never too late to be who you might have been

by acetamide

Summary

Erik wakes suddenly and takes a deep breath, and realises that there is nothing.

Notes

Written for the following prompt:

Set between the first and second X-Men movies. Something happens, and for whatever reason Erik and Charles become young again, looking just like they did in First Class. They also only remember everything that happened up to the age they are, so they don't know that they are now enemies.

I deviated somewhat though. Whoops!

See the end of the work for more notes.

Erik wakes suddenly and takes a deep breath, and realises that there is nothing.

There are no wires, there are no pipes. There are no handles or clocks or buttons or zips. There are screws or divets or washers or bolts. There are no rings or necklaces or bracelets or cufflinks, no knives or forks or spoons. There are no bedframes or window latches or taps or plugs. There are no guns and no knives.

And his mind is just as empty; there is no comfort there. There is no quiet reassurance, no auxiliary layer of confidence and belief and hope that keeps him afloat when his own fails. There is no
murmur of companionship, no unspoken promise of acceptance.

There is no soul brushing against his own, warm and affectionate and intelligent and terrifyingly powerful.

He opens his eyes and sees the room that surrounds him, the clinical white and translucent cage that is everything he is not. It is unfamiliar and unwelcoming and it is his prison for a crime that he hasn’t committed.

Before Charles, he had metal to fill the aching gaps. Now he has nothing, and he has no idea how the world has ended so suddenly.

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Charles wakes to the sound of hammering on his door, and voices.

He stretches lazily, the late summer sun streaking in through the half-open curtains. He’s alone in his bed, but that’s not unusual – especially since he’s starting sleeping late into the morning on weekends. It’s a luxury that he’s not often allowed himself but one that he’s finding he enjoys, regardless.

He rolls out of bed ungracefully, and stumbles across the room whilst his brain tries its very hardest to wake up. The voice that’s calling his name through the door is distinctly female, but doesn’t sound like Moira – Raven, perhaps, trying out a new form. He smiles as he reaches for the handle – he’s always liked analysing Raven’s disguises with her.

He opens the door and his smile slides off his face. He’s fairly sure that the look of shock on the three strangers’ faces is mirrored in his own, but he has no time to ask before the woman with the red hair reaches out, and then he’s gone.

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He wakes for the second time with a headache, and opens his eyes to a bright light.

The room he’s in now looks like a medical room of sorts – it’s very clean, all brushed steel and shining screens. There are machines that he’s never seen before, but they all seem to be hooked up to him somehow with electrodes placed strategically all over his body, but mostly across his head where it isn’t covered with hair.

He takes a moment, breathes, and spreads it out logically. There are new mutants in his house. In any other circumstances he would be delighted but these mutants attacked him, and have him in a strange room and appear to be monitoring him whilst he’s unconscious. He needs to talk to these people – most importantly, he needs to contact Raven because they’ll be wondering where he is. He could have been knocked out for ten minutes, or ten hours, he has no idea.

He doesn’t even know where he is right now.
He eases his mind out of the room, down the darkened corridors that feel uncomfortably familiar even though he’s never been here before in his life. There’s a lift just a few feet away and he follows it up, and his stomach drops.

These rooms don’t exist – they can’t. And yet here they are, nestled deep underneath his own childhood home, a whole network of secret places hidden away that he’s fairly sure were never here before. Even his step-father didn’t build anything as extensive as this.

He widens his search, takes in the whole house, and his mind stutters at the sheer number of mutants wandering through the rooms – mostly teenagers, but adults too. He can sense a telepath, a pyrokinetic, a weather manipulator, a cryokinetic, there’s a girl who controls plasmoids and one who walks through walls and his heart burns at the thought of so many, safe under one roof.

But he can’t find his own mutants. There’s someone who feels so much like Alex, and another whose mind reads exactly like Sean, but he can’t find Raven. He can’t find Hank. He can’t find Moira. And he can’t find Erik.

The momentary affection that he felt for these people is quickly crushed in the sudden loss of all of his closest friends, and now all he can feel is anger. The screens that are attached to all of those machines flicker briefly, and they beep a little louder and a little more urgently. And he thinks, they’ve taken her, and thinks that he’s been calm and logical for long enough now, and the machines shudder in their places. And he thinks, they’ve taken him, and they scream in warning and overload as he rips the electrodes from his body.

He heads straight for the most powerful mutant that he can find in the house – the telepath, an omega. The corridors are slightly disorientating at first but this is his home and he needs to find them, and behind him the floor is littered with sleeping students that fell as soon as he saw them.

The three of them stand when he walks into the lounge, and the man’s fingers shoot up to his face, but Charles is quicker. Before they’ve even taken one breath they’re frozen, held in place but completely aware and Charles is almost disappointed that this telepath, whose power is nearly on par with Erik’s, would succumb to his mind tricks to easily – he had been expecting a fight. He hadn’t expected her to look at him almost helplessly from her chair, unable to move.

He refuses to believe that now, it might be fury that’s driving him now but he can feel them fighting, can feel their minds trying to push him out. This is neither serenity, nor any point in between. He is not being the better man; he is being desperate.

“Whilst I have several questions that I wish to ask you, ranging from who you are to what mutations you have, there is one matter that is rather more pressing and I will only ask you once,” he says, and he casts a glance through the very surfaces of their minds, and feels a dark and unpleasant sense of satisfaction when he finds fear lacing their thoughts.

“Where are my students?” he asks coldly, and they stare back at him with wide eyes that are locked into place. “Where is my sister, and where is Erik Lensherr?”

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“I’m sorry you woke up alone down there,” Jean says as she hands him a glass of water. She hesitates for a moment as though unsure what to do, and eventually settles for sitting down and
smoothing her skirt over her knees. “We didn’t expect you to wake up so quickly – I put strong mental blocks in your mind to keep you unconscious.”

“Not strong enough to contain me,” he says, a little sharply. She flinches, and he immediately regrets it. This is not her fault. “Though I’m impressed that you managed to knock me out in the first place. I don’t expect many people would be able to do that.”

In truth, she managed because he was still half-asleep and completely surprised by the mental attack and they both know it, but she smiles graciously and accepts the kindness that he’s offering as an olive branch.

“I’m still not sure if I believe you,” Scott says. “A telepath as strong as you could easily be manipulating everything here.”

“And you’re completely right not to trust me without proof,” Charles agrees, and turns his attention back to Jean. “I would have thought that your first priority once I was unconscious would be to search my mind, to find out my intentions, who I am. Just out of curiosity, why didn’t you?”

“I tried, but you seemed to have put up a shield. I couldn’t get through at all, it just bounced straight back to me,” she says, and he shrugs, and leans forward in his seat and rests his elbows on his knees, his head within arm’s reach of her.

“So read me now. I’ll keep my mind open – feel free to search through whatever you need to in order to convince yourself. I won’t resist.”

She hesitates – Charles knows that she has almost limitless power, but she clearly has no idea how to use it. She raises her hands but then falters, looking to Scott and Storm for guidance. Their faces are unreadable, and Charles leans forward ever so slightly until his temple brushes her right index finger with his mind as open as he can make it without broadcasting to the entire house.

It’s all of the encouragement that she needs and she takes hold and dives in, and Charles experiences somebody else taking charge of his mind for the first time in his life.

It’s strange, being on the receiving end for once – though he’d like to think that he is more elegant when he searches through people’s minds, more graceful and tactful about what he does. He can’t blame her though; her powers are untrained and undeveloped and maybe, if he stays a little longer, he can help her with that – or at least found out why he hasn’t already.

He feels it when she finds his most recent memories of the past month or two. She must have seen enough already to know that he is telling the truth but she takes hold of the scene where he dives into the water and wraps himself around Erik, pulling him upwards, and Charles can feel her shock rippling through his own mind. This, she was not ready for. She clearly wasn’t expecting any of those memories, all of the ones leading up to Kennedy’s address, and when he says _there’s good, too, I felt it_, she jerks away as if she’s been burnt.

She pulls out of his mind and away from his body with a gasp with a suddenness that leaves him feeling inexplicably empty, but only for a few scant seconds before he gathers himself enough to lean back and watch Jean.

“He’s telling the truth,” she says after a long while, and her voice shakes as she massages her temples slowly. “He’s the Professor, and his last memory is of going to bed on the twenty-second of October, 1962, when he and Magneto were preparing to prevent a mutant called Sebastian Shaw from starting World War III with the Cuban Missile Crisis.”
“Magneto?” Storm whispers urgently, leaning forward towards Jean, but Charles ignores her in favour of standing and walking to the window. The students are mostly outside, socialising in the autumn sun, and he feels a deep thrill of pride that he did this. It might be several decades down the line, but he’s succeeded in creating a place where young mutants can come and be themselves, be safe and accepted and never judged.

“Thirty-eight years,” he says quietly, and pushes his hands deep in his pockets. “From your collective memories, I should think it’s fair to say that an awful lot has happened in those thirty-eight years.”

“You achieved a lot of great things,” Storm says, as though it’s supposed to be a consolation, and he frowns despite himself.

“And yet here I am, without the people that I love by my side. What must I have done to drive them away?” he asks, and though he could search to find answers he doesn’t really want them. “Was it time and distance, or was it something that I did? Does the blame lie with me?”

“Professor...”

“And you still haven’t answered my question,” he interrupts sharply, and pulls his focus from the space in the trees where just hours ago, a behemoth of metal had turned to face him and shone so brightly that Erik’s smile reflected the light straight back. And Charles had looked at him in the fading light, the last vestiges of Erik’s psyche skating around the edges of his own mind and he had thought, we were made for this.

Scott, Jean and Storm are looking at him expectantly. Their expressions might say that they’ve forgotten which question he means, but their minds say otherwise. They were hoping that he would forget; but he won’t. He never could.

“I have opened my mind to you and answered any and all questions that you have posed to me, and the least that you could do is extend me the courtesy of doing the same. So I will ask you once more, and after that, I will pull the answer from your minds. Where is Erik Lensherr?”

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They won’t let him change into normal clothes; they insist that he continue to wear the tracksuit and Jean checks him thoroughly for any trace of metal. They can’t allow anything to sneak into Magneto’s prison, they say. He’s dangerous and he will bring about the destruction of mankind.

Charles doesn’t believe them. His Erik, his beautiful broken Erik, is more likely to destroy himself than anybody else – more likely to have his friend press the barrel of a gun against his forehead and urge him to pull the trigger. But that Erik isn’t who he’s being taken to see; it seems that Erik died, many decades ago, and Magneto was reborn in his place and from what he’s heard, Charles isn’t sure if he’s going to enjoy this encounter.

He has seen in the deepest, most secret corners of Erik’s mind the potential for absolute greatness, one way or the other. And whilst he has seen Erik kill and torture, it has been out of vengeance for the mother that he still mourns, whose death he feels so responsible for, and to find out that Erik will at some point between 1962 and now succumb to the darkest urges in his soul – it feels like a failure on his own part, an inability to save Magneto from himself, and it makes his heart ache.
He asks them, whilst they are sat in the car that will take them to Erik, what happened to twist everything out of control, but they have no answers. Their knowledge is limited to the time that they have personally spent with him, and any extra information that he might have decided to impart to them on a whim; it seems that whatever happened was so distressing, or horrific, or heartbreaking that he didn’t want people to know.

He begins to feel Erik after they’ve been driving for about half an hour – just a tickle at the edges of his consciousness, a faint imprint of what he’s used to, and he probably wouldn’t be getting even that if he wasn’t reaching out so desperately and concentrating on nothing more than finding him and bringing him back home.

But there’s something wrong, he realises as they get closer and the link strengthens. Erik is there but he isn’t aware of anything – his mind is present, solid and warm and familiar but there’s no thoughts buzzing through his head, no emotions, no dreams, nothing, and it brings a sick feeling to his stomach. Erik’s mind is often quiet, but it is never silent.

Jean and Scott are silent in the car as they drive – it’s entirely possible that they’re having their own telepathic conversation and if he wanted, Charles could listen in but he doesn’t care. He’s too busy staring out of the window and watching the new world whizz by in a blur of green and silver, and his entire focus is on calling out to Erik until he gets the response that he desperately craves.

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The plaque on the wall beside the main entrance is decorated with a triangle, a shield and an eagle and the text around it reads Department of Domestic Security and Defence.

They are keeping them in a prison and even if he has changed so much that Charles no longer recognises him, he knows that everyone else in the room (possibly the entire complex) feels his absolute fury when he finds out what this place is. He says nothing; he knows what Magneto has done and he won’t try to excuse it. But he can’t help the sudden onslaught of emotions nor keep them in check and he won’t apologise for them, even as he watches the people around him wince and clutch at their heads.

“Take me to him,” he says, and if there is power in his voice, he’ll pretend otherwise.

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They have built the perfect cage, and they say that it was Charles who helped design it, and hearing that makes the bile rise up to choke him.

“There has been an... incident, shall we say, since you visited,” the doctor tells them as they approach the entrance chamber to Magneto’s cell. “But nothing that you need to be worried about.”

“What incident?” Charles asks sharply, and the doctor gives him an almost indulgent look from behind his glasses. This man has no idea who he is; they had agreed in the car to keep that to themselves but he’s almost regretting it now.
“As I said, it’s nothing to be worried about.”

“What incident?” he repeats, but the doctor ignores him in favour of swiping his card against the panel in front of them. It beeps once or twice then slides open with a faint whooshing noise, and even as tense as he is, Charles can’t help but marvel at how technology has advanced since yesterday. Since 1962. Erik would have excellent fun, now that everything seems to be made of metal. He’s sure of it.

One of the guards in the antechamber comes to them as they walk in, passing them each through a pair of uprights that seem to scan the person between them; it makes Charles feel extremely awkward, and he focuses instead on the walkway that’s rising up in front of him, a bridge to the monster that Erik will become. He can’t see Magneto from here, not really – he can see him lying on the bed, but nothing more. He tests the link again, his own telepathic bridge to him, but it’s as unresponsive as it has been since it first opened.

The doctor’s highly-polished shoes click loudly on the walkway as he strides ahead of them, and Charles glances at Jean and Scott before following.

“As I said, there has been an incident, but there’s no reason to be alarmed,” the doctor calls over his shoulder. “Magneto may not appear as he usually does but I can assure you, it is definitely him.”

“Wait, what?” Charles demands, and catches up the doctor as his heart stutters in his chest. “What did you say?”

The doctor regards him coolly, and the doors to Magneto’s prison slide open in an invitation. The doctor doesn’t respond – he just indicates to where Magneto is lying on the bed, dressed all in white with his hands folded over his chest.

Charles tries to say his name, but it doesn’t come out right – the only noise that he makes is a choked-off sound of surprise and affection and anger and relief as he scrambles to Erik’s side, dropping to his knees on the hard floor and presses two fingers to the smooth skin at Erik’s temple, unlined with age and weariness.

“What happened?” he snarls and glares up at the doctor, ignores the patent looks of shock on Jean and Scott’s faces. The doctor shrugs, and leans against the glass table where there’s a game of chess set out. It’s halfway through the game.

“When the guard on duty brought him his breakfast, his body had changed appearance. He kept insisting that he had no idea where he was, and that he wasn’t Magneto,” the doctor says flatly. “He became violent when the guards came into the prison, so we sedated him.”

“This is more than sedation,” Charles corrects, because even in such close contact and with his mind thrown right open and pressing in on Erik’s from all sides, he’s still not getting a response.

“It was only supposed to be sedation – he should have woken up after four hours. We don’t know why he’s still unconscious.”

“And when you came to work and found a man nearly forty years younger than the one that you’re used to, did it not occur to you to perhaps contact the people responsible for putting him in here in the first place?” he snaps, furiously, and the doctor takes an uncertain step back. “Was it not perhaps the better idea to consult those of us who are considered experts in this field, rather than just blithely assuming that there was nothing particularly out of the ordinary, and you’d just sedate him and carry on as normal?”
“Of course we knew something wasn’t right,” the guard growls, the one who had put them through the scanner. “But we have our own systems here – not everything is run by mutants, you know. We already told you, we did the DNA test. Didn’t see any reason to get you guys involved.”

“There was every reason to get us involved, Mr Laurio, because you are out of your depth here and have absolutely no idea what you’re dealing with here,” Charles says, and turns away before the anger can rise any further. “Now don’t interrupt me.”

Both the doctor and the guard make noises of displeasure but Charles ignores them, satisfied that Jean and Scott will keep them quiet. Beneath his fingers, Erik’s skin is warm. He reaches up to touch his other temple and pushes, but there’s no response. His mind is still there, still unfractured and undamaged, but it’s not active. It’s as though once sedated, Erik made the conscious decision to stay that way, to lock himself down and block out what’s happening outside. And once Charles flicks through his most recent memories, he can see why – the feeling of nothing upon first waking, of being locked in a cell for a crime he hadn’t committed, of the hatred from people that he’d never met before and the ache. The ache in Erik’s chest, the lack of everything, the lack of metal and Charles and –

*Wake up,* he thinks, the hardest that he’s ever directed a thought at a single person, and Erik’s consciousness twitches beneath him. And there is it, the flicker of activity, the gentle murmur of emotion that he’s used to feeling when Erik’s asleep. But it’s not enough, it will never be enough.

*Wake up,* he persists, even as Erik’s mind stirs into consciousness. *Wake up, you stupid man. I’m here and you’re safe, now wake up, wake up, wake up*–.

“Ow, ow, Charles!” Erik shouts, surging awake and clutching at his head with his eyes flickering back and forth wildly, his whole body curling up on the bed and his knuckles white with the pain. “Charles!”

He lets go, fingers tingling and mind racing, and the prison is silent but for his own heavy breathing.

“Charles,” Erik croaks, and that’s all the prompting that he needs to take hold of Erik’s head in his hands again and push back in, but so gently this time. He can feel the contentment flowing through the link, his overwhelming gratitude that Charles is here, and his confusion at the whole predicament.

“Oh, my friend, what have they done to you?” he whispers, and he can feel the stares of the other four people in the room, hot and judgemental on the back of his neck, but they’re unimportant. In the grand scheme of things, right now, they are as insignificant as the dust in the room.

“Sixty-four hours, I couldn’t feel you anywhere,” Erik gasps, and he squeezes his eyes shut and leans forward to press his forehead to Charles’ as though he’s trying to sink right in. “I thought I was alone. I thought you must have left me.”

“I’ve told you before, you’re not alone. You never will be,” he says, viciously, and projects his own most recent memories directly to Erik by way of some vague explanation. He can’t ease Erik’s mind but this will help, make him see that he’s been trying. He wasn’t abandoned; just displaced in time.

He turns to Jean and Scott as Erik processes the memories, keeps his hands pressed to his skin and keeps his mind open, implicit permission for Erik to climb inside and bury himself in Charles’ emotions if that will calm him at all. And they look at him, look at them both, as though they’re waiting for the world to end.

“We’re taking him back to the mansion,” he says and they glance between themselves, and at the doctor and the guard, and Charles knows what they’re going to say before they’ve even finished
thinking about it. But he won’t hear it, not now. This is not something that he is willing to negotiate.

And he wants so desperately to be the better man, to never use this power for his own benefit and to never use it to harm humans – but he is finding it increasingly difficult as they continue to treat him like someone that they can’t trust, someone who will turn on them. An enemy.

“I am taking him home,” he says slowly, and he hates himself more and more with every syllable. “I would strongly advise that you do not attempt to stop me.”

The humans may have no idea what he means but Jean and Scott do, and they nod without trying to persuade him otherwise. But even Charles helps Erik to his unsteady feet and walks him down the walkway with an arm wrapped around his waist, he can feel their gazes burning into his mind.

These people, who claim to be his allies and students and friends are looking at them with a mixture of pity and disgust, and Charles begins to wonder what choices he and Erik have made in their lives that would lead them to this moment.

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The drive back to the mansion is oppressively quiet; as with the journey to the prison, Charles knows that Jean and Scott are speaking telepathically, but he has no more desire to listen to what they are saying than to engage in conversation with them out loud. He is fairly sure that whatever they are discussing will only make him angry, and he’s experienced enough displeasure today. The last thing that he needs is another argument.

Instead, he wraps his fingers around Erik’s wrist and his mind around Erik’s own, and tells he has no idea what is going on but he will find out, and he will fix this. And Erik says yes, he knows that Charles will – he has absolute faith in him.

Charles is stuck between wondering what he did to inspire such devotion, and wondering at what point his and Erik’s minds became so thoroughly entwined that he is struggling to separate their thoughts.

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_They tell me that Moira has moved to Scotland and has set up her own base of operations there, and Sean’s staying with her at the moment. His daughter’s here, at the School – her name is Theresa and she has the same powers_, Charles says as the car crawls up the drive towards the mansion, familiar and strange all at once. _Hank is trying to get into government; he’s in talks to become the first ever Secretary of Mutant Affairs._

_And I expect he’ll be terribly successful at it._

_Well, we can hope. Alex was last seen on the island of Genosha, but nobody has heard from him in months._

_And Raven?_ Erik prompts, his eyes curious. Charles looks away and out of the window as his chest
goes cold at the thought of everything that he’s been told his sister has become; the path that she’s chosen to follow that was laid out for her by Erik.

*Raven has gone*, he says, and until he can shake off the sense that he should be mourning her, that’s as far as he’s willing to discuss it.

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Storm introduces them to the students as Max Eisenhardt and Francis Pembroke, and says that they are old friends that will be staying with them for a short while. The students, on the whole, are relatively disinterested and seem to quickly forget about them, going about their business as usual. Charles wonders just how different their reactions would be if they knew their true identities.

They have lunch with the students, between classes. And it’s heartbreaking – surrounding him on all sides is his dream come to life, everything that he could have ever wanted in one place and flourishing despite the humans’ persistent hostility. Yet it’s not everything that he’s ever wanted, because somewhere along the line Erik becomes Magneto and he stops being so terrifyingly important to Charles.

Jean takes him away from Erik as classes restart, and leads him into the bowels of the school and to a room so large that Charles has no idea how there’s space for it underneath the mansion. She tells him that it’s a machine called Cerebro, and it amplifies his power over the whole world. He thinks of Hank, and asks who built it – and she says *you did, Professor, with Magneto’s help*, and his stomach clenches.

Erik isn’t where he left him when he finally emerges from the underground levels – but it doesn’t take long to find him in a room in the near-empty eastern wing, far away from the students. He’s sitting on the bed, staring at his hands when Charles arrives – the room is bare and lifeless and the light filtering in through the open curtains is weaker than on the other side of the building, and it casts everything in a pallid glow. Erik looks up as Charles walks in, and he looks lost and utterly helpless.

“Scott said that this will be my room until they fix this,” he says, and his voice is hoarse and unsure. “I don’t have anything to put in it. No clothes, no trinkets, no research. I have nothing.”

Charles crosses the room and pulls Erik to his feet, and guides him from the room with a firm hand in the small of his back. They walk together to the west wing, where the sun is warm, and Charles doesn’t look back at the empty bedroom.

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Charles wakes alone the next morning; but the sheets are still warm beside him, and Erik has left an imprint where he was sleeping. He calls out for him, more out of curiosity than concern, and the reply comes from halfway across the grounds where he’s decided to go for a morning run. His mind feels calm, but Charles can sense the disquiet vibrating underneath – Erik had spent the evening with his thoughts mostly locked-down, even against Charles’ quiet presence, and the experience had unnerved him.
A grumbling from his stomach prompts Charles to clamber out of bed and go in search of food. He hasn’t been there yet but he’s sure that the kitchen is still in the same place as it was all those ago, where Raven had rippled to blue in front of him and he’d realised, his heart soaring, that he wasn’t alone.

He stops short as he reaches the top of the stairs – there’s a student, a girl, stood at the window and staring out of it. Her gloved hands are balled into fists at her sides and her face is set, unmoving, and when Charles reaches out to her all he can feel are waves of fear and confusion cresting straight from her core. He approaches her quietly and follows her gaze; in the near distance, he can see Erik’s figure moving quickly and precisely across the grass.

“I know who you are,” she says quite suddenly and turns to face him, and Charles is momentarily taken aback. “And I know who he is too.”

“Then you know that he is not the same man that forced you to absorb his powers. You’re frightened of him though?”

“No,” she says quickly, and her face sets into a defensive expression for a moment before it crumples again and she lets out a breath. “Yes.”

“I would be surprised if you weren’t,” he says, and she seems to take it for the small comfort that it is. “I should think that most people would hate him, after what he did.”

“But I don’t,” she says, and twists her hair again and again around her finger. “Hate him, I mean. I feel like I should though. I want to. But my power doesn’t just absorb abilities, it’s much more than that. I got all of his memories, too – that’s how I knew who you were, I saw you both in his mind. And I saw everything that’s happened to him, everything that was done to him to make him into Magneto. I’ve seen his deepest desire, and it’s to help people like us, to keep us safe. He doesn’t go about it in the best way, but he just wants to protect us from what he’s experienced himself. So I can’t hate him.”

She moves away from the window and sits on the very top step of the stairs, and the sunlight coming in from the window glints off the white streak in her hair; Charles watches Erik for a few seconds longer before joining her. She’s fidgeting nervously, picking at her gloves as though she wants nothing more than to take them off. Here is another student, come here to learn and be kept safe, and be taught to control her powers instead of them controlling her. Here is his dream, come to life, but he can’t even remember achieving it.

“For what it’s worth, I think that you’re being extremely mature about it all,” he offers after a moment, and she gives him a half-smile in return.

“It’s easier, seeing him like this,” she admits. “If he looked like he did on Liberty Island, it’d be different. It’s weird though – he doesn’t look like him. He doesn’t look like a bad guy, like someone that’d kill people because they get in his way. But I know that he is, or at least was. I know that loads of stuff happened to make him how he is.”

Charles starts quite suddenly, struck by the possible implications of what she is saying.

“Marie,” he says urgently, and she blinks in surprise at the use of her real name. “You said that you absorbed all of Erik’s memories?”

“Yeah, but I’ll lose them soon enough. Memories stick around longer than powers, but not forever.”

“Then do you know why Erik and I parted ways in the first place?” he asks, and her face drops, and
he knows that she saw it. He could take the memory himself, could be deft and nimble and she wouldn’t even know that he’d been in her mind. But he doesn’t want to do it that way; he wants her to give up the memory of her own volition. He wants her to trust him, the way that she trusts his older self. “I need to know.”

“The memories I got... they’re only as strong as he remembered them himself. His memories are all either specific details or really general ideas. I can’t make sense of them, really.”

“Then let me look at them myself,” he pleads, and though she looks away, he knows that she will let him. “Please, Marie. I need to know how to stop this from happening.”

She looks at him for a moment that lasts so many heartbeats, and then nods, and squeezes her eyes shut – bracing herself for the memory that she’s about to dredge up, and Charles’ presence in her head. He pauses for only a split second before reaching out and touching her mind, and soaking up the information.

It’s a sudden shock to the system, and it’s nothing like when he pulled the memory from Erik’s head – as buried and lost as it had been, it had still been crystal clear and untainted. But this, this swirling mass colours and noise and smell and feelings is overwhelming and terrifying.

He sees a beach, smells metal – he sees himself, fingers to his temple and disillusioned, and everyone’s looking at the sky. Then it’s sand everywhere, pressing into his skin and knuckles against flesh, and then gunshots ringing loud and screaming – it’s metal in his hand and Charles’ skin feverish and familiar against his hands, and I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry, and my friend, we do not.

And then, unyielding and unshakable and rattling around inside his own head as everything falls apart around him, a thought that’s trapped inside his helmet even though he wants nothing more than for Charles to hear him (though he’d never say it out loud), even if you do not want me by your side I will always protect you and fight for you until you are safe, or I am dead.

And then he is sat on the stairs in his mansion, his hands trembling where it’s clutching Rogue’s, and he remembers to breathe.

**

Erik returns from his run breathing heavily, and his face is flushed and his back damp with sweat. The first thing that he does when he comes through the bedroom door is strip off his shirt and head towards the bathroom and Charles follows him; Erik’s reflection looks at his in the mirror and smile – and it’s a very soft, very private smile that Charles doesn’t think he’s ever seen before. And this man would do anything to keep Charles safe, even if it means killing thousands of innocent men who are just following orders.

He steps close and slides his hands around Erik’s chest, pressing against his back and resting his cheek against the back of his neck, and allows all of the affection and respect and contentment and love that he possibly can flow through him and into Erik. Because neither of them can say it, but they both know that it’s true anyway.

This is the man who would do anything to keep Charles safe, and he is not letting go.
“Why is he here?” Scott asks abruptly, as soon as they enter the room, and Charles halts in surprise. Erik very nearly walks into the back of him.

“Because I’m here,” Charles snaps back in return, and crosses the room to sit on the empty sofa.

“Professor, we asked to speak with you alone…”

“And you’d be fools to think that I wouldn’t share the whole conversation with him as soon as I left the room anyway. But this is pointless, and not what you called me here to discuss, so can we move on please?”

There’s a sense of unease in the room that Charles doesn’t need his powers to feel, and he’s acutely aware of the gazes of the others tracking Erik’s movements as he sits beside him on the sofa; and if Erik’s own apprehension is anything to go by, he’s just as mindful of their distrust.

“We wanted to talk to you about what’s happening, Professor,” Storm says eventually, with a meaningful look. “And whether or not it can be reversed.”

“Unfortunately I’m no more knowledgeable than you are. As I’ve already told you, the last thing that we remember is going to sleep in 1962, the night before going to stop Shaw from starting World War III. Neither of us have any memories between that night and recently.”

“And you’ve remembered nothing since?”

“Nothing at all,” he says simply, and shrugs. “I have very few suggestions. Are there any students here, or any other mutants that you know of, with an ability that could cause this? A power that de-ages people, say, or removes memories. Anything of the sort?”

“No,” Jean says with a sigh. “But we need to work out what’s going on here, and get it fixed. We can’t continue this way – the students are going to start asking questions. And as soon as either one of you uses your powers around them, one of them will work out what’s going on. If you’re both stuck this way, we need to have a plan.”

“I’ve always felt that the truth is the best option,” Charles concedes, and turns to his left, where Erik has been silent throughout the discussion. “Erik?”

“I don’t want to,” he says quite abruptly, and everyone turns their gazes to him. His knee is pressed against Charles’ thigh and he can feel him vibrating, a mass of barely-contained tension. He’s looking down at his hands where they rest on his lap, and doggedly not looking at them.

“Don’t want to what?” Charles asks, and Erik lifts his gaze.

“I don’t want to go back to how it was before. It would be an entirely wasted opportunity. Look around yourself, Charles,” he pleads, and gestures around at the room. “What have you achieved?”

“My friend, this school...”

“But what of outside the mansion?” Erik presses, leaning forward in his seat. “Can you go out onto the streets in the cities and use your powers? Can you show the world who you really are? Can your children walk amongst humans and feel safe? Do they sleep soundly at night, knowing that if strangers found out that they were members of an entirely different species, they would not be
spurned or attacked?"

“It’s not like that –” Scott starts, but Erik cuts him off sharply.

“It’s exactly like that, and a school like this – hidden away from human eyes – would not be needed otherwise,” he says vehemently, and turns to Charles. “Don’t you see? Humans are still caught between fearing us and hating us. There might be a few like Moira that don’t but they’re in the minority, just like before. I don’t know what everyone’s been doing for the last three decades but it’s not working.”

“So what do you suggest instead?” Charles asks, and for a moment, Erik’s eyes light up and for the first time since he moved the satellite dish, he looks almost hopeful.

“We can change things, my friend. We have a chance here to try again, to make a difference this time. More of a difference.”

“And what would you do differently this time?” Storm asks, and she fixes Erik with a stern glance. “Something more along the lines of your own methods?”

“Magneto’s methods,” he retorts, and his face pulls downwards into a scowl. “And no. Clearly, neither approaches to humans have been effective. Magneto has been too aggressive, Xavier too passive. We need to reach a compromise and start anew.”

*I would never have thought you a man concerned about humanity’s acceptance of us,* Charles says, and he feels Erik’s surprise at the sudden mental statement in the midst of normal conversation. But this is something that he does not want the others to hear; they are suspicious enough of Erik as it is, without Charles’ confusion over his intentions exacerbating anything.

*I won’t lie to you – I have no interest in humans accepting us. But I do take issue with them controlling us, and I’m tired of living in fear of humans and what they might do to us. We can try again to change the set of their minds.*

*And?* he prompts, and Erik’s gaze flickers briefly to the others before settling back on Charles, with a look in his eyes that dares Charles to mock him.

*And I cannot stand the thought of a future where you and I are enemies,* he says, quite simply, and Charles more than understands. He presses his leg more solidly against Erik’s knee, and Erik almost smiles.

“We can continue my work with fresh ideas and all of the knowledge of our previous mistakes,” he says out loud, and looks back at the others. They clearly know that he and Erik just had a private exchange, but none of them are willing to call him on it. “Erik is right, we’ve been given a second chance. With the progress that’s already been made with establishing the school and training new students, we can turn our focus to improving human relations. And now, we have an extra thirty-eight years to work with, and unrecognised faces. We can reinvent ourselves and bring new perspectives to the debates. This doesn’t have to be a bad thing that’s happened.”

Storm, Jean and Scott exchange pointed looks for nearly a minute, and Charles lets them have their own private conversation – he glances at Erik, and he is looking straight back, with a startlingly intense expression on his face. Erik reaches out just slightly to touch Charles’ wrist with the very tips of his fingers, and immediately Charles is hit with the same unerringly sentiment that he’d pushed into Erik’s mind just hours before.
**This doesn’t have to be a bad thing**, Erik repeats firmly, and Charles knows that he’s talking about so much more than just this. He feels content; Erik is correct in that for as much his dreams of a safe haven for mutants have come true, there is still so much unachieved – and yet here he has the opportunity to try again, and get it right this time. There are few more things that he could ask for.

Jean makes a noise of agreement across the coffee table, says something about needing to formulate a plan to explain the situation to the students, but Charles isn’t listening. His whole being is focused on that point of contact on his wrist, and everything that the future promises to be.

**

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Erik asks, and he twirls his rook twice between his fingers before setting it down (black, always black, like the soul that Erik thinks is inside him but Charles knows so fiercely otherwise). Charles takes a moment to assess the board, to run through all of the possible strategies that Erik is employing; he seems to be playing an offensive game and aiming straight for the first rank. He usually does.

“You’re being very vague,” he says by way of a response, and shifts a pawn forwards. They are fed and watered and washed, and Charles can feel his own contentment mirrored in the slouch of Erik’s shoulders, in the way that his foot is pressed against Charles’ calf beneath the table, in his warm eyes and easy smile.

It’s a relief to see him anything other than tense – today, after they had eaten their lunch and were sitting quietly on a bench in the gardens, Jean had come to ask if they wanted to sit in the back of her Mutant History class with the students. They had said yes, of course, and followed her through the hallways and Charles couldn’t help but grin at the cheerfulness rippling from the man beside him purely because Jean had called him Erik.

For all that Erik proclaims not to care for other people’s acceptance, he feels much more comfortable now that he knows at least one other person here does not hate him for things that he can’t even remember doing.

But this is the first game of chess that they’ve managed to play since they woke up, and it’s refreshing; it’s almost like being back home, sipping on Scotch with a fire roaring on the hearth and the trees rustling in the breeze. The room, however, is not the same – between the day before war and now, Charles had moved from the top floor to the ground floor, and the wheelchair behind the screen in the corner is a painful reminder of why.

Charles hasn’t said a word to Erik about it. He wants to tell him so desperately, wants to tell him the extent of what went wrong on the beach, but he can’t bring himself to. He knows that Erik will blame himself, will hate himself, and he doesn’t want to destroy the calmness that Erik has managed to find here for the moment.

“You know what I mean,” Erik prompts, and runs the tip of one finger around the edge of his glass. “Staying here, like this, and not trying to change things back to how they were. Are you sure you’re happy with the idea?”

“I can’t see why I wouldn’t be content with it. I mean yes, I hadn’t really considered it before you pointed it out, but it seems silly in retrospect to want to reverse the process. As you said, we now have an extra thirty-eight years to make an impact. We could disagree about our respective
approaches to handling the situation until we talk each other’s ears off – and I’m fairly sure that we will, it would be terribly boring if we agreed with each other at every turn – but I can’t deny that this is an opportunity, and it would be foolish to squander it.”

Erik doesn’t even consider his answer; he just fixes Charles with an intense look and holds it until Charles wants to look away. But he doesn’t.

“I didn’t ask if you were content, I asked if you were happy,” he says slowly, and Charles smiles and pulls Erik’s mind into his.

“Half of my dreams have been realised, and I’m experiencing them with you by my side. Why would I not be happy?”

It’s the answer that Erik was looking for and he stands, pushing at Charles both mentally and physically until he topples backwards onto the bed with a laugh. The chess game lies incomplete and forgotten behind them. It is irrelevant, like all things but their minds entwined together.

**

It comes to him in the middle of the night, when the mansion is quiet with the gentle humming of dreams and Erik is warm and snoring beside him, arms wrapped around him and face pressed against his shoulder. It comes hard and fast and out of nowhere, and the force of it wakes him from sleep.

It’s disorienting to start with. It was not a dream, or certainly no type of dream that Charles has ever had before – no, it felt like a memory, but the sort that has been buried for years and years, completely forgotten, until suddenly something stirs it and it rises to the surface. But it’s just the tiniest detail from a memory, a flash of some sort of nostalgia. He knows that it is important, but he has no idea why.

“A man,” he says out loud, staring up at the ceiling, and projects the image directly to Erik. He watches as it filters down through his subconscious, through all of the careful defences that he knows just how to avoid, and through the layers of dreams. He watches Erik turn where he’s stood on the sand, grains lingering in the creases of his clothes and blood flecking his knuckles, and the air tastes of twisted metal.

“Who’s this?” he says – curious, but not fearful – and Charles shrugs. The man is tall, at least as tall as Erik, and built like an athlete. He’s wearing a curious blue suit, not dissimilar to the ones that he’s seen the X-Men wear whilst training, and his hair is a shocking white. There’s a voice in the back of his head that says you know this man, but he doesn’t; or at least, he can’t remember him at all.

“I don’t know, but I just had an extremely sharp memory of him. Not a normal memory though – it felt forced. Like someone – or something – was making me remember him, had triggered the memory.”

“So it may well be somebody that you’ve encountered between 1962 and now?”

“Possibly. Perhaps it was him that did this to us, and I managed to reach out with my powers in the split second before whatever he did took effect, and I’ve somehow managed to recall the memory? I don’t know, but it feels important. We can ask the others, see if they recognise him. I know that we’ve agreed not to change things back, but it could be useful to find out why it happened in the first place regardless.”
Erik stares at the man for a few more seconds and then turns back to face the sea, the beach stretching out in an arch around him, and he holds out his hand to Charles.

“It can wait until morning. Stay with me for a while longer.”

Charles nods, and the projection of the man disappears. He takes the few steps to stand by Erik’s side and lets himself sink into this dream, and last it out until the sun sets over the ocean and rises over the mansion.

**

Charles finds Storm ushering students into the conservatory for their first lesson of the day; he projects the vision of the man into her mind but she just shakes her head, and calls down the corridor to John to stop messing around and get into class.

He finds Scott in the lower levels, training with Piotr, and he watches as optic blasts bounce off the metallic skin, leaving great scars on the walls of the room. Once they finish he asks the same thing of Scott but again, he shakes his head.

He finds Jean in the library, reading quietly with the book held in position telekinetically, holding a cup of tea with both hands. She looks up when he enters and smiles; the students all project to a certain extent, but most of them do it unconsciously and he can filter them out completely if he wants near-silence in his mind. Jean, however, knows how his power works and seems to project directly to him. He knows that right now, as she watches him walk across the room to sit opposite her, that she’s thinking of how wonderful it is to see her Professor not needing his wheelchair.

“How can I help you?” she asks, and he is so terribly grateful for her acceptance of both him and Erik. They could have easily turned them away, pointed out that they were in effect strangers to them, but they didn’t; they might still not be too sure of Erik but they’ve given them more than Charles could have expected. He likes to think, somewhat arrogantly, that it’s a product of his older self’s own morals and lessons that have nurtured their compassion.

“I remembered something last night. The briefest of memories, only an image – a man. But it’s not somebody that I recognise, and neither do Erik, Scott or Storm. He feels important though and perhaps it was he who did this to us. Would you mind taking a look, in case you know who he is?”

She smiles and sets down her book and cup, and leans forward; he mimics her posture instinctively and she raises her hands to either side of his head, closing her eyes and easing her way in.

But he can tell, as soon as she’s seen the memory, that she has no more idea of who this man is than the rest of them do. Her apology is palpable as she recedes and leans backwards and picking up her tea to take an anxious sip.

“Have you asked any students yet?” she suggests, but he shakes his head. Perhaps once they’ve explained the whole situation to the children he might feel more comfortable asking for their help, but not yet. They deserve to know who they are assisting before he requests it of them, and he is not in favour of taking information from his students by force. They are here to be protected; he will not betray that.

“It was always a stab in the dark anyway – he could be a memory from any point in my life between 1962 and now. There’s no way that I could have expected you to recognise him,” he says ruefully,
and she nods slowly, but he can tell that she’s not really listening. She’s thinking, that magnificent brain of hers coming up with solutions, and it’s beautiful to watch. He’s eager to start training with her, to teach her how to harness her gifts and how to control them so that they bend to her will. She has the potential to be great.

“There is one thing that you could try, if you really want to know who he is,” Jean says after a moment, and she lowers her cup very slowly. “You could use Cerebro.”

**

The room seems larger than it did several weeks ago, when he was first shown it. It’s the first time that Erik has been inside though, and he’s fascinated – the technology on the console is far beyond anything that they two of them encountered in their own time, but Charles can see hints of the CIA prototype in the workings.

“So you got the designs for this from Hank McCoy?” Erik asks, running his hand over the panels, and Charles can feel the warm hum of the metal through the weak feedback link to Erik’s mind, and the contentment that comes with them.

“We have no idea,” Jean admits, and she touches her fingers briefly to an area in the middle of the console; it lights up, and the room seems to swell with potential. “You and the Professor built Cerebro long before any of us came to the mansion.”

The floor of the walkway is cool beneath his skin as he kneels on the floor – Erik hasn’t asked why it’s been designed at waist-height, and Charles doesn’t particularly feel like explaining. The headpiece is surprisingly light when he takes hold of it, and it feels comfortable and natural in his hands. He’s aware of Jean walking away and out the doors, but Erik is still lurking uncertainly by his shoulder, caught between leaving and staying.

“I want you by my side,” he says firmly, without looking up, and the words feel heavy and familiar on his tongue and he’s struck with such a sudden sense of déjà vu that he nearly drops Cerebro, even though he knows that he’s never said that phrase before. It feels like home and heartbreak at the same time, and he shakes it off.

He puts on the headpiece slowly, feels Erik’s hand curling around his shoulder. He knows the theory behind this version of Cerebro; know how it’s been modified from Hank’s prototype, how he only has to think of a mutant in order for the machine to access them.

Charles takes a breath, and thinks of the man in his dreams.

He sees fire and crying and people shouting and screaming, and a woman burning to death. He sees a little girl with blonde hair and golden eyes, he sees mutants dying in the rain. He sees a massive machine firing down upon himself, he feels the pain that rips through his body. He sees a girl with dark hair, crying in the dark and curled up against him. He feels his mind trickle away, feels the psychosis setting in. He sees millions become hundreds in a few scant seconds, with just three words. He sees a woman with long red hair arching her body against his. He sees himself, a thousand different variations of different ages scattered throughout the snatches of life and he sees a mountain, rising up through the middle and encompassing everything; where it all started, where the world began to end. He sees –
Nothing.

He blinks, and groans; his whole body aches and his head is pounding and his ears are ringing. There’s blood dripping into his mouth, hot and coppery where he’s managed to force himself into a nosebleed. Cerebro is quiet around him.

“...Charles,” he hears, quite suddenly, and realises that Erik is clutching him and he’s lying on the floor of Cerebro, the headpiece abandoned a few feet away.

“Erik,” he manages, and even that takes effort. He takes a moment to gather his thoughts; the image of a white lightning bolt is still seared into his mind. “What happened?”

“It looked like you were overloading,” Erik says, and Charles can hear the residual fear in his voice. “You grabbed Cerebro but didn’t take it off – it was like you couldn’t, even though you were hurting yourself. I thought it was just because you weren’t used to this version of Cerebro, but then you started to bleed and fell to the floor.”

“Well I’ll admit that it didn’t go as planned,” he says, and sits up slowly. His head is still spinning and the shape of the room is disorienting from a low angle – he looks around and can’t help but sway slightly, but Erik takes hold of him and keeps him steady.

“Did you find anything out before you collapsed? Who is he?”

“I don’t know,” Charles mutters, and rubs at his temples. The headache is beginning to ease, but very slowly. “It was such a mix of images, memories of events that have happened and haven’t happened and might have happened. There’s something different about him, something not right – I couldn’t get a decent hold of his mind. It’s like it was too fluid, like he was everywhere in every time at once. But now that I know what to expect, I’ll be better prepared to deal with it.”

“You’re not trying again,” Erik says strongly, his forehead touching Charles’ briefly and his hands holding on tight. “Whoever this man is, it’s not important. It doesn’t matter.”

“But he –”

“No. I don’t care who is he, or what he did, or anything about him. You are more important than any of those things and I won’t have you risking your mind for something so inconsequential.”

Charles knows that the expression on his face is mutinous and he nearly protests, nearly tries to reason with Erik, but the line of his mouth and the dark edge in his eyes says that he won’t be reasoned with; not on this. So Charles nods and sighs, and Erik’s body relaxes – almost as though until that point, he was ready to physically restrain Charles from picking up Cerebro again.

“Fine,” he grumbles, and Erik helps him stand. His legs still feel too weak to support him fully and his head is still slowly spinning, so he leans heavily on Erik as they exit the room and make their way back upstairs. He doesn’t want to rest, but he knows that Erik will insist upon it, and he doesn’t have the energy to argue. So he doesn’t complain as Erik steers him down the landing and into their room, and pushes him onto the bed.

And he can’t object when Erik kicks off his boots and curls his own body around him, thumb rubbing slow, small circles in the indentation of his hip, either.

**
The next morning, Scott calls all of the students together, and tells them with no pretences that Max Eisenhardt and Francis Pembroke are in fact Erik Lensherr and Charles Xavier, and they children react in an unexpected manner – they insist upon proof.

Erik and Charles are both more than willing to provide, of course – every metal item in the room shakes and rises, and Charles reads a few minds. He even projects a brief explanation of what’s happened to them – an abridged version, though. They don’t need to feel his horror, or his fury, or Erik’s despair at being cut off from the two things that ground him. Those moments are private and they belong to just the two of them, and he will not share them.

The students watch their demonstrations and relive the memories, and they assess the two men standing before them, proclaiming to be both humankind’s greatest enemy and mutantkind’s greatest hope, and they say nothing for quite a while. It’s one of the youngest children that speaks up first – a boy with a forked tongue, who points at Erik and frowns. It’s a fairly innocuous gesture but Charles can feel the concern bleeding from Erik’s mind, the worry of rejection. He takes a step closer.

“He can’t be Magneto,” he proclaims, and lowers his hand. “He’s not evil enough.”

“He’s not Magneto,” Rogue says, quite suddenly, and everybody in the room turns to face her. The students all know the story of what Magneto did to her, and they watch her as though her decision on this matter will be the final one; and perhaps it will be. Out of all of the students, she’s the only one who’s been directly affected by Magneto and so the only one that truly has a reason to hate him.

“He’s not Magneto,” she repeats, and she looks straight at Erik. She doesn’t smile, but neither does she frown. “He’s Erik.”

And just like that, the decision is made, and Charles basks in Erik’s relief as the students accept him into their fold.

**

Charles comes down to breakfast one morning to find a blonde-haired teenage girl outside the main door, snoozing where she’s curled up in a ball using her rucksack as a pillow.

He wakes her and she blinks sleepily, yawning in the morning light, and tells him that she’s looking for Charles Xavier.

**

“Her name is Tabitha,” Charles says, his hand resting gently on the girl’s forehead as she sleeps on the medical table. “She’s thirteen years old.”

Erik crosses the room, manoeuvring the machines out of his way with wide sweeps of his hand. He peers at Tabitha as he reaches the table, taking in the bruising on her face and the swelling of her wrist, and Charles watches him catalogue the markings. The journey from Roanoke to North Salem
took most of the previous day and partway through the night but the time has only deepened the
colours of the bruises, not faded them.

“Who was it that attacked her?” he asks finally, and lightly touching the edges of her black eye with
the very tip of his finger. She remains unmoving in her sleep, induced by Charles to promote a full
recovery. The machines hum and beep around them in a comforting way.

“Her father,” he says, and swallows down the bile that rises up in his throat. “He beat her when he
found out that she was a mutant. She played a prank on him, a silly prank, and he just... she’s his
daughter, Erik. His own daughter. How can someone do something like that?”
Erik looks at him, and moves his hand from Tabitha’s face to Charles’, brushing the backs of his
fingers against his cheek and Charles leans into the touch, leans into the comfort and empathy and
understanding that he offers. He pulls his hand away from Tabitha and drops the mental link; he can
only watch his own father kick himself in the stomach over and over for something that he can’t help
so many times.

“He did it because he was scared of her, like nearly all humans are when they first encounter us. And
when humans are scared of something, they come to hate it. In this case, his fear of mutants made
him turn on his own daughter and beat her senseless. It’s how it’s always been Charles; and how it
always will be, until we do something to change it.”
Charles closes his eyes and nods and feels a great sense of disappointment in himself – or at least the
older version of him – that he has failed so disastrously in moving the world forward, in really
making a difference to how humanity perceives mutants. Part of his dream was to provide a safe
haven for mutants and that he has achieved, but nothing has progressed on the other front. Thirty-
eight years and he has accomplished very little.

Give us another thirty-eight years, and then see what we’ve managed, Erik says firmly and Charles
closes his eyes, relaxing into the familiar link. This time, we’ll do it right.
He opens his eyes and looks at Tabitha’s young face, marked with hatred, and thinks that this time
he’ll make sure that no other mutant is faced with the same sort of treatment at a human's hands. This
time, humanity will learn to accept mutants and see that they're not going anywhere without a fight.
Charles can feel Erik's smile across the link, and it feels like a promise.

**

For a few intense hours three times a week, the students of Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters
are set free.

The training sessions are designed to push them up to and beyond their limits, to test their strength
and their control, and they are demanding; Charles has seen young teenagers being hardened into
warriors, being taught how to focus their powers to incapacitate and injure, and he hates that the sort
of situation they’re preparing for is still a possibility. Every time he sees one of his children leave the
Danger Room with a bruise or a graze or a cut, he feels a massive well of despair that this sort of
training is even necessary.

But despite the seriousness of what they’re doing and the injuries that they sustain, the students love
their sessions. It’s their chance to be themselves, completely, without any fear of hostility or
aggression of violence against them. The use of powers is meticulously restricted throughout the school – mostly for the safety of those in it. In training, however, the students can use their powers to their full capacity.

In training, then can be who they were meant to be.

It is Saturday, and the sun is hot and blinding, and the students that Charles and Erik are leading have already destroyed two trees and a fence and half of the pond is frozen over. It is Saturday, and training is well under way.

The target is twenty five metres away, and John has missed it every time. The fire that he pushes towards it tends to go straight but has yet to last the full distance and not fizzle out and die whilst John watches, fingers splayed and stretching out. John is getting more and more frustrated with himself at every failure and as a result, his aim is getting worse as his concentration falters. It doesn’t help that Bobby has done consistently well so far during the session.

“I know that I can do it,” John says angrily as another attempt sputters and smokes, and kicks at a stone on the floor in childish disgruntlement. “When my powers manifested I blew the roof off the home that I was at. I should be able to hit one lousy target!”

Charles gets to his feet from where he’s been sitting on the bench beside Erik. Here is another young man, so full of rage and pain and anger and it’s quite possible that he can use the same approach with John as he did with Erik to help him achieve his full potential. He takes a step forward, but it stopped by a hand on his arm, warm against his bare skin; he looks at Erik curiously as the other man stands, but neither Erik’s face nor mind is giving anything away. So Charles sits back down and watches as Erik strides to where John is working himself up into a temper, firing short bursts of fire up into the sky.

“What is fire to you?” Erik asks as he approaches and John turns to look at him, eyebrows draw togethers and squinting in the sunlight.

“A weapon.”

“Wrong. It’s part of you, as much as your bones or your skin or your muscles.”

“It’s not a part of me,” John scoffs, and turns away. “I can only manipulate it; I can’t create it. It’s just something that I can use.”

“So you’re telling me that you don’t feel it?” Erik counters, stepping back into John’s field of vision and staring him down. “When there’s a fire, are you saying that it doesn’t thrill you? It doesn’t make your blood sing or your head feel light or your soul more complete? You’re telling me that you can’t sense the heartbeat of a flame from a hundred yards away?”

John glares back, mutinous and stubborn and unmoving. There’s a few moments’ silence that stretches on, and then there’s a faint groaning sound. The earth rumbles gently, then more insistently; John looks down and sees the grass shifting and cracks appearing and steps back, looking to Charles for either an explanation or assistance. He offers neither.

Then there’s a shrieking noise, and suddenly a writhing mass of wires and pipes lurch out of the ground, all around them, and John tumbles to the floor as it ruptures beneath his feet. The metal stretches and bends and pointedly does not break, and Charles sends a quick message inside the mansion that everything is fine; they’re just giving a demonstration.

The writhing mass of metal hovers in mid-air, suspended in loops and whirls and figures of eight
around them, and Charles can’t tell if the look that John is giving Erik from his position on the floor is one of fear or awe. It’s possibly a mixture of both. Erik leans down and holds out a hand, and John takes it.

“Whenever there’s metal around me, I can feel it. It whispers to me in the dark and hums deep in my bones and when I was recently separated from it, it felt like part of my soul had been ripped away. I can’t create metal out of nothing, just like Bobby can’t create ice out of nothing – I have to use whatever’s around me, and he pulls moisture out of the air. Your only disadvantage here is that you wield fire; you don’t feel it. Make it a part of you, feel it in your veins, and you’ll be able to blow roofs off again.”

The pipes and wires shudder and ripple, and then drop back into the ground as quickly as they were raised. The ground is a battlefield where Erik pulled them up; Charles makes a mental note to ask Jean to fix the area later, and smiles at Erik as he sits back down next to him.

*Novel approach*, he remarks, and Erik shrugs, returning the smile.

*It’s true though – he’s thinking about his power in the wrong way. I was exactly the same when I first got away from Shaw and started using my powers how and when I wanted to. I saw them as a tool, not an integral part of what makes me who I am, and it took me a while to reach the point that I was at when you first pulled me out of the water. He needs to understand his power before you can give him the rage and serenity spiel*, he replies, and it’s gently mocking and entirely endearing, and Charles shoves at his shoulder before turning his attention back to John.

He’s standing very still, with his eyes closed, and his face hanging down towards the damaged ground. In his left hand he’s holding his lighter, the flame flickering in the still air. A quick glance around shows Bobby to still be several hundred yards away, repeatedly freezing and unfreezing the pond as practice.

John transfers the flame from the lighter to his right hand, and the ball of fire grows to fit his palm. He flexes his fingers, and the fire twitches with him; he inhales, and the fire expands and contracts gently, breathing in time with him. Charles prods carefully at John’s mind inquisitively – this method, this process of feeling the element, isn’t one that he’s ever had to experience before. His initially struggles with his powers in puberty were always more about reducing his range, filtering things out, dampening the nightmares screams. Charles has never found his power to be weak at any point (though sometimes he wishes that he did). He can sense it now though, the way that the fire is filling all of the empty parts of John’s soul, and wonders if this is how it feels for Erik; wonders how it must have felt to wake up in the plastic prison, with a part of him utterly missing.

The grounds are silent; even the birds have stopped singing in anticipation. Erik shifts, pressing closer to Charles and opening up the mental link, and Charles can feel the expectation vibrating through his body.

John takes a deep breath and raises his hands to the sun, and the sky burns.

**

The next day, the President is nearly killed.
“Are you behind this?” Scott demands from his position by the window, and Erik immediately bristles beside Charles.

“Ignoring the fact that I’ve been here in the mansion with all of you for the last four weeks and so have had no opportunity to organise anything – why would I even want to?” Erik counters. Scott just scowls in response. “This Mutant Registration Act that you’ve talked about, surely an attack like this will just cause them to reintroduce it.”

“Or worse, the President could declare a state of emergency and place every mutant in the country under arrest,” Charles points out. Storm makes a noise of discontent from her chair and Jean shifts uncomfortably.

“But there’s still a possibility that you planned this whilst in prison,” Scott presses. Charles can feel the irritation rising to the surface of Erik’s mind and reaches out to him. “Mystique could have been acting on your orders.”

“No.”

Everyone in the room turns to Charles in surprise, and he finds himself wondering belatedly why he’s so adamant about it. The Raven that he knows and loves and misses so terribly would never, ever construct a plan for a mutant to kill the President, even on somebody else’s orders; yet the Mystique that he’s been told about, the woman that his sister has become, is dangerous and ruthless and focused. He has no idea what she is capable of now, having spent the last forty or so years under Magneto’s wing, but he’s almost glad that he hasn’t been able to find her. He’s not sure that he’d like what she has become.

“This is neither Erik nor Magneto’s doing,” he says firmly, and for the moment Scott seems to accept it, but he’s still looking at Erik with the permanent distrust on his face. It seems that Scott, out of all of the X-Men, is still reluctant to receive Erik into their lives with quite the readiness that the others have managed.

“Do you think the assassin was working alone?” Jean asks after a moment, and Charles shrugs.

“We’ll only know that if we find him before the authorities do. I can use Cerebro to try to track him, but I can’t promise anything. My last attempt at using the machine were not as fruitful as I’d hoped,” he says ruefully, and Jean smiles at him. “If I’m successful we can collect him and bring him here but if not, we’ll just have to hope that he can evade those that would want him dead, or otherwise.”

Then there’s a twinge in the back of Charles’ head; a familiar mind coming into reach that’s inaccessible to him, mental scar tissue creating a natural barrier, but still makes him think of smoke and whiskey and old men in bars in 1962. It feels like this is one thing that he did manage to achieve, even when everything else might have failed.

**

Jean makes Erik and Charles stay well away whilst she explains to Logan what’s happened in his absence; she says that it’ll probably be safer if they’re not around, and Charles can understand that
given what they’ve been told about Liberty Island and the events leading up to it. So they go to Cerebro instead, and flatly ignore the raised voices coming from the hallway, and Charles wonders what would make a mutant want to kill the most powerful man in the world.

The room is pleasantly cool and so much more welcoming than the last time, as though it’s promising that he can do this. He can find one man in over six billion; this isn’t too much for him. He has this amount of power, and the control required for such a task. He can do this.

“Of course you can,” Erik says mildly, and Charles starts, unaware that he’d been projecting his thoughts through the link. “You can do anything.”

Charles sends a rush of gratitude and affection to Erik and kneels on the floor, the machine surging to life around him. He picks up the headpiece and settles it into place as Erik’s hand curls around the nape of his neck fingers pushing under the metal of the headpiece to rest in his hair, and he thinks of all the mutants that he possibly can.

The room warps; the panels shrink and disappear and everything goes dark, momentarily. Then there’s light – thousands of them, millions even – tiny pinpricks in the night and glowing red and alive. It takes a moment for Charles to realise that he’s managed to create a map of the whole world around him. And he somehow knows, even though this is the first time that he can remember doing this, he knows what all of the lights are.

“I told you that you weren’t alone,” he says, and Erik’s pleasure rumbles through him like an earthquake.

**

“How likely do you think it is that the President will turn against us?”

Charles pauses brushing his teeth, and looks up at Erik’s reflection in the mirror. He’s worried; Charles doesn’t need telepathy to know that – it’s clear from the way that his eyebrows are pulled in, from the downturn of his lips, the way that his arms are crossed tightly over his bare chest and his fingers are drumming on the side of his ribcage.

“I honestly don’t know,” he says around a mouthful of toothpaste, and at Erik’s mildly disgusted expression, spits before continuing. “But you can understand why he might. I mean, you have to see how this looks to him. A mutant breaks into the White House, launching a full-scale attack on his men and trying to assassinate him? It’s a perfect example of how the wrong person with the wrong power could destroy governments. Implementing the Mutant Registration Act would mean that he would at least be aware of any potentially dangerous abilities and in the light of this attack, it’s not an impossible scenario, despite Mystique’s efforts to remove the Act from consideration.”

He bends down to splash water on his face and when he straightens up again, Erik has moved from his position where he was leaning against the doorframe to stand right behind him. He watches him for a moment, wiping at the water trickling down to his collarbone, and leans back slightly. Erik takes it as the invitation that it is and steps into him, wrapping his arms around Charles’ chest and holding on, nose pressed into the back of his neck and breathing deeply.

“If he does decide to enforce the Act, we’ll fight it,” Charles promises, and takes a gentle hold of Erik’s arms around him. He’s warm and fresh from the shower, and Charles can feel the dampness of
his towel-dried hair against his shoulder. “I don’t know this President, but Jean seems to think that he can be reasoned with. We can stop this before it gets out of hand.”

Erik is silent, and Charles waits, opening up to him and allowing him to settle into the comfortable pocket that he’s hollowed out for himself, and Charles has kept open. He can feel their chests rise and fall together; can feel their hearts beating in time. It’s a familiar, safe sense of peace and he can feel his eyes drooping, held in an impregnable embrace.

“They’ll round us up,” Erik says suddenly, his words quiet and muffled against Charles’ neck. “They’ll trace us through our families and friends and they’ll come for us in the night. It’ll start with a list of names. It always starts with a list.”

“I will never let them take you,” Charles says vehemently, and grips Erik’s forearm tightly. “I would make them forget who they were before I would allow them to treat you like anything less than the phenomenon that you are.”

And he can feel all of the emotion that Erik is pouring into his head, all of the gratitude trust belief admiration contentment love that he possibly can until the emotion feeds back on itself, mixing in with everything that Charles is until he feels complete and at peace, with Erik wrapped around his mind and body.

“Come to bed,” Erik whispers, low and urgent against his skin and pulling his backwards out of the bathroom, and Charles goes with him. By the morning, Storm and Jean should have returned from their hunt and Charles can question the mutant, and they can prepare for the aftermath – but for now, until the sun rises and all hell breaks loose, it’s just Charles and Erik and everything that they can be together.

It’s more than enough, and Charles finds himself wishing that they could stay like this, apart from the world, forever.

**

Charles is torn into wakefulness by a terrible screaming – a piercing noise that resonates through his skull, rattling around, and he clutches his hands over his ears, vaguely aware of Erik mirroring his actions beside him. He recognises the scream, even though he’s never heard it before; this is the sound of a Cassidy, coming in at over one hundred decibels and rising. This means that something is wrong.

And then Theresa’s screaming stops, and the night air is filled with the sound of helicopters and thumping feet and gunfire and a roar of anger, and Erik grabs at his bicep, his fingernails digging into the soft skin.

“They children,” Charles says in horror, and turns in the dark room. “Erik, the children.”

They leap out of bed to the sound of cries and bullets and run out into the corridor; there’s a flash of a muzzle and the ratatatat of artillery, but the bullets never reach their target of Charles’ chest. Instead, the soldier that fired them lets out a cut-off noise of pain, then slumps to the floor. Charles feels as though he should berate Erik as they jump over his body and head towards the screams – but then he thinks of the students, and how one of those bullets could have been fired at them, and he doesn’t care.
He reaches out through the mansion as quickly as he can, and finds that most of the students are running haphazard around the place. Logan is on the rampage, claws unsheathed and bloodlust burning in his veins and working methodically through the mansion, destroying any soldier that he comes across. Scott has ensconced himself by the broken window on the first-floor landing, and is shooting at anything he can see moving out in the grounds.

And then there are eight of his children, unconscious and helpless, and he can feel the intentions of these soldiers, and the man who has organised this whole operation and he knows that if Colonel William Stryker gets his way, he will take more than just eight children – he will take Charles’ whole world from him.

*Logan, keep the children safe. Scott, defend the roof,* he shouts, and as they round the corner, two soldiers whip around at the sound of their footsteps and raise their weapons; and Charles lifts his fingers to his temple before Erik can react.

The men crumple.

“Take the front,” Charles says quietly, and looks down at the immobile bodies, acutely aware of Erik’s still-bare chest pressed to his arm. “But don’t kill him.”

Erik nods in the dark, and disappears down the stairs in relative silence until the sound of gunfire and screams proves that he’s found more soldiers. Charles knows that Piotr has by now collected Theresa and is leading most of the children towards the tunnel entrance and feels a great swell of relief, but he can also still sense three of the students running around, separated and terrified and utterly alone.

*It’s okay,* he says, and head towards where they’re panicking further down the next landing. *We’re coming for you.*

There’s a flash of red, accompanied by the screeching of metal and the sudden, hot burn of a fireball behind him as he moves, and he knows before looking that Scott has shot down a helicopter from the sky. There’s a sense of regret, at the waste of so many lives of men just following orders – but he won’t tell Scott or Erik or Logan to stop. Not this time; this time, they’ve taken it too far.

“Professor!”

Rogue runs straight towards him but stops just short of touching, and her hair is flying everywhere and Bobby and John are hot on her heels, and there’s a soldier following them with a tranquilizer gun aimed, and then he’s on the floor.

“We lost the others,” Bobby explains, slightly out of breath and looking around frantically, and Charles touches his mind to all of theirs and offers them some calm and reassurance even as there’s a massive boom from outside and the ground shakes.

*I have him,* Erik says suddenly, triumphant, and a shiver of a thrill snakes its way down Charles’ bare back as Logan appears in the dark behind the students, claws dripping with blood and a crazed look in his eyes.

“Take these three to the others; they’re in the tunnels. Make sure that they stay there until I tell you it’s clear,” he instructs, and he almost expects Logan to argue – to say that he can help, be more use by Charles’ side – but he seems to understand the fury in Charles’ voice. He takes the students away without a further word and if Rogue is worried about what he’s going to do, Charles pretends not to feel it.

And when Erik says that he has him, he really does have him. Charles walks out onto the front lawn
and whilst he’s aware of all the soldiers held frozen in position, at the vehicles that have ground to a halt and the helicopters that lay crushed into the ground, but all he can really see is Stryker – a man that he’s never met before, but already loathes with everything that he is. He crosses the grass to stand beside Erik and study this man, the man who thought that he could take on a haven for mutants and win.

He looks at Erik – at his bare chest, heaving with laboured breaths. At his temple, where blood is trickling down his cheek from a small head wound. At the way that he’s looking right back, and his eyes are saying what next?

He looks at Stryker’s men held in place by Erik’s hand, with their guns and grenade and grappling hooks, and their hatred, and he thinks nothing has changed.

“You were a fool to come to this school, looking for trouble,” he says coldly, and Stryker just sneers at him, the lights from his own men and vehicles shining on them in the centre of the grounds.

“If you’re going to kill me, just get the hell on with it,” Stryker growls, his muscles twitching against Erik’s power and his face twisting with repulsion. “You’ll only prove me right.”

“I’m not going to kill you, Colonel Stryker,” Charles retorts, and he can feel Erik’s discontent at his decision, but he ignores it for the moment. “My friend here would like, quite dearly, to kill you all – and I don’t blame him, not entirely. But I will give you once chance. We will release you, and you and your men will leave this school and you will never, ever, come back again. You will stop with your ridiculous vendetta against my kind, you will abandon any government-sanctioned operations regarding our registration, capture or detainment. And if you ever try to attack any mutant, ever again, I can guarantee that you will regret ever making that decision.”

Stryker laughs then, a horrible sound that rattles in his chest and echoes through the otherwise silent grounds. There is no noise now from the mansion; Logan and Scott must have incapacitated all of the soldiers inside.

“And you call me a fool,” Stryker taunts. “You already have the upper hand in this war but you’re throwing it away, all because of some stupid principles? I can promise you now, I won’t be so merciful the next time that we meet.”

“Unless absolutely necessary, I balk at the idea of using my power to harm anybody, mutant or human. It goes against everything that I believe in and I cannot see how it would help our cause, to live peacefully alongside you,” he says and raises his fingers to touch Stryker’s temple, and he tries to jerk away from Charles’ touch but is held secure by Erik. “And I’ve seen the whole of you, seen everything that drives you, and I know that you almost want me to kill you. You think that it would aid your feud against us, and that alone would be enough for me to want to leave you alive.”

“I will continue to come for you, until every last one of you is dead or under control.”

“And if ever hurt anybody that I care about, ever again, I will show you just how powerful I am,” Charles says, very calmly, and raises his hand to touch Erik’s elbow.

Release them, he says, and for a moment he thinks that Erik will refuse; but after a brief flash of displeasure, Erik lowers his hand and the soldiers move again stumbling forward and looking to Stryker for their orders. But Stryker is just standing there, staring at Charles and Erik with an indescribable look on his face.

“This is the only warning that you’ll get,” Charles says, and reaches out to take hold of Erik’s wrist. “We don’t want a war, Stryker. Now leave.”
They’ll never stop, Erik says as they turn around, turn their back to the enemy and Charles nods.

That’s their choice to make. Stryker isn’t a stupid man; he’ll come up with another plan before he attacks us again. His schemes for Cerebro have failed, and now he knows that the mansion is protected, he’ll think twice before coming for us again on our own ground.

Erik grunts in agreement.

And then there is the terrible, echoing sound of a single gunshot and Erik jerks forward beside him, a gasp falling from his lips. He crumples to the cold grass as blood oozes from his bare shoulder, the bullet gone straight through and out the other side.

For a heartbeat, Charles is frozen, not knowing how to react. All he can see is Erik, bleeding on the floor, and his first instinct is to throw himself to the ground and cradle him, but he’s suddenly filled with a white-hot, burning vengeance. He turns quickly back to Stryker, and he’s still holding the gun, the barrel smoking faintly.

“Your first mistake was coming here at all,” Charles says, utterly furious, and Stryker just glares back at him. “Your second was to come after the students. And you just made your third.”

“I’m not scared of what your pet mutant will do to me,” Stryker spits, and he cocks the gun again. “I already created one plastic prison to hold a metallokinetic – I can create a world around me that will protect me from another.”

“It was never him that you should have been scared of.”

He doesn’t shout it. He doesn’t growl or hiss or snarl or say it in another other than a perfectly calm, collected tone of voice. But in the split second after he speaks, he can see the fear creep into Stryker’s eyes. Because Stryker realises, in that moment, that he never asked his name.

The stars are bright over their heads and in the stifling silence, Erik coughs – a sound so painful to hear that even Stryker flinches. There are no powers needed to hold everyone here fixed and silent; they’re all waiting to see what Charles will do next.

Charles raises his hand.

**

Erik wakes suddenly and takes a deep breath, and it is 1962.

He’s not sure how he knows, but something deep in his gut tells him that he’s back where he belongs, and he opens his eyes and looks around for confirmation. He’s lying on the grass, out in the grounds of the mansion – exactly where he fell when Stryker shot him in the back.

But there’s no pain, he realises suddenly, and reaches around to touch his shoulder. There’s no wound either; it’s like it never happened. He can still feel the impact, the detached awareness that he’d been shot, the blood running down his back, Charles’ voice furious and powerful above his head – but it feels like phantom pain in a missing limb, like a dream.

“No. It did happen. Luckily for you, I’m – shall we say – organised.”
Erik scrambles to his feet so quickly that he nearly unbalances himself, and standing behind him are two men – one with golden skin that shines in the moonlight, and the other with white hair – the man that Charles had brought into his dreams. They're both watching him, like they knew that he would be here.

“Go back to the others,” the second man says to the one with the golden skin, and his voice is low and calm and strangely familiar. “I’ll be with you shortly.”

“Where is Charles?” Erik demands, raising one hand as a threat, and the man has the gall to smile at him in the faint light as his companion disappears into the night, his work apparently done.

“He’ll be along shortly. I took you to the future first, so you were pulled back before him. It won’t be long.”

“What are you? Some sort of time-traveller?”

“Some sort, yes,” he concedes. “Let’s just say that I had a run-in with the Terrigen Mists and an old friend of yours, Fabian Cortez. His and my powers combined are what enabled me to do what I did to yourself and Xavier – push you thirty-eight years into the future.”

Erik opens his mouth to argue, to say that it’s impossible, but he closes it again quickly. He’s seen enough in the past few months to know that not only is nearly anything possible, it is also likely. And it would make sense, in theory (though he doesn’t want to think too much about the logistics), and he knows that this man is at least, in part, telling some truths – it is 1962, and Charles is not yet here.

“So if you took Charles and I from 1962 and put us into 2003, what’s happened to the real us from that time? Where did you put them?” he says after a moment to gather his thoughts. He might as well try to work this out whilst he’s waiting for Charles to reappear – because as much as he wants so desperately to threaten and hurt this man until Charles is beside him, this is a person who has the power to travel through time, and Erik has just recovered from a gunshot wound. They are not by any means evenly matched right now.

“They were temporarily displaced,” the man says, and he sounds as though he almost regrets it. “They’re back where they belong now – not that it should matter.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“That means that provided you’ve learnt something from this experience, that future will cease to exist. I took you there to see how you will fail – both of you – and so that you can do things different this time around. Tomorrow, you and Xavier will be faced with a decision that will change everything. Make the wrong choice, and the future that you saw will be the one that you live through it properly, this time. Make the right decision, and the future will be infinitely better.”

“But we can’t change the future,” Erik argues, and shivers slightly; there’s a cool breeze drifting up from the satellite dish, and he’s still shirtless in the middle of October. “We made what you’re calling the wrong choice once, surely we’ll make it again? We can’t change our ideals that drastically.”

“You think so? The real Xavier of that time would never use his powers to harm another person. But the Xavier that you know is willing to do things that you’d never think him capable of.”

“You’re wrong,” he persists, absolutely adamant, and the man just continues to smile as though he knows everything.

“I put you both thirty-eight years into your own futures. What had changed?” he asks, spreading his hands. “You had turned yourself into the exact opposite of Xavier; the dark mirror to his soul.
Mutants and humans alike feared and hated you, and you were no further in your goal of mutant superiority. And Xavier? Paralysed and hiding away with his children in his school, where most of them are still too afraid to go out in public."

“You’ve made your point; our lives were miserable and unfulfilled and lonely and nothing like we’d ever dream they could be,” Erik snaps, his patience wearing thin and a pressing need for Charles aching in the back of his mind. “I don’t see how any of this is relevant to Charles and what he might or might not have done.”

“Have you not been watching him these past few weeks? All he’s been seeing if his failures; he’s been slowly becoming more and more unsure about his methods of dealing with this problem, and he’s sick and tired of all the hate and fear. He’s seen what humans will do to mutant children and tonight, Stryker went too far.”

And Erik thinks of Charles, standing commanding and unyielding on the grass and watching Stryker squirm in front of him; he thinks of Charles, and the pure outrage in his voice, and is struck cold at the thought of what he might do. Charles is the most powerful telepath in the world and his powers are near-limitless, and one idiotic human was stupid enough to test them.

“What did he do?” he asks, though he’s not even sure that he wants to know. Yes, his Charles has been growing despondent, but he hates the idea that he would lower himself to destroy a man’s psyche – for Erik. He doesn’t want to have been the man that brings Charles down to his level; for as much as Erik talks of being the better men, ultimately, Charles is the best of all of them.

“Eingesschlossenensein, Magnus. That is what the failed future has brought him to; that is what he would do, for you.”

It takes a moment for Erik to pull the word out of the depths of his mind, to remember exactly what the word means, and once he does his stomach clenches painfully and a sense of awful dread creeps into his mind. He feels almost like he’s going to be sick, and his head spins momentarily. The thought that Charles would do something so horrible, in vengeance, is so completely heartbreaking and humbling at the same time that he wants to cry.

“But why?” he asks, his voice cracking, and the man shrugs.

“Because to him, you’re worth everything. He sees the all of the good in you – you are not a bad man, Magnus. For you, everything is about family. Building a home – a world – where you can feel safe, where you need never be afraid again. But it always gets twisted because the child in you can’t escape those nightmares or Shaw, and your mother, and wants revenge. Even so, the force that drives you is love. Xavier knows that, because he’s seen the heart of you. And he knows that you can take it all and turn it into something incredible.”

And Erik has no idea how to respond to that. The urge to hurt this man for ripping them from their home and throwing them both into an entirely alien world has gone; he seems genuinely interested in helping them change the future, though Erik doubts that it’s entirely altruistic. Though considering the changes could possibly render this strange man non-existent, if the consequences of their choices extend that far, then the future that he comes from must be dire if the only option left is to rewrite it.

“The path that was set before you, before I displaced you both, was one of defeat. You’ve seen where it would have led, but it would only get worse,” the man says, as though he knows that Erik is curious about what is going to go so horribly wrong. “Many years in the future, your daughter would lose her mind because of your failings, because you would devote your entire being to your crusade for mutant superiority and neglect to care for the people that mean the most to you. And as she lost her mind, she would warp reality and strip the X-gene from 99% of the mutant population, and
everything that you would have been working towards would have been in vain. She would have
destroyed the lives of millions of people, all because of you.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Erik croaks, even as his mind says, I have a daughter?, and the man
doesn’t even blink.

“So that you can learn from your mistakes. You’ve seen the degeneration of yourself, the inadequacy
of Xavier’s pacifist movements. You can prevent the world that you’ve seen; you can make it anew,
make it better. This is an opportunity. In that future, you and Xavier are operating at both extremes of
the spectrum and neither of you is succeeding. Do it differently, this time.”

Suddenly there’s a strange humming noise, then a crack, and then Charles is stood beside him. His
hand is outstretched and he’s staring into the distance and there is a look of rage so potent on his face
that Erik takes a step back. He’s seen Charles disappointed, he’s seen him angry; he’s seen him
frustrated and betrayed and irritable and annoyed. But he has never seen him so utterly savage that he
seems ready to destroy the minds of hundreds of men, and the sight scares him.

Then there’s another crack and when Erik looks, the man has disappeared without a trace; at the
same time, Charles seems to realise that he’s no longer facing down Stryker and Erik is stood, whole
and well, in front of him.

“Oh, thank goodness you’re safe,” Charles says faintly, and stands there swaying for a moment, and
then launches himself at Erik and pulls him into a fierce embrace, gripping him tightly and pushing
their mind together. Erik opens up immediately, grateful for the presence in his mind, and projects the
conversation that he just had.

“I don’t deserve you, or the things that you would do for me,” he says quietly, speaking directly to
the space just behind Charles’ ear, and the grip around his back just tightens more.

“I told you that I would never let anybody take you,” Charles replies, and kisses the cold skin on his
neck. “You are worth protecting, Erik, whether you think so or not.”

They stand there in silence for several minutes, clutching at each other in the dark; Erik is content to
stand there for hours, sinking into Charles until they become one mind, but he knows that they can’t.
Tomorrow, it would seem, everything changes.

Tomorrow, Charles says, and it feels like foreshadowing. That’s when we make a decision that will
change the world.

No pressure.

Charles snorts with amusement and relief and exhaustion against his neck, and Erik smiles; Charles is
warm and alive in his arms, and they are home, and Erik can feel Charles’ excitement at seeing
Raven again after so long trembling at the edges of his mind. But his smile fades, quickly, and a
terrible sense of foreboding replaces it, and he doesn’t try to hide it from Charles. They both know.

For now, everything is fine. But tomorrow, they go to war.

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“Everything you did made me stronger; made me the weapon I am today. It’s the truth – I’ve known
“It all along,” Erik says, and Shaw leans closer, an awful smile pulling up the corners on his lips as he tastes triumph at last. “You are my creator.”

Then there’s a flurry of activity as the helmet is removed by the metal, and Erik can feel its smooth surface through the wires that hold it as he drops the girder that was pressed against his ribs. It feels cold and unyielding and lonely and he looks between it and Shaw, frozen with his hand outstretched towards his refuge against Charles.

He looks at them both, and he waits.

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“I thought that you wanted to kill him,” Charles says quietly as he stands beside Erik, regarding the man in front of them dispassionately. It’s taking a small amount of effort to hold him in place, but he can easily manage it – a few months ago he might not have been able to, but he’s been honing his powers with Cerebro since then. This is not difficult, not any more.

“I can’t but feel that you’d disapprove,” Erik points out, and he pulls the coin that he’s been holding onto for so many years out of his pocket. “That you’d think it detrimental to our plans for mutantkind.”

“Not detrimental to mutantkind, but to yourself, which is far more important. But I thought you would go through with it anyway; I hoped to terribly that you wouldn’t, but I suspected that you might regardless of what I thought you should do.”

*You told me, months and hours ago, that killing him wouldn’t bring me peace,* he reminds Charles, switching to a more private conversation, and Charles fixes him with an inscrutable look; he feels like he’s waiting for something, but has no idea what.

*And you told me that wasn’t what you wanted.*

Well I’ve found my peace, he says. I found it fifteen hundred miles north of here, in a walled garden with a chessboard and the evening sun, and my mind laid open and waiting for you. I don’t want to lose that because of him. He’s taken too much from me already; I won’t let him take you as well.

Charles is quiet. He doesn’t say anything, but then he doesn’t need to, because he floods the link quite suddenly with a massive burst of love that makes Erik take a physical step back. He takes hold of Erik’s wrist to hold him in close proximity, and looks back at Shaw, still vacant and staring.

“Even if you don’t kill him, he still needs to be neutralised. He’s far too dangerous as he is.”

He keeps hold of Erik’s wrist and takes a step forward, and touches his free hand to Shaw’s temple.

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“The man that you were following no longer exists,” Erik declares as he lowers the three of them down towards the sand and they all look up, their children staring up at them as they glow in the sun.
above. “He has been stripped of his powers and memories – he doesn’t even know who he is.”

“So stop this ridiculous fighting,” Charles says, and they land softly in the sand amongst the destruction, Shaw’s unconscious body slumping to the ground between them. “Stop fighting amongst yourselves and come home with us, and we can start again. We can make a new home for ourselves, somewhere that we can live in safety and in numbers. Come with us, and help us found our own nation and show the humans that mutants are here to stay.”

They’ll find a hospital to take Shaw to later, once this is over and done with; they’ll abandon him and allow him to create a new life for himself, but Charles will keep tabs on him. They can’t risk his memories or powers somehow returning to him.

“This, what you were planning? This would not achieve anything,” Erik persists, and Charles notes as he goes to envelop Raven in a massive hug that Azazel, Angel and Riptide seem to be listening to him. “This isn’t the way to go about things. All it will end in is death and destruction and more hatred, more fear. We may be homo superior based on our genetics, but we have to earn that title before we can abuse it. Come with us.”

Charles releases Raven, throws a smile at Moira, and Shaw’s men follow Erik across the battlefield towards them. Then Erik stops suddenly, freezing on the sand, his head twitching backwards towards the fleets. Everybody on the beach turns to look at him, sensing the abrupt change in his demeanour.

What’s wrong? Charles asks urgently, and Erik catches his gaze and holds it, then looks out across the bay. Charles follows his gaze and he can see the ships moving, aligning themselves.

“The humans – they’re targeting us,” Erik says, but he doesn’t sound surprised. “They’re going to fire on us.”

Charles is vaguely, numbly aware of Moira running back to the jet, trying frantically to contact the fleet commanders, but he knows that it’s no use. He can tell without even reading their minds that the humans are terrified and determined and operating under orders from higher powers to destroy the mutant threat once and for all. They just watched a man pull a submarine from the ocean; they’re running scared.

Then there’s a sudden rapid succession of booms and bangs that shake the ground beneath their feet. There’s the trails of hundreds of rocket streaking upwards then changing course, pulling around and heading towards their target, and Charles thinks, this is what he has failed to change in the future. This is everything that he has to look forward to, if they don’t change something.

He hears a series of sharp whoosh-bangs behind him, and turns just in time to see Raven suddenly disappear in the blast of red smoke – the rest of the beach is already empty. Charles blinks and then Azazel’s there, hand on his arm, but he stops him with a quick mental push.

“No,” he says, as Azazel takes a brief step back in confusion. “Thank you, but we’ll be fine. Go to the others or stay, it’s your choice, but Erik and I aren’t finished here.”

He doesn’t wait to see what Azazel’s choice will be – he turns back as the missiles bear down upon them, but he’s not scared. He has complete faith in Erik’s ability and he watches with a sense of inner calm as Erik catches them just metres away from their faces, and everything falls silent.

The metal glints in the sunlight, turning slowly; the burning fires extinguish and splutter, and Charles can hear the shock and resignation and fear coming from the ships in waves. He knows that they are watching through binoculars, knows that they can see how one man just stopped a hundred weapons
by doing nothing more than raising his hand.

And they watch, in dumbstruck awe, as all of those rockets fall harmlessly out of the sky, hitting the ground with splashes and soft thumps.

“They don’t know what to do,” he says, almost amused, as he reads the commanders in their confusion and panic. “They’re not sure if they should fire again or just not bother – they’ve seen how pointless it is, but they’re wondering if they should just try again on principle.”

“Then help them make that decision.”

So Charles does.

He spreads and pushes, grasping onto every mind and planting a strong suggestion. Not forcing them though – he would make so many thousands of innocent men think something so contradictory to their own beliefs – but in the space of a heartbeat he has given them a hundred and one different reasons why they should not fire again, why they should realise that Charles and Erik and Raven and everyone else has just saved all of their lives and prevented World War III, why they need to start accepting mutants in modern society.

It takes a split second to plant the tiniest seed of acceptance, but it takes root and Charles knows by the time he’s retreated out of their minds that the idea will grow. Now, for the first time in thirty-eight years, they’re making progress. The tension bleeds out of the bay and the metal sighs in relief, and Azazel shifts behind them.

Charles turns to Erik and he reaches out for him, ready to be swept away in a haze of smoke and hot air; away from the humans and their rapidly-adjusting mindsets, and moving forwards together to a new world.

“Let’s change the world,” he says.

Erik stands by his side, and nods, and smiles.

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end.

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End Notes

I've had to tweak the X2 canon slightly so that whilst Stryker has access to Magneto, he's not involved to the point where he would be informed of Erik's appearance. A few other comic-based facts are altered (such as removing the Beyonder from Tabitha's history) but hopefully nothing that's too glaring or major.

For anybody that hasn't worked it out and is curious, the man from Charles' dream is Quicksilver; the man with the golden skin is Elixir. Whether or not Fabian Cortez would actually be able to augment Quicksilver's Mist-induced powers so that he can travel basically
anywhere in time, I'm not sure, but let's pretend that it would in fact work.

_Eingeschlossensein_ - that which Charles did to Stryker - is also known as *locked-in syndrome*. It's not nice stuff.

The events that Quicksilver references, about Wanda warping reality so that mutants reign over humans, happen during the limited series *House of M*. It's probably my favourite arc within the franchise and I would seriously recommend that EVERYBODY EVER reads it.

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