A Country of One

by High_Pretension

Summary

Six months into his new life, Charles struggles to hold onto his sanity. He fights tooth and nail to survive Erik, all the while dreaming of an escape with Jean and Ororo. His only hopes lie with the rebellion that Mystique is planning against Magneto and his First Mutant Regime. Things come to a head when old enemies rear their ugly head, and Charles is caught between their devastating plans and Erik's all-consuming revenge...

Notes

At the outset, let me say, in all possible seriousness, that this is not a happy fic! Please heed all trigger warnings and then some. While none of the sexual descriptions are downright graphic, the fact that there is no consent involved makes it downright triggery. Secondly, this is part of a series and will not make a whole lot of sense when read in isolation. However, for a short summary of the first part, go to my end notes. Trudge on, ye...

See the end of the work for more notes.
In the end, it’s metal. It always is. And by Erik’s design, it’s glorious.

Here Charles is; tightening his fingers, purely out of instinct, around the cast-iron railings of some dark, non-descript balcony. Mostly he wonders how he ended up here on a night where less than two hours ago, he had no prospects other than coloring with Jean and Ororo. At the sane end of his thoughts, everything feels like history repeating itself. Mute, wound-up and a spectator to Erik’s chaos, the déjà vu is real enough.

“Xavier…” Angel Salvadore acknowledges, stepping lithely onto the balcony and leaning out over the railings.

“What am I doing here?” Charles asks in a voice that is decidedly not his own.

The rough edges of Angel’s wings catch the light, and glimmer. She stares languidly at the lawn below, the once majestic landscaping and the small army of cameras and news crews buzzing around it: “Are you a gambling man?”

“I’ve never had to gamble on anything.” Charles answers with the kind of honesty that fear brings on.

“You’ve got to start sometime…” Angel smirks. “Might as well with Erik…”

“What is he going to do?” Charles is a little breathless with paranoia. Erik Lehnsherr does not do less than apocalyptic.

“Oh, does the pillow talk not include the good stuff?” Angel retorts triumphantly.

Charles shifts his gaze back to the lawn, trying to halt his spiral of absolute hatred. Does it not all come down to Erik taking away that bit of him, his telepathy?

“I’ll take that as a no.” Angel presses cruelly along. “Not that I’m surprised…”

Charles cannot think of anything to say that will reverse the damage. Poetic then, that Erik – cape, helmet, insanity and all – should choose this moment to stride out.

There is a snap of silence. Even Charles holds his breath. Like clockwork the recording lights on the cameras blink silently, and a distinct whirring is in the air.

“Welcome to the circus.” Erik says gravely, his cape fluttering a little. “Anything less than the Pentagon would have been insulting for something so momentous…”

For just a second, the world hangs in balance. Until Emma Frost and Azazel marches a beleaguered Bolivar Trask forward.

“The time for war is past. Now we call for justice…” Erik sweeps a damning arm forward, dragging Trask to the fore by the metal zippers on his clothes.

Charles feels that familiar twist in the gut. Death, he’s going to witness death.

“Bolivar Trask, ex-general of the defeated Human Militia, and former defense consultant to the US Military…” Frost proclaims “For the countless mutants you and your men systematically
massacred, for every mutant child you cut open in the name of science, for every slaughter you inspired, we the First Mutant Regime hereby sanction your execution.”

The hatred rising off Trask is palpable, his quivering form is suddenly the center of Charles’s attention.

Trask arranges his features into a deranged snarl: “You stupid bitch, do you think I’m the last one? My work won’t end with me. Hang me and others will rise to fight, a million humans will come for you-”

Frost raises her hand, shutting Trask up in an impressive show of her powers: “You’re a dirty war relic and we’re going to wipe you away now…that will be that.”

“Besides…” Azazel rejoins, a deeply unpleasant smile flitting across his face. “Who said anything about hanging you?”

Trask stares on, his face a mixture of comic incredulity and mesmerized anger.

“This is for all of us…” Erik says in an echoing whisper, both his hands stretched out at Trask.

At first, there is no clue of what is to come. Just Erik and Trask locked into each other as though by a magic thread. A chill, like snow dust, runs down Charles’s spine.

“Go to hell, Trask.” Angel fumes, her wings rustling ominously.

And from that impatience stems the first signs of impending doom – a small trickle of blood from Trask’s nose, a bizarre twitch of the head, a long gasp – finally, finally, Angel is smiling.

There’s something to be said for the fine, pink mist that covers Trask, little specks in the precise arcs of the spotlights. Charles reels from the sight, paling and sickening by turns.

“Don’t faint on me, Xavier.” Angel mutters out of the corner of her mouth.

“I can’t watch…” Charles manages, refusing to heave more words into his mouth for fear of retching.

“Erik won’t like it one bit if you don’t.” A warning, then, and Angel won’t exactly lose sleep over snitching.

Charles could beg Erik’s forgiveness later, go down on his knees and be pretty; it’d hardly be any more demeaning than stripping at Erik’s pleasure and lying quietly in his arms afterwards. Still, if only it were as simple as wrenching his eyes away now.

“All of you waiting to follow Trask, all of you hiding in the dark and scheming like rats…” Anger punctuates Erik’s words. “…the next time, you think about hurting my brothers and sisters, remember there are honest-to-god atomic scraps of metal in your Neanderthal blood…”

Charles imagines the first miniscule globes of trace-iron singing to Erik, pooling in the blood and struggling to cut across tissue and bone. Who knew death could come from so deep within? Certainly not Trask, as his low, infernal keen proves.

“So how long now, do you think?” Angel simmers at the spectacle. There is the hint of mischief, the beginning of a game that will entertain her, one that Charles will lose ultimately.

Trust Erik to time this just right. Trust him to map out every screaming nerve in Trask’s body, to
deny him the comfort of a coma, to pull him savagely away from the stroke of death.

“Long.” Charles concedes, hugging himself as the first pocket of red erupts over Trask’s khaki shirt.

“Long is not a bet, Xavier.” Angel sounds disappointed. “I say anytime between now and the next two minutes.”

Tellingly, Trask keels over and strings out syllable after indeterminate syllable of curses and plagues. Frost has allowed him the final mercy of speech.

“Long live the revolution.” Erik growls out, pronouncing every inch of his own physical strain. “Long live the human with iron in his blood.”

Erik churning out the militia chant in mockery and then closing his hands into fists, all in one terrifying moment; the end when it comes, bathes Erik in a spray of Trask’s blood. The shock is audible and quite in his element, of course.

“This is what will happen to anyone who stands in our way.” Erik thunders.

Only Charles shudders, caught so perfectly in a loop between wanting to run and his legs refusing to moving.

“I win.” Angel says simply.

Charles begins to agree, but says nothing in the end. He is too well aware of the familiar thrum of Erik’s powers climbing in the alloy of his wristwatch; Erik knows exactly where Charles is.

Without meaning to, Charles thinks about his trysts with Raven Darkholme and Betsey Braddock, and their grand plans to topple Magneto. In the numbness that trails, he dwells more and more on his own blood. And, on the metal that is always his undoing.

Physics be damned. Charles does everything he can to line up against the far wall, hoping to sink into it and never be seen again. For the love of god, he will not be swallowed by this infernal cape pooling around him, even if it is the only thing keeping him warm.

Across the sorry expanse of his office, Erik is quick to the chase, catching Charles’s eyes every now and then. It is truly remarkable how he turns something so intimate into an act of lust, of wanting. At least, Erik’s steady gaggle of officers do not deign to spare Charles a second glance. They mill quickly around Magneto at the opposite end of the room, spouting glorious nothings.

“This war isn’t over, you realize?” Erik says soberly, cutting across a dozen voices singing his praises.

Azazel waits at the door, impatiently showing people out and frequently asking the rest to leave. Not that it dents anyone’s enthusiasm in the least.

A burly man intensely repeats: “This war isn’t over.”

Erik himself sways to the allure of victory, basks in the attention. Yet in the passage of a second, everything sours.

“Mystique is still out there…” An unwise someone says.

“She’s next!” Erik snaps, a violent hush wrapping his silhouette as best as Charles can make out.
There is only an unruly ticking from the clock above Charles, dead at ten past ten but still twitching back and forth without direction.

“Enough!” Azazel orders victoriously. “Magneto will not be seeing anyone else.”

A rush of footsteps, one sharply shut door and a crack of sulfur later, Charles is alone with Erik.

“You’ve said maybe five words tonight.” Erik states, some manner of accusation weighing on his tongue. The exhaustion makes itself felt too. Pulling out trace-metal from the veins of a mass murderer is no mean feat, after all.

Charles shakes his head, dipping his hand into a pocket and rolling his fingers around Ororo’s crayon, carried along in forgetfulness. No sense in drawing this out.

“Nothing?” Erik presses his advantage. “Do I have your blessings then?”

“You’ve won.” Charles says softly. “My blessings don’t matter.”

Erik watches him closely, eerily following the movement of his lips as though to catch a lie there. He demands finally: “Come here, Charles.”

Charles stalls. This pause in time, he has learnt from six months of dire lessons, is all sorts of dangerous. Because to deny Erik anything is ultimately just that. Dangerous.

“Charles…” A flash of intent streaks across Erik’s face.

Charles’s feet pick up motion of their own accord. The walk is awkward with the cape licking his feet. He slides quietly into Erik’s waiting arms.

Erik, for his part, is utterly callous. Without warning, he tips Charles into a kiss that is salty with possessiveness and something altogether different.

“You’ve got blood on you!” Charles balks, pulling back from the kiss.

“Well, it isn’t mine.” Erik is wry, even with a litany of imperceptible red spots across his face, and further beneath the helmet.

“There is blood on you!” Charles repeats, hooking a hand under Erik’s helmet and yanking it off without preamble.

The mood Erik is in, Charles is certain he will yank the helmet right back. Instead he glances incredulously between Charles and the helmet, a quiet vein of amusement on his lips: “So you keep telling me…”

Charles’s knees go weak, he is aware for once that the weight of the helmet is wrong in his hands. No more wrong than the blood matted in Erik’s hair, darkened into clumps, but wrong all the same. Charles can’t help the sinking thought that the right things to say and do have eluded him.

“If you’re done, I’d like that back now.” Erik leans forward and Charles can feel a phantom pull on the helmet. He lets it go and watches it float in the air.

There’s no two ways about it as far as Charles can tell from the hungry look in Erik’s eyes. Blood or no blood, he will be kissed again. And Trask’s blood will gleam on his face as well, no matter what he makes of it. So, in the end there is only one thing to do. He grabs a fistful of the cape and starts to wipe at Erik’s face, cautious at first. Erik stands favorably still.
Charles prays that the light in Erik’s eyes is not what love looks like.

Tonight, Erik is desperate to be happy. After weeks of wallowing in power games, after dreams of justice and rolling heads, tonight all he wants is Charles.

In a showing of peace, he deliberately says nothing about the many-armed coat hanger in the study room, unfathomably adorned with random trinkets. Not even a word about the ominous red and gold reindeer hung by the neck, and the precariously cracked green orb. The crystal spoon, Erik decides, is just plain funny.

“The pleasures of sharing a room with Ororo and Jean…” Erik says by way of announcing his presence to Charles who is tucked away at his desk among toys, board games, origami, and volumes of encyclopedias.

As if Charles, Charles who follows and files away every movement Erik makes in the cramped space of his apartment, needs an announcement. Predictably Charles overdoes his surprise, looking up far too quickly from the obscure genetics text he has been pretending to read.

“It’s fine.” Charles nods, his gaze habitually flicking over the distance between Erik and the door. The pink panda sitting at his elbow wobbles with him and undercuts his point.

“We can always move your books and desk into the bedroom.” Erik suggests, sitting down on the creaky make-shift bed that Jean and Ororo shares.

“No.” Charles swivels completely around, nearly jumping to his feet. “I like it this way…”

“No.” Erik smiles, and smiles more when he sees Charles seizing up. “You like having an excuse to hide away in here.”

Charles, for his part, does nothing to deny the contention. He turns defiantly back around and bends over his book: “I’m not ready for bed, Erik.”

So, this is not to be one of Charles’s puppet nights, then. Erik is somewhat grateful to think that Charles will rise into himself beneath his blue eyes tonight, as opposed to the doll-like inattentiveness he often gives into.

Erik runs an eager finger down Charles’s neck, delighting in the flurry of his pulse there: “Let’s play this game, then. I’ll wait. I have all the time in the world…”

“What kind of game?” Ororo’s sudden, excited voice wafts in out of nowhere.

Erik jolts, and the war-driven, craven part of him has already sought out metal by rote.

But Charles, infinitely aware, is already turning to the unholy mess that is the coat hanger: “Ororo?”

“You can’t tell J. Grey. We’re playing hide and go seek.” Ororo sticks her head out and Erik can see the dome of his helmet perched on top.

“I looked everywhere for you. For the hundredth time, you are not to wear that helmet.” Charles chastises, sounding as though he has entirely forgotten about everything else. “Give it back to Erik.”

“Give what back? E. Lehnsherr hasn’t seen a thing.” Ororo smiles wickedly, arranging herself carefully back into hiding.
“Hey, I’m not E. Lehnsherr, it’s Erik. We talked about this!” Erik shakes his head, but feels a slight grin pull at his lips. “And that is not a toy.”

“You know how it freaks Jean out.” Charles pushes, ignoring Ororo’s appeal to Erik.

“But J. Grey cheats all the time!” Ororo rants, shoving a particularly cheery elf out of her face.

“Call her Jean.” Erik corrects softer than he intended. “I’m gone for two weeks and we’re back to this?”

“I never get to win ‘cos she always knows where I am.” Ororo whines.

“Ororo, I don’t care. Take it off!” Charles is unusually commanding. “And get out from behind the Christmas tree.”

“That’s a Christmas tree?” Erik cannot keep the incredulity out of his voice.

Charles chooses wisely to glance at Ororo who stomps forward past mismatched baubles, her hands tugging down the helmet in revolt: “I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“This is quite the stash…” Erik stands up as innocuously as he can, nearing the tree to inspect it. “You’ve been busy.”

Charles blushes and turns his face away, and there are a million things Erik likes about that. But when he finally answers there is only a small trace of sadness: “Ororo and Jean wanted a tree. So, I got them one.”

“And far be it from me to keep you, love.” Erik smirks, picking up a bauble with the legend 4D embossed on it. “Though I doubt your neighbors from 4D would appreciate you rifling through their belongings.”

“Thank my lucky stars, you had the foresight to march all of them out of their homes.” Charles bristles. “What does it matter where 4D or 1E are, long as you can be happy here in 3A?”

There, right there, Erik can see the fire that Charles hides so well these days.

“Where are they?” Ororo asks, wide-eyed and curious. “Where’s 4D and 1E gone?”

“Right where humans belong.” Erik declares, not breaking his stare at Charles who seems on the verge of something unspeakable.

“Where’s that?” Ororo asks again, her interest piqued more by Charles’s reaction than anything else.

“Don’t.” Charles interrupts, his fists curled into balls, as Erik begins to answer.

“Anything for you.” Erik watches Charles’s frame shiver ever so slightly.

With the last vestiges of his dignity and calm, Charles turns to Ororo: “Darling, take the helmet off.”

“No.” Ororo pulls a long face and crosses her arms.

“Ororo…” Erik says sternly. “Listen to Charles.”

“But J. Grey will find me.” Ororo pleads with trembling lips.

“We’re calling her Jean, remember?” Erik says, just as Charles cuts in: “J. Grey went running out of
the apartment to find you and bring you back. That’s how worried she gets when she can’t read your mind. Do you really want her wandering around an empty, spooky building for you?”

Ororo tearfully lets the helmet plop to the floor: “Fine! I’m not playing this stupid game anymore.”

“Oh sweetheart.” Charles opens his arms, beckoning Ororo to him. “Here, let’s get you cookies and I can tell you stories before bed, how about that?”

“Please tell me Braddock is with Jean.” Erik steps back, watching Ororo make a show of considering the offer, and wiping away the big, fat tears rolling down her cheeks.

Charles nods once at Erik and goes back to wooing Ororo: “There’s some hot chocolate to go with the cookies…”

“But I get to put the star on the Christmas tree.” She bargains, pointing to a brass star propped against the wall behind the coat hanger. Its metal cloys against Erik’s powers and feels old.

“It’s a deal.” Charles smiles, his eyes brightening as Ororo squeezes into his hug.

“Now?” Ororo is excited again, she glances up at Charles. “Can we do it now?”

Erik lets the star rise neatly from its perch and whizz through the air into his waiting hands. He can see Charles’s hands tighten around Ororo, his face temper into unwillingness. Ororo is simply inquisitive.

“Let’s do something cool.” Erik says, tracing the edges of the star with his finger. He reaches down and plucks Ororo from Charles.

“Ready?” He hands the star over to Ororo, curled safely in his arms, and lifts her over to the very top of the faux tree. When the star is affixed, its metal magnetized, and poised to stand on point atop the coat hanger, he whispers: “Now, let go.”

Erik throws a small sidelong glance, sure enough, Charles is brooding as he always does when he thinks no one is watching.

But Ororo does not need to be told twice. The moment her hand falls away, the star pirouettes, faster and dizzyingly faster, until Ororo is shaking with joyful laughter.

“I found this little monster on the ground floor, looking for that little monster under the stairwell.” Braddock drawls, having slinked into the room without anyone noticing. She softly pushes Jean forward.

“Jean.” Charles sighs in relief. “You can’t just run out of the apartment on your own.”

“Look what I did.” Ororo yells mirthfully, bringing everyone’s attention back to the star. Jean stumbles forward, equally awed by the spectacle.

“Now that star says Christmas like nobody’s business. Wish I could say the same for the rest of that effing coat hanger.” Braddock shrugs, casually leaning on the door.

“It’s an effing Christmas tree!” Erik states religiously at Braddock, letting a writhing Ororo onto the floor. Charles gives him a stony look.

“For the man who gave the rest of justice…” Braddock chirps. “Of course, it’s an effing Christmas tree.”
“You don’t need to come in tomorrow.” Erik is curt. “I’ll be home.”

Charles shifts uneasily from one foot to the other, as if he were deciding on where to run. Still, he cleverly evades any eye-contact. Erik sees no point in forcing it now, especially when in a little while, Charles will be all his.

“Certainly.” Braddock steadies herself. “Celebrations are due, after all. It’s like Christmas, only better.”

An insistent tug on his t-shirt distracts Erik. It’s Jean, with a triumphant Ororo in tow.

“J-Jean wants to do it too.” Ororo supplies an explanation, stammering around the name.

“Me too…” Jean manages to mouth, her voice as much a shock to Erik as the first time he’d heard her speak. It is still such a rarity that even Charles wanes in his crusade and shares a brief look with Erik.

“Then we better hurry and pick out a good one before bedtime, hmm?” Erik sets them running towards the tree and he dismisses Braddock with a mutter: “That’ll be all.”

The next time Erik looks up from the heap of ornaments made just that extra bit unruly by the children’s frantic picking, Charles is staring absently at the door that Braddock has shut behind her.

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Charles is somewhere between rows of cereals and cookies, halfway down the aisle as it stretches eerily on. Already his cart is heavy with tropical fruits, batteries and a dozen magazines, things he’s reached for without thought.

“Could you not disappear every two minutes?” Braddock hisses, trudging into line behind him. “It makes me nervous.”

“You should be nervous.” Charles says bitterly, snagging an atrocious knitting kit off a display pyramid. “I was just about to ride this cart into the sunset.”

“Go ahead, try it.” Braddock scowls half-heartedly. “Give me a reason…not that I want to punch someone who knits.”

“Sentiments, Braddock?” Charles scoffs, haphazardly placing the kit back on its perch. “Who knew?”

“That’s right, Charlotte, you’re not the only one.” Braddock mocks, slightly breathless as she tails Charles.

Charles seethes, strolling closer to a pile of butterfly shaped wall hooks, blue, black, and outrageously yellow.

“And fucking stop buying ridiculous things you can’t explain later. You’ll make Magneto suspicious.” Braddock adds in a serious, low voice. “I didn’t like the way he looked over those stupid pet collars you got last time.”

Charles drops to a conspiring whisper as well: “And Erik’s definitely not going to be suspicious when we show up after three hours with some fruits and his favorite brand of razors?”

“You. don’t. have. pets.” Braddock intones, wringing her hands in exasperation. “Buy things that
“Collars made perfect sense to me.” Charles grits out and knows that his answer is not a winning one. Any sense of achievement he’s derived from the back and forth easily spirals out.

Even Braddock, with her instinct for cruelty, doesn’t goad. Mostly it’s because of the frumpy old man tottering up to them, waving and smiling.

“At the very least, look happy to see me.” The man says, leaning expertly on a cane, and sizing Charles up with his hazel left eye and dark right eye.

“Took you long enough…” Braddock says with all the airs of a complaint.

“I had to make sure I wasn’t being followed.” The man shrugs. “And that you weren’t being watched.”

A shudder rushes through Braddock’s frame as though the possibility has just occurred to her: “This is a busy place, I just figured it would be easy to go unnoticed here.”

“I’m not sure heterochromia is the best way to escape notice.” Charles attempts to smile, and ends up twitching the corners of his lips.

The man frowns, cramping his eyebrows together: “What?”

“Your eyes…they’re two different colors, Raven.” Charles whispers, taken aback by Raven’s apparent surprise.

The man bares his teeth, and in the space of a grimace, switches both eyes to hazel: “What’s so urgent that I have to meet with no reconnaissance and no backup?”

“Wait a minute, what happened to your backup?” Braddock begins to ask.

“-That does not answer my question.” Raven says in a low voice, shifting her grip on the cane. “I am in the middle of an unvetted location. Looking at wall hooks in a goddamn supermarket! So, get on with it…and while you’re at it, maybe also try to explain how you two live with Magneto and miss his plan to execute Trask.”

“I think Magneto knows.” The utterance gushes out of Braddock, as deep fears often do. “He must…”

“Paranoia isn’t going to help you…” Raven hisses. “That is a luxury neither of you have, right now.”

Charles shakes his head mournfully: “Do you know how I found about Trask? Erik took me to the Pentagon and left me on a balcony. He told me to enjoy the show. And then I watched him do it. That’s how I found out.”

“Charles.” Raven soothes over, an indecipherable emotion welling up on the man’s face. “Think, something must have been different.”

“He hadn’t been home in five or six days, but that’s just how it is. He’s been gone for longer before.” Charles adds, wilting under Raven’s gaze. “Honestly, I am the last person to complain about Erik not being home.”

“No mention of Trask at all?” Raven pries.

“I’m telling you, he did not give me anything.” Charles says in a weak voice.
"He knows." Braddock's face breaks into dread. "He’s just waiting for the right time."

"Does Erik strike you as the kind to bide his time?" Raven asks, unnervingly straight with the man’s bland face. "If either of you give him cause to so much as wonder about your loyalty, this is over."

Braddock balks for a second, before regaining enough composure to continue: "That’s exactly why I wanted to meet! How are you planning to get us out?"

"I will find a way." Raven sounds solemn, despite the very slight tremble in her tone. But that might just be how the old man’s voice works. "Stick to the plan and keep each other safe. Give me time."

"You don’t have time, Raven." Charles counters, taking a step forward. "Trask is out of the way. What do you think Erik is going to do next?"

"You think I don’t know that?" Raven tenses, once again moving her weight on the cane. "In the five days since Trask’s execution, FMR troops around my territories have doubled. There have been at least five infiltration attempts on my base."

Neat, organized chaos is Erik’s calling card, Charles is barely surprised: "How bad is it really?"

"I will not lie." Raven says calmly. "Our forces are on the verge of retreating further into Boston. We don’t have the numbers or weapons to take on Magneto. I’ve been trying to rope in a Canadian mutant group to help us. A negotiation I left hanging to come here and meet you."

"That’s why you have no backup." Braddock crosses her arm like a petulant brat. "You have no people to spare."

"No, there’s no one to spare." Raven allows a sort of blandness to fill the man’s face, and uneasily taps the cane on the floor.

"Worse." Charles feels a heaviness envelop his body as he watches her. "That cane is not a prop. You’re injured, aren’t you?"

Raven nods.

"Am I on my own?" Braddock asks in a curious mix of fear and menace.

"Betsey, you’re never going to be on your own." Raven’s eyes brim with the sort of hope that Charles has long forgotten. "At the moment, I do not have a raft. So, don’t sink."

"Sinking is the least of my worries." Braddock retorts, far warmer now.

"Just stay alive." Charles wraps his fingers around the man’s, Raven’s, thick wrists and finds sweat drenched skin there.

For a little while, beneath the man’s hazel eyes, Charles thinks he can see Raven pause and gather her thoughts; he can almost feel her consider him carefully.

"One way or the other, Charles…” Raven says softly. "I will survive."

The moment passes swiftly. Raven pulls herself further away and Charles lets his hands go limply back to his sides.

"Before you go, tell this moron not to buy these ugly wall hooks.” Braddock barks out, glaring at Charles.
“She’s right.” Mystique is already walking away. “You have a whole aisle to choose from down at that end.”

Erik is content to stretch out on the floor, cobbling together a crane out of Charles’s paper clips. He lets it hover and swoop in the air, occasionally flying it across the television broadcast Charles is rooted to.

Not that Charles is impressed by late-night antics; he sinks listlessly into the armchair, listening to a sage, white-haired reporter.

“…Midday clash in front of the supreme court where, for the sixth consecutive day, hundreds of human protestors gathered to demonstrate against Trask’s execution.” The report rolls soberly on. “Eyewitnesses say the march was mostly peaceful until late in the morning when a group of Militia sympathizers started to advance aggressively at the riot police. Ten of the instigators have been taken into custody and are currently being interrogated, according to our sources. Official counts say fifteen FMR soldiers as well as forty civilians have sustained injuries, with a seventeen-year-old human boy reported to be suffering from several broken ribs and a punctured lung…”

Erik hears a ring of dissatisfaction in the sigh that escapes Charles.

“Something the matter, love?” He asks, shrugging without indulgence.

Charles wordlessly looks over Erik, taking in every bit of him. In between, Erik counts out the number of times his eyes dart to the crane, zooming in and out of sight.

“Would you rather I didn’t maim your stationery?” Erik half-smirks, bringing the crane to a pause at the tip of his fingers.

“Oh no, by all means, I live for it.” Charles answers with impish precision; Erik has seen Ororo settle into this same impunity at the fighting end of arguments. He has seen the same, sly haughtiness in Jean’s silences. They learn from the master, of course.

Before Erik can channel his quiet amusement into a reply, Charles trains his attention back to the news.

“In related news, the UN has expressed its disappointment with the FMR’s unwillingness to engage in diplomatic talks…” The reporter sounds perfectly disdainful. “The organization, while continuing to strongly condemn Trask’s public execution as archaic and cruel, has said that it will not retaliate in kind or co-ordinate a military response. A UN spokesperson confirms that it will not endorse any action that might escalate conflict in the region.”

“We continue to hope that Magneto and the FMR will come in for talks.” A young woman blinks into the camera. “The coup has run its course and now, peace is on everyone’s agenda. Which is why we offer once again to moderate a treaty between all parties…”

“They’re offering a treaty again…” Charles leans urgently into Erik’s field of vision. “Are you listening?”

“I listened to them call us a coup.” Erik is sure to keep the sharpness out of his commentary, settling instead for flattening his crane out. If Charles notices the mutilation, he gives away no sign.

Instead, he falls haphazardly back into the armchair as though his limbs have no will left: “You are a coup.”
“And a victorious coup, Charles,” Erik savours a second of reflection, using the time to shut the TV off. “…is a government.”

“A mutant dictatorship in a human democracy.” A certain frailty seems to invade Charles’s body. “What you are is a foreign power. Don’t you know enough of history to be afraid?”

Erik sits up and faces Charles earnestly, the paperclips twitching into a small orbit around his hand: “Are we still taking about politics?”

The silence that follows is long enough to give Erik his answer. He watches Charles wet his lips and stare back, anticipation rising in his eyes.

“Is it all that different to you?” Charles asks, inert like a rag-doll. “Am I so different from everything else you want to conquer?”

Erik lets his hand wander and rest on Charles’s ankle. He pretends not to feel a small tremble break out under his touch.

What little solitude Charles can finally claim to be his, always arrives on those afternoons when the children doze off. Today, Braddock sticks to her anxious worst. She switches between grousing about Mystique, ignoring Charles entirely, and scouting the news.

“Fuck, fuck…Magneto knows.” She murmurs, apparently in response to a piece about stock markets plunging.

Charles wisely does not comment. Left to his own devices, he takes down the Christmas ornaments from the coat hanger, carefully packing them into a musty old box.

“Might as well…” Braddock scoffs when she cottons on to what he is doing. “One man’s Christmas tree is another’s psychiatric distress.”

In lieu of an actual interaction, Charles slips out the door, huddling the box in front of him. He climbs gingerly down the stairs and heads into the corridor between 1A and 1F. The echoes of his own footsteps and breathing follow him as he heeds at 1D.

Here, he has, over time, discovered tawdry leopard print curtains, unfortunate furniture and an extensive collection of epics and classics. He might be persuaded to forgive the deluded décor just for the sheer hours of boredom salvaged by the books. The box fits under a corner niche, Charles discovers, and is pleased to leave it.

“Rest in peace, and may I never have reason to lay eyes on you again.” Charles wishes out aloud, kicking the box perfectly out of sight.

He sees the bookshelf, alphabetized, and numbered to meet someone else’s exacting standards. A lavish line of book covers peek out at him. He runs his hand along their spines, thinking reverently of the motley old woman who lived in 1D. An emerald green cover stashed away in the back of the shelf strikes his fancy. It comes loose with a puff of dust, and a yellowing photograph falls from between its pages.

A sturdy boy, dressed to the tee in Militia regalia, fills the square frame. He gleefully holds up a scaly green hand, artlessly severed at the wrist and splashed in blood. At the bottom, a lean, cursive script lovingly reads: *We’re winning, Nana. No more freaks.*
Charles outwaits the pounding of his heart, and the lingering bite of bile in his mouth. With shaking hands, he slips the photo back among the pages of the book, and jams it violently into its old place. It looks back at him, strangely innocuous to the eye now.

A small, unsteady part of him wants to cry.

Metal takes on an unforgiving aura in the dark, Erik knows. In the underground silo, its shapes and movements become second nature to him even when light fails all around him. This is the only reason he is not impaled at the wrong end of those ravaging claws.

Rogue is not so lucky; she goes down after one mighty slash in a slurry of terror and blood.

“Emma!” Erik yells, using a surge of his powers to pin the assailant to a wall. “Down here.”

The man rips out animal growls, scratching out brick surfaces and pipes in a frenzy. Each time he thrashes, and he thrashes with all the strength in his sinews, Erik has to dig deeper and deeper.

“Here…” He shouts again, spying Emma’s faltering diamond form. ‘Freeze him!”

“I’m trying…” Emma screams back at him. “Hold him still.”

“What do you think I’m trying to do?” Erik snaps, stretching the man taut as best as he can. It brings a renewed roar of pain and a fresh series of struggles.

“I can’t reach him.” A rare shade of panic infiltrates Emma’s tone. “His mind is like smoke. Neutralize him, get the knifes off him.”

Erik pulls in one swift motion, wanting to divest the man of his razor shape blades. Instead, all he gets is raw, unadulterated pain – a scream that promises to occupy his nightmares for months to come.

“Emma.” Erik is hoarse with new realization. “The knives are him. It’s in his body.”

Without another word, Emma lifts her hand, and brings it down in a ragged motion of telepathic energy. Erik knows what’s coming. He watches the man crumble onto himself, mouth still open in a roar of agony.

“Two down, two down. We need backup now…” Emma bellows, already running to the lone circle of light at the entrance. “Get Hank and a medical team now.”

Beneath the touch of his powers, Erik is intrigued to no end by a strange metal cloaking the man’s skeleton: “Mind of smoke and bones harder than diamonds.”

“Wh-what is he?” Rogue groans from a faintly lit corner. It’s not unfathomable that she shares nothing of Erik’s curiosity. A short glance in her general direction reveals damage aplenty.

“Weapon X, I presume.” Erik frowns, almost tasting the blood dripping off the man’s still battle-ready claws.

The last things Charles expects to find in his living room are a rising plume of smoke, the acrid scent of sulphur, and a very harried Azazel at the centre of it all. And in that second, he sees only the
unchecked terror in Braddock’s eyes and is caught in a loop of Erik-knows and run-run-run.

Azazel pays no heed to the discomfiting silence, presently rifling through files left on the coffee table: “I’m here for some papers…Magneto wants them…”

Braddock eases off, assuming a pose of alertness: “Howdy to you, too.”

It takes longer for Charles to free the breath caught in his throat, however. And even then, he can feel Jean’s doubt at the back of his thoughts. It’s a ritual now for Jean to latch onto his mind at the first inkling of turbulence, be it on his part or hers.

“You want to tell the tell the child there’s no trouble?” Azazel asks sourly, loping his head in the general direction of the study.

Sure enough, Jean peers sleepily out. In her confusion, she sets herself on the dam Frost has erected in Charles’s head – it never fails to leave him with a blinding headache, many moments of grief for his own powers and a little awe at how powerful Jean already is.

“Hey, sleepyhead…Everything’s fine…” Charles soothes, hoping to slowly disentangle her mind from his.

“The little ones are a handful, yes?” Azazel asks, glancing curiously at Jean, who decides that today is her day to be fascinated by the bizarre red man and his swishing tail. Today of all days, after months and months of seeing the man fade into thin smoke before her eyes.

Not that it steers her impossible interest away from the tender parts of Charles’s head.

Charles leans slightly against the nearest wall, steeling himself not to grimace. Luckily, Azazel meanders on without waiting for a reply: “Children will be children now…when they grow into their powers, you will miss the little things they do.”

“How…” Charles drawls, feeling the drag of Jean’s appraisal across his head. Across the room, he can see Braddock taking stock of which files and papers are being picked up by Azazel. “…I seriously doubt that…”

“No.” Azazel pauses, unconsciously rolling up a thin bundle of papers and casting it aside. “You will.”

“That sounds like experience speaking.” Charles prods to buy time for Braddock.

Azazel does not let his composure fly at will. He takes his time arranging the papers on the desk, and neatly taking them into his hand: “All that’s a lifetime away, now.”

And before Charles can ask him another question, the man disappears into pall and sulfur, leaving behind one bewitched child and two ill-at-ease adults.

Erik hears the question perfectly well the first time.

“Knives?” Charles cannot shake the incredulity yet, asking a pertinent second time. “Out of his knuckles?”

Erik hums a distracted yes into Charles’s collarbones, much gaunter now than the first time he placed a kiss there. Slightly worrisome, that.
“And adamantium…” Charles’s voice curls just so with the pain he must be imagining. “That poor man.”

“You need to eat more.” Erik grouses, nuzzling at the soft hollow of Charles’s neck. “You’re all bone.”

It’s Charles’s turn to hum in disinterest, blinking up at a nothing-spot in the ceiling and leaving Erik with a small, dark pang in his heart.

“I’m down here, love.” Erik says quietly, ghosting a tender kiss along Charles’s jaw. It is always exhilarating to watch Charles behold him; one degree of alarm, and several of cautiousness buried without ado under submission.

“I know.” Charles says, sinking into Erik’s attention.

“Do you?” Erik uses the leeway to pull a plaint Charles into his arms. “Then where are you, tonight?”

Charles’s lies have a way of spreading out from his eyes, one tendril of falsehood after another until it reaches his lips: “Where do you want me?”

“Well played.” Erik laughs out his approval, feeling the distinct dig of Charles’s nails to his shoulders.

“Thank you.” Charles takes the compliment in dead seriousness.

“Now, come back to me…” Erik knows he will not be able to hide the demand in his tone, and does not try.

Charles, to his credit, does not give in tamely. Erik waits and waits without patience, watching Charles quell every instinct in his body to finally whisper: “You know I’m right here, Erik.”

Erik, of course, knows better.

ix

Everything is snow-strewn and white in the park. A fact that apparently delights Ravens, and leaves Charles to stomp through dampness and ice to their spot near the swings.

In fact, the only dash of color for miles is from the distressed neon uniform of the lawns keeper; a behemoth of a man who dimly guffaws as Charles passes his shoddy office: “Not another soul out there.”

“Maybe not so wise, after all.” Charles rues ever jumping at the chance to take over Braddock’s double agent duties. He only hopes Raven will show before the wind really picks up. This time, at least, he has information to hand over.

At a little distance, he can make out a lonely silhouette on one of the swings. It isn’t often that Raven waits out in the open. Perhaps a bad winter day is also an exceptionally safe one. At any rate, the lawns keeper has no clue of her presence.

“Raven…” Charles calls, stopping by the toppled carousel to give it one sharp push.

She wears the face of a lean, starved woman today. Recognition on those features look cruel, almost like belated hate.
“Hear me out…” Charles says quickly. “Erik’s left some blueprints in the house. We don’t know what they’re for but Braddock’s back there making copies. Who knows how long we’ll have access to them. That’s why she suggested I come in her place. You know we wouldn’t take this big a risk just for the hell of it.”

Raven sighs, and spritely rises to her feet. Her now blond hair falls in a tumble everywhere. She crooks her fingers, gesturing for Charles to follow, and strolls briskly towards the walled-off jungle gym.

“Why did you want to meet?” Charles asks, made deeply aware of Raven’s disappointment.

The air has a slight bite of chill now. Raven’s form recedes behind the high wooden walls, somewhere among the maze of crossbars and planks. She has not once turned back or looked Charles in the eye.

“Raven, I’m sorry.” Charles verges on tears. “This will never happen again.”

In the semi-dark, even familiar symmetry seems alien. Everything seems to continue in one unending shadow – there’s no real difference between the jungle gym and anything else.

“Raven?” Charles takes a full step back, and is hit with new foreboding.

And slowly light fills the room, settling first on the rotten, white corpse; there is certainly no denying the gnarled artistry of hanging it by a rusty chain from the trapeze bar.

A scream is already stuck in Charles’s throat when William Stryker pins him down, nose to hard grind cement.

“I’m so disappointed, Xavier.” Stryker’s voice is erratic with anger. “You forgot me.”

The irony of it all strikes Charles harshly, of destiny coming full-circle stark in the middle of winter, surrounded only by loneliness and an unkempt lawn.

“He’s just being adorable…” The woman says, her laughter still as high as Charles remembers. “He knows exactly who we are.”

“Let me go, please let me go…” Charles yells, his mouth bitter with the taste of blood.

“Enjoyed your borrowed time?” Stryker punctuates the sentence with a violent half-twist of his hand; the malice of it closing against Charles’s windpipe is all too real. “For your sake, I sure hope you did.”

“Stop.” Charles whimpers, arching his body for leverage that never comes. Instead, he glimpses the dirty feet of the corpse. “Stop.”

The woman’s hand sneakily perches at the back of Charles’s neck, cool and prickling on the exposed skin there: “Silly little thing, that’s not how you beg for your life.”

Masks and white-hot knives are all Charles can conjure up in his thoughts. That, he is certain, is from a lifetime ago. Above him, Stryker leans in for a kiss, the woman mumbles: “He’ll look nice hanging. Just like that one.”

For once, the surprise and violence is lost on Charles. A battle starkness descents on him. He rears, and the movement is harsh enough to dislodge Stryker who then catches the full brunt of Charles’s elbow on his face. The crunch of bone on bone is sickening, and sordidly satisfying.

Once he is on his feet, it’s clockwork. Everything in his vision is a frantic blur. Behind him, there is the single, urgent slapping of pursuing feet. He runs as hard as he can, his feet giving him little purchase on the snow, and his lungs burning for air.

An abrupt, hard-wired movement to the side alerts Charles to yet another presence.

“Help, help me…” Charles bellows, pivoting blind and raising his hands.

The last sane thought on his mind is of a neon splash of color on white snow, and of pain.

Murder is often, in Erik’s count, a pure science. Tighten a chain on Braddock’s neck there, there, and stop air from reaching her lungs, clot blood in her brain, and voila, murder. Do it halfway and it’s a lesson. Rigorous, exacting, and effective, as Braddock will testify.

Vindictiveness only gets him so far. He paces at break-neck speeds, prowling by Charles’s bed, and coming further undone every second until Charles stirs and wearily opens his eyes.

“Erik…” Charles says as though his name uttered in that soft, accidental fashion explains everything.

The unknotted in Erik’s chest is messy, threads of stray relief coiling unhappily with rage and betrayal. He does not trust himself to do much except pause in indecision.

“Erik…” Charles says again, a definite ring of fear in his voice this time. He sits half-upright in a discomfiting pose.

A levee breaks somewhere inside Erik. He is down on Charles like revenge: “What were you thinking? What the fuck were you thinking?”

For all his impulsiveness, Erik is intensely conscious of just how brittle Charles feels in his grip, just how easily he rattles.

“Erik, go easy on him.” Emma counsels from across the room.

“Get out.” Erik snarls, malevolence rising out of control.

Even as Emma buckles, Charles responds with a crazed apology: “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, Erik.”

Erik drops his pincer-hold on Charles’s shoulders in shock, and traces a new garden of bruises there with his eyes.

“Trauma does terrible things. You have to understand.” Emma lingers, toeing some goddamn line. “So many of his memories are so fuzzy and unclear. I can go in deeper and get them. But right now-“

“I heard you the last twenty-five times.” Erik hisses. “Stay the fuck out of his head.”

“If you won’t let me fix him, stop adding damage.” Emma says plaintively and closes the door behind her.

“Get Out!” Erik stresses without anything acerbic to add.

There is nothing jubilatory about getting his way. A warm trickle of tears mar Charles’s face and he
seems convinced of Erik’s intentions to bring him some measure of pain.

“You were lucky.” Erik can’t help the hoarseness of his voice, or the slight shaking that overtakes it. “Don’t you see, you…we were so lucky. After all this, now when we are so close to winning this war…I will not lose you to your own naivete!”

A strange blankness passes across Charles’s face.

“Or is it arrogance, Charles?” The thought hardens Erik’s gaze. “Listen well, Charles Xavier, I’m only going to say this once. Everything you have here is an illusion. A two-person mirror trick I let you play. One that I will end if you cannot keep your side of the terms…”

“My terms…” Charles turns a rare shade paler.

“Silence.” Erik snaps. “You are allowed out only, fucking only, under supervision. You know this like the palm of your hand.”

“Erik, I’m so, so very sorry…” Charles appears finally to have some life seep into him.

“Are you?” Erik’s question slices, making Charles flinch just that little. “Forget that Braddock got in on your recklessness, forget that you forgot we’re in the middle of a war…you broke your word to me. And look what came of it!”

“Erik…what I did was stupid. Believe me, I know now. And I am sorry.” Charles reaches out and inexpertly grabs a fistful of Erik’s sleeve. As far as moves go, this one throws Erik into a loop. How many times has Charles ever been the one to initiate any physical contact?

“I almost lost you.” There is such a harrowing quality to the mere possibility, Erik realizes.

“I’ll make it up to you. I will…” Charles promises, his eyes brimming over with sadness.

Erik wonders if it really is in him to make a deal one more time. A warning’s only fair. So, he brushes an easy hair out of Charles’s face, kissing him gently on the forehead: “Careful, you might not like the things that come with vows.”

Erik knows it is only icy fear, vaulting from deep, deep in Charles’s heart, that keeps him from leaning out of the kiss.

Charles knows he has signed his name in the devil’s ledger all over again. If there were an iota of blissful doubt, Erik dashes that morsel in one quick, painful go. Now, events are to be set into motion. And nothing, not Charles’s trembling frame or his soft pleading, will really get to Erik.

“Trophies are earned, Charles.” Erik whispers in his ears, his lanky arms inescapably tight across Charles’s waist.

The item in contention is a pink Vera Wang, its lightness and weight equally familiar to Charles. To see it lying under the open moonlight of their roof is quite daunting. Worse, to see it lying among a heap of magazines and old newspaper is tearing him apart.

“You let them do this to you once, Charles.” Erik is severe even when Charles cannot see his face. But the breath coming to resting on the back of his neck, its thin veil of warmth, tells him enough.
“Never again.”

Never again, Charles wonders; what does Erik know about that, Erik who has seen one war too many? Someone should tell him how fickle a thought never-again really is.

“Charles…” Erik as always commandeers Charles’s attention.

A cool, opaline lighter is pushed into the softness of Charles’s palm. Left to their own devices, smooth metal and butane will never think of making fire. Yet, in this world, Erik’s ripple of power makes it click, click, click and pop into a tongue of flame.

“Go on.” Erik loosens the circle made by his arms, pulling away just so from Charles. “Show me where you are…”

Charles takes one step, and then another, until he is directly over the dress. He is close enough to see the copper streaks that disfigure its pink linen, the odd lines where knives ripped it apart.

“I’m right here, Erik.” Charles says, unsure what Erik hears over the crackle and poof of fabric catching fire and melting into paper, and turning an awful ember shade in the night.

End Notes

The Republic of Stars Summary: Charles Xavier is a telepath living in a world that fears mutants; he has openly advocated for the co-existence of humans and mutants. He comes face to face with this hatred when Stryker and his anti-mutant friends attack Charles in his apartment. Having realized that he is gay, they humiliate him by forcing him into a Vera Wang outfit before carving a ‘M’ on his back. Soon, Magneto defeats Bolivar Trask's Human Militia and establishes the First Mutant Regime along the East coast of the US. Charles, having been a pacifist and human sympathizer, is a dissenter in their eyes. His powers are chemically suppressed. Erik forces Charles into a relationship with him, implicitly offering to keep him from the camps in exchange for sex and submission. Jean and Ororo, rescued from Trask's hands, are left in Charles's care as well. Charles must somehow learn how to negotiate for his freedom and consent from Erik who is brutal and single-minded in all his pursuits, and does not care about collateral damage - as proven by his bloody campaign to bring down Bolivar Trask's final stand and thus ensure mutant superiority. [I hope this helps in reading the current fic]

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