Everything you know is wrong

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Summary

When Charles Xavier was five years old, he worshiped his father. When he was eleven, he learned to loathe his abusive stepfather. When he was sixteen, he gave up any claim on the family fortune just to escape. At twenty-four, he's moved away from home into a crappy, standard-issue graduate student house, and gone through his degree program with his best friend, Moira, by his side.

He's adjusted. He knows who he is and where he comes from and what his future holds. At least, until a stranger in a bathrobe shows up in his living room, having used his shower, eaten his lunch and, oh yes, broken in uninvited. Suddenly, everything Charles knows to be true about himself may turn out to be wrong, and his future and past both may be more dangerous than he ever could have imagined.

(aka the bathrobe fic)

Notes

Warning: Non-explicit mentions of past child abuse.

Collected, edited, and revised, here is "the bathrobe fic," as we coined it while writing it back and forth on tumblr. We had a blast doing this, and hope you enjoy reading the entire thing. Thanks to everyone who cheered us on along the way, especially to fassbender-mcavoyobssessed for creating the gif that inspired the whole thing, and Professor for the title and for making this XD
The last thing Charles had expected to see when he stepped into his house was an angry man sitting in his living room, wearing a fluffy bathrobe. After standing in his doorway, his own doorway, staring for an inappropriate length of time, all Charles can come up with is There's a stranger on my futon, wearing a bathrobe.

It's not even Charles' bathrobe. A host of questions rises up, clamoring for answers. Did he break in wearing the bathrobe? Did he break in and then change into a bathrobe that he brought with him for the express purpose of lounging in a stranger's house? Is he naked under the bathrobe?

These are probably not the sorts of things Charles should be preoccupied with. He should probably be more concerned with maybe calling the police.

To be fair, Charles reasons, when you walk into your house and see an angry man sitting in your living room, wearing a bathrobe not your own, these questions are extremely pressing. So many unknowns, all clamoring for answers. Paradoxical as it is, mind-numbing puzzlement is a rational reaction when one expects to see only one's forgotten lunch waiting on the table, not a strange man in a bathrobe.

The shame is starting to set in, too. He definitely meant to throw out those pizza boxes last night, but he was tired and he lives on his own, so it's not like anyone was going to see them. Same with the empty beer bottles. And the stacks of dishes.

Somehow repeating to himself, This is an intruder who is violating your private residence is not making him feel any better about the fact that the intruder must think he's an utter slob.

He tries to fortify himself with indignation as he fumbles for his cell phone. So what if he hasn't straightened up his place in the past week? Perhaps, if the intruder had wanted to wear his bathrobe in a random stranger's house, he should have gone to Charles' former address, or perhaps picked a place not on a street full of overworked graduate students.

"Honestly!" he grumbles to himself. "If you break into random strangers' houses just to wear your bathrobe in their living room, you've got to expect they haven't picked up the place in case you decided to drop in unannounced. And the least you could do is wash some dishes. Or put a towel down."

The stranger's sharp gaze goes befuddled, and Charles pauses, his finger still over the keypad on his phone. Did he say that out loud? Did he say all those things out loud?

Good lord, this is worse than the incident in his organic chemistry seminar when he was an undergraduate. That had taught him to save his opinions about some professors for their evaluations.

"That is to say—I just mean—you could give some warning if you expect things to be—rather—" He gestures vaguely with his phone. This is probably yet another indicator that he should perhaps try to get a full night's sleep occasionally.

"What are you doing?" the stranger asks, gaze idly tracking the phone while the quarter dances across the backs of his fingers.

The nerve of an intruder to ask what Charles is doing in his own house! He should turn that question around immediately, demand to know why some handsome deviant has decided to wander in off the
street and drop himself onto Charles' furniture as if he belongs there, entirely without permission or
the courtesy to call in advance and give Charles some warning to spruce the place up a bit.

Instead of saying any of that, he stutters, "I'm...I'm calling the police?"

"Oh," says the stranger. "It looked like you were talking to yourself."

Charles draws himself up and scowls. "Excuse me, but walking into your house to get the lunch that
you forgot earlier, only to find—" He stops, noticing what's on the battered coffee table in front of
him, the empty paper bag and crumpled saran wrap. "You ate my lunch?"

"Your bread is going a little stale," the stranger tells him. "And you'll want to finish up those apples
in a couple more days."

"And you took a shower! In my bathroom!" Charles bursts out, all the surreal details of the scene
crashing down in full force upon him: the stranger's damp hair and bare feet, the drying footprints on
the floor, Charles' towel over the arm of the couch. That's leaving aside the quarter, or whatever,
hovering menacingly over the stranger's fingertips. "Did you sleep in my bed, too? Was it just right?"

"It wasn't bad," the stranger says.

"Oh my god," Charles mumbles.

"There are hotels, you know!" Charles feels compelled to point out, after an insupportable minute of
being stared at by the bathrobed stranger. "Lots of them, around here! Places where you can go and,
in exchange for a sum of money—or, I suppose, enough deliberate disregard for social rules and
norms—you can temporarily gain access to a bed and a shower and the contents of a minibar without
violating a stranger's privacy!"

Mini-bar. A drink sounds quite good right now. A voice in the back of his mind that sounds like
Moira informs him that it isn't even noon and he hasn't even started grading yet and this is what
people mean when they talk about unhealthy coping mechanisms. He snidely informs that voice that
there are extenuating circumstances. That an intruder has gotten his...his felonious germs all over all
of Charles' private belongings.

"Why would I need a hotel?" the stranger asks. "Everything I needed was right here. The selection
of bath products could have been better, I suppose. And you have abysmal taste in beer."

"I'm a student!" Charles protests. "It was left over from a party! Why should I even care what the
felon on my couch thinks about my beer choices?"

"And your taste in movies," the stranger adds.

"Oh, I'm very sorry not to have the oeuvre of Werner Herzog in my media cabinet," Charles says.
"There's an art house theatre on campus doing a marathon. Maybe they'll let you sit there in your
bathrobe as long as you buy some popcorn."

The stranger hums. "And," Charles adds, "you're more than welcome to go there now."

"I'm not a fan of theatre seats." The stranger, the intruder, the felon, pats the futon thoughtfully.
"Your futon's very comfortable, though."

"I'm glad at least one thing in my house—" Charles realizes what he's saying, and registers the
exasperated relief at the stranger's approval. "You know what? No. No. Do you want money? If so,
I've got..." He winces as he mentally pages through his wallet. "Fifteen bucks. You can have that
and all the stale bread you want."

Sighing, the stranger drops the quarter and folds his hands in his lap, regarding Charles steadily. "I don't want your money, Charles. I wouldn't mind another sandwich, though."

"I am not Charles to you!" Charles informs him, hearing his voice start to spike upwards to hysterical shrillness. He hasn't moved for the duration of this conversation: still by his door, the intruder still on his futon. "I am the person whose house you've broken into and whose hot water you've used and sandwich bread you've eaten. And you are the person who has wrongfully made use of my things. That's all you are, but I'd also like you to be the stranger who leaves my house right now."

"You don't want that, Charles," the stranger says, and Charles fists his hands to keep them from shaking with anger and adrenaline and just a hint of the fear that's starting to push past the outrage and confusion and remind him that there is a stranger in his house.

"You don't get to tell me what I do and don't want!" Charles shouts. "You don't even know me! You don't—"

He freezes and rewinds through the entire ludicrous encounter, the bathrobe, the lunch, the shower, the movies, the glib remarks, and, no. He's never said his name. He's never identified himself. There's a chance, of course, a good one, probably, that the stranger saw his name while paging through his belongings, scrawled on a Netflix DVD or a bank statement, but there's something about the way the man has used his name—deliberately, calculated, like a tool or a weapon—that makes Charles think the paperwork only confirmed something the stranger already knew.

"How do you know my name?" Charles asks quietly. His voice is the only thing that works, his body locked up, frozen between flight and fight.

"Why don't you take advantage of the only decent piece of furniture you own and sit down so we can talk?" the stranger says, patting the futon once more.

"I don't think I will," Charles says, choosing to let the stranger's insult to his furniture go unacknowledged. He consolidates his position by the door, leaning against the cabinets. The late-morning sun shines through the windows behind him; his neck feels, suddenly, terribly exposed. "Now, he says," ignoring the creeping anxiety in his gut and the stranger's steady gaze, "why should I even listen to you? I don't even know your name."

The stranger, regardless of his preposterous bathrobe and bare feet resting on Charles' coffee table, regards him coolly. It's an expression Charles hasn't seen on anyone's face since he'd left home, but the time and distance haven't done much to cool his hatred of it. Fortunately for him, the stranger must see or sense something of this, because he says, "My name's Erik. Erik Lehnsherr."

Charles nods. It's an effort not to grip the cabinets behind him to keep himself steady. "Okay. Erik." He reminds himself he's got a name now, even if it's likely not the stranger's—Erik's—real one. "And what are you doing here?"

"I'm here to keep an eye on you," Erik says calmly, gazing up at him with an expression that says he's not going to be moved by Charles' anger or imperiousness, or anything Charles might say to his pronouncement.

For a moment, Charles can't say anything. He can't decide if it's anger or betrayal or more fear that's filling his throat, only that there's something unpleasant tightening his breathing and flooding down into his lungs.
"Did my family send you?" he demands. "Because if they did, you really do need to leave."

"The man your family sent is the man you should be worrying about," Erik says. "Not me."

Charles pauses for a breath. He'd like to pause long enough to get his bearings, but he's afraid that might take quite a long time.

"You know," he says, "this theatricality is rather off-putting. Is it really that hard to say what you bloody well mean?"

His voices rises at the end, just slightly more than he'd like. Not that he's done a good job at hiding anything from this man yet. He wishes the counter wasn't holding him up. He'd like the ability to stand on his own so he could throttle Erik. Or at least pour himself a drink. Or maybe head for the hills. Regardless of whom his family sent and for what purpose, things are probably about to get ugly.

"What I mean is that, if you were to fall prey to an unfortunate accident, right now it would be in your family's best interests to have that happen," Erik says. "And despite your questionable taste in decorating and your charming personality, we have mutual acquaintances who would prefer that didn't happen."

"My personality?" Charles says, and the indignation gives him a surprising amount of strength. "Oh, that's rich. I'm sorry I'm not on my best manners, given you broke into my house and then went through my belongings. I think I'm allowed to be a bit put out."

Erik smiles at him. His smile is large and contains far too many teeth. Charles thinks he may actually prefer the scowl.

"Well," he says. "I suggest you get used to me. I may be here for some time."

"This isn't happening," Charles mutters. He decides the best way to deal with his family possibly wanting him dead and a handsome bathrobed stranger on his futon, is denial and broken laughter. He can't stop his shoulders from shaking. "I'm just a biosci graduate student. I have to give a midterm in two hours."

"You're not just anything" Erik says calmly, "and you can still give your midterm. I'll go with you."

"In that?" Erik gives him a look, eloquent of don't be stupid, before rising to his feet, hands going to the belt of the robe. Charles whips around to stare out the window into his neighbor's yard, his face burning even as he entertains thoughts of accidents and assassins. "I'll—I'll make my lunch again while you... while you get ready."

He inches into the kitchen, not without catching a glimpse of pale muscled shoulder and torso. Food is the farthest thing from his mind, and Erik's right, the bread's starting to go stale, but he mechanically starts swiping on peanut butter and jelly anyway. The just-going-off apples taunt him from their bowl on the windowsill. It occurs to him as he's stuffing sandwich, apple, and packaged brownie into a bag that he has a bodyguard. A bodyguard who's stolen his lunch.

When he peeks back into his living room, Erik's not in his bathrobe anymore, but is in jeans and long-sleeved shirt and sweater, a long pea-type coat draped over his arm. It's so jarringly ordinary, Charles is almost disappointed.

"No black suit and tie?" he asks. "No sunglasses?"

"Are there a lot of other people on your campus who wear dark suits and sunglasses?" Erik asks. "If
there are, I can change. I assumed that most professors and students dress rather casually, but if dressing casually amongst a throng of people in dark suits and sunglasses will make me stand out and thus bring more unwanted attention to you, by all means."

Charles narrows his eyes.

"Are you always this much of an ass?" he asks.

"Yes," Erik says, and shrugs on the coat. "We should go if you want to actually eat that stale sandwich before your midterm."

Charles wants to find out who hired Erik and give them a stern talking-to. Or perhaps hit them. Repeatedly.

* * *

Charles spends the walk back to campus fidgeting nervously, looking in every direction. Erik, by contrast, shoves his hands in his pockets and strolls along casually next to him. He doesn't seem to be looking for assassins at all, or doing any bodyguard-type things, really. Charles wonders, not for the first time, if someone is playing an elaborate joke on him, or if this is one of Moira's plots to set him up.

He wouldn't put it past her; it could very well be both, knowing Moira, an elaborate joke and the intro to a blind date.

"Shouldn't you be looking for whomever wants to kill me?" he asks.

"Whoever," Erik says. "And who says I'm not? I don't tell you how to teach—don't try and tell me how to do my job."

"Fine," Charles mutters, but he doesn't stop looking over his shoulder, even once they've entered the natural sciences building and the familiar buzz of overworked grad students and harried undergrads surrounds him. Mercifully he doesn't seem any of his friends, just a few professors who give him distracted nods before turning back to their work. He thinks unhappily of every action movie he's ever seen, where these same sorts of people, innocent bystanders just going about their business, end up being vaporized or blown to high heaven just so some shadowy figure can kill the protagonist or steal the government secrets the protagonist carries.

Moira's in the cramped former closet they use as a joint office when they finally arrive. She looks unfazed when she sees Erik, which—Charles blinks. The first thing he'd been when he'd seen Erik had been very definitely fazed; he thinks that has to be a default reaction to Erik, bathrobe or not. Then, much to his ire, she gets up from his chair, breezes right by him, and addresses Erik.

"You find the place all right?" she asks him.

"What," Charles says.

"It was fine." Erik peers past Moira into the menacing recesses of their tiny office. "It's secure. Well, as secure as that dump can be."

"Moira," Charles says, trapped somewhere between hysterical and furious.

"Surprise!" Moira says.

Charles is going to set her on fire.
"You need to breathe," Moira tells him. "And probably sit down."

Charles' knees decide to buckle under the weight of the past hour and deposit him in the office chair Erik's shoved underneath him. The chair creaks in protest at the shock; Charles knows how it feels.

"What." His chest is once again doing the thing where it tightens and makes each breath work to reach his lungs, and his brain is one giant error message. Moira. Moira's in on this. "Moira, I know you have a uniquely terrible sense of humor, but this is uniquely terrible even for you."

"Charles." Moira's kneeling next to him, her hand on his thigh, and her voice is quietly serious, compelling him to look. The last time he'd heard it had been when he'd fallen down a flight of stairs and banged his head; the last time he'd seen this expression, absolutely determined, had been when he'd opened his eyes to see two of her staring down at him.

"Charles," Moira says again, "this isn't a joke."

"You sent a man to hang out in my living room in his bathrobe," Charles mutters.

Moira makes a choking noise and Erik mutters something that sounds like oh for fuck's sake. "I didn't send him to do that," she says, the laughter falling away. "And I didn't send him, to be honest."

"Yes, the people you work for did, I'm quite sure." Charles levels a glare at Erik, who remains unmoved. "Moira, who are you? Are you—" Are you even my friend? "Yes, it is." She shifts a little, making herself comfortable. "And I really am working on my degree with you. And I'd like to think we've been friends as long as we've known each other... or at least since you apologized for throwing up in my trashcan and passing out on my bed."

"But you were sent to find me and watch over me or some rubbish like that," Charles says. He doesn't want to think about years of lies and false pretense. He trusts (trusted?) Moira. He loves Moira. She's his best friend, the first person he could truly rely on after he'd left home.

"Not at all," Moira says. She squeezes his hand. "But I have some friends in my previous line of work who heard your name come up recently—well, an ex—"

"Mr. Romance?" Charles asks, remembering vividly a few of Moira's sloppier drunken reminiscences. "Was that a lie too?"

"I'm telling you, Charles, I didn't lie to you," she says, sighing. "I swear, it was just like I told you. Except he was sort of my boss. And there was more hand to hand combat involved, less sitting behind a desk. But the point is that Mr. Romance tipped me off and I asked if he could help and...here we are."

"I'm still not sure how that explains a strange man breaking into my home," Charles says. "And eating my food and using my toiletries and criticizing my tastes—" He's picking up steam again. He needs to stay irate. As long as he's irate, he won't messily melt down in front of his best friend and stupid attractive asshole bodyguard.

"It was shitty beer," Erik says, helpfully. Charles glares at him.

"Not his fault," Moira says. "Someone brought it to a party."

"Can we move past the beer?" Charles says, his voice shriller than he'd like. Moira and Erik are both quiet for a moment, staring at him like he's about to lose his cool.
Or, possibly, like he's already lost it.

"His toiletries?" Moira finally asks. "You're such an asshole, Lehnsherr."

"It was a long flight," Erik says.

He's going to murder both of them.

"Hello? Uh, Charles?"

How did they not close the door? How did none of them notice one of Charles' students approaching? Wasn't Erik—and, well, Moira, it seems—supposed to be trained in this sort thing? Privacy and people sneaking up and the like? Erik straightens, directing a glare at the undergraduate who's appeared in the doorway, ferocious enough to make him back up a couple of steps.

"Hello," Charles says faintly.

"I'm sorry," the boy says. Charles thinks his name is Sean. Undergrad. Loud. Sits in the back. "I thought it was office hours?"

"It is," Charles says. He clears his throat and tries for something resembling casual, hoping Sean sees three TAs killing time during their usually-boring office hours. "I was just having a chat with Moira and my new bod—"

"Boyfriend," Moira says smoothly, smiling up at Sean. Charles chokes. Erik looks unfazed. Moira taps on the partition that separates their two tiny work areas. "Why don't you go have a seat at my desk? I'll be over in a minute to see if I can't answer your question, after I finish talking to Charles and his boyfriend."

"I, um, I gotta go to the restroom. Be right back?" With a last worried look at Erik, Sean leaves. While Erik's eyes follow him down the hall, Moira gives Charles a subtle thumbs-up. He's hot, she mouths.

"I'm going to set you on fire," Charles repeats, out loud this time.

"Try not to do that just yet." The threat, like most other things, slides right off Moira. "You'll thank me for setting you up, just you wait."

Over Moira's shoulder, Erik's stationed himself by the door, gazing out into the hallway. On the alert for resentful undergraduates and rogue lab assistants no doubt. Charles sighs. "How long is this going to last?"

"A while," Moira says briskly. She stands up, dusting off her hands—or maybe washing them of the conversation. "We'll talk more later. Erik, are you going back to Charles' place with him?"

"After his midterm," Erik says, with a dry sort of emphasis accompanied by a curl of his thin, temperamental mouth. He offers Charles a quick glance. Charles swallows. Now that Moira's pointed it out, Erik is hot, in a sort of brooding-deviant-in-the-living-room kind of way. Or a bodyguard-possible-assassin way. "I'd prefer to go back to my place, though."

"Makes sense," Moira says. The look she gives Charles tells him not to press; he remembers it very clearly from the times an unwise junior grad student had pushed his luck with misogynist "women in science" cracks. "I'll see you in a bit, okay, Charles?"

"Whatever," Charles mutters.
He ignores the disappointment he gets in return and turns to his computer. When he presses the power button, he half-expects the hard drive to explode, or black-clad ninjas to hurl themselves from the ceiling vents. All that happens is he gets his password screen. Just on the other side of the partition, he hears Moira chatting with Sean, like she hadn't just told Charles she was some kind of secret agent in deep cover, like Charles' world isn't comprehensively upended.

An hour of the hour and a half until class time crawls by, a slow-moving blur. Moira leaves for an appointment with their adviser, but not without a last, unwarranted comment about giving Charles and Erik some alone time. Charles stares at the equations on his screen, seeing only Erik's face and words like your family wants to kill you and other people don't want you dead, and why other people might be interested him, Charles has no idea.

He does know he fought hard to get away from his family. He doesn't know if getting away from these people—the shadowy figures behind Erik, Moira, and Mr. Romance—will be any easier.

A hand falls on his shoulder. Charles starts violently, heart in his throat, but it's only Erik, holding Charles' plastic-wrapped sandwich.

"You should eat," Erik says.

"Bread's stale," Charles mutters darkly, but he takes it from Erik anyway. "Not like my stomach can manage after—" He gestures futilely, as though his messy desk and computer can somehow convey the hell of an afternoon that he's had.

"We didn't have to come here," Erik says. "You were the one insisting on giving your midterm. Don't blame your inability to process this on me."

"I'm sorry if I'm troubled by the fact that, in the past two hours, a strange man has broken into my house, told me my family has taken a hit out on me, and revealed my best friend is some sort of mysterious spy with a dark past who hired me a bodyguard to protect me from assassins," Charles hisses. Erik offers him nothing in response but a carefully blank look.

"No one says 'take a hit out on' anymore," Erik finally says when the silence has begun to linger. Charles mutinously chews his stale sandwich and returns his attention to his computer screen. "Listen," Erik continues, his voice quiet. "Moira did you a favor. I don't think you can really comprehend exactly how big a favor it is. The people I work for—the people she knows—they're not in the business of doing things like this out of the goodness of their hearts." It's not just the volume of his voice that's changed, it's the tone. The condescension is gone, as is the cool edge. He sounds...sincere, perhaps. He is sincere. "Take this seriously. Take me seriously. And if you can't take me seriously, take Moira seriously. She cares about you. She wouldn't do this if that wasn't true." Erik pauses. "Well, she might, because she's one of those people who actually cares about others, but she wouldn't have insisted. She wouldn't have nearly broken cover for you, to be absolutely sure."

Charles wants to think it's another act, but something in his gut is telling him to trust Erik.

He hates going on instinct. There's a reason he's a scientist.

"I—" he starts to say, but realizes he has no idea how the sentence is going to end. He needs time to process all of this. He's suddenly grateful that all he has to do this afternoon is proctor exams. "Do you want some of my apple?" he asks instead.

Great. Resorting to preschool overtures of friendship.
"It's going off," Erik reminds him, but pulls it out of the bag on the desk anyway. He produces a pocket knife and cuts it neatly in half, handing one part to Charles and keeping the other half to himself.

It's a start, Charles supposes.

The truce between them, or at least Charles' willingness to cooperate, lasts until they get to the lecture hall. Before Charles can duck in, Erik stops him, hand on his arm so Charles almost collides with a student trying to squeeze through the door. It's a fresh reminder that someone's out to get him, that they could be anywhere, that his life is in danger and it's thanks to people who were supposed to care for him.

"Do you honestly think my family would—would," he can't say the words.

"Your family would prefer it if things were neater," Erik says. He has his head bent close to Charles, his body screening him, angled as if to deflect a bullet. "But these things are never neat."

Anyone passing would think they were a couple, the annoying mushy kind, indulging in PDA in the hallway between classes. Charles is fairly certain some of his own students are witness to it; sure enough, he sees Alex and Darwin goggling as they slow down to appreciate the horror of their TA having a sex life. Erik twines the fingers of one hand through Charles', calluses brushing against Charles' palm, holding him still and close.

"Okay," Charles sighs. "Just, just don't be any more obvious than you're already going to be."

Erik precedes Charles into the room, Moira materializing right behind them, her arms full of the exam papers Charles had forgotten. Charles wonders how long it's going to be before the students catch on to the fact that everything they're seeing—their one TA's boyfriend taking a seat in the corner, their other TA setting out the exam materials, the first TA hovering indecisively at the front desk—is a terrible, sick farce.

They don't, of course, too preoccupied with the exam. Charles proceeds through the hour and a half on autopilot, reading out the instructions and patrolling the aisles for cheaters. As he paces, he feels Erik's gaze on him, even though when he glances up, Erik's studying the equations on the board, or the bank of windows opposite the door.

"Time to go home, I guess," Charles says once the last exam is collected and the last student has escaped.

"Not to your place," Moira says quietly. "No way to keep you safe there."

"It's my place," Charles says. It's probably a health hazard all on its own, but it's his place, awful furniture and all, somewhere quiet to retreat to. Ever since he got it at the beginning of his grad work, it's been safe for him.

Moira and Erik exchange a look, which Charles would be more annoyed about if he wasn't so exhausted.

"Let's go to my place to debrief," Moira says. "Then we can figure out what we're going to do from here."

Charles has to admire her reasoning. Moira has always been pragmatic, and he can see what she's doing here—neutral, familiar ground, where Charles has always felt safe.

"Fine," he says, though he hates knowing she's playing him. Erik and Moira exchange another look,
and Moira nods, and that, Charles decides, is the bloody end. "May I request that if you're going to have a conversation about my safety, that we do it out loud?"

Erik gives him a withering look, and then says something in what might be Russian. Moira responds likewise, and the urge to kill both of them returns.

"English," he says through his teeth.

"Before, when he did the eyebrow thing, he was asking if my place was secure, and I told him yes," Moira says. "In Russian, he asked me if you were always this obnoxious and I told him attractive men sometimes make you nervous."

"He doesn't make me nervous," Charles insists. Then, off of Erik's smirk, "Not that I'm saying—I don't mean—oh, shut up. Let's go to Moira's, where I trust the two of you will tell me a very detailed and convincing story that will set my mind at ease while I drink quite a lot of Moira's best wine."

* * *

In all the times Charles has been to Moira's place, it's been nothing more than a typical grad student apartment in one half of a converted house. Now that Moira's a secret agent, Charles examines the place for signs of covert activity. Were there infrared sensors zigzagging across the lawn? Charles glances up at the porch light, wondering if a camera was concealed inside it. When Moira taps out her alarm code on the panel inside the front door, Charles imagines it zinging out to some top-secret base buried in a mountain.

"Bulletproof glass," Moira says when Charles runs fingers over the window that looks out into Moira's tidy backyard. "And there were four security cameras on the porch."

"Steel cladding in the walls," Erik says with reluctant approval as he paces the room. Moira makes a sarcastic sound that Charles recognizes, a sort of oh I don't know what I did before I got your opinion noise.

Erik eventually folds his ridiculously lean self into one of Moira's chairs, while Charles, determined to salvage at least one thing from the day, heads for Moira's wine rack and her glasses. "I hope you have a decent red in there," Erik calls out.

"Fuck you, Lehnsherr," Moira replies as she reaches for the corkscrew. "And if you think you're getting drunk tonight, Charles, you've got another thing coming. And I don't care if it's your favorite coping mechanism."

"There's no coping mechanism in the world for this," Charles says, leaning against the kitchen counter. Moira's apartment is so... ordinary. The only difference between her place and Charles'—other than the steel panels in the walls and the security equipment, maybe some hidden weapons cabinet, for all Charles knows—is that it's neater. They both have copies of the same photo on their refrigerators, both of them drunk and leaning against each other, Moira's arm outstretched to take their picture.

"One glass," Moira says, twisting the corkscrew down. "To calm your nerves. And mine. But I'm serious, we need you to be here."

"I don't get carried away like that anymore," Charles says quietly. "Not really. Not in years."

Moira places the bottle on the counter and holds out her arms hesitantly. A part of Charles wants to refuse the affection, to step away and shun the contact, but he's stepping into her embrace automatically. Moira hugs him fiercely, her slim arms tightening around him, and Charles wonders if
it's not more for her sake than his own.

"I know," she says. "But this is scary stuff."

"What is it?" Charles says. "I know that...things were bad when I left, but having me killed?" The words still sound surreal, although he knows how much his stepfather hated him and probably still hates him.

Moira releases him and picks up the wine bottle again, pulls out the cork and pours three glasses.

"Money makes people do strange things," Moira says. "You should know that better than anyone."

"I was disinherited," Charles says. He picks up a glass and forces himself to sip, rather than down the whole thing at once. "That was one of the...conditions, for me to go to school. I was disinherited. It shouldn't matter."

"Well," Moira says, "it turns out that your stepfather had no legal power to cut you off from what's essentially your father's fortune and since your mother was already married to him...it's complicated, and money is only the very top layer."

"Getting you out of the way will solve a lot of their problems," Erik says. Charles hadn't even heard him approach. Maybe he was better at the secret spy bodyguard thing than Charles had guessed.

Erik accepts the glass Moira holds out to him, fingers curling around the base of the glass bowl. He drinks like he's James Bond, neat and precise, which intrigues and infuriates Charles in equal measure. Before Erik can catch him looking, Charles devotes himself to his own glass, remembering to take careful, measured swallows; Moira's going to hold him to that one drink.

"If I'd known all he wanted was the money, I'd just give it to him," Charles says. The wine and the words are metallic at the back of his tongue. "I'd rather be broke than give him any reason to contact me." Or kill me.

"Like I said, it's complicated," Moira says with a sad smile. "The estate money's part of it, but you're also heir to your father's company; controlling interest in Xavier Biogenetics is even more money, which your stepfather is managing to acquire right now because he's chairman of the board, and the patents in your father's and the company's names. And a few other things."

She's the only person Charles has ever told about his mother and stepfather and stepbrother; she knows Charles hasn't said his stepfather's name in years, what happens if Charles sees his stepfather's name in the paper. He wonders if she's told Erik, if all his family pain is in a dossier somewhere. As much as he hates it, because she's Moira and she deserves better, he wishes he could read her mind and see if she's kept all that secret.

"What other things?" Charles asks. He sits down at Moira's tiny kitchen table, gazing steadily up at both of them, a pair of secret agents standing next to the kitchen sink and drying rack. He puts on the expression that most of his students think of as slightly unnerving: wide-eyed and expectant, unflinching. "I feel like you're burying the lede."

Surprisingly, it's Erik who answers. "You know I'm a mutant," he says, gesturing so Moira's bread knife slides easily out of its wooden block, turning figure-eights in the air. Charles nods warily.

"You are too," Erik says calmly, meeting Charles' eyes with his own pale grey ones, grey like steel. "Me." Charles is fairly sure his mouth is hanging open. "Me."
Charles stares at Erik. When seconds pass without inspiration for actual human speech, he turns his 
gaze on Moira. When that, too, yields nothing, he turns to the wine rack, mentally calculating how 
shitfaced he needs to get in order to come out of the other side of this fever dream.

"Charles," Moira says warningly.

"I... am literally speechless," Charles manages to say. "No, on second thought, I'm merely suddenly 
positive you have lost your minds. I can't be—I study—I'd know. I—there's no way."

"There's a way," Erik says, as Charles very quickly finishes his glass of wine. "There's an expensive, 
experimental, so far unduplicated way that means you wouldn't know. No one knows how it works, 
why it only worked on you, or even what it is. There were experiments in the 80s and you're the 
only known survivor and every scrap of paper, every note, every file, every specimen, is somewhere 
in the Xavier Biogenetics building behind, we think, a genetic code. There are only about a dozen 
people on the planet that even know it exists."

Charles wants to blame his nausea on the wine, but he knows better. His head is spinning. He can't 
believe this. He can't believe the implications. That he...that his father...that all of these years he's 
been living his life without knowing....

"You two knew," he says faintly. "You knew this about me." He looks at Moira. "You never told 
me."

"I didn't know," Moira says quickly. "Not until very recently. Last week. When I started this 
program, Nick—Mr. Romance—did a...well, he ran a background check on everyone I was working 
with. I guess he started to piece it together with some stuff he already had in the files. He kept it to 
himself. Hand to god, Charles, he told me for the first time last week when he told me he thought 
you were in danger."

"Does he know you call him that?" Erik asks, looking at Moira again.

"Erik, do you really think this is the time?" Moira hisses.

"Why now?" Charles asks before they can continue bickering. He needs to know, not listen to the 
two people with answers get into a tiff about something inconsequential. Best for them to save that 
for the hospital waiting room where they'll inevitably have to sit after he has his imminent meltdown.

"Your mother's sick," Erik says. He's not drinking anymore, or pretending to drink. "Lawyers are 
starting to poke around her assets and ask questions, and while whatever's in you is so classified it 
could never be found by a civilian lawyer, Kurt now knows it's there for sure. And he doesn't need 
you possibly contesting your disinheritance. You, up and moving around, are a wrench in their plans 
for Kurt to lead Xavier Biogen into a brave new world. You, dead and containing the secrets to what 
could be a bigger technological or pharmaceutical boom than an iPhone that cures cancer, are the key 
to enough money to buy entire countries."

Erik is speaking faster than Charles' mind can process information, or perhaps just faster than he can emotionally process it. He's hated them, all of them, for years. Even his mother's supposed illness 
brings him nothing but the regret that comes from thinking about other mothers and sons. But even in 
his hatred, he never could have imagined them being this cruel. This... grotesque. Because Erik must 
mean....

"They'd kill me to get the secret," Charles says softly. "They'd open me up to find it, knowing I'd 
ever give it to them willingly." He couldn't. No one in their right mind would. A mutant "cure" has 
been speculated about since at least the forties when mutants were first "discovered." Even now,
when mutants have mostly integrated into society, there are still groups that would manage to turn anything of the sort into a weapon almost immediately. There's too much potential for abuse, no matter the talk of helping mutants control their abilities for their own safety.

He's debated both sides with students before, played devil's advocate in more liberal classes, been the hypothetical voice of mutants in more cautious groups. It was just an exercise before. The knowledge that it's his reality, that something's been done to him against his will, that he's lived his whole life as a fraction of the truth—he feels violated. Broken. Tired.

"There are two choices, as I see it," Erik says. "Choice number one: we spend an indeterminate number of years on the run from these thugs, trying to keep you safe."

Charles squeezes his eyes shut.

"Choice two?" he asks, rubbing his temples.

When Erik doesn't immediately say anything, Charles opens his eyes again. Erik is wearing the same smile, the one with too many teeth and a vicious edge.

"We break into Xavier Biogenetics and we find your father's secret files," Erik says. "We steal the secret right out from under them."

"You would go for that one," Moira says with exasperation. It's a fond exasperation, though, the kind she saves for Charles sometimes.

"I prefer being proactive."

"Erik's smile fades slightly as he calls the knife over to him, studying the play of light across the blade, running his finger across the serrated edge. Charles waits for a drop of blood to bloom on Erik's fingertip, but it doesn't come.

"What can I do?" he asks, hating the plaintive tone to his voice, hating that Moira and Erik know more about him than he does and know more about what's going to happen. "I mean, what's my ability?"

"We don't know," Moira says. Her voice is achingly kind, which angers Charles and exhausts him at once, as if the anger simply flows out of him as quickly as it runs in, like water through a sieve. "The best Nick could guess, your father was able to... to activate your mutation, but also turn it off somehow. The particulars of your mutation weren't recorded in the files we have access to. None of the data from the experiments that—" a hesitation, where Moira never hesitates "—that he did ever made it out of the company. Nick had to build his case on inference. There were some big holes to fill, but the logic is solid. It was more than enough to reach out to Erik, when Nick realized what was going on."

Erik shifts, exhaling sharply. "You see why we need you, why we need that information, Charles. In the wrong hands—"

"It's a weapon, yes," Charles snaps. He feels different inside, as if his own cells are strange to him. *They are. You don't know what's really you anymore.* There's a secret in them, waiting. "And that's what has you worried, isn't it? You and the people you work for."

"Yes," Erik says, just as blunt. He straightens, and every line of his body reminds Charles of exactly what he is. "The Brotherhood. We've followed your career, Charles—not that we knew what you were, but you were conducting research on mutations and their genetic basis. We knew you were related to a man who'd done groundbreaking work in the field. We couldn't not keep a watch on you, if your own work took you in the wrong direction."
Charles nods. He can't blame Erik, not really, although still, he wants to choke, or scream, or punch someone in the face, at realizing the freedom he'd thought he'd had had been an illusion. Less than that—some kind of pathetic lie he'd told himself and believed in wholeheartedly.

"You could just kill me." Charles wonders if that that possibility had gone through Erik's head while he'd been waiting for Charles to arrive home. "Kill me, burn my body, and that secret would be gone forever. You'd never have to worry about it again."

"We don't kill our own," Erik says softly, emphatically.

Our own, Charles thinks, too dazed to feel anything at the words. Our own. You're a mutant, whether by hook or by crook... or some kind of Frankensteinian science experiment. Still, though, Erik had said our own.

The affection Charles suddenly feels for Erik is warm and, frankly, unwanted. Right now, there's no place inside of him for gratitude, not when all of his focus is on not screaming or crawling under the table with the rest of the wine bottle. He pushes the feeling away, concentrates on his memories of—hell, it was just a few hours ago, it feels like an age—Erik breaking into his home and making himself comfortable with Charles' things, apparently just to get a rise out of him.

The irritation feels good. Familiar. He clings to that and abruptly turns back to Moira.

"And you?" he asks. "Are you a mutant too?"

She shakes her head. "Fully baseline," she says. "Although there are times when I've been working in the lab or grading all night when I wish I had the power to stop time or freeze undergrads with my angry stare."

"You come close enough as it is," Charles says absently. He's thought those things more than once as well—they all make the jokes after hours of work, even the two mutants in their lab. Why couldn't I have a good power, like making beer appear from thin air? or Super-speed would make this set-up go faster or If we ever figure out how to make artificial mutations, I'm cloning myself so I can finish my dissertation, catch up on Game of Thrones and clean my house sometime in the next decade. For all he knows, he really did—does—have one of those mutations. Well, probably not the beer one.

"The organization I used to work for occasionally called in The Brotherhood for mutant-related issues," Moira says. "Well, at least, once Erik took over. They have the most experience and the best chance of defusing the situation in the safest way for all involved. Some of our government contacts took less care when it came to mutant cases."

Beside Charles, the knife Erik is holding spins through the air rapidly. Charles slides minutely closer to Moira, but she doesn't even flinch.

"Yeah, yeah," she says. "Mutant superiority, people who hurt mutants are scum, you're going to wipe the Earth of them, et cetera. We obviously agree with you—to a point—so there's really no need for showmanship." The knife slows and gently lands back at the table, despite the disgruntled look that Erik shoots at Moira. "We're the good guys, Lehnsherr. That's why we call you in instead of the feds."

"For a given value of good," he mutters. "And don't think I haven't noticed you've gone back to using 'we.' What happened to, 'I'm out of that business now' and 'I'm just a student, stop showing up on my doorstep at five am?'"
"Old habits," Moira says. "And, seriously, if you regularly show up on anyone's doorstep at five am, how are you still alive? I was inches away from killing you and I generally tolerate you. I know you have enemies."

"I don't give them time to make the first move," Erik says.

Charles is actually grateful for the exasperation that's building up. It's enough for him to push past his shock and misery, the despair and panic, to snap, "Could you stop doing—" He gestures between them. "—this while I'm in the middle of a crisis?"

"Old habits," they repeat in unison.

"Sorry," Moira adds.

"I know you don't mean to," he says, "but it doesn't help, you two making secret agent inside jokes." He can't articulate it. He's used to having friends and colleagues and being alone by choice, not having this kind of isolation—the isolation of being in someone's crosshairs, of being the only person in the room not understanding—forced on him.

"We can be deadly serious if you want," Erik says mildly, although he's frowning again, the same uncompromising expression he'd fixed Charles with back at his house. It seems like ages ago now, not earlier this afternoon. "And whether you want it or not, we are going to have to make a decision as to what to do."

"Nick's definitely open to taking him into protective custody," Moira tells Erik. "It's probably his favorite option, rather than having you gallivanting into Xavier Biogen, guns blazing."

"I don't gallivant," Erik says. The knife trembles under the influence of an invisible hand. Charles can't muster up any of his usual interest in someone displaying their mutation so effortlessly, so casually. "And we take care of our own. He'll be just as safe with us, Moira. Maybe safer."

"What," Moira scoffs, "like Stark and Rogers are going to hand him over to Creed just because they're—"

"I'm not saying that, I'm saying Stark spends too much time—"

"Don't I get a say?" Charles asks. Or, possibly, demands. "What if I want to go into, I don't know, Witness Protection?"

"And be a grocery store clerk in Helena?" Erik snorts. "And having the US Marshals keep you safe? Creed would find you before you unpacked."

"Not them." It feels like the kitchen is closing around him, both Moira and Erik looming like implacable judges. If he does have a mutant power and this isn't some insane delusion, it would be nice if it manifested now. Teleportation, maybe, to a deserted island. Or invisibility. "Mr. Romance. I'm sure he has connections."

"They aren't going to stop looking, Charles," Moira says. She slides into the seat next to Charles, reaching for his hand. He withdraws it, placing it in his lap. Moira sighs. "Erik's right; the more people who know about you, the faster they'll find you. And you stand out. I don't want you to think we're being dictatorial—"

"You're fighting over me like two dogs with a bone." For a person who's spent most of his life embracing pacifism, Charles finds he rather enjoys anger. "Three dogs, if you count my family. And I won't... I know you mean well," he tells Moira, "but I won't put up with it."
When neither of them says anything, Charles shakes his head in disbelief. Somewhere down in the bottom of his lungs, right over his diaphragm, there's a hysterical laugh waiting to bubble up, hot like lava under pressure. If he gives in, he'll probably never stop, so instead of laughing until he dies, he says, "Do I need a retinal scan to get into the guest bedroom?"

"No," Moira says softly. "I'm going to be by myself and try to process this," Charles tells them both, and is quietly relieved when neither of them tries to follow. And if "processing this" means lying on Moira's fold-out mattress and staring at the wall, neither of them need to know that.

Whatever Moira uses to reinforce the walls must be decent at soundproofing as well. Charles doesn't hear a peep from outside the guest room, not even the squeak of a chair sliding across the floor. He's never noticed it before, but it's not the sort of thing you notice in the house of someone who's supposed to be, uncomplicatedly, your friend.

He stares at the wall, listening only to his own breathing, for an indeterminate length of time. Although he'd like to make good on his promise not to come out until he's sorted some of the mess in his head, it's his bladder that eventually makes the call for him.

"Traitor," he mutters to himself, and hefts himself up off the bed.

He does his business, sneaking through the hallway out of some desperate need not to be seen, darting from doorway to doorway, but stops on his way back to the guest room. He can see Moira from where he's standing, sitting on the couch with her feet on the coffee table, holding the bottle of wine in one hand and the remote control in the other, a TV show playing on mute so it casts changing patterns of light across her face. She looks miserable, and while part of him feels rather good about that, the rest is reminding him that she's not only his only friends—he's hers, too.

God, they're a couple of sad sacks.

Against his better judgment, he slowly steps out of the shadows and enters the living room, joining her on the couch. She doesn't look up.

"Where's Erik?" he asks.

"He went by his safe house to get some things," she says. "Knowing him, that probably translates to 'scary knives.' He'll be back pretty soon."

They're alone then. He almost wants to use their privacy to throw a tantrum, but he refrains. "What is it?" he asks instead. "A government agency? Are you a spy?"

"No," she says without looking away from the television. It's an old Law and Order, the characters talking soundlessly to themselves. "Yes. I don't know. It's hard to describe."

"Describe it," Charles says, and she sighs but relents.

"It's sort of, well, beyond the government," she says. "Outside of it. They don't answer to the government. They sort of answer to the UN, but Nick's not above doing his own thing."

That sounds...horrifying, actually. Not that the actual government is any better these days.

"How did you end up there?" Charles asks her. He knows Moira's a little older than him. She'd told him that after finishing her bachelor's she'd spent some years working to afford more school.
"I was recruited by Nick—Mr. Romance," she says. "I finished my undergrad degree early. It was really exactly what I told you. I was twenty and trying to decide what to do next and he approached me and offered me a job. The terms were five years of service with them, and at the end of the five years, if I didn't want to stay on, they'd make sure I got into whatever school I wanted and pay for all my expenses. And it was...not bad. I had a knack for it. It was terrifying and strange, but also kind of fun." She smiles a little her eyes lighting up in the glow of the television. "And I was really fucking good at it. They didn't want me to go, but I wanted to try this, too. It had always been my dream. I wanted to see if I could still do it, or if five years of being a secret agent had killed my inner science nerd."

By all accounts, it hadn't. Moira's work and mind were second only to his own in what was widely believed to be the best mutant bio department in the country, if not the world. He spends a moment being slightly jealous that she's able to be a beautiful genius super spy while he can barely walk in a straight line before remembering how many times he's held her hair back while she vomited and that time she twisted her ankle trying to push down the garbage in her trash barrel.

"I wish you'd told me," he says quietly.

She doesn't say anything in response, but when she puts her hand on his, this time he doesn't pull away. He holds on, instead, and if he's holding too hard, crushing the slim bones of her hand, she doesn't protest. Instead, she says, "I wish I could have, Charles. Secrecy's usually second nature—first nature, really, in my line of work. My old line of work. But if I could have told you and guaranteed you'd be safe, I would have in a second. I hated keeping that much from you."

She knows almost everything about him (even the stuff you don't know about yourself, that furious voice whispers to him), including his family and his struggle to get away from them. And, he admits with a rueful silent laugh, she's stroked his back during his own sessions with the toilet and tolerated him in his more asinine moments.

"Is Nick's last name really Romance?" Charles asks.

Moira snorts with laughter and bumps her shoulder against his. "No, but you won't believe me if I tell you what it really is. It's almost as ridiculous. Right out of a comic book." She winces. "Don't tell him I said that."

"It'll be my bargaining chip."

He finds himself settling against Moira, or Moira settling against him. They've spent a lot of evenings like this, watching terrible movies after finals or grading marathons; he hopes Erik's mocked Moira's DVD collection, in the interests of fairness. The Law and Order episode proceeds silently on, the detectives hot on the trail of the murderer, the ADA holding a 90s-era brick of a cell phone to her ear to call in a warrant.

"The man you and Erik talked about," he says as police cars pull up outside a ramshackle brownstone.


That's me. I'm one of them. It's a good thing Erik isn't here, for the safety of Moira's knife block. "I'm not—I might biologically be, but in terms of what I can do, I'm as baseline as the next human." He fumbles his way around the terms: mutant and human are so vexed, tugged constantly between scientific terminology, the popular imagination, and the law.
"Better safe than sorry," Moira says with chilling pragmatism. Charles sucks in a breath. It's possible, he realizes dimly, that it's finally sinking in: people want him dead and have taken steps to make him so. Moira sits up and twists around to face him, both her hands in his now.

"We're not going to let that happen." She says it as if, by saying the words, Charles will live forever. "But you need to trust me, at least. Trust Erik, if you can. He's not so bad, once you get to know him."

"I can't imagine what he was like when you first met him. Did he steal your shampoo too? Is that how he shows affection?"

"You're not too far off." Moira kisses his cheek. "Are you hungry? I stocked up yesterday."

Because she knew this was going to happen. Charles swallows. He's not really hungry, but if his world is going to be pulled out from under him and send him tumbling into corporate espionage while trying to evade assassins, he'll need his energy.

"I could eat," he says.

Years of friendship means Moira knows Charles' comfort foods backwards and forwards. Her fridge and cabinets are stocked with Chinese food, granny smith apples, his favorite chips and salsa, and peanut butter cookies. All the foods he turns to in his pajamas when his data isn't doing what it's supposed to or another idiotic man has dumped him. It's not just him she was worried about, though—not there are also Oreos, tomato soup, and alphabet pretzels, which are Moira's own favorite pajama foods. Together, they plate and heat up the orange chicken and General Tso's without speaking much, though the silence is less heavy than it's been since the morning. They're already sitting in front of the television when Erik returns.

"There's food in the kitchen," Moira says.

"So he came out?" Erik says.

"Can't you keep yourself from being a complete ass for ten minutes while you're in my house, addressing my friend?" Moira asks.

"No," Erik says, dropping a duffel bag onto the ground and ducking into the kitchen. "Do you have any of that thing with string beans?"

"Sorry," Moira says to Charles. "I swear he's...well, I won't say he's not always like this, but you get used to it?"

"You got me a bodyguard I need to be stockholmed into tolerating," Charles says, his good temper returning with a warm meal, a second glass of wine, a bit of explanation, and a very deliberate choice to not think too hard about what's happening to him. "Cheers, Moira. Really. Brilliant work."

"I got you a hot bodyguard," Moira says. "I mean, if you're gonna be spending the next however long with him, might as well have someone nice to look at right?"

"Right," Charles says, thinking of Erik sprawled on his couch in a bathrobe, feet on his coffee table, his chest peeking out the vee of the robe. He realizes he's maybe gotten lost in that memory when he blinks and Moira is smirking at him. "I mean, shut up."

Erik rematerializes from the kitchen, clutching a bowl full of glazed string beans and rice, a glass of water in his other hand. He takes the empty chair, plunking his feet on the coffee table, re-plunking them after Moira shoves them off. Charles tells himself this is three friends eating a late dinner.
together. It isn't two friends, one of whom is a secret agent, and an assassin-bodyguard. He takes another deep swallow of wine to help with that.

"Enough," Erik growls, leaning forward to appropriate the bottle of wine. "I'm not going to drag your hungover ass out of the house."

"You'll just leave me for Creed, then?" Charles asks as lightly as he can.

"I had to tell him," Moira says before Erik can do more than glare. "He has a right to know, Erik, and the more he knows, the more he can help protect himself."

Miraculously, Erik subsides back into his seat, although a pair of stray bottle caps begins to spin in the air. Charles watches them, half-envious, as they loop around each other in infinity symbols and complex parabolas. Could I do that? Or could I do something different? He snorts, carefully keeping his attention on his plate of orange chicken, now mostly sauce and sticky grains of rice. It doesn't matter now, does it? Since my dad... He swallows hard. Since he what, turned me off? Rendered me harmless?

"Um, I'll be right back," he says in response to Moira asking him if he wants to keep watching Law and Order, and flees to the bathroom.

In the safety of Moira's tiny, tiled bathroom, he can stare at his reflection and ask it questions his reflection can't answer. For a moment, he thinks he'll throw up and concentrates on not making himself. A splash of cold water almost returns him to his skin—he'd felt for a second he might be creeping out of it, standing just to the side of himself, seeing himself like a stranger—but he can't settle fully into it. You're a mutant. A mutant, and you have no idea what you are. He recites it over and over again, trying to convince himself of the truth.

A peremptory knock interrupts him at his sixty-fourth you're a mutant, followed by the click of the lock mechanism drawing back and the pin springing free. Already, predictably, Erik's there, his tall, broad-shouldered body blocking off escape.

"Moira wants to know if you want to talk to me," Erik says irritably. He meets Charles' eyes in the mirror. "She thinks I might understand better than she can."

"You said it yourself," Charles says. He turns and leans back against the sink, crossing his arms. He's done, for the moment, being angry. He's going to ride to wave of fear instead and see where it takes him. Maybe it will be less exhausting than the anger. "I'm the only one. The only one who's been through this. What can you possibly say to me?"

"Nothing," Erik says flatly. "I can't relate. I can't pretend I understand you. What I can offer you is this—a chance at revenge. A chance to figure out who you are. A chance to reverse what was done to you and make sure it will never happen to anyone else."

There's a determination to Erik's gaze that's entirely lacking in emotion. Erik's not sympathetic, he's not worried, he's not taking into account Charles' feelings. He doesn't, Charles realizes, really seem to care about Charles at all. This is his objective opinion. This is what he thinks should be done for the good of mutant kind.

"Break into my father's company, you mean," Charles says. "Risk seeing...them again. Risk being arrested. Risk being killed. You think it's worth it."

"I think it's the only option," Erik says. "You're literally the key to this mystery. We won't find anything out without you. It's a waste to hide you in some dark corner, hoping one day the danger
will be past. Because it won't be. Moira's good, her people are good, but the people your family has hired—they don't leave survivors and they don't give up. We either do this, end this, or you spend the rest of your life hiding. And you'll never find out who you are."

Charles squeezes the edge of the sink, the formica biting into his fingers. He just wants to finish his research. He wants to collect his data, record his findings, write his thesis, and graduate. He wants to teach somewhere and meet a man who treats him well and go on to live a boring life and forget about his past.

But his past and who he is are two different things. He doesn't want to ever think about where he came from again, but he's always tried to be open with himself. He's never shied away from what was inside of him, his past and his determination to forge through it. Sometimes it was all he had.

Could he really go on with his life, forget about this, ignore the knowledge that there's more to him, something that's been taken from him all these years?

"You have a plan, I imagine," Charles says slowly. "What is it?"

Charles must be getting used to Erik's smile, because this time it seems less frightening and more like a comfort. At least one person seems to know what they're getting into.

* * *

The first step of the plan, which seems very well-thought-out and foolproof to Erik while Charles entertains grave (almost literally) doubts about its chances of success, is to leave Moira's and head directly to an undisclosed location. That phrase, undisclosed location, actually leaves Erik's mouth and Charles has to struggle not to laugh.

He must be getting used to everything, not just Erik's smile, or maybe his mind has decided to cope with trauma via laughter. Erik, for a wonder, actually smiles back, a thin expression suggestive of humor rather than devouring things. Moira shakes her head and continues to shove supplies into a duffel of her own.

She's putting a small, locked box in when Erik's head comes up. Charles freezes.

"We need to get out of here," Erik says. "Now. Come on."

Even as he's speaking, he's moving, calling his car keys to him. Charles feels his power wrap around all the metal Charles is wearing—when Erik had seen his steel watch, he'd ordered Charles not to take it off—and tug Charles along like luggage. Part of him wants to resist, but part of him can scent Erik's worry like a bloodhound, and threaded through it, fury and determination.

Moira throws her bag at Erik. The invisible fingers of Erik's power catch it, pulling it along, along with a cloud of knives and metal shrapnel, down to the blades of Moira's food processor. Charles glances over his shoulder just as the side door opens, Erik slipping out of it with two guns drawn. Moira's behind him, her own weapons out, looking distressingly competent.

"What's happening?" he asks, or tries to; his voice comes out in a terrible, arthritic creak.

"They've found us," Erik says shortly. "Come on."

The car's already started. Erik tosses Moira's duffel and Charles into the backseat with orders to keep down. Moira comes just a moment later, ducking low but moving fast, with a grace that Charles might find impressive if he weren't so terrified. She slides into the passenger seat and punches the glove box button.
"Are those grenades?" Charles whispers.

"Keep your head down," snaps Moira. "Erik!"

For answer, Erik climbs in. The car screeches away even before his door closes. Charles can't help it; he sits up a little, just so his eyes clear the seat back, and looks behind him, down the rapidly receding alley that's Moira's driveway. Erik curses as the car misses a gear; then it catches and Erik swerves hard, tires screeching out into the street.

It's not until the car is moving that Charles realizes it's not the only car moving. Moira's car is right behind them, moving just as quickly. For a moment, in his panic, he thinks they're being followed, but when he turns around to say as much, he sees the way Erik is staring at it and realizes no, Erik is moving it. Erik is moving the entire car. Its tires shriek as it pulls down to the foot of the driveway where it stops in front of the hedge, and Charles can distantly hear the sound of one of the doors opening and closing quickly. A decoy. It has to be some kind of decoy. He closes his eyes and wills them to fall for it. He wishes, prays, begs the secret thing hidden inside him to make itself useful, to help them in their escape, to keep their pursuers focused on the other car. It doesn't answer.

Over the jackrabbit pounding of his heart, over the roar of the engine, a shrill whistle pierces the air. And then, like the crash of a giant's hand coming down, the roar of an explosion, a bright light with flames and smoke racing through it, shrapnel riding the shockwaves outward, all where the other car used to be. Charles hears himself make a sound and his body seems to lock,

"There goes my car," Moira breathes. "They bought the decoy, at least."

"It bought us some time," Erik corrects. "If it's time enough to find your Mr. Romance, I have no idea." He twists in his seat. "Charles, are you okay?"

"No," Charles whispers. He thinks of twisted wreckage, the physics of the explosion. It would have taken out the side of Moira's house, and maybe - "The people on the other side of her driveway, are they—"

"We can't worry about them now," Erik says, and presses the gas down harder.

* * *

Charles is too shaken to follow their path, but he soon realizes that even if he had been clear-headed and eagle-eyed, he's still have no idea where they are. Erik takes turns seemingly at random, doubles back over his tracks, and weaves in and out of places in town that Charles doesn't think he's ever been before. Occasionally, Moira adds a terse direction, but silence blankets the car.

He should be using this time to think. Mostly, he's trying not to hyperventilate.

"Should we live," Charles says, conversationally, after almost an hour of drive time, "I am completely unable to fathom how either of you will ever be able to make this up to me."

"If we keep you alive, hopefully that will be enough," Moira says. "Goddammit, Nick, answer your fucking phone! Some forever love this is."

"I'm not going to ask," Erik mutters, and cuts the wheel left again.

"It was, you know, something he said when I left," Moira says. "That even when I left, even if we both moved on, I could always call, blah blah blah, he'd always answer, he was sorry I turned him down, but I would always be important to him—"
"I said I wasn't going to ask," Erik says. Then, in the ensuing silence, he grudgingly adds, "What do you mean, turned him down? To stay on the team?"

Charles finds his voice.

"Marriage," he croaks. "Unless that was a lie too."

"What?" Erik asks.

"It wasn't," Moira says. She pinches the bridge of her nose between her fingers. "Do we really need to talk about this now? We're running for our lives."

"We're always running for our lives," Erik says.

"Speak for yourself," Charles mutters. Still, every bit of Moira's past that turns out to be true makes him feel slightly more at ease. He's still sitting mostly on the floor. It's oddly comfortable, and he's not sure he has the energy or ability to pull himself up to the seat. He rests his head against the back of Moira's seat and closes his eyes.

"It was dumb," Moira says. "It was, you know—I was leaving, I was the best agent he ever had, he wanted me to stay."

"So he proposed?" Erik asks. "That's idiotic."

"It was lovely," Charles says. He's heard this story drunkenly recited enough times to tell it himself. "He cooked her dinner from scratch, they drove around to all the important places in their relationship, then they went to the same field where they stargazed on their first date."

"No one asked you to chime in, peanut gallery," Moira says. He opens his eyes. If he cranes his head, he can see, through the sliver of space between the door and her seat, that she's blushing.

"Are we talking about the same man?" Erik asks. "Tall, eyepatch, good with a gun?"

"There's a reason we call him Mr. Romance," Charles says. He closes his eyes again. It's easy, when he can't see the guns and the truly impressive array of metal items littering the back seat, to forget they're on the run, to pretend he and Moira are on their way home from a conference and he's trying to sleep until it's time to switch drivers.

"I thought you were being ironic," Erik says.

"He's an excellent agent and a fantastic leader and that doesn't mean he wasn't a great boyfriend," Moira snaps. "I don't want to talk about it, okay? I wanted to get my degree, so we parted ways as friends."

"Whatever," Erik says. He turns again, this time onto a road Charles recognizes, first by the annoying speed humps they fly over fast enough for Charles to bump his head against the door panel, and then by the signs when he opens his eyes and sits up enough to see out the window. It's the old highway. Completely out of the way and mostly obsolete once the freeway came in. A good choice to get somewhere fast and off the grid, if somewhat more meandering.

"Mr. Romance," Erik repeats, shaking his head, and something about the combination of his wonder and Moira's embarrassment makes him smile, just a little, as Erik speeds the car up further. He closes his eyes again, and this time the engine and the exhaustion from his harrowing day are enough to lull him into a comfortable half-sleep.
The dreams he manages are the half-waking kind that borrow in elements from the waking world. Charles dreams he's on a ship exactly the size of the car, rocking back and forth on a mad and endless sea. Erik is the pilot, staring indefatigably forward into the night, his hands clenched around the wheel. He can't see Moira from where he is, but he can hear her voice, very low, *God I hope he's okay, hope we can get south, hope Nick is—*

He's never heard her so anxious, and her anxiety seeps into him, coloring the dream so they're fleeing, pushed on a strong gale as their pursuers give chase. In his dream he thinks he should turn to see how close their enemies are, but if he turns they might see him and Erik says he should stay hidden. Erik, whose mind is turned away from magnetic north, guiding the car down strange currents, heading south into the rolling rural emptiness near Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania? He blinks, snapping back into himself. Moira's nervousness disappears, leaving the air curiously empty. When he blinks, the half-light of the dream doesn't dispel; for a moment he panics, thinking he's still asleep and can't wake up, but no, they're speeding through a town, under streetlights, and the moon is out.

"Sleeping Beauty," Erik says without turning around. "It's a good thing you're so short; you fit in the backseat okay."

"Shut up," Charles rasps. He struggles up, fighting the stiffness in his spine to sit properly upright and on the seat of the chair. The back of his neck crawls again, waiting for a bullet or a knife, but Erik doesn't tell him to lie back down. "Was that—that was them. Creed."

"Yes," Erik says. "He knows how to deal with mutants. Your stepfather didn't want to take the chance that you hadn't manifested. Or the chance that mutants might have befriended you, or found out about you." Erik sniffs dismissively. "A bit overkill, for a graduate student."

"But you sensed him." Charles clings to that, unwilling to grant omnipotence to Erik but deeply, desperately grateful for the fact that Erik had saved him. Them. Moira, he thinks shamefully, wouldn't have been able to do it, managing him and evading Creed at the same time.

"Metallokinesis, as you saw." Erik turns sharply onto another country road. In the headlights, Charles can see this is heading south and east, angling around the big cities. "Guns, rocket launchers, all of them require metal in some form, even if it's only a firing pin. I know all possible configurations for them, and I sensed one moving toward us. Sloppy." Erik's scorn is nearly palpable. "He must be working with people."

Charles leans his head against the window, wincing a little at the cold that seeps through his skull. "Did you find Nick?"

"Going to try one more time in a bit," Moira says. "That's the problem with having an ex-boyfriend who travels for a living."

"Off extending UN hegemony, no doubt," Erik grumbles. Charles closes his eyes, bracing for a rant, but all Erik says is, "I want a granola bar."

Sighing, figuring food might make Erik easier to deal with, Charles fumbles in the least lethal-looking bag and pulls out a box of granola bars from it. The box does actually contain granola bars and not, as Charles had half-expected, bullets or grenades. He selects one and thrusts it at Erik, who receives it with the most perplexed expression Charles has ever seen on him.

"Maybe you'll be less cranky," Charles says. Moira snort-coughs doubtful, and outright snickers in response to Erik's "Fuck you, MacTaggert."
Charles eats his own granola bar and hands one to Moira, letting the car settle back into silence again. The miles unspool under them, the car rocking steadily back and forth under the impetus of Erik's abilities. He imagines Erik's ability spreading out like antennae across miles and miles, registering iron ore and the flickering race of electricity and the metal of their car and everyone else's car, anything and everything. Erik is a colossal ass, Charles decides, but it seems as if his truculence means nothing, not even Creed, can kill them. Trying to kill him would simply make Erik angry.

Moira's phone rings, an unfamiliar song that's electric and pop-sounding and makes Erik arch an eyebrow. "Really, MacTaggert?"

"Shut up, Lehnsherr," Moira says, and swipes her finger across the touchscreen to accept the call.

"About time," Moira snaps into the phone. "What happened to 'any time, day or night'?"

Charles leans over and peers through the seats. Moira looks tense and annoyed but there's also the ghost of a smile lingering on her face.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I don't see what's so important that you couldn't just send—yes," she continues. "Listen, okay, things went a little pear shaped here and Creed—no, no, no, babe, we're fine. All three of us are fine, but we need to—"

In the rearview mirror, Erik catches Charles' eye. He rolls his eyes and smiles, and Charles smiles back.

"Sergeant Fury, get your shit together and listen to me!" Moira snaps. Her tone is enough to make even Erik sit back and straighten his shoulders. Charles thought she was commanding with their students and firm with men in bars. This goes above and beyond. He thinks even the objects littering the back of the car are suddenly at attention, though that could be residual from Erik. "We need to accelerate the plan. What do we do next?"

Moira is quiet for some time after that, aside from the occasional hum of encouragement. Nearly ten minutes pass before she says, "Right, see you soon," and hangs up.

"Orders?" Erik asks dryly.

"I don't take orders from Nick Fury any longer," Moira says. "I do, however, take advice. I know where we're going and the best way to get there. I'd offer to switch, but I know how you are with driving."

"You wouldn't be driving even if we did switch," Erik says. "I'd just be driving from the passenger seat."

"Like I said," Moira says, "I know how you are. Take the third exit from here and I'll direct us the rest of the way. It should be a little more than an hour, ninety minutes tops. Nick'll meet us and we'll talk about next steps."

"I've already told you the next steps," Erik says.

"Yeah, well, we'll get Nick's opinion on them," Moira says.

"I don't need Nick's opinion on them, and if he doesn't want to help, then I can just as easily find somewhere else to hide."

"We have resources you don't."
"And how many of them are as compromised as your supposedly-secure apartment was?"

"You can't let your whole revenge schtick get the best of you. You can't get tunnel vision like you do, not when you have Charles to worry about."

"I know how to do my damn job."

"Well, maybe it would do Charles good to hear a second opinion."

"Maybe you should ask him instead of deciding for him."

"The same can be said for you and your completely un-prepped, unplanned march on Xavier Biogen."

Moira swivels abruptly, not giving Erik time for a rebuttal.

"Charles," she says. "Would it kill you to listen to, if not a second opinion, at least someone who can better refine Erik's plan?"

Charles blinks at her.

"His name is Nick Fury?" he sputters.

For a moment, the car is silent. The silence breaks into breathless laughter from Erik, loud enough to fill the whole car. Charles stares at him like he's insane. Moira just looks...fond.

"Shut up and keep driving," she says to Erik.

Charles has to admit, the thought of advice from someone named Nick Fury seems less than wise. It seems maybe a bit more advisable than taking advice from someone whose first course of action is "break into a highly secured building and steal things," but that's a pretty low bar to leap over. He reminds himself that Moira trusts this man, and trusts him for more than showing her a good time.

Erik... Charles tries to look at him without being totally obvious about it. That Erik believes in his cause and will stop at nothing to see his mission through, he can't doubt; that he'll defend Charles like some ominous bathrobed guardian angel, Charles also finds oddly reassuring. That he's doing it because Charles is a fellow mutant (which Charles is still convinced must be a mistake, it just is not possible), isn't a welcome thought, but Erik is the sort of person who doesn't have friends. He has missions, and Charles is Mission Xavier.

Why do you want to be his friend, anyway? He's a gigantic asshole, he broke into your house and stole your shampoo, and again, he's a gigantic asshole. Charles sits back in his seat, watching the shadowy landscape scrolling by. Moira's teasing aside—We definitely aren't boyfriends, we aren't even pretend boyfriends—he thinks it would be easier to dislike Erik. He might be able to keep some sense of himself that way, the Charles Francis Xavier he's always known, even if that Charles is the fabrication of a kid desperate to get away from his family.

They're back off the state highway again, winding into a small town that's long been bypassed by tourists and anyone looking to go anywhere. Charles straightens as Moira stirs, her voice softly directing Erik through the silent roads sleeping under their streetlights.

"Do all covert extra-governmental organizations have bases hidden in the Appalachian foothills?"

Charles asks.

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you," Moira says. "It's two more houses down on the left."
"An A-frame with a white picket fence," Erik mutters as he pulls into the drive. "Is there a golden retriever too?"

"Go to hell," Moira says pleasantly. "But before you do..." She taps the screen of her phone a few times, and is rewarded with a beep and the garage yawnning open.

A man's standing there, squarely in the middle of the floor. Charles tenses, his heart already prepared to kick his body into motion, and he senses the car doing the same, Erik's power sinking into the frame and every scrap of metal in it.

In the moment it takes him to think God Creed's here, that's him, I'm going to die after all, Moira's up and out of the car, her gun at her side and not pointed at the dark figure. Charles opens his mouth to say something, maybe shoot him! or No!, but before he can force the syllables over his uncooperative tongue, Moira's talking, quick, insistent, then stepping out of the way and gesturing to Erik.

Erik pulls in and the garage shuts, a heavy clang of finality that sounds more like immense iron doors closing. Charles hopes so.

"Are we going to talk strategy now?" Erik asks as he swings out of the car. "Or are we going to have to wait for the soppy reunion?"

"I was thinking," the man, Nick Fury (Nick Fury), says, "we'd get inside first. Take it one step at a time for once in your career, Lehnsherr."

"Like you can talk," Erik says. "I've seen you in action."

"You haven't even seen the start of the me in action," Nick responds. He pulls open a door and the garage is bathed in light. Charles examines him for the first time—he's at least as tall as Erik and dressed in dark tactical gear, including three guns that Charles can see. He's black and bald, but the most striking thing about him is the patch over his left eye. It's very hard to reconcile the stern looking figure in front of him with his mental image of the Mr. Romance whom Moira would only fleetingly describe as 'I don't know, tall, black, bald, hot—he liked wearing black turtlenecks.'

Charles had imagined something like a poet, not someone who probably had knives hidden on his person.

"Both of you shut up," Moira says now, elbowing past Nick and into the house. Charles follows quickly behind her. He trusts Erik to protect him because he knows he's an asset to Erik, as well as a fellow mutant. He trusts Nick to protect him since he seems like a man who takes his job seriously. He trusts Moira to protect him, though, because Moira loves him, and right now, that makes her the person he feels safest with.

"Now," Moira says, "A, I'm starving. B, let's figure out what the hell we're doing, and C—holy shit, is that the old couch?"

Charles stops taking stock of the interior of the house to turn his attention to the item of furniture Moira is pointing at. The front room is divided almost down the middle, with the kitchen and a high tech computer layout against the back wall and an idyllic living room set up against the front wall. There's an old floral couch shoved in the corner, strangely, of the computer area.

"I wasn't about to put a perfectly good sofa in the dumpster," Nick says, but he's embarrassed, Charles can tell even if his tone of voice hasn't changed.

"Uh-huh," Moira says. A moment of pointed silence passes between them before she continues.
"Anyway, C was going to be a tour so Lehnsherr can learn the layout."

"The entire house is titanium reinforced and lead-lined," Lehnsherr says. "I can feel the layout just from standing here." He grudgingly adds, "Good work."

"The armory and escape tunnel are in the basement," Nick says anyway. "There's a backup computer terminal down there too, along with barracks, and the door is triple reinforced to turn the whole basement into a panic room. Attic has surveillance equipment and covert essentials. The main computer systems are here. There's a min-lab set-up in the garage and a workbench in the basement. The kitchen is a kitchen."

"Thank you for that," Erik says dryly.

"Wasn't for you," Nick says. He looks at Charles. "You need anything, feel free to ask. Moira can give you an actual tour after we figure out what the fuck we're going to do with you, since Mr. Sensitive decided to show off rather than make your life easier."

"Uh," Charles says.

"Show off?" Erik says. He glares at Nick. "Please, Mr. Romance."

Charles thinks back to the coin floating between Erik's fingers when he first walked in on Erik in his bathrobe this afternoon.

"Uh," Charles repeats, this time directing his gaze at Erik.

"Oh, shut up," Erik says.

Charles smirks. "What was the bathrobe about, then?"

"I like my bathrobe." Erik stalks off for the kitchen. "I'm the one who drove all night, and MacTaggert's the one starving. I hope you've got decent food in here, Fury." The refrigerator door opens itself and Erik peers inside; Charles imagines the milk and eggs cowering in terror. "Good."

Although his body's still humming with the perpetual motion of the past several hours, still feeling like it's moving (or maybe that's just the world, getting away from him while he chases after it), Charles eases himself up on a stool positioned by the breakfast bar. Moira smiles at him, before moving to displace Erik from the open refrigerator.

"You made orange chicken," Moira says, pulling out a plastic container, its insides painted with orangey sauce. Her mouth tightens and her grip on the container tightens too, before she tosses her hair back and places the container on the counter. "I hope there's rice."

"Green bowl in the back," Fury tells her. He's stationed himself next to Charles, and there's no possible way to miss that laser scrutiny, Fury cataloguing him head to toe. His attention is a weight that presses down just behind Charles' neck.

"I thought you'd be taller," Fury says after a minute.

"And I thought you had my dossier, complete with my latest checkup."

"Charles," Moira begins.

"Since you had to run a background check on me before I could be Moira's friend." Fury's mouth thins in annoyance, but Charles finds he's rapidly becoming used to the short tempers of tall men
carrying weapons. "And you definitely had enough to know I've got something in me that needs to be genetically decrypted—"

"Would you have believed it if I'd told you myself?" Fury asks dryly. "It's better this way, believe me, and you were better off hearing it from Moira. Your stepfather and Creed might not be the only people to look out for."

Moira's stopped spooning pieces of chicken into her bowl, and Charles can feel the knife-edge of Erik's tension sharpening, and see an actual knife beginning to hover. Fury, at least doesn't seem impressed. "Let's just say, what you've got in there," he nods at Charles, "would be interesting to, say, the U.S. government. Or any government. Or certain fringe organizations with friends in high places like the Friends of Humanity. Mutants have been pretty well integrated," Erik scoffs and Nick shrugs, "and there's no real mutant panic like we had back in the '70s, but... just in case."

"Just in case," Erik echoes bitterly.

"That's why Nick told me, and only me," Moira says into the anger Charles can feel gathering in his chest. "And that's why I told Erik." She scrapes at some of the sauce, transferring it to the top of the chicken. "We need to get rid of those files, yeah, but I need to keep you safe, because you're my friend, not because it's a matter of international security."

He can hear Moira's sincerity, can very nearly feel it. Charles tells himself he can understand her not telling him about her work for some international shadow organization; she'd probably told him more about herself than she should have. Her expression right now is the same one she wears when she's talked Charles out of a funk, convincing him hey, you'll be okay, fuck them, when thoughts of his family snap shut on him like a bear trap.

"When this is over," he says slowly, "when we've got rid of Creed and destroyed those files, and I'm safe, you'll let me go then? You're not going to change your mind and turn me over to... to whomever it is you work for?"

"Wouldn't be here if I'd planned on screwing you over," Fury says. That's the truth too; Moira wouldn't have fallen for him if he'd been the kind of person who could sell out her best friends.

"And I'm here," Erik adds quietly, although he's gone back to cutting tomatoes, his hold on the metal around him relaxed. "I'm here, just in case."

There's a weight to Erik's statement, to the moment between them, that Charles is too tired to parse. He lets the words hang in the air for a moment as Nick pours himself a glass of water and Moira licks the sauce off her fingertips. The knife Erik is using to cut the tomatoes doesn't pause.

"Finally," Erik mutters.

"I was relying on you to be the voice of reason in this, you know," Moira says. She points a spoon at him accusingly.

"Well," Nick says, "I've been thinking about that. And as much as I hate to agree with Lehnsherr, it's unavoidable. If we want to get the files out, we need to get you in there. If we leave the files, you're gonna spend the rest of your fucking life looking over your shoulder. If we're gonna do this right, we've gotta take them out once and for all."

"Finally," Erik mutters.

"Well, I've got a better plan than his stupid-ass 'we storm the building and take what's ours,' so don't
give up on me yet, sweets," Nick says. Charles has to chuckle, if only with relief. Sure, he believed that what Erik said—what Nick was now agreeing with—was true, that he needed to get rid of his father's files if he ever wanted to sleep easily again. That didn't mean he was looking forward to breaking into an office full of people who either wanted him dead or locked up in a lab somewhere.

"It was more nuanced than that," Erik mutters, but he doesn't look up from his sandwich, which Charles takes to mean it really wasn't.

"We have two major goals," Nick continues. "We need to keep your ass away from the assassins, government agents, and whoever the fuck else wants to kill you, and we need to get those files from Xavier Biogen. By my math, that means, the best place for you right now is inside Xavier Biogen."

Charles blinks.

"Excuse me," he says, "I think you just told me the best way to protect myself from my murderous stepfather is to...walk into the office of my murderous stepfather."

"You're a genius, think it through," Nick says. "He's not gonna shoot you on sight. It'll kill his stock prices, for one, and land his ass in jail. If you're in that building, he can't lay a finger on you. There are enough people there still loyal to your father that he can't risk it." Charles thinks about the blurry memories of his father, dead before Charles' sixth birthday. He thinks about the experiments that he can't remember. He's not sure he's even loyal to his father any longer.

"So we get Charles in and we keep him in," Moira says quietly. "That's...insane. And perfect."

"Go in and ask to speak to your stepfather," Nick says. "Tell him you're short on cash, you're not asking for a handout, but you found some stock certificates in your safety deposit box and you'd like to sell your shares. Act dumb as a brick. Don't ask about your inheritance, your shares in the company. He's gonna see it as the golden opportunity to taunt you and get you to sign some sketchy shit against your will. The more pathetic you look, the better. If he can get you to sign away your rights to the company, then follow you once you leave the building and get rid of you, all his problems are solved."

"But you're not going to leave the building," Moira says, catching on. "One of us goes with him?"

"Lehnsherr," Nick says. "His lawyer, his keeper, whatever. Don't want to leave him a total sitting duck. You and I'll sneak in, beat the security, head up to IT and start trying to figure out what the fuck we're looking for."

"Charles and Erik stage a scene, give Marko and his goons the slip," Moira says.

"Meet up with us, and the four of us puzzle out what we're looking for, how to find it, and how to get rid of it," Nick concludes. "That's the rough outline, anyway. Obviously it's a bit more detailed than that."

But Charles has barely heard them.

He's going to have to do it. He's going to have to confront...that man. See him again. Talk to him. Sacrifice his dignity and beg.

He swore he'd never do that. He swore he'd never see them again, any of them, but especially him.

"Charles," Moira says softly, "are you okay with this? Seeing your stepfather? Playing this game with him?"
"No," Charles says honestly.

He thinks about what could happen if his father's dirty secret leaks. He thinks about the man who's trying to kill him. He thinks about how desperately his stepfather needs to be behind bars.

"But I'm ready to do it anyway," he adds.

Moira only nods, but he can see she's pleased. Even Nick, mostly inscrutable behind his eyepatch, looks satisfied with Charles' answer. What Erik thinks, Charles doesn't entirely want to know. Nick and Erik might have his dossier, but they don't have what Moira does (he hopes), the knots of pain that have tied themselves around his memories of Kurt, the times he's still can't believe he got away.

Going back means revisiting all of it. It also means having to remember he's nominally a pacifist and not punching Kurt in the face, or asking Erik to do it for him.

Speaking of Erik... Charles glances at him nervously, but Erik's still plowing steadily through the last of his sandwich. "I don't know if my stepfather's going to buy that Erik's my lawyer. Aside from the whole... hitman ethos, I haven't asked him or my mother for money since I left home. There's no way I'd be able to afford a lawyer."

"Your boyfriend, then." She says this with far too much enthusiasm in Charles' opinion. "He's going with you for support."

"And Kurt will be too distracted thinking about his gay mutant-loving stepson to wonder if I've got something up my sleeve?" Charles says bitterly. *You're a mutant too, remember, his gay mutant-loving stepson who is also a mutant.* He wonders if that's another dimension of Kurt's hatred, that Charles is what he is—some kind of freak, not purely mutant, but not entirely baseline. Erik doesn't seem happy either, so Charles says, "We'll talk about it. Maybe there's a better option that doesn't involve... that."

"We'll talk about it later," Nick says. He's looking over Charles' shoulder, out the window where dawn is coming up over the edges of the trees. "You should grab a few hours sleep. You look like shit."

"You haven't eaten." Moira's holding an orange in a way that suggests she's going to throw it at Charles' face if he refuses.

He can feel hunger deep down in his stomach, but it's muffled under layers of exhaustion and terror and surreality. Still, he catches the orange when Moira tosses it to him, frowning a little at the sweet, warm scent.

"Like I said, bedrooms are downstairs," Nick says. "It's a bit cramped down there. Barracks, really." His voice doesn't seem to change much, Charles thinks, steady and straight-ahead like the sense of purpose that radiates from him, but still—there's a heartbeat hesitation, uncertainty. "Lehnsherr and Charles will bunk together, but I don't know if you want—"

"Don't be stupid," Moira says briskly. She dumps her dishes in the sink. Erik does the same. "I still need to yell at you about not picking up your damn phone and making me worry, and I can hardly do that on the other side of a reinforced concrete wall."

The thought of Moira's reunion with Mr. Romance abruptly moves to the back seat as what Nick has said sinks in: *Lehnsherr and Charles will bunk together.* Erik's expression is indecipherable, no matter how Charles tries to decode it, so the only thing to do is not boggle as Nick presses something on his watch and the living room floor opens up to reveal a futuristically-lit stairway.
"Is this where all that UN funding goes?" Erik asks, even as he leads the way down into the basement. Charles hesitates for a moment, but Moira nudges him into following, staying close behind him as they descend the stairs.

The basement is much like Nick described—rows of cabinets and weapons hanging on the wall, a thick metal door that seemingly leads into the wall, and, on the other side of the room, a series of three doors.

"First door on the left, there," Nick says. "Middle door's a toilet. It's almost six—we'll reconvene at noon and put this into motion."

Erik opens the door to their room. From where Charles is standing, it doesn't look very big. He doesn't think that opinion is going to change once he's inside. Still, there's nothing for it. It's just a place to sleep—he doesn't know why he's so nervous.

"Hey," Moira says, touching his shoulder before he can follow Erik inside. He turns to her, and she hugs him suddenly and tightly. "I'm so happy you're alright, Charles."

It's a comfort, holding on to someone else through all of this. Moira is all he has in the world since he left home. Even despite the lies, he doesn't know what he'd do without her.

"I'm happy you're here," he tells her.

She pulls back and inspects him at arm's length for a long moment before she releases him. The concern and affection she's radiating are a comfort in the middle of an unfamiliar and frightening situation.

"Eat your orange," she tells him, and shoves him towards the bedroom.

Inside the bedroom, which looks more like a large storage closet, there's barely enough room to move around. Three cots take up most of the space, one against each wall; he and Erik take up a good part of the rest. Erik is taking off his boots and putting them neatly in the corner.

"You're against the wall behind the door," he says. "The center is the best defensive position."

"Not at the moment." Charles works hard not to stare. Cecelia and Hank, his labmates, hate it, Hank especially so, and there's an uncomfortable history of mutants being treated as spectacles and freaks even before mutant became a common term. And science experiments.

A smaller gun slides out from underneath Erik's sleeve and joins its companions on the cot. Erik regards them with satisfaction and drops his duffel on the floor.

Charles feels like he's about to drop himself, and sits down on his cot before he can fall down. The pillow is flat and utilitarian, the blanket unpromisingly scratchy-looking, but he's fairly sure he could sleep on the bare cement floor if he had to.

"Eat your orange before you pass out," Erik says. He's rifling through his duffel, which clatters with metallic ominousness. "And you'll have to eat properly tomorrow before we leave."

The last thing Charles wants to do before going to face Kurt is eat food he'd probably end up throwing up anyway. "No dead weight?"

"I'm not going into the field with you compromised." Erik's eyes are an odd grey-green, piercing and
It feels like there's a lot bound up in safety, more than making sure Charles remains alive and unmaimed. "Because I'm a mutant too?" Charles asks. He snorts. "Even though I've got no idea what my mutation is? Even though I can probably never use it again?"

Erik hesitates before he offers his curt yes and returns to inspecting his duffel bag.

"What was done to you," Erik bursts out after a moment, as if he can't keep the words inside him anymore and they've been building like pressure under a steel door, "it shouldn't have fucking been allowed. If I could pull down that building tomorrow, I would."

Erik probably could pull down Xavier Biogen's headquarters; it's only knowing that they need that information, that Moira, Nick, and Charles need to be safe that's keeping him from doing it. Charles knows that, with absolute certainty; Erik's conviction fills the room, crowding out any other possible emotion.

"Maybe," Charles says, wanting to soothe and not entirely knowing how, "if we get that information, whatever it is, we could... I don't know. Reverse whatever it did to me."

"Stop trying to make me less angry." Erik finally finishes whatever he was doing and zips the duffel, folds himself gracefully onto the cot, the guns and knives laid out next to him like stuffed animals. Charles entertains the image of Erik cuddling them and laughs softly, which gets him a snort and an impatient, "Finish up and go to sleep, Xavier."

"I bet you wish you were on my futon right now." Charles digs his fingers into the orange rind and peels it back. The orange comes apart into neat sections, and now that he can smell it properly, he's famished. He manages not to swallow the sections whole, makes himself chew a few times so the sweet-tart juice fills his mouth.

"It was a comfortable futon," Erik says. He angles a smirk up at Charles. "Lights out in five. We've got a day tomorrow."

Charles makes it to three minutes before collapsing sideways onto his pillow. When he wakes up into the indeterminate half-light, some timeless space later, there are two blankets spread over him, and Erik's still asleep.

He pushes himself up and looks at Erik more critically. Even in sleep, Erik seems poised to spring into action at any moment, his arms crossed tightly against his chest, his weapons still within reach.

Something about Erik's face, the lines of his body, the long slope of his torso, is visually compelling. It's not the first time he's examined Erik, cataloged the shape of his body and the planes of his face. There were excuses along the way—shock, suspicion, a need to examine this unlikely ally—but there's no excuse here in the low, artificial light of their bunk, save for the fact that Charles likes the look of him.

Charles doesn't want to like Erik. He sees Erik, in his mind, as the manifestation of his world turning inside out. His entire life was upended, and it started with walking in on Erik sitting in his living room. He looks at Erik and he sees change.

Change has always frightened him more than he likes to admit.

Surprisingly, despite the circumstances of their meeting, the turbulence of Charles' life, and the horror he's still trying to quietly unravel in the back of his mind, Charles finds he does...if not like Erik, at least appreciate him. He doesn't know Erik yet, but, against all reason, he'd maybe like to get to
know him once they're out of immediate danger. If nothing else, Moira seems to tolerate him with affection, which is as strong a character reference as possible, as far as Charles is concerned.

He realizes, abruptly, he's being rather creepy. If Erik were to wake up and see him staring—well. Best not to leave that to chance. He quietly pushes his blankets back and shifts in his cot, ready to get up and find the facilities—he feels caked in grime and wistfully thinks of the load of laundry he finally got around to doing two days ago, still sitting in the basket on the edge of his bed, back in his dumpy apartment.

"I brought you some clothes," Erik says.

Charles chokes back a shout of surprise, though a strangled squeak makes it out despite his best efforts. When he looks back at Erik, he's wide awake and alert, staring at Charles.

"In the duffel bag," Erik continues. "I stopped by your place to stake it out and pick up some things for you when you were at Moira's."

"I'm sorry if I woke you," Charles manages to say once his heart is no longer beating out of his chest. "I'm a light sleeper," Erik replies.

"I'm going to take a shower," is all Charles can think to say.

For answer, Erik swings to his feet, as fluid and graceful as if he hasn't just spent the past... however long they've been asleep on a cot with a murderous pillow. Charles' neck aches with a deep, angry ache, tightening his shoulders and temples and all the rest of him. He's still dazed with not enough sleep, so it takes him a moment to realize that Erik's standing not to go get breakfast or find another bathroom but to follow him.

"Oh for god's sake," Charles snaps. "Really? You've already violated the sanctity of my bathroom in my house. Do you really have to watch me shower? I don't think Creed is going to be hiding in the bloody bathtub."

Under different circumstances, he would have offered to let Erik join him, and said something that, in retrospect, would be horribly embarrassing, such as I'll need help scrubbing my back, that would make Moira sigh and Charles triumphantly point out that it had worked.

"Relax." Erik grabs one of his bags—no rattle; it must be the gun-free duffel—and thrusts it at Charles. "Clothes. Towel. Your sacred body wash that says it's basil peppermint but isn't."

"You—" Charles accepts the bag, although Erik doesn't release it immediately. "You packed a whole bag, then?" More than just shoving the first clothes he saw into a bag, it seems like Erik took care in making sure Charles had some comforts from home. It's not annoyance that bubbles up in his chest at the thought of Erik roaming his house, stepping into the chaos of Charles' bedroom, but something else.

"Obviously," Erik grumbles. "Now come on, I want to shower too. After you're done," he adds. "You can get dressed while I'm in there."

The shower, once he's underneath it with his face tilted into the spray, helps wash away the surface awfulness, at least. There's no scrubbing out other things, but he feels human (ha) enough with the grime and car-smell and sweat cleaned away. And he likes the way his body wash smells, thank you, despite Erik's complaining about it from the other side of the shower door.

If, when he steps out, towel wrapped properly around his hips, Erik stalks past him, towel already
discarded to show a promising swath of pale skin with powerful muscle beneath it, he decides he can be forgiven for looking. Moira's objectively right; Erik is hot, and Charles decides he might as well appreciate something about this catastrophe, even if he has no idea what to make of Erik himself.

He dries off and quickly changes into the clothes Erik picked out for him, all things from the laundry basket on the foot of his bed. When he's finished, he eyes the door to the bathroom, though he figures if Erik insisted on waiting while Charles showered, he's not likely to be keen on Charles wandering out while Erik is otherwise occupied. Instead, he examines his face in the mirror, wiping the fog away with his damp towel. He doesn't look any different than he did during his panic last night. He doesn't even look noticeably more tired, despite sleeping on a mattress that contained roughly the same amount of stuffing as an old teddy bear.

The shower turns off and the door abruptly opens. Erik wastes no time, it seems, and Charles looks down, staring at the sink as Erik towels off, with his back to the mirror.

Then he thinks, *Fuck* it and looks up again, catching another glimpse of the muscles of Erik's back, his disturbingly narrow waist and the way it tapers down to his ass. Erik dries himself quickly and then pulls the bathrobe out of his bag and slips it on. Charles looks down again just as Erik begins to turn, hoping he's not been caught.

"Really?" Charles asks, gesturing at the bathrobe.

"I told you, I like this bathrobe," Erik says. "It helps me think."

Charles raises his eyebrows skeptically. Erik chooses to ignore him, instead opening the door to the bathroom. The cool air rushing in makes Charles shiver, and he wishes he had thought to put on socks as he rushes after Erik, who is already climbing the staircase.

Moira is sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and eating toast. Her hair is pinned up and she's wearing a t-shirt with a panda bear on it and sweats that obviously do not belong to her.

"No comments from the peanut gallery," she says without looking up from the iPad in front of her.

"I wasn't going to say anything," Charles insists.

"I was," Erik says. "The San Diego Zoo?"

"We went there on a date," Moira says, still engrossed in the iPad. "You remember, that mutant smuggling ring."

"We were in San Diego for forty-eight hours," Erik says. "You beat the crap out of terrorist smugglers and then went to the zoo?"

"Nick wanted to see the pandas," Moira says.

"There was a baby panda." Nick pushes past Charles. "They're not born every day, you know, and he was goddamn adorable. Babe, you want eggs?"

"Over—"

"Over easy, I know." Nick's already rummaging in the refrigerator, pulling out eggs and milk, and Moira's smiling stupidly down at her iPad.

Breakfast passes almost silently, other than Erik's quiet grumblings about the lack of metal in the
kitchen and unnecessary wastes of time when they could be on the road or in the air back to the city. "Says the man in the bathrobe," Charles mutters into his cereal spoon.

"What?" Erik asks.

"Nothing." Charles pushes his cereal bowl away. I eat breakfast, he thinks with a distant fascination, cereal, eggs, fruit, more coffee than he usually likes because apparently his tea preferences aren't in Nick's super-secret files. The event has the strangeness of familiar things in different places, an ordinary breakfast in a suburban house disguised as a fortress with a bunker underneath it, with a paid assassin lurking somewhere out there and a secret agent in a bathrobe next to him.

The clarity of the world stuns him a little. Is this what it's like to be terrified? he wonders. He's noticing everything, remembering everything, even the weird sailing dream from last night. He can even hear Moira, murmuring softly as she works through a possible timetable.

"Are you okay?" Erik asks, nudging at Charles with his elbow. The expression on his face is more impatient than concerned.

"Fine." Charles straightens up. "Are we going back to New York today? Or are we waiting for more of your secretive government operatives to show up?"

"We'd better not be," Erik says, glaring at Nick.

"I make a promise, I keep the promise." Nick's scowl is, somehow, even more terrifying with the eye patch. "SHIELD doesn't know about him, or any of this, which means we're going in on our own." Erik nods, satisfied. "It also means tech is limited. And we're getting our own asses to the city."

"I don't need tech," Erik says. "Just get me in that building."

"Which'll happen the day after tomorrow," Moira says. That seems to appease Erik a little. "We'll need to work out our plan today, drive back to the city tomorrow morning, bright and early. The sooner we get you in that building—"

"The sooner I see Kurt again." His breakfast turns over heavily in his stomach.

"Are you sure you still want to do this?" Moira asks.

"I said I am," Charles replies, "and I'm going to. I'm actually," he laughs a little, "I'm actually looking forward to seeing his face when I walk into his office." It's not entirely a lie.

"That makes two of us," Erik says and, for a wonder, he smiles. It's not an expression designed to put people at ease, too wide and too many teeth, but Charles senses Erik's honestly amused and trying, in his own particular idiom, to convey that.

"How familiar are you with the building?" Nick asks, and Charles tears himself away from further examining Erik's smile.

"Somewhat," Charles says. "When I was a small child, I wandered around quite a bit. Once Kurt married my mother when I was eleven, that stopped, but I'd have heard if there were any major renovations." Mostly, he'd have heard Kurt complaining about the money. Xavier Biogen had enough patents to support the large R&D division, as well as impressive salaries for its executive team, but it wasn't enough for Kurt. With all of Brian's money tied up in trusts that even Sharon had problems accessing, he was still looking for his due. He cut corners and changed hours just to take home a slightly larger piece of the pie. He certainly wasn't about to make costly alterations to the building.
"We have the public plans for the building," Nick says. "I'm hoping you can tell us what's accurate."

Moira spins her iPad around and slides it across the table to Charles. The building is eight stories tall and has two basements, and each floor is its own page. It'll take ages to go through and inspect all of them in detail, holding them up against his fading childhood memories. He flips through them quickly at first, to see if anything glaring stands out to him. When he gets to the first basement and swipes to see the next, he finds himself back at the beginning, with the eighth floor.

"You're missing a page," Charles says. He holds up the iPad and flips between the eighth floor and the basement again to show them. "The sub-basement isn't here."

"That's the whole plan," Moira says, even as she takes the device back from him to tinker with it. "That's everything that was publicly filed."

"I know it was there," Charles says. "It was another lab." He remembers, quite clearly, riding down to it with his father, one of those crisp, lingering memories of childhood, sharp and bright and hard to contextualize, when everything else from those years has become a haze of childhood. Actually, he remembers his father swiping a card to get them to the sub-basement. And he remembers they had to take the elevator next to his office, because the main elevators couldn't reach it.

"I think we've just discovered where we should start looking," Charles says.

"Do you know where Kurt's office would be?" Erik asks. He's looming over Charles' shoulder, all that focus bent on the schematics.

"When he worked for my dad, he had an office on the same floor, down the hall. He was in charge of reviewing new projects, helping to pick the ones the lab would pursue. I remember my dad telling my mom Kurt was more interested in the money than the science." And your dad was interested in science enough to, what, experiment on you? "I bet Kurt's moved into my dad's office, though. Not-so-subtly symbolic and all."

Erik snorts. "It would make one thing much easier: getting down to that sub-basement, if he's in there. I can manipulate the card reader and the elevator mechanism. We might not even need you, Fury."

"Nice try," Nick says with the thin kind of pleasantness Charles has heard from Moira more than once. "You're not going in without backup, Lehnsherr, since last I checked you don't have a genetics background."

"Charles does."

"And I do too." Moira pivots her iPad back to face her again. "And since you're already planning on incapacitating Kurt, you should also know that someone's going to notice he's taking a really long nap and go in to check. When they realize what's up, that's when things will get interesting."

She actually sounds excited about this, her face alight with the enthusiasm Charles associates with the lab computer spitting out promising results or when they're both drunk on exhaustion and realizing that they're on to something. Only, this excitement involves espionage and possible explosions, like Ocean's 11 but with genetics.

"You can take the girl out of the secret agency, but you can't take the secret agent out of the girl," Nick says, looking as close to mushy as a bald man with an eye patch can possibly look. Moira beams mushily back.

"Would you like some alone time?" Erik asks sarcastically. "Maybe with the old couch? Or, we
could get back to the logistics you were insisting on last night."

"Our timeline still holds." Nick leans back, crossing his arms; Charles feels as if he should be sitting at attention. "I took the liberty of contacting some surveillance sources—no, Lehnsherr, I didn't tell them what for—and Marko's in town. He should be in the office tomorrow."

Which means another day in the suburban fortress and another night down in the bunker with Erik. At least, after breakfast, Erik changes out of his bathrobe, although it's into jeans and a thermal t-shirt that don't do much to disguise the body Charles has seen in his few stolen glimpses. Between trying to keep himself from watching Erik and thinking about Erik and everything he represents, and thinking about Kurt and dangerous, illegal activities, concentrating on the book he's chosen to pass the afternoon isn't as easy as he'd like.

"Is there any reason you're looking at me?" Erik growls. He's in an easy chair—not on the old couch—and, Charles had thought, flipping through something on his own tablet.

"I was just, wondering what you'd look like if I saw you completely naked," Charles says. "I was wondering, when did you manifest?"

The question isn't one he'd thought to ask, but now he finds himself curious. Presumably, Erik was a child at some point—maybe a shorter, juvenile asshole, but a child nonetheless. And now that he's asked the question, he finds he wants to know.

"When I was five," Erik says slowly. He sets his tablet down on his thigh and looks at Charles more fully. "I don't remember it well, but according to my mother, I wanted to play with those colored letter magnets, the ones that go on refrigerators."

That's... adorable, Charles thinks but doesn't say. "That's pretty early, isn't it? At least for your generation."

"Manifestation age is dropping." Erik traces a finger over the tablet, seeming unaccountably angry—although not about that. "Some mutations manifest earlier. Somatic ones—shapeshifters, usually—manifest from the womb. Psionic mutations too. Kinetics manifest a bit later and there's a wider age range. I was early."

"Psionics usually repress their abilities, though." Charles hasn't worked much with the mechanics of when and how mutant abilities first reveal themselves, but inevitably his research takes him in that direction. "Most kids don't really demonstrate psionic powers until much later, although the extra psi energy they produce is measurable."

"Generally," Erik agrees. "But there are reports of kids three, four, five years old manifesting with psionic abilities. They tend to be more powerful than the ones who manifest later. It's the only mutation where that's true—usually the time of your manifestation doesn't have any correlation to the strength of your ability or your control. A psionic comfortable enough with their powers to start using them at an early age, though—they can be unstoppable."

Unstoppable. He says it with a sharp smile. Charles thinks he might mean it as a compliment, but there's fear there, too. Charles isn't surprised. Psionics are often persecuted, even within mutant communities. They're the most strongly regulated mutants under federal and state laws, too. It seems the one thing everyone has in common, regardless of race, class, gender, or genetics, is the fear of exposing their secrets.

Erik Lehnsherr has no shortage of secrets.
"If you were five than you were probably...right before or right after the registration debacle," Charles says. "I mean, if you're from here." Lehnsherr has a bit of an accent, though it's hard to distinguish its origins. It's melded into a mish-mash of different European countries and American, just enough of a twist to make it clear he's foreign without revealing where he's from.

"I was here by then," Erik says. "But things like that were even more complicated with immigrants. My mother used to say it was lucky I didn't manifest in Germany, or else we'd probably never have been able to move to New York. The eighties were a fucking nightmare for mutant rights."

Charles himself was born just after the registration law was laid to rest. Would things have been different if it was still in effect? Would his father still have turned him into a science experiment if he had to give Charles' DNA to the government?

"My father died when I was six," he says slowly. "If he already had time to create and execute enough experiments to formulate whatever it was he used on me...I must have been so young. Much younger than average. He must have known from infancy." He rubs his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Dammit, I wish I could remember any of it. What the hell was I? What am I? What would make him do that?"

"Nothing," Erik snaps. "Nothing made him do that. It was his choice to mutilate his son's genetic code. He doesn't deserve a fucking pass on this."

It's then that Charles notices the jar of pens and pencils on the end table next to him is starting to rattle with Erik's fury.

"Erik," Charles murmurs, hoping to placate him.

Erik doesn't want to be placated; his anger is an actual presence, a dark, looming thing filling the air and pressing against Charles' temples so a headache starts building just beneath the bone. Charles rubs at the small ridge of bone just behind his eye; the pain spikes briefly before settling down to an angry throb.

"Whatever you're doing, knock it off!" he manages to say. "Erik! Erik!"

The metal in the room settles down, including the pencil jar and the metal lamp stand. Erik's still visibly angry, but that terrible pressure is gone and Charles feels less like his skull is going to splinter apart. Still, he tries to rub the lingering ache away. It doesn't quite work.

"Thank you for not bringing the house down," he says as sarcastically as he can, once speech seems possible.

"I'm not that careless." Erik's miles from being repentant or concerned. "And I learned to control my anger a long time ago."

There are more secrets in there, more than Charles wants to try to unlock; Erik's as secure as that laboratory Charles' dad has hidden in the sub-basement of Xavier Biogen and Charles doesn't have the key. No one does. Instead of pressing (Moira, he thinks, would say something cutting about how Charles is controlling his questions), he folds in on himself, chilled a bit as the tension leaves him and more questions creep in.

"Maybe my mutation was unstable," he says, just to hear the question out loud. "He could have been trying to help me."

"Then why the fuck hide the serum, or formula, or whatever it is?" Erik growls. "Why not tell you?"
"He died before he could do that," Charles says. "It was pretty sudden. An accident."

"Or maybe he thought your mutation was dangerous," Charles expects the pencil jar to start rattling again, but it stays still. Instead, Erik gets to his feet, tall and imposing and eyes dark with anger. "Don't try to explain him or justify him, Charles. Don't try to pretend that what he did wasn't unconscionable. You were a child, a mutant, and he experimented on you, treated you worse than a lab rat, and he never once told you what you were. You said you remember some details of the office, yes?" Charles nods cautiously, "Then you would remember him telling you what you were."

Charles aches with the words, every other silent attempt to find some better explanation for his father met with Erik's objections. No, he didn't want to help you, he wanted to control you. He knew what you were, he wanted a normal boy, a human. But he hid the formula, maybe he didn't want—stop!

Erik's drawing an angry breath to say more when he freezes, swinging around to face the kitchen and the trap door. Charles looks up, and it's Moira, pausing in the doorway. She's wearing jeans that belong to her and a t-shirt that isn't pandas, and a cautious expression.

"Am I interrupting anything?" she asks.

Charles clears his throat.

"Not at all," Charles says. "We're fine."

"Are you sure?" Moira asks. She eyes Lehnsherr and takes half a step forward.

"We're fine," Charles repeats. "I was just thinking...well, I might want a nap, I think. I've got a bit of a headache."

Moira lets him walk by without saying anything, but Charles hears her smack Erik once he's descending the stairs.

It's not entirely a lie—he does have a splitting headache, brought on by Erik's anger and a night spent sleeping on a thin mattress with a thinner pillow, as well as the weight of the past two days, the things he doesn't remember, the things he's about to do.

Nick is standing in the armory downstairs, going through one of the lockers. He looks up when Charles walks by, but doesn't say anything. Charles appreciates that.

He means to use the time to think, to spend half an hour lying in the dark with his eyes closed, tuning out the world and examining how he feels about his father, his family, his current state of mind. He wants to go into this mess as clear-headed as possible, and that means stabilizing his emotions before they get into the car to go back to New York.

Unfortunately, the moment he curls up on his cot, his body has other ideas. He tries to focus on his problems, but they all blur together and before long, he's actually asleep.

When he wakes up, it's out of the same dream of sailing that's been plaguing him since the evening before. He stretches and rubs his eyes, cursing when he realizes he's been asleep. He rolls onto his side and comes face to face with Erik, who's sitting on the opposite bed, staring at him.

Instead of startling, Charles stays very still.

"I'm sorry," Erik says. He almost sounds like he means it. "Not about what I said, which is true, but I'm sorry I snapped. Sort of. Not really. I'm sorry you got upset, I suppose."
Charles smiles.

"Moira made you come down here, didn't she?" he asks.

"No." Erik makes an aggravated noise. "Yes."

"That was almost an actual apology," he says. "Is that as close as you've ever come to expressing regret for something?"

"Don't make me take it all back," Erik says. For a wonder, he looks away, studying the steel walls and steel-floored hallway beyond the opened steel door. Charles wonders if Erik feels safer in a place like this, surrounded everywhere by metal. "But I'm not really sorry you got upset. Mostly annoyed."

"I'm sorry you got annoyed, but your not-apology's accepted," Charles says. When Erik snorts, he adds, "So we can tell Moira we made up."

Erik's mouth twitches, as if he's fighting a smile and not quite winning. "She's not going to believe any of it."

"Well, she's not going to believe that you apologized. You still haven't apologized for using my bath gel or dripping water on my futon."

"You're going to hang on to that until you die, aren't you?" Oddly, Erik looks amused, even pleased, rather than annoyed. When Charles shrugs, as if to say probably, yes, Erik shakes his head. And then, to Charles' astonishment, "Are you feeling better?"

Charles considers himself. His headache is mostly gone, reduced to a tension lurking in the background, although tiredness clings; the dream is as exhausting as it had been the night before, a feeling of perpetual motion, of being un-still, as if his mind has kept moving even when his body lay inert. He's still off his schedule, but maybe, with one more night's sleep - if he can manage it - he'll be back to himself.

"Yes," he says at last. "At least, I think so."

"Good." Erik stands. "Dinner's in just a bit; you were out most of the afternoon, so I got to put up with your best friend and her boyfriend being obnoxiously nostalgic."

"Should I rescue you? We could practice our pretend boyfriend act, if we want to convince people that we're romantically involved, and not a college student being followed around by an assassin."

"That's what you are," Erik says with chilling practicality. Charles sighs; there's no winning with Erik. "But," Erik adds, "I suppose you have a point."

"I always have a point," Charles says loftily. He manages to stand without falling over, though for a moment his body wants to go one way and his head another. "Shall we?"

Erik, true to form, precedes Charles out of the room and back up into the house. Charles is still trudging sleepily up the stairs when he hears Moira's fondly exasperated Wonder what the odds are of him coming anywhere near an apology coming somewhere from the kitchen

They eat dinner in comfortable quiet. It's not silence—everyone remarks upon the food and Moira inquires after Nick's mother and Nick asks Erik about someone they used to work with and Moira tells Charles she's planted a cover story at the university, blaming the explosion at her house on a gas leak and claiming they sustained minor injuries—but none of the conversations last long, and the scrape of silverware on plates is comforting.
"We'll clean up," Charles tells Moira once they've finished. "It's only fair, if you made dinner."

"I made dinner," Nick says. "She sat on the counter and watched."

"I sliced vegetables," Moira protests. "And, anyway, that's not gonna stop me from reaping the rewards. Let's go do a tech check."

"Good plan," Nick says, and let's Moira lead the way out of the kitchen.

Erik looks up at Charles with his eyebrows raised.

"I didn't volunteer for kitchen duty," he says.

"Yes," Charles says. "But it's polite. And besides, we really should have at least the general outline of a cover story."

Erik pushes back from the table and gets to his feet. "I'm not polite," he says, "but I suppose you're right about the other part. Did you have something in mind?"

They're in close quarters at the sink. Charles has a few things in mind. He keeps them to himself and clears his throat.

"Well," he says. "For a start, we should figure out how long we've been dating, when we met, what you do...that sort of thing. I guess set some...boundaries. Or cues. To signal if something's wrong?"

"What, like you stick your tongue down my throat if you think something's wrong?" Erik asks, and Charles drops the tumbler he's washing, relieved that it's plastic.

"Or," he suggests, "I hold your hand." But I'm open to your idea as well, he doesn't add.

"So, not very long then," Erik says, still dry as dust. "Or, we're just not one of those couples."

"I don't think we'll be able to convince anyone we've been together very long." Charles tries to focus on washing, rinsing every last soap bubble from the tumbler and handing it off to Erik. Erik stares at it as if Charles is offering him some mysterious artifact, and Charles shakes it meaningfully. "For you. To dry."

Erik sighs and accepts it, wiping at it cursorily. "You'd figure a house that has about two million dollars' worth of unclassified and god knows how many millions of classified technology in it would have a decent dishwasher."

"We met at school," Charles says. If he concentrates on the dish in his hands, he can concentrate on keeping the conversation on track. His mind won't stray in the direction of leaning up on his toes to kiss Erik's temperamental mouth, or sliding his hands under the deceptive softness of Erik's t-shirt. In that direction lies the knowledge that Erik is very much his type. "We met at school, you're in a different program. Maybe a tragically awkward mixer brought us together."

"I don't go to mixers." After swiping halfheartedly at the dish Charles has just handed him, Erik plucks it down on the counter. "But I suppose I can pretend." Charles waits for Erik to attach an asshole comment, but Erik only says, "German Ph.D. student. It's one of my best languages and I can fake the rest, if for some reason your stepfather wants to interrogate me."

Kurt, right. Charles sucks in a breath. "He probably won't care. He's only ever used my sexuality for..." He sees one of the forks in the dishwater start to rotate. "Anyway, maybe we just met at the beginning of last term. I brought you along with me because we were doing something else."
He swipes at an itch working its way across his forehead. "We, I don't know, we've been on a bunch of dates but have only slept together a couple times. Definitely haven't met your parents. Are your parents alive?"

"You don't need to know that," Erik says with dark finality. Charles nods and reaches for a bowl, and thinks, absurdly, *His parents are gone.*

"You just said we don't need a backstory," Erik's turned to face Charles more directly, peering down at him with those gunmetal eyes. "Any reason you're giving us one now?"

"Just in case. You know, contingencies?" It has nothing to do with how he's been single forever, aside from a few half-hearted attempts at dating and more than a few one-night stands, all of them accompanied by Moira's disapproval. "Besides," he adds, striving for something resembling humor, "I have to have something to convince my stepfather I'd land the world's hottest, most frightening German student."

"'Hottest?'" Erik says, smirking, and Charles tries to wave it off in the spirit he intended, casual and objective.

"Look at you," he says. He gestures towards Erik's body, which might as well have been poured into his clothes. "And then there's me, who did laundry for the first time in a month about twelve hours before you broke into my apartment. All of my pick-up lines are terrible genetics puns."

"Sure," Erik says, "but you look—" He hesitates for a moment. *Sexy and adorable*, pops into Charles' mind, but he immediately banishes the thought. He has no idea where it came from—the juxtaposition of the words makes no sense and he's normally more modest when it comes to his looks. "Not terrible," Erik finishes.

"Not terrible," Charles says, scrubbing viciously at a pan to hide his blush. "Yes, thank you for that. And, anyway, it's not getting people into bed that's a problem—it's keeping them there. Or wanting them to stay there."

He stops himself from going further. He and Erik aren't friends. He can't forget that. After they get through the next two days, he'll likely never see Erik again, except for maybe at Moira and Nick's wedding, if that rekindled romance keeps going in the direction that Charles thinks it's probably headed. He shouldn't bare his soul to someone who was still little more than a stranger. Especially something as mortifying as the state of his love life. Especially when the stranger is as attractive as Erik.

Erik watches him for a moment, his hands once again still, though he's holding a plate and a dishtowel in them.

"Well, then you're simply not going after the right men," he says, and returns to drying. Then, as if sensing he's said too many nice things in a row, he adds, "Either that, or they've seen the state of your apartment and decided not to risk their health."

"What's life without risk?" Charles asks blithely. "A sense of danger is always very attractive."

That gets him an abrupt and awful silence, and his own embarrassed realization comes rushing in to fill it: *Did you hear what just came out of your mouth? Could you have come on to him in any more awkward and obvious way?* When drunk, the questions would not have been an issue; he would have heard what had come out of his mouth, and wouldn't have cared. (He probably would have found it hilarious.) But now, Erik's turning away to place the cups and plates into their proper places, unease written in the line of his neck and shoulder.
"I mean," he adds quickly, hoping his face isn't about to burn off from embarrassment, "If you can't take your life in your hands walking across a laundry-strewn bedroom, what's the point?"

That, for a wonder, surprises a laugh out of Erik, a burst of delight quickly suppressed. It's more attractive than it should be. Charles sneaks a quick look at him, and Erik's still smiling, even though he's shaking his head as if trying to shake his amusement off. In that moment, though, it seems to Charles as if they're both inhabiting space together, not two bodies awkwardly thrown together, but bodies that are comfortable with each other.

Stop it, he orders his—his libido, his poorly-repressed subconscious desires for home and stability, whatever it is. "You know," he says as he shuts the water off and dries his hands, "if you can manage something like that expression, where you've managed to approximate a human smile, I might be able to convince Kurt you've agreed to sleep in the same bed with me more than once."

Erik offers him a sidewise look, the smile turning more predatory. Danger, Charles thinks. He fumbles the towel onto the rack and, finding nothing else to do at the sink, can't avoid the thought that they're both crammed into a small corner of the kitchen, with no reason to be. And along with that comes the thought that Erik's hip has occasionally brushed him, and that Erik's very warm, and his awareness of Erik's body means he's going to be thinking about Erik this close all night long, with Erik just a few feet away when they go to bed.

When said I didn't want to think about the catastrophe my life has become, I didn't mean this.

Fleettingly, he grasps at an excuse to turn Erik back into a harmless fantasy and not a very real living person standing close enough that Charles can hear his breathing.

"I won't be stepping on any toes, will I?" he asks. Erik squints at him, and Charles adds, "I mean, obviously my love life is a sad state of affairs, but it sounds like you don't play pretend boyfriend with any frequency and I wouldn't want—that is, if there's someone you—"

Erik puts him out of his misery, rolling his eyes.

"No," he says shortly. "I don't play pretend because I don't play these government games. Why infiltrate when it's just as easy to slip in and slip out unnoticed?"

Charles nods. That makes sense. And he's definitely not going to ask if Erik meant 'no, I'm not seeing anyone' or 'no, the reason I don't bother with undercover has nothing to do with whether I'm seeing anyone and now that you mention it, I'm happily married.'

"I...well, I did play Moira's fake husband once," Erik adds. "It was a disastrous mission, we barely escaped with what we went in for. A perfect example of why undercover nonsense shouldn't be bothered with."

It's not hard to picture Erik and Moira undercover as a couple. The way they bicker and their easy familiarity reminds Charles more of a pair of obstinate siblings, but that could be parlayed into a fake relationship with ease. He's been Moira's fake boyfriend before, as well as vice versa, when they were avoiding particular exes and hangers on around campus. She knows how to play up their affection, how to turn their casual touches into something more intimate, or at least intimate enough to turn away unwanted attention. They were probably skills she learned in her spy training or whatever it was she had prior to her work with Nick, but he must be getting used to that idea, because it doesn't taint the memories at all. He merely smiles and shakes his head.

"All of this disdain for undercover work is not leaving me overly confident about our upcoming activities," Charles says, hoping that his smile is enough to convey that he's joking.
"Then it's a good thing we're going to get in and get out." Erik eels out from the narrow space between Charles and the kitchen counter, heading for the living room. "I'll knock Marko out if I have to."

"Believe me, I'd like nothing better for that to happen," Charles begins, "but we can't—"

"I've been doing this for a very long time," Erik says, wheeling around to face Charles, and he's not even the asshole who's made Charles' life difficult for the past day and a half, he's the man who'd stared flatly at Charles across his living room and called him by his name and known exactly how to throw Charles off-balance. "I've been doing this since I knew how to use my abilities for reasons other than the laws Moira and Fury tell themselves they're upholding. Asshole or not, nice or whatever, I am going to get you in and out of there alive, Charles, and I'll do what I have to."

Charles trails after Erik, although remaining in the kitchen would probably be safer; at least he might be out of the blast zone of an irritation that's rapidly working its way up to anger. The headache starts up again, a buzz like very angry wasps threatening to sting. He rubs at it before he can catch himself.

"I know," Charles says, trying to placate, and he does know it. Erik's conviction sinks into him like heat from a fire, seeping through him and filling every pore. "I know that, Erik, but I'm not used to— I don't proceed on faith."

Erik shakes his head. "Faith is believing in things you haven't seen." Faith is believing in your father being a good person forced into doing horrible things. "You've seen what I can do, you know what I'll do if I have to. You know Moira's worked with me, that Nick knew me well enough to agree with her that I should be involved. That's not faith, that's trust, Charles. And I need that, if we're going to get through this and be sure you're safe."

"And that code or whatever it is we're going to find," Charles says, although his throat is almost too tight to speak.

"That too," Erik says.

Trust. How is Charles supposed to trust anyone if literally everything he's ever known about himself and everyone around has proven to be a lie in the past few days? He doesn't even know if he trusts himself—he can't trust himself. There's something inside of him that's unnatural, something that's changed his very DNA, the essence of who he is. He isn't who he always thought he was.

It's because of that, though, that Charles finds himself realizing that he already trusts Erik. Erik hasn't told him a single lie since this started. Erik has been upfront about who he is and what he's doing from the moment Charles actually asked as opposed to openly gaping at him.

Charles loves Moira, and he does trust her, but there's a slight hesitation there, new and depressing, since the discovery that she's more than she said she was. That same hesitation doesn't apply to Erik, who's open about everything, be it his disdain for Charles' supply of apples or his anger about what was done to Charles.

"I do trust you," he says to Erik, squeezing his eyes shut in an attempt to squash his headache before it can get any worse. He stops following Erik and takes a moment to sort his thoughts. Erik may be an asshole, but if he and Charles are going to pull any of this off, there needs to be at least a basic respect between them.

"I swear I don't doubt your abilities or your intentions," he says, and Erik stills and turns back to look
at him. "I fully believe that you will get this job done, but you need to understand that this is not who I am. This all new to me! My entire world has been turned upside down and while I am still reeling from the revelation, I like to think I'm handling it better than many people in my situation would. You don't know me—you may have a file on me, but you have no idea what the past few years have been like for me. I have no one and I'm not used to trusting anyone, let alone a stranger, but you already have that from me. I've shown it a hundred times over from the moment I followed you to campus and in everything that's happened since, and with that in mind, I'd like to request that you please at least try to treat me as more than the bothersome puppy you've been saddled with. I may not be an expert in these things, but I am fully aware we're in danger and that if we make a mistake, one or all of us might not be coming back."

He's impressed with himself for not shouting, even though anger had no part in fueling him, or at least nowhere near as large a part as the exhaustion and frustration at being the outsider in this world.

For the first time in their acquaintance, he gets that assessing look—but one without the usual silent judgment or impatience that sits in the lines on Erik's face. Charles holds himself still and makes himself look right back, refusing to give way and refusing to think about what will happen if Erik decides he's still an annoying burden.

"If I thought that—if I thought you were useless, or better off locked away somewhere," Erik says at last. "I would have suggested that. Not with SHIELD, of course, but... somewhere safe, while I took care of this." He blows out a heavy breath. "I know you can do this, Charles. I wouldn't want you coming with me, if I thought you were more of a liability than a benefit."

There are probably words he could say to that, but Charles can't find them. Erik sighs again. "You know I read your file. So you should also know I can read between the lines. Not everyone walks away from a fortune rather than fight for it when it means they end up in a shitty apartment eating stale bread on a graduate stipend. Admittedly, MacTaggert's your best friend, so I question your judgment in some respects, but... not everyone does what you did. Make the hard choices."

"It was an easy choice," Charles says. When he'd gotten the certified letter saying his rights to the estate were terminated, one day out of the blue when he'd been in undergrad, he'd shrugged and thrown it away.

"My point." Erik settles back into silence, rocking on his heels. It's not an anxious motion, but, very nearly, Erik relaxing. "You're rubbing at your head again."

"Bloody headache." Charles drops his hand back to his side.

"Do you get them a lot? Your file," Erik dwells on the word half-mockingly, "didn't say."

"Only tension headaches," Charles says and adds, to show Erik he can still be difficult, "since there's a lot of tension going around at the moment."

Erik snorts. "No sleeping meds, but you can have ibuprofen or Tylenol."

"Four ibuprofen," Charles tells him. That earns him a raised eyebrow. "You can probably power through an amputated limb on a shot of whiskey, but I can't." Whiskey sounds good, come to think of it, pounding headache or no. "Or, we could watch a movie. Moira and I had a ritual after finals, the stupidest movies we could possibly find."

"Knowing her, they're astoundingly inane," Erik says dryly. He's wandered back over to the kitchen to root in a cabinet, one containing a random assortment of bottles and packages that don't seem to belong anywhere. Even an ultra-secret government hideout has to have a junk cabinet, Charles
thinks. After a minute, Erik surfaces and tosses a blister pack of four Advil at him, the movement and intent telegraphed so clearly Charles has his hand raised even before Erik begins the throw.

"Come on," Charles says, popping four pills out of their foil wrap. "Nick—well, he was Mr. Romance when I found this out—likes old kaiju movies. Can I tempt you with *Gamera vs. Guiron*?"

They're halfway through the film when Nick and Moira join them. Charles is half asleep, curled up in the corner of the couch with his legs beneath him and a fleece blanket draped over him. The painkillers are doing their job, and while his headache is still lingering in the back of his mind, it's recessed enough that it's not actively bothering him. Erik is slumped in the middle, close enough that Charles is pleasantly warmed by his body heat. He keeps making pointed comments about every aspect of the film, like a slightly more mean-spirited and less-tolerant version of *Mystery Science Theatre*.

It's not an unpleasant way to pass the time.

"Big day tomorrow," Nick says when the movie finally ends. "I want us on the road by 8am. It's a three-hour drive, minimum, and probably more with the evasive route we're taking. We'll go over the final details of the plan once we get to the next safe house, and thirty-six hours from now, we're walking into Xavier Biogen, so get some rest. You're gonna need it."

It's slightly foreboding, as pep talks go, but Charles has no problem following that order. He gets off the couch and stretches out, reaching for the ceiling as he yawns. The stretch does him good—as soon as he lifts his hands skyward, he feels sharply attentive and warm. He looks over to his left and just catches Erik quickly looking away from him.

"What?" he asks.

"I didn't say anything," Erik says, not meeting his eyes as he rocks to his feet. "Let's move."

Another night on the insubstantial cot isn't as unappealing as it could be—Charles is just eager to be horizontal. If his previous thoughts on the matter hold, a good night's sleep will restore his equilibrium, hopefully leaving him alert enough to tackle their upcoming trial. And he wants to be alert—Erik thinks he's a benefit. Erik thinks of him as more than just cargo to be transported and protected, but as an asset. He needs to be well rested if he doesn't want to let Erik down.

"Good night," he says quietly as he pulls his blankets up to his chin, after the arduous process of getting ready for bed with heavy, exhausted limbs. Erik is still arranging his various weapons within arm's reach. He pauses, though, and looks up.

"Good night," Erik says.

There's more fondness there. Fondness and respect and maybe a glimmer of affection.

Or maybe that's just Charles' brain reading into his own thoughts as he drifts off to sleep.

The drive the next day doesn't start with the car, but with a long hike down the secret passageway that Nick says runs a mile to another building and a car that Creed will never have seen before. "And one," Moira adds while they're waiting for Nick to key in the code to open the titanium-reinforced door and let them into the tunnel, "that's got bulletproof glass, armor underneath the body, and Kevlar seats."

"And me," Erik says. He's in casual clothes; they'd be anonymous if it weren't for the fact that it's Erik wearing them. Meanwhile, Charles is stuffed into a bulletproof vest and under orders to never even think about rolling down his window or leaving the car for any reason. ("Even to piss," Erik
had added with an evil look.) "We'll get there."

Charles barely stops himself from saying I know, uncertain if it would come out impatient or worryingly mushy. Nick gets the door open a moment later, though, and the prospect of a walk down a long, futuristic cavern means he doesn't have to worry about what to say.

Once they're in the car, the three and a half-hour drive stretches to almost six. Erik, with more practicality than willingness, follows Nick's directions, balancing progress against visibility, deliberation against the knowledge that they need to get into the city before rush hour clogs all the roads. Staring at the side of Erik's face, Charles imagines him dragging the Lincoln Tunnel down behind him if he had to. For a moment he can see it, the steel girders ripping themselves from their concrete tombs, crushing anything pursuing them.

Erik doesn't have to destroy the tunnel, or pull down a skyscraper. The traffic melts away in front of them, cars turning onto side roads or taxis pulling over to pick up passengers as they angle away from the chaos of Port Authority. There's a traffic jam two blocks down. Breath crawls through Charles' lungs like the traffic. If Creed's close, we've got nowhere to go. We're stuck.

"We're okay," Erik says, but Charles feels the tension in his voice, his concentration as he stretches the tendrils of his power through the city. How many people carry guns here? Charles wonders. How can he tell the difference?

At last, the knot ahead of them dissolves. Erik accelerates past another driver. Out of the way, out of the way, Charles says to himself, silently praying for the people ahead of them to go faster or just go away. Once a rickshaw shuffles hastily onto the curb, Erik speeds unimpeded down the street.

"Here we are," Nick says.

Here is a narrow brownstone townhouse crammed between two others—and here isn't quite here, Moira explains after she hustles Charles inside. It's just another stop on the way to somewhere else, in this case, another house several blocks, and another secret tunnel, away.

"This is absurd, you know," Charles says as they finally settle into their final destination. It's a much more mundane house than the one in Pennsylvania. While the basement houses all sorts of blinking panels and locked cases of guns, and is protected by more giant titanium doors, the living area they're in seems just that—a living area. No piles of weapons or high-tech set-ups.

"It's keeping you safe," Moira says.

"It's every cliché," Charles says.

"Clichés are clichés for a reason," Moira says.

"That's a cliché too, you know."

Nick, who had preceded them into the house and then disappeared, returns to the living room.

"Clear," he says. "You can take the vest off."

"Oh thank god." Charles extricates himself from the Kevlar and tosses it onto the couch. He rolls his shoulders and rubs his back where the edge was digging into his skin.

"Am I going to have to wear that tomorrow?" Charles asks. He doesn't know what he wants the answer to be.
"If you show up in a bulletproof vest, it might tip Kurt off," Moira says.

He'll have to count on Erik to stop any bullets tomorrow.

As if summoned, Erik comes up the stairs with the last of the bags from the car. He looks first to Charles, confirming his safety, then to Moira and Nick.

"As far as I can tell, no one followed us," he says. "I hid the car and melded the door to the tunnel into the wall of the brownstone. They won't be following."

"Good work, Lehnsherr," Nick says.

Erik nods at the stairs. "Showers upstairs?"

"Yeah," Nick says.

"Wonderful," Charles says. He'd like to wash off the grime of a day sweating in the car, if doing so is even possible; it feels ground into his skin, along with the sweat that had built up inside that godforsaken vest.

"Bedrooms too," Nick continues. "Just two, so you two will be bunking together again. No cots this time, so I hope you don't mind sharing. I'd like to go over tomorrow sooner rather than later, though, give us time to unwind and hit the hay early."

Charles is about to agree wholeheartedly when a particularity of what Nick's just said strikes him.

"What, as in a room?" Charles asks. "Or—"

"I hope you don't kick in your sleep, Xavier," Erik says and marches into the kitchen.

"Moira," Charles hisses, when he's fairly certain that Erik can't hear and Nick's gone upstairs.

"What?" Moira's expression is the one she uses when Charles has caught her trying to purloin the last of the Reese's Cups, or trying to set Charles up with a completely unacceptable date. "You can't tell me you've decided to be modest all of a sudden."

"You know—" Charles stops and sucks in an aggravated breath. "You've been teasing me about this the second after Erik and I showed up at our office, and gloating right now is very unattractive, just so you're aware."

Moira shakes her head, her mouth twitching as she fights against laughing. She actually snorts into her hand, Charles observes with a scowl, before she can control herself. "We could always swap. Nick can crash with you, and Erik and I can sleep together. Or not," she adds, in response to something (possibly the dangerous expression) on Charles' face. "It's New York City. Even the funds of our UN-backed shadow agency can get us only so much real estate."

"I'm just saying, mortal peril is not what most people would call romantic. It's a terrible first date," Charles grumbles.

Moira grins. "I'm sure, when all's said and done, Erik will drop you off on the front step of your apartment and kiss you on the cheek. I bet he'd be the perfect gentleman."

That brings up another question, light years away from what would Erik kissing me be like. "Moira, after this is all over, and assuming I'm alive.... what does happen?" He swallows hard as possibility yawns in front of him. "I don't care about the money, I don't want it, but the other things..."
Moira sidles close, pressing against him like they're back on Moira's couch or his futon, watching movies after a terrible day. "Your genetic information belongs to you. I've managed to get Nick to agree not to take it from you. But that formula, or whatever it is your dad was experimenting with... I guess that's yours as well, just out of common decency."

*I want to destroy it,* Charles thinks, not daring to say it out loud. He doesn't care if it means he'll never be whole again, never be whatever it is he's supposed to be, but he wants that formula gone, utterly erased, as if his father had never worked on it. He trusts Moira, he does (*he does*), but he can't trust this place, can't trust that, if it came down to it, Moira wouldn't pick Nick and her agency over him.

"Come on," she says. "Let's go over the plan one last time and eat something."

She's still got her arm around him as they walk into the kitchen, like the dozens of nights they helped each other home from bars or parties or even just particularly late nights at the lab. He has to believe that Moira wants what's best for him. He can't erase all that history. And he does believe it, but he can't help defending his voice to a silent, invisible judge anyway. *If you're surrounded by people who've lied to you, pick the one who's at least never let you down.*

"Good," Nick says when they sit down at the kitchen table. Erik's already there as well, unshowered and waiting in silent, burning impatience. "Let's do this fucking thing already."

"We're basically about to go over every detail of the next twenty-four to thirty-six hours," Moira says. "As you haven't been extensively trained in preparation for these kinds of missions, here's your crash course—memorize your part and your contingencies, don't worry too much about what everyone else is doing. When we're in the building, follow your team leader—Erik, in this case—and do whatever the hell he says, regardless of how crazy it sounds. Don't question him, and if he tells you to run, don't go back for him." She punches his shoulder lightly. "There—I took a month-long training course to learn all of those things. I wish it had been summed up that succinctly for me."

Charles nods—he doesn't know what else to do. He can live with the idea of following orders, but he doesn't like the implication that he might be asked to abandon his friends for his own safety. He's a civilian and he never should have been mixed up in this in the first place, but these people are risking their lives for him and the idea of running away and leaving them to be captured or worse seems...disingenuous. Or deeply wrong.

"Now for the details." Nick has already laid out two iPads, one with the floor plan open and one with a timeline. He wastes no time in launching into the details of the plan, using both tablets to illustrate as he moves through it.

Charles is grateful Moira told him to focus on his own parts. Every move seems choreographed a particular way, and if Charles was trying to remember every step of everyone's objectives, he thinks he'd go insane. As it is, he concentrates on boiling down Moira and Nick's actions to generalities. They'll sneak in using some cloned badges and make their way to the fifth floor—HR and Finance—to wait for Erik to remotely send the private executive elevator up to meet them. They'll take it down to the sub-basement, hack the security code that restricts access to that level, and start their search.

Charles’ own part is trickier, though physically less complex, which he appreciates.

"You and Erik will come in with these," Nick says, sliding two papers across the table. They're old stock certificates, the kind Xavier Biogen used to give out to stockholders before they were abolished in favor of solely electronic records. They look suitably worn and they're made out in his name for a measly ten shares each. "The story is that you found these in a shoebox, or something; your father gave them to you when you were young. You need money and you want to wash your hands of all
ties to the family, so you'd like to cash them out and disappear. We're pretty sure the dual temptations of seeing you downtrodden and asking for help as well as being able to get you in private and take what he wants will be enough to get him to call you up to his office once you request to see him."

That's the part Charles fears the most—the shame of begging and the fear of being trapped with Kurt. It lingers with him, even as he pushes it away so he can memorize the rest of the plan. Go up to the office with Erik, wait a minute or two, knock Kurt out, distract his assistant so they can take the elevator down to meet Moira and Nick. He'll see Kurt again. It's real, now, and soon—he'll have to see Kurt again.

He hopes, because that's all he can do, that whatever Nick and Erik know about him doesn't include the details of his history with Kurt. It doesn't matter that they can guess, given Charles' refusal to have anything to do with his own family, even for the sake of the millions the Xavier name is worth. They'd know whatever that reason is would go beyond resentment, or teenage rebellion, or even the anger of a resentful, greedy stepfather. If Charles can't even think of it without a thing made of dread and hatred turning over in his stomach like a restless beast, he doesn't want anyone else thinking about it.

"I can do this," he says, as firmly as he can.

"Can't be worse than your qualifying exams," Moira says. She doesn't rub his arm, or even touch him, but he feels her affection anyway.

"Please," Charles says. "Those were a cakewalk." Most of the stress had been on his side, right up until he'd sat down in front of his committee and started talking. Once you get started, there's no shutting you up, Moira had said, halfway into a celebratory bottle of prosecco. But don't even think about denying you were practically green waiting to go in.

The worst part has to be anticipation, Charles figures. Isn't that where everyone's worst fears are supposed to be?

"You will do this." Erik's been quiet, aside from a few suggestions that had been more like orders to improve their plan, and some scathing remarks on corporate culture. "You have no reason to fear him, Charles. And if you're afraid... be angry instead."

"Great advice, Lehnsherr," Nick says.

Erik ignores him. "You have every advantage going in there. You have his arrogance and ignorance, you have what you know about him. You have me." More than Charles can safely think about is bound up in that, fierce protectiveness and anger of Erik's own. "You have Moira and Nick. Don't think about him, think about what we're going in there to get. It's far more important than Marko is."

Easy for you to say, Charles wants to reply. But, all the same, sometimes at night when he's been lying in his tiny, creaky bed, staring up at the water stain on his ceiling, the anger comes out of nowhere. There's so much of it, it wants to break out of his skin; he thinks it will drown him if he can't let it go. You're not that little kid anymore. You have your work, your independence, your life, and you don't have to let Kurt take it away from you. You won't let him.

"Right," he says. Breathing is still a bit shaky, but easier. He's always faced Kurt alone before, not even the tenuous shield of his mother between them. He doesn't have to face him alone now. "We shouldn't count on him arriving before ten tomorrow morning. He hated sitting in traffic."

The strategy session and the knowledge that they're one sleep away from trying to pull this off—without back-up, without authorization, without anyone coming to rescue them if they fail—is
sobering. The comfortable quiet of their last dinner is gone as they eat tonight. The only sound that fills the room is the scraping of silverware against plates. Charles doesn't mind—he has enough to think about and avoiding thinking about both.

This safe house is, in fact, equipped with a dishwasher, as well as an open layout that doesn't leave both Charles and Erik squished into one corner as they attempt to clean up after dinner. Charles puts aside his mounting dread to focus on Erik instead, and the myriad feelings he inspires. They may not be in each other's personal space as they do the washing up, but they certainly will be tonight and Charles still isn't sure if it's a bright spot in the cloud of terror surrounding him or terrifying in its own right.

_Grow up, Xavier. It's not as if you're going to jump the man the night before you attempt to pull off a heist on your stepfather. Just take it for the comfort that it is._ It's been too long since there was someone else in his bed. Maybe not sleeping alone will have a calming effect on the events of tomorrow morning, forcing them into the perspective Charles can't reach right now.

"I think I'd like a shower," Charles says once he's finished wiping the counter down. The dishwasher is humming, the sink is empty, and the kitchen looks as immaculate as it looked when they came in this afternoon. At least if they don't make it back, the next inhabitants won't have to worry about cleaning up their mess.

"Me too," Erik says. "And then we should get some rest. It's going to be a long day tomorrow and I don't want you wandering into the line of fire because you were too stupid to go to bed at a reasonable hour."

Though Erik's tone is as gruff as always, Charles takes it as the affectionate concern it's meant. If nothing else, at least he'll leave this mission having gained the ability to understand the true meaning behind at least some of Erik's angry barbs.

The shower helps a little, the steam clearing his head and the thrumming water against his body something to concentrate on instead of the push-pull of fear and anger going on just beneath his diaphragm. He still has to ask Erik for his towel, because Erik's parked himself in front of the sink, ostensibly shaving, and there's still an awkward moment where Charles can't quite keep his gaze from traveling appreciatively down the highway of Erik's spine when Erik undresses and steps into the shower.

While he waits, and to keep himself from glancing at the shadow of Erik's body behind the curtain, Charles brushes his teeth and tries hard not to stare at his own reflection. His face doesn't seem to be quite his, belonging to someone else, as if there's some mistake in the mirror. He swishes and spits and swallows some more painkillers, staring defiantly at the wide-eyed young man watching him anxiously on the other side of the glass.

Erik has the decency to reach for his towel and grab it off the rack before stepping out. By the time he's out and has the towel around his hips and another around his neck, Charles' boxers and t-shirt are stuck damply to his thighs and his shoulders, and Charles gives fervent thanks for the fact that the bathroom is one clearly made for two people, not the closet of the other place.

There's no window in his bedroom, of course, though there's an escape hatch beneath the rag carpet on the floor. (Erik points it out to him, of course, and issues peremptory orders for Charles to use it if something happens.) "It never seemed this ridiculous in spy movies," Charles says as Erik pulls his own sleep clothes on.

"Odd, considering spy movies are ridiculous," Erik says. He pulls the bedcovers back, glaring at the mattress as if expecting an assassin to materialize there at any moment. "I hope you don't snore."
"And I hope you don't try to murder me in my sleep if I twitch wrong." Much more calmly than he feels, Charles climbs in on his side of the bed, the side, he sees by now, that's easier to defend. Erik's ever-present weapons are, of course, lined up neatly by his side and on the bedside table.

Charles settles back against his pillow, staring up at the ceiling and the light splayed across it. His hands rest just beneath his sternum, safely atop the covers. If this were any other situation—well, any other situation not involving possible death and assassins—you would be all over this, he thinks, every atom in his body awkwardly aware of Erik not three feet away. You would have angled for this the entire evening.

Erik flicks out the light with his powers and the immediate darkness is disorienting. With no windows and lacking the usual glow of plugged in electronics, the only source of light is what sneaks in through the crack beneath the door. It takes Charles' eyes some time to adjust, and even once they do, he can't see much more than the outline of the furniture in the room.

"Go to sleep," Erik says after those endless minutes of adjustment pass, as if it's that easy.

"Yes, well, I'm trying," Charles says. "It's not like flipping a switch." He feels the bed shift and tears his gaze away from the dresser on the wall opposite of them. Erik is propped up on one elbow, his expression hard to read in the low light. Charles gets the impression he's being scrutinized.

"You're nervous," Erik says.

Not entirely about what you think I'm nervous about, Charles says to the ceiling.

"Yes," he says. It's not a lie, although he'd call the strange energy humming under his skin from sharing a bed with an attractive man whom he actually halfway likes to be more anticipation than nerves.

"Hm," Erik says. Charles wonders what would happen if he were to suggest a quick fuck to calm them both, but Erik lies back down on his back and says nothing until Charles' gaze is back on the ceiling.

"My parents...died," Erik murmurs. His voice is so low Charles almost doesn't hear it. He's shocked at the admission, even if he's not surprised to learn their fate; you don't have that kind of anger, that driving determination, without loss. "Years ago. And a man—a mutant—he told me...all sorts of lies. How I could avenge them. And it was all I wanted, to get justice for them where the police couldn't. So I joined up with him. I let him direct me and use me, thinking I could get vengeance." He snorts. "He must have fucking loved it."

His tone is vicious. Charles already knows how this story is going to end.

"In the end, I found out he was the one who killed them. He wanted me to join his crusade, and that seemed like the best way to do it. He's dead now—I killed him myself and I took over." He breathe out slowly. Charles closes his eyes, awash in Erik's pain and regret, the anger that still flares up when he thinks of this man. "The point being—I know what it's like to confront someone who's wronged you, who's stolen everything you thought you knew about yourself. You're stronger than him. You're better than him. You're going to beat him. I won't let it turn out otherwise."

"I know," Charles says. The words sound weaker than the certainty behind them; if Charles were to falter, Erik would drag him by the scruff of his neck, pulling him along with the magnetic field of his resolve. Now that he's looking down the abyss with one foot out over it, the only thing to do is commit himself to finishing that step.
"When I was a kid," nearly a teenager, really; Charles can see his skinny younger self in his mind's eye, "my mother married Kurt. I got a stepbrother, too. Cain. He'd hit me, push me downstairs, destroy my things. Kurt helped. More than that." His life had split in two, the polished one inhabited by his mother and her socialite friends, the mirror world filled with his stepfamily and terror. "When I turned sixteen, Kurt told me the only way I could go to college early was if I didn't fight when my mother signed the estate over to him. Otherwise, I'd be stuck there."

He doesn't need the light to know Erik's anger has sunk itself into all the metal in the room. Erik's breathing has the tightly audible quality of someone breathing through difficulty. His own fingers have knotted themselves in the covers. "I told him to take what he wanted, I didn't care. I needed the money for the first two years of my undergrad. When I turned eighteen, it stopped."

His own anger brings him clarity, and in that moment he thinks he might understand how Erik sees the world, his rage simplifying, paring everything down to what must be done and what's unnecessary. *Who needs to die and who can live.* Erik's killed a man (at least one), not for some lofty, empty patriotism or out of pragmatism, but because his anger had demanded it.

"I don't know if I could kill him," Charles confesses. Erik huffs softly, a fondly exasperated, *Of course you can't, I didn't expect you to.* "But it would be enough to take from him everything he wants, that he's worked for. He'd rather die than live without whatever Xavier Biogen has given him."

"Sometimes death is too good," Erik says, his voice thick with satisfaction, like he's standing over the body of the man he'd killed, Shaw, not relieved but elated. "Other times, it isn't."

There's an ethereal quality to secrets told in the dark. Erik's not told Charles anything he didn't know or couldn't have guessed, and even the parts he hadn't known weren't surprises. He knows enough of Erik now to know that he doesn't hide behind any sense of decorum and he has his own scale of morality. Erik killed a man in anger, a man who killed his parents, because he thought the world would be better off without him. Charles can't abide by that sort of decision on his own, but his trust of Erik is strong enough that Charles doesn't question it from him. If Erik thinks the man needed to die, who is Charles to say otherwise? God knows there are terrible people in the world, and while a week ago, Charles may have protested that courts and laws and police men exist for this very reason, that was a week before someone with a bloody rocket launcher destroyed his best friend's house in an attempt to murder him. It was a week before he found out that his own father altered his genetic code when he was too young to remember or fight back.

But all that aside, it's not the heaviness of Erik's truths that interest him now, it's the way that they were given—quietly in the dark, alone and offered for reassurance. They're in bed together—Charles could touch Erik if he reached out, take his hand or squeeze his shoulder or touch his cheek. They're sharing body heat and breaths in the silence of the room, and this—something Charles doesn't think Erik had shared with many other people, if he's shared it at all. It's a gift.

"You didn't have to tell me that," he murmurs. "Any of it."

"I know," Erik says. "I wanted you to know it. No matter what happens in there tomorrow, this is a man who hurt you—physically, emotionally, financially, and spiritually. This is a man who thinks you're less than human and worth only as much as the secrets in your body. No matter what happens, he is nothing and you are worth more than he can ever imagine. He's going to try and scare you and he's going to try and make you feel like you have nothing and you're worth nothing. I'm telling you—I've been there. And I'll be there tomorrow to remind you that none of it is true."

Charles bites his lip. He doesn't think he's going to cry, but whatever sharp thing that's lodged inside his chest makes him want to, its edges made of fear and awe and gratitude. When he manages to
exhale, he doesn't sob, which is a relief; it comes out, instead, as a soft, disbelieving laugh.

"I tried to be nice," Erik growls, "like MacTaggert fucking wanted me to, and this is what I get."

They've only known each other a few days; still, Charles hears the annoyed affection and teasing, expressed only in the slightest change to Erik's syllables, drawn out on sarcasm instead of clipped short. He trembles, adrenaline and memory letting him go enough so he can say, "If I'd known all I needed to have was an emotional crisis to get you to be nice, I would have had it sooner."

"Ass," Erik says, shifting a little so he's looking at Charles now; Charles knows he is, somehow. "Go to sleep."

Sleep refuses to come right away, but eventually it draws close, lured in by Erik's soft breaths and the fact of his presence by Charles' side. Feeling like a little kid at a sleepover, staying up past lights-out, Charles turns over on his side, drawing his knees up a little, memorizing the dimly-lit lines of Erik's face until his own eyes slip shut and his lungs match their pace to Erik's.

The sailing dream returns, the odd sensation of movement without exertion. The dreamscape scrolls by him (and he knows it's a dream, although he can't change anything about it), first the dark road of the morning and then the city looming up, on the other side of an impossibly narrow bridge, its high arch twisting in the wind. For a moment he fears that the bridge will tilt, or the car will lose its precarious balance, but then he remembers Erik's driving, and between his abilities and his resolve, they'll cross the bridge to safety.

At some point in the anonymous dark, he wakes, startled by a strange, terrifying, hateful face, thin and foxy-like under a thatch of sandy hair. *Erik my boy*, the face had said, before the dream had shaken Charles out of it and into wakefulness. It's a face Charles has never seen before, but he can see it even now, etched against his eyelids, and he knows it.

No, he doesn't know it. It's a dream face, conjured to go with the sort of person who would kill a boy's innocent parents. Charles swallows and tries to calm down, focusing on Erik again.

Erik hasn't moved, but the relaxed planes of sleep are gone from his face. The lines that Charles traced with his eyes only hours ago are now sharp and tense. He's having a dream of some kind, a bad one, and Charles is reaching for him before he can fully think things through.

He's barely touched Erik's shoulder before Erik wakes, grabbing Charles' wrist and twisting it as he sits upright. There's a knife hovering in the air between them, and for one hysterical second, Charles is sure Erik is going to kill him.

Erik blinks and the knife retreats.

"Fuck!" he hisses. "Charles!"

"You were having—I thought you—you seemed distressed!" Charles babbles. "I'm sorry, I thought—I shouldn't have—"

Erik sighs and flops back into the pillow. He's still holding Charles' forearm. Charles' heart pounds in his ears, loud enough to almost drown out the sound of Erik's heavy breathing. They're closer like this than they were while they were sleeping, necessitated by Erik's grip on Charles. He thinks he'll take time to appreciate that once he stops having a heart attack.

"Don't...do that ever again," Erik says. He releases his grip on Charles' arm, but doesn't let go, smoothing his fingers over Charles' skin. Charles shivers. "Are you okay? Did I hurt you? Dammit, I could have killed you." He sounds angrier at himself than at Charles.
"I'm fine," Charles says. He swallows as Erik rubs his thumb against Charles' pulse, still checking for bruises. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—it's not as if it's not incredibly obvious that you're a 'maul first, ask questions later' sort of person, but I just—you looked upset."


"I did," he says. "It's not surprising, it was heavy stuff for a bedtime story, and I didn't want you to—" He fumbles for an explanation, but Erik's really was the best possible. "I wanted to help," he repeats. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." The word is loose and exhausted. Erik stops rubbing the inside of Charles' wrist, but the pressure remains, softer now that Charles' pulse has slowed from its gallop and isn't banging against his skin. Erik says, as if Charles hasn't already absorbed the lesson, "Don't do that again."

"I swear I won't," Charles says, still a bit breathless. He wonders if he should try to reclaim his forearm, before sharing Erik's space turns from the calm after terror to awkwardness. "But it's not like we're going to—to sleep together again after tonight, right?"

Erik huffs, a soft, bitter sound. The tensing of the body under Charles says the moment is awkward now, a mire of uncertainty like quicksand, any movement liable to suck them further in. "We need to make sure Creed's off your trail. Dead, preferably. He's been on the Brotherhood's list for a long time. There's no guarantee Kurt, whatever happens to him, won't try for revenge."

"Figures." That one moment that ends Kurt, where Charles can walk away with a clear conscience, is just a fantasy; the many heads of everything he represents, every way he can still try to hurt Charles, can't be killed. *Unless you kill him, unless Erik does.* It's easier to talk about this than Erik's dream, but, he thinks, he might owe Erik a chance to show he can be trusted too. "Was it about the man who killed your parents?"

Erik's surprise registers as a shiver of muscle. Charles is a little startled himself. "Yeah. I guess it makes sense, given our conversation."

"Shaw's gone," Charles reminds him, "but I know... I know what that's like." He'd still dreamed of Kurt regularly, even years after escaping from the house. Anything could call him up, seeing Xavier Biogen in the news or a large man in the streets.

More of Erik's silence greets him, and they breathe together in the quiet for a space Charles can't define, until Erik says, "It might take some time, but we'll make sure you're safe. It's what the Brotherhood does."

"So you'll be my shadow for a while longer?" Charles asks, striving for something like levity. He manages a caricature of it. "Moira's been wanting me to have some kind of serious relationship with someone other than my work, but she could have picked a better way to go about it."

Silence answers that, a thinking silence. Charles strains his eyes to pick out Erik's profile, set and stern and thoughtful where the light has edged it. There's no way, Charles realizes, that Erik can be unaware of what's started to develop between them already, whether or not either or both of them have wanted it. It's sneaked in from the edges and hidden in the margins of conversation, but it's here now, a thing to be dealt with.

"Not now, Charles," Erik says quietly, still gazing steadfastly up at the ceiling. His fingers press harder against Charles' wrist, into the tendon and bone. "We need to sleep; morning'll be here soon."

Charles swallows. "I know," he says. He wants to add more, but he doesn't know what else to say.
Erik's grip on his wrist loosens, but instead of letting go entirely, he slides his hand down Charles' until their fingers can knit together. He squeezes Charles' hand once, releases it.

"Go to sleep," he says, and closes his eyes.

Charles rolls onto his back and stares at the ceiling. What the hell was supposed to mean? His hand still feels warm where Erik had held it, if only for a few seconds, and the soreness of his wrist is already fading. The whole thing has a dream-like quality to it. Maybe in the morning, they'll wake up and they will have completely forgotten it happened at all.

He really hopes that's not the case.

Charles does manage to fall back to sleep without much trouble and next wakes to the sound of the alarm on Erik's watch beeping from the bedside table. They've both shifted towards the center of the bed in sleep; they're not quite cuddling, but they're much closer, close enough that a chill replaces the warmth against Charles' skin when Erik sits up and shifts to the edge of the bed, his weapons taking flight like some kind of macabre mobile, before settling back into his duffel bag.

"You're awake," Erik says when he looks over his shoulder and sees Charles blinking the sleep out of his eyes. Charles is flooded with an odd tenderness he's too tired to deal with, though it breaks through the last of his doze. "How's your wrist?"

So it looks like they're not ignoring that conversation after all.

"It's fine," Charles says. "You didn't hurt me."

"This time," Erik says, which Charles finds unnecessarily foreboding of him.

"I told you, it won't happen again," Charles says. "I'll be sure to wake you from a safe distance."

"That's not what I meant," Erik says. He nods towards their bags. "Let's get dressed. We shouldn't run into danger on an empty stomach if we want enough energy to get through the day."

"All good vague yet menacing government agents eat their Wheaties?" Charles asks, rather than chase after what Erik did mean. He gets a snort of laughter, at least, and a dress shirt flung at his head.

He's going in as a petitioner, Charles knows. Clueless, desperate enough to get some money so he can pay his rent. Harmless, a nonentity briefly appearing, trying to get Kurt's notice. He buttons his shirt up to the top, stopping with the collar and reaches for the khakis Erik's set out on the bed.

Erik's already dressed, in jeans and casual shirt. Charles hasn't seen him hide any of his weapons—but he wouldn't, not with security screening and alarms that might go off if they're tampered with. It doesn't matter, of course. All of Erik is a weapon. His surroundings can be, if he needs them to be.

Moira and Nick are already at the kitchen table, breakfast spread out in front of them. "Protein and carbs," Moira tells him. "Easy to digest. Did you sleep okay?"

"Like the dead," Erik says smoothly. He sits down and reaches for a bagel and the peanut butter. "Charles, eat."

The anxiety is hidden down inside him, waiting to pounce and shatter the calm that's sitting atop him like a pane of glass. Charles tries to borrow some of Erik's certainty, thinking that he might be able to reach into Erik's head and find that reservoir of iron-strong resolve and take some of it for himself.
It works, oddly. The nervousness settles back, slit-eyed and waiting, but no longer menacing. Charles eats a bagel of his own, manages a half-cup of coffee with more water. Moira and Nick are both obnoxiously bright-eyed, at ease with each other and the fact that in a few hours they're going to be breaking into a fortress of a building.

"I've never seen you this excited before," Charles says to her. He can't stop himself from wondering if she's going to go back sooner or later, if this life isn't what she really loves doing, but it seems petty to ask.

"Nothing feels quite as good as giving bad guys what they deserve," she says. Then, "Well, actually, new discoveries in the lab come close. If only it wasn't for all the paperwork."

"And the undergrads," Charles adds, smiling a little. It's their old refrain, though while Charles doesn't really mind the undergrads so much, they drive Moira up the wall. Knowing what Moira's been through, he supposes it makes sense. It must be hard to sympathize with insubstantial excuses for missing work when she used to regularly run around doing all sorts of secret agent things.

"Graydon Creed's been on our radar for a long time," Nick adds. "We've been building up to this for years."

"Not if I get there first," Erik mutters, and drains the last of his coffee. "Let's load up already."

The plan is to take the car back to the vicinity of the office, hide it close, and approach the building on foot. It's a plan that makes Erik nervous, especially since he and Charles are the second group to enter. His nerves are starting to wear on Charles as they double-check their gear—limited to no weapons and minimal tech—and prepare to re-enter the tunnel.

"We'll be fine," Charles says with more certainty than he feels. "You'll protect me, I'm sure, and you're too stubborn to let Creed take you out before you've gotten a few hits in yourself."

It must sound convincing, because Erik rolls his eyes, but becomes markedly calmer as they file into the tunnel behind Moira and Nick.

It's a long, dim walk back to the brownstone, and Charles already feels the adrenaline pumping through his veins. He tries to calm himself, but he remains keyed up as they follow Erik quickly to the hidden car, and then as they drive back to Manhattan. Moira kisses his cheek once they reach their destination, and then she and Nick have disappeared into the crowd. All that's left is for the two of them to wait for their cue to follow.

He can't decide if it's forever or only a few minutes before Erik straightens; one moment time stretches on endlessly in stasis, the next it snaps back hard, into motion again. Charles' heart picks up its pace.

"Creed?" he whispers.

"We're on," Erik says, folding up the tourist map he's been studying. "Let's go."

The street is abrupt and bright when they step out of the parking garage. Charles has spent the past age—the past, god, thirty-three minutes, only thirty-three minutes—praying no one sees them, and if they do, they see only an innocuous young man and his friend, killing time or trying to decide what sights to see. He keeps praying, sending orders to all the faces on the street, don't look, don't look, out of our way, please, please don't see us, and for a miracle the streets of New York don't register them at all.

Erik ushers him through the door of the Xavier Biogen offices, to the front desk. Charles thinks the
office must offend and please Erik in equal measure, with everything chrome and metallic but unbearably garish under the fluorescent lights. The receptionist is more or less like her surroundings, trim and cut-and-polished, impersonal so any humanity might slide off her.

Charles realizes that she might well refuse to let him up, some kind of standing order that Charles isn't allowed to darken Kurt's office door, or that Kurt might refuse after all, if the receptionist calls up. That they might have to wait, so Kurt can have the satisfaction of letting him twist in the wind for a while.

*Let us up,* he asks her silently. The receptionist twitches a little, ascending out of her indifference. *I belong here, there's nothing unusual, let us up.*

"Can I help you?" she asks, her eyes skating over Charles' rumpled shirt and Erik's forbidding silence.

"Charles Xavier to see Kurt Marko," Charles says. He hears his voice from far away, but it seems steady. *Remember what he did. This is your chance to have some kind of justice.* "It's a matter of family business."

The receptionist placidly picks up her phone and hits a few buttons. "Yes, sir," she says, while Charles imagines Kurt sitting in his father's office and wills that vast hostility to bend to him for once. "Charles Xavier to see you... yes, sir. Of course, right away."

"You can go up," the receptionist tells him with a smile. She hands over a pair of temporary badges. "I trust you know your way, Mr. Xavier?"

"I do," he says, taking the badges. One has a sticker that says *Charles Xavier* on it. The other simply says *Guest.* He hands Erik the appropriate badge and leads him towards the main elevator bank. They're forced to pass through metal detectors, but the lights above flash green almost before they step through. Erik smirks at him as the security guards wave them away.

Charles spends just a moment taking in the atrium of the building. When he was a small boy, he'd thought it was incredibly fancy and futuristic. He'd imagined that he would be working here one day, running around in a white coat carrying files. He dreamed about it.

He's better off now, he knows it, but he allows a moment of childish nostalgia and regret that he'll never achieve that boy's dream.

They board an elevator, Charles fidgeting after hitting the appropriate button. This is it. He's going to be face to face with Kurt in mere moments. He shifts from foot to foot and takes a deep breath, until Erik reaches across and takes his hand, squeezing it tightly until Charles stills. He doesn't let go, though, even as the elevator stops and the doors open.

"In character," he says quietly. "I'm supposed to be your doting boyfriend, aren't I?"

"Right," Charles says. He swallows. With Erik's hand in his, he feels stronger, strong enough to walk down the hall, right to Kurt's assistant. "Uh—" he says. "I'm here—I'm Charles Xavier, I'm here to see—"

"Have a seat, Mr. Xavier," she says without looking up. Charles wishes he'd finished his doctorate already, as if "doctor" before his name would make him feel stronger. "Mr. Marko will be right with you."

*Deep breaths.* Sweat slicks his hand, but he doesn't let go of Erik. They sit in two of the uncomfortable chairs outside Kurt's office, still holding hands. Erik looks around the room and then
leans close, as if to nuzzle Charles' cheek.

"MacTaggert and Fury are in the elevator," he whispers into Charles' ear. "They're headed down to the sub-basement. Now we just need to do our part."

Charles nods and tries not to shiver as Erik's breath curls warm around his ear. Nick and Moira are safe so far and getting to work. The rest is up to him and Erik.

Now that it's upon him, he wants this over. The silence coming from behind the door in answer to his thundering heart echoes ominously, the still, heavy air before a storm. *Come on,* he thinks. *You want to see me, you want to get this over with so you can get on with your day.*

A moment later, the phone on the secretary's desk beeps. "You can go in now," she says, not looking up from her work.

"Come on," Erik says quietly. If the secretary hears him, she gives no sign of it. He stands first, tugging Charles up as the door yawns open.

Kurt sits at the massive desk from Charles' earliest memories, looming over it like a hunter crouching behind a trophy kill. Gone are the bulky computers and stacks of disorganized notes; a few flatscreens have colonized the desktop, their giant rectangle eyes showing only the Xavier Biogen logo. They're fixed on Kurt himself, who is still as mountainous as Charles remembers, with his dark hair greying and as much malice and contempt in his small black eyes as there'd been the first time Charles had seen him.

The disdain throbbing in the air nerves him. He lets go of Erik's hand, although he knows Kurt's already seen what he thinks they are to each other.

"Kurt," he says.

"Charles." The smile Kurt offers him is a vulture's grin. He doesn't offer his hand, and Charles doesn't bother to offer his own. "What can I do for you? And who," Kurt's voice cools, "is this?"

"Max," Erik says, the name coming off his tongue as if it's really his own. "Charles' boyfriend. We're in town for a couple of days." Kurt withdraws a little, his rocky face flexing uncertainly.

"So what the hell did you stop by here for?" Kurt asks, settling back behind his desk. "You've got thirty seconds and then you're out."

The forged stock certificates are in his satchel. He should reach for them, keep up the charade long enough to be sure Moira and Nick are in position downstairs and working away, long enough for Kurt to try something or tip his hand.

He doesn't.

Kurt is worried. Worried, furious, uncertain. Charles can see it clear as day, the subtext leaping out at him from beneath Kurt's surface condescension. Charles shouldn't be here, he should be dead or in Creed's control. Charles wonders what Creed had told him, or if Kurt had heard of the explosion at Moira's house and made his own assumptions.

"Did Creed tell you I was dead?" Charles asks. Behind him Erik makes a startled noise; any other time, he'd turn around to enjoy what is undoubtedly a gratifyingly flummoxed expression on Erik's face. "Or did you hear something on the news reports about an explosion that destroyed a graduate student's home?"
"I don't know what you're talking about," Kurt says. He rises to his feet again, every powerful line of him quivering with volcanic rage and terror. As a boy, he'd looked up at that pitiless face and those hulking shoulders and despaired, but now—now.

"You wanted me dead," Charles says quietly. "Or maybe a tame science experiment, like I was for my father. You would have taken me either way you could get me, yes?" Kurt must have been furious at Creed for trying to obliterate Charles rather than bring him in alive, or at least leave enough for useful DNA to be harvested.

"Listen, you little pissant." Kurt's heavy hands flex on the edge of his desk as if trying to snap the wood instead of Charles' bones. "I've got you here, and if you think you're going to leave, if you think I'm not going to have what I want from your worthless carcass, then you're so very wrong." His voice twists unpleasantly. "I don't know what the hell you think you're doing, but I'm going to break your—"

He stops talking and slumps into his chair. The eyes that Charles only ever remembers as glinting with cruel superiority stare blankly back at him, at Charles and through him into nothing.

"What did you do?" Charles whispers, staring at the slumping hulk in its expensive desk chair. He hadn't seen anything metallic, there hadn't been a heavy thud of a blunt object against bone. "Did you—did you shut down his brain's electromagnetic field? What?"

Erik is staring at him when Charles turns around. He's thinking—his scrutiny is sharp and intense and probing, but he doesn't speak. Instead, he crosses to the door and opens it just a crack, peering out into the reception area.

"We need to move quickly," he says. "Get to Moira and Nick downstairs before they realize anything's wrong. I've already disabled the cameras throughout the building—they're going to be blinking on and off all day, all over the building, unpredictably. But we need to distract her so she doesn't come in and find Kurt."

"Erik, what did you do?" Charles repeats, but Erik doesn't acknowledge him. A moment later, something beeps on the receptionist's computer. Soon after, a crackling noises fills the air and she swears. He hears her pick up the phone and curse when it's dead as well, and then he sees her through the open sliver of the door, muttering to herself and walking quickly down the hall, as fast as her high heels can take her, in search of another phone.

Stay gone, Charles prays. Please.

"Now," Erik says, and grabs Charles' hand again, pulling him out of the office and around the corner, the door swinging silently shut behind him. He still hasn't explained how he took Kurt out. It's a deliberate silence, and Charles wonders if Erik has killed him, if that's what he's trying to protect Charles from.

The hallway in front of the elevator is empty, the receptionist nowhere to be seen, and all Erik has to do is wave his hand in front of the card reader to change the light from red to green. The elevator meets them a moment later, and they duck into it. Erik pulls the same trick on the card reader on the inside, and they begin their descent.

"Erik," Charles says again. "What aren't you telling me?"

Erik turns to face him, as serious as he's ever been. They have the whole elevator to themselves, but he's looming over Charles, right in his personal space.
"I didn't say his name last night," Erik says. It's nonsensical, but Charles is too shaken by the intensity pouring off of Erik to ask for clarification. "I thought maybe I had, I was disoriented from the dream, but I know I didn't."

"What are you talking about?" Charles asks.

"I didn't take Kurt out," Erik says.

"What do you mean?" Charles demands. "Then who did?"

"Charles," Erik says, "What am I thinking?"

"I don't know!" Charles says. He hates having to look up, but Erik refuses to move back, crowding Charles against the elevator wall. His ears pop as the elevator's air pressure drops. "That we shouldn't be having this conversation? That we're, I don't know, in the middle of breaking into a fortress of a building and we don't have time for this?"

Erik withdraws a little, the fierce concentration on his face diluted with perplexity. Charles wants to ask why and maybe what the hell is going on. "Is something wrong?" he asks. "Erik—"

The elevator beeps at them and the door swishes open onto a hallway that glows red on every surface, red warning lights glowing softly in their ceiling recesses. Erik immediately turns right and trots down the hallway; behind him and beside them, metal panels peel away from the walls, crumpling in on themselves or sharpening into makeshift blades.

"Do you remember any of this?" Erik asks. He hesitates at a junction, pinning Charles against the wall while he checks the sightlines.

"No," Charles says quietly. They move again, a left, then two rights, then another left, all past shut doors whose windows peer blankly into rooms filled with cabinets or humming computer equipment. "This all used to be lab space down here." Where my father experimented on me. "I hope Moira and Nick know what they're looking for."

"They do." Erik tugs him around one more turn and there they are, through a door that Erik's abilities open easily, despite the heavy titanium bar that serves as the lock.

"Charles," Nick says. He's bent over Moira, who's bent over a laptop, her fingers racing across the keys. "MacTaggert, academia's slowed you up."

"Fuck off," Moira sing-songs. Next to her, a tiny, sleek black box whirs to itself. "I'm dumping all the files I can find; this computer's not hooked up to the rest of the company network. Getting into it was a pain in the ass."

"How much longer?" Erik asks. He's turned away from their conversation, body strung tight, every line of him watchful. "We've got maybe ten minutes to get out of here, and that's assuming the secretary hasn't found Kurt unconscious in his office and us missing." He glances at Charles again, another maddening, significant look.

Charles doesn't know what Erik wants, aside from his continuous plea for Charles to understand, to put the pieces together. His scrutiny is overwhelming, nearly enough to make Charles dizzy. He has to look away, and still it's suffocating.

"Done!" Moira says. "I've got everything on there, I don't know if it—"

"Good!" Erik says. "Follow me."
He grabs Charles' arm again and the four of them are soon dashing through the halls. They're going
to the opposite way from where they came—away from the elevators. He's so twisted around by the
design and by the way Erik keeps looking at Charles like he knows something, like he's waiting for
Charles to catch on, like he's disappointed Charles hasn't caught on yet—

It's hard to concentrate. His headache is coming back. He tries to will it away, cursing himself for not
bringing painkillers. This is the worst possible time.

Erik stops abruptly, facing a back wall. Moira and Nick nearly slam into them, but they stop just in
time.

"What the fuck is the hold up, Lehnsherr?" Nick snaps, but Erik holds up a hand.

"There's a room here," he says. "There's a room behind this wall. There's a door behind this wall."

"We don't have time—" Moira starts to say, but the metal paneling peels from the wall and they're
presented with a door, as Erik predicted. There's no keyhole or card reader or number pad. There's
just a smooth glass panel next to the door.

"Lehnsherr, can you get in there?" Nick asks.

"No," Moira says quietly. "Charles—put your hand on the glass."

"Moira—" Charles says.

"Do it," Moira says, and Charles looks at her, then raises his hand and does so. Nothing happens for
a moment, and then the glass warms up. It flashes red and then green and then the door opens.

"Inside!" Nick says, and the four of them pile in. Erik pulls the door shut behind them and then
extends his fingers towards the door. Charles assumes he's putting the metal wall back in place and
turns around to inspect the room. It's a lab. And it looks strangely, distantly, hazily familiar.

Erik's saying something Charles doesn't hear, that usually-important voice washing over him. Moira
replies—they're going to have to figure out how to get to the elevators, or another way out; security's
been notified and Erik can't hold the elevator down here without drawing attention.

They've found Kurt. Charles knows that with absolute certainty, like he knows he's been in this room
although the memories he has of it are little more than impressions.

"My father and I came down here," he says softly. A picture unfolds for him, a little first-person
story: "He'd let me press the button on the elevator. We'd come down here. I'd—I'd touch the glass."
The story stops there, blurring off into grey.

He thinks he knows how it ends. An examination table squats in the middle of the room, underneath
a large light that hangs on an arm descending from the ceiling. Ranks of rolling tables wait for orders
along one wall. On another, old computers—powerful but almost comically outsized—stare with
their own monitors at the empty table.

"I played while my father worked," he mutters to himself. The table isn't very long. Underneath
it are ports for various instruments and a drawer full of contact pads. Another full of needles and vials.
Charles hunts for some hint that says he doesn't belong here, that this place was meant for someone
else.

"Everything in here's connected to its own generator," Erik says. The lights had come up when
Charles hit the glass plate. *It couldn't have my handprint in the system,* he thinks. *My DNA? Xavier
Biogen had worked on DNA-based security; he remembers some press releases about it. Erik’s prowling around, examining everything, even the ceiling. "Your father didn't want anyone knowing what went on in this room."

"Someone didn't," Moira says. She fiddles with some switches and buttons, but the machines remain stubbornly silent.

Charles stares at them hard, the story unfolding in his head again, a twist of clarity. He touches the corner of one screen, left index finger, and the computer thrums to life.

"This is what we're looking for," he murmurs. There's a file directory on the screen. He was never as good with computers as he wished he could be. Even back then, he didn't take to them naturally the way he did the other things in the lab. Can't be good at everything, his father had said one afternoon while watching him attempt to play on the computer and then give up when he couldn't understand it.

No. His father hadn't said it. His father was silently taking notes on the desk. But he heard it. He knows he heard it. He hears it now, in his head, just like he had then.

"MacTaggert," Erik growls.

"On it," Moira says. She gently nudges Charles away from the computer and puts her fingers on the keyboard. Rapid clicking fills the otherwise quiet air, and Charles steps backwards again, looking around the room over and over again. It's not very large—it seemed bigger when he was a child. Nick is wandering around, opening cabinets and peering at the contents, looking for files. There are no files. Brian didn't keep files. It was their secret, his and Charles', and no one else was to know.

Erik is still staring at him.

"Charles," he says again, softly, until Charles focuses on him. "What am I thinking?"

"I look sick," Charles says. "You're afraid I'm going to have a fit."

Moira's clicking and Nick's shuffling stop.

"Oh my god," Moira says softly.

"What?" Charles asks. "No, I'm not reading his mind, I can just...tell. I can tell by the way he's looking at me."

"I'm not looking at you any differently than I normally do, Charles," Erik says.

"And I didn't ask if you were reading his mind out loud," Moira says.

"It was the natural question!" Charles protests. "I wasn't—it's obvious." Is it though? Of course it is. He's not a psychic. He would know if he was a telepath. His father turned off his mutation, whatever it was, but he'd have discovered it years ago, given the relative age of psionic manifestation. He'd remember that about himself.

Right?

"I'd know," he says again. "I'd remember something like that."

How he might remember, when he's forgotten so much else—there's no answer to that. He leans heavily against the exam table, acutely aware it's the only thing holding him up right now; his knees
don't want to support the weight of questions and revelations and the feeling that a heavy, sharp thing is pressing down on his skull.

"Nick," Moira says from far away, "make yourself useful and see about pulling files off that computer." She joins Charles by the table, her own slight body holding his up. "No fainting, Xavier."

"You said that out loud," Charles says. He knows that; he'd seen her mouth move and felt her breath. "I'm not reading your mind." He holds on to that thought, on the edge of drowning as Moira gazes at him and her doubt seems to spill everywhere, water through floodgates.

"Charles," Moira says, shaking him a little until Charles refocuses on her.

"I'll be okay," he tells her, although he's not entirely sure of that. The odd sailing feeling of his dream comes back, as if he's being tugged free of his moorings and being set adrift. "No, that is not happening. I'm here, I'm me, I'm the same Charles I always was, I'm not a telepath."

"I know you're the same," Moira says. "You're the same pain in the ass best friend you've always been. But I need you—Charles, I need you to concentrate for me, okay?"

His attention doesn't want to focus itself. It slides like oil over to Erik, who's watching with hawkish intensity, so there's no one else in the room, no chaos on the other side of the wall.

"Last night," Erik says softly, "you called Shaw by his name."

"Yes," Charles says, puzzled at the choice of topics. "The man who killed your family."

"I never said his name," Erik says, with a peculiar emphasis that reminds Charles of that abortive conversation in the elevator. *Sebastian Shaw.*

"Sebastian Shaw," Charles says softly. "You must have said it. You must have—"

"I didn't," Erik says. "I don't. Not unless I have to." He approaches Charles slowly, as if Charles is a wild rabbit who might scurry away if frightened. He feels like a rabbit, frozen in place, his heart hammering in his chest. "It's not the first time. You say things—you react to things we don't say. You react to things we feel but don't express."

"I'm perceptive," Charles whispers. "Moira, you've always said—"

"I always thought," Moira says. Her arm around him tightens and he leans further into her as Erik takes another two tentative steps forward. "I mean, I didn't know. I thought—I just assumed you were intuitive. That you were good at reading body language and a little more empathetic than usual."

"That's all," Charles insists. "Empathetic, not an empath." He curls the fingers of his hand around the edge of the exam table until the metal bites into his skin. The pain anchors him. He needs it. He needs to stay here. He can't float away.

"The way that everyone let us up without question," Erik says, close enough now that Charles can't ignore him. "I was expecting some pushback from someone—the receptionist, Kurt, anyone. Every door opened. Every hallway was clear. Even the Manhattan sidewalks were clear, Charles. No one so much as looked at us. Why?"

"I don't know!" Charles says. *Because you didn't want them to see you. Because you wanted them to get out of your way.* Erik places his hand on Charles' shoulder and squeezes, not enough to hurt, but
to remind Charles of where he is. Maybe if Moira and Erik box him in like this, hold him down, he won't leave. He'll stay right here, surrounded by the people who care about him, the same person he's always been.

"Not the same person you've always been," Erik says. "Before you remember, there was another part of you. That's what this is. You're not changing into something new, you're changing back."

_You were always meant to be this_, and now that he's paying attention, Charles sees, he sees that Erik's mouth isn't moving, he hears Erik's voice not as a thing external to himself, but inside him, in a place he can't name. And he doesn't hear it, precisely, more like hears and sees and feels it, sees the contours of Erik's conviction and ripples of anger that this had been done to Charles, spikes that are his awareness of the metal in the building and the metal-decked people moving through it.

"I can hear you," he whispers. Erik's hand has migrated to his neck, his fingers molded to Charles' nape and massaging the tension in his spine. "I've never—" He laughs unsteadily. Underneath the laughter confusion and terror lurk, and he'd thought he'd be relieved when he'd found out what this great and terrible secret was supposed to be. "I've never heard someone like this." _Only you have, you just didn't realize it._

Erik smiles crookedly. "I heard that, you know. We know something of what you can do now: broadcasting, receiving..." _Manipulation_, he adds silently when Charles flinches, both of them remembering any possible obstruction melting away in front of them, moved aside as easily as Erik might move a paperclip. "What I need to know, Charles, is if you can stay together long enough for us to get out of here."

"I don't know how to make it work," Charles says, seeing a few contingency plans flit through Erik's head, some involving Charles shuffling people aside. "It just... I want something and it happens. Sometimes." He can't remember it happening before Erik showed up, or before he'd been so terrified he'd been praying for people to move, for him to be invisible. _Then again, how do you know you haven't been doing it this entire time? That's the point._

"We won't rely on that," Nick says briskly. He's pulled something from the bowels of the computer —Moira makes an indignant noise when she sees the front panel has been pulled away and half the guts taken out. "Don't need to—I think between three highly-trained operatives, we've got extraction covered. I've got all the data off the drive, and we'll take this," it's a complex of memory chips, Nick's mind tells him, "with us. Erik, you mind?"

"No," Erik says, and a new kind of awareness flickers over Charles like a static field, Erik actively exercising his powers to crush the computer into so many glass shards and scraps and torn plastic.

Charles stares at the computer's twisted carcass and the bag in Nick's arms. _That's everything_, he thinks dully, _that's everything I didn't know about myself._

"Now," Moira says, shaking Charles slightly, the way she does when Charles is too drunk to initiate independent movement on his own. "Let's see about getting out of here. Is the elevator an option? It's probably on lockdown, or they're using it to transport security. We can't wait for that to clear."

"We're not going to wait for the fucking elevator," Erik says.

"We're not going to bring the whole building down on top of ourselves, either," Moira says, narrowing her eyes at Erik. Erik wants to, though. Charles can tell. He wants to pull out all the girders, pulls the whole infrastructure down on top of them, on top of everyone who let this happen, who let a man experiment on his own son, who let Xavier hurt Charles, change him against his will all those years ago. He feels what Erik feels, the sharp clarity of anger and intent, filling his senses.
"Erik," he chokes, and Erik looks down and abruptly removes his hand from Charles' neck. The flood of hatred stops, or is buffered, at least, by the few inches of air between them and the jolt of Erik breaking their physical contact.

Charles can't look away from Erik, though, who's staring at him with the same single-minded determination he always has, except now Charles can detect a hint of something else, this thing they've only barely acknowledged out loud.

"For fuck's sake," Nick mutters, and Erik abruptly looks away. For a fraction of a second, he looks embarrassed, but his usual scowl quickly slides into place.

"Like you can talk, Fury," Erik says. He turns back to Moira. "I'm not going to bring the building down. But we don't need elevators. We don't even need doors. We can just as easily go under it or through it."

"Subtle," Moira says. "We're trying for subtle, Lehnsherr. We're trying to not start a firefight or alert the entire security force to our presence."

"I can be subtle," Erik says.

Moira looks pointedly between the two of them, eyebrows raised.

"Uh-huh," she says. "I'll believe it when I see it."

"Trying to tunnel out or what the fuck ever you want to do is going to indirectly accomplish what you want," Nick says. "Any way we can do this and not condemn the building?"

"Jesus," Erik growls. "I just said I wasn't going to wait for the elevator. I'll drag it down the cables myself."

Moira has her pad out, skimming through the plans. "If we can take the executive elevator to the ground floor we might be home free. Step out and walk out like it's easy." She glances up overhead, into and beyond the ceiling tiles. "Wish I knew what was going on up there; we might have to skip up a few floors, then go back down on the main elevator. A couple of visitors and techs in the executive elevator's going to look weird."

"Everyone's freaked out," Charles says hoarsely. It's all right there, knowledge he wants coming to him quick as thought. Everything and more; anxiety races through him, a sharp current of electricity turning his nerves to static and his stomach to a tumult. "They—the cameras went down and the secretary found Kurt."

It's like seeing through glass, or a narrow lens that won't stay in front of his eyes, bobbing around drunkenly. From someone's eyes he sees the reception area, an ambulance parked outside with its lights flashing, a couple of ominously black-clad men in tactical vests talking to the receptionist, who looks a lot more animated than before. A few confused clients hover near their chairs.

"We should leave," Charles makes himself say. "Creed's still out there somewhere, and I don't know how to find him."

"How's Kurt doing?" Erik asks. He's moved a little closer now.

"I don't know." All Charles can get is blurry, nauseating nervousness. "I don't know if the secretary told them that you and I were in there. I don't know if they're looking for us." He doesn't have that sense, but it's better not to assume.
"Okay," Nick says, "we're going to have to take that chance, or sit here fucking around and exploring feelings for the next 24 hours. Lehnsherr, you're on point." Erik nods tightly, torn between disliking orders and recognizing Nick's right. "Charles, you're behind him, and MacTaggert and I are right behind you. Second we hit ground floor, we're a couple of lost service techs, you two are visitors we hooked up with when we heard there was an emergency. Lehnsherr, anything happens, take Charles and clear out, got it? We'll meet back at the safe house."

"Got it," Erik says. Already his ability's flexing itself, and it's beautiful, Charles thinks, frightening and magnificent as Erik settles it into the wall on the other side of the door. "Ready, Charles?"

"I don't think I have a choice," Charles says faintly, but he moves to stand behind Erik. He pushes his mind out past Erik, but not quite to the panic above them. "I don't think they know we're down here," he says. "They haven't checked the logs for the executive elevator."

"Good," Nick says. "Lehnsherr, go."

The door opens on a blank wall at first, but it curls back, as if it's been torn open by invisible hands. The four of them file into the hall and then the lights go off behind them, the door shuts, and the wall seals back up as if door and room were never there. Erik doesn't even miss a step as he leads them through a labyrinth of hallways, turning left and then right, and ending up in front of the elevator they came down in. He waves his hand in front of the card reader, an old trick at this point, and it turns green. Moments later, the elevator opens in front of them.

"Next stop, ground floor," he says. "Be ready to run if we need to."

"Right," Charles says. His legs don't want to support him and intense emotion from other people (from other people) rolls over him, pushing him to the edge of his balance. A woman on the third floor paces in fear because she's afraid that whatever is happening means they'll do a drug test and they'll find out she smoked up over the weekend. A man on the fifth floor fumes because he can't get out of the building to meet his girlfriend for lunch. One of the clients waiting in reception has to use the restroom and has been denied three times by the men in tactical vests still grilling the receptionist. You didn't see us, we're just ordinary visitors there's nothing special about us you don't remember us, he tells the officers and the confused civilians, and hopes it's as effective as it was this morning.

Moira and Nick check their lab coats and straighten their clothes. Moira puts her hair into a ponytail and slips a pair of glasses on. Erik flexes his fingers in anticipation as the elevator comes up to the ground floor.

The door dings, then opens, and they all cautiously step out. There's a general air of confusion, but no one is looking at them in particular, nor do they seem to have noticed the elevator at all.

"Start walking," Erik mutters. "Follow me, stay close, and act natural."

What Charles wants to do is what he and Moira had done at a Halloween haunted house one night (while, of course, drunk), which is crowd up against Erik's back and cling tightly to his shirt. What he actually does is adjust his collar and make himself stay reasonably close to Erik, reminding himself that Moira and Nick are right behind him.

Stepping out into the open vault of the atrium is like stepping into an active firing range. Please, Charles begs himself, the dark, hidden part of him that doesn't seem to come at his bidding but just is, beyond any sort of control, please work. Please keep everyone here from seeing us. He concentrates on the secretary and the security officers; the ambulance behind the window is gone.
The secretary stammers out a reply to a question, wringing her hands. "—told Mr. Xavier he could just go—"

_No_, Charles thinks at her, hard, and for a moment he thinks he can see the synapses rearranging themselves, connections breaking, new connections forming. _Say—_

"—I mean, I'm sorry, Mr. Smith, I told him he could go in..."

"Hurry," Erik hisses, his stride lengthening.

_You didn't hear my name. You never heard it_, Charles sends to the officers, feeling like he's pleading, begging with them. His head wants to split open and he's sure he's going to vomit up his pitiful breakfast and the day's revelations and all his terror. _You heard Mr. Smith. You heard Mr. Smith. You heard Mr. Smith, okay?_

"We'll look for him," one of the officers says mechanically.

They're almost to the door, moving under the watchful eyes of the security cameras. Charles reminds himself Erik's disabled them. They're almost safe, so close, Erik's ability pushing the doors open ahead of them so they can step into the blistering-bright daylight, so they can turn and leave this place behind, hauling Charles' secrets with them.

It's only when he has to let go and sag against Erik because he's fairly certain his brain is going to drip out of his ears, and Erik's voice rises in a crescendo around him, _god what's wrong, what's wrong CHARLES? fuck get MacTaggert help help CHARLES_, that he feels it, a mind cold and calculating as one of Erik's blades, covered in blood, waiting for them.

"Erik," he whispers. "Creed——"

Erik's next frantic move would be comical if Charles weren't so scared and in so much pain. He holds Charles up with one arm around his waist and turns in a quick circle with the other stretched out defensively, looking all around them, nearly tripping over Charles' feet in the process.

"MacTaggert!" he bellows, but before the word is even fully out of his mouth, Moira and Nick have surrounded them, guns drawn.

"Go!" Nick shouts. "Get him to safety!"

Moira presses something into Charles' hand and he barely has the presence of mind to take it, scanning the streets again to find Creed, _he was here, he was right here_, he needs to help but his head is splitting in two—

"Between the buildings across the street," Charles chokes out, his voice cracking. "There are three people with him they're armed——"

His vision goes spotty and he feels himself being dragged away quickly, first tucked under Erik's arm and then, after a curse, hauled over his shoulder in a fireman's carry as Erik dashes through the streets. Charles is more of a burden than a help this time—he can't open his eyes, but he can feel the shock of onlookers as Erik elbows past them, Charles clutching the bag with the computer hard drive to his chest, but otherwise limp in Erik's hold.

Everything feels sharp and loud and too much, but he keeps pushing himself harder. He needs to know Moira and Nick are okay, he needs to find Creed again and let them know where he is. He's spent the last few days being next to helpless—he needs to pay them back by doing this one thing and he can't—
"Stop," Erik manages to say between breaths. His mind is still an ordered list of commands broken up by concern—*Keep going. Run. Look around. CHARLES. Assess the metal. Look at the faces. Keep going. CHARLES.* It's almost soothing compared to the cacophony emanating out of the rest of the world around them. He tries to focus on it, but that means blocking out potential threats, even if it makes his head stop spinning. "Stop, relax, you don't need to do anything—no one expects—and you're just projecting, maybe to the whole street—" His breaths come harsh and sharp and measured. His grip on Charles tightens and he starts to slow.

"Can you walk?" Erik asks. "Better still, can you run?"

"Yeah," Charles grits out. He slides gracelessly to the ground, his legs reluctant shuddering at the edge of giving out before he can stiffen them. He makes himself walk, then jog, each step echoing in his head like a jackhammer. "But we need to turn—"

"We need to keep going." Erik propels him along, up the cold, dank ramp and onto their level of the garage.

"No," Charles says, balking. "No, no, they're still out there—I don't know where. I can't tell where they are. I can't tell if Moira and Nick are safe—"

"Deep breaths," Erik says. His voice is echoing—his real voice. Charles forces his eyes open. They're back in the parking garage. "We're almost there."

Charles feels the presence before he hears the voice—ice cold, razor sharp, deep blood red.

"Are you, now?" Creed says.

Erik grunts, the oddest, most undignified sound, one emphatic punch of breath out of his lungs. His weight catapults forward onto Charles, and Charles has to force his legs not to collapse beneath him and his back to take Erik's body folding atop him. It feels like his bones are liquefying under him as Erik scrabbles uselessly to hold himself up and can't do it; Charles hits the rough concrete on his right shoulder, the shock rebounding up and down his spine.

His body moves without him really willing it, his mind racing ahead in blind terror. He half-turns over, twisted and trapped between the floor and Erik's weight—Erik's dead weight. "Erik," Charles whispers.

The black handle of a knife protrudes from Erik's shoulder, the pad of muscle just over the scapula. The bone must have stopped it, Charles thinks dully, from going any further.

"Charles." Erik's staring down at him, those remarkable eyes glassy, pain spilling out of him like the blood darkening the back of his shirt, pain for the wound and the bitter sense of having failed. "Charles, run. Run."

*You said you could listen to orders,* Erik thinks, the words defiant and bright and clear, cutting through the tether of Charles' terror, freeing him. Charles worms out from underneath him, still clutching the computer drive to his chest. The presence, Creed, is watching, somewhere behind him, calculating, working out how to take him without damaging the prize Charles is carrying.

He races two aisles across to the outermost row of cars and behind the hulk of a Cadillac SUV, crouching so his forehead is pressed against the car's metallic side, his shoulders against the cold concrete barrier. The sun beyond the garage can't penetrate the gloom, or the dank iciness inside.

*Run,* Erik had said. *Run.* Charles tries to gather his wits back to him and looks around. The doorway
leading back down to street level is maybe fifteen feet away, a frantic sprint—or frantic stagger, given the pain howling behind his temples. Swallowing means swallowing back saliva and blood and bile; the door seems very far away now.

*Please,* he begs to the alien power inside him, the thing Erik says is part of what he is. He imagines so many things, imagines Moira and hearing his frantic *Please come please come please come help me* and imagines Erik listening to his order to *stay alive please stay alive you have to dying isn't an option,* imagines doing to Creed whatever he did to Kurt, imagines cutting and stopping and ending.

"Xavier," Creed calls, his voice echoing.

Charles stays quiet. Maybe Creed hasn't seen where he's gone. He can still make that staircase. Well, as long as Creed doesn't have a gun.

*Don't think about that now,* he orders himself. *Erik told you to run. You have to do this for him. You can do this for him.*

"I'm assuming your friend here wasn't carrying you for show," Creed calls out. There's a thumping sound and Erik grunts. Charles tries not to vomit. "It's no use running. Just come out, boy."

"That's what all the movie villains always say," Charles manages to choke out. "Please—don't hurt him."

"And that's what all the movie heroes always say," Creed calls back. "And I think we can agree, this isn't a movie. You're not going to win—there's no deus ex machina that's going to swoop in during the third act to save the day. You're injured in a confined space with someone who doesn't have a problem killing you. Come out, hand over that drive, and I'll give you to Marko alive. You'll probably wish you were dead once you get there, of course."

"Charles, just—arugh!" Erik's words cut off in a hoarse shout. When it tapers off, Creed chuckles.

"Or you can stay there, hiding, while I continue to cut your friend to ribbons with this ceramic knife."

Charles squeezes his eyes shut, as if that can block out Erik's pained breaths or the steady mantra in his head of *Breathe through it you've had worse have to wait it out have to find his weak spot have to protect Charles CHARLES if you're hearing this FORGET ABOUT ME—*

He just wants to rest. It's all he's ever wanted. He's tired of fighting, of fighting against Kurt, of saving every penny and selling his valuables to live on his own, of running for the past few days. He wants to rest. That's all. It's all he's wanted since he was a child, to just have time to rest without worrying any longer.

But he can't give in—not today. Not with people depending on him. Erik and Moira and Nick have put their lives on the line for him. He doesn't even know if Nick and Moira are safe, but Erik is here, close, bleeding because of him. The least he can do is go down fighting. The least he can do is make this count.

He takes off his jacket and wraps it around the bag, tying it into a bundle with the arms. Then he crawls to the drain in the wall of the garage and shoves his jacket bundle in as far as it will go. He replaces the drain cover, then takes a deep breath and stands up.

He doesn't know what he's going to do, what he can do past the ringing in his ears and spotty vision, but the time has come for him to stand up for himself.
He can't let himself look at Erik beyond seeing him in the lower periphery of his vision, bloodstained and so deathly still. He makes himself look at the man standing over him, incongruously neat in suit and tie and polished hair, immaculate, not one drop of Erik's blood on him. The only blood there is that isn't on Erik is on the blade of the knife in the man's right hand, and the afterimage of it roiling behind his eyes—a savage, bloodsoaked pleasure beneath the overlay of calm.

Graydon Creed. Charles swallows. His head, for a wonder, doesn't hurt anymore; he feels perilously clear, now that he's made his decision, free for maybe the first time.

Creed's cold gaze flickers over him, fastening on Charles' empty hands. "Where's the drive?"

"Don't," Erik coughs. Creed kicks him and Erik can't even cry out.

Don't look at him, don't look. "I threw it over the side," Charles says as steadily as he can, willing Creed to believe him. "It's in a million pieces on the sidewalk now."

Creed's face flexes, a spasm of fury. "You think that was going to save your life?" Another knife slides down his arm, dropping neatly into his palm. One saving grace, at least; he isn't carrying a gun. "You think your stepfather still isn't going to want you? He'll want you dead now. All in a day's work, a brat of a crippled mutant and some Brotherhood scum."

A license plate on a nearby Lexus flexes, tugging at the screws holding it in place. It slips through the faltering fingers of Erik's power, the pain too heavy for Erik's anger to push through it and grab hold of any weapon. Creed sees it and laughs, a tight, cruel sound.

"It won't work," Charles says quietly. He wonders if contact might help, as it did with Erik, if he could last long enough against Creed to inflict any kind of damage. "If I die, if you take me, people will still know I'm gone. My friends know, and they'll tell everyone. The world will know you were the one who killed me, that Kurt ordered you to do it."

"You're talking like I care what happens to Marko," Creed says. He steps around Erik's body (no, around Erik, he's still alive, he's still fighting), knives at the ready. "But just come with me, Xavier, and when I get you alone, I'll kill you fast and neat."

"You won't," Charles tells him, and Creed laughs.

"Really? What can you do, little mutant? Or, what could you do, before your daddy cut it out of you like cancer?"

"You don't want to know," Charles says, and stops in his tracks.

He still feels clear, free, even the nauseating stab of his headache pushed far away. Please, he says to his telepathy, to himself, as he starts to imagine what he needs to happen, what must happen, the contours of Creed's brain, all of them shaped around hatred and killing, hatred of mutants and difference and any power that isn't his own, the connections between hatred and action and the muscle memory that knows how to throw a knife and inflict pain. He imagines reaching into that terrible tangle, like reaching into knotted guts and squeezing out the life.

Stop, he thinks. STOP.

Creed falters in his step—the arm drawn back to throw the first knife twitches and slams back against his side, bungling the throw. Charles feels the blade slice the outside of his arm as it flies past and clatters uselessly to the floor. Creed's face twists with rage and confusion and fear—it would be funny if Charles wasn't so terrified, wasn't pulling against the inner workings of Creed's mind.
You're not a killer you're not a killer you're not a killer. He wants Creed to stop, wants to wash his hatred away, but he'll be different, after, and he doesn't know if he can stand to be that person. But—could he get out of bed every day knowing that he killed someone, that he decided he knew best whether a man should be allowed to keep living? Even a man as detestable as Creed?

He thinks again of Erik and the man who killed Erik's family—Sebastian Shaw. Creed has probably killed hundreds—no, he has, Charles can see it in his mind, feel the superiority that flowed through Creed as he ended each of their lives. He took joy in it. And he'll continue to take joy in it unless Charles stops him.

He still doesn't know if he can. Is that selfish? Is it selfish of him, hesitating to kill this man, knowing he needs to be stopped, simply because he doesn't know if he can sleep easily afterwards?

Creed's throwing arm still won't move.

"What the fuck did you do to me?" he spits. His mouth curls into a grimace that makes Charles' stomach hurt. All Creed is feeling is revulsion and fear and that miasma rolls over Charles in waves. He raises the other arm, knife clasped in his hand, and Charles thinks of Erik and Moira and Nick and their sacrifice—their time, their safety, their futures. He can't let that be a waste.

He needs more time.

STOP, he thinks again, and this time, it's not just Creed's arm, but his whole body that stops, frozen in place.

Charles can do nothing but stare at him for a long time. He looks like something out of a nightmare, his face red with fury, veins bulging at his temple and on his arm. He looks like he wants to rip Charles in half with his bare hands. It looks like he would delight in it.

"Erik?" Charles asks quietly, still staring at Creed. "Erik, are you—" Not fine, not okay, Charles has seen him, bleeding and bruised and limp on the concrete. He doesn't know what to ask. "Erik," he settles for saying again, "Please say something."

"Fuck," Erik says. It's more rattle than word, clogged in Erik's throat, but Charles wants to laugh—or cry—or collapse in relief.

An eye on Creed and his mental finger still pressing down hard on Creed's ability to move, Charles hurries over to Erik. He does collapse, then, ungraceful clattering to knees and shins by Erik's side. The blood from the knife wound in Erik's shoulder has run down his side and arm and back, sticking Erik's shirt to him and beginning to stain the concrete, settling in with the oil and grunge of the parking garage floor. Erik's so terribly pale next to the blood, and next to the bruise rising on his cheekbone, the vague shape and indent of a boot print.

There's a dark spot in Erik's hair, at the base of his skull. Creed kicked him there, Charles thinks hollowly,

"Erik," he whispers. "Please, please don't die. You'll be okay."

"Yeah." Erik's eyes are glassy with concussion when he gets them open to look at Charles. It's wrong, him looking like this, still and broken—no, not broken, cracked, just that; Creed's not going to kill him, Charles decides. Not after all of this, after Erik's fought for him. He tugs his dress shirt off, wishing briefly for his jacket, and, wadding it up, presses it against Erik's shoulder. Erik grunts again, biting down on his lip hard enough to draw more blood.

It's slowing at least, Charles thinks, hoping Erik can hear, hoping it's because the blood is
coagulating and no major vessels were hit, not because Erik's heart is giving up.

"Do you know what happened to Kurt?" Charles asks Creed quietly. Neither of them have cell phones; he wants to reach out to Moira and Nick, to beg them to be safe and to come when they can, but he has no idea if he can do that while keeping Creed still. He has no idea if they can wait however many minutes until some poor, random person wanders out to get their car, or until security realizes something's wrong.

"Saw him being carried out on a stretcher," Creed says thickly. He coughs, a small, tight sound, his lungs pressing against a frozen chest wall.

"I did that," Charles says. He turns to look over his shoulder at Creed, almost comically still now, the hand with the knife ever-so-slightly upraised. "I made him stop. I should stop you forever."

"Do it, then," Creed rasps. His eyes are tearing, the lids twitching as Creed fights to blink.

Charles wavers to his feet. Now that he's in Creed's mind, he can see what he needs to do to make Creed stop, for good and all, reaching into the network of fiber and electricity of the medulla oblongata and cutting the signal to the heart.

Creed stares with blank fury at him as Charles draws closer, and Charles feels the desperation to get away, the need to kill, the revulsion. It hurts worse than the headache, knowing this hatred is for him, for Erik, everyone Creed's killed and everyone he wants to kill. It's frightening and yet...

"It's sad," Charles says softly. "Underneath all of this, you're just... you're afraid. Under all that blood and violence, you're scared."

Creed tries to spit at him, but he doesn't have the lung capacity or muscle control. Instead, he dribbles down his chin and onto the front of his immaculate shirt, his eyes still crazed with fury.

"I don't know that I can kill someone," Charles says out loud, because keeping it in his head has been useless. "Could I live with myself, afterward? But could I live with myself if you were still alive and still killing other people?"

"Spare me this bullshit," Creed says. "Kill me or let me kill you."

The contrary part of Charles wants to spare Creed just for having said that, but there's no time for that sort of immaturity. He needs to make a decision. His heart weighs heavy and his mind is being bombarded by every cruel word, every disgusting insult, every jolt of fear and hatred that ricochets through Creed as he watches Charles slowly walk towards him.

Beneath all that, though, there's something else.

You don't have a choice.

It's Erik, faint and distant. Charles turns to look at him and Erik's eyes open again, still only half focused.

He wants to make you question it. He wants you to waver. He wants to haunt you. Don't let him, Charles. It needs to be done. I'd do it myself if I could sit up.

Charles swallows. The sound of Erik's voice is weak in Charles' head and he can see the red bleeding through Charles' balled up dress shirt.

It will be hard, living with it, but you're strong. And I'll be there to help you through it.
"Promise me!" Charles says, his voice wavering. "Promise me you're not going anywhere."

"I promise," Erik rasps from the floor.

Erik's word will have to be enough proof that he'll be okay for now. Charles has a feeling he doesn't make promises lightly.

He turns back to Creed, jaw set. He thinks he's going to be sick.

"I know you won't believe it, and I know you don't care, but I really am sorry about this," Charles whispers.

Creed opens his mouth, maybe to speak, maybe to scream, but Charles doesn't want to hear it. He squeezes his eyes shut and he tells Creed's brain to shut down his heart.

His eyes are still closed when he hears the thump of Creed's body hitting the concrete.

*Turn around. Erik's voice comes from far away. Don't look at him. Turn around and come to me.*

Erik isn't a telepath, Charles thinks dully, but his body responds like Erik's voice is pulling the strings of his joints, turning him away from Creed, so when Charles opens his eyes all he sees is Erik, lying with his head resting on the cold concrete, staring fixedly up at him. *Come on, Charles. I need your help.*

He shouldn't let someone else die today, should he? Charles shuffles over to Erik, feeling the knowledge of what he's done looming behind him, waiting to pounce. Erik moves a little, enough to keep eye contact. As long as he keeps doing that, Charles won't break down into hysterical screams or sobs or just come out of his skin.

Awkwardly, he slides to his knees by Erik's side. Erik sighs. *See if you can do something about that compress.* The directions help, helping Erik not die helps; Charles refolds his shirt, trying to ignore the blood smearing his palms, and presses the dry fabric to Erik's shoulder. "The bleeding's slowing," he tells Erik, just to hear his own voice, and Erik nods slightly.

All of Erik's body is pain, the sharp, penetrating pain of the knife stab and the vicious ache at the base of his skull and constellations of new bruises rising under his clothes. Hesitantly, Charles strokes Erik's sweaty hair back from his forehead and tells Erik, with all the conviction in him, *You're not going to die.*

"'Course I'm not," Erik rasps. He has a bloody nose, Charles sees, red smeared around his mouth. He tells himself it's from Creed, not because Erik, contrary to orders, is dying. Erik adds, still rattly and faint, "Don't be stupid, Xavier."

"I'll leave that to you," Charles says. His own voice totters on the verge of falling. No matter how hard he tries, he keeps seeing Creed, fleeting glimpses of him, lying so very still. *Dead. Dead because of you.*

"Where," Erik licks his lips, wincing at the blood. "Where's the drive?"

"Hidden," Charles says. He presses down harder, wondering if the dampness under his palm is fresh blood or old. "Don't worry about it." *Worry about other things.*

Charles figures Creed had disabled the security cameras. It's mid-morning, but the garage is still as night, although his reason tells him it's not been ten minutes. Erik needs help, every second slipping by meaning he could be slipping away, so Charles closes his eyes and reaches as far as he can,
through the constraints of concrete and steel and out over the city. *Moira.*

**Charles!**

The immediate response makes Charles sag with relief before he realizes that telepathy isn't like shouting—just because he can hear Moira doesn't necessarily mean she's close.

She falters, trying to properly project her thoughts his way. *You're okay? We lost Creed, we got his goons, but we lost him. We're still looking.*

*Creed's dead,* he tells her. *I'm fine, Erik's hurt, he's bleeding, we're in the parking garage where we left the car, I need help. There's so much blood...*

Moira doesn't say she's on her way, not exactly, but he can watch the synapses fire, feel her communicate what Charles has said to Nick, feel her mind firing orders down her neural pathways, making her break into a run with Nick behind her.

He wrenches himself away from Moira and focuses on Erik again. Erik is still awake and aware and breathing, and that's all Charles can really ask for at this point.

"Moira and Nick are coming," Charles says. He strokes Erik's forehead again with the hand that's not pressing his shirt to Erik's shoulder. "Just hang on."

"S'not as bad as it looks," Erik mutters. "'ve had worse."

Charles tries to focus on Erik and not on the body behind him. He's still fired up from the confrontation—he has a feeling that as soon as the last of the adrenaline and panic disappear, his headache is going to come back with a vengeance. Also, he'll probably cry or pass out, though he's not sure which.

They're closer than Charles thought to Xavier Biogen, or else Moira and Nick wandered towards them in their own fight, because it takes them less than five minutes to appear in the stairwell, winded, a little battered, but still both in one piece.

"Jesus, Lehnsherr," Moira says as she rushes over, panting. "All this from going up against one guy? You're getting old."

"Fuck you," Erik growls. "It was a fucking ambush." Moira kneels down next to Charles and gently nudges him out of the way to inspect the wound.

"All that whining over this?" she says to Erik. "It's nothing. A few pints of blood, some stitches, some PT, and you'll be back to annoying the shit out of us."

Charles can't tell if she's being overly optimistic to keep their spirits high or if she's telling the truth. He hopes for the latter as he tries to wipe Erik's blood off of his hands.

He only succeeds in smearing it, until he finds a clean corner of his shirt. Moira watches him closely, her mind carefully neutral and precise, the impulse to hug him buried under layers of professionalism. Eventually he gives up and sighs, slumping back.

"I called some friends when Nick and I were headed over," she says, half to Erik and half to Charles. "I'm going to take you to the hospital, Erik—yes, hospital—" she adds when Erik protests "—a very nice, discreet hospital, that may or may not have doctors on staff that Nick knows personally, to get you stitched up. And Nick and our friends are going to take care of things here."
"Speaking of things." Nick had bypassed Erik and Charles and gone straight for Creed, kneeling down by him to press cursory fingers across his pulse. Charles quickly looks away. "Nice to see I've got one less pain in the ass to worry about. How'd he die?"

Charles' heart freezes in his chest. *I did it,* he wants to say, only his mouth can't work, locked up with fear and the knowledge that he's killed someone. *Barely a day with my ability and already someone's dead.*

"I did it," Erik says. His hand, which has found its way into Charles' limp one, presses firmly into the cup of Charles' palm. "Pulled—pulled his blood cells apart when he thought he'd finished me. He was going for Charles, couldn't take the chance Charles was compromised."

One look at Moira's face tells Charles that Moira knows the truth; telepath or not, or she strongly believes Erik's lying. It's better for Moira to believe he's the harmless, empathetic grad student she's always known, the one who's been with her through dozens of benders and finals and experiments. He wants to believe he's that person, so very badly.

The rumble of a car engine behind them breaks Charles from his reverie. He looks up, irrationally terrified it's the police, or (hysterically, surreally) someone trying to find a parking space.

It's a sleek black car, sliding into park and then into silence as its driver turns off the ignition. The driver, and a passenger, step out, and Charles knows in that instant they're both mutants, though they're human-standard. One of them is icy perfection from her pale blonde hair to her white stilettos and the perfect, polished smile she offers him a moment before she *becomes* ice, crystalline and flawless.

"Emma," Erik sighs. "Fuck. Of all the members of the Brotherhood..."

"Lehnsherr," the ice woman says with cool amusement. "Hello, Charles Xavier. MacTaggert, Fury, we're here to make sure Creed has the burial he deserves."

Nick stands up and steps away from Creed's corpse, shrugging.

"We don't give a fuck what happens to his body," he says. "He's dead. We did our part."

The ice woman—Emma—sneers at Nick in a cool, polite, attractive way. "Our agent helped as well," she says, even and chilly. "We've been keeping an eye on Xavier Biogen, despite you refusing to share information."

"Your agent did the bulk of it, it seems," Nick says. Emma raises her eyebrows and looks at Erik. He glares at her, radiating keep your mouth shut. "How...interesting." She then turns her piercing gaze on Charles.

*Nice to meet you, Charles Xavier,* she says straight into his mind. *You and I will have to have a chat later.*

"Telepath," Erik mutters, and Charles feels himself flush with shame. She must know. She knows Charles killed Creed. She knows Charles took a life.

"Janos," Emma says, gesturing towards the body, and the driver pulls a key fob out of his pocket and pops the trunk. He replaces it, then raises both hands. A gust of wind emanates out from him and gently lifts Creed's body off the concrete. It hovers in the air, as if Janos and Emma are savoring it, limply hanging from invisible chains. Charles swallows and looks away quickly. Once Janos secures the body in the trunk, he drops his hands and walks back over to the car. The trunk shuts heavily, with finality.
Charles feels slightly better now that Creed is out of his sight, but not by much.

"Do you want us to wait for you, boss?" the wind man asks Erik.

"No," Erik says. "Do what you want. I don't care. I might...be a while, still."

Emma looks at Charles again and smiles sharply.

"How cute," she says, though her tone makes it clear she equates whatever it is that's developed between Charles and Erik to—roughly—gum stuck to the bottom of her shoe. "I'll continue to make sure things run smoothly in your absence."

"Fuck off," Erik says. "I'm still in charge."

"Of course," she says. "We'll be sure to send you a get well card."

"That's all well and good," Moira says, looking back and forth between Erik and Emma, "but we've gotta get Erik to the hospital, so if you could save the reunion for later?"

"I suppose, but it's rather nice, seeing Lehnsherr like this," Emma says with crystalline disdain. "Agents Fury, MacTaggert, it's been more of a pleasure than usual, which isn't saying much."

"Frost," Nick says, face expressionless and mind nearly so.

Emma and Janos leave, reversing to turn around the way they came. Emma's amusement still rings in Charles' ears, sharp and empty, well after the rumble of the sedan's engine fades, even after they finally get Erik upright and staggering to their car.

Don't worry, Erik sends weakly, once Moira and Nick have him stretched awkwardly across the backseat. Charles is half in the passenger seat, twisted around to be sure the bleeding doesn't start again while Moira buckles Erik in, ignoring his complaints about not needing a damned seat belt. She likes you better because... He doesn't finish the thought, but Charles doesn't need him to. Because you killed Creed, Erik means.

"Nick's going to stay here," Moira says, so very gentle. She knows, and Charles wishes he could tell her just so she could hear him admit it and have it not be a terrible, unspoken truth. "He'll take care of the blood Erik left all over the place, pull a few strings. This will disappear."

"What about Kurt?" Charles asks. He tries not to think about how he just knows what Moira's thinking now, can feel the tangle of her emotions as she works through her hatred of him, her knowledge of what's happened, likely outcomes.

"The official story from Xavier Biogen will be a heart attack," Moira says. "Probably due to the stress of his wife's illness. Speaking of... where's the drive?"

"Yeah." Charles extracts himself from the car and heads for the Cadillac that had been his shelter earlier. I suppose these things actually are useful, he thinks as he bends stiffly to work the drain cover open and pull the package of his jacket and satchel out. The fabric's damp, and he doesn't want to think about what's mixed in with the old rainwater and leaves, but the drive and memory cards seem to be safe.

They're his secret now. Charles cradles the package against his chest. The data they hold should never have existed, but it does, and it's his. Maybe, if they can decode whatever his father's left on those small plates of silicon and copper, he'll know why his father did this to him, why he wanted to bury the secret in the bottom of a building—why, Charles wonders with a sick, heavy swallow—he
himself had forgotten it.

"Come on, Charles," Moira calls. She has the car started up, her mind radiating impatience. Erik's thoughts are, uncharacteristically, softer, blurry with blood loss and exhaustion.

Charles hurries to climb in, and almost before he's got the door shut, Moira's speeding down the ramp, heading for the exit.

The place they end up is more of a clinic than a hospital, but it's clean, well-lit, and well-stocked, which Charles supposes is all that's important. Erik refuses a wheelchair, instead hobbling in propped up between Moira and Charles, face ashen as every step jostles his wound. Charles glances around at it repeatedly to make sure it doesn't start bleeding again.

"Agent MacTaggert!" says an older woman inside, dressed in scrubs and holding a clipboard. "What a pleasure. And here I thought, when Nicholas called, he was looking to patch himself up."

"No," Moira says. "This one here. Stab wound to the back shoulder and it looks nasty—the blade was serrated. Possible concussion, and generally beaten to hell from head to toe. He's lost a lot of blood."

"Oh dear," the woman says. "Well, nothing for it, then. Bring him on back."

Moira leads them through the door and into a hallway full of clinic rooms. They hoist Erik up onto a bed as the doctor reappears, hair tied back and surgical gloves on her hands. She slowly removes Charles' compress and whistles when she sees the wound.

"Oh, that is a nice one," she says. "They really know how to do the most damage with one blow. This is a beauty."

"Just...fucking...fix it..." Erik hisses as she prods him.

"No need to take that tone," she says to Erik. Then, to Moira and Charles, "We'll need the room, dears."

Charles tries to think of something to say to Erik, but everything seems trite and unable to encompass the last few days.

"I'll see you soon," is what he does say, and then follows Moira back out into the waiting room. She doesn't sit, but rather slips behind the empty desk and into the storage closet. When she reappears, she's holding a pile of clean scrubs.

"You're covered in blood and dirt and god knows what else," she says. She tosses him a pair of pants, a long sleeved t-shirt, and a scrub shirt. "There's a bathroom down the hall. Wash up and get changed."

She means down the hall and to the left, not to the right; there's a shower in that one. Charles doesn't think about how he knows that. He also doesn't think about what Moira's feeling right now, a stew of relief Creed's gone and concern for Erik and full-blown worry and grief for Charles. Instead, he turns around and concentrates on the twenty steps to the bathroom.

Scalding water distracts him a little. As long as you don't think what you're washing off of you, you'll be okay, he tells himself as he squeezes more and more generic antiseptic body wash out of its dispenser and rubs it on himself, scrubbing at the blood that's caked under his fingernails and tacky on his palms with a washcloth. No, no, don't think about that. You saved Erik. He'll be okay once the doctor puts him back together. He's already cursing. He's fine. He's fine. Moira's safe. Nick's safe.
That's what's important. He thinks it into the hot water beating down on him, his skin flinching away from the burn.

When he finally exhausts the hot water, he stumbles out of the stall and into a towel. The steam on the mirrors means he doesn't have to look at himself as he dries off. The towels are the rough, over-laundered kind found in gyms and crappy hotel rooms, more hardened nub than fabric. Charles rubs himself dry, trying to dredge up some amusement at his painfully pink skin. One time he and Moira had gone to the beach one summer, a long weekend of pretending they didn't have a ton of work to do. Charles had spent it huddled under a t-shirt, shorts, sunglasses, hat, umbrella, and the strongest sunblock he could find, and had still come back looking like this: a well-cooked lobster.

He climbs back into his boxers and then the scrubs. He's straightening to adjust a wrinkle in the long-sleeved undershirt Moira had given him (oversized, like the scrub top) when he sees the smeared handprint he or Erik must have left across the chest of his t-shirt.

I killed Creed. He sinks down, back against the wall because the wall is the only thing holding him up. I killed him. It doesn't matter if he deserved it or not, I'm still the one who took his life. The memory rises up, hot and panicky, behind his clenched-shut eyes, what it had felt like to do that.

"Oh god," he says into the hand he's clapped over his mouth to keep himself from screaming or telling the world what he'd done. Now that he's alone, there's no escaping from it anymore. "Oh god, oh god."

From very far away, there's a knock on the door, gentle but unavoidable. It's Moira, Charles knows that even before the door opens.

Charles' head is resting on his knees, his eyes squeezed shut, his fingernails digging into his cheek as he presses his hand harder against his mouth, as if it's enough to hold back his imminent panic attack. Moira quietly kneels down next to him and wraps him in her arms. Her sympathy and compassion and love should make him feel better, but instead he's filled with shame. He's killed a man. He's ended a man's life. He made the choice, as if he should have any say in who deserves to live. He's not worthy of Moira's strength and sympathy. He's not the person she loves any longer.

"Oh, shut up," Moira says, holding him tighter. "The first thing we're gonna have to do is teach you how to shield better." She rests her chin on the top of your head. "Charles, you didn't have any other choice. I don't hate you. Do you think I haven't killed people before? It sucks. I know it sucks. But sometimes it's what needs to be done. Do you love me any less now that you know I used to regularly hurt people as part of my job?"

Charles doesn't trust himself to speak. He shakes his head instead, and manages to uncurl his hand from his mouth, at the very least, clinging instead to Moira's shirt, his hand fisted in the fabric.

"I wish you hadn't had to do it," she says. "Because I know you and I know what you're like and I know how much this must be killing you. I know nothing I can say is going to magically clear your conscience, but I don't think less of you for doing it, okay? Nobody would. He was going to kill you. He was going to kill Erik. He's killed countless other mutants and mutant allies, and not out of anything other than malice. He's bombed mutant community centers. He's gone after mutant leaders. He's done terrible things. Don't for a moment think he didn't deserve it and that you weren't acting in self-defense."

Charles wants to believe her, he does, but there were other choices. There had to have been other choices, even if Charles couldn't think of them at the time. There's no doubt that Creed was a bad person, but that doesn't give Charles the right to decide he shouldn't exist any longer.
"You're not a bad person, Charles," Moira says. "You did the right thing. And I know you can't believe it yourself right now, but just trust me, okay?"

If she'd asked him that two days ago, he wouldn't have known his answer; he would have said yes, *I'll trust you* but with that reservation lingering in the back of his mind, the caveat that said *but only so far*. It occurs to him that now he can look and see for himself—no. *No, Moira deserves better than that from you*. And what Moira's asking him to trust is the future, some hypothetical future Charles who can come to terms with what he's done, which neither she nor Charles can see.

"I couldn't look at him," he mumbles into Moira's neck. "I couldn't let myself see what—I did." "And if he could have, Creed would have killed you from as far away as he could," Moira tells him. "He tried to, once. You don't owe him better than what he would have given you, Charles." Her arms tighten around him; Moira's much stronger than she looks. "And I know you, Charles. You wouldn't have done it without considering whatever options you could. I've seen you be merciful with way too many undergrads before giving them the F they so richly deserved."

The laughter Charles manages is more choke and snot than laugh. Moira continues, "You've lived with your abilities, knowing what they were, for a handful of hours. There's no way you could know them well enough to make Creed into a peaceful mutant-lover, or wipe his memory. You did what you could with what you had, and that got you and Erik out alive. It helped keep Nick and me safe."

All of that's true as well, though Moira's words can't patch the wound. "What if," he coughs, holding tighter to her as the realization sweeps over him, remembering what Erik had said about early-manifesting psionics. Unstoppable. "What if that's what my father realized.... that I could do this, unless he did something about it? What if that's why he—why he did what he did."

"Don't," Moira says fiercely. "This is not like wondering what would have happened if Hitler had gotten into art school. Why your dad did what he did, we might never know. But even if he did it because he thought you'd grow up to kill people with your brain, that wouldn't make what he did to you all right. It made him just as bad as Creed, taking out his fear on someone who couldn't fight back." *His own kid*, Moira's thinking, although she's locked her anger deep under her affection for him.

"And don't let Erik hear you say that," Moira adds. "He's probably already thought of it himself, but you saying it would just piss him off."

"Part of me still wants to defend him," Charles admits. "Even after knowing what he did to me. It's just—he was my dad. And everything I remember about him—it's good things. He wasn't as attentive as he could have been, but when he was, he was good to me." He knows, somewhere in the vague memories of his childhood, either stolen from his mind or repressed or just naturally dissolved over time, his father hurt him. Maybe not the same way Kurt did, but his father changed him. His father decided he didn't like a fundamental part of Charles and his solution was to take that part away.

It's abuse every bit as cruel as the physical blows and emotional wounds Charles nursed under Kurt for years, but he still can't reconcile it with the man he remembers from his childhood, the one who told him how good and smart he was and showed him off to his colleagues.

"That's natural, Charles," Moira says. "Again, you probably shouldn't say it in front of Erik, but it's not strange for you to feel that way."

He doesn't want to keep secrets from Erik, not when Erik has told him so much and done so much for him. Not when Erik took a knife and a beating to save Charles' life. Even if it was just a job to
him—and Charles hopes it's more, knows Erik feels something—Charles is still in his debt.

"Will he be alright?" Charles asks. "Really?"

"He'll be fine," Moira says. "I wasn't exaggerating. He's had worse. The knife wound was nasty—you saw it—but not fatal. He'll probably need PT to get the shoulder back up to strength, but he'll be back to being his usual obnoxious self in a matter of hours, once he's got some more blood in him." She pauses for a moment, stroking Charles' hair, and then adds, "Also, I'm not going to say 'I told you so, he's super hot and you want to adopt a million babies with him,' but..."

"... but you're going to tell me anyway." Carefully, Charles sits up, wiping at the snot and tears drying on his face. His eyes are puffy and his head aches with a lot more than the headache that's plagued him.

"He is hot," Moira says. Her smile isn't quite steady, which eases something inside of Charles like setting a piece of broken china back into place. "And you know he likes you."

Charles does know. He knows it with a clarity that stuns him, when he replays the few moments he's had with Erik and realizes that what he'd taken as a mistake on his part or his own unaccountable emotions—affection, fond exasperation, terror and anger at the thought that Charles had been or could be hurt—had been Erik, not himself. He knows, more annoyingly, from the superior look Emma Frost had given him in the parking garage, that what Erik feels for him is more than whatever he might feel for a fellow mutant.

"Why don't we start with a date that doesn't involve him turning up in my house in a bathrobe?" Charles suggests. He winces, half-shutting his eyes against the fluorescent brightness of the bathroom. His smile doesn't sit right on his mouth, but then, nothing sits quite right about himself anymore. "I thought that's what that was at first, you know. One of your awful set Charles up with a marriageable guy escapades."

"That sounds nothing like something I'd do," Moira protests. Her shoulder is warm and sturdy against him as they lean into each other. "Just because I think it would be good for you to be with someone who's good for you, who deserves you, someone who might actually be family, doesn't mean I'm going to invent some crazy scenario to introduce you to someone."

"I don't really have a good template for families," Charles reminds her, squeezing her hand tightly. "And you've been my family. The only one I've had since I left home."

The only one that counts, he adds silently, projecting to her as carefully as he can. He wonders, now, if what she wants for him is what she'd given up to pursue her work, but he keeps that to himself.

"Don't make me cry, Xavier," Moira says. She swallows and rubs the heel of her hand across her eye. "Okay. Not crying. Can you stand up? You should rest for a while, in a place not on the bathroom floor, and you can see Erik when he's done being stitched up."

"I don't know if I'll be able to sleep," Charles says, but when Moira slowly stands, Charles does too. The world around him still feels uneven and askew, but he can stand on his own. That's something.

"Rest, then," Moira says. "Stop running and thinking so hard."

"Impossible," Charles says, and forces a smile that Moira returns.

Together, they walk back out into the hall and into one of the other empty rooms. Moira fiddles with the exam table until the top part is slightly less elevated and the table is more like a bed. She goes through cabinets and finds a blanket and tiny pillow.
"Just close your eyes for a little while," she tells him. "I'm going to call Nick and take a shower myself. I'll let you know when we figure out our next move."

She hits the light as she leaves the room. There's a small window up near the ceiling that lets in the afternoon light. Charles can't believe that all of this has only happened over the course of a few hours.

He approaches the exam table and lies down, covering himself with the blanket. He doesn't sleep, precisely, but he closes his eyes and tries to stop thinking about the past few days, what he's done, whether Erik's okay, the fact that his whole life has been a lie. He thinks, instead, about the project waiting on him back in the lab. He goes over his results in his head, losing himself in the data, drifting aimlessly, half asleep and half awake. He worries about collecting enough data to finish his research on schedule. He worries about what will happen if Dr. Platt doesn't get tenure.

It's almost a relief, worrying about something other than a threat to his life.

A clatter in the hallway jolts him out of his reverie. The shadows are longer than when he'd laid down, but not by much. His chest isn't as tight as it was in the bathroom, and he takes that as a good sign, sitting up and hopping back down to the floor.

He pads barefoot down the hall to Erik's room. There's no one inside but Erik, asleep on his stomach and covered by one of the same scratchy white blankets that Charles had. There's a chair next to the exam table, and Charles wonders if it's too cliché to sit down next to the bed and wait for Erik to wake up.

He decides, after a moment of hesitation, that it doesn't matter how cliché it is. He crosses the room and does it anyway.

_The last time I tried to touch you while you were sleeping, you almost killed me_, he says to Erik, trying to keep his voice to a mental whisper, trying to keep his presence as quiet as possible. _And I don't feel like having you stab me with a bloody huge needle or scalpel_.

Erik doesn't stir, aside from his soft breaths, and his stillness worries Charles more than he wants to think about. In the ugly hospital lights, his face is pale under his bruises and older-seeming, the delicate lines around his eyes more pronounced. A bag of blood hangs from the IV stand, on its way to empty; Charles wonders how long Erik's been hooked up to it. The monitor he's hooked to clicks steadily along, its beeping muted. The blanket hides Erik's shoulder, but the bandage peeks over the edge, pristinely white against Erik's skin, which is also fair but freckled in places.

"Stop worrying at me," Erik rasps.

"Erik!" Charles tries to keep his relief from spilling all over the place; from the wince and scowl on Erik's face, he must not be doing it that well. "God, Erik. Are you—I mean, you're not okay, but. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Erik's eye, which had opened for one moment, has slid shut again. "Aside from the goddamn hole in my shoulder. And the headache."

"He could have killed you," Charles says. He can't help it, and if Erik doesn't like it, Charles figures he can let go; he takes Erik's hand in both of his, wrapping his own warm fingers around Erik's cold ones. "He was going to."

"As long as you were alive and in that building, he wanted me alive too." Erik licks his lips, and there, blooming in Charles' head, is _I need some water_. Charles finds a pitcher and cup on the stand
by the monitors and, with an effort (and a bendy straw, to Erik's annoyance), gets Erik to drink. When he's finished, Erik says, "He knew you were a soft touch. You wouldn't run to save yourself if it meant sacrificing me. Because you're an idiot. I knew it the second I saw you."

What kind of idiot doesn't call the police the second he sees a strange man sitting on his futon, wearing a bathrobe?

Charles sees that absurd moment from Erik's perspective (and how odd, seeing himself through the filter of someone's own eyes), a startled, wide-eyed boy frozen almost comically in his doorway, recovering from his shock and transitioning to indignation. He sees his own hands fumbling with his cell phone and hears himself demanding to know why this stranger couldn't just get his own bloody hotel room, and feels, placed over the amusement and irritation of the moment, Erik's affection, newfound and confounding, coloring the memory.

"Yes, well, you rather caught me off-guard," Charles says. "I didn't know what to think."

"You need to learn self-preservation, Xavier," Erik says. "When there's a strange man in your house, you call the police. You have the survival instincts of a turnip."

The grouchiness, Charles thinks, is a good sign. That means Erik is getting back to normal, right? Grumpy, asshole Erik who spat sarcastic barb after sarcastic barb Charles' way, bullying him into accepting help when he was too shocked and stubborn to look out for himself. Charles thinks Erik is softer than he wants people to realize, just a little. Or maybe that softness is reserved just for him.

They're both too tired and abused to deal with that right now, but it doesn't stop Charles from saying, "But it wasn't anything dangerous, it was you. You're the best thing to happen to me in too long."

Erik is quiet for a long time. Their breathing and the clicking of the machine are the only things breaking the silence.

"I don't know what to do with you," Erik finally says. He sounds frustrated, but the affection is still in the forefront of Erik's mind, blooming outward and settling over everything, warm and soft. Charles can't fight the small smile that slowly crosses his face.

Normally, if they were in a bar or a club, if the moment was less heavy, less serious, Charles would answer that question with ridiculous sexual innuendo, the type of pick-up line that Moira swears only works because Charles is, in her words, "cute as fuck." But this isn't a bar and Erik isn't a random attractive man. Erik is important. Regardless of what happens or how they choose to deal with their attraction, Erik deserves better. He deserves care.

"Concentrate on getting all your blood back into your body," Charles says. "When you've accomplished that, we'll figure out what to do about the rest of it."

Erik hums in acknowledgement and closes his eyes again. Charles slides his chair closer to the bed so he can lean against it more comfortably, and almost misses Erik's hand sneaking out from under the sheets again. That, Charles can read without even using his telepathy. He lifts his own hand and clasps Erik's, sliding their fingers together.

It's a start, Charles thinks.

The doctor only lets Erik out after he spends the night and part of the next morning, and only after Erik starts mutinously rattling all the metal he can find. Before she releases him, she subjects him to a final CT scan, "to be sure you won't keel over after I let you out of here," and when that comes back
clean, the only thing keeping Erik from bolting out at full speed is his shoulder.

"I can't believe how quickly this all got wrapped up," Moira says. They're in a car that isn't the one decorated with Erik's blood, plowing steadily through midtown. "We really only had to miss less than a week of work. Although," she pauses, her fingers absently drumming the steering wheel, "you might need to stay out a little longer."

"I want to get back to my life." *It's not really your life anymore, is it? Or it won't be for a time.*

Spending the night in Erik's room, or the part of the night that Moira let him before she plied him with dinner and herded him back to his own bed, had brought a series of realizations. He needs to learn about his ability, what it is, how to control it. He needs to learn what his father did to him and, if he can, why. They need to destroy that drive as soon as Charles has his answers, if answers can be found on it.

He needs to talk to Kurt and his mother.

He needs to get back in the lab, back in his crummy apartment, back in his tiny office with Moira clattering away on the computer next to him. He needs to have his own things again, the things he'd worked for and fought to have.

"Take it one step at a time," Erik grumbles from the backseat. Charles sighs. "If you're concentrating hard or experiencing strong emotions, you project," Erik says, as authoritative as if he's the telepath, Charles thinks sourly. Erik might as well be; he's been around them, worked with them.

"Emma notwithstanding," Erik says, "other telepaths out there can help you. You've got an entire community who can help you."

*You have me*, Erik adds silently, clear and firm, and Charles has to look out the window to hide his smile.

They compromise—Moira talks Charles into staying one more day and night at the safe house in the city and promises they'll return to campus the next morning. Charles can sense it's as good as he's going to get, so he agrees without much protest.

They don't bother with the brownstone and the tunnel, instead parking outside a building that Charles assumes is the safe house. It looks so unassuming from the outside, ordinary even against the anonymous stone and brick townhouses to either side of it.

"Nick is inside," Charles warns them as they ascend the steps. Moira perks up, unconsciously fixing her hair with her free hand as she opens the door. Erik rolls his eyes.

Of course, once the door is open to reveal a second, steel door inside that opens with a keypad, it's a little less innocuous.

Moira punches in a code and the door slides open into the familiar living room of the safe house.

"Nick?" she calls out, and Erik puts a hand on Charles' arm to keep him from following.

"Believe me," Erik says. "We don't want to witness this reunion."

Charles hears a crash from the kitchen and thinks he might agree with Erik.

"Why don't we give them a little time to...work that out...before we have Moira try to figure out the computer drives?" Erik suggests. "I'm sure you have questions."
Is this Erik angling to get him alone? A thin veneer of attraction colors Erik's words, but now that Charles knows what to look for, he can see it in all of their interactions, going back to before Charles was even aware of his powers. It's hard to tell if this is any different.

"You've studied mutants, of course, but there's a difference between having an academic interest and living it," Erik continues.

Maybe not angling to get him alone, then, but Charles appreciates it all the same.

"I have questions," Charles admits, "but I have so many, I don't remember them. Or I can't think of any. They aren't questions I ever thought I'd have to ask."

Erik nods. They're in the living room, as far as they can get from whatever's going on in the kitchen (which Charles is emphatically not going to think about) without being in their bedroom. Even safe houses maintained by covert operations groups must bow to the demands of New York City real estate prices, Charles supposes. At least the living room's big, and the kitchen on the other end of a hallway that connects the two.

After a minute, Charles says, "It feels like... it feels like a radio with bad reception sometimes. As if I'm trying to tune in to a station, but the signal doesn't stay or the station keeps flipping over to static. I have to want to hear, some times, but other times..." He thinks of all the times Moira's made some comment about his intuition—a student cheating when there was no evidence, showing up on her doorstep with her favorite takeout and a movie when she was feeling down—and wonders how true that is.

"When I was a kid," Erik says slowly, summoning over another quarter, spinning it idly through the air, "it was like that. I could sense purely metallic objects, the bigger the better. Smaller things, I couldn't, or some alloys. My world felt incomplete for a while, as if parts of me were numb, or I was looking at something but couldn't see it clearly."

"We don't have words for them," Charles says, remembering an article he'd read on medical terminology for mutant abilities. "But that's... it's how I feel." Creed had only partially stopped the first time Charles had tried to freeze him; he'd botched the throw, but he'd still been able to move. In the terror of the moment, Charles hadn't realized it, but now, he remembers clawing at the motor centers of Creed's brain, feeling his ability bounce off Creed's resolve to kill him.

"Maybe one day, when we've transcended the limits of human language, we'll have words," Erik says, enough mocking in his tone to indicate he doesn't want to start an argument. (Which is, of course, a miracle.) "Psionics have their own community among mutants. When we get back to your hole of an apartment, I can help you find them. Although, they might find you first."

A bit of jealousy laces through Erik at the thought, other people spending time with him, and it's entirely too gratifying and warm for Charles' ego. Erik scowls. "Stop that," he mutters. "Moira told me you were an ass, but I didn't believe her."

"Oh, I am," Charles says. "I don't know why you didn't believe her."

"You were—" Erik's mind flashes through a host of words—scared, harmless, adorable, sweet, brilliant, funny, hot—before he decides that maybe silence is best and chooses not to complete that sentence.

"What else did she tell you about me?" Charles asks. He's still grinning at Erik's flurry of emotions, the cloud of different feelings that surround his thoughts of Charles.
"Outside of the dossier?" he asks, and Charles nods. He doesn't want to know what the government thinks about him. He wants to know what Moira said and what Erik thought. "She told me you were the smartest person she's ever met—that you were the youngest grad student in the program and already three years into it, and you'd be further if you hadn't hit so many roadblocks divorcing yourself from your family. She told me you could be an asshole, but that you were kind. That you didn't trust easily, but that you were always willing to give strangers the benefit of the doubt. She told me you were hot—" Charles' smile widens. "—and more fucked up than you looked." And Charles' smile flips into a frown. He gets distracted by a particular feeling from Erik, one he can't identify on the surface. He looks up to see a familiar expression on Erik's face, an expressionless sort of intent. It's not the first time he's seen it.

He digs a little deeper, into the actual substance of the emotion, and his jaw drops in shock.

"You're thinking about kissing me!" he says.

"I am," Erik says.

"Have you been—this whole time, every time you've looked like that?" Charles asks.

"I have," Erik confirms. "I don't know why you're so surprised. I thought we had a mutual acknowledgement and understanding that we would put this—" He gestures between them. "—on hold until danger wasn't imminent."

"I'm not—surprised," Charles says. "I just—it's strange to see myself from that angle. It's strange to think of someone else thinking of me in that way." It's strange to see what someone else thinks of me, Charles admits.

I think a lot of things about you, Erik tells him, and then gestures for him to look for himself.

"I've discovered that physical contact increases the immediacy of the impressions," Charles says with as much seriousness as he can, the earnestness that, Moira says, makes his horrible pick-up lines more successful than they should be. The look on Erik's face says One of the things I think about you is "ridiculous." "It's true!" Charles protests, laughing.

"Shut up," Erik growls.

He reaches for Charles, his fingers sliding across Charles' temple, right at the spot that either tingles or stabs with pain when he's trying to use his abilities. The contact unleashes a torrent of emotion, as if the brush of fingertips has dissolved the wall that's always existed between Charles and the other minds around him, and Oh, Charles thinks, almost too submerged in Erik already to realize Erik's kissing him.

You're ridiculous, Erik's thinking, and infuriating and have the self-preservation instinct of a gnat and still can't believe your eyes are that color and I'm so fucking glad you're alive, all of it mixed up with affection and exasperation. Underneath it there's the determination that never wavers, that Charles knows is always a part of Erik, all of it focused on him, which is terrifying and exhilarating both at once.

We shouldn't be doing most of what you're thinking about on the couch, Charles tells him silently, smiling as best he can against Erik's mouth. Erik has one arm wrapped around him, careful of his shoulder, and Charles makes it easier on him, leaning into the kiss and into the curve of Erik's torso. Erik sighs, as close to bliss as Charles has ever heard him.

And you know, he can't help adding, this is a benefit to telepathy I can't believe I've never thought of:
"Fucking hell," Erik coughs, pulling back from the kiss, wincing as unexpected laughter pulls the knife wound. He recovers quickly, though, pinning Charles with a look. "If all you want to do is talk while we're making out, I'm going to have to question my technique."

"Moira says it's hard to get me to stop talking," Charles confesses. *Just been kissed* looks good on Erik, his color higher, thin lips softer and satisfaction in his grey eyes.

"You can say that again," Moira says from the hallway. Her just-straightened hair is even more disheveled now, and she's blushing. Charles looks hastily away from the images wandering around Moira's cortex. The ones in Nick's head aren't much better. "But if you're done necking on the couch like teenagers, we can try to sort some of that," she nods at the drive on the coffee table, "sorted out."

"I'll get the laptop," Nick says, throwing a smirk their way and then disappearing downstairs.

Moira is still leaning against the doorway and smiling slyly at Charles, raising her eyebrows. Charles rolls his eyes and looks away. He's still wearing his clinic scrubs. Loathe as he is to get up from his corner of the sofa, wedged in next to Erik, he really would like to be in his own clothes again.

"I'm going to go get changed before we get started," he tells them. "I'll be right back." He stands from the couch and Erik is only a moment behind him.

"I'm going to do that too," Erik adds.

"Sure," Moira says. "We're starting in five minutes with or without you, so just keep that in mind as you 'change clothes.'"

"That's all we're going to do," Charles promises her, and heads up the stairs with Erik behind him. They make it as far as the bedroom before Charles turns around and grabs Erik around the waist. He doesn't even need to urge Erik down for the kiss—Erik meets him halfway, sliding his fingers back into Charles' hair. Erik's mind opens up to him again as their mouths meet, the rush of the foreign thoughts and feelings so focused on Charles just as thrilling as the physical sensation of the kiss and Erik's chest beneath Charles' hands. He sees himself as Erik sees him, he feels the strength of Erik's respect, the weight of his desire. It puts every one of his nerve endings on edge.

*I really do need to change.* Charles hadn't realized his telepathic voice could sound breathless.

*I'll help,* Erik replies. One of his hands slips under Charles' shirt and scrub top, sliding up Charles' spine. Charles can clearly see in Erik's mind where he wants this to go—stripping and then the bed and then—

Charles wants that too, god, he wants it, but he also wants to know what's inside of him.

He pulls away, slowly, pushing Erik back with gentle hands on his chest.

"Unfortunately, five minutes isn't quite enough time to take this as far as we'd like," he says.

Erik rubs his face with his hands and sighs.

"You're killing me, Xavier," he says, but he allows himself a small smile before stepping back and grabbing some clean clothes from his duffle bag. He slips out of the bedroom, and Charles needs only brush by his mind to discover he's going to change in the bathroom.

Well. It's probably for the best.
Charles is half dressed before he realizes the frustration emanating from the bathroom isn't just the result of a halted make-out session—it's laced with pain. As it turns out, the stitches the doctor put in him hold together muscle and skin in such a way that bending to pull his jeans up his legs, or shrugging a shirt on, sparks a pain that Erik can't dull, no matter how hard he tries. Charles can't help but notice it.

"Don't be an idiot," Charles says, barging into the bathroom and relishing the chance to use that line on Erik after three days of having his intelligence questioned. He shakes out Erik's jeans and, ignoring Erik's disgruntled scowl (but having a more difficult time ignoring other things), kneels down. "Come on, one foot, then the other."

"I'm not fucking four years old," Erik grumbles. He complies, though, balancing against the bathroom counter. "And I can do that by myself," he adds, buttoning and zipping his jeans, although he bends in to steal another kiss, one Charles happily grants.

A spark of impatience from Moira pulls Charles from thoughts of just having Erik walk around shirtless forever—his skin is scarred, perfect, a new topography for Charles to learn. Erik submits to ending the kiss and having Charles help him with his shirt, a button-up, which they both clumsily button together.

"You're going to be one of those couples, aren't you?" Moira asks when they make it downstairs.

"Like you have room to talk, with your orange chicken and sentimental flowered couch," Erik says. He tugs Erik over to the dining room table, where the laptop is whirring quietly, a confusion of cables linking it to the drive they've taken from the lab. A pair of data sticks, containing some supplementary files from the basement, sits by the keyboard.

"The encryption on this is, like, NSA-level," Moira says as Charles takes his seat. He sees that the computer's running a codebreaking program; he can almost sense its frustration. "We've got a SHIELD program running on the laptop, but we could be here for ages." She sighs. "I wasn't expecting a code developed in the nineties to be so secure."

"No," Charles says quietly. "I—I know what it is. You said I have the secret, right?" The secret and the key, he thinks, shivering. "My father would have used my DNA, specifically the random mutations that produced my own specific mutation, to encrypt his data."

It's not on the first memory stick but on the second. The actual key is hidden behind a password, a complicated string of numbers and letters that, fortunately, the SHIELD computer works out in a few minutes. The benefits of old technology; the password technology had to be years out of date.

Ten minutes later the computer beeps, and the endlessly scrolling figures vanish. For a moment Charles thinks this is it, everything's gone, but then the screen lights up again, filled with a tree of directories and subdirectories—and down at the bottom, where a finger would have tapped the screen, the file that holds everything he's supposed to be.

"I don't know if I can do this," Charles says. He's going to. He has to. He knows that. But for one wild moment, he imagines closing the laptop and driving back to campus, settling back into his apartment, going back to his life, taking Erik with him, and pretending none of this happened.

It's fleeting, but he lets himself go down that path for a moment. He'd be happy, he thinks.

"You can," Erik says. "And it doesn't matter if you look or not, in the long run. It doesn't change what you are." He takes Charles' hand and squeezes it.
It's true. Even if he doesn't look, he's broken through whatever it was hiding his powers. He can't go backwards and even if he ignores the files, that doesn't stop them from existing.

He takes the mouse from Moira and opens the directory. Inside is a of documents with dates attached, a collection of photographs, and a few dozen other files. He opens the first dated document, which turns out to be a lab journal entry. He skims through the first few paragraphs before realizing with a sinking stomach that 'Subject 0421' is him.

He closes it quickly.

He opens the first image file next and is presented with a photo of himself smiling for the camera. He can't be more than three years old at most. He's shirtless and cheerful with electrodes attached to his chest and temples (the contact pads peek out from his thatch of curly brown hair) and a Band-Aid and cotton swab in the crook of his elbow. He remembers what Erik said about psionics manifesting late and the power of those that manifest earlier than that.

He closes that too.

"I'll look at them later," Charles says to the rest of them. He doesn't look away from the screen and takes a deep breath to settle his shaking hands. Okay, so, the dated documents are his lab journals, the photos are of his progress. Next, he goes for one of the other documents. This one is just chemical formulas and notes, and those he begins to read more closely. He feels Moira leaning over his shoulder and reading as well.

"Wow," Moira says. "I mean...wow. How are you still alive?"

"Ha ha," Charles says, but his throat is dry.

"What are we even looking at?" Erik asks, leaning over Charles' other shoulder.

"This," Moira says, "appears to be a series of formulas that Charles' dad tried to use on him to suppress his powers, along with the effects of each of them. It appears he was trying to literally rewrite the series of genes that control his powers."

"The X-gene," Erik says.

Moira and Charles sigh in unison. Charles actually appreciates the flash of irritation, which distracts him from his horror.

"Scientists called it 'the X-gene' before they knew what it was," Moira says, with the tone of someone who's given this speech before.

"They actually discovered it was a series of genes, but the name stuck," Charles finishes. It's an odd aspect of mutant history for Erik not to know. A quick look in his mind reveals that he did know, but was doing his part to cut through the tension. Charles looks up at him and smiles.

He scrolls down the page. And down, and down. By the time he comes to the end, he's worked his way through eight different trial drugs. Links embedded in each section transfer him to other files, 3D models of each drug's molecular structure. Moira curses softly at each one.

"You said it was amazing he was alive," Nick says quietly.

"The sixth, seventh, and eighth experiments weren't designed as gene therapies," Moira says. Charles doesn't want to listen to her, but he's already read what she's trying to explain to Nick, read the intent in the links between atoms and the chemical equations. "They were targeted toward suppressing
Charles' psionic abilities—limiting his telepathy. A neuroscientist could tell you more, but..." She trails off, and Charles is glad for it.

"It didn't work," he says. His voice is detached, flat, not horrified or frightened or anything. Clinical. *Did my father sound like this when he read out my lab results?* He has a few memories of his father praising him, telling him he was being good. He can't remember any pain. "Each section has links to MRI and CT scans." He clicks on one and the scans pop up, brilliantly colored, a violet, nearly white, patch glowing defiantly, spreading tendrils across the cortex. "That's the part of the brain associated with telepathic activity after an unsuccessful treatment."

He closes the file out. Another document with a label similar to the first has only three sets of formulae with links and notes. "These last two," Moira says, her words nearly matching those going through Charles' head. "The tenth and eleventh tries worked, but they worked in concert. On the third trial, he administered the therapies concurrently."

"He did want to—to eliminate my mutation," Charles says. He sits back from the computer, pushing away although he can't get away from the knowledge now. "When replacement didn't work at first, he tried to damage my brain, but it recovered. And then he tried again, and it worked. He wanted this."

Moira's quietly explaining to Nick, the grief and anger coming off her almost overwhelming her words. It was, essentially, gene therapy, disrupting the activity of the genes responsible for Charles' telepathy. It was a balancing act, though; the genes that produce mutations have complex interactions.

Mechanically, he clicks back to the journals, scrolling down to the last one. The date indicates Charles was five years and nine months. The entry, after the brief notes on dosage and protocol, is short.

"No measurable psi-waves," he reads. "DNA drawn from Subject 0421 85% neutralized. Tests for telepathy and empathy both negative. Follow-up and second treatment in three months."

"He died before he could give you your next dose," Erik says with quiet, vicious satisfaction. "He died before he could finish what he tried to do to you."

*That doesn't matter,* Charles thinks. He hopes, very much, he's kept that to himself. "If it's okay," he says, hating how small his voice is, "I—I would very much like to be alone right now."

Moira squeezes his shoulder and steps back so he can push his chair back from the table. He doesn't miss the way she grabs Erik's wrist, either, holding him back from whatever movement he was about to make.

They're going to talk about him when he leaves the room. They're going to read through the rest of the files, and even if they don't do that, Moira's going to explain the meaning behind all of this. He can't even summon the strength to be embarrassed or hurt or angry at them. All of that energy is being funneled into the cloud of useless anger directed at a man who's been dead for years.

He ends up back in the bedroom, curled on his side on the bed, staring at the wall. Erik would chastise him for putting his back to the door, but what does it matter? What does it matter if there are strangers in the world out to get him? What does it matter now that he knows for a fact that his father was one of them?

*Because he is a stranger.* The man Charles thought he knew—the figure in his memories—he's obviously not the man Brian Xavier really was.
He tries not to linger on his past. He tries not to be a sad sack. He tries not to let circumstance drag him down. It was one part of his life and it's long over. Somehow, though, the knowledge that it goes deeper than he thought—that the time before Kurt, the happy childhood he remembered before the death of his father was just as full of lies and abuse—has him feeling like he's cracked in two.

He was born with a gift and his father's first reaction—his scientist father's first reaction—was to try to stomp it out of him. Instead of loving Charles for who he was, instead of accepting him, he took his toddler and tried to rewrite his very existence.

At least Kurt was mean. At least Kurt hated him. Charles knew how to deal with that. This...this...

He doesn't have words for this betrayal, just the hollow feeling in his chest and the way it hurts to breathe.

There's a knock on the door eventually. Charles doesn't answer, but Erik comes in anyway.

"Moira didn't know who you'd want to talk to," he says. "A scientist or a mutant or your best friend or...me."

Charles doesn't answer that, either. He's afraid of what will come out if he opens his mouth.

Erik moves further into the room anyway, because he's Erik. The humor rattles around in Charles' empty chest, small and difficult. He can hear Erik, not his movements—which are trained to silence, even now—but his emotions, the incandescent anger like molten steel, bending around his worry for Charles, a hesitation and carefulness Erik isn't used to feeling.

The bed dips as Erik settles on the edge of the mattress. It's memory foam, so no springs creak; the bed's far, far nicer than his own smaller one. Erik's desires telegraph themselves, images of him reaching across the space between them, something that Charles would call yearning if it weren't for the impatience underlying it.

"You were right," Charles says, when Erik stays still for an insupportable amount of time. "I knew, but didn't want to believe, you were right. There was something in me he hated, and he wanted to...to get rid of it."

"I didn't come here to gloat, Charles," Erik says softly, though there's a bitter, quiet Of course I was right; this is how it always goes. "And I didn't come here because Moira made me."

Charles stares fixedly at the wall, a plain cream. It makes sense they wouldn't go to much expense to make a place like this interesting.

"I'm not the kind of person who advocates looking on the bright side," Erik says after a minute. "What your father did to you was unconscionable. If he were alive today..." Erik hesitates, backing away from the I would have killed him myself he wants to say. "He's not. He didn't get to finish what he set out to do. He didn't win."

Because he died. Charles shivers. He can't really remember much about the weeks surrounding his father's death, only crying because his mother had been crying and all the adults around him had been upset. Then, a bit later, crying because he had realized his father wasn't coming home.

"I don't know if I should be glad he's dead," he says out loud, listening to the rasp of his voice in his throat. "That drives you crazy. You've never been sorry you killed Shaw, even though he gave you a lot. Everything, almost."

"The cost was too high," Erik says fiercely. "You can—you can be glad he's dead. He gave you
your genes," and tried to rip them out, "but no more than that. Nothing you owe him for. The man you'd mourn... he never existed, Charles."

That's almost worse somehow. He tightens his grip on his forearm, nails biting into his skin, and hopes he doesn't cry. When Erik's hand, his good hand, settles on Charles' shoulder, Charles realizes he's shaking, muscle and bone jumping against the pressure of Erik's palm.

He tries to speak, but it takes him several swallows to clear the slickness in his throat. It's still more uneven than he'd like when he manages to begin, but he's not crying, which is something.

"The only good memories I have of my childhood are of my father." His voice is soft—it's all he can manage if he wants to keep himself together. "Saying he never existed—you don't understand. For years, those memories were the only consolation I had. And it was all a lie. I can't just—"

He stops there. He doesn't trust himself to say anything more. He closes his eyes again and feels the mattress shift as Erik comes closer. Erik strokes his side from shoulder to hip as if to calm him. Erik's mind is alight with concern and frustration and panic alike; he doesn't know what to do to help. He thinks maybe he should have let Moira come up instead. He can't even move the way he'd like to with his shoulder the way it is. Charles sees it right there in his head, the way he'd lie on the bed and hold onto Charles until he stopped shaking.

"I—don't necessarily understand," Erik says slowly. "But they're not all you have any longer. You're not alone with your memories. And I just don't want—" He sighs. His grip on Charles' hip tightens for a moment. "He's hurt you enough already. I don't want to watch you hurt over him any longer."

A rough, humorless laugh escapes Charles. It hurts where it tears at his throat unexpectedly.

"Well, I hope that's not a deal breaker, because I don't think you have a choice," he says, but his voice cracks on the last word and he has to swallow back a sob and blink tears from his eyes.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Erik mutters, and before Charles can react, he's being levered into a sitting position with Erik's good arm, and then immediately embraced. He wants to be outraged at Erik's presumptuousness, but he doesn't have space inside him to be outraged right now, and it feels good to hold on to something. It feels good to be anchored. This close, Erik's fierce protectiveness and dismay roll over him in comforting waves, along with a different type of desire, one that isn't sexual, but goes deeper than that—desire not for Charles' body, but for Charles as an entity, to be around him, to be with him.

"I don't want to tell you how to feel," Erik manages to say before Charles interrupts him. His laugh is weak and liquid; he can feel that Erik does want to tell him how to feel, very badly, but is restraining himself.

Erik sighs. "You ass. I'm trying to comfort you here." Still, his arm tightens around Charles, holding him secure against Erik's body, his forehead pressed to the firm pad of Erik's chest. "When I killed Shaw, I didn't grieve for what I might have lost because he wasn't my parents. No matter what he taught me about myself, no matter what good he did for me, he never replaced them. He never could." The flat of his hand rubs across the span of Charles' shoulders, shifting the tension around. "I know that betrayal, though."

He does know, and Charles sees that he does. A memory plays out for him, hazy and blind with shock, Shaw's words ringing in his ears: They were baseline, Erik; they'd only hold you back. They'd hold all of us back, if they could. Even now, a gap lies between Erik and what he knows is the truth, as if part of Erik still can't accept the truth. It's the part that still desperately wishes his parents were alive, that misses them with a power that hasn't diminished no matter how many years pass. And it's
the part, Charles realizes as he runs shaky mental fingers over the brilliant fragments that make up
Erik, that's still a kid, numb with the man he'd thought was his savior by his side, sitting in his
parents' apartment while visitors passed silently through and whispered blessings on their way out.

"I only remember good things about him," Charles whispers, like confessing a weakness. "Not
much, but they're—they're happy memories. He played games with me. He gave me ice cream when
my mother said not to. He—" he bites his lip, "—he took me to work and told me about the research
the company did. And he did this to me."

Erik's anger flares up again, hot and protective and, having nowhere to go—nothing to break or bend
or melt—it wraps around Charles, not menacing, but like a shield, something between him and
everything else.

*You don't have to feel this way forever,* Erik tells him silently. His breath ruffles Charles' already-
disordered hair. *You won't. Time doesn't heal, but it changes things, at least. It's shit comfort, but
there's nothing else to say that isn't a lie.*

"Good," Charles says. "Don't lie to me. I can't take any more of that this week."

"I won't," Erik promises. He means it. The weight of the promise wraps itself around both of them
and sits heavy in Charles' mind. Erik keeps his promises. Charles would expect nothing less.

"Tell me something good," Charles says when he feels another wave of anguish building up inside
of his chest, his mind circling back to his father once again, after the brief distraction of Erik's
trustworthiness. He hopes it does get better in time. He doesn't know that he can cope with feeling
this desolation every time his mind wanders back to his father. "Anything."

Erik is quiet for a long time. His good hand is stroking through Charles' hair as they breathe mostly
in sync, Charles' chest hitching on suppressed emotion on every third breath.

"I went to college," he says finally. "He thought that I should be educated." A brief flare of anger
again at Shaw's manipulation, but Erik tries to crush it before it can get far. "But I used to—there was
a student lounge with these board games and when I was stressed out, I used to go in there and play
chess. My mother taught me to play. I guess I felt...close to her. But I would stay there for hours
playing against myself or other people who wandered in. And it was—fun. It had been years since I
just had fun. I liked those people. I felt like they liked me, in those few hours we would spend
together. I hadn't liked anyone in a long time. I hadn't done anything but focus on my anger and need
for revenge for a long time, really."

Charles feels the invitation whisper against his mind and follows it back into Erik's. He feels the
exhausted joy in those nights, the humor. The relief at the chance to turn off all of his pain and
anxiety for long enough to do this. One of the few bright spots in the expanse of Erik's memory,
Charles realizes as he pulls back and looks out as far as he can see. It's linked to a brighter one, a
series of snapshots of playing chess with his mother at the table while she cooked and in the living
room while his father read the paper and in the park when it was warm and sunny. His mother's
smile—proud when he did well, sly when she took the lead.

Somehow, all of it lessens the weight on his chest, at least enough that he can breathe.

*Thank you,* he thinks. "We'll have to play some time," he says, voice hoarse.

"I'd kick your ass," Erik says, his laugh a soft huff of breath. Charles snorts.

They don't move, the peace balanced on the edge, close to falling over it and shattering. Erik's
fingers trace up and down Charles' neck and shoulders, lacing into his hair as if Erik can't quite keep himself from touching it. When Charles does move, it's to straighten, his vertebrae popping softly, and lean up to kiss Erik on the mouth. It gets a quietly surprised sigh, but Erik opens to him, returning what Charles gives him with an ease that would make Charles' blood sing if he weren't so tired.

*You're something, Xavier,* Erik tells him. He draws back a little, looking down at Charles with dark, serious eyes. Erik's tired too, from blood loss and having his shoulder pieced back together, and now he's mostly running on concern for Charles and annoyance at not being able to do what he wants to because of his injury. And Charles knows that, knows it not with common sense or the vague intuition Moira'd thought he'd had, but with part of himself that he'd never known existed.

*I'm a telepath,* he says to Erik, marveling at communicating like this, at hearing and feeling the different shades that attach themselves to words, all the concepts that are folded into spoken syllables, silent and yet present. He remembers what Erik had said, *this is who you are, who you were meant to be,* and the past few days have been a return to himself, not a departure from what he was.

He can, one day, walk free of his past; Charles can almost see it, an undefined future point where he can accept what had happened to him and move ahead. It could be a fool's hope, or not, and if he can't walk free, he can carry his past with him and not despair over the weight.

"I felt something there," Erik murmurs. That appraising look is back, like he's working out everything that makes Charles tick, the gears and wheels of him. His fingers have migrated up to Charles' temple, ghosting across the delicate skin and its armature of bone, pushing his hair back.

"Just... deciding things," Charles says. "As much as I can."

"That's good." Erik adjusts his position, a corner of his mind flaring with annoyance when his shoulder protests. "I'm not going to ask you if you feel better or some bullshit like that, but do you need anything? Moira said you like peanut butter cookies and tea, so she made Nick go out and get some."

Charles can't find a scrap of appetite in him, but now that Erik's reminded him of his body—no food since Moira had forced a candy bar into him last night at the clinic and a paper cup of atrocious tea this morning—he realizes the ache in his head isn't memory, it's hunger. And, now that he's acknowledged it, his stomach is sending up a steady, muted protest at its emptiness.

"Some mutations have a higher requirement for nutrition," Erik says. "Psionics are among them." Of course, Charles realizes, more glucose to fuel an overactive brain. "But, yeah, peanut butter cookies. And pho, and your favorite whiskey."

Part of Charles wants to bristle at being coddled, but... it's Moira. She's always done this for him, the only person he's ever trusted to do something like this for him.

Until Erik, he amends, and feels that impossible, happy warmth start up in his chest again.

Erik's lips quirk into a smile and his thumb brushes Charles' temple again.

"I hope whatever you're thinking about me is good," he says. "I'm almost disappointed that you're going to learn how to shield that eventually." Charles kisses him quiet, once and then again, until he can't ignore the rumbling in his stomach any longer. He gently pulls away from Erik and climbs off the bed, with Erik close behind him.

Downstairs, Moira and Nick are sitting on the couch watching *The Rebirth of Mothra,* with enough
food to feed a family of five for a week spread out on the coffee table in front of them. Moira looks up when she hears them on the stairs and holds out her arms. Charles wastes no time in sitting down next to her and allowing her to hug him tightly.

"I love you," she says.

"I love you too," Charles says. "And I'm starving."

Moira laughs and lets go of him so he can grab a plastic container of pho and some chopsticks from the table. Erik sits down next to him, wedged into the corner of the couch and already leaning over Charles' shoulder to inspect his food.

"Get your own," Charles says. "We're not at the 'sharing food' point yet."

Moira makes a noise of amusement and Charles kicks her ankle. Gently.

"Watch the movie and let the kid eat, babe," Nick says. "We have a whole car ride tomorrow to needle him and Lehnsherr."

"Good point," Moira says.

"Do we really have to watch this?" Erik asks. He grabs a spring roll from the table and wordlessly offers half of it to Charles, who takes it with a gently projected wave of thanks.

"Don't fuck with Mothra," Nick says. "You're in my house, you'll watch my damn movie."

"Fine," Erik says. "But I don't have to like it."

It's unbelievable how easy it feels to slip back into this. Nothing's fixed, not really—the anxiety and pain are still there—but he trusts they might be, one day. He's at ease, for the moment, to put his fear aside and enjoy warm food and good company, Moira nudging his side good-naturedly and Erik's arm around his shoulder, holding him close. Creed is dead and Kurt is dealt with, at least temporarily. He can enjoy this without worrying that someone is going to burst in and take it away.

He digs into his pho and leans back against Erik, content to relax and watch Mothra and Mothra Leo fight to save the earth.

Erik complains extensively when, after Mothra ends, Nick puts in The X from Outer Space. Moira wordlessly hands Charles a plate of small, round doughnuts, their golden surfaces dusted with powdered sugar; the plate comes with a silent request to do something about him, will you?

"You like it," Charles says softly, evilly, holding up one of the doughnuts when Erik scowls at him. "Well, not the movie, exactly, but being here. And Moira knows you love these doughnuts; they've got raspberry jam in the middle."

Mutinously, Erik accepts a doughnut, although he also licks at Charles' fingers, cleaning the sugar from them. He takes another when he's done with the first. And, more importantly, he doesn't move until the giant alien lizard (giant alien lizard, Erik's thinking with disbelief) has been defeated, allowing Charles to stay curled against him.

"Speaking of giant horrible monsters," Charles says as the DVD returns to the menu screen, "I want to see Kurt tomorrow, before we go back home."

That gets a flicker of surprise from Moira, and a torrent of concern before she can dam it up. She turns on her hip to face him more fully, one hand finding his own "If that's what you want," she says,
although Charles can see the caution decorating the syllables, the worry that Charles is trying to prove something to them or pushing too hard. "He's at New York-Presbyterian, we can stop by on the way out of town. But, Charles, you don't have to."

"I do," he tells her, and she nods.

_He needs to know I'm not helpless_, he says to Erik later, after they've gotten ready for bed and he's had the privilege of taking Erik's clothes off. They're curled up together, Erik lying grumpily on his right shoulder instead of on his back, his long torso curved perfectly around Charles. _He needs to know that, whatever he wants to think, I'm not that helpless little boy anymore._

_Or you need to know you're not_, Erik says, with that aggravating perceptiveness. His mind burns with steady confidence, the knowledge that Charles is far more than what people like Kurt think he is. _But I understand that. And, for what it's worth... you were already strong, to survive what he did. He's always feared you; he'll know he was right to be afraid, tomorrow._

Erik kisses him firmly, the kind of kiss that doesn't go anywhere except further into itself. Charles opens to him, sighing under Erik's mouth, and when it ends, Erik settles back, his mind immediately going soft and sleep-blurry, and its quiet happiness, so different from what Charles has seen in him before, is so soft, it takes Charles down into sleep with it.

On the other side of a dreamless night, the next morning is deceptively serene. Erik gently shakes him awake and kisses away the lingering exhaustion from his dreams—no more boats, just the aftereffects of the last few days drifting through his subconscious. The four of them eat breakfast and pack up their belongings, loading them into Nick's car. Charles is doing one last loop of the house when Moira corners him on the stairs.

"You are absolutely within your right to do this," Moira says. "And we're not going to stop you. But you don't have to. You know that, right? No one will think less of you for going back home and never looking back."

"I know," Charles says. "But I need to do it. I really do."

Moira looks him over, her critical assessment seeping into his mind as her eyes take in his expression and stance. He feels her approval before she speaks.

"Okay," she says. "Just making sure."

When they're sure they've got everything, Nick drives and Moira sits shotgun. Erik slides into the backseat next to Charles and says nothing, but offers his hand as the engine turns over and Nick starts navigating their way down the Manhattan streets. Charles clasps Erik's hand in his and watches the buildings go by, his mind brushing against the thoughts of pedestrians as they go by, just a peek into their thoughts before moving on. He's violating their privacy and he knows it, but he can't manage to find the energy to care right now.

Nick slows the car down across the street from the main entrance of the hospital.

"I'll stay with the car," he says. "Take as much time as you need." He frowns and then says, "But I want to be the fuck out of here before rush hour, so don't take forever."

Charles tries to smile at that, but he can't quite make his mouth move in the correct way. He follows Erik out of the backseat and joins Moira on the sidewalk. The three of them stand there, looking at the front of the hospital for a moment. Charles knows Moira and Erik are putting it on him to take the lead, but he just needs one more moment to fantasize about running away.
The moment comes and goes and he sighs and leads them across the street and into the front of the hospital. He considers stopping and asking the clerk for directions—he's Kurt's stepson, they might not question it—but in the end, he reaches out through the hospital until he feels Kurt's presence.

"He's in a private room, cardiology unit," he mutters. Kurt's slightly sedated, still in more than a little shock from what happened yesterday, but the malice, the hatred that sustains him, is there, stirring restlessly underneath the drugs. Sooner or later, it'll break out again.

Kurt's never changing; Charles has to show Kurt that he's changed.

He doesn't have to ask directions from the front desk; he doesn't even need to ask permission to visit, once he, Erik, and Moira arrive in the Cardiology unit; the doctors, nurses, and interns wandering by need only the slightest nudge to redirect their attention to other patients or to tasks that need doing. Back away from most of the hustle and bustle of the floor, there's a set of private rooms—Conveniently quiet, Erik thinks dryly, a soft drift of admiration for Charles' abilities.

"We'll wait outside," Moira says when they reach the closed door.

Charles stares at it, habitual fear gripping his throat, his memories roaring back to engulf him. For a moment he doesn't know if he can do this, a moment until he remembers that he isn't what he was, isn't the boy who'd stand trembling in Kurt's office door, waiting for the worst to descend on him. You have Erik, he reminds himself, and you have your powers.

Erik nods, radiating encouragement. He's stationed himself on one side like—well, like the bodyguard he's been for the past almost-week. Charles can't imagine Erik not being there now, near him.

He squares his shoulders and pushes the door open.

Kurt's asleep, pale and limp in his hospital gown. A monitor's clipped to his index finger, almost comically. Charles stares. Kurt's already insignificant, his powerful, blocky body a mask for something that can be quickly, effortlessly broken.

"Hello, Kurt," he says.

The eyes open, the same black, cruel eyes from every one of Charles' worst memories. They fix on Charles like magnets and Kurt struggles to sit up.

"Charles," Kurt says, his name an unpleasant sound. He fumbles for the nurse call button on the side of his bed.

"No one's going to come," Charles says apologetically. It's easy to find the sudden, bright flash of realization that stands out from the humdrum activity of the ward, to turn it aside to other tasks—remembering that something needs filing. "We do need to talk, Kurt. Very much. Or rather, I need to tell you a few things."

Kurt's gone even paler, the chalk of his skin stark against red-rimmed eyes. "You've come back then, you little brat? You think you're going to be able to leave here—"

"Alive? Creed's dead, Kurt," Charles tells him, moving closer. "Creed's dead, and my father's files on me are gone."

Kurt makes a noise of protest, maybe of fear, but Charles doesn't let himself react to it.

"You knew," he says. "All those years that you tortured me—you knew. You knew what he did to
"He cleansed you, but you were still one of them—a freak," Kurt spits out. "Nothing can erase that. It's bad blood. You deserved everything you got."

It's going through his mind now, a mental scrapbook of the worst of Charles' childhood memories—trips to the hospital to set broken limbs, evenings spent hiding in cupboards, crying silently and hoping not to be seen, hours where he was stuck listening to Kurt hurl insults and abuse at him—Charles consoled himself for years by thinking Kurt was carelessly cruel, but no—he enjoyed it. He remembers it. Stuck-up brat with bad genes, broken on the inside and asking for punishment. He reveled in it. Charles was a child.

It makes him sick. It makes him angry.

"I was a little boy!" he says.

"You're one of them!" Kurt says. "You always were. Whatever your old man did to you—it didn't change that." Charles wonders, distantly, how Kurt would feel knowing that Erik echoed that sentiment, but from a very different perspective. "And he could have made the company millions, selling that cure! I could have retired a billionaire years ago, but no! I'm still stuck at that cesspool—I still can't touch any of the Xavier money and it's all because of you."

Lawsuits, Charles reads from him. Charles' trust. Questions about the legal documents, about things that lawyers discovered may not have been his to sign away. Everything tied up in Charles' name until he turns twenty-five, so why not just kill him and get it over with? Do it before Sharon dies and it goes to her and it's as good as his. And on top of that, they can finally, finally take him apart and see what's inside of him—they scoured the building and nothing—Xavier left nothing behind, he took that goddamn secret to the grave and the world is scrambling for a way to get rid of those filthy—

He pulls himself bodily out of Kurt's mind and shakes himself. His skin still tingles with disgust. He doesn't understand how someone could love money and hate everything else that deeply.

It's all gone now, Charles tells him, relishing in a sharp, mean way the horror on Kurt's face. My father didn't 'cleanse' me, you're right. That bare 15% had saved him, maybe, his body slowly repairing itself, returning to its natural state, his abilities lying half-asleep. He couldn't get rid of this part of me because it's what I am.

"Stop that," Kurt rasps, licking his lips. His thumb spasms on the call button.

Charles moves closer. He's standing at the foot of Kurt's bed now. Kurt's gaze darts past him to the open door, where Moira and Erik are waiting. Quick footsteps pass by, a doctor and nurse on their ways to somewhere else; neither of them stop or acknowledge the boy and terrified man in the private room.

Stop like you did for me, when I begged you? Charles asks. A not-inconsiderable part of him wants to press, to find those places in Kurt's brain and see what a more delicate touch can do—to do to Kurt what he'd done to Creed. Kurt swallows like he's going to vomit.

"I've come to tell you it's over, Kurt." He says it as gently as he can, although as he speaks he unfolds for Kurt the path his future will take. "The formula is gone. Creed is gone. The mutant community—my people, all the rest of us—know what you tried to have done to me. And the fortune you wanted... that will be gone too."
Erik's surprise flickers across his cortex, an electric shock of disbelief followed by conflict: the angry thought that it's blood money, tainted, then it's Charles', that's his blood, the least his father could do. Charles has to push aside that paradox, what his father did to him, the love and care and determination that Charles would still inherit. Guilty conscience, he tells himself and swallows back the grief again.

"Maybe," he says, "I'll keep it. Or donate it. Or start a program to help mutants with their abilities, or advance mutant rights. Maybe all of them... but none of it will be yours."

"Go to hell," Kurt snarls.

"That would have frightened me once," Charles says. Deep down, it still does. "But now... no." You can't hurt me anymore. And if you try...

"This isn't over," Kurt hisses at him. Charles looks at him for a moment, really looks at him. Charles is still short and he'll never be as stocky as Kurt or as built as Cain, though he's hardly slight for his height and weight. He'll always be more cerebral than they are—he'll always be quieter. Dreamy, Kurt used to say with a scowl. Sensitive. That was one of the kinder remarks, still dripping with contempt. He wonders if Kurt knew that's where his hidden powers lay.

He'll never be as big or as tough or as mean as Kurt, but he doesn't have to be weaker. He can wield his own sort of power, and not just with his telepathy, though that doesn't hurt. It's time to stop being the scared little boy.

"It is over," he says. "When I see you next, it will be with a lawyer. I'll be twenty-five soon and in light of all of the things that have come to pass this week, I'll be contesting my inheritance after all. Get well soon."

He leaves before Kurt can say anything else, rejoins Moira and Erik in the hallway. His heart is hammering in his chest. He just made things infinitely more complicated for himself, but for the first time since his father died, he's not exhausted thinking of the next challenge he has to overcome—he knows, now, that he won't have to do it alone.

"I don't care if it's blood money," he says to Erik without looking at him. "I don't think—I'd rather do something good with it than let him have it. It's all he loves, money. It's all he wants. I want to take it from him." He looks up with a tentative smile. "Plus, I recall you saying something about the furniture in my apartment needing to be replaced."

"It's your money and your choice," Erik says, and he broadcasts his honest belief in that point. "Do whatever you think you need to do to make him suffer."

"Plus," Moira adds, "basically my whole house exploded? So, if you're going to be coming into hundreds of millions of dollars and wanted to give me a small loan...."

Charles laughs. He's still shaking, but he feels...good. Determined. It's time to move forward.

"We'll talk about it on the ride back," he says. "You are, of course, welcome to my futon for as long as you need it."

"Take him up on that offer, it's the only decent furniture he owns," Erik says. I'd complain about being relegated to the bed. Erik tells him, his mental voice low and sly and private, but I have a feeling I'm going to enjoy the amenities more this time around.

Charles takes his hand as they head for the elevator.
I certainly hope so, he says.

Nick's waiting for them outside, as promised, with a once-over for Charles and a comment on how they'd taken nowhere near as long as he'd thought.

"I was pretty convinced we'd have to pull Lehnsherr off Marko's body," Nick says idly, once they're back in the car and heading out of the city. Erik snorts derisively and Nick laughs. "I know it's just killing you, having to sit back there with your bum shoulder and all."

"Whatever, I'm still driving," Erik says loftily. He's sitting turned slightly to the side, leaning into Charles' space to avoid jarring his shoulder. It provides a convenient excuse to hold hands, something Charles finds he likes; Erik's hand is warm and strong, calluses ridging his palms and fingertips, and even better, the contact lets him hear the background thrum of Erik's emotions. There's satisfaction and pride, anticipation that has to do with Charles' bed and a hazy future beyond that.

Carefully, he stretches his mind out through the car, sensing Nick and Moira's hesitant thoughts about each other before turning away to move beyond the doors and windows and out onto the road. Moira's determined to stay in school and finish, in the very least; Nick's trying to come up with ways to ask about marriage and long-distance relationships without actually saying the words. He considers saying something to Moira, but refrains; he doesn't know yet what she'll really think of all the implications of his telepathy, though she knows him well enough to read his mind.

The city hums and throbs and sings around him, psionic energy rising up, a web of joy and petty frustration and hatred and love, half-articulated voices and clearer ones breaking through. It's the same world, viewed differently, beautiful and entrancing. I was meant to see it this way. For a moment he feels himself start to drift, a ship on an invisible sea, but Erik's fingers tightening around his keep him anchored.

Stay with me, Erik says, mostly stern but partly affectionate. I'm not letting you go anywhere yet.

Erik doesn't really let him go until they arrive back home a few hours later. Charles' apartment is as plain and dumpy as it had been when he'd left, no nasty surprises hidden that Erik or Nick's shadow agency technology can find.

"The bread is now officially stale," Charles sighs as he inspects the kitchen. It's not just stale; there's mold starting on the crust. The apples don't bear thinking about. Erik laughs, the quick, soft laugh that says he's trying not to be obviously amused.

He's going through his mail—bills, a university press catalog, his undergrad alumni association—and basking in the awareness of Erik moving around his apartment, settling in, when a drift of uncertainty catches his attention. When he looks up, Moira's hovering by the door, biting her lip.

"Uh, I need..." she hooks a thumb over her shoulder. "I need to go talk to Nick for a bit. Thank him for saving your ass and all, and... you know."

"Certainly," Charles says. "Maybe you should go get a cup of coffee somewhere. Sit down, have a chance to talk..." Moira scowls at him.

"Are you trying to set me up?" she asks. "With my own former—well...sort of former boyfriend?"

"Fair payback," Charles says. "Go on. We'll still be here when you get back." Moira sighs. Charles can feel her nerves battering against him. "I'm sure everything will be fine," he adds.

"You're right," she says. "Of course you're right. Fine. I'll be back...soon. Uh, if you want to put off
shopping and stuff and squeeze another day out of this mini-vacation, you probably can. Nick set us up with a cover via his people," she reminds him.

"A gas leak at your place that caused an explosion," Charles says, remembering the conversation over dinner at the Pennsylvania safe house.

"Yup," Moira says. "I was vague about the injuries we sustained. They won't question another day recuperating."

"Okay," Charles says. "Good to know." The idea of going grocery shopping right now is a little exhausting, though he finds he wants to get back to work—back to his routine—sooner rather than later. "Have fun."

"Right," Moira says, and walks out with more determination than excitement. Charles watches her go and then follows her mind, even after the door has closed and Erik has come up to stand behind him, his hand resting at the small of Charles' back.

"Do I hear wedding bells?" Erik asks.

"It's entirely possible," Charles says. "Nick proposed once before, but Moira turned him down because she didn't want to do the whole long distance thing while working on her degree. She only has a year or two left, though, if her research goes well, so...who knows."

"You do," Erik says. He steps in front of Charles and cups his face between his hands, his index and middle fingers drumming lightly where they rest against Charles' temples. "You could. You could know anything now, you know."

"There are laws against that," Charles says. He doesn't know the particulars of every single law limiting psionics—they were never really relevant to him before now. He's going to have to learn them.

"There are," Erik agrees. "That doesn't mean everyone follows them. It's been two days and you're already one of the most powerful telepaths I've ever encountered. Who knows what you'll be able to do once your brain finishes reprogramming itself."

He can't help a shiver at that. Already he can do so much, has done so much, he scares himself if he thinks about it. Creed's a ghost hovering over the shoulder of his conscience; he doesn't know if he'll ever be able to exorcise the memory or the responsibility. If he'd even want to, if he could somehow make himself forget. Erik and Moira say he did what he had to; anyone in his situation would have been justified in reaching for any weapon to save themselves, but it's different, somehow, that it's part of him.

Part of me is a weapon, he thinks, a weapon his father feared enough to disable.

Although he sees Erik's mostly eager for Charles to gain his full strength again, to be what he was always meant to be, fear still whispers to him. "I can't... I'll think about that later," he says as carefully as he can. "I've had enough people speculating about my abilities, valuing me for them—or for not having them. I can't deal with that anymore. I won't."

Even if it's you, he adds silently, so he can pour all his regret and fear into it, that otherwise might go unheard, so Erik can see and, hopefully, understand. Erik looks away guiltily. I know you don't mean to, I know most of you doesn't want that—you don't want to be like my father, or Kurt, or the baselines that want regulation and registration. I know you want me to be what I am, and I WILL be that again, but for myself. Not for anyone's cause. Not yet.
"Okay," Erik says. He nods his head, a tight, abortive gesture. "Yeah. I can't pretend... Fuck." He fixes Charles with that uncompromising look. "In an ideal world, you'd be with me in the Brotherhood," he says at last. "But I can't—no, I won't ask that of you, not unless you want it."

"Thank you." Charles leans into Erik, trusting him with his weight, a trust Erik meets by holding him up, good arm coming around Charles' shoulders. Bitter memories of Shaw float up in Erik's head, a recriminating he did the same thing with you, be better than that Lehnsherr followed by a quietly guilty, yet defiant it's not the same thing, and I still want it.

"You've already familiarized yourself with my place, I'm sure," Charles says after a minute of calm, a minute in which Erik is nothing more complicated that a warm, sturdy column for Charles to lean against. "Anything in particular you want to do with the rest of our day off while we wait for Moira's big announcement?"

"We do need to get food that isn't stale and moldy," Erik says musingly. He runs his fingers through Charles' hair, but it's lazy, for the enjoyment of doing it and because Erik, to his embarrassment, can't get over how soft and thick it is. "But, as I think I mentioned earlier, your bed might be more enjoyable with two people in it."

"I've never had complaints," Charles says, grinning up at Erik, who rolls his eyes but bends down to gather Charles closer and kiss him anyway.

* * *

Having sex while being able to read your partner's mind is...different. Exhausting. Overwhelming. Intense.

But amazing.

"We have to do that again," Charles says, dazed, as he and Erik lie curled around each other, half covered by rumpled sheets. He feels pleasantly wrung out and like his mind has been turned to jelly. Erik is sprawled out next to him, on his side to relieve his bad shoulder, and he's gorgeous, even bruised and battered as he is. Charles had assumed as much from his stolen glances and two days playing valet and helping Erik dress and undress, but seeing him stretched out on Charles' bed, naked and mussed, is unbelievably hot.

"That's the plan," Erik says. He sounds entirely too satisfied with himself. Next time, Charles is going to share some of the massive emotional overload—the way Erik makes him feel, the way Erik's mind makes him feel when it's so sharply focused on Charles that he can hardly breathe. He can still hardly breathe, ten minutes after his orgasm.

"Shut up," Charles says, and tilts his head to kiss the part of Erik closest to him—his wrist, resting near the base of Charles' neck as Erik traces his collarbones. Erik won't stop touching him. Charles is almost embarrassed by how much he likes that. He allows himself a moment to imagine he gets to keep this—Erik in his bed, thinking the world of him, unable to keep his hands to himself, being rude and arrogant and obnoxious and kind.

Then he allows real life to seep back into his fantasies and breathes deeply, turning slightly to look Erik in the face. They need to have this conversation sooner or later, and he thinks he'd rather have it without Moira and Nick around. Especially if they're going to be celebrating their engagement.

"What is the plan, exactly?" he asks. "You have—a life. And I have a life. And—god, my life's about to change entirely—I'm going to need to come out as a mutant. I'm going to have to decide if I want to talk about what my father did or pretend it never happened. My whole life is going to..."
change. But here. It's going to change here. And yours is...elsewhere, I imagine. And I just—I know you—well, I assume you have people. Responsibilities. And I just—" He swallows. Erik keeps telling him he can't shield when he's emotional, but Charles thinks Erik might be able to read his desperation on his face even without the aid of telepathy. "I really like you," he says.

He doesn't know if it's his telepathy or just knowing Erik that lets him see the affection written in the lines of Erik's face and in the clear grey of his eyes. However he knows it, he's overcome by it, despite fearing that, if he keeps looking, he'll see regret and pulling away.

"I've got PT for a while, thanks to that fucking knife," Erik says. He's still touching Charles, tracing impossible thoughts into his skin. "And you'll need help with the government, not just the psi registration shit, but knowing your rights, what you have to disclose. And," Erik hesitates a moment, hand resting on Charles' belly, "I'll be here to help you with Kurt, if you want. I know you can do it yourself, but you don't have to."

Another hesitation, in which Charles spends a lot of effort trying not to hope. "I've given... a lot of myself to the cause. Ever since Shaw—my parents—I've been part of the Brotherhood, almost all of my life that counts. I can't leave it forever, but I can leave it for a time."

"So... you're staying?" Charles asks. He traps Erik's hand with his, pressing it tightly, as if that might trap Erik here as well.

"MacTaggert said you were a genius, and you turned out to be a telepath, and it isn't obvious by now?" Erik asks with most of his usual sarcasm. He's smiling, though, the reserved expression that says far more than most people see.

Charles can't stop his own smile and doesn't want to. If Erik's shoulder could take it, if Erik wasn't still covered in bruises from head to toe, he'd push Erik on his back and climb on top of him and, recovery be damned, do his best to show him how happy he is. Instead, he tugs Erik's wrist, showing him what he wants, and Erik obliges, sliding neatly over so he's half-atop Charles, their legs twining together and torsos curved around each other, and they can trade lazy, grinning kisses back and forth.

"Oh my god, Xavier!" Moira shouts from the living room, her presence an abrupt flare of annoyance. "Does the entire neighborhood have to experience your afterglow?"

"Yes!" Erik shouts back. "Stop bitching, MacTaggert."

"Lucky for you." Moira's voice draws closer to the door, although she prudently doesn't open it, "my boyfriend knows how to show a girl a good time. He's booked a room at a very nice bed and breakfast and we'll be spending the night there. Possibly a couple nights. No offense to your futon, Charles, but I don't want to know what sex with Lehnsherr is like."

"And you'll never find out," Erik says, before nuzzling at Charles' neck.

"Wait!" Charles shouts when he feels Moira's mind withdrawing, turning towards collecting her stuff and leaving, Nick waiting outside. He grabs the first decent article of clothing he finds—Erik's bathrobe—and pulls it on, belting it shut just before he opens the door.

Moira's leaning against the kitchen counter, grinning at him.

"Nice threads," she says. "Is that the infamous bathrobe?"

"It was the closest thing to the bed," Charles says, pulling it more tightly around himself. It's very soft.
"I don't even want to know why," Moira says, and Charles rolls his eyes.

"So, how did it go?" Charles asks, moving to sit on the futon. Moira joins him, tucking her legs up next to her and leaning against Charles' shoulder. "If you're getting married, please don't take his last name, it would just be ridiculous."

Moira elbows him, but she's smiling.

"I can't tell if you already know and you're being polite, or if you've just guessed," she says. "For now...we're doing the long distance thing while I finish up my degree. But, honestly—yeah, we know where this is headed."

Charles can't hide the smile that's spreading across his face. He hugs Moira tightly and feels the same joy radiating off of her.

"I'm very happy for you," he says into her hair. "I know you cared about him—care about him—a lot."

"I do, it's gross," she says. Her smile matches his when she looks up, the two of them still sitting in a loose embrace.

"And after you're finished?" Charles asks. "Are you going back to—wherever it was you worked before?"

This she's less certain of.

"We'll see," she says. "Who knows? I've still got a year or two left. A lot can change in that amount of time. A lot can change in far less than that, as this week has proven."

"It certainly has," Charles mutters.

"And—" She hesitates and pulls back, studying him again. She bites her lip, simultaneously gripping him tightly and giving him space. "I just wanted to say—I didn't mean—it was shitty of me to lie to you. And I can make excuses and claim it was for the greater good all that I want, but at the end of the day, it was a lie of omission. You're my best friend—you're my family. And I'm sorry I kept all of my past from you before. I hope you can forgive me."

"I can," Charles says. "And I have, already. Admittedly, my taste of the secret agent life was just for a few days," although already it seems like years, he's so far beyond what he'd been only last week, "but I see why you did it. And I'd do the same, if it meant protecting you." He frowns. "I guess that would make Erik Mr. Romance in that alternate universe."

"Good luck getting him to take you to a bed and breakfast," Moira says. She's smiling, although she impatiently rubs at her eye with the heel of her palm, chasing away something Charles diplomatically refuses to call a tear. "Your apartment's a dust pit, Xavier. You should look into making Erik earn his keep."

"I'm injured, or haven't you heard?" Erik wanders out of Charles' bedroom (out of my bedroom, Charles thinks with delirious happiness), mercifully dressed in boxers and t-shirt.

"You're injured, not inert," Moira says. She leans in to give Charles a quick kiss on the cheek. "I need to get my stuff and we're going to hit the road. I'll be back day after tomorrow and we'll see what hell the undergrads have wrought in our lab."

"I helped save his life," Erik says. When Charles rises, he wraps his good arm around Charles'
shoulder, and it's perilously perfect, how it feels to rock back into Erik's warmth. "I think that gets me some kind of exemption."

"And you were the one complaining about my wreck of a house," Charles says, poking at Erik's side with his elbow. Erik rubs his hair in response.

"Oh my god, that is so much more disgusting than a romantic weekend at a chintzy b-and-b." Moira spins away and grabs her bag, stuffing her cell phone and wallet into it. "I've got my cell phone if you need me."

"Babe!" Nick's mind radiates fond impatience, just on the other side of the front door. Erik gestures the door open, a flicker of power used so casually Charles thinks his eyes might go starry. Nick's face is probably not much less besotted, even with the eye patch. "Babe, car's running."


"Get out of here, MacTaggert," Erik grumbles, but submits to a hug and even agrees to shake Nick's hand. "And thank you."

Nick and Moira leave in a cloud of goodbyes and see-you-soon's, and despite knowing he'll see Moira at work, like always, the goodbyes have a different quality, the kind Charles isn't used to—that a corner's been turned, things are changing.

Erik gathers Charles back against him again, idly rubbing Charles' collar bone, just under the soft border of the bathrobe.

"I'm going to want that back eventually," Erik tells him. He's not really thinking about the bathrobe, but about the moment, the hours left between now and night stretching out in speculation. *Maybe a proper dinner out. Nothing romantic, just actual decent food that isn't warmed-over Chinese or old apples.*

*I love you too,* Charles says, and lets Erik tug him back inside.

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