kids possess. He had built a raft, all by himself, and he had taken it out on the water, all by himself. It was summer, and the mosquitoes were buzzing and the sun was hot and humid in the impossibly blue sky and every inch of Scott was soaked with sweat and he was so very alive. The raft had collapsed in the exact center of the lake, and the water had been icy cold despite the burning sun. He had had to swim back the entire way to shore, and he crawled out covered in mud and muck and slimy grime. He had been disgusting.

He had been drunk on the exhilarating youth of it all. On the free, all-encompassing, heart-racing, pulse-pounding youth of his existence.

Jean pocketed that memory too.

Just one happy memory. Just one. And soon, maybe, she would have time to find more.

Jean ventured deeper into his mind.

She would leave soon, she decided. She wouldn’t explore much longer. She just wanted to find the center, where Scott stored himself. Maybe then, she could give him the memory.

Jean tripped over and through doorways, past dusty bookshelves and grimy pictures, all painstakingly yet failingly maintained and polished. There, in the corner of a vast library, laid Scott, curled up in a ball on the floor.

(He couldn’t remember what a bed felt like, anyway.)
Jean smiled, and then her smile disappeared.

She wasn’t alone in Scott’s mind. And, whoever he was, this long brown-haired man in oddly formal wear, he was entirely too close to Scott’s immobile form. Jean felt the flames scream inside.

“Who the hell are you?” she snarled.

Dr. Essex glanced through the report, frowning.

This would be a problem.

“We’re about to take off, sir --”

Essex very calmly pulled his gun from his belt and fired a single round into his pilot’s head. Cleanly standing from his seat, he closed the file and slid it into his briefcase. Then, with an easy professionalism, he stepped over limp body slowly leaking blood over the pristine white carpet of the private plane.

you’re deluded

Stupid, foolish boy.

you honestly believe they value you

Nathaniel Essex had come to learn certain truths about HYDRA, since he first began to work for them. One such truth was that, when you were at a certain level, you could be killed for anything, and when you were at another level, you could justify anything. Which meant that no matter how much you espouse their beliefs, no matter dedicated you were to their cause, you would stab your fellow member in the back at a moment’s notice, because if you did, you rose in the ranks. And if you rose in the ranks, you ensured your own safety for a little while longer. Then, once you reached that blissful Nirvana of being a top member, nobody would dare move against you.

As long as you continued to deliver, that is.
Essex had risen through the ranks quickly and easily, with all the skill granted to him by a prodigious intellect and ruthless disposition. He had gained a reputation for being one of the best at Asset Selection and Manipulation, and had gotten his pick of the litter.

He had wanted the Soldier, and he had received him. Then, he had been perusing possible candidates for new Assets and had found Scott, and he wanted him as well.

He would have him as well.

Few people appreciated the sheer aesthetic beauty of uncompromising brute force anymore. Nowadays, it was all sly government politics and poison in vintage wine instead of bullets and knives. Gone was the Golden Age of the Red Skull, complete with the delicate brutality of hidden labs and the sleek beauty of bombs meant for the entire world. That had disappeared in the Arctic, down with Captain America’s plane. Now, nobody wanted to hear from you unless you had a new plan for blackmailing a president or taking over a country without anyone realizing it. Now, with HYDRA disappeared into the underground of criminal networks and covert government agencies, nobody wanted to hear from you if you had something that could be noticed. Unfortunately, Asset Management was one of the few places certain alternative… ideals still reigned supreme.

And Essex had chosen Asset Management. He could have gone anywhere, but he had personally selected his own position. And he had thrived in it. As Head of the Department, he determined which Assets were terminated and which were the new recruits. He had the power, if he so wished, to personally manage an Asset. Only once had he undertaken such a position, out of the many under his command -- the Soldier. The very concept of it had been enticing, the idea of the Soldier himself drawing Essex in until he ordered the death or reassignment of the Soldier’s previous handler -- he truly didn’t care, or remember, which -- and replaced him with himself. All that deadly precision, all that sleek force -- and it was all under Essex’s command. It all belonged to him.

(And then Essex had seen something, found something that embodied pure destructive energy and blunt, brutalizing force, and had desired it like he had desired the Soldier. And so he took it.

Anything beautiful, after all, was on this Earth for the sole reason of being taken by those strong enough to do so. And Essex was very strong indeed.)
When Essex found a package sitting on his desk, detailing the newest livestock up for Auction, he discovered a small tape of a burning mountain inside a file, and he knew what he wanted to have once more.

_I may not know_

And he had put so much _effort_ into the acquisition of Scott. After all, his unique ability wasn’t exactly subtle, and subtle was exactly the business HYDRA was in, currently. He was sure to be expensive, and the neanderthals he called his colleagues were hesitant to pay for high-ticket mutant for an assassin when they could grab a homeless rat off the streets and train him for the same job. *(Why buy a finely-bred stallion, Essex thought to himself disgustedly, _when any old crippled ass could carry you instead_?)* But he had raised the support for the purchase. He had carefully selected the trainers. He had personally designed and built the apparatus to contain Scott’s blasts. It had taken time to accomplish everything needed to complete the transaction, time and effort, but every last ounce of it was worth it.

Simply discovering the boy’s _name_ was difficult; he was only ever documented as A-13, and nobody had bothered to recall what it was originally. He had discovered it, eventually, but only when he traced the boy’s original sale back to his parents and personally asked them himself. There had been easier ways, granted, but Essex enjoyed the challenge. He enjoyed the effort.

It was always so much better, he thought, when you conquered something and knew that _you_ had conquered it. I was always so much better when you knew that you had earned every last inch of something you owned.

And, if effort exerted was the determining factor in ownership, then Nathaniel Essex owned Scott Summers -- in every sense of the word. He had _earned_ him.

_much about your organization_

The boy didn’t know that yet, but Essex preferred it that way. It was always so much better to see their deterioration from individual to tool in person.

He had been _defiant_ -- deliciously, incandescently defiant. Essex found himself chuckling at the memory; it was so rare to find someone that didn’t respond in blind fear anymore. The Soldier had responded much in the same way Scott had, at first, but after the nth round of reeducation, he usually just replied with the same blank obedience as always. They never were quite as sublime as they were
before the first wipe, and the Soldier had undergone many a wipe before Essex had even met him. It made him wonder, wistfully, about the original days, and what maybe James Buchanan Barnes had been like back then, before he shook himself free of the desire. He would be able to see every last second of Scott Summers’s degradation, after all.

but i don’t really have to

The boy had been a cord of energy in that office, taut and tense and begging to be snapped, and Essex couldn’t help but increase the tension, just a smidge. Scott’s mind, after all, belonged to him, and he had every right to tamper in it. He had just wanted to add one little ingredient, just one, and see if it caused an explosion.

(It hadn’t worked. Essex had noticed that, before their meeting ended. It only made his excitement grow.)

in order to know how they work

The explosion he had received, however, was not to his liking.

do i

It was one thing for Scott Summers -- an uncontrolled Asset who had never properly set foot under Essex’s jurisdiction -- to escape containment before transportation. He had few skills left in the outside world -- only what they taught him, really, and that wouldn’t be enough to escape completely -- and even fewer resources. He would be caught, quickly, and Trask’s incompetence at containing him would provide them one more profitable piece of leverage against the organization. All in all, the young mutant’s little escapade would have been ultimately profitable to Essex.

Would have been, that is, if it wasn’t for the fact that Summers had taken the Soldier with him.

they’re all really the same, in the end

Scott Summers was Nathaniel’s pet project, his pet, his property in all but name; the Soldier, however, had been with HYDRA for many years, and had been very profitable to them in that time. He was not Dr. Essex’s possession, but merely some useful tool that had been leased to him under the condition of its eventual return, in perfect working condition -- and he would have to pay the full
value of any damaged or lost goods.

the second you screw up

It was a price he could not afford.

you're dead

No one could, really. The only payment HYDRA would accept would be Essex’s own life, and he was rather partial to that. He wasn’t entirely certain he could die, granted, but he would rather not reach the point that he had to put his mutation to the test. Which left but one recourse.

He would have to arrange for the retrieval of his lost property himself.

they’ll put you down

Working with HYDRA was a game of cards, and he always made certain he had the better hand. Sometimes, however, he found himself in the unfortunate situation of being in the potential disfavor of the organization.

Essex had a knack for spinning such situations to his benefit.

Anything would be justifiable in the end, if he had the proper leverage walking out of this.

Take, for instance, the foolish underling whose brains were currently painted across the plane: He meant nothing. Alive, he could have potentially informed certain interested parties about the escape before Essex was ready, ensuring his own advancement but complicating matters greatly for Nathaniel’s cause. Dead, he was a footnote, if even that. Nobody would care about him once Essex was finished spinning the situation. His death, like his life, meant nothing.

like the dog you are

It would be impossible to cover up the Soldier and Scott’s escape now; too much damage had been
done. HYDRA would know, and soon, and he would have to have something in place when that moment came.

Scott and the Asset had not been alone when they escaped, Essex mused absently. They had been accompanied by a girl -- a very special, powerful girl. A girl like that would be a great benefit to HYDRA, and thereby to him when he delivered her to HYDRA on a silver platter. Two powerful mutants for the price of one (or none, if he managed to stop the payment to Trask in the midst of the chaos). He would come out of this better than he came into it. If he could pull it off, that is.

And he would. The Soldier was not the only asset at his disposal, and he had cards up his sleeve not even HYDRA knew about.

This was a job for a Marauder, Dr. Essex mused.

_i’ll see you soon, scott_

Calmly, he walked down the steps of the small private plane, blinking as the sun glinted against the sleek silver wing.

He would see Scott very soon, he decided, and his little redheaded friend as well. He would see them all very, very soon.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I'll try to get another chapter up soon. Also, just a reminder, Essex has a very different backstory in this than he had in the comics. If you're looking for original stuff, this would be very confusing. His original backstory was kind of shot to hell in the movieverse, what with Apocalypse being trapped in a collapsed pyramid and unable to collude with 1800s Mr. Sinister and all, and I'm basing this more off the movies than the comics so I couldn't use it. And since all we've seen of Essex in the movies is a short, mysterious little post-credits thing, I'm flying blind. I'm following the well-established tradition of stealing little bits and pieces of canon and twisting it until it crams into another format.
In Which Numerous Females Attack the Good Professor Xavier

Chapter Summary

Charles learns that it's maybe not the best idea to have a woman he needs to keep a secret from in the same building as people who know said secret, but do not know that said secret is a secret.

Or: Charles gets slapped.

Chapter Notes

You don't know fear until you're trying to copy the chapter you just finished, can't remember the keyboard command for "copy," guess, guess wrong, and delete everything you just wrote. That's all I have to say.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Raven’s childhood home was exactly how she remembered it. She wasn’t really certain if that made her hate it or not.

“Which way is Charles?” Erik growled, shoving his way in the front door without waiting for an answer.

“You do realize we got here the exact same time, right?” Raven called after him, hurrying in his wake. She nodded to her man, and the teleporter disappeared in a blink. She’d find a different way out of here. “I have exactly the same amount of information that you do.”

Erik strode into the front corridor, casting wild, angry glares about him. A young girl with pale blonde hair, a student, Raven presumed, turned invisible under his brief gaze. Several others stared. One fainted.

“Stop right there,” a soft, determined voice said from the side. A gun cocked in the heavy air. “Erik Lehnsherr, you’re under arrest. Keep your hands where I can see them. Kids, clear out of here.”

Raven whirled around. “Moira?”
Erik barely spared their former friend a glance. “We’ve been through this before,” he scoffed. Her gun fell to pieces in her hands. “And I don’t have time for round two. Charles! Where are you, Charles?”

Raven had only a brief second to take in Moria’s completely and utterly dumbfounded look before Alex Summers skidded into the room.

It was in that second that Raven realized that she was missing something.

“Raven!” Alex choked. “You… brought Erik. And you’ve met Moira. Great.”

“Met?” Raven clarified.

“Erik?” Moira snarled. “You know him?”

“And you don’t?” Raven demanded.

“Should I?”

“Uh, yes.”

And that was when Raven heard the tell-tale whir of her brother’s wheelchair.

“Speak of the devil and he shall appear,” she greeted. “Charles. Care to fill us in?”

“Raven,” he smiled, and it was blinding. “You’re back. I’ve missed you.”

Slowly, Raven closed her eyes, and opened them again. “I’ve… missed you too,” she admitted, and it was true.

“Really?”
Raven had forgotten just how obscenely \textit{wide} Charles could smile.

“We don’t have time for this,” Erik snapped. “We have to find my daughter. Get moving, Charles.”

“What is going on?” Moira shouted, stepping forward.

Alex winced. Hank sprinted into the foyer, took one look at the proceedings, nodded, turned on his heel, and tried to run in the direction he came before Alex snagged him by the jacket and pulled him into the group.

“You know him?” Moira spluttered. \textit{“Him. A known terrorist, and you’re working with him? I shared information with you! \textit{Classified} information. I - I could lose my job, I could have endangered the country.”} She looked faint. Then, anger rushed into her pallor once more. “And what do you mean that \textit{I’m} supposed to know him? I would have remembered that! I… would have… remembered…”

Oh. Oh damn.

Charles had wiped her.

An inkling of an idea colored her tone. Then, “No.” She shook her head. \textit{“No. You didn’t. Not that. I - I don’t know you. I’ve never met you before now. I’ve never been here before. I couldn’t have.”}

Nobody moved.

Stepping forward, Erik looked at Charles squarely in the face. “Whatever this is, fix it. I don’t have time to wait. If you’re not at Cerebro in ten minutes, I’ll come and get you myself.”

And then he strode off, as purposeful as if he had lived there for years, and Raven knew they’d find him at the steel doors deep within the mansion.

Charles sucked in a deep breath. “Moira, I know this is all very confusing to you, and there is an
He trailed off, looking at the agent’s bewildered face.

“Tell me what’s happening,” she pleaded.

“I -” He stopped.

“Tell her,” Alex prompted. “Or I will.”

His tone brokered no compromise.

Slowly, contritely, Charles nodded. As he raised his fingers to his forehead, he looked Moira squarely in the eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said simply.

Moira gently raised a hand to her brow. A single tear streaked down her face.

Then, her palm cracked against the professor's face.

“How. Dare. You,” she gritted out, and it was not a question. “I - you - Months of my life! Some of the best months of my life! Gone! I thought I was crazy! I thought I had amnesia from some mission gone bad that I couldn’t remember but was still being punished for or - or - something! And for what? What - what even gives you the right?”


It was an apology, even if it didn’t sound like one.

Moira closed her eyes for one, two, three heartbeats. When she opened them again, her face was clear. “It doesn’t matter,” she decided. “Not right now. I made a promise to myself a long time ago that I’d get Scott out, and I’m going to keep it. Scott -- Alex,” she cried in sudden realization, spinning around. “Oh God, Alex, I’m so sorry.”
“Hey, Moira,” Alex whispered. “Good to have you back.”

Tentatively, he wrapped his arms around her tense figure. Moira tightened her grip around his neck, and hugged him firmly back. “We’ll get him back,” she promised. “I swear to God we’ll get him back.”

“I know,” Alex said, pulling back. “We have to.”

“Hi, Moira,” Hank greeted hesitantly, fiddling with his glasses before drawing back again. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“Hank!” she grinned. She hugged his spindly frame, before abruptly smacking him on the back of the head. “I’m mad at you,” she announced. “All of you. But that can wait.” Moira offered Raven a quick smile and nod, a promise of more later, before continuing. “What’s Erik doing here?”

“His daughter was being held in the same lab as Scott,” Charles offered.

There was a brief flash of surprise in her eyes, a momentary blink, before she recovered. “Right then. We don’t have a second to loose. Shall we?”

Then, she turned on her heel without waiting for the answer, walking across the hardwood floors as if she owned them.

Raven had missed Moira.

Charles and Erik had a coffee table relationship, in Charles opinion.

It hadn’t always been that way. Once, Charles hadn’t been able to imagine a world where Erik wasn’t there, a constant source of companionship and support. He hadn’t been able to think of a world where their friendship didn’t exist, immutable and stable.

He also hadn’t been able to imagine a world without his legs. Things changed.
Now, their friendship relationship was something not quite disposable but dismissable, something painfully easy to discard of and not exactly easy to pick up again but available nevertheless.

What they had once had had become the dusty old magazine sitting unused on a coffee table, only to be retrieved when there were no other alternatives, and yet always there, waiting.

Charles couldn’t help but wonder how things had deteriorated to the point that they had, and then realized that oh yeah, Erik had shot him, and he had thrown everything Erik believed in in his face on that Cuban beach. There had probably been someone leaving the other for dead at some point or another. Maybe an attempted murder. Charles couldn’t remember at this point.

Anywho.

“Can you find her?” Erik demanded in lieu of greeting, falling into step next to Charles’s wheelchair with a practiced ease.

“I don’t know yet. I have to see.”

“And how long will that take?”

“Fifteen minutes, maybe.”

Erik relaxed and tensed all at once. Alex looked as if he might puke. The sleek doors of Cerebro whooshed open before them.

Ignoring the buzz of Moira’s righteous anger, the begrudging family of Raven, the nauseating fear of Alex and Erik, Charles rolled into the chamber and placed the controller on his head. And just like that, the dams opened, and the world rushed in.

Stretching himself out, Charles felt pinpricks against his mind, little bursts of whispers that brushed by on the wings of butterflies before disappearing once more. He allowed himself to be lost against the stream.
He allowed himself to be carried farther, battered from one rock to another, one pinprick to the next, until he found the echoes of Russia.

“They’re alive,” Charles gasped, the brilliant blue of Cerebro dancing before them. The room spun and tilted, until two prone forms outlined in blue appeared. Both were very, very small. “They’re together.”

Someone gasped behind him, a mixture of relief, joy, and pain churning until one could not be distinguished from the other. Charles kept his eyes on those two prone figures.

“What happened?” Erik demanded.

The events were still fresh in their young, scarred minds. The blue figures rushed backwards and stopped, frozen in pantomime.

“They were shutting down the labs,” Charles whispered, listening to the hum of the two exhausted sparks. “Scott was about to be sent away. Scott broke out --” There was something else there, some knot of memory Charles needed to untangle, but it was interwoven with too many strands to focus. He continued to chase the thread labeled Nina. “-- and he went looking for something. He found Nina.” One of the electric caricatures fell to their knees. Two dull navy stood behind it. One of the dull-dead- gone figures raised his arm towards the brilliant-beaming- alive profile’s head. “She was about to be killed. Scott stopped them.” Another spark of light joined them then, burning itself up from the light inside. The spark blurred. The spark fought. “Something happened.”

The coal-bright arm raised in a painful mimicry of the navy one, and it jerked backwards, once.

Alex sucked in a sharp, hard breath. He stepped closer, and watched as the blue pyre fell to its knees next to the dead slick.

Charles sent out a harsh command, wiping the bitter, private memory from display. He unraveled more of the thread labeled Nina, and pulled on some of the one labeled Scott. “They’ve been together ever since. They’re quite attached to each other at this point. At the moment, they’re sleeping, but they won’t be for long. They’re scared. They’re both so very scared.”

Backtracking, Xavier returned to the bunch tangled in the pattern of Escape, about to delve deeper, before he was forced to stop.
“Pain,” he whispered, squeezing his eyes shut. “They’re in so much pain.”

He felt physical pain, echoing of much-hated training sessions and outmatched fights and clumsy stumbling across the cold, hard ground and twisted roots. This pain was spread unevenly across the surface, localized in clumps and festering where it lay.

There was another pain, however.

This pain had been injected into their cores and abandoned to spread throughout their bodies, fusing with their veins until every last inch was rotted with the ache. It was the pain of lost families, of gunshots ringing in cottages and hallways and actions that could not be taken back. It was the pain of being methodically dehumanized, stripped of all independent thought and action until they were reduced to nothing.

They ached, and Charles ached with them.

“They’re hidden on the outskirts of Berlin. How long will it take you to reach if you leave now?” he asked.

“At least 16 hours,” Hank spoke up. “And that’s if I push the Blackbird to it’s max, and maybe not even then. It will probably take longer.”

“They’re being followed,” Charles whispered, and in the corner of his mind, he could see them, the hunters of men who refused to recognize what they were chasing. “But they’re as of yet far off. Nina and Scott will be moving on soon. They’re going to keep going for as long and as far as they can.” He paused, the last details of his plans clicking neatly into place. “If you leave now, I can keep them asleep until you get there. They won’t wake up if I don’t let them. I’ll be able to reenter Cerebro for intervals while you’re traveling, and keep their pursuers moving in the opposite direction. They won’t be found.”

For a short moment, Charles could keep them safe. He could let them rest, for a little while, and end their nightmare now. When they woke up, they could be with their families again.

“When they wake up, you’ll be there,” he promised.

“Would it be a normal sleep?” Alex questioned. “Would it hurt them?”
“It’d be exactly the same as if they simply fell asleep. It’d probably be beneficial to them; they haven’t been getting much sleep lately.” Charles paused, and skimmed deeper. “Scott has nightmares,” he revealed. “He’s had them for years now. And Nina’s started to get them too. If I put them to sleep like this, they’ll be trapped in one. But I can give them something nice to dream of instead.”

Alex paused. So did Erik.

“Alright,” Erik sighed. “Do it.” Somewhat reluctantly, Alex nodded his assent as well.

Building dreams were more complicated than one would think. You couldn’t just set an image and allow it to run, like a movie; minds took that kernel and expanded it as far as they could, adding to that initial catalyst with constructions of its own. What starts as a simple swim could turn into a shark attack, if minds were so dispositioned. Charles would have to be careful about what he selected, or it could go terribly, terribly wrong.

Nina was easy, relatively speaking. She still remembered happiness so very clearly, and craved it like a junkie in withdrawal. All Xavier would have to do was set an undeniably joyful scene, and her mind would drive it in the desired direction.

Charles built her a meadow to play in, and developed pantomimes of animals for her to interact with. Gently, he lifted her collapsed, shaking form from the small, dark cage her memories were trapped in, carried her to the bright sunshine, and laid her down in the brilliant green grass.

When Nina opened her eyes, she was without fear.

“How are you?” she questioned, Polish dripping from her tongue.

Charles Xavier smiled kindly. “A friend,” he answered in kind. “You’re safe now. No one will hurt you here.”

Nina looked at him with unquestioning joy. She smiled and opened her mouth, only to stop.

An wide smile curled at her lips, and a laugh burst from its depths. Darting to her feet, she ran to the faunting lingering at the corners of Charles’s vision. She held out her hands, and the deer
approached without fear.

Charles left Nina’s mind with a smile.

That smile instantly disappeared when he entered Scott’s mind.

Scott Summers had the kind of deep set pain that only comes when a wound doesn't have time to heal before it's reopened again. He was angry at the world and what it did to him, but too tired to care about avenging himself on it. He wanted to be left alone with a kind of desperation that seeped into his core, and had the devastated hopelessness of someone that knew it would never happen. He always expected the worst because the worst unfailingly happened to him, and as a result, Charles would have to take a different approach with him.

A mind that was conditioned to accept only the worst would spin any story Charles provided it with as the worst. If it didn't already know the outcome, it would build the most likely outcome it could imagine -- and that would never be a good thing. For Scott, Charles would need a designated ending.

A memory, then.

Charles didn't exit from Scott’s initial mindscape; he didn't traverse deeper into the labyrinth he could already sense. Not only would such a thing be a violation, but it would also be pointless. Charles could sense it, in the carefully crafted chaos to the rooms, tangling in on itself, grotesquely delicate, like a clock with too many gears, that it would never be so simple as --

A hidden door clicked open. Charles smiled.

Once again, his smile disappeared.

There were scratches along the door, the clumsy work of a too-forceful telepath, as if they had been scrabbling for purchase but couldn't figure out the proper unlocking mechanism. “Someone else has been in here,” he realized.

“Another telepath?”
Alex. He sounded anxious.

“Yes.”

Pressing deeper, Charles brushed a single finger lightly over the grooves.

(i’ll see you soon, Scott)

Snatching his hand back, he hissed, “Essex.”

“Who?”

“I’m not sure. Not yet.”

Creeping softly, he crossed over the threshold. The antechamber was lined with images of Alex, which moved when touched. The air was laced with stale dust and a bittersweet remembrance, and Charles passed through without being noticed.

The deeper he got, the more memories he found.

The majority were of the labs, and what they did to him there. These recollections were kept in thick, dusty tomes shuffled to the back of deep bookshelves, which somehow inevitably migrated to the front no matter how deeply Scott buried them. At times, they would quiver, rattling in their places, until they flipped and flopped to the ground. When they flapped open, screams would emanate, or sometimes just cold, clinical voices, or the whir of a bonesaw followed by pain pain pain, they never gave him sedatives during surgery, only paralytics, not because they didn't have any but because Harding got some sick enjoyment out of the way Scott wouldn't do anything for days after an operation, he would just curl up into a ball and try to forget the way the scalpel cut into him over and over and over and over and over and over and over --

Charles blinked, and stepped away. Very, very carefully, he placed the book back on the shelf.

“What was that?” Alex demanded. “What was it?”
“Nothing Scott would want anyone to know about,” Charles responded softly, and cautiously blocked the echoes he had been allowing through.

Eventually, Charles managed to dig up an old memory, one of a race, unimportant but still precious. The day had been perfect, the sky blue and the sun high, and the air had been so crisp in Scott’s lungs and everything had seemed sharp and crystalline. The pound of feet had reverberated through his ears and bounced against the walls of his mind, and Scott had gotten lost in the rhythm of it all.

He had been free.

Cradling the dusty thought in his arms, Charles brought it over to the curled up avatar in the corner, and carefully knelt by his side.

Here came the hard part.

Scott laid against a disused, forgotten wall, his back firmly pressed against its surface (for safety, the books echoed), his brow creased in perpetual discomfort. Charles had no doubt that if he sensed any unusual origin of the dream, he would wake, and instantly move both himself and Nina. If he did, they could be harmed, or captured, and Charles couldn’t risk such an occurrence.

Ghosting a hand over the boy’s brow, he painted the memory bit by bit, brushing color with slow, methodical strokes. The image came gradually, wistfully, the mimicry of a dream.

For a moment, Scott jerked slightly, shocked to discover a hue of blue that felt somehow right. Then, he stilled, a rationality calming him, and Charles spun down the peaceful string like a fireman down a pole. The recollection had seemed off somehow at first, some deviation from the norm, and anything different had the potential to be bad --

(we’re going to be visiting a friend of your father’s today)

-- but then Scott realized that some differentiation was only to be anticipated. He had known she would find a memory while she was in his mind, requested it, even, and he couldn’t possibly expect her to --
Charles froze, then rapidly backtracked to the knotted strand of thought he had ignored earlier.

“I'm not the only telepath in here,” he realized.

“What?”

Scott and Nina had not been alone when they had escaped.

There had been two other people, the strands begrudgingly revealed. One wasn't a mutant, but he was different, and he had been bad at first but not really, he had always been good, Scott just hadn’t known it --

(Commander James, the thread eventually hummed.)

The other rope vibrated at a much different frequency, quicker than a hummingbird’s heart. Whenever Charles tried to grasp it, it just beat quicker, blurring until he couldn't read the secrets in its strands.

(There had been a girl, it whispered, barely. A voice. She had been different to anything Scott knew. She had been light, and Scott needed to keep her secret, keep her safe, she --)

The thread sped up.)

“What the hell are you?”

Very, very slowly, Charles stood up and turned around. He knew that red hair, that burning glare.

“Jean,” he breathed.

“Get away from him,” Jean demanded, eyeing the too-small space between the man (dangerdangerdanger) and Scott. “Now.”
Immediately, the man stepped away.

“I mean you no harm, Jean,” he swore. “Not to any of you.”

“Right,” Jean sneered. “You're simply a well-meaning philanthropist, taking a stroll through Scott’s head. Who are you?”

“A friend.”

Jean laughed, hard and bitter.

“I am your friend, Jean, yours and Scott’s both. My name is Charles Xavier; I'm a friend of Scott’s brother.”

Jerking back as if she had been stung, Jean spat, “Liar.”


Clenching her fists, Jean gathered herself. “Tell me something I don't know. So,” she began, circling around the man, like a shark, “why does big brother dearest finally give a crap about Scott after all these years?”

“Alex has always cared about Scott,” he swore. “Always. The situation is complicated, and there's not much time. I promise I’m your friend, Jean.” Jean came to a stop between the telepath and Scott’s prone body. “There's not much time. Scott is hurt, and so are you. Trask’s forces are getting closer by the second; you can't outrun them forever. And there's more -- another telepath has been here, he - -”

“Essex,” Jean interrupted. “I know.” Callously, she waved her hand, her eyes narrowing in the man’s direction. “Fine. Say I believe you. Say you're helping Scott’s long lost brother, and you have nothing but sunshine and roses planned for us. What were you doing in Scott’s head?”
Charles Xavier did not answer.

Her gut twisting, Jean spun on her heel and knelt next to Scott. Gently, she placed a hand on his icy forehead.

The sweet, dulcet sound of *sleep* sang up to her.

“You were putting him to sleep.”

Charles Xavier did not answer.

Very, very slowly, her hand tightened into a clenched fist, and Jean watched as blood dripped from her palm. “You were *tampering* with his mind,” she ground out. “Like them.”

“Only to keep him out of harm’s way until his brother could reach him,” Xavier reassured, trodding two steps closer. Jean let a spear of fire lose, and pushed him four steps back. “Scott is blind and injured. He is safer here than tramping around in the freezing woods.” Jean didn’t reply. “Alex would have been here in a matter of hours, and explained everything to him them.”

Jean remained silent, and continued to stare down at her friend’s creased forehead.

“Let me help you, Jean.”

Jean went still.

The woman had been beautiful, with long dark hair and sparkling golden eyes that matched the light streaking down her arms. She had been a mutant, so very clearly a mutant, and Jean had had blood soaking her favorite blue shirt and she couldn't remember if it was her own or not. Her parents had been huddled in the corner, scared but blessedly *alive*, and there were men garbed in heavy black tactical gear collapsed all over the floor and Jean couldn't remember if she had killed them or not. The fire was scalding then, burning her from the inside out, and Jean had never felt a heat so bad but a part of her only wanted to burn hotter.

She had weeped with joy, seeing a fellow mutant.
Then:

(Let me help you, Jean.)

crack

“Someone’s said those words to me before,” she stated quietly.

Jean stood up.

Charles saw the exact moment he lost her.

“Jean,” he cautioned.

“Get out,” she spat, whirling around. “Get out.”

“There’s been a misunderstanding --”

“Oh, I understand perfectly,” she said, far too calmly. The room began to tremble, and Scott groaned, in pain, behind them all. “You think,” she declared, stepping forward, “that we don’t matter. That nobody does, as long as you get your paycheck. “Do you honestly believe I haven't heard the thoughts of people like you? I hear everything,” she snapped. “Everyone. And I have heard a million people like you screwing us over.”

Charles felt a hook of flames wrap around his neck, yanking him backwards.

“We are done being lab rats,” she swore. “We will never be tools for other people again. You tell your employers to go to Hell -”

“Or I swear,” she said, coming within an inch of him, “I'll drag them there myself.”

Charles slammed back into being in Cerebro, the flames a dull sting on his neck. Cursing, he yanked off the helmet with a gasp, his hands shaking.

“Oh, Phoenix,” he realized.

“— happened, Charles? Charles! What happened —”

He had only vague memories of what had occurred from his elder self, but he knew that Trask must have damaged Jean badly indeed to cause these outbursts to rise so early in life. He needed to find her, find all of them, and fast.

“Where’s my daughter, Charles?”

“Safe,” Xavier breathed. “But I don’t know for how long.”

“What happened?” Alex demanded, crowding closer. “Where’s Scott?”

“They’ll all be moving quite soon I’m afraid,” he winced. “Jean was there.”

“Jean.” Alex blinked. “Scottie’s future wife, Jean?”

“I’m afraid so,” he confirmed.

“What?” Right, Moira was still there, too. Lovely.

“Later,” he waved. “The point is, she caught me in Scott’s mind. And now, she thinks I’m working for Trask. They’ll be running the moment they wake up.”
“Running to where?”

I'm not sure.” His gaze trailed in the direction of Cerebro’s helmet. “But I can try to find out.”

Alex followed his glance, apprehensive. “Do you think you can?”

He shrugged. “I might catch a whisper. Jean may not be expecting me to try again.”

But as he stretched himself over Russia, he heard no sign of any of them. “She's blocking me,” he realized, shocked. “It's really quite amazing -- I can't hear any of them. It's like she's built up a smokescreen around all of their minds.” He removed the apparatus. “I'm sorry, but I won't be much help.”

“Right then,” Erik declared, not hesitating a moment. “We're doing this the old fashioned way. Hank, start the jet. We're going to the last location we saw them from and following them from there.”

“Get up!”

Jean’s eyes flew open, snapping to her feet instantly. “Now!” she screamed again, her heart hammering. Immediately, she weaved a dome around them, crafted of flames and smoke that only she could see.

Let’s see you get through that, Xavier, she thought viciously.

Scott scrambled up, his mask a crooked tilt. James was up too, it appeared, already returned and not at all asleep. “What happened?” he demanded.

“We have to move, now,” Jean panted. “There was a telepath in Scott’s mind. He was trying to put Scott to sleep. He - he knows where we are now, I'm certain of it. We've got to get out of here.”

“Guys,” Scott beckoned, panic coloring his tone. “I can't wake Nina up.”
Jean spun around. Scott was on his knees, his hands frantically shaking Nina’s shoulders. She laid there, limp and unresponsive.

“The telepath,” Jean realized.

“Nina,” Scott prompted, shaking harder. “Nina.”

Nina did not wake.

“Scott, move,” she ordered, marching closer. Brusquely, Jean knelt at her side and placed a hand on Nina’s check. The weighty hum of Xavier’s influence wafted up to her, making Jean’s own limbs leaden and slow.

Shaking her head, Jean pushed her own presence into Nina’s mind, but still nothing happened. The telepath was too crafty, too thorough. It was as if she was faced with a lock, but lacked the combination.

Biting her lip, Jean raised a single, reluctant hand, and brought it across Nina’s face with a hard crack.

A pair of brown eyes flew open, and Nina sat up. She stared at Jean, askance, and chastisement in an unintelligible language spouted from her pouting lips.


Laughing, Jean yanked Nina into a tight hug in relief. Bewildered, the child returned it, muttering into Jean’s chest.

“She wants to know what’s happened,” Scott translated. “Why you slapped her. And I do not know the word for telepath in any language other than English, so we’re gonna need another plan for that.”

“Just tell her we need to run, fast,” Jean ordered. “We'll explain everything later.”
“James grabbed the car,” Scott informed her, his head tilted.

A few moments later, the *plitty plitty clunk grrr* of the farmer’s ragged old car filled the air. “It's scary how you do that.”

Scott shrugged. “Lose one sense, the rest sharpen.” He hefted Nina and himself to their feet, and then held out a hand for Jean. She gracefully ignored it, and stood on her own. “And if you lose all of them, they hurt like hell when you get them back. You can get this and similar fun facts in sensory deprivation tanks.”

“I’ve had my own experience, thanks,” Jean deflected. Quickly, they reached the rusted red truck and loaded Nina inside. “Wait, why were either of us in sensory deprivation tanks? What did it even accomplish?”

Scott shrugged, tapping the side of the car until he found the open door. “I always thought the scientists got bored sometimes and tried random crap for fun.”

“ Seems about right.” Jean turned, and noticed James’s face behind the driver’s wheel, filled with a mixture of annoyance and disbelief. “What?”

“What?”

“James is staring at us like we're crazy,” Jean explained. “He has this weird eyebrow thing going on.”

“Ah,” Scott nodded. “Are we crazy?”

“Probably.”

“Figures.”

“Get in the car!” James snapped.
Jean and Scott got in the car.

It was only later, when they were miles down the snowy road, that Scott spoke again. “I liked it, though. The memory.”

Jean felt cold. “What memory?”

“The one you gave me. Of the race.”

“I didn’t give you a memory, Scott,” Jean said slowly. “The telepath must have.”

Scott stilled. “What was he doing in my memories?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you know about him?”

“He was like the mutants that helped capture me,” Jean remembered. “He acted a lot the same. I didn't trust him.” Then, slowly, she said, “He mentioned your brother.”

“Alex?” Scott snapped.

“Yeah,” Jean confirmed. “I think he found him in your memories and decided to use that. Said he was helping Alex find you.”

When Jean glanced down, she saw Scott’s hand, with rusted red blood splashed over tight white knuckles.

“Alex wouldn’t be trying to find me after all this time,” Scott declined reluctantly. “He never bothered looking for me in the first place. The telepath was lying.”
Jean placed her pale, bloody hand over Scott’s, and felt it slowly relax over the miles.

They drove on in silence.

“You're not coming to help us find Scott,” Alex denied, shaking his head. “You have to stay here.”

“It’s my plane, Alex,” Charles informed him slowly, as if he was talking to one of his petulant students. “You don't have a say in the matter.”

“You're in a wheelchair.”


Alex groaned. “We can't be slowed down!”

“Jean knows what I feel like from Cerebro. She can sense me and stop me, from that distance. If you have any dream of tracking Scott down before Trask, you need me to find them, and for that, you need me to be closer.”

Alex bit his lip, conflicted.

“I swear to you, Alex,” Charles declared, staring at him intently, “the moment I become a hindrance, I'll stay in the jet. I won't get in the way of finding any of them.”

“What about the school?” Alex attempted. “Someone has to stay to take care of it.”

“We have other teachers,” the Professor waved off.

“Yeah, they can't do much of anything. Except teach, but that's it.”
“Aren't they supposed to be teaching?” Hank wondered, then promptly returned to his control panel when he noticed the glare Alex leveled at him.

Frustrated, Alex closed his eyes. “This is my brother, Charles.”

“I know. And it's my son, and my daughter.”

Alex opened his eyes.

“I remember them,” Charles continued. “From before. Future me gave me some of his memories, or maybe I took them, I can't tell which. I see them sometimes. I close my eyes and I can hear their laugh, see their smile, listen to their voice, and it's so, so very really at times that I go throughout the mansion trying to find them. And it takes me hours to realize they've never been here before.” Charles sucked in a deep, painful breath. “I have failed them in every possible way. Let me fix it. I -- I can't lose them again. They're my kids.”

Sighing, Alex decided, “Get on the plane.”

Chapter End Notes

I like to think of this as more of the intersection chapter than anything else. Finally, the two story lines have collided, a bit like two trains. The explosion is what's coming. Thanks for reading!
In Which the Escape Route of One (1) Motley Crew is a Problem for their Allies, their Enemies, and the World in General

Chapter Summary

Scott, Jean, Nina, and James will do whatever it takes to escape once and for all. This promptly becomes everybody's problem.

Chapter Notes

I... do not really have an explanation for how long I've been gone for. I took a break from writing in general for a while, and that break turned out to be far longer than I anticipated. I am back now, though. Probably. Thank you so much to everybody who has continued to read and support my works! I really, truly appreciate it, though I have been awful about showing it.

diese sehen aus wie mühe: These look like trouble

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They were in Berlin for approximately five seconds before they realized they had no freaking clue as to how to get past the Wall.

“How,” Scott hissed, grinding his teeth, “did the guards get helmets that could block Jean?”

“I can guess,” Jean spat.


“Well, we need a way across,” Scott said. “Or we’re screwed. Anyone know the requirements for passage?”

Every second they spent on the wrong side of that stupid wall was a second closer to getting recaptured. And getting captured wasn't an option. Not for any of them.
They were in Berlin for approximately seven minutes before someone tapped on the window of their parked vehicle.

Jean tensed, and watched as everyone else in the car tensed with her.

“What do you want?” James asked gruffly as he stared down the woman outside of the window.

“My employer would like a word with you,” she said, calm. “For your benefit.”

Pretty, Asian, and clutching a katana on her belt, Jean quickly decided her employer was of the less than legitimate kind.

“You're a mutant,” she realized.

The woman cast her a sharp glare. “That word is dangerous here. Be careful where you use it.”

“What does your employer want with us?” Scott asked.

“A business transaction. And if you want to get past that wall, you'll take it.”

“How did you know we were here?” Bucky said.

“My employer knows every mutant that enters the city. And he knows how to get them out of the city. Take it, don't take it, but I'm walking away now.”

“What's in it for your employer?”

“The price is between you and him. Coming?”

For a moment, the occupants of the car paused, and looked at one another.
They needed to get across the Wall.

“Carefully,” Scott decided. “Very carefully.”

They followed the woman, Nina’s hands slipped in Scott and Jean’s, as secure as any little girl could be.

_I hate this._

_We haven't even met her employer yet._

_Doesn't stop me from hating this._

**Scott.**

Scott winced at her tone, and tried to navigate the streets with the least amount of stumbling possible.

God, he hated being blind.

The worst part was how _weak_ it made him. Even Nina didn't slow them down this much. There was always a root to trip over, an unseen obstacle in the road, a tree to bump into. Always another thing keeping them from getting away.

And not one of those things would be a problem if it wasn't for Scott.

*Scott, Jean chimed. She's leading us into some kind of building, I think we're heading underground.*

*Scott bit his lip. This is dangerous. It's their home turf, not ours. We need to be careful.*
What we need is to get past that wall, Jean fired back. And this is our best lead so far.

What are you getting from her?

Same stuff as before: dark room, some bald dude at a table, and lots and lots of mutants. Nothing that reeks of Trask whatsoever. But that doesn't mean much.

What are her specific thoughts saying?

Gentle chastisement wafted over. I wouldn't know; I don't speak much German.

Surprise briefly lit up Scott’s thoughts, yellow and green and bright. She has an American accent, though.

Either it’s just a really good imitation, or she’s trained herself to think in another language around telepaths. Whatever the reason, it’s not English she’s thinking in. I’m relying mostly on images and emotions.

An idea flopped on the surface of his mind before swimming back down, breaching just long enough to be important. Can you patch me in? To her thoughts. Like… maybe echo them to me?

…I can try.

Scott stumbled when he heard it.

They weren't words, per se. They were a stream, a bubbling, bloated mixture of emotion and images and diese sehen aus wie mühe. There was language, granted, but that was only one facet of the overall meaning.

Scott frowned. Who's Caliban?

Boss, do you think?
Seems that way. She’s definitely not with Trask, at least. I think they’re smugglers.

So they could get us past the wall?

“Ah! Caliban will see you now. Come, come!

“So, you wish to speak with Caliban, yes? It was very smart of you to seek Caliban out, very smart. How can Caliban help you today?”

_Uh… Do you have any idea what’s going on here, Jean?_

_No._

_Wonderful._

“Excuse me,” Scott said, trying to make his voice as reasonable as possible. “Is Caliban here? Can we speak to him directly?”

“You are speaking to Caliban, yes.”

“Oh! So… you’re just talking about yourself… in the third person… Got it.”

“No third person here, just Caliban. How can Caliban help you today?”

“…well you kind of specifically sent someone out after us, so we don’t really know.”

“I see you need grand tour, yes? Caliban will show you now. This,” he said, pausing dramatically, “is Caliban’s business. It is very nice, yes?”
Scott glanced around at the absolute darkness his visor afforded him. “Very nice,” he said agreeably.

“How did you know we wanted to go past the Wall?” Jean snapped.

Caliban laughed at that. “No mutants come to this city without wanting to get past Wall,” he said, still chuckling. “This is a very dangerous city for mutants. You either end up dead or in a fight ring. No, all want to leave. I find it better for business to just bring any mutants who enter Berlin here. Smart, yes?”

“Business,” Scott echoed. “We… we don’t have any money.”

“That is not good for Caliban’s business.”

“We need to get past the Wall,” James said. “What’s your price?”

“Hmm… You want to know Caliban’s price, but you have no money. Caliban will have to make special price for you.” Caliban hummed faintly, then clapped his hands. “Caliban will give passage for three. And the little girl will stay with Caliban as payment.”

Several things happened all at once.

First, there was a clatter and a whir followed by a choking noise, which Scott took as James strangling Caliban.

Next, a whisper of *swish shleek* came from Scott’s left, and Scott just barely ducked under the sword that followed. He slammed his fist towards the noise, and just barely grazed the ribs of Caliban’s stooge. Quickly, he corrected his aim and slammed a foot into her gut, ducked her returning sword, only to get slashed by something he couldn’t hear.

Clutching his bleeding arm, he tilted his head in concentration. Then—

Scott gripped the woman’s sword, raising the blade to her neck.

“If you try anything else,” he said, “I open my eyes. And you won’t like that.”

He didn’t know if he was lying or not.

The woman was silent before him, stiff and waiting, and then—

She jerked.

“Careful, Scott,” Jean warned. “Her mutation allows her to create some kind of mirror thing of objects. You can’t hear those. Don’t worry though—” She sounded strained “I got her.” Her voice turned hard. “I’ve got everyone.”

Slowly, Scott lowered the sword. “You’re in control now?” He clicked his tongue. Jean’s form was odd, bigger than normal, and he couldn’t quite figure out why.

“Yeah. Nina’s with me too, so don’t worry.”

Scott let out a breath.

“What,” James spat, “did you want with the girl?”

“Not what you think,” Caliban gasped, barely audible. “Caliban does not like little children in that way. Caliban hates creatures who would do such things.”

“Is he telling the truth?” James asked Jean.
“Yeah,” Jean said. “I can tell that much. His head is weird though. It echoes too much. I can feel—” her voice broke off into a sob “—everything.”

Scott walked over and took her hand.

“Let Caliban breathe,” Caliban choked, “and Caliban will help you.”

“Were you going to sell her to someone who would do those things?” James said, gruff.

“No.”

**whir click scree**

Someone gasped.

“Give me one good reason,” James hissed, “why I shouldn’t beat the shit out of you here and now.”

“Caliban will get you past Wall! All four! Guaranteed! But only if you do not break Caliban’s face.”

**whir click whir click whir click scree**

Another gasp. A sound like splintering wood. A whimper.

“Go for the gun in your drawer,” James spat, “and believe me, it won’t just be your face getting broken.”

A drawer slid shut.

“No, no breaking,” Caliban said. “No, we make you papers now. Process go quick, yes? Then you four leave and never come back.”
“It sounds,” Jean said tightly, “like we have a deal.”

This was, at the very least, awkward, Jean thought.

“You will let my employees go now, yes?”

Jean looked at Caliban flatly. “No.”

“Caliban needs them to do his work.”

“Caliban needs them to attack us,” Jean corrected. “Caliban is perfectly capable of doing this by himself. They can stay where they are until we go.”

“So now we’re jumping on this freaky third-person bandwagon too, Jean? Scott thought at her wryly. Scott thinks that’s a bit weird.

Shut up, idiot.

Shutting up.


“We can,” Jean informed him dryly.

James flexed his metal arm slowly, a metallic buzz filling the air. Scott cocked his head like a golden retriever.

Caliban flinched. “Caliban will make the passports now.” He looked at them warningly. “It will take time.”
It had the oddest reverberation to it, as if it was bouncing from person to person, mutant to mutant. It was like she was trapped in an echo chamber hosting a high school marching band competition. Jean could only bear to listen to it at the very surface, if even that.

“Come, come,” Caliban said, waving at Scott. “Blind boy. You cannot see me, but I am waving at you. This way. This way. Not towards me, towards where I am pointing.”

“But that is such a helpful direction,” Scott said.

“Here,” James said, positioning Scott in front of Caliban’s camera.

“Thanks,” he muttered, red dusting his checks. Jean smelled the faintest gusts of embarrassment and shame, but before she could pursue it further, Caliban spoke.

“Take off mask, boy, we must take picture now, and no passport has costume. Quickly, quickly. Sooner Caliban finishes, the sooner you leave Caliban alone, yes?”

Scott took off his mask.

Caliban sighed. “Can you not open eyes for picture? Good picture supposed to include eyes.”

“Well,” Scott said delicately, “that depends on whether you’d like to keep your building intact.”

Caliban paused. “Maybe guards think you blink, yes?”

He took the picture, James passing Scott his mask back the moment it finished. Hurriedly, Scott pushed it back on, and hate bubbled and popped for a moment.
Jean frowned. What was wrong with--

“So,” Caliban said, oddly bright. “Who wants to go next?”

Nina hummed tiredly in Scott’s arms, fidgeting unhappily at the wait.

“So,” Caliban said, “you are American, no?”

No one answered.

“You like baseball?”

“No,” James said flatly.

Scott sighed.

A ringing phone was such a nuisance. Phones, unless answered, promised no hint at identity. There was no specific ring to suggest that the person on the other end of the phone was impatient, was dangerous, was not the kind of man to be kept waiting.

Essex wished there was. He truly abhorred waiting.

“Hello?”

“Greycrow. I have a job for you.”

“Okay, okay,” Caliban said. “Here are your papers, scary girl. Leave and never come back now.”

Jean raised an imperious eyebrow. Caliban flinched, much in the way a man staring down his peevish, spiteful mother-in-law with a penchant for violence and horribly ugly pastels flinched.
“How do I know that you didn’t botch these to make sure we get caught?”

Caliban sighed impatiently. “If Caliban does that you probably come back,” he declared, disgusted. “It take far too much effort to ever deal with you again. Caliban is regretting many life choices.”

Jean glanced at Scott. Scott, whose mutation was determining when people were looking at him when it wasn’t blowing up buildings, said brightly, “I trust him.”

There were moments that Jean despaired that Scott couldn’t see her glaring at him.

“Scary girl, please leave. Caliban has been under a lot of stress.”

“Well,” Scott said, twining one hand in Jean’s and the other in Nina’s as they marched out the door, “I liked him.”

Essex hung up on Greycrow without saying goodbye. He drummed his fingers against the side of the cracked, grimy phone booth.

_Ernst was here_, small, scribbled graffiti declared in German.

_Ernst was a dumbass twit who shouldn’t deface public property_, read the cramped words beneath it.

_Are you kidding me right now_, said the pale purple graffiti, the curls of its letters interrupting the elegantly drawn sketch of a startlingly accurate male reproductive organ.

Essex rather hated humanity, the revolting, gritty thing that it was. There was no satisfaction to be gleaned from them, nothing but abject disgust to be felt. He derived the exact same amount of joy from his fellow man -- if one could call him that -- as one did a cockroach.

That is to say none, until it was finally, satisfyingly killed.

There were very few things in this world that Essex could tolerate, and even fewer that he actually enjoyed. There were, currently, exactly two things in this world that Essex actively admired, and he would. not. tolerate. the loss of his playthings.
There was beauty left on Earth, Essex decided, raising the dusty receiver once more. But you had to forge it yourself, shatter away all the ugliness and build it back up in the way you chose.

Diamonds, he thought, were only made if one applied pressure to coal themselves.

He would break Scott first, slowly, calmly, deliciously. He would savor it. The boy was new in a way that the Soldier never could be, and Essex was going to take his time bringing Scott to his knees.

The Soldier was still beautiful in his own right, granted, but in an aged, well-worn manner. He was powerful, but he had already been tamed. Essex need only remind him of his leash, and he would come to heel.

Power was at its height of beauty while it was still in the process of being broken. There was a magic something about watching raw, unmitigated force collapse into helplessness, something sublime in its decay. Essex had yet to find anything that could compare to the feeling of having a snarling, lunging wolf at your feet, and knowing that you could do anything to it.

It was a shame, really, that someone could only truly be broken once.

Essex would never understand the desire to conquer the world. The world was such a meaningless, ugly object filled with meaningless, ugly creatures, mewling and scrabbling for their own paltry existences before they crumpled like wet pieces of paper. The world would be so easy to conquer that it wasn’t even worth the effort.

Power was only enjoyable when you fought to attain it. It was only beautiful when you fought to break it.

Essex listened as the phone rang innocuously, his fingers drumming against the dirt-encrusted windows, and he thought about Scott Summers bleeding and broken and gasping, strapped into the Chair and kicked to his knees, and throughout it all he screamed and sobbed and begged until his voice gave out to a deliciously pathetic whimper.

Yes, it was a shame that someone could only be broken once.
Raven’s phone rang.

Moria stared at her, askance. “How on earth is that thing working up here? Mine drops calls more than it receives them!”

Raven slipped her smaller than typical phone out of her bag with a smirk. “I know a guy.”

She knew a mutant, to be exact, one who had enhanced skills with technology on a scale that would make a science-fiction novelist dizzy with jealousy and highly questionable access to some highly questionable satellites whose existence was highly questionable.

“I think we’ll all have phones like that in the future,” Charles said brightly. “Even smaller than that, in fact. With bigger screens. And we’ll be able to play virtual versions of Yahtzee on them.”

“Sure we will, Charles,” Alex said. “Are we there yet?”

“It does take time to cross the Atlantic Ocean, Alex,” Hank said.

Raven sighed. She slid the antenna out of the top of her phone, punching the answer key with a distracted air. “Hello?”

“Caliban has had a very stressful day,” Caliban hissed.

“And Caliban is telling me this because…?”

“Because it is your fault,” Caliban said. “Caliban was bringing you the mutant you were interested in, but now Caliban is very put out.”

Raven bolted upright. “You have Nina?”

“Give me the phone,” Erik demanded. Raven waved him off.
The plane pitched to the side. Hank swore. Raven shot him a look which communicated with an alarming degree of clarity that she was entirely willing to kick him in the head once more.

The plane straightened again.

“Caliban does not have the little girl. The little girl had very three large and scary friends who abused Caliban’s staff and threatened Caliban. And they did not pay their fee.”

“Where did they go?”

“Four passports and permits are very expensive,” Caliban said. “Caliban can’t focus on anything except how much money he has lost.”

“I will pay the fare for all four of them,” Raven said, gritting her teeth. “But you’re not going to see a cent of that money unless you tell me everything you know right now.”

“There is not need to be upset, Mystique,” Caliban said, delighted. “Caliban knows much about your lost little girl. She is approaching the Wall as we speak. Their car is on its last legs; they are not in good shape themselves. They won’t get far.”

“What were they wearing when you saw them?” Raven demanded. “Did they mention anything about where they were headed? What did the four of them look like?”

“Calm, Mystique. There’s nothing to worry about. They --”

The line turned to static.

“Caliban?”

“Oh dear,” Caliban said, his voice distant. “That is not good for business.”

“Stop!” Jean screamed.
Calmly, James pulled the car to the side of the road.

“What is it?” he asked lowly.

“They’ve closed the border,” Jean said, her chest heaving. “They’re not letting anyone through, even if they have permission. They’re investigating everyone that tries.”

“They know we’re trying to cross,” Scott said. “Or they suspect it, at least.”

“Who the hell,” Jean hissed, “are your buyers, Scott? No way this is Trask.”

“Dangerous people,” James said. “People who won’t hesitate to destroy all of us if they get the chance.”

“Bad men going to kill us?” Nina asked, her voice shaking.

“No,” Scott said. His voice was calm. “They’re not.”

Jean.

Yes?

We made a promise to never go back. I made a promise.

Yeah.

Scott felt her take his hand, a spark of light in the black surrounding him. He gripped it like an impoverished man gripped a fifteen cent lotto ticket.

What if we’re not the only ones who that promise affects?
Jean didn’t answer.

Slowly, she slipped into Scott’s mind like curling smoke, the last remnant in a building that’s already turned to ash. If Scott’s mind had had a door, he would have opened it wide and let her in, but he had learned long ago that locked doors were an invitation for broken boards. It was far more effective to simply go underground.

Jean’s smoke seeped into the ground, slipped through the loose dirt like rainwater and fell past tree roots and rabbit holes like Alice.

*If you do this, you can’t come back from this Scott. None of us can.*

*We’ve never had anywhere to go back to, Jean. Let’s not fool ourselves into thinking otherwise.*

*This is selfish.*

*It is.*

*It’s dangerous.*

*It is.*

“One?” Nina asked, her voice thick. “Scott? Why do you look scared?”

Scott felt Jean shift next to him, and heard the rustle of hair. She smelt like snow and iron.

*We’re going to do this, Jean thought.*

*We are.*
“Everything’s going to be fine,” Jean said, her voice like logs popping in a fire. “It’s going to be just fine, Nina.”

Scott slipped his mask off his face, and he handed it to James.

“I hope you’re a good driver,” he mumbled, just low enough that Nina couldn’t hear.

“Worry about yourself, kid,” James returned. “You sure about this?”

Scott laughed, but the sound wasn’t particularly pleasant. “What, do you think I’m going to do something crazy?”

“I’ve come to expect it, with you.” James sounded tired, but not surprised.

“Let us out here,” Jean said. “Get ready to pick us up. You’ll know when.”

“Ah, you mean when you lob the sh--” James paused “-- feces directly at the fan? You mean then?”

“Exactly,” Scott said, his voice bright. He fumbled the door open with far less grace than he had imagined while planning this moment in his head, then immediately fell on his face as the elegant sequel.

Jean jerked him to his feet. “We’ll be fine,” she said. She sounded pained.

Scott nodded convincingly next to her.

Can you get everyone out of the way? Scott asked. He linked his elbow with hers, for all intents and purposes a charming couple going for a lovely stroll in the midst of Russia-occupied East Germany. On both sides?

I think so, Jean replied. I can feel everyone. It’s just a matter of... grabbing hold.
Okay. Scott sucked in a deep breath. Okay. Find me a good line of sight.

Jean tangled her hand in his, and for a moment, Scott felt fire rolling beneath her fingertips.

A little bit farther ahead, Jean thought. I need to be closer to grab everyone. She paused. Does this count as an act of warfare?

I don’t think so, Scott said, but he didn’t sound certain. We aren’t actually representatives of the United States, so they can’t be held responsible for our actions. We’re more… third party aggressors. Like the Barbary pirates.

So we’re pirates now?

Better than being lab rats.

Jean brought them to a stop. Here, she decided. She let go of Scott, slipping a step behind him.

Scott gripped his own hand to stop it from shaking. Am I pointed in the right direction?

Not exactly. Scott felt smooth, warm fingers slip along the back of his neck. Let me show you.

Scott breathed in. He breathed out.

Ready?

Scott, Jean said suddenly. I don’t want to kill. Ever again.

I know. Scott breathed in. I think -- he breathed out -- I think that’s why we have to do this.

We can still back out, you know.
No we can’t.

Scott, Jean said, I have everyone.

Okay. Scott breathed in. Okay.

Jean’s fingertips tightened briefly on the back of his neck, just barely, and a chorus of screams replaced the air like smoke.

Scott breathed out.

Then, he opened his eyes, and he blew up the Berlin Wall.

Chapter End Notes

I have decided to continue the X-Men's tradition of screwing with major landmarks and events (i.e. the pyramids, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the killing of Kennedy, etc.) with my own addition. Okay, I will hopefully update again soon and not like, after disappearing for a year. Hopefully. You never quite know, with me. Thank you for reading!

End Notes

In the films, they had such a great opportunity to explore the Alex/Scott brotherly relationship. Instead, they decided to kill one of them off half an hour into the movie. This must be fixed. I know I've made the Summers parents into total jerks, which is necessary for this plot, but I would like to give a shout-out to the comic version of them. Who happened to be space pirates. Comic books are weird. Also, this is the first story I have ever posted to this site, so I apologize now for any formatting mistakes.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!