Summary

Charles considered his next move. His 'gift', even a couple of weeks on, was still perplexing him because he wasn't sure of the best way to handle him. Erik was... unstable. He was a classic example of being riddled with post traumatic stress, trauma induced mental breakdowns, with defenses and walls everywhere. Kal-El had been right, strangely enough. Erik might not intend to harm them, but he was effectively a highly powered equivalent of a grenade with its pin out that you've just noticed in the corner of the room.

There were odder contracts he'd been given. Kal-El kept a mental file folder of some of the funnier ones he'd done for the imperials, kept separate of the usual life or death and dire cases. But this was just strange – transporting a meta from an Imperial Holding Facility to House Xavier.

It wasn't helped by the fact that he disliked Imperial Holding Facilities as a rule. Stark lighting that was so white it was almost blue, contrasting not at all with the white walls and the polished reflective floors, enough to make him want to squint while the soldiers walked with him towards Cell 94b.

He could tell some of them were looking at him sideways. They were always surprised that he was so young when they got a close look at him and more than one of the Imperial Guard were no doubt wondering if he was capable of dealing with the Meta in question. So. Time to appear competent and put on the sort of show that would make Bruce and Alfred proud of him.

"Could you give me information on the Meta to be transported please?" he asked politely, unconsciously deepening his voice. Bruce always smirked when he did that. Lex liked to imitate...
him and laugh. Bruce wouldn't mind if he dropped in on Lex on the way home. No doubt he was expecting it.

Lex certainly wouldn't mind being dropped in on. That would be something to look forward to in the aftermath of whatever this job was going to be like. The Imperial House did not call in a world renowned Meta for courier duty unless there was a high level of risk.

The Imperial Guard to his left seemed a little surprised, but pulled out a datapad and seemed to have information quickly on hand. "Subject is 29-year-old male John Doe, code name 'Magneto'. Former Russian held Meta, went rogue last year, put down by you. Retrieval team dug him out of the rubble a week later after checking for lifesigns in the area." The guard slid the datapad back into his hip holster. "He's highly uncooperative. In preparation for the transportation, we installed a sedative drip two days ago."

"Oh.." Kal-El grimaced as his recall brought back the incident. "I remember that... It was a group of them." It had been bad. Bad enough to knock the stuffing out of him and without kryptonite, that was very impressive. One of the Brother-hood had literally self destructed rather than be taken and even Bruce had assumed after he come to scrape Clark off the rubble that there were no survivors.

So, of course their titular leader – and Kal remembered him, the cape, the crazed *smile* that was more of a grimace, the fact that he couldn't really see the man's eyes for the helmet he was wearing – had survived. "Magneto is being transferred as a gift for House Xavier. The house head's personal died a few months ago. Hair color's the same."

The other guard was pulling out a plastic swipe key to run through the door. "Once he's disconnected from the drip, you'll probably have two hours of sedation to work with, sir. His few personal items are up at the front."

"I know House Xavier has a reputation for dealing with Meta-humans and their training but..." Kal-El hesitated. Of course, Bruce would have seen the political intent instantly and so would Lex, no doubt. The Emperor's gift was not so much a gift as a grenade tossed in through the House doorway. The Emperor did not *want* Xavier to succeed.

"It will not take me that long to get there," Clark answered. He at least understood why he had been chosen. He hadn't died when the rogue had tried to pull the blood from his body.

It had still hurt like nothing else he'd ever felt, tiny capillaries popping and blood coming out of his skin in a mist because the only thing that could harm him was... himself. His otherwise impervious skin wasn't impervious to itself, but his healing had kept pace with the damage long enough for him to take his opponent out.

"Good. He's in bad shape, so it should help." The Imperial Guard lowered his voice a little, while his companion opened the door.

Oh yeah, someone in the facility had worked the guy over before putting him under sedation – or maybe he'd just fought that much. His face was still bloody, and the prison clothes he was wearing looked like they were matted with blood. The IV tube was jacked into what looked like a ceramic port on his arm.

"If anyone can make him something useful, Xavier can."

"I hope Master Xavier is prepared." Kal-El looked at him trying to seem impassive, but already planning to get the man cleaned up somehow. "Don't you have some fresh clothes for him?"
It could him there, maybe lying with a kryptonite needle in his arm.

It made his nerves crawl, because that was the kind of subduing he'd need, if he weren't with House Wayne, if he didn't have his parents, if his *life* wasn't comfortable the way it was. "You'll be bringing the message to them when you take him. There are no clothes we can issue out with him." The Imperial Guard gave him a sideways look. "If you're ready, I'll shut off the drugs."

That was a shitty thing to do, but he had no choice. "Very well, do so."

The man lifted his head, gestured to someone who was probably watching them on a camera, and then leaned over to take the tube out of the port. "I'm not sad to see John Doe here leaving. We've only been able to get him to cooperate on two contracts. And he tried to escape after both."

Clark refrained from showing that he didn't blame him. Instead, he moved over to lift the Meta effortlessly. "I, Kal-El of House Wayne, hereby take formal charge of the contract as purchased by the Imperial House of Rassilon. I will deliver him to House Xavier forthwith. Thank you for your assistance."

He wondered how long it would take for the man to become conscious, even as he walked out carefully. He hoped it was the full two hours he'd been told, because he didn't want to have to handle him. Once he formally passed the man over... it was over. Done, out of his hands.

The walk back towards the front, out of the cell areas, was quiet, easy, just a dead weight that he was carrying in his arms. There was another Imperial Guard at the front desk near the door, after he'd passed through a few security checkpoints, with a rucksack. "Remains of his clothes and the helmet are in there. Good luck, Kal-El."

He inclined his head in appreciation, and took the belongings and left the building. Outside, he contemplated. No, this wasn't fair. To be given in this state to a new Master. Unconscious or not, he could clean him and get him clothes from a House Wayne complex on the way. He could not let him go, not now, but...

The temptation to interfere was growing in him. This Magneto had been hurt and was drugged and alone but had fought, and fought against the impossible. He knew how that felt. It only would take him minutes to deal with this and to give him some semblance of dignity and humanity.

There wasn't an option for him to fail his house, and just let the man go. Kal-El had fought him, knew the man was a more than formidable opponent. Clark on the other hand wanted to respect the man’s quest for freedom – it was not dissimilar to his own situation with his ‘Kal-El’ persona, the ultimate Meta public face concealing ‘Clark’, his other self who was, as both Bruce and Lex called him, a definite soft touch and bleeding heart. No, he couldn’t let him go without bringing the wrath of the Emperor down on all the Houses involved. But he could, would, take a few minutes to clean him up, out of respect to House Xavier. It might soften the delivery of the ‘gift’ a little. He half-remembered Charles Xavier’s last personal -- huge, towering fellow, with a glowing eye and a metal arm. Not graceful or even exceptionally well trained, but he suspected the man made a hell of a bodyguard. It was strange, because Clark hadn't heard anything about his demise.

It probably meant he wasn't dead.

Perhaps he had just vanished. Bruce knew things about House Xavier, but then Bruce knew a lot about every House, and it was widely known in their circle that Charles Xavier's overt Meta sympathies were just the tip of the ice-berg. Perhaps he had arranged something.

Carrying his charge, he shot into the air, and seconds later he was at a House Wayne affiliated
complex, where he rather high handedly got everyone to vacate a communal bath house and bring him some clothes. It wouldn't be fancy, and 'Magneto' would still need medical attention afterwards, but he would be clean and presentable.

Perhaps he was stretching his authority as he washed the unconscious man off, but he remembered him in the aura of his power and to see him like this...well, it wasn't right.

He could almost hear Bruce clicking his tongue, a quiet disapproval of... either his meddling or his sympathetic streak. Clark laid the man down beside the water, then knelt down and started to peel the prison scrubs off of the man. He *had* taken quite the beating, huge blooming bruises on his chest. One of them looked like a boot print if Clark squinted at it.

Clark tried to not linger as he finished undressing the man, but it was hard to not stare a little when he saw the odd metal mesh that was plastered tight around one knee, and both ankles. Strange – almost like bandaging from the angle of the weave.

He flicked a look with his x-ray vision and could see the metal literally weaving through flesh, holding it together. In fact there was a high proportion of metal in there. It was obviously a good thing, acting like some sort of pin and brace. He walked into the water of the baths with him, scrubbed him off and hoped that the sedative would last as he tended to him. The moment he tried anything he would fly him to his destination, naked or not.

He was a fine-looking man, really, but Lex and Bruce were more to his taste. Long and lean and comfortable for him were Clark's tastes. It was hard to shake the memory of how *insane* Magneto had seemed when he'd fought him, to not compare it to the pliant, limp meta he propped against the wall of the baths while he worked out what were bloodstains he was scrubbing off and what were actual wounds that might re-open. Insanity took a lot of the gleam off of 'good looking, nice muscles' as far as Clark was concerned.

"Vos?" It was slurred, barely audible, but Magneto's head lolled against the tile. Oh shit.

Clark grimaced a little and speed wiped, dried and dressed the other meta swiftly. "Hi... You're not in the Imperial Holding facility anymore," he said as he slowed enough to button a shirt. "I am taking you to your new home."

Surely he couldn't focus his will enough to actually cause more than a nose bleed. The fact that all Clark got for an answer was a bleary questioning noise was fantastic for his hope of getting the job done unharmed. Magneto might have thrown the sedative faster than they'd expected at the Holding Facility, but he wasn't functional.

It was time to move on, though, and quickly.

Super speed was very handy to have, and it meant he was ready to leave swiftly with a clean if bruised charge. He didn't understand why people did this, especially to someone who was so powerful. Bruce had explained that it was a fallacy to believe that one day anyone as powerful as Clark was would not someday be in a position of power. The same surely applied to Magneto, but what Bruce always warned had happened, he had come up against someone stronger than him. Bruce said for all his strength he could not assume he would not meet someone stronger, faster, able to beat him because assuming he was invincible was a sure-fire way to prove he was not.

Bruce...and now Lex liked to demonstrate that to him sometimes. It was something he blushed to admit he relished when done with that sure knowledge of their emotions for him.

The heart of the Xavier House was easy enough to spot from the air - a mansion steeped in history and technology. His training kicked in as he overflew the place and assessed it. He could have broken in, but instead he made a point of landing directly in a reception zone in a courtyard, hearing
alarms trip the moment he set foot to ground sending people running towards him.

They were all well trained metas, and it was that transitory time of the evening when people were winding down, starting to mentally pack up for the day, for all that they lived in the same place they worked. But the alarms triggered them, and he saw at least one Meta -- Cyclops -- with his hand at the side of his head, ready to fire. "Identify yourself!"

One day, he'd get Lex to make him one of the identifier tags the house Xavier Metas had, so he wouldn't trip their alarms.

"I am Kal-El of the Great House Wayne, Meta and Personal to Master Bruce Wayne. I have been contracted by his Imperial Majesty to safely deliver a... gift to your Master. The Imperial dictate is here." He held Magneto in one arm, and tossed the elaborately sealed envelope over. They were still nervous. "I am not here as any aggressive act. Today, I am merely courier."

Another day, it could be different. Letting his eyes hit the shadows, he could see a few metas he *had* put down in the past, now accepted and House affiliated. "A gift," Cyclops repeated, not moving for a moment even though he'd caught the envelope. "X-men, stand down. I'll escort our... visitor."

Cyclops had a relatively powerful energy blast, but Clark knew he could resist it. He remained poised, knowing Bruce would know if he disgraced him, if only because he couldn't keep it a secret. "My thanks," he said and walked through the courtyard after him. He didn't like being thought badly of but the fact was he was only usually brought in if there was mass destruction on the cards.

It probably left a bad taste in their mouths, just by association.

Unlike the guards at the holding centre, Cyclops didn't talk. He walked straight, taking no shortcuts, only touching hallways Clark had already been down before. They were headed for great wooden double-doors -- the study, come office, come therapy room, he was sure, where Charles Xavier held court for the Great House Xavier. It was inviting, appealing, and part of what Clark considered a carefully sculpted illusion.

He knew enough to know there was much more to this place than that. Nevertheless, he calmed himself using the exercises he had been drilled in and entered the presence of the Master of House Xavier.

"Master Xavier," he said in his best Personal trained greeting filled with the body language nuance a high-level Personal could muster that encouraged trust and a reduction of hostility. "I bring you a gift from the Emperor himself, contracted by his Imperial bond. I would also presume to offer cordial greetings from my Master, Master Wayne, who I know holds your House in high regard."

Which was true enough. Clark would not have mentioned anything if it was not the truth.

The funny thing was that Charles Xavier had a presence. He was mellow, almost genial seeming, poised behind his office desk which bore a pile of paperwork, and he moved himself out from behind it in his chair contraption with the grace of someone at ease with their own infirmity.

"A pleasure to see you again, as always, Kal-El. Please pass my most sincere thanks to Master Wayne. Scott, you are dismissed. Please close the door behind you." He was looking at Magneto, or rather, Magneto's backside, since Clark had slung him over his shoulder on landing.

Clark waited until Scott had left before saying, "Master Xavier, may I speak frankly to you?" His
conscience would not allow him to leave a potential disaster in the lap of a man who had no knowledge of what he was getting himself into, for all the fact that working together was practically alien to most of the Houses.

"Of course." He inclined his head slightly, still sitting straight-backed, almost regally so, in his wheel-chair. Like Bruce's family, the Xavier's were an older house. A much older house, with an inclination to amazing scientific developments, and with Charles Xavier's obvious sympathies, metas.

"Master Xavier, I believe I was selected for this task because this Meta, who has the designation of Magneto, is exceptionally powerful," Clark said. "I was sent to stop him some time ago, with a group of rogue Metas and he was not entirely... sane at the time. When I collected him today, it was evident he had not been treated well. I had to make him presentable myself and he will most certainly need medical attention."

He took a deep breath, wondering how far to over step his mark, and then just decided to state it aloud. "Master Xavier, it is presumptuous of me in my capacity as a mere courier to suggest, but I believe this gift is more than generosity, and I would caution you to be aware of the safety of your person and those of your House."

"Thank you for your concern, Kal-El." He sounded genuine, and watched while Clark shifted and set the man down on the sofa. There was no 'But I can take care of myself' from Master Xavier, only quiet contemplation while he kept his focus on Clark. "Scott was so flustered by your presence that he walked off with the imperial writ. Can you tell me what it might have said in regards to this... gift?"

He could recall it word for word. "In recognition of incomparable services to the training and rehabilitation of valuable Imperial assets, we hereby Gift Master Charles Francis Xavier of our loyal Great Houses, with the Meta property designated Magneto. It is our belief that the skills of your House will serve you well and perhaps you will find within his rehabilitation a new Personal to fill the lack at your side at the Imperial Court. With cordial best wishes...."

Clark stopped, not quite needing to say any more.

"Thank you." He inclined his head slightly, letting his eyes slide off of Clark, and towards the half conscious man on the sofa. "I appreciate your concern, given the circumstances. Is there anything else you can tell me?" And Clark assumed if not, he was on his way to being, gently but firmly, dismissed.

He inclined his head. "Be aware Master Xavier, it is not enough to remove metal from his vicinity. In extreme circumstances he can pull blood from a person's body." He gave the other man the traditional bow due to a man of his station "I have discharged my service to you. Please confirm that I have been satisfactory in doing so."

"You have been very satisfactory in your duties," Master Xavier confirmed. "Please have a safe trip home, and give my regards to your master."

With that Clark had to be content. He took one last look at the Meta he had delivered and hoped that they wouldn't just slit his throat before he gained true consciousness. There was nothing more he could do right now, but it didn't seem enough.

It was time for him to go home... possibly via House Luthor. After all, he hadn't surprised Lex in at least 12 hours.
Everything was slow and murky.

He had enough experience with drugs to know the best thing to do was to lay still and wait for the gogginess to pass, the murkiness to clear before he moved. It took a while to get to the point where he could reliably sit up, squinting against the dim light in the room he was in, his hand on a... sofa-back.

Interesting.

"Good evening," a mellow voice said as he re-orientated himself. "How are you feeling? You seemed to be resting well, so I did not disturb you."

Erik blinked, turning his head to look for that voice, taking a moment to feel out where he was, the metal imbedded in the walls around them. "Where am I?"

"You have been... gifted to House Xavier," the man said, sounding amused. "Where I can guarantee that it won't be necessary to fight your way out of here."

"No?" He rubbed at his eyes for a moment, sitting up a little better. The man was sitting by the fire, not quite looking at him. "That's good of you to decide for me." House Xavier, House Xavier... was half-familiar to him as a name.

"Would you care to tell me your name? I am Charles Xavier." It was done pleasantly as if he wasn't a Slave. That was confusing. He understood the dynamics of that power struggle intimately but someone treating him like this did not resonate with his experience.

He waited a moment, watching the side of the man's head, half his face. There were no cuffs, no collar around his own neck, but Erik was sure he was still a slave. "Erik. Erik Magnus Lehnsherr."

"Welcome to House Xavier, Erik," Charles replied. He seemed to have no fear of him at all. "You have not been well treated. When was the last time you remember actually eating?"

"First night in the Holding cells." After that it had been sedatives and feeding tubes as far as he could guess, mixed and muddled anger and unconsciousness. He felt sore, tired even as he sat there, and that wasn't something he'd been used to when he was Russian held.

Of course, they met violence with violence, and the North American Imperials had a completely different reaction to him putting a fork through someone's arm. They had just nullified him. Drugs or something. He hated drugs.

"Then we must take it carefully. Your stomach is not used to food," Charles replied. "Erik, I know this is unsettling, but do you think you can refrain from trying to escape or attempting to kill any of us?"

He was weakened, sore, still disoriented, but he could escape. He *could*, and that was a comforting feeling to worry at while he rubbed at his temples and slowly readjusted to having his eyes open. The ceramic port was still in his arm, and it was going to get pulled out in probably another minute, once he felt like his fingers were working well enough. His eyes stutter-skipped over the tattoo to the inside of his arm. "What a strange question to ask."

"If the Meta Kal-El takes time to caution me, then I believe I will listen," Charles said with a faint smile. "Besides, I wish to know if I should bother to show you to your own room or not.

He watched Charles, watched him with his second sense, and realized what had been drawing his eye had been the oddness of his posture -- the electrical signals of his nerves didn't go to his legs. It
was cold and dead, except for the hum of the metal of the hover chair. Very few places would tolerate a crippled House Master and for one to maintain leadership of a Great House of the Imperial Court meant the man must have some special qualities.

"Give me a reason why I should stay." It wasn't government captivity, it wasn't cells and bars and white white walls. Not yet, but it could be.

"Because if you leave, they would once again send Kal-El after you and perhaps this time they would decide you are too much of a risk to keep alive," Charles answered. "On the other hand, you can stay here and we can... work towards a common goal."
It sounded irritatingly high-minded of the other man. 'Common goal'. Erik didn't have goals. He had, he had tiredness, he had an urge for freedom, he had anger and very little else to call his own. Perhaps the next time they sent Kal-El after him, he'd kill the man. It had been a mistake to not kill him then, to have hesitated even the slightest bit when he'd caught himself in the half-fascinating act of ripping the man's blood out for lack of other effective weapons.

"I won't run." Yet. He didn’t know what force House Xavier could bring to bear

"I will take you at your word," Charles said. "I am reliably informed that you are injured and were not treated well. Kal-El apparently was disconcerted enough that he stopped to ensure you were clean and clothed."

Why would he do that? Erik was puzzled. He had tried to kill him before he had come at him with that last attack. There was no question at all that he'd tried to kill Kal-El, and Kal-El had left him for dead under the rubble, so, no, the message had gotten through quite clearly. "That was a very accurate assessment Kal-El made." And it explained why he wasn't in Holding Cell red uniform gear.

"He is young enough to retain some innocence," Charles said, moving his chair forward. "Hank ... Dr. McCoy will attend to you when you are in your room. You are in a House of Metas, Erik. I should warn you, it can get a bit... lively in here sometimes."

"I was in a House of Metas before this." He'd need Charles to define 'lively', but the man didn't seem likely to try to cripple him to keep him from escaping. He stood a little stiffly, trying to shake off the last of the sedative, and what was probably becoming muscle atrophy. They'd been kind enough to leave his metal bracings in place at the Holding center, un-tampered with, probably because his own make-shift medical repairs seemed insane and too complicated to bother with unless they wanted to risk his mobility.

"But not in a House where they are focused on the rights of Metas," Charles said, gliding his hover chair to the door. "Follow me, it is not too far, but not even the best physiotherapy can hold back muscle atrophy."

Ironic, he had just been thinking that.

The miserable thing of it was that he'd recovered from atrophy and hunger other times, and he still remembered the slow slope to recovery. It was always too slow, and he was always too desperate to catch up to his usual functioning level to really have the patience recovery called for to be truly successful. There was always another contract, another *something*, governments to hide from, metas like Kal-El, House punishments. And here he was, back in a House again, and all he could think of was hours spent on a Russian concrete floor, wrists bound to knees as he took proxy for Illyana's punishments. Not even the pain, so much as the position, over and over in his mind, mingled up with older agonies.
Xavier opened the double doors, and had cocked his head at Erik. Oh, yes. People expected him to try to make small-talk. "I'll recover."

"I would like it to be more than survival Erik," Charles said, moving at a sedate pace in his chair. "I would like to believe that you will thrive in House Xavier."

The man could believe whatever he liked, Erik supposed. He wasn't sure what thriving was, and he hadn't been there consciously for more than a few minutes. "We'll see." The hallways were quiet, though he was aware of a girl peering out through a cracked open door while they passed, the shift in the magnetic field.

"The Xavier House has a great many Metas here," Charles Xavier explained. "Of very different types and personalities. They will no doubt be curious about you. A couple might be a little over protective." He smiled a little. "I believe that to be unnecessary of course."

Over-protective of what? The *House*? "Mmm. What will my duties be?" He needed to make himself useful in short order, because eventually he'd snap and use up the man's good graces, and if he didn't want to have to become a man on the run again…

He seemed oblivious to that. Charles seemed to ignore the question about his duties as he continued talking about his fellow housemates. "Many of them will respond to their codename only, and offer their own name in their own time. It is symbolic of a level of trust. You may do as you wish, but do not be offended if they do not offer it." They were heading up a ramp to a higher floor. "We train other Metas to make the best use of their talents and abilities or to control them for other Houses as well, but while they are here they are treated the same as any bond-slave."

Not actually an answer of the expectations he was going to be held to, but Erik processed it all the same, falling into step with the man. He needed to work on his knee, because it felt like he was limping. Codename only, that was fine. "Do you distinguish in the house between your metas and ones from other houses?" That had to be interesting, housing other metas with the usual house on house friction.

"No, though some like to wear their House collars here," he said as a reply. "For their own benefit I assume."

"Ah." Some people liked their House enough to do that, yes, and he was trying to not think of unfinished business with his old House. Erik slid his eyes over the wall, taking the place in a little deeper as they walked. "I suppose I'll be re-cuffed here." They hadn't bothered at the facility, not that he remembered.

"I do not insist upon it unless you are to be seen in public," Charles answer and halted outside a door. "This is your room. All start with their own basic room like this and you may alter it as you wish. Larger rooms come with time and privilege. Would you like to take a look? It is plain but serviceable."

"I believe you." He'd look in, make it his own as much as possible when he was left to his own devices. If he was left to his own devices. He knew where the door was, and he could return to it without getting lost.

"This is your key," Charles said handing it to him. "Though I suspect in your case this is irrelevant. We will head to our medical centre. Dr McCoy is ready to see you."

He nodded, an inclination of his head as he took the key, and started to idly levitate it in one hand. There was no guessing how long it'd manage to hold its shape while he toyed with it. "Thank you."
He still hadn't said a word of what Erik's duties were going to be, and that made him curious.

"Your abilities seem uninhibited by your experience," Charles commented.

"It's like breathing. Being separated from it is very uncomfortable," Erik murmured, spinning the key until it flattened into a disc that he brought back together into a ball, starting to sort out the base metals.

"You enjoy exercising your abilities?" Charles asked as they entered an elevator. Of course, with his limitations, elevators even in a house like this was to be expected.

"A good deal, yes. I enjoy it very much. My old house had me trained as an engineer to make the most of my proclivities." What use was one who understood metal without understanding the underlying concepts of creation in a formalized setting?

"Perhaps we should discuss what you like to do," Charles said as the elevator dropped down rapidly. There were more levels than he thought.

There were things on the other side of the shaft that passed through his awareness, and then slipped out again, brief impressions of metal and magnetic fields. "It doesn't matter. Whatever duties you have in mind for me matter."

"As I did not set to acquire you, I have no specific duties in mind," Charles said mildly as the doors opened. "You should take this as an opportunity."

Well. "I'm not usually given opportunities." He had to seize them, by force, had to fight for every inch. No one gave you opportunities, they gave you traps or bait for the unwary. "You'll have to forgive me for being skeptical. But given the choice, I enjoy designing, building."

"Things are done differently here," Charles said as they rounded a corner. "Hank? I have brought you a patient."

Hank was bright blue, furred all over and perched on a chair like some kind of forest creature. He swiveled on the chair, readjusting a pair of comparatively tiny spectacles. "Charles! I wasn't expecting you down here tonight -- what can I do?" He was looking at Erik, like he was sizing him up, and Erik was mostly trying to process the very blue, furriness.

"We have a new arrival to the house who was not well treated and needs your assistance," Charles Xavier said.

"Oh, indeed, well then please enter my lair," he gestured with a blue finger. "I am Hank McCoy, but I suppose most people have heard of me as Beast. I will answer to either. And you are...?"

"Erik. I've gone by Magneto as a code name." Erik took a step away from Charles, taking it as the pass-off from the Master of the house and into in-processing.

"Well Erik, please sit up here and we'll patch you up," he said moving with uncommon grace for his size that spoke of him being comfortable with his form. "Magneto hmm? Let's see what data we have on you already." He tapped away at the computer next to him. "Metahuman power, manipulation of metals and magnetism. Ability to levitate. Senses electro-magnetism... is that correct?"

And then some, but he was going to let that lie as yet undiscovered to keep an advantage in reserve. "Yes." There was what looked like an examination table, covered in that odd white paper, and Erik moved to sit on it carefully. He was glad that he wasn't still wearing the Holding Facility red, at
"We'll just use the scanners. Not electromagnetic ones of course but that might be interesting. Would it empower you or react with you?" Hank said thoughtfully. "Ah curiosity... 'The important thing is to not stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing.' - Albert Einstein."

The edge of Erik's mouth twitched a little as he looked at Hank, watched him bustle over to his computers. "I don't actually throw a magnetic field by accident any longer. It's very controlled. I do have very high concentrations of metal in my blood, however."

"Interesting, you are correct," Hank answered looking up from a readout. "In an ordinary human this would be haemochromatosis... do you get a proportional anemia?"

"I have no idea what that means," Erik admitted blandly. He felt the elevator on the other side of the room activating, Charles Xavier taking quiet leave of the room.

"I am speculating whether you need to lose more blood to pass out," Hank said. "Oh, my stars and garters, what do we have here? You have metal threaded through your leg?"

"And both ankles," Erik confirmed quietly. He leaned a little, slowly, enough to pull up his pant leg to show it.

"Bad injuries?" the doctor asked. "I can see evidence of multiple fractures, is that correct?"

"Yes, and they were bad injuries. Before I learned to levitate, the easiest way to stop me from running was to cripple me." Erik shifted, leaned back on the examination table a little, on his palms.

"We should do something about this," Hank replied. "It is not good for the tissue."

Probably not. "Do you have any suggestions? The pain isn't bad."

"The pain should not be there at all. I will think on it, Erik," Hank said frowning slightly. "It is not something to disturb without forethought as to the consequences. Now, to treat your bruises and injuries. Charles would not want you in pain."

"I keep being told that," Erik agreed, watching Hank, waiting for some kind of signal. Otherwise, he was going to sit still and wait until he was told to do something.

"Could you unbutton your shirt please?" Hank asked as he fetched an ointment.

Erik half-watched him move, unbuttoning the shirt quickly before he shrugged out of it. Once he was done, he'd have to find the kitchen, grab a few bits of food and retreat to his room. "They left a drug delivery port in my arm. If possible, I'd like it removed. Before I try to do it myself."

"Oh of course," Hank said as if it really was that easy. "Nasty things. I'm surprised you don't have phlebitis. Now, I'm sorry if this smart's. I would appreciate it if you didn't attempt to kill me. Wolverine has a nasty habit of threatening to skewer me... not that he hardly ever comes down here, but sometimes even he has a problem."

"I'm of two minds about medical care, but I prefer proper treatment." As long as he could keep his nerves down, and it seemed very unlikely that a blue-furred doctor was going to have much interest in vivisecting him. His comfortable attitude to his own obvious mutation eroded more of his own suspicions; you couldn't fake that level of ease and he wasn't wearing bondslave cuffs or collars yet as a meta he should have been. It intrigued him.
"Which I hope to provide." His fingers were surprisingly deft and the ointment was cool on his skin. "Removing the port might hurt a little - hold on."

Erik closed his eyes, and oh, yes, that was a slow burn of pain coming down his arm while the tube slid its way out, but he focused on the end result: no easy way to drug him, no easy way to control him. He still inhaled a little sharply, but then it was out, and he opened his eyes to look at Hank holding it up with huge, absurdly latex-gloved hands. So glad to have that gone and not in him, disrupting the flow of things.

"There my boy," Hank said. "It's out. That's the bruises dealt with. You are in surprisingly good health otherwise. You must have a naturally good constitution."

"Yes, I do." Held up well under stress, pain, torture, survived having a mountain dropped on him, hardly fell apart at all after having been drugged for months. He could feel the old memories back there, but it wasn't really a convenient time to deal with any of them. There were probably telepaths in the area, and he needed to get his helmet on before anything was safe or sacred was brought to mind. "Is there anything else, or can I go?"

"Take these pills - they are mild painkillers and anti-inflammatories, as you need them, if your leg is bothering you," Hank said. "Feel free to have a look around, I believe Charles wanted you to familiarize yourself with Westchester."

Hank passed him a small plastic bottle, that Erik pocketed as he stood up, and shrugged the borrowed shirt back on. "If you do come up with a solution for my legs, I'm interested. As it is, if I pull the metal out, I can't walk. It's somewhat problematic." And when he strained his powers, it was problematic to have to hold that little bit back to remain fully functional.

"Well, there are Metas who can heal, even if they are expensive," Hank said. "Perhaps Charles can negotiate an option if I can find a likely candidate. There are few Metas who would not help him."

"And I was thinking along more traditional lines," Erik shrugged. If he could get *stronger*, in an under the radar way, without too much attention, then he would, but if it was going to be a fuss, no. No. "Where is the kitchen?"

"Three levels up there is a communal Kitchen. You may help yourself to anything there," he said. "Would you like me to show you the way?"

"No, I'll find the way." Erik inclined his head slightly, and moved towards the elevator, idly toying with the metal that had been a key. Separating it out took a little extra concentration, kept him busy while he navigated through unfamiliar places.

He used his sensing ability to avoid meeting other Metas. Not right now. When he was a bit more focused and stable, then he would see what the company was like. It was enough for now to find his way to the very large kitchen with rows of interestingly filled fridges. Obviously some of the Metas had specialist diets. He managed to find enough to sate his hunger. Bread, cheese, milk, fruit, some meats. Simple and un-complex and a feast in comparison to what he had been given in his previous Houses.

He took a good portion worth of the feast back to his room, to tuck away for later if he needed it, though not anything that would spoil quickly. His room was easy to get into, and it didn't surprise him to see the remnants of his uniform, and his helmet, resting on the pillow.

Waiting for him. A little peace and quiet, and food. It was suspiciously like paradise.
Charles considered his next move. His 'gift', even a couple of weeks on, was still perplexing him because he wasn't sure of the best way to handle him. Erik was... unstable. He was a classic example of being riddled with post traumatic stress, trauma induced mental breakdowns, and defenses and walls everywhere. Kal-El had been right, strangely enough. Erik might not intend to harm them, but he was effectively a highly powered equivalent of a grenade with its pin out that you've just noticed in the corner of the room.

The first stages of care, feeding, building up strength and dignity were well underway, and he had taken to holding daily meetings to just discuss things with him over a game of chess.

Erik wasn't really responding. He hadn't tweaked to the fact that Charles was a telepath, because Charles was keeping it close to his chest. Erik was suspicious of telepaths, untrusting of them because he hadn't met an ethical one. And the spillover of his thoughts were enough to make Charles wonder if he was an ethical telepath, because while he contemplated his next chess move, there was a quiet background play of painful memories sliding through Erik's mind, intermingling and interacting with the world around him, tainting it all for him.

"How was your first encounter with Wolverine, Erik?" he asked, contemplating whether to move his knight or sacrifice a bishop for a shot at the queen.

It was hard to choose between the two when Erik was sitting across from him, calm as anything on the outside, quietly reliving a mix of day to day life at his old House, and being buried under rubble, interrupted with a vivid recollection of meeting Wolverine. At least it wasn't rape today -- the running theme this afternoon seemed to claustrophobia.

Erik was making a poor chess player of him.

"He was... Feral. I think, coming from me, those words carry more weight than they might usually." Erik ran his tongue over two teeth, arms folded over his chest while he watched Charles' hand hover over his bishop. He rattled the queen where it stood on the board.

"Wolverine and yourself share a great deal in the way of experiences," he said as he moved the knight. "I thought perhaps you might have a common ground."

Or test to see if he might crack on that front when meeting a challenge. He hadn't cracked. Not yet.

"We don't. Unless one considers that neither of us are interested in talking to the other. I think it's a fine common ground." There was a split second of contemplation, and Erik carefully slid a pawn for-ward with no mind to defense.

Charles smiled a little. "I suppose Wolverine is not the best conversationalist. Hank tells me you are fighting fit so to speak. How are you feeling?"

He was quiet for a moment, because there was no quick answer that was an honest one. "I don't know."

"Confused then," Charles answered, selecting a neutral word. "I should mention one of my skill sets encompasses gem level proficiencies in psychiatry and so on. Habits are hard to break."

"I would never have guessed." It was droll, and Erik's mouth pulled crookedly for a moment. "I don't have anything to fight for."

"I do not believe a Meta human can be their best if trained by fear and force," Charles said, leaning back. "The Emperor made an implicit suggestion that you should replace my previous Personal..."
He dangled a question out there, reading for a response.

Well, it wasn't much of a read to be made when he watched the chess board jitter briefly, and Erik seemed to flinch before his face slid back to impassivity. "I've done Personal work before."

"By which, you mean you hated it," Charles answered. "Which part did you hate?"

"Groveling. The humiliation. The fact that there was pain involved." And there was a girl, there were people back in the barracks, other young metas he couldn't protect if he was handling those duties. Charles knew that Illyana was dead, just as he knew that her brother was there in the mansion, but Erik hadn't ventured out enough to meet Piotr and make the connection. There were a lot of things wrapped up in that girl that Erik wasn't thinking, and Charles was trying to be the responsible telepath, waiting until Erik trusted him enough to say, until it was more than the suggestion in spillover.

"Do I look like I require, or desire, groveling or humiliation?" Charles said mildly. "We have vastly different requirements here. In fact, of late, anyone acting as my Personal has effectively been my Bodyguard. Was the House where you were a Personal a very traditional House?"

"It was Russian, and I was a German meta war-slave." Erik cocked an eyebrow at him, unfolding his hand far enough to tidy his half of the board a little after the rattle. Still shaken by the suggestion, then, if he didn't use his abilities to do that. He probably would've made it worse. "It was very traditional, I'm twice over not human, and I was of the enemy. What do you think?"

"I think they treated you very badly indeed," Charles said softly, trying to meet his gaze to communicate his sincerity. "And now you expect that from everyone you meet. You expect me to do the same?"

Images of horror drifted through his mind. What a waste it had been, a terrible waste of life. No one had guessed that the German Emperor would not abide by the all important Ceasefire and Judgment. Craziness, insanity to conduct War in such a way. The First Great War had been bad enough, but it had been a cascade of Great Houses verses Great Houses and at the Ceasefire, the accounting was made and the judgment declared. But the second war...

Insanity. Everyone knew keeping War Slaves alive benefitted the accounting, but Emperor Adolf had slaughtered hundreds of thousands.

And he'd decimated his own people, in the name of an insane obsession with Metas, the uber-human. The historical knowledge, the memories of the war from the North American side, mingled with Erik's memories in his mind, the on the ground horror, sharper, the smell of blood, of burning flesh, the feeling of cold and fear, always scared, he was always cold and scared and fighting through it, and as quickly as the images started, he felt Erik shut down inside, snap snap snap. "You've treated me well. But that could change. Everything changes."

"True enough. But sometimes they change for the better," he said, impulsively touching Erik on the hand and was unprepared for the response to that simple gesture.

Erik was unpredictable, from what he'd seen so far, strong reactions muted back. But a hand touching his when he'd set it on the table, still waiting for Charles to make his next move, startled him a little, and then there was a flood of what Charles could only firmly call positive response, without probing at Erik. It was confused, yes, but positive in nature, an odd contrast to Erik's controlled answer of, "We'll have to see."

Touch. The man was touch starved, but feared intimacy. It was an opening of sorts, one he could
work on. Charles mused on this as he made his next move. "Mmm. Still, aside from any metal based and engineering projects that come up, the main vacancy is my de-facto Body guard. You do have the enviable capability to stop bullets after all."

"True." Erik drew his hand back, and finally took out Charles' knight in a quick move. "I would be willing to do that."

It allowed him to counter move with his rook and take a bishop but it wasn't a well thought through strategy.

"Then I will designate you as my bodyguard. This will mean training, however. Combat training." He needed him close because only a Meta like Kal-El could stop him physically, but if he needed to, a psionic would manage it too.

If he had to, he could stop Erik, as much as Erik could stop a bullet. He hadn't *needed* to stop Nathaniel, but Nathaniel was older and wiser than Erik, he'd been exceedingly well trained, and had been amazing in bed. It was a shame he was gone, but little Nate was two now, and it had taken forever for Jean to stop looking at Nathaniel as Charles's personal without her eye twitching. That Nathaniel had carried on with his time-travelling was likely for the best. For Jean and Scott's sanity, as they tried to raise the younger version.

"Combat training is something I could always use more of." *You mean you designate me as your Personal, but you're afraid to say it in case I react poorly.*

It was a little shocking, to feel that intrusion, and Erik had no idea he'd done it, because he was eyeing the board and working out how to come back from the loss of his bishop. Rook against rook from the gesture he was making.

It was a good sign he guessed, that Erik was relaxing enough to let his thoughts surface. Well he would test that assumption. "Technically I suppose that would make you a Personal, but I will not require you to perform other duties normally associated with the role." He did not want something unwilling. Nate had been willing. More than willing and of course as head of a Great House, he could summon a Pleasure Slave at any time, though it was disconcerting to be able to read the reality behind their perfectly acted roles.

It tended to deaden the appeal of the act, for Charles.

Erik closed his eyes for a moment, before shifting Charles a doubtful look. "Oh yes? How does that work in Court matters?"

"People assume I have no interest in that side of things due to my condition," Charles answered calmly. "I do not always attend Court with a Personal."

Which was not ideal, but true enough. He was needed by the Emperor, and sometimes cached in on that fact.

Of course, now that the emperor had gifted Erik to him, he'd expect him to be there the next time Court met. Erik still didn't seem to believe him, but he wasn't really reacting, except to make his move, rook on rook.

He re-crossed his arms. "What would make this easiest on you?"

Charles looked at him in surprise. "Erik, perhaps I need to clarify things. I am in need of a Personal for the practical reasons I have stated. I would like a Personal for other reasons as well, however I most definitely do not want someone unwilling. I would rather have a willing companion. My
qualifications and experience tell me without too much of a mental leap that your usage as a Personal in the past for intimate reasons was very unpleasant and your defensive body language now tells me that you would not be willing to do that but would feel forced into it. I do not want that."

Erik shifted, arms loosening a little. "I dislike not meeting expectations." Well, that wasn't very explanatory, but he was getting mixed signals off of Erik as he glanced down at the board. "And against all sanity, I'll probably try to meet even unspoken expectations. If..."

Charles exhaled. "Do you want to try this or would you prefer to be a pure engineer?" he asked.

"I'll get bored if all I do is engineering." But he hadn't said he wanted to try it. Then again, it might be the best answer he was going to get from Erik.

"Then we will try it," Charles said. "But I will not let you try and do something you are not really ready to do," he responded. "I have some skills in that area."

He watched Erik nod, starting to look at him again rather than the board. "Right. I'm sure you do." And there was more, but it felt almost like a sense of relief from Erik, wound up with nerves. He started to say something else, but there was a knock on the door to Charles's study.

Jean, outside, carrying a pile of new contracts.

"Come in," Charles called, remembering not to mention her name. "I fear our time is going to once again going to be curtailed Erik."

"Of course." Erik stood up, giving him a tight smile. He needed time to think over what they'd discussed, needed space, so it as probably for the best. "If I'm dismissed..."

If he was dismissed, he could dodge having to interact with Jean, which seemed to be a personal goal of Erik's. Jean swept into the study, polite and poised as ever.

He decided to be lenient. "Of course Erik, you may leave." He wanted to be the one to unravel the mystery the man presented, not pass it on to Jean.

And Erik disliked telepaths... quite a bit. "Thank you." He inclined his head, not at all a bow, and turned to leave through the door.

It closed behind him, leaving Jean peering over her shoulder in his wake. Then she shifted her attention to him, half-sorting the contracts into quick piles. "Is it going well, Charles?"

"Well enough," he replied. "He is very complex, more so than Logan in many ways. Or Gambit for that matter. But he has agreed a trial as a Personal to me on a Bodyguard basis."

And possibly more. Jean smiled a little, genuinely, as she watched him move away from the interrupted chess game. "I don't know if you knew already, but that helmet blocks telepaths." She sounded half-irked and half intrigued. "I'd love to get it out of his hands and find out how it works. All right, these are the contracts requiring one meta, these are the contracts for the incoming students for the next class, and these two are the big ones."

"Yes, I am trying to find a way to let him know about that without jeopardizing the level of trust," Charles said. "I suspect after a certain point, psionics were used to control him. Ah yes, these are simple enough. Scott has made his recommendations I assume? What are these large contracts?"

"One contract to clean up a drug smuggling ring in the south, and one is to find a suspected Skrull
in the Imperial guard structure." And he suspected Scott had made his recommendations on who to send for those, as well. It was a point of pride that his x-men were trained to the point that they could handle situations on their own.

"Hmm. Skrulls are nothing to be taken for granted. Where there is one there could be more. That is to be a team contract," Charles said considering the political ramifications of that as well as the mission directive. "I am sure you have the relevant psionics for detection in mind. A drug smuggling ring...well, Scott has people in mind, but I think some of our most recent graduates need to get real mission experience. Who is ready to go?"

"Cannonball and his team, I think, would be well suited to it." Challenging, let them stretch themselves a little, but not too much. Nathaniel had been quite taken with the grouping as a unit. They were a little less... moralistic than the primary X-men were. "I would like to work with Emma on the Skrull contract, and Bishop. Given their past experiences." And one or two more, yes.

"Put Gambit with Cannonball, he has the most experience in dealing with the unbonded cartels, but give Cannonball the lead. Gambit will know what I am doing. You need some heavy hitters with you," Charles said focusing. "What is Logan doing?"

Jean's eyes flickered or a moment. "Logan should go with us. He's only aiding on a course." Logan generally kept himself under scheduled for the need to fulfill contracts.

"Pick one other," he instructed. "We have enough here that I sincerely doubt we will be considered weakened unduly by your absence."

It was always a danger. Send too many out and the home base was unguarded.

He disliked working more than two large contracts at once, as often contracts spiraled in terms of the resources predicted they'd need. There was every chance that a lone Skrull would turn into an infestation, which would require a full routing, and likely a more sinister plan to overtake the world.

"Kurt. We can always use Kurt." And a good range of abilities travelling together.

"Then take him and assemble your team," Charles agreed. "Have we had additional requests for training recently?"

"Oh yes. Quite a few from House Wayne." She laid it on his desk, because while the preparations had no doubt already begun, it was ultimately his purview. "We'll head out without the next two hours, and I'll talk to Gambit."

And the house would be a little quieter for a day or two, and Charles would wait and worry.

"Thank you Jean," he said by way of a dismissal. If nothing else he would be able to distract himself with Erik, and trying to find out what exactly the Emperor was up to, and House Wayne for that matter. That could not be a coincidence. He was sure the Master of House Wayne would have scoffed at the concept. No, he was going to make this plan of the Emperor's back fire on him, come what may.

He would rather have been working on his engineering projects.

It was hard to not think that as he looked for the room he had been instructed to meet Storm in. Storm was close and social with Wolverine, which struck him as odd, but she was also aloof. He
wasn't sure how... 'instruction' was supposed to go, but it kept the girl who could phase through walls from stalking him at a distance, so he would take it.

Two floors down, surrounded by the comfort of metal walls and bracing while he walked, stopping in front of a door to knock when he could've unlocked.

"Enter," her voice rolled out in rich tones and when he did enter the training room she was apparently sitting meditating, surrounded by exotic incense. "Ah, Magneto, please come in and make yourself comfortable. Master Xavier wishes you to have some additional training."

It wasn't as cold and stark as the hallway had been, well appointed, drapery covering the walls that he knew were metal. The lighting was dimmer and warmer in feel. "So I was informed, Storm." He closed the door with an idle thought, and walked towards her. Pillows on the floor weren't problematic, even though there was less to lean on.

Her movement was graceful and effortless. "The heart of the Personal comes from inner control and personal flexibility. How would you rate your inner control?"

Erik settled, stiffly, crosslegged on a pillow. He could lie to her, and feel better, or he could just answer. "Too much and none at all."

She seemed pleased by a genuine answer. "Then let us examine that. Where do you have control?"

"Where, as opposed by when. That's not really a stable circumstance." Erik leaned his elbows on his knees.

"Where in terms of in yourself," she said patiently. "What part of you exists in stability?"

"My powers." That was the first, easy answer. "My sense of self, my pride." That was all that came to mind immediately, and he wasn't sure how to really process that question through.

"So to rob you of your powers, to curtail them is to unbalance your equilibrium?" Storm commented. "And where are you without balance?"

"Interacting with other people." Erik was watching her, patiently, while she was watching him. "Emotions, I suppose."

She nodded. "Then we shall give emotion to your control, and control to your emotion. I too have experienced this, and it is my eternal regret that there comes a point where one will overwhelm the other and make a disaster. This is a simple set of exercises that will hone both abilities and one I use myself. There are ingots of metal there Magneto." She gestured. "You will need them."

So far, it didn't seem so bad. Erik reached for them, sitting up a little straighter as he levitated them into his hands after sensing them. "You've caught my curiosity."

She smiled. "There are different levels to this process. We will start with the most basic." She spun up out of her hand a wisping pattern shape of what seemed to be vapour and light. "You will copy in your element, that which I demonstrate in mine. It will become complex. This is about finesse not power. I will then ask you questions regarding emotions. The stability of your talent, the control you have will support and provide an indicator that you can see and monitor. Does this make sense to you?"

Given the rattle he'd given the chessboard the morning before when Charles had suggested Erik serve as his Personal, it was not only sensible, but imminently necessary. "Yes. And you're doing that with... lightning." Storm indeed.
"Or with the other weather elements," she replied and a winged horse boiled up out of cloud vapour in her hand, mane and tail crackling with sparks. "Our talents can be beautiful Magneto..." The pegasus took to the air and hovered in front of him. The detail in it was astonishing.

The control was astonishing.

Erik started to work the first piece of metal idly into a horse while he waited for her to start. "Unfortunately, I'm no artist."

"No, you do not believe you are an artist. There is a difference. Beauty comes when you touch something within you that you are passionate about. But we will try that later." She watched as the metal pegasus took shape. "Detail. Work on the detail. Now. Talk to me of how you feel now."

"Fine. Calm. I spend a lot of time shaping things out of metal. Pegasus, not so much, but he'd shaped toys before and he would again, even as he carefully worked the details in. "I have an urge to add joints."

"Do so." Storm suggested. "And how did you feel when you first arrived outside of my door?"

"Nervous. This is... not what I associate with Personal training." He detailed it out, shoulder joints first, then the knees, then the ankles, and he set it down briefly to make sure it was level and held its balance.

"Tell me what you did expect?" Storm queried as her pegasus flapped ethereal wings at him and soared down to see his. She was trying to entice him to make it move, and respond. A piece of harmless play acting - when had he last done something harmless just for fun with his abilities?

It had been a long time, since before he'd made his escape.

The metal pegasus reared on its back legs, but he was still working on the wings -- not natural jointing, not without taking time to make it more precise first, but certainly passable. "I expected a much more sexually charged environment. I expected a dungeon."

"This has been your experience to date?" Storm queried as the cloud horse mimicked its counterparts movements. "One of the sexual skills of the Personals designation?"

He hinged one wing, still taking his time, before testing it and moving on the other wing. "Yes. And it would still be a stretch for me to call myself particularly finessed in that area."

"Why would you say that?" Storm asked curiously, without heat or judgment in her tone.

He didn't quite look up from working on the detailing of the second wing, the jointing. "I'm not usually very... interactive. I'm much more likely to blacken someone's eye than to pretend to be the fawning servant."

Storm laughed. "Because you are unsuited to fawn yes? The association of Personals with fawning is a fallacious one. Tell me Magneto, do I look like I fawn?"

"No, you look like you take men's eyes out with your fingernails. For fun, on Saturdays." He glanced sideways at her, working idly on the mane. Metal work was one of those things where if he had a good idea, he could always backtrack it in later. If, and it certainly felt like it, he was making a toy for a child, trying to articulate the mane was very much like creating jewelry. Like links for a necklace. The ingot had been very good quality metal. "In my old house, Personals were the ultimate in submissives. To serve, and to enjoy it was the job. I did not enjoy it, and I did not break from their treatment."
Until someone slit Illyana's throat, as the ultimate punishment for him. And the delicate links he as
spinning off of a short work of narrow wire turned to liquid, and he had to let them fall. Shake it
off, pick back up where he was.

Storm was watching him. "You touched a painful memory did you not?" she asked. "I wish you to
tell me what happens to your talent when that occurs?"

She did not ask what the memory was. He was not sure he could describe it.

"It flares on whatever I was concentrating on. I've ruined more projects and plans with... self
inflicted mental ambushes than I care to think of." He started to gather it back into the wire again,
narrowing it carefully, trying to keep the quality high while he drew the piece out again and went
back to making the links.

"So, more energy pours into it, and it becomes more fluid," Storm stated. "I will return to that point
later. Personal training here is considered useful for Metas by Master Xavier, not because of a
desire for sexual subjugation or exploitation, but because the most common issue's with Metas is
control. Personal training teaches control, reaction, planning, analysis. It is very uncommon in fact
for a Metahuman to ever be considered as a Personal in the traditional sense. Kal-El of House
Wayne is an anomaly in that regard. Personal training in House Xavier is training of your talent,
your mind and emotions. It is too easy to lose control in combat and with some of us...with *you*
Magneto, your power is such that it could have devastating consequences."

"I know." He started to connect the links smoothly into a mane, a few deep breaths settling him. "I
killed most of my old House." With... very little by way of regrets.

"There are few of us here who have not a history containing such deeds. In time some will share
that with you," Storm was watching him, he could tell. "Once I was a goddess to a people in
Africa. Then I was a collared Slave, treated with fear and suspicion. Now I am at peace."

"I envy you that." He wasn't. He was still restless, still felt like there were things to do, and there
*were* things to do, things he couldn't think about until he was sure. Sure that the House was the
way it seemed on the outside, inside. It was still too early to tell. "I don't regret what I did."

"That is not what we are here for," she said calmly. "This is not judgment. The only judgment here
is that which you do yourself. Is your winged horse ready to fly?"

Levitating it was easy, and keeping the motion of wings flapping, legs moving somewhat naturally,
was easy, too. "I think so."

"Shall we race them around the room?" Storm suggested as she raised an eyebrow.

"We could. Though I suspect yours will win. This is less aerodynamic and more like a toy." He ran
it in a circle around their heads, considering what he could do. "I should give this to the boy
Phoenix was carrying around at breakfast."

"I am sure Nathaniel would appreciate it," she said as hers ran around with his. "Perhaps something
else. Take another ingot Magneto."

He settled the pegasus down on the ground, and moved to bring another ingot in towards his
hands. "All right." He'd tidy the pegasus out later, smooth out any sharp edges.

"Make a simple sphere and levitate it in front of you," she instructed. "This will be a more
challenging task. We are going to examine a painful memory and hold this shape."
He spun a basic sphere out quickly, and held it in front of him, but not so it would stop him from looking at Storm. "Go on."

"Call up a memory," she said. "A difficult one. and try to recall it while focusing on the shape of the sphere. It will be difficult."

There were too many at first, and he tilted his head a little, trying to focus on just one of the things that usually popped to his mind without effort or concentration. "This is... a game to play with telepaths. 'Don't think about the white elephant' gets you white elephants. 'Think of something painful'... gets you nothing." Erik gave the ball a spin, and exhaled slowly. Leaving the children with his sister. No, not painful at all, damn. He had a disobedient mind on a good day.

First day as a Russian War Slave... yes. The ball wobbled a little, and he didn't really focus too hard on the memory yet. "All right, I'm there."

"Balance the memory, balance it with the control of the sphere. Feel the naturalness of what you do, of your own strength flowing through you to the metal, and then let the memory unwind. You are protected from it by what you do."

Very easy for her to do. He closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the metal, his connection to it. In processing had been a replay of inprocessing -- shave his hair down again, mark his tattoo as an identifying sign, catalogue his powers, catalogue his height, weight, age, take him from a person to a ledger book sheet. They were puzzled by what to do with him, because cuffs were decorative. Not binding, though they'd cuffed and collared him, and put him in a few bad positions to start.

Taken away who he was, tried to boil him down to nothing, and that angered him more than the physical pain and terror and fear in the moment had. The ball wobbled, and he focused on the sphere again.

"Good. Good Magneto, hold the shape, and allow the energy to flow into the sphere. Hold it close..." Storm said softly.

She seemed so very sympathetic, and he focused on the memory -- as much as he could, before his mind slid back a little, the first processing. The cold, and the fear, and the shock that the showers had been water. First time was always the worst, for everything. First kill, first fuck, first inprocessing, first dead body in his hands, under his hands, searching it for minerals and metals for the Emperor's war machine, before the next and the next and the next.

It lost its shape entirely, and Erik grimaced, pulling it back together.

"Again Magneto. You are doing well. The metal will be highly energized," she said. "Let it flow within the shape, respond to it rather than cage it."

He wasn't sure how to do that, but as a concept it seemed nice. Doable.

If only it didn't involve torturing himself while he focused on his metalwork. Over and over again, and every time it got sloppy he tightened it up, over and over, with Storm suggesting calm thoughts of control until he couldn't. Couldn't, couldn't focus, couldn't function a thought together except misery and rage muddled together, and what could he do about any of it? Nothing. Nothing, it was just memory, just something gone and past. He set the sphere down on the floor between them, tried to form it back into shape with a somewhat heavy hand.

"I'm sorry, I can't."

"You have done well for today," Storm said. "It is difficult. We will practice again. Let me show
you the end result." A sphere of cloud appeared in her hand. "My own demons unleashed." The centre of it grew brighter and brighter as lightening flickered and burned. "But the energy becomes a form, and form is a control and when it becomes right..."

Plasma, the sphere was plasma and it bloomed light - a perfect lotus shape in her hand spinning and floating, splitting into blossom after blossom in a perpetual motion of harmony.

"This is what you will be able to do."

"In time." Erik closed his eyes, and tried to not give in to the odd temptation to take the plasma from her, because he could. He could control it. "I think... I need to go."

She banished the plasma lightning, and nodded. "Go, rest. You might have a great deal to absorb."

Erik floated the pegasus back towards himself as he stood up, stretching out his knee a little. "Yes, I do." And now he could, *would*, walk back towards his room and try to get his head together. Distract himself with work.

Storm nodded, and dismissed him with an elegant nod, allowing him out to freedom. It had been harder than he thought to do the simple exercises, but at least Storm wasn't a psionic.

He lost a little time, actually, wandering the hallways, trying to focus on nothing at all while he walked. When he reached his room, he gathered up what was passing for equipment and tools, and his unfinished project, and went to look for a workroom. The mansion was riddled with communal workspaces with equipment, but the only ones he was interested in were the empty ones.

He didn't want company. He wanted to tinker and let his mind mull over things without distractions of people. People left metal there, and leaving metal where he was was just asking for it to be manipulated and made into something.

He found one a little later on.

Erik settled into the space, tucked himself into a chair, and laid out his project. The helmet was good for battle, but poor for walking around the house. And now he had the lee-way to make himself a more discrete version, something a little less battleworthy.

It was the alloys he needed though, combinations to make the circuitry. Finding the components was not easy but it was working now. This lab was full of mineral samples to play with. They dabbled in sciences.

They dabbled, they played, but they didn't do anything Erik as willing to call applied. Not quite. They made things they needed, crutches for the handicaps that came with being a mutant, but they didn't really... stretch the scope. Erik gathered some of the samples together, started to separate out the tiny pure bits he needed. He didn't need much.

He only needed enough to replicate the circuits.

He was so intent the first he knew of someone watching him was a young girlish voice saying "You're Magneto aren't you?" right next to his elbow.

He jerked a little, but didn't harm his project, setting it down carefully on the table. "Yes. And you are...?"

"Shadowcat," she said with a smile. "But you can call me Kitty, Kitty Pryde if you want. Everyone wants to know more about you, and I figured you don't find out if you don't ask right?"
What a basely stupid assumption. Erik twisted a little in his work chair, not willing to turn his back to her. "And you might ask and still not find out. Are you of this House, or...?"

"Me? Yeah, have been for years," she said seemingly unaffected by his attitude. "House Xavier is the best for Metas, everyone knows that. So, Bobby says that you were from one of the Russian Houses originally - is that right?"

"I don't know who 'Bobby' is, but yes." Erik tilted his head in a stiff nod.

"Iceman," Kitty supplied helpfully. "That's really cool. We had a Meta sent over who...well I really liked. He wouldn't tell me much about the Russian Houses, I was wondering what they were like? His name is Colossus."

Erik grimaced a little as he looked at her. She as all but twirling her hair, wearing jeans and a t-shirt with some no doubt 'cool' slogan on it. "Kitty, how old are you?"

"Old enough to go on missions. I was one of the youngest to graduate to contract work. " She smiled. "I'm twenty two."

"Then I'm going to assume he did not tell you to spare himself the suffering. Russian Houses are very traditional. And I think that is all you need to know." Another former Russian House survivor, that was interesting. He might have to look 'Colossus' up.

"Aw, you sound just like him," she said pouting a little. "What's your meta-talent then? Metal? wow, that would be freaky. Colossus pretty much shifts into metal."

"Magnetism, to be precise. It's a good deal more than metal." He wasn't going to do any demos, wasn't going to show off. "And I assume you walk through walls."

"It's a phase thing apparently," she said and shrugged. "And I disrupt electricity if I do it around it. Really annoys people if I phase into the TV room."

"I'm sure it does," Erik snorted. That was something she could probably learn to control, in the same way he could work with circuitry and computer systems from a little basic control. "So, you've been here since you manifested, or...?"

She shrugged a little. "My parents, my family. We were in the Camps in the War? I don't remember much of it now, though I probably should. My father said it is just as well. All I know is three of us got our and we Ran. Ran all the way over here. I remember that at least. Then a few years later I started getting the migraines and..." she shrugged again.

"You were in the Camps?" She would've been six, and Erik honestly wasn't sure how she was alive, still. Unless they had been in one of the few early riots at in processing.

"I don't remember," she said. "I have heavy natural memory block there, and I don't remember anything until we got here. It's a blur. I don't like to be cold though."

"Did they mark you?" The number would answer his question about how they escaped, because he knew, perhaps, too much about the camps.

She pulled up a sleeve and there was an all too familiar looking mark. "I keep thinking about getting Beast to remove it, but I haven't gotten around to it yet. I'd probably be stood down from active duty for a couple of weeks."

He eyed the number, tilting his head to read it. Yes, she was there early, just a little after he had.
One of the experimentation blocs had rebelled -- but not his. "I would leave it." Erik sat back a little, carefully unbuttoning his shirt sleeve at the wrist to roll it up. "Your family had been selected for experimentation. I remember when the bloc escaped."

"You remember?" Her eyes were wide. "Were you there too? At the same time? Did you escape too?"

"No." He shook his head a little ruefully, and held his head out, with the number, just a few thousand lower than hers, still quite clear on his skin. "No. I was still alive in the Camps when the Russians 'liberated' us all those years later." And he was alive because he was willing to desecrate the bodies of his people to remain so.

"I'm sorry," Kitty said sincerely. "So one of the Russian Houses claimed you? That had to be better than the camps right?"

"Yes and no. I was a War Slave, and a Meta. So there was more food and less cold, but also a great deal more imminent pain." And rape, and torture to control them, using each Meta against the others. A man made out of metal--he saw one, when he was new to the house, used to conduct electricity into the bodies of three other Metas for their punishment -- spared, while they were not.

Was it the same boy, was the question.

"I suspect that is why your friend Colossus does not talk about it. If he was a good man, then he suffered a great deal. And if he was not, if he played along with the House, then he watched what few friends he had suffer a great deal. No one gets away from those Houses cleanly."

"Oh." Kitty seemed a little horrified. "You really think so?" Some of the attitude vanished. "He's a pacifist. He doesn't want to fight either."

"That would not have been appreciated back there. At least I enjoy fighting." Erik slid his sleeve back down, still watching Kitty. Her facial expressions seemed to shift, playing through a range of horror while she no doubt re-visited some thoughts in a new context. "Is he in the House now, or is he on a mission? I think perhaps I should make the effort to meet him."

"He's here," she replied. "I'm sure he will enjoy talking to you, Magneto."

And the question was, did he finish his project, or take it with him and back to is room to finish into the night, after meeting this other Meta?

"Erik. My name is Erik." He shifted, stood up, and started to tidy up the work, pulling together the tiny bits of metal he'd need later. "Could you show me where he is?"

"Sure! He's painting down in the Sun room. Do you want to come now?" she asked.

He bundled his work together, carefully. "Yes. Yes, I do." Painting, well. Painting was certainly what Erik would consider a pacifistic act. Left to his own devices, he still designed things which were essentially weapons.

"Okay, follow me," she said. "Oops, nearly phased...habit. This way."

She led him through the corridors of the mansion, easily.

It seemed to stun her that she couldn't travel through the walls to do it, that she was walking with someone who was bound by the solidity of objects. It was a little hysterical to watch, and Erik did not shadow her too closely through the mansion for fear of walking into a wall like she seemed to
want to do at every turn.

The sun room was up two floors, it seemed. "Is this the door?"

"Yeah." She gave a perfunctory knock and opened it. "Piotr? I've brought someone to meet you?

"Kitty?" He watched an oddly normal looking man turn away from the canvas he was standing in front of. "Who is this?"

"Someone curious if you were from House Radim," Erik asked in careful Russian as he lurked in the doorway.

The young man turned. "Who are you? What do you know of House Radim? You look..."

Familiar. There was a spark of recognition there in his eyes.

Familiar, yes. It had been a few years, but yes. "Familiar," Erik finished for Piotr, and his brain clicked then, finally put the name in place once his mind said it correctly. "You were Illanya's brother."

"How do you know of Illanya..." His eyes widened. "Erik? I heard we had a new addition, but I thought, I thought you dead."

Erik gave a crooked smile. "A great deal of people may have wished that was so. It is good to see you are truly well. They told us they were going to kill you over here."

It was perhaps to be expected that Piotr got up and approached to embrace him. "And yet rumors of my death are unsubstantiated. Kitty, would you mind giving us some privacy? It has been many years for us both."

She looked like she was desperate to stay, but finally gave in. "Fine. But we are talking later." The young Meta left through the nearest wall.

Many years, and with a grip like that, Erik was sure that at least *Piotr* was being treated well. He laughed a little as he pulled back from the embrace. "You're well here. Truly well? After my stay in Imperial Holding, I'm reluctant to believe that this... this illusion of safety is real." And yet. Every person he interacted with seemed content, in a very natural way.

"Imperials..." Piotr shook his head. "We are weapons to them. If we do not fight we are useless. They tried and I was sent here for retraining as damaged and broken. Xavier, he saw I would not kill and purchased me as a bargain. I do other things now."

"Good." He wasn't going to press and ask what those other things were, but perhaps it was protecting. A House needed security, needed someone to be there in the event of an attack. Or teach -- most of the metas seemed to teach, and Piotr seemed the type. "I fought everything, including them, which is a different type of useless to the Imperials." One that as he ran it through his head made him feel almost proud, because being so angry he couldn't work with them was resistance, in a way. At least, it was funny now that he was a little removed from it.

Piotr laughed. "You always were the unbreakable one, for all my body becomes metal. You belong to the House or are here for training?"

"Belong. I'm Xavier's new bodyguard. In training." Which was a little absurd, because combat and fighting were easy for Erik. Control... was the part he did need the training on, as grueling as it had made his morning.
"Ah!" Piotr grinned at him. "Training with Storm? She can make you more exhausted sitting doing nothing than taking on an Imperial battalion. It is worth it though." He became serious, seeming to see something in his expression. "Erik, I know one thing you should know. This is a good House for Metas. Not just because we train but...it is soon for you to know this but I know you better than others... this is a house that works towards Metas having rights as normals."

That didn't quite sink in. He heard it, yes, but he still needed to see it, needed to know it. "Why? Why does Xavier... want that, care at all?"

"Because he too is a Meta, my friend," Piotr said. "One skilled enough to remain undetected and wise enough to know to force society is to break it. You did not know this?"

"No." Erik shook his head a little, keeping his expression surprised -- and that was honest enough -- but guileless, still. A meta. A meta with a broken spine, or perhaps no legs at all, as Erik hadn't looked in more than a nerve signal manner, with a penchant for finishing Erik's sentences. "No, but I've spent a lot of time in my room, trying to..."

He wasn't even sure what he was trying to do. Keep himself together. *get* himself together?
"Adjust. A lot of things went badly very quickly before I felled the House."

"It is hard yes. I had difficulty," Piotr said. "Thought it was too good to be true, waiting for other cuff to snap." He smiled. "Is not perfect here, but compared to there... yes, very different. There are good peoples here, each with bad stories." He looked at him with that still innocent gaze. "You are wondering how to trust yes?"

"Yes." And Illyana's death was on the tip of his tongue, something he needed to say, needed to share, because it was *Piotr*, long gone, yes, but that didn't mean he didn't care. He might've already known. Might. "And I might. With time. There are things you need to know, once I'm sure this place is.... truly safe."

"I know you trust with difficulty, and perhaps I trust too easily," Piotr said. "I can only tell you that Master Xavier has been trustworthy to me. He has made mistakes, but he has apologized and tried to fix that which he could. If you are to be his Personal, there are many here that would see that as an honor."

"I don't doubt they would." They all seemed quite devoted to him, but if the man was a telepath, well. Well. Erik decidedly needed a little clarity of mind before he pressed things much further. "Why don't you tell me about what you have been doing here..."

Things got a little busy over the next few days for Charles, as he tried to track down exactly what the Emperor was up to by attending some of the social events the Court demanded and getting close enough to try and read some of the known sympathizers minds. Unfortunately without a Personal, he could not really attend a full session at Court, so his efforts were slightly unsatisfying. Rumors and speculation were high. More than one House head mentally agreed that the gift of Magneto was the proverbial poison chalice.

What disturbed him was the thought that perhaps it was a little too obvious a ploy. Certainly it smacked of desperation, and lacked the subtly he was used to in dealing with the Imperial House, but then with the events involving House Luthor and House Wayne and the almost certain formal alliance there, House Rassilon and Emperor Rassilon the IX must be feeling a little unsettled. Some-time soon Wayne and Luthor would be trying to push through the motion of Adoptive Heirs through the Imperial Court, and that would shake the foundations of their society.
After all this politics he was actually looking forward to his chess game with Erik. Up until the point he realized that there was a white noise where Erik's mind usually was throwing out random clues to him of his thoughts.

"You're quiet today." Erik tilted his head, and gave the board a faint jostle, as if to remind Charles that it was his turn to start. Nothing, not the usual ebb and flow of spilling over emotions that ran off of Erik. The tilt of his head came with a glint, though, just barely touching his temple on the side Charles could see without openly craning his head to look at the other side. Metal, and disappearing back into his hair.

"I have had a… frustrating few days," Charles said. "I am afraid it occupies my thoughts a little. How goes your training with Storm?" He wasn't sure whether to mention anything. Perhaps he should not because if he queried him now it would be obvious he had been reading the louder thoughts of Erik's mind.

And Erik was naturally a little on the loud side, mentally. Strong emotions, strong thoughts, and now it was obvious how much he'd been using that as a crutch in their interactions. He watched Erik's eyebrows go up. "Well enough. Exhausting, if I'm honest about it. But, I've found another fellow former member of House Radim here." There was a pause, and Erik added, "and, you knew that."

"Ah, I wondered when you might discover Colossus," Charles replied, pleased that Erik had finally stopped holing up in his room. "I was not sure if it would give you bad memories or provide comfort."

So, while he'd been gone, Erik had ventured out a little. It was a start. Eventually he'd have to train Erik enough to be able to *take* him to Court as his Personal, but there was no way to gauge Erik's progress with the white noise.

Well, not the usual way. "A little of both. And Kitty also survived the Camps. Which... you knew. They're both much easier to have a conversation with than Wolverine."

"Most people are," Charles said. "But I learn a lot from Wolverine's instinctive reaction to someone. Whether he knows it or not, it is one of the most reliable indicators of potential danger I know." He smiled a little. "He probably wouldn't appreciate knowing that though."

"So, am I a potential danger?" Erik glanced at the chess board, and occasionally, Charles wasn't even sure why he bothered setting it up because it was only a *thin* excuse to sit Erik down and talk to him.

"Did Wolverine try to spit you on his claws?" Charles asked rhetorically. It was actually rather refreshing to talk to someone and not be assaulted by memories. "Not as much as perhaps I was led to believe," he answered frankly as he moved a piece.

"There was a great deal of posturing on both our parts, but no." Erik moved out the queen's knight, eyeing the board.

"Then you are not likely to immediately implode," Charles said complacently, watching the board. "Posturing is practically the daily ritual at Westchester. So how was your discussion with Piotr and Shadowcat?"

"Kitty was not wholly annoying, and it was good to trade news and information with Piotr. He seems to be doing well here. He trusts you." Erik was watching him, always watching him, as if he could read minds, too. It was hard to tell what was passing through his mind, though. "Knowing
Piotr as I did, his opinion holds a great deal of weight to me."

Charles raised his eyebrows a little. He didn't have to be a telepath to read the angling that Erik was doing. He moved his queen up beside the pawn. "Do you trust me Erik?"

"I might. I'm not so sure, now, if you think that I'm going to lose to the same move as last time we played. How bad *was* the Court, for you to be this distracted?" He folded his arms over his chest, peering hard at the board as if it would help him work out a way to not lose this time.

"They were minor events, but there is word that the House Wayne and House Luthor are consolidating their Alliance and will be presenting their case for legal Adoptive Heirs shortly," Charles said freely enough. "Did you follow the politics of what occurred?"

"Yes. As much as I can, from a distance. The question is, who is the heir they've already decided on. One does not push for a change like that in a vacuum." Erik moved a pawn from the far side forward with a twitch of his powers, not threatening the queen like he had the last time. Not yet.

"No." Charles exhaled. "It could get difficult. It makes it difficult to push for reform on the Metahuman Dictates when this is muddying the waters. But, I heard rumours that the Wayne Meta, Kal-El has made some public symbolic gestures... there was something in Vegas some time back in front of an Imperial judge no less. And yet, they were not called to task."

"Huh. Well, Kal-El is... compliant, agreeable, and quite in line with what the Imperials expect otherwise." There was a glint of something in Erik's eyes that he couldn't read, almost a wolfish look. "Which means it's a ploy. How long, do you think, until House Rassilon falls, and we have Emperor Wayne?"

"And that is exactly the problem," Charles said. "Kal-El is young though, and coincidentally House Wayne has submitted requests for Meta training where they have not before."

"And you don't know why. All that mindreading, and you came back with nothing." Erik nudged the board gently again. "It's your move. Still."

Charles smiled a little. Ah, he'd finally come out with it. Stating it as if he actually knew. He made his next move. "I wondered when you would finally come out and say what you were thinking. You've been trying to give me enough rope to hang myself with yes?"

"It didn't work," Erik pointed out, looking at him rather than the board. "Piotr is... very trusting, and very poor at keeping secrets, you see. Always has been."

"It is not exactly a secret with House walls for those bonded to House Xavier. I presume he asked that first?" Charles asked rhetorically. "I believe in letting people find their own way to the truth."

"I'm sure you do." He watched Erik glance down to the board, making a move that gave his queen somewhat more protection, but still not pressing an attack yet.

"Erik..." Charles said softly. "You can ask questions, you know. I will not lie to you. I have not yet lied to you and I intend not to do so."

"I don't know what I want to ask." Erik leaned back in the chair, generally a sign that he was relaxed, but uncomfortable at the same time. It was an odd emotion at the best of times, and now Charles had only white noise.

"I know that you have a fear and hatred of psionics," he answered as he made his counter move. "No doubt well founded."
"Nothing like not being sure if what you're experiencing, feeling, or if your *reality* is actually real." Erik lifted his eyebrows. "Now that I'm blocking you, nothing has changed."

"That is because I do not believe in *invading* a mind," Charles said. The pieces were there and he could not hold back from the truth. "Erik, I am a very strong telepath. Strong enough to protect my secret even at the highest levels. I am a meta-human, but my manifestation happened at a point where I became strong enough to be unnoticed and ensure I stayed that way. I deliberately made House Xavier into a Meta specialist, because there but for the grace of god is my life."

"God has very little to do with it." Erik shifted a piece, but it was clear he wasn't paying attention to the game. "So you've created a haven for metas, within the rules. I can appreciate that."

"With a view to changing those rules. To building an acceptance in our society," Charles said. "To have the same rights as normals, to realize we are all human." He stopped a moment. "I am sorry, it is something I feel passionately about."

He watched Erik's eyes flick between him and the board, and then he reached up to the back of his head, pulling the band loose. All at once, he felt that now familiar overflow, spikes of emotion from Erik. Erik felt confused. "I hope you manage to do it someday. I'd like to do what I can to help."

"Will you let me help you?" Charles asked, reaching to touch Erik's hand. "I can help you if you let me into your mind."

"How?" There was a little feeling of unease at the suggestion, but Erik's expression was still curious, and skin against his hand garnered a completely different series of emotions.

"By working through things with you. Protecting you from the traps in your own mind," Charles explained. "A change wrought by a telepath is...well it requires immense energy to sustain, and then it crumbles. One thing I am sure we will find is the shattered constructs of false memories."

There was conflict in Erik, but he finally answered, "I will let you." Not that it was actually a let, but Erik did have at least a defense against him.

"Thank you. Incidentally, I am very intrigued by your blocker," Charles said hoping to make Erik relax a little more. "It is...very restful to me."

While it did deprive him of the crutches he was using to interact with Erik, it was possibly the closest to normal interaction with another person he'd had in some time. "That's good to know. I'm only going to be taking it off at your request." So, it wasn’t just *him* Erik was worried about when it came to telepaths.

"I would be interested in how you make them. It would give some of our Meta's protection against psionic rogues if we are contracted to deal with them," Charles said. "I am honored though, that you trust me to that point."

The man was responding to the openness of the discussion.

"I put it together out of mineral scraps from the workrooms. I think I can make a few more," Erik offered agreeing. Give him a purpose, all he needed was a purpose, all he *thought* he needed was a purpose, but he was contact starved, and Charles still had a hand on the back of his. *Never going to do more than that, as long as he looks at me like I'm ready to crack.*

Time for the thought experience then. "Erik, I would very much like to enter your mind, and let you have access to mine. May I do that?" Other Masters would have taken it as their right, as Bond-
slaves were property, but Charles was not like them. At least he kept telling himself that.

He had to draw lines, because he could have been chattel, the same as they were. The reciprocal part of the offer seemed to catch Erik's interest. "Yes."

He didn't need to hold onto Erik's hand but he did so never the less and spun them both into a mindscape of a hill in sunshine, looking out over lands beneath them. Welcome to the world of the psychic he said standing strong on his own two feet here. This is part of my mind.

Erik was looking around, staring a little, eyes wide as he looked over at Charles. It feels solid. And yet wasn't, which as part of the illusion, the danger, the adventure. This is beautiful.

A place I remember he said. Where I was happy once, thinking I would go to the British Empire to be with Moira... I was very young, and very foolish and this was a hill in the Scottish Homelands.

He had been going to propose. He had been full of excitement and anticipation and the world seemed open and wonderful to him.

He'd had his accident not long after, and Moira had sidestepped into someone else's arms. He'd been heartbroken, and the timing couldn't have been worse for him, personally. Newly crippled *and* alone, cut adrift.

Scotland. Does it still look like this?

Perhaps. Getting there now would be difficult, Charles replied. He gestured and the sky faded into a different view And now we look into your mind from the safety of mine.

I have very few good memories. But, Erik was trying, even if the images moved unsteadily past, flickering fast -- a house, a nice European row house, and a man with white hair and a beard showing a white haired boy how to make necklace chain by hand. There were other people in the memory, as background noise, happy normal circumstances. A girl entering the scene changed the memory, and it shifted to an old farmhouse and someone knocking on a door. The girl had changed into a woman, and there was a man behind her. They were poor, but happy, from the memory, but then it skipped again, sliding along to a House Complex in flames.

"A House War or the Great War?" Charles asked, his avatar-self encouraging Erik to sit on the grass with him.

Erik sat down, legs pulled up so he could rest his arms on them. "Great war. We were freemen, but affiliated to a governmental house. My father was a bureaucrat, and my uncle was a freeman jeweler. My uncle was executed when we were in the containment ghetto for smuggling. My father and mother were gassed in the camps. My sister was a camp whore. We both survived."

"Is your sister still alive?" Charles sensed something flickering there in the touch of their thoughts.

"Yes. I saw her after I destroyed the House. She's safe." Safe and something more, and the thing of it was that the mind free associated, but still flashes, all of Erik's memories intertwined almost painfully. There were two little children, barely past babies, added to Erik's sister's two, and they didn't look much like her or her husband. The boy had white hair, and the girl had bright, bright eyes. And then that image of another young woman getting her throat slit, seen from a ground position, and almost as if Erik realized what was going across the screen it shifted, violently, to the monotony of camps.

He put an arm around him to steady the other man. The children were important to him, he could tell that much. "Tell me why people believe you are a trap for me, Erik."
I think you’re going about it all wrong. We’re *not* human -- we’re *better* than human. And there’s more of us every day. Erik leaned into Charles, a little stiffly. I don’t obey orders, I won’t do what you tell me to unless it suits me, and when I lose my focus, I want to do things with my powers that defy sanity. And they’re easy for me.

Ah. Honest enough. That way lies disaster, Erik, he said softly. Perhaps you have to be a telepath to see it, to know why. We have power yes. I have power you have no idea about. You say we are superior, but it is not being superior, it is being different that is the crux of the matter. Look at your memories. That is what difference does.

They first time they wanted me dead was because I was Jewish. And we didn't fight back, we didn't, we thought it would blow over, go away, that we’d be safe in our enclaves and our Houses and we *weren't*. It hurt to feel, old rage and misery, and shutter fast images of the camps, men with shaved heads and bodies slowly turning skeletal, and bodies. Erik processed bodies, pulled out teeth, and then that image was gone, too, and all he could see past the hill they were sitting on as pits of burning bodies. We all went up in smoke. And in the accounting, those of us who survived were given over to the Russian Houses. For the crime of... I don’t know. Not dying sooner. I don’t know.

You have a lot of rage in you, Charles said. Righteous rage. What happened to you and the others was terrible, Erik.

You talk about it like it’s gone and over. Like because the chimneys were blown up we can all just move on and forget it. Erik couldn't forget it, couldn't move past it, and that with his manifestation as a meta paired together, forever linked for him.

I do not expect you to forget it, Charles said gently. But you can move past it, move forward. You need to stop it shaping everything you do. You can look at it and stop giving the memories your strength and energy. That is the best way of winning.

He could subtly loosen the choke hold grip of the memories, not eradicate them, though he could do that, he had the ability, but that would make Erik... not Erik.

It wasn't something he was particularly interested in doing, no matter how suspicious of telepaths Erik was.

The fires were still burning, and he could see down by the pit, a young man who looked like Erik following orders, stirring the bodies around. There was a good chance that he'd never forgiven himself for what he'd done to survive.

I don't know how. He felt Erik try to shove the memories away, the mix of pain and shame palpable, but it slid over to House Radim, Erik on his knees, a man with a whip standing in front of him. Charles could almost feel the ropes tying his wrists to his ankles behind his back, the memory that sharp still. Erik tried to slide that memory away, as well, panic fast.

No Erik, he said and then brought his mind to bear, pulling Erik out of the memory so he could observe, but not relive as if he was there. Do not push it away. Face it. Show it does not control you, but you control it. The memory was still there, freeze framed in front of them. We can stop at any time.

Erik grimaced, shoulders tightening as he looked at the stuck moment. I don’t know what good this is going to do. It was just one of many punishments.

Then why did this come to mind? Charles asked. What had happened? It was important that Erik
regain control over his memories, that was the key. Right now, he avoided them, repressed them and that made them uncontrollable. I want you to look and observe, take control of what you want to see, not push it away.

He could do that for him, but no, that was not what was needed. It was a rebuilding. Erik inhaled, unsteady. I proxied for as many of the younger Metas as I could manage. Took their punishments in lieu of. I was punished for blocking their... development with the proxying, but the House didn't stop me. Erik focused on the picture, and it shifted a little, but wasn't live. Mastermind was always there. I lashed out, attacked, escaped, over and over in my mind while this happened. None of it was real. And he remembered, in that vague shattered way the escape attempts and attacks that hadn't been real.

Charles remembered with him, looking at them, feeling the edges of them, the hint of manipulation. That, he could help with. File them out of the way of real memories, unclutter and tidy it up to make them less confused. He created an area, gave it the appearance of a door, and literally caught the loose false memories, and filed them away. 

You will feel much more clear-headed when these are not cluttering up your recall. They are still here, but they won't mingle with real memories when you remember. Now, why did you protect them? Why did you proxy Erik?

Because they hadn't done anything wrong. It was an oddly complex statement, for six words, tied up in concern and worry and frustration for Erik.

But then, neither had you, Charles said still maintaining a close grip on him, absently helping to tidy and structure the memories rather than alter them. Why you instead of them?

When you're already in hell, why not do what you can to keep other people out? The image didn't change, but Charles could feel the thoughts below it, the lingering memories of the Camp. He'd been experimented on, Charles could feel, until someone had gotten bored and thrown Erik into the work-force to die there with the rest of them. He could feel Erik's knee ache with the memory. Oddly, it wasn't among the sharper memories that seemed to fight for Erik's attention. He'd made his peace with it, and moved on.

Oddly, it wasn't among the sharper memories that seemed to fight for Erik's attention. He'd made his peace with it, and moved on.

Charles concentrated and the faces of the figures in the memory changed, their appearance, but the actions remained the same. If you observe the event of what happened, and they are not you, what do think and feel? I see... a brave courageous man, a hero doing his best in impossible circumstance. No need to feel shame or guilt...

He could let Erik actually see and feel that he was telling the truth. It was a powerful tool in healing.

I couldn't get them out of there. Everything I tried, it wasn't enough. Erik was only half looking at the image, more of his attention on Charles now.

But you did try. Most people did not, Charles answered. Erik, you need to understand that there was no way that would have magically made everything you went through null and void. You were trapped by the insanity around you.

I didn't want to make it null and void. I wanted the people I cared about to *not* die again.

Charles could feel the rawness underneath that sentiment and let the memory he was holding go, letting Erik form his own images again from his subconscious.
Losing people we love is hard, he said.

They were fast flickers of pictures, the young woman with her throat being slit, again, a horror Erik wasn't inclined to let go of, and then years earlier, younger, the girl, blond and pretty and standing beside Piotr, grinning almost maniacally, and then it shifted to Erik's sister again, and then, almost very carefully to nothing at all.

It seemed to take Erik quite a bit of effort to keep the pictures from playing out, and Charles could feel the strain.

Piotr's sister? Charles said sure that the darkness held something. He didn't push it though, it would take many sessions to work through all of this.

She's dead. I haven't told him. I suppose he guesses as much. I promised to keep her safe. It wasn't... love, it didn't feel like love. It felt like friendship and sadness tangled together, failed obligation and failed friendship.

Charles brought the memory of Illyana back, intending to use it as a tool, already anticipating Erik's rejection of facing the issue. As he mentally handled it, he paused. Wait, this feels..

Wrong. It felt wrong and it was subtle as if a grandmaster had been forged and the merest hint of a wrong shade in a tiny area triggered suspicion. He started probing the memory Erik, I need you to see if you can remember a bit before, the run up to this moment

Erik's shoulders shifted, tensed, but he did, playing it back more hazily. Illyana was bound, and being held upright, forced to watch while Erik took punishment for... Erik couldn't actually remember what. It felt so very bog standard, in Erik's perceptions, and there was the texture of masking. Some-thing else had gone on.

Charles stood and froze the images as it filled the sky in front of them shed some of his harmless presentation This has been tampered with he said. By a very skilled expert. I am going to try and break the block. Clever, it has been designed to repeat to reinforce itself over years.

I saw her die. Yes and no. Erik sat up a little taller, staring at the image as Charles started to care-fully disassemble it.

Perhaps, Charles agreed. Or perhaps not. I am sorry, this may hurt. The tampering had a taste of age and dark power and he put his mind to it and grasped at the image, tearing down the surface like he was ripping away a paper covering to reveal what was beneath. It was enough to prove that things had not be the same as they were presented.

It had started as a normal punishment, yes, but it looked like he'd seen Illyana being pulled into a rift, which was very different than just death. A rift in space and time... to here? The edges looked familiar to him.

There was another figure there in the shadows, one missing from the original scene and he paused everything to touch the memories of that rip directly, to *feel* what they were, to hear the noise and sensations that Erik was most likely unaware of. Immediately the two of them were spinning in dark-ness, falling and tumbling until he had the presence of might to give himself wings and grab Erik. Home. Wake

He blinked himself, hand shaking as he heart pounded. "That...was unexpected."

Erik looked and felt deeply shaken, and he felt the outreach of What was that? in his mind, clear and crisp and well formed, even though Erik was pulling his hand back from Charles, moving to
almost hesitantly put the band back in place around the back of his head.

"That was... Limbo. Otherplace some cultures call it. Illyana is not dead Erik, she is in Limbo, Charles replied massaging his temples. The effort had been unplanned for and had left him with a headache.

"How?" He could feel a little surge from Erik, before he shielded himself again, back to white noise and... yes. Yes, Charles could find that quite acceptable, because it did ease his headache a little to not have to interact with Erik on two levels at the same time.

"I do not know. I suspect a Meta ability but I am not sure if it was hers or another’s..." Charles answered. "I cannot guarantee what happened next, but she did not die then."

"Then there is still hope." Erik was still shaking, and he looked over his shoulder for a moment. "This is usually when Jean comes in to run me off for wasting your time."

Charles laughed. "It's usually because I have been neglecting my work. I think we need a break, a nice drink of something to steady our nerves. What would you like?"

"I don't know." Erik stood up, though, walking over to the small wet bar in the corner. "What do you drink?"

"Now I think a good cognac would help me relax." Just enough to make him relax but not enough to get drunk. "Feel free to help yourself to anything you would like."

He watched Erik pick up two glasses, checking over the labels on the cognacs before he selected one to pour. More for Charles than for himself, and he stoppered the bottle before coming back to Charles. "This should help. I know I'm poor material for a Personal, but I do know massage." It sounded like an offer.

"Do you want to?" Charles asked mildly surprised. "A massage from a willing novice is by far preferable to an expert who is bored to tears."

Erik took a swig from the glass, and set it on the side table. "I can't fix anything in your head, but I can at least ease your headache." And it wasn't entirely altruistic, Charles as willing to guess, because Erik wanted touch, wanted *to* touch. This was a fine place to start, hands light at the sides of his head.

"As Logan would say, knock yourself out," Charles murmured. "I will enjoy something relaxing."

He closed his eyes, and just trusted Erik. It felt good, rubbing at his temples and then back, Erik's thumbs focusing at the base of his neck and just to the sides, working in small circles that were slowly starting to ease the tension.

He had been getting complacent. He needed to stretch himself a little more. A Meta who could do that... no, he needed to start training himself again. He kept putting it off because he was so busy, but he needed it all the more for that reason.

"That is good."

"Good." Erik sounded amused, and was only moving on through each muscle group slowly, moving down Charles' neck. He stopped, reached around to loosen Charles's necktie, because it was going to be in the way shortly.

"I would do the same to you if I weren't melting here," Charles said. He liked the thought of seeing
Erik unraveling in front of him.

Maybe... soon. He needed to be able to take Erik to court functions, just to get into them again himself. But he needed to work on *Erik*, first, Erik's stability, before he worried about the trappings of Court and whatever the Emperor thought gifting Erik to him would achieve. "Melting is a good look on you." And felt better, strong hands sliding beneath the neckline of his shirt, pushing his suit jacket off of his shoulders to rub the ache out of them. Not a professional, no, but very good at it. Good enough.

"How are you feeling after our session?" he asked closing his eyes a little. "Do you want me to continue to help?"

"Yes. It's not... comfortable, but I think it's necessary." Good, that was good to hear. Erik slid a hand down the front of Charles's shirt, pressed flat against his pectoral to steady him while he pressed at a knot of muscle to the side of his shoulderblade that hurt to touch, at first. "Who knows what other secrets are lurking in there, unknown to me?"

"We all have them," he answered. "Mmm, ow, that's sore just there."

Erik did not verbalise but the impression of ‘what did you expect?’ was undeniable and then interrupted by a rumble from the man’s stomach.

Charles smiled, amused and pleased as that was often an indication that someone was relaxing. "We should perhaps have a proper dinner. I know you have been scavenging from the refrigerators."

After weeks of that, Charles would've been tired of it, but Erik seemed content with the arrangement. "It's been decent scavenging," Erik drawled, shifting sides. The other side hurt less, but was still tense, and then Erik started to work back up his neck. "But if you want a proper dinner, all right."

Charles smiled as he relaxed. One advantage of being a Master of a Great House and a telepath meant he knew exactly what Erik would be in the mood to eat.

Jean had given him looks in the kitchen.

He wasn't sure if she was giving him looks because his mind was suddenly completely unreadable, or because he was fetching dinner for two to bring back to Xavier's quarters. Or both. Erik didn't care either way, because he was still a little caught up in the fact that Illyana wasn't dead, she was just... elsewhere. A very disturbing elsewhere. But alive, or at least she had been. The fact that Charles had been so disturbed by the sight told Erik what he needed to know about the direness of the situation.

Well, he situation that *had* been. Past tense, and Erik couldn't effect it, no matter how much parts of him wanted to. And couldn't.

Setting the table, pouring the wine was easy, low stress compared to House Radim, and it was partially because Charles wasn't... quite the physical threat he was used to having to handle. Wheelchair, hoverchair bound made for a different sort of interaction for Erik.

There was a sort of implicit feeling that he could physically escape or do something if he needed to do so. The food was a cut above the average and this was almost like an intimate quiet date than something formal. Perhaps Charles really did like his company.
Talking with Charles wasn't a problem -- he was exceedingly intelligent, very easy to interact with, even if he was occasionally probing. Erik was trying to meet it with as much honesty as he could muster, because that lingering feeling that House Xavier was his last chance, unless he went rogue and stayed that way, hadn't left after he'd put the blocker in place. It was a gut instinct, then, and his gut instincts were usually correct.

So, it was here or on the run again. There was no reason for him to *not* try very hard.

"Please sit, eat before it goes cold," Charles said. "I find myself somewhat peckish."

"This is why I usually scavenge," Erik pointed out, finally sitting down. "I can do five other things if I'm not sitting down for a formal meal."

"Yes, well you deserve better than leftovers, and I believe this is to your taste," Charles said as he looked to his own meal. "I have a weakness for exotic foods."

Erik stared at it for a moment before he worked out what it was, exactly, that had been beneath the covering plate. "Salmon, and couscous." And lemon, and possibly garlic. It smelled delicious, seared very nicely, and Erik wasted a moment working out where to start. "This smells very good."

"Healthy too, at least this course," Charles said. "I thought you might like it."

Food had never been a huge consideration for him, above getting enough of it to survive. He took a bite, chewed slowly, savored it. "It tastes very good. I think I like this quite a bit." The decadence of being able to just sit and enjoy a meal for the sake of it, hungry enough to enjoy the food but not actually feeling *hunger* was definitely a novel experience.

"You need to have more decent food. Besides I enjoy your company and after a session like ours I did not want to have a communal meal." Charles admitted.

"You can't block out the bleedover, can you? It's always there." Erik could at least choose how he saw the world, and when he synched to magnetic fields for visuals, it often came with a feeling of great comfort. He could and had done it for weeks at a time to no ill effect.

"There is a price to be paid for being very good at what I do. I can block but it takes a lot of energy. Some people are louder than others...you, I hear very well when you relax," Charles admitted.

"I can work a little, rough telepathy when I have to." Erik was trying, carefully, to not inhale his food and miss savouring the taste. "It's... tied up in my abilities, part of it. Everything is tied up in magnetic fields. Down to electron bonds in atoms. With time and focus..." He was sure he'd be capable of so much more.

"You have potential to be an Omega class Meta," Charles said thoughtfully, but not shying away from the fact he had essentially declared his capacity to bring ruination on the world. It make him wonder about Charles’ talent. "I wonder if the Emperor knew this."

"I had the potential to be killed with a drug overdose and my body quietly burned," Erik muttered, scraping couscous into a little pile to get it onto his fork. "If he knew, why would he just turn me over, free of charge?"

"Because he believes you will destroy me," Charles said calmly, eating a mouthful of a just perfectly cooked salmon fillet.
"Based on...? My unwillingness to play along with the Imperials? That I nearly felled Kal-El?" If he was such a risk, such a danger, why let him *out* again? Not that he was going to argue. He already had a tool to use against psionics that he hadn't had before, more subtle than the helmet, more functional, it felt like and he was still working on perfecting it.

"Either," he said. "Or, more disconcertingly the thought has occurred to me that you are being used as an obvious distraction so I believe you are the danger when he is preparing it to strike from elsewhere."

That was more likely. "Yes, distract you with the shiny new unhinged meta to repair and train," Erik drawled, tidily polishing off his plate. "The question is, is it a threat from the court, political, or physical?"

"With the Emperor, we have to assume all angles have been covered," Charles replied. "I have been useful to him, but now I represent a threat because my power base of Meta has increased dramatically. If I accede to the opportunity of House Wayne to train Kal-El, he will no doubt see that as a power bloc against him...or perhaps just my known pro-meta stance is enough to consider me allied with Luthor and Wayne. If his authority is challenged then we could end in the first Great Coup attempt in... well I believe the last was 1842."

"You need to be able to return to court and find out what they're thinking." Which was an unethical situation, but it was a tool to be used. And if it protected people like Kitty and Piotr, well.

"I do. But to do that, I need a Personal... in appearance, if not in mind," he said. "I cannot attend the full court without one due to the Emperor's adherence to the old traditions. Much of the information is exchanged between Personals."

"I thought I'd already agreed to that." At least, in his own dodging way of agreeing to anything. Not wanting to say the words directly made it no less binding.

"It will involve polishing of manners. The Imperial court has strict codes," Charles replied sounding like he was picking his words carefully. "But possibly of a different type to the Russians. Even so, often Personals are required to perform, and in ways that I suspect would not be to your liking."

"I won't ever *not* find that aspect distasteful," Erik pointed out, "but I can play act when I have to. Manners... I can work on. I can learn the codes."

"Is there a means of making your blocker permeable to only one thought pattern? It would be useful to have a means of bespeaking your privately at court," Charles commented.

He had to think about it for a moment. "I think I could. I think I *can*," Erik corrected, because the little tenses mattered between would he and wouldn't he. "I'll tinker with it over the next few days."

"That would be very useful," Charles said agreeably. "Particularly if it can be adapted for combat situation. Our greatest vulnerability for most of our powerful Metas is a psionic attack. There are one or two with resistance, or natural barriers but not enough."

Somehow it was difficult to think of Charles in the same league as the Masters of the Houses he had been attached to in the past. They seemed to be of a certain type, arrogant, cruel, uncompromising wielding the power of life and death over their bond-slaves with the same level of empathy as someone swatting flies. By all common wisdom, he should have been mowed down by tougher houses and yet here he was, a leader of a Great House of the Imperial Court of the most
powerful Empire in the world, indulging in intrigue with the Emperor himself.

And he was putting up with what Erik was willing to admit was a very high level of argumentativeness and disrespect, given what other Masters weren't willing to put up with and would bring down public punishments, or in House correction. Even in the Empire of the United States those consequences still applied. "My helmet was designed for combat, and it's quite a bit more complicated than what I'm using now. I don't think this design is combat ready, in fact, but I can *make* it so." He'd only made it because sleeping with the helmet on was bothersome – living day to day *life* with the helmet on was bothersome. "And I can make it so you're the only one who can get past it, if you want. Of course, if someone were able to mimic your thought patterns... we're probably already in trouble if that happens."

"I will ensure you have the elements you require to make them," Charles answered. "Don't let your dinner go cold. I still want you to continue your lessons with Storm though. She has a great deal of skill. Many of my Xavier House Meta's are exceptional in what they can do with their talent. House Genosha concentrate primarily on training in destruction – we deal with creativity and flexibility and I believe our record shows this is a longer term success."

"Of course. It won't be a problem. I've been... relatively unscheduled." Which Erik wasn't used to being, and he had a pile of designs to no particular purpose starting to build on the edge of his desk.

"That will alter," Charles said. "I wanted to give you time to feel out your surroundings. Now I wish you to be trained and to work through things. I will spend an hour a day working through your memories, effectively mental house keeping - you will be surprised tomorrow how much clearer your thoughts will feel. I will be specifically working on false memories as well. Storm will work with you on control but we will add combat training in the Danger Room as well. I also want you to attend the House stylists - It is time we got you clothes, toned your body and brought you to the standard of a Personal in appearance if you are going to play the part. You will also need a set of Imperial Court standard cuffs as well."

He cocked an eyebrow at Charles while he started to work through the last of the food on is plate. "Are these standardized, or should I just save House Xavier the time and make them myself?" House Radim had finally used leather on him, out of frustration.

The toning his body thing was... funny. Erik had always been strong and very well muscled, though it wasn't, he supposed, a 'pretty' muscled. Imperial courts were generally considered insane for a reason, though, and far be it for Erik to argue with fashion when he had no sense of it.

"Right now, making them yourself will be most useful," Charles replied and smiled a little. "From the faces you are pulling, stylists are not your choice?" Charles seemed to be finding that amusing.

"I was just thinking about the bizarre nature of the imperial court that as strong as I am, it's still necessary to 'tone' my body? As for the rest, it's probably for the best if someone else makes my choices. Afterall, my costume is dark red and purple. I've been told many... any times that I can't cast stones there."

Charles smiled. "It'll be the cutting of hair, dehairing of other areas, compulsory sunbed sessions and cruel and unusual massage that will be needed in your case. As well as fashion advice. Not that I am one to talk; I dislike fashion."

Erik gave a low chuckle. "Is that why you seem to have an endless collection of three piece suits?"

"Yes," Charles seemed to brighten when he laughed and that was interesting. Perhaps he was interested in him a little after all. "I have an urge to give instructions to see how you look in glitter
"You'll probably regret that urge more than I would. I don't think it would work well." Erik was a little too... manly, he felt, to carry that off well.

"Perhaps I will declare a House celebration sometime and require everyone to come in glitter. I'm just trying to imagine Wolverine dripping in glitter and glass," Charles said with a definite laugh himself. "Although there are some who would look stunning."

Erik as playing that through his head. "Mostly the women, I think. Possibly the one with the wings, uh, Angel."

"Gambit also, and possibly... hmm Cyclops if he would ever relax enough to enjoy it," Charles answered. "Ah well, it keeps me flexible thinking of things like that. Would you care for dessert?"

"Yes?" He had a bit of a sweet tooth, though it wasn't something that was usually indulged, wasn't something he usually had the opportunity to indulge.

"Would you please bring the dishes over?" Charles asked. "The dessert is over there." He gestured and this was civilized and oddly nice.

"At some point, I'll stop marveling over how nice this is." Erik stood up, tidying up his and Charles's plate and then trading them for the other, smaller covered plates.

"I rather like the look of surprise on your face," Charles said. "I believe you will like this dessert. It can only be described as decadent assuming you like chocolate of course."

"I do, when I've had the occasion to have it." Erik set Charles's plate down first, and then sat down. "I know some of the Metas in Holding thought that going rogue was the... ultimate freedom, where you can do and have anything. But it involved quite a lot of eating squirrels and other small wildlife until we managed to build ourselves up enough to interfere with shipping transports." And now he was the only survivor of that short lived experiment with meta liberation.

"Unfortunately, there are limits imposed by circumstances there. To be unbonded is in our society a prison in itself. You do not have a functioning identity. "Charles said "This is a rum truffle torte, with crushed amaretto biscuits. Incredibly rich."

"I've never seen anything like it," Erik murmured, staring at the plate while he picked up the other fork to start doing away with it. It smelled rich. "I had a functioning identity just fine, until Kal-El put us down like dogs."

"Something, which you might be interested to know, he regrets," Charles said. "He has a strange mind. I cannot push deeply into it, but the thoughts he thinks that are amplified by emotion, well, those I hear. He is a strange young man, oddly innocent and... well, with bleeding heart tendencies."

"It's not something I hold against him. A contract is a contract." Erik shrugged a little as he slid the fork into the torte to take a bite. "I understand he had little choice in the matter."

It was smooth creamy chocolate, with the burn of alcohol and crunch of crumbled biscuit providing a perfect contrast. "He perhaps is more a Slave than most of us and is fully aware of that fact," Charles acknowledged as he took a mouthful. "Mmm, good."

"Mmmhm. " Erik closed his eyes for a moment, just tasting, just enjoying the flavor.
When he opened them, he caught sight of Charles just watching him with a half smile that was very close to being a smirk on his face. In fact, he wasn't sure what that meant. It looked almost flirtatious.

He was rather glad he wasn't a mind-reader, because it would have spoiled the question to the thought, knowing. Then again, Charles was functioning blind as well. It was a shame he was shit at flirting back. "I suppose footsie's out."

Charles laughed instead of being insulted by his reference to his disability. "Yes, unfortunately you'll have to find other means of expressing an interest. If you are interested."

"I'm interested." With caveats, which Charles probably understood better than Erik did, if he trusted him.

"Then perhaps you would like to go a step further tonight?" Charles asked. "Would that be acceptable?"

"I'd find it very acceptable," Erik murmured, taking another bite of the torte. There was no feeling of pressure, no feeling that he had to do anything.

"Better than the game of chess I was going to suggest," Charles pointed out. He seemed to genuinely want him, which was a chance from people wanting to use him.

"I'm not actually that good at chess. I was starting to wonder why you kept asking me to play," Erik drawled. "Yes, I think it should be much better." Good enough to abandon desert, if he could get away with it.

"Will you take off the blocker?" Charles asked. "I would appreciate it if you would."

He didn't bother to answer that with words - it as far easier to reach up and take it off, setting it on the table, trying to not think *too* loudly at Charles. "Is your headache from earlier better?"

"Yes, much better," Charles replied. "You can play mental footsie if you like." It was an invitation of sorts, one he could appreciate.

The edge of Erik's mouth pulled up in a smirk. "Well, that's new. I'm not sure where to start?"

"Speculate and I'll hear," Charles said. "And you can finish dessert and start foreplay at the same time."

"That's novel." It honestly was. Erik swept up another careful forkful, taking his time, and pulling up and discarding a few ideas that Charles probably actually witnessed, because Erik immediately went to full on sex, except that wasn't where one started. He had to rewind his mind a little and, well, imagine ideal conditions. Getting Charles out of that suit, out of that *chair* that he wore like a piece of armor.

"Have you thought about this before Erik?" Charles asked with a faint laugh. "You seem to have some ideas lurking."

"I've had a lot of freetime on my hands." Erik felt a little heat rising on his face. "A *lot*."

"I am flattered," Charles answered. "I can feel arousal as well...show me more."

"Well, that's good to hear. Out of curiosity, what..." There had to be a way to phrase that which wasn't offensive, but Erik as at a loss, because it boiled down to what *worked*. But the more
immediate fantasy thoughts were less concerned with that, and more concerned with touching, with kissing Charles, leaning into him somewhere comfortable, kissing him and trying to seduce him with touch.

"Mmm, I am functional," he replied catching the edge of his thought no doubt. "But in terms of pleasure, that happens in the brain so... I do not suffer from the lack of pleasure."

"No, I suppose not." Except Erik couldn't quite manage a coherent fantasy thought, mostly because he wanted to *do* what he was thinking, which was generally the whole point of thinking it in the first place.

Well, damn the last of dessert anyway. On an impulse, not even a thought, he stood up and moved around the table to kiss Charles.

It was a good kiss, tasting of smooth chocolate and rum making their lips burn. There was no frenetic fuck or die feeling in the contact, no desperation, just a calm want and desire. *Time to go to bed I believe* Charles said mentally.

*Yes. Please.* It felt good, and broke the kiss only slowly, inhaling slowly as he lingered close. It was an awkward position, bent over like that, but felt good, easy and just... warm.

Could it really be that *simple*?

*Yes Erik, it can be that simple* Charles said in a soft voice in his mind. *Pick me up please, it is easier that driving and I feel in a hurry.*

It was easier than it seemed, touching the hover chair, finding the latch on the front, and then sliding an arm behind Charles's knees, another behind his back as he carefully lifted him out. He felt very solid, and the muscles in his arms were impressive when he slid one over Erik's shoulders to steady he process. *Just tell me where to go.*

*This way* Charles said showing him a route. It was not far from his study and library which made sense. Charles would not want to travel far.

Just out of convenience, if nothing else. It didn't make sense for him to go upstairs, and pushing the door open, sliding the locks gently open was easy. If they passed anyone in the hallway, Erik didn't particularly call.

No one apparently was around which was good and Charles was holding onto him with a surprisingly strong grip. His room was large and the bed was practically palatial, if harking back to the days of yore by being a four poster. *The posts are very practical for me,* Charles said.

*I'm sure they are.* Except wood, not the most sturdy of things, and that was Erik's bias speaking. He set Charles down carefully on the side of the bed that seemed to be occupied, and leaned in to pick up where they'd left off in the other room. Just kissing, just a start, but in a location where things could go as far as needed.

Here Charles seemed less reserved. He responded to the kissing with less hesitation and his hands which were smooth and slender slid over his skin in that way he just could not ignore. No one touched him except to hurt him, his body had that beaten into it, but now... here it was, something rare and precious. A touch for pleasure, for comfort and need.

Not... not even need, so much as want. He wanted, and he was allowed to want. Erik didn't break the kisses, didn't stop the contact, just pulled back enough to make a poor stutter start attempt at getting his shirt off, at getting *Charles* shirt off, because hands between fabric and skin usually
indicated fabric needed to go.

Charles was chuckling in his head as he made progress in removing Erik's shirt. *It strikes me that wearing something with metal buttons would have been more practical for tonight*

The tiny plastic buttons were a challenge, but he could at least slide Charles' zipper down, doing away the top button with the same ease, though he didn't go further. *That doesn't guarantee finesse. Finesse is not always to my taste,* Charles said kissing him back. *You really do have remarkable eyes Erik.*

Strangely that seemed like a sincere fascination from the other man. Very few had praised his physical form for anything save fighting.

It was hard to not feel a little, briefly, taken aback, and he didn't really have an answer for that. Erik finally got Charles's shirt open, the suit coat somewhere on the floor where it belonged, and he could touch warm skin and muscle rather than just imagine it in the back of his mind.

Charles was touching his scars, exploring them and it made him shiver slightly, but not with cold. "Mmm," Charles murmured and his mind as broadcasting nothing but enjoyment.

It was something of a relief. There were people who expected Erik to be ashamed of his scars, and people who delighted in them for sadistic reasons, but feeling, mentally feeling someone note them and not dwell in any way was... fascinating. With the washes of enjoyment hitting him, it was hard to focus, hard to do more than shiver for a moment before he pulled himself together enough to slide a thumb over Charles's right nipple.

Now that was something Charles seemed to like from his reaction. His nipples were obviously sensitive where his legs were not.

*Yes Erik, more of that,* Charles said to him, tangling one hand into his white hair as reached to steady himself.

Kneeling over his hips seemed to do nothing at all, but that, well, gave Erik a much better idea, helping Charles lean against the pillows and the headboard better while Erik leaned down to slide his tongue over the spot his thumb had been.

The words even in his mind smoothed out into something less articulate when he was touching Charles. It would seem he was in need as well. His hands though stroked up and down his back and over his arms as he licked him, never stopping moving. Just exploring, hands moving back up to toy with Charles's nipples while he kissed a line down the middle of his chest, feeling Charles's hands erratic against the back of his neck, his back. Erik wondered if the other man could orgasm from just that.

Maybe the intensity of sensation had focused in the area's where he could feel. "Yes..." Charles practically hissed and he could feel him lifting as much as he could with his lower torso, trying to ineffectually press against him.

Erik exhaled, feeling that echoing back to him. "You'll put your muscles out of alignment." Spend enough time compensating for ruined joints, and Erik understood those problems. He pulled back a little, a hand still idling at Charles's side, sliding out of his pants. They weren't even his, actually, they were borrowed, part of the communal leftovers from prior metas.

"I don't care..." Charles answered. "I need to feel more..." A glimpse and it was obvious that any sensation there was magnified by being surrounded by a silence of nerves. Charles was not
feigning, he wanted a lot more.

"What do you want?" And if it meshed with Erik's, then that was for the better.

"You. I want you.." he said, flashing images of Erik sucking him, fucking him, anything, rapid fire, and it just made Erik slide out of his clothes faster. "I have an idea. Do you have anything...?" He returned a hazy thought of fucking.

There was an image of the drawer in the beside table next to them. "There, all in there..."he said and the eagerness was there. It was the mechanics that would be the problem, but where there was a will there was a way. He pulled back, watching Charles lean forward unsteadily to start sliding his own pants down. "Good. Right..." In the drawer, well, that was easy.

He managed to get the rather expensive tube of lube - Charles was a Master after all, he had to remember that. Charles was giving him complete leeway if he was interpreting it correctly but he was still the Master of the House. He remembered his basic Personal training. If in doubt, take it slow and easy. Not that Erik ever had done such a thing. But there was a midpoint between something possibly too far and not satisfying enough for either of them. Erik knelt back onto the bed, cold metal against very expensive sheets while he knelt over Charles's hips, leaning in to kiss him again, to get back to the desperation point.

It didn't take long from the way Charles responded. Yes Erik... yes, like that he encouraged. Touch me again.

That was no hardship for Erik. He built back up the stroking touches, made sure Charles was up against the headboard as securely as possible, and then slid a hand between them to palm his dick, just to see the reaction.

There was a reaction - not consistent as if feeling there was not complete but it didn't seem to stop there being a growing erection. From Charles' groan it was evident he was feeling something.

That was good enough, and Erik leaned into Charles a little more, moving his hand to get lubricant on it, while Charles steadied himself against Erik. Just roaming hands, that felt so, so very good, lingering, arousing.

Charles was kissing him, whatever he could reach. It was strange but he didn't have fantasies that felt as good as this. No blood, no violence... just that put it in the top ten.

A kiss to the side of his neck made his hand falter, made his throat catch a little because it sent a jolt right down to his dick, and that was even before he stopped stroking lubricant over Charles's dick to use it on himself.

It was a way of doing things, something to give them both what they might need. Yes Charles was saying mentally Yes Erik, please

Please. He didn't think he'd ever heard that in that context before, or quiet so honestly, and he wasn't together enough for words but he could offer emotion, sensation, what it felt like to slide two fingers into his own ass in hasty preparation. It had been a while, and hasty probably wasn't enough, but he was relaxed and Charles was pressing a hand against the small of his back so it felt like liquid heat was seeping out from the touch. Erik dropped his forehead against Charles's shoulder, trying to adjust to his own fingers before he went further. "Almost, just..."

"Erik..." it was a whisper in his ear, something that reached and touched some withered emotions inside of him and prodded them to uncurl. It wasn't about being Meta's here and now it was about
being men and that was strange and new and exciting in its own way.

It wasn't a feeling he wanted to have go away, and yet. It would, even if he could hold onto that moment that closeness for a very long time, letting it mingle with the desperate want while he tried to get himself just stretched enough. Erik uncurled his fingers, moved his hand to Charles's dick to position himself.

This was the only way Charles would be able to fuck him, if he did the work for him. But that was okay, more than okay he thought as he lowered himself down and heard Charles groan. **tight... hot... so tight** Erik

Tight, yes, Erik could feel that quite well, controlling his breath as he eased himself down, knees on either side of Charles's hips. The angle wasn't perfect, but the closeness felt good, being able to slide his arms around Charles to steady them both while he settled his ass down against Charles's hips. All he could manage was **perfect**, and a mixture of enjoyment, because it felt full but not painful, and he was going to have to control the movement.

Normally someone he did this too would have been bucking and straining, but Charles could not really do that. He wanted to, Erik could tell that but he just couldn't manage it. Still, after he adjusted it was enough reason to set him gently rocking.

Slowly, gently, at first, trying to get himself comfortable with a steadily growing pace, his hard cock pressed against Charles's stomach because he wanted to lean forward, into Charles, and not away, wanted to brace himself on the other man and feel his muscles move, tighten, reading body language.

Charles hands were helping to steady him, hot against his skin, his lower back, and his eyes closed as he arched his upper body with a decadence of indulgence.

It took a while, a couple of minute of moving to fall into a pace, to feel Charles start to respond, to stop holding back while he waited for Charles to respond. Erik kept his eyes open, mostly, watching Charles, leaning in to kiss him, his jaw, his neck, a little distracted to do more than *move*, faster and faster, fucking himself onto Charles's cock.

The urge to keep going grew and he could feel an echo of what Charles was feeling too and that drove him crazy. He had to resist coming because he wanted Charles to come first and that was more difficult. But it seemed like he was getting there.

The wordless urging was hitting a fever pitch.

"Please, please..." So close, so close, and he was on the edge, so close it as frustrating, or maybe that as Charles so close on the edge it was frustrating, an aching urge to come, just...

Climax. Apparently it wasn't subtle in a strong telepath because Charles coming was like someone lighting up the orgasm button in his brain before he actually had come himself and then doubling up on the experience as he couldn't hold back.

The dazed thought that he'd come all over his Master's stomach drifted into his head when he was still leaning on Charles, trying to catch his breath, the other man's softening cock still in his ass. It was almost an uncomfortable position, but he wasn't much inclined to move yet, still chest to chest with Charles.

It struck him that Charles had to be as tall as he was for that to work with any level of comfort for either of them.
It was quite a long time before Charles said, "Well, that was at the least... satisfactory," in a teasing tone.

Erik groaned, and dropped his forehead against Charles's shoulder. "I think my bones disintegrated."

"Not one of my meta abilities," Charles confessed with a smile and a laugh. "It has been a while."

"It has," Erik agreed, inhaling slowly and trying to steel himself for movement -- off of Charles, off of the bed, to find a washcloth to clean up. "No reason for it to be a while again."

"Within recovery times yes," Charles said. "And you said you were not a good Personal."

"Well, when held to the standard of sexy and seductive rather than pragmatic, yes." He shifted, flex-ing his thighs, easing himself up off of Charles's cock, steadying himself with a palm pressed against one of the many sensitive spots on Charles's torso. He'd have to pay closer attention next time, map them all out in his mind.

"Perhaps I enjoy the pragmatic," he said by way of a response. "I do want you to stay though...stay here. I find the presence of another person very comforting."

Erik didn't have to say that he wanted to stay, because Charles had probably already caught the thought sliding across his mind. "I'll be right back." He was still awake and coherent enough to know that he'd regret not cleaning up a little when he woke up in the morning.

And as Charles evidently approved as well, he was going to let himself relax and enjoy having someone there who was no threat to him, who seemed to want to touch him without hurting him and for all his wariness seemed to be as good as promised.

Watching Erik's gradual transformation from a danger to a human being was a source of great pleasure for Charles. He had been expected to treat Erik with distrust and that would have been the spark to ignite the explosive temper that lurked within the man that surely would have been enough to severely weaken the House. Instead Charles had cultivated trust from the moment Erik had been delivered to House Xavier, taking what others would have deemed as unacceptable risks and chances at each point that had paid off. If not for his psionic advantage Charles knew he would never have been in a position to allow that risk so perhaps it was not as obtuse a move by the Emperor as it now appeared.

Erik was now looking healthy, styled with well-fitting clothes. His long white hair was a source of constant delight to Charles, especially as it was surprisingly fine and soft now it had been conditioned and cut. The day Erik had been scrubbed, exfoliated, and beauty spa treated had been a great source of amusement to Charles but the results had been very pleasing, and he had soothed Erik's ruffled feathers with lavish attention and tactile praise of fresh smooth glowing skin. He looked, as Charles knew he would look, completely magnificent.

His training with Storm had come on apace with a level of finesse and creativity appearing in his talent. Charles had very fond memories of day Erik had come back from a session enthused and alive with passion because he’d been able to allow one of his crafted creatures – a dragon this time - to move fluidly and like a living thing because he was able to spot liquify metal in many tiny areas simultaneously, and then have it breathe a glowing plasma magnetic flame. He’d demonstrated it but it had been the aliveness of Magneto that had taken Charles’s breath away and caused the rest of his morning meetings to be cancelled at short notice. Erik now had enough control and resilience that he was now ready to take the next leap in trust with him, getting
Magneto to play nice with others before they went on missions.

Erik had focused on interacting with a very... small group: Charles himself, Storm, Piotr and Kitty. And that was that. He skirted Jean like she was a living hazard, eyed Henry with mild suspicion, and blatantly avoided the rest. He was starting to get accustomed to the *House*, at least, and had taken good interest in the equipment, the generators in particular, more than willing to take on repairs and improvements.

But Charles still needed all of his Metas to be able to function together as a team.

Getting a group to the Danger room for a work out was always a way to break down barriers. Team building in a semi-combat situation was a short cut to team-bonding in a pressurized environment and he needed to test out Erik's reaction under fire. Kal-El's thoughts had projected the images of an out of control half insane Magneto fighting with a brute force rather than strategy and he couldn't risk that with the team. On the other hand, Erik was very, very powerful and would be an immense asset if he could work with others.

Best not to have one team versus another, no, better to run one of the simulation programs.

He had the best view of the house, even as he settled in front of the computer and brought the simulation up. He thought some of the milder, easier personalities would be a better place to start than throwing Erik in with Gambit and Logan quite off the bat, so Jean, Scott, Kurt, Bobby and Kitty as an addition. Jean and Scott would be able to give perfectly articulated opinions on how it had gone after the fact.

He opened the comm-channel to the Danger room. "Your mission will be to subdue and contain where possible a group of Meta-humans hired by a rival House who are conducting a last ditch House War raid. Your priority is to protect incumbent House members, and capture raiders. Understood?"

Protect and capture. Protect and capture. It was very different than many other houses worked, and he suspected that Erik might find a challenge in the line between capture and kill. He watched the opening remarks between the team, watched Erik put his helmet on and seal out the world except for Charles. He looked intimidating, face shielded, mostly hidden.

Remember Erik, Scott is technically the team leader he murmured. This sort of mission was their bread and butter. A last ditch attempt by a House to defend itself from hired Meta's, making it willing to nearly bankrupt themselves to do so because if they lost they would have nothing anyway AND they would most likely be dead.

As far as Charles was concerned, survival and protection was primary.

Fear not, I have no inclinations to lead. And probably no inclination to take direction from Scott, but he seemed amused as he nodded a greeting to Scott. He set the timer, and after three minutes they slid over to a new reality.

Charles had carefully selected the opponents for the Danger Room to generate. The Marauders of House Essex would be a formidable force for this group. Sabretooth for pure strength and ferocity, Sunfire for aerial assault and who would be immune to psionic attack, Riptide who had an organic attack that Erik would not be able just to bounce away, Mystique whose shapechanging ability made it very difficult to know friend from foe and Lady Mastermind, dead in real life but a possible challenge to Jean, and enough of a reminder that this wasn't real to possibly keep Erik grounded with his temper.
It began quite well from his point of view -- a quick tactical discussion, the sensors reading that Erik was reaching behind them and in front of them in a wave, feeling out what threats were ahead while Scott and Jean led the way. Jean was doing the same in her own way, but she was going to miss Sunfire.

Sunfire could also manipulate and store electromagnetism so Erik’s powers would increase his. It was just the sort of thing they needed to strategise and swap out because they would look to Erik to take him on as he could fly.

The terrain they crossed showed a fairly typical House layout. Perimeter, defenses, a complex based town apparently in flames already. Screams of people.

Not a challenge for the rest of the team as far as sequences went, but he needed to see if any of it would trigger Erik. He seemed mission focused, and the team made their first connection - Sabretooth. But part of it was that they couldn't devote all of their resources to one man at a time, they needed to find the others, draw them out.

He was glad to see that Scott was reaching that conclusion, getting Jean to scan for them, getting Bobby to protect civilians from the fire and Kurt to perform rescues. But he was under-utilizing Erik because he was not familiar with his abilities. He tried to take on Sabretooth alone to give Jean time to scan. He watched trying not to intervene, and waiting to see what Erik would do.

Erik, left to his own, didn't wait for direction. It was a shame he wasn't being integrated like Kitty was, who was directed to rescue, to find those who hid in out of the way places with her phasing, but he looked around and headed within the complex towards what was actually one of the population centers, and there was Sunfire headed that way as well. Good, this could be interesting.

Sunfire was the one setting the fires and Jean had not been able to locate him. Charles was intrigued at how Erik manipulated the magnetic fields to fly. From inside Erik’s head it was a smooth innate flexing of thought becoming action. Willing himself to fly and it happened.

Sunfire however saw of felt him coming and Erik had his first battle on his hands as the first beams of energy were sent at him with definite hostile intent.

He threw shields up fast, repelling the first shots of plasma while he pulled himself up to a halt, challenging and not chasing Sunfire any more. Charles watched as Erik threw back energy at the other meta, a blast that looked like ball lightning.

Baiting him. He was baiting him, because he wanted Sunfire closer to get the edge of the energy that fuelled Sunfire's plasma.

Clever. He knew Erik was clever but he had also sensed the violence that lurked underneath and that was what he was testing. The construct Sunfire snatched the ball lightning from the air and absorbed it, laughing, and the response was even more highly charged plasma directed at Erik.

He seized it, holding in abeyance, and that was a question, how much energy could Erik handle, wield at the same time. At what point did his body -- built, to a certain degree, to handle those energies -- start to suffer? Not easy questions to answer for any meta, least of all most of his team.

Sunfire moved to attack again, and Erik had been taking his time, reaching out with his mind, with his abilities, and Charles could feel what he was doing to the simulation, pulling apart the bonds linking Sunfire's self-fueled energy. Like taking a breath and blowing out a candle, Sunfire went *out*, and dropped from the sky. Erik moved past him, past that, energy crackling off of him as he finally set foot to ground and started into the facility.
People to protect, couldn't be bothered ripping Sunfire apart.

A good thing to a certain extent but Meta humans were tricky. He would have to make a note to mention the normal protocol to secure even the unconscious or apparently dead. Metahumans had a disturbing ability to come back. Erik had rejoined the raid and it seemed that Shadowcat was in some sort of trouble from Lady Mastermind. Scott, finally seeming to realize Erik wasn't useless, asked him to try and distract her so Kurt could teleport in and out again. The problem was that it was a layer of illusions and that intriguing, Lady Mastermind had wrapped the illusion of Riptide around one of their own team, Bobby.

And Erik was interacting with the mess like it wasn't going on at all. He was ignoring Bobby and the illusion that was distracting Jean, and headed right for Lady Mastermind, distracting her with a window frame flung at her head.

Charles nodded to himself. The helmet. It really was going to be tactically very sound. That was easy...ah, but there was the real Riptide behind him, whirling out a deadly rain of bone based shards and shuriken. He saw Jean shout, and reach with a shield and Scott turned to blast at Riptide, but having to duck away.

They were hard light holographs, and any damage taken was very real indeed. He watched Erik pivot, and hesitate for a fraction of a second as he felt out the situation and failed to get back anything useful. It was enough time for the first volley to hit, and with pain, Charles felt Erik's temper spike. Teeth gritted, angry, and still streaming with excess energy from Sunfire, Charles could honestly say that yes, his personal looked quite like a madman while he pulled a hand up and flattened Riptide against the wall with a chunk of metal drawn in from outside. That wall was taking a beating.

No worse than when Wolverine and Gambit tried some recreational dueling no doubt. Jean was facing down Lady Mastermind, Bobby was throwing up ice shields, Kitty was rescuing civilians as Scott fought a rearguard on Sabretooth. That wasn’t going to hold the other mutant, and they needed to restrain the others as well.

Riptide was still functional, from what Charles could tell, and Erik seemed to sense the threat as well, still angry, still moving fast -- Charles didn't feel he thought ahead of time, so much as he experienced it live, while Erik reached down and snapped the man's neck in a savage twist before turning his attention to Scott still trying to handle Sabretooth.

He should have secured him, not killed him. A Captured Meta in a House War could tip the account-ing. Everyone was worth more alive. Another note.

Scott was doing well but Sabretooth was not easy to stop. He had ripped apart Houses on his own and they all knew it. He and Wolverine were evenly matched, but for this group they were going to have to be inventive.

No metal in his body to manipulate, and Scott was having a hard time subduing the other meta with energy blasts. Erik drew along some of the metal that he'd used to crush Riptide, and flung it at Sabretooth, where it wrapped around his neck like a collar. His hands went up to his neck immediately, and Erik yelled at Scott, "Hit him with a concussive shot!"

Scott nodded and then snapped out a burst of energy as requested, even as Bobby secured Lady Mastermind in ice.

Charles considered what they had in mind, wondering at it’s efficacy because usually it needed a psionic to get through to Sabretooth and hold him for any length of time.
Erik was quickly forming chains, throwing them around Sabretooth while he was still reeling with semi-consciousness.

A good attempt, but Sabretooth usually could get through chains. Sure enough, he snapped them as if they were strange of cotton and like a shot was leaping at Erik, baring his fanged teeth in rage even as Kurt teleported in and teleported Erik a few metres away, leaving the other Meta to drop.

He heard Scott shout out for Erik to do that again, and then for Bobby to start building ice around him while he was slowed. That was a tactic that might work.

It was worth a try, but Charles could feel Erik wasn't going to do that as he headed back towards where Sabretooth had fallen. He could feel a milder concentration, Erik with a hand held out like he was choking Sabretooth from afar, but he wasn't. He was... slowing bloodflow to his brain.

Risky, risky but was working to the same effect. Precision work which he could half attribute to the control he had learned with Storm. In reality, he wasn't sure how the real mutants ability would work, with the strength of the healing factor.

But in the simulation, it worked. Enough to slow Sabretooth down, enough let Bobby put him on ice. They had neutralised the opposing team, and then there was the mop up. Saving the Civilians caught in the fall out.

Erik went back out to re-collect Sunfire -- alive, but still subdued from having been drained -- and add him to the tally. He was limping, but he wasn't stopping, which was a good sign. Then he rejoined the effort of gathering together the civilians for a safety pickup.

It was standard then. Rescue, guarding all the usual. Erik’s abilities proving useful in lifting collapsed houses and finding people. He would have to remember that for any rescue contracts. Erik and Jean would be a powerful combination.

As the scenario came to an end, Charles made his way down to the Danger Room to meet them and give feed back.

Erik took his helmet off, grinning a little wildly, still, coming down off of it. He could feel that, a mix of adrenaline and... almost being high on his own powers.

"Well, sir, we had a few glitches, but..."

"Not a bad performance," Charles acknowledged. "I have some notes to pass on, but I would like to hear from you what you thought of the scenario. "

"I was challenged," Kitty offered, while he could still feel the others coming up with their words. "I couldn't *see* straight when Lady, uh, Lady mastermind was at it?"

"No offence sir, but psionics are damn tricky," Bobby said with a grin.

"Watch your mouth," Jean said lightly slapping him.

"You picked a team for us to fight who we would have weaknesses against," Scott said with just a hint of censure in his tone. Yes he had, and that was exactly the point. You didn’t learn against easy wins.

"You don't know who you might face when you take this sort of mission," Charles reminded them.

Scott smiled a little grimly, and nodded. "Magneto, I want to run through a few sessions with you
by yourself because I have no idea what I can expect from you in a mission."

"Yes, I noticed that. It's probably a good idea... later." The spines from Riptide were gone with the rest of the simulation, but the wounds they'd left were still there, and Erik was actively realising that he needed to retune the metal he had woven through his ankles and knee. There was the very clear consideration that it wasn't combat standard after that time in Imperial Holding, and he was hurting for it, just standing there while they had their After Action Report.

And something about his tone tweaked Scott. "Sometimes we don't have the option of putting it off until later."

"And right now, Cyclops, we do."

"Enough." Charles raised a hand to forestall an impending disagreement. "Magneto has an injury that needs to be attended to so it will wait. However, I will say a few quick things before I ensure he goes to see Hank. Scott, you have already mentioned your main area for development. You were not aware of Magneto's capabilities and left him without instruction. Jean, you did well targeting Lady Mastermind and protecting Magneto's back, and you dealt with Mystique quietly and efficiently. You did miss the illusion wrapped around Bobby. If the others had not been so focused, he could have been a target. ShadowCat, you fulfilled your instructions well and saved a lot of civilians. Kurt, good job and excellent initiative in protecting a team mate..." The new ones needed encouragement. "Erik... well done, but you should have secured Riptide rather than kill him. Unconscious like that Jean could have rendered him comatose. He is worth more captured and alive and at that point you had him down. Good teamwork on Sabretooth although I would not guarantee that strategy in the real world."

"The real world is usually harder," Scott agreed. "Magneto, tomorrow morning, 0800 until we're done."

The edge of Erik's mouth pulled up in a not comforting smile. "Of course. Looking forward to it."

Kitty inhaled, looking between them and getting an elbow from Bobby. "Oof."

Charles tried not to smile. "Well done. If you have any ill effects report to the Infirmary. Erik, I know your reluctance so I am escorting you there personally. Come with me."

*So did you have fun?* he asked as he led him away.

*Yes.* It was a quick answer, no hesitation. *I'm looking forward to being able to go out with one of your teams.* There was no expectation that it was *soon*, but here was a hope, because Erik really did get a rush off of being active.

*Training first. Scott is right, we do need to get an idea of what you can do* Charles said mentally and continued verbally with, "An interesting move with Sabretooth. That could be useful although I am unsure how it would work in reality as he has the healing factor."

"I could injure him badly enough that he'd be subdued while he pulled himself together," Erik suggested, and there was the thought of using his blood against him in other, grimmer ways. "It works on some people and not on others. It entirely depends on their body."

"I would prefer it, if you made that attack a... less well known one of your repertoire," Charles advised. "Seriously, Erik, we have to be careful. As an unknown weapon, I think it has potential. I was impressed at how you dealt with Sunfire though. I wondered if he might give you a little trouble."
Saved for emergencies, then. Yes, that would probably be best. "I couldn't do that just few years ago." And not in a didn't know how to do it way, but in a physically did not have the strength to do it way from the information in his thoughts.

"We need to monitor that as well. There have been incidences of powers becoming a danger to the person involved." Charles replied. And I do not want you to effectively self-destruct.

"Or, if I just keep working on my control..." Erik shrugged a little, clearly not feeling worried. "I lost a year. I'm still working through what I can do now that I couldn't when Kal-El subdued me." So Scott might just regret saying 'until we're done' for the next day's plan.

"As I say to all those who we train here, the only limit to a Meta’s powers is their imagination and self knowledge," Charles answered. "Creativity in application is important."

"Yes, yes it is." Erik still felt upbeat, even when he was in pain. Charles didn't really think creativity would be a problem, because Erik was considering looking at how the hard light holograms worked, and if that could be expanded into the battlefield, and the energy sources required, and...

And as a back of background thought, if he could sleep with Charles that night. Erik's own room was very seldom used.

What a waste it had been to lock him down, to drug him to insensibility. "How much did you hurt the leg?" he asked. And yes you may sleep with me tonight. If Erik regarded that as a reward then he was more than willing to give it.

It was no hardship for Charles to have him there, and quite an enjoyment, because he'd been alone since Nate had left, and it was that same type of dynamic -- easy, simple, hardly ever considering his paralysis except pragmatically in sex. Erik liked to sleep behind him, pressed close, and Nate had done roughly the same, though a little less touch-desperate.

Thank you."It's not that I hurt it. It's that the metal shoring up the joint isn't... aligned correctly any more. The fields I was wielding in the danger room threw it just that extra bit out of alignment." He'd never talked about the source of the injuries, but bizarre as they were, Charles knew they were human-inflicted. And he knew that Erik's knee had been wrecked since the Camps.

"I have asked Hank to see what level of healing Meta we would require to make it whole again," he said. "We don't have anyone here at the moment with that level of ability. I will have to put out a contract, but I will only do so for the person able to do the job. We could really use a direct healer as well as Hanks expertise."

"Direct healers are rare and well horded." But he could feel a sense of gratefulness, of hope that maybe this would be the last time he'd have to completely re-do the job he'd done to himself.

"This is true," Charles agreed. It would be expensive but worth it. They entered the elevator and descended to Infirmary level.

There was an Imperial Court event he needed to go to in three weeks, and it was probably time to take Erik with him to one of them. His temper seemed to be holding, and he was close enough to Charles now that no-one would really question if Erik *was* his personal. "I've started to catch mental spillover from you, Charles," Erik said just before the doors opened. I don't know if that's good or problematic. I felt you flinch watching the scenario before I snapped Riptide's neck.

But you still did it Charles said. I would very much prefer you did not kill unless absolutely
nec essary

Perhaps he was getting too attached to Erik.

*I’ll try.* And Erik was nothing if not brutally honest with him. Erik had meant it when he’d said he wouldn’t follow orders that didn’t suit him, and the fact that he’d felt Charles react and then had carried on anyway adhered to that. *If I train to that standard enough...* He might overcome the gut reaction. Well, it was something to hope for.

Henry was buried in some project as they came in -- he always was, always had five different research themes up in the air at once, waiting for that eureka moment where everything fell into place.

"Ah, Hank, I have brought Magneto for an examination after a Danger Room session," he said.

"I sense there will be a trend," came the reply from Beast. "Very well Magneto, if you would oblige me...what is giving you pain?"

"Few gashes from the hard light holograph," Erik murmured as he moved to sit on the examination table. "And I need to sit here with any kind of scanner for a hour or so and re-work my knee and ankles."

"Well we can soon sort that out for you," Hank said. "And I have a scanner you can use. Do you mind if I observe?"

"No, by all means. If you have any suggestions... I'm no medical professional, and I'm sure it could be done better." He could probably leave now, and trust hat Erik would play nice with Hank.

"Then we shall work together," Hank said mildly.

Charles smiled. "I will see you when you are finished Erik. "

"Of course." *Shouldn't be long.* Unless Hank derailed it, but eventually, Erik would be back to see him. He was taking his cloak off, woven metal fibers, and starting to strip off.

He paused a moment to take in the view and saw Hank's knowing look and faint smile and knew he had been noticed. Beast took his vow of confidentiality seriously so he was sure he would keep it quiet, but he would be in for some quiet teasing when they were next alone.

*Later Erik* he promised mentally. *Later*

---

Erik was waiting for Scott in the danger-room at 0800 sharp. When he'd left, Charles had been milling about in the bathroom, still waking up.

Charles was not a morning person, much to Erik's amusement.

Erik on the other hand, had no problem being up early though on occasion he relished a lie in. Charles had given him some explanation about how sometimes he ended up working in his sleep or something. It seemed like an excuse to him, but the upshot was he was bright and early even as Scott walked through the doors.

"Magneto. Glad to see you are here on time”, Scott said and he sounded a little surprised at that.

"Any particular reason I wouldn't be?” He was there to try to work honestly with the man that Charles thought of as a son. Scott was the leader, a natural at it even if the exact decisions he was
"Some are not always good at deadlines," he said. "Particularly newcomers to the House. The Professor was right. I made an error in judgment, and I don't know your capabilities or strength so I didn't use it effectively. So. What can you do?"

"That's a very long list. It's limited by my creativity." Erik kept the helmet held under his arm. "Manipulation of magnetic fields."

"That I can read in your file. I need examples. Let's fire up a workout," Scott said. "A variety of targets and measurements can be taken."

"Stretch it a little past target practice." He was going to let Scott select the program, but it was hard to feel dubious about only having target practice.

"You asked for it. Let's see." Scott smirked a little. "Sentinel program 3. Load it up."

The air shimmered and the area manifested into a wooded area.

Woods, Erik was well accustomed to fighting in woods -- no urban rot hanging around to use in the fight, but there were ores if he needed them, and the magnetic fields as well.

Of course the moment his first opponent lurched into sight, he almost felt like laughing. A giant metal robot...

"Creativity!" Scott shouted as he levitated himself up. "That's what I'm looking for!"

Sounded like Scott had taken Charles' lessons to heart.

"You could have given me something harder!" Erik called back, circling the thing. He could completely flatten it, turn it into rubble, rip it to pieces, deflect the energy beam it wielded until it destroyed itself with it, or... He could erase the delicate programming and leave it standing.

"It gets harder," Scott replied. "It's not like Sentinels ever turn up alone!"

Sure enough, they were popping up in his awareness all over.

"Still not hard!" He shattered a wave through he systems of the first one, and soared around the head of the next one, ripping the great control system off of its body with a torquing wave. Three more, and an energy shot coming at his shield that he absorbed. Two more appeared for every one he destroyed, and while he'd taken each one out in a different way, one by one was agonizingly non progressive when he could pull them up, hard, control them as one unit.

"Sentinel program 7- load" he heard Scott say, and okay, these guys were faster and tougher. They had some non metal shielding even if the securing lines that whipped out to capture him were still metal. And the blasts came faster and more frequent and they appeared to be coordinating.

Good. Coordination meant something he could tangle with, reflect back to them, interfere with. His shield was holding up well, and no matter what they did to the shielding, their bodies were still willed with metal to tear down and still.

It was actually almost fun. No moral dilemma just a good work out, enough to get the magnetic fields buzzing and flowing, adrenaline pumping. He barely heard Scott say "Load Sentinel program 13" because it was suddenly like a scene from the apocalypse. Darkness, fire, energy bolts every were, enemies closing in and closing in...
He lashed out, took out what he could immediately, not worrying about finesse, pulling the power from some to have as much energy as possible to throw at the next one, but they were mounting. Finally, a bolt broke through his shielding, and that was it, that as *enough* of fun and games against them.

With a roar, Erik blew out the field of them, and it, the claustrophobic edge of disaster feeling, stopped.

"End program." Scott's voice penetrated the program and it closed down. He was standing there with his arms folded. "Well you would have been useful when House Genosha tried this stunt on some houses with Metas. Program 13 was based on the actual assault we had to put down."

Erik levitated down to where Scott was standing, taking his helmet off as he did so. He'd just single handedly taken out a simulated program that they'd had to take down as a team. "I'm sorry to hear House Genosha would resort to that kind of tactic."

"They specialize in using sentinel robots to abduct Meta's and then they would be drugged insensible for the 28 days, locked down and ten they were cuffed and collared by House Genosha, as legal as anything," Scott said. "You take any hits in that?"

"One." Back of his shoulder, *barely* a sting, but it had pissed him off like nothing else.

Scott nodded taking a look. "So what has given you a problem? In the past?"

"In battle? Very little." It was arrogant, yes, but Erik didn't particularly care. "Kal-El gave me trouble. And psionics. Psionics are a bane to my existence. Generally."

"Kal-El gives everyone trouble," Scott said. "What can your magnetic fields deflect? What can penetrate? Has anyone gotten through your blocker?"

"If they can get it off, they can get through it," Erik said, arms crossed over his chest. "And the only reason Kal-El gave me trouble is because I hesitated. If I hadn't, I would've killed him. I suppose it's for the best I didn't. And it's not... fields, quite."

"Then what is it?" Scott asked. "I need to know." He looked at Erik appraisingly. "You are dangerous Magneto. I know it, we all know it. Not because of your powers because if we had to, we could bring you down, but because of your connection with the Professor."

"I'm not sure how that makes me a danger." He was still considering the best way to phrase what it was, exactly, he could do.

"Because you could hurt him." Scott said. "He lets very few close. Hardly any as close as he is letting you."

The voice was flat and hard, and Erik could almost feel the defensiveness roiling off of Scott. "I'm not going to hurt him."

"So you say," Scott replied. "And that might be the case but right now, I don't know you well enough to be sure. You fight well but... we've learned to be cautious."

"Be cautious. But I'm not going to purposefully do anything to hurt Charles. You can believe me or not." He might screw up in Imperial Court, which was a more pressing concern.

"You've gotta learn to trust us as we learn to trust you." he said. "That will mean opening up to our psionics, working with us, not as a solo. You're not a Meta sent in for training. You are a member
of the house."

"I'm not opening up to your psionics," Erik said smoothly, trying to watch his words and keep his temper down. "But I will work with them."

"They won't manipulate or control you." Scott said. "Jean would never do that. But if you don't let her in, or the Professor, then they can't help you."

Ah, Scott obviously believed that he was not letting even Charles in.

"I've modified the equipment to allow me to continue to interact with Charles. I'm working on blockers for a team that would be open to both Jean and Charles. But you're going to have to forgive me if I continue with the model I'm using now. I don't know Jean."

"The Professor has been working mind to mind with you?" Scott asked and seemed to relax a little. "He didn't say that before."

"I didn't know it needed to be said," Erik noted blandly. It was hard to tell what Scott's facial expressions were, seeing as his eyes were nothing.

"He never does that," Scott said. Was he jealous? It was difficult to tell. "Okay let's do some duo work."

He didn't expect it to go well, but he was going to try. "Then let's begin." He moved to his put his helmet back on, watching Scott. Energy bursts from his eyes.

"Okay, let's run a pretty tough program as you have good fire power... you and me versus Apocalypse," Scott said. "Load Apocalypse program 2."

"En Saban Nur?" Erik grimaced a little, because he'd heard *stories* of Apocalypse passing through long before his time.

"Not full power, but way above normal," Scott said. "We watch each other's back, we survive. Ready?"

There was a thudding noise as if something powerful was approaching.

It was going to be a long training session.

Erik left Scott to Dr. McCoy's curious, probing, and slightly nosy mercies, after a few minutes of them both assuring that Scott had hit his head from the simulation, and nothing of Erik's doing. It had been a very good, tiring fight, and it had taken him and Scott well over two hours to completely take the simulated Apocalypse down and keep him down. There really was no contain and control for house points to worry about with that simulation, at least.

It was a little worrying to realize that it was a de-powered simulation. He wasn't sure if he wanted to face the real thing any time soon, but it allowed for a good work out and they had started to learn each other's styles. In the mean time, he was considering going for a soak in one of the communal hot baths.

Much to his astonishment he was starting to actually feel unfamiliar emotions of happiness. He couldn't actually remember the last time he felt like this, full of adrenalin, feeling alive, stretching his talent, stretching himself and the implicit knowledge that someone was pleased to see him and wanted him there. He didn't know how long it
would last but right now he was relishing the experience.

There was another Meta in the baths, one he didn't know immediately.

Not that he knew most of them. Erik lifted his eyebrows, gave a nod to the other man.

He was a lean looking man lounging in the water, practically oozing sensuality from his well muscled frame. "'Allo mon ami," he said lazily to Erik. "Is plenty of room." His eyes were red on black, and the water had darkened a fairly loose looking hair to a dark reddish brown.

"We haven’t met yet," Erik murmured, starting to put his helmet and cloak on the benches that lined the bath area.

"The name's Gambit," the man replied still with his thick accented drawl. "You're Magneto, non?"

There was the faintest impression that the accent was a little bit emphasised. He was wearing cuffs that he could see were heavily set with gem designation in the Personal area, and no Personal would not have been trained to that level without being able to speak Imperial English perfectly.

And Erik wasn’t wearing his cuffs at all. Would when he left the House, but he felt no urge to broadcast who he was and what his specialties were. "Yes, I am." And why would Charles go to court without a personal when he clearly had trained Metas in house who were capable?

There was Storm, and now apparently Gambit. So why him?

"Eh, heard much about you mon ami," Gambit said with a faint smirk."Training up for t' Professor. He'll send you t' me eventually cher."

There was no mistaking that blatant sexuality and the truth was Gambit was...very distracting in that regard.

Just, not quite his tastes. "I'm afraid my americanised french is very poor," Erik remarked, trying to keep his own accent at least level while he undressed to get in the bath, "So you're going to have to forgive me for not understanding half of that."

Gambit smiled, "Trainin' for the personal side of Personals." He stretched a little and hot water made scar marks show on his skin. He obviously wasn't a purely Personal, Personal and he'd heard of him going out on missions.

It seemed to be how the House worked. Erik sat down on the bench, pulling his boots off. "Ah. Charles hadn’t actually mentioned that." Not really shocking, given how skittish Erik knew he came off as, occasionally.

"Mebbe he won't," Gambit answered laconically. "He is Master." The red on black eyes focused on him. "Cyke put you through paces non?"

Houses, where everyone knew everyone else's business. "Yes. It was effective. I'm looking forward to getting back to the actual field work."

"Bien," Gambit answered lazily."I keep telling Wolverine his claws are gettin' rusty."

Erik stood up, sliding his pants off before he moved to get into the pool, to settle on the ledge under the water. The heat was a little shocking at first, but much better once he started to adjust. "Why would that be?"
"Cause, he's wadin' through some past shit right now," Gambit replied. "Needs a movin' target or somethin' to occupy him. Could be me, could be you. Logan, likes mystery."

Another smile then that implied Gambit liked being mysterious.

Erik shifted, pressed his shoulders against the wall, and just tried to relax. "There's an entire danger room to occupy him if he's bored."

Gambit chuckled. "Wolverine tend t'destroy it if we leave him there too long. Professor says no more solo work until we pay last bills. You could stop him though mm?"

"I could. I prefer to not get involved in House interactions." Of course, he was having one just then.

Gambit smiled a little. "House not as simple as it appears on t'surface," he said. "Professor not as naive as people think."

"No, he's not naive at all," Erik drawled. "He's quite cunning. It's a nice change of pace."

The other man seemed amused at his tone and words. "Already fallin' for him eh? He's a good man. Deserves a good Personal."

Erik snorted. "This place is crawling with people better qualified in Personal than I am. So I'm a little confused."

Gambit laughed. "Nah. You imagine Stormy letting even the Professor do horizontal mambo with her? An' me? Professor won't have me. Can't read me.." Gambit shrugged a little. "Sides, at court I'm busy doing other t'ings."

"Yes?" He laughed, because, well. In most houses, *choice* didn't factor into the matter.

"Workin' mon ami, workin' hard," came the response. "You think, you have a tool who can charm 'is way into any bed, is the best thief in America, and cannot be read by psionic meta 'cos of a natural barrier, what do you do with him eh?"

"You make him the House spymaster," Erik drawled without hesitation. "House Radim used a psionic for it, but I suppose you have more finesse."

He nodded. "Most people, they look at Jean and think it her. Psionics miss stuff y'know? Mind reading 'arder than you would ever think. Besides Professor likes evidence to act on."

"I've gotten the feeling that it takes a lot of effort to do it correctly. So, I take it you like the work."

"Used to be unbonded mon ami," Gambit answered stretching out in the water. "You'd think freer, better..." He shook his head. "Free to starve, free to be playt’ing of whoever, free to have the merde beaten out of you every day even on the good days. Most unbonded driven by somthin’."

"I was unbonded for a year. Freer usually meant a great deal more time hungry." With no nice hot baths to soak in after he'd gotten the shit beaten out of him in a simulation. It was perhaps a little like being a kept pet, but it was a good fifty steps better than his old House.

"Eh. I hear you. Gambit spend a lot of time hungry as a child," he replied. He developed a slightly shuttered look as if it was an area he did not particularly want to go into. "So, you liking it so far?"

"Yes. I know I'm technically a flight risk, but I have no plans to flee." His life felt satisfying for the
first time in a long time, though he wanted to see what the situation in Imperial Court was before he rectified the situation with his sister.

"Sources say you been tampered with mon ami," Gambit answered looking over at him carefully. "Could have trap planted and not know in your mind. Seen it happen before."

"A trap," Erik repeated, looking at the other man. Not actually something he’d considered before, but he had lost a year to Imperial Holding.

"For Professor mebbe, or for House," Gambit looked at him. "If you lost it, you could tear place apart, 'specially if coordinated with 'nother attack."

The accent was misleading, Gambit was a lot sharper than he sounded or behaved. Some of the wary reactions to him made more sense.

Particularly if they thought he was planted. Erik stretched his muscles, eyes closed for a moment. "If that were a plan, I’d say it’s a poor one. You’re all wary of me, on edge around me because you expect that. I could much more easily fell the house by..."

Oh. Just snapping Charles’s neck, say.

Gambit shook his head. "De Professor not as much an easy target as he appear. We seen attempts before, but if he work and is open to you when trap sprung. That might get him. Lay hand on him if he conscious and he will drop you in a thought. Is fact, unless you be havin' the blocks some psionics have. Mais, I am not so sure you are plant. I tink Emperors plan more...sneaky."

"I'm interested if you have any ideas," Erik half-asked. "My understanding of this Imperial Court is still very poor." He was following the interactions of House Wayne and House Luthor as much as he could, but beyond that the situation was fluid, and he knew there were any number of smaller houses that could cause greater trouble to House Xavier than the larger ones.

"Workin' on it mon ami," Gambit replied. " Might have to do a little sneakin' around before I have an answer. Mais, if we ask you to have scans an’ all, is not you we doan trust but the Emperor."

"Being gifted is a suspicious thing," Erik stretched his legs under the water, trying to not feel restless about being there. Conversation with other people simply made him that way. "I do understand that."

Gambit nodded, shifting in the water. "Eh, well. Time for me to get out, unless you need help soaping your back..." He gave a slight smile at him as he started to move.

"No, I’m quite all right." He gave a polite enough goodbye to the man, and then waited for the man to leave before he relaxed. The spymaster was unconcerned as he slipped unabashedly from the pool and sauntered to grab a towel, and wandered out of the baths, allowing him to relax and soak. It did put a different spin on things, and give him a deeper appreciation of Charles’ trust in him. He did have the tendency to react as if they were accusing him of something, with good reason. His experience taught him that Meta’s could be blamed for pretty much anything and people would believe it. So the mystery that he whiled away his time chewing over as he soak in the bath, was why had Charles decided to trust him at all?

The Summer Court was going to be in session soon, and Charles knew he had to be there with his newly 'tamed' Personal in tow or he would stand to be judged as weak and incur some level of public Imperial censure. It was ridiculous how much a few words could impact on their security –
stocks would fall, business would go to their rivals at the very least. And in these circles, a House judged as weak was a target.

Storm had done a lot for Erik's comportment and control, and he was certainly sporting the right sort of clothes and accoutrements, but there was the matter of the other requirements of Personal's at the court. The entertainments, the kneeling, the submission...

That was a whole other story right there

Erik was not... submissive. Not in any normal way of defining it, though he was oddly solicitous and mannerly. He certainly immediately looked to Charles' needs, in a very natural way which would have been impossible to fake at the Imperial Court.

But showy? Not at all.

"Erik, I know this is hard for you, but it's something that has to be done," Charles said, beginning to contemplate Gambit's offer to help train Erik in all seriousness. "You must appear to submit. You know I do not demand or relish the thought of you being so subservient, but in the Court, it is the way it is."

"What do you want me to do?" He was at least open to the *idea*, though once they started the training, it was hard to tell if Erik would continue to be that open. His posture just then was certainly defensive.

"Relax for a start. Now, I know Storm has gone over the protocols with you, and you learn swiftly. What we have to do is make it seem natural," Charles pointed out. "I move, you move with me, sometimes leashed. Here, now I've had a leash made which is of chain link which will attach to my chair. You will be able to attach or disconnect as you wish. Come over here Erik, I need to put it on you with the collar."

He watched Erik work his shoulders in a circle, slowly relaxing. Erik knelt down, slow, graceful, and bent his head to Charles. He still needed practice, but it was quite appealing and the investment in the healer for his knees and ankles was plain to see.

For all their play acting, the first time a Master put a collar on a Personal was an important moment. He had again had it made in metals, knowing Erik could mold it as he needed.

He stroked Erik's hair a moment. So much smoother with good food, better care and nutrition. "You are beautiful Erik," he murmured. His fingers stroked his skin on his cheek and he opened his thoughts of affection and happiness to the other man as he clicked it shut. "Perfect."

It shifted a little under his fingertips, Erik molding it absent to fit a little better. There was an odd sense of comfort that he was getting back in answer to the affection he as sharing, and it stirred a thought in him that perhaps Erik needed a little of that more intense interaction between Personals and Masters, even if he'd never stated he wanted it. The natural response of security to that collar was a reaction to be cherished, cultivated.

"You belong to me," he said lingering with his touch. "You are precious to me." It wasn't just words, ritual or otherwise. It was almost startling to realize that he was speaking the truth. He hadn't felt like this about Nate. It had been enjoyable, intimate but there had been a level of distance between them, not this fierce urge to have this man and protect and keep him. Charles wanted that more than he did submission.

Which was a good thing, because he had a feeling that he wasn't going to get submission, and it
was probably for the better. Erik didn't answer, but the wash of emotions were better than any trite words, warmth, a little embarrassment, a deep feeling of gratification. What does one say to that? Thank you.

Charles exerted a very faint pull on the leash chain to draw Erik to kiss him. "You do know, thanks are not necessary. You deserve this. More than this. I will give you what I can Erik."

And Erik would take what he could. He would take kisses and collars and anything else he could get, in a very open way that made Charles fear, a little, just what the Emperor's plan was, because he'd been through Erik's mind, sifted through his thoughts and his memories except for a few, and those few he knew enough of the content of to know were safe. "And for that, I'll do my very best," he murmured against Charles's mouth, not quite breaking the kiss.

Perhaps it would be best to have a little fun in these roles before he had to introduce the things he knew Erik would dislike. Being restrained in anyway, having sex that way.

"Mm. Your best is always superb," he said. "This is the chair I use at the Imperial Court. Watch." He pressed a button and it folded back cunningly to reveal Charles sitting. "It is not uncommon for the Personal to sit at the Masters feet and ..uh, entertain him or her."

Erik sat back on his heels, looking up at Charles with a relaxed expression, a little mischievous. "Entertain you. What would you like for entertainment?"

"Ah well, you are meant to read my moods, and give me what I need," Charles said with mock solemnity. "Fortunately I have pretty explicit moods."

He let his thought slip into Erik's mind of him nuzzling at the odd spots on his thighs where he could feel something, to his cock.

"And you're comfortable having this done to you in public?" It felt like it was without Erik's easy reach points, that he wouldn't be too bothered doing it in court.

"It is not something I prefer, but it is necessary," Charles said. "It gives an illusion of normality. Stops them seeing me as a cripple and a eunuch. As weak..."

"You're not weak." Yes, well, Erik was partial to his upper body strength, but Erik was decidedly *biased*. He seemed to be working out the best way to position himself realistically, and to make it a show, and finally leaned in, one hand sliding over Charles’ belly a little before he unfastened the but-tons and zipper without a touch. That was an easy thing for Erik, but it would play well in court.

"Remind me to ensure you have a comfortable spot down there, " he said. "Would you like cushions or furs?" It was just very pleasant indeed to have Erik lavishing his attention on him.

Neither, this is quite nice. And his knee had to be completely better, because there wasn't any discomfort nagging at Erik. He was quite open, without Charles having to probe far, and Erik was shifting again to kiss just above his erection, moving a hand so he could slide a thumb over one of those spots high on his thigh. It was just enough of a spike of sensation to make his dick twitch.

"They keep this up for a long time, Charles warned. "Through dull entertainment usually. Mmm."

"So I should keep you on edge," Erik mused, repeating the gesture.

"Mmm, yes, unless I indicate otherwise," he answered and looked at Erik. "Will you find this an arduous task?"
"No." Erik shifted, though, laid his head on Charles's lap. It called for a different position, which was a good thing, sitting a little more off to the side, sliding an arm to loop over Charles's legs.

"That's nice," Charles approved. "That is a comfortably indolent pose." The chain leash still clinked as it shifted.

"I think I could manage this one for quite a long time." Just idly fondling Charles, yes. The powerful Meta 'tamed' would be a good message.

"Good." He was like a white haired lion down there, all power, muscle and danger. "Much as I am enjoying that, the most difficult thing is going to be the entertainments."

"Tell me about them." And for the moment, Erik seemed content to continue on. It was a dry run, the first of many, and he was enjoying the closeness.

"Often Houses are expected to have a set piece. Houses with bonded Meta's are expected to make their interesting. It is often a sex show and the Emperors tastes are… old fashioned. There are combined free form entertainments as well, usually improvised around a theme. Sometimes we are required to...collaborate with other Houses to provide an entertainment."

Charles exhaled. "I will not lie Erik, often it is restraints and punishment scenarios which appear to be this Emperors preference."

He could see Erik tighten his arm a little, even if he couldn't feel it. "What do you want me to do?" And he'd do it. Charles knew he would, he'd just be tense and miserable about it.

"I will be with you no matter what," Charles assured him. "Where I can, I will place you in a dominant role in the scenarios. Sometimes this is not a choice we have. We will think on performances pieces...but maybe I need to show you that it can be pleasant."

He exhaled, a little unsteadily, and Charles watched it more than felt. "I'd like that."

"It involves trusting me," Charles said. "Trust is not the same as submission. It can form a part of it, a crucial part but, it is not the same." He stroked Erik just a little. "Will you do that?"

"I already trust you." Yes, as far as Erik was concerned with the emotion, he trusted Charles quite a lot.

"You will discover this is something different," Charles said. "Get up and come over to the bed. We will start this at a gentle level."

Erik settled his pants loosely back into place first, but stood up, looking a combination for curious and unsure as he walked over towards he bed.

Best to keep it with an escape route built in if it got too much, so Charles pulled the metal items from his box, which would be hard discipline for others, but for Erik, the presence of metal close to him was comforting. "Lie down and put your arms and legs out towards the corner posts. I want you to then take these cuffs and chains and tie yourself to each corner securely. So you are comfortable."

He might as well have been giving Erik silk handkerchiefs, but he knew that they'd used wood and leather against him in House Radim, to great effect. He'd been the only Meta in the house with Leather wrist cuffs showing is ratings, stitched in place because no metal locking mechanism would take longer to break for Erik than leather sewn to leather would.
Still, Erik hesitated for a moment, before he situated himself on the bed with them, and leaned forwards to secure his ankles first.

"You know if you want to get out of them, you will be able to do so," Charles said. "But I want you to suspend that ability the best you can." He twitched a smile. "In fact, as an incentive, anything I try on you and you endure, I will give you permission to try on me later."

"That's a very good incentive," Erik murmured, looking over at him before he lay down and worked the cuffs onto his wrists and the opposite bedposts with his abilities. He tightened them up a little, and at least *looked* firmly secured.

"I am just going to lay a... well, an inhibition on you, in your mind to stop you pulling free accidentally," Charles said. "You will have to make a conscious decision to do so." It was a mere wisp of power, but it was just like a little soft focus on his mind, so he would have to concentrate to free his hands. "Just test it to check."

He watched, watched Erik flex his arms, and it seemed to be working -- sometimes metal melted right away as a natural reaction, crumbling when Erik even subconsciously wanted it to give. But it stayed firm around his palms, and it looked quite nice on him.

"Yes, it works. I think... could you do that when we go to Court?"

"Yes, if you wish," Charles said. "We will manufacture a fake control mechanism, such as the one that Kal-El must wear in the Emperor's presence. In reality it will be a mind block, but people are more inclined to believe in mysterious stones and energy fields." He moved over to the bed, items at the ready as he managed to position himself on the edge and swing round right next to him. He started trailing fingers over Erik's skin, luxuriating in process.

"Technology to tame the savage meta?" Erik closed his eyes, and exhaled. It was always interesting, to feel the level of concentration Erik was giving his every touch, even just a hand on his chest.

He was incredibly touch responsive, and Charles was sure if he just sat here and stroked him for hours on end, he would be in bliss. "Something like that. Relax, exhale..." he urged as Erik seemed to have started holding his breath unconsciously as his fingers teased around his smooth skin.

Erik chuckled, eyes opening for a moment to look at him before he closed them again.
"Anticipation makes me do that."

"It is part of the fun," Charles agreed. Not knowing exactly where or when you might be touched, or how." He bend forward to lick at Erik's nipples and chest. Heard Erik's breath catch, heard him groan a little, pulling idly at the chain with his left hand.

"Oh, that's good."

He deliberately sucked them, then bit at them lightly, paying a lot of attention to them. Erik did that to him and people often did things they personally found arousing.

It seemed to be working, because Erik arched, twisted, but it wasn't panic. It was trying to get more, better contact, more contact, more sensation. It felt good to feel that kind of need.

He drew back a little." You appear to be enjoying your sensations Erik," he murmured tracing around his muscles. Beautiful. His fingers teased a little at his cock.

"Uhnh." Erik swallowed, a beautiful gesture to watch. He was all honed muscles, well cared for
now, his skin soft and pliant under Charles's fingertips.

He monitored how Erik was doing with his thoughts, and was pleased with the response. It was easy enough to use his mouth down there, just a little to give him taste before he introduced the other parts of what they would do. He picked up a pair of fairly tame clamps - none of the saw toothed monstrosities he'd seen elsewhere. This was often considered appropriate attire for the bond-slaves and personals. He slipped them onto his nipples and smoothed the pain out with a little more licking.

He felt the spike of resistance from Erik, brief, fleeting, because Charles was still touching him, and that was perhaps the important part. He could use that constantly touch-starved response to their advantage, the way Erik reacted so well to his contact because it was non-threatening.

"The pain is temporary...it will start an endorphin buzz," he said. "Mmm. How do they feel now?"

Fantastic. Just pressure, not too sharp, just an ache, and he focused on the feelings behind the sensations while Erik tried to find his words. "I think I could get used to it."

He stroked at Erik’s skin, teasing down over his stomach and just a little over his cock until he felt the awareness of discomfort mellow into something else. "You see, what happens is that the pressure makes them extraordinarily sensitive," he murmured. "If done correctly of course."

He judged his moment and then flicked one carefully.

Felt the spike of sensation, and watched Erik arch upwards, groaning quietly through his teeth. "Funny, how the same thing can be done very differently."

"Mmm. It should be done with emotion. The bond between a Personal and a Master should go both ways," Charles said. He was aware that Erik was starting to anticipate what he was doing, and that was good. He wanted to flood him with the pleasure of it and recondition him to some of the things he had no doubt had to wear or be used in the past. He picked up another device, one oddly appropriate for Erik as it was of interlocking metal rings that would fit over his erection and hold back orgasm. No doubt leather or plastic versions had been used on him in the past. "Do you recognize this?"

"It's a cockring. Of a sort." Erik's mind was wide open to him, and he could see the leather version that had been so very often used, crude but effective.

"I'm going to put this on you," he said. "Partly because I want you to last through what I wish to do to you, and the way you are responding to even the simplest thing, I believe it will all be over far too soon."

And as it was likely to be emotionally exhausting for Erik whether he knew it or not, Charles decided not to push it to make him climax then force him again. The urgency of a first time would be better and more pleasurably overwhelming if he held him back.

He leisurely slipped them on Erik, feeling the responses to cool metal against his cock, and the sensations of tightness as he got it settled. "It looks good on you," he commented.

Erik had a very positive reaction to metal, and he was going to use that to his advantage when they were in the Imperial Court. "Feels good." And Erik hadn't denied that he *was* reacting to the simplest of things, no, he was comfortable with his reactions. It was a good start.

"Mmm," Charles replied very carefully running fingers over the now entrapped member, feeling the contrast between cool metal to hot flesh. "And it means of course I can play with you for a long
time before I let you come."

As long as Erik was willing to play along, because he could feel Erik sliding mentally through the molecules of the metal, testing its composition before leaving it alone. One day, he was going to have to sit down and see if he could see the world the way Erik did. It would be interesting, to be more than just *aware* of the other man's metal-sense.

Erik stretched, and it served as hysterically poor cover for him raising his hips a little. "Doesn't feel like a horrible threat."

"You may come to regret that," Charles said with a little teasing tone. Erik could wait just a little longer for attention there. He was going to make sure he was already aching before he started there. It would be interesting to see how much control Erik was really able to relax and give to him.

He leaned over and started exploring the metal ringed cock with his mouth and tongue, deliberately light, and monitoring Erik's state of arousal. When he felt a peak starting he would reach up and flick one of the clamps and watch it turn into something distracting and like fire in his belly.

He could feel Erik trying to not react, could see it on his face, so it was a failed lack of reaction, fun-ny to watch while his expression contorted and pleasure burst across his face before he tried to settle it back down.

Charles was amused. It was pleasurable to feel Erik’s reactions and he paused a moment, looking up at him. "How does that feel?" Tight, aching, with an unfamiliar growing sensation in his stomach. His plan to make Erik overwhelmed with pleasure was coming along.

"Extremely good." Erik's eyes were half closed, and he felt very far from the vague distress that the first suggestion of chains had aroused in him.

"Mm." Charles started to explore with his fingers down towards his ass, putting some oil on them so they would slide over skin, and tease his ass. "Do you want this?" It was really a rhetorical question.

After all, if he didn't, he was in very little position to refuse. But Erik did like good sex, enjoyed fucking himself onto Charles's cock as much as he'd enjoyed the one time he'd very carefully -- at least, at first -- taken Charles. Charles was definitely hoping for more of that, and to persuade him that paralysis did not mean he was fragile. Erik flexed, lifted his ass off the mattress a little to give Charles's hand more room. "Yes."

"Well..." He put a cushion under his lower back so he wouldn't have to strain and eased a finger into him. "Perhaps I will do this to you or I could do anything to you."

From a different person 'anything' would've been a little horrifying to Erik, but he trusted Charles. "You could." And Erik would be all right with that.

"I would give you pleasure," he murmured. "And all you could do is feel." He moved his fingers carefully, adding another.

And feel, and feel, until Erik couldn't stand it any longer, and maybe past that. Charles felt tight muscles spasm, clenching against his fingers while he pushed them in and out slowly, feeling the smooth muscle walls.

He was enjoying it as well, but he was wanting to add a little pleasurable torment to the experience. He reached for one of the vibrators, and slicked it up. "Let's see how you do with this."
"What? It's, oh. Ohh." Erik seemed to be trying to mentally steady himself, and steady himself again when Charles turned it on to a low buzz.

"Mmm.." Charles left it there and leaned up to kiss him, savoring the moment. He nuzzled him down his neck and then placed a hand on the clamp, toying with it while he kissed him.

And just left the vibrator in place. Erik kissed him back, when he could, when Charles moved in close enough again, and the touch was a little desperate, a little heady for more contact.

He clipped a chain onto the clamps so he could move himself down and pay attention to Erik's ass and cock, and still be able to tweak them as he wanted. He made sure to keep a hand on Erik somewhere. That seemed to be what Erik needed. He started to play a little with the vibrator, moving it in and out slowly, every now and then lowering himself to suck around the now tightly constrained cock. As he reached out with his mind, Erik did not seem to be objecting at all.

He wanted more, he wanted the intensity that would put him completely over the edge, but he wasn't going to get it yet. The deeply heated, over stimulated feeling felt too good for Charles to let him go yet. "Mmmh."

What a tragedy that he had not felt this way before. Charles was determined to keep this going, and started mind speaking to Erik. Let yourself go Erik, I am here. You can relax and let me do as I wish and know you will be safe

Don't quite know how to let go. He wasn't adverse to the idea, just didn't know how to let go of that last bit of control.

He'd had to cling to his self-control for so long, it was like a man clinging to the edge of a cliff by his fingernails. Immediately, the mindscape shifted to show that scenario and he reached over and met-aphorically took a grip on Eriks arm. I have you now...I can make sure you don't fall. Here he was stronger, more capable than anyone. He could wrap himself around Erik and protect him as he could not physically. It was a sudden intense level of intimacy. It was Charles's greatest area of strength.

Erik let go, and his arm jolted, yes, but Charles still had a hold of him in the mindscape, and there was an odd feeling of Erik being astonished it had worked. He hadn't expected it to, but he'd still let go.

I have you, he said enveloping him as he hauled him up into his mind visions arms. Now you can really enjoy yourself.

Erik had trusted him, and the scenario, symbolic or otherwise had worked because as he drew them back to their awareness of the physical again, there was a difference there. Time to turn up the intensity, literally and figuratively. The vibrator was turned up higher then and he started fucking Erik with it in earnest, applying more suction around the caged cock and balls, tugging at the clamps hard until they came off and blood rushed back into tortured nipples. Just to add to it, he mentally implanted the sensations of licking and sucking there as well, effectively launching a full pleasurable assault on him.

The noises Erik was making were pleasurable, to hear, to feel, while he stayed leaned over Erik, lightly tonguing the head of his cock. Erik's balls were tight, engorged with blood, and his breath was past ragged.

"Mm." Charles gauged how close he was. "How much do you want to come?" He didn't let up
even for a moment.

"Please..."

Charles repeated the motion, a trace of friction around Erik's cockhead as soft contrast to the relentless vibrator in his ass. "Uhn! Please, Charles, please..."

Charles smiled and joined his mind again; he carefully and precisely released the inhibition on the first of the rings on his cock and watched as it immediately stretched allowing blood to engorge. So he did the second, the third, and then forth with only the last holding him in, Erik's cock dark with blood as he went for it, sucking him hard.

Then finally, he pulled all his imposed inhibition, turned the vibrator up full and waited for the explosion.

It wasn't *quite* controlled verbal permission, but it was permission and Erik didn't hesitate, that last ring stretching as if it had been nothing, a natural reaction for him to throw his bonds. It was a little vicarious of Charles to ride along with the orgasm, to feel Erik stretch his legs, muscles clenching tight while he came.

It was enough to make him come as well, without stimulation so he wasn't doing without. If filled the pair of them with a wonderful post orgasmic glow, even as he removed the vibrator, and then rolled close to just hold on to Erik until he could speak.

Erik seemed a little startled when he moved a hand, effortlessly, and laid it on Charles's back, first one and then the other, because the restraint had seemed so very real, but it wasn't. He'd have to repair the chains and the palm cuffs, yes, because they had not survived the climax.

That was easy enough for Erik, he could just mould it again. "So, different to what you have experienced before?" he asked mildly once he judged Erik had regained his composure.

"I think that would be understating it," Erik answered, sliding a hand up to rest his palm between Charles's shoulder blades.

"Something you would be interested in developing?" he asked. "Or playing with." It was all to do with teasing him, tantalizing him rather than force.

"Yes, I think exploring that further would be... very good. Very easy." Charles was making a mental list of things that would make being in the Imperial Court very easy for Erik, for them both -- an inhibition not on his power but on just breaking the actual chains. Touch as a grounding force.

Even now, Erik was idly stroking his back.

"You know we're going to work through things that are more intense?" Charles said. "Different positions? More equipment."

"Yes. *But you'll still be here.* And that was the important part to Erik.

"Always," Charles promised and kissed him again. "Mm. And you were wonderful."

Erik made a quiet scoffing noise, but his arms tightened around Charles, and the nameless warm emotion roiling off of him was very easy for Charles to place.

Everything had been going very smoothly.
He and Charles were going to Imperial Court in the morning; they had a 'set piece' which was probably not terribly interesting, but it was functional, and Gambit was the one in the submissive position while Erik 'tortured' him erotically with metal. As far as torture went, it was most unconvincing, because Remy moaned too much in Erik’s opinion, but… Charles said it would probably be to the Emperor’s taste. Imperial court was something Erik didn’t think he’d ever quite understand. Why an Empire would return to practices of the ancient Empires instead of the more progressive ones that had been slowly developing over time, he did not know.

Just a few days for this session, Charles had said, a few days of high politics and stress, before coming back home. He could handle it, he could more than handle it. And if it went well... Well, it was going to go well, and then Erik had plans to put into place.

It started, he supposed, with handing Jean the blockers he’d created, six of them, enough for the better part of a team.

"Thank you Magneto," Jean said with a slightly wry smile and as Charles looked an inch away from laughing.

You look like you are sucking on a lemon. he commented.

I dislike psionics as a rule. There was a pause, and Erik added, You're the exception."These should allow for communications on your mental frequency and Charles. I worked your specs through with Hank's help." Which had been a fantastic way to *avoid* her and still get the job done.

"It will be very useful," Charles added. "There are psionics at court and usually I have an exhausting time blocking everyone. They believe me more of an invalid than I am. Fortunately I don't need to block Gambit, and Jean can take care of herself..."

"Are you sure you are both ready for this?" Jean asked. "Gambit is concerned, and...you know he rarely worries about anything."

"I think this won't go any better three or four months from now, except Charles will be behind on whatever is going on." Erik shrugged his shoulders. "Now is as good a time as any."

"I need to know what is planned now. " Charles looked at her. "We will be safe enough. I have people enough around me."

"Who will technically be nullified," Jean pointed out. "The Emperor has the House Genosha suppression technology."

And of course no one had mentioned it to Erik. He looked between them. "Do we have any technical information on that technology?"

"Jean said technically nullified." Charles reassured him. "We manage to pick the locks within a few minutes of being there."

"There is always the chance that they will have changed it," Jean said.

"Neither of you answered my question of 'do we have technical information on it'? If possible, I would like to read in on what I might be picking locks to." If they had changed it, understanding it beforehand would save them so much time.

"I will get them to you," Jean said. "But the point is, you can't overtly utilise your abilities even with it disarmed. I understand you have a set piece?"
“One that is sufficient” Charles said.

We hope. Otherwise it would be playing it by ear and hoping that whatever blocks Charles could put on his urge to throw the chains on him would hold. "And I understand that they might require more, or the rules may change."

"The rules can always change at the Emperors whim." Jean looked at them both. "Do not fear about your set piece with Gambit. He cheats by using his charm ability and we know it. What concerns me is the likelihood of a specific request from the Emperor."

Charles frowned. "Is this likely Jean?"

"I believe so. He is more cunning than he appears. The odds of him asking you to display your new Personal's talents with another House's that he wants to cause tension with is... high."

"Then we'll take that as it comes," Erik shrugged. "And I will try to be careful to not *actually* offend."

Jean looked at him. "I am trying to give advice here," she said finally. "It would be easier if you weren't standing there radiating hostility."

“Jean...” Charles looked at her.

"I mean it professor, I haven't once stepped out of line and he has focused on me as the epitome of all evil!"

"I think you're flattering yourself with that comparison," Erik drawled. "Advice would actually entail suggestions and not vague warnings of impending doom."

"I was getting to that.." Jean said and Charles smiled.

"Children, Children, behave," he said giving Erik a look that was a request to just let Jean say her piece. "Go ahead Jean."

"The most probably requested pairing is likely to be Magneto and Kal-El of House Wayne," she said. "This would effect a technical power struggle and put us at odds with them, depending upon the scene outcome. On the other hand, you have told us that the Meta Kal-El feels a sense of guilt and obligation, so might be receptive to a dominant twist. Otherwise, he might choose someone from House Luthor or from an uncommitted ally."

"I think Kal-El and I will be able to come to a decent accord," Erik shrugged. "I've been involved in enough house games to work out how to last through them. House Luthor is allied with House Wayne, correct? I can't see them putting themselves in a position to make themselves any more enemies."

"But the status of a Personal in relation to others speaks of the House Status," Jean said.

Charles mused. "Then it is whoever he wishes to punish most, or most publicly."

"And you think it might be you?" Erik asked, eyeing Charles.

"Perhaps," Charles seemed unsure about that. "He has targeted us, but his most overt enemies are House Luthor and House Wayne. This is of course without the normal intrigues. If Houses seeking to curry Imperial favor join in this could make for a fraught stay."
"More than fraught," Jean advised. "It is dangerous Professor."

If it went badly, it wouldn't be the first time, nor the last, that he'd proxied for someone, taken punishment that made no sense to protect someone else. All it took was that particular mindset, and Erik would be able to cope. "So is not going at all."

"We have Magneto who tests out at the highest level in terms of power, Gambit and who else could I take?" Charles asked rhetorically. "I cannot take Storm and who else is trained to standard?"

No one, he was guessing. Jean's mouth compressed a little. "I wish Nate had been here, is all. I was confident Nate was capable."

"Him not being here is precisely the reason we had to wait until Erik was trained. " Xavier said. "And he will do well. I can bring a larger group to our quarters in the Imperial Compound, but I insult the emperor if I behave as if I need body guards inside the Court itself. Personals and Pleasure slaves only."

"Just an excuse to ensure no one can make an attempt on him," Jean muttered.

"I can't particularly blame him," Erik pointed out, "because, after all, we're sitting here plotting to circumvent those narrow designations."

"We will remain prepared," Charles agreed. "There is little else I can do. I need to know what he has done, or is planning to do if he is wanting to undermine privately owned meta-power. The Imperial Guard and their supplier House Genosha has most of the metas in the world and out of the Houses left, we have the greatest concentration, followed by House Luthor and House Wayne."

"Which if he truly is against Metas means it is certain he will attack you," Jean said frustrated. "It is walking into a trap professor."

"It's a trap." There was no disagreeing, no, but Jean was trying to stop it, to fix things, and it just couldn't be settled so simplistically. "But sometimes one has to walk into a trap to work out how to get out."

"Precisely. The Emperor is not aware of my own ability which is an advantage," Charles pointed out.

"You can't rely on that Professor." Jean was definitely worried. "Take some more firepower with you. The House can spare a few to guard your compound, and not be weakened."

"Who would you suggest?" Charles said mildly.

"I... Scott. Scott could go." Scott walked like he'd been born with a board implanted in his spine.

"Jean, I have quite a bit of 'firepower'," Erik offered. "If it comes to that. I have no moral qualms about killing for self preservation." Though Charles was still trying to coax that reaction out of his 'go to' possibilities in a fight.

"Neither does Gambit," Charles replied. "How far can Nightcrawler teleport with a passenger now?"

Jean's eyes canted up for a moment. "Half a mile, now."

"Then he will come, along with one other. If I am in danger he will be able to teleport me out of
immediate range," Charles answered. "I will be able to summon him."

And once Charles was out, killing anyone in his way wasn't something that would have caveats to it. Erik nodded, still watching Jean, and wondered if she knew, at all, that his backup plan involved destroying their government. "Does that satisfy you?"

"As much as I can be satisfied when I am not there," Jean answered. "But I know the necessity for staying. I will ensure all your equipment and formal clothes are ready."

Formal clothes, which was hysterical in light of the fact that everyone had made it very clear that he was going to be naked or half dressed more often than not. He'd put a little effort into making his metal bracings somewhat decorative, to that end. "Good. Let me know if you have trouble reaching through the bands."

Jean nodded and glanced at Charles and evidently they had a couple of private telepathic words before saying. "Good luck," to the both of them and leaving.

Charles sighed. "She as a point. If Jean is uneasy there is usually good reason. If Gambit is, that is even more of a reason as you ignore the moods of your Spymaster at your peril."

Erik leaned back in the armchair he liked to claim as his own. "I don't doubt it. But there's little point of worrying about it if you're not going to bother also planning to handle it."

"Psionics have a habit of worrying. No doubt I will stay linked with you for the entire time we are there," Charles answered. "For both our security."

"That's fine. I know I broadcast quite a bit regardless." And the extra level of connection wouldn't be an undue burden to his ability to focus.

"If you are in an entertainment, I will stay with you," Charles promised. "If there is no choice, I will ensure you do not feel pain."

Charles could do that. He was so apparently unassuming that it was a shock to realise he could literally change someone's mind.

With little effort, he could do... a great deal to another person's mind, but it was back to what he'd been trying, and probably trying badly, to explain to Jean. There were things that could not be changed, could not be handled, could not be affected. If Charles weren't, or decided to not be, an ethical telepath, then there was very little Erik could do. It was easier to accept that he was, and Erik wanted it to be true.

"I think it might be better if I do feel pain."

"Why?" Charles asked. "I don't want you to suffer Erik." There was a brief surge of protective feeling under those simple words that leaked over to his thoughts.

"I don't want to suffer, either." Erik tipped his head a little, looking over at Charles. "But I can use pain to my advantage, and it keeps me grounded in a bad situation."

"Then I will temper my interference," he promised. "And give you instructions on whether you are offending the Masters of the Great Houses. I do not particularly us want to face a challenge fight."

"I don't think anyone does. Is there anything else we need to do in preparation?"

"I suspect rest," Charles said. "We will get precious little of it in Washington. Erik, if I talk about
you differently, behave in public differently, I want you to know I am playing a part."

"You'll be acting the part of the House Master. Which you certainly don't right now." The fact that he could say that to Charles was well representative of his laxness. In another Great House at the very least it would have been enough to require discipline and he was aware that if people knew they would judge Charles as weak. Charles had once said that most of his strength was wrapped up in not doing things because he could just ‘change’ peoples minds with a thought. "I understand."

"I act it well enough," Charles said. "Well enough to pass in Court otherwise I would not be here now."

"I know." Erik inclined his head slightly. *I meant it as a complement. I prefer that you're acting when you go to Court.*

Charles was looking at him. "Why they believe they have to adhere to old style traditions and manners I don't know. It comes to something that we have reverted back a hundred years of progress. Although, seeing you nearly naked will be a welcome distraction from tedious business."

"You see me naked often enough that I'd think you'd find it boring by now," Erik drawled. A little verbal sparring before they called it a night. Charles probably needed to rest, because his usual hours, which were completely of his making, were going to be inconvenienced by the court.

"I don't think I could ever find that boring," he answered. "I enjoy your hair long as well. It is very eyecatching."

*If I ever cut it, I could use the better part of it to make a wig.* "I'm not sure I want to catch any eyes while we're there." Erik stood up slowly, watching Charles. "You said we should rest to-night."

"Yes. Easier said than done but I suppose that we should make the effort," Charles said. "You will most definitely be sleeping with me."

"Thank you." It was very far from a hardship to sleep with Charles -- it was one of the things he cherished most about being there. Just... quiet and peace, and being able to relax.

"Gambit no doubt will be elsewhere," Charles said with a smile. "Let us go to bed now, though I doubt I will sleep properly."

*You shouldn't worry.* Erik moved the double doors open with a gesture, though, waiting for Charles to go first.

"Easy to say and not easy to do," he answered and Erik was sure Charles would be on light sleep the entire time they were at court. "But maybe you can take my mind off of it somehow."

He put a hand on Charles's shoulder when he fell into step with him, and let the doors close behind them. "It would be my pleasure."

Entering the Imperial Court was an exercise in ridiculousness and decadence. The complex that housed the entourages of the Great House's were practically like a city in itself, each with their own territory and insignia flying on banners that were raised as they entered the apartments.

Everywhere was decadence. The richest woods, art, gold, glitter of gems, marble. It was all flash and glory and that included their Personals. Imperial Court manners meant he had to dress in a full Master of the House regalia. The colours of House Xavier were dark green, and gold and he was one of those who had a very full personal set of status markers on his formal mantle. A good
excuse for gems to brighten the comparatively dark basis of his attire.

Erik on the other hand was in dress Personal gear. Jean had done them proud. The collar was gold chased with the insignia of the house - a florid stylised X made from crossed swords was picked out in emeralds.

Erik's cuffs were gold based - he was allowed to do that with a majority skills base over three quarters in the gem levels, and they glittered as well, marked clearly with gem specialties in engineering, sciences as well as in the Personal quadrant. He was wearing the practically indecent loin cloth and nipple clamps that were expected. He'd looped a shimmering patterns of loose chains from those clamps, knowing Erik would make them light and reasoning that should something happen, at least he would have a ready source of weaponry. Jean had taken that to heart and given Erik an outfit that had metal upper cuffs on his arms, and several sets on his legs with an outfit made from the dangling gilt chains connecting each point to one of the others.

As they entered the inner Court, Charles was struggling not to laugh. Erik was jingling.  

*I'm a belled cat.*

Erik had already tweaked around the house Genosha neutralizers, like it was nothing, like Charles had asked him to get him a glass of water. When Erik had stressed and stressed that he was very natural with engineering, with equipment and mechanics he had not been exaggerating on any level.

*Mmm, I should dangle some bells from your chains* Charles said mentally, keeping a set expression of serious authority despite his amusement. *Perhaps I should have put an emerald in your navel after all*

They were approaching the reception hall - not as intimate as the Emperors Court where Entertainments and discussion took place, but instead leaning towards the grand. *I'd move and it would fall out.* Erik was keeping his eyes down, and Charles was half aware he wasn't even looking, he was feeling the world out with his sense of metal, of magnetic fields, a bright, vivid world that didn't particularly need eyes or Erik's usually defiant gaze.

Starting with the reception was always the best place -- a little mingling, a great deal of bartering and gossip.

It was effectively a place to display status and... good lord, it looked like the Summer Court this year was being represented by a bucolic, midsummer night's dream theme. Pleasure slaves, the Emperor's own were costumed as nymphs and fairy creatures. Inside, a crafted woodland with interesting artificial glowing will o' the wisps that flitted past.

No doubt they would be required to fall in with the theme, even as an artificial waterfall cascaded down a crystal cliff in the centre of the room.

*Should have brought anyone with wings by the looks of it.* Charles said trying not to seem too impressed by the spectacle that had no doubt cost millions in House tithes.

*This is insanity.* And wonderment. Erik was taking it all in with a little shock, even if he was logically filing it away as insanity. Some the other houses looked like they were starting to side with the theme, hastily, and Charles let himself take in who was already there and who wasn't.

There was the black diamond glitter of House Wayne. Even from here, and even with him kneeling at Wayne's feet Kal-El drew the eye with his godlike body and bejeweled cuffs. There was House
Luthor, in rich purples and Charles was trying to see who their new Personal would be. He was pretty sure Lex Luthor was not using a proper Personal.

He had a pretty blond girl who probably, Charles was sure, wasn't an actual personal, even if she was standing perfectly poised at Luthor's side. He kept scanning, noting other houses -- the great financial house, Ross, in gleaming white, the Khushrenada and Peacecraft houses all giving each other dirty looks fit to burn a building down.

They still hadn't forgiven each other over the House War they had conducted even though they were several years down the line. The fact that Kushrenada had manage to win free in a brilliant internal counterstrike after a judgment against them was a testament to their tactical brilliance. Enough to secure them the Imperial contracts for strategic oversight at least. He could see the tall elegant blues of the Mistress of House Weir, conversing with the yellows of the Mistress of House Cuddy. The deep reds of House Harvelle appeared to be in discussion with the Silvers of House Von Doom, and House Osbourne - a vibrant green to his darker shade was very visible over near one of the Masters he could not quite make out. The place was a riot of color and politics and it was difficult to pick out where he needed to go first. He opened his mind a little, dipping for reactions to his presence and to Magneto.

It was a muddled mix of reactions, a good deal of interest in his presence at Court, in Erik's presence at his side, and a good deal of suspicion. He wasn't sure who to head for first, in terms of houses, in terms of behavior as very few seemed to be inclined to approach him which was a concern as that often reflected the business market.

He was saved the decision by being approached by House Ross. Ah, yes, one of his recent contracts has been to ferret out a saboteur in one of their Banks. Jean had seen through them easily enough though it had gotten a little fraught at the denouement that saw some rather destructive efforts on the part of the saboteur.

"Master Xavier. A pleasure to see you back at Court," she said cordially.

"It is good to be back Mistress Ross," he said pausing. Formal kneeling, or casual?

He did kneel, though, formal to start with, while Master Ross's personal did the same at her side once she stopped.

Stay formal. She is a stickler and can claim insult if she feels she is not taken seriously Charles said.

"I see you have a new Personal," she commented glancing down at Magneto.

"A recent gift from the Emperor," Charles agreed pleasantly, tossing out the subtle reminder that he was in the Imperial favor. "It has been most entertaining to train him to the collar."

If only she knew, Charles murmured in his mind. He'd kept true to his promise that Erik could try anything they did together in reverse. The experiments had been very pleasurable. Erik kept his head down, though, and his bearing very still. Not stiff, but still, hands loosely folded in front of him.

"I'm sure it would be. I heard he was a meta. A dangerous one." Sally Ross was looking at him, and while she didn't touch him, she wanted to -- he caught the flickers of wondering about running her hands through his long white hair and Charles had to quell a little flare of possessiveness as he stroked through Erik’s hair himself. Her own personal was a pretty girl, with delicate features who blended easily into he woodland creature theme of the decor -- but her eyes were sharp, even down-
cast. Someone trained to their trade and then as a Personal from the looks of it.

"Then it is as well he came to my House with our specialty," Charles replied seeking the source of that information. Ethics were a luxury at the Imperial Court. Hmm.. Looked like House Ross had a link into the Imperial Service. Banks and money got everywhere in the end. "And how is your bondslave recovering from his ordeal? I understand one of your rivals managed a temporary abduction of your Jansky yes?"

The man wasn't the quality one could bring to Court as Personal, but everyone *knew* about Jansky's importance to House Ross. "Most unfortunate, yes. We recovered him quite quickly with our own resources." And if it had been closer to the deadline, he was sure she would've contracted with his House or House Wayne to get the man back. He was an exceptional mind. "And he's recovered enough to come in the entourage."

"Ah, I am pleased," Charles nodded, immediately catching her suspicion of ‘Why?’ in her mind. "My meta Phoenix grew to like him when she contracted for you. She said he has a most wonderful mind."

Which immediately settled that faint suspicion, which could have grown if not addressed so quickly. "He does have a beautiful mind. It's why we keep him, and he's afforded such good treatment. One must... cultivate great assets."

"Should he need more direct intervention then I am sure that we have the resources to assist," he said. Erik was being the model of a good Personal beside him and he reached out and stroked his hair again as a reward for his patience.

The faint motion of his head was allowable, the quiet exhale he gave from the contact. It wasn't breaking House Ross's strict expectations. "Clearly. You've turned a mad dog into something quite tame. I congratulate you."

"Not as polished as your Ann, but then few are," he flattered outrageously. "If you will excuse me, I received a message that House Wayne wanted to discuss a contract with me."

She would respect a business reason to move on. It was probably the only reason she would respect. Erik stood up, carefully, only once Charles made the first move to go.

Well done he mentally bespoke Erik. She can be a task master. If you can pass her you can pass the others. Now let’s see what Master Wayne has to say for himself. You ready to face Kal-El again? I've been ready. Erik was still keeping his eyes down, and with a gentle probe the shift from vision to a world where people felt faint and walls and wiring felt, looked, solid, was almost shocking. So many different colors, and Charles wasn't sure some of them had names. He pulled back from that, but could still feel Erik's smile. It makes it very easy to be sedate.

Mmm. I will reward you for your patience later, he promised as he approached Master Wayne. He waited to be acknowledged, looking at the kneeling Kal-El who took a glance at Erik and he could feel the miserable surge of guilt. No doubt he thought they had done something to Erik to make him so compliant. It was a logical thought as those he had acquired ‘broken’ or ‘defective’ from House Genosha had been subjected to brainwashing techniques. Kal-El no doubt expected Magneto’s fate to have been the same.

He could not have been further from the truth. "Good afternoon, Master Xavier." The head of
House Wayne sounded controlled, perhaps a little worried which was highly unusual. Bruce Wayne was usually the epitome of the calm mask over emotions and not letting your friends or enemies see anything.

"Good afternoon, Master Wayne," he responded. "I trust you are well." Wayne very rarely let thoughts drift like other people did. He had a natural shield that would require focus to break, and though he could do it, it would be noticeable to the other man and to other psionics. Still, he always listened for any stray clue should Bruce relax even a little.

Anything, a side thought, a whisper could give him an advantage. "I am. I see you've appropriately managed the gift Kal-El delivered." That surge of guilt wasn't leaving Kal-El, either, and he almost wanted to soothe him, to let him know that it was all right. Only, it was Court, and Kal-El was *not* one of his Metas.

"Indeed. His assistance was very valuable and his solicitude admirable," Charles said inclining his head. What was worrying the unflappable Bruce Wayne? "Magneto has done very well since joining us."

"Always good news. Your house is considered the premier Meta House for a reason." An interesting bit of flattery as the position of House Genosha was arguably more important to the Imperial Throne, but they produced soldiers and he produced…specialists in all areas. He was trying to distract him somehow. He watched Wayne's eyes move, quick, hit Luthor's position across the room, and then back like it hadn't happened at all.

Ah, concern for Lex Luthor. The more vulnerable target. He would ask Gambit to keep a surreptitious ear to the ground for rumors of moves against House Luthor. It would not harm to have that information to curry favor and it might shed some light on the strange dynamics between the two Houses. "Speaking of which, I understand you have made enquiries regarding Meta training?"

"In your House's search and rescue techniques. I would like Kal-El to train with your team."

That was a surprise. He’d assumed the requests were for one on one development rather than team work which would require a placement. "You would trust my House enough to allow your Kal-El train there?" he asked. "I am honored." He actually was. Wayne never did that. "May I ask why?"

And he wasn't able to pick up anything, but Kal. And Kal seemed not at all surprised, which meant they had discussed it beforehand so Bruce had intended to bring this up at some point during court. "Kal-El has not had the ability to train with any functional teams except for the ones fielded by the Imperial House. I would like to broaden his experiences in that regard, because not all contracts are single meta events."

"True," Charles acknowledged. "There might be difficulties with some of the Meta's as he has been pivotal in many Meta's captures. Perhaps we can discuss the details and terms of contracts privately at some point."

Wayne wanted to sound him out more thoroughly, he could sense that much. Easy enough to give him the option for a business meeting.

And a private conversation would more thoroughly provide for it. "I look forward to having that conversation with you." Wayne tilted his head slightly. "Kal-El, please fetch me a drink."

He really was a joy to behold as he got up, something he could appreciate aesthetically, but Charles found he didn't want to swap out Erik even if he had the choice.
Erik was appealing in his own way, and still a little feral at heart, but their interactions, and his willingness to be honest with Charles -- to a fault -- was worth it all.

And perhaps he could send Erik to get him a drink, as well.

"Erik, please follow Kal-El and get me one also," he instructed. Lex Luthor was heading their way as well, which could be interesting.

Erik stood up smoothly, head inclined, and turned to follow. It cleared space for Luthor, who looked, as always, a tiny bit smug. It was difficult to decided whether it was an inherited trait as his father had always worn the same expression. His head was very busy, like a hundred wheels spinning and he had less of a natural shield than Master Wayne.

He was more open than Bruce, but very intelligent. It was fascinating, very interesting and he pulled his attention back. "Master Luthor, a pleasure."

"Master Xavier. I see we're having a gathering of Meta owners," Luthor drawled. He didn't play much close to the hilt, or so it seemed, but Charles knew that was a cover for what he was plotting. House Luthor plotted like other people breathed but this Luthor had the capacity to back it up with actual contributions. "Master Wayne."

The enigmatic master of House Wayne inclined his head to the other man, formal as ever. "I applaud your latest move with the science patents Master Luthor," he said pleasantly enough, but Charles could detect the pride.

"I am remiss, I appear to have missed a triumph," Charles said lightly. "The praise of House Wayne is hard-earned."

"A few small personal achievements." Very few Masters did what Charles was willing to term... work. It was mostly an act of management, and yet, House Luthor had been known for their nose to the grindstone attitude, even when Lionel brought the House up.

But then Lionel had been the Master of underhanded dealing in more ways than one. He wondered if anyone had claimed the deathmark on the man yet. He was slippery enough to be giving even seasoned hunters the runaround. It probably wasn't politic to bring that up to Luthor however.

"I see I am not the only one with a new Personal at this occasion," Charles commented. "A new acquisition?"

Oh yes, and Bruce Wayne did not like that either, a little crack and a whiff of possessive jealousy, gone almost immediately. Not surprising, the man had relished having the Luthor Heir as a Personal for a year. It had been the talk of the Court for the entire year cycle.

"A long time house holding, actually, cross-trained." Someone he trusted then, likely, rather than someone who was explicitly trained and naturally with Personal inclinations.

"She is beautiful," Charles approved, glancing around for Erik. "Magneto could stand a little polish, but then I have not had him that long."

"Oh, we all know. Your personal was the talk of the short session last month. The Russian Emperor had filed papers in the international Court about getting him extradited from Imperial Holdings back to Russia. It was struck down, but still. Kept the mouths spinning around here," Luthor drawled.

"Oh really?" Charles looked at them both. "I was surprised by the Emperors... generosity."
"Technically, I could have had Kal-El take him for House Wayne. He managed it once before," Wayne offered idly. "But, I did not have the luxury of time to train him at that point."

Ah yes, the lunar contract, with draconian deadlines. Ostensibly one of the formal reasons for a connection between House Wayne and Luthor. Maybe if he could encourage a private conversation, he might be able to contract Erik's services in engineering for that project.

Besides Charles didn't think that Wayne's particular style of training would have been at all effective with a meta who pushed back harder when pushed. Erik only escalated, step by step, and Charles could shortcut that spiral.

"Or the inclination to take on unwanted trouble." Luthor looked over his shoulder again. "No, you've done quite well."

"Thank you. My House specialty of course," Charles replied. "May I ask what other news I missed when I was unable to attend Court?"

"Well. Where to start?" Luthor looked over at Wayne, caught his eyes, and Charles could have sworn it was almost like they were talking mind to mind.

Personals at the Imperial Court were attractive in almost a magnetic sense that Erik could appreciate. Not always conventionally beautiful - they had the Pleasure Slaves for that, they were nevertheless charismatic human beings and meta's and prone to gossip as they 'got a drink' for their Masters and Mistresses.

Not a lot of waiter service was going on.

"And then I pretty much wrapped the guy right up, and delivered him in a neat parcel to the House Guard," one young man was saying enthusiastically to Kal-El.

"Peter, you've got to be more careful with yourself," Kal-El said concerned. "You don't want to have to deal with all of House Genosha."

And there was an appeal to having Metas for personals in the Imperial Houses -- people who were *more* than human, and couldn't buy off. Erik lurked up behind Kal-El, eyeing the table with glasses and unpoured drinks that no one was really touching.

"Those nutcases? Couldn't squish little old me, besides Genosha is getting all het up about House Stark pushing to get back into the Imperial Court." the other meta said charmingly. "Oh hey, the new guy...how you doing?"

"Newish, apparently. I'm Magneto." He would have offered his hand, but he'd been warned that it wasn't what Personals did. Instead, he inclined his head slightly to 'Peter'.


"So you keep telling me," Kal-El said with a faint smile that betrayed a little of his awkwardness. "This is where you get to know the other Personals. Often we do some...negotiating at this stage."

"He's so polite," Peter said. "He means about when they make us get down and dirty."

"Yes, Charles has vaguely alluded to that." Erik nodded to Kal-El, watching Kal-El move a little, widening the circle in invitation. "Kal-El dropped a mountain on me, so yes, I do remember him."
"He has a tendency to do that," Peter said as Kal-El looked uncomfortable. "First time at Court, everyone's gonna want to get a piece of you. Steer clear of the House Essex metas if you can. They, well they'll fuck you over."

"Your refined manners are the wonder of the Court," an elegant man approached them."Grodin of House Weir. Sometimes I believe you don't take your role seriously."

"Hey, I wasn't born Meta you know. Just saying." 

"Very few people are." Erik shrugged, nodding at Grodin. "I'm Magneto, of House Xavier. Nice to meet you."

"Ah, the tamer of savage beasts," Grodin said. "You have a formidable Master. Mistress Weir is often impressed at how he rarely seems to earn the enmity of hardly any of his fellow Great Houses."

"Boring..." Peter mock yawned although Erik was beginning to think that he was putting on part of the persona. "We should be giving him the low down."

"Yes, please. Give me the low down," Erik smiled, folding his hands loosely behind his back. The feeling of the metal he was wearing *was* very comfortable.

"Well, House Essex Personal? Creed? Not good to be on the receiving end of, I can tell you. He's all about the blood," Peter answered. "Although, the House Cuddy Personal are good to connect with. The whole house has some degree of medical specialization."

"Magneto will not have to deal with Creed," another Personal said, coming in to join the group. "Everyone knows the Emperor wants to screw with house politics."

It was the lovely woman from before. Ann, that was it of House Ross. Erik shifted a little, still looking at her before looking at the rest of the group. "Do you have any theories?"

"He is trying to prevent a Meta House faction forming. It will be metas against metas," she said confidently.

Erik looked sideways at Kal-El. "And I wonder who the emperor wants House Xavier to not ally with."

"It's not like you need to be subtle about it," Peter says. "Pretty much everyone knows. And, he might even put a proviso on it who does what like he did after that Vegas stunt Kal."

The young Meta winced a little. "Don't remind me."

"What happened?" He was keeping himself restrained, aloof, idle in comparison to them in his reactions.

"Roughest sessions I've seen with Kal-El bound by decree to receive attention from all others," Ann replied, her lips pursed in disapproval. "This is what happens when you flout the rules Kal-El."

"It was necessary." Kal-El said resolutely, though Erik could tell the memories of the incident were definitely not among the House Wayne’s Personal’s favourites. "I do not regret what I did."

"What rules did you flout? If you don't mind me asking." He would have liked to talk to Kal-El, alone, but now wasn't the time.
"There was a presentation of a House Heir in Vegas and we attended. An Imperial judge attended also with a… temporary Personal," Kal-El said.

"So, Kal decided to play hero and in protecting him, pissed off everyone else and made a particularly blatant political statement that he could take down everyone if he wanted to in front of an Imperial Judge with direct connections to the Emperor," Peter chipped in. "Man, the Emperor was not happy."

"A definite understatement," Grodin replied nodding sagely. "Unfortunately, most of our Masters see the political sense in us being on top so to speak."

"So who is on top is a... deeper statement of house interrelations?" Erik asked, cocking an eyebrow. "You'll have to forgive my ignorance, I'm still learning."

"In certain situations," Ann said a little precisely. "Or it is used as a means of proxy humiliation. Kal gets that a lot unfortunately as a symbolic means of putting him in his place."

"Being too powerful can be dangerous," Grodin said. "In the Court, the Emperor has an arena to play his own games. He wants no one to forget the Great Houses exist for him, and fortunes rise and fall on his favour. So he might specify a group entertainment to a theme that we must improvise, or he might select a house to provide the entertainment or he might select Personals from different Houses and dictate the type of entertainment he wishes to see."

"Ah." Erik inclined his head slightly. "The Russian Emperor had the same idea of entertainment, though this place is much more impressive."

"You were at the Russian Imperial Court?" Ann asked. "Is it true that they still fight even minor insult challenges over there?"

"It's great sport back there. The personals are not expected to be so mannerly, nor so permanent as you all are." Death in the court entertainments had been common enough, though usually of pleasure slaves rather than personals. It wasn’t unknown however – there was less play acting and more violent response to situations.

"I hear they adhere to Imperial manners even within House walls," Grodin added. "Were you a Personal in a Russian House?"

"I was a floating personal, when it suited them." Erik's mouth pulled a little, and he was trying to keep a smile on his face.

An older looking Personal joined them, limping slightly and more covered than others, almost paired with another man in more traditional Personal attire.

"Oh let's plumb the tortured depths of his past experience," the first said. "That'll be fun."

"Greg," the other man said warningly. "He's a bit cranky. His video game privileges were revoked for the duration."

"I'm shocked that's all that was revoked," Grodin smiled slowly. He obviously found the casual approach of the man irritating.

"I'm Magneto, House Xavier." Erik inclined his head to them both, expecting to at least know what house to attach to them.

"I am... Diagnosto!" the snarky man said and was duly hit over the head by his companion. "What?
It's my superpower."

"His name is Greg, and I am James, though he tends to call me Wilson and we are both House Cuddy."

"She should totally change the House name. " Greg said. "We sound like some sort of children's comforter."

"Right, you get to bring that up in bed tonight," James drawled.

"Pleasure to meet you." Erik gave another nod. That fact that they were all there, in a clot, 'gathering drinks' didn't seem to be a problem. What a thin excuse, though.

"Small talk is always so necessary when we're going to be sticking our dicks in each other shortly," Greg replied and James winced.

"Nice, Greg."

"Look, Magnet-man, they are all dancing around the fact but we all know that the Emperor is going to set you and Kal-El up," he said. "Only thing to bet on is whose going to be on top."

Erik looked sideways at Kal-El, who wasn't actually looking at him, and hadn't really since he'd come over. "It's a shame I don't have any money to put in the pool."

"The controversy rages over the fact no one is sure that giving you as a gift was a mark of favor or being out of favor," Grodin commented. "It's pretty much the only thing new at the moment."

"So you're all bored and I'm the current topic of gossip." Well. His house had their own ideas, which Erik wasn't going to share. "I'm no mad dog, and I'm loyal to House Xavier. I don't think it matters whether it was a mark for or against favor."

Kal shifted slightly. "I had best return with the drink. Magneto, may I just have a quick word?"

"Yes." Since it was so obvious, yes. He peeled away, headed for the glasses. Charles would probably like the nice white wine.

Kal was waiting for him as he collected the wine. "We can't talk properly here, but we do need to discuss things. When we return to our House quarters, there is a central area called the commons where members can mingle. As you can fly, I would appreciate meeting you on top of the temple dome if you are permitted."

Erik carefully poured, only half looking at Kal. "It doesn't matter what I am permitted to do or not. I will be there."

He nodded to him briefly, and headed back towards his Master who was still talking with Charles and Lex Luthor, with a few more heads of Houses drifting in as well.

Erik followed, trying to pull himself back into the rules -- eyes down, don't do anything unless instructed. It wasn't particularly *hard* to do, for all of Charles's praises that he was managing it.

Perhaps it was a learned response from the camps. You didn't make eye contact unless you deliberately wanted to attract attention. That much had been ingrained into him.

"...and then House Genosha traded for some technological expertise with Von Doom. The second generation suppression collars are tamper proof," one of them was saying.
"Really?" Charles said blandly. "I must upgrade, I was not aware that the first generation could be tampered with."

And if what the emperor as inflicting on them all was second generation technology, Erik was sorely unimpressed with the tamper proof quality. He stopped at Charles' side, kneeling as he offered the wine.

_Thank you_ Charles said mentally, but ignoring him in reality.

"Oh yes," Bruce Wayne said. "There was that distressing incident where someone produced technology that broadcast an override and turned on the meta's collars mid battle."

"Ah, it is fortunate that I don't run my Metas with collars during conflict contracts," Charles answered. "I don't believe it is necessary if they are trained sufficiently."

"I'm curious what your secret is," Luthor was saying, looking at Erik, and while he could feel the attention shift, he kept his eyes pointedly down. He felt Luthor get nearer, though, felt him almost touch where his blocking band rested snugly against his temple. "I see this one has some additional hardware. Is it part of your training process?"

_He is too perceptive_, Charles commented before glibly saying. "He is comparatively new to the House. It acts as a sophisticated monitor of various vital statistics. We have found it useful in training and combat as it gives realtime information on performance. I will use it later to see if he has become unduly stressed by any particular situation."

"Not any kind of control unit or limiter?" Luthor shifted back, and Erik stayed stock still. "How very behavioralist of you."

"It has that potential," Charles acknowledged and lying through his teeth. Charles was the limiter and the controller. "I have not yet had to use it."

"Mm," Bruce Wayne smiled. "Of course, Kal-El has his own unique collar. The Genoshan technology does not concern me."

_Shockingly, I suspect you won't have to. They'll probably still want a demonstration._" Erik pushed across a mental image of him relaxing against Charles's lap, and whether that was appropriate yet. The response of a gentle ‘wait’ kept him where he was and the reason became clear as he picked up another in close proximity.

"Very little concerns you, Wayne." It sounded like a woman, but not Mistress Ross, a new voice, a little more nasally, but softer, too.

"I find it best to avoid situations, where concerns are necessary," Bruce Wayne answered. "Congratulations Mistress Cuddy on avoiding the Imperial judgment against your bond-slave. That must have required some delicate footwork."

_Greg, her Personal. You might have met him. He is renowned for being the cause of Challenge fights. We get a lot of work from her due to him, Charles mentally commented.

_I've met him._" No answer to his other inquiry, but Charles was studying, probably listening in on the other minds as much s possible. Erik slid his eyes up a little, enough to see Kal-El leaning against Bruce's legs. That was enough of a cue to move, to lean into Charles and stretch an arm over his knees and relax a little.

"It did indeed," she commented wryly. "Fortunately he is worth the penalty we had to pay."
Sometimes genius needs some allowances."

Charles was fondling his hair absently. Erik kept his eyes low, but stayed relaxed.

"You do have a reputation for being able to cure anything that's not a solid death sentence."

"And sometimes even that," Mistress Cuddy added with a smile. She was very eyecatching, at least from what Erik could see from Charles' thoughts. "We are fortunate enough to have acquired those at the top of their fields. Master Luthor, I would like to discuss the possibility of some manufacturing of some pharmaceutical developments we have made recently at your convenience."

This is how business is done, Charles said. Through what is ostensibly idle chatter.

I've noticed. Erik closed his eyes, relaxing a faction more. This level of hypervigilance to nuance, tone and action was exhausting. No wonder Charles was never over enthusiastic about attending if it was all that and thoughts as well.

"Of course, we can discuss it later."

"I don't suppose you're interested in discussing the sharing of a few blood samples from that meta of yours who heals.....?"

"I'm afraid that has been tried before," Charles answered. "The genetics are very different. One of my own specialists Dr McCoy is working on it however. However, if there is an interesting proposal that you can put forward, I might consider it."

It's not hard to get a sample of Wolverines blood, he leaves enough of it around, but it is very difficult to get it to actually DO something. Charles commented. It is so resistant that it doesn't actually adapt well

"Well, we can discuss it later, because we do... have a proposal." Business, business, with the requirement of a fun plaything at all of their sides. Charles's fingers were still massaging his scalp, sliding through his hair idly.

Charles was answering when there was a rather gratuitous fanfare, and 'all hail the Emperor Comes' it seemed from the communal reaction. Everyone stood to attention.

Kneel up Erik. The Emperor will greet us then inform us of events and we will be dismissed for this session.

He shifted, knelt up straight and tall, eyes down as he felt it out with his metal sense, the heavy decorations that the emperor was wearing, and what looked like an absurd collar to his robes.

Unsurprisingly, the Emperor was rife with devices of various types. It would be interesting to know what they all did.

"His Imperial Majesty of the Americas, Emperor Rassilon the Ninth, Protector of the Great Houses, Upholder of Imperial Law, Defender of the Sacred Trine and Imperial Commander of the Guard!" bellowed out a herald, and the Emperors entourage swept into the chamber and they all cleared a path for them immediately.

It was ostentation at its finest. A veritable pack of Personals attended the potentate on bejeweled leashes all beautiful and garbed in magnificent style. The Emperor walked in robes so lavish and ornate that he needed Pleasure slaves to help carry them.
"Welcome to the Summer Court Masters and Mistresses of the Great Houses of the Americas," he announced in a rich rolling voice that had command implicit in every syllable. "It is my pleasure to have such illustrious visitors to my humble dwelling." He gestured to the contrived Arcadian fantasy around them. "This will be a time of relaxation and wonder. We shall relax and renew our affiliations and ties in the otherworld of the Fey."

What a lovely sentiment and a lovely pile of crap, but Erik stayed still, focused on that stillness, and let himself drift as he felt out the newcomers, just reading their magnetic fields, the things they were wearing. Their technology was beautiful and interesting, and he wanted to forage through all of it.

"Tonight we shall Feast, and then tomorrow we shall convene the Great Council and entertainments shall begin. We shall have an open theme for all Personals called the Pleasures of the Fey. I trust this will be sufficient time to prepare something appropriate."

He will have left information packages in the House Quarters. We'll look when we get back, Charles murmured.

"The Feast will begin in the twilight times. Please come garbed accordingly." The Emperor said and stepped down from the raised area on the central sculpture and swept out of the room.

"Elves and fairies," Bruce Wayne was practically rolling his eyes. "Another Party theme."

"Dance, puppets, dance," Luthor muttered, and it seemed like there might be a little lingering bitching before people filtered out. Interesting.

"No doubt a little darker than the sparkly concepts we are used to," Cuddy said with pinched look. "The Emperor’s tastes are darker than this implies." She glanced around at the landscaped hall. A flight of exotic butterflies drifted past, no doubt hatched for the occasion.

The Fey are traditionally murdering bastards, aren't they? He was fairly sure the old folk tales had portrayed them that way.

Beautiful, bizarre murdering bastards. In all, possibly a good summary of most of the Great Houses, Charles agreed.

"Well, I best see if I can transform myself into an Elf lord or some such," Charles said. "And perhaps think of something entertaining for my Personal and attendants to be."

And head back to their quarters. Later, he'd find Kal-El. Later. Erik stood up, once Charles had re-leashed him, and they headed back out.

The Feast had been an event the likes of which Erik had never seen before. It was decadent to the extreme, with the tables piled high with food and drink -- fresh meats of all kinds, fruits Erik was fairly sure did not exist in nature, flavors he'd never tasted before. The quality of the food, and Charles's teasing words in his head had kept him from being infuriated that he was being hand fed, that he wasn't allowed to touch but to only take what Charles pressed against his lips.

And if he spent much more time with his eyes canted down he was going to put a metal band over his eyes to save himself the trouble of remembering to not look up when he heard a new voice.

And the costumery, well. Going as some kind of wild metal elemental was too easy really, but he'd made metal wings for his 'elf lord' as well, and was just unfastening it. It was nice to be able to look around freely after so many hours of *not*, to let his hands idle on Charles's shoulders while
he formed the fastenings away. "There."

"Thank you," Charles replied, touching his arm. "The silver veins are a nice touch. Lady Harvelle was a particularly impressive Banshee as well."

"Frightening looking," Erik agreed mildly, setting the configuration down because it was going to be used again. He wanted to relax, but he still needed to meet with Kal-El and plan, discuss what had been in the sheaf of papers on the entertainment. Their speculation had been correct, there had been a requirement for him and Kal-El to basically enact a 'fuck you House Wayne!' message. "Is there anything I can help with?"

Charles looked at him. "I sense you have somewhere you want to be Erik. I have some work to go over before I meet with some other Houses tomorrow."

"Want to be is a very strong word for it." After all, the quarters they'd been given were very nice, and so was the bed Charles had been given. "I'll be back soon."

"I shall be waiting for you," Charles said with a smile. "I did promise you a reward. You may go Erik."

Well, and now he was going to be very quick. Erik nodded, and moved to open one of the windows to leave from. *I won't be going far.* Or for long, given that promise. He didn't linger, though, and took off into the air, flying straight up so he could get his bearings on location.

*I know* Charles thought echoed. *You can contact me if you need to.*

He was going to stay overlapped with him after all.

The Temple dome was obvious and like everything else in the Imperial city, completely over done. Ornate, decorated, sheathed in some sort of opalescent material, the dome loomed high above the central compound. And sitting up there, looking at the stars was Kal-El. There was no doubt about it, he looked unearthly in his beauty in the moonlight.

It was freeing to fly in open air, un-hindered, to feel the air flow around him, to feel the earth's forces, even if it was for a short time, even if it was just to get to the temple dome, and stop, still floating in the air, in front of Kal-El. "Hello."

"Magneto," Kal-El said looking up with a faint smile. "Have a seat, plenty of roof here for everyone."

It was really strange. This was the first time that he realized that Kal-El was actually really quite young.

Maybe past, a little bit into his 20s, which... Erik had sympathy for, remembering himself at that age. He levitated to sit down beside Kal-El. "Circumstances have changed since we last were face to face alone."

"I know." The other Meta glanced at him. "It is not a coincidence that the Emperor has requested something that will enable you to have a public revenge." There was an implicit question in his statement.

Erik tilted his head, watching Kal-El's face while he said that. "I don't want revenge."

"Whether you want it or not, it will be what you have to have," Kal-El said sounding resigned to being a participant in what was going to be a very uncomfortable session at the least. "It was...
pretty predictable actually. Bruce-- Master Wayne has been warning me what would probably happen when we got here. His information is very good."

"Charles was fairly sure I'd be put into a scene with you." Erik leaned back on his hands, looking out into the night's sky. The stars looked different from there than they had back in House Radim. A little fainter. Different positions. "We thought it might be reversed, though."

"It was a possibility," Kal-El agreed. "I think you already know that most Houses view your gifting to Xavier as a poison chalice. They thought it meant he was next on the hit list and in doing so several have relaxed into a state of compliancy thinking the eye is off of them. This is all very obviously a means to stir up trouble between our Houses. Your Master is known as, well, as a more moderate Master. He has made no secret over the years that he does not enjoy the suffering of Meta's or anyone so we did think that the scene might go that way. But it appears the Bill going to the Imperial Court of Law is still his number one priority."

"So as retribution for your house, you're going to be punished." And Erik was going to be the tool for that retribution. He disliked being used, no matter whether it was physically or manipulatively. He'd had enough of both to last two or three lifetimes, and a store of shutter fast snapshots in his mind to match. "How do you want this handled?"

"You'll have to do it. He has specifically requested a scene where you take me down in combat and then slake your rage and need for dominance. It is a reverse of how our last interaction went. It is possible he believes he will trigger a well worn revenge fantasy. Believe me, he won't let it stop until there is blood," Kal-El said. "He is a classic sadist, Magneto."

Possibly without Charles, he would have gnawed his own sanity into a frenzy in that way. "I can please a classic sadist, Kal-El. I learned from some of the best. The question is... what would make it least agonizing for you?" He pulled at one of his chains, palming the metal, before holding his palm up and forming it with idle thoughts into spike. "It's the difference between me covering you in barbered wire, or just twisted wire with thorns."

Kal-El leaned over and crushed the spikes with little effort to demonstrate a point. "Right now, nothing could touch me, but I'll be unshielded enough to bleed and then... it will just go. No damage is permanent on me," he said calmly. "What was your performance piece with your House mate going to be?"

"A lot of chains, and a little bloodplay. It was a bit back and forth, with him starting on me, and then I turned the tables." Because Charles disliked him being hurt. He'd been ready for it, ready for the scene with Kal-El to go not at all in his favor. Right now he wasn't sure if he was more mentally prepared to be the one receiving.

He shaped a thin length of chain in his hand while he talked, adding the spikes that looked fearsome but were mostly decorative.

"He does like powers," Kal-El agreed examining the chain. "I suggest you go to town with that theme, but up the blood. My body can stand a lot. Electricity or powerburst too. From past experience I can tell you the Emperor is fond of forced penetration, whips and complete overboard restraint." His voice became more clinical as if planning something that would not be happening to him. "I suggest at the end of our 'combat' you restrain me with a lot fearsome looking things that appear to have interior spikes as well which I believe you can retract on actual contact. Hook suspension is another possible as it looks gruesome but the actual piercing is not too bad, as is metal whips. The skin breaking will cause the necessary blood. However, he is about sexual gratification so barbed looking tentacles are probably the required climax. It will look impressive if you can have the metal literally crawling around, inside and out."
Erik bent his once bad knee, pulling it up, and tapped it with his hand. "I have already done that. I know the places where it won't hurt so much, but it looks effective."

"Then I will trust the details to you, and should the Emperor change his mind, and our positions are reversed, I hope you will trust me to make things as good as I can." For all the calmness in Kal-El's voice, there was a stiffness to him that showed Erik that this all bothered the other Meta in some way.

It was a sign that he'd been spending too much time with Charles because he didn't particularly want to let it lie like that. "Is this going to be a problem for you?"

That got him a surprised look. "No, not a problem. I dislike even the possibility of having to force someone. Here there is at least an implicit consent but even so...I find it is best to give a permission or ask for it I guess."

"Then this is my consent in advance. If things do end up reversed, I know this is by order of our esteemed emperor, and that when it's over, I go home to House Xavier, to Charles. Knowing that, a great deal is suddenly much more bearable."

That seemed to get him a second glance. "You have a good relationship with your new Master?" Kal-El asked.

"Yes." He could say that without hesitance as he sat there, looking out at the sky again. "I have a very good relationship with him."

"I admit it, we often wonder how Xavier manages it, considering your capture." Kal-El said. "Can I ask, what it is about the relationship that is good?"

There were a few places to start, and some of them were quite prurient, even by Erik's admissions. The fact that Charles could give him pleasure like nothing else he had experienced, that he was encouraged to do the same in return completely to his own will. The quiet and certain knowledge that Charles cared, believed and extended trust to him at all times. "I've had a miserable life until recently. There were little highlights, but very few and far between. Lose enough people, face enough pain, and you'd seem like a mad dog, too. It's dammingly simple -- he treats me like an equal when we talk, and takes my concerns and issues into consideration."

"You speak very freely," Kal-El said. "I would advise you to not mention that in a more public setting. " He looked at him sharply as if realizing something. "Perhaps the Emperors fears are not as unfounded as people might have thought."

"That the system is broken?" Erik drawled. "And only works well when circumvented, as your House and House Luthor has done?"

"You realize you speak treason," Kal-El pointed out calmly. "But then, I have skirted it too often myself. Magneto...I need to know, is Charles Xavier a good man?"

"You nearly killed me for treason, and this shocks you?" Erik shifted, almost ready to leave, but. "Yes, Charles is a very good man. I trust him implicitly."

"His stance on Meta rights is genuine?" Kal-El was peculiarly insistent about that.

"Very genuine. And if you use this news against him, I will finish what I hesitated to finish before, and pull the blood out of your heart." There was no venom in his suggestion, no heat -- there wasn't a need, yet.
"My master would be foolish to let that remain an advantage," Kal-El said with a faint smile. "Then... you should know, he has allies. Strong allies if he wishes to make it formal."

"I know. And if he's looking to add House Xavier to that list, that's not my business. I'm going to protect my House if this goes badly." And he had no limit. No limit that wasn't self imposed, and if something *happened*, there was no limit to the damage he could do. Had done.

There would never be a limit when it came to those he loved.

"You loyalty does you credit. I was told to offer alliance if I judged you genuine. Please pass it on," Kal-El got up then. "And Erik? I know his secret, but for a good man I will keep it to myself."

He didn't, couldn't react while he stood up, or give it away in any manner. "I will pass your words on to Charles." If he hadn't already heard. Erik turned then, to head back to Charles's room in their quarters.

Kal-El floated up into the sky and he just couldn't feel how he was doing it. "And I will pass yours to my masters."

And he was gone. And he had definitely said 'masters'.

Masters. That was interesting, and if Erik *sped* back to the same window he'd come out of, well, it was excusable, even if Charles had overheard everything.

Erik...Charles was waiting, and looked more than a little alarmed. You are safe?

I'm safe and well. He needed a moment to gather himself, and closed the window behind him with an idle hand, reaching out to seal the room a little better before he went on. "House Wayne offers alliance."

"Are you sure?" Charles replied. "Sometimes this can be a trap, and I cannot read Wayne without making it known that is what I am doing."

"They were exact words, Charles. And Kal-El says he will keep your secret, as you're a good man." I neither confirmed or denied when he said you had a secret. But.

He knows. Does that mean Wayne knows or not. Kal-El has...a different shape of mind. I do not know how to access it easily. Charles seemed agitated. "This is serious. Very serious. They have never approached me before."

"I told him that I would pass his words on. He said he would convey that to his *masters*." Erik was inclined to pace, to wander, to rail, because nerves were excess energy.

"Masters? Plural?" Charles said sharp and alert. "Well now, that is interesting. It looks like the Wayne-Luthor alliance might be more than just a business arrangement."

"Plural," Erik agreed. "Which... I'm not even sure how that would work, what that could lead to."

"Luthor and Wayne on their own are something to keep an eye on, but together, they could take the throne. And a deal made from more than business is unlikely to be broken," Charles said. "They could topple the Emperor and he knows it... if we joined, nothing could stop us. Wayne and Luthor are trialing their power in the courts with the legislation with something they know secretly all Houses want. Being able to adopt an Heir is -well, it secures the House line."

"It would secure your house line." If Charles could find a not yet identified meta he wanted to
adopt to that end. Erik folded his arms over his chest, just watching Charles. "And if you aligned with them, then what would they do?"

"It gets a little murky," Charles admitted. "Wayne is a Master among masters at the game of the Court. Block voting in Council would be the least of it. But if his agenda includes Meta rights..."

"Kal-El asked me if your stance on meta rights was genuine. So, I assume it would." He watched Charles' hands move restlessly, and gave up, closing the space he'd kept between them to at least give Charles' hands something to do.

"They made a bold move," Charles said reaching for him. "Which means they are either confident or have reason to suspect the Emperor is moving against them. I dislike being a tool."

"So do I. But if this is to your advantage...?" Use them back. Use them back until it wasn't useful anymore. He smoothed a hand over Charles's back.

"It is determining whether the risk is too great, Charles said. "Gambit will not be sleeping much while we are here I suspect. What did you agree with regards your performance?"

"We agreed that I'm not trying to kill him, and he's not trying to kill me even if it might look like it. The papers as they stand suggest I should be taking Kal-El apart and he had remarkable specific suggestions of what would be appropriate, but we both know that can change at a moment's notice." They couldn't just reverse the scenario – he would not survive the sorts of things they had discussed.

"True enough," Charles said. "And no doubt you will be expected to serve in a rougher capacity yourself."

'Rougher capacity'. Charles had a way with words, and even if the thought made Erik distinctly uncomfortable, he still leaned into Charles. "Yes. At some point, I'm sure I will."

"You are prepared for that?" Charles queried pulling him closer to kiss him. "I can help you."

He kissed Charles back, but pulled away sooner than he usually would have usually. "Can I carry you to bed, or do you have other things to take care of?"

"Mmm, taking me to bed would be nice," Charles murmured. "Very nice. I have been looking at you all day..."

"And what are you going to do about it?" He shifted his arms, took it as permission to lift Charles out of his chair to carry him into the next room in Charles's suite. He wasn't prepared and he didn't want help, either. He just wanted to enjoy himself.

"I would very much like to check out every inch of you," Charles answered. "Make sure no one has tried to touch you."

It wasn't even a suggestion he would've entertained before he'd come to House Xavier, but now it was something he associated with an easy sort of comfort. "I think I was very seldom out of your sight." There had been two glasses of wine, and Charles's trip to the bathroom because of said wine, and that was it. And Kal-El.

He settled Charles carefully on the overly luxurious bed.

"I know, but...I admit to a desire to keep you for myself," Charles said. "And you don't know how you looked tonight all gleaming with metal."
"Ridiculous?" Erik teased, crouching a little, arms still around Charles while he kissed his neck, because he could. "I was wearing an armory, and none of them knew."

"No, sexy," Charles answered leaning back to expose more of that neck. "Though the obedient demeanor is not as appealing to me as to others. It is ridiculous really, I know for a fact that half the Personals in the room are usually dominant in their own Houses."

"Ah? That's interesting." The House Cuddy personals clearly weren't submissive to the point of wiping their personalities like everyone expected them to be. Kal-El was probably the most well behaved one there, other than Mistress Ross's. Erik closed his eyes, used a little scrape of teeth, followed it with a touch of tongue.

"And yet we bring them here and expect them to be something they are not and against their nature as their nature is to serve in the capacity their Master needs. And if that means they are the ones binding their Masters then there should be nothing wrong with that." Charles murmured and shivered. "I like that Erik, just...there, yes."

Pretend to be something they aren't. I suspect few of them change their true nature. Erik repeated the gesture, and then moved a little, towards Charles's collarbone. He liked feeling Charles shiver, liked the way his skin tasted, liked the faint emotion that broke at the edge of his voice.

We're all doing that, Charles murmured. But with you...I don't have to. I can be who I am and that is a great gift in my life. More shivers and reactions as if he really was sensitized to his touch,

I like who you are. Charles Xavier, a master who was cunning but not in the expected ways, manipulative, but not in the expected ways, who enjoyed being touched, being explored, feeling everything he could feel.

Do you want to show me how much you like me? Charles murmured in his mind. I know restraining yourself was frustrating.

Yes. Yes I do. Erik shifted, leaned into Charles, and moved him back. Just, back, just enough so he wouldn't slide off the bed and that he could lean back across the mattress, because Erik wanted to do things to Charles that just weren't actually feasible.

"Good," Charles said. "Even if you can't do it, show me what you *want* to do."

He wanted Charles on his hands in knees in bed, he wanted him pushing back and *feeling* it when Erik took him hard, except that wasn't going to happen and mostly he was sad about it for Charles's sake.

One day we'll do that...with our abilities, Charles promised. You won't know the difference

Yes, well. Somewhat more interested in *you* not knowing the difference. He moved a hand, sliding it over one of those spots that made Charles's nerves spike high with pleasure, an innocuous point low on is stomach, just along the line where sensation went away.

"Mmm," Charles answered. "I'm sure you'll think of something to prove how real you can make things."

The way he relaxed under his touch was something that couldn't be faked and Erik felt a peculiar form of comfort in that Charles, even in this stressful situation trusted him that much. "Mmm, given enough time." He leaned up just enough to kiss Charles again, plotting briefly in his head the best way to further that relaxation. If that was all they managed to do tonight before facing their first full day at the Imperial Court, Erik would count it time well spent.
The third evening revel was relatively typical in a way, although for once Charles actually had something to watch. Not even when Nate was participating was he this interested, but with Erik his attention was captured well and truly. He had to admit, the Personals made the fantastic seem real and tangible amongst them all and with the Meta's allowed at least some of their powers, it didn't seem a stretch to believe in a Court of the Fey, because they were doing some incredible things that were dark and erotic.

Erik was a glory to watch in action -- not fighting, but just toying with his metal, part show piece, part of the fray. He used his chains, reformed them, pulled them apart at what Charles knew was a molecular level to reform them in a way a hot forge couldn't manage.

He was managing to skillfully avoid having too much intimate contact but what he did do was rise up like a god in an aura of his magnetic power crackling everywhere. The chains fluttered like a bizarre form of shining mock wings and he really did look like he was more than just toying with them all.

And Charles could see the Emperor's expression when he saw that.

Tense, tense and concerned, for just a flicker, before smoothing down, because no, he'd possibly made a mistake in giving Charles such an asset which wasn't supposed to have been tamable.

Slowly, Charles let his attention drift towards the man, trying to feel at his surface thoughts. There was a sense of regret there, seeping out from strong shields.

**Erik, play it up for the Emperor, he has his eye on you, but he's not letting it slip. Use Gambit if you wish**

Erik and Gambit had already worked out how things would go if they needed to put on a show, Charles was sure of it, because Erik hauled Gambit up into the air by his cuffs, held over his head like he was in hand suspension, except. Nothing but air. Gambit knew how to ‘struggle’ in a way that left mouths dry and heartbeats accelerate around them but the Emperor was a jaded connoisseur of what was in effect live porn and they needed more. His reaction to the scene with Kal-El and Erik on the previous evening had been saturated with incredibly high arousal, pure sadistic lust and intense pleasure while it had been all he had been able to do not to flinch or gag. Bruce Wayne’s and Lex Luthor’s reactions as they stared at him afterwards would have convinced a stone they were now hated enemies on the verge of a blood-feud. To add fuel to the fire, the Emperor had made a request for a final night personal audience with the two of them which boded not well for Erik or Kal-El. Consequentially Charles found him taking a lot more risks than he usually did sensing near the Emperors thoughts. He did not want Erik in that private audience.

**Gambit, put on your charm, I want the Emperor to lose a little of his control** Charles instructed, the effort of trying to read the man without leaving a trace making his temple throb.

The cajun had a secondary charm ability that was more than the practiced skill he claimed. It was the type of thing that when he turned it on, the unsuspecting would find themselves walking into signs and tripping off the curb just to see him. When he used it in earnest in a sexual situation it took a highly discipline mind to resist it.

Erik gave Gambit a spin, slowly, like he was showing off his newly claimed toy, before pulling him in to kiss him, to suggest that he was going to be a ravaging fey.

Charles had to consider that with Gambit, often that became a full on almost wrestling match, not to get away but to get *more* and that’s exactly what happened. He was suddenly the epitome of
an incubus broadcasting want and a need to be ravaged, taken, filled, possessed that spoke to many of the values and expectations they had all been brought up with. He could feel Masters and Mistresses around him jump up more than a notch or two in arousal and he probed carefully at the Emperors mind.

Just a sense of liking the power of Magneto, the rightness of might doing what it should and.. and a feeling of what a shame.

That last part lingered in Charles's mind, stuck in his head and startled him. What a shame. *Why* was it a shame, when he was watching a room full of personals put on a show for his pleasure.

He had to resist the urge to just stab in with a diamond hard thought probe. It would be so easy, but every-one would know and he had no doubt the Emperor had at least one very talented psychic in his retinue and there would be no doing it without alerting them.

A lot of people were watching his pair, focused by their natural contrast – Erik, broader, muscular, white hair like some vengeful angelic figure and Remy all whipcord lean, red hair and with his ‘diablo eyes’ the image of a demon. He knew Gambit and Erik had a neat trick at the end where Erik produced tiny iron filings or the equivalent and Gambit charged them into harmless brilliant sparks that popped and sparkled that Erik could move and sculpt into shapes of light. The first time he had seen it, even he had been struck with awe. He wondered if they were planning that as a finale. Kal-El was fast and strong but he couldn't provide a visual like that.

This was two creative mutants, two *very* creative mutants who weren't interested in sex with each other and much more interested in producing what Charles felt was a very nice show. There was a great deal of flash and flare and rubbing and skin, and very little substance.

He was sure Gambit would go through with it, because he generally did, just as he knew the man had secrets as dark as Erik's own, if not more so as he was one of the only ones who could hold him off behind a mental block. Nevertheless, even as the room degenerated into a literal orgy around them all his pair seemed oddly transcendent hovering above them with a midair suspension, chain tentacles as apparently unbridled lust was underway.

There was something refined about their performance, practiced, even as Charles watched Erik start to fuck Gambit with the tentacles. It'd taken long enough.

It was a little distracting from his purpose because he started to wonder what it might be like and then what it might be like to have Erik have sex with him just with his powers. That could be very intriguing and something to suggest as he could imagine Erik's delight in using his powers that way. He almost forgot to sense the Emperor. Oh.. well yes, he was enjoying that sight, he liked that idea too just as he had with Kal-El.

Glimpses of the man’s thought underneath the growing arousal, flickering and incomplete were a mixture of lust, his half imaginings of who else could be reduced to incoherent messes with intrusive metal, and the cold hard scheming the Emperor was known for. He just needed to focus on the Emperor while keeping his eyes on the two of them, focus and wait for a slip where he could get in.

It was difficult to do for all the Personals were alluring in their own way and the music playing added to the atmosphere. The Emperor had some Meta's creating illusions as well to give an authentic atmosphere, and it was winding to a fever pitch. Erik and Gambit were trying for some sort of porn award, the way they were flaunting themselves and the Emperor seemed to very much like the thought of metal and flesh like that, interspersing it with more violent versions as had been done the night before
Not particularly shocking, but something to mention to Erik to keep in mind. He felt the Emperor eye Erik's bracings, the metal he was wearing, the same sort of way he'd eyed Nate's arm. Perhaps the man would find some kind of sex robot gift sufficient to win a House a reprieve from his games. Heaven knew what he'd do if Colossus was ever brought to court if he found metal that much of a turn on.

Although, that was not a particularly good idea.

The scene was moving to a climax inexorably, in a figurative and literal way, and he had to remember to react accordingly. It was no good, all he could get was hints of regret from the Emperor that he was going to have to do something and he was watching Erik and Gambit, and that wasn't good. Wasn't good at all, wasn't safe for Erik, but it was a little late to send him *home*.

Eventually, as if synchronized in a cascade, the orgy began to reach its climax, lost in sex and arousal and sheer decadence. Gambit managed to come, and they made their shining particles of metal, Erik swirling them into a dragon of light that roared silently around them both. It was a spectacular finish, a beautiful set piece.

He was proud of them for managing it, for getting through Erik's reluctance. Proud of Erik for not needing to reach out to Charles while doing the piece to mentally steady himself, even if Charles's probing had come to very little.

And the Emperor had enjoyed it, seemed to draw back in on himself while the personals and pleasure slaves departed slowly from the floor. Erik landed with Gambit beside Charles's chair, letting Gambit free only once they were on the ground.

There was the traditional returning to Masters and he was pleased to see the both of them there, returning to him. *Well done* he said and petted Erik. "Gambit, you may clean yourself and return in a moment."

"My pleasure." Gambit hitched one leg up a little when he turned to leave, like he was shaking off a cramp while Erik more formally knelt and stayed kneeling.

*Not half as bad as you feared. Gambit is very good at what he does.* Erik replied.

*He is. If he ever turns that charm on you, you will forget me* Charles said and he surprised himself by being a little jealous. "Come, you have done well...rest."

It didn't take much goading to get Erik to do that, to sprawl against Charles's lap, to close his eyes and lose a little of the formalness for a little while. *Thank you.*

*You were beautiful there, distracting to both of us. Here, I know you don't like to be fed but you need a drink.* He proffered his own glass to Erik.

He could feel Erik huff an exhalation, and then he leaned up, a hand on the arm of Charles's chair to steady himself while he let Charles give him a drink.

"You have pleased me, and the Emperor," he said aloud. "I am sure of this. This is a great achievement." *It really is. Turns out the Emperor likes the idea of metal like that. Like the idea of metal doing a lot of things.* Charles added.

Erik swallowed, and seemed a little pleased once he realized Charles was drinking water. It was better for Charles, anyway, and he needed his mind clear for the day. *And it'll be such a hardship to just... keep playing with metal.* Erik leaned back, apparently done, and shifted to put his head on Charles's lap again.
"It is possible he may bestow a token of the Imperial favor," Charles speculated. *I must find a way to bestow my own as well. Somehow.*

**Bestow what?** Erik shifted, and the metal around him shifted, tightening up, reforming itself while he relaxed.

**Favor...of some description. We'll discuss it later** Charles said thinking about his own thoughts during the scene. "You did not strain yourself at all?"

"No." Erik was lying, a little. His knees were stiff from all the kneeling, maddeningly so, but it wasn't more than a nag.

"Good. I would hate for you to not be able to perform," Charles said. *And pain is not something I relish at all. The other Personals will return and the Emperor will make closing remarks.*

"I can perform. Just tell me when I have to move." Erik had his eyes closed, which was better than keeping them down, and he looked more restful than he felt.

"Gambit will return soon," Charles said gently, passing Erik something to eat by pressing it to the other man's lips. He ate a little, obedient in these small ways at least, chewing on a piece of sweet bread that Charles knew would go over well.

They remained like that outwardly relaxed as the place was cleaned and all Personals returned to their place at their Master or Mistresses feet. The assembled group came to a hushed silence as the Emperor rose from his throne.

"The revels were most pleasing. As ever, your chattels have done well. However my eye was caught by a fine effort for one so new to this court and I would bestow upon him favor from the Imperial Throne," he said. "Approach me, Magneto, Personal of the Great House Xavier."

For a moment, Charles was afraid Erik would jerk upright and panic, but he hadn't. Erik moved smoothly, calmly standing up and approaching the throne, before kneeling appropriately, head down.

The Emperor took a ring from his own finger, which allayed some of Charles anxiety, and took Erik's hand and slipped it on a finger. It worried him, it worried him a great deal but he could not stop that.

"May you continue to enrich the Empire with your talent. You are a credit to your Master."

"Thank you, Emperor. Thank you." Erik kept his head bowed, and seemed like he was awaiting a dismissal. Charles could feel the nerves, but he could also feel... a burst of something from the Emperor.

He needed to get that ring off of Erik and run some tests on it. Gambit would have some analyzers back in their quarters or possibly...well, he'd think about approaching Wayne and Luthor if it came to that.

"The Feast is over, you may linger to your hearts content," the Emperor said and then swept out with his retinue.

*We shall go back. I'm worried about what he has given you* Charles said while outwardly showing the mix of pride and delight he was meant to experience at a sign of overt behaviour, as other Masters and Mistresses congratulated him. 
He paid them as much attention as he could, while Erik walked back to him, head still down. We need to go back to quarters now, Charles. It was springloaded, but I can't feel it with my metal sense. It feels like there's a needle in my hand.

"Congratulations, Master Xavier," Luthor was saying.

"You are too kind Master Luthor," Charles said. "I do not wish to appear rude, but my Personal and I..." He let the words trail off suggestively. "Let us just say, I have missed having one."

Goddamn him, Charles said fervently I will have Nightcrawler prepare the scanners, and we will get you a dose of anything we can in case it is poison of some kind.

"Of course, of course. We will see you later then, Master Xavier." Luthor inclined his head slightly, and moved to seek more business profitable company, no doubt. It seemed an acceptable reason for a hasty exit, even as Erik stayed close to his side while Charles maneuvered his wheelchair to leave.

Can you feel anything? Charles asked even as they made their way to the exit. He was mentally relaying urgent information to their quarters and the others would be ready. No one came to the Imperial court without precautions.

"No." Erik was holding his hand awkwardly, focusing on something as he walked beside Charles. Stopping my blood flow to my arm. Whatever it is... Whatever it was had been planned, and that was what was such a shame for the emperor.

That was a handy trick, but not something that could get them there quicker. The moment they were out of the Court itself, Gambit had caught up with them and Charles said, "Erik, go now as swiftly as you can to our quarters and take Gambit."

It was a miserable shame that Hank wasn't there. He lagged behind, while Erik took off running. Not flying, because he was probably too focused on what he was doing, on manipulating blood flow without clotting. Apparently if Erik wasn't going to ruin House Xavier from within, he wasn't going to be allowed to *live*.

They weren't sure what it had been.

There were tests running, yes, and it hadn't seemed to be a poison. Once the ceramic needle had been extracted from his skin, Erik had smoothed through the ring, tested its safety and had been forced to continue wearing it, despite the fact that for all he knew, he was actively dying. He certainly felt tired, stretched thin enough that he might've been.

Charles was at once enraged and then scared enough to just hold him gently in bed all night, even though Hank advised otherwise. If he had any doubt that feelings went both ways in their relationship the tenderness and quiet need in the way Charles clung to him would have dispelled them completely. Blood tests could not be rushed and he had to be present at the Court come what may for the Council. Charles could not be seen to miss that, and there they were, sitting wasting precious hours while potentially something a poison or a biological agent, or a drug lay dormant within him.

Why can't I just snap his neck? There was a nagging urge to cough, but Erik had a feeling it would have broken the manner rules he was supposed to adhere to so as not to offend the Emperor. As it was, Charles kept a hand on his head, fingers loosely rubbing at his scalp while he tried to hope that whatever it was wasn't communicable. As Charles had said, if it was communicable it was too
late for him or for anyone else present at the time of first exposure, and if it was not then there was no harm in him touching him.

Because it would not be that simple Charles said. He has his own Metas and you can bet any move against him would be an excuse to kill half of us. Charles had evidently been probing for hints of the Emperor’s plans with more boldness than normal, targeting not just the man himself but his retinue. His discoveries, though fragments and seemingly incoherent in isolation, put together had led him to suspect the Emperor was preparing for unprecedented action.

I might manage it. Erik shifted, laid the side of his head against Charles's knees. No, he didn't feel good at all, and they were taking a vote, but he had a list of things he needed to *tell* Charles, and possibly with a map drawn out. It just wasn't the time.

We are still trying to identify what he did Charles said soothingly. You feel a little feverish. This was a bad idea

Yes, but you need to vote. At least Charles was making quiet soothing noises at him in real life so they seemed much less like silent madmen. He felt feverish. He felt horrible, and once Charles voted he was going to get up and get a glass of water for Charles so he could have some.

Yes, I do but right now, the business of the Empire can just take a running jump Charles answered sounding and looking worried now. He could obviously sense his despair that something was gaining pace. He had been fine at the start of the session and now…now he felt it worsening moment by moment. I don't want to lose you Erik, you mean too much to me

Vote. The point was to disrupt you, to break you. Don't give him that satisfaction. I'll be fine. He was trying to hold back worry, trying to not leak too much along their mental pathway. Just keep his eyes closed, try to relax, try to not feel. That was all he needed to do.

"House Xavier's vote -- yes or no?"

"House Xavier -Yes," Charles said smoothly. He was always the last vote as they did it alphabetically. It concluded the matter of substance vote nicely.

I'm getting water. Not that he was moving yet. He pressed his temple against Charles's knee a little longer, just breathing, focusing so he could get up, walk to the socializing table, past it, get water, and come back.

"Magneto, fetch me some water," Charles said kindly, giving him cause to go. Are you well enough to go? You seem to be worse now.

It comes in waves. Flood waves, because there wasn't that relief feeling of it receding back. Erik stood up, steadying himself on Charles's knee before he started out after the rest of the Personals.

Be careful Charles said. I am here if you need me. We will leave as soon as we can.

Right. Right, but he got moving, trying to manage as much of a straight line as possible. Kal-El was there, and... those fellows from House Cuddy.

"Wow, you look crappy," the older man said with a complete lack of tact. Greg, that was it.

"House!," the other one looked at him with a long-suffering expression. "Mind you, he has a point, you don't look right."

"I don't feel right." He needed to move past them to get water, but for the moment the feverish
feeling swept over him in a wave that made his head feel like it was going to explode and left his ears ringing as he became disorientated.

The lights flickered and Kal-El looked around as did everyone else. "Okay, what was that?" he asked in a low voice as a murmur of concern gained in volume. "Was that you?"

"I think, yes." Erik exhaled, trying to feel what that had been. He’d shifted the magnetic field in the room as his balance had been compromised without quite thinking about it. He hadn't ruined electronics and stopped watches since he was fourteen, but there it was. Clear evidence that whatever the Emperor had done was going to send him out of control. Charles, I need you to shut me down.

What has happened? Charles said sounding anxious. He could feel his presence stronger in his head as if it was touching on something sensitive or bruised I am trying to lock down your power.

The lights. That was me. He let Charles in, welcomed him, standing here and trying to feel coherent while House peered hard at him, looking for diagnostic signs. He wanted to say the explanation was easy -- the Emperor as trying to kill him -- but the reality of revealing it was less so.

Something that makes your powers go out of control? That's not good. Realistically, who can stop you if something happens? Charles asked.

You could. And Kal-El, maybe. Maybe. That was why they'd sent him to House Xavier, because Charles would probably snap his mind in two and stop it, except he wasn't going to, not now, and the Emperor probably knew it and his thoughts were rambling. No, the Emperor didn't know about Charles, but maybe he thought there was a strong psionic or had this been the plan all along, but if it was why something that would kick off in a Court session, or had he miscalculated, but he didn’t miscalculate and… another paralyzing wave swept over his body and head. There was a snap and fizz of the useless Genoshan technology as his abilities fried the circuits.

"Magneto, your nose is bleeding..."

He inhaled, but couldn't quite move his hand to wipe it because he was focused on staying reigned in.

"Look, just...sit down here okay?" James said reaching to take his arm to steady him and get him to sit down.

"He's fried the control collar," Greg pointed out. "That's got to be one hell of a surge to get through that. You going to drop dead on us?"

I have a lock on your conscious mind Charles said. But a lot of it is unconscious. This could be a problem. If I lock down that it will take everything I've got to do so. You are very strong.

"Don't know." He didn't fight when James put a hand on his arm, steering him to sit in one of the few chairs lining the room. It was metal, though, and it jammed itself hard up against the wall as if trying to get away from him when he felt the next spike shiver loose before he tamped it down. So are you. I've seen what you can do, Charles. Need you to *do* it. Erik wavered, sat on the floor, and he could hear the start of a quiet commotion.

You haven't seen what I can do and I will NOT do it to you, Charles said vehemently. Try and hold it in, I'm going to try and get out of this as soon as possible.

The next wave saw any metal in his immediate vicinity twist and stretch.
"Whoa," James said glancing at the tree like remains of the metal chair. "Okay, it's getting worse, exponentially. How bad is this going to get?"

"Bad," Kal-El said coming closer. He met Erik’s eyes briefly and he allowed him to see the fear he had of everything going out of control that Kal would understand more than most. The other Meta gave a barely perceptible nod which reassured him. "He nearly took me in combat once."

"Could've. I hesitated." He bent his head down, forehead pressed against his knee, and the close metal he could focus on that his skin was touching. If he just focused on that, it might not be so bad. It might be okay. He could focus on self protection, that should carry through to the subconscious. Charles, I could blow this place apart and kill you all. I'm begging you.

_I don't think it would work_ Charles answered and there he was making his way towards them. _If I mind wiped you, there would be no control at all._

The latest surge blinded him with pain in his head, his abilities flaring like someone had tossed rocket fuel on a fire. Around him metal flowed, super energized, electronics fried like some hallucinatory trip made real.

"Shit...my cuffs," James said in alarm. "They are twisting all over the place, pulling open. And the collar..."

Gone, falling back over his shoulders deformedly. Erik tried to clamp down on it, because his own was still holding together, except the next burst did finally take out all the lights, and paired with a stabbing migraine.

"Seriously, I think it's time to get him out of here," James said.

"I love it when you state the obvious," Greg answered as his cuffs dripped off his wrists. "Kal-El, I think this is a job...uh..."

Kal-El was clutching at his throat in an alarming fashion as the special collar he was required to wear warped and a vibrant green glowing stone fell out of a lead setting and dropped literally onto Erik’s lap even as the meta dropped to his knees with green veins raising up everywhere.

"That's just nasty," Greg said. "Time to declare an emergency. This might not be containable anymore to rate it is developing. From a bit dizzy to this in ten minutes... now there’s an exponential progression if ever I’ve seen on." He limped his way over to the wall and hit an alarm button. The emergency lighting came on but the security doors slammed down effective trapping everyone inside.

Fuck. And he had to have broken through whatever Charles had put in place or something had a stimulating effect on his out of control powers, because he was sensing the world through metal, people hollowing out around him to a sense of minerals and metal on their bodies, visual even with his eyes closed. He could feel rather horrifically the blood in Kal’s veins boiling and an energy he could sense by it’s impact rather than the energy itself. He could feel Charles's chair getting closer, and wanted him to *not*, because the next spike was going to take that hover chair out. _Don't get any closer. Please Charles_

"What is going on here?" The Emperor demanded as he strode over. "Some argument between House Xavier and House Wayne?" Even as ill as he was, Erik could hear the smugness in the mans voice. Yes that would bloody well suit the man, he didn’t doubt it.

Master Wayne was there and Master Luthor and strangely it was Luthor who picked up the
growing rock from him and moved it away. Immediately the green vein effect faded as well as the
debilitating weakness and pain and Kal-El pushed himself up.

"No your Imperial majesty," Charles said having approached despite his warning.. "Magneto was feeling a little unwell this morning but felt able to continue, but his illness appears to be having a strange effect on his powers. If a surge was strong enough to break the control collars then we are all potentially in danger."

The next spike rattled the room again, and he bent his head in, directed what he could catch through himself. His body was resistant to it, handled the changes in electrical current like it was nothing. It was nothing.

The next one blew out his cuffs and collar but he kept it contained inside of the tight force field he was starting to weave. At least with his control, he could do that, twist and redirect. "I think your gift, your majesty, may be all of our undoing."

"What did you say?" The Emperor sounded furious to be addressed by a Personal without permission

"He is delirious," Charles said hastily. "Perhaps I best take him back to our quarters."

"We are in lock down," Bruce Wayne said. "And if there is something capable of effecting Meta humans, then we cannot risk spreading it anywhere."

Except they were in a room full of some of the most powerful metas in the world. Erik looked up at the emperor, but he could only manage to focus on the man through his metal sense, seeing the splendor and expensive metals woven into his clothes as highlights and supports. It took everything in him to not let his power spark through them when it spiked again. "Help."

"Then it is best to end it now," the Emperor said and gestured to a couple of the Imperial Guard, who pulled their guns. "He is but a Meta and a slave and we are the Masters of the Empire."

"No!" Charles called out almost too late and that was enough of a transgression that Charles would pay for it. But then they had to know he stopped bullets. No Imperial soldier could even come near him.

He could have put a hand out to stop it, but hand gestures were nothing more than affectation and Erik was too busy shivering through fever. The bullet stopped short of him, and fell to the floor, and then the other guard pulled his trigger in a panic, and Erik did move a hand then, stopping it in the gun, jamming it up. "Idiots."

"We need some sedation," Charles said glaring at the Emperors Guard. If I can get you under, I might be able to build some blocks without your talent fighting me.

Lady Cuddy looked at her Personals who shook their heads. "Apparently we only have Vicodin."

"Then if we have permission?" Master Wayne said beckoning to Kal-El and raising an eyebrow to Charles.

"If he can, then please..." He said that aloud to Charles, not just in his head.

Please. He wanted sedation, except it was a good time to try to kill him, as good as any. If this, if this kills me, I want your team to find my sister and get the children out of Russian territory. There's no reason now for the emperor to not more openly try to kill me.
You will survive, I will not let you die Charles said vehemently. I promise, but you must fight for control. Fight it Erik, your mind is stronger than any metal. This is not just about us, I think… I think he wants an excuse to put down all metas. Our powers are too great for him. His mistake has been to target you. He does not know how stubborn you can be.

I will try Charles he replied but he wanted him to know he did not want to hurt him in any way.

"You have my permission," Charles said and Kal-El stepped forward.

"I am sorry about this," he apologized and raised his arm.

The last thing he saw was Kal-El's fist.

He could not wipe Erik’s mind, he would not. He loved him and he’d never said the words out loud to him, not directly and he wanted that choice.

Charles managed to construct a block over the wildly fluctuating energy, and perhaps he could hold him completely if he half put himself into a state that would effectively shut down his body to allow his mind free rein. They had a problem though, a bad problem. He could feel other Meta's in the room saturated with fear and anxiety and the starting hints of something spreading.

"My Personals believe this is contagious," Lady Cuddy said to their impromptu council of doctors and Masters with a science background.

Her personals were probably right, but Charles wasn't going to say that. Erik was curled up at his feet, still unconscious, still pliant. If he locked Erik down, what good would it do in the other metas? He had an anger and a rage building in him and he hoped to all the powers of the Sacred Trine that this didn’t mean he had contracted the disease. He needed to plan swiftly and rapidly for that eventuality.

"We are going to have a problem here shortly," Master Luthor agreed.

"A problem brought in by your Personal," Von Doom said as if apportioning the blame negated the problem and Charles had enough.

"My Personal was fine until yesterday after the event," he snapped back. "And receiving the Emperor’s favour.”

The shock of the others hearing him snap at them was palpable for they knew him as mild mannered and even tempered and conciliatory in his interaction but he didn't care. With a cold recklessness he ploughed on because he knew there was nothing to lose now. He was already on the Emperor’s shit list. "I have a question for you Emperor. Was your gift meant to be contagious or meant only for my Personal?"

God help him, he was accusing the Emperor of attempted murder but he was furious and livid, and that made him more dangerous than any other meta in the room. If he became unleashed...

If.

They needed to solve it before it became a problem.

He channeled that energy at the Emperor wanting to force an answer.

He watched the Emperor draw himself up and for a moment he thought he would get the usual
ignoring, but either arrogance on the other man’s behalf or the influence of his psionic push made him toss Charles a flat, almost bored answer. "Just for your Personal."

There was a muttering around him, and the Charles thought Emperor might not realize what a grave error he had admitted to, having been unassailable for so long. He played the game of course, but never believed he could seriously lose and now he had openly admitted to a political maneuver that was putting them all at risk. Everyone knew now the Emperor had deliberately tried to send an exceptionally powerful Meta out of control at a full Council. The more astute were calculating the political ramifications of that happening without it being attributable to the Emperor and what the Imperial crown stood to gain by engineering something so volatile. More stringent Meta controls, possible confiscation of assets if they push for the Imperial Throne holding all Metas, the public decimation of at least one Great House, possibly more and at the least the removal of the power base of a lot of them... there were a lot of benefits to the Throne, but nothing for others and plenty of direct danger as well. If Magneto had gone on a rampage, how did they plan to put him down? Charles knew this was not over, not by a long shot.

"Then, as it is spreading, and it is possible that not only metas will be effected," Charles said harshly, wanting the Emperor to feel the cold touch of fear. "Evidently the contagion has mutated...your Imperial Highness."

The Emperor looked at him as if measuring him for a coffin. "Impossible. It was tailored. There would need to be a mutagenic agent of some kind."

"Ah," Bruce Wayne stepped forward, proving the alliance offer had not been just empty words. "The control collar substance that you proscribe for Kal-El as a condition of his appearance in your presence has been cited in the production of various metahumans. Normally, of course it is shielded."

"The control collar which Charles's Personal melted like a pat of butter," Luthor said unhelpfully. "Everyone knows it's Smallville's greatest resource and possibly the most powerful mutagenic agent currently known on Earth."

Neither of them addressed the Emperor by his title which was shockingly rude in the Imperial Court. Charles realized if there were any two who could make the lightning quick deductions about court politics and realise they were on the very edge of losing Kal-El to this unspeakably risky gambit by the Emperor, it was Bruce Wayne and Lex Luthor. The Emperor’s plots had had a greater scope than they had imagined; it was not for nothing House Rassilon had held the Imperial Throne for centuries.

"Great, so what we have is a killer bug, hopped up on mutagenic crack and liable to infect all of us to the point of showing symptoms in under 12 hours," Greg said and the Emperor casually backhanded him for him speaking out of turn.

"You are merely property, be silent."

"With respect, your Imperial Majesty," Lady Cuddy said, her expression cold and hard. "He is also the best diagnostician in the Empire. I have learned to respect his opinion in these matters."

And now others were following their lead. The shifting of power was almost tangible.

"My opinion is we're screwed," Greg muttered wiping blood from a split on his lip. “Tailored virus no doubt, now mutated. Might as well be a B-movie plot.”

"It hasn't even been 24 hours," Luthor pointed out. "And Magneto is already out of control. That
was *before* the kryptonite. I think we need to put some serious resources on working out how to counteract it. Now."

"I have sealed the Imperial city," the Emperor said coldly, but Charles could sense the fear in him now as he grasped the problem now encompassed him personally. "It is in a literal dome lockdown that we have used to ensure it is safe from any form of attack. I will go and arrange for the best specialists I have at my disposal to work on a solution. You would be best advised to find a means of restraining the Metas before they become out of control."

The best option was to lock them down mentally, of course, but Charles couldn't be caught involving himself in it, at least not until there was literally no other option.

"We will do that, your...Imperial majesty." Luthor had a way of twisting words, just like his father, to make a compliment a slap in the face and an agreement a snark.

The Emperor swept out in a royal snit, seething at the turn of events. There was a palpable relief as he left and anxiety. If they hadn't been in the firing line before, they definitely were now and things were going to progress rapidly, Charlies knew it and Erik was patient zero. Wayne's anxiety as he looked at Luthor was very high and for anything to be escaping his formidable shields they had a serious problem.

"What can we do to stop this?" Charles asked. "Was this actually planned?"

"I think he just meant to kill your personal and profit from the ensuing chaos." Luthor was rubbing at the side of his face. "Death and powers raging out of control would be a convenient excuse to put some of us down, and potentially take Kal-El out at the same time as your Magneto came the closest at that point to taking him down. But if all talents run out of control, how will that work with the healers?" Charles suddenly knew then without a shadow of a doubt that Luthor had the Meta gene and was a healer, must be a self-healer. Perhaps not as spectacular as some, but still a meta. He was surprised the man had been able to conceal it this long, and it made him consider who else might be holding a secret similar to himself.

"I do not know. If it targets the meta-gene then perhaps they succumb more easily, or their abilities will fend it off for longer," Charles said.

"Look, "Cuddy said. "This isn't an ordinary illness. It was created, so it might not follow normal rules. What metas do we have in here and what can we do to neutralize them?"

"Kal-El is the most pressing concern, but there is the House Xavier contingent...." All of them, who had likely been exposed.

Charles grimaced. "Yes. This could be difficult. We might need sedatory drugs for some of them.

"I think the best thing to do would be to sequester the metas to other side of the ballroom, and start to go through it... more procedurally. After all, if they think this is going to get solved with them being shot in the head, I don't think most of them will admit to being sick until it's too late." Luthor speaking from the voice of experience, Charles was sure.

"A good suggestion," Charles agreed. "We should make a list of what supplies we will need as well, such as the useful drugs. And some sort of communication to our Houses...they will wonder what is happening."

"Does anyone have a telepath?" Wayne asked, leaning back to get the other Master's attentions. Completely without irony.
"I am sure there are several," Charles said. "I have one I can access." He could pretend to have one.

"What do you believe they could do?"

"Spread the news outside of this all and within the city. Possibly block some of the non-sedatable metas. I would like to talk with them, if possible."

"Mmm, I am sure that I can pass it on. It is not one of their advertised talents," Charles said.

"Then advertise it," Luthor shrugged. "I'll see what I can muster from my House without breaking quarantine that might be useful."

"I will get them to inform the news outside. If any of you have a statement to prepare I will ensure it reaches the outside world," he said.

_Gambit, I need you to come and pretend to be a secret telepath_ he ordered.

_"Oui Professor, I will come."

"Thank you." That seemed to be all they wanted of him, and then Luthor peeled off. He looked nervous, tense, felt like his mind was spinning.

Gambit arrived and Charles made a show of talking to him to get him to pass on messages. In the mean time he bespoke him mentally.

_How is Erik?_ he asked.

_Was he hurt badly?_

_Non, professor. He is not well, but not hurtin’._ Gambit replied. _Mais, others have this thing, it is now certain._

_Who? It was only a matter of time until he came down with it, if he hadn't gotten it from extended close contact with Erik the night before. He'd just held him, talked, but that was more than enough for a few germs to pass._

_Some of House Genosha... and I see it in some of the Emperors assistants who are not meant to be Meta._ Gambit replied. _Not Kal-El, which is good non?_

_Not yet. The longer it takes for him to fall ill... the better for us all._ It was an easy distraction, staying off to one side with Gambit.

_We will have it no doubt_ Gambit said seriously. _De Imperial city is completely shut off. We’re sealed in physically. Is like a dome or shelter. The Emperor is a cautious man Professor_

_I am sure we will. We are going to work towards a solution._ If they didn't talk it to death first, which seemed to be the first inclination.

Gambit knelt for a little longer faking what Charles could only assume was an imitation of him when he was mindspeaking. "Master, I have sent the messages you have requested of me," he said deferentially. "Perhaps I should return to the other room. Mebbe you can visit Magneto and myself when they have given him the drugs that will make him safe?"

"Yes, I look forward to that." As if anything was going to just solve the problem quickly and easily. No one had the resources for it there, and that included the Emperor – after all, he outsourced things like that to them.

Charles started to mentally check himself. So far he felt fine, but that did not mean he was not
infect-d. He bespoke Nightcrawler to get them to send an urgent message to his own House, to make preparations in case they did go rogue, and to ask Hank for any insight he could provide.

He could feel the Emperor's anger and fear like a flame now, even out of sight as he was. He was demanding, insisting, threatening because he had screwed up and...there was something else there. A certainty that he would be affected too.

Why?

There was the obvious answer, but it couldn't be *that*. Charles passing for so long had been a fluke, and everyone knew the extensive testing the royal house's line went through, just as a matter fact.

But then...the royal line controlled the tests, and controlled people. If the Emperor was a Meta what type was he? There had been that rumor of a member of the family who vanished one day, went on the run, and everyone knew that Harold wanted to be Master of the House and thereby Emperor and no one was sure what exactly had happened to him. Things had become a little fuzzy in resolution.

So, perhaps the royal house was rife with metas. If he assumed that, then their constant state of power over the years, relatively unchallenged, made a great deal of sense.

It must be something subtle. They did seem to know a lot about people, about things but he'd recognize another telepath or psionic and he had been able to pick up unshielded thoughts. It had to be something different. Something unique to the family line. No doubt in the male heirs at least. No wonder the bastard seemed so confident all the time. Knowledge was power, more so than the brute force of someone like Kal-El, he had proven that himself year after year. Perhaps as the Emperors guards went out of control, he would be able to find out for sure.

Charles needed to consider who was going to stop him however, if it came to it. It was not for nothing he knew he classed as an Omega Meta. He could kill everyone with a thought if his full power lay behind the mental blow.

The usual way to control a psionic was a stronger psionic -- or death. Or hypnosis, occasionally. Charles wasn't sure, but he had at least temporarily locked down Erik. If he could do the same with Kal-El, then he could worry about himself.

The only person in this room with mental shields, natural mental shields that might last long enough to put him down was Bruce Wayne. In some ways psionics were easier as they were big targets he could hit. Bruce Wayne had natural non-psionic shield. He could break it, he knew he could but it might be a pause of just long enough. Perhaps... Perhaps he should discuss this with him. Kal-El had made overtures that were very risky and it was a fair indication of trust and the discussion with the Emperor had backed words with action.

Perhaps he needed to take on the burden of that trust and reach back to Wayne, bring that up sooner rather than later. He was feeling tired, and it was hard to tell if it was *it*, or wholly psychosomatic, or the strain of training to maintain Erik’s blocks.

He made a decision and moved over towards Wayne, even as he heard one of the Emperor's minions announce there were Imperial specialists on their way to figure it all out and no one had to worry about anything.

A lot of people were huddled in corners, discussing situations in hushed tones so he was sure no one would over hear immediately.
"Master Wayne? May I have a word?"

"Yes." Wayne had a faint hint of worry on his face, a tightness around his eyes which didn't take a mind-reader to work out was concern, though there were at least two people that Wayne could've been concerned about. He moved towards Charles, crowding in on his chair a little as if that would add to the privacy.

"This situation," Charles said carefully. "With the Metas is liable to go out of control. The measures that might have to be taken...have you given them some thought?"

"I only have Kal-El with me. If I have to, Kryptonite is a sufficient method." Because his meta was an alien, not a human. Of course.

"But there are other Metas here," Charles said smoothly. "Who do not respond to Kryptonite. And Kal-El might not be available or in a position to suppress them."

He was trying to work out the man's feelings but it was incredibly hard. He just did not naturally share his thoughts. "We don't know how it's going to manifest in them. Most of the Metas here are defensive in nature, except for your house and Kal-El." And when he said 'your house', Charles swore he could see the wheels turning.

"Mm." Charles looked directly into his eyes and decided to take a chance. I know about Lex, he projected mentally to Bruce Wayne. As you can tell, it is not something you have to worry about with me. A secret for a secret.

He watched Bruce Wayne's eyes go wide, a faint flare of the nostrils. There was no response like he'd get from Erik, smooth interplay that he was already missing. "I see."

"It is a difficult situation," Charles said. "When a powerful Meta could potentially go out of control."

Underneath he was saying You have natural shields Bruce, you let rarely anything out at all so you do not have to be concerned I have been reading your mind like a book. No psychic here could do so without you feeling the intrusion in the form of a sudden migraine. You let Kal-El approach Magneto for a reason didn't you? Just think back, my abilities mean I can hear you.

"We have a room packed with them, and all of the high value people in the empire." I let Kal-El approach Magneto because we had heard for years that you ran a very clean Meta house -- but it was hard to tell how much of that was PR.

His mind voice was sharp and brilliant. There was a lot more to Bruce Wayne than he showed. I believe Metas are humans and try to get a legal reform. That is true. The point is, I am technically one of the most powerful Metas currently on the planet. This is no false pride, it is a fact. I could, if I lose control do more than wreck the building, he said even as he covered it with, "And our safety is paramount. The Emperor no doubt is concerned."

"He should be concerned, he admitted to attempted murder in his court." And you need someone to stop you if you become like Magneto did? The past tense, the *deep* past tense, like Erik was already dead, stung. "It might be a matter for the Imperial Court," Charles agreed. Bruce, I am holding Magneto now. I could even hold Kal-El, but if I am affected... then you of everyone else stand a chance to shut me down. Also, I have suspicions. The Emperor is convinced he will get the disease.

I see. No elaboration needed. "If there is a court left when this is over." I will do my best if it comes
If he stopped holding Magneto, then there was no telling what damage the man could do, and Charles knew, knew what his fail-safe would have to be. Reach in and do more than hold him. *I will not risk the court's safety if I feel myself slip.* he said mentally even as he spoke aloud. "I hope there will be."

There was a chime, calling for their attention to be brought to the Imperial Throne and the Emperor and etiquette dictated their habit to fall silent as they turned to face the man who had potentially initiated something incredibly dangerous. "Masters of the Great Houses, I call upon you to take what steps are possible to contain this affliction. I have arranged for a team of Imperial Specialists to attend with a view to curing this disease. To get to us, they will have to disengage the defense shield, so it is imperative that those Meta's with the powers of flight are contained. This is an Imperial decree."

If it spread beyond the walls, the devastation to the world would be untold and the more normal humans who came into contact with it, the greater the chance that it would mutate and begin to kill humans as well.

Charles grimaced a little. That meant a lot of his people would be grounded, and they hadn't established if it was air born or not. Was this the Emperor attempting nullify the really strong Metas of his vassals? He couldn't be the only Master to consider that. Time for some direct action. "Master Bruce, I feel it would be expedient to pool our resources in case of disaster."

Their resources, Wayne's resources, who were unwell as much as Erik. It was hard to read the man's expression, though his eyes flicked over to Luthor again, where the man was discussing something with his entourage, that spike of anxiety. "Yes. Dwindling as they are."

"Perhaps we can persuade others to join us?" Charles replied as calmly as he could with the seething pressure of fear and anxiety growing all the time around him, clamoring for his attention.

"I am unable to speak for other houses, but can indicate those who have similar inclinations, though defensive in nature." He nodded his head slightly toward Luthor. "Ross as well."

"Of course. And in a medical crisis, all Houses turn to House Cuddy," Charles replied. "I shall speak with them after I have checked on Magneto." He was concerned about him, how far things had progressed, even through his slowing of blood flow and the mental blocks.

And the movement of the metas to the other side of the room, as if that would somehow keep it from spreading with metas in their own midst, made there more distance he needed to cross to see.

Charles took a moment to go back to where Erik was comfortably semiconscious, held under by his will. Waking him completely would be a problem if his powers would remain out of control. Charles knew it was not bravado, Erik had very strong Meta capabilities and had almost escaped even Kal-El's pursuit.

Semi conscious was not a problem for him - if Erik could not wake up completely, he could drop in communication under the surface.

*Erik? Can you hear me?*

*Charles?* He seemed faintly surprised to be hearing him and felt at a distance.

He focused his mind. *There you are... I wanted to see how you are doing. I knew you were not completely unconscious, but I can't allow your abilities to run loose.*
Have you solved it? There was hope there, that he wasn't going to die, that they weren't all going to die.

No. We know it is some sort of virus that targets meta-genetics Charles replied stroking through Erik's hair as if he was missing him. The Emperor has summoned a specialist team to work on it.

Are they going to work on it or execute us? He had no hope it was the former, just experience that told him it might be the latter.

I believe work on it. The Emperor is worried and I believe he is a meta as well. He wants a cure, but I believe we will be in danger he said. We have witnessed a direct attempt on your life...which for me would be enough, but he has put the lives of all the heads of the Great Houses in peril. At this point, someone could use one of the sacred laws to prove this is evidence of the corruption of the mandate of heaven and the gods.

War, war in the court with no one well armed or capable just then. Who would?

Not sure, although it would seem Bruce Wayne is very pro-meta and he indicated Luthor might be interested. Charles replied I wish you were able to be awake and with me.

Rip the building down. Erik sounded sad and exasperated at the suggestion, as if Charles were mad to say it, but the emotion was conveyed that showed he wanted to be there.

I know, but I miss you Charles murmured mentally. I have become ...accustomed to you.

Why Charles. Have you grown fond of me? Erik was reaching for poised and failing, because there was a softer undercurrent that was hard to hide one semi conscious. The Erik who had laid with him the night before shivering, needing him there as much as he needed him. Made him wonder why he had not already come down with it as they had skin to skin and lip to lip contact.

Yes. More than fond Charles confessed. I will not let this bitter sadist take you from me. He felt an undeniable surge of protectiveness run through him.

Erik stirred a little, feverish, and didn't reply with anything more than a returning push of protectiveness.

Charles sighed and withdrew from mind to mind contact. He was aware of his own thoughts enough to know he had indeed fallen for Erik, which probably had never been part of the game plan. As ever a threat to survival had made that feeling more obvious, and pronounced. Well, if he was going to get out of this alive and Erik, too it was time to see if he could recruit more assistance.

He should have expected that the imperials would be consummate professionals about their task, but instead they had lingered outside the shields while one of their unit worked on it and the rest had argued and plotted and pondered what was going on inside. He could sense the urgent pressure of their thoughts, of the ridiculous of a system that locked out even help so thoroughly.

By this time, the Emperor had withdrawn to an antechamber, and most of the Masters and Mistresses had taken that as a sign to urgent and rapidly feel out the situation with the others. You didn’t get to be a leader of the Court without the best in protection and that meant that most of them there had Metas directly affected by the mutated virus that the Emperor had used on Magneto. As such Charles had managed to steer some of the opinion his way. Gentle nudges of the fact it could have been any of them that would have received the ring, it could have been any of them when their star was in the ascendant. He became a centre of one faction appalled by the attempted murder as a result of their discussions as they waited for rescue.
The elite team, when it came in was surprisingly small, comprising of a detachment of Imperial
warfighters, apparently led by a lean looking ranking officer with messy dark hair who looked like
he shared some Gambit's charm metagene. With him were two other freemen, who appeared to be
more scientists from all their kit they carried with them.

They were dressed like warfighters, but they had busy minds, busy busy, conferring with each
other, one thinking defenses, and the other considering the medical issues. He listened, let them
talk and didn't interfere with their thinking, their busy lives, as they likely held the key to all of
their survival.

"John, I need an area to set up the portable lab," one of the men said in a Scottish brogue. Charles
listened, lifting his identity from their minds. Carson Beckett, freeman contractor, doctor and
geneticist, his mind already buzzing with a game plan when he must have been literally told
minutes before to come.

The Imperial officer turned and smirked a little as if he was used to dealing with scientists with
their minds on other things. "Pick a corner Carson, we'll make sure Rodney is in the other corner.
Secure the area." A handful of Imperial soldiers immediately fanned out, securing the area. It was
almost laughable, a smattering of imperials against the world's strongest metas, but he watched
them move, watched the officer survey the room without talking to any of them.

"So this corner with people or that corner with people," The other scientist sniped at the officer and
in other circumstance it might be considered rude but the officer seem oddly accustomed to it.

"I want the forcefield back up right now," the officer said. John, his mind supplied quickly
followed by Sheppard. Often just called Sheppard. "Carson you have the inhibitor?"

"Aye, lad but I need to just run a blood sample through a scanner. May I have permission from one
of the Masters present to make a blood sample of one of the infected Metas."

"I'm working on it. Give a man a chance..." The other one went to work, but it was hard to tell if
the doctor scientist was asking John that question or the masters at large. There was no rush to
answer him.

Carson turned to look around the room. "Excuse me, we have a potential inhibitor of the progress
of this organism, if I have permission to take the blood of one of the affected. It is not a cure, but it
should give us time to find a cure by temporarily slowing and stabilizing the situation. Are there
any volunteers?"

Charles hesitated Erik, can I allow them to take a blood sample from you? They might have
something that will allow you to be awake. while they try to cure it.

The response from Erik’s fever soaked mind was hazy, barely formulated into a word but it was an
affirmative. Charles exhaled in relief. It was a chance at least.

Thank you. He directed his hover chair towards the Imperials. "I volunteer Magneto. He was the
point of first infection."

"Even better," the Scottish doctor said nodding taking out a syringe. "This one over here?"

"That is him yes," Charles agreed. "We had to knock him out."

He also noticed even as Dr Beckett took the blood sample that Bruce Wayne, Kal-El and Lex
Luthor of all people had gathered close to the one called McKay, with familiarity. It seemed they
knew him. "Rodney, do you have the scanner?"
"Here." Rodney, the one conferring with Luthor and Wayne, handed over a device, and he let himself listen, heard the excitement of Rodney as he brought the shields back up with a hard whoosh of noise.

The man’s head was an experience of brilliance, almost blinding in its thought processes. He was a genius in the truest possible sense of the word... and from the constant subconscious reaching he did, he was intimately involved with not only Dr Beckett but with the Imperial, John Sheppard as well. Inventively involved from the spillover he detected.

"That is not House Wayne technology." Bruce Wayne said. His eyes were bright with interest even in the dire straits they were in.

"No, it's a ...wee device we picked up in our travels," Dr Beckett said studying the impossibly rapid analysis of the blood sample he was taken. "Ah, good. I was right... my base for the ATA therapy will stabilise this."

"No nanites for you to deal with Rodney," John Sheppard drawled.

"Yippee, we're not all going to die today." It was sarcastic and honestly relieved at the same time.
"Alright I will continue stabilizing the area... It looks like some of the electrical wiring was damaged..."

"That was probably Magneto," Charles interjected. "His abilities are quite powerful." More than quite powerful.

"Well, give this a few minutes and we'll see how he reacts, and then give it to the other Metas," Beckett said giving Erik an injection. "Then I'll start trying to tailor a cure."

"I take it that the Emperor has sequestered himself away to avoid the unpleasantness?" Sheppard asked them a little formally, listening to his radio. Charles could hear the thoughts in his mind. The forcefield was back in place, Imperial forces were mustering in a perimeter around the Imperial compound. Nothing was going to be allowed out and Sheppard privately thought the Emperor was a complete bastard for abandoning his people like that.

"The emperor is merely being pragmatic when surrounded with such medically induced danger," Luthor drawled, smiling as he said it. Bait, bait, bait, and it was hard to tell what other alliances the man had made because he was a slick surface just then, bubbling with excitement.

He had a brilliant mind too, but slicker and less all-encompassing than Rodney's and part of his genius extended to handling people which was an area Rodney McKay was lacking. He also had a tendency to hide his thoughts, which was a natural pattern of someone who had grown up having to guard every thought and action for consequences.

"Well, Carson will fix it, but we need time. Until then, no one will be able to leave. Quarantine protocol is in place," Sheppard said and his certainty in Carson’s abilities was absolute. He had absolutely no doubt that a cure would be found if his scientists were on the job. "Which makes our resident freeman doctor specialist the most important person in the room at the moment as only a registered doctor with gem level status and a security level with top clearance can release the forcefield."

Top level? That was very unusual. House Cuddy never had standing top level clearance and Charles wondered if the freeman knew how dangerous that top level clearance was, if he had ever been called to attend the Emperors family.
“No pressure,” Carson Beckett muttered under his breath, but he was moving in measured, focused way that bespoke a lot of practice of dealing with emergencies.

"No pressure." It was a smiled remark from the lead soldier, and he circled smoothly away, leaving Rodney and Carson with what he felt, deeply, were safe hands, to survey the rest of the large sprawling space and oversee his men.

Charles became aware of Erik's presence pushing harder against his shields and let the constraints drop, eager to see if the treatment had worked. *Erik? I've let the restraints go.* he mentally murmured. "I think he's waking up." Charles said not having to feign interest.

"Kal-El, please be on alert," Master Wayne said blandly and his Personal stood to attention.

"That's it Erik, wake up now," he murmured, reaching from his chair to touch him. It was an awkward position, perhaps more than a Personal called for, but Erik started to sit up, pulling his legs awkwardly under him as his eyes struggled to open.

"That's it lad, slowly now," Dr Beckett leaned forward. "I'm Dr Beckett, you can call me Carson if you want. When you are upright, please let me know how you are feeling?"

"Hot." He rubbed fingers at his temple, still trying to steady himself as he got sitting upright. *Hello, Charles.* He reached to him, to support him to reassure him and damn the consequences of being thought too enamoured of his Personal. The relief of seeing Erik conscious was enough to make him act recklessly.

Still, someone would see, someone would witness it and then news would spread. The doctor looked askance at him for a moment and then he sensed the moment when he ‘got it’. "Hopefully your temperature will come down as the treatment continues," Dr Beckett said.

*I am so glad you're awake and conscious* Charles replied not bothering to conceal his emotions as he sent the thought. *Magneto, can you stand?*

"I will try." He started to stand slowly, and though every muscle ached, Erik was a creature of willpower and mind over matter which Charles definitely approved of and he levered himself on the edge of the hover chair to steady himself, confusion and warm responses bleeding over.

"That is good," Charles encouraged. "When you feel steady, I want you to just try and use your abilities to see how stable they are." *I will be here to stop you if it goes out of control* he reassured him.

*You haven't seen me out of control* and Erik didn't want him to, not real out of control, but Charles needed to know what was safe and what wasn't. If they had hope for a quick solution... "Yes, master." He seemed to focus on standing.

“That's it lad," the doctor said scanning him. "The readings are settling out."

"That is it Magneto," he encouraged in his Master voice. All he really wanted to do was to steal Erik away and hold him and steer clear of the sadistic murdering bastard of an Emperor. There was knowing the machinations of the court, but that was different than having them play out on a loved one, because he had 'tamed' Erik rather than suffered from his presence, the Emperor had tried to mete out his decision for a second time to damage or destroy him. Erik pulled at the ruins of his cuffs, started to reform them. The ability seemed to be holding steady and Charles exhaled.

"That confirms it," Dr Beckett said. "Right then, let's get everyone inoculated."
"Just Metas or..?" Charles asked. He was sure there were other here like himself - secretly a Meta and unwilling to show it. He would need the stabiliser and cure but could not admit to it. On the other hand, the good doctor would take his oath of confidentiality seriously.

That revelation was very… inducing but there was a simpler way to convey his need to have it. “We were together after the exposure.”

"Ah, ah, of course. If you've had intimate contact with uh, Magneto since infection, there's the potential it could jump over if it was still actively mutating."

"Then I should have an injection also," Charles volunteered thankful for that excuse and not correcting him on the time line of exposure to the glowing stone from Kal-El’s collar. The last thing they needed was for him to go crazy with the illness as well.

In his right mind, powers under his control, he could snuff a mind out like a candle - it was a muscle he hadn't had to flex in some time, but he could do it. If overcome with the illness... "I don't want to have caused him to become ill." Erik was carefully stretching his powers, working the cuffs back from crude malformed shapes to proper status cuffs, uneasy about what he was doing. *Feels heavy.*

*I know. It will not be perfect.* Charles agreed. *It is a stop-gap at best.* He proffered his arm to be injected feeling only a slight sting as the Imperial Doctor did so. It was a relief to know there was at least a level of delay there now. No change in sensation, but he also wasn't ill yet.

Erik struggled and reached, still moving his powers with care. *Now, now we...*

*Now we take a moment and think things through,* Charles answered. *This is spiraling out of control*

"Follow me Magneto, we shall leave the Imperials to their work."

Erik inclined his head, and moved unsteadily with Charles to a further away portion of the room. There was no space for privacy, but at least with the treatment beginning the tight clusters could break up.

They returned to their designated area with the House Xavier insignia. He gestured for Gambit to go and get his inoculation, seeing the visible sparks and bursts of energy around him indicating he had the virus too rather obviously. Erik knew Gambits abilities out of control could also pose a significant threat and he saw Charles catch the other Meta’s eye to reassure him before turning back to Erik.

"Come sit with me," he indicated wanting him close. "Gambit will ensure the rest of our people are under control." He winced a little as Charles's fingers explored the bruise on his face.

*Kal-El.* Charles said apologetically. *He didn’t want to do it, but we had little choice. Does it hurt?* He rested his hand in Erik's hair stroking it soothingly.

*I feel like I had a mountain dropped on me again.* He laid placidly still, rather than making a show of it, and that had to be calming for the rest of the court to see. The imperials had arrived and all was well. A minor glitch only on the surface at least. Underneath it all, he didn’t need Charles senses to feel the almost frantic alliances being forged in dark corners. *How does he end this without killing us all?*

*That is the question. And I believe the others are starting to realise that the only thing saving them at the moment is the Emperor's fear of contracting the virus* Charles exhaled. *I have revealed myself to Bruce Wayne who had not denounced me. In sheer survival tactics, we may have to be*
party to treason. He wanted you to either be untameable, deliberately mistreated and in his opinion too feral to be functional so provokable with his demands and as a consequence put us in opposition to Wayne and Luthor. His back up plan was to try and force that state giving him excuses to nullify meta-power alliances and perhaps a way of encouraging his rivals to destroy ourselves by fighting. We have not...and I will be damned if he will take you away from me now! His emotions felt more volatile than normal, even despite the inhibitor.

Erik stretched fingers, petting at his knee in gentle motions that he couldn't feel but could see. You were starting to come down with it, too.

Yes. I find myself constantly having to suppress the urge to leave them all here and disappear to our bed with you and not let you out of my sight until we are both thoroughly sated or the world has ended Charles confessed. My inhibitions are slipping The desire for Erik was growing into a throbbing want want want.

It gained a response that was like a smirk, and warm feeling as Erik idled his hand up further. Once we're not about to be murdered.

Mmm. Now, I have outed myself to Bruce Wayne. He has the most to lose if something happens to Kal-El. I believe there is a secret relationship between him and Lex Luthor probably stemming from that incident last year. They, I believe will formally ally with us -they have in word at least, perhaps they will in deed.Charles said trying to distract himself, passing drink to Erik.

Erik leaned up, took a deep draught, and settled back in. And who else?

I am not sure who to approach. House Cuddy perhaps, as her Personals are trying to help. In theory, House Genosha should but I do not believe they will. If nothing else their moral stance on Meta training techniques makes me doubt our compatibility Charles stroked his hair.

Unsafe to ally with, given their tactics. Houses you've done favours for...?

We will ask around. The good news is that the Imperials overseeing this operation are not brain-washed drones and are genuinely looking for a cure. But we could end up in a blood bath if we are not careful.Charles acknowledged.

We might end up with one anyway. And Erik was thinking of conserving strength, having to take the imperials hostage, using them to break out, and all of them running. If they had to.

Think tactically on those opposing us. We will need a game plan if the attack comes. The Emperor has psionics for a start Charles mused.

That's convenient.Erik was at least interested in the challenge, stubborn and looking for a way to get revenge.

I can handle most of them, he said. But I do not know their full range of abilities Charles sighed. How are you feeling? When you are able to stand I would like you to try and have conversations with the other Personals. You can be less guarded than the Masters – I've garnered some ground but not enough if it becomes a direct attack.

Will anyone even talk to me? he asked, faintly amused, and still lounging there.

Yes. The feeling has shifted to one predominantly of sympathy and outrage...partly due to their own peril.Charles told him. The metas at least realise it could have been any one of them

Erik shifted up slowly, testing himself. Then we shouldn't waste time.
"Magneto, I would appreciate a drink if you are well enough to fetch it," Charles said aloud. It was a clear signal that he wanted discussions to take place.

The world around him was still glitchy, unsteady and heavy in his senses as he made his way back to the drink table, which hadn't had a refill but was still quite well stocked from when everything had gone wrong. All of the Personals were in various stages of unease, many of them sporting the signs of an injection and some the signs of a low fever. Charles was right, the tension in the place was obvious even to someone with very recent Personal training.

Kal-El was there at the table, mixing drinks with curious focus and without his collar. He'd been responsible for that. Ruining it. "Kal-el. I apologize for what I did to your raiment."

"And I apologise for punching you in the face," Kal-El said frankly. It was strange but again possibly because he was robbed of the collar that glittered and gleamed with a fortune in gemstones as well as the deadly glowing green stone, he was realised how young the other Meta was in comparison to most of the other Metas. Spiderman of House Osborne being a notable exception. "I believe the insult is greater on my part." He looked worried, glancing over to the others and towards his Master.

"My face recovers," Erik said slyly, "and the roof is still serving as a roof, so all for a good cause. How are they?"

"Worried." That was uncharacteristically blunt as well. "I am given to understand we are in a state of alliance Magneto. Our Houses are in alignment."

"I believe this to be true." He inclined his head to Kal-el. "I think we all require more backing. My Master suspects things might take…and unpleasant turn."

Kal-El appeared to be listening for a moment. "No one is listening directly to us. We can speak more openly. Master Bruce believes that The Emperor had some... intelligence that indicated that House Xavier would be instrumental in moving against him," he said in a hushed tone. "Master Bruce and Master Lex have long believed that part of the Imperial retinue is a precog of some description. Analysis of interactions have indicated that the Emperor and his father before him had consistently managed to deflect or break up any potential alliance strong enough to break the throne. We suspect he has had a hand in many things."

"It would be a shame if this pre-cog or whatever he is declines to take the jab." Eric took a sip of water letting it slide down his parched throat. Charles. What would stop at precog from knowing that this was going to happen?

Precogs are notoriously erratic at the best of time, Charles replied even as he was talking to the Master of House Osbourne. The mind tends to start interpreting things symbolically to protect itself. Interpretation can bring error. Or create the situation you are trying to avoid.

Kal-El nodded in response to his verbalized comment. "Perhaps, but it is unlikely. They could be pretending to have a minor talent in the retinue."

Add in illness. Erik suggested. "Would he have the inoculation?" He took another sip of water. So far the Imperials had not gone in search of the Emperor which meant either they had tried or been rebuff or were confident in his safety

"I do not know." Kal-El said. "It would imply he was tainted in some way and he has to be careful of reputation. He should if he has sense."
"Reputations do funny things to people." Erik took another sip of water. "We'll see, I suppose. We should help our houses be ready."

"We will be ready. How are your powers responding? I have yet to feel any effects." Which was lucky for them all. Kal-El had too many powers that were potentially disastrous on their own let alone in combination.

"They're coming around. It feels heavy." Maybe he was there to hold onto and sense too much at one time.

"But useable?" Kal-El seemed to be calculating advantages. "How much protection does your Master require?"

"Surprisingly little. Very useable. What do you need to do...?"

"You removed my collar accidentally which means I have no suppression mechanism subject to Imperial over ride," Kal-El said in a low voice. "There are others here in a similar situation. Not everyone is adept with technology as yours and my Masters."

"There are many here in a similar situation," Erik agreed, which was all he could say without showing Charles' hand. "We have an upper hand."

"We have determined who is on our side if we have to move, it would be good if you can remove whatever suppression mechanisms there are," Kal-El exhaled. "The Emperor will try guile before outright force unless he has lost complete control. He prefers the Great Houses to fight amongst themselves, not against him."

"Point out who has a suppression mechanism," Erik murmured. "I need to know who is safe."

"Spiderman is one. Peter is young, but he will side with us as long as House Osbourne fall in with us. Your own Gambit, though if the rumors are correct he will have worked out how to deactivate his."

"My house is taken care of," Erik murmured, making a show of getting a drink for Charles. They had possibly loitered too long by themselves. "Essex could go either way."

"Genosha will side with the Emperor. They secured a lucrative contract from him for the automated sentinels," he said. "They will protect him against us. House Weir and House Ross do not have Meta's in the room but are likely to be on our side."

"And we're a house made for battle." Peaceful enough, but ready for it, and he'd trained and trained to slaughter and fight house Genosha and house Essex. "We will help."

"Then I believe it is in our best interests to circulate and find out what metas we can count on if things go sour," Kal-El said thoughtfully. "We have no time to lose."

And with Charles’ presence in his mind Erik at least knew he had the advantage of know who would back up words with deeds.

His Imperial Majesty of the Americas, Emperor Rassilon the Ninth, Protector of the Great Houses, Upholder of Imperial Law, Defender of the Sacred Trine and Imperial Commander of the Guard was pacing in the antechamber where he had sequestered himself and his immediate entourage. This was not as he had planned - indeed things were unravelling rapidly from the timeline he had traced.
He could not under any circumstances show that the Rassilon Imperial line held Meta blood. He needed a way to get access to any cure without allowing himself to be seen to be inoculated. Unfortunately the time sense of his blood line was not particularly helpful in this respect.

He could see things that would be, but it took intelligence to apply that knowledge, creative forward thinking, and it wasn't helping enough. He could see threads, wisps of the time in front of him but did not extend as long as it needed to foresee an outcome favourable to him.

Part of it was Kal-El; time did not flow the same around him as it did humans, which was at once fascinating and disturbing. He could have a distorting effect at times. Not all of the times he summoned him to service were to do with sex, though of course the Metas resilience was a delightful bonus. So many others were too fragile for his tastes. But now, the cluster of futures he had been trying to pick through were tangled around the unfortunate slip that led to the exposure of the kryptonite next to the subject with live reproducing virus. Unpredictable futures had suddenly erupted in the timeline spiraling like a vortex.

Perhaps different perspectives were needed for clarity because his sense was bringing conflict to the fore. "I need to speak to my Blood Heirs. Have them brought to me," he ordered, trusting one of his entourage to take the command.

Nearer perspectives, providing him a source of his own blood to pull threads from, and use as a reference. Triangulation, his father had called it when they had scoured the timelines together to ensure the survival of the Empire. They had Seen the precise decisive point of when to join the Great War, together, though he always maintained the foreknowledge of the atrocities his father had let happen had killed him, leaving him to complete the task. He held none of that weakness and neither would his blood heirs, trained as they were in the Blood Code to his way of thinking and ruthlessness – though some more successfully than others. It was not a long wait for his heirs to be brought to him, not with the key pieces of the House sequestered together.

Koschei looked every inch the Blood Heir designate he was, though his eyes were bright with a fey streak that even the Blood Code had been unable to quell. His insatiable desire for power had led to some highly confidential incidents but he was still brilliant and could be relied on to make decisions that would cause deaths for the greater good. Theta, on the other hand would try and bend timelines to avoid death wherever possible and seemed to have no interest in the Throne. He was disrespectful and tried to ignore his lineage name and referred to himself as John. He looked thin, wiry and he could discern concealed bruising. No doubt his brother was looking at means of killing him again, which was a waste as Theta would not threaten his brothers claim to the Throne. They would have to face discipline again for being disobedient to his wishes – this was no time for family squabbling. If death was to occur it would be from his hand, not theirs. Their bodies, their will, their very futures were his to control and dictate.

"Koschei, Theta, come sit with me." They were not to take control from him over anything.

"Yes, sir." Overlapping responses, and Theta's more of a drawl, Koschei's smug. Both of them intolerable disrespect that they would most definitely pay for. Imperial blood or not, it would not spare them from a flogging.

"Privacy!" he snapped out and his retainers instantly moved into formation at a distance where they could not be over heard.

"I inquire after your health from the both of you. And Koschei, less of the attitude. Crisis or not I will not tolerate disrespect. You are bound by the Blood Code. " That was a phrase reinforced over the years to engender obedience. The only way to train their line. It was too powerful not have actions, precepts and proclivities programmed in and he had literally had it beaten into them.
"Yes sir." Better. Better. "I feel fine, sir. Why wouldn't I?"

"A mutated virus has become keyed to the meta-gene is loose in the compound. There is a team working on it, but our situation is more complex."

"Is it really that much more complex, sir?" Theta asked quietly and with appropriate deference. "You're the Emperor. Every precaution should be afforded you."

"Save the one thing we cannot show publicly," he said. "I want to know what the pair of you have seen."

"Houses conspiring to create your absence," Koschei said quickly, while Theta frowned.

"Blood," his second son said quietly. "I see blood in the timelines. That is what you are asking isn't it Father?"

It was. Koschei's answer did not tell him anything new. Koschei never had any nuance in his interpretation, was unable to grasp the subtler moments. That was where he truly failed as a blood heir. His brother had greater nuance but lacked a will to power. "Yes. And it will not be ours."

Bravado but also true. Their line could turn the tides of fate with enough focus, especially if they combined forces. "You must stay safe," he warned.

"We will." But to get involved without the risk was something that took care to execute.

His own meditations had informed him that if House Luthor, House Wayne and House Xavier allied, his personal future became very uncertain. He had manipulated Lionel Luthor into what he thought would be direct conflict with House Wayne. Lex Luthor should have hated and resented someone who had treated him as a Personal, but instead they had allied and were on guard. So he strove to eliminate and occupy House Xavier by tasking them with Magneto's training. Magneto had nearly been strong enough to go toe-to-toe with Kal-el and practically feral. He should have been untameable.

And yet impossibly in defiance of all profiling and logic, he had been tamed. He was bowed and obedient to House Xavier, against all odds, and now, now what did he face? It was a mess of options and things he couldn't see the end of, threats and ways to be overthrown through unlikely alliances. Even potentially the rise of House Luthor to the throne which could not be, would never be because that way led to the end of their line in its entirety.

His last attempt to send Magneto into frenzy that would destroy his Master and leave the vassals of House Xavier ripe for the picking had backfired and now he was in direct peril. Scenarios were starting to tangle in his head as he tried to follow individual timelines.

"Bring me the Eye of Rassilon," he ordered. "My Heirs, you will also use it." Different people would see and focus on different things, their ways of thinking resonating with different futures.

And he needed to use it to the fullest, needed to focus. Theta stood up smoothly, heading to do just that.

The Eye had been created by the first of the Rassilon Great House, Omega. Ironic that the first should have a name meaning the last. It had given them a great deal of advantage - it focused their gift into visions rather than feelings and intuition. It turned wisps into clarity, and they needed that just then, then Koschei, and his strength.

Oh, he was brilliant of course. So was Theta in a different way, but he wasn't as strong and ruthless in his opinion. He'd tried to run away from his Blood Heir training when he was young. He
couldn't have that and perhaps the resulting retribution had made the boy hesitant and weak. No, they would find out the paths of the future and each would play a part. He unlocked the bloodline lock the artefact had upon it, and the swirling dark sphere was revealed suspended before them.

He settled to focus on the possible futures. Now with the orb to focus on he was able to look clearly to the threads that comprised each possible timeline. The one he was on now started as a manipulation again to try and set them against each other and the end clearly had Luthor as Emperor, all of the houses uniting with House Luthor or House Wayne against him. His heirs laid dead, crushed by metas.

The decision point lay ahead in linear time; there was time to salvage this. He added the possibility of an action into the mix. A second strand - a surprise strike from his forces on the assembly there without warning. Death, blood, fire...carnage as the heads of houses lay dying around him. He survived but society turned on him...

No, another strand. Surprise attack, but death...for one of his sons. An excuse played to the media of crazed metas slaughtering his own family and forced to destroy them in his grief. A worldwide backlash against Meta and an opportunity to claim them for the throne...but he was still alive! It was possible and that was the most important factor. Still, it was worth checking.

"Koschei, what do you see?"

"I see ways out of this." Koschei tilted his head, glancing up at his father with a faint gleam in his eyes. There were ways out of it yes, but whether they were tolerable was another matter

"I hear the drumbeats of war," Theta said and Rassilon looked at his eldest son and his youngest and contemplated. It would have to be Theta that died to preserve them. There was no filial love between the two brothers any more, the Blood Code had put paid to that and he had systematically uprooted their disturbing co-dependency of their childhood. At least there had been no more reports for years that they were indulging in anything any more with each other. Koschei would turn on his brother without hesitation for the whiff of power that went with being an undisputed Heir to the Imperial Throne.

"Yes, there is a pathway through the battlefield," Rassilon agreed, not clarifying his plan.

"I see metal...and mind," Theta added. "They are the rallying point."

"Who?" Koschei scowled, making a sorting gesture as he seemed to dive deeper. "I see a rallying to the true emperor."

Yes, that was what he wanted to hear. Metal and mind? Theta tended to see in symbols that were often opaque to interpretation to him at least. The effort was making him feel hot, giving him a headache. That's all it was, just the effort of staring into the Eye of Rassilon. The visions were violent, the timelines twisting around each other. In one Bruce Wayne stabbed him, in another, Lex Luthor. In another, he saved himself using a soft Imperial scientist as a shield and a dark haired Imperial soldier calmly turned and emptied bullets into him at point blank range. He made a note to have him killed before the thought could even occur. Treason in one future meant it could occur as some point in this one. They could not be trusted. He had removed many seemingly blameless people on the basis of a timeline’s future action.

No imperial should be allowed to live who could turn on their emperor with such impunity. In the struggle, he would have to make sure that man never came back. And there were more people who in their quickness of response proved their disloyalty. He struggled with anger because the next few moments would call for peace and calm. He had seen enough.
He sat back from the Eye of Rassilon, trying to fight down the surges of anger that threatened him calm. The timelines were tangling even now he was detached. The last time he felt like this was when he had taken the Imperial Throne from his father and purged the rest of the line who would challenge him. He had instituted the strictest form of the Blood Code again for his sons to ensure their obedience and if he had to sacrifice Theta to the timelines to ensure his survival then he would.

"You see a focus of metal and mind. Mind could be a psionic, Metal could be the Meta Magneto. We shall be prepared. We cannot risk a mental leak of intentions. We will strike directly at them all without warning using my honor Guard and Personals. I have Metas of my own." Rassilon looked around at where his retinue was waiting out of earshot in postures of submission. They had been well trained and conditioned by House Genosha, brainwashed into devotion to his life at the expense of their own.

He would lose some of them inevitably in the conflict but the wisest of them would continue to survive. "Yes sir." There was no time to waste and they needed to move out quickly. He would keep the boys close, use Theta as a shield when that pivotal moment occurred.

"Attend me!" he ordered in a louder voice. "My loyal ones, protectors of the Blood Imperial, prepare for battle. We have information that a coup is being planned by those faithless vassals. The Heads of Great Houses plot treason. We shall not allow this. You are my possessions, my property and you shall do my will." He leaned in to Koschei who tended to see the timelines of battle with a clearer focus than anything. "Did you see who should subdue Kal-El?"

"The manhunter," Koschei selected, still staring deeply at the eye.

"Hmmm. Are there any other recommendations?" Rassilon asked eying his protectors. The Manhunter would not be able to defeat Kal-El in an extended fight, but it would be long enough for him to have his Master killed. "We may have an unknown psionic."

"Then let us place the manhunter against the psionic, and the Amazon against Kal-El. Even if he does die before a tallying..."

He nodded again. "Prepare for battle. Manhunter, you shall prevent any psionic interference. Wonder Woman, you shall subdue Kal-El to allow Green Arrow to take out Bruce Wayne and Lex Luthor. Green Lantern shall deal with other Metas, the Flash shall protect us from projectiles. The others will subdue with lethal force any who oppose us. Theta and Koschei, House Rassilon stands together. Arm yourselves."

"Yes sir." They said it in unison, and departed smartly, no hesitation, as House Rassilon marched out to an inevitable quick victory.

Charles rubbed his temples. There was an annoying buzz growing in his telepathic field. It wasn't the increasingly anxious Masters and their Personals, although they didn't help. No, he realised someone was deliberately jamming telepathic scanning. Erik was lying beside him on one side, and Gambit to the other. They had established allies - a good amount. Come what may, Bruce Wayne now knew his secret but he would deal with that. Everyone had called all the members of their House they could but... something was being hidden from them. He was the strongest psionic he was aware that existed and if he could not break that interference then no one could. And where brute force was not possible, he had developed finesse. He pushed at the shield with a probe like the finest of hypodermic needle filaments. So fine it was barely noticeable, especially if someone was expecting a battering ram pushing all the way through to the Emperor himself not caring now if he was noticed.
Count down from ten, coordination is key... They will pay, they will die for their treason. The future does not lie. I will have their lives!

He stiffened instantly. The Emperor had delirious thoughts and against all logic and sanity he was planning an ambush...this was it!

Erik didn't tense, but he did shift a leg idly, ready to move. Do we wait for them to strike first?

Gambit, sound the alarm for an ambush. Be ready, we have only seconds, Charles said urgently.

Gambit surged to his feet not hesitating for an instant. "An attack comes! be on your guard. They plan no mercy for any of us!"

As people leapt to their feet seemingly willing to take their word for it, Charles said I did not say that Gambit!

It is true, non? The other Meta said readying his cards and his other weapons. The fripperies of court attire could be utilized as many weapons to the biokinetic.

"Magneto, release the suppressors on the other Meta's," Charles said aloud and that was all he had time for before a mental force slammed into him even as the Emperor's force stormed the room.

Erik ripped the collars down, not subtle, but effective, unleashing every meta who was on their side of the fight in the clearest way possible, as he stood up, and smoothly collapsed a door frame down on the incoming people.

It was enough to slow them for the few seconds most of them on their side needed to not be taken completely by surprise. Charles found him-self engaged in a mental battle that required all of his attention. In his mindscape, he was fighting the Manhunter and something dire and terrible was wrong with the Meta. Even on the mental level, it was as if the being had been collared by fire, a constant source of agony and fear driving it to do the Emperor's bidding unmercifully. He would recognise the hallmark of House Genosha's processing instantly.

It caused metas to rage out of control, to savage anything in their path when loosed, and he concentrated on fighting that burning mental flame and fending off the manhunter's intensely strong telepathy while Erik protected them physically and continued to block and barricade their allies to give them a chance.

He was aware of roughly what was happening, but was helpless to assist while being caught up in conflict himself. However, he did not want to kill these Metas, he wanted to break the mental control that robbed them of their will. It was an abomination! If he could just break it apart...

Erik was protecting the Imperial soldiers who were bemused to be as much a target as everyone else. Surprisingly the laconic dark haired Imperial soldier called Sheppard appeared very adept at responding quickly to a surprise attack and issuing orders that immediately ended up with lines being drawn between those Houses trying to side with the Emperor and them. He recognized a brief flash that this was not the first time Sheppard had defied a chain of command to support what was right and was surprised and grateful that was his attitude. A lesser man would have obeyed the Emperor, let his men be cut down as servants to his will. Unfortunately for House Genosha, and House Essex they were less quick to realise the Emperor was clearly in no mood to recognize allies.

He lashed out sharply at Essex himself by giving a sharp order, and a fast blur suddenly wrapped the man up to his House's consternation. The Flash he assumed. He risked a brief glance at the
Emperor’s thoughts, snatching at information there and nearly staggered as the Manhunter mentally lunged at him, seeing a point of weakness to drive in psionic shards. He clung on and rather rudely dumped information into Erik’s and Gambit’s minds.

The Emperor is infected, paranoid and targeting specifically Wayne, Luthor and myself. He fully intends to massacre all of us here...including his son Theta...blame it on Metas and...ahh!

The pain in his head was blinding. He had split his attention and the Manhunter had mentally clawed at him. Vicious, painful, and he had to work to unpick the damage done to the man to keep himself from suffering further harm. His house members would do good work without him, he had full faith in them to work to protect as well as to defend.

Erik surged forward, trying to go for vicious control and knocking people down hard. The Flash was a threat, and how did one deal with speed? Speed, vibration, control down to an elemental level. His magnetic powers had nothing he could grasp onto in the movement of the man and obstacles he flung at him were avoided with laughable ease.

The one called Wonder Woman was attacking Kal-El full power, ruthless and deadly and seemingly able to take the hits returned by the Meta. Bruce Wayne and Lex Luthor were standing back to back behind Kal-El fighting there as well. Bruce seemed to have innumerable technological weapons to hand which counteracted many of the Meta abilities around them. Surprisingly it was the Imperial scientist McKay who stopped the Flash in his tracks with an emitter burst of some energy that knocked him flat. The man must have put that together in seconds, not deemed a threat by the battling meta-humans.

He shackled the man then, wrapped him tight in metal from ruined collars and crushed hard enough to break a couple of bones. Nothing that wouldn't heal, but running on broken legs would not be happening so it took him effectively out of the game. Spiderman swung in and webbed the man to be on the safe side, as the Flash started struggling.

Erik intercepted some of the arrows targeting House Ross, Weir and Cuddy drawing them off with ease and sending them back at full velocity towards Green Arrow.

"Magneto, take out the Cyborg and give me a boost!" Gambit shouted out as he launched himself into the air. They had to get to the Emperor. He was doing...something around them that just blocked all attacks they threw his way. Projectiles appeared to stop in front of them as if frozen somehow in the air. Charles had been right, he was a Meta after all. He had been perpetrating atrocities and enslaving his own kind for decades! Madness.

Purest madness, and he pulled hard at the projectiles, pinning the Cyborg to a wall with his own arm and frying circuitry with a thought, while multi tasking and flinging Remy higher in the air than normal so he could lay down a covering fire of energy charged cards before trying to move the suspended projectiles somehow. But he was unable to feel the vibration of their elements to move them which was impossible. It was as if they weren't in his frame of reference.

"Magneto!" There was a bellow from behind him and he recognised the voice of Master Wayne shouting with a rawness that alerted him to something going badly wrong. He turned to see Wonder Woman turning from a spin, having slashed Kal-El across the throat. It looked like she was moving in for the kill, even as he saw the Personal Wilson of House Cuddy and the freeman Doctor Beckett run over the fallen alien to try and staunch the blood flow.

He bolted closer, needing to be nearer, needing to focus as he shoved hard, reached down past the heaviness of his hands and his mind to pull at everything he could in here. She couldn't go in for
the kill if she couldn’t breathe, if she couldn't move.

She choked, inexplicably maintained her focus, whipping a glowing lasso around him. "Remember the worst truth of your life," she hissed even as she choked around his clenching power.

He started to pull harder, grabbing at iron, at everything he could from her. The worst truth, the worst truth, there was no worth truth that he didn't already know to the depth of his soul, nothing he hadn't envisioned a hundred times. The truth he feared might be, that could have broken him, that Charles’ feelings were not true, did not materialize.

Instead, memories of the Russian Houses rose up in his mind, the war atrocities where the world was shocked by the world domination ambitions of Emperor Hitler. He latched onto her cuff bracelets trying to wrench them apart and distract her. She was immensely powerful and he wasn't at full strength himself.

It was like an animal struggling with a human hand, and he felt no shame in shoving and pulling where he had to, anything to keep her from being able to focus. "Nothing I haven't faced every morning with breakfast. I taste ashes in my coffee. My grief is my own -- and what about yours?"
He jerked, trying to yank the lasso free.

"I have nothing that is not the Emperors." It was a curiously flat tone, something he recognized from the Holding cells, a repeated mantra over and over from brainwashed prisoners around him and she elected to launch herself at him physically, aiming to hit him with intense power. At least the lasso slipped in the process. He slapped at her side with it more than anything, dodging the damn blow, and trying hard again to pull at her blood.

He needed to get her down, so they could get to the Emperor and stop this stand off. To the side of him, Gambit was taking on House Essex practically alone, blazing with charged particles around him that made him wonder how much of his powers had he kept to himself. Spiderman of House Osborne was tangling up Green Arrow and some non-descript looking man seemed locked together with Charles. The Green Lantern was facing off against all those trying to get to House Rassilon and protecting the Imperial family direct.

Erik. It was a faint whisper in his head. I need you. A distraction...There was a sound of almost pain in his head from an echo of the contact.

No no no, and he yanked hard at the Amazon, a mist of blood appearing from her shoulders before he turned his attention to Charles, throwing what had been a chair hard at the man-creature's head. It seemed enough - Charles unexpected lunged forward to physically touch his opponent, and the effects were dramatic. There was a sudden wail from the man as that shape dissolved into a green humanoid clutching his head. "No, no, no...what have I done, no..."

They have been mindlocked Erik. Much like what they were going to do to you Charles said sounding like he had run a marathon. I have the pattern now but I need you to get me close enough to touch them to force a rapport.

Mindlocked, and he wasn't following what was going on exactly as he equated it to brainwashing in his own head, but he did understand that he needed to get up in the air and he needed to pull Charles out of his chair, because everything was too hard just then.

Wonder Woman first. She is currently the most dangerous Charles said reaching to hold on to him and reassuring him with his touch. You can do it Erik.

He held him tight, and there was no chance he was going to let go of Charles. Focus on her and let
me protect you.

He levitated them both back towards Wonder Woman and this time he seized control of her metal bracelet cuffs instantly, even as she snarled and exerted considerable strength to try and break free. As they got closer she high kicked to his head but Charles lunged to touch her at the same time. She locked in place staring at nothing and then rather disturbingly, tears started to pour down her cheeks as if everything about herself had been revealed as a betrayal and grief that devastated her where even Kal-El could barely hold her off.

He didn't unlock her cuffs, melting their edges as he levitated Charles away from her. The memory was going to stick with him for a long time, the crying, as he turned his focus toward the emperor.

Charles was looking even more pasty white than before, showing the mental effort needed to snap that imposed control, but he was still determined. Distract the Green Lantern and I'll.--

They were interrupted by a commotion to the side of them and he risked a glance to see Kal-El rise up into the air, covered in blood still and a terrible expression as Lex Luthor dropped to the floor struck by something. Dead or unconscious he didn’t know, but he hoped that Charles’ suspicions about him being a self-healer were correct because Kal-El looked like he was losing control.

He looked like he was going to rush the Emperor head on and be damned to the consequences but he heard Charles say Kal-El, stop! The Emperor has control of time and is a Meta. Work with Magneto and I will continue to break the mindlock of his honour guard. The power in Charles’ command was astonishing, and enough to halt the one Meta no one wanted out of control.

"Magneto." The voice was a harsh sound, Kal-El's throat still healing and his expression tormented with the possibility of losing one of his Masters and lovers.

He shifted his hands, held tight to Charles, because they needed to distract the Green Lantern, needed to focus on protecting their Masters, controlling Kal-El, and letting go of Charles, setting him anywhere was not an option. "Work with us, we're both weakened." He meant he and Kal-El, but however the man took it was fine.

"I will," Kal-El replied.

"Listen to me!" McKay managed to duck his way through the fight, speaking very rapidly. “The shield they are using is a 4th dimensional time-based barrier. We’re screwed unless we can get through it but we did some hypothetical work on this when I was on the Wayne contract with Clark… uh Kal, and there’s a possibility he can breach it but it might take him out of circulation for bit, don’t know how long so someone has to be ready to follow up. Of course it could potentially destroy us all and rip a dimensional hole that sucks our reality into it and--”

“McKay..” Sheppard said urgently. “Shut up, they’ve got the idea.” They all ducked as a massive explosion over near Gambit hurled debris around.

"Can you breach time?" Charles said urgently. "They have control of a time barrier."

The meta turned and glanced at the Imperial scientist McKay and grimaced. "If someone's equations and math are correct, in theory yes."

"Pierce that barrier and I will be able to get to them, closer the better."

"And we can follow." Would, with speed and strength, and ferocity. And the Green Lantern still needed to go down.

“I’ll take him down if you can do it,” Sheppard said in a low voice. "You need to strike at them and protect your Master when he is attempting contact. We are ready."

"I..." He hesitated, and shifted to hand Charles off to Kal-El, because now the plan made sense.

He could pull the blood in the mans body enough to make him dizzy and faint, Kal-El could pierce the time barrier and Charles could get a grip on them mentally. They could survive this if he could just get near enough to Green Lantern. He swooped in, trying to focus even as a powerful fist shape of green energy swatted at him.

It impacted him and then fuzzed to nothing as he pushed an electro magnetic field through and against it. Energy with energy, just like a hard light hologram. He could disrupt it with enough intense manipulation. He focused his ability and Green Lanterns constructs started to collapse around the ball of electro magnetism he was wielding forcing him to fight to maintain and rebuild them. As he did so, he could see Sheppard sneaking around debris to get behind the man.

"Now Kal-El!" Charles called out and he barely caught a blur corkscrewing in a vortex pattern to impact that barrier with a brilliant burst of light that was like a crate of stun grenades being let off at once blinding everyone in the room.

Kal-El was...unnatural. To have such power and not in his hands was a travesty. The Emperor had felt confident that the time barrier generated by the three of the Blood with the ability together would successfully protect them from physical harm. Never the less, he had been disturbed to see the fall of so many of his most powerful Metas in the conflict. Then to see Kal-El line up on their barrier, a sudden flicker of impossible outcomes flashed in his mind just as he charged. It was enough warning to angle the shield so it would destroy his second son in its destruction not his Heir designate or himself. The impact was as devastating as he had foreseen but the results were not as he assumed. Theta yelled as the time barrier exploded and it should have torn him to shreds but somehow Theta absorbed it into himself, glowing with a golden energy as he dropped to the ground instead of being vaporized or -- Impossible, it was impossible for someone even of their line to absorb the energy of a time vortex. He was the useless one, the runt of the Rassilon line, useful only as a martyr.

"You really are a bastard father," Koschei hissed in his ear, no sign of the obedient conditioning now. "A fucking, sadistic homicidal delusion bastard. You didn't have to do that.. I KNOW you didn't. You could have saved him, but you chose yourself."

This was intolerable rudeness. "I will have you flogged for disobedience Koschei! Now stop Kal-El."

"No." His Heir designate surged up making his attention flare in sudden horror. He had not checked the time lines for him. Why should he when Koschei would be getting everything he always wanted – clear access to the throne, uncontested power. All he could see were two outcomes now; one where his eldest survived and became emperor and the world burned, and burned as he stared with lost empty eyes and one where Theta survived and.. He had been blinded by his vision at a crucial time, twisting to his arrogant eldest son, when he saw the knife in his hand, the motion he was making with it sure and surely impossible, a flash of light catching it as Kal-El came at him, at all of them, and then biting, sharp searing pain and the metallic taste of blood as his heart was pierced through by his own Bloods hand.

Theta regained consciousness just in time to see his father’s last moments, though he could barely
comprehend what he was seeing. The Emperor died, blood pouring from his mouth as the blade pierced his heart and lung from a swift precise movement that he himself had ordered taught to them both. He collapsed amid the debris, his falling a soft sigh among the conflict.

"The Emperor is dead, Long live the Emperor," Koschei giggled. The strain of breaking the indoctrinated obedience had twisted his mind even further, even as he crouched over his younger brother. They had been warned of the psychic blocks, the manipulations and what it might do if they struggled against their fate. The sheer strength and power his brother must have had to break that himself. "Theta...John, you can't be dead. You never die. I never see you dying."

He laid there, struggling to breathe against the fizzing weight of time in his blood, changing him, shaping him, the immensity of it distressing and distracting, and too much information all at once, too much and too little, and Koschei kept laughing, laughing and kneeling at his side while tears rolled down his face, petting at his shoulders as if it would pull him free of time.

Theta sat up unsteadily, unsure of how he had survived being his father’s sacrificial lamb. He’d felt the decision a millisecond before it happened and he’d react on instinct.

It was then he heard an immensely strong mind voice penetrate the disturbance all around him.

John, order your honour guard to stop fighting. They are destroying themselves. the voice said. Kal-El will not harm you or your brother. His mind is fractured, he needs help to regain his sanity. You are the Emperor now. Do not turn on us.

Curious, very curious, but he didn't react directly, not immediately, at the voice in his head. He brushed it away, and rubbed at his forehead, wisps of golden light still clinging to his fingers. "Stand down." No, no, too weak, too washy, and he started to stand up, using his brother, who was still giggling, to right himself. He felt like he was glowing. "Stand down! Stop this madness at once!"

He realised he could stop them if he wanted, clear this problem with a clean sweep of death but he was not his father. He hated the degradation and archaic sexual exploitation of his father’s court. He’d always said it was about not appearing weak, that his own father had been weak and sentimental and it had destroyed him and there would be none of that, but Theta and Koschei had both known it was nothing of the sort. Their father was a sick sadistic bastard, paranoid and abusively controlling to all around him. Only his talent had allowed him to hold the Throne this far into a bloody reign. Rassilon’s death threw him only because it was a huge relief and that he had bitter confirmation of what he had always known - his father did not love him. He was just a construct puppet of blood and bone to him. Property in all but name. But now... if he could hold the throne, he could right wrongs. One thing he was grateful for was his Father in-graining at least a habit of obedience into the Masters of the Empire. They did stop at least long enough for him to speak. And that was one thing he could do. Talk.

He could talk. He had a gift there, and it didn't fail him as he glanced at his father, briefly, and then looked out to the unexpectedly slow to still masters. "You will obey your Emperor and put down your weapons. There will be no reckoning for what has occurred here in the name of my father’s orders."

_They doubt that. The Emperor is dead and no one is sure how it happened_ the helpful telepathic advice came. Who was that? He should be able to locate him. "My Father is dead and yes, driven insane by a weapon he sought to use against all of you. My brother, my brother has been broken on the wheel of his ambition. Our Father was fully prepared to sacrifice me as well as all of you to preserve his own personal power." He paused a moment and then said in a quiet voice that nevertheless carried. "This is not how is should be. This is not how it WILL be."
It helped that his brother staggered to his feet, funny fat sharp ripping blade in hand as he stood up, still dripping their fathers' blood down his arm. "Long live the emperor, and House Rassilon!"

Sometimes he hated it when Koschei made his point for him.

"And what of those who have died and been injured here today?" Bruce Wayne limped in front of him his eyes seeking and finding his Kal-El who had dropped to his knees, looking weary. Time energy was crawling all over him too, he could see it. "You followed the Blood Code. Your father controlled your will for years and he wished us destroyed. Is that what you want?" There was an audible gasp from the room as Wayne deliberately did not acknowledge him as Emperor.

Wayne does not want the Throne, but if he thought you would destroy Kal-El or Metas over this he will put Luthor on that path. Now would be a time to give a major concession the mystery telepath advised him. He glanced over in surprise to see Lex Luthor crawling over towards Kal-El. He was sure Luthor had taken a fatal blow. Just as you have hidden your Meta status and it is now revealed to all, there are many here masquerading as normal who are affected by the virus. They could challenge you on that law where your father enshrined the tenets of permanent irrevocable slavery for Metas. There is a para-dox....break it while people are still stunned otherwise they will consider and then question your right to do so.

"No. No it isn't." He moved carefully to take the knife from Koschei, because apparently his house was still too stunned to intervene and many of the honour guard incapacitated. It was a moment of awkward wrestling that seemed to take forever, but probably didn't. "How many Masters have nearly died today because of what they were born as? Too many, too many houses noble born and forced to keep secrets or face being collared. No Meta should face a lifetime of service, with no hope of being free."

There was another ripple of reaction, but this time one of excitement with some tension as House Genosha's Master stepped forward. "Enough of this! This is...an abhorrence. Metas are born as slaves, die as slaves! You are a false Emperor! I invoke the Master command of House Genosha! All Metas indoctrinated by our House will obey me!"

Of course, they would protect themselves or would have been on the verge of staging their own coup with psionic master commands. "I stand with the Emperor against your treason," Kal-El said pushing himself up to his feet, which was comforting. A meta who could survive a cut across the throat, who could break time itself. Well always someone useful to pick your side when the chips were down.

Do not fear, I am breaking that illegal control the telepath informed him. Your body guards have not been themselves. They are likely to be upset. And they remember who did what to them. Devious to program in a psionic back door.

All around him, Meta's were clutching their heads and groaning and more to the point not obeying House Genosha. There was a lot of emotional reaction, physical reaction in passing out or vomiting from the conditioning backlash, but there was no doubt the master command was no longer an issue. This was a very powerful psionic talent indeed. Time to be more Imperial then if only to protect them all.

"Master Hodge. Master Cameron Hodge, who became head of house Genosha by overthrow, killing Master Moreau. Step down from your challenge. I know your secrets. As your Emperor, I will grant mercy to your *house* for the service your *house* provided my family." He paused, carefully folding Koschei's blade shut against his thigh. "Do you understand what I'm saying?" He had to give them a chance, otherwise he was worse than his father.
"You have no power base!" Master Hodge replied.

"You sure about that?" the Imperial named Sheppard limped over to be able to back the Emperor. He recognized him as the man able to neutralize Green Lantern by virtue of knocking him unconscious. At an almost imperceptible command by him, the Imperial strike team formed up in a defensive block.


"I beg to differ. House Xavier stands with the Emperor," Master Xavier said from his vantage point lying on the dias. "If you excuse me not actually standing. Magneto, if you would..."

He lifted Charles from where he sat on the floor, a calm, powerful presence with a gleam in his eyes lifting another. Theta tucked that away, quietly, and kept watching Master Hodge as he spoke again. "I will bring a different, better Court to this empire. Metas will bargain and earn their way to freeman, just like everyone else in the system. Their service is no longer an order but a privilege and the way they chose to serve is their choice. And my Imperials will keep the peace, providing a strong protection for our empire, their ranks strengthened by those who are there by choice rather than enslavement."

He half wanted to ask who had been brought up under the blood code and had actually enjoyed it, but held back, breathing and focusing. "No more blood code. We're better than the Russians, aren't we? We're better than they are and a fundamental precept of the Sacred Trine is that Merit determines fate. In recent years we have closed our eyes and ears to the true meaning of this, subjugating those with talent...with merit to feed our own paths to power. The Blood code strips away the choices of those with merit. So I say this is how the future will be, and we will need their cooperation and their abilities given willingly for there are greater threats out there than most of us can comprehend. So I say again, who else would challenge me?"

There was none who would step forward now. He knew it. He looked at Master Xavier in his Personal’s arms and saw the two forces of his vision. Metal and mind. Xavier was a Meta and a powerful one and his mystery telepath.

I am indeed. And Metas are perhaps the only ones in this world who have suffered more than those under the blood code or archaic House tradition, Xavier said to him. And yet they still hoped this day would come. I suggest Emperor, that you focus people on the cure. I believe Dr Beckett somehow managed to produce something he believes is a cure in all that disruption for which he definitely deserves accolades. I would like my Erik treated as soon as possible.

Of course. And Kal-El. And himself. "I can announce that our Imperial specialists have a cure for the engineered disease my father caused to spread. We will treat the recognised metas first, and then as a precondition all those of the houses present will be inoculated and then of the compound itself. We cannot risk this disease getting into the general population so I hope you will not resent the Imperial hospitality being imposed upon you until this process is complete. The Imperials will help us make an orderly accounting of damages, and the traitor Hodges and my brother will be imprisoned pending trial. A message will be sent to Master Hodges’ son informing him of his new position as head of House Genosha."

Only then did the man seem to realise that he had been handed a death mark sentence, though the judgement was still technically pending. "Wait, no... you can't do this!" He yelled even as the Imperials bustled him out.

Theta could just about hear a scottish sounding voice say "How the bloody hell did he know I'd..."
finished a cure?" from over to the side even as the freeman doctor stepped forward and bowed. "Your Imperial Majesty, I have engineered a prototype retrovirus. It is specific and I will be able to get enough done by tomorrow to fulfil your needs, but I have a few doses here now. Who should have them?"

"Magneto, Kal-El, anyone else who is showing symptoms of fever as a priority." He could have indicated himself but he wanted fairness and concern to be one of his first official command to counteract death sentences. He would be a good Emperor, or try to be, and that was the best he could do.

The Emperor was getting the inoculation jab, and Erik was tired, exhausted and unwilling to let go of Charles.

Around them the cleanup was beginning. Many of the Emperors personal bodyguards and entourage had been unable to cope with the release of their Genoshan mindlocks and were weeping or practically catatonic as their memories came back to them and reconnected with their awareness. Charles had made the offer for them to be treated and rehabilitated at House Xavier, to which the new Emperor, His Imperial Majesty Emperor Theta the Tenth of the Imperial line of Rassilon, Defender of something and Commander of ...a thing that Erik really didn't give a shit about.

It came down to their house being allowed a contract to treat the Emperor's metas, and as heads of House and their people were given their treatments, they were going to be allowed, soon, to leave. And that was important, getting back to their house quarters, quiet time, to be able to focus down again for a few minutes.

There was going to be a ridiculous amount of fall out over this, he knew that much and it was a relief when they were dismissed to rest and recuperate in their Imperial quarters.

_Time for some well earned rest, Charles said with evident relief. Are you sure you do not need medical treatment?_ 

_For what? The fight? No, though he'd damaged his knee again, but nothing that he couldn't repair from scratch when he had time and focus to work on it. Are we truly safe now?_ 

_Safer than normal. And I have left Gambit with the Emperor so he is not taken advantage of... or forgets his promises. I do not believe he will. He has a brilliant mind and he genuinely does not want the sort of domination his father did. He looks at what Metas can do and thinks 'Brilliant!'_ Charles said as they headed towards their quarters. People would be working through the night to fix this place.

_Different than the last one, then. Time manipulator as well? Frightening if he was, because Erik had never felt something resist him like that before. It made him want to practice all the harder to never have it happen again. _

_I'm not sure – certainly some form of time related talent. That seems to be in their bloodline. He absorbed time energy when Kal-El broke it...how I'm not sure. He was better at seeing things. That appears to have been the Rassilon gift - seeing possible timelines, he answered. The ultimate tactical advantage. It explains a lot about the dynastic longevity. _

_If you know what your enemy is doing before they can do it....Erik wondered how the Great War had happened, how his people had fallen on such loss, if one of the empires in the fight had *such* an immense advantage. Why had they not entered the war sooner and decisively?_
I suspect you give the majority of the Imperial line too much credit for supporting humanity. Charles murmured. Or they callously calculated how much power they could achieve by entering the conflict when they did. We will not know. You have been so...magnificent, Erik.

He pushed open the door to their quarters, and held it for Charles as he came through it. I will feel magnificent when I wash, and when we sleep. And when he could get the taste of the lasso out of the back of his mouth, an odd unbalanced moment where she expected more reaction out of it than she got as if he was the type to suppress or ignore his past

I agree. That was a significant test of my powers. J'onn...the Manhunter is very strong. I suspect if he hadn't been fighting the mindblock all the time he might have taken me, Charles admitted. I almost cannot believe this has occurred.

That the emperor is dead and we might one day be free? What an odd thought, it felt surreal and he wasn't ready to deal with it just yet.

Yes. Yes. Part of Wayne's plan and Luthor's, Charles said. He has been playing a long game, though I sincerely doubt he expected this level of change.

The shower, the bathroom was almost palatial in itself. Marble and old sculptures, gleaming gilded gold. A bathing pool fit for half a house to bathe in. He shadowed Charles to the showering room. It had been... A very long day or two, he wasn't sure what he was doing or where he should be aside from never letting Charles out of his sight again.

“Will you help me bathe, Erik?” Charles asked aloud. “I am still feeling some of the effects. It made me...rather possessive of you.”

"Why possessive?” He answered the first question by moving toward Charles shrugging out of his own completely soiled clothing. He had had a fever at some point during the ordeal and what little clothing he was wearing felt stiff from dried sweat.

“Because I want you Erik,” Charles murmured. “Everything about you.” It was strange to hear. Even now, it was jarring. Even when he trusted Charles implicitly, it just didn't quite... Erik didn't know. "But you have me.” Moving help Charles undress was relaxing, taking his time skimming fingers over bare skin.

“But it's not Magneto the Personal I want, it's Erik,” Charles said softly. “I was...jealous even before the virus. When I watched you and Gambit, I wanted to call you back and say no, he is no ones but mine.”

Good. "I don't want to be anyone else's.” There was discussing it, and knowing it mentally, and then there was experiencing it and trying to feign reactions. Left him feeling tired and hollow, though it was nowhere near Russian court traditions.

“I want it to be your choice Erik to be with me. Not because of politics and malicious games.” Charles murmured reacting to him. “You know I want you, feel for you.”

Yes. He leaned in, kissed the side of Charles's neck just to taste, because he knew it was sensitive. "If I weren't attracted to you, I wouldn't have volunteered.”

He felt the other man shiver. “Let's get cleaned up,” he said smiling up at him and Erik found it strangely different from the Master Xavier persona, the one who had shredded the mind controls that the strongest Metas alive could not handle.
Those rare moments where he relaxed were precious to Erik, glimpses of the man he really couldn't beat in a chess game. No matter how hard he tried, blockers and all. "I think we can do two things at once." He let his fingers linger at Charles upper back, before shifting to pick him up and set him in the bathing pool.

Charles sighed at the hot water soothing sore muscles even has he felt them start to unknot and unravel on himself. "Tell me you are going to do something. I did have some rather splendid fantasies of you before."

He sent some of that feedback his way; images of the entertainment, Erik using his powers to tease him relentless with tendrils of metal. Vivid scenarios where Charles teased him as well all tangled and meshed together.

"I would rather play those games in the safety of your house. Where I know I can join you in your bed after, and in the morning the worst thing you will face is Jean making you do your decision-making and paperwork. What I want now..." And he did want, he wanted to touch Charles all over, wanted to do more than just things that were showy.

"Show me.." Charles said in a lower, soft voice. "You deserve to get everything you want.” He kissed him and murmured in his mind. Show me

It was a sensation more than an image, a series of moments that he pressed at Charles, of comfort and ease, washing him sensually and enjoying the heat and then taking him back to his bed to fuck him, slowly, and the image turned a little questioning then. He tended to assume Charles could do everything until told otherwise.

"Of course,” Charles said. “If you wish to do this for me, I am not going to do anything else except give into your desires.” He smiled a little.

"I enjoy sharing attention and giving as much as receiving it from you,” he murmured, reaching to make sure the tap was good and the tub was full before sliding in himself.

“Mm. I wish my attention could be more physical for you,” he said. “I want you Erik. Pamper me to your hearts content.”

Erik tsked quietly. "You're very physical. It's just that your legs don't move." And they were still in good shape. He leaned in, grabbed the lavender and something scented soap, and started with Charles's legs.

It was a shame he couldn't feel most of it, but he was lucky enough to have some sensation higher up. Enough for sex to give feeling. Of course, some of that might be due to the telepathy because he could hear, see and feel Erik enjoying himself and that was more than enough. It was hard to tell where the overlap began and ended and it was fine that he didn't have an answer. He didn't particularly need one, as long as Charles was enjoying himself, and he could lean up to kiss him occasionally.

Charles always kissed back with a warming passion. Starting slow and building their heat with a luxurious indulgence. Erik always got the impression Charles wanted to linger over the kissing.

It felt good, and he let himself linger, shifting up to straddle Charles's hips with a bar of soap in his hand so he could keep kissing. “Are you sure you don't have a healing factor?” Charles said, smoothing his hands over his skin and muscles. “You were battered and bruised.”

"I still feel battered and bruised. I was lucky." And the water was warm, and it felt good to unwind.
“And powerful,” Charles said kneading at his sore muscles. “You battled some of the most powerful Metas in the world today.”

"I felt like I was underwater," he groused, taking his time rubbing soapy hands on Charles' chest.

“Is it feeling better now? So soon after Dr Beckett's injection?” Charles asked curiously. “If you make your hair wet I can help you.”

He leaned in for a moment, pressing his forehead against Charles's shoulder before shifting back to duck under the water. "It is."

“Good.” And he couldn't help it, he loved it when Charles ran his fingers through his hair. Charles taking the shampoo and massaging it into his scalp was blissful. It felt so good, and he moved back in to Charles again in the spacious pool, because that was a luxury he'd never had before. They needed one of these back at Westchester, a proper bathing pool experience where Charles and him could float together.

“Feel free to lie on top of me, then you can reach what you want and I can reach what I want...” Charles murmured. His tangles were being smoothed out, order being brought to his hair.

It was lazy for a moment, and he was reminded again of how tall Charles was, as he settled and stroked at his chest, his aides, and just enjoyed the rubbing of fingers.

How had he come to something so easy? He had spent his life struggling against everything, but this somehow, worked. He didn’t feel tamed, he felt cared for, trusted and loved, and he did the same back. With a little more perspective and the example of the paranoia of the last Emperor at the powers of metahumans, he was even more amazed that Charles had taken that leap of faith when all common sense dictated that he should not.

For someone whose power lay in his mind so definitively, Charles acted on instructions from his emotions more often than not. And occasionally on demands from his body - Charles' body was flushed with arousal already.

He tweaked gently at a nipple and closed his eyes, feeling Charles's muscles move in response.

Charles chuckled a little, even as the nipple hardened. “Mmm.” He teased at the back of his neck this time. The muscles there were tight, and the soft light touches felt so good as Erik turned his head and rinsed Charles's skin before kissing his chest.

*I love this* Charles told him mentally. *I love feeling you like this, knowing you.*

Yes. Of the blending and the relaxing, being able to be at ease. *I was so afraid I was going to leave you.*

*I think I would cross the Emperor himself if they tried taking you away,* Charles answered.

*You already did.* It was a firm response, and he lifted his head to meet Charles' eyes.

*True enough, I did make some rather rash statements because I wanted to defend you against the might of the entire Imperial Forces.* Behind the faint amusement there was a hint of steel and Erik knew that it was true. Throughout his life he had been the protector, found a purpose in that role even when made helpless and suffering horrors and indignities to drive any normal man insane. But here an now he had discovered someone willing to change the world for him, to personally face down powers that could destroy everything he had worked for, for his sake.
You're the first. It was novel and left his chest feeling aching as he shifted up to kiss the bridge of Charles' nose. I am here because I want to be.

That is all I need to know. Charles would know the truth of it and he was smiling like he'd seen a vision.

I will ally House Xavier with House Wayne and Luthor formally if it gets me the chance to have you by my side as an equal. Even if it takes years, we will be the first House to be run by Metas for Metas.

Charles had been hiding a future he had been working towards, from the sounds of it, deep in his mind. Having a future was a strange concept to him. He didn't know what to do with it, but he was open to the idea, and let a clenched down memory surface, the two children left behind, the ones he swore to protect and find again. He would have to see about bringing them home. You already provide a safe haven.

For any Meta, but especially those beloved by you Charles replied, his mindvoice tender. And we will stop those disturbed and try to heal them.

And keep you sane and healthy, Erik added, sliding his hands back down. Companionship was a two way street, and he felt more stable, was learning more about himself and others than he had in years.

I want to see you do the amazing things I know you can do with your talent Charles said as he leaned into him. These are amazing things. It cannot be a coincidence that at this stage in human existence Meta's are appearing so frequently. I believe that there is a reason for it and that the abilities should be cherished. He kissed him back But you, Erik are more than just your abilities, more than everything to me. I love you. I admire Magneto and respect him, but Erik...I love.

He didn't know what to do with that; in time, he supposed he might be able to respond with more than a deep feeling and an urge to show the same through doing things. He wanted to do something because he felt nameless, enormous feelings he could not control so he pushed them back into the shadows. Never going to be a romantic. But I will be everything else I can be for you.

Charles laughed out loud at that. “The day you are romantic Erik in the traditional sense is the day I'll start quizzing all the psionics in the House for interference. But you are romantic in very real ways.” Charles rinsed off his hair, leaving him feeling clean. I didn't say it for reciprocation and gushing declarations. I wanted you to be without doubt as to where you stand with me, secure because for so long you have been denied that basic human need.

I feel secure with you. He would show it in the best ways he could, sharing the ideas inside of his head, building new things for Charles.

Good Charles shifted a little. Feel free to continue what you started before I interrupted

"Only a little distracted." He smiled, and leaned in to ease his way back down, kissing at Charles' chest back to the point of his hips and the waterline.

“Have we ever done this in a bath before?” Charles asked leaning back. “It feels good.”

He looked good too, all smooth skinned and his upper body well-muscled from his daily physio.

"Never at my leisure, no..." He liked the taste of water, and Charles' skin, and the stirrings of an erection.
“Mm. That feels good. I feel more supported in water,” he said moving a little more than usual.

Floating, less pressure on his sore spots and spine, and Erik would have to do something with Charles’ tub at home until they built a bathing pool. He shifted two hands, lifting his hips and holding him carefully still.

Charles stretched luxuriantly and quirked another inviting smile at him arching an eyebrow in what he probably thought was a come-hither manner.

It was not, but it made Erik smile, as he leaned in to kiss the head of his cock.

“It's just as well I can float,” Charles said closing his eyes presumably to relish the sensation he could feel.

I'm going to test that soon. It was not quite a crystal sharp thought, blurred with arousal and his focus on slowly sucking Charles’ cock.

He enjoyed Charles reactions and the way he could feel his mind unconsciously wrap around him. It was like being inside of him before he got inside of him physically, an intimate connection that he suspected spoiled him for sex with anyone else. Erik wasn't exactly heartbroken at that prospect, given what sex had been for so long. With practice they soon would not need water and muscles for what he was going to do. He pushed across the image of Charles floating in the air with him.

Well that's interesting, he replied with a definite jump of arousal. I love your ideas Erik. Can you do it without metal?

On my own body, yes. The finesse I need to expand that field is growing... And it would be fun, fun rather than a battle use, which was a novel reason for Erik to be stretching his ideas and creativity. He toyed with Charles's balls, and sucked slowly, working his way up and down a little messily.

Oh god Charles groaned. I need that. And also, I dare you to tell Storm the reason you are developing your finesse and control.

He shifted a little, getting the head of Charles's cock to the back of his throat and swallowing. Not the dainty blowjobs the court required, but the kind that got Erik hard, twinned with the mental wrapping. I will.

Fuck Erik! Charles said mentally and tried to move but his muscles failed him. Still he could feel he wanted it so desperately in his attempts to move his body. He felt the muscles in Charles's mid back flex, felt he tension in his body as he cupped his ass and pulled back to breathe through his nose for a moment before leaning down to engulf him again. A little more, and then he'd slick Charles up and take him.

Another groan and exhalation from Charles who looked like he was leaning back to float again.

“Erik...”

He pulled back, pushing across a questioning feeling even as he reached for the oil to slick things.

“Yes...much as I love to go on for hours I don't think I have the stamina. I want you...now.” Charles admitted.

He laughed, and leaned up fingers in the oil and sliding between Charles's asscheeks to press and pry and tease. "Later, we'll take more time."

“Much better,” Charles said relaxing again. “When we've rested and dealt with politics.” He knew
just how to make Charles forget about that.

He slipped one finger in slowly, tearing to see how it felt for Charles and open to the feeling that would come back to him. Charles let him into his mind easily and pleasure flooded back. There was encouragement to do more implicit too. Still, he wanted to be careful at the same time; careful and enjoy the exploration, so he switched to two fingers and leaned down to bite and kiss marks against Charles' ribs. The shape of his thoughts blurred a little under the pressure of the growing pleasure and arousal. Even so he could make out Charles wanting more, asking him for more.

It was a beautiful signal to get, to feel and push back wanting more and openness even as he rubbed oil over his dick and shifted Charles with care in the water.

Yes Erik, now, please Charles whispered into his mind. I'm ready, I'm ready, now, please

He pushed in, slow, watching Charles's expression shift, feeling it shift, feeling how tight he was. Feeling the spillover of what Charles was feeling. Too many things at once, and it was beautiful.

It was like a surge of brilliance and darkness in Charles mind all at the same time. The burn, the ache, he never had to guess if he was doing it right. He could tell and adjust, driving Charles higher and higher as he slid in and back out, in and back out, steadying them both with his hands in Charles's hips, hitting off nerves. Charles was bracing himself in the bath as the water sloshed around them, swirling and providing sensation all over.

It wasn't a race or a struggle but a low slow burn, he felt like he was drowning despite the burn, falling into and losing himself in sensations until he wasn't sure which was his and which were Charles.

The edges of themselves blurred during sex, and so did the awareness of who had the first climax because there it was right there in his mind, a starburst of pleasure detonating another, pulsing through their orgasm's with jolts of pleasure until they were both left with an afterglow and some of the adrenaline and stress of the evening washed away.

There was still a lot of adrenaline and stress to wash away. Erik struggled for a moment, but pulled them both out of the tub and Charles to his chair to dry off. It was hard to not grin a little.

“That, as ever, was magnificent and you are looking well pleased with yourself,” Charles said eventually having been apparently pleasure dazed through the drying process. “Think you can get us to bed now?”

"If the only thing I have to do afterwards is crawl in with you, Charles, yes.” He let fingers linger against Charles's side.

“That's all I need.” Charles replied looking up at him. “Tomorrow will be a day of politics, and deals and re-associations, but tonight it is just us.”

Time to ease away the headaches, to rest and recover. To gain back some semblance of themselves, safe. Erik would do anything to help that, easily. Helping Charles back to the room was easy, too. As they slipped into bed together, still damp from the bath, Charles spooned into him automatically, trusting him to move his legs where he needed them to be for that position, wanting him close without even having to think of it consciously.

So easy, to feel Charles’ back press against him, to slide his arms around him and tuck in close, pressing his mouth against the back of Charles's shoulder. It was something he'd never expected.

It didn't need thoughts or words, it was just something bypassed anything conscious. He never
thought he would feel happiness. Happiness was something dangerous and threatening. A weapon to be used against someone like him, a means of control waiting in the wings. He thought at best contentment might be all he could be allowed but somehow he had moved beyond that. And there was still a part of him that worried at the thought of allowing himself to feel this good out of a long habit and bitter experience but it just made the sensation all the more miraculous. Here in quiet of just the two of them his world had been changed. Tomorrow, they'd see about changing the rest of the world.

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