

Read First: Hey there, guys and girls! Surprised to see me? It's been over a year, I know. And what a crazy year for me it has been. Thank you so much those of you who bear with my long absences and unpredictable updates, especially those who check in on me and send me emails or reviews! I had most of this done a while back but had to find the drive and time to sit down and finish it.

For those of you reading this at Nifty, I will keep updating it there but I don't hang around those archives as much and I don't know if I might just stop updating there in the future. As for the Fanfiction Archives...I don't know if I want to stay here either. It came to my attention (thanks Britney!) that a user on Fanfiction, calling himself freakfaze, has stolen this story and brazenly passed it off as his own, claiming he wrote it as an aspiring new author.

I've emailed the staff at Fanfiction and they have not responded or removed the story on freakfaze's account. Then again that doesn't surprise me. We all know the flakiness of the service – but we get what we pay for :P.

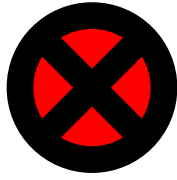
Anyway, what I propose is that you guys who are interested join a Yahoo group I made so that when new chapters come out I can send a message and you don't have to check. Also, in the event I need to send an important announcement or the like it's easy for me to do so. To join you just need to sign up for a free Yahoo account. No pressure though. It's more for convenience than anything.

I also understand that many of you are at universities that have Nifty labeled under porn and blocked. In that case joining the Yahoo group would allow you to access the stories using the school network.

The group address is –

<http://www.groups.yahoo.com/group/phoenixstories/>

Finally, as usual, **bold** text is for emphasis, *italics* is for telepathy and personal thoughts (depending on the context). I really hope you guys enjoy this long, LONG overdue chapter!



PHOENIX: DEATH WISH

CHAPTER TEN

Cerebro? Professor Xavier asked in (not a little) surprise. *Cerebro is functional again? Fully functional or –*

Yes, Professor, he – er –it is. Better than ever,” Betsy responded. *Magneto paid a visit to the Mansion earlier. Sabretooth and Avalanche distracted us on the surface while he repaired Cerebro. He ran into a problem when the AI refused to help him though. Anyway, that’s how I found you guys.*

Professor Xavier said a silent prayer of thanks. Cerebro would be their only hope in locating John. It had originally been suggested by Remy that they use the Hawk’s homing beacon to track down their stolen craft – when in operation it constantly projected a tracer signal on a securely coded frequency.

However, that plan was quickly tossed aside when Reed and Hank reminded all present that the signal the homing beacon used was a radio frequency, and thus a form of **electromagnetic** radiation – of which Magneto was the undisputed master. He no doubt would have sensed the emanations from the Hawk as soon as it was airborne, and taken steps to obscure it. Trying to locate the Hawk through that method would likely be futile.

*Betsy, any chance that **you** can locate John on your own using Cerebro?*
Scott anxiously interjected into the telepathic conversation.

Her response was, I've been trying, Scott, but I haven't managed to find him. All I can say for certain is that he's most definitely alive. His psychic emanations are as strong as ever. At least on the Astral Plane they are. If he were dead he wouldn't have any influence there.

The method she used to determine whether Jonathan Summers still drew breath was both simple and brilliant at the same time. When all of the typical scanning procedures proved ineffectual in ascertaining John's status, Betsy was all but ready to quit. Cerebro, as it turned out, had an idea. People exist and interact on many different levels, Cerebro had said.

According to the computerized records that Professor Xavier kept, when John's powers first activated there began a series of telepathic ripples on the Astral Plane. If she couldn't locate him on the physical, then perhaps she could on the astral level; were he dead, his psychic signature would have disappeared from there.

About Cerebro, Betsy continued, he's undergone a few...erm...changes. It's complicated and I don't understand it myself. This isn't the best time to discuss it but suffice it to say that he now seems capable of independent thought.

What do you mean? Professor Xavier asked in confusion. *Are you saying it's...alive?*

Or pretty darn close to it, Betsy replied. *I really think you guys should return to the Mansion. You just might have more luck tracking John down than me. I've got to sign off for now. Cerebro's using up all of the remaining power. Kurt and Peter are going to run some more connections from the Mansion to the Subbasement though, so things should be in order when you get here – I hope. Just hurry up and get here.*

We're working on it, Betsy, Professor Xavier replied. *Goodbye for now.*

Bye, she responded, her mental presence fading away.

“Reed, how long do you think it will take for that contact of yours to send a plane up here?” Scott asked, turning to the leader of the Fantastic Four.

Reed rubbed his chin, doing some quick mental calculations. “Assuming he ordered it off as soon as he got our message...about an hour and a half.”

“An hour and a half,” Logan grumbled, speaking for the first time since he returned from his search in the forest. “John could be dead in that space of time.”

An even blacker mood seemed to descend upon the company upon hearing those words. Logan had a gift when it came to pessimistic outlooks. He, however, would prefer to say realistic.

“I think we might have some time,” Alex said, trying to counter the response that Logan’s statement had evoked. As any good commander knows, in times of war troop morale is of the utmost importance. And Logan’s statement was doing nothing to improve troop morale.

“And just how do ya figure that?” Logan asked irritably.

“Because,” Alex said, “Magneto could have killed John instantly upon capture. Instead, he took off with him.”

Lorna was quick to add, “He must be planning to do something that will require a bit of time. Something other than simply killing him. That’d explain him taking off with the jet to slow us down. The question is – what?”

“Speaking of questions,” Scott interrupted as he pointedly stared at Lilandra and company, “there’s some I’d really like answers to.”

Most everyone else followed his gaze and stared at the newcomers. Ken began to fidget a little but the rest of them were resolute. Especially their leader.

“Just who are you people?” Scott asked. “What do you want with my son? And how the hell did you find him?”

“I would suggest that you alter your tone if you wish us to be more forthcoming with information,” one of the two women, the one called Sibyl, said.

Scott opened his mouth to say something to that but didn't get a chance to. He was interrupted by the Professor.

“Don't misunderstand us,” Xavier said quickly. “We **do** appreciate the assistance. But, as I'm sure you realize by now – John's situation is unique and for his safety's sake we cannot assume anything about anyone. Especially not those whose intentions we aren't aware of.”

“We are not all that different Professor,” Lilandra said. “Like your organization, we seek the betterment of **all** humanity.”

“Makin' the world a better place? Really?” Logan asked, a little bit sarcastically. “Lady, that ain't really gonna make me rest easier at night. You will not believe how many times I heard that same ol' jazz from some pretty sick people.”

“I agree,” Scott said in support of Logan's statement. “Would you just cut the crap and spit it out already?”

“Hey, you got your secrets,” Ken retorted, “we got ours.”

“Ken...” Lilandra said in warning. She turned to the X-men once more and promptly realized that some of them were staring at her neck. Specifically at her silver pendant. When they realized she was aware of this they abruptly shifted their gazes. “Look, I don't really think this is the best time for a long, drawn out explanation. Suffice it to say that we specialize in psychic phenomena, specifically of the sort that John is going through. I'm of the belief that actions speak louder than words. If our actions didn't succeed in convincing you, then I see little chance of our words doing so. I hope you're more open minded when next we meet. Farewell.”

“What?” Scott asked, with raised eyebrow. “How can –”

Lilandra ignored him and motioned for her people to follow her.

“Hey, where’d you think you’re going?” Logan called after them, getting ready to pounce.

“When last I checked,” Lilandra replied without turning back, “this was a free country and vigilantes didn’t have the power of arrest.”

“Professor,” Ororo whispered to their mentor, “you’re a well known public figure and on the off chance she didn’t place you by face...she heard us refer to you by name numerous times.”

“They all did,” Lorna added. “They know that you’re linked to the X-men. You need to erase their memories.”

Professor Xavier was grave. “I’ve already tried.”

Everyone looked at him in confusion.

“Whaddya mean **tried**, Chuck?” Logan asked, eyes locked on the figures in the distance.

“I was unable to read any of their minds,” the Professor informed the gathering.

“Huh?!” Alex asked. “But you’re like the most powerful telepath –”

“**Known** telepath anyway,” Xavier interjected. “In any event I don’t think I was discovered trying to breach their mind, and couldn’t, because they put up a defense against me. I don’t think they even realized what I was doing. I had no problem **entering** their minds. It was more like I was trying to read a book written in a language I had no knowledge of. I simply couldn’t read their thoughts to determine which to erase. However, I while I couldn’t read their **thoughts**, I did sense a trickling of their **emotions**. They were benevolent. I really do believe they were trying to help for benign purposes.”

“She seemed pretty certain we’d meet again,” Scott mused thoughtfully.

“She’s probably right,” Ororo replied, “considering they seem to have vested interest in John and *specialize* in that sort of psychic phenomena. Whatever she meant by that.”

“Guys, I think we should head back into the woods and keep under cover,” Lorna suggested as she sensed the metallic bodies of advancing vehicles in the distance. “The authorities will likely start combing the area soon and out here in an open clearing we’d be spotted immediately.”

Everyone was agreeable and so they headed back into the thick cover of the trees and awaited the transportation that Reed’s contact was sending their way...

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“You can quit pretending to be asleep you know,” Mystique remarked as she walked past the strapped down boy in the back of the Hawk. “The dosage of that tranquilizing drug that we gave you would have been cleared from your system two hours ago. In any case, Wits sensed your thoughts as you awakened.”

Seeing as it was pointless to maintain the charade any longer (and also due to the fact that keeping his eyes closed with them present was making him **very** uncomfortable) John opened his eyes.

Mystique smirked as she sat down in the seat directly opposite to him. “They’ve certainly trained you well, kid. Most people we abduct wouldn’t have thought of pretending to be under in order to glean some intel.”

John glared at her defiantly but said nothing, deciding it wouldn’t be in his best interest to antagonize her any more than was necessary.

“Oh yes,” Mystique continued, stretching back comfortably. “You no doubt are aware of what we plan to do with you,” she said, smiling in a manner most wicked.

“You’re enjoying this aren't you?” John finally got out through gritted teeth.

Mystique pretended to contemplate for a few moments as the boy continued to glare at her. “After how your people treated me – you bet your ass I am.”

“That’s pretty sadistic and sick,” John continued in a tone dripping with sarcasm. “But then again we all know that you lot aren’t exactly the most mentally stable folks around.”

This time she actually cackled before replying, “Oh really? Kid, wait until we’re done with you and then we’ll see who’s more mentally stable.”

John mentally cursed her out in his head. He had been pondering for close to an hour. Mostly about Emma’s proposal to not kill him and instead perform some sort of lobotomy on him that could leave him a vegetable. Currently he was working on the theory that Emma wanted some weirdly poetic sort of revenge on him. She felt that she was wrongfully punished by having been sent to Happy Valley Psychiatric Hospital – that much was certain. And she probably blamed it all on John. Perhaps she wanted to render him worthy of some of the psychiatric help that she herself was subjected to. As a sort of poetic justice to her way of thinking.

“Aww,” Mystique crooned. “You went all quiet? Is there something on your mind, Johnny boy? You had better enjoy thinking while you still can. Don’t let me disturb you.”

This was too much for John and he opened his mouth to speak. He didn’t get the chance to however because at that moment he felt the niggling presence of someone in his mind.

It really isn't wise to annoy her you know. So just keep quiet for goodness sake.

The presence was both familiar and distasteful at the same time.

Emma.

Glad to see you remember me.

Oh, you are? Cuz I sure as hell am not. John scowled. Failing amnesia or other such mental abnormalities, forgetting Emma Frost or her actions wasn't a very likely possibility.

Emma's response came back quickly, forestalling any chance of John starting up a telepathic argument with her. *Just do yourself a favor and shut up...and you just might live through this entire ordeal.*

As a vegetable? John asked with both anger and sarcasm coloring his thought patterns. *I bet you'd like that wouldn't you?*

Emma didn't respond to the question and merely reiterated that it would be in his best interest to shut up and quit angering his abductors. She didn't exactly phrase it that nicely though.

They flew on in silence for about half an hour more before the plane began lowering itself towards the ground. A little thud as they made contact with terra firma signaled the end of the flight. The makeshift shackles that fastened his arms and legs to his seat flew off, reshaping themselves into cuffs that promptly restrained his hands – thankfully to the front and not the back.

“Get up, runt,” Sabretooth gruffly said, grabbing John by the neck and pulling him to his feet when he was too slow in complying.

John grunted in pain at the feral mutant's forcefulness.

Magneto frowned. “A little less force if you please, Victor. Any more force and you might damn near decapitate him.”

“Yeah,” Avalanche said. “I doubt there's much a neurosurgeon can do for a headless person.”

“Fine,” Sabretooth grumbled, pushing John towards the open hatch.

John walked the down the stairs and stepped out onto a field that was covered with bright green grass and thick shrubbery as far as the eye could see.

“Where are we?” he asked reflexively and without thinking.

Mystique rolled her yellow eyes. “You don’t **really** expect us to **tell** you, do you?”

John’s look darkened. “Well forgive me for asking. It’s my first time being abducted.”

Mystique withdrew a blindfold and promptly placed it over John’s eyes and spun him around a few times to disorient him.

“Follow me,” Magneto called out as he took to the air and landed in front of the party.

They all complied (John having to be pushed now and then) and trailed after the Master of Magnetism on foot.

No one chanced to see or sense the individual who slipped out from the compartment that housed the landing gear of the plane. She quickly darted into the cover of the shrubs and followed Magneto and the others unseen, slinking from one tract of greenery to the next in quick shadowy movements...

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It was a relief to finally have the blindfold taken off. From what John could make out, they were inside some sort of underground cavern that had been rigged to serve as a base of operations. Currently, Magneto, Mystique, and

Emma were seated at a circular table in a distant corner, in rapt discussion. In another corner Avalanche was seated behind a console and appeared to be keeping watch via footage from security cameras.

A few feet away at another table Sabretooth and most of the MALE were assembled and appeared to be having a meal. At the sight and smell of the food John's stomach rumbled. Sabretooth's ears perked up at the faint sound and he turned towards the boy with a smirk. Then he took up what looked to be a piece of fried chicken and began eating it in a tantalizingly slow manner. He might as well have been having oral sex with it. His intent was obviously to taunt.

Looking away, John scanned the place for any sign of a clock so that he could estimate how much time had passed. He was out of luck in this regard.

"Would someone kindly see to our guest's needs?" Magneto called out from across the room. "We certainly wouldn't want to give him the impression that we're ungracious hosts."

Wanda rose but Sabretooth motioned for her to remain seated as he was practically done eating, having basically gobbled it all down as a wild animal would. He walked out of the room and the sound of clinking dishes could be heard. Minutes later he reemerged and walked over to John with a plate.

The restraints on John's wrists suddenly fell off. Instinctively John glanced towards Magneto just in time to see the last stages of the gesture that had released him.

"Don't be trying nothin' smart," Sabretooth warned him as thrust the plate into John's hands.

John just managed to grab the plate before it fell out of his grasp. As part of their training Generation X had to acquaint themselves with the primary adversaries of the X-men. Sabretooth's files were among the more

disturbing and downright terrifying ones. Being so close to the brute and (powerless to boot) was not helping John's emotional state. Sabretooth possessed the mentality of a wild, ferocious animal. Currently he was under Magneto's control but goodness knew how long it would be before his inner nature rebelled. Some animals just could not be truly domesticated.

"What're you staring at?" Sabretooth asked the boy with a sneer.

John shook his head. "Nothing."

To John's consternation Sabretooth didn't leave immediately. Instead he found himself the subject of one of Sabretooth's stares in return.

"Something wrong?" Mystique called out from the head table.

Sabretooth slowly turned towards them. "There's something about this kid that I just don't like. That's all."

"Oh believe me, the feeling's mutual," Mystique replied , before turning back to Magneto and Emma.

Finally Sabretooth left him and returned to the kitchen area for seconds. John let out a sigh of temporary relief and nibbled on a French fry. Hungry though he was, he wasn't quite sure that his stomach could handle the chicken. It was in the midst of reaching for another fry that it happened. A telepathic intrusion in his psyche, a paralyzing presence that made him freeze into position. Since his eyes could still move he directed them towards the MALE's telepath, Wits, and saw that she was busy eating. Emma appeared to be deeply engrossed with Magneto behind a laptop. If it wasn't them who was responsible, then who?

John, listen to me. I'm sorry, but I had to make sure you wouldn't cry out in surprise and draw their attention. My name is Tessa. I'm one of Lilandra's people and I've come here to help you...

“Thanks a lot for the assist, Tony,” Reed said, thanking the man whose image was displayed on the intercom monitor, none other than Tony Stark.

“No problem, Richie,” Stark replied, adding jovially, “now **you** owe **me**. You can pay me back the next time any of our scientific research departments runs into a stumbling block.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” Reed replied with a faint smile, then he cut the call after saying his goodbyes.

Professor Xavier and the X-men looked appreciatively upon the craftsmanship of the jet they were in. It made them recall fond memories of the Blackbird they’d had to self-destruct as well as the stolen Hawk.

“I will of course reimburse you for the loss of your aircraft, Reed,” Xavier said, “just as soon as this situation has been resolved.”

Reed nodded, a pressing worry taken off of his shoulders.

“I’m actually kind of glad it got busted,” Johnny remarked casually, tossing one of his flaming orbs up and down as if it were a ball.

Everyone looked at him incredulously.

“Now we get to redesign and give our bird a sexier look,” was his response. “Some sleeker lines.”

Reed rubbed his chin. “Well, I guess the aerodynamics **could** stand to be improved a bit.”

“Not to mention the paintjob,” Logan quipped unashamedly. “Do you guys **really** need to have 4 painted so big on **everything** you own? Which brings me to your uniforms. Couldn’t the 4 be a **little** smaller?”

Susan’s eyebrows raised. “You’re all bristling with X-badges, buckles, knee and elbow pads and you want to give us fashion advice?”

“Touché,” Logan grumbled. “Just so you know I ain't never liked the design of our uniforms.”

Remy opened his mouth to speak but was silenced before he got a word out.

“Make **one** comment about yellow spandex. Go on, Cajun,” Logan said with a growl.

The juniors looked on silently as the seniors made small talk to cover their nervousness.

“Professor, what’s the plan once we get back to the Mansion?” Logan asked, directing his attention to the brooding Xavier.

“According to Betsy, Cerebro is fully functional once more,” Xavier replied, brow furrowing as he contemplated the wisdom of his next course of action. “I intend to work in tandem with Betsy and Cerebro. Emma is in league with Magneto and is no doubt shielding their presence psionically together with that Wits girl. And they’re doing a very credible job. But any wall subjected to enough force will crumble.”

“Do you think you can do it?” Reed asked.

Xavier shuddered a little as the memory of being forced to locate (and attack) all mutant minds on the planet by Stryker and Jason assaulted him. “I...know I can. The psychic feedback will prove exceedingly dangerous to Emma and Wits...possibly lethal. I wish it needn’t have come to this. But they have made their choice.”

The Professor’s somber mood quickly spread and the rest of the journey to the Mansion was spent in silence.

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Look, Tessa, it isn't safe to communicate with me, John said in the telepathic equivalent of a whisper. They might hear you. Emma Frost is –

One of the most powerful mutant minds on the planet. Yes, I'm aware. We're she to sense me and attack I'd be no match. But you needn't worry. Let's just say we're using a...private telepathic frequency. One which their minds are not calibrated to perceive.

John held his breath when he realized that Sabretooth's eyes were again upon him. Sabretooth had been staring at him on and off ever since dinner and his face now bore a pensive look. It was beyond unnerving to be subjected to attention the likes of his. John bit into another French fry and tried to act as **normal** as the situation allowed.

There are too many of them to fight, John continued. But you...do you have a cell phone?

Yes. But it wouldn't be wise to use it. If Magneto doesn't detect the signal, they no doubt have scanners running that will.

John closed his eyes and mentally kicked himself. He hadn't considered that. He'd had a sudden surge of hope at the thought that maybe she could phone one of the X-men and they could piggyback on the signal, tracing his location and come running to the rescue.

It's not like you can make it outta here...wherever here is...in time to bring anyone back. Without the jet you're stranded. I really don't see how you can help me.

I can help you to help us, was her reply. I just need to get close enough to you first.

Just when John thought he could sink no lower, hearing her plan accomplished that feat.

I'm not much help to anyone, John replied, instinctively glancing at Mystique. And they'll make sure it stays that way. I've been dosed with a mutant suppressor drug pending my lobotomy.

An odd surge of what would be described as scandalous laughter erupted from Tessa. It was brief but enough to worry John.

*Oh, I'm not crazy. Just confident in **my** abilities. That's all. I'm just outside, hidden in some bushes. Once you all exit I'll make my move. Just be ready for anything.*

Yes, yes. But what are you going to do?

I have the power to activate and amplify the genetic potential of other living beings. It's a specialized form of telekinesis that boosts DNA expression at the molecular level – like a catalyst. For a short while it realizes another's full potential into actuality.

Say what?

I'm going to open a window into your future, John. A glimpse of what you may ultimately one day become. And I'm betting it will be more than enough to save both our hides. Especially since we'll have the element of surprise on our side. I'm going to lay low again. Just be ready.

I..will.

And as suddenly as she had intruded upon his thoughts, Tessa departed and John's body was completely his own again.

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"Holy shit," Ben Grimm swore as they exited the jet and stepped out onto the Mansion greens. "It looks like a freakin' tornado hit this place."

The Mansion doors flew open and the small contingent of remaining X-men ran out to meet them as they stepped onto the porch. Namely Warren, Rogue and Peter.

Xavier raised his hands for silence. "I trust the elevators have not yet been fully repaired?"

Warren shook his head in the negative. "No. And even if they were we don't have the power to run them. Cerebro's sapping up all the juice. The greedy little bastard."

Everyone looked at him oddly.

"Oh, you'll understand soon enough," Warren replied with a roll of his eyes.

Xavier closed his eyes and located Kurt. A moment later he appeared in a puff of black and grey smoke.

"Would you kindly see us down to the subbasement, Kurt?" Xavier asked.

Kurt nodded. "Would everyone please hold hands?"

They complied. With everyone having established a point of contact Kurt activated his power and in the next instant they found themselves standing in the hallway of the subbasement right outside the Cerebro room. The doors promptly slid open to reveal Betsy seated at the console. Her seat swiveled as she turned to face them.

"Thank goodness you guys are alright," she said by way of greeting.

The seniors entered the room, keeping Generation X members back.

"I want all of you to survey the other rooms," Scott ordered. "Make a note of everything worth salvaging."

"Inventory?" someone grumbled. "You want us to take inventory?"

"Just do it," Ororo commanded, her stern expression driving most of them away and to their task.

Some of the senior X-men left to oversee the progress of their job.

Julian remained briefly behind, sharing a look with Betsy.

He's still alive, Betsy soothingly informed him.

With a barely imperceptible nod Julian turned and left, following his fellow Generation X comrades to help with the recovery efforts.

"Marvelous," Charles remarked as he approached the console. "It looks almost like new."

"And speaking of new," Betsy said a little nervously. "There's someone I'd like you all to meet. He's been very helpful."

Everyone looked around and saw no one new.

"So where is he?" Logan asked, getting impatient.

"Right here," Betsy said, motioning towards the panels. "He —"

"Oh, so he's someone who you've been liaising with via Cerebro," Ororo interjected. "Another psychic?"

Betsy shook her head in the negative. "Nope. I have not been liaising with him with Cerebro. My new friend *is* Cerebro." She snapped her fingers and the room went pitch black. Seconds later flickering illumination lit up the room as the holographic projectors began forming the image of a face in the ether before them. That of a dark haired teenage boy with piercing blue eyes and a somewhat hesitant expression.

"Um...hi," Cerebro greeted.

"H-hello," Xavier stammered, totally unprepared for this.

"What...the hell?" Scott asked, stepping forward to get a closer look.

Hank rushed past him and went to the consoles, pounded a few keys and surveyed the system's core data files. "Who programmed this construct?"

Magneto? It...could be a virus...a Trojan horse or –” Hank paused when, after examining Cerebro’s system files, he came to the same conclusion that Betsy and the others had.

“The fidelity of Cerebro’s core system files as well as the operating system’s are one hundred percent unblemished,” Betsy said with a comforting pat to Hank’s furry blue shoulder. “You needn’t worry.”

“This is amazing,” Scott continued. “What could have transformed Cerebro’s AI like this?”

“Cerebro’s AI is extremely adaptive,” Xavier explained. “It monitors the brainwave patterns and mental engrams of its users and adapts to best suit their needs. However, I too am baffled as to how it could have been changed in such a fundamental manner.”

Betsy had news for them. “I have a theory actually.” She punched something into the console and invited everyone to have a look. “I’ve been checking the records more probingly. It *seems* that the readjustment of the AI took place while John was using Cerebro...specifically while both he and the Professor were in mental symbiosis.”

“What?” Logan asked, all this talk going over his head as usual. “The Professor...John...”

“They’re my daddies,” Cerebro joked, and then proceeded to laugh at the stunned looks on their faces.

At a warning glance from Betsy he stopped. She turned to the X-men once more. “In a way he’s right. Cerebro, as part of its usual function, like the Professor said, monitors users’ brainwave activity and matches its own frequencies to suite. Observe.” She hit a button and a graphic of three different waveforms was displayed for their benefit. “The blue wave is the Professor’s, the red is John’s and the purple wave is –”

Warren burst into laughter. Everyone, for the second time, looked at him in confusion.

“Shut up or get out, Warren,” Betsy said with a scowl. She continued, “as I was saying, the purple wave is Cerebro’s. As you can see, the AI is operating at a sort of hybrid frequency, combining aspects of both John and Professor Xavier’s brainwave patterns. On the surface he seems to be immature and carefree...but he has insights and ideas that are just astounding. It makes sense as now that he’s sentient...he knows himself better than we do.”

The face projected before them blushed.

“And he’s so cute too,” Ororo said in a saccharine tone.

“Eh hem,” Logan coughed under his breath, causing her to stop.

“I actually managed to sense whether John is still alive by using an idea of Cerebro’s,” Betsy informed them. “I looked for his presence on the Astral Plane instead of on the physical. I might not be able to tell where he is physically but at least we know he’s still alive.”

The Professor nodded. “The time has come to find him...physically. For which I’ll be needing your help, Betsy. To break through the psychic shielding that’s hiding John’s location. If everyone would please be so kind as to vacate the room.”

“I don’t know if we have enough power for that,” Betsy said with a sigh. “The power core is still not fully functional. And I don’t think it might be wise to have Noriko overextend herself again so soon.”

“Looks like we’re gonna have to do what we did in the old days,” Scott said, turning towards Ororo with a knowing look.

She nodded, taking to the air already. “One thunderstorm coming right up!”

Logan turned and followed her out of the room. “I’ll get Kurt to help me run the wires from the lightning conductors.”

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“Hold still!” Mystique ordered as John reflexively struggled under Avalanche’s restraining hold.

Sabretooth growled from the corner and started to his feet. “Why don’t you just knock him out?” he asked, getting a little irritated.

Mystique rolled her eyes. “Is that your solution to everything?”

Sabretooth subjected her to a withering look. “I mean why don’t you get Frost or that other one to work their brain mojo on him.”

Mystique was quick to inform him that they had already tried. It had, in fact, failed.

“Which can only mean,” Mystique said, “that his psychic defenses are coming back online. We have to get this into him before his **offensive** capabilities become functional again. And quickly. Frost has located a suitable neurosurgeon and we’re set to take off at twenty hundred hours.”

Sabretooth walked over to them and knelt in front of the writhing kid. At this proximity his hypersensitive nostrils were subjected to the boy’s pheromone scent full force. Once again, as had happened many times since the abduction, the smell’s nature had a perplexing effect on him. It was somehow vaguely familiar but try as he might, he just couldn’t place it, like a word on the tip of one’s tongue. The perplexing bit was that while he had the notion he’d encountered something **like** it before, it was also **new** and unique at the same time. There was little time to ponder on it at the moment.

“Alright, listen you little shrimp,” Sabretooth growled, unsheathing his claws and bringing them dangerously close to John’s neck, then his face. “The only reason you’re still breathing is because of Magneto and Frost’s plan. The way I see it is this. If I kill you, Magneto will be upset, might chew me out a bit. But, he needs me. He ain’t gonna **kill** me. You on the other hand just might. If you think I’m gonna sit around here while you buy time

'til you get your powers back, better think again. I say fuck the plan." To emphasize how serious he was Sabretooth traced a thin line on John's left jaw, cutting him lightly, smirking when the boy cried out in surprise and pain, and surrendered to Mystique's syringe.

"You're so good with kids, Victor," Mystique said with a smirk, withdrawing the now empty syringe.

"Anytime you feel like havin' some, baby, you gimme a call," Sabretooth said, winking at Mystique who merely rolled her eyes, half disgusted and half amused.

He laughed, the sound of it causing John to shiver, ever aware of the deadly claws' presence and the thin trickle of blood running down his neck. To his horror Sabretooth leaned in, an animalistic look in his eyes, and licked it clean. His tongue was harsh, like sandpaper, but John dared not so much as squirm.

As soon as Sabretooth retracted his tongue, and got a proper taste of the blood, his face contorted confusedly.

"Something wrong?" Avalanche asked. "You know, aside from how totally gross that was?"

Sabretooth rose slowly and absently shook his head, eyes boring into John's all the while. "Get him ready before Magneto starts getting on our case. We done wasted enough time."

Without another word he left the room. John breathed a little easier as both Mystique and Avalanche followed suite, leaving him alone with his thoughts. Speaking of which, the mysterious Tessa had not been in contact since dinner. As the clock ticked away and their departure time drew ever closer, John's nervousness intensified.

Tessa's intentions might be benign. But did she really know what she was getting into? From what she'd told him, it seemed she had the ability to boost another mutant's powers to their ultimate levels. But John wasn't

exactly like other mutants. John leaned back onto his bunk and recalled his and Logan's close call with death in the Danger Room a while back. When nearly overwhelmed it seemed that his subconscious mind, acting on pure survival instinct, unleashed his powers full force, shattering the Professor's psychic breakers that held his telekinesis in check. At least temporarily.

And that was on his own, at his current level. At present the telepathic blocks were disabled, as the Professor hadn't the opportunity to restore them before they fled the mansion. What if Tessa's pushed him too far, too fast? Telekinesis was one thing. But a telepathic overload of a high enough magnitude could render someone comatose, insane or dead.

And that was assuming that Tessa *could* help. When John had informed her that they'd dosed him with a suppressor drug she'd merely laughed. What if she was overconfident? If their plan failed Tessa would run the risk of endangering herself. In any event, he couldn't contact her now to try and talk her out of it. She'd said to merely sit tight and wait until the right moment came. To be ready for anything. Her mind seemed to be made up.

The sound of the door's lock clicking snapped John out of his musing and he sat up quickly on the bed. The door slowly swung open and upon seeing Sabretooth enter again, John felt a cold shiver come over him. Sabretooth shut the door behind him, locking it. As intimidated as Sabretooth made him feel before, John could sense that there was something different this time. Sabretooth eyes glinted dangerously as if they held some secret knowledge.

"W-what do you want?" John asked, cursing himself for letting his fear show.

Sabretooth sat on the bed and stretched, yawning a little. "Just wanna...talk a little."

Yeah, and I'm the queen of Sheba, John thought, not daring to say that out loud, powerless and alone with a sadistic murderer as he was. Instead, he warily asked in a forcibly level tone of voice, "Talk? About what?"

Sabretooth didn't answer the question but instead asked one of his own. "So you're Summers and Grey's kid, huh?"

John slowly nodded, not quite sure why Sabretooth would be asking him questions he already knew the answer to. "Yeah," was all he replied.

A smirk flashed across Sabretooth's face, barely lasting a second. John really didn't like the look of that.

"You know Logan?" Sabretooth said more than asked. "Right?"

"Of...course," John answered slowly, not quite understand why Sabretooth was asking him these questions whose answers were obvious. He wasn't the smartest guy around, but still...

"I want you to give him a message for me," Sabretooth replied, voice dropping to a near whisper. "See, me and him were really good friends at one point."

Despite his nervousness John couldn't help but say, "Friends? Logan hates you. Everyone at the school knows that."

"Oh we were *real* close back in the day," Sabretooth said with insistence. "I remember it well. Logan doesn't seem to. Maybe he doesn't want to. Who the hell can say. I'm no shrink. Anyway, we ain't seen each other for a while...the whole me being in prison thing, ya know. I was just thinking we should get reacquainted. Just to let him know that I haven't forgotten about him like he seems to have forgotten about me."

John locked eyes with Sabretooth in an attempt to discern whether he was lying. He couldn't tell one way or another. He was well aware that both Logan and Sabretooth were much older than they appeared thanks to their healing factor. John's mind refused to accept that Logan was a friend to the monster before him at any time in the past.

"So that's why I need you to pass on a message for me."

“Yeah, well, considering what Magneto plans to do with me,” John said evenly, “I don’t think I’ll be in any position to tell Logan whatever it is you wanna –”

“Oh it’s not that kinda message,” Sabretooth turning to face John with that dangerous glint in his eyes again.

Instinctively, John got to his feet and took a few steps backward towards the door. Sabretooth jumped up then with a swiftness belying his size. It occurred to John that he should scream. While his conscious brain battled with the irony of calling for help from his enemies (and whether it wouldn’t be better to die than live the life they had planned for him) – Sabretooth lunged and took him down screaming.

“I’m not gonna kill ya,” the monster said, dragging the struggling and screaming boy towards the bed. “But feel free to scream all you like. These walls are sound proof. I like it when they scream.” Eventually John’s struggling began to anger Sabretooth. He was far smaller and squirmed so violently that it was hard to maintain a firm grip.

SNIKT!

The vicious looking claws hovering near his throat finally subjugated John and he forced himself to stay still as they raked lightly across his neck. Sabretooth took the opportunity to flip John onto his stomach, get on top of him, pull his shirt up and over his head and bare his back. John shivered as the cool air made contact with his skin. Not to mention the claws of the man on top of him. While he waited with tightly closed eyes, Sabretooth crumpled the t-shirt and took it to his nose, inhaling deeply.

*This is your boy, Logan, Sabretooth thought wickedly to himself. He has to be. I always knew you and Jean had some chemistry going between you. If it wasn’t for the way he smelled, the way his blood tasted...I’d never have guessed. He doesn’t seem to know. Do you? Don’t matter. Pretty soon everyone’s gonna know. Let’s see what **that** does for team morale.*

Sabretooth's grin became feral as he traced a clawed finger lightly over the boy's back. John tensed and bit down on his lip.

"Oh relax," the man above him said lightly, continuing to trace circles on his back with his long, sharp nails. "I'm not gonna fuck you...even though you're a darn sight prettier than what I had to make do with in the hole."

John let out a breath that wasn't exactly relief, but was something closely akin to it.

"You must get your looks from your mother," Sabretooth said. "Cuz you sure ain't got them from your father." He laughed at his secret knowledge to John's confusion and irritation. "Sorry to bore you, kid. Now we get to the fun part."

As he felt Sabretooth's claws pierce the skin of his back, John screamed.

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"God, how much is it gonna cost to fix **this** time around?" Scott grumbled as he, Ororo and Logan stepped out onto the mansion grounds.

The scene before them was utter chaos. Deep, penetrating holes were bored into the ground and leaking, frayed pipelines were scattered about the place, resembling a coil of silvery serpents in some parts. The mansion greenery which Ororo was so proud of could in no way be rescued. They'd have to replant and do some serious corrective landscaping.

"Just be thankful you ain't the one payin', Slim," Logan replied to Scott as he joined him out on the lawn."

"Indeed," Ororo said to that as he joined them. "Not only do we have to replace two jets, but we also need to conduct a massive, school wide infrastructural refurbishment."

Logan's face contorted. "Huh?"

"Fix all the plumbing, electrical conduits, structural damages, Logan," Scott clarified. "Professor Xavier's gonna make a special contractor out there **very** happy."

The sound of rumbling announced the jet's (and the Fantastic Four's) departure.

"Ooh, I forgot that Professor Xavier has to pay to have their bird replaced as well," Ororo added as she watched the jet disappear into the clouds. "This might set us back a few weeks. The repairs to the school alone might force a temporary suspension of teaching activities."

Scott mumbled absently and took a seat on the veranda ledge. Opposite to him Logan did the same. Ororo was content to lean on the wall for support.

"At least the dormitories weren't damaged," Logan chipped in, "so we can at least house the kids here."

Ororo nodded her agreement. Scott was spaced out.

Logan smacked him on the shoulder. "Earth to Scott."

"Sorry."

"Chuck will find him," Logan said as reassuringly as he could. "He's going to pull out all the stops."

"I know," Scott said, adjusting his visor absently. "I'm just thinking about what's to be done when we **do** find him."

Ororo looked away uncomfortably upon hearing Scott's dark tone. Several days before she had witnessed Scott fire with deadly force upon the MALE's Blob. He was barely an adult.

"The professor's never allowed us to entertain the notion of terminating Magneto before," Ororo said. "But he's been degenerating further and

further these past few years. This is the final straw I believe. If it comes to it –”

Scott scoffed mildly. “Magneto can fight us all to a standstill. And now he has his Brotherhood heavy hitters back. As well as the MALE. And Frost. I really don’t see much hope of terminating him in the immediate future. The best we can hope for is to recover John in one piece.”

Logan’s brow furrowed. “That won’t solve the problem. Magneto will just –”

“Keep on trying,” Scott finished for him. “I know. Which is why I’ve decided...after we get John back I’m quitting the X-men and we’re going to disappear.”

Ororo and Logan flashed a glance at each other.

“I know the situation *seems* hopeless, but –” Ororo began, but was quickly cut off.

Scott continued, not having registered Ororo’s words. “Of course Magneto will try to use our family as bait to draw us out. So we’re going to need the professor to use his contacts to set us all up with new identities and settle us down somewhere far...far away.” Scott turned towards Ororo, his expression dire. “I just thought I should let you two know in advance. Ororo is next in line to lead...and she’s gonna need a good second in command, Logan.”

“Scott, look, all this is a little premature, don’t you think?” Logan asked quickly. “Let’s just find the kid first and then we can make long term plans –”

Scott turned and began walking towards the Mansion’s front door. “My mind’s made up. I’ve put the X-men before my family for the last time. One way or another, this is our final mission together. Let’s make it count. For John’s sake.”

And with that he left them both to their own thoughts.

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“You okay, little man?” Sabretooth asked with mock concern. The boy beneath him had ceased writhing and screaming for a while now and things were getting pretty boring.

It was enough of an effort for John to breathe with the hulking brute on top of him, let alone speak. He didn’t know if he could even get much sound out. He was fairly certain he screamed himself hoarse. The sheet on which he lay was by then reddened with his blood and the air smelled heavily of it.

Sabretooth however seemed more interested in John’s distinctive aroma than that of the blood which soaked the sheets and reddened his hands. Animalistic at heart, the pheromone scent so captivated his attention that he took no notice of the banging at the door. When the door was forcibly knocked off its hinges and thrown aside, however, he was forced to acknowledge it.

Standing at the door was Emma Frost in her alternate diamond form.

“Just what the hell is going on here?!” Emma asked, furious at what she was witness to.

Sabretooth got off the bed and onto his feet. “Easy toots. Just having a little fun is all.”

Emma was aghast. “Fun? You call this fun?” She approached, safe in the knowledge that in this form her physical strength was greater than Sabretooth’s and her invulnerable diamond body meant he couldn’t hurt her with his vicious claws. “Get out.”

Sabretooth grinned, raising both his hands in supplication. "Alright, alright. All the scream's gone outta him anyway." Emma scowled and he casually left.

"Damn," she whispered under her breath as she inspected the damage. There appeared to be what looked like words carved into the flesh of John's back.

At first she was a little worried by the fact that John wasn't moving. Carefully, she nudged him and breathed a small sigh of relief when he squirmed away from her touch.

"Mystique?!" Emma shouted, head angled for distance. "Get your blue ass in here! Now! And bring a first aid kit!"

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"Any luck?" Scott asked as Betsy and the Professor exited the Danger Room, looking thoroughly exhausted.

Betsy shook her head slowly. "No. Wherever they are must be very heavily shielded indeed."

"Magneto did help me build Cerebro," Professor Xavier said despondently. "He knows how to evade its searches. I had thought he'd be relying on Frost and...Wits to do the shielding for him. If that were the case then we should have broken through there barriers."

"And?" Scott prodded.

"He must not be using them to shield their location," Betsy responded. "Or we'd have found them by now. He must have access to a base of some sort, maybe one that he built that's shielded technologically. Likely with the same sort of masking technology that his helmet is based on. Or perhaps he

commandeered some masking technology from the human military or the like. They've finally stumbled upon the secret. He's been gone quite a while and we have no way of knowing what he's been up to."

Scott's face fell. They had thought that after the events at Alkali Lake that Magneto and his all but decimated Brotherhood (down to just him and Mystique) would have been on the run and in hiding. Then came the surprise of Mystique and the MALE. And now there was the possibility that Magneto himself had been busy fortifying a new base in the meantime.

"John is still alive," Xavier continued. "Scanning on the Astral Plane has revealed his presence there to be strong. Don't give up hope."

"What confuses me," Scott said, expression growing pensive, "is why Magneto hasn't just...terminated John and whatever threat he see in him. Does he actually think he can get John to work for them or something? Maybe by having Frost try and brainwash him or the like?"

The professor's face darkened. "A most disconcerting prospect. But at least if that's the case then we still have a chance. If we can recover John then we can reverse whatever psychological conditioning they did to his mind."

"If that's the case," Betsy added, "and Magneto wants to use John...then it'd be for something large scale. I can't see him having all that power in his hands and limiting its use. He always tends to go for the big time anyway."

Scott and Xavier nodded.

"I better go check on how the repairs are coming along," Scott said, turning to leave.

"Don't give up hope," Xavier said, willing his voice to sound as optimistic as he could.

Scott said nothing but nodded, then turned around the corner and headed for the elevator. He had an idea. A long shot, true, but at present he was a man ready to grasp at straws. He was well aware that many within the X-

men's ranks would disagree with what he had planned. So he didn't plan on telling them in order to avoid lengthy arguments that would waste precious time.

As he passed her in the corridor Ororo asked, "Scott, what did Professor Xavier say about —"

"Didn't find them," Scott answered quickly before continuing down the hall and through to the garage. Thankfully all the ground vehicles were undamaged and fully functional. From his jacket he withdrew an article he had taken from the vault, a small slip of hard paper. The card that John had given to the professor what seemed eons ago. It listed the contact information and address of Rebirth Center. Without wasting any more time Scott got onto his bike and rode out of the garage and down the Mansion drive, hoping that no one would notice him leaving.

As it happened, someone did and decided to follow.

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"Don't touch me!" John exasperated as Emma and Mystique swabbed over his back with alcohol.

Mystique frowned. "We're almost done anyway. So shut up and hold — what the hell?!"

"What? What the fuck are you on about now?" John tried to turn around but was held firmly by Emma.

Mystique squinted trying to make more sense of the figures Sabretooth had carved into the boy's back. Sabretooth had started well enough but eventually his bloodlust had taken over and he had begun slicing for the fun of it, obliterating some portions of his little letter to Logan. All Mystique

could make out were some disjointed segments of the original message. But they were enough.

“Holy shit!” Mystique exclaimed, then began to chuckle to herself nastily. “Look, you finish up here, Frost. I gotta go see Victor about this.” Without waiting for a reply Mystique left the room, her laughter echoing off the corridor’s walls.

John winced as Emma applied the last bandage to his wounds. “What’s so damn funny?”

Emma got up and looked away. “It’s...um...it’s nothing.”

Squinting, John surveyed her face but he couldn’t read anything off it. She was, after all, gifted with the ability to hide her emotions and thoughts very well. “What’s in this for you?” John asked, his eyes boring through hers. “Hoping to score some points by being responsible for them not killing me outright?”

Emma leaned against the wall for support. “And why might I be trying to do that?”

Several reasons came to mind.

“Well, considering you’re mentally disturbed and illogical,” John said slowly, “you wouldn’t in some twisted way think that it might get you back in with the X-men, would you?”

Emma looked away quickly. “No, I know what I did was unforgiveable.”

John continued. “Maybe you know that they *will* eventually find Magneto and company. And you hope that scoring some points might mean you get punished less severely. Just like you were saying on the jet.”

John wasn’t sure about that one though. He sure as hell hoped that if they got their way and turned him into a vegetable for the rest of his life that the X-men would exact the maximum penalty from all who were responsible.

“Maybe,” Emma began, interrupting John’s flow of thoughts, “maybe I argued against killing you because I don’t believe in murdering kids.”

“Really?” John asked, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “You didn’t have any problem with trying to frame me and send me away to a mental institute did you?”

Emma opened her mouth to say something. Then checked herself. “Get dressed. I expect this little incident will delay us somewhat. But not for long.”

John watched her go, feeling a cold shudder pass over him at the pronouncement. Whatever Tessa hoped to spring on the Brotherhood had better work.

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“Just what the hell are you doing following me?” Scott asked as soon as Logan pulled over to the sidewalk. He had been unaware that he was being tailed until he was at the very gate of the Rebirth Center.

Logan took off his helmet and got off his bike. “I didn’t like the thought of you jetting off on your own at a time like this. People have a way of doing stupid things in a crisis.”

Scott looked away from him and towards the large facility with the well manicured front lawn. “I’m doing what I have to do. Don’t try and stop me, Logan.”

Logan shook his head in the negative. “I understand, Scott. Really, I do. But we don’t know anything about these people.”

Scott walked up to the gate with Logan following his lead. “Yeah, well I know enough about Magneto. And I know that whatever he’s got planned

for my son isn't good. If these people can help us find John, then I have to take that chance. Even if they have their own agenda, we can deal with that after."

"Why do you even think they can help?" Logan asked, for the life of him not understanding Scott's logic. "Chuck's the most talented telepath on the planet and –"

"Most talented that we *knew* of," Scott interrupted. "In any event, these people were able to find John on their own when we had to run to the Morlocks for help. The professor couldn't read their minds. He said it was as if their thoughts were coded in a different language. But he *did* say he sensed genuine concern and a desire to help."

Logan finally nodded. "If this is what you wanna do...what you *have* to do, then I won't try and stop you."

Scott nodded and pressed the intercom button. "Good evening. I'd like to speak with Dr. Lilandra Neramani. It's urgent."

["Who may I ask is requesting this meeting?"]

"Scott Summers. Just tell her I want to discuss a certain young man of...mutual interest to us both," Scott replied.

["Very well."]

Less than a minute later the double gate slip open and Scott and Logan all but ran up the drive and towards the building.

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"Mr. Summers," Lilandra said, rising from her chair when he and Logan entered her office. "I wasn't expecting to hear from you so soon."

“Dr. Neramani –” Scott began.

“Lilandra will be fine,” she interrupted. “I take it you still haven't found him.”

“No,” Logan answered, eyes roving over the office, looking for anything suspicious, but finding nothing.

“We were actually hoping that you might be able to help us with that,” Scott confessed.

Lilandra’s expression did nothing to reassure Scott. “We’ve been trying. It was a relatively simple matter to find him in Dundee because his mind was radiating psychic energy like a beacon. But now it’s stopped.”

Logan scowled. “That’s because Magneto’s no doubt dosed him with mutant suppressor drugs.”

Lilandra nodded slowly. “We expected as much. In any event, it’s making matters complicated for us. Several of our psychics have been in mental symbiosis...linking their minds together to try and improve their sensitivity and range. But so far, no luck.”

Scott’s mouth hung open as he had a eureka moment. “So, what you’re saying is that if your range and sensitivity were somehow improved, you might be able to find him?”

Lilandra nodded. “Yes. Easier said than done however.”

Scott and Logan looked at each other, one thought in both their minds. Cerebro.

“We might be able to help with that,” Scott said quickly. “But would you be willing to come with us to the Xavier Institute? We haven’t told the others yet...but I’m sure that we can convince them.”

Lilandra looked torn. “Some of them weren’t very welcoming when we met before.”

“Look, lady. I was the most *unwelcoming* of the lot,” Logan said, butting in. “But now I’m asking you to help us find John...please.”

Lilandra mulled it over and finally nodded her assent. “Very well. Let’s go.”

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Lilandra looked at her watch. She was waiting in the corridor, Logan next to her. “They’re arguing.”

“Nah,” Logan replied, unconsciously looking at his watch as well.

“They’re...discussing.”

Lilandra couldn’t help but smile. “Oh? Just like you’re not guarding me but, instead, keeping me company.”

Logan sighed and ground out his cigar.

“You don’t trust me,” Lilandra said without irritation. “And I understand that. I’m glad you were willing to put mistrust aside and come to me for help.”

“I just hope the rest of ‘em can do that,” Logan said impatiently, perking up as the door to the War Room slid open.

Scott walked out, looking tired. But he nodded with a shaky smile.

“We’re in business,” Logan said, motioning Lilandra towards the Cerebro room.

Professor Xavier, Betsy and Scott followed.

“This is an amazing facility you have here,” Lilandra remarked.

Xavier and Betsy eyed each other. “Thank you,” he responded, “we’re quite proud of it.”

“I believe you’ll be even more impressed with Cerebro,” Betsy added, eyes boring into Scott, who ignored her. She was very wary of this woman and had voiced her anger at Scott just rushing off without consulting anyone to bring an outsider to what was supposed to be their **secret** based of operations.

Presently they entered the Cerebro room and Lilandra gasped.

“Goodness,” she said.

The sensors, detecting a voice, activated the Cerebro operating system. The room temporarily went dark for several seconds before the holographic projectors came online, bathing the room in a shimmering light. Finally, the face of Cerebro’s avatar appeared before them.

“Hey guys,” Cerebro greeted. His image flickered in curiosity. “Who’s she?”

“She’s a...a friend,” Xavier said. “We’d like you to assist her anyway you can. Understood?”

“Got it, Prof,” Cerebro said, nodding. “Could you take a seat please?”

“This is amazing,” Lilandra said, allowing herself to be led to the seat. “I’ve never met an AI program that was so lifelike.”

Scott and Betsy shared a glance.

“Well, John and the Professor are responsible,” Betsy said as she placed the helmet onto Lilandra’s head. “Their minds were both linked at the time and John was using Bro...er, Cerebro...and well...this was the result.”

“I see.”

“Let’s hope that Cerebro is compatible with your brand of telepathy,” Betsy continued. “Your abilities seem to follow a different set of rules from ours.”

“If Cerebro could augment John’s powers, then I’m sure he should be able to do the same for me,” Lilandra said confidently.

“Scott, Logan,” Xavier said, garnering their attention. “Could you both wait outside. This will be a sensitive operation and the presence of non-telepathic minds in here would only increase the background psychic noise that Dr. Nera...that Lilandra will have to break through.”

Both men nodded and acquiesced, feeling for the first time that they might actually have a shot at finding John this time around.

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Despite his dire circumstances, John couldn't help but feel a pang of vindication upon seeing Sabretooth struggling with a metal band around his neck, placed there by Magneto as punishment for his earlier actions. The metallic collar appeared to be all but choking him as he was held suspended in midair by a localized magnetic levitation field – again courtesy of Magneto.

“You'll have to forgive my compatriot,” Magneto said, flicking his wrist, causing the collar to tighten. “He tends to get carried away at times and lets his animalistic urges drive him. He tends to forget the concept of following orders. But then, it's been quite some time since he's been with us and I expect he's gotten out of practice. Just needs a few reminders, that's all.”

John jumped as he heard something crack and realized it must have been one of Sabretooth's vertebral bones. Good thing the lucky bastard had a healing factor. Not wasting any more time, Magneto ordered the evacuation of the base. Everyone seemed more than willing to go having been stuck underground for longer than anticipated.

John?

Tessa?

Yeah. Remember what I said. Just be ready.

John glanced at Emma and Wits. Both still seemed oblivious to the telepathic conversation he was carrying on with the woman outside.

Ready for what?

You'll know when it happens, was Tessa's reply. Once it does we'll need to act fast.

Alright, but if things don't work out –

John...

No, if they don't then you need to run and fast. The Brotherhood ain't known for their mercies. I'm surprised I'm not dead by now.

Grudgingly, Tessa agreed, but gave her assurance that she wouldn't fail him. Since John had nothing else to lose and no other prospects anyway, he figured he might as well have some faith in her.

"Stop dilly-dallying," Mystique said gruffly, pushing John forward, causing him to wince as his as she aggravated his wounds.

John said nothing but walked faster to spare himself another push and presently exited through the threshold. This time around he was not blindfolded. But he suspected that part would be soon to follow. As he was pondering this thought, from out of the bushes that surrounded (and helped to mask) the doorway, a hand shot out and grabbed him, pulling him away before either Mystique or Avalanche could react.

John found himself flat on his rump with a woman (Tessa he presumed) kneeling to his side.

"We've got only seconds," Tessa said, tossing aside her jet black tresses from her eyes. Without saying anymore she placed her palm on John's forehead.

John opened his mouth to ask what she was doing but before he could utter a word, he felt it. A jolt emanating from her palm that spread to his

head, down his spinal cord and through his whole body. Even when Avalanche pulled her off him and Mystique dragged him to his feet, he continued to feel the buzz.

Oh my God... was all he could think as he realized what was happening to him.

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“Something’s happening!” Lilandra announced hurriedly.

Betsy and the Professor looked about worriedly as the display on the walls of the Cerebro room began to warp and blink.

“Bro, status report!” Betsy demanded.

“Sensors temporarily overloaded. Massive psionic spikes detected,” Cerebro replied after a brief pause. “Compensating and recalibrating now.”

Professor Xavier approached the console to have a look at the readings. The patterns looked familiar, but to confirm his suspicions he asked, “Cerebro, please cross reference these brainwave readings with those in our database. Look for any possible matches.”

Xavier held his breath and waited.

Cerebro finally responded. “There is a ninety eight point six percent probability that Jonathan Grey Summers is the source of these emanations.”

Betsy and Xavier looked at each other, worry etched into both their countenances. Had Jonathan’s psychic dam finally broken? What would be the repercussions if it had? At the console, Lilandra herself sat perturbed. She was also worried, but for a very different reason.

“Cerebro, do your utmost to track the source of these emanations,” Xavier ordered.

All three hoped that things hadn't just taken a turn for the worst...

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And indeed things **had** taken a turn for the worst...but for the Brotherhood.

“Ouch!” Mystique exclaimed in pain when John suddenly stamped his heel down hard on her foot.

Before she should punish him for it he had elbowed her midsection, wriggled out of her weakened grasp and made his way over to Tessa.

“If I were you,” Tessa said, assuming a fighter’s stance, “I’d run.” She grabbed onto John again and send another jolt through him, finishing what she started. “Alright, now let’s have some real fun.”

“Restrain him, now!” Magneto bellowed from above, descending upon the scene.

John looked up at him and Magneto gasped when he saw that the boy’s eyes were ablaze with psionic fire. Taken by surprise, he had no time to react to this new development. Two seconds later he was subjected to a powerful telekinetic squeeze (that forced all the air out of his lungs), wrapped up in his own red cape and flung aside. His head hit a rock with enough force to crack his helmet and knock him unconscious. In one fell swoop the self-styled Master of Magnetism fell helpless.

“I thought those drugs were supposed to keep him under control!” Avalanche said, running to Magneto to see if he was alright.

“They were,” Mystique responded. “It’s obvious SHE is responsible.” Mystique lunged into the ether towards them, was stopped midair and sent flying towards Magneto and Avalanche. She fell on Avalanche, knocking them both painfully to the ground. When they tried to get up, they found that they couldn’t as an unseen force was pressing them firmly to the ground. It felt as if a ton of bricks had just fallen on top of them. As it was they could only just manage to breathe.

Eventually the MALE, Emma Frost and an angry Sabretooth had arrived on the scene, drawn there from the jet by the noise. At this time Tessa’s jumpstart was reaching its maximum effect and John was surrounded by the same golden aura they’d seen in Mystique’s cell phone video (as well as around the professor’s astral form on the Mansion lawn).

“Get him!” Sabretooth shouted out, running forward.

Pyro lit his lighter, manipulating the small flame into a blazing fireball which he hurled towards John and Tessa. It exploded harmlessly in a brilliant shower of sparks as it collided with a telekinetic shield courtesy of John. Emma Frost gasped as she was snatched up psionically and deposited next to Tessa. She’d expected to be on the receiving end of John’s anger and was speechless but so no complaining.

Wordlessly, John opened his fist and a tiny point of light appeared over his palm. Barely a spark. Within seconds it grew in intensity and size until it was too bright to look at directly. Without warning, the orb burst into high intensity flames as the molecular acceleration process reached its completion. He extended his palm towards Pyro and unleashed a torrent of fire that the hotheaded mutant could scarcely control...for all of ten seconds, before he, Toad and the Scarlet Witch were trapped in a cage of seething flames that threatened to incinerate them if they didn’t keep still. Toad tried to sneak his tongue through the bars and got it singed as one of them shifted to compensate. He didn’t dare try a second time.

Blob, Quicksilver and Sabretooth thought they could get the drop on John as he seemed to be preoccupied. But as they approached Quicksilver began moving backwards, regardless of how much effort he put in to go the opposite direction. His feet were moving so fast they were a blur and yet he continued to perform a Moonwalk that Michael Jackson would have been proud of.

Blob didn't fare much better as a sudden bout of nausea overtook him when the contents of his stomach were tossed this way and that under the mental influence of John. Moments later he was vomiting uncontrollably, keeled over and unable to continue the charge.

Sabretooth continued to press on, progress slowed as it was by the waves of telekinetic force buffeting his frame. He was pretty sure that if he killed John now, Magneto would reward him and not punish him as before.

After having dealt with everyone else John turned his attention to Sabretooth. When their eyes locked the feral mutant found himself paralyzed and unable to move. John walked up to him, closing distance until he was near enough to touch. Which he did, tracing a finger on Sabretooth's forehead.

"What the fuck..." was all Sabretooth could manage before he started screaming in abject pain. It felt as if his back were being torn open and, as the blood trickled and pooled to his feet, he realized that indeed it was. Thanks to his healing factor, Sabretooth had never been subjected to intense pain for long, as his mutant abilities always ensured that even the most grievous physical wounds healed astoundingly fast. He had a feeling that this time would be different however. For one thing, he couldn't feel the torn flesh immediately knitting itself together as he usually did. And small wonder as his healing factor had been psionically disabled when John touched his forehead.

With everyone physically taken care of it was time for phase two. Everyone (who was still conscious) cowered in fear as the aura around John

intensified and pulsed with violent promise. Moments later most were screaming as their minds were invaded and their thoughts and memories restructured at the boy's whim. None was more surprised than Mystique, for her mind was normally impervious to telepathic intrusion. Now, she could feel her defenses being torn apart.

We should have killed him when we had the chance, was her last thought before she succumbed to the darkness...

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"Are they...dead?" Emma asked, kicking Mystique's head to test the theory.

Tessa rolled her eyes. "Why don't you shift outta your diamond form, try to read their minds and find out?"

Emma, as a matter of fact, was in her crystalline form. When she saw John attacking the Brotherhood and MALE earlier she'd shifted in order to be protected should he try a telepathic assault on her. Not to mention that she was a whole lot more physically durable in diamond mode.

Emma treated Tessa to a withering look.

"They're not dead," John said. "I just rewrote their memories, together with wiping anything and everything concerning myself and my powers from their minds."

Emma nodded, knelt before Mystique and extracted her cell phone from her jacket. "You might want to deal with the physical evidence as well. They had videos on..." Emma trailed off as she skimmed through the contents of Mystique's phone, finding no trace of said video recordings. "But they were _"

“It’s been taken care of,” John said, flicking his wrist and mentally spinning Emma around to face him. “Now I have got to see to you.”

Emma’s blood went cold. John’s eyes flashed and against her will she found herself morphing back into her flesh and blood form. Try as she might she could not put up a barrier strong enough to block John’s entry into her mind and he soon began sifting through the contents of her psyche. She closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable to happen...but it didn’t. When she opened her eyes it was to find John looking at her with a puzzled expression on his face. She only breathed easier when his eyes lost their golden fire and returned to their normal blue hue.

“The...jet’s this way,” John said, turning around and walking off.

“What about them?” Tessa asked, following him. “We can’t leave them here.”

Emma shakily jogged after them. “There was another guy from the MALE. He wasn’t here with us.”

“Gateway,” John said nonchalantly. “Not to worry. He’s under my control. I’ve got it covered. We won’t be flying the jet home. It doesn’t have the fuel for that. We’ll be using Gateway to teleport us and the jet back to the Mansion. Once we’re safely there, I’ll have him transport Magneto and the rest to the MALE hideout. Now come on. We’ve got to get out of here before they wake up and see us. I can’t keep wiping their minds repeatedly in such a short time span. It could cause serious damage...and that’d be unethical and whatever.”

John had briefly toyed with the idea of sending Sabretooth and Avalanche back to prison via Gateway’s teleportation. However, he didn’t really see the point as Magneto had busted them out fairly easily on his own in the first place and would probably just do so again if and when he needed them.

He would have liked to send them both to the X-men's brig. But then he'd have to rewrite their memories, Magneto and company's memories as well as the law enforcers'. It was simplest to leave them with Magneto for the time being and have them all think Magneto had broken them free to help with the recent mission at Alkali Lake. John had set the date of the Alkali mission in their heads as the same day that Avalanche and Sabretooth were 'rescued', just in case they saw anything on the news and got suspicious at the date discrepancy.

"Here we are," Tessa announced, "finally."

John's eyes flashed, the ramp lowered and hatch opened. All three hurried inside and took a seat.

"Alright, here we go," John said, closing his eyes and willing Gateway to send them home.

Outside of the Hawk an intense orange glow could be seen and the backdrop of woods and distant mountains began to blue and fade...

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Betsy let the fire extinguisher fall to the floor with a metallic clang. Lilandra and Xavier were positioned behind her, well away from the still sparking console.

"Bro?" Betsy called out worriedly. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," the computer answered. "I think so. The circuitry overload was limited to the controls, holographic projectors and psionic dampeners and sensors. All my other systems appear to be undamaged and fully functional."

“Um, Cerebro?” Lilandra asked tentatively. “Did you manage to pinpoint the source of the psychic surge before the sensors burnt out?”

“Not precisely,” Cerebro responded. “I narrowed it down to somewhere in the vicinity of the Rocky Mountains.”

Professor Xavier sighed. “It’s a start at least.”

At that moment the intercom buzzed to life and the excited voice of Warren came through.

“Professor! Some weird shit’s going on outside in the backyard,” Warren shouted out hurriedly. “You gotta take a look at this!”

As the door to the Cerebro room slid open and external psychic energy flooded in, Xavier, Lilandra and Betsy were hit by a sudden wave of excitement and some apprehension radiating from those outside observing whatever phenomenon Warren was on about.

Kurt? Xavier called out telepathically.

Coming, Professor.

+++

“What the heck is that?” Rogue asked worriedly, as she hovered in midair, preparing herself for anything.

An enormous pulsating orb of amber energy was currently situated over the basketball court (under which was the hangar). Its boundaries were not sharply demarcated but blurred and, every now and then, what resembled small solar flares could be seen erupting from its surface, looping around and reentering it again. Given that it was night they only hoped that the lightshow didn’t attract any unwanted attention.

Hank stood at the forefront, a sensor in one hand and a handheld computing device in the other. "I'm detecting a massive spatial distortion. Something is bending the fabric of space itself. I...I've seen such distortion before. With Kurt. I think something's trying to teleport in!"

BAMF!

"Speak of the devil," Logan muttered, then looked away mildly embarrassed when he received several looks.

Kurt had just then materialized with the professor, Betsy and Lilandra.

"My word," Xavier gasped out, directing his hover chair closer for a better look.

"Stay back, Professor," Scott warned, hand on his visor. "Hank thinks someone's trying to teleport in and given the size of that thing..."

Scott trailed off as the orb suddenly changed hue from amber to orange. The boundaries became sharply defined and the flaring promptly ceased.

"Hey, wait a minute," Ororo said, squinting a little as she recalled something. "That thing looks like a supersized version of the...the teleportation auras that Magneto's associate Gateway used. When we were at Alkali Lake."

"Shit," Logan swore, extending his claws.

Everyone else assumed aggressive stances, and not a moment too soon. With a sudden flash and a mild boom, the orb vanished and something huge stood in its place.

"The Hawk," Rogue whispered. "Didn't Magneto and 'em steal it?"

Scott's visor fingers grew itchy. "Yeah."

With bated breath everyone waited. Several jumped slightly as the hatch opened with a loud clang and the ramp lowered. A pair of white boots

appeared, then shapely legs, a bare midriff, and then finally the entire sinuous body.

“It’s Frost!” exclaimed Betsy, forming a psychic spike and hurling it towards the White Queen.

Emma quickly braced herself and shifted momentarily to her diamond form. The bolt glance harmlessly aside.

“Don’t shoot!” Emma screeched, taking two steps back.

Presently another woman, raven haired appeared behind Emma. She scanned the crowd, saw Lilandra and waved, smiling to let her know everything was okay.

“Tessa!” Lilandra cried out, running forward with a smile. “She’s one of mine,” Lilandra exclaimed. She ran towards Tessa and the two embraced.

A third pair of legs, clad in denim jeans appeared on the ramp.

Scott stepped forward, hands dropping from his visor. “Professor?” Scott asked in an expectant tone.

Xavier ran a mental scan and looked confused. “I don’t know, Scott. The mind of that person appears to be encoded similarly to Lilandra’s and her associates. I can’t tell who it is. It may be another of her people.”

Scott’s face fell. Logan’s nose crinkled.

“Or maybe not!” Logan shouted out as his nose caught the scent of what could be none other than John’s pheromone signature.

Everyone’s jaw dropped as John finally stepped into plain sight and onto the court, looking exhausted.

“Good Goddess!” Ororo exclaimed with a smile, “Logan was right! And...the Professor was wrong!” She reddened and turned to the Professor. “Sorry, Professor. This is just a first.”

In a body they all ran towards the jet, Scott at the fore pressing madly at his com badge to alert Alex and Lorna, forgetting that the transmitters had been fried in the fight with Magneto at Dundee.

“Wow, they’re really glad to see you, kiddo,” Tessa said, smirking and pushing John forward towards them.

“Hey, watch it!” John cried out, stumbling before being caught by his father and crushed in a hug.

“I’m glad to see you too, dad,” John said, returning the hug and smiling tiredly as the air was squeezed out of him. “Um, you can let go now.”

Scott just hugged tighter. “Are you okay? Did they –”

“I’m fine,” John said, adding as he reddened. “Dad...you’re embarrassing me.”

Scott only stopped when someone shouted out that Emma Frost was running off. Scott raised his hand to his visor and prepared to fire a stunning shot, but was stopped by John.

“What? She was with Magneto. She tried to –”

John sighed. “It came as a shock to me too, believe me. If I hadn't been digging around in her head and seen it for myself I’d never have believed it but...Emma is genuinely *sorry* for what she did.”

“Sorry my ass,” Logan muttered, running off to catch her while he still could. He didn’t make it past more than a few steps before being slowed and pulled back by John’s telekinesis. He turned around, frowning deeply.

“What gives?”

“Magneto and Mystique...they’d planned on killing me,” John explained. “Emma talked them out of it. She convinced them to surgically alter my brain instead so that I couldn’t use my powers. It would have left me a vegetable...but I’d be alive.”

Betsy scowled. "That's not much of an improvement in my book."

"Mine either," John went on. "At first I thought she was trying to score points so that when you guys inevitably meet up again, she could claim credit for me being alive and wouldn't be punished as badly. But when I was going through her thoughts I realized that wasn't it. Emma really doesn't have it in her to commit cold blooded murder. She was actually trying to buy you guys some more time to find me."

Logan looked stunned. "I'll be damned."

John watched Emma climb the wall and finally exit the grounds. "I think Emma has a lot of soul searching to do. I guess there's something to be said for Happy Valley's methods after all."

Lilandra and Tessa shared a look, both secretly knowing that Happy Valley wasn't what was responsible for Emma's seemingly miraculous turnaround.

Scott motioned towards Tessa. "And what about –"

"Tessa," Lilandra reminded him.

"It's thanks to Tessa that I'm not under the knife right now," John answered, shuddering a little at the thought. "They had me on suppressor drugs but somehow when Tessa touched me she jumpstarted my powers...I mean REALLY jumpstarted them."

Tessa smirked. "He took down the Brotherhood, the MALE –"

Scott's look of relief swiftly changed and became dire. "We have to leave, immediately." without waiting for a response he grabbed John's arm and started pulling him away and in the direction of their house.

"Dad, hold up!" John exasperated, trying to resist being towed along. The others followed, asking Scott to pause and reconsider a moment.

Scott merely pulled harder and quickened the pace. "Magneto and the others could be regrouping for another assault as we speak."

“Actually,” John said, twisting out of his father’s iron grip, “they’re not.”

Scott paused and looked at him curiously. “They aren’t?”

“No, I wiped their minds clean of everything concerning me and my powers,” John explained, looking quite proud of himself. “The physical evidence too – the videos they had stored on the cell phones, and I had Gateway check and delete any references in their computer and storage media at the MALE hideout.”

Scott didn’t look convinced. “Magneto...his helmet –”

John shook his head. “I threw him. His helmet got cracked open when his head collided with the rocks.”

Logan couldn’t help but smile upon hearing that bit of news. Personally, he wouldn’t have minded it if Magneto’s head had cracked open as well. It couldn’t be denied that he was feeling something quite close to pride.

“And Mystique?” Ororo asked hurriedly. “She’s immune to telepathic invasion.”

John shrugged. “Didn’t seem to help her any this time around. I did feel some resistance, but it broke down in seconds.”

Professor Xavier looked pensive. Currently, John’s mind was unreadable to him. Just as Lilandra and Tessa’s were. Perhaps, he speculated, their telepathy was operating on a different frequency than the usual variant. If that were so, then it could be possible that they could pierce Mystique’s telepathic immunity.

“I don’t know...” Scott trailed off.

Betsy spoke up. “I’m supposedly immune to telepathic invasion. And John has managed to read my mind before – albeit unconsciously.”

Xavier’s eyebrows shot up. “How could I forget? You’re referring to when you gave them that essay assignment and –”

“He wrote down precisely those points I was pondering while supervising them,” Betsy finished for him. “Yes. It’s not really all that shocking. If what we’re seeing is a whole new stage in psychic evolution the old rules need not apply.”

“Dad, trust me,” John said reassuringly, “they don’t know a thing. I even cleared the specifics from Frost’s mind.”

“What if one of us gets our mind read?” Scott persisted. “By some future telepathic enemy and they come to know of it. Or even by that MALE telepath, Wits. I imagine we’ve not seen the last of her.”

“We can mentally encrypt the information,” Betsy suggested, “so that any unauthorized viewers won’t be able to make heads or tails of it. Now that we have some time on our hands we can see to it that everyone who knows the full details is properly secured.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Logan said, eyeing Scott expectantly.

Finally the tension seemed to leave Scott’s body. “Come on, let’s get inside. It’s freezing out here.” He quickly turned so that no one would have to see him all emotional any longer. “Alex and Lorna are worried sick.”

John smiled at his father’s attempt to hide his feelings, futile as they were to all the psychics present. All followed suite and headed towards the Mansion and out of the chilly night air...

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“What I don’t understand,” Lorna said as she sat down with a cup of tea, “is why you didn’t contact us after you dealt with the Brotherhood and the MALE.”

John's explanation was simple. After having his powers not only restored, but boosted, he wasn't quite sure of his own strength for the time being.

"If I'd used too much power to send a message long distance to a non-telepath," John explained to them, "it could have fried your mind. I was willing to risk it with Gateway, but not with you guys. I tried to make contact with the Professor and Betsy but something was blocking my —"

"We were inside the Cerebro Room," Professor Xavier explained. "It's a shielded environment. Cerebro's psionic dampeners were online. Those were blocking your attempts at communication."

Betsy shook her head and quickly replied. "It **was** a shielded environment. My guess is that your trying to force through the blockade burnt out its circuits."

John looked sheepish and blushed. "Sorry. I just keep ringing up the charges, huh? First the Danger Room...and now Cerebro..."

Alex slapped him on the shoulder comfortingly. "Well, don't take it to heart. You were partly responsible for giving the AI program a major upgrade."

John looked at him, totally confused. "What are you talking about?"

"You'll see tomorrow," Scott said, stifling a yawn. He nudged John. "Let's go home and get some sleep. We have an early day tomorrow, remember?"

They were scheduled to pay a visit to Rebirth Center and meet Lilandra and her associates properly.

"Yeah, good night, guys." John nodded and got up. After being given one final hug from his aunt and uncle, he followed his father outside and onto the Mansion greens and together they walked home.

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As soon as John heard the tapping on his bedroom window he ran to it and parted the curtains. Sure enough, outside an anxious looking Julian was hovering and pointing to the locking mechanism. It was swiftly unlatched. Within seconds their limbs were entwined together as they frantically kissed away their fears that they might not have ever seen each other again. Things got so intense that a chair was knocked aside and fell with a heavy thud.

“John?” Scott’s voice could be heard calling out from the hallway. “Is everything okay?”

Both boys froze and their lips parted with a wet smack.

“Uh, yeah, dad,” John shouted in response. Telekinetically he made sure the door was locked. “Everything’s fine.”

“Alright then, night.”

“Night.”

Several moments of silence passed and then they both decided that Scott had finally turned in for the night. John allowed himself to fall flat on the bed, grabbing Julian’s shirt and pulling him down on top of him. For once Julian didn’t seem to mind when John touched his scar.

“Do you have any idea how much I missed you?” Julian murmured into John’s neck.

“How ‘bout you show me,” John replied in a wickedly suggestive tone, running his palms down Julian’s nicely muscled torso.

“Sir, yes, sir,” Julian said with a grin, hands slipping behind John’s tee shirt and up his back. John let out a gasp as he felt Julian’s fingers brush the base of his spine and begin travelling upwards. Abruptly, the digits ceased their motion.

“What?” John asked, opening his eyes to find Julian’s face twisted in confusion. “Is something wrong?” John looked mildly embarrassed. “Am...am I being too slutty?”

Julian shook his head in the negative. “No, of course not.”

“You sure?”

“Positive,” Julian assured his boyfriend. “It’s just...could you raise up a little?”

John complied and Julian ran his fingers further up. His fingers made contact with something roughish that could not possibly be John’s skin. He eased off John and carefully turned him on his side.

“Hmm, doesn’t spooning usually come *after* the making out?” John asked teasingly.

Julian didn’t answer and instead pushed up the tee to reveal blood encrusted bandages covering John’s back.

“What the hell are these?” Julian asked, switching on the bedside lamp to get more light to see by.

“What are you talking about...” John trailed off as Julian pulled carefully at one of the bandages. It was then that it struck him that he’d forgotten all about the state of his back. “Oh God, how could that have slipped my mind?” John pondered a moment. He hadn’t felt any pain there for some time. He was probably too busy and his mind was quite literally focused on other things...except, now that he was aware of his wounds once more, why weren’t they hurting?

“What happened to you?” Julian asked, sounding both worried and pissed off. “How’d you get like this?”

“It was Sabretooth,” John said, sitting up. He reached back and began tentatively stroking the bandages. “He said he had a message...for Logan and he wrote it on my back...with his claws.”

“The sick motherfucker,” Julian muttered under his breath. He got up, switched on the light and ordered John to get on his stomach. “Those bandages need to be changed. And he did it with his claws? When was the last time your back was disinfected?”

“Four...maybe five hours ago.” John scratched his chin absently. “I’m not sure.”

“Why didn’t you tell anyone?” Julian demanded.

“I forgot.”

“Forgot?” Julian asked skeptically. “Those things bled and soaked through the bandages. How could you forget? Don’t they hurt?”

“They haven’t hurt for a while. They’re not hurting now.”

Julian was adamant. “Well, tomorrow you’ll have to go down to Med Bay. For now I’ll just change the bandages. First aid kit in the bathroom?”

“Yes, but —” John began.

“I’ll be careful,” Julian responded, kissing his forehead. “It’s just down the hall. I’ll fly so I won’t make any noise.”

John acquiesced and Julian snuck out. After removing his tee shirt, John held it up to the bright light and carefully scrutinized it. On the back there were some places that seemed a bit off color, slightly darker than the rest of the fabric. You had to know what you were looking for and looked real carefully to notice it. The dried blood was responsible. Perhaps, John reasoned, that was why Logan hadn’t smelled it. Because it was already dried up.

The door opened and Julian walked in with the first aid kit. “Okay, get on your belly.”

“Okay,” John replied, tongue in cheek. “But wouldn’t you rather have me on my hands and knees?”

Julian's jaw dropped and his cheeks burnt with sudden heat. "Uh...I..."

John chuckled and lowered himself back onto bed the on his stomach.
"Man, I don't think I'll ever get fed up of seeing you blush. Alright, do me."

Julian swatted him on the rump. "Very funny. Now just tell me if it hurts.
Okay?"

"Gotcha."

Sitting at John's side, Julian began to pick at one of the bandages and slowly began to peel it off. "Does it hurt?"

"Nuh uh. Maybe you should just pull them off with one quick motion."

Julian shook his head. "No, we do this slow and carefully. We don't want to risk making the injuries worse." So saying, Julian persevered until finally, one of the bloodstained bandages came off. He placed it on the nightstand and got an alcohol swab ready. "Okay, you might wanna get a pillow handy in case you wanna scream into it."

"I'm a big boy."

"Alright, here goes..." Julian squinted.

"I'm waiting...patiently..."

"It's...I don't see any wound," Julian said, putting down the swab. "I'll take off another." Julian repeated the process and removed another bandage, and another until all were lying in a loose pile on the nightstand. There was not so much as a bruise on his boyfriend's back. "There's nothing."

"Whaddya mean nothing?"

"That there's no skin off your back...literally," Julian said, getting up and pulling John to his feet and over to the mirror. "Look."

After twisting his head at an uncomfortable angle and finally seeing for himself, John muttered. "Damn. How did that happen?"

Julian leaned against the wall, pondering. "It could be your powers. Psychic healing is a specialized form of telekinesis affecting the body at the cellular level. Speeds up the metabolism and forces cells to divide and regenerate and other stuff."

John reached around and ran his fingers up his back. "You don't say. It musta been an unconscious thing then, because I don't remember doing it. I'm still figuring out what I can do. Tessa, she did something to me. She said she was gonna gimme a peek at what I might turn out to be one day." John walked over to the bed and sat down.

Julian followed.

"It's wearing off slowly," John continued, face falling a little. "I can feel it. So whatever she did is temporary. Man, that sucks. I sure could get used to this."

Julian patted him on the back. "Hey, it'll be so much better when you know that you worked to attain your potential. It'll mean more earning it than having it just given to you."

"I dunno. I got the shielding skills telepathically handed to me," John teased.

"That was different. We were running against the clock." Julian rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah, yeah. No sense griping about it," John replied, grabbing him by his shirt and pulling him down onto the bed again. "Now where were we..."

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The next morning...

Lilandra Neramani stood at the window in her office staring out at the sunrise, and sipping at a cup of her favorite herbal tea. She'd had less than four hours sleep the night before owing to her troubled state of mind. Jonathan Summers was back home, safe and sound. That she was extremely grateful for. It was the means by which his escape had been made possible that worried her.

"What's wrong?"

Lilandra turned around to find Sibyl leaning at the doorway, a concerned expression playing on her face.

"You've been uneasy ever since you came back last night," Sibyl said, stepping into the office proper and joining Lilandra at the window. "I'd think you'd be glad. Things worked out far better than we'd hoped."

That much was true. In addition to the avatar being alive and well, the X-men seemed to be coming around and agreed to meet them later that day. Slowly but surely an atmosphere of trust and possible cooperation was beginning to coalesce.

"It's..."

"Don't say it's nothing," Sibyl cut in pointedly. "We always said we'd be honest with each other. No secrets. Remember?"

Lilandra nodded and sighed. "Very well. There has been an unforeseen development."

"Oh?"

Lilandra began to explain. When Sage/Tessa had gone missing they had all surmised (correctly) that she was tailing John and his abductors. They knew that she wasn't dead. That much they could sense. It was their hope that perhaps they could home into her via their unique mental bond, and by finding her they could themselves locate Jonathan Summers before Magneto could have his way.

That didn't work out due to the sheer distance separating them. Which was why when Scott Summers paid a visit to Rebirth House and asked her assistance, Lilandra jumped at the chance upon learning they had the means to technologically boost psychic signals. Unfortunately she wasn't able to locate either Jonathan or Tessa in time.

"Well, no need to blame yourself," Sibyl said soothingly. "Everything worked out fine. They escaped didn't they?"

Lilandra shook her head slowly. "No. Tessa gave him a boost."

Sibyl's eyes widened. "What?"

"He was under some kind of mutant suppressor drug," Lilandra explained to her compatriot. "And Tessa decided to override it by turning potentiality to actuality."

"But what about his self-control, his —"

"There's no worry there," Lilandra interrupted. "His control increased in sync with his power level. He doesn't seem to realize just what he's capable of yet. Which, as I'm sure you'll appreciate, is a good thing."

As John would eventually have to learn, there would be consequences should he channel massive amounts of psychic energy without the utmost care. Indeed, there already were due to his recent Danger Room incident. Everything in life came with a price.

Sibyl breathed a small sigh of relief. "Well, thank goodness it's temporary. It'll wear off in a few days. Maybe a week max. I expect he'll be resting from his ordeal and likely won't be hitting dangerous levels of energy consumption."

That wasn't what was worrying Lilandra. As a leader, she knew all too well that some things were best kept secret, that not all her followers would understand or agree with the great lengths she had taken to ensure that

they would have an avatar powerful enough to serve when the time came for it.

For a brief moment Lilandra toyed with the idea of sharing her secret with Sibyl. But she checked herself hastily. "You're probably right. We're just going to have to be more vigilant from now on."

Sibyl nodded. "I hope our meeting goes well today."

"Me too, dear," Lilandra replied, taking another sip of her herbal tea.

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Later that morning at the Summer's Home...

John awoke to sunlight streaming into his room and cascading onto his bed. After shaking off some of his morning grogginess, and smiling at the memory of the night before, he tried to get up only to realize that he was caught in a hug by the still sleeping Julian.

Still somewhat groggy (and needing to pee) he wriggled a bit and tried to extricate himself from the entwining arms of his boyfriend. It was when he managed to throw off the covers and catch a glimpse of his torso and upper limbs that he realized something was terribly wrong. Too shocked to speak, John held up his arms. His shrunken forearms were tiny when compared to their usual size. And so too was his upper body.

Quickly, John flung the covers off him completely to find that his briefs were supersized and completely loose on his tiny hips. His legs were childlike and terminated in feet that looked like they might suit a doll better than a person. Scampering off the bed and onto the floor made John realize that his current height placed him hardly level with the mattress. His underwear promptly fell to the floor and, horror of horror, his penis and testicles were discovered to be miniscule.

“What the fuck?” John muttered, suddenly stopping and putting his hand to his mouth upon hearing his voice. Without wasting any more time he ran to the mirror, tiny feet making pitter patter sounds that deeply disturbed him. Upon looking into the mirror he was forced to confront what his mind hitherto refused to allow him to believe. John stumbled backwards and fell flat onto his rump, crying out in pain and he hit his funny bone on the foot of the bed.

The sound was enough to wake Julian who yawned, got up and stretched. When he saw a tiny figure rising at the foot of the bed and realized he was in the presence of a child...he ripped the sheet off the bed and covered himself, too shocked for words. What the hell was a child doing there he wondered. Could he be some one of John’s family come visiting and then wandered into the room?

The boy turned around and stepped shakily into plain view. He was stark naked and looked to be on the verge of tears.

Thinking quickly, Julian tried to reach out with his mind to make contact with John. Hopefully his boyfriend could get the kid outta there and if the child said anything John could chalk it up to children’s imagination. That could work, Julian thought. The kid looked damned young. No older than five or so.

John?! John?! Get in here now. Where are you?

The kid sniffled. “I’m right here,” he said, voice quivering.

Julian’s jaw dropped and he walked closer and knelt before the kid. The hair was the same red hue, blue eyes and a little button nose.

“John, is that you? Holy shit! It *is* you, isn’t it?!” Julian exclaimed, then hit himself for using language like that in front of a child.

“It’s alright,” John said sulkily. “As far as I can tell, only my body’s been affected.”

“We’ve gotta get help,” Julian said gravely. He rose quickly and began throwing on his clothing. “This could damn well be related to your back...the wounds that just vanished. That woman...whatever she’s done is obviously having some side effects.”

“You go back to the Mansion and wait,” John said in his little boy voice. “You’re not supposed to be here. I’m going to have to tell dad.”

Julian lifted John and sat him down on the bed and covered him with a corner of the sheet. “You might want to put something on first. And warn him before he sees you. God, this is gonna be one hell of a shock. I’ve heard about powerful psychics unconsciously rearranging their DNA on the molecular level to match their frame of mind. This could be something like that.”

“Really?” John asked, wide eyed.

Julian nodded. “Yeah. Psychosomatic to the extreme.”

“But...but I don’t feel any different,” John said with a cute pout. “I mean relieved, yeah, but –”

“Well,” Julian said, brushing aside some stray hair from his face, “you’ve been through a very frightening ordeal. Maybe your subconscious mind just wants to go back to a place where it feels safe...and your body physically reacted to that. The Professor will know what to do.”

John hoped he was right. “You think?”

Julian nodded if only for comfort. “Yeah, he’s dealt with a lot of weird psychic stuff over the years. You should see some of the archive’s files.” After a final hug, Julian leapt out the window, leaving John to the task of revealing his current status to his father.

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Dad? You awake?

John stood nervously outside the door to his father's bedroom, clothed in a tee shirt that fell down to the floor and was more akin to a **gown**.

Yeah.

John could sense his father's presence growing stronger and knew he was approaching the door.

Stop. Don't move.

A tinge of worry colored Scott's thoughts. *Is something wrong?*

Um, yeah. I have something to tell...and um, show you. It's gonna be a real shock. You might wanna sit down and brace yourself.

John what's going on –

You'll see. Just sit down ...and make sure your glasses are on properly. We wouldn't want any accidents. Tell me when you're ready.

Scott mentally replied that he was ready. John looked at the doorknob. It was higher up than his head. Sighing, he reached up and grasped the doorknob and turned...or **tried** to rather. It was harder than he expected, given the small size of his hands. Finally he decided to just use his powers. He didn't get the chance to.

Scott, confused as to why John was struggling with the door had walked over and turned it, swinging the door wide open. Moments later he was stumbling backwards in shock, mouth gaping.

"J-John?" Scott stuttered, wondering if all the stress had finally gotten to him or if this was some sort of dream.

John walked slowly inside, tripping when he stepped on the lower hem of the tee shirt. He landed at his father's feet. Scott tentatively helped him back up.

Scott walked slowly around his son, scrutinizing from all angles. "How on earth did this happen?"

"I don't know," John answered. "I just went to bed and woke up like this." John quickly went on to explain about what Sabretooth had done to his back.

"He what?" Scott asked through gritted teeth, making a mental note to himself to pay Sabretooth back the next time they chanced to meet.

"And they just vanished," John went on. "And now this."

"Okay, we'll go see Professor Xavier," Scott said, taking a resisting John by the arm. "But first we need to get you some clothes that fit."

John succeeded in yanking his arm away with some effort. "I don't got any clothes that –"

Scott got a nostalgic look on his face. "Your mother and I kept some...for sentimental reasons. They're in the attic." Scott made to take his son's hand but checked himself quickly. "Come on."

John shuddered as he followed his father up to the attic, praying that they would find something decent that he could afford to show his face in...

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...Which they didn't.

“I can’t believe I’m going out in public dressed like this,” John grumbled as he walked across the Mansion greens with his father. “How could you and mom dress me like this as a kid. It amounts to child cruelty.”

“We didn’t buy it. It was a gift.” Scott carefully hid a smile. “You don’t remember this outfit?”

John shook his head in the negative. “No. obviously the memory musta been so traumatic that I blocked it out.”

“Well you should be thankful you didn’t...uh, shrink any smaller,” Scott went on. “Or we’d have had to make do with one of the others.”

John blinked stupidly. “On second thought, a sailor suit’s not so bad.”

Finally they entered the front door and walked past the entrance hall and into the sitting room. Ororo was just coming in with a cup of coffee when she chanced to see them. Her hot cup of coffee promptly fell onto the expensive rug, missing her feet by mere inches.

“Good Goddess!” she exclaimed, walking uneasily forward. “Whatever’s going on?”

John tried to swat her hands away as she squeezed, prodded, poked and rubbed his cheeks, chin and head as if to ascertain what she was seeing was real.

“When did this happen?” she finally asked.

They filled her in quickly. Just as they finished Rogue and Remy decided to traipse in and the cycle repeated itself, with Remy hollering a Cajun obscenity in his shock, the sound of which was enough to bring in Hank and Logan who were just around the corner. Soon the room was filled with anxious, curious, worried X-men. The females among them finding time to go ‘aww’ at the sight of a cute kid in a sailor suit.

Finally John could bear it no longer and all but ran from the room and down the hallway, heading straight for the subbasement elevator. He rapidly

punched in the numbers when he heard footsteps following him. He entered the elevator and swiftly shut the double doors with his telekinesis.

For God's sake stop crowding me! It's not helping. John exasperated mentally. *Professor? Professor!*

There was a pause and then a reply came in strong and clear.

Yes, I'm here.

I need to see you, sir. Could you please come to the Subbasement? I'll wait for you in the War Room. Oh, and could you please not bring along a crowd?

Understood. I'll be there shortly.

John closed the mental channel, stepped out into the Subbasement corridor and walked towards the War Room, taking care to scan the area for anyone down there. several scattered Generation X members were about but no seniors. He entered the War Room and took a seat, patiently awaiting the arrival of the Professor.

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It took a great deal of willpower to restrain himself when Professor Xavier entered the War Room and met with John. His countenance was a serene mask but inside he was seething with questions. Foremost on his mind was whether he made a mistake the night before in not attempting to reinstall the psychic blocks on John's mind.

He'd decided against since Tessa and Lilandra assured him that John's control and skill were increased together with his power level. Since Xavier didn't sense any spillages of psionic energy escaping from John he decided

that there was likely minimal danger and did not restore the barriers. He had hoped to document the progress of Tessa's boost...but now this...

"So do you think it could have been caused by what Tessa did?" Scott asked the Professor.

"That is difficult to ascertain at the moment," Professor Xavier said, rubbing his chin. "We'll need to take tissue samples and perform cytological evaluations to determine the extent to which your body's cells have been altered. And a thorough physiological battery of tests as well as a mental evaluation."

Scott leaned back in his chair, fingers drumming the armrest. "Hank's lab was spared any major damage," Scott said, "but we don't have the resource personnel to handle –"

"No we don't," Xavier interrupted. "It seems we may have to pay a trip to Muir Island."

John's face twisted. "Muir Island? Where's that?"

"It's an island off the coast of Scotland," his father answered. "One of the Professor's friends runs the Mutant Research Institute there."

Xavier nodded and smiled hopefully. "Dr. Moira Mactaggert. She's the foremost mutant researcher in the field. If anyone can give us timely answers about what's going on – she can."

John moaned in frustration. He had always relished the thought of one day hopping about the globe as an X-man. But after having spent a week away and hiding for what he thought might be an indefinite duration...he wanted a nice rest at home, to unwind with his friends again and regain some semblance of order to his life. Now here he was set to jet off to Scotland.

"If it's really temporary," John said hopefully, "it might just reverse itself. Right?"

“That’s possible,” Xavier replied, trying to sound optimistic. “If you’re okay with it, might we begin the mental evaluation now?”

John nodded assent and Xavier set about his task under the watchful eyes of Scott...

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“Scott!” Alex called out as he chanced to see his brother exiting the elevator. “Is it true?”

Alex could only be asking about one thing. Likely it was the talk around the Mansion by then.

“Lorna!” Alex yelled out behind him. “I found him!”

Seconds later Lorna came running down the hallway and joined them.

“Scott, everyone’s saying that John’s having a second childhood,” Lorna gasped out in one breath.

Scott nodded. “Yeah, he is. Shocked the hell outta me too.” He began walking down the hallway, the two of them trailing him.

“Well how is he?” Alex asked concernedly. “Is he okay? They say he’s like just over three feet tall.”

Scott nodded. “Three feet, four inches actually.”

“What about his mental age?” Lorna asked hurriedly. “Did that decrease too?”

“Oh his mind wasn’t affected,” Scott was pleased to confirm. “Just his body. He looks like he’s about four or five or so. He’s wearing that sailor suit you

guys bought him. We didn't have anything else that fit him. Knowing that, you can approximate his general appearance...and how he must be feeling."

Alex and Lorna stared at each other then turned swiftly to Scott.

"We want to see him," Lorna said with authority.

Scott looked doubtful. "He's really sensitive right now about anyone seeing him like this. Just now he ran off when everyone was –"

Alex scoffed. "We're not just anyone. We're family."

Scott paused, considering. "Oh, alright. He's down in the Subbasement...in the War Room having his mind scanned by the Professor. Don't interrupt them until they're finished. We're due to fly out to Muir Island soon. You can come along if you want...and if he lets you. Now if you'll excuse me, I gotta go see to some things."

"Right," Alex said, taking Lorna with him towards the elevator. "Later, Scott."

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Later on that day, in the War Room...

"I still think we should get in contact with Lilandra," Scott insisted to the gathered X-men seated in the War Room. "They're likely responsible for this...it stands to reason that they might be able to tell us what's going on."

Opinion was divided on the matter as several of the X-men were still upset with Scott for allowing Lilandra Neramani onto the premises without consultation.

"It's not like they didn't know about us already," Scott defended. "It was a command decision."

Some murmurs rippled through the gathering but no one said anything coherent. No one wanted to rehash the argument all over again.

“Scott,” Professor Xavier began, raising his hand for silence, “I agree with you. But first I think we should see what Moira can discover and then contact Miss Neramani. Just so that we can verify if both sets of findings add up.”

Hank looked thoughtful. “It **would** give us an opportunity to test their trustworthiness...”

“Indeed,” Xavier continued. “As it is – I’m stumped. I can’t seem to read John’s mind to any great extent. It’s as if it’s been rewired somehow...reconfigured.”

“Is he dangerous?” Rogue asked, looking worried.

Professor Xavier was quick to dispel unfounded fears. “No. There’s almost no telepathic leakages from his mind. Whatever he is, he’s in full control. It’s quite extraordinary what Tessa’s accomplished really.”

“Well, let’s hope Moira can shed some light on this,” Ororo added, eyes shifting momentarily to Logan. He’d been quiet all during the conversation. “When are you leaving?”

“Later this evening,” Scott answered. “I wanted John to get some more rest. Alex and Lorna took him shopping for some clothes that actually fit...and um, he got tired.”

Someone tittered but promptly stopped.

“Anyway, we’re all heading out at 17:00 hours,” Scott continued. “It’s a good thing he brought the jet back.”

Logan, who had been looking thoughtful, spoke up. “So...you’re all going? To Muir Island? Alex and Lorna too I mean.”

Scott nodded. "Yeah. Lorna and Alex insisted they come along...family, you know how it is."

Actually, Logan didn't, but he said nothing of it. "Does anyone else in the family know?"

Scott shook his head in the negative. He'd decided against worrying them until they had a proper understanding of what was going on. That and John and Elaine might run the risk of having heart attacks.

"I think that's very wise," Professor Xavier said.

"So...if there's nothing else..." Scott trailed off, "I've got to go get ready and check up on John."

"Actually," Logan interjected before Scott could leave, "I think I'll go along with you guys."

Remy and Warren looked at each other, then to Logan.

"But you were gonna help us with the rewiring and—" Warren began, before being cut off.

Logan waved him off. "Yeah, well it can wait. I been meaning to check up on my ol' buddy, Forge."

Remy rolled his eyes. "Since when were you and Forge so close?"

"I think he's trying to get outta helping us," Warren said, pouting like a child.

"I said I'm going," Logan reiterated heatedly. "I'm not answerable to you." He looked towards the Professor. "That is...if it's okay with you, Prof?"

Xavier knew better than to disagree. Of course, if he wished it Logan would remain. But for some reason, going to Muir was important to Logan. Since he so rarely asked for any personal time off...Xavier couldn't deny him.

“It’s quite alright, Logan,” Xavier said good naturedly, defusing any possible situation arising. “We’ll manage without you.”

Logan nodded and promptly exited the room.

Orooro timidly raised her hand. “Um, I think I’d like to tag along too, Professor.”

Warren opened his mouth again but at a glance from Xavier, shut it without saying anything.

“Very well then, Orooro. But we’ll need to have a talk about what’s to be done with the grounds immediately upon your return.”

She nodded and took off after Logan. Mutterings and murmurings began once more. Scott sighed and took his leave, glad to be getting away from it all, if only for a little while.

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“Touch me again and I’ll have you up for child molestation,” John said to his aunt as she tried to rub his cheeks for the umpteenth time that day.

Lorna’s hands dropped harmlessly to her side. “Spoilsport. And after I gave you the best window seat too.”

John blushed a little. “Sorry. It’s just hard getting used to...*this*.”

Lorna nodded and pushed some stray hairs out of his face. “I know, sweetie.”

“Lorna...”

“I mean – I know, **John**,” she corrected herself. “But hopefully Dr. Mactaggert will be able to figure out what’s going on. I’ve been reading up on her. She won a Nobel prize for her mutant cytogenetic research.”

John nodded, glancing to their left to find Logan and Ororo staring at him. When their eyes met they quickly looked away. John had hoped that it would be just them going to Muir but for some reason Logan and Ororo had insisted on accompanying them on the journey...and staring at him to boot. The very thing John had hoped he could avoid.

“Everyone, we’re about to land!” Scott called from the pilot’s seat.

“Brace for it,” Logan joked from across the cabin.

Alex muttered something up front in a not so nice tone...their descent began...

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John took in the sight before him as he set foot onto the tarmac. The Mutant Research Center must have had some serious funding indeed judging from the sheer size of the complex. From what he could make out there was a central, semi-spherical building that was comprised of glass panels build onto a metal skeleton. This was surrounded on four points by massive, metallic looking towers. Hovering above the entire complex was a lookout post, held aloft by antigravity rings.

In the distance a redheaded woman could be seen standing, lab coat fluttering in the strong breeze.

Alex whistled. “Would you look at this place? And I thought the Professor ran a slick operation.”

“Da-yum,” Loran muttered, using her powers to scan the area. “I think it extends below ground. I can feel metal all around.”

“Well, let’s not waste any time,” Scott said as he closed the hatch behind him. Unconsciously, he took John’s hand, who surprisingly didn’t pull away, and they began to walk towards the entrance.

Behind them Logan and Ororo followed, keeping a reasonable distance.

“Welcome to Muir Island!” the woman shouted above the howling winds when they finally reached the front entrance. “It’s good to see you again, Scott, Logan...Ororo. Let’s get inside.”

Everyone hurried on in, the double doors sealing shut behind them and silencing the wind.

“This is my brother and his girlfriend,” Scott said, pointing to them.

“I’m Alex.”

“Lorna.”

Moira welcomed them warmly and they returned in kind. “I see Logan and Ororo came with you. Moral support, Scott?”

“Actually –”

“Yeah, you know us X-men,” Logan said evenly.

Ororo continued. “Tight knit and always there for each other.”

“I wish we came under better circumstances, Moira,” Scott said, nodding towards his son.

Moira flipped on her glasses and seeming to have seen John for the first time. “My word,” she said, slipping into an even stronger Scottish accent. “How long has he been like this?”

“He –”

“I woke up like this,” John said. “This morning.”

Moira looked surprised. “Oh, so sorry! I just assumed that everything about you had...your father hadn't said anything about –”

Scott immediately apologized. “It plain slipped my mind to mention that his mental age didn't change. Only his physical.”

Moira nodded, whipping out a handheld computing device and taking notes. “I see. Well, we'll get right on it, lad,” she said, rolling the 'r'. “Meanwhile, why don't the rest of you relax in our lounge and make use of the recreational facilities.”

Alex and Lorna were about to insist on tagging along.

“I just need to give John a full battery of tests and I believe he may be more comfortable without a crowd,” Moira explained.

Lady, I like the way you think.

Moira smiled. *Medical physicals were not meant to be spectator sports.* She turned to the rest of them. “Scott, I'll need you to come along. The rest of you may feel free to partake of anything the facility has to offer. This way please.”

Scott and John followed her, leaving Alex, Lorna, Logan and Ororo in the entrance hall.

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“This place is amazing,” John said as they walked down a long hallway brimming with white coated scientists and assistants rushing about.

Moira smiled. “It's the fulfillment of a dream,” she said. “A facility devoted entirely to the medical study of mutants. There's so much about you lot

that we don't know and often it has medical repercussions. Sometimes severe ones."

John frowned in confusion. "You lot? But aren't you a —"

Moira chuckled. "No, lad. I'm a regular, run of the mill Homo sapien."

"Oh, there's nothing run of the mill about you, Moira," Scott said amiably. "You practically developed your own field of study. This stuff isn't even being taught in medical schools."

"Yet." Moira took the compliment in her stride. "We're getting there...slowly but surely."

Abruptly John stopped walking. It took a few moments before Scott and Moira noticed. Scott turned around and quickly ran up to him. Moira followed, looking worried.

"What? What is it?" Scott asked, kneeling down.

John looked a bit unsteady.

"I...don't feel so good," John said, swaying a little on his feet. "I feel sorta dizzy."

Scott steadied him and looked to Moira.

"It may be the trip," Moira suggested. "Such a journey can't have been easy on him in his present condition. Children often —"

John shook his head forcibly. "No...it's...not..."

Scott and Moira started in shock as John's eyes blazed with psychic flame and a golden aura enveloped him. John turned to the solitary door which stood down a short corridor to their extreme right. It was very heavy duty in comparison to most others they'd seen in the facility and relatively out of the way. Emblazoned on the door in bright yellow paint was '**C-27**'.

“I can feel someone in there,” John said softly. “He’s...angry. No, *more* than angry.”

A nervous look flashed across Moira’s features, but it quickly vanished. Scott, however, didn’t fail to notice it.

“He wants out,” John continued, voice barely a whisper. “Bad. His emotions, they’re so strong. I don’t think I’ve ever felt anything like it before.”

“It may just be your increased telepathic sensitivity,” Moira was quick to say. “You may just be oversensitive at the moment.”

“No,” John replied, shutting his eyes tightly, the glow about him fading away. Quickly, he erected empathic shields to prevent being caught surprised by the powerful waves of emotions a second time. “Whoever’s inside there is pissed as...er...mad as hell.”

“Who’s in there, Moira?” Scott asked, getting to his feet again and staring down the corridor.

“A teenage boy whose mutation activated a few weeks ago,” Moira answered quickly. “His powers are...destructive and involuntary in nature and so he was brought here for help and training. Due to the nature of his mutation we’ve had to keep him contained and in a controlled environment.”

Scott’s face twisted. “Contained? His parents —”

“His parents know and understand completely,” Moira said, directing them back on course. “I can assure you. The lab’s this way.”

Scott and John shared a look as they followed her.

She’s hiding something, John said to his father mentally.

Scott concurred. *Yeah, but whatever it is...it can wait for the time being. We need her help right now.*

*You don't know how it felt, dad. I can understand needing to seclude someone for safety reasons...but the **rage** I felt just now...what if they're crossing some kinda ethical line here?*

After she runs those tests we'll look into it, Scott promised. He himself couldn't shake the definite feeling that Moira was hiding something.

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"Cars?" Scott asked, an amused look on his face. He was referring to the underwear John was currently wearing.

John rolled his eyes. "Trust me. They were the manliest pair I could find," John said, quickly getting his clothing on again. He'd just had a complete body scan, blood drawn, tissue samples and biometric measurements performed. Laboratory aides ran helter-skelter with the samples and immediately began conducting various assessments.

Scott watched the bustle and asked, "How soon can we expect results?"

Moira stretched and walked towards the door. "Results will be available within the hour. But it's the interpretation of those results that's likely to take some time. Why don't we go get something to snack on at the cafeteria while we wait, hmmm?"

"Ooh! You got ice cream?" John asked, already heading out the door.

Moira smirked. "We've got the entire works."

Scott looked distant for a moment, then quickly said, "Why don't you go with Moira? I need to report to the Professor. Check up on the others for me, okay?"

Both were agreeable and left him, arranging to meet back at the lab in an hour. As soon as they turned the corner Scott clandestinely made his way to an out of the way computer terminal and began trying to access the facility's data banks via through the network...

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"I wonder how she pays for all this?" Lorna mused out loud. She took a long sip of her juice and watched Moira chatting with John across the room.

Alex swallowed his ice cream and replied, "She probably has sponsors and investors. I guess **some** people must be interested in her research. Not everyone's as bigoted and repressed as we are in the states."

Lorna nodded. She was a bit uneasy though. Upon arriving at the facility she had detected a massive amount of metal underground, leading her to believe that much of the complex was hidden. The question was, why? From what she was told, the Mutant Research Center was a completely open and legitimate facility. Hell, didn't Moira win a Nobel prize for the research she conducted here?

Alex scoffed. "Lorna, why must you always be so suspicious?"

Lorna looked at him incredulously. "My suspicions usually pan out. I'm guess a place like this uses a lot of power...but I can sense massive electromagnetic fields underground. Just how much energy do they need?"

"Cut it out," Alex warned her. "We're not here to make trouble. Moira seems very nice."

"So did Frost. I still cannot believe John made them let her go," Lorna said in disbelief. "Last I heard he wanted her in prison."

Alex took another bite of his sundae. "Maybe he knows something about her that the rest of them don't. He did say he got all up in her head."

"Ooh, they're coming over," Lorna said suddenly, whipping on a smile. "Act natural."

"I am. You're the one who..." Alex quickly changed his expression. "Hey, Moira!"

"Enjoying yourselves?" Moira asked as she came within speaking distance.

Alex nodded, glanced at Lorna and said, "You bet. We're gonna have to speak with the Professor about improving the cafeteria's selection back home."

"Damn right," John said, wiping his cheek clean of ice cream. "That really hit the spot."

Lorna sighed. "Just what we need. You getting all hyper on us."

John's face darkened. "Not funny."

"Well, he's a growing boy," Moira said fondly. "It comes with the territory."

"Yeah, growing boys need to eat," John replied, eyeing Alex's ice cream sundae.

"Moira?" Lorna interjected. "Can I ask you a question? And please don't take this the wrong way...cuz I don't mean anything by it. Really."

"Oh ask away," Moira said in a good natured manner.

Alex looked at his girlfriend piercingly. "Lorna, don't start."

She ignored him. "It's just that --"

Lorna did not get a chance to finish her sentence. At that moment the entire cafeteria was plunged into darkness. Seconds later emergency lights came on and warning klaxons could be heard blaring.

“Sector C-27 breached,” a voice boomed over the intercom. “Structural integrity compromised. This is not a drill. I repeat this is not a drill.”

“Oh no...” Moira trailed off, a look of terror on her face. She turned to her guests. “Please, remain here.”

Lorna and Alex looked alarmed to say the least.

“What’s going on?” Alex asked her.

She didn’t answer him. “Just stay here.” And with that she ran out of the cafeteria.

Lorna’s eyes took on a green glow.

“What is it?” Alex asked her.

“Those electromagnetic fields I was sensing underground,” she said, “I’m not feeling them anymore.”

A thought suddenly occurred to John as he had a visual flashback. C-27? Wasn’t that painted on the door they’d passed on the way to the lab. The same door Moira had gotten cagey about when asked. He closed his eyes for a moment then swiftly reopened them.

“Stay here,” John said to his aunt and uncle.

Lorna grabbed his arm a tad too tight and John winced. She didn’t release the pressure. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“Damn straight,” Alex said, reaching for his cell phone to call Scott. There was no dial tone. “Fuck, it’s not working. John, you try.”

“No.”

“No?” Alex asked incredulously. “Why the hell not?”

John rolled his eyes. "Because then he'll ORDER me to stay here and if I don't I'll get into trouble. Listen to me, there was a mutant boy Moira's people were keeping locked up inside sector C-27."

Lorna's eyes narrowed. "A mutant boy? Locked away? Like a prisoner?" She turned towards Alex. "See I knew there was something fishy about this place."

"She said they had to keep him...contained," John went on. "For everyone's safety. She may have been correct. But when we passed the door leading to sector C-27 I got hit by this guy's thoughts and feelings. There was the distinct impression that he wanted out and would do *whatever* it took to break free."

"That tends to happen when you lock someone up," a familiar, gruff voice said behind them.

They all turned to see Logan with Ororo following behind him.

"Moira said his parents were in agreement," John said to them.

Ororo rolled her eyes. "All too often parents don't do what's best for their children. We have to investigate."

John nodded. "Right, I was just about to –"

Alex chuckled dryly. "Oh no you weren't."

John wriggled free of his grasp. "Look, if it really is this guy whose busted free, then they got a serious problem on their hands. That sector looked to be heavily fortified and for him to have broken outta there...it must have took some major power."

Lorna scoffed. "Your point? Please?"

"Lives are at stake," John continued. "And while I have this boost going for me I might as well put it to good use. Look at this place, it's crawling with

civilians. A long drawn out fight here would cause serious damage and probably injure a lot for people.”

Alex didn't see that as an issue. “I'm sure they will be evacuating the place soon enough.”

John begged to differ. “Why do you think Moira told us to stay here, Alex? From what I can sense, every exit and entry point has been sealed. The entire facility is on lockdown. Whoever this guy is, they sure as hell don't want him getting out...and he sure as hell has got a problem with that. Maybe I can track him down telepathically. At least help them find the guy.”

Ororo opened her mouth.

“Can it,” John said to her before she got started. “I took down the Brotherhood and the MALE didn't I? This is a good opportunity to test my capabilities. Think of it as a field evaluation exercise. This boost won't last forever. Who knows when next I'll have this chance to learn more about myself. Now, excuse me.”

Before they could stop him John took to the air and flew out of the cafeteria, blazing a trail of golden flames.

“He...has a point,” Logan admitted, running after him.

Ororo sighed. “Scott will not be pleased.” She too flew off.

Several minutes passed before the inevitable happened. Lorna cracked her knuckles. “No sense they get to have all the fun,” she said, leaping into the ether.

Alex frowned and took a final bite of his now melting ice cream sundae. “With all the action we been seeing lately we might as well sign up for the X-men too,” he said, running out the door after his girlfriend.

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“Shit, shit, shit!” Scott swore uncharacteristically. “Really stepped into that one.”

Scott’s little attempt at hacking had in fact backfired. He managed to access the facility’s schematics just fine and did locate the sector in which Moira was keeping the mutant she spoke about. However, he had misinterpreted the security data. Scott thought he was disabling the *file* security protocols, unlocking the information stored on the mutant denizen. Instead, he had disabled the sector’s secure lockdown mechanisms...allowing whoever was inside to escape.

“Place your hands above your head,” a harsh voice said behind him, “and step away from the console.”

Scott let out an exasperated breath and turned around. In one swift motion he fired upon the two security guards in a broad arc, knocking them clear across the lab and stunning them.

“Sorry, guys,” Scott said, walking past them and out the door.

First he needed to find John and then get him and the others somewhere safe. Then he’d help clean up the mess he’d caused. Finally, Moira would have some explaining to do.

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“What the fuck?” Logan whispered as he, Ororo and John stepped into the entrance hall.

Ororo looked about anxiously for any sign of sector C-27's escapee. While he wasn't currently at the main doors it was obvious that he had been. "My goodness. It looks like the artwork of a little child," Ororo whispered as she inspected the damage. "Like something made out of Play-Doh...that, um, melted."

"Either that or the handiwork of a demented lunatic," John said, walking up to the wall but not daring to touch it. "I think I understand why Moira looked so damn freaked out just now. Just look at the damage this guy can do."

The place looked as if someone had gone to town with Photoshop. The walls appeared to have melted and oozed onto the floor – not the paint, the **walls** themselves. In some places the floor seemed to have extruded thick tentacles from its surface. They pulsed and waved like bloated cilia with a will of their own.

Ororo knelt and took a closer look at the strange structures. "This seems to have been caused by some sort of reality warp," she finally pronounced. "At a molecular level."

John had been staring at a tentacle for some time, as if hypnotized. "Yeah," he said, eyes flashing. The tentacles retracted in his immediate vicinity and the floor became whole again. John turned his telekinetic focus to the western walls. The mounds of 'melted' material flowed upwards and redistributed themselves accordingly, then solidified once more. Section by section, he repeated the process until the entrance hall was as it should have been.

"How'd you do that?" Logan asked. He walked over and began pounding on the wall to make sure it was solid. Thudding sounds reverberated and proved that it was.

John shrugged his shoulders. "You know, ever since Tessa did what she did I've been trying to figure that out myself. It's like...using a computer I guess. You can do all sorts of things with it and not know how the hell the

computer actually works. I just know I can do it, not the technical details. It was like packing books that fell back onto a shelf...creating order from chaos..."

"Uh, guys," Ororo said, tapping John and Logan on their shoulders. "I think we've got company."

Outside in the corridor an orange glow could be seen. The doorway's rectangular opening began to twist, first into a trapezoid and then to an elongated oval.

"Time for meet and greet," Logan muttered, unsheathing his claws with a metallic snikt.

The glow intensified, prompting Logan, Ororo and John to assume defensive stances. Without doubt the one responsible was approaching their position. The question was, what kind of mood was he in and how far was he willing to go to fulfill his intent...

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Author's End Note: Okay, so how was this chapter? Like it, hate it? Hate me for making you wait so long? Feel free to review or you can email me at the following address – adriananderson587@gmail.com .

For the nitpickers who might be wondering why Sabretooth could pick up on John's scent and why Logan didn't, well here's my explanation. John smelled like Logan, alright? Now, the thing about sensory input is that when subjected to the same stimulus, in this case smell, repeatedly your brain gets desensitized to it. People and animals tend not to easily notice their own scent as their brains basically ignore it as not critical when compared to scents from other sources. So what that means is that Logan didn't really notice his scent or John's since it resembled his own so much.

Well, that's it. Be sure to let me know what you think! And I'm out!