Unbound

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by Cesare, helens78

Summary

Thousands of miles apart, Erik Lehnsherr and Charles Xavier form a soulbond. But when that bond is severed five years later, they have to spend the next ten years trying to rebuild their lives alone.

Notes

About the Archive warnings (underage, noncon): This is not an underage AU or a
noncon AU; those elements show up in specific chapters, and are warned for in the notes for those chapters.

The "Bound and Determined" universe is both a soulbonding AU and a D/s AU, in which people are usually soulbonded to one another through a natural psychic connection. Generally, soulbonded pairs are made up of one dominant and one submissive, but not always -- there are any number of ways connections can work in this AU. :)  

With orientation being much more important in this universe than gender, we're using Spivak pronouns for a gender-neutral singular pronoun (see here for an explanation of Spivak pronouns): "ey" for he/she, "em" for him/her, "eir" for his/hers, "emself" for himself/herself, and occasionally "emfriend" for boyfriend/girlfriend (although that one's new, as far as we know!).

We have a collection of "Bound and Determined" snippets on our respective Tumbrls, though we make no promises that those snippets will show up in the main story the way they do on Tumblr (Tumblr is for off-the-cuff snippets, AO3 is "canon"). But if you want to see those:

Cesare's "bound and determined" tag on Tumblr
Helens's "bound and determined" tag on Tumblr

ETA: We took a brief intermission to post Homeward Bound, which is the alternate version of this story in which, with Edie's help, the boys meet as teenagers.
In Eugene, Oregon, Erik Lehnsherr feels something new.

It's an ordinary Friday night in November; cold and rainy, but the apartment they're in these days has good baseboard heaters, and Erik's got enough blankets on his bed that he's never cold. Tonight he's *anything but* cold, and even one blanket seems like too many. He shifts and squirms on his bed, kicking the covers down to his feet. Carefully, he presses his fingertips to that spot on the back of his head, the "joining spot" at the base of the skull, his soul's-home. The spot itself feels normal when he touches it. It's sensitive, and it gives him a shiver that's gotten more and more exciting for the last year or so... but tonight something about it feels *different*.

When Edie knocks at his door, Erik jumps, scrambling to pull covers up over himself. "Mom--!"

"Erik, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm *fine*!" He's answering too fast, too loud. He tries to take a few deep breaths, get himself together. "I'm fine, I'm okay. You can come in."

She tries the door, but it's locked. That's mostly a suggestion on his part; stopping when she feels the resistance is mostly a courtesy on hers. The lock on the door doesn't do much good when your mother can control machines-- and at its heart, a lock is a machine. It may be unpowered and simple, but it has moving metal parts. That's all Edie needs.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

The lock clicks open, and Edie opens the door. "What's going on, sweetheart?"

She doesn't give the tangled blankets a second look, but she zeroes in on his hand, still touching the base of his skull. He quickly drops it, rubbing his palm against the sheet. "Nothing! Why do you think something's wrong?"

"You know the heaters?" Erik nods. "One of them snapped a coil. And you've been kind of keyed up lately, so..."

"Oh." Erik bites his lower lip. He hadn't realized he'd been warm enough to reach for the coils in the baseboard heater; this isn't the first time he's done something to the metal around him, either. When he was really little, all he could do was make pennies jump, or move quarters around. He figured out how to turn the dials on those little vending machines in the front of grocery stores without having a quarter at all, and snuck away with a lot of candy before Edie caught him at it. "I'm sorry about the heater. Did you fix it?"

"Yep. But I thought I'd check on you and see if something was going on."

He sighs and points at his head again, at the back of it, trying not to be crude while still making sure she knows where he means. "It's *warm.*"
Edie raises an eyebrow. "Warm?"

"My--" He reaches back, touches the back of his head, low down, just above the hairline. Like every other kid his age, he's been told things like don't just keep touching it, you'll go blind, and of course he knows he shouldn't do it around other people, especially his mother, but... it itches, and it's warm, and it feels strange. It's a little scary. "Right here," he says. "It feels different."

"To the touch? Or inside?"

He considers it, feeling carefully around that spot. "Inside," he says, definitively. "Like there's--"

There's something. For twelve years he's just lived with that spot, quiet, inactive, obviously there, but... he's never felt anything from it, certainly never anything like this. He looks back at Edie, blinking quickly. "I can feel something."

"Like a path?"

He shakes his head. "Like a, um--" He sketches out a pair of tall poles and draws a line between them with one finger. "Like a telephone pole, like the wire in between. Except not always. Like, if I turn my head this way--" he cranes his head to the right-- "I can't feel it at all, but this way--" and he turns his head to the left-- "and it's kind of there. But it's like one of those things with the mirrors, I can't look right at it, it goes away."

Edie takes a seat on the edge of Erik's bed. "Do you know what emergence means?"

"Of course," Erik says, rolling his eyes. "Emergence is when you first feel your soulmate on the other end of the--" Erik's eyes go wide and round. "Oh."

Edie smiles at him and slips her hand over his. "You're a little young, but not by much. If we were settled down somewhere--" and she gets that look on her face that she always gets when she's apologizing for the way they live, the day-to-day traveling life they've led ever since Erik can remember-- "you'd probably have gone through bond ed classes the way most kids do these days. And you'd be in Hebrew school somewhere-- between that and whatever regular school you were in, you'd have more people your age to talk to about it."

Erik nods. He knows what people say about the soulbond; he knows he probably shouldn't be talking about it now, either, not now that it's so, so obvious what this is. He turns his head to the left again, trying to feel his way through it. He can tell it goes off into the distance, but nothing more. "What was it like for you?" he asks, and then almost immediately blushes; his mother's always said he could talk to her about anything, but... she's his mother.

"When I first sparked," she says softly, and then trails off for a bit. He can tell she's trying to be delicate. "For me it really was like sparking. Little flashes in my vision now and then. I told your grandfather about it, because I thought maybe it meant I needed glasses, or maybe something was wrong with my brain. But we talked for a while, and he figured it out with me the same way I just figured it out with you. And after a few months, the sparks cleared out of my vision, and I could feel your father all the time."

Erik almost holds his breath; it's rare that Edie talks about Erik's father. He's almost afraid to ask for any more detail than that; usually if she gets started talking about his father, she'll end up sad or angry-- or, worse, she'll start packing, putting them on the road again. They've only been in Eugene for three weeks, not even enough time to meet anybody.

But curiosity gets the better of him, and he asks, "Was it like sparks for him, too?"
She smiles. "No. Jakob always said it was like a river. It started out with a stream, and by the time we met it--" She cuts herself off, turning her face away, but he can see a slight flush on her cheek when she does, and he squirms a little, too, wondering if he was right the first time and shouldn't have brought it up with his mom in the first place.

"Anyway," she finishes, lightly, "that's what's going on with you. And as the two of you get older, you'll feel more and more of it, until you can feel what ey's feeling and know where ey is."

"Ey's that way," Erik says, pointing back behind him, the direction the pull feels the strongest. "Is that... east?"

"I hope so. Otherwise ey's either in the ocean or somewhere in Asia, maybe. It'd be easier if ey were just further east."

Erik winces. It's a good point. "Thanks, Mom."

She catches his hand again and squeezes it. "You can talk to me about anything you want. But I'll see if I can find you some books, okay? So you don't always have to ask your mom about this stuff." She winks, and he sighs with relief; thank goodness she gets it. "Good night, honey. Try to leave the heaters alone, okay? You can shut yours off and open a window if you're too warm."

"Okay," Erik agrees. "Good night."
Charles, March 1996

Chapter Summary

In Westchester, New York, Charles Xavier feels something for the first time.

Charles first notices it during another silent family dinner. He's picking at the glazed duck breast and fennel salad, trying hard to close his mind against the dull unhappiness in the room, when he feels something else... a growing warmth starting at the back of his head, spreading through his body, lighting up behind his breastbone.

And he feels emotions: curiosity. Nervousness. It's not from him. But it's not from outside him, either; he knows what that feels like, too well, the essential strangeness of thoughts and feelings that aren't his own.

Part of him, but not him. Maybe, then... he doesn't know what else it could be.

"May I be excused?"

Raven looks at him, concerned. He gives her a smile and a quick «Everything's all right.» He could tell Raven... of everyone he knows, his sister is the only one he'd like to tell. But for now he just wants to keep this for himself before he shares it with anyone, even her.

His mother frowns a little at his barely-touched plate. "You're excused, but wrap that up and put it away. If you're hungry later, finish your dinner instead of eating junk food, all right?"

"All right."

Charles covers his plate with clingfilm and stashes it in the refrigerator, climbs the stairs and goes to his room. A year ago he begged to move to the room with the window seat, and his mother indulged him, on Kurt's condition that Charles move all his things himself. He's still not sure he put the bed back together correctly-- it makes funny noises sometimes-- but it's worth it.

It's definitely worth it at times like this, when he can sit in the window seat hugging his knees, draw the curtain and open the window and feel entirely separate from everything in the house. A space of his own. The best place he could want to be, to feel this... this sense of uncomplicated happiness, someone else's happiness, igniting his own, reflecting and building on it, til Charles is smiling hard enough to make his face hurt.

He closes his eyes, and touches his temple. «Can you hear me?» he sends.

He feels a ripple of surprise. No answer, but maybe a sign that his message was received.

«I can't wait to meet you.» Charles tries to tell his soulmate, across whatever miles might separate them. «I know we'll have to... but I hope maybe we can talk to each other til then.»

A little shiver of emotion, not much, but enough to encourage him.

«I'm a mutant. A telepath,» Charles sends. «I've always wanted--» even as fast as he can think, he cuts that off, unsure. But that feeling in him is so steady, so warm. If he can say it to anyone... «I've
always wanted to find someone who wouldn't mind that I can hear their thoughts. I already know how you feel through the bond... maybe it would be all right...?»

There's nothing specific to tell him he's being understood, but the wide-open sense of happiness and homecoming is enough. It's enough to stop doubting and worrying, for now. He leans his head against the windowpane and looks out, the breeze cool on his face. Usually he'd be shivering at these temperatures without a jumper, but with the bond taking hold, getting stronger, lighting him up, he feels as if he'll never be cold again.
Chapter Summary

Erik's been hearing something through the bond lately. But that's not supposed to be possible, is it?

"Did you ever hear my father?" Erik asks, over hamburgers and fries at McDonald's. Edie looks up at him, startled. "Like... his voice. Talking to you."

"Oh, honey, it doesn't work that way," Edie says, wiping her hands off and taking a sip of coffee. "I wish it did. Believe me."

Erik frowns. "But--"

He's been hearing it more and more lately. There's a sound, pitched like someone's talking to him, but he can't make out words. Sometimes he gets feelings-- really big feelings, happiness, hope... the occasional feeling that makes him lock himself in the bathroom and hope his mother doesn't ask any questions... but over the last month or so it's been getting clearer and clearer. He's pretty sure that if this goes on for much longer, he'll be able to hear what his soulmate's saying. If he's really lucky, maybe he'll be able to say something in return.

"What is it?" Edie asks.

"Can we talk about it when we're back on the road?"

"Of course."

They finish up fast, Erik wolfing down the rest of his burger in a few quick bites, Edie getting everything off to the trash can while Erik refills his soda. In the car again, Erik waits until they're back on the highway before he starts trying to explain.

"You remember how I told you I knew he's a he?" Erik says.

"Yes..."

At the time, he'd said he just knew, the way a lot of kids his age apparently did. He'd figured out his orientation that way, this glowing little sense of knowledge, recognizing that he and his soulmate were really two halves of one connection-- and that he was waiting for his dominant to take the lead. He'd been pretty giddy about that for a while, not that he'd really told anybody. Most adults could tell it about each other, but at Erik's age it's like they've forgotten they had that part of themselves at all, like kids these days are somehow going to hold off on thinking about sex and domination and submission until they're old enough to acknowledge and recognize their bonds.

But beyond his orientation, it wasn't really just knowing. It wasn't simple intuition, not when it came to his soulmate's gender, all the little things about him Erik can feel now. "I could... I can hear his voice. That's how I knew."

"That's not possible."
"It is possible." Erik crosses his arms over his chest and frowns. "I don't know how, and I know the books say we can't, but I can. I can hear him. He talks to me."

"Erik--"

"I thought it was because of my mutation," Erik says, trying to get this out before his mother can go on and on about how it just isn't possible. "I can tune a radio in better than the dial, maybe I can tune in people, too--"

"Tuning in the radio has to do with control over the antenna and the conductor. I know, because I can feel it when you do it."

"Yeah, but us, our mutations-- I thought maybe you-- maybe you, with my father--"

"No," Edie says sharply, and her lips thin out into a line. "No, I can't hear him."

Erik stops short. Can't and not couldn't. And she looks angry... but he's starting to see more than anger in her expression, more than just sadness when she talks about his father. She's never said why exactly they go from place to place the way they do, what she's looking for, but...

"Are you trying?" Erik asks quietly.

Edie taps her fingers on the steering wheel. "Spokane just wasn't right, okay?" she says. "We're going to try Portland for a while."

"Are we looking for my father? Is that why we do this?"

"We're not talking about it."

"I'm fourteen!" Erik says. "I'm not a baby. You don't have to protect me. Maybe I could help. I can feel you when you're out of sight, I can feel my soulmate-- what if I could feel my father, too? If I just knew what I was looking for--"

"Erik, stop. Stop." Edie rubs at her forehead. "We're not just looking for your father, all right? We're looking for a place where they're okay with our being mutants, where I can get a job that lets me use my ability instead of having people look at me like I'm a freak. Where the kids at school are okay with you picking your pens off the floor with your power instead of with your hand."

Her longing echoes into him, fierce and clear. They've managed to make it to Mutant Pride parades, to spend a week or two here and there with other people in the community, but the fact that they never settle down makes it hard to form roots, to feel like anywhere is really home. "I want that, too."

"So we're going to keep moving until we find it." Edie looks over at him. "Are you sure you can hear a voice? Sometimes people want to find their other half so badly they fool themselves into believing they can hear them." She winces. "Believe me, I know about that."

But Erik shakes his head. "No, that's not it." He faces straight forward, puts his joining spot to the east while they travel further and further west. He hates going away from his soulmate like this, hates how it feels like the distance gets that much bigger with every mile they cross. But at least when he's facing this way he can feel his soulmate more than ever. This is how it's brightest, clearest: when the joining spot's facing in the right direction, east, always east, it's like a long steel cable almost pulling him toward his soulmate. Are you there? Can you hear me? I'm here, I'm here...
He gets a tone back, a soft sound that's suffused with a sense of pleasure at making contact. Another rush of conversation, he's sure his soulmate's talking to him, but it's like his mate's above the surface of the ocean and Erik's twenty feet underwater. "I can hear him," he says softly. "I swear, Mom. I'm not making it up. What if he's a mutant, too?"

Edie thinks that over. "He might be," she admits. "It seems to run in the family. Your father, me, my mother, my father and his soulmate..."

"That would be..." There are no words to say how good that would be, but Edie probably understands. Erik sighs. "I guess I'll find out in three years."

Edie's quiet for a while, so long that Erik just closes his eyes and presses his consciousness up against the bond and sends quiet thoughts and feelings along to his soulmate. I'm here. I'll find you. I can feel you. Can you hear me? Are you there?

"Maybe," Edie says quietly, "if Portland doesn't work out, we can head east for a little while. If you're still sure you can feel him, if you can still hear him."

Erik's eyes fly open, and he goggles at her. "But-- I'm not even fifteen, I won't be fifteen for months--"

"Portland might last more than a few months."

"But even then--"

"Even then, if I'm the one taking you, it's okay. And I'm not saying that-- if we go and if you find him-- the two of you can acknowledge early. His family will have to have a say in it, too. But if it's as clear for you in a few months as it is today, then... maybe. Just maybe."

*Maybe,* Erik thinks, passing it along to his soulmate. *Maybe in a few more months, I can finally meet you...*
It isn't easy being a young mutant, not even for Charles and Raven.

"I'm sore," Raven complains as they walk together through school grounds, leaves shattering under their feet. "Are we far enough away? I have to drop this."

Charles touches his temple. "No one near. Let's sit up here," he points to a bench not far from the practice football pitch, a muddy stretch after the rainy weather of the past few days.

The bench is dry, though, and he motions Raven to sit, coming around to stand behind her. "Go ahead," he encourages, and she lets slip the camouflage she usually wears, the blonde Raven everyone's so much more comfortable with.

"I couldn't believe how much she made me do today," says Raven. "All those faces. It's like, lady, I'm not made of Play-Doh."

"It's hard for her," says Charles, resting his hands on Raven's shoulders, slowly beginning to massage the tension away. "One class for all us mutants, when we're all so different. How can she teach you to use an ability she's never even seen before? All she can do is make you practice. Mrs. O'Neal isn't getting any support from the school, and she's stuck teaching Health and Concordance as well."

"She sucks at those too," says Raven unforgivingly. "I had her for Health and she just talked the whole time about self-esteem. We spent maybe one day talking about birth control and how you can use tampons and still be a virgin. Then right back to self-esteem. And people come out of that Concordance class barely knowing one end of the whip from the other."

"Be kind," Charles says automatically. "She does her best." He bears down a bit; Raven's not just carping, she really does feel tight under his hands, her muscles tense. "Put your foot down next time if you feel taxed. Or were you showing off for Hank?"

"I was not! Shut up," Raven giggles.

"I'm just saying, you can't blame Mrs. O'Neal for that!" Charles's hands slip easily over her blue skin as he kneads her shoulders. One of the less obvious aspects of Raven's mutation makes her sebaceous secretions closer to lanolin than the sebum of baseline humans. Possibly it helps protect her changeable skin, or keeps the scale-like formations supple. Even now, years into the Mutant Genome Project, no one really knows how most mutations work in their particulars.

Charles is awed every time he considers all the little adaptations that accompany a viable X-Gene mutation. His own mutation is telepathy, but his brain also functions differently to most baseline humans. It has to, or he'd've gone mad as a boy when the voices began to crowd in, before he learned to shield his mind against them. He can maintain multiple lines of thought, and that likely saved him. For his last birthday, Raven gave him a book called *Hard-Boiled Wonderland And The End Of The World*, and he felt a rare pang of recognition when he read a passage in which the narrator demonstrated his ability to think two things at once by reaching into his pockets and
counting different amounts of spare change with each hand at the same time.

It was striking, very nearly unique: fiction is usually so strange for him, each character trapped with nothing but eir own mind for company, the emotions from the soulbond eir only connection outside eirselfs, and sometimes not even that. Everyone seems so limited and lonely. No matter how many times he catches glimpses of the minds of the people around him, he can't understand what it could possibly be like for them to live entirely without telepathy, never feeling the presence of other people's thoughts and feelings.

Though conversely, there are some things he's missing out on. He rubs Raven's neck, careful to keep well below the joining spot at the base of her skull.

Nearly everyone with a soulbond feels sensitivity there, at soul's-home. But that spot doesn't feel like anything special to Charles, even though he's been through emergence and feels his soulbond quite strongly. He's feeling it right now, a little hum of contentment and pride coming from his soulmate.

He suspects his mutation helps contribute to the strength of his soulbond, as well. He can keep a thread of attention on the bond almost all the time, and the bond seems to flourish when soulmates can spare more concentration for it. And the bond is psionic. Last time he had a Mutation Aptitude Test, the evaluation said he generates psionic energy to spare, an indication that his telepathy is likely to keep growing stronger as he matures.

Though it's hard for him to imagine what it will be like to be able to read more, to be stronger. Or to be older, for that matter. Sometimes he already feels as if he's lived half a dozen lifetimes, after so many secondhand experiences streaming into his head. But he's still stuck looking like a thirteen-year-old; at least getting older will help with that. And maybe he'll be able to block thoughts more effectively and easily as his ability develops. That would be a relief.

"That's much better," Raven sighs, "thanks," and he comes round to sit next to her on the bench.

"I've been practicing," says Charles. "Maybe someday I'll be good enough at creating illusions that I can project for you when you need to relax."

"Maybe someday, I won't have to hide to keep people from staring," Raven says tiredly.

"Some of them stare for good reasons." Charles nudges her shoulder with his. "I probably shouldn't tell you, invasion of privacy et cetera, but Hank has a crush on you too."

"That doesn't change the world," says Raven, but she looks over at him. "Really?"

"Cross my heart."

"And who has a crush on you?" Raven teases.

"That really would be invading their privacy, since it's nothing at all to do with you," says Charles.

"Ooh, they, there's more than one... if I guess, will you tell me if I'm right?"

"No!"

"I bet it's Harry," she says. "Harry, and Gabrielle. Ha! You're smiling, I'm totally right."

"Will you stop?" Charles grumbles. "I'm never telling you anything again."
Raven stands and catches his hand, tugging him along. "Oh, yes you will."

They walk back toward the school, swinging their hands between them, but soon Charles senses three other people nearby, a crackle of hostility coming from them. He tries to steer clear, but the three are obviously out to find Charles and Raven, and there's no avoiding them entirely.

He catches Raven's eye, and he doesn't even have to send her thoughts. She can tell just from his expression what's going on, rippling herself back to her typical disguise of blonde hair and rosy complexion. By the time the three boys emerge, Charles and Raven are both well braced for whatever they intend to sling.

They start out strong. "My dad says you're an abomination," Quentin tells Charles.

"I doubt it," Charles answers, "since that's not a word."

"He says no one should be able to know what you feel except your soulmate."

"It's an interesting contention, and certainly not one unique to your father," says Charles; sometimes he can confuse or bore would-be bullies until they give up. "On the other hand, there are plenty of more pluralistic traditions. Even as recently as 1100 AD, some branches of Christianity recognized bonds between three people."

"Shut up," says one of the others, Teddy.

"No, I don't think I will," Charles shrugs. "Thomas Aquinas called the mind and the soulbond 'substantial forms'-- he believed the mind, the soul and the soulbond are all just parts of the body. So going by that, perceiving the mind isn't any more abominable than perceiving the body, which you don't seem to have any trouble with, going by the way you're ogling my sister."

"I'm not," Quentin reddens. "That's not what she really looks like anyway, everyone knows that. She fakes like she's pretty but she's just an ugly mutant underneath it."

"Yeah," says Teddy, "she looks like the Creature From The Black Lagoon."

"I heard she's all messed up like the Toxic Avenger," says Finn. "No wonder she's a switch, she has to be, she can't turn anyone down."

"Raven is beautiful," says Charles, lifting his hand to his temple. "And all three of you know it. If you don't leave us alone, maybe we should talk about your--"

«bedwetting; you should see a doctor, Quentin, it might be your medication, it's a frequent side effect, nothing to be ashamed of--»

«crush on Quentin; Teddy, why don't you just tell him how you feel instead of encouraging this pointless bullying--»

«orientation; there's nothing wrong with being a switch, Finn, but it's awfully hypocritical to mock other people just because you're not comfortable with switching yourself.»

The three boys look at Charles and each other uneasily. He sent his thoughts to each of them separately, but they don't know that for certain, and they're unlikely to compare notes.

"We could discuss it further, aloud," Charles says, "if you'd like to stick around," and the three of them break in different directions.
But once they're at what they judge to be a safe distance, they start throwing rocks. Charles reads them all for their aim and steers Raven to avoid the stones.

She shakes him off. "My turn," she says, shifting to something closer to her natural form, but camouflaged, speckled brown and green; she hurls herself up into the nearest tree and nimbly leaps from limb to limb, one tree to the next.

"Don't hurt anyone," Charles pleads. "Much."

Teddy's the biggest of the three; Raven drops on him from above, throwing him down and knocking the wind out of him. "No promises," she calls back to Charles, and hearing her, seeing Teddy felled, the other two turn tail and scurry back to school.

Charles runs as well, hurrying to join Raven. He knows she won't really hurt Teddy further unless he provokes her, and Teddy seems cowed, but Charles wouldn't stake anyone's safety on it. "Come on, Raven, let's go back."

"Get up," Raven prods Teddy with a toe. "Come at me. You know you want to. Or are you only brave from a distance? Asshole."

"Raven--"

"No, Charles! I know you think no one can do anything to you because you can just read their minds and stay one step ahead, but those rocks really could've hurt!"

"They weren't throwing them that hard," Charles says.

"How hard does it have to be before you get mad?" Raven demands. "You're always so sympathetic to them, why not to us? To me?"

"Of course I am," he says automatically, but she's glaring, and he repeats more seriously, "I am. They're wrong. But they're also scared and confused, and it won't help anything if we answer their bad decisions with bad choices of our own. We should try to rise above that."

"You saw! If we take the high road, they'll just throw rocks at us from the low road."

He reaches for her and squeezes her hand. "We can protect ourselves. And we'll still be on higher ground, with a better view." Charles turns toward Teddy and offers his other hand to help him up.

Teddy ignores it, picking himself off the ground and sullenly stomping away. Once he's cleared the treeline and he's safe from any more aerial attacks from Raven, he turns around and yells, "Freaks!"

Charles tightens his hold on Raven's hand. She scowls at him, but she stays.

Emboldened, Teddy goes to pick up another rock. Before Raven can race after him and rejoin the fight again, Charles touches his temple.

Teddy puts the rock in his mouth.

Raven bursts into laughter, snickering helplessly. "Okay," she says, "that's almost as good as kicking his ass," and she only laughs harder when Charles lets go and Teddy spits out the rock and tries to scrub dirt off his tongue with his shirtsleeve.

Incredibly enough, Teddy's gearing up to shout at them again, but Charles sees no reason why they should have to listen to any more of this nonsense; he sends, «Go ahead, open your mouth again,
there are plenty of rocks about."

At that, at last, Teddy gives up and runs back to the school.

There's a quiet but intense feeling of inquiry and concern coming to Charles from the bond in response to his agitation, and Charles answers that feeling with reassurance. «Everything's okay now,» he sends. «But thank you.» He gets back relief, and a trickle of shy affection that strengthens when Charles responds with warmth of his own.

"All that did was make them mad, and next time they'll come at us worse," says Raven, relaxing back to blue again. "We need to teach them a lesson."

"How? By kicking them in the head? If anything's likely to perpetuate the cycle of violence..."

"I'm just so sick of it!" says Raven.

Charles faces her and wraps his arms around her. "I know."

She buries her face in his shoulder and sighs, hugging him back. When she lifts her head, she's much more solemn. "What're we going to do if our soulmates are humans? What if they're like those three?"

"They won't be," Charles reassures her. "Humans like those three are afraid of us because they don't understand us. You and your soulmate are linked, you feel each other's emotions. I'm sure she'll understand."

"I don't know," says Raven. "I don't feel her like you do yours. It's been six months and I can tell if she's happy or not, but that's about it."

"It's different for everybody," Charles reminds her. "And I might be able to tell more about what my soulmate's feeling because I can sense emotions from anyone."

"I guess," says Raven. She looks down at herself, at her textured blue hands and bared blue knees, and slowly she ripples the change up her body, going back to blonde peaches-and-cream Raven as they trudge back to the school.

Charles isn't sure what else to say to make this better, and he's unwillingly a bit preoccupied with the point she brought up. He hasn't seriously considered the possibility that his soulmate might be a baseline human. Somehow Charles has just always assumed that his other half has a mutation of some kind as well.

It makes him wonder how often mutants bond with other mutants. For that matter, how many children born to bonded couples are mutants, compared to children born to unbonded couples? Charles isn't sure how to frame the question or find the answer, but it stays with him... mutation, the bond, the bond, mutation. He'll have to read more about it.

«Are you a mutant?» he asks his soulmate. «Are you like me?» Of course there's no answer, just a hint of preoccupation and determination, followed by a sudden burst of pride, a giddy sense of accomplishment that his other half shares with Charles freely.

Charles has to smile. «I don't suppose it matters in the end. Whoever you are, whatever you're like... I know your heart. I know I'll love you just the same.»
Erik, October 1997

Chapter Summary

Portland, and traveling east.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains new warnings; please see the chapter endnotes.

USE THIS LINK; THE AUTOMATIC AO3 LINK IS BUGGED:

Chapter 5 endnotes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Erik likes Portland, likes it a lot. He's been going to a special school, a public charter school that only started up a year ago, meant for students with "special needs"-- in this case, students with mutations. It has a metal shop; Erik's been learning how to use tools for welding and cutting, but he's also allowed to spend the last fifteen minutes of every class just working with metal on his own, as extra credit.

Extra credit for using his *power*. It doesn't seem real.

The first thing he made was a tiny windcatcher, kind of like things he's seen on the tops of wind chimes at the mall. He's loved the way they move since the first time he saw one: thin rings, delicate concentric circles of metal spinning around and around. His version is smaller but more elaborate; it has a post through the rings and miniscule beads separating each ring from the next. When flattened, it looks deceptively like a disk, but when he threads a chain through the loop he's added to the top, he can tap the rings with a finger and set them all to spinning independently... or, better yet, he can use his power to push the rings into motion.

Everything fits together more precisely than mere machinery could accomplish, and Erik is ridiculously proud of it. It's beautiful.

Most of the time he carries it around with him in his pocket. It's got the chain-- he could wear it on his wrist, around his neck-- but it gives the impression of being part of a collar, and no matter how certain he is that his dominant's going to love him and want him, it feels wrong to wear something so symbolic without his dominant putting it around Erik's neck himself. And besides, his dominant might have other ideas about what kind of collar he'll want Erik to wear.

He just hopes his dominant understands what the windcatcher means to him. It's *his*, something he built from a thin sheet of stainless steel. Built with his power, on his own. If his soulmate really is a mutant, maybe... maybe he'll understand. If he doesn't want Erik to wear it, maybe he'll like it enough to keep it. Maybe they can find someplace to hang it, once they have a home together.

He's been happy enough here that he hasn't even asked about going off to find his soulmate, even
though the voice hasn't gotten any less present in his life. If anything, it's louder now; he hears at least a little bit of something almost every day. The bond is getting stronger and stronger; sometimes it seems so real and alive that he's surprised he can't feel it with his hands, winding its way east. But he can wait. If he has to, he can wait.

He comes through the door to their apartment one afternoon and sees the boxes, and his heart sinks a little. "Are we going?" Not already, he thinks. Not yet.

Edie's just finishing up with one last box, this one-- like most of them-- marked Goodwill. They travel light when they're on the road. When she sees him, she tries for a little smile. "Yeah. But I've got a surprise for you."

He's not sure any surprise is going to be worth giving up his new school for, but he tries not to show his disappointment. "What?"

Edie comes over to the kitchen table and drags out a road atlas. "We're not going north or south this time. We're going east. You tell me where."

Erik stares at the map, wide-eyed, one hand reaching up to the back of his neck. He looks at the huge, two-page map of the United States, and for all the time he's spent on the road, all he can think is There's so much of it. Idaho, Wyoming, Nebraska, Iowa, and that's just the states leading up to the Mississippi.

"How far can we go?"

Edie swallows and presses both her hands against the table. "I think I've been running us around long enough. Your turn. We can go as far as we need to."

It takes all the sting out of having to leave. When they get on the road again, Erik has his windcatcher in his pocket, and he closes his eyes, thinking as hard as he can: I'm here. Are you there? Can you hear me? I'll see you soon.

It's a decent enough night, traffic moving at a steady clip, rain light and sun still high, and they're laughing and fighting over the radio station. Edie can control it through the car itself, and Erik can use his power to reach for the dial-- his control's gotten fine enough that he can do that without even touching it.

So he's grabbing for the hard rock station, and she's trying to get it back to the oldies, and then suddenly she sits bolt upright in her seat.

"No," she whimpers, and Erik stares, wide-eyed, radio station tuned to static and forgotten. "No, come back to me, please don't go, I'm here--"

She chokes, and Erik makes a wild grab for the steering wheel, body and power both. His body gets tangled in the seat belt, his power fights hers for the car itself, and then she's collapsing, head slammed back against the headrest.

He has a split-second to feel a giant, looming metal weight coming right at them, to hear the frantic blast of a horn, and then there's impact and noise and the world goes dark.

Chapter End Notes
Warning: Death of a supporting character.
Chapter Summary

Charles can sense Erik's grief through the bond, and he doesn't want to leave Erik alone.

"He's hurting," Charles tells the counselor.

Dr. Bradstreet looks at him with concern, though he's mostly thinking about lunch. Charles is trying to shield, but when he's upset like this, it's hard to keep up his block against everyone else's thoughts.

"Adolescence is hard on some kids," Dr. Bradstreet says. "I know you haven't always had an easy time of it yourself, Charles."

"But not like this," says Charles. "It's all the time, it's like he's grieving. And he's unhappy a lot and-- scared, sometimes-- there must be something I can do. Aren't we supposed to be able to get help? In Health class they told us that if you think your soulmate is in a bad situation, you can report it and try to find em."

"Don't you think it's possible that those are normal feelings? Unhappy, scared... a lot of teenagers feel that way, it doesn't mean they're in any trouble. Maybe your telepathy is amplifying what you're picking up through the bond."

"It doesn't work that way," Charles frowns.

"How can you know that? There are so few telepaths, Charles, especially with abilities as strong as yours."

"I know because it's my telepathy," says Charles. "I know how it works because I experience it every moment of every day, and it's not like that. It doesn't 'amplify' anything."

Dr. Bradstreet spreads his hands. "But how would you know?"

"How do you know that what you're seeing is what's really there?" Charles demands. "You know because all your experience tells you that you can trust your eyes. You know because your brain has adapted to interpret visual information. Mine has adapted to interpret thoughts. I know what I sense, and I'm not amplifying anything."

"Okay, all right, calm down," says the counselor. "You know, it's customary to wait until you're eighteen to go seeking."

Charles folds his arms. "I'm not leaving my soulmate alone to be scared and unhappy for four more years just because it's customary."

"I see you've made up your mind," says the counselor. "But you'll have to get your parents' permission before you can do anything else."

"Then I will."
But at home, "Absolutely not, don't be ridiculous," says Kurt.

"What do you mean? Why not?" Charles asks. It's not as if Kurt likes having him around. Ever since he learned of Charles's mutation, Kurt's been sketchy around him, trying to hide what Charles knows anyway: Kurt married Sharon Xavier for the money.

*I already know,* Charles wants to tell him sometimes. *She already knows. She always knew.* Charles's mother doesn't love Kurt either, anymore, though she felt something for him at first. Even by the time they were married Sharon realized Kurt wanted the money more than he wanted her.

Even so, she thought their families would be better together. Such a lovely family portrait, Kurt and Cain, and Sharon and Charles and Raven. Charles hates doing anything to call attention to how wrong she was, how much better off they'd be without Kurt and Cain in their lives. He learned that lesson when he tried to tell her about Kurt's temper, about the way Cain cringes when his father's angry, the painful memories Cain carries that Charles couldn't shut out.

He told her about the way Cain reacted when he realized Charles knew, the clashes between them that Kurt's been passing off as hormones; *three dominant teenagers that age in the same space, of course there's going to be some sparring.* As if that explains the way Cain tries to get Charles alone, shoulders him into corners, snarls, *Whatever you think you know, you tell anyone and I'll make you sorry.*

And after all that, his mother told Charles he was imagining things. Charles is a telepath, shouldn't that count for something? He's read it right there in Kurt's mind, he knows that Kurt resented Brian Xavier when he was alive, resents him still. Kurt always intended to send the kids off to boarding school, and he's infuriated that Sharon disagreed, angrier still that she demurred on the basis of following Brian's last wishes.

Kurt has tried not to lay a hand on Cain since coming here, wary of Charles's ability. A lot of telepaths can only read surface thoughts, not memories. Maybe he thinks if he's stopped, no one will ever know.

But they've all felt it by now, how Kurt's hands come down a little too hard on shoulders, how his grip goes too tight, the way he crowds and shoves when he's angry. Sharon pardons all that as well. *He's a dominant, he's forceful,* she says, a little wan, a little distant, the way she's been ever since her soulmate's death.

Charles loves his mother, but it's hard to feel the way he should about her as long as she wears Kurt's collar around her neck.

"You're not going to embarrass your mother bringing home some child bride when you're fourteen years old," says Kurt.

"I wouldn't!" Charles says. "I'm not asking to recognize early, or even acknowledge. I just need to find out if he's safe."

"Ey's probably fine," Kurt dismisses. "Probably just unhappy because ey doesn't have eir own car yet."

"It's more serious than that."

"You don't know that. Everything's drama at your age. And maybe your mutation is boosting the feelings you get through the bond."

"Why does everyone think they know how my telepathy works better than I do?" Charles says,
frustrated. "This doesn't have anything to do with telepathy. I feel him through the bond, and he's scared, and I have to do something! Why can't I just take a seeker bus?"

"That's just asking to be kidnapped for ransom."

Oddly, Charles can read that Kurt's not just using that as an excuse to forbid him to go; he really believes it's a danger. It seems surreal to Charles, and more than a little intimidating, but he says, "Seeker buses have security. I could take a Diviner, they have two guards on every bus and more at every station."

"Rent-a-cops. That's not good enough. I know with Valentine's Day coming up, kids start getting ideas into their heads, but you can forget about this. I'm not hiring a bodyguard to go with you on some filthy seeker bus so you can go find out that your soulmate's sulking about eir allowance."

"He's a he, and he's in trouble," says Charles, hands tightening into fists. "Please. I need to help him. You have to let me go, why can't you just say yes--"

"Yes," Kurt says abruptly.
Charles stops short. "Really?"

"Yes, you can go."

"So you'll sign the sheet?"

Kurt looks at Charles blankly. Charles hands him the form: *Minor Permission To Travel*. He's already filled in everything but the Parent Or Guardian's Signature lines.

After Kurt just squints at the paper for a few long moments, Charles gets him a pen. Once he signs, Charles takes it to his mum to co-sign it.

"Why did Kurt sign this? He knows I don't want you going off already," she says. "Charles, you're only fourteen. Some kids aren't even feeling the bond yet. Are you sure--"

"I'm sure! I know what I feel, and I need to find him."

"We'll have to discuss this," she says, and Marches him right back to Kurt. "I thought we decided he wasn't going early."

"He can go," says Kurt flatly.

"What, just like that, he can go? My fourteen-year-old son can just vanish off on some wild goose chase...?"

"Yes," says Kurt, perfectly calm.

Charles feels uneasy, worse still when his mother looks at him with a hint of fear.

"Charles...?"

He puts his fingers to his temple, and touches Kurt's mind. The block damming off Kurt's objections is clumsy, huge, easy to take back.

"What were we talking about?" Kurt asks.

"Go to your room, Charles," his mum says. "Now."
"It was an accident. I'm sorry," Charles says, but it's a bit late for that.

In his room, Charles sits in the window seat, knees against his chest. «Can you...» he starts to reach out to his soulmate, and stops. What if he's doing something to his soulmate through the bond, like he did to Kurt? What if all the unhappiness and fear Charles gets from his other half is a reaction to him?

But all he feels now through the bond is eagerness, strong and welcoming; a feeling of attention, as if his mate is just waiting for more. It's so tempting to reach out to that, when he feels so alone. And if anyone can withstand what Charles is, what he can do, it ought to be his soulmate.

«I'm here,» he sends. «I'm here. I'm in New York, in Westchester. Where are you? Maybe if I guessed... are you in Pennsylvania?» Sometimes he feels the pull of the bond as if it's coming from the west.

He can read minds and send thoughts from as far as a few miles away, a bit further every day; Raven's helped him test it. He believes his soulmate hears him at least a little, because he feels his mate's emotions through the bond, and he can feel his mate reacting to him.

Charles has read everything he could lay hands on about mutation and the soulbond; in some cases, the bond can boost psionic abilities, but he couldn't find anything about telepaths being able to send thoughts through the bond.

So it seems as if he must be reaching his soulmate with his mind the same way he does everyone else. He might get a bit more power when he draws on the bond-- people talk about it as if it's something physical, the rope of the soul, the invisible cord, the Herzbrücke, but it's composed of psionic energy, after all. It likely boosts him beyond his normal limits, but according to all the available research, the bond can only do so much. It stands to reason that his bondmate can't be too far away.

There's no reaction to Pennsylvania, though. «Maryland?» he asks, and doubtfully, «Connecticut? Jersey?» Nothing, just an unwavering feeling of his other half listening. «Oh, I'm being ridiculous. Are you in New York as well?» No reaction to that either. «You must be east of the Mississippi...?»

No reaction, and he has to face it, his soulmate still isn't getting the meaning of what Charles is sending. Sometimes it almost seems as if Charles's words are getting through, the reactions are so in tune with what he says, but at times like this, it's clear that's not the case. Though... his soulmate might not speak English. Charles's telepathy doesn't have to take the form of language, but words seem easier for people to handle, so that's what he tends to use.

Charles pictures a map, clearly as he can, and calls to mind the shape of each state. New York. Pennsylvania. Maryland. When that doesn't net him a reaction, he pictures the entire United States, imagines everything east of the Mississippi brightening, turning green. «Yes?» Then he imagines it darkening, turning red. «Or no?»

He's starting to feel a trickle of confusion. «I just wish you could tell me,» Charles sends. «I just want to find you,» and there, some of that must have got across; he gets back a wave of longing, a match for his own.

There's a tap on his door, and even knowing the words won't be understood, Charles sends, «I have to go for now. I'll talk to you again soon. Tonight, soon. I promise,» before he calls, "Come in."

Raven doesn't have to ask; she shuts the door behind her, and climbs into the window seat with
him. Soon they won't both be able to fit in here. Or, well, they will if Raven changes herself to be smaller, but in her natural form, like now, she's nearly as tall as he is.

She doesn't say anything, just watches him, golden-eyed and serious.

"You're not afraid?" Charles asks finally.

"A little," she admits right away. "You didn't know you were doing it?"

Charles shakes his head.

"Pretty scary," Raven says. "But... for you too, isn't it? Being a dominant, you want control-- over yourself, not just other people, right?"

"Right." Charles meets her eyes. "I didn't mean to, Rae. You know I try to," he puts his fingers to his temple, and she tenses; he drops them quickly. "No, I'm not going to... I won't. I just mean, you know it makes it easier to focus if I do that, but I don't need it. I do it all the time because I'm trying to make it a habit. If I get used to always gesturing when I do it, maybe I won't do it without that."

"Maybe," Raven agrees. She doesn't sound very convinced.

Charles looks at his hands clasped around his knees. "It's okay if you don't want to stay too close for a while."

"Whatever," says Raven, "scoot over," and she pushes his knees out of the way and rearranges herself to lie back against him, dragging his arm over her.

He clutches her a little too tightly, probably, but she doesn't complain, and he feels better, for a while; his sister warm next to him, his hand at his temple as he sends out, «I should tell you what happened today,» trying to push the meaning across as best he can, and getting back only warmth and comfort from the west.

It doesn't last. When he comes home from school the next day, Charles finds he's been enrolled in extra tutoring to harness his psionic abilities, on top of the school program he's already in.

Kurt's enraged, trying to hide it from Charles's powers and only growing that much more resentful; Cain is terrified and angry, slamming doors, thundering around. The strained atmosphere has Raven on edge as well. The house is big enough that they can all retreat away from one another at times like this, but the tension poisons the air.

"Maybe after you have the telepathy under control, if you're still convinced you need to find your soulmate, we'll talk about letting you go," his mum says. She looks calm, but the worry and dread are jangling so loudly in her mind that he can't block it all.

Charles is too shaken by the fear roiling in the house now, the awareness of what he did and how much worse he could do, to argue anymore.
Chapter Summary

Erik meets his new foster parents, Aileen and Gerald Stone.

Chapter Notes

Aileen and Gerald are original characters (so no need to dig through your X-Men comics trying to figure out where they come from!). :)

"Erik, this is Aileen and Gerald Stone, your new foster parents."

Erik barely looks at them. They won't last any longer than the last three did. He's always tried to be good, be quiet, not make any trouble, but Nebraska isn't the most mutant-friendly state, and his status is all over his records. *Mutation: able to detect and manipulate metal. Tests indicate a potential of at least Sigma-level, possibly higher. The Sigma-level scares off a lot of people, and from the basic tests he's had to go through in order to get help from social services at all, Erik's sure he'll be able to do more when he's older. The things he can do with metal now dwarf what he could do when he was ten, when he was twelve. He's fifteen now, and he thinks when he's fully-grown and has had a chance to practice, he could do anything.*

And the social workers want him to hide it. Lie about it. They've hinted that they could help him have those records buried, the tests redone and showing only Beta or Gamma-level strength. At that level, maybe he could force a coin flip or tell the difference between fourteen-karat and eighteen-karat gold just by touching it.

Fuck that.

He doesn't ask if the Stones are mutants themselves, if that was why they were willing to take the risk of having him in their home. He doesn't ask anything about them. Maybe his radar's off, but he can't even tell which one of them's the dom and which of them's the sub, not that it matters to him. Neither wears a collar; both wear rings. Maybe they're not even recognized, not even bonded. Maybe *that's* why; maybe he was the only foster kid they could get. Maybe they're all in this together.

The Stones' house is huge, beautiful, in one of the wealthier subdivisions of Park View. If the Stones decide this is working out, he'll be changing schools next school year. Erik won't be sad to leave the last one behind, but he can't imagine the next one will be any different. There might be a shop class, but who knows if he'll even be allowed to take it-- with a Sigma-level mutation involving metal on his records, he isn't allowed within fifty feet of the workroom at his current school.

And when he walks into his bedroom, he knows it's going to be the same way here. So much for being in this together-- Erik's bedroom furniture is all made of solid wood, the curtains are held up with plastic rods, and the shelves are all wood pieced together with little dowel pegs and glue--
there's not so much as a nail in his room, not until you get under the thick layer of carpet and into the floorboards. Heating ducts, doorknob, door hinges, the levers for the windows. They didn't make a whole plastic room for him, but it's close enough.

It feels about as lonely as anything ever has.

They don't take away his windcatcher, though a part of him thinks let them try. He's taken to sleeping with it under his pillow, hand curled around it for comfort. Maybe it's only because he's thought of it as belonging to his soulmate for so long, but he feels closer to his soulmate when he holds it, when he's touching it or can feel it with his mutation or see it.

Late that first night, he looks out the window and focuses on his bond, the connection between him and his soulmate. It's stronger all the time, sometimes so clear he thinks he could close his eyes and follow it, step by step until he walked right into his soulmate's arms. Are you still there? Are you out there? Please say something. Anything. Who are you? What's your name? Are you like me? Please...

He gets back a soft wave of reassurance and sinks into it, going to his bed and kneeling. He's read about different positions, different postures, and he likes this one: palms face-up, hands resting loosely on his knees. He can only imagine what it'll be like to finally find his other half and kneel down, take some refuge in being at his feet. The older he gets, the more obvious it seems to be to everyone around him. He gets looks from doms now, like they think he's available just because he hasn't found his dominant yet. Some of them stare. Some of the doms in his classes have made sure Erik knows they're looking, but he's already gotten a reputation for being an Ice Slave, never letting anyone near him.

That won't change at a new school. It's stupid and romantic, but he wants the first time he goes to his knees for someone to be the day he finally meets his soulmate face-to-face. He wants to give his submission free and clear, and he wants it to mean something.

He gets so much acceptance from his soulmate, especially lately. Every time he reaches out, he hears his other half's voice, words seeming closer and closer to the surface. If you could just tell me where you are, if you could tell me I'd be welcome when I got there-- I'd go, I'd run away, just please, please... I need to hear that, I need to know...

If his soulmate can make out words from Erik's side, there's never been any sign of it. Erik sighs and digs into his pocket for his windcatcher, holds it in his hand until the metal warms up. Three more years, he thinks. That's all. And then they can't stop me. I'll find you.
Chapter Summary

Erik's foster parents aren't so sure about that voice Erik's been hearing through the bond.

Three months, and it's not as though he's starting to love the Stones, not even really starting to trust them... but now and then it's not so bad, being here. They've stopped trying to hide all the metal in the house from him, now that they've seen what his mutation is really like-- he's not randomly yanking pipes from the walls or using it to rifle through their jewelry, he just uses his mutation like any other sense. He plays with coins sometimes, flipping them through and between his fingers; he sets the table with his ability instead of with his hands; he doesn't complain about doing the dishes, and he can put a fine edge on a knife and buff a mark off a stainless steel pan without any effort at all.

It's clear that Aileen isn't enthusiastic about his mutation the way Erik's mother was, but she's trying. Gerald's trying a little harder. He says there's at least one other mutant at Erik's new school, maybe a few others-- though he waited until Aileen was out of the room before sharing that. It'll only be another week before school starts; Erik will find out for sure then, and maybe he won't feel so alone.

One afternoon he stops right in the middle of putting cookies in the oven, eyes tracking east, trying to make out what his soulmate's saying. It's so close, he really can almost hear him. Again, say that again, I'm here, I'm here--

"Erik?"

Tell me! I'm listening, I'm here for you, always--

"Erik, watch out, the oven--"

Almost, almost... just a little more, if only his soulmate were speaking just a little louder. I can hear you, just say it again, I can almost make it out, I'm here--

"Erik!"

He slams the cookie sheet into the oven and pushes the oven door closed with his power. "What?"

Aileen's staring at him. "What did you mean, say it again, I can almost make it out?"

The blood drains out of Erik's face. He wants to take the words back, wants to pull them out of the air the way he can pull coins from a fountain. How could he have been so careless? "I didn't mean anything."

"Were you talking to your bondmate?"

Erik winces. Apparently that's answer enough. Aileen comes over to him and grabs his arms, a little too tightly, shaking him. Erik jerks back, eyes wide. He had one bad foster family, bad enough he had to defend himself with his ability, but the Stones have never been like that. Aileen's
never put her hands on him before.

"Can you hear em?"

"I-- no," Erik says, uncertain. The only thing he's sure of is that he can't tell her. She knows too much already. "No, I-- of course not--"

"That's not what you said a minute ago."

"I--" He swallows. "I don't mean words," he says, trying to sound scathing, condescending. "Of course I can't hear words. I get feelings, and come on, it's been years. I'm used to feeling things from him. This time it was a little vague, so--"

"You said I can hear you," she cuts in. "Erik. Are you hearing voices?"

It's times like this that he's sure she's the dominant in the Stones' relationship; she's forceful in ways Gerald could never be. "I--"

"Answer me. I need to know." Aileen's voice is all layered over with anger and worry and fear. "Is that what's going on, is that who you're talking to at night?"

"At night-- what do you mean--"

"After you go to bed. I can hear you sometimes--"

"You're spying on me?"

"No, I didn't mean to, but when your window's open and I'm outside--"

Stupid, stupid-- he should have realized that, should have been looking out for the Stones when he leaves his window open. "It's not that," he tries. "I promise, it's not that..."

"Don't lie to me. Please, Erik, you're not in trouble, I'm not going to do anything to you, but I need to know. Are you hearing voices? Are you hearing eir voice? Is ey talking to you?"

She's not going to give up on this, not after what she heard. "Yes," Erik whispers, "but it's not--"

Aileen sucks in a rough breath through her teeth. "Erik, don't you know what a voice means? If you're hearing someone talking to you in your head, that could be a sign of mental illness. Your dominant could have a serious condition, and if you stay connected ey could hurt you or make you sick, too--"

"He's not sick," Erik says angrily. "He's not going to make me sick. Unless you mean maybe he's a mutant, in which case I already am."

"That's not what I mean," Aileen says. "We don't hate your mutation, we don't mind that you're a mutant, but you have to listen to me-- this could be serious, you might really need help."

"I'm fine," Erik says. "You're not listening to me! It's been like this for years now, and it's fine. It's always been fine. It gets--" In for a penny, in for a pound; there's no going back, and from the look on her face, she certainly isn't going to forget about it. "It gets stronger every year," he admits. "But I swear, I'm okay. I mean, do I seem sick to you?"

She's gone ashen; Erik knows immediately it was the wrong thing to say, that sharing this was the wrong thing to do. "You have to renounce. You need to try to block your bond," she says hoarsely. "You need to start right now--"
"What?" Erik actually recoils from her, takes a step backward. "No! Are you kidding me? Cut him off? Why would I do that?"

"Because if you don't, if ey's sick, if that illness gets all the way to you-- you have no idea how much damage ey could do, how much ey might already have done--"

"I'm not blocking him," Erik says, shaking his head. "Not a chance. He's the best thing that's ever happened to me. He's the last person left alive who cares about me--"

Aileen's eyes go wide, and she turns away, stricken. Erik nearly reaches out to her, almost says he's sorry... but there's no way he's doing what she wants him to do. No way.

He turns on his heel, walking out of the kitchen. Back in his bedroom, he pushes the door shut. There's no lock on his door, but it has metal hinges, and the knob itself and the latchplate are both brass. Unless they're willing to break down the wood around the doorframe itself, there's no way they're getting in.

He goes to the window, facing east and closing his eyes. He leaves the window shut. The bond is stronger all the time, and nowadays he can feel the heat traveling between them, almost an electric crackle when he focuses on it. In just the time he's been in Nebraska, it's become that much more present in his life-- although maybe that's because he's relying on it so much, pushing so much hope and need and desperation into it. He gets so much back from it; all the reassurance he needs, the unconditional welcome and support that says You're not alone. Even if his soulmate doesn't say it in words he can understand, when Erik touches the bond, he knows he's loved.

*Block him,* Erik thinks. Cut himself off from this feeling, this warm gift of acceptance and love? Nothing in the world could be worth giving this up. People renounce, and of course he's heard about it in health class-- tell an adult if you start receiving anything more than feelings from the bond; renunciation, or "bond blocking," may be the only thing that can keep you both healthy-- but it's different for him. He's a mutant. Somewhere out there, his bondmate's a mutant, too. He has to be; Erik refuses to believe anything else. His family-- his mother, his father, his grandparents, his grandfather's soulmate. All mutants. His soulmate's like him. That's all this is.

Aileen said "renounce" like it was *easy.* Erik can't imagine how she did it. He's heard lots of stories about people who block their bonds; everyone has a friend of a friend who's been through it. Once someone's been cut off, it's almost never the same. Soap operas are full of renunciation plots, people who block their bonds and can't find each other again, people who come back to each other after long separations and can't form a true bond. In most states, people like that can't recognize; they can marry, but that's a private or religious ceremony, not something accepted by the state. There are some movements around that want to change that, give full recognition rights even to unbonded couples, but the fundamentalists around the country are almost always against it, and it hasn't gained much traction. Nearly everyone has a soulmate; most people can't imagine life without theirs.

But it's not the legality that concerns Erik. It's the connection between his soulmate and himself. Right now it's vibrant, beautiful, the most important thing in Erik's world. But if he blocked... what if his soulmate felt that, and when it was safe for Erik to come seeking him, he didn't want to connect again? Once people get used to living without their soulmates' presence, supposedly they can just... walk away, move on. It hurts just thinking about that. *Could you forget me? I could never forget you.*

He made it about halfway there; he thinks he was halfway to his soulmate before the accident, before he got stranded in the middle of the country. He could get the rest of the way on his own. He could find a way to get money. Steal it, if he had to. He knows it's not always safe for a sub
traveling alone, but he's not afraid of humans.

Are you out there? It's me. I'm here. He takes a deep breath. They know about you. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. But it's going to be okay. Just a little longer and I'll come to you. I'll find you.

Relief, from the other side of the bond, and reassurance... Erik can hear that voice, pure and resonant, deep inside him as though it's a part of him. He likes to imagine what the words would be, if he could make them out: I'm here. I'm waiting for you. I'll take care of you. It's going to be all right.

He's not sick. The mind on the other end of this connection... he's not imagining things, he's not making the voice up. His mother believed him. And she was taking him closer, getting him to his soulmate, not trying to pry him away.

It's such a huge difference from what Aileen wants him to do. Block the bond, cut off all emotion and communication with his soulmate... he can't. He can't even think about it. They belong together. He can't give this up. He's not sick. He's fine. He's fine.

Don't worry, Erik thinks, mouth shut tightly, trying to force the words as far to the east as he can. I'm yours. I'm always going to be yours. I'm not going to let them do anything to separate us. I promise.
Chapter Summary

A series of pre-admissions evaluations puts Charles in a tight spot. But Charles is never alone, not even at moments like these.

"Star. Cross. Circle. Star," says Charles, leaning his head against his hand. It's been a long day of this. The Harvard admissions office says he should get a new evaluation of his telepathy and his control over it before he's admitted early to start attending in the fall.

More importantly, he won't be allowed to go seeking his soulmate until after his first year of college, and even that's conditional.

So he's here at the Center for Psionic Research in North Carolina, not far from Duke University, where some of the earliest tests of mutant psionics took place. Yesterday he allowed a raft of physical examinations... CAT scans, MRIs, X-rays.

Today they've tested him for every related mental power from precognition (nil) to remote viewing (ditto,) but the evaluations of his telepathy have all been as weak as this Zener card nonsense. The tester flips the cards and looks at them behind an opaque divider, and Charles reads the card's symbol from her mind. A Gamma-level telepath could do it; Charles was ranked at Theta when he was seven.

"Square. Star. Star. Cross," Charles stretches his awareness, blanketing the building, beyond the building, the block, the neighborhood, the city. Here in Durham he's a little further west than he usually is at home, but his soulmate doesn't feel closer from here.

Ever since he started to feel his soulmate's unhappiness through the bond, he's tried to convince his mother to take the family on vacations within the States. But Kurt never agreed, and that meant the answer was always no. This year he begged to go skiing in Aspen instead of Kurt's favorite resort in Switzerland, but they don't trust him anymore. He wonders if they refused him just to prove that they still can.

Kurt's locked down all the accounts, and Charles's credit card is now deemed for emergencies only: any time it's used, Kurt is alerted with a phone call. Charles can draw just one eighty-dollar cash advance with the card, which Kurt pointed out was enough for a meal, a hotel room, and a phone call home.

The precautions are ludicrous. If Charles were untrustworthy enough to merit all that, he'd just steal money. It would be easy for him; he knows because he's done it, a total of $322 from Kurt. It's all been petty, opportunist theft, using his telepathy to give Kurt the impression things cost more than they do and taking the difference, partly to have it in case of an emergency, but mostly out of an admittedly childish urge to prove to himself how little their restrictions can touch him.

"Circle. Cross. Square. Star." He should just go. He's thought of it often, but what stops him every time is the fact that he'll have to sleep eventually, and he won't be able to defend himself then.

Kurt's honest suspicions about abduction have left an impression on him, but if he ran away, it's
probably the police he'd really have to worry about. A missing persons report might not stir much response, but a missing mutant with Charles's powers... that might.

Charles could travel without ever giving out his real name, probably, but the number of people he'd have to deceive and alter is daunting. He's not sure he could block Kurt and his mum from notifying the authorities if he disappeared, and he's afraid to try. He doesn't want to hurt anybody.

"Square. Waves. Waves. Waves. Did someone forget to shuffle these?" Charles asks.

His tester cracks a tiny smile, but she just keeps turning cards over. It's been going on for so long and it's such a pitifully simple test considering the extent of Charles's ability that he knows it must be a cover for something else, but so far, he can't tell what. They brought him deep underground for the testing. Maybe they think he's too far away to affect anyone beyond the scientists immediately around him.

Other people are a little muffled from here, but Charles can reach them if he needs to, if he tries. It seems like a good idea to hold back, though. Maybe it's better if they think they know his limits.

He picks through the minds around him, the tester, the scientists monitoring from outside. They're all aware of his abilities, all trained to shield, steeling themselves against him. For all the good that does. Charles can infiltrate those shields; they feel flimsy to him.

Maybe that's what they're really waiting for, maybe they're measuring his brainwaves to see if he's invading minds. But there's no law against that; there can't be. There are only rules against how a telepath can use that kind of information, once ey has it.

"Cross, circle, star, waves," says Charles, and gives up on playing this straight. He finds the most emotionally charged mind among the scientists; he seems likely to be the one who knows most about what's going on.

Charles hops the figurative fence into the man's mind: hello, Dr. Craig Taylor Monroe. Monroe's only shielding his current thoughts. Charles can get to his memories easily enough, and from there it's easy to find the short-term memories, the ones that are being processed by Monroe's brain right now, moment by moment, just the tiniest lag after they happen.

There's no shield to stop Charles from reading Monroe's thoughts here, passing into memory nanoseconds after they occur: *There's the spike-- that's the pattern we're looking for. Took you long enough, you little fucker. So we know how bored he has to get before he starts poking around. Now, how bored does he have to get before he starts tinkering? In the old days they wouldn't have to wait around like this. They'd stage some kind of attack to make him defend himself. Can't do that anymore. Liabilities! Violates the subject's rights! Like this kid isn't a walking talking human rights violation every second he's alive. He can read your mind, make you do whatever he wants and wipe your memory afterward-- I don't care how good-hearted Lisa thinks he is, he ought to get a lethal injection, you don't just let that kind of power run around free.*

Charles drops quickly out of Monroe's mind, peers more carefully into the minds of the others. Of the five at the monitoring stations, Monroe and Cortini think Charles should be euthanized, Ferreria thinks Charles should be kept on a permanent diet of drugs to suppress his telepathy, Husom thinks much the same with the added notion that he'd like to fuck Charles once he's sedated, and Tarczynski has no prescriptions, she just wants to know more about how his mind works.

*Thank you, Dr. Tarczynski.*
"Lisa" turns out to be the tester, Dr. Lisa Barnes, Charles finds when he reads her. Behind her shields, she thinks Charles is sweet, with his big blue eyes and freckles and his cute English accent, and so polite and patient. But maybe Craig has a point, maybe Charles is only sweet because he knows how to treat people from reading their minds, maybe he's just lulling them while he gets into their heads. She doesn't agree that he ought to be killed, though. Drugs ought to be enough.

By the time he's read all six of them, Charles can manage to insinuate into their thoughts without tipping them off with that distinctive brainwave pattern Craig noticed. So at least that's useful. He also makes very sure that there aren't any real plans to kill or drug him. Those are just the doctors' personal opinions.

Charles shouldn't be surprised. He's encountered this sort of thing plenty of times before, people thinking he should've been aborted, or drowned like a sack of kittens; dashed against a rock, left exposed on a hillside, dropped down a well, taken out and shot.

It used to frighten him, but he's found a smile and a friendly word go a long way toward dispelling most thoughts along those lines. People are social animals, and as much as they fear what's different, they also tend to respond to cues like self-assurance and kindness; Charles makes it a point to conspicuously practice both. His mutation is invisible, and generally no one can tell how he's using it, so it's easy for people to forget.

But these are scientists who specialize in the study of psionic mutations, and five out of six want him drugged out of his mind, or dead. It's a little unnerving.

"Cross, star, square," Charles says. "Can we take a break?"

"Just a few more," says Dr. Barnes.

"What are a few more going to tell you that the first two hundred and twenty-six didn't?" Charles asks.

"Come on, Charles," Dr. Barnes smiles, "if you want early admission, you're going to have to put up with a few more tests."

"I don't, actually," Charles says, and feels the attention of all six scientists perk up. Monroe checks to make sure the live video feed is going out, that the recording is being captured, so that if Charles alters all their minds, there will be evidence of what happened.

"If you quit now, you're giving up your shot at Harvard," says Dr. Barnes.

"I'm doing these tests as a courtesy," Charles says. "The university has no legal grounds to demand additional tests of my mutation. If they try to claim it's mandatory, that's discrimination, and I'll take it to the Mutant Legal Defense Foundation."

"Everybody gets huffy and threatens to sue over the least little thing these days," Dr. Barnes says; now she's just trying to needle him into taking her over.

"If you get this a lot, maybe that should prompt you to reconsider your approach," says Charles. "I'd like to leave now."

Dr. Barnes tells him, "Okay, your call," and makes a show of straightening the deck of cards.

Charles goes to the door; the knob won't turn. "It's locked."

"Oops," says Dr. Barnes, unconcerned. "It must have locked automatically. It's not supposed to do
that during business hours. The system must be screwed up. I don't have my keys on me."

Charles sets his jaw. Right. Staging an attack or holding him against his will would be a human rights violation, but they can likely get away with the plausible deniability of an "accidentally" locked door and forgotten keys.

"As long as we're stuck here," Dr. Barnes says brightly, "why don't you have a seat and we'll finish up?"

"There's no way to ring someone and ask them to fix the lock?" Charles asks pointedly. He knocks at the door. "There's no one in this corridor to hear me knocking? No one's monitoring what goes on in these testing rooms? There's a camera right up there in the corner, why don't we write a note and hold it up so they'll come let us out?"

"Be my guest," says Dr. Barnes.

It's on the tip of Charles's tongue to use his ability and ask Dr. Tarczynski to intervene. But she hasn't yet, and shows no sign of doing so, even though this locked door is a protocol violation at best and an infringement on his rights at worst.

And it seems suspicious to him, now that he considers it, that there are six doctors in the immediate area, five hostile and one neutral. One very obvious candidate to appeal to, when the situation seems threatening. And if Dr. Tarczynski seems reluctant to help him, how tempted would he be to change her mind, just that little bit of a nudge to get her to come and unlock the door?

They're probably waiting for another brainwave pattern to show up, the pattern that shows Charles changing someone's mind, not just reading it. There's no law against that either, exactly, but only because there's no precedent yet. If he forces someone to do something against eir will while the instruments are measuring and the cameras rolling, maybe he'll become that precedent.

He didn't read anything like that from them, but it's possible they're better at shielding than it seemed, and he only got through the first line of defense. Or maybe they haven't been informed exactly what they're participating in, how the deck's been stacked. Just following orders.

Charles comes back to the table. Dr. Barnes smiles at him once again. "Ready to get back to it?"

"No," he says, turning the chair around. He sits with his back to Dr. Barnes, crosses his legs and gets comfortable, puts his fingers to his temple.

«Hi,» he sends, tuning out this room, this place, these people, focusing on the bond. «Are you there? Are you free?»

From his soulmate he gets a little flicker of pleased surprise, and then a fierce warmth, an embattled feeling.

«I hope things are better for you than they are here, right now,» Charles sends. «From the way you feel lately, I wonder.»

Curiosity and concern, set against his soulmate's nearly constant backdrop of worry and sadness. Charles pushes reassurance to him, sends a hint of irritation followed by resignation, to let his mate know his own situation's not that serious.

It's not that serious. His telepathy has been a matter of record since he was first tested at seven. It must be the control they're after, and Charles refuses to give them a demonstration of that. They can only do this accidentally-locked-in rubbish for so long, and he'll put his ability to keep himself
occupied up against theirs any day.

«I can be patient,» Charles tells himself as much as his mate, who probably can't make out the words anyway, just the gist. «I have you to keep me company. Even if we can't properly talk, it's enough. My sister says I like it best when I do all the talking anyway. Not very nice, but probably not completely untrue either...»

His soulmate's attention drops away briefly twice, but for the most part, he keeps his focus on the bond for as long as Charles does, and the feelings they trade are so vibrant, it's almost like a conversation. At one point his soulmate sends a hint of arousal; Charles has to send back regret, and receives disappointment and understanding in return, and a brisk feeling, almost like... Charles wonders if his soulmate is thinking of a cold shower, or actually taking one.

The idea makes him smile, and he shares back a feeling of mischief, imagines snapping a towel. His soulmate retorts with mock disapproval, chased with another quick little jolt of arousal, like a tease-- and back to the brisk feeling. Charles imagines his soulmate stepping right back into the shower again after getting out, and smiles to himself like a fool, sending amusement, getting back a sense of accomplishment, happiness, affection...

And it's funny, but he never really thought about it before. You're meant to love your soulmate, of course. Your mate is your other half. You're uniquely connected and drawn to one another, and you can each know what the other is feeling, so naturally, it's just assumed that you love each other.

But Charles knows what a lot of people feel, and what they think, as well. He knows what these six doctors think and feel-- he knows how bored and frustrated they are right now, which is satisfying. If that were all it took to love someone, Charles would be in love with nearly everyone he's ever read. And while sometimes he does feel an almost uncomfortable degree of sympathy for most people, that's not love.

What he feels for his soulmate... this is love. He doesn't know who his soulmate is or where he is, nothing about his life, except that he seems to be having a hard time of it. But somewhere out there, his mate has spent-- it must be hours, now-- concentrating on Charles, sending feelings to him, relieving the worry and isolation. Now that Charles is happy, his mate feels pleased and content as well, just from helping him.

Charles might've received a very different response... annoyance, or impatience, or just a simple lack of attention that would have lessened the strength of the energy between them. Instead, he's been given this amazing loyalty and devotion.

He bites his lip and puts all his focus on the bond, trying to put across all his appreciation and gratitude and love. «There's so much good in you,» he sends. «There's so much more to you than this-- the situation you're in, whatever's making you unhappy and holding you back. I promise that one day everything's going to be better for you. I'll do anything to make that happen. I love you.»

His feelings get through, if nothing else does, and there's exuberance and love coming back in return. The joy between them feels so strong that it's like the bond stands out in a new way from all the other thoughts and feelings that Charles senses with his telepathy, day in and day out.

He feels as if he's standing in sunlight, like there's a trail of it ahead of him, a lighted path leading west. West and north from here, it's so clear right now, as if Charles could just walk that path and find him at the end of it...

"Charles," says Dr. Barnes. "We can go now."
Charles ignores her, trying to hold onto this. North as well as west from here, when normally from home he only feels it from the west. Supposedly as you get older, closer to seeking age, you can find your mate through intuition, looking at maps and road signs, feeling drawn to one destination over all others. «Where are you? Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana--»

"Are you all right? Maybe we kept him here too long. Charles?"

«Illinois, Missouri, Iowa--»

"Charles!" Someone's shaking him now, and he loses that warm, lighted clarity-- he turns and faces Dr. Barnes, seething, and she takes a step back. She probably doesn't think he's quite so sweet, right now.

"Maybe we should test you again for astral projection," says Dr. Monroe. All the monitoring scientists have come into the testing room. Apparently he's been unresponsive for a while, long enough to worry them.

"Maybe you should let me leave," Charles says. His soulmate's sending worry, he must've caught the anger when Charles lost the path; Charles responds with reassurance, tries to convey that he's unhappy because he's been interrupted, because his attention's being demanded. Understanding comes back, and encouragement, a buoyant feeling of support.

«I love you so much," Charles thinks. If no other words ever make it through, he hopes those do. The happiness in return feels so complete; maybe they did.

"We're moving on to the last test," says Dr. Barnes.

Charles stares. "There's more?"

"It shouldn't be hard for you," she says, leading him out into the corridor. "It's just an entrance exam. You flew through your SATs, you'll do fine."

"Then why do I have to take it?"

"Well, you know, with a telepath, there's always the question of whether you've really learned something, or whether you're just getting it out of someone else's mind," says Dr. Barnes. "So we're going to help verify that it's all you."

"I already undergo modified exams to accommodate my mutation," says Charles. "All my exams are administered by computer so that there's no one around me who knows the answers."

"But you could still get the concepts from the teachers' minds."

"I don't," says Charles. "And even if I did, any telepath can tell you that's a skill in itself, probably a lot harder than anything on the actual exam."

"Then you won't mind proving it," says Dr. Barnes, and she opens a door to reveal a narrow little room with a computer queued up and waiting.

After being locked into the last room, there's no way Charles will just stroll into this one. He leans in cautiously, but it's like a hood coming down over his head-- he backs out quickly and rounds on the doctor. "What is that?"

"There's a thin layer of anti-psionic metal particles in the paint on the walls," says Dr. Barnes placidly.
Charles laughs. "Are you entirely mad? I'm not going in there."

"It's the only way to be fair to the other candidates, Charles."

"Fair? If I went into that room, I wouldn't deserve to be admitted into a preschool, let alone Harvard," Charles says. "I won't make myself vulnerable like that and it's not fair to ask that of me. You wouldn't expect a baseline human candidate to take an exam handcuffed with a blindfold and gag on, you can't expect me to submit to this."

"How else can you prove you're not using your abilities to gain an unfair advantage?"

"Telepathy isn't an unfair advantage any more than intelligence is," Charles says. "It's a part of me, it has pluses and minuses. All you think about is whether I could get access to other people's minds to help me get answers, not about the fact that I had to block against a hundred other students' anxiety during final exams."

"Then who knows, maybe you'll do even better," says Dr. Barnes. "No distractions."

"Being without my telepathy is worse than a distraction. You're obliged by the Amended Americans with Disabilities Act to provide a safe and fair testing environment," Charles cites. "You can try to pass this off as fair, somehow, but even you can't pretend it's safe. I can't feel safe if I'm deprived of one of my senses. Telepathy may be extrasensory perception to you, but it's not 'extra' to me, it's innate. I'm not doing this. I want to leave. Now. Or did you forget the keys to the lift, as well?"

Dr. Barnes looks past him. The other researchers are coming down the corridor, Monroe and Husom in the lead. They might be upping the stakes, still trying to goad him into taking someone over, or maybe they really are going to try to get him into that room.

Either way, Charles is done with this. He's still getting a steady undercurrent of support from his soulmate, and it keeps him from panicking, stops him reacting out of fear. He draws on the strength he's receiving from the bond; he can feel the minds in the building above easily, now.

He puts his fingers to his temple and sends to Raven, thirty stories up, «I may need your help.»

Raven responds, «Finally! You've been down there forever! Are you okay?»

«I didn't want them to know I could reach you,» Charles explains, «they've been monitoring me to find out how strong I am. But I don't have much choice now, they're not letting me leave. Phone Martin, and tell Mum what's going on.»

"What are you doing?" asks Monroe, patting himself down. "What did you do?"

"Nothing, to you," says Charles. "I told my sister to get in touch with our lawyer."

"You can transmit thoughts through thirty stories?" asks Dr. Tarczynski, diverted.

"Yes," says Charles. "I can broadcast thoughts that far, to dozens of people-- and if you don't take me back to the first floor directly, I'm going to start."

The six of them hesitate long enough to put Charles on edge, but Dr. Husom makes a quick phone call and soon says, "We're supposed to send him back up. I'll go with him."

"No," says Charles. "If someone has to go with me, it can be Dr. Tarczynski."
Dr. Husom goes red and angry, realizing Charles must've read him, and the others look uncomfortable, but they let Dr. Tarczynski take him to the lift and up to the lobby.

Raven's waiting, and hugs him as soon as he steps out of the lift. "You're all right?"

"I'm fine." «Really,» he adds.

"I told Sharon we shouldn't have let them take you down there," says Raven, and hugs him again.

«I think it was all just intimidation tactics to try to get me to show more of my abilities,» Charles tells her. «But it got to a point that I wasn't willing to take the chance they were serious.»

"Good! Assholes," says Raven.

Even Kurt doesn't argue; maybe only because they've all been kept waiting for so long, but Charles will take it. When they get out into the car park under the warm afternoon sun, he finally takes a deep breath and relaxes.

He's lucky, he sees that. If those researchers were more determined, if Charles hadn't had advocates waiting for him above, if he weren't from a wealthy family with a lawyer on retainer, if he didn't know his rights... maybe they would have felt more free to keep manipulating him to get the result they wanted. Maybe they wouldn't have waited for a result at all.

«Everything's okay,» he sends to his soulmate once they're in the car putting Durham behind them. «You helped me so much. I don't know what I'd do without you. I just wish I could do as much for you.»

He leans his head against Raven's shoulder, and she shifts her form a little to be the right height for it. He takes her hand and squeezes it. "Thank you. I'm really glad you were there."

"Me too. Are you babbling at your soulmate again?" she asks, flicking his fingers on his temple. "Aren't you worried that poor guy is going to be sick of you by the time you finally meet?"

"No," Charles smiles, feeling a warm sense of relief and affection coming through the bond. "I'm not worried at all."
Chapter Summary

As Erik makes his way through high school, his foster parents get more and more nervous about Erik's powers and that strange connection he has to his soulmate.

Chapter Notes

In this chapter, we're welcoming Jason Wyngarde to our cast of characters. You might have heard of him. In the Bound and Determined universe, our mental casting job for him is the marvelous Lanny Joon (so, you know, heads up! In B&D, Jason's Asian-American).

You'll be seeing quite a bit more of Jason. ^_^

"I don't like it," Gerald says, voice low. "I don't like how he's been acting lately, and I think it's all about those friends of his. They're not a good influence."

This school year has been different from last year already; Erik can't exactly argue with that. It's his junior year, he's sixteen, and instead of being the new sub at school, he's earned a reputation for being someone you don't fuck with.

And for bending metal. He's done hiding his mutation, and those friends Gerald worries so much about are just like he is: mutants. There's a "Mutant Pride" badge sewn onto Erik's backpack now. He didn't get to go to the Mutant Pride March in Washington this summer, and he's still pissed off about that; the Wyngardes offered to fly him out along with Jason, even offered to pay for his plane ticket, and the Stones flat-out said no. A few weeks after Jason got back from Washington, Gerald found the copies of Mutagen magazine Jason brought back for Erik; both the Stones had walked on eggshells for a week. He can just imagine them wondering why it had to be Mutagen, why it couldn't be Fist And Chain, something that only had pictures of doms posed provocatively with floggers instead of being a magazine that advocated mutant supremacy.

"I don't like it, either, but he hasn't been interested in making normal friends," Aileen points out. "What are we going to do? Tell him he can't see them anymore? They're the only two friends he has."

"The Wygarde kid's... okay," Gerald concedes. "He and his parents get along fine, and he's even adopted. I thought maybe he'd be able to show Erik it isn't so bad, being with someone other than his birth parents..."

"It's different with Jason," Aileen points out. "And the Wyngardes, God, they think all three of their mutations are cute. Even Mort's, can you imagine that? Cute."

"Well, Jason grew up with them--"
"Exactly. It's not like it is with Erik and us. The Wyngardes have had Jason since he was a baby. Trust me, you don't want to bring up adoption with Erik, he doesn't want to hear it." Erik flinches--that conversation was ugly, and he's not proud of how fast he got angry with her, how quick he was to say you're not my mother, you're never going to be my mother, but she still thinks he's sick. She still thinks his soulmate's doing something to him, she still watches him too closely when his soulmate's talking to him.

Well, he can listen in, too. He's learned not to speak out loud to his soulmate anymore, and when the Stones are talking about Erik or his friends they're very careful to be quiet, but the heating ducts in this house are all connected, and they're all metal. He can feel the vibrations in the duct nearest them, amplify those vibrations until their conversation plays out at full volume in his room.

It doesn't surprise him that they hate his friends. Aileen might have said that they don't hate his mutation, but he's never believed them. He's also not surprised that Jason's the one both of them think is "all right". Of course he is; Jason looks normal. Or everyone thinks he looks normal, but with his ability he could look like anything. No one would ever know who the real Jason is. Maybe the fact that he's Asian and his adoptive parents are white should be enough to convince people that he isn't hiding his real self, but once people find out his mutation is all about illusions, most of them have to ask the question. Teasing, some of them: do you ever make yourself taller? clear up any skin problems? make yourself more handsome?

He doesn't really need the help. He's gorgeous, as far as Erik is concerned: slender, a few inches shorter than Erik, smart, dominant as hell. Dark hair, intense eyes, beautiful full lips. If Erik thought of himself as single, he'd have dropped to his knees early on.

Jason once told Erik that he won't change his appearance unless he's in a fight and needs the advantage. But he's blatant about his mutation, puts up illusionary neon lights that say "FUCK YOU" when someone gets in his face, changes banners and light displays and blackboards when the whim takes him. "I was never going to blend in anyway," he told Erik, both of them looking at the family photos hanging on the wall at Jason's house. "Why hide?" Erik felt close to him from the first, thanks to that.

As for Mort-- when Erik first met Mort, he was wearing makeup, dyeing his hair, covering everything else. But everyone knew, and until Erik stood up for Mort and put a stop to it, people called him "Toad" right to his face. Mort hated the makeup. Hated the hair dye. Mort has never been ashamed of who he is; he's just angry that the world thinks he should be.

They're the only three out mutants in their class-- Erik thinks there are more mutants who are hiding, but there's no proof, and thank God Nebraska doesn't have some of the scarier mutant registration laws on the books. Still, ever since the three of them became inseparable, a brotherhood of sorts, they've been scaring the hell out of people just by existing. They've never done anything to start trouble, although Erik's not shy about standing up for all three of them when he needs to-- with a threatening look, mostly, but with his fists, too.

He'd use his ability if it came to that. He uses it on a daily basis at school already, opening and closing his locker, peeling back the foil on school lunches, all the little things that all his foster families and social workers have told him to do by hand, like normal people. All the things his mother used to high-five him for doing. Mostly it doesn't bother people; they think his mutation is little more than a party trick. But most people don't know what he's capable of.

The Stones had him tested again when he turned sixteen. He's testing Phi-level now. God, his mother would have been proud of him. He holds onto that belief, the memory of all the ways she encouraged him to use his mutation to the fullest extent of his ability, and he pushes that pride to
his soulmate whenever he breaks through another barrier. Opening lockers, peeling back foil? He can lift cars, sense steel transmission towers and their aluminum power lines from miles and miles away.

For Erik's birthday, Jason got him a huge, horrible, ugly copper sculpture in the shape of a cowboy boot, something he found at an estate sale he'd gone to with his parents. "Mom looked at me like I was nuts, but the sign on it said it was solid copper. I thought you might get a kick out of it." He was right. First Erik figured out how to shake off the patina, and then he started using it like modeling clay, drawing off a piece now and then to make trinkets and decorations. He'd even made a vase for Jason's mother, who'd laughed and thanked him and conceded the point; the vase is on their mantelpiece now, right out on display in the living room, and Patricia's been hinting to Erik that she could use some matching candlesticks. It's hard not to be a little jealous of Jason's family.

But after the fun of making simple metal objects wore off, it was Jason's idea to see if Erik could mix copper into other metals, make his own alloys. When Erik finally figured out how to make bronze, he gave Jason the first thing he made: a solid heavy wristband, rugged enough to work as dominant jewelry. "People are going to think we're going steady," Jason joked at the time, but most days he wears it anyway.

Having friends who know what he can do and are proud of him for doing it makes a huge difference. The Stones can disapprove all they want, but there's no way Erik's giving Mort or Jason up. Mort thinks he's amazing; Jason thinks he's going to end up Omega-level by the time he's through, thinks Erik ought to study molecular chemistry in order to see if his powers extend to the microscopic level as well as moving big solid objects around. It all depends on where he ends up after he turns eighteen and finds his soulmate, but he'll probably look into advanced physics and chemistry when he gets to college-- along with mutant studies, maybe law, mutant rights advocacy.

He just has to make it through the next couple of years first, and that means getting along with the Stones. And they're not excited about his mutation the way his friends are. Not proud the way his mother would have been, the way even Jason's mother is, a little. They don't understand him at all.

"He's always been so quiet," Aileen says. "That's what they say about the kids who start trouble-- God, if Erik really lost control--"

"He hasn't so far. I don't think we have to worry about him shooting up the school or anything--"

"He wouldn't even need a gun to do that. He could probably kill everyone in the school just with the pipes and the wiring."

Erik feels a little sick hearing that; he's never been under the illusion that his foster parents love him, but there's a difference between thinking they don't love him and realizing that they think he's capable of mass murder.

"Because I'm a mutant, he thinks, both hands curling into fists. That's all they need to know about me.

"I don't think he'd do that," Gerald says. Weak. Unconvincing. Human.

"You don't think. But you didn't hear him when he was talking to his bondmate--"

"Oh, he's just pretending. Come on, we all do that."

"He's not pretending." Aileen sounds just as scared and angry as she did when she caught him doing it in the first place. "Or he doesn't think he is. He thinks his bondmate's talking to him, and
he's talking back—I've heard him."

Gerald's whisper is almost too low for Erik to hear: "Fuck."

Aileen laughs, but not happily. "Yeah. I tried to tell him something could be wrong, but he wasn't listening to me."

"Did you tell him about—"

"I told him he needed to block it right now," Aileen goes on. "He needs to protect himself—"

At that, she cuts herself off abruptly, and for a few seconds there's nothing but silence. When Aileen starts talking again, she sounds miserable and sorry: "Oh, God. Oh, Gerry, no no no no, I didn't mean—"

"It's all right," Gerald struggles to get out, "it's all right, you're right, you don't have to apologize for that. Not ever."

"I didn't mean it the way it sounded—"

"I know that." Gerald's voice is strained, though. "Right now, we need to do what we can for Erik."

"I tried. But all he said was that his bondmate's probably a mutant like he is, so he thinks everything's fine."

"Great." Gerald groans. "Great, just great. Any other symptoms? Headaches, dizziness, hallucinations...?"

"I think we'd have noticed, don't you?"

"When? We barely even see him anymore."

*I'm not sick.* Erik's skin is crawling. He's never had headaches or dizziness, certainly never any hallucinations. *It isn't like that. We're not sick. We're fine.* The fear gets to him anyway, though, and he reaches out through the bond, scared, worried. *Are you out there? Can you hear me? Are you okay? Please, tell me you're okay...*

He gets an instant wave of concern, a tug at the strand between them. Erik tugs back and tries to form his worry into something a little more solid—sometimes his soulmate's feelings are so clear, it's like they're having a conversation. *They think you're sick, that something's the matter with you or the bond. It's not that, is it? You're like me, you're one of us-- when we meet in person I'll make out all the words and we'll tell them, we'll tell everyone, we're fine, we're not sick, we're fine...*

Reassurance. Acceptance. Affection. His soulmate feels so strong, stronger all the time, and Erik's always loved that. He's been hoping that maybe while his mutation was climbing up to Phi-level and beyond, his soulmate's was doing the same. *Tell me again,* Erik thinks, and his soulmate comes through for him, sending him as much reassurance as he needs. Erik almost shakes with relief. *You're like me,* he thinks fiercely. *You're like me, there's nothing wrong with either of us. We'll show them.*

He can almost feel his soulmate enfolding him in all that comfort and support. He sags against the wall, turns his face to the east and holds as still as he can, doesn't even breathe. He could follow their bond now, right now, just walk out of this house and keep walking, eyes closed and heart full and searching... but he's supposed to wait. Another year and a half. He's waited this long, he knows his soulmate will wait as long as they need to.
I love you, he sends out. I promise, it won't be much longer. The quiet joy he gets back in return makes him wonder if his soulmate can understand him, if he's listening for just these thoughts, waiting for Erik to tell him all the things he needs to hear. I love you. I belong to you. I can't wait to give myself to you.

He gets a tug of questioning arousal at that, but he has to send back regret; the Stones have been quiet all this time, but now they're talking again. His soulmate matches the sentiment, but backs off, and Erik sends him affection and gratitude, which earns him another wave of warmth. How could I ever give you up?

"We could call Dr. Shaw," Gerald says. "Defective bonds-- this is what he specializes in. He couldn't help us, with my side of the bond being what it is--"

"Gerry, stop-- it's not your fault, you were a kid, you were sick--"

"Yeah, and if the doctors had realized what the chemo was going to do to the bond, maybe we could have--"

"I blocked it in time. We still had enough for you to find me. We're together now, and I can feel you. I don't need anything else." Gerald's quiet; Aileen's voice drops. "Damn it. I mean that. I love you. You're mine. That's all that matters."

All the pieces are starting to fit. Erik's known for a while that the Stones aren't traditionally bonded, that they're married but didn't legally recognize their bond. He always assumed that's why they had enough trouble adopting that they were willing to take on Erik as a foster child, but he's never asked about that.

But if some kind of childhood illness damaged their bond, then suddenly a lot of things make sense. Not every state has laws on the books asking for the traditional affinity test, dating back to the dark ages when people had to "prove" they were bonded by responding to the emotions of their bondmates, but very few place openly allow unbonded couples to recognize, even couples who were supposed to have been bonded. There's such a taboo against claiming someone other than a fully-joined soulmate as a partner-for-life; for all Erik knows, the Stones were just too ashamed of what happened to them to fight for their legal rights.

So it's all a little clearer now: Aileen's reaction, her sense of panic. Maybe Aileen has reason to be afraid of the same thing happening to Erik, damaging his bond. Erik rubs at his temples. It's not what's happening to him, but he can understand why she was so upset when she first found out, why she grabbed him and shook him, why she looked like she'd seen a ghost.

Your ghost, he thinks, not mine.

"I'm just saying," Gerald says, a little later, "I'm just saying that if something's going wrong with Erik's bond, maybe if we get him to a doctor early, they can actually help him. But if he's really hearing voices... God, what if it's too late?"

"Maybe you're right about Dr. Shaw." Now Aileen just sounds tired. "I'm not getting through. Maybe a real doctor would."

"If Dr. Shaw got him onto some of those new bond-blocking drugs, maybe..."

"I don't see that happening," Aileen says; Erik can almost hear her rolling her eyes. And she should; there's no fucking way he'd let anyone put him on some kind of meds that interfere with his bond. "But if we could at least get him into bond therapy, he might calm down some. God, if he'd
just listened... blocking would have been so much easier. I was hoping we could convince him to renounce-- if he'd just spend a week in prayer, I thought there was a Jewish ritual for it--"

There is, as it turns out; Erik's heard of people who achieve a meditative state, looking to block the bond, and use the practice of putting on a tallit or laying tefillin as the endpoint of that process. But if the Stones think they're actually going to convince him to do it... good luck with that.

"Maybe he's tried," Gerald says. "Maybe he can't block the bond. Or maybe his bondmate won't let him."

"Shit. I hadn't even thought about that." Aileen takes a shaky breath. "Okay. I'll call Dr. Shaw in the morning. Maybe there'll be something he can do."

"We just need to hang in there. He'll come to accept us someday, understand that we're doing what's best for him. Maybe if Dr. Shaw can do something about that bond, he'll be able to lead a normal life."

He stops listening at that. Yeah, he's sorry for their bond, sorry about whatever's wrong with them, but fuck their doctors. There's nothing wrong with him. Nothing wrong with the bond-- he knows everything's all right between them. It's the only thing in his life he is sure about.

He goes to the window, like he does every night. I'm still here... are you out there? Can you hear me? Are you all right?

Happiness rolls over him, happiness that washes away all the worries and fears and doubts he's had all night, and he knows the answer's yes, that every answer is yes. I love you. I'm here. I can't wait to be with you. It's so hard waiting. Is it hard for you, too? He's sure it is; he's felt impatience through the bond time and time again. Don't worry. We'll be together soon, and then they're never taking you away from me.
Chapter Summary

Erik meets his bond therapist, Sebastian Shaw.

Walking into Dr. Shaw's office, Erik doesn't know what to expect. He's never had to go to therapy before, let alone bond therapy. But if it was this or have the Stones start getting serious about bond-blocking drugs... Dr. Shaw seems like the lesser of a lot of evils right now.

"Erik, hello," Dr. Shaw says. His office is plain, boring, just a desk on one side of the room, a couch and an armchair on the other. The desk is a little messy, a pencil cup overflowing with pens and pencils of all different kinds, a candy dish with Hershey's Kisses. "Help yourself if you want. Do you like chocolate?"

Erik shakes his head and takes a seat in the armchair. It's surprisingly cushy, for all that it looks like something that Shaw might have picked up at the curb, left out for the garbage truck or the first vulture to come along, whoever was faster that day. He squirms a little; he's not here to get comfortable.

"Why don't you tell me what's brought you here?" Dr. Shaw asks.

"My foster parents think I'm having trouble with my bond."

"Mm-hm. What do you think?"

Erik crosses his arms over his chest. "I'm a mutant. It's different for me."

Dr. Shaw digs into his candy dish and unwraps one of the Hershey's Kisses, nibbling at it before he responds. "You know, Erik, I've actually talked to a lot of mutants. And it turns out that most of the time, mutations get in the way of bonds... they don't enhance them."

Erik doesn't know which one of those things to reply to first. He blinks at Dr. Shaw, eyes wide. "You..." He starts with the first thing he can think of. "You've worked with other mutants?"

"Mm-hm." Dr. Shaw wads the foil wrapper into a tiny ball and leaves it on his desk. He nods down at the foil. "The Stones tell me your talents have to do with metal. Can you move something that's made of foil?"

Erik flicks a finger in the direction of the candy wrapper; it spreads itself out thin and flat, the tears in the foil repairing themselves instantly. With another moment's thought, he folds the wrapper into a tiny paper-airplane shape and lifts it into the air, whirling it around the room.

Dr. Shaw looks delighted. Erik smiles, a little relieved, and he relaxes enough to show off some. He sends the foil airplane rocketing across the entire length of the office, slamming it into the door so hard that it sinks into the wood about halfway. Not much of a feat, though; he can feel from the leftover impression in the foil that the door's cheap. Thin wood, easily breakable. Dr. Shaw sits back in his chair, laughing softly.

"That's wonderful," he says. "So what are you testing at, what level?"
Erik hesitates. It's probably in his medical records, and if it's not, the Stones might have told Dr. Shaw directly. "Phi-level," he admits. "As of last April."

"Almost a year, then," Dr. Shaw says. "We should probably see about getting you tested again. The techniques I've come up with for bond rehabilitation are all pretty unique to the candidates involved, but with mutants who are Sigma-level and above, we often need to push a little harder to make sure everything clears."

"Techniques," Erik says, expression darkening. "What's that supposed to mean? I don't need bond rehabilitation, I'm fine-- maybe they told you I'm sick, but I'm not, I'm just a mutant, my bondmate's like me--"

Dr. Shaw shakes his head. "It's fine, Erik. We won't do anything you don't want to do. But when it comes to the symptoms the Stones describe, I think it's important to rule out the worst-case scenarios. And in the meantime, you should probably start learning how to block the bond, just in case."

"Just in case," Erik repeats. "So I don't have to start right now...?"

"Not if you're not ready. We've got a lot of research to do. We want to keep you healthy-- that's what all of us want. We should take it slowly."

"Okay," Erik says carefully.

"So why don't I start teaching you some blocking techniques, things that have proven really effective with mutants of your ability level and higher? And that way, if you ever get worried or nervous about things you're feeling through the bond, you'll have the resources to start dealing with it right away-- you won't need to get emergency help or resort to drugs."

"I'm not going to take bond-blocking drugs," Erik says immediately, hands gripping the armrests of his chair. "I don't care what the Stones think--"

"Easy. Calm down," Dr. Shaw says; his voice is carefully modulated, like it's the textbook definition of soothing, but Erik feels a chill creep down his spine anyway. "Nobody's going to make you take drugs without your consent. You're, what, almost seventeen now. Almost an adult. We're going to work through your treatment together. Okay, Erik?"

It's not okay. But there's a year and three months' difference between almost seventeen and not a minor anymore, and Erik just nods, ready to stay on his guard.
Chapter Summary

Like everyone else, Dr. Shaw seems to think there's something the matter with Erik's soulbond.

"Focus," Dr. Shaw murmurs. "There's a heavy wall between you and your bondmate, thick lead, nothing getting through..."

Erik stretches out on the couch, eyes closed. Are you out there? he sends. Can you hear me?

"It's your wall, Erik. It's metal, so it's yours, and all it's going to do is protect you from any unhealthy influence your bondmate might be sending you..."

Attentive interest flows through to Erik, as if his bondmate's asking him what's going on, or what Erik's doing. Erik folds one arm behind his head, hand pressed against his joining spot. Nothing much here. Just another one of these stupid bond therapy sessions. I'm bored, how are you?

He's never been sure how well boredom transmits to his soulmate. Unfortunately, Erik hasn't quite gotten the hang of holding back some of the more negative emotions he's feeling, so his bondmate's getting boredom, frustration, anger, insecurity-- all the things he tends to feel when he's stuck in a room with Dr. Shaw.

Dr. Shaw's not pushing too hard, but something about him bothers Erik. He takes a lot of notes, watches Erik a little too closely, and sometimes, like today, Erik has a feeling he's--

"Erik, I don't think we're getting anywhere today. I think your focus is off a little."

Erik blinks his eyes open. "Are you sure? I really felt like I had the wall up that time."

Dr. Shaw glances at his computer screen. "Let's try something different today. Why don't you try this from the floor?"

"You want me to sit on the floor?" Erik asks, doubtfully; he glances down at it. Industrial-pile carpet over a cement base, rebar stabilizing it. It doesn't look very comfortable.

"You can sit if you want, yes," Dr. Shaw says. "Or, if you think it'd be more comfortable, you can kneel."

Erik immediately narrows his eyes, looking hard at Dr. Shaw. Dr. Shaw lifts both hands and sits back in his desk chair. "Nothing shady, I promise. I just think you might be able to concentrate on your bond a little better if you're in the same kind of position you're in when you talk to your bondmate. You do kneel when you're talking to your bondmate...?"

Flushing, Erik looks away. "I don't really think that's any of your business..."

"It's completely normal. Trust me. Most submissives your age do a whole lot of kneeling, whether they can talk to their dominants yet or not."

Dr. Shaw smiles. He's trying to look friendly, but the mustache just makes his whole face look... weirdly untrustworthy. Erik's been trying all this time to
give him the benefit of the doubt, but it's getting harder and harder.

"I'm not going to kneel," Erik says firmly. "I don't need to be on the floor. I'm just going to do it from the couch, like I always do."

Dr. Shaw sighs. "Okay. Listen, Erik, I'll level with you. I've got a psionic energy meter running."

Erik sits bolt upright, eyes wide. "You said you weren't going to test me without my consent--"

He said that early on, during Erik's second session with him. There were a lot of tests he suggested Erik take, not just another run through a state-created Mutation Aptitude Test. Erik took psionic ability tests, psychological evaluations, basic physical tests like a CAT scan and an MRI. Other than the fact that the MRI felt good-- Erik was high for a couple of days after being exposed to such a strong magnetic field for that long-- nothing turned up any results worth noting.

After those tests were done, Dr. Shaw started offering Erik some more in-depth, individualized exams. One by one, each test more invasive and personal than the last, question after question about his bond and how different types of focus felt to him, until Erik actually called a halt in the middle of an psychological evaluation and said, "Are you seriously asking me what 'resonant emotions' make me jerk off?"

Dr. Shaw just met his eyes and said, "I'm trying to help you. If any of these questions make you uncomfortable, we'll stop, and you don't have to continue with the tests." Something went hard in his face, though, and he added, "But if I can't honestly tell the Stones you're giving this your best effort, I'm going to have to start recommending more intrusive therapy..."

Rock and a hard place. Erik's been putting up with questions like that ever since, although Dr. Shaw's never come right out and asked Erik to kneel before. And Erik thought he'd never tried to test Erik without Erik's knowledge and consent before, either. So much for that.

"This isn't anything serious," Dr. Shaw says. "Think of it like an infrared meter, or an ultraviolet light. All I'm doing is trying to sense environmental energy around you."

"That sounds like a lot of hocus-pocus to me," Erik says, dubious all over again. "Environmental energy...?"

"Your particular bond has a lot of influence, not just on you--"

"I'm not being influenced--"

"--but on the things around you. I'm not talking about mind control, Erik, I'm talking about the ways in which your bond shapes you, changes you, makes you the young man that you are."

Erik goes quiet; he can't deny that the bond's done a lot of things for him. There's no way for him to even imagine who he'd be without it, or if his bond connected him to someone else. The feelings from his soulmate have affected him through and through. When Erik's sad, when he's grieving, he gets a clean, honest sympathy that's untainted by pity. When he feels better, his soulmate encourages him, sends hope and happiness until Erik's feeling it too. When he's angry, his soulmate sends peace and calm, and often that's enough to cool Erik down.

"But beyond the influence it has on you, there's a certain amount of energy that surrounds you. I've been doing a lot of research in order to find out more about that energy. It's generally accepted that the bond can be sensed by powerful psionic mutants, as if it's a living thing. But certain scans are starting to give us the ability to see that bond even without psionic mutations, so normal... sorry, baseline humans can see and work with the bond as well."
"You mean... see it with your eyes? Visually?" Erik's intrigued despite himself. "What does it look like?"

"It's a cord, actually. Pretty much just like you'd imagine it. Most people's bonds... if we put it on a scale of one to ten in terms of how much psionic energy passes through it, how well we can see it with these new techniques, then by definition, the average bond is about a five, right?" Erik nods. "Now, people like the Stones, who have a damaged bond--maybe they show up as a one on the scale, or maybe we can't see them at all. But people like you who have so much psionic energy that it reads high even when you're blocking..." Dr. Shaw raises his eyebrows. "Well, you could be off the charts."

And there it is, the corner Erik's been afraid he's been getting backed into all this time. If he tells Dr. Shaw he hasn't been blocking at all, Dr. Shaw's going to go to the Stones and tell them Erik won't cooperate. Then what? They can't force him to block or take the bond-blocking meds... he'd run away first.

But if he doesn't tell Dr. Shaw the truth, maybe it throws off his calculations. Maybe whatever Dr. Shaw wants to try next really will damage the bond. Erik can't risk that.

Dr. Shaw is quiet, patient. Erik closes his eyes, sends a fast sorry, sorry, sorry to his soulmate, and rolls the dice.

"I haven't been blocking," Erik admits. "I can't. I don't want to."

As soon as he says it, he realizes he worded it wrong. Dr. Shaw's eyes narrow. "You can't?"

"I won't," Erik says firmly. "I could, but there's no way I'm doing it. He's my soulmate. I don't want to lose him."

"Renouncing your soulbond doesn't have to be permanent," Dr. Shaw says. "You could block it until you're old enough to go on a seeker trip, for example."

"Look, I know you think there's something wrong with him--"

"You've done all the reading I asked you to do, haven't you? All the passages I marked, especially?"

All those pages with little flags attached to them; all those phrases underlined with neat red lines, drawn with the help of a ruler. Erik grits his teeth.

"So you know there's a strong chance that your bond really is being affected by a form of mental illness on your bondmate's side--"

"That's not it," Erik says, for the hundredth time, the thousandth. Dr. Shaw's not listening. He's never going to listen. "Your energy meter, can't it tell the difference between healthy and unhealthy psionic energy? If my bondmate has the same mutation as I do, and we can share thoughts like--" Erik throws up his hands. "Like tin cans on a string, like he's amplifying the vibrations the way I do--"

"Erik--"

"If his ability's psionic, or even-- who knows-- some kind of amplified ventriloquism--"

"Erik, the kind of ability you're talking about would require a psionic of at least Phi-level, maybe higher. How many Phi-level psionics do you think there are out there? For that matter, how many
Phi-level mutants?"

"I'm one," Erik points out. "My friend Jason, at school, he's one. Why couldn't my soulmate be Phi-level? Maybe the bond is trying to bring together mutants--"

"If that were the case, wouldn't your bondmate be female? It's not as though you and a male bondmate could reproduce."

Erik winces. Dr. Shaw's got him there; it was probably a stupid idea. But he can't give up wanting it to be true. "My family," he tries again. "Mutants have been bonding with mutants in my family for at least three generations. Me and mine, my mother and father, my mother's parents were both mutants, my grandfather's soulmate was a mutant--"

"Erik, I know how badly you must want that tradition to continue," Dr. Shaw says. He's brought out the soothing tone now; he's leading up to something bad. Erik braces himself. "And in a perfect world, we could all choose our soulmates, and you could have a mutant as powerful as you are on the other end of your bond. Maybe someday soon we'll have that option, but the way things are today, that's just not very likely."

Erik can only stare. "Choose-- how would that even work--"

"Well, in emergency cases there are some techniques that allow doctors to sever the bond. Usually these are life-or-death situations, with people whose bonds are causing immediate psychic or physical damage, but if it could be done to healthy people who are simply incompatible, then those people should have no difficulty forming new bonds down the line. There are all kinds of precedents in both biology and technology for different kinds of-- for lack of a better term, 'splicing'; pulling things apart and putting them back together. Why not the bond?"

Mutely horrified, Erik just shakes his head. "I'm..." He looks away. "I'm glad there's no such thing," he says quietly. "I don't want to block him," and his eyes go right back to Dr. Shaw, hoping Dr. Shaw can see how deeply he means this. "I'm going to meet him next year, and we'll know for sure then."

"I can't in good conscience support your decision not to block," Dr. Shaw says. "I'm sorry, Erik. I just can't."

"Then maybe it's time for me to find another therapist," Erik says evenly. "I'm pretty sure there's nothing more you can do for me."

"I'll have to talk to your foster parents about that."

"Okay. Fine." Erik stands up. "I think we're done for today."

"I'm very sorry you feel that way." But Dr. Shaw stays at his desk, and he doesn't try to prevent Erik from leaving. It's a good thing. Erik wasn't in the mood for a fight.

He drives around for a while, burning off the extra time so Aileen and Gerald won't have any reason to ask him why he's home so early. He only gets the keys to Gerald's car when he has therapy sessions, and if he's not home on time, they'll report the car stolen and start looking for him right away. He's nearly seventeen, but still not old enough to go on his own seeker trip; as much as the road tugs on him, urging him to go east, he knows he can't.

Back at home, though, it's clear Dr. Shaw's already called the Stones. They're both in a panic, Gerald grabbing his keys back, Aileen's eyes glittering with angry tears. "He says you walked out," Aileen says. "He says you're not even trying."
There's nothing Erik can say to that. He shakes his head and leans back against the kitchen table. "I told him. Like I told you. There's nothing wrong with us. There's never been anything wrong with us."

"Did you really tell him you can't block?" Gerald asks. "Because if that's true---"

"I could," Erik says firmly. "I won't."

"God, what are we going to do with you," Aileen murmurs, rubbing at her forehead. "Car privileges-- gone. You can go to school, you can still go to chess club, but no more hanging out with your friends until all hours of the night."

Erik flinches, but nods. He's still braced to hear the rest.

"We're not going to force you to go on medication," Aileen says, finally, and Erik sags with relief.

Gerald takes over from there. "But Erik, please. Please at least try. If this gets bad enough to harm you... I can tell you for sure that your bondmate would never, ever want that. He'd want you to block the bond if it was affecting your health in any way."

"He wouldn't do that to me!" Erik says, voice raised. "He won't hurt me, and he'd never ask me to be alone that way. You don't know him, neither of you knows him---"

"We know you," Aileen fires back, just as frustrated. "We know that when you first came to us, you were a good kid who'd had a rough time. And now it's all mutant rights this and mutant rights that, and you're so angry all the time-- if he gives you just that one little push, think about what your powers could do to people."

"You don't understand," Erik tries, but it's useless; it's not just that they don't understand, it's that they can't. Their bond's defective, and Erik knows that neither one of them can possibly understand the way emotions work through the bond. If his soulmate were sick or scared, if he were truly hurt in some way, Erik would respond to that, of course he would.

But his soulmate's been a calming influence on him, not an agitating one. He's never amplified Erik's negative emotions, never pushed Erik into a frenzy. And Erik's powers are his; he's not going to lash out with them at random, no matter what his soulmate's feeling.

"We'll look for a new bond therapist," Gerald says. "We'll see if we can find one who can take you on right away. If you can't work with Dr. Shaw, then you can't work with him. It's all right."

"Is it?" Erik asks quietly.

"Yes." Gerald looks at Aileen, who shakes her head and turns away. "Yes, it's all right. But please. If not for your sake, then your bondmate's. At least try to block."

For a while, Erik's silent. But it seems like the only words that will finish this conversation are the lie the Stones want to hear, so he finally gives it to them.

"All right."

Erik's a lot more forceful when he comes over the bond that night. Are you there? Answer me. Where are you? Where are you, tell me, I can feel you. You're east. Is it New York? Boston? Philadelphia? Where? Tell me. I need to find you, I need to be with you, I need to tell them it's okay--
He cuts himself off, backs away from the window. It won't do any good getting his soulmate worked up and worried. He can survive this. He can get through this. Another year. They can't do anything to him that he doesn't want them to do. He doesn't have to see Dr. Shaw again. They can't force him to block.

He digs his windcatcher out of his pocket and clutches it to his chest; he closes his eyes. *I'll find you. Wait for me. I'll be there soon.*
Erik, April 20, 2000

Chapter Summary

There's no way Erik's going to let four humans attack a young mutant girl, no matter what the consequences might be.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains stuff for which warnings might be necessary. Please see the chapter endnotes for a heads-up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's yelling in the hall; a fight's broken out. At first Erik and Mort and Jason steer clear-- if Mort gets suspended one more time, his parents have threatened to send him to military school, and God only knows what the military would do with someone who has the kind of strength, speed and agility Mort does-- but the instant Erik hears the word mutie, he's shoving through the crowd, pushing people aside by their belts and the rivets on their jeans.

There are five people in the center of the circle, four senior boys attacking the same small girl. Erik knows her-- she's a recent transfer student, a freshman. Her name is Sally. And although he wasn't certain of it before, he is now. She's one of them. A mutant.

He knows this the same way everyone else knows it: none of the people fighting her can put a hand on her. There's a soft yellow glow that comes up around her body, deflecting punches and kicks, thrown objects and all the attempts the humans make to grab her. She's spinning around, trying to dodge and being blocked in over and over. Her books and purse are scattered all over the floor; she's wild-eyed, crying, cringing.

Her power can protect her physically, but when things like this are happening within the walls of his own school, Erik wonders how any mutant will ever be able to feel safe here.

He says, "This ends now," and the humans look at him, two of them startled and slinking backward, the other two high on the loosed anger and frustrated violence of attacking someone smaller than them-- someone who is rather more powerful than either of them-- and as far as they're concerned, winning. Winning, having pushed Sally to the point of terror, to the point where she's skittering back from them, finally pushed up against the lockers with her arms covering her face, sobbing and pleading even though they can't hurt her.

Erik has never been this angry.

"I don't take orders from submissives," one of the humans sneers. The other laughs, too, and the two who were starting to back away end up coming back, shored up a little by the remark.

Erik ignores the jab, keeping his eyes on all four humans and extending a hand to Sally. "I'm Erik," he says. "It's going to be all right."
"Aw, is she your domme?" says the human leader. Kevin, Erik thinks. He knows the others, too; George, who didn't back off, and Larry and Simon, who initially did. "Is the big bad mutie sub standing up for his little freak domme?"

"It's going to be all right," Erik says again. "Get behind me."

She jerks herself away from the lockers and comes over to him, slipping a hand into his and squeezing hard. He can feel a faint tingle from her mutation, can see a golden glow out of the corner of his eye. "Thank you," she whispers.

"Right here, Erik," and that's Jason, behind Erik and to the left.

"Me, too." Mort, behind and to the right.

"Mort, could you see that Sally gets to the nurse's office," Erik says calmly. "Jason, if you wouldn't mind ending the show for the rest of them."

"You sure?" Mort asks. "I can take the little guys."

"I can handle this. Sally, go with Mort; you can trust him."

Sally squeezes Erik's hand one more time, and then Mort slips an arm behind her shoulders and guides her away. The crowd parts for him; it's absurd how many people think mutation is catching, how many people are afraid to touch Mort for fear of his speckled skin or long tongue rubbing off on them, but right now it's useful.

The air warps around Jason, his theatricality coming in full-force; now he's wearing the illusion of a tuxedo with tails, he has pristine white gloves on, and he's holding an illusory top hat and cane. He steps behind Erik and spreads his arms wide, bowing. "Ladies and gentlemen, like the man said: the show's over."

There's the sound of a curtain closing, even the feel of air moving behind him; in his peripheral vision, Erik can see a heavy red velvet curtain coming in between himself and Jason, separating the four attackers from the rest of the crowd. They stare at Erik, and he glares back at them. Four humans who thought nothing of hurting and terrorizing a little girl, just because she's different.

"He can't take us all on," says Kevin. "We jump him and we can take this uppity little sub down--"

Erik curls his hands into fists and then flexes them, eyes narrowing, body tense. "Come on, then. Unless you're afraid to take on a mutant who isn't a fourteen-year-old girl..."

"Get this asshole," George says, and he and Kevin come at Erik, the two others hanging back for a split-second before joining their leaders. Erik can sense every atom of metal on them, can almost grip the four teenagers through the metals in their blood. He shoves, and all four of them go slamming back, into the wall of lockers behind them.

"You're pathetic," Erik says quietly. "So afraid of becoming obsolete that you'll strike out at anyone who's better than you."

"You sound like those fucking mutant radicals on the news," George spits back. "We're not obsolete, mutie, you're the one who's gonna get stomped out--"

"Stomped out," Erik says, glancing down George's body. "With those steel-toed boots you're wearing?"
George's eyes go wide, and Erik closes his right hand. The toes on George's boots flatten, and George screams; on the far end of the row of them, Larry shakes from head to foot, his pants darkening at the crotch. Simon babbles out, "Just let me go, I'm not with them, I didn't do anything- -"

"Is that what Sally would say?"

"I never laid a hand on her--"

"Because you couldn't," Erik snarls. "But if her power had given out, the four of you would have beaten her unconscious in the hall. A girl half your size, who's never done anything to you."

"She's a mutant," Kevin says, unhurt, defiant. "Like you. You think you're so fucking badass, but you're just another piece of mutant trash--"

Erik shoves his arm forward again, and the locker behind Kevin crumples, taking him with it. It wedges him between two lockers, and he screams, cursing, struggling against the locker. The struggle only makes him scream again; he's gone ashen, and there's something wrong with one of his shoulders.

And suddenly the curtain's gone.

Someone tackles Erik from behind, and he hits the floor. "Hold still, hold still," someone's shouting, and Erik looks around.

They've got Jason pinned to the wall. His eyes meet Erik's, and he says, "I'm sorry," but with Jason in the hands of the school security guards, it's over. Erik goes still and lets the humans cuff his wrists with metal, lets them take him to the assistant principal's office. He hopes to God Mort and Sally got away.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter contains violent high school bullying (of a minor character) and violent retaliation (from a major character).
There's no convincing Erik's foster parents that Erik's fight at school wasn't due to his unusual soulbond.

Gerald won't even look at him, but Aileen's shaking as she tells Erik what they want him to do. "After what you did at school, we need to know whether you're being controlled through your bond."

It's the most ridiculous thing Erik's ever heard, and he tells them so. "If you think I would ever stand back while someone's hurting a mutant-- if I didn't have a bond at all I'd never allow that to happen."

Erik shivers; that sounds worse than he'd expected. "What do you mean?"

"I mean we want you to go see Dr. Shaw again."

"What-- no," Erik says immediately. "No, he's just going to say it's because I'm not blocking--"

"What if it really is because you're not blocking?" Aileen shakes her head. "We already called Dr. Shaw, and he says he's got a new test-- just a test!-- and it'll show whether your bond's being interrupted or manipulated--"

"God, how many times do I have to tell you, I'm fine," Erik yells. "You're just like the rest of them, you're afraid of me because of what I am--"

"You broke a kid's toes with his own shoe!" Aileen explodes. "You broke Kevin Bentley's collarbone, dislocated one of his arms! What else are you going to do? We knew it was getting bad, but it was never like this, you were never like this before!"

"I never saw four seniors try to beat the crap out of a little girl before-- was I supposed to let them?"

"The nurse at school says she's fine, totally unhurt, they didn't so much as harm a hair on her head--"

"Because her mutation protected her!" Erik shakes his head. "Do you think she'll ever feel safe at that school again? She's going to have to walk into school every day knowing that people hate her that much, that if her power slips for even an instant her own classmates could kill her--"

"And if your power slips for even an instant, who could you kill?"
Erik sucks a breath in through his teeth. "I don't slip," he says, but he remembers the thrum of power through his body, how tempted he was to do more to those mutantphobic bastards than he actually did. He falls silent, struggling to stay calm.

"Okay, listen. Just listen. Just-- think about it the other way around. What do you think your bondmate's getting from you right now? What do you think is happening to him if you're getting into fights? What do you think would happen to him if you were hurt, if something happened to you?"

He doesn't want to, but he flashes back to his mother, behind the wheel of their car. Her wide eyes and her whispered no, come back to me. Her powers never slipped before; she'd never hurt herself or anyone else with them. But a thousand miles away, the death of a man she hadn't seen in fourteen years put her in shock, dragged their car across two lanes of traffic and a grassy median, and into an oncoming truck.

"One more test," Aileen says. "Dr. Shaw explained it all to me. All he's going to do is follow your bond back as far as he can and see if he can detect any signs of damage or influence. He's got a psionic on his team, Dr. Steed, and he says she can amplify all his equipment, make absolutely sure you're safe."

"And if I am?" Erik asks quietly. "Then what? Things go back to normal?"

"Things have never been normal," Aileen says, settling heavily back into her armchair. She rubs a hand over her face. "Erik, we knew it wasn't going to be easy for you, living here, but for two years you've been like a son to us. We want you to be safe, and healthy, and if something's happening to make you sick, we want to fix it."

"I'm not sick," Erik whispers. "I'm a mutant. I have a soulmate, I can hear him-- I'm not hearing things-- and there's nothing wrong with him, either. Let me go and look for him myself, I don't need Dr. Shaw for that." He leans forward. "Please. I'll be careful, it's not like anyone can hurt me--"

"I am not sticking you on a seeker bus like this," Gerald snaps, finally turning away from the window. "You don't even know what it's like on those things, but it's bad. People getting into fights, emotions running high because people can't find their mates--"

"I'd be fine--"

"You don't know," Gerald says. "You don't know, but I do. I was on the seeker grid for eight months, looking for Aileen. I didn't want trouble, I didn't want to hurt anybody, but fights just happen there. And for somebody like you..."

There it is again. "Somebody like me," Erik repeats. "What if I say no? You can't make me do this."

"It's just a test, Erik," Aileen says. "Just do the test and then decide if you need to say no or not."

"Dr. Shaw's all right, isn't he?" Gerald asks. "If you don't trust us, trust Dr. Shaw. He's never done anything to hurt you."

He hasn't, Erik thinks. Yet.

But he doesn't have a choice. It's do the test or run, and if he runs, then what? He's a violent mutant, his power making him armed and dangerous. Would they send the police after him? The Stones might not, but the Bentleys... if he left here, if he ran away, if he took Gerald's car and tried
to get as far as he could, he'd be across state lines in a matter of hours. And then it's a manhunt, the kind of thing he's only seen on television or in the movies. He thinks he could deflect bullets if someone were shooting at him, but if he can't-- if he doesn't know they're shooting at him-- if he's wrong...

*What do you think would happen to him if you were hurt, if something happened to you,* Aileen asks in his mind, and he remembers the blare of the truck's horn, fighting with his mother for control of the car...

He tells them to let him sleep on it, but he doesn't sleep much. He looks out the window, tries looking up at the stars, wondering if his soulmate is looking at them, too. *I need you,* he sends out. *Tell me where you are, give me a way to reach you. Please. I can't let anything happen to you.*

Worry, concern, reassurance. It's all he's going to get.

Erik rubs his hands over his face. *Where are you? Are you even out there? What if they're right and I'm making this up, what if I can't really hear you, what if my mutation really is driving me insane... what if you're sick, and it's hurting our bond somehow... what if I run, and I don't make it. What happens to you?*

The emotions woven through the bond are so complicated. He can't tell if he's getting worry or fear, if he's getting reassurance or bargaining. There's something solid in all that feeling, but what is it?

Another strong sense of reassurance, and he hears the voice again... a cadence like speaking... utter confidence. It's like the voice is saying *You're not alone. I'm here.*

But he doesn't know.

He heads to bed, and in the morning, he sits in the back of the Stones' SUV, lets them take him to the clinic.

"Dr. Shaw says it'll be over in an hour. We'll be right here waiting," Aileen says.

A nurse comes out with a clipboard. "Erik Lehnsherr?"

Erik nods.

"Dr. Shaw's prepping for the procedure. Come with me and we'll get you all set up."
Charles, April 22, 2000

Chapter Summary

While Erik submits to Shaw's latest test, Charles is out on the quad on a beautiful spring day.

Chapter Notes

Recommended supplies for the next two chapters include at least one of the following: a blankie, a stuffed animal, or an amenable cat who is up for emergency snuggles.

Charles is out in the quad on a beautiful spring day when it ends.

It's warmer than he expected, once he's outside. He takes off his cardigan and bundles it up with his biology textbook, tucking both under his arm, slipping his hands into his pockets.

«It's gorgeous here today,» he sends through the bond. «I wish you could be here for it.» As always, there's not exactly an answer. Just that vibrant frisson of response that makes Charles feel as if he's being heard, feelings of relief and welcome, even if they're underlaid by the doubt and worry his soulmate's been feeling more than ever lately.

Last night was the worst yet. Hours of stress and fear and doubt, and something forceful that he's received more and more lately, a frustration that comes across in angry pulses and seems to be aimed at Charles, about him.

No matter how often he tries to send comfort, hope, patience... no matter how hard he tries to communicate with his telepathy in words, images, even touch and smell and taste... nothing seems to help; there's just that snarl of worry, a tight knot of anger and unhappiness. It's been getting worse and worse recently. He feels it now more than ever.

"Hey, kid!" says Rey, one of his dormmates.

Charles waves, "Hi!" The other guys in the dorm treat him a bit like a mascot, since he's two years younger than the other freshmen. Rey's kicking a football with two other guys, but it doesn't seem to take much of his attention; Charles walks over. "I've been meaning to speak to you, actually."

"Yeah? What about?"

"You've gone on your seeker trip, haven't you?"

"Over the summer," Rey nods. "I went on Diviner. I found my domme three days before my ticket expired."

"I was hoping you could tell me a bit about what it was like."

People go on their seeker trips every day. Charles is too young, but here on campus he can get a
fake ID easily enough. He's more confident these days that he could use his telepathy to evade the police if his mum reports him missing, and now that he's away from home, he'll have more of a head start.

Since he's underage and, though no one admits as much, because he's a psionic mutant, he's meant to check in with his advisor twice a week. But he's tested it, and if he just phones and says he's sick, his advisor takes his word for it. Charles could buy himself as much as a week of lead time that way.

And he can use his ability to get money if he needs it. He'll return it later, when he comes of legal age and gets access to his trust fund. That's straight from his father's will, nothing and no one can stop that.

It's wrong, he knows that... nothing can make it right. He doesn't want to use his mutation against people. But it's worse to leave his soulmate hurting like this. Charles has held back too long for fear of what his ability might do.

After last night, he can't convince himself to keep waiting. Even though it's just a few more weeks til his mum and Kurt agreed to let him go, it's not soon enough. Charles has been letting them delay him over and over, a few more weeks, a few more months, another year, and things just keep getting worse. And what if they just come up with a new excuse to put him off again?

Everything else can wait, Harvard can wait. He needs to go. Now it's just a matter of finding out what he's in for.

"It's pretty much like everybody says," Rey tells him unhelpfully. "It was fun, mostly. We were hitting all these truck stops, and they have these packets of vitamins that're supposed to help you feel the bond better to find your soulmate easier. But there's this one kind, Mega-Seek Boost Plus, that will totally get you high. After the first couple of weeks most of us were taking them every day. It was awesome."

"You weren't afraid that'd interfere...?"

"Nah, it was cool. Plenty of people were taking them and finding their soulmates. And it's way better than getting drunk. People who were drinking got kind of fucked up after a while. You know, eight weeks in on a ten-week ticket, people can start to get pretty pissy. On Diviner it never got bad. It probably helped that my mom begged me to take subs-only buses whenever they were available. One time though, at a rest stop, we saw a bunch of people from Greyhound and Pilgrim buses get into a big fistfight."

"What about?"

"Who knows? Didn't have to be anything," says Rey. "It was almost the end of the summer, people were on edge. I gotta admit, I was feeling it toward the end, thinking I might have to give up and wait another year to look again." He smiles brilliantly. "And then I found her."

"Lucky," Charles says. His throat aches with envy. What would that be like, to finally meet and know and be sure? To talk after years of feeling one another and never understanding each other, not completely, not for certain. To touch... he can't even think about that part.

"Yeah," says Rey. "It was almost perfect. But we couldn't acknowledge yet. Her family's traditional, they want us to wait til we're ready to recognize."

"That strict?" Charles asks. He doesn't know what his family will let him do once he finds his
soulmate-- he's been so focused on getting to that point, he hasn't even considered what would come next. Chances are, his mum probably hasn't thought about it either, and Kurt's opinion always depends on his mood. Which isn't going to be good if Charles defies them by leaving early.

"Well, they said they'd let us acknowledge, but we can't have sex," Rey says gloomily. "They've got a bundling board for her bed and everything. Seda and I talked it over and there was just no way. You know what everyone says about meeting your mate? Man, it's seriously all true. I could barely get near her without going to my knees. We'd never make it through a whole night. So we're going to do it all next summer. Acknowledge and recognize. I'd invite you to the acknowledgement party and the recognition ceremony and everything, but can you even drive?"

"I'm sixteen," Charles says mildly, "I can drive."

"Then you're invited," Rey smiles brilliantly. He stops the oncoming football with a tap of his heel. "We're just kicking the ball around, you want in on this?"

"Sure. Thanks. Where should I stand?"

"Over there," Rey points.

«I'm going to pay for the fake ID tonight. Blake told me it'll be done by the end of the week. Just a few more days,» Charles tells his soulmate as he walks to his place, wishing his words could soothe the feelings of stress and tension coming through the bond. «I'll be there soon. I won't stop til we're together. I'll finally meet you.»

"Heads up!"

The football comes flying, and Charles gives the ball a solid kick back, still clutching his book and jumper for now.

The day's perfect; sunny, with just enough clouds to keep the light out of his eyes. A breeze ruffles his hair. He catches the ball between his feet the next time it comes around and gives it a good kick back to David.

He's beginning to feel unsettled, though. The emotions resonating through the bond keep growing more and more upset. It's not just the usual unhappy mood that his soulmate seems to experience much too often, not even the strung-tight anxiety of last night. There's an alarmed quality to the feeling this time.

«What's happening?» Charles sends, but the alarm keeps building to a higher pitch. The ball comes his way and Charles intercepts it, kicks it much too hard, sending it flying over Blake's head. His chest tightens with distress... and then it's fear, real fear, not just the nervous scared feeling that Charles has received from his soulmate before, not just last night's dread, but fear, hard and certain.

«What's going on? Where are you?» Charles knows his soulmate can't understand, he's never been able to before, but he can't stop himself asking, «What can I do?»

Nothing but fear lodging in his chest. Everyone who told him it wasn't as serious as he kept insisting, everyone who said that he had time, they were all so wrong. Charles clutches the bundle of his book and jumper to him. He keeps licking his lips and gulping, like he's trying to swallow the awful feeling back down.

The fear explodes into terror and Charles staggers and goes down in the grass. «I'm sorry, I'm so sorry,» he should be there, he never should have let anyone sway him from finding his other half for a moment-- whatever's happening to his soulmate, Charles should be between him and it right
now; he should at least be at his side to face it with him.

It's too late now. He's flat in the grass, cool green against his face, warmth falling on his back like a giant smothering hand.

Charles feels it go. The terror is all-consuming, and then there's less of it, not less intensity, just less. It's like when someone goes out of range of his telepathy. The thoughts are still intense but he can't reach them-- no, it can't be that, no...

Less, and less, like an iris closing tight, like a morgue drawer gliding shut. Something in the way, something between them, shutting him out... something more and worse than distance, and he can't get through it no matter how hard he pushes and fights.

«Please, don't go, stay with me,» he has both hands on his temples, he's sending with power he didn't know he had, his head aching, spikes through his temples, a hollow pain at the back of his skull. It's not enough.

He feels an awful wrenching sensation that makes him double over...

then no more pain, just absence so huge it dwarfs pain, overshadows everything. There's nothing.

Charles stares. Blades of grass. Sandals and trainers. People are around him now, someone's covering him with his cardigan. Nice of them. He is awfully cold. They're trying to get him to say something, but all Charles can think is He's gone and he can't speak at all.

He just wants to sleep. He wishes he could pass out and sleep. But he can't.
Erik, April 22, 2000

Chapter Summary

For the rest of his life, Erik will think this: I should have known.

Erik should have known, when they gave him the injection; he should have stopped the needle, prevented them from drugging him.

If he'd thought about it-- if he'd just thought for one second about what was happening to him-- he might have realized that they weren't just giving him a harmless injection that would help them pinpoint any damage that had been done to his bond over the years. It should have been obvious. He should have known.

He trusted Aileen and Gerald, who must have known, had to have known, this kind of procedure can't be done without the consent of his legal guardians. God. He hopes it can't be done without their consent, but he's a mutant, and he's a mutant who's shown evidence of violent behavior. Maybe no one needs to consent to this. Maybe the doctors even lied to the Stones, got them to pass the lie along so Erik would walk in without a fight.

He should have known Shaw couldn't be trusted. Shaw's psionic energy meter, the one test he admitted to administering without Erik's knowledge... how many more were there? That look on Shaw's face when he and Erik were together in their sessions... it never sat well with Erik, but now he knows it wasn't about Erik being a young submissive. Shaw's probably had this procedure in mind from the first day he and Erik spoke.

Erik should have protected himself, but he didn't, and now he's strapped face-down, unable to see what's going on around him. He can't move. He's conscious, and he doesn't even know if he was meant to be. He can't speak.

The straps holding his head in place are all wide tough canvas, fastened down with velcro. If there's metal in this room, he can barely feel it, which is terrifying; it's like being blindfolded, gagged, having earplugs in. He's on a metal-railed bed but he can't feel the metal, even though it's right there beside him. He can feel it in the walls, the floor, the ceiling, but not in the things that are holding him down. And if there are metal instruments, he can't sense them, either. They could have hacksaws and scalpels and rotary blades, and he wouldn't be able to stop them from cutting him apart. There's nothing for him to grip, and he's woozy, dizzy... he feels the pipes and ducts in the ceiling best, but there's no way he could pull them down. His grip slips over them and just slides away, useless, halfway to dead.

He feels something cold on his back, and when it's touching him, he realizes it's metal; he can feel its structure. The small comfort of having a portion of his power back is quickly swallowed up by the fear of what that metal might be, what it might be designed to do. The metal on his back is a latticework, a... cage? It fits in a squat oval, curving over both his shoulders, contacting the platform his face is resting on so that the cage covers him from well above his head to nearly the center of his back. It's a fine mesh, some of the most elegant metal he's ever felt. The structure feels delicate, but the metal is strong. If he could only use his power, though, it wouldn't be any match for him.
There are large holes in it, two on each side; hand-shaped holes. The threat of those holes and the thought of what this latticework is meant to do... Erik has no idea what it's meant for, but it's there for something awful. He's too weak to move, though; too weak to try to budge it with a fierce jerk upward from the shoulders. He can't touch it with his power; he can't break it with his body. He's helpless.

He can feel a prickle through the cage—just through the metal at first, and then heating and vibrating slightly against his skin. It's a low buzz, one he can almost hear and feel in his teeth. Have they electrified it, or is it something worse? He doesn't know, can't know, there's no way for him to even ask. His best guess is that it's about his mutation. They must be after his powers, trying to take them away, cut them out of him— he doesn't know how that can even be possible, but he isn't surprised that the humans are working on it.

And then two hands—hands with some kind of metal covering, a thin, intricate chainwork of an alloy he can only feel when it's this close, similar to the cage—slip through the holes on the latticework and card gently through the hair at the nape of his neck. There's a moment's pause, as if whoever's touching him has found something—and then there's a rough, invasive tug at his bond, and Erik's eyes flash open, his breathing unsteady.

"There it is. Do you see that, Dr. Steed? The adamantium-silver cage and the energy field make the psionic energy of the bond visible to us, able to be handled with the proper equipment."

"Like your gloves?"

"Or a powerful psionic manifestation—your psionic implements should be fine for manipulating the bond. Isn't this better than relying on telepathy, getting a visual of what you're doing? You can be much more precise."

"Of course."

"So take a close look. Now we can see the bond, and at first it seems healthy and normal..."

"I see it, Dr. Shaw. The bond's stronger than we expected, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Not really a good sign."

"For someone who's never actually met his bondmate? No. No, it's not."

A second pinch against the bond. Erik whimpers, tries to struggle. He's strapped in too tightly, and he doesn't even know if the sound registers to them. Stop it. Stop it, not yours, don't touch that, don't touch me--

"If you take a look from this side--" He pauses, and something in the bond shifts, making Erik so nauseous he almost shakes with it. "You can see this darker line, here. That represents a resonance with lower-frequency brainwaves. I've only seen that in patients whose bondmates were either brain-dead or had a serious form of mental illness."

"Do you have measurements from previous years?"

"No, I'm afraid I didn't get Erik into the cage as early as I would have liked; I didn't have the consent forms. His foster parents dragged their heels. Procrastinators."

"But you do have the consent forms now?"
Silence; Erik holds his breath. But apparently Dr. Shaw isn't going to dignify the question with a response. "Things are a bit more urgent now," he says instead.

"How so?"

"His foster parents think he's being incited to violence through the bond, something that would be consistent with a bondmate who has schizophrenia or any number of psychotic disorders."

"And a mutant with his abilities--"

"Exactly."

"All right," Steed says. She sounds much less uncertain than she did. "Solutions..."

"First, it's possible we could could interrupt just the low-frequency waves."

"By severing the dark line on its own?"

"Good," Sebastian says warmly, while Erik's breath stutters and he struggles not to throw up. "But if you'll hold this for me, here and here--"

A sharp energy presses against the bond, and Erik can actually feel his pulse skyrocketing. If he were someone else, he might describe this sensation as a metallic taste in the back of his throat, but he knows what metal feels like, tastes like, and he can't feel any power or comfort in this. It's awful, threatening, a burning stretch of the bond that blots out Erik's vision and makes his breath erratic.

"My God," Dr. Steed whispers. "What is that--"

"All that energy," Dr. Shaw murmurs. "If you want my honest medical opinion, Dr. Steed... I have no idea. But it's a reasonable guess that the violence at school two days ago was directly attributable to this malformed bond, and when you combine that with the evidence that Erik's bondmate has some kind of severe psychotic disorder, this really is the only way to protect him from further damage, not to mention protecting the people around him. I'm sure we could get a court order to have this performed, but I don't honestly believe we can afford to wait that long. Even with his foster parents on board, it would take months. We're lucky he didn't kill anyone at school two days ago, and he's got another full year of school to go."

You're wrong, Erik thinks, flashes starting to blot out his vision; he's cold, so cold, his skin feels clammy, he can feel sweat dripping down his neck. It wasn't the bond, it was me, I was protecting the people around me, don't touch me, oh God, please stop please stop--

"Then the entire bond--"

"It's the only way," Dr. Shaw says, absolutely certain.

Erik stops breathing. No, please don't, I can't, this can't happen-- and he sends out a panicked flare to his soulmate, help me, they're hurting me, please, please--

He tries to speak, but his throat is rusted shut, his chest too tight to make a sound. It wasn't the bond, it was me. It wasn't him. Me. It was me. Hurt me if you have to, don't hurt him, don't touch it, let it go, let me go--

"All right," Dr. Steed says. She sounds troubled, but it doesn't hold a candle to Erik's terror and panic. "When you're ready."
The bond jerks, pain filling Erik's entire field of vision, everything within him. If he could reach out with his power, he'd be pulling the building down to get that pain to stop. He feels the bond pulled tight, taut, until his head nearly tips back along with it, until the joining spot burns from the pressure--

"Here," Shaw says, and Erik flares with panic again. *No no no please*--

It wrenches at him, agonizing, the link he's felt since he was barely more than a child separating and tearing away from him. He gets an answering call, a match for his fear and horror at what's being done to him, and the voice is shouting now, screaming. There are words in it, he hears them, *now he hears them*, a plea, his soulmate begging the way Erik's begging in his head, and then--

--*please don't go*--

--everything explodes from inside, and Erik convulses on the table.
Erik, April 23, 2000

Chapter Summary

Erik doesn't wake up from his procedure alone. This is a very bad thing.

Chapter Notes

There are warnings in the end notes, and the main story headers have been updated to reflect them, as well as a new pairing (yes, very likely the one you think). If you want a heads-up before reading, checking out the headers or end notes is highly recommended.

ETA: It's been suggested that we update our warnings with another couple of tags, which have now been added to the main headers as well. Please check the end notes!

Erik wakes up warm and shivering, an unfamiliar touch resting against his joining spot, warm air against it as someone kisses him there. It hurts in a way nothing's ever hurt before; it feels horrifying.

Something's wrong.

There's more than just the touch against that spot, his soul's-home; there's an arm around his waist, a body pressed tightly against his. He's never slept with someone else, let alone done more than that, but now... here... he is, he has.

It might be a dream. He shuts his eyes tightly, tries to wake himself up. Everything feels such a long way off-- he can sense metal in this room, in the bed he's... they're lying in, but it feels muffled, as though it's all behind thick cotton padding. Not just the mattress or the blankets or the pillows; he gropes for the metal in the bedframe, reaches just to see if he can grasp it, but he can't take hold.

And someone's there. Someone's been sleeping beside him. Someone's touching him. Someone's mouth is against that spot at the base of his skull, someone's hand is slipping down his stomach--

Are you there? Can you hear me? Erik sends. God, I'm sorry, I'm sorry--

There's a brief instant when he thinks the man behind him will answer, words out loud if not in his head, but all he gets in return is an awful, deafening silence.

And then the man behind him presses close, warmth and affection and-- possessiveness-- weaving their way into Erik's mind, and he whispers, "You're awake. Thank God, Erik."

Erik's eyes snap open. The last thing he heard that voice saying was It's the only way, and then that terrible grasping invasion--
He jerks forward, but Dr. Shaw has him too tightly for that. He shifts his grip back to Erik's waist and holds on. "Shh," he whispers. "Quiet. Easy. It's okay. You're okay."

Erik swallows, stomach pitching and rolling. "Get away from me," he whispers. His voice barely stutters out of his throat. "Get off me. Don't-- don't touch me like that, get off of me--"

"Calm down," Dr. Shaw tells him, his grip only tightening. Erik struggles, and the grip goes tighter and tighter, and he can't breathe, he can't breathe, he can't feel his soulmate--

Something rips into him, a charged rush that starts at the base of his skull. He stops struggling, stops fighting. His eyes are locked, wide and open, unseeing.

He can--

He can feel it.

The bond's warped, ugly, wrong-- it feels like a part of him's been torn to pieces and something new's been forced inside him, spliced in and knotted into place. All the old, frayed ends are left loose, jerking and spasming as if still trying to find their real connection. But most of the energy's moving from his bond into that new, corrupted connection.

*Please, please, say something, anything-- can you hear me, tell me, I'm so fucking scared, this can't be real--*

Nothing. Still nothing. The thoughts rush out of him, dribbling out of the old tattered strands. That strong connection between him and his soulmate has been *shredded*, and every time he sends thoughts to his soulmate-- the same way he's doing day after day for the last *five years*-- it's like they're bleeding out of him, spattering away in drips and bloody chunks.

He grits his teeth and swallows back the bile, the fear... and he follows the new bond back, past the knots and the scarring and the jarring rough bump that leads him from his own self to someone else's. It's not a long path. It leads right here, just beside him...

It leads to Dr. Shaw.

"What did you do to me?" Erik whispers.

"I saved your life." Dr. Shaw lets him go, but Erik doesn't move. He's not sure he can. Dr. Shaw runs his hand up Erik's back-- bare-- God, he's naked under these blankets, and so is Dr. Shaw. Dr. Shaw's hand rests against Erik's joining spot, and Erik shudders in revulsion and pain, but in more than that, too... he's feeling arousal like he's never imagined before, so hard he can hardly breathe, so desperate to be touched he has to bite his lip to keep from asking for it. "You were dying. There was feedback when we cut the bond, psionic backlash, and the only way to stop the overload from killing you was to join you to someone else. Someone who could absorb that energy with you." Dr. Shaw's breath is hot against Erik's shoulder. "All that energy. All that power..."

It can't be real. Erik shakes his head, succeeding only in brushing his joining spot against Dr. Shaw's fingers. He shivers, trying not to let himself feel the arousal from that, trying to feel nothing but the pain. "No," he whispers. "No. No. Please, you have to put it back, you can't leave me like this, you have to-- I can find him again, I could find him--"

Dr. Shaw reaches up and catches Erik's hair in his hand, clutching tightly. "There's no going back," he says roughly. "You're mine now. I was the only one close enough who didn't have an active bond; I've been widowed four years now. I volunteered, and nobody warned me how much this was going to fucking hurt." He shakes Erik's head, pain rocking through the bond; Erik would
...double over if he weren't lying down already. "But it's not all bad. I feel good, too. Somewhere deep down. My old bond was never like this. Never made me feel like I could... take... and just keep taking... and spend that energy on something... I don't know. Fun." He laughs. "We'll see what happens with that."

"I'm not yours," Erik whispers. "I'm not yours, this isn't right, you have to let me go, I have to find him, I have to, he doesn't know--"

"You're not going anywhere," Dr. Shaw snarls. "Maybe you didn't hear me. You're mine." He twists his fingers through the strands of Erik's hair, drags his head back again so his mouth's at Erik's ear. "This is my bond. I'm not letting you go. You belong to me now."

"No--"

"He's dead, Erik."

Erik goes stock-still, not even breathing.

"If there's any mercy in the world, he's dead."

*Please, no-- please-- please, oh God, please answer me, please answer me, it can't be true, he's lying, please God tell me he's lying, you can't be, please no, please, please...*

The silence says everything. Erik's eyes slip shut, and he feels out along that empty, torn bond, but there's nothing. Nothing. There's no one.

There's only Dr. Shaw, and this monstrosity he's created between them.

He doesn't realize he's crying until the tears start running down his cheeks; he doesn't realize he's shaking with his sobs until the bed starts to rattle with them.

"Okay," Dr. Shaw whispers. "Okay. You get this all out of your system now. I understand. It's hard to lose somebody-- I know that, believe me."

"You," Erik manages. "You killed him."

"Get it all out now, Erik. All of it. Because for every second you spend grieving him after today, you're going to spend an hour showing me you know who your dominant really is." Dr. Shaw releases his grip on Erik's hair, slides out of the hospital bed. Erik curls up on himself and cries, knowing there's no way he'll ever get this out of his system.

*I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry...*

Aileen has tears in her eyes when she comes to see Erik at the hospital; Gerald looks ashen and miserable. "We didn't know," Aileen tells him. He doesn't believe her. "What do you want to do now?"

He shakes his head, wooden. "It doesn't matter anymore," he says quietly. "Just sign the consent form. Sebastian says it's for the best."

They exchange a look, but they get the papers signed and notarized, and before Erik's even released from the hospital there's a justice of the peace in front of him, Sebastian standing at his side.

*Sebastian.* Erik's almost surprised he didn't insist on "sir" or "Master"; he's heard of dominants doing that, of dominants who don't even allow their submissives to refer to themselves with "I" or a
name. It wouldn't have mattered much to Erik; there's not much left of him, he doesn't think, not enough to make a difference.

But Sebastian wants him anyway.

Erik hears it all as if from a distance: the ritual reading of the recognition contract, the Stones confirming their agreement, Sebastian saying *I take this man as my legally recognized submissive* with quiet dignity.

He wants to tear at the base of his skull, *rip* this new connection out piece by piece, but he can barely even touch that spot without the nausea rising up and sending him reeling. He should know his dominant like he knows himself— he *did* know his soulmate like he knows himself—

Did. Past tense. His other half is gone. So there's nothing left, just this-- seventeen years old, he shouldn't even be meeting his soulmate for another year. Shouldn't be saying the words in return, dead, emotionless: *I take this man as my legally recognized dominant. I swear to love, obey, and serve; to care for and nurture the bond between us...*

The words are all ash on his tongue, burnt and rotted and ugly. He isn't getting the wedding he would have wanted: no ketubah, no chuppah, no breaking of a glass. No friends or family standing beside them, wishing them well; they don't even get a wedding night, because Erik's still at the hospital, recovering from the surgery.

There's a prenuptial agreement of sorts, a trust fund that the Stones insisted on regardless of whether Erik and Sebastian remain together after their recognition, but there's nothing spiritual or emotional about it. It's nothing but legalities now, the things Sebastian has to take on because of what he did, the things Erik must accept because they are what they are to each other.

"I know you didn't want this," Sebastian says, the day Erik finally comes home from the hospital. *Home*, except it's Sebastian's house, a submissive's pallet set up on the floor by Sebastian's bed. Maybe he won't be expected to sleep with Sebastian, maybe-- maybe Sebastian won't expect him to...

Sebastian's eyes dim, his body shuddering in a terrifying, inhuman way. Did he know, before, Erik wonders; *did you know you were like me, did you even know you were a mutant or did I do this to you?*

His hands are hard, his grip unbreakable; his expectations are immediately clear. Erik starts to fight and only succeeds in bringing himself to his knees, whimpering from the pain. It's as if Sebastian's absorbed every ounce of Erik's struggle and is giving it back to him, moment-by-moment, and Erik holds himself still, kneeling on his pallet and hoping it will all be over fast.

"I know you didn't want it," Sebastian repeats, "but I'll teach you how to like it. Where you are is good. You can start from there."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter contains underage non-explicit sexual content, which is also dubious-consent content (ETA: Actually, it's quite arguable that it is outright non-consensual, not just dubiously consensual, and as a result, we've tagged this fic with noncon specifically for this chapter; we are sorry for getting that wrong initially).
It also contains grieving for a lost partner.
Chapter Summary

Charles wakes up in a hospital room, too, also badly off.

"Charles, you're awake," Raven says, tearful, relieved.

He wouldn't know it, if she hadn't said so. His eyes are open, and he sees the flecked white ceiling overhead, feels sheets and blankets, a cannula curving under his nose. Soreness in his arm, soreness everywhere, a hollow feeling at the back of his head. None of it seems real, nothing's real...

Raven squeezes his hand. Was she holding it before? His senses are skewed. Her voice sounds flat somehow when she urges, "Say something."

"I'm not awake," he says, his voice dry and rough. "I can't be awake, I can't feel you. I can't feel anyone."

"Do you feel this?" Raven squeezes his hand again.

"Yes... but I don't feel you," Charles says. "Are you here?"

"Of course I'm here," she puts her hand on his forehead now, smooths back his hair. "You see me, don't you? Your eyes are tracking."

"But I don't feel you," he insists, his breath coming faster, because this is less and less like a dream. In his worst nightmares he's never even dreamed that he could ever be this cut off from everything, this lost. "Are they drugging me?"

"You have an IV," Raven says. "Just for fluids. They stopped giving you drugs yesterday. You've been out of it for a while. You didn't go into the mourning sleep, but you were really sick, so they induced a medical coma for a few days. You woke up before, but you weren't lucid, they said you might not remember."

"Raven, you have to help me take this out," Charles says, feeling for the IV. "I need this out."

"You can't yet," she tries to intercept his hand. "Charles, you're sick, that's been keeping you alive. I'll ring for the nurse."

"No! Please." He grabs her hand and holds it, and looks at her. She looks like Raven, exactly the right pattern of rippled blue scales, he knows her face too well for the slightest difference to fool him. No one but another shapeshifter could mimic those eyes, depthless and bright gold, and not even another shapeshifter could match Raven's alert intelligence, the concern that knits her brow.

But it's not her. It can't be.

"Tell me something only you would know," Charles says.

She looks confused, but she says, "Um... you spent almost a whole day one time trying to convince Sharon to let you change your name to Codon. You said we could call you Cody for short. I guess
technically I'm not the only one who knows that, since Sharon was there, but she just kept saying 'That's nice, dear' so... I think it counts."

He shuts his eyes hard, screwing up his face, and opens them again. It doesn't change anything. "Something else."

Raven looks over her shoulder at the door before turning back to him and murmuring, "When I wanted to test whether I could morph a male body, you stripped and let me feel you up so I could figure out how to make the shapes."

Charles draws a shaky breath and lifts his hand unsteadily to his temple. But when he tries to read Raven, there's nothing, a sickening dizzy emptiness. His head feels like it's full of something dense and impenetrable and wrong, like rusted wet steel wool.

He goes for the IV again, trying to work the needle out, but everything's taped down and his hands feel weak. "Help me take it out," he asks again. "Raven, please."

"I can't," she covers his hand again. "Charles, stop. Leave it alone."

"You're not Raven," he says.

She stares. "Of course I'm me."

"Raven would help me."

Her eyes fill with tears again. But Charles isn't fooled.

"She wouldn't let them do this to me."

"Charles, let me call the nurse."

He doesn't try to persuade her not to, this time. It doesn't matter now.

A nurse comes and checks Charles over, says something about the doctor visiting later. He knows it's pointless to ask, but he does anyway, and she tells him she can't take his IV out yet. She gives him a cup of ice chips and a pitcher of water and another cup and a straw.

Raven... not Raven... not-Raven tries to get him to drink or eat some ice, but he won't. He's so thirsty he feels like he'd lick a drainpipe to get some water, but he can't take anything here, he has to get the IV out and there's no point getting the IV out if he's just going to drink whatever they give him, which is probably also drugged.

He must say that out loud, at some point. Possibly there's also some kind of truth serum drug involved, though Charles knows there's no such thing really, but it could have been amobarbitol, or temazepam... when the doctor comes, she starts talking about paranoia and Capgras delusion.

"I'm not deluded," Charles says, "it's just that none of you are real."

"Why don't you think we're real?" the doctor asks.

Charles touches his temple. "Nobody's there." He frowns. "You're drugging me to suppress my telepathy. Maybe you are real and I just can't sense you because of the drugs." There's more logic in that, but he can't look at these people and feel nothing and believe in them. He can't sense any other presences in the room with him, so how could these be real people? They might as well be projected movie images, trompe-l'œil paintings, shadows on the wall.
Of course now that they know he's onto them, the doctor injects something into the IV line that makes him tired, and he drops off hearing her say comforting things to not-Raven.

When he wakes up, the IV is gone, the cannula's gone. Raven is still there and still isn't real, but she says, "I got them to stop all the drugs," and he believes she's his sister, even though he can't feel her.

"Thank you, Raven," he rasps.

"Will you drink something if I promise it's safe?" She sniffs, and wipes her eyes. "It's in a can, you can tell no one's doctored it. It's not from the hospital. I went and got a six-pack from a gas station myself, and I've had it the whole time."

He nods. She cranks the bed up, and helps him sit up a little further, and he accepts a ginger ale from her. It takes so much effort to open it, but the can hisses when he finally breaks the tab. He's so thirsty he's half pouring it down his throat; it tastes so sweet and so good, better than anything ever, ever has.

"I guess you believe I'm me, now?"

Charles looks at her and nods.

"That was really fucking scary," Raven says.

"It still is," Charles tells her. He knows he can never explain to her how horrifying this is, how shaky he feels, how his heart's pounding. He can see and hear and touch, all the solid things around him are the same, but the whole world feels desolate, so empty. And yet he knows people are still out there, he hears rattling carts outside the door, he sees figures passing; it's like seeing ghosts. He's never been this frightened or this helpless, not ever. "How long have I been off the drugs?"

"They took out the IV a little over five hours ago."

If he was on a maximum dose of the most powerful psionic suppressants he's ever read about, he should metabolize them and feel the effects start to lift in seven hours. He just has to hold on a little longer.

His mum comes and sits with him for most of it; Kurt and Cain come in and fidget for a while, and leave when he doesn't respond to their presence. He can scarcely relate to his own mother under these circumstances, he's finding it hard even to talk to Raven. Of course he can't deal with Kurt and Cain right now.

After seven hours, Charles brings up his knees and curls into a ball and puts his hands to his temples, trying and trying and getting nothing. After eight hours, his mum and Raven clear out and the hospital sends someone in to counsel him.

«Hello, Charles,» she sends, sitting in the chair next to his bed. «My name is Sibyl.»

He lifts his head and stares. «Finally! I can hear you, can you hear me?»

«Of course.»

Charles strains again to sense other people, but he can't even sense Sibyl beyond what she's projecting. «What's going on? I don't feel you. I don't feel anyone.»

«You've had an enormous psionic shock,» she tells him. «Your telepathy doesn't seem to be
available to you right now."

«No... you have to help me, it's because they've been drugging me,» Charles sends urgently, and he pushes his experience in Durham to her, the scientists who thought his telepathy was too powerful and dangerous, who wanted it suppressed. «And now that's happening. Please help me, I can't stand being like this, it's like there's nobody else in the world...»

«It's not drugs, Charles. I think you know that. You've memorized all the side effects of the medications it would take the suppress your level of telepathy, and you're not experiencing any of them.»

«I could be having an idiosyncratic reaction.»

«No,» she says, and she believes she's telling the truth. Or she's good enough to put across conviction, even when she's lying. Charles knows it's possible; normally he has enough ability to do that himself. «I know this is difficult for you, but you need to turn your attention to the bond.»

«That's being suppressed as well, by the drugs,» Charles insists.

«If that's true, you won't be able to put energy across it or receive much from your bondmate, but you should still be able to feel that it's there,» says Sibyl.

«It'll come back.» Charles looks at the clock. «They must've slipped me something right before I woke up, they got around Raven somehow. I've only been awake three hours, in another four the effects of the drugs should fade.»

«Then it's not going to hurt anything to pay attention to the bond in the meantime,» Sybil coaxes.

«I won't,» he answers obstinately. «It-- hurt, before--» Oh, god, he's starting to remember. He remembers lying in the grass and thinking _He's gone_. But that can't be true. «It'll come back in another four hours,» he sends again, but if it doesn't, he's already inventing explanations. If it's not back in four hours, maybe they have him on experimental new drugs that last longer, or maybe they're speeding the clocks and playing with his time perception for some reason, or maybe another telepath is cutting him off, or there are anti-psionic metal particles in the paint on the walls.

Maybe he's dead; it doesn't make any sense for death to be a hospital room, but this must be what it would feel like, no life anywhere around him, no other presences, just everywhere this awful void, this utter nothing.

«I don't want to be dead. If what I want makes a difference, I want to be alive again,» he tells Sibyl, though he doesn't know why he's appealing to her. If he's right in his theory, in one of his theories anyway, the one about another telepath caging his mind, then she's the most likely candidate.

«You're disoriented,» she sends. «That's natural. You tested at Theta level when you were seven; you probably can't remember a time that you couldn't sense thoughts or feelings, or at least the psionic energy of other people around you. It must be very disturbing to lose that now.»

«How can you be so calm?» Charles fires back. «What's happening to me? They're drugging me or I'm going mad or I'm dead and you don't even care.»

«I care, Charles,» Sibyl sends him compassion with her thought, «but you need to face what's happened to you, and sooner is better than later. You won't thank me for leaving you confused any longer than you have to be.»

«Just tell me when it's going to stop,» Charles sends back. «Four hours--»
«No. You know already what's going on, you just don't want to let it sink in. Your soulbond is gone. Your mate could be ill, or hurt, or the worst may have happened. It's a terrible thing and I'm sorry this has happened to em and to you, but you need to face it.»

«He's fine.» Charles denies. «He's fine, you don't understand, he's very strong, he'll be fine.»

«Strong people can get sick or hurt just like the rest of us,» Sibyl tells him gently.

«He's fine,» Charles insists, «we're fine. Except someone's drugged me, but it'll go away in another four hours and then everything will be okay.»

Sibyl sighs, and she tries a few more times, but eventually she gives up and gets out a book.

After he's been awake over seven hours, Charles still can't feel anything, and not after eight hours, and not after nine. And then it's morning and Raven comes through the door to his room, and that's what finally breaks him: he didn't feel her coming, he didn't sense her on her way. He didn't know til she walked in.

"You're a counselor?" Raven yells while Charles sobs all over the collar of her blouse. "What the hell did you do to him?"

"He's finally coming out of denial," Sibyl tells her.

"Oh, well, in that case, great job," says Raven. "Fuck you, help him-- god, Charles, you're shaking like a leaf-- look, lady, do something or get someone who can."

«Are you ready to talk, Charles?»

«Go away.» Charles sends, but then he thinks about being left in this room with no one else in his mind at all, and quickly he's saying «No, please, I'm sorry, don't leave. I'm sorry. Don't leave me here. Please don't leave me all alone here,» and he can't hold out anymore, he needs his soulmate so badly... he reaches for the bond.

And she was right. It's gone. He's gone, he's really gone.
Chapter Summary

While Erik tries to make the best of his new life with Sebastian, Jason's just as determined to talk Erik into getting the hell out of there. Meanwhile, Erik discovers he can lie to Sebastian and not get caught, and he learns that while he's not happy about everything Sebastian does to him, he can appreciate metal cock rings and knifeplay for their own sakes.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains Shaw, dubious consent (some readers may consider it inherently non-consent), knifeplay, implied sadomasochism with resulting bruises, and angst. Erik is still 17.

Erik eats because he's ordered to, showers because he's told to. When Sebastian pointed out that Erik missed the last month of the school year and asked if Erik wanted to take summer school, Erik just shrugged.

Sebastian brought in a tutor for him, and with nothing to do but study, Erik qualified for and took his GED over the summer, skipping his whole senior year of high school. He couldn't have gone back after everything that's happened, even if his school would have admitted him.

That night, Sebastian rubbed his shoulders. He gave Erik orders to follow, gave him pain that made him shiver, told Erik how to please him and didn't get angry when Erik couldn't figure out what, exactly, he was asking for. When it was over, he kissed the back of Erik's head at the joining spot, and Erik managed not to flinch away. "I'm proud of you," Sebastian said, playing with Erik's collar, the chain he sealed onto Erik's neck the first week they were together.

The collar is made from the same material that Shaw's psionic cage was made from, a bright alloy of adamantium and silver. Erik remembers how it felt in the operating room, how he'd been so sure that with his ability he could have ripped the cage to pieces. It seems impossible to imagine now. Shaw had to use his newfound mutation to bend those links into place. This collar is never coming off.

"Now it's just you and me, and you don't have to worry about anything, never again. Tell me the kinds of things you like to do, I'll get you some stuff. Do you play video games, read?"

He thinks about the block of copper left over in the Stones' house, all the things he used to make with it, the way he used to press it into shapes as though it was modeling clay. He'd been in the middle of making candlesticks for Jason's mother, like she's been teasing him about for months; there are three, a fourth in progress that will never be complete.

And at home-- even the Stones' house seems like home now, compared to this-- his bookshelf was full of books on mutant history, plus a dog-eared collection of trashy romance novels. When he and
Mort and Jason had all the time in the world, they used to pretend to put on magic shows, Mort performing acrobatics, Erik doing endless variations on coin and ring tricks, Jason showing off by sawing illusionary people in half or making cars or statues or elephants disappear.

Metal is dead to him now, something he can identify only if he's touching it, and he certainly can't move it. There's one saving grace to that: he can barely feel Sebastian's chain collar. When he's at his most selfish and bitter, grieving the loss of his ability above almost everything else, he reminds himself that if he could still sense metal the way he used to, he'd never be able to rid himself of the choking, grasping clench of the thing. The solid links would weigh him down every moment, unforgettable, unable to be ignored.

He shakes his head. There's nothing he can think of that he could actually enjoy. "I like to read," he says faintly, "I guess."

Sebastian brings him a stack of romance novels, plus some cookbooks and a few nonfiction classics: How To Please The Dom You Love, Serving A Master, The Path To True Submission. Sebastian's even nice enough to mark particular passages in those last three. Green flags, red lines marked out neatly with the help of a ruler. Erik reads them just to get an idea about what might be coming next, but it doesn't help much.

In July Jason's allowed to start visiting him; something about a probation period being over, Jason doesn't go into the details. He pulls Erik into a hug as soon as Erik opens the door for him, and Erik has to grimace and shift back a little.

"What, what's wrong, what did I--" Jason looks him up and down for the first time, and his eyes go wide. "Erik, damn."

Erik knows what he looks like; he just hasn't bothered to look into a mirror more than he's had to for the last two and a half months. He's dressed in the same thing he's always dressed in these days, a tight tank top and thin pajama pants, and the dark bruises around his throat and down his arms are the least of what he's got marking his body. When Sebastian takes him out of the house-- they do occasionally go out to dinner-- or when Erik's out on his own, he wears turtlenecks, even though it's summer; it's not so uncommon for subs bonded to highly-traditional dominants, especially ones who like bruises.

Today Erik's not even very stiff, the majority of his bruises on the road to healing rather than being fresh and new. He still wishes he'd thought to put on a sweatshirt before opening the door. "Come in."

Getting caught up feels like getting news from another world. Jason won't talk about what happened to him as a result of the fight at school; he just mentions that he's going to a private school in the fall. "With you and Mort gone, there was no point in hanging around that bunch of fucking mutantphobes--"

"Mort, where's Mort?" Erik jumps on the news. "What happened? He wasn't even involved--"

"Military school," Jason says, mouth turning down at the corners. "His parents wanted him away from us before we could be a worse influence than we already are."

Erik just shakes his head. "Maybe once," he says quietly. "I doubt I could influence anything anymore."

Jason looks at him for a while, then goes on. "I got Sally's email address," he says. "She's not coming back in the fall, either. She's going to some fancy boarding school out in New Jersey, I
guess. She's doing okay. She wanted me to tell you thanks."

"I would have done it for any mutant," Erik says quietly, but he wonders if it's as true today as it was then. He couldn't push his way through a crowd using the metal on their bodies; he couldn't shove four teenagers into a row of lockers and pin all four of them there. He'd try, but he'd probably pay for it. And that's just what would happen in the fight-- if Sebastian found out, if Sebastian thought Erik was doing something dangerous, if Erik was doing something he didn't like...

"Erik," Jason says quietly. Sebastian's upstairs; Erik doesn't think he can hear them. "How bad is it?"

*How bad is it?* Erik just stares. "It's my life," he says, finally. It almost feels like the truth, these days, which maybe answers Jason's question better than any words could.

"Can I--" Jason comes off the couch, sits next to Erik on the floor. He glances up at the stairs, and finally projects words onto the floor. *IS IT SAFE TO TALK?*

Erik grimaces and looks upstairs, too. He shakes his head.

**CAN I HELP YOU GET OUT OF HERE?**

Swallowing, Erik looks up at Jason again. He looks down at the floor-- Jason's already got a Ouija-board-like alphabet displayed, but Erik shakes his head. No. *No.* There's nowhere else to go, and his soulmate's *dead*; what happens to Erik doesn't matter. It's as good as anywhere.

Jason's frowning, but eventually he sighs and climbs back onto the couch. "Okay," he says softly. "So what are you keeping busy with?"

Erik shrugs. He tries to smile, but he doesn't think it gets all the way onto his face. "I'm reading more," he offers.

"That's-- good," Jason says hesitantly. "Do you want me to go back to the Stones, see if I can get any of your old books and magazines? I could--"

"No," Erik cuts him off. "No, don't-- just leave it. Part of my old life. I don't need that back."

Jason pauses, then nods. "Okay," he says. "So what are you reading now...?"

"Mostly the same thing. A few books on submission." Erik leans forward, pulls one of them off the coffee table. "This one's been useful."

"*Transform Yourself: How To Become The Ultimate Slave?*" Jason actually recoils from the cover, which features a sub wearing a ball gag and a blindfold, leaning forward until her throat rests against the point of a box cutter. He puts the book back on the coffee table, and, shaken, projects words onto the floor again. *LET ME HELP YOU. YOU CAN'T SERIOUSLY WANT TO LIVE LIKE THIS.*

He leaves the alphabet on the floor again, and this time Erik spells out a response, pointing from letter to letter. Painstakingly, he spells out *IT DOESN'T MATTER,* and Jason covers his face with his hand.

They manage to make more small talk, and eventually Erik goes up to Sebastian, asks for permission to watch a movie. Sebastian smiles absently and nods, and Erik makes popcorn, settling back down on his cushion while he and Jason watch *The World Is Not Enough,* mindless
entertainment that Erik can nearly sleep through. They saw it together when it came out last November; Erik remembers the trip to the theater, having to elbow Jason to keep him from "fixing" some of the special effects.

He'd forgotten about the garotte chair, though, and when Elektra King starts winding Bond into it, choking him, Erik comes to his feet and grabs the empty soda cans off the coffee table. "I'll just be--"

Jason takes one look at him and stops the movie. "Erik."

"Just a second. Keep going," Erik says, eyes pleading, and he flees to the kitchen while Jason starts the movie-- and then fast-forwards past the rest of the scene, if the way the sound cuts in and out is any indication.

It's hard not to let that put a damper on the afternoon. Erik finishes the movie with knots in his stomach, and Jason's expression is fierce but shuttered.

"Can I come back tomorrow?" Jason asks, when Erik takes him to the door.

Erik shakes his head. "I'll call you when I can see you again. I need to ask--"

"--Sebastian, right," Jason says, cutting him off. "You do that. Meanwhile-- you know, there's an inter-school chess club that's been meeting over the summer. We play at the mall, Tuesday mornings and Thursday evenings. Think you could make it sometime?"

"I don't know." Erik sighs. "I'll ask."

"Please," Jason says quietly. "I miss you."

Erik nods, throat tight, and he reaches out to wrap Jason up in a hug. This time Jason's gentle, patting Erik's back but barely making contact.

It's not what Erik wants, but nothing is anymore. It's like he said before: it doesn't matter.

Three Tuesdays later, Erik's finally able to get to the mall for chess club. He shows up to surprised looks and tentative handshakes, which doesn't surprise him; he wouldn't know how to greet himself, either.

After three rounds of speed chess, all of which Erik loses, Jason taps him lightly on the shoulder. "Let's take a break, I want some ice cream."

"All right." Erik leaves the chess pieces and chessboard behind and follows Jason through the mall, over to the food court.

Jason glances around; for a moment, his eyes close, his lashes fluttering slightly. "Okay. We're blanked out. Talk to me. How are you really doing?"

Erik sags a little, one arm coming across his chest, the other up to rub at his forehead. "We talked about this before..."

"Three words don't constitute a conversation." Jason puts a hand on Erik's shoulder but doesn't squeeze; today it would be all right, there are no bruises under Erik's turtleneck. Sebastian hasn't been much in the mood these last couple of weeks; Erik's mostly been sleeping on the floor alone. "Are you safe there?"
"I'm..." Erik sighs. "I don't think he's ever planned to harm me."

"I'm not even going to get into that," Jason says darkly. "But you know he's not your soulmate. You knew him. Your dom was east coast, you said. You always said he was east. Philadelphia or New York, Boston or whatever. What the hell happened?"

Erik looks around. No one's taking any notice of them. The chances of anyone around here being able to see through Jason's illusions are almost zero.

He takes a breath. "They cut us apart," he says. "And something went wrong. Sebastian said taking on the other end of my bond himself was the only way to save me--"

"And so, wow, he winds up with a brand shiny new seventeen-year-old sub? Because that doesn't sound suspicious at all."

Erik shakes his head. "I don't think that was how it happened. I don't think he wanted me like that until he didn't have a choice..." But that time in Sebastian's office when Sebastian tried to get Erik to kneel... Erik's not going to forget about that any time soon. "I think it was an accident."

"Fuck accidents, who cares if it was an accident. You need to get out of here, find your real soulmate--"

"Sebastian thinks he's dead." Erik swallows down all the feelings that go along with that statement. After two and a half months of paying for it every time he lets himself grieve for even an instant, repressing it feels almost natural. "And I can't feel anything through that part of my bond. It isn't there anymore. He's gone."

"I'm sorry." Jason reaches out again, rubbing Erik's back between the shoulderblades. It's easy enough to feel his body heat through the thin slip of Erik's turtleneck, and it's nice... beyond nice, really. Erik finds himself leaning into that touch and closing his eyes to try and savor it.

"That's what I meant," Erik says, so quiet Jason leans in to hear him. "When I said it didn't matter. He already took my soulmate. My power. I don't have anywhere else to go."


"You mean what's left of me."

"If it has to be like that? Then yeah. Whatever's left of you still matters."

He can't quite bring himself to believe it, but he leans in anyway, lets Jason hold him for a while under the protective veil of Jason's illusion. This is the lie, though: this embrace, this comfort. He'll have to go back home eventually.

"You've seemed happier these last couple weeks," Sebastian says. Erik's at the stove, making dinner while Sebastian sits at the counter with his laptop. "I guess we had a breakthrough, but you didn't tell me what it was. What's up?"

Erik concentrates on the food in front of him, careful not to let anything scorch. His real soulmate wouldn't have had to ask. He would have known right away through Erik's emotions. Maybe he would have been able to read Erik's mind.

Thank God Sebastian can't do that. And the emotional impressions they get from the bond are always choppy, blocky; they never tell a full story the way Erik's bond used to do, only leaving a
hint of something. Erik can tell when Sebastian's happy, but never why; he can feel the burning clash of anger or annoyance from Sebastian, but it doesn't help him figure out what he's doing wrong, mostly.

It means Sebastian reads him wrong all the time-- in bed, around the house, everywhere-- but he doesn't seem to notice much. He has to ask.

It gives Erik a little surge of satisfaction, chased by a second surge of hope. Sebastian doesn't know what he's thinking, and he thinks Erik's happiness lately is about him, not about seeing Jason again and going to chess club once a week.

Even now, Sebastian's smiling. He thinks that satisfaction has something to do with them. Erik lays on a smile, a seductive one layered with a little bit of shyness. It's worth testing this, just to see if Sebastian really will believe what Erik's saying even if the truth is something radically different. And if it means getting more of something Erik actually likes... there's really nothing to lose.

"I like the things you've been doing with metal," Erik says. "The clamps are nice."

"Metal. Right." Sebastian laughs. "I almost forgot all about that. We should play more with that."

Erik smiles down at dinner, giving the vegetables another stir. 

"Fuck you," he thinks, pushing the confidence at the bond, not the anger or the hatred. Sebastian doesn't seem to notice any of the above.

When Erik comes to bed that night, Sebastian has what must be every metal toy in his toybox laid out on the bed. Clamps, cock rings, ball stretchers and extra weights, a cock cage, a ball chain flogger, a leather case with several slim metal rods, a knife.

"Pick something," Sebastian urges. "I want to make you happy, baby."

"Thank you," Erik murmurs. He looks at everything, lingers over the flogger and the cock cage-- he used to fantasize about things like those, used to imagine his dominant locking him into the cock cage and then kissing him, playing with Erik's nipples until Erik panted with excitement and pain.

His dominant. Not Sebastian.

"Can we start small?" Erik asks. He reaches for one of the cock rings. "I like these..."

"Sure," Sebastian says. He moves some of the toys back to the toybox, though the knife and the nipple clamps stay on the nightstand along with the cock ring. "I think we better hurry up and get that on you, baby." His eyes linger at Erik's cock, half-hard under his thin pajama pants. "Before we have to break out some ice cubes to get that to go down."

Erik steps out of his clothes and gives Sebastian another false blinding smile, focusing on the metal he's about to have touching him. Metal, he can still take uncomplicated joy in, even if it isn't his the way it used to be.

And that uncomplicated joy manages to mask everything else-- or if it doesn't, Sebastian doesn't seem to give a damn. When Sebastian's inside him, stroking Erik's cock while Erik whimpers against the constriction of the cock ring, Erik feels it all so clearly.

*I can lie to you. I can lie to your face and you can't catch me.*

"Do you want to come?" Sebastian pants; he must be close. He squeezes Erik's cock, and Erik
"I can't," Erik gasps out. "I can't..."

"Sure you can," Sebastian says. "You can do that for me, you can come for me..."

He's certain he can't, until Sebastian leans to the nightstand and comes back with the knife. Heavy, dense, its presence swallows up Erik's attention, and when Sebastian sweeps the flat of the blade over Erik's back, Erik grabs frantically at the covers, trying not to come immediately. Stainless steel, oh God, I can feel it, I can feel the nickel in the alloy, oh God, yes, yes--

"Yes," he groans, "let me, let me, oh God please let me--"

"You know how to ask," Sebastian growls, stepping up the power behind his thrusts. Erik shudders with the pain, his ass thoroughly used, his cock hard and aching, the tease of the blade on his back nearly searing him-- but Sebastian's right, Erik knows how to ask.

"Please," Erik manages. "Please. Master. Sebastian. Please may I come, please may I come for you, please, please..."

The blade's edge rests against Erik's back, down at the lower right side, and Erik shudders.

"Sebastian-- Sebastian, please, oh God, please, yes, may I come, may I come--"

"This knife is sharp," Sebastian warns him. He stops thrusting, holds still with the knife against Erik's back, his other hand gripping Erik by the hip, and his cock thick and deep in Erik's ass. "You could cut yourself."

Oh. Erik licks his lips and swallows. "Do-- do you want me to...?"

Sebastian groans. "Baby," he says, voice thick with arousal, "baby, I love you so much--"

The hurt from that is worse than the slight sharp pain when Sebastian draws the blade across Erik's skin, cuts him just enough to make him bleed. Sebastian drops the knife and slams his palm down against the cut, and then he's pounding in again, nearly flattening Erik on the bed.

"Come," Sebastian snarls. "Come on, baby, come for me--"

Erik shudders, trying-- and the cock ring eases, just enough, just enough that he can, and he does, instantly, throwing his head back and yelling as the orgasm rocks through his entire body.

Sebastian's right there with him, slamming in for another frenzied half-dozen thrusts, and when he comes he does pin Erik down on the bed, stretching out all over him, reaching up to grip Erik's wrists. His right hand is wet and sticky with Erik's blood; Erik hums out softly, smelling the iron in it.

It's not about Sebastian; none of the satisfaction and lust and excitement were for him. But Erik squirms like the slave Sebastian expects him to be, groans with pleasure Sebastian thinks is his, and not just inspired by a cock ring and a knife and the coppery tang of nearby blood.

"I love you," Sebastian murmurs again, his lips at the back of Erik's neck.

He says it to the knife, to himself, to what's left of his mutation and his lost soulmate. He says it to everything but Sebastian, and Sebastian doesn't know. For the first time in all these months, the smile on Erik's face is genuine. "I love you, too."
Erik, September 2000

Chapter Summary

After Shaw tells Erik he can't see Jason anymore, Erik's ready to do whatever it takes to leave. Jason helps him plan an escape, and gets him out of there.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains dubious consent (may be considered inherently non-consensual due to circumstances), humiliation in front of a friend (spitting), violent wrestling, implied punishment, heavy breathplay, references to bootplay as humiliation, and angst. Erik is 17.

"Check," Jason says. Erik looks the chessboard over and smirks up at him; Jason blinks and looks down at the board again. "Oh. Oh shit." Jason's king tips over, and Erik settles back on his heels, puts his hands behind his back and stretches, satisfied from head to toe. It's been a good afternoon.

Jason wipes the board out, the illusion vanishing, and he sits back on the couch. Words come over the coffee table, Jason's neat block print standing out in stark white against the oak. IT'S STILL FUCKING WEIRD SEEING YOU ON THE FLOOR LIKE THIS. HOW MUCH LONGER ARE YOU GOING TO PUT UP WITH THIS SHIT?

Erik sighs and scratches at his forehead. Sebastian's upstairs; Jason's been coming over for an hour or two after school ever since school started again, at least during days when he doesn't have chess club or drama club. There are no more inter-school chess club meetings at the mall on Tuesday mornings, not now that the school year's started, but since Jason can come over more often now, that's not so bad. Jason's not allowed in the house when Erik's alone, but it doesn't seem like much of a sacrifice. At least Erik gets to see him.

ARE THINGS BETTER?

Erik shrugs. It's fall now, but he's still wearing the gauzy pajama pants and thin tank tops Sebastian favors, even though the house gets colder every day. And with that kind of outfit, Jason can see Erik's bruises, the same as they've always been, month after month. Sebastian doesn't take it easy just because Jason's coming over.

Jason gives him an alphabet to work with, and they've gotten better and better at this-- since neither one of them knows whether Sebastian's mutation has any psionic components, they don't take chances, they don't have Jason try to blank them out at home. For all Erik knows there are hidden cameras, recording them whenever Jason visits. But Erik can spell out words quickly, disguising his motions to look like random rhythmic movements tapping out a song of sorts on the surface, and Jason can read them as fast as Erik can tap them out.

I THINK THIS IS AS GOOD AS IT'S GOING TO GET.
Jason grimaces. I STILL THINK YOU OUGHT TO BOOK IT. GET THE F**K OUT OF HERE.

GO WHERE, THOUGH? WHAT'S THE POINT? WHAT WOULD I DO?

ANYTHING. TRY TO GET YOUR POWERS BACK. SEE IF HE WAS TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT YOUR SOULMATE.

Erik cuts him off, shaking his head and deliberately turning away from the coffee table. "Sorry," Jason says. He reaches out and rests a hand on Erik's shoulder, squeezing lightly. "Hey, c'mere."

Erik leans in without even thinking about it. He and Jason have never been more than friends, for all the looks they used to get, for all that Mort used to tease Jason about wearing Erik's bronze wristband. But right now Jason's touching him, and it isn't a contest of wills or a game or a lie. It's moments like this that Erik realizes how exhausting his life with Sebastian is, but like he told Jason: this is probably as good as it's going to get.

Erik turns his head and rests his cheek against the side of Jason's knee, and Jason slides his fingers through Erik's hair.

And it turns out that was a mistake.

There's the sound of a throat clearing, the light patter of Sebastian's footsteps on the stairs. Erik jerks upright, but not fast enough. "Baby," Sebastian says, "c'mere a minute."

Jason glances over his shoulder, but Erik squeezes Jason's knee as he comes to his feet, getting Jason's attention and shaking his head. "It's fine," he whispers. He walks over to Sebastian and slips his hands behind his back, lowering his eyes and inclining his head. "Yes, Sebastian?"

Sebastian slides a hand up Erik's chest, over the thin soft tank top Erik's wearing. His touch doesn't look like much, but he's making a point of pressing at all the worst of Erik's bruises, places that have been sore for days. He keeps going, rubbing over Erik's shoulder and then reaching up and clenching the back of Erik's neck, high up at the base of his skull, pressure and pain radiating through Erik's joining spot.

Erik's gotten better at this; he doesn't suck in a breath, doesn't flinch. Sebastian might know it hurts him, but Erik tries not to share how much.

Sebastian squeezes a little longer, just to finish staking his claim, and then lets his hand drop down a little, running his fingertips over Erik's collar. "Tell me who you belong to," Sebastian murmurs.

"Not you. Never you. He caps the defiance, gives Sebastian a sense of obedience and defeat. "I belong to you."

"Get on your knees and open your mouth." Sebastian exerts some pressure against the back of Erik's neck again, tugging him down.

This could end up being anything; Erik wouldn't put it past Sebastian to fuck Erik's mouth right in front of one of Erik's friends. He goes to his knees, keeping his hands behind his back, and looks up at Sebastian. His lips are parted, but not much.

"Wider," Sebastian says. He reaches down and puts a thumb at the corner of Erik's mouth, rubbing gently along Erik's lips. Erik opens his mouth wider, and then a little wider, until finally Sebastian takes his hand away and looks carefully down at him.

"Hold still," he warns Erik, and then Erik can see it coming. It's not so bad, it's not going to hurt, this is easier than so many of the things Sebastian's done to him. Sebastian swirls the saliva around in his mouth and then spits, carefully, onto Erik's face, the splash mostly landing against his cheek.
and sliding toward his lips.

"Who do you belong to?" Sebastian murmurs.

This time he gets it out without a pause. "I belong to you."

"Good boy. Okay, baby. Go make me a cup of tea, oolong, and bring it upstairs to me." He reaches down and rubs his thumb down Erik's cheek, just beside the cooling track of spittle. "Don't clean up."

"Yes, Sebastian."

Sebastian heads back up the stairs, and Erik feels Jason's eyes on him as he comes off his knees and passes through the living room and into the kitchen.

Tea is easy; he knows just how Sebastian likes it. He gets the tea into the infuser and rests it in the cup of hot water, setting a timer to ensure it all happens exactly the way Sebastian wants it.

Jason comes to the kitchen doorway and leans against it, arms crossed over his chest. "Are you kidding me?"

"It's fine," Erik says. "It's all right, I'm not hurt."

"You've got spit drying on your cheek and you're telling me you're not hurt. Because, what, the two dozen bruises you've got all over your body are nothing, too?"

Erik glances up at Jason. "Don't tell me you've suddenly decided that sadism is abuse. I know what kinds of magazines you like..."

"I know what kinds of magazines you like, too, and I'm pretty sure spit-to-the-face doesn't feature in them."

"We've been coming to a few understandings lately," Erik says evenly. "I've been getting more time with metal toys, and we play with humiliation, a little, sometimes. I don't mind it."

"If he had a problem with me touching you, he could've told me. Hurting you because of me--"

"I'm not hurt," Erik repeats, a little angry. He taps at the counter, and Jason gives him an alphabet. THIS IS AS GOOD AS IT'S GETTING. LET ME HAVE THAT, AT LEAST.

Jason looks away. The timer goes off, and Erik takes the infuser out of the teacup. "I'll be back in a minute."

"Right. Fine. I'll be here."

Erik heads upstairs with Sebastian's tea and kneels down beside Sebastian's desk. Sebastian's typing, working on his book the way he always is these days. Bound By Choice, Erik thinks it's called. Erik's going to be mentioned in it, from what he understands, but Sebastian hasn't asked to interview him. It's just as well; he doesn't think he'd be able to give the right answers. This has never been Erik's choice, but for all he knows Sebastian's deluded himself into thinking it was. Erik would rather not find out.

After a while, Sebastian reaches for the cup, takes a drink, and sets the cup down next to his keyboard. "Good," he murmurs. "Now you go downstairs, and you get your friend the fuck out of my house."
The bottom drops out of Erik's stomach. "Now?" he whispers.

Sebastian glances over, and Erik can already see it was the wrong thing to ask. Sebastian lashes out, backhanded, but thank God he's not charged up; it hurts, but it doesn't knock Erik over. It probably won't leave a mark. It might not have been loud enough to hear from downstairs.

"Who do you belong to?" Sebastian asks. Erik doesn't even try to pick himself up off the floor.

"You," Erik says, desperation lending weight to the lie. "I know that. Jason knows that. We weren't doing anything--"

"I've been letting him come here for months because I trusted you," Sebastian says. Still calm, still even, still steady. "Maybe when you prove to me that trust wasn't misplaced, you can see him again."

"Nothing happened."

"Do you really want to argue with me right now?" Sebastian raises an eyebrow. "Be sure, Erik. Be really, really sure."

Anger flares up, Erik's skin flushing from the chest up, and there's no way he can hide that. Even Sebastian won't be able to miss it. "I'll tell him to go," Erik grits out.

"You do that. And you get your ass back up here the second he's gone. It better not take more than--" Sebastian glances at his watch. "Sixty seconds. You be here, on the floor, on your knees, in sixty seconds, or you'll be making it up to me."

Somehow Erik figures he'll be making it up one way or another. He pushes his focus back, into his joining spot, into their bond, and as much as it hurts, he clenches at it, tries to pull against it.

Sebastian jerks forward, hands flattening on his desk. Erik tries to steel himself to do it again, but he doesn't have time: Sebastian shoves away from his desk, tackles Erik into the floor and pushes him over on his stomach. He pins Erik down at the back of the neck and uses his other hand to grip Erik at soul's-home, waves of ugly, crashing pain rocking into Erik until Erik can hardly breathe.

"Sometimes," and this is the worst of it, Sebastian's voice so casual and careless, as if he isn't pinning Erik down bodily, as if he isn't causing surge after surge of pain, "you really don't seem grateful at all. And I've done so goddamn much for you." He eases his grip at soul's-home; Erik takes in a few deep, desperate breaths, gulping in air as Sebastian's other hand comes around to the front of his neck. One more breath, and Sebastian tightens his grip there, too, holding hard. He stretches out, pushes the length of his body up against Erik's, and gets his lips at Erik's ear. "Do what you're told," he whispers, cock hard against Erik's ass.

When he comes up, it's all at once, leaving Erik to suck in another desperate breath. Erik pushes himself to hands and knees and then finally comes up on his feet, hoping he's not marked too badly from all this.

"I'm sorry," Erik says. "I'll tell him to go."

Jason's at the foot of the stairs, angry expression on his face. The fight probably was loud enough to hear from downstairs, then. "Erik--"

"You have to go."

"Erik."
"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Erik grabs Jason by the arm. "Please don't make this worse for me," he whispers, and then louder, in case Sebastian's listening, "You have to go."

Jason sets his jaw and lets Erik walk him out of the house. "I want to help you," Jason whispers. "Let me help you."

"You can't," Erik whispers back. "It's over. Forget me."

He's seen that stubborn look on Jason's face before, but Jason doesn't say anything else. He heads for his car and drives away, and Erik sags a little, rubbing at his face as he turns to go back inside. Sebastian's spit is sticky and cold on his fingers. His joining spot aches.

When the door closes, Sebastian comes out of his study and walks slowly down the stairs. "Okay," Sebastian says. "Up to you. Right here on the floor, or back in bed?"

"Bed," Erik says, and he pushes past Sebastian, heading up the stairs.

Erik's at the library a week later, looking through the romances on a Thursday afternoon, when a pretty blonde domme in jeans and a tailored shirt and tie comes up to him.

"Hey," she says.

Erik nods. "Hello."

"Looking for anything in particular?"

"Not really. Just browsing." He looks at her again. Maybe she's a librarian? He doesn't see a nametag, just the shirt and the tie and--

--the bronze wristband, when her sleeve rides up a little.

Erik stares. "Jason?"

The smirk on her face gives the game away, or at least it gives the game away to someone who knows Jason the way Erik does. But- "You're," Erik says, looking Jason up and down. The domme camouflage is perfect; if Jason hadn't projected the illusion of that bronze wristband, Erik never would have known. "You're someone else."

"Yeah, well, look who's talking," Jason whispers, his voice just as perfectly disguised as the rest of him. "We need to talk."

"I can't. I can't talk to you." Erik grabs a book off the shelf at random. Sebastian will wonder what happened if he doesn't come home with something. "I can't see you."

Jason closes his eyes; his eyelashes flutter for a second. He doesn't drop the illusion around himself, but he says, "We're blanked. If you think I'm leaving you in that place, dream on."

"Where else would I go?" Erik glances around. If Jason's maintaining his self-illusion, that's two full layers: the illusion disguising him, and the illusion of Erik and this fake domme having an innocuous conversation in the library. His heart leaps a little as he realizes no one's looking, that Jason's managing it without even looking as though he's having to think too hard. Jason's control over illusions is getting better every day-- and Erik's missing it.

But they don't have time for Erik to gush about that. This conversation gets riskier every minute. Sebastian knows Erik comes to the library on Thursday afternoons; he's never shown up to give
Erik a ride home, but he could. He always could. "Where could I go? I don't have any family, the Stones can't take me back--"

"You run away. Jesus, Erik, there are resources for people like you--"

"No one's like me," Erik says, reaching up to his joining spot and pressing hard. The pain rocks through him, reminding him what he is, what his bond is, now. "They'd just send for Sebastian, try to get us back together."

"So go east. Hitchhike if you have to. See if you can find your dom, your real dom. You don't think he'd take you in?"

Erik swallows, eyes stinging. "He's dead," he whispers.

"Shaw says. He could be lying--"

"He's dead," Erik insists. "I could feel him if he were there. If there were anything left to feel I'd know. There's nothing left, I don't have anywhere else to go--"

"You hate him." Jason looks Erik in the eyes, and for all that he's wearing blue eyes, he's seeing right into Erik, his eyes telling Erik that Erik can't bullshit him. "You hate his house. You hate wearing his collar. You didn't say it, but I know you. You don't have to stay."

"How would I even leave him?" He glances up at the clock on the wall. "If I'm not home in another twenty minutes he'll--" Jason looks away; his illusion's fair complexion turns slightly green. "Yes, well. That. Or worse. So just let me go now and don't do this to me again. It's--" He wants to say it's not so bad, but it's a lie. He knows it's a lie. Jason knows. "It's all right. You don't owe me anything."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," Jason says, glaring. "Look. I can distract him. I can project an illusion of you, get you all the head start you could need--"

"He'd know it's not me. He can feel me, remember?"

"Fuck." Jason sighs. "My mutation's psionic, maybe I could fake that."

"Fake the bond? With an illusion?"

"It's not the real bond," Jason fires back. "And what, you think I'm not good enough? Fuck you."

"It's the bond," Erik says. "Come on. You can fake a lot of things, but that? No one could fake that."

"I'm good, you know I am. I am fucking great. And I can feel my soulmate now, so I know what it's like to sense emotion. You said yourself, he doesn't get everything."

"He doesn't get everything, but if you're wrong..." Still. Erik can't help but wonder. He's been lying to Sebastian for months now-- lying through the bond-- and Sebastian hasn't picked up on it. He knows they can't feel each other when they're apart, only when they're face-to-face. Right now he can't tell where Sebastian is, and that's a little frightening at home-- he never knows when Sebastian's coming back until he hears the garage door open-- but what if Jason's right? What if Jason could fake the bond itself?

Sebastian might still come after him. But if Erik could get a head start, if he had a few hours before Sebastian realized he was missing...
"Erik," Jason says softly, and he puts his hand on Erik's forearm, holds on gently. The feel of it doesn't match the way it looks, even though Jason could make it match. What Erik's feeling is real: Jason's real hand. Jason touching him because he cares, for comfort, and not to prove a point or stake a claim.

Erik swallows and blinks a few times. "I have to get home," he whispers. "Can you meet me here next week? I'm here once a week."

"Bring your stuff, I'll--"

"I need to think about it." Erik takes a deep breath. "I can't just take off without a plan."

"Okay." Jason rubs at his face, his illusion's face. "I'll have a plan. I swear, I'll have a plan that works. You meet me here next week and we'll go over it."

Erik's heart leaps. "I'll be here. Next week. Next Thursday. Four."

"Four," Jason promises. "I'll see you then."

"Are we still blanked?"

"Yeah."

Erik drags Jason into a hug, and Jason shivers and drops the illusion around himself. Erik's holding onto Jason now, not the false domme he's been looking at all this time. It helps, somehow; the familiarity helps, the embrace helps. "I can make it another week," Erik whispers. "And another week after that, if I have to. I'm going to be all right. I promise you."

"I promise you," Jason fires back, every bit as fierce. "I promise you. It's going to be all right, Erik. I'm going to get you out of there."

Erik draws back and strokes his hand down Jason's cheek, just because he can. He gives Jason the best smirk he's got left to him. "Bossy," he drawls. "You're acting like such a dom."

"You--" Jason bites his tongue and winces; the response he always used to give Erik was you know you love it. "If it gets you out of there," Jason says instead, "I'll act like anything I need to."

He really means it. Erik knows how much it means to Jason to wear his own skin, to stay proud of who he is and what he looks like no matter how much easier it would be to blend in. But for this... for Erik, he's willing to be someone else.

"Thank you," Erik whispers. And then he looks up at the clock, and his stomach rolls over. "I have to go."

He has to run home, and he's relieved that Sebastian wasn't home early, that he's still got time to get dinner together. He leaves the book on the counter, doesn't even check its title.

Sebastian does, of course, when he comes home. He walks into the kitchen, picks up the book, and laughs at the cover. "Always with the boots," he says; it's only then that Erik glances over and sees that it's got a picture of a sub under his dom's boot on the cover, and the title is Tough As Boot Leather. "We can play around with that later if you want."

He doesn't give Erik a chance to reply, though, coming around to where Erik's stirring sauce on the stove; he wraps his arms around Erik from behind and bites Erik's ear. "Smells good," he murmurs. "The food, too."
Erik laughs. He's expected to laugh. "Thank you, master," he says, soft and easy.

It's the right thing to say. He's finally figuring out all the right things to say. Sebastian gives his shoulders a squeeze, kisses Erik's joining spot, and then moves away. "Just going to go up and change. I'll be back down soon. Love you, baby."

"Love you, too," Erik answers automatically, sending Sebastian the emotions from earlier today: elation from the possibility of escape-- and Sebastian's gone before he can see the way the smile sticks on Erik's face.

"So I thought about a whole shitload of things," Jason says quietly, the two of them blanked out by another illusion-- Erik reading a paperback, Jason's false persona studying-- while Jason goes over his plans. "But thank fuck I told my father about this--"

"You did what," Erik sputters. "How could you--"

"Do you seriously believe my parents want you in that house any more than I do?" Jason shakes his head. "They ask about you every time I see you. And when I showed them what you look like now--"

Erik shivers and hugs himself. "You shouldn't have--"

"No, believe me, I should have. I should have done it sooner. Mom is furious. Dad thinks you should sue the living fuck out of Shaw and the Stones--"

Shaking his head, Erik says, "No. No. I just-- I want to go. I want to leave, I don't want to have anything to do with any of them--"

"Okay," Jason says, reaching across the table and stroking his hand down Erik's arm. "Okay. So let me tell you the plan, because you want to know what, my original plans were pretty much shit."

"It sounded good to me..."

"Ha. Sending Shaw home with an illusion would've been great and all, I could've faked that bullshit good-sub act you put on, but do you think I could've held out through whatever the fuck he does to you without puking? I'm tough, man, but I'm not that tough."

Erik grimaces. "All right. Fair enough. What is the plan, then?"

"We leave from here. I take you out of here, and we head for Omaha."

Erik blinks. "That's an hour away-- what if someone sees us, what if Sebastian calls the police--"

Jason waves a hand. "Not an issue. I'm not going to be using my car-- well, I am going to be using my car, but it's not going to look like my car."

"Ah." Erik smiles, just a little. "Okay. And then?"

"My parents are getting you some money and some bus tickets. Is there somewhere you want to go?"

Erik shakes his head. "Anywhere. It doesn't matter. Away."

"I figured. So that's being taken care of. I can get you some things, clothes, a backpack, a cell phone..."
"Thank you." Erik sighs. "I'm probably not going to be able to take anything with me. Not that I give a damn. Nothing in Sebastian's house is mine." One thing. There's one thing he's going to need, but he hasn't dared wear it or carry it around with him; he doesn't want Sebastian to know how much the windcatcher means to him. "Anything you can get for me... I'd appreciate it."

"I will," Jason promises. He raises his eyebrows. "Are you sure you don't want that lawyer? Because my dad knows people out east, he could find somebody who'd take your case when you get there."

"What if I lose," Erik says quietly. "What then? I attacked four people, hurt two of them badly. Suppose it turns out they only dropped those charges on condition that I stay bonded to Sebastian?"

"God, I fucking hope not..." Jason rubs at his face. "Okay. So we just get you out of here like I said, and then when you get where you're going, you fucking call me. Don't you dare keep me waiting, you hear me? I need to know you're okay."

"I'm going to be okay," Erik promises him, reaching over to catch Jason's hand in his. "Thank you. Tell your parents thank you. Next week, is that enough time to pull everything together? Can we do this next week?"

"Hell yes we can do this next week," Jason says, voice shaking, hand tight on Erik's. "We could do it tomorrow--"

Tempting as that is, Erik shakes his head. "Better to stick to the routine," he says. "Even a couple of hours' lead would make a difference. If something's different and I don't have that lead, Sebastian's going to know right away."

"Okay. Next week, next Thursday. I'll be waiting, I'll have my car outside."

"Thank you." Erik slides his hand up to Jason's wristband; the metal's warm beneath his fingertips. "For remembering who I used to be."

Sometimes he wakes up like this: Sebastian's hand in his hair, Sebastian dragging him up on the bed. He's half asleep as he straddles Sebastian's hips, but when Sebastian pushes two slick fingers into him, Erik's awake enough to be grateful he got that. He looks down at Sebastian and thinks, I'm leaving you, and he rocks down hard, groaning as he takes Sebastian in. I'm leaving you, I'm going, I'm getting out of here, thighs straining as he lifts and lowers himself on Sebastian's cock, throat hoarse with all the sounds he's making.

"That's it." Sebastian growls, both hands going up to Erik's throat. He squeezes, but not enough to cut Erik's air off altogether. "That's it, let me feel it. Make some noise, baby, I want to feel that under my hands..."

Erik doesn't try to hold anything back. Leaving, he thinks, and he's harder than he's ever been, his throat hot against Sebastian's palms. Sebastian squeezes tighter, and tighter, and Erik's noises are turning into choked, gasping, desperate little battles for air, but it's okay. It's all going to be okay.

"Come," Sebastian growls out, Erik's breath finally gone completely. Erik gives in, readily this time, easily, he can give all the ground Sebastian wants. He comes in messy streaks across Sebastian's stomach, throat pressed to Sebastian's palm, keeping it there even when Sebastian looses his grip and lets Erik have a full breath of air.

"My turn," Sebastian growls, and there's Erik's throat again, caught up hard now, no chance at a
breath until Sebastian's ready to let him. His chest goes tight, ass clenching around Sebastian's cock, and while Sebastian grunts and snarls and slams in again and again, Erik's sight is starting to fade out, hot white and red sparks jolting through his field of vision.

"Don't close your eyes," Sebastian tells him, "keep your eyes open, who do you belong to, you're mine, say it, say it--"

He can't. He can't get any sound out. He struggles, hands coming up to tug at Sebastian's wrists, lips forming the shape of yours while Sebastian fucks up into him, and his chest is quaking, trying to force words past Sebastian's hands. Sebastian groans, finally, and comes, hands crushing Erik's throat, bright white pain flaring up so hard that Erik thinks he's going to pass out--

But then it's over, Sebastian sitting up and pressing his mouth hard to Erik's. He's breathing into Erik's mouth, giving Erik his breath, and Erik sucks at it, clutches at Sebastian's shoulders and drinks the air in. When Sebastian lets him go, Erik pants for it, body heaving, shuddering all over.

"Who do you belong to?" Sebastian asks, cradling Erik in his arms. "Come on, baby, you can do it, you can tell me..."

You, Erik thinks, across the miles, across the months, thinking it at a ghost.

"You," he whispers, throat raw, burning with it, and Sebastian strokes his hair.

The next Thursday morning, Sebastian leaves for work, and Erik mentions the library as he's going. Sebastian smiles at him. "Yep, I guess it's about that time," he says. "How'd you like the one from a couple weeks back, the boot worship one?"

"It was all right," Erik says.

"Well, they sure as hell know their technique, I tell you what," Sebastian laughs, reaching out to ruffle Erik's hair. "That thing we did..." Hands bound behind him, humping forward desperately against Sebastian's ankle, Sebastian's fingers in his mouth, sucking them, almost choking on them... Erik's not sure if Sebastian's talking about any of that, or if he's talking about what he did to Erik afterward, the fuck that got harder and harder until Sebastian was giving it to him with his power, not just with his body. Erik came apart at the seams, came screaming; it was all he could do to make sure he was screaming the right things. Sometimes it's good, all the sex and domination and control Sebastian brings to bear on him; Erik might hate that most of all.

"See if you can find something on fisting today, huh?" Sebastian leans in and kisses Erik softly on the mouth. "I want to do that to you. I want you to take my hand and show me how much of a slut you are, how you'll do anything to get more..."

Somehow Erik manages to smile. "I'll look," he promises.

"The things subs write about these days! Man." Sebastian winks. "Who needs college, baby? Talk about a great education." And with that, he's done, thank God. Go. Get out of here. "Have fun, baby. I'll see you later."

Erik stands at the door, waves Sebastian off, and then goes upstairs to dress. He doesn't know what he'll do with himself until it's time to leave. It's not as though he's got anything to pack. All he needs is his windcatcher, and he doesn't want to have that out before he's ready to go; if something goes wrong, if Sebastian comes home from work early or comes home for lunch, Erik doesn't want Sebastian to know Erik has it on him.
But with half an hour to go, he goes upstairs and tugs his sock drawer all the way out of the dresser. In the back, there's a wadded white sock, the same as any other. Erik can feel the difference, though; if every other scrap of metal in the world is dead to him, there's still this. There will always be this.

He pulls the windcatcher out of the sock and clutches it tightly in his hand. *I don't know where I'm going, but if I can find any part of you... I'll look. I'm coming. I'll look for you.*

At the library, he looks at everyone's wrists, knowing full well that Jason could be any of them. Over and over, there's no one, until a stunningly gorgeous brown-haired dom walks by Erik, deliberately bumping into him. Erik actually stares for a second, mouth slightly open-- the dom's tall and built and has beautiful classic features, along with striking blue eyes and a light sprinkling of freckles across his nose-- and then the dom raises both eyebrows, smirks, leans in, and lifts his left hand, running his fingers through his hair.

Bronze. Erik sucks in a breath; bronze wristband. All right.

"I bet," Jason says, and *God*, who did he study for that voice?-- "you want to come to the john with me. Don't you, boy?"

Erik glances around. There are a few people watching the show-- probably watching Jason, good God, he's *beautiful*. And it occurs to Erik: Jason's doing this on purpose. If Sebastian comes around the library asking what happened to his sub, people aren't going to remember Erik running off by himself: they're going to remember Jason's illusion, and put Sebastian on the trail of a man who doesn't exist.

"I shouldn't," Erik stammers.

"Sure you should," Jason says smoothly, and he puts a hand on Erik's shoulder and steers him out of the reading room, through the lobby, and into the restroom.

No one's in here, so Jason just grins. "You ready to go?"

Erik sags, shoulders slumping. "You're still sure about this?"


"I'm fine." Erik exhales. "I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing, but-- I'm here, I want out. Get me out of here."

"You got it," Jason says. "My car's outside-- I have it disguised as a pickup."

"From all the way in here?" Erik asks. It's a little bit absurd, being distracted by that, and of course he knows Jason's powerful, Jason's been testing Phi-level since he was fourteen... but God, Erik misses his own ability, misses everything about it. He reaches up and catches Jason's wristband, sucking in a breath and *remembering*. This was his, once; he made this alloy, blended the metals until they were a single new compound. He shaped this wristband, made it thick and solid, designed it to fit perfectly around Jason's wrist with a gap between the ends so he could twist his wrist into it. This was *his*.

"Are you all right?" Jason asks softly. He brings his other hand up and slides his fingers through Erik's hair, gentle with it, careful.
"I want to go," Erik whispers, biting down hard on his lower lip. He's not going to break down, not now. He's getting away. What's left of him.

"I'm going to take you out of here as yourself," Jason explains softly, still caressing Erik's hair. "I'm going to wear this body until we're out of town and on the road, and I'm going to pull off somewhere between here and Omaha and change up the car and myself. We got you bus tickets." Jason reaches into his inner jacket pocket and pulls out a thick envelope; Erik looks inside, heart clenching at the sight of cash-- a lot of cash-- and tickets that are sending him off to Philadelphia.

"I didn't have time to get you a fake ID, sorry," Jason says, wincing. "But that's five thousand dollars, so it should--"

"Five thousand-- where did you--"

"I told you my parents were in on it." Jason shrugs, and the sheepish grin on his face is his, not his illusion's-- it almost doesn't fit. "They're my alibi, too. And if you ever need anything, you can call the house, they'll help you."

Erik shakes his head. "God. I wish your parents had adopted me."

"So do I," Jason says, and then he's pulling Erik fully into his arms, the illusion vanishing from his body. "Goddamnit, Erik, I'm so sorry, if we'd known what they were going to let him do to you--"

Erik cringes, shaking his head, drawing back. "Don't. Don't do that, don't apologize for that-- it wasn't your fault, you couldn't have known. I didn't know." He puts his hands on Jason's shoulders. "Don't think about the rest, all right? Just get me the fuck out of here."

"Okay." Jason reaches up and squeezes Erik's wrist. "Okay."

They leave in a blue pickup truck, and as soon as the city gives way to miles and miles of farmland, Jason turns off the road and out of sight. The car shimmers underneath them and turns into a black Ford Explorer. Erik knows they're really riding in Jason's Jeep, but he can't feel the chassis underneath him or the structure around him. It's a little like riding on nothing at all, strange and frightening, but he's gotten used to the way cars feel in the last few months; Shaw takes him-- took him-- out of the house sometimes.

Jason concentrates for a moment and takes on a new appearance. In all the time Erik's known him, this is only the fourth time he's changed to look like someone else. Four times, and all four times were for him.

"Jason--"

Jason looks up at him. He's white again, no surprise if he wants to blend in, Erik supposes, and he deliberately avoids looking in the rearview mirror for now. This time Jason's kept his own height, his own build, and he's given himself features that are average enough to be forgettable. "Something wrong, did you forget something?"

"I just..." Erik shakes his head. "I know what it does to you, looking like someone else... like this..."

Jason lets the strain show in his illusion's face, but he shakes his head. "I'll need a week of showers to scrub the feeling off," he admits, "but I'd stay like this for as long as it took to get you out of here."
Erik looks down at his hands. "I should be the one wearing the illusion," he admits quietly. "I don't know who I am anymore."

"You're my best friend," Jason says. He reaches out, gently touches Erik's shoulder. "Good enough for me. You can find the rest when you're someplace new. Maybe that asshole was lying about your real soulmate, maybe you can find him..."

"If he were out there, I could feel him," Erik says. He reaches into his pocket, pulls the windcatcher out and holds on tight, trying to sense anything. The metal, his soulmate's presence... anything at all. "I could feel him."

"It's worth trying," Jason insists. "Just get out there, see if maybe you can feel him when you get closer. You know, like a normal person--" Jason winces, immediately rephrasing, "--like a normal **mutant** whose power doesn't turn him into a living compass. I can feel mine, you know? But fuck if I know if ey's north, south, or in the fucking Pacific." Jason shrugs. "You always said east coast before. See if it turns out to feel right."

It doesn't sound right, somehow, but nothing does. At least Philadelphia is a place to start. Or start over, if he gets that far and there's still nothing to search for. If it comes to that.

Jason reaches up to Erik's neck. "Do you want this off you?"

Erik had almost forgotten, but the instant Jason gets close to Sebastian's collar, Erik flinches. Jason draws back. "It's metal," he says. "Can you take it off yourself?"

Erik reaches up and hooks two fingers into it, straining with every ounce of his dead ability. He remembers what it felt like, remembers the sensation pulsing through his body-- he remembers how easy it would have been, once, the metal giving way underneath a slight nudge of his power...

"I can't," Erik whispers, shaking his head. "I can't get it off."

"I was afraid of that," Jason says gently, touching Erik's arm. "I brought wire cutters."

And somehow that's what breaks Erik down. Jason's seen him juggle cars, lift abandoned railway cars. Erik's made **bronze**, sculpted out pieces of copper, even once managed to lift a flattened disk he was standing on-- it was only the fact that he couldn't keep his balance that stopped him from being able to use that disk to fly. He's eavesdropped by amplifying metal vibrations, spent hours and hours daydreaming and feeling his way down high-tension lines-- he always wondered if he could feel the wires and towers full states away, the way it felt like, or if he was only imagining it. He's been shut in an MRI tube and had the cells in his body aligned with the use of strong magnetic fields, and for days after he felt like he was one with the Earth, like everything around him was his in the same way metal was, if only he could figure out how to bend all the magnetic fields himself.

Jason's been there for almost all of it, one of the very few people in Erik's world who cheered him on after his mother was gone and he had **nobody**. Jason was the one who slapped Erik on the back and said **fucking Omega, man, when you get older you're going to test fucking Omega or I will eat an entire store of top hats.**

And here he is, opening his glove compartment, taking out a set of small wire cutters to snip open a simple piece of chain with quarter-inch lengths.

If he thought Jason could cut through the adamantium alloy, Erik might let him. But he shakes his head, not wanting to watch Jason try and fail. "No."

"Erik--"
"It's not silver. It's something else. You won't be able to cut it."

Jason stares at the wire cutters in his hand and groans. "Fuck." He looks back up at Erik. "Are you sure you can't... do you want to try?"

"Am I sure-- would I be wearing it if I weren't sure--" But that's as much as he can get out; Erik covers his face with his hands, stops even pretending to hold himself together. He breaks down and cries, for the first time since the hospital: for his soulmate, for himself, his lost gifts, his life.

When he's done, though, he looks up at Jason. Jason's ashy and pale, but he's not looking at Erik with pity.

Erik puts a hand on his collar and closes his eyes. If he concentrates, he can feel it: the dense, heavy weight of adamantium, and beneath that the shining clarity of silver, the hum of conductive potential, the faintest trace of copper in all the rest of the metal, like a lick of blood around a cool ocean of purity. He can feel every link, every last one of them, and maybe it's because this appalling false claim has been touching his skin for every minute of the last few months, or maybe it's because he just wants to so damned badly, but he thinks... he thinks...

"Maybe I can't get it off now," Erik whispers, "but I can fucking feel it. I want to take it off myself, when I can. I don't want him to have taken everything from me."

Jason nods, slowly. "Okay," he says, and he puts the wire cutters back into the glove compartment. "All right." He looks Erik in the eyes. "Are you ready to keep going?"

"I'm ready," Erik says, wiping his face with his sleeve. "Let's go."

At the bus station in Omaha, Jason comes out of the car-- wearing his nondescript illusion again-- and walks around the side of it, pulling Erik into a hug.

"Safe. Be safe," Jason whispers. "Call me when you can. Don't keep me in the dark, man, you know I'm going to be up nights thinking about you."

"I'll call," Erik promises. "Thank you for this. Thank you. Tell your parents I'm grateful for their help. And that I'm sorry I couldn't say goodbye."

"I will."

"And if anything happens-- if Sebastian comes after you--"

"I can take him," Jason says grimly.

Erik shakes his head. "No, I need to tell you, first-- he's not what I thought he was. He's not a human."

Jason's eyes go wide. "Shit, why didn't you tell me? Is that why he did whatever the fuck he did to you?"

"I don't know-- maybe." Erik shakes his head. "I don't think I'm ever going to know. But you have to be careful. I don't know what he can do, exactly-- I just know if you hit him, it doesn't hurt him, and he can hit back twice as hard."

"Oh, Jesus, Erik--"

Impatient, Erik shakes his head. "Don't get caught up feeling sorry for me, I'm trying to warn you--
"I get it. I get it. I can't hit him, which, okay, I guess, good to know, but what do you think he's going to do to me, seriously? I mean, shit, we might live in Park View because of my mom's family, but we're still the fucking Wyngardes. Unless he comes on a gun-toting rampage, he's not going to get at me. I think my dad's side of the family can sue his ass out of existence if he tries anything." Jason pauses. "And Dad was serious about that. If you ever want to pursue that--"

"I just want to get away." Erik takes a deep breath and opens his hand, looks down at his windcatcher. "I just want to be somewhere he won't find me for a while. I can't think about anything else right now."

"Okay. Okay." Jason exhales, runs his hands through his false self's hair, and looks up at Erik again. "How much time do you have? Do you want me to stay with you until the bus comes?"

"You don't have to--"

"It's not about feeling like I have to," Jason says. "It might be a long time before we see each other again."

Erik nods. "Yeah, then. Stay."

They find a bench, and Jason drapes an arm over Erik's shoulders, holding onto him. Erik leans into that touch, sighing and leaning his head down, resting it on Jason's shoulder. "Have you thought about where you're going to college next year?"

"A little bit," Jason says. "Dad's really pushing Yale, he just keeps going on and on about how great it was, how awesome his fraternity was. I asked if they take mutants, and he kinda looked like he swallowed a goldfish for a second, which for all I know he used to do back then." Erik smiles; Jason can probably feel him do it. "And then he said, well, if they don't now, they will when you get there, so guess what that whole experience would be like. Probably not Yale," he concludes. "I'll send applications all over. I know I sure as hell don't plan on staying in Nebraska."

"Come east," Erik murmurs. He squeezes his eyes shut and takes a deep breath. "If you can. Or there's Portland. Portland was nice."

"Probably east. Might be nice to see Dad's side of the family more often." Jason squeezes Erik's shoulders. "I'm not just going to leave you alone, you know. If you need anything, you tell me. I'll be there."

"Thank you," Erik whispers. "I'll stay in touch. I promise."

When the announcement comes over the loudspeaker, Erik reaches out and drags Jason into a hug. He takes an unsteady breath while Jason strokes his hand down Erik's back, but there's no point in delaying this more than absolutely necessary. This is the rest of Erik's life; it's time to get on with it.

The bus doesn't quite fill up, but someone takes the seat next to Erik's anyway. He's a dom with a nice smile and a short Afro, and when he looks Erik over, Erik sits up just a little straighter in his seat. "I'm Mark," he says, offering Erik his hand. "How far are you going?"

He's not Erik's soulmate, but he's not Sebastian Shaw. Erik gives him as much of a smile as he can muster. "As far as you feel like taking me."
Charles, April 2001

Chapter Summary

A year later, Charles still doesn't know what happened, but he's doing his best to move on with his life.

Charles types into the search box, *renounced soulbond*, and looks at the words. This is how little courage he has: he's done this a hundred times now, and he can never even bring himself to hit Enter.

It's ridiculous. He clicks on the magnifying glass icon and looks at the results.

The sponsored ads across the top make him wince.

**Renunciation Assistance**
Bad bond? Learn to renounce. Results guaranteed. No hidden fees.

**Bound By Choice**
New Bonds Forged With Dr. Shaw's Patented Technique. Affordable Evaluation.

**Been Renounced?**
Find Out Now. Certified Psionics, Guaranteed Accuracy.

Halfway down the page, a result from health.gov says **Renounced Bonds: Why does it happen?**

**How can you know?** Clicking it, Charles snorts; it's a *cartoon*.

He lets it play anyway.

"Ella, why are you crying?" says a blonde teenager with a promise collar.

Her brunette friend sniffs. "Oh Nicki, I stopped feeling my soulmate last night. I think I've been renounced!"

"Lots of things can interrupt the bond, Ella. It doesn't have to be renunciation."

"But what if it is? What's going to happen to me?"

"Even if your bond was renounced, it's not the end of the world."

Charles shakes his head. Not the end of the world, no. Just five weeks in hospital. Just his telepathy dimming to nothing. That came back gradually, but he's not nearly as strong as he used to be; he has less range now, and some of his abilities are just gone. He can't alter memories or change minds now without touching the person he's affecting, and it gives him a migraine to make the tiniest change.

In a way that's a bright spot, maybe the only one of the whole ordeal. People are scared enough of mindreading, something so natural to him that those days in hospital without it were devastating.

But even he was disturbed by the ability he had to control and change people. As frightening as it
was at first to lose that defense, he'd only been able to exert that sort of control for a couple of years and he never felt entirely comfortable with it. It's mostly a relief that it's gone.

The cartoon continues, the brunette replying, "That's easy for you to say. You've met your soulmate."

"I have. And I haven't told many people this, Ella, but... I've blocked the bond."

"What? You? But why? You and Gary are crazy about each other!"

"My grandmother and I were really close, and when she died last year, I felt so sad for months. Gary was there for me, but he's at a very important time in his studies. After a while he really needed to get back to work, and he couldn't pay attention to anything else while I was hurting. So I spent a week meditating and I learned how to block the bond, and we're keeping it blocked until the end of the year."

"You're blocking it, but you're going to stop blocking it later? I didn't know you could do that."

"You see, Ella, 'renunciation' is such an old-fashioned term for it. The bond isn't necessarily renounced when you stop feeling it. Nowadays we know it's possible to block the bond without doing any harm, and if the soulbond is hurting you or holding you back, it's okay to block for a while."

"How can I know if my soulmate renounced me, or if ey blocked the bond for some other reason?"

The blonde sobers. "You might never know. That's the part that's given renouncing such a bad name. But the Health Department has done surveys. There's a pamphlet in the guidance counselor's office-- let's check it out!"

A pie chart comes up, Why Bonds Are Blocked, superimposed on the two girls reading the booklet. The blonde sub's voice reads it out and elaborates.

28% - Illness
"Some kinds of illness can block the bond temporarily or damage it permanently."

21% - Traditions
"Some traditions disapprove of bonds with anyone outside a certain group. Others forbid bonds between two doms or two subs, or between two men or two women. If a bondmate observes those traditions, ey may block a bond that runs contrary to eir beliefs."

20% - Personality conflicts
"Once bondmates meet, they might find that despite sharing the bond, they're not compatible in a way that lets them build a life together."

17% - Mental illness
"Some kinds of mental illness can interrupt the bond."

9% - Problem with the bond
"Sometimes the bond goes wrong. The affinity might be too intense, or it might transmit more than it's meant to-- sensations or even thoughts. These malformed bonds aren't a type of mental illness themselves but they can sometimes lead to mental illness or a serious disruption in psionic energy that can cause health problems."

5% - Other
"There can be as many reasons to block the bond as there are individuals. Sometimes a person just
isn't ready to be bonded, or needs time to pursue other life goals without sharing eir bondmate's emotional state."

"See, Ella? Even if your bondmate blocked the bond, it probably doesn't have anything to do with you. It's hard not to take it personally, but don't blame yourself. You can move on. There's more to life than the soulbond. You want to be a doctor, right?"

"Yes," the brunette brightens. "That's important to me."

"And even if your bond is permanently blocked, it doesn't mean you'll end up alone. As many as seven percent of us never form the bond in the first place. You could still find a fulfilling romantic relationship without the bond. It's customary to wait a year to see if your bondmate will change eir mind, but after that, you should feel free to live your own life on your terms."

"Thanks, Nicki. I'm still a little sad, but I feel a lot bett--"

Charles shuts down the browser and rubs his mouth. It's been nearly a year. If he doesn't know by now what happened to his bondmate, he'll probably never know for sure.

If they'd ever met, if they'd had an acknowledgement night, then maybe on the anniversary, Charles would have some tiny chance of finding him. Even if they never feel each other much at any other time, most bonded people feel the pull around then, strong enough to follow.

But they never had that. The bond itself is gone, that sense of his bondmate's feelings and presence. Without that, Charles has no hope of ever finding him. Maybe he was hurt, or ill, or even died, though Charles didn't go into the mourning sleep. The doctors said maybe Charles's mutation kept him from slipping into the day-long coma that typically follows a bondmate's death.

Charles doesn't believe it, though. He's read everything he can lay hands on about the bond, about psionic energy and psionic mutation. It hasn't helped him understand what happened, it hasn't offered any way to find his bondmate again, though he's scoured books and online resources.

But there was that little consolation. There's nothing he could find in the literature to suggest he'd react differently and bypass mourning sleep if his bondmate had died. Not due to his mutation, nor any other factor. There's every reason to believe that his bondmate is alive.

Out there, somewhere. But Charles can't reach him. Maybe he renounced the bond. Charles sent his thoughts to his bondmate on a daily basis; he told him so much. It didn't seem as though his words were getting through, but maybe some did.

Toward the end, Charles was getting anger and frustration from his mate along with the worry and stress. Maybe Charles said the wrong thing or revealed something his bondmate couldn't accept. Maybe as they grew closer to legal seeking age, his bondmate thought better of spending the rest of his life tied to a mutant, or a telepath. Or just to Charles.

Maybe his bondmate received Charles's messages that last day... maybe he sensed Charles's determination to seek him as soon as possible, and broke the bond to stop Charles from finding him.

Charles really shouldn't be thinking of him as 'his bondmate' anymore. They're not bonded, now. Charles could walk past him on the street and never know it.

Someone taps at his dorm room door, and Charles calls, "Come in."

Daniel from the next room over opens the door and stands leaning in the doorway. "Hey. You
going to the party at Jake's place?"

"Skipping it," Charles says.

"He didn't mean anything, you know," says Daniel. "He's just into you, and you know how some people are, they can't handle mammal sex. They lose their shit if nobody's kneeling."

"I know he's your friend, but he's an ass," Charles says. "You should try to gently tell him sometime that going up to a stranger and opening with 'You'd look so pretty on your knees' isn't likely to work with anyone, regardless of whether he turns out to be another dominant. Nobody's that submissive."

"You'd be surprised," Daniel says. "What about you?"

"What about me?" Charles arches an eyebrow, leveling a hard look at Daniel. Before Charles lost the bond, no one ever typed him wrong; people could easily tell he's a dominant. Since then, though, people seem to read him as submissive quite a lot.

Charles isn't the sort of dominant to take it as an insult to be mistyped, but he does wonder what changed. It's true he's not as forceful and sure of himself as he was before; how could he be? But he still wants the same sort of relationship, he still likes the same things in bed, that ought to be the beginning and the end of it.

Daniel fidgets. "C'mon, don't tell me you're not peeking into people's heads, you have to know what I'm talking about."

"I try not to," Charles says. Now and then he smooths his way by catching emotions or surface thoughts and using what he reads there, and sometimes he genuinely can't help it, when he's tired or when someone's thoughts are at a particularly high pitch. But when it comes to people who know about his ability and perceive it as a threat to their privacy, he really does try his best to keep his mind to himself. Not just for their sake, but for his own.

He's learned to shield against people at first meetings especially, when they learn about his mutation. The sudden blare of fear and paranoia is universal, and there's often revulsion and anger as well. It's... wearing.

"Okay," Daniel says doubtfully, and drops his voice to a hush. "Then what about you, have you ever tried it mammal style?"

"What, basic sex? No power exchange?" Charles asks, a little surprised. It's not that he's never had sex without domination and submission before, but he's never been asked so explicitly this way. It's usually the sort of thing a partner only asks about shyly after a few sessions of normal sex.

"Yeah," says Daniel, scrubbing a hand through his straw-blond hair.

"I've tried it, I like it well enough. If you're asking..."

"I'm asking."

"Daniel... I like you," Charles says, and Daniel's face falls. Charles could kick himself. Really, he's sort of terrible at this when he's not reading minds at all, it feels like he's missing half the picture. Hastily he goes on, "So yes! I like you, so yes. I don't think I'd want that with just anyone, but I like you, so yes."

Daniel grins, "Watch out, somebody might get the idea that you like me."
Charles closes his laptop. *Feel free to live your own life on your terms.* Free isn't really what he feels, but without any way of knowing what happened, he doesn't have much choice. His own terms are all he has, now. "Your room, then?"

Daniel peers around; Charles's roommate isn't in at present. "Why not here?"

"Ryan will be back in half an hour," Charles says, standing and going to Daniel. "I'm hoping we'll be doing things we don't want anyone walking in on for a lot longer than that."

Daniel laughs. "Okay then. My room."
Erik, April 2001

Chapter Summary

On the first anniversary of their forced bond, Erik finds himself back at Sebastian's house, moth to a flame. But he's feeling more than just hatred and urgency and desire: he can feel metal all around him, even if only for a few hours.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains dubious consent, knifeplay, bloodplay, rimming, and angst. Erik is 18.

It's morning. Six o'clock; Erik knows because he can feel the hands on the little brass travel clock, spread vertically across the face of it.

For a few seconds he thinks he's still dreaming, because right now he can feel every scrap of metal in his room. For the last year he's been all but blind to metal, only able to sense what he touches, and even then without much consistency. This morning, he can stretch his senses out and take in the pins holding the curtains over the hotel room window; he can feel his clock, his watch, his windcatcher, the drawer pulls on the nightstands to either side of him.

He stays still, reaching, feeling more and more. The button and zipper on his jeans; the buckle and rivets on his belt. Both of those are across the room, draped over the desk chair. The bedsprings beneath him, each of them shifting minutely as he breathes. The bedframe itself, metal bars covered by a faux-wood base. Above him, the sprinkler nozzle, and across the room, there's something he can almost identify but can't... quite... God, it's the circuits inside his cell phone.

He tries for the bathroom, the doorknob and fixtures and pipes, but everything's unclear that far away. It almost doesn't matter. Compared to how he's been for the last year, it's like being able to feel everything.

Everything. He reaches up with one hand, runs his fingertips over the collar still tight around his throat. Still, after seven months. He can feel the collar, too. Most of the links are twisted now, some of them broken, tending to scratch him if he tucks the collar under his shirt-- which he does most of the time. He wears a lot of turtlenecks these days, trying to cover the collar, but anytime he's seeing someone, there's always that question. Are you stepping out on your dom?

He hooks two fingers under the collar and pulls, focusing everything he has on the link in front, the one where he's managed to break the seal and draw the ends apart just the barest fraction of a micron. With all this awareness, he has to be able to bend it-- he has to--

He gets a surge of power, a sharp bright flare-- the metal moves-- but it isn't enough. Erik drops his hand back to his side, eyes closed, panting and sweating from the exertion.

All right, then. All right. Not enough. Not yet. But today, of all fucking days, he can feel his power
again. He can sense metal. He stretches out a hand toward the nightstand on his left, fingers splayed, reaching for the clock. Move. Move, goddamnit--

It shifts by nearly half an inch and then stops; Erik's courting a migraine from this much effort. But still: half an inch.

One more try, then. Something that's his, that's always been his. The metal he knows better than any other; the metal he's loved longer than anything else he's owned. The only thing he managed to carry through the severing, the one thing he could never let go.

The windcatcher comes slowly off the nightstand, floating in the air; the chain dangles against it, useless, a dead weight through the post on the top of it. It makes the windcatcher seem so heavy, even though the chain itself is light, almost fragile. He tilts the windcatcher, hand shaking from the effort, sweat starting to gather at his temples. The chain slips free, puddles onto the nightstand, and suddenly the windcatcher's lighter, light enough to be less of a struggle. His eyes are stinging, but he has it-- he has it.

He lifts the windcatcher up, floats it just above the palm of his hand. He even manages to give the rings a spin before he groans, exhausted and shaking, and the windcatcher falls out of his grasp. It hits his palm and rolls off, and he bolts out of bed, reaching down to the floor for it. He snatches it up in his hand and squeezes it tightly, bringing his fist up to his mouth, breathing hard. I won't lose you. I'll never lose you. I swear.

It's why he puts the windcatcher back on the hotel nightstand, knowing he's not going to take it with him this afternoon. The idea of Sebastian getting his hands on it-- he can't let that happen.

Settling back down on the bed, he stretches out, both palms turned face-up, face relaxed, breathing evenly. One last try. Imagine six lead walls. Thick. Dense. Protective, like the lead blankets you wear when you're being X-rayed. One to either side of you; one in front, one behind. One above, one below. Nothing can get through them. Your walls, Erik. Protecting you from your bondmate...

He feels like a fool for even trying. It's April 22, 2001. It's been a year since his true soulmate died. A year since he found himself with a bondmate he didn't want... one that he wanted to block, after all those years fighting to keep his soulbond intact.

And he's in a hotel room in Park View, Nebraska, because for the last month, all he's been able to think about is Sebastian.

He pulls the covers off himself, pads quietly into the bathroom. The bond is so much more powerful than any kind of mental shield he can erect; all those months of pretending to learn to block the bond, and none of Sebastian's techniques do a damned thing. Maybe they were never meant to do anything. Maybe it was all a lie, a trick to get Erik into surgery. Someone had to be the first to undergo Sebastian's Bound By Choice techniques, now trademarked and patented, a bestselling "self-help" book that serves as a glorified advertisement for the procedure. There might have been something about Erik's mutation... or his bondmate's... that made Sebastian think Erik was the right candidate.

He brushes his teeth, runs water for the shower. Face under the spray, he reaches out for the metal in the bathroom again-- this time successfully. He can feel all the steel, and even the copper pipes behind the walls. He can feel the chrome plating on the faucet and the knobs.

He clenches his hand into a fist, twists hard in an attempt to grasp and turn the cold water knob. The water temperature doesn't change.
Damn you. He slams his fist into the tile, grits his teeth against the hard shock of pain. Why am I back here, why can't I block you...?

But the only man who stands even the slightest chance of having those answers is out there, on the other end of this bond, waiting. Erik finishes his shower and shoves the shower curtain aside, drying off impatiently. He can do this. He can make it fast. And then he can go back to Atlantic City, as far away from Sebastian as he can get.

The bus drops him off three blocks from Sebastian's house. When Erik gets there, everything looks the same: the lawn's kept the same way, the bushes trimmed down, flowerbeds in front of the house kept tidy. There's a swing on the front porch, and in the upstairs window he can see the outline of Sebastian's desk chair, black and looming, facing away from the window.

The tug is harsh now, beyond insistent. Erik feels like the bond could almost lift him off his feet, float him to the front door. He's leaning forward in spite of himself, moth to a flame.

It's been seven months since he's seen Sebastian. There have been others-- after all that time waiting for his real soulmate and getting Sebastian instead, Erik's fucked his way across a few states on the East Coast. As if that proves anything. As if he can get away from the hold Sebastian has on him just by offering his body to someone else. As if he's not hard already, sweating, just from standing outside and feeling Sebastian nearby. It's incredible, wanting someone as badly as this when he doesn't want to be near him, or want anything to do with him. It's insult to injury, standing here and knowing that, no matter what the rest of him believes, his body wants to be inside that house, kneeling on Sebastian's floor.

He shakes, head to foot, hands balled into fists at his sides. He doesn't have to do this. He doesn't have to be here. He can move, he can leave, he can find a way to separate himself from Sebastian-- if blocking doesn't work, then there must be something, someone who can tear this monstrosity out of his soul--

He's just about to take that first step away when the door opens, and Sebastian's standing there, looking as calm and cool as Erik feels hot and wrecked. Twenty-five feet and seven months separate them, and it feels like nothing. It's nothing.

"Come in," Sebastian says-- an order, not a request-- and Erik closes his eyes for a moment before uncurling his hands and following Sebastian into the house.

Some things are like they were before. Sebastian still likes using his hands best, and he still fucks Erik like it's his right, like he doesn't have to ask permission.

Erik's done this with dozens of doms since Sebastian, hundreds of them. He's been taken enough ways he can't remember them all, hurt and broken and made to bleed, cry, beg. It doesn't help much. Now that he's here, it's like he's never been away.

The links of his collar are twisted, the collar itself mangled, but when Sebastian traces Erik's collar with both hands, he doesn't seem to notice. "Mine," he pants. Erik's on him, riding him, his thighs flexing as he bears down on Sebastian again and again. "God, I needed this, I needed you, you're mine, how the fuck have you stayed away all this time--"

He hooks his fingers into Erik's collar and draws him down, and Erik grits his teeth, snarling when Sebastian tries for a kiss. "No," Erik says. He shoves at Sebastian's hands, all too aware that he's charging Sebastian up-- but fuck it. Maybe if he gets too excited he can rip through the adamantium
alloy; maybe his power can do what Erik's can't, anymore. "Fuck you."

And he slams his hand down, the slap ringing and snapping Sebastian's head to the side. Sebastian groans, body shivering with the ugly aftermath of his absorption ability, but he jerks his hands out of Erik's collar, as if afraid the godforsaken thing is fragile. "Okay," Sebastian pants, letting Erik sit up again. "Okay, your way this time. You want to do that again, you go on. Free shot."

Not a chance. Erik doesn't want to give Sebastian any more of him than he has to, and that includes kinetic force. He shakes his head and keeps going-- the way the two of them are charged for each other, it can't last, it can't go on forever.

Sebastian gets his arms onto Erik's shoulders. "Who do you belong to?" One of Sebastian's thumbs comes up and rubs down the center of Erik's throat. "Say it. Come on. You had your freedom, and you're still right back here--"

Erik drags Sebastian's hand away from his throat. "I'm not staying," he says. He braces himself on Sebastian's chest, leaning down hard with all his body weight while he picks up the pace. "I'm going. When we're done I'm going."

Sebastian lays a hard slap against Erik's ass; Erik groans and tightens up around him. "You're going," Sebastian repeats. He reaches up; this time Erik's not fast enough to knock his hand away. He gets both hands around Erik's throat, one palm curved around the front, one around the back, fingertips moving up toward Erik's joining spot. "Who fucks you like this? Who makes you feel like this? Huh?" He tightens his grip, shakes Erik even as he's dragging Erik down on his cock. "Nobody's ever going to make you feel the way I do. I love you. You're mine."

Erik shudders, but it's taking all his effort just to get air into his system; he can't spare any breath to talk back. But he's thinking no; he's thinking I hope no one ever makes me feel like you do, you son of a bitch. He's had doms who choked him and doms who liked to leave bruises and doms who treated him like an object, but he's never hated anyone who's fucking him the way he hates Sebastian. It's a burning hot coal in the pit of his stomach; it's a tight leather strap wound around the base of his cock, getting him up and keeping him up. He'll never take Sebastian on by choice.

When the first round's over, Erik collapses on his back, panting, staring up at the ceiling. Sebastian disappears for a few minutes, much to Erik's bemusement; when he comes back, he's got a warm damp washcloth, and he cleans Erik up, wipes his ass and his thighs and carefully blots up the smears of come streaking Erik's stomach.

"Okay," Sebastian says quietly. "What's it going to take?"

Erik just shakes his head. "I don't want this. I never wanted this. If you think I'm going to stay and pretend I do..."

"You're not pretending." Sebastian reaches up to Erik's inner thigh, digs his nails in and draws them down toward Erik's knee. Erik groans, legs falling open, cock jerking a little as he feels himself starting to get hard again. "Come on. Who are you ever going to meet that knows you the way I do?"

Erik turns his face away. No one, he thinks, you saw to that, didn't you.

Sebastian steps over to one of his dressers for a moment, giving Erik a couple of seconds to recover on his own... but then he's headed back, and Erik shivers, eyes flashing over to Sebastian. He can feel it: bright glittering metal, thin, sharp. He stares at the knife in Sebastian's hand and breathes in deeply, readying himself. Maybe he can't deflect that knife or blunt it, maybe he can't fling it
across the room, but if Sebastian thinks he won't fight, he's wrong.

"You always liked to see me choke so much," Erik says, leaving his body open and loose on the bed. No tensing, not now. He needs all his strength to fight off that blade, and he needs to wait for the right moment. "I thought if it was going to come to this, that's how you'd do it. Your hands."

"I'm not going to hurt you," Sebastian says. He climbs back onto the bed and kneels at Erik's side, blade's edge away from Erik, knife at rest instead of ready to strike. "I was thinking we could do something you always liked."

"You don't know me as well as you think you do," Erik says, but he's faltering; he's got his eyes on the knife, and he can't help thinking about the times Sebastian really did manage to please him. It was always with something metal, so often with something sharp; it didn't matter that Erik didn't want to be in this house, this room, this bed, there was still something so good about being able to feel metal right up against his skin, metal inside him when Sebastian pressed the knife against him and drew thin little cuts into his body.

"I could never forget you. All the things you gave me." Sebastian brings the knife up, rests the flat of it against Erik's upper thigh. "Let me give you something."

Erik's trying not to shiver under the metal. He can feel it so perfectly; he's been trying not to reach out to the dressers, to all the metal toys that he knows are still in there, even though having this much of his ability back-- just the ability to feel things is the best thing that's happened to him in the last year. But with the blade resting against his skin, he can't get away from the sensation. He feels hot all over, or maybe cold; he feels something, and he doesn't want to be feeling it.

"You can't actually believe I trust you," Erik says softly. "Even you can't believe that."

"You say that," Sebastian says, lightly drawing the blade down Erik's thigh. "But you're here. Roll over for me."

"What are you going to do?"

"Roll over," Sebastian says, a little more urgently. His eyes are starting to narrow; he turns the blade, edge just beginning to hint at a threat or a promise. "Roll over. On your stomach. Stretch out."

He doesn't want to. He's never wanted to. But he's doing it, turning over, panting and reaching between his legs to draw his cock up against his stomach. He reaches out for the bedrails, curls his hands around them. Wood, not metal. Sebastian was never good enough to him to replace the bedframe... or maybe he didn't trust Erik not to use it, someday, if his powers came back. Wrap those bars around Sebastian's wrists and his neck, going slowly, squeezing so he couldn't leech the energy from it...

Sebastian slides down the bed, settles himself down between Erik's legs. Erik can feel the knife just to his right, near his hip but not touching him. It's a tease-- everything Sebastian's doing is a tease, but Erik doubts Sebastian realizes that. He's just intent on what he wants to do to Erik, and right now it's-- he can't be, not him, but oh God, his mouth's coming down from Erik's lower back to the swell and curve of his ass, and he's licking, biting, teeth scraping, tongue teasing, and Erik groans despite himself and rocks his hips up.

"Yeah," Sebastian whispers. "You want this. Let me give it to you. I love you, Erik, let me give you this..."
Erik clamps his teeth shut, clenches his jaw as tightly as he can. When Sebastian slips his thumb into Erik's cleft and draws him open, Erik struggles not to moan for it. But then Sebastian's licking in, licking up them, the leftover traces of their sweat, his own seed, Erik's spit. Everything's mingled together, and he can feel the slightest rush of emotion from their mangled bond, satisfaction from Sebastian, but below that, a little bit of desperation.

Maybe he's fucked-up enough to believe he really does love Erik. Maybe he's trying to be kind.

Erik shakes his head and gives Sebastian the truth, for once. I don't love you. I'm never going to love you. I'm never going to want this, even if I can't stop myself from craving it. It doesn't matter how good you make me feel. I'm not yours.

"I'm not yours," Erik pants, even as he's pushing back against the warm glide of Sebastian's tongue. "I'm not. I was never-- God--" He's hard, so hard, he needs more, needs-- he needs something, something else, and he's whispering out "please" before he can choke off the word in his throat.

"That's it," Sebastian whispers. "That's what I needed. Thank you, baby, I needed that so much..."

And the knife moves. Erik freezes, his too-weak ability gripping that blade, and the contact is whisper-thin, but he has it. He can stop whatever's going to happen, he could stop it, he could--

Sebastian moves the knife to Erik's lower back. He's cut Erik here before; he's had Erik whimpering for it, pressing up to make that cut happen.

"Do you want me to do this?" Sebastian whispers.

Fuck. Fuck you. Erik grips the bedrails harder, breathing out unsteadily. "Even if I didn't--"

The knife comes off his back. Erik whimpers. "Fuck."

"You're going to have to ask me for it," Sebastian says. "If you want it, you need to ask. Ask me." It's an order. It's a challenge. It's a tease, and a lie, and a promise, and Erik buries his face in Sebastian's pillow and tries to breathe through the scent of their reunion.

He tilts his head back up. "I'm leaving you," he growls. "Do you understand me? I'm going. When we're done here I'm leaving. I'm not coming back to you."

"I could give you anything. Everything. I'll give you everything you ever dreamed about, just stay. Stay." He brings the knife back down, flat of the blade against Erik's lower back, and he ducks his head again, tongue slipping between Erik's cheeks. Erik shivers, hands clenching and unclenching. Seven months, and damn him to hell, Sebastian's right: no one's ever made Erik feel this way. Maybe no one ever will.

"Cut me," Erik says, desperate; it sends sparks up his spine just to say it, demand it. "Cut me, I want that, it's all I fucking want from you, just do it--"

And there it is, edge of the blade against Erik's skin, pressed in harder and harder, until Erik feels the metal sinking into him, hurting him, sharp and perfect, everything he wanted. It bites harder than it used to, deeper, but this time it's up to him-- the knife's his, every part of it, all the way up to the shank in the handle, and he drags the blade across his body, slow and steady, drawing Sebastian's hand along with it. Does Sebastian know he's being led, Erik wonders, but it doesn't matter; when the cut's been made Erik jerks the knife aside, one hand reaching out to catch it instead of letting it hit the ground.

"You want to do something with that?" Sebastian asks. He's as breathless as Erik feels. Metal, in
him, under his command-- right now the whole room feels lit with it, braced by it. Erik can touch it, move it... he looks at the nightstand, grips the watch Sebastian left there and pulls it three inches across the wood surface. It goes without an argument, and even if he's exhausted and winded, it just feels *so goddamned good* to have it back.

"I have something for you." Sebastian comes up off the bed and heads back for the dresser. Erik can feel blood running down his side, the sting from the cut still intense and bright, but perfect, so perfect, metal, blade, *his*. When Sebastian comes back over, holding something dense and metallic, Erik sucks in a breath. He can feel the shape of it: a rod, rounded into spheres at either end with another sphere in the center; one end is thicker than the other. Even without gripping or lifting Sebastian's toy, Erik can feel the weight of it, the cool perfect sheen of all that metal, and he groans out loud.

"Yeah?" Sebastian asks, taking a seat on the edge of the bed again. He presses the rod against Erik's thigh, where Erik can feel just how cold the metal is, but *oh, God*, the temperature isn't all Erik's sensing about it. It's solid stainless steel, and this could be his, too, if he wanted it.

And he does. He does want it. He's pressed up a little further on the bed now, elbows tucked under him, hands clutching at the covers; he's spreading his legs, making it all too obvious what he wants, where he wants that rod. Sebastian rolls it over Erik's thigh, rubs it against his ass, getting closer and closer to where Erik wants it, *needs* it.

"Baby," Sebastian murmurs, and Erik grits his teeth. It's not about him. None of this is about him, *wanton this* isn't about Sebastian, it's about Erik and the *metal*, the deep heavy weight of metal that Erik needs inside him *now*. "Everything I've ever done-- it's because of you. I love you. I always have."

Erik's head whips around; he looks at Sebastian, staring, wide-eyed, disbelieving. That? That's *why*? How can that be why, how can he *say* that--

But seeing the expression on Sebastian's face, it's clear that while Sebastian might be able to fool himself into believing it, he'll never fool Erik. Erik shakes his head. "I was a good candidate, wasn't I," he murmurs. "You thought at least I had a chance of surviving what you did to me."

Something about Sebastian's expression goes cold, and he rests the wider end of the rod against Erik's hole. "Do you want this?"

Rudimentary cleanup or no, Erik's still slick enough from earlier. And he can hate Sebastian with every last part of himself, and still want this. Maybe that's what he's here to learn.

"*Give,*" Erik snarls, and Sebastian presses forward, does.

Outside Sebastian's home, the tug gets less and less with every step away. What's bothering Erik is that the sense of metal all around him is fading, too-- at first, he could feel the structure of the house, the brass in the doorknobs and the knocker, the keys on the little table in the entryway, even as far out as the mailbox, out by the street.

Now he's halfway to the mailbox and he can barely feel any of it: the house, the mailbox itself, the collar around his neck.

He grits his teeth, closes his eyes. It'll probably all be gone tomorrow, now that the anniversary's done, now that the call to be here is leaving him. He'll wake up in his hotel room tomorrow morning, senses muffled, metal seeming like an illusion.
He takes three steps back toward the house—back toward Sebastian, still sleeping upstairs—and he can feel it again. But now he can tell it's all weakening moment-by-moment, his power slipping away from him.

There's enough time for this, there has to be—he can't leave here this way. He gets his hand under his collar, curls his fingers around it, closes his eyes. Off me, come on, get off me. get off--

One link pries loose, but one link is all it takes. The collar flies apart, ends of the chain whipping around and striking the back of his hand. It stings, but it doesn't matter: he's free. Chain in hand, staring back at the house where his soulmate's murderer lies sleeping and satisfied—but free. For now.

He thinks about dropping the collar, leaving it here—but he can't. It's a test of his ability; it's a metal that doesn't hold power over him anymore. He can't leave it here for Sebastian to find, to hold onto as though he still owns part of Erik's soul.

He tucks it into his pocket. Maybe he'll find a use for it someday; maybe someday he'll have enough of his power back to straighten those links, wrap this piece of metal around Sebastian's throat and squeeze.

Someday, but not now. He turns around again, and he walks away, getting the hell out of this place. If he has to leave his power behind, so be it. He'll find it again, somehow.
As his second anniversary with Shaw approaches, Erik gets proactive, seeking out help from a psychic in order to try to break his false bond.

The first anniversary, Erik felt the call out of nowhere; he didn't know what to do other than go back to Park View and hope for closure. The scar on his lower back and the fact that Sebastian's collar came apart in pieces as soon as Erik got out the front door was as close as he got. He still has the scraps of that collar, unable to let go of them, somehow. Maybe it's the alloy; after all these years, he's still never felt anything like it. Maybe it's to measure his ability; if he can reshape that collar, he can do anything. He tries, now and then, but the most he's been able to do is sense what the links are, what the alloy's made of. He can't strip the alloy into its component metals, can't bend it into a sphere or recycle it into something new. He's trying, though. God help him, he's trying.

One bright spot in all of this is the windcatcher. He doesn't have his powers back, doesn't even have the hint of his abilities the way he did in that hotel room in Park View, in Sebastian's house, but he can feel the windcatcher, even move it and spin its rings sometimes. It's his in a way nothing else will ever be, and these days he wears it around his wrist, letting the metal rub and glance against the inside of it. It's as close as he's come to feeling his soulmate in nearly two years. Maybe he should learn to let go and move on, but he can't. He doesn't think he ever will.

When April comes around, though, he feels a sensation of heat and tightness building up at soul's-home. He can see the anniversary date looming on his calendar, and he's not going to fool himself into believing one thing isn't causing the other. He'd hoped so much that it was a one-time event, that it wouldn't happen again-- but trying to pretend the pull isn't happening will only leave him standing on Sebastian's doorstep again, hating him, wanting him.

And so the minute it starts to be more than just heat, turning into an itch for connection in his joining spot, he looks up a bond specialist and makes an appointment. The day the appointment comes due, he lets himself into the office, quiet, giving the secretary his name.

"Erik Shaw?" She nods. "I'll let Dr. Graves know you're here."

Dr. Graves is younger than Sebastian but still older than Erik. He has a pocket watch and a ridiculous stream of patter.

"A bond is a choice," he says, "not just a psionic connection between two people. If your bondmate has been unkind to you, we can help you remove eir negativity from your life. Lie down on the couch, please, and relax. Clear your mind."

Erik's eyes track the watch, and he does his best to clear his mind, but at the end of the session he's still patched in with Sebastian, as trapped as ever.

"It might take several sessions," Dr. Graves says. "It's perfectly normal."
Something about the way Dr. Graves has been looking at him is setting off alarm bells for Erik; he flashes back to Sebastian, to his suggestion that Erik start doing their sessions from the floor...

"I can't afford more sessions," Erik says. Not true, not strictly, but he tries to imbue it with a little desperation. "I want to be free of this, but--"

Dr. Graves smiles at him. Slipping his glasses off his face, he looks Erik over carefully. "Oh," he murmurs, "I'm sure we can work something out. It might even go a long way toward separating you from your bondmate, if you've got somewhere else to direct all that energy."

He's a liar, a fraud, and a charlatan. Erik comes off the couch and shakes his head. "You can't help me," he says, and he stalks out of the office, pays in cash. There's got to be some other solution to all this, something else he can do.

There's another bond specialist he's heard about, a woman whose shop is more "psychic" and less "psychiatrist". "Priestess Selene," she calls herself, though he's not sure whether any actual religion is involved. But the important thing is that she's in a mutant-friendly part of town, and the rumors imply she has more to offer than the usual suggestions about meditation, prayer, and drugs.

It's April fourteenth; he doesn't have a lot of time to make a considered decision. He walks into her studio and asks for an appointment, the soonest one she can manage. Her assistant gives him one for the next day.

"How are you doing?" Jason asks over dinner. In English for a change, even though Jason finally talked Erik into taking some language classes at Allegheny in order to help Jason keep up with his German. Weirdly enough, Erik took to it right away, and last semester he ended up taking a refresher course in French, too, picking up most of what he'd forgotten after high school.

They've both been doing well here in Pittsburgh, Jason at Carnegie Mellon, Erik with his German classes and his job at the jewelry store. He's never thought of himself as particularly personable, but it's nice being around so many different kinds of metal every day-- the fact that he has to fend off dominants who want him to "try on" different collars notwithstanding. He could let them; it's not like he's really saving himself for anyone. Anything. He just doesn't really care about that sort of thing anymore.

Jason missed that part of Erik's life, and Erik's a little relieved. Jason would have had a lot more to worry about and watch for if he'd been around for that first seven months after Erik got away from Sebastian. There were a lot of doms, a lot of clubs, a lot of kneeling and learning what he liked-- what he liked, not just what Sebastian had felt like giving him.

Metal, obviously. It's not as good with strangers as-- God, Erik hates to admit this-- as it was with Sebastian, but it's still something. Pain. He's liked pain ever since he can remember. Early on he used to bite his arm while he was jerking off for his dominant, hoping that his dominant would want to share that with him when they finally met. He still likes it. He's glad about that.

But the shine has worn off, mostly. Sex doesn't hold a lot of appeal for him these days. He likes contact now and then, likes to be touched, likes it when Jason tugs him over while they're watching TV together and puts an arm around him. But maybe he's worn himself out by now. It's been months since anyone's appealed to him enough to bother.

"I'm all right," Erik says. Not entirely a lie. He's going to be fine. He's going to be fine. He has an appointment with a probably-psionic bond specialist. He's going to make it through the anniversary and move on with his life. "You?"
Jason shrugs. "Weirdest thing’s been going on with my bond lately. It's like it's fading out sometimes. Sometimes I can feel em, sometimes..." He shakes his head. "I don't know. Ey doesn't seem hurt, doesn't seem angry or sad, just... busy, I guess. Like when I reach out for em, ey doesn't have the time."

"I'm sorry," Erik says quietly. It's been almost two years, but he still remembers how it felt to reach out to his soulmate, grasp for reassurance and love, feel all of that and more returned to him.

"Yeah. Well. I shouldn't bitch. It could be worse." Jason sighs. "I don't mean to get into it, I just... it's been on my mind."

"It's all right. You can get into it if you want." Erik reaches across the table, rests his hand on Jason's wrist. His fingers brush against the bronze wristband he made for Jason all those years ago; sometimes touching that wristband brings back a ghost of memory, the feeling of what it was like to create that alloy. It's not really like having part of his ability back, but it's still nice. It amazes him that Jason still wears it. *Maybe someday I'll make something new for you. Someday.*

Jason reaches over and puts his other hand on Erik's, holding his hand for a few seconds. Erik ends up drawing back, clearing his throat as he looks down at his plate. "You're not going to be in Pittsburgh over the summer, are you?"

"My parents want me to help out with the big move," Jason admits. "Not that I blame them for wanting to get out of Park View, but you'd think they could've hired movers."

"It's all right. When you get to Boston, maybe I'll meet you. Sublet my apartment over the summer or something."

"Or let the lease go, and find something with me for next fall."

"Jason..." There's no good way to turn that offer down. Fortunately, just the way Erik says Jason's name lets Jason know what the answer is. He nods, backing off immediately.

"It's cool." Jason grins at him. "I'm still getting off campus next year, though. Your apartment complex, they're mutant-friendly..."

"There's a deposit for that," Erik says, rolling his eyes. "A little more than a pet deposit. Doesn't matter what your mutation is. You could always be someone who lights fires or conjures water. Let's all make sure the building's protected from the man who can sometimes tell whether something's alloyed with tin or iron."

"You never know. Maybe this time next year you'll be pulling the nails out of the walls." But Jason probably doesn't believe that any more than Erik does, at this point. If he ever gets back to that point, it won't be next year. Or the year after, or probably the year after that.

"Either way. It's a good apartment otherwise. I like my neighbors." Erik shrugs. "It's nice to be around other mutants."

"My floor is like that," Jason says, "but the minute somebody finds out what I can do, they're asking me to fake an ID and a face for them and buy beer. Thank God I'm not the only one who can alter appearances. Like there's not a fuckload of better things I can do with my mutation than get people drunk."

"At least there was a mutant floor in the housing system," Erik says. "Imagine going to a school where they didn't have resources for mutants."
"I'd rather not," Jason says dryly. "I did that for twelve years. So did you, mostly."

"Fair point." Erik sighs and looks down at his windcatcher. "I miss Portland, sometimes."

Jason's quiet for a while. "You could go back."

"Maybe someday. Just... not yet. Too soon." Erik looks up at Jason. "I thought maybe I'd take a seeker trip this summer. Just to see."

Nodding, Jason reaches over again, slides his fingertips over the back of Erik's hand. "Okay. Will you let me know how it goes?"

"Yeah." Erik reaches out, threads his fingers through Jason's. "Thank you. For everything."

Jason squeezes his hand. "You don't have to keep doing that. Thanking me. You know I'd do anything for you."

"I'd do the same for you. I mean it."

"I know." Jason edges back into his seat, lets Erik's hand go. "Does that cover sharing the rest of your fries?"

Erik laughs and pushes his plate closer to Jason. "If you ask in German."

"Kann ich bitte ein paar von deinen Pommes haben?" Jason snaps out, no hesitation; he flashes Erik a smile.

"Klar!" Erik returns, and Jason snags some of Erik's fries. "You're welcome."

Priestess Selene is as tall as Erik, bald head, blue eyes, green robe. If she's trying to look imposing, she's doing a decent enough job, although it's her quiet stare that keeps Erik from laughing at all the accoutrements in her studio. He's amazed she doesn't have a crystal ball.

"You're not the usual kind of skeptic," she says, looking him over, one brow just on the verge of arching. "You don't like the atmosphere, but you still believe I can help you. Why's that?"

Erik tilts his head slightly to one side. "I think this is the part where I'm supposed to say--"

"--that if I'm such a gifted psychic, I should be able to tell you." Selene sighs. "Observation is every bit as powerful as psychic gifts, most of the time. You gave me your name, Mr. Shaw; I had eighteen hours to look you up. I could have found out nearly anything I wanted to know about you, between the Internet and a few resources I have. So telling you about your background isn't going to impress you."

"Probably not," Erik admits. "Did you look me up?"

She shakes her head. "No. Resources cost time and money, and believe it or not, I really do have gifts that allow me to bypass some of that." She extends a hand to him, palm down, fingers slightly splayed but relaxed. "With your permission?"

Erik pauses. "What am I granting permission for?"

"I'd like you to touch my hand. I can sense impressions much more strongly with skin-to-skin contact."
It isn't very invasive, not compared to some of the things he could end up being asked to do. He takes her hand, gently, and nearly recoils at how cold her fingers are.

Still, the spark of something passes between them. It almost feels familiar, and that alone is enough to make Erik sit bolt upright in excitement. She might actually be telling the truth.

"Well," she drawls. "Should I do this with all the drama, or give it to you without the presentation?"

It feels like a trick question, somehow. Erik shakes his head. "Whatever you need to do."

Her eyes narrow; her lashes flutter. "I can sense the two of us have something in common. Something that brought you to me, instead of the others, this time. Something that you think might allow me to help you when others have failed. Will you tell me what that is, Erik?"

All the drama indeed; the presentation is so theatrical even Jason would be impressed. Erik has to stifle a smile. "We're both mutants."

"You thought you might not be, anymore. Early on."

Just as quickly, the smile vanishes. Now Erik's wondering if his own skin's going cold. "Yes," he whispers.

"Why are you here today?"

"The same reason everyone comes to you, I'd imagine."

"But it's more than that. You've tried other bond specialists."

"Yes..." Erik looks at their joined hands. "I'm here because I thought it would probably take a psionic to separate me from my bondmate."

She regards him quietly for a while, before finally nodding and settling back in her chair, breaking the link between them. "Your bondmate is a mutant, too."

"Yes."

"And your soulmate."

Erik's hands are shaking. No one ever thinks about how specific he is about those terms. Sebastian might be his bondmate-- there's nothing he can do about that now-- but he'll never be Erik's soulmate. He takes an unsteady breath. "I always thought so." He looks at Selene again, heart pounding. It took a psionic to cut him away from his soulmate the first time. Maybe that's what it'll take this time, too. "Can you help me?"

"I can try, if you're willing to commit to the attempt."

"I'll commit to anything to get away from him," Erik says. "What do I need to do?"

The calculating look in her eyes is one Erik's seen before, and he came here braced for it. Still, he's not going to slip to the floor without a good fucking reason. He doesn't do that anymore. Even with Sebastian, it wasn't about submission the last time; even Sebastian couldn't pretend that it was.

"You're going to need your focus on something other than your bondmate," she says, meeting his eyes evenly. "The energy from the bond can sometimes become trapped between two people, and since most soulmates never look outside their bond for another connection, it's not much of a
factor, most of the time. But having a nearby locus of energy to center your attention on while we try to break the bond can 'trick' the bond into looking elsewhere for a connection. At that point, it's up to you. You've tried blocking techniques, I assume."

"Yes."

"Drugs?"

Erik hesitates. He's thought about it, of course. He's thought about it more than once. He could go to the police after an anniversary, show them the bruises, the new cut, the scars. With a police report in hand, there'd be no difficulty obtaining a psychologist's prescription for bond-blocking drugs.

Or, for that matter, he could just tell the truth-- what was true three years ago. He could tell them he's hearing a voice. They'd prescribe anything then.

But if there's any possibility his true soulmate's out there, he doesn't want to take unnecessary risks. Bond-blocking drugs alter brain chemistry; it's the only way for them to cause a break in the connection. He doubts the drugs can differentiate between a true bond and an unwanted bond, and he's not willing to take the chance. Statistics say that most people recover a part of the bond within a year, but the chance that he'd wind up in the 20% of people who never recover enough to feel anything from the bond again...

He can't give up the hope that his true bond will heal, someday. That he'll be able to feel his soulmate if he waits long enough. If his soulmate's alive, if they can just find each other... he can survive Sebastian, if that's what it takes to keep his true bond alive. There's nothing he wouldn't do if he could just feel his soulmate again.

"Drugs aren't an option."

"Then you'll need something to concentrate on. Something vital enough, or immediate enough, to keep your thoughts and emotions from traveling back to your bondmate."

"You," Erik says, his grip on her fingers tightening. "You were going to suggest yourself."

"I'm not a concordance therapist," she says, a hint of sharpness coming into her voice. "Ideally, you'd be able to bring someone along, or go to someone immediately beforehand. Barring that, you'll need something else, and it needs to be emotionally resonant for you. Do you have anything that belonged to your soulmate?"

"We never met," Erik says, and then-- God. Of course.

"Maybe. There are no guarantees." She squeezes his hand. "Erik. There are no guarantees. This could buy you some space and some time, or it could do nothing at all. Are you prepared for that?"

"At worst, I'm where I am now. At best..." He shivers. "It would mean everything to have this bond broken. Everything."

"I understand." She finally closes her eyes, squeezes his hand tightly one more time, and lets go. "I'd like a few days to get to know your situation first. I'll need to know as much about your bondmate and your bond as I can. When we've got a good foundation for the effort, we'll take an afternoon and try it." She raises an eyebrow. "Which means this isn't going to be cheap."
"I have money." Erik isn't destitute. He's had jobs. He doesn't spend much. This is worth spending what little savings he has, if only it works. "I don't know if I have time."

"Why's that?"

"The man I need to be separated from-- I got called back to him last year on our anniversary, and I'm feeling it again now." Erik grimaces. "Our anniversary is the 22nd. I have a week."

"Okay. Well, you've paid for an hour, so let's use that time productively." She stretches out both hands to him. "I'm afraid this isn't going to be pleasant for you. I need to ask you to recall everything you can about him, everything that brought you together in the first place. Can you do that for me?"

"There are things I don't remember at all," Erik admits, but he reaches out and places his hands in hers, lifting the windcatcher briefly with his power to let it rest against the back of his wrist. "I was drugged. I remember pain, and fear. Not much else."

"You may remember things much more vividly by the time we're through. Are you willing to go through with that?"

"Yes."

"Then let's get started."

After an hour, Selene calls a halt to their first session. Erik's not happy about that, but Selene holds her ground. "You're not a psychic," she points out. "Your mind isn't meant to communicate emotions and feelings this way, not all the time."

"I feel fine. I can keep going." Erik rubs at his stomach; he's nauseated and aching, remembering so much about how this bond of his came into being, but he's not hurting, not really. There's no headache, no dizziness. "Please."

"I'm not going to risk it," she says flatly. "You need time to recover. Go home. Sleep this off. We'll go again tomorrow, at the same time."

"It's just drawing things out," Erik argues. "I don't have time to waste."

"Do you think being mentally and psychically exhausted will make it easier to renounce your bondmate? You need to be rested to even make the attempt. If you don't have the strength to keep that block up, you'll just end up in the same place again, but this time I won't be able to help you. You'll have tried my way only to give your bondmate all the information he needs to cut through that block as though it's nothing."

Erik shivers; the consequences for failing are high. "I didn't think it worked that way. I didn't think someone could break through another person's block."

"Usually they can't. What about your situation is usual?"

Erik can't argue the point.

"Tomorrow," Selene says. "We'll get you there if we can, Erik."

"Thank you." Erik takes to his feet. "Thank you for trying."

"Don't thank me yet. We still have a long way to go with this."
"I know." Erik rubs at his face. "But thank you anyway."

The second session is much the same, but in the third there's something more. Erik's memories open up, and for all he'd like to forget the severing itself, there's something in it he needs, now; something he needs to find, to take with him while he's fighting to free himself from the false bond.

"Back to the beginning," Selene murmurs. "Think back, Erik. Think back to what he took from you..."

He doesn't want that part, doesn't want to be reminded of everything he lost, but his eyes slide shut, and he remembers:

Steed's voice, fear evident just from her tone. Sebastian, fascinated, determined.

*Then the entire bond--*

*It's the only way.*

But Sebastian and Steed fade to a murmur. All he hears now is the echo in his mind, his soulmate's voice responding to the panic he's sending through their bond. A whisper, a shout, words beyond the veil. *I can hear him, I can almost hear him--*

Pain, flaring; his thoughts sparking, bursting into flame from the inside. He's reaching for his soulmate, fighting the cut from Steed's psionic scalpel with everything inside him, and it's not enough, not enough, he's *losing*.

He can't stand to relive that. But there were words, finally, at the very last, and now he can hear them. And for that... anything for that.

*Please, don't go, stay with me.* The first words he's ever made out, battered and repressed in the wake of memories he couldn't bear to hold. His soulmate's voice, agonized and terrified, pushing power through the bond, so much psionic backlash Erik can barely stand to look at it from years away. But he's grabbing for it, too, the last chance he'll ever have to hear his soulmate's voice, the last time they'll ever touch minds, the *last--*

And then the cut, the convulsions, but this time he's not wracked, this time he's out of the moment, he can perceive what's happening. The things Sebastian did, they shouldn't be possible: a redirection, a splice, the energy forced into a new shape to fit with Sebastian's empty bond, necrotic tendrils digging in. Those tendrils touch the power left to Erik from the boy on the other end of Erik's true bond and surge into life, strengthening. All of it-- Sebastian takes it all, siphoning it off, reveling in it, his body straining and *changing* in response to the influx of power.

Erik comes out of the hypnosis and drops down on all fours, cold with sweat all over. Whatever that forced connection fed to Sebastian, maybe it's made this bond something that can't be broken, can't be ripped apart. He remembers fighting Sebastian, and watching Sebastian absorb all the energy Erik gave him. If someone came at Sebastian with a psionic scalpel, wouldn't he just absorb that, too?

Shaking, tears running down his face, acid burning his throat, he forces himself to his feet.

"Erik..." Seleste stands and walks over to him, reaches out for Erik's shoulder.

"How much more?" Erik whispers. "How much more is it going to take?"
She sighs and draws herself up, straightening her spine. Her eyes flutter closed, and she seems to center herself, her eyebrows drawing slightly together.

"Tomorrow," she says. "If you're rested enough. Go home, Erik. Sleep."

_Tomorrow_. As soon as that, he could have Sebastian's bond out of him; as soon as that, he could start reaching inside himself, trying to find that lost connection to his soulmate.

"I'll sleep," he promises.

It isn't as easy as that. Erik dreams about his soulmate, about the severing. Over and over again, that trapped feeling, the sense of having everything that matters to him torn away. In the end he puts the windcatcher around his neck, clutches tightly to it as he catches sleep in stolen moments.

_Please, don't go, stay with me._ God, he remembers; he remembers that voice now, so clear, so much a part of him. His other half; the part of his soul he so desperately needed then, needs now. He opens up as much as he can, pushes his thoughts through as hard as he remembers how. _Are you out there, can you hear me-- be alive, please be alive, I'll find you somehow, I love you, I still love you, I'll find you--_

Hours and hours later, he finally manages to drift off completely. He's as rested as he can possibly be. He hopes it's enough.

Back in Selene's studio, he sits on the floor, windcatcher over his heart, hands pressed tightly into hers. _What's been done to you is unnatural,_ she murmurs, _unwanted, unneeded. Find the places it attaches, and loosen those knots._

With her powers enhancing his ability to see within himself, he can see everything-- he can see _beyond_ everything, it's like being on an entirely different plane of existence. He's a constellation in deep space, an outline on a field of black, energy directed into the void. His bond is _there_, just in front of him, and as he focuses on it, it rushes up to meet him.

It isn't a cord, nothing so simple as that. It's more like a knot, snarled together and tangled, frayed ends hanging off in pieces, sparks stuttering out of those ends in a confused, battered rhythm. He can hardly even get near the ends; just being close to them leaves him shaken and wary, trying to pull away despite himself.

But there are worse things in Erik's bond. There's a link coming from outside himself, dark and nearly necrotic, forced tightly into the tangle of Erik's bond. _Sebastian._

It hurts even more to approach that spliced segment than it did to come close to the frayed ends where his real soulmate belongs, but Erik steels himself and leaps in. Both hands outstretched, white-hot with psionic energy, he grabs hold of the bond and tries the simplest, fastest route: a harsh ugly tug that sends him sprawling.

More finesse, then. He tries untying it, scratching at it with his fingernails until his fingertips go numb. He takes a deep breath, hands outstretched, and summons a knife from his imagination; he can almost taste the steel in the blade, and he stabs down hard, only to find the knife bouncing away from the false bond. Fire, then, or ice, or lightning; he tries burning it out, freezing it, the bond sending wave after wave of agony into him with each attempt. Maybe he doesn't have the right weapon, or maybe Sebastian's mutation is fighting him at every step of the way. Maybe he'll never be free of this.

One more try, and this time he summons the feeling of his windcatcher, hot against the center of
his chest. *Please, don't go, stay with me.* All his memories, all his pain-- everything drawn up and centered in the same place his powers used to be, and he gathers it up, shoves it forward as though he's trying to flatten a building.

The frayed ends of his bond spark and shudder, pain lancing through Erik as he pushes and pushes and *can't fucking reach it*, can't touch the false bond, even with all his hatred and anger. It's all slipping away now, this place, the concentration it took to get here. It's leaving him, and he's still connected to Sebastian, still trapped in that mockery of a bond.

Finally, shaking his head, exhausted, Erik opens his eyes and looks up at Selene. "Nothing," he whispers hoarsely. "It didn't work."

She takes her hands out of his and draws a pair of handkerchiefs out of her sleeves. The first, she offers to him; the second, she uses to blot her own face, damp with sweat and exertion.

"I'm sorry, Erik."

"We could try again--" "And what would make a second attempt succeed where the first failed?" She raises an eyebrow at him. "Could you want it more?"

Erik looks away. "No."

"Could you hate him more?"

"No."

She shakes her head. "I'm sorry. But whatever this is going to take, it's not something I can give you."

He can't blame her. Maybe no one can change this. Maybe it's never going to be anything other than what it is, this terrible unwanted thing pressed into his soul by force. Maybe he'll be taking buses and trains and planes out to wherever Sebastian is once a year for the rest of his life.

When he comes home from their second anniversary meeting, he has a second scar, and a memory of what it felt like to feel metal all around him again. And a few weeks later, when he picks up Sebastian's collar to see if he can feel the metal in it, the links rattle for him.
Charles, January 2003

Chapter Summary

Charles takes a few liberal arts classes -- a Concordance class, which goes reasonably well, and a Literature class, which is very different -- and meets a lovely submissive named Moira MacTaggert.

Charles laces his fingers together, inverts his hands and stretches his arms out; bends and touches his toes, touches the floor. Most of the other dominants in class are doing the same and making even more of a show of it, cracking their knuckles. The submissives nudge each other and look unimpressed.

"All right, everyone, present your canes," Dr. Buckman says, and goes up and down the line. Their school canes are nylon and a bit thick; some of the doms voiced disappointment when they saw the course equipment list, claiming they couldn't learn with anything but rattan, but their instructor was unswayed.

"This is your first lab with me, so we're going to start out with some ground rules," says Dr. Buckman. Charles listens attentively, but the protocol is the same as all his other Concordance classes so far.

This is the same, as well: Dr. Buckman says, "All right, submissives get into position against your benches."

Charles raises his hand.

"Mr. Xavier?"

"What about submissive sadists? Shouldn't they be taught this end of the cane?" Charles asks. "Or dominant masochists, the bench?"

"Are you a masochist, Mr. Xavier?"

"No." Not that it's relevant to his question, but he keeps that part behind his teeth.

"Do we have any dominant masochists?" Dr. Buckman asks. There's fidgeting, but no one speaks up. "What about submissive sadists?"

A woman among the submissives raises her hand, terrifically pretty, auburn hair and dark eyes.

"Ms. MacTaggert. Would you prefer to train with the dominants?"

"No, sir," she says, "I'm a masochist too."

"Apparently Mr. Xavier appreciates that sort of flexibility," says Dr. Buckman. "Pair up. Everyone find your partner, pick your bench and get comfortable; the rest of you are assigned as follows. Adelson and Bluth. Armstrong and Buchanan..."

"Thanks, that wasn't awkward at all," says Ms. MacTaggert as Charles joins her.
"Sorry?" Charles offers. "I tried to ask privately, but Buckman doesn't seem to read his email, and he arrived late."

"It's all right, I guess. Moira," she says, offering her hand.

"Charles," he says, shaking it. "I'm a telepath."

"I know. It's in the syllabus, for some reason."

"Some instructors have a policy about disclosing psionic mutations," Charles says.

"So why tell me again?"

"In case you didn't know that was me," he says. "But I don't read minds as a matter of course. I'll ask permission if it comes up."

"Okay, well... good, I guess." Moira gets into position at the ladder bench, hands linked behind her back, shoulders straight and head high. The others are still pairing off and getting into place, though, and she cuts her eyes to him, raising a brow. "You know, if you're really interested in switching things up..."

"I'm really fairly sure I'm not a masochist," Charles smiles, "sorry."

"I don't mean that," she says. "But subs have to get bare to take our stripes, and you doms don't have to take off anything. That's not really fair, is it?"

"No, I suppose not," Charles says, glancing at the rest of the class. All the doms are in t-shirts at least, and most are in polos, or shirtsleeves like him. He's actually dressed a bit more than most since he's wearing his black waistcoat as well, so it's going to be terribly conspicuous if he strips.

He looks back at Moira, who shrugs, her point made.

"Mind holding this?" Charles asks, and hands her his cane so he can start unbuttoning.

Dr. Buckman looks over as Charles is taking off his shirt. "Mr. Xavier, is it too warm in here for you?"

"No," one of the other students answers for him, looking at his chest, his nipples tight in the cool air. Charles masters the urge to cross his arms over himself. Sort of contrary to the spirit of the thing.

"You said get comfortable," Charles answers innocently, folding up his shirt and waistcoat and stowing them in his satchel.

Buckman shakes his head, but some of the submissives are throwing appreciative looks Charles's way, and as the dominants spot it, several of them take off their shirts as well. A domme takes off hers to reveal a gorgeous corset, and her sub gets starry-eyed and begs to know where she got it.

"See?" says Moira. "Much more friendly."

"I'm glad you're happy," he confides, "I'm freezing."

Her smile turns impish. "Once you start swinging, you'll warm up."

"Dominants, your assignment is to prepare your partner to receive six stripes, and deliver them, each placed one cane's-width apart. You are to leave visible marks with as little welting as
possible." Buckman waits out a murmur of disappointment. "This is an exercise in control, not just force. You can play harder on your own time, but in this class you're going to show me that you can gauge your partner's body and adapt to achieve a particular effect."

Charles comes around to stand in front of Moira to let her see what he's doing as he tests the cane against the air and swats it lightly against his calf.

"Are you teasing me?" she asks.

"Is it working?" Charles smiles. "No. It matters less with a nylon cane, but my last instructor pointed out that it's a good habit to get into, testing every time. Since canes made of natural materials can be changeable, depending on the humidity. What sort of pain do you favor?"

"Thuddy more than stinging," she answers readily. "It's too bad you're not supposed to leave welts, I like those."

His smile widens. "Maybe next time."

Moira was right; after some test strikes to find her pain tolerance and the way her skin responds to blows, and then the careful control of giving her six stripes, Charles is warmed up in several senses.

"You took that well," he says as they dress and pack up after class. It's the traditional compliment, but he's sincere. Moira responded to each stripe with mingled enjoyment and pain, she didn't squirm or try to rub away the sting, and she even murmured Thank you sir at the sixth, which certainly wasn't required. Charles isn't usually much for being addressed as 'sir', but when it's spoken in that tone, he finds he rather likes it.

"You dealt it well," she answers. "Are you busy after class?"

"I wasn't," Charles gives her a winning smile.

"Okay, you almost blew it with that," Moira says, immune.

"Almost?"

"I've got a pretty good endorphin buzz going," she says. "You can still save it."

He offers his arm. "Would you do me the honor?"

Moira takes it, chuckling. She has a lovely laugh. "That's more like it. I'd be delighted."

Back at his, "Something to drink?" he offers. "I've bowed to stereotype and learned to make a decent cup of tea."

"Maybe after," she says.

"Right to it." He spans his hands at her hips. "I admire your initiative." They're just inside the archway to the lounge; here would be fine, there's the sofa if they want to be comfortable, and the coffee table's sturdy, if they don't.

"I took six of the best," she winds her arms around his neck. "And then a ten minute walk, while the sting settled in. That's not really right to it."

"True," Charles murmurs, and cups her ass, runs his nails very lightly over those perfect curves.
She's wearing a skirt, no trouser pockets in his way, and when he rakes a little harder over her marks, she groans and kisses him.

They start undressing a bit gracelessly, and Charles breaks away before Moira can take off her bra and completely distract him. "One moment," he promises, and hurries down the hall to the linen closet, fetches out a clean fluffy towel. Coming back, he spreads it on the back of the sofa, rough side up, and backs her against it; the sofa back's the right height for her to sit against.

Moira glances back at the towel. "Roommate's couch?"

"No, it's mine," he says, and tucks his fingers under the elastic band of her underwear. "Ready to lose these?" She turns out her heels to make it a little easier for him to drag them down, and once she steps out of them, he takes her hips and presses her back against the towel.

"Oh, ow, okay," and as steadily as she took those marks in class, Moira's squirming now at the feel of the nubbly fabric against her sensitized skin. Charles covers her cleft with his palm and presses, lets her grind against it, but every move makes her rub against the towel more until she's making fantastic pained little noises at the back of her throat.

He drops his hand; she trims but doesn't completely shave, and it feels good under his thumbs as he parts her, feels better when he presses in and starts licking.

"Oh god, oh god, do I need to ask permission to come?"

Charles shakes his head-- he's not willing to take his mouth off her for a moment to answer-- and she relaxes into it with a soft moan. He traps her hips back against the sofa to keep her abrading those marks, and when her thighs start to tremble and her cries escalate, he chases her through the orgasm, refusing to let up til she's gasping, "Please."

He sits back on his heels and drags the back of his hand across his mouth, composing himself, clearing his throat. "Do you want to go for another?"

"I usually can't again, this fast," she sighs, catching her breath. "I don't know why I say 'usually', I mean never. I never have again, right after. Or really anytime soon."

"If you don't mind my tuning in to what you're feeling," Charles taps his temple, "I can get you there."

"Because of that?" she asks. "Or more like quid pro quo?"

"Because of it," he says. "I'm not trying to trade for it. If I was, that was a poor negotiating tactic, getting you off the first time before I asked."

"Not really," she murmurs. "Just feelings, no thoughts?"

"No thoughts." He knows better than to ask for that.

Moira furrows her brow. "How can you get just feelings and no thoughts?"

"The same way you can smell something without tasting it," says Charles.

Moira seems to accept that, rolling her shoulders, stretching her neck. "What about you? What do you want?" she eyes him.

"If I'm getting what you're feeling while I make you come, that'll work for me," he answers frankly.
"We can do more if you're up for it, but I'm happy enough with that."

"Will I feel anything?" she wonders. "I guess we can't know til you try. Go ahead."

Charles relaxes his habitual shield a little, and lets Moira's emotions wash through him. Mostly curiosity, some trepidation and reluctance, attraction, doubt, wonder. He smiles. "That's lovely. Thank you."

A thread of skepticism winds through, though she's good-natured when she voices it: "And that's going to help you get me off again?"

"Not just that." Charles stands and slips his arms around her, unfastening her bra; he feints toward a kiss, but he feels her reluctance, a bit put off by her own smell on him, so he aims for her neck instead, seeking out the places that make her clutch him tighter, and finding a rhythm that doesn't just make her physically react, but makes her excited, makes her happy.

He eases back to let her take off her bra. She cares about it, it's either a favorite or it's expensive, so he waits til she's put it aside before he moves back in. It's not just her emotions but her body language telling him not to go straight for her breasts, much as he's tempted. He keeps his hands on her waist and devotes some attention to her ear. He reaches to trace over her stripes and gets mixed feelings: she's not after pain now.

He pulls her closer, off the towel and onto his thigh so she can ride against him, and it's fast after that. When she starts the climb she tightens her arms around him and gasps, "Wait, though. Don't yet, wait, okay? We'll do more."

He senses her sudden worry that he's going to take offense, that he'll hear it as a sub giving an order not to come, rather than a request and a promise. "I'll wait," he tells her, low, burying his face in all that gorgeous auburn hair, the perfume of her sweat and the tension building in her fast, about to break open. "I want more."

"You're very beautiful," Charles tells her, much later.

Moira smiles over at him. She's stretched out on her stomach in his bed, a gloss of balm on her ass and thighs, soothing the second set of marks; he gave her those promised welts. "Wearing your stripes, you mean?"

"They do suit you," he smiles back, "but I meant it in a more encompassing sense."

"You never noticed me before."

"It's only the first week of classes," he says, "I try to save ogling my classmates for no earlier than week two."

"You really didn't see me at all, did you?" Moira shakes her head. "We were in Genetics 391 together last semester."

"Oh. That course. No, I don't suppose I would've spotted you in that one. But that's nothing to do with you," Charles says. "In order to take courses in the NRB, I had to sign an agreement not to use my telepathy while I'm in the building. I suppose some of the researchers were worried I'd nick their ideas."

"How can they know whether you do it or not?"
"They can't," he says. "It's on the honor system, but I agreed to submit to special proceedings if I'm accused of plagiarism... it's nothing I want to deal with, so I try to block everything out while I'm there."

"And that's so difficult, you don't notice very beautiful girls right in front of your face?" Moira teases.

It's more complicated than that; when he's blocking that much, people seem obscured to him, like they're scarcely even there. It's eerie and uncomfortable. He doesn't have much confidence he can explain it, though, so he just agrees, "Essentially."

"Hm. So that's why you never talked to anyone. Everybody thought you were just an asshole."

"I can't speak to that," says Charles dryly, "but I wasn't intentionally snubbing anyone."

"I'm glad we had another class together," she says. "In a building where you don't have to be so shut down."

He kisses her shoulder. "So am I."

After Moira's recovered enough to be able to sit, Charles makes her that cup of tea.

"Have you gone on a seeker trip yet?" Moira asks.

And now they come to hurdle number two; she doesn't seem to mind his mutation, but this often puts people off as well. All those dreadful films about unbonded people becoming obsessed with bondmates, stalking and threatening them; when a character in a film or TV show is introduced as unbonded, ey's generally either wrong about that and find eir soulmate eventually, or ey's a villain. He doesn't watch much of that sort of thing himself, but Raven tells him it's even odds who gets worse media representation, unbonded people or mutants.

"I'm not bonded," Charles says.

"Oh. Sorry."

He's glad she doesn't ask further. "You?"

"I just started feeling em a few months ago," Moira says. "And it comes and goes. I already have an internship scheduled for this summer, so I'm going to wait and try next summer."

Charles quells his impulse to urge her not to delay. Millions of people wait til later in life to find their soulmates, and it works out well enough for them. For all he knows, it was his rush to seek his bondmate that led his bondmate to panic and renounce him. He's the last person who ought to be giving advice.

He walks Moira back to campus afterward. He found a place of his own as soon as he turned eighteen, when his trust fund came out of escrow. He already practically had a single before. None of his roommates lasted more than a month. His control is shakiest when he's just waking up or falling asleep, and occasionally he slips and answers a question before it's asked, or projects a thought instead of speaking aloud.

As much effort as he devotes to putting people at ease, presenting himself as personable and unthreatening, it didn't take much to remind his roommates and send them clamoring to the housing office-- never mind that if he really wanted to read them for some reason, he could
probably reach them nearly anywhere on campus. Better to live on his own rather than deal with that over and over again.

"I had fun," Moira says when they reach her dorm.

"We should do another scene sometime," Charles answers.

"I'm up for it," she smiles, and pecks a kiss on his cheek. "See you in class."

His afternoon with Moira is a bright spot in an otherwise dreary week. The start of term is rarely fun for anyone, but Charles particularly dislikes it, since most of his classes require him to make a spectacle of himself in some fashion or another.

In Literature class, Dr. Wheeler says, "We will be making special accommodations this semester for one of our mutant students. Mr. Xavier?"

Charles stands. Enough of his classes have required this aggro that he's developed something of a spiel for it, but that doesn't make it easier to keep doing it time after time. Still, he puts on his most friendly, upbeat smile and says, "Hello, I'm Charles. My mutation allows me to perceive emotional impressions and thoughts."

He shields as hard as he can against the anxiety and resentment of the several dozen people in the room; he can't quite shut it all out, but it's manageable. After the first wave ebbs, he adds, "Of course I'm not doing that all the time, or even all that often. Think of it like the internet. You know in theory someone could track everything you do online and trace it back to you. But you don't worry much about it because there are loads of people on the internet, so what are the odds someone's going to keep tabs on you in particular? Same with me. Out of everyone around, it's very unlikely that I'd be picking up anything from you. Especially as I've agreed to block others' thoughts during most classes and study sessions, and in certain buildings, like the NRB and the libraries."

"Thank you, Mr. Xavier," says Dr. Wheeler. "Any questions?"

"He said he's not allowed to do it in most classes. Can he do it in this class?" one student asks, not looking at Charles.

"No," Dr. Wheeler assures her, which is the first Charles has heard of it.

He hears more later, when class is dismissed and Dr. Wheeler says, "A word, Mr. Xavier."

Charles comes up to the lectern and waits as the rest of the students file out.

"If I find out you've been using your mutation in connection with my class in any way, you'll receive a failing grade," says Dr. Wheeler. "No exceptions."

"May I ask why?"

"It would be cheating."

"No, cheating would be cheating," Charles says. "If I plagiarize, you can catch that as easily as with any of your other students. Or more easily, since if I used my mutation, I'd be copying from someone nearby, whereas if they cheated, they'd probably be copying from one of those term paper sites online. Anyway, I already have arrangements to take my exams in isolation, by computer."
"You could still get answers from the other students in the meantime," says Dr. Wheeler.

"They aren't 'answers' if we're not being examined on them," Charles points out. "They're just ideas. Aren't we meant to be sharing those anyway in the class discussions?"

Dr. Wheeler shakes his head. "It's not fair to the other students to let you use an extranormal ability to your advantage."

"Hang 'fair,'" says Charles, surprising himself with his vehemence. "Students who're taller than me aren't obliged to hobble themselves to make it 'fair' for me when I can't match their strides. Students who're better with computers than me don't have to power down their machines to let me catch up. I thought the point of being here was to learn. To advance ourselves, not limit ourselves."

"What you can do isn't like having a longer stride or more skill with a computer," says Dr. Wheeler. "Your ability infringes on other people, and you won't be doing it in this class. I suggest you keep your mutation to yourself, keep your head down and do the reading."

"Sounds fulfilling," says Charles. "Maybe we could start with Harrison Bergeron."

Dr. Wheeler squints at him angrily. "What did I just say?"

"I didn't read your mind for that! It's a modern literature course, it's the obvious reference!" Charles rolls his eyes. "Never mind, I'll drop the class." He certainly doesn't need the credit; he only enrolled because he thought it might be nice to participate in discussions about something besides chromatids and centomeres for a change.

From now on if he wants a break from genetics or a more social classroom experience, he'll stick to Concordance classes. At least in those, even if the class is a loss, he might end up with a date.
Erik, June 2003

Chapter Summary

In Boston, visiting Jason for the summer, Erik meets a woman named Magda and ends up with his very first emfriend, ever. She's not oriented; he can't deal with the thought of submitting. It seemed like such a good match at the time...

Chapter Notes

Magda Maximoff (and yeah, I know we don't actually know what Marvel!Magda's last name was, and that it wasn't Maximoff, but bear with us here, this is Movieverse fic, and we are streamlining) is being played, at least in our heads, by the lovely Maggie Gyllenhaal.

Linden is an OC, so no Marvelverse equivalent for him!

This chapter is being posted on its own because it is massive; same thing is going to happen tomorrow (massive single chapter post).

This summer's shaping up to be a good one. April 22nd came and went, and while he had to go to Chicago to meet Sebastian this year, at least that meant a shorter bus ride there, fewer hours to spend in dread and anticipation.

After that, he took a bus straight to Boston, set up shop there while waiting the few weeks it took for Jason to be finished with his classes for the year. This summer Jason's been over at Erik's more often than he's gone home to his parents' house. It's a little cramped; at his parents' house, Jason's bathroom is about the size of Erik's entire apartment. The company's nice, though, and as Jason points out, Erik's place is a hell of a lot closer to the mutant-friendly clubs Jason likes to cruise than the Wyngarde estate. Jason pitches in on groceries and doesn't mind helping out with the cleaning. It feels like a win/win situation.

It even feels like that when Erik finds himself sleeping on his own couch. Thankfully, the couch is comfortable, because Erik's on it almost as often as Jason is. He's been letting Jason have the bedroom on nights when Erik's place is a better option than wherever Jason's date lives. Erik really doesn't mind it at all. At least one of them's getting laid-- though the fact that Erik isn't is no one's fault, really. Erik just doesn't give a damn about any of that anymore. He's not interested in submission these days; he's never had a dominant bone in his body. Basic is an option, as Jason has gently pointed out time and again, but Erik would have to go to special clubs, and figure out how to relate to partners without the guidance of roles, with no idea what the expectations are or what to do. And then there's the possibility of running into people who say they're into basic mammal sex, but who'd end up expecting to see Erik on his knees... or people who take in Erik's height and his tendency to be aggressive about going after what he wants, and expect him to pin them down. Navigating ever-changing boundaries is a lot harder than having a quick list of hard and soft limits and a safeword to fall back on if all else fails. It all seems like so much work.
This is one of those mornings when Jason is over at Erik's place with a date-- apparently one who neither wanted to sneak out in the middle of the night nor got gently nudged out early in the morning-- and so instead of caving in to the temptation to listen while Jason gives his overnight sub what's starting to sound like a really delicious spanking, Erik takes off, heading down the block for coffee and a bagel. There's no seating in the coffeeshop, though; it's a busy morning. Good news for the coffeeshop owners, less so for Erik, who heads back out to the street, coffee in one hand, bagel in the other, and finds his path blocked by a very large green couch that is hovering in the air.

He looks again. It's not hovering in the air, although that wouldn't be out of the question in this part of town. He has a few telekinetic neighbors. Instead, the couch is being held up awkwardly by a woman in a green-and-brown plaid shirt, and more to the point, the couch is starting to tip over.

Erik shoves his bagel into his mouth and reaches up with one hand, catching the end of the couch, trying to feel whether it has enough metal in it for him to grab, if today's a good day for his powers. The answer to both seems to be "no"; he'd grimace if he could, but then his bagel would drop to the ground, and he'd probably have the couch land right on top of him anyway.

"I got it I got it I got it-- let go, let go, I got it," the woman yells. Erik steps back quickly, and the couch wobbles a bit, then drops down to the ground with a crash. But not on top of anyone, near as Erik can tell, which is something.

"Well," says the woman, hands on her hips. A lock of reddish-brown hair falls into her face; she purses her lips and puffs a breath at the errant curl, which does nothing to move it. "Stupid things. They're always more bulky than heavy."

"Mmhph," Erik says around his bagel, eyes just a little wide. She's a few inches shorter than him, but not too many. She's not carrying the kind of musculature a baseline human would need in order to lift something that heavy. So she's a mutant, and her mutation is... above-average strength? More?

"Thanks for trying, anyway," she says. "Listen, you got a minute? I could use somebody who doesn't mind opening doors for me. I can keep the thing up, it was just--" She points at the nearby apartment building, door unhelpfully closed and, he can sense from here, locked. "I couldn't balance it on one arm and get the door open. I can give you the keys if you've got the time."

"Mm-hm!" Erik agrees, and finally realizing he should get the bagel out of his mouth and say hello properly, he does just that, licking poppyseeds off his lips. He's never going to make a good impression at this rate. "Of course," he says. "Just moving in?"

"Yeah. I'm doing an internship at the MRL," she says. "Um, the Mutant Rights--"

"The Mutant Rights League, yes, I know," Erik says. "I volunteered at the Pittsburgh chapter most of last year."

"Really?" She beams at him, and for a few seconds he grins back, and bagel, coffee, and couch are all forgotten.

A bit later, she recovers, pointing down at the couch again. "Anyway! I found this awesome couch that somebody set out on the street, but of course then I had to get it home. All well and good until I had to go through a door, right? Let me grab my keys." They're hanging on a carabiner clipped to her left-side belt loop, which normally flags someone dominant. Erik would buy that; she seems... forceful. In a good way.
Or maybe she's just in a hurry, because she takes her keys off her belt loop and tosses them at Erik, only then realizing that he doesn't have a hand free to catch them. She covers her mouth with both hands, looking horrified, but this time his powers do fire, and he's able to stop the keys in midair just an inch from his face. He steps aside, quickly shoves his bagel back into his mouth, and grabs the keys before his powers can give out again. Keys secured in his hand, he clips them onto his own belt, right-hand side along with his wallet chain, and takes his bagel out of his mouth once more. At this point he's starting to think breakfast is a lost cause.

"I'm so sorry," she says, hurrying over. "Are you all right? I didn't actually clock you with the keys, did I?"

"I'm fine," Erik tells her. He carefully shifts his bagel over to the hand holding the coffee--awkward, but workable for now--and holds his now-free hand out to her, his windcatcher dangling against the inside of his right wrist. A second later, he realizes he has cream cheese on his thumb; he wipes his hand on his jeans and tries again. "I'm Erik Shaw."

"Magda Maximoff," she says, shaking his hand. If the cream cheese bothers her, she isn't showing it. "I seriously need to look before I leap. Or toss. Whatever. It's a good thing you're a... teke...?"

"Metalhead," Erik offers, smiling. He lifts his right hand, gives the rings on his windcatcher a spin with his power. He can do that much, now, almost every time. "Mild affinity for anything metal. And you're, what, enhanced strength...?"

"And speed, and healing." She's smiling back now. "How about if we get that inside," she points at the couch, "and if your bagel's too far gone to eat at that point, I'll buy you a new one?"

"Fair enough," Erik says. He heads for the complex door, glancing briefly at the keys, and when he spots the lock he doesn't have any difficulty finding the right one; he holds the door open for her and watches with more than a little admiration as she wrestles the couch inside.

Jason's sub for the night turns out to be more like his sub for the week; a few days along, Erik discovered his name is Linden, and that he's actually here in Boston at the tail end of a seeker trip. "Now I'm maybe in a little less of a hurry," he said at the time, beaming up at Jason, who grinned and slipped his arms around Linden's waist.

"Nothing wrong with taking your time," Jason responded, nuzzling lightly at a new bruise on Linden's shoulder. "I'm not in a hurry, either."

They're almost disgustingly cute to watch. Linden's just over eighteen, tall--taller than Erik, in fact--brown-haired, brown eyes, slim. His mutation involves a little bit of enhanced flexibility, as far as he knows, and Jason's been putting that to use--Erik's walked in on them a few times. Jason's quite a few inches shorter than Linden, but that matters less when Linden's usually kneeling around him. It's nice seeing Jason so happy with someone, although it does mean that going into the kitchen for breakfast sometimes means inadvertently running into a scene where Jason's hand-feeding Linden little pieces of English muffin out of the palm of his hand.

"Hey," Jason says, soft and soothing--he and Linden must just have rolled out of bed. Linden's hands are laced together at the small of his back, and he nuzzles Jason's hip gently while Jason runs his fingers through Linden's hair.

"Hey," Erik murmurs back. No need to spoil the mood.

"Hungry?"
Erik's eyes track back to the table. There are still a half-dozen little pieces of English muffin on Jason's plate. He clears his throat and goes over to the pantry, pulling down a box of oatmeal. From the sound of it, it's empty, but he opens the lid anyway, looking into the empty oatmeal box as though the secrets of the universe might just be contained within it. "Ah... look at that, we're out of oatmeal," he says. "I think I'll head downstairs, pick up a bagel and some coffee."

"I'll get oatmeal later," Jason promises.

"Sorry about that!" Linden looks up at Erik from the floor and yawns; Jason gives him a good rough scratch through his hair and down the back of his neck. Linden shivers, but quickly gets his attention back on Erik. "Cookies sounded good last night..."

"They were good," Erik admits, smiling. In fact, there are still a few cookies left over, neatly put away in plastic wrap; between Linden and Jason, Erik hasn't had to do much around here in terms of chores lately. That's been nice. "They just won't do for breakfast."

"Cookies are always good for breakfast," Jason protests, but Erik's already shrugging into his jacket, flicking his windcatcher out of his sleeve, and waving as he heads out the door.

He's just left the coffeeshop when Magda comes hurtling out of her apartment building, nearly colliding with him. Her reflexes keep her from knocking him straight to the pavement, but it's a near thing. Fortunately, he had his bagel in the coffeeshop today, and his coffee's half gone, so he just reels back and laughs.

"Late for work?" he asks. She's in fairly nice clothes, a blouse and slacks, and she has a messenger satchel slung over an arm. With the heels on her boots she's tall enough to look him right in the eyes, and he has to admit he's not minding the view at all.

"What-- oh! You're the guy with the couch. Or, I mean, the guy from when I had the couch. Don't tell me-- metalhead-- Erik," she finishes, triumphant. When he nods, she grins ear-to-ear. "I'm a little late. Not that late. I was going to run."

"In those heels? Did you leave out the part where you have enhanced agility?"

Magda looks down at her boots and laughs. "Yeah, they're kind of tricky, but what the hell, I like boots."

"So do I," Erik offers, and then he busies himself taking a drink of his coffee. Just because Jason and Linden have him a bit worked up doesn't mean he should be giving completely obvious lines to near-strangers; that's just rude.

But Magda's smiling at him, and finally she says, "Listen, you want to try this on purpose at some point? Like-- tonight, when I'm done with work? You know where to find me, obviously, so if you gave me your number, I could call you, we could work out a time to meet..."

"I'm between cell phones right now," Erik says, apologetic. "But I'm off work today at four. I could meet you here then, or anytime after that works for you."

"Seven," Magda says definitively. "How's seven?"

"Seven's fine." Erik smiles. "Are we doing anything in particular?"

"How about dinner? I'm still pretty new in town, but you're not, right? Do you know a good Italian place?"
"Sure." He doesn't, but he can always ask Jason; he'll know.

"Great. So I'll see you at seven, and we'll take it from there."

She waves as she runs off, and then she really does run, enhanced speed and everything. Erik watches her go and can't help smiling.

Erik stops on the way home and picks up a new prepaid cell phone. Back in his apartment, Linden's gone, and Jason's changing the sheets on Erik's bed.

"Oh," Erik says, looking around for Linden's duffel bag. "Is he...?"

"He's going to hang out in town, sightsee a little. He didn't say, but-- I figure he's out there to see if he feels anything from his soulmate." Jason shrugs. "And what the hell... might as well hope for the best, right?"

"Right," Erik says softly, reaching out and squeezing Jason's shoulder. "He's nice, though."

"Yeah. He is." Jason finishes with the new sheets, puts Erik's blankets back on the bed. "So how about you? You were gone a while just for breakfast..."

"Right. That." Erik digs the note out of his pocket that has his new cell phone number on it; he gives the number to Jason, who nods, fishing his own phone out of his jeans and putting the number into memory. "And I guess I'm going out tonight. What's the nicest Italian restaurant you can think of that's in walking distance? Something at least relatively within my budget."

"Langoustine," Jason answers immediately. "Why the sudden urge for lasagna?"

There's no good reason for this to be strange or difficult to say, so Erik just takes a breath and says it. "I think I have a date."

Jason just stares at him. "You think?"

Erik relays the morning's conversation, and when Jason just keeps looking at him, goes back and adds the story about Magda and the couch, too. After a while, Jason raises an eyebrow.

"Okayyyy," he says. "So. Domme?"

"Not sure. I don't know how much it matters, it's not like I'm interested in submission." Erik grimaces. "Which is why I'm not saying for sure that it's a date-- who wants to go out with a sub who doesn't submit?"

"I'm more keeling over from the fact that you said yes in the first place," Jason says. "I wish you had the projection ability, I'd love to see what she looks like."

"Five-nine, reddish hair, blue eyes." Erik shrugs. "I wouldn't think about it too much if I were you. For all I know she'll run screaming when she finds out I'm not oriented. Or, well," he makes a face, "not oriented anymore."

Jason gives Erik a long, considering look. "I doubt it," he says, finally. "Let's see if we can find you something nice to wear."

Erik has suits, actually; last year's job at the jewelry store meant he was wearing the traditional submissive's suit, complete with corset vest, almost every day. But that's not the kind of impression
he wants to give someone on a first date, which of course Jason knows, and so they head out to a local thrift store and pick through clothes that walk the middle of the line, neither too submissive nor too dominant.

In the end, Erik lets Jason pick out a new jacket and a pair of nice turtlenecks for him, and when they get back home, Jason pulls one of Erik's nicer pairs of jeans out of the closet as well as a pair of recently-shined ankle boots.

Once Erik's dressed, Jason stands back and looks him over, head to foot. "You look amazing," Jason says.

"Shut up," Erik mutters, smoothing his hair back as he looks in the mirror. He dithers for a few seconds about whether to tuck his windcatcher into his sleeve or leave it out the way he always does; for this, he tucks it in, under the tight cuff of his turtleneck.

"I'm serious. You look great." Jason leans against the bathroom doorframe, meeting Erik's eyes in the mirror. "You want a full-length?"

There's no full-length mirror in the bathroom; Erik nods and steps into the living room where there's more space. Jason gives him a mirrored projection, something that lets him take in his appearance and smooth out the wrinkles in his shirt, the wayward strands of hair. "I should have gotten a haircut," Erik says. "I really look all right?"

"You don't need to be nervous," Jason says. The projected version of Erik grins, and Erik stares at it for a second; Jason always goes overboard with the way he looks. It's a little too much to hope for that Jason would give him an unbiased picture, though, after all these years of friendship. "You'll do fine."

"Easy for you to say. It's not your first date."

"Junior prom didn't count as a date?" Just like that, the image shifts; it's Jason and Erik together in their tuxes, Jason's vintage tuxedo with full tails, white gloves, top hat and cane, Erik's more modern submissive's tuxedo with its red satin corset vest. Looking at them, it's hard to believe they were ever that young. That version of Erik still had his soul intact, still wanted to save himself for his dominant; he thought he'd be meeting his soulmate in a little less than a year. And a week later, he'd stepped in to stop four seniors from chasing a mutant down the hallway, and everything changed.

Erik waves a hand through the illusion, and Jason lets it go. "It was a while ago," Erik says lightly. "A lifetime ago. I think I'm starting from scratch."

"Just be yourself. She's a mutant, she's working at the MRL. You're bound to have some things in common." Jason pulls him into a hug. "Hope for the best, right?"

"Right," Erik says, stroking his hands down Jason's back. "I'll see you later tonight."

Erik's at Magda's apartment building five minutes early. When the door opens and she walks out, she gets a playful look on her face and feints forward, as if to tackle him. Erik braces himself quickly, one leg behind him, and she laughs, coming close and offering him a handshake instead.

"I figure at this point, almost knocking you over is part of the routine," she teases. "How are you?"

She's in dark red leggings and a black camisole with a sheer red wrap over her shoulders; her boots are knee-high, black, and the heels on them are nearly tall enough to put her above Erik in height.
The one piece of jewelry she's wearing is a slender chain around her right wrist, with links in all different metals— it actually takes Erik some effort not to get distracted by that. Her hair's loose around her shoulders. It's a little strange that Erik can't type her at all, but while the camisole and wrap read submissive, the boots and leggings practically scream dominant. Erik's not exactly sending clear signals on that front, either, though, so it's not as though he can complain. And really-- he isn't complaining about anything when it comes to how she looks. She's gorgeous.

"I'm fine, thank you," he says, shaking her hand. She has a strong grip-- no surprise there. "You look beautiful."

"So do you," she says, giving him an obvious once-over, one that makes him straighten up out of sheer reflex. He barely manages to keep his hands at his sides instead of slipping into a parade-rest present position. It's a near thing, and it makes him itch all the way up his spine and into his joining spot. Not the most comfortable he's been all day. "So," she says, looking back at his eyes again, thank God, "dinner...?"

"Yes," Erik says, clearing his throat and trying to casually shake some of the strain out of his shoulders. "Are you up for a walk? It's only three blocks."

"Absolutely. Lead the way."

Langoustine is a nice place, and they end up seated outside on the patio, chatting over italian sodas, menus set aside and all but forgotten for now. It's so strange; this reminds him of the trashy romance novels he still has a fondness for. First dates really are like this: pointless but pleasant conversation, talking about jobs and hobbies, friends and family, an occasional awkward foray into less-than-pleasant subjects.

"When you said you were just here for the summer I wondered if it was a seeker trip," Magda admits. Erik winces. "Which, it's okay if that's it, but I wouldn't mind knowing in advance..."

"I would have told you," Erik says. "I'm here visiting a friend. Although it seems like he's half moved in with me at this point." He laughs. "His name's Jason."

"Oh." Magda blinks. "Okay, so you're non-monogamous--"

"What?" Erik stares at her. "What, ah, I'm-- no, not that sort of friend. Platonic friend. Close friend," he adds, because 'platonic' seems like it's understating matters a bit, "but we don't scene or anything."

"It's all so complicated, isn't it?" she asks. "Roles and orientations and everything. We can't just say 'my friend', it always has to mean something else. We have to specify 'platonic' if we're not sceneing with somebody, we have to specify 'not oriented' if we're not into grabbing or being grabbed..."

"That can be complicated, too," Erik points out quietly. "Sometimes orientations change. You can start out thinking you're something and wind up something else. Or nothing else."

"And you always have to make accommodations for that all-important bondmate." She sighs. "I think it's a little worse at our age. People are always going on a seeker trip or finishing one or planning one. It's hard to meet anybody who doesn't think of you as just a temporary fling on the way to someone else."

"It's not like that for me," Erik says. He thought it was coming out of a bitter place, the part of him that still resents the Stones for blocking his way to finding his soulmate early, but it ends up a little more wistful as he says it aloud. "I think... maybe we need to appreciate what we have. While we
have it. Nothing's guaranteed." He looks down at the table. "Not even soulmates."

There's a long, awkward silence, during which Erik's positive he's blown it, but then Magda reaches forward for her Italian soda and finishes it off, and it's hard not to laugh at the enthusiastic way she sucks every last drop of cream out of the bottom of the glass. "Yeah," she says, leaning back. "So about that thing where there aren't any guarantees." She gives him a rueful little smile, something that seems pained but practiced. "I'm not actually bonded. At all. I don't mean widowed or renounced or anything... I mean I don't have a soulmate." She winces and looks up at him, and that practiced rueful look delves into some humor; that looks like something she's done a hundred times, too. "But on the bright side, I can tell you for sure that I'm not going to run off on a seeker trip, like, tomorrow. So there's a plus factor, too."

"That's not a problem for me," Erik says; Magda brushes the back of her hand over her forehead in an exaggerated 'whew' gesture, but she does sit back in her chair, relaxing a little. "I'm not going to be heading off on a seeker trip, either. I'm..." The simplest explanation; he doesn't want to get into all the gruesome details, especially not on a first date. "I'm separated from my bondmate. We weren't compatible." I would have given anything to know my real soulmate. I don't even know if he's still alive. If I ever feel a trace of him again... Better not to get into the rest of it.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Magda catches Erik's hand in hers, and he finds himself squeezing back, looking down at her fingers and the slim multicolored chain around her right wrist. She catches the look and gives him a coy smile up through her lashes. "So I wore the mishmash bracelet. It was a Home Shopping Network special... my mom got it for me a few years ago. Apparently different metals have different meanings in certain spiritual traditions. Can you tell metals apart?"

He smiles back and cups her hand in one of his, traces the links with a fingertip that grazes gently against the inside of her wrist as he goes. "Aluminum. Copper. Platinum over sterling silver, there's some copper in that as well. Tin. Gold--" He stops at that one, rubbing his thumb over it. "And it's twenty-four karat, that's lovely. Rose gold, alloyed with copper. Bronze. Silver. Should I keep going?"

"I think I love this bracelet," Magda says, a little breathless. "Yeah, Erik. Yeah. I'd like you to keep going."

They don't actually make it through dinner.

Erik tosses cash on the table; Magda insists on adding money for the tip. They head off to her place, her hand tight on his, her strides quicker and stronger than Erik's, and once they're in her apartment, she tugs at his shirt, gets it out of his waistband and slides her hand underneath, purring softly at the warm, toned muscle there. "God. You're gorgeous," she whispers, pushing him onto the couch and draping herself all over him. "Tell me what you like, what are you into? Are you dominant, submissive, I couldn't tell..."

"I couldn't tell about you, either," Erik says, reaching up and burying his hands in her hair. "Does it have to be-- do you ever do it basic, is that too weird on a first date--"

"No no no, it's not weird, it's fine, I'm fine with that," she reassures him, bending down to kiss him squarely on the mouth. And true to her word, it's not a kiss that takes over, not one that immediately gives ground. It's just a kiss, warm and delicious with her tongue tasting of cream and almond, and Erik gasps, squirming underneath her.
"Want," Erik whispers, "oh God, I want, yes, this--"

"--not quite this," she says, levering herself up, looking down at him. She grins. "I have condoms in
the bedroom."

"Okay," Erik says, and if he's a little too wide-eyed, she's sweet enough to say nothing about it at all.

When Erik gets back to his apartment-- very, very late, almost dawn-- his couch is empty, and he
ducks briefly into the bedroom to see if Jason's there.

He is, and Linden's back, too, sleeping peacefully on his side, facing away from the door. The
slight sound and the change in lighting get Jason's attention, though, and he slips out of bed,
grabbing his boxers off the floor and pulling them on before heading out of the bedroom.

"Blanked," Jason says. No need to whisper when he can just mask sound; it's not the first time he's
done that in order to let his partner get some extra sleep. "So I'm guessing your date went well?"

Erik holds himself well clear of Jason; he's sure he smells like sex all over. He certainly did his
best to end up that way.

"It was nice."

"You have a hickey." Jason points up at Erik's neck; Erik reaches up and covers the mark
automatically, but he's grinning as he does. "Looks nice."

"Thanks," Erik murmurs. He drops his hand to his side, giving his windcatcher a spin with his
power as he does; right now it feels like he could keep the rings spinning forever, without even
needing to think about it. "I think we're going to see each other again."

"Good," Jason says. It's probably just because it's so late, so quiet otherwise, Jason accustomed to
blanking out sound instead of talking in a hush, but he sounds a little louder than Erik might have
expected. "That's good. That's great, I'm happy for you."

"She was all right with basic," Erik says, a little shy now, smiling down at the floor. "I was pretty
sure I was going to end up kneeling at first. She's aggressive. Forthright."

"Domme," Jason concludes. "But a nice one, sounds like."

"Subs can be aggressive and forthright, you realize," Erik defends, one eyebrow going up. "How
many times did we get mistyped in high school...?"

"I never cared about that. You know that, right?"

Erik nods, and he doesn't know how it's taken him this long to notice, but he sees the bronze on
Jason's wrist and realizes-- "You're wearing your wristband."

"Uh. Yeah?" Jason asks. "Like I usually am?"

"Not overnight."

"Sometimes overnight," Jason protests.

"It's so nineties," Erik says, reaching out and running his fingertips over it. Jason brings his hand
up immediately, putting the wristband in easy reach. "A lot of bumps and studs. I wish I could do
something a little more classic for you. Smoother. Something you could wear when you're dressed
up." But the metal feels warm under his fingertips, malleable. Erik caresses it, breathing in
unsteadily; he can feel it, he can feel the copper in it and taste the tin. "Jason...

Jason pulls his wrist out of Erik's grip, and Erik blinks at him. It's only then Erik realizes that Jason's boxers are sort of tented in front, that Jason's hard. And hasn't been, all this time; this is happening now, not something from earlier, inspired by Linden or a reflex from sleep.

"I'm glad you had a good date," Jason says, but he sounds a little strained. "I hope you go somewhere good with her."

"Jason, I--"

"If you apologize right now I will play that Muzak version of Paranoid at full volume in your head for a week, don't think I won't."

It makes Erik laugh, and he shakes his head. "All right. No apologizing. Thank you."

"And for the record, I don't care if it screams nineties." Jason curls his fingers around his wristband. "If you ever make me another one, I'll wear it. But this one's mine. I wouldn't want you to change it. Even if I wish like hell that you could."

"Maybe someday," Erik offers softly, and for once it's not just empty optimism. The way he feels right now... it could happen. Someday, it really could happen.

Going from not being all that interested in sex to having an actual sex partner takes some getting used to, but Erik's willing to make the adjustment. It doesn't surprise him to find that Magda is a little bossy in bed, except... that's not quite it. She knows what she likes and she knows what she doesn't, and she's very clear on both. But what Erik winds up appreciating about her is that she's not so caught up in roles that she won't try things a whole new way, or invent them on the fly. It's fantastic, just what he needs right now. She doesn't ask him to go to his knees all the time, though he's been on them to get into the right position now and then. She doesn't ask him to beg, doesn't just break out handcuffs without asking first. It's been wonderful.

His eyes roll back in his head, a little, the first time she goes down on him. Her mouth is gorgeous, lipstick dark today-- probably just for the contrast, maybe she was planning this. The thought leaves him giddy, and he's close already, straining to hold back the motions he wants to let loose, trying not to let this be over too quickly.

"You okay?" she asks, when she comes up for air. Erik nods passionately, lower lip held between his teeth, and she laughs at him. "You look like you either need me to get you off right away or you need a little help. What's your pleasure?"

"This is really a very great deal of pleasure," Erik pants. Magda laughs again.

"I think I've got a scrunchie here..." She digs in her nightstand and comes up with a hair tie, the padded fabric kind that's a classic for a reason. Quickly doubling it over, she slips it down Erik's shaft and gently tugs it down past his balls, letting the elastic cinch him gently. It's not as hardcore as some of the neoprene or leather ones he's used, nothing at all like the one with the plastic teeth that one of his Atlantic City doms used on him, but it helps, a little.

"Okay. All set?" Magda asks. Erik nods, settling back down, fluffing the pillows behind him a little so he can watch her. "Is it okay if I hold your hips down?"

"Of course--"
"No, I mean--" She laughs. "Is it okay if I hold your hips down." She presses, and though the motion's gentle, the force behind it isn't. When she says *hold you down*, she really means it; she can keep him in place, keep him anywhere she wants.

Enhanced strength as a mutation. It makes her *so much stronger* than he is. Maybe that should put him off, worry him a bit, but it doesn't. She's not the first mutant with enhanced strength he's been with-- not the first he's been with *by choice*, since in those months after Sebastian, he tended to seek out other mutants whenever he could.

But this is his choice. She's *asking* him. He can nod to her, say "Yes" to her, tell her yes, God, *yes, please hold me down*.

She's at it for a long time, long enough that the word *merciless* seems like it might apply, or *insatiable*. Erik lifts his hands up above his head, laces his fingers together as he lets himself go. He brings his windcatcher up between his palms, feels the metal warming and vibrating as Magda teases him, licks him, sucks on him until he can't do anything but moan.

He lets himself strain against her grip, pushes his hips up as hard as he can, trying to get more. It all feels *so good*; he can't help telling her so, whispering her name over and over, and finally, when it's too good to do anything but beg, he gives her that, too, panting out "*please, please, please*, oh God, Magda, please, yes, please," until she tilts her head up and gets her hand around his shaft and strokes him, a few hard strokes that make him come hard enough to see stars.

Afterward, she looks down at him, a little concern causing her brows to draw together. "Erik..."

Most of his higher brain functions are on standby, but even so, he can tell that's not a good sign. "Hmm?"

"Listen-- you don't have to beg, okay? I mean... I get that it's pretty much the natural thing to do if you're being done *to*, right, it's what you hear in all the, ah, movies." Porn, he can read between the lines.

Suddenly the evening seems more awkward than perfect. Erik unclenches his hands, flexes and stretches them as he realizes how long he's had them laced together above his head. The windcatcher's left an impression in both his palms, circles drawn into his skin. He looks down at the hair tie she wrapped around his cock, and gingerly gets it loose, setting it down on the already messy sheets-- he made a bit of a mess of everything, apparently.

"It was fine," she tries. "I don't mean to... I'm not criticizing or anything, I promise. It's just that..." She gives him a little smile, and it reminds him of the one she had on her face when she first told him she was unbonded. Practiced, and braced. "I thought maybe you'd figured it out by now, about me. I'm not oriented."

"I'm not either," Erik says immediately. Magda's tiny smile blooms into this beautiful, beautiful grin, and Erik grins back purely out of reflex-- she is *so gorgeous*, sometimes it hurts to look at her-- but he's not feeling that grin the same way she is, he's sure of that.

"I thought-- I didn't want to assume," she says, but she draws him back down to the bed, snuggles up close and hugs him. "I know everybody reads me as a domme, I get that, I want what I want, but I don't... I don't ever want you to feel like you have to beg me to get things, you know? I don't need to be in control. That doesn't do anything for me. I don't need you to say 'please', I just need to know you like it."

Erik strokes her hair for a while, staring up at the ceiling. "Okay," he says softly. "I don't have to
say 'please' if you don't want me to."

At that, Magda levers herself up, frowning a little. "That's... uh, kind of an odd response. I don't need you to take orders, so you'll... avoid saying 'please' because it's, because you're... kind of hearing it like an order...?"

"I didn't mean it like that," Erik says, pulling away. "Forget it. Look, I'm not oriented now, but I was a submissive for years and years until it stopped feeling right. Sometimes I still have those instincts."

"That's fine," she says, fast, following him as he goes to the side of the bed and starts gathering up his clothes. "Erik, that's fine. That actually helps a lot. I don't expect you to be able to turn those instincts off overnight, I just wanted you to know how it feels to me. I don't hate it, it doesn't wreck an evening or anything, but I really am unoriented. It's a little weird for me to hear it. I feel like I'm supposed to do something extra."

"I'm sorry," he says quietly. "I didn't mean to make things weird for you."

"It's okay." She bites her lip. "Are you going?"

"I think I should, don't you?"

"If you think so." She leans in and kisses his cheek. "Are we still on for dinner Tuesday?"

"Of course." He manages a smile, and it's a pretty good one, by the look he gets in return. "Pizza with Jason, and Linden if he's around."

"Finally getting to meet the mysterious roommate! I can't wait."

"He's not so mysterious," Erik says, smiling a little more genuinely now, "but don't tell him I said that. He'll take it as a slight against his mutation."

"Oh, illusions, mystery, ha, I get it." Magda leans back in bed and watches as Erik gets dressed; he isn't showy about it, doesn't want to put on some kind of performance, especially now, but she still licks her lower lip in a way that-- after tonight, especially-- gives him all sorts of ideas. Some of which he ends up shoving to the bottom of the pile, trying to forget about them as he laces up his boots. It's a little weird for me to hear it. She has a point. That's not what they're doing with all this.

"Have a good night," he tells her, kissing her goodbye, and since his apartment's barely a block away, it doesn't take him any time to get there at all.

"--ohhh, fuck, please, sir, please, please, can I, oh God, can I come, sir, please," and that's Linden's voice, not the least bit blocked or muffled by Jason's ability tonight. Erik closes the door quietly behind him, locks it; he pulls the sheets and pillows out of the coat closet and gets set up on the couch. It's late enough, he's tired enough; he should be able to sleep.

But it won't be easy, not with the two of them going at it like that. Jason's breathless, happy, when he says, "Hell, no, you can't come yet; when did I say you could come?"

"Oh! Fuck, fuck, that feels so good-- God, yes, yes, yesss--"

"When," Jason says again. Linden whimpers loudly enough Erik can hear him all the way from here. "When did I say?"
"When you tell me to," Linden manages, "when you say so oh God, sir, when you say so, I'll come when you say so, please tell me, please, please--"

Jason moans. "You're so pretty," he says, "God, you're so fucking pretty when you beg, more of that, beg me for it, give it to me, I want that, I fucking want that, anybody would want you, beg for me, boy, c'mon, beg--"

Sleep. Right. No, that's definitely not going to happen at this rate. Erik heads for the bathroom, washes his face, brushes his teeth, takes a piss, even digs out pajamas from the laundry hamper and changes into them, but after he's wasted as much time as he can doing all of that, he can still hear Jason and Linden-- mostly Jason.

"Again-- come on, Linden, keep going, tell me, talk to me--"

"Please," and at this point Erik might beg if it would get Jason off. He sighs and looks at himself in the mirror. It's not their fault Erik's date came crashing down just a little at the end.

Jason says so many things in moments like these. You're so pretty when you beg. Anybody would want you. How could anybody look at you and not want you begging, how does anybody look at you and not fantasize about seeing you on your knees, Erik's heard a lot of that.

And he's also heard it's a little weird for me, but that's his own damned fault. He's the one who said not oriented; he's the one who spent what would otherwise have been a spectacular blowjob saying please over and over to his unoriented girlfriend.

"Get on the floor," Jason snaps, "on your knees, right now."

Erik sags a little against the counter. He's not going to be hearing that anytime soon, and it's all right; it's not like he knows if he can still do it. Even if he wanted to, maybe he couldn't.

Here, though-- here it's just him, and the bath mat, and nobody's going to know. He takes a deep breath and gets down on the floor, on his knees, and he's not sure whether he's glad or irritated that it's so easy to be down here.

It was only ever easy once, with one other person, and he twists his wrist, slips the doubled chain off and takes a deep breath, focusing all his attention and energy on the windcatcher. It floats up, chain and all, dangling in the air, rings spinning. Erik turns his hands so his palms are facing up, and it all feels so much like it used to, kneeling down, thinking are you out there, can you hear me as loud as he can...

But the emptiness on the other end of his bond is so loud he can't ignore it, and the windcatcher falls out of the air despite all his efforts to keep it aloft. He catches it, puts it back around his wrist.

This isn't him anymore; he's finished with it. He's been finished for a while.

He wishes he'd thought about whether Jason and Linden might've been finished for a while, because the bathroom door just opens, Jason walking in naked and thoroughly debauched, and he stares down at Erik, who gapes a little, stuck in place as Jason quickly projects a bathrobe onto himself.

"Fuck, sorry," Jason says. "I was getting-- I'll just-- there's paper towels in the kitchen, I'll just grab some of those or something--"

Erik shoots to his feet. "You don't have to-- there's still clean hand towels under the sink, I was just, I was. I was--" He can't think of anything he might have been doing, and despite the evening he spent with Magda, he's rock hard all over again. He's not sure how much of that has to do with
kneeling and how much has to do with Jason and Linden, and he's not going to offer that information, either. "I was meditating," he says, finally.

"Um," Jason offers. "Okay. So if you'd just--"

"Right," Erik says, sliding past Jason so Jason can get to the sink. "Sorry."

Back in the living room, he settles down under the covers on the couch, piling up as many blankets as he can. He's not cold, but he'd rather be under a hell of a lot of covers than give Jason another look at his hard-on when Jason has to go through the living room to get back to bed.

Jason doesn't let him drop it that easily, though. He comes back to the living room and leans over the back of the sofa, still in that fluffy bathrobe that Erik knows full well isn't really there. "Hey," he says. "Sorry about all the noise. If I'd realized you were home, I would've blanked us."

"It's all right," Erik says. "I mean... it's fine. I'm fine. You don't have to blank yourself out on my account."

"Something happen with Magda tonight?"

Erik wrinkles his nose, shakes his head. "I'm just winning the Awkward Olympics today, I think. Between her and--" He nods at the bathroom. Jason glances back with him, nodding.

"For what it's worth," Jason says, "it wasn't really awkward so much as, ah, unexpected."

"That's what was awkward about it with Magda," Erik says, groaning and covering his face with his hand.

"You-- what-- knelt unexpectedly? In her bathroom?"

Erik peeks out from behind his hand; Jason's got a smirk on his face that means he's just joking. But when Erik looks seriously at him, Jason blinks, all smirking gone.

"I wasn't kneeling and it wasn't in her bathroom, but... apparently when I have enough sex to be comfortable with someone, I start begging. Who knew." Erik snorts. "Or maybe it was just that she was coming off more toppy than usual. So..." He shrugs. "Not awkward, you said. Does that mean I don't look weird on my knees?"

"Of course you don't, and that corset doesn't make your ass look fat, either."

Erik laughs. "I withdraw the question," he says. "You should probably get back to Linden. He's going to want that hand towel, if you did as much to him as it sounded like you did."

"Yeah." Jason straightens up. "Hang in there, okay? You're still in new territory." He reaches down and ruffles Erik's hair. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night."

Linden begs off when it comes to dinner; Jason doesn't explain why, but Erik can fill in the blanks easily enough. If his soulmate really is nearby, the pull must be getting stronger every day.

At any rate, the pizza's good, and it's all much less awkward than Erik feared, after the last time he saw Magda; she cuddles up to him in the booth and leans her head on his shoulder just like she usually does, and Jason is as charming as Erik's ever seen him.
When Magda excuses herself to visit the restroom, Jason leans forward, lowers his voice. "She's nice," he says.

"I think so."

"Does she know the first fucking thing about you?"

Erik frowns. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean as far as she knows you're this beta-level mutant with a little bit of control over metal now and then. You're unbonded--"

"She knows I'm separated from my bondmate."

"She doesn't know why, though. Does she? And I bet you haven't told her you have a soulmate, either." Jason points at the windcatcher. "Does she know what that means to you? Has she ever even asked about it?"

"Don't," Erik pleads. "Don't get into that, I'm not ready to explain the whole thing--"

"I won't," Jason promises. "But she thinks you're unoriented, that the two of you are just two of a kind that way, that it's never going to give you any trouble--"

"It doesn't have to."

"You were kneeling on the bathroom floor the other day because it doesn't have to give you any trouble," Jason says. "Erik, Jesus. You don't have to tell your life story to everybody you sleep with, but when you're dating someone--"

"Just because you think it's so goddamned easy to find someone that way doesn't mean--"

"Easy, right, because it's so goddamned easy," Jason mocks-- that's not his power giving Erik his own voice back, it's just Jason's talent for mimicry-- "to deal with falling for someone and having to watch him pining away for his soulmate day after fucking day--"

Erik blinks at Jason several times, heart thudding in his chest. "Falling for someone," he says.

Jason taps his fingers on the table for a few seconds. "Yeah?"

"Does Linden know?" It shouldn't bother him. It should not be bothering Erik this much, he knows that. Maybe he's just bothered on Jason's behalf; maybe it's the idea that Jason could be falling for someone, and he's out there right now, looking for his soulmate instead of appreciating the man right in front of him.

Something's wrong about all that, but Erik chalks it up to the stress from tonight's outing and pushes it aside.

"That's not the point," Jason says, waving him off. "And I'm not going to let you distract me from that point, which was: If you want this thing with you and Magda to go somewhere, she deserves to know. She needs to know you're a submissive, and this thing where you want to kneel isn't going to go away."

"I can't-- I don't even know if I can do that. I could drop to my knees and have to come right back up, what is that, what kind of shitty thing to offer would that be--"

Jason's going on, ignoring that; right, of course, he doesn't want to think about Erik kneeling any
more than Magda did. "She needs to know about Shaw. About your soulmate."

"You're asking me to tell someone I've known for under a month everything about me," Erik says, frustrated. "I'm not ready."

"It's not going to be easier later on."

"I guess we'll find out," Erik says, leaning back in the booth and crossing his arms over his chest. When Magda comes back, the tension's still thick between Erik and Jason, and Jason ends up sliding out of the booth not much later. "I'm going to call it a night early," he says. "Have a good one, you two. Take care of each other."

"Absolutely," Magda says, and Erik flinches down at the table. It's sweet of her to say, but she doesn't mean it the way he'd like.

It keeps coming up. It almost can't be helped; there are a lot of ways to have sex that don't involve power exchange, and a lot of things that feel inherently like having power exchange occur, whether Magda means them that way or not. Having her strap on a dildo and fuck him with it is incredible, but he ends up gritting his teeth to keep from begging. The way she tastes when she's up on the breakfast table and he's got his face between her thighs is gorgeous, but mostly he can't stop thinking about the fact that he's on his knees, that the spiked point of her high heel is digging into his back.

When she's got both hands laced into his and she's riding him, Erik ends up biting his tongue against the urge to beg for permission to come. He doesn't need it, he knows asking is only going to wreck things, but the intent look on her face and the way her arms have him locked into place--God, he does need it, he needs to be told.

And what then, how would he react then-- would it be easy or difficult, would he shake afterwards and need to leave, would he even be able to look at her after taking something like that...? He doesn't know. There's no way to test things, no way to take this for a trial run. Nothing to do but hope it worked out, and that's if she were willing to give it to him in the first place.

He's still achingly hard after she's ridden him through three orgasms of her own, and he just--can't. He can't. "I'm sorry," he pants. "Sorry. I can't. I want to--"

"It's okay, it's all right," she whispers. She lets his hands go. "It's fine. Do you want to stop?"

He reaches up and gets both arms around her waist, burying his face against her chest. He's going to have to answer yes to that eventually.

Everyone's cranky at Erik's apartment this morning. There's no sweet little handfeeding scene at breakfast; Linden and Jason aren't even talking. It takes a while for Erik to realize what's going on, and when he does, he catches the illusion of Jason by the arm and says, "I need to talk to you. Now."

The illusion nods, and Erik stalks off to the bedroom; a few seconds later, Jason follows. Erik nods back out toward the kitchen as soon as the bedroom door's shut. "So is he getting to fight with an illusion, or am I?"

"Neither. I told him you needed to talk to me, he's out there finishing up the dishes." Jason's jaw is set and tight, his eyes narrowed. He's got his hands on his hips. "So. What?"
"You're blanking me."

"Yeah, I was blanking you." Jason shrugs. "What, a guy can't fight with his submissive in peace? It's a small apartment, there's barely room for three of us as it is."

Erik flinches at the words his submissive, much as he doesn't have any right to. "Well, too fucking bad-- it's my apartment, and I'm sleeping on the couch all the time anyway--"

"When you're here," Jason fires back. "When you're not spending the night with Magda."

"I haven't spent the night at her place for a week," Erik points out, "not that you've even fucking noticed--"

"Yeah, I've noticed. I notice you come in and you don't say a word, you don't check in, you just go straight to the couch, or straight to the bathroom--"

"What do you want me to do, sleep in the kitchen, piss in the sink? I'm sorry if I'm not leaving you and your submissive as much space in my apartment as you need--"

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry if I don't really want to walk into the bathroom after a scene and find you kneeling on the bath mat!"

"What-- fuck you," Erik stutters, face going red. He yanks his windcatcher up into his hand, squeezes it. "I didn't realize I was such a downgrade after all that--"

Jason's gone a little ashen himself, and he reaches out for Erik. Erik jerks back. "I'm sorry," Jason says. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, that's-- that wasn't what I meant. I didn't mean that."

"It doesn't matter." Erik swallows down the sting, letting the windcatcher dangle down against his wrist, rubbing at his face with both hands. "You're not the only one who doesn't want that."

"Oh, God, fuck, shit," Jason says, reaching out again. "You talked to her?"

This time Erik lets Jason put his hands on Erik's arms, rub briskly. "Not yet," he says. "I can't keep doing this. You were right. I need to call it off."

"I didn't say you needed to call it off," Jason says softly. "I said you needed to tell her the truth. You don't think you can compromise?"

"Should I have to?" Erik steps back a little, far enough he can look at Jason. "I lost my soulmate. But what am I asking for, really-- someone who gives a damn about me, who knows about Sebastian and lets me deal with that in the spring, who doesn't flinch when they see me on my knees."

"Someone who knows you'll drop everything if you ever find out your soulmate's alive," Jason adds, thumb grazing against the upper curve of Erik's bicep. "Some of it is a lot to ask. Doesn't mean you shouldn't try."

But Erik shakes his head. "Maybe someday. Fuck. I hate this. I don't know if I can kneel. Maybe I'd try it and I'd be right back on my feet, breaking out in hives."

"You want to, though." Jason takes his hands back, shoves them into his back pockets. "You want to give it a shot."

"I feel so fucking ungrateful. I haven't wanted to kneel for anyone, and what happens-- I find
someone who cares about me, who's never going to expect me to offer up my submission, who's never going to feel cheated or disappointed if I can't give her that. I find someone who just wants me, useless fucking beta-level mutation and all. And I look at her, and she's so beautiful." Erik scratches both hands through his hair, looks down at the floor. "And all I can think is, I wish I could settle for this."

For the longest time, Jason's quiet. Finally, he says, "How much more would you need?"

Erik blows out a breath, shakes his head. "I don't know. More than this. Room to submit again, if it turns out I can do it. To get my mutation back, if it's ever going to fucking come. You're right, you know? You were right. Magda cares, but it's-- she doesn't know me, hasn't seen me at my worst. She doesn't know about Sebastian. She doesn't know about my soulmate."

"Tell her," Jason urges. "Don't give up on this without trying. Maybe she'd understand about your bond. Maybe she'd learn to switch up. She might end up liking it. You never know."

"I know," Erik insists. "Everything I have with her is built on things that are half-true at best. I'm not oriented. I'm separated from my bondmate. It's not real. How is it ever going to be what I need if it's all just--"

Jason cracks half a smile. "Illusions?"

Erik shakes his head. "I was going to say, pretending. I'm fooling myself. I'm fooling both of us. How fair is it to stay when that's all I'm really doing?"

"Are you sure that's all? Are you absolutely sure about that, because God, you've been so happy with her--"

"You've missed half the story yourself, then," Erik says softly. "Do you really think I'd be kneeling on my own in the bathroom if I were that happy with her?" Jason doesn't answer, and Erik sighs and sets his shoulders. "I'm not going to draw this out. I'm telling her tonight."

"Okay." Jason lets out a breath, too. "Well, I'll be here."

Trying for a smile, Erik says, "Yeah. Well, if Linden feels like using up the oatmeal on cookies again..."

"Linden won't be around."

And there it is, the reason Jason was blanking their fight out to begin with, Erik realizes. Erik reaches out automatically, puts his hands on Jason's waist. "What...?"

"He's going to finish his seeker trip. He says he's feeling his bondmate really clearly now. I guess it's tonight or bust. He's already packed."

"Already. God." Erik pulls Jason into his arms, hugs him tightly. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I knew what I was getting into. He told me up-front he was here on a seeker trip." But Jason's clinging every bit as hard. "If I could just feel mine again, if I knew ey was out there--"

"Ey is." Erik squeezes Jason, and then does it again for good measure. "I know it. You just have to have--"

Jason leans back and looks up at Erik. "Faith?"
"I was going to say hope," Erik murmurs, and he's looking right into Jason's eyes, deep, so deep, now--

--but just as quickly, Jason's backing away from him, shaking his head. "I'll believe it when I feel it," he says. "Until then, hope is just something that could fuck me up."

Erik sighs, rubbing at his forehead with the heel of his hand. "I wish I could argue with that," he murmurs. "But you know I've been there."

"I know you've been there," Jason agrees. "I'm sorry about Magda. I know how much you like her."

"I'm sorry, too."

"You sure it's for the best?" Jason starts to reach out and stops himself. Erik can't help feeling a little bereft. "I hate to keep asking, but-- I'd never forgive myself if I didn't. Are you really sure about this?"

Erik's not sure what's worse: what he's going to have to do, or knowing what the answer to Jason's question is. "Yes."

When Erik walks into Magda's apartment, she has candles lit at the kitchen table, places set. She's nowhere to be seen, but when he says, "Hello?" she walks out of the bedroom holding a bouquet of flowers, all red roses and purple hydrangeas.

"Hi," she says. "These are for you."

Erik takes them and stares down at them, dumbfounded. "I've never... thank you," he finally manages, some vestiges of good manners kicking in.

"Never had anyone get you flowers before?"

"Junior prom," he says. "I got something for my tux from Jason."

"Good for him," Magda says. "It's about time you got them again."

This isn't making things any easier. "Magda..."

Magda reaches up, presses her fingers to his lips. "Listen for a second, okay? I know I've been kind of distant on the orientation thing. I know there are things you like that I haven't been supporting you on. Just... if you can hang in there with me, if you can put up with the fact that I'm not a domme, I can try a little harder."

"You shouldn't have to try harder," Erik says. He puts the flowers down on the kitchen table. "What's all this about?"

"I just want things to be like they were when we got started," Magda says. And now that Erik's hands aren't full, she reaches forward, runs her fingernails lightly against the inside of his wrists. It's enough to make Erik shiver all over, turn his hands up so she can do more of that. "I want this to work out for us."

"Magda... I really do like you--"

She slips her hands around his wrists-- careful, on the right side, to grip him above the chain his windcatcher's on, not directly around it-- and squeezes. He looks into her eyes, holding his breath.
"Can I take you to bed?" she whispers.

Holding onto him like that, but still asking. Erik lets that breath go and nods. "All right."

Later, much later— the candles on the table have probably guttered out, whatever she had planned for dinner must be long past cold— Magda traces little circles on Erik's chest with her fingertips, humming out a little appreciative noise. "You're pretty," she murmurs.

Erik laughs, noiseless; he's still a little out of breath. "Thank you. So are you."

"I mean, I caught that from the beginning. Pretty. And you're a mutant. And you're nice."

"Now you're just flattering me."

"You're good to me," she clarifies, and he doesn't try to argue that. "I really wasn't expecting you to be unoriented, too. I remember thinking, wow, that's too good, where's the catch?" She squeezes him-- not too hard, just with baseline strength. He hugs her back, kissing the top of her head; she slips her hand down his arm, curling her fingers around his wrist.

With Magda's hand on his wrist, the last thing Erik feels is unoriented. He closes his eyes. "I think you found it," he murmurs.

"I had a little help," Magda admits. Erik's eyes snap open, and he frowns at her. "Nothing bad. I just-- Jason called."

"What," Erik says hoarsely, heart pounding. "What did he do that for, what did he say--"

"He asked if we could get together for coffee, and he said it was important. So I took a late lunch break and we had a chat." Magda slides off him, pushes up on an elbow so she can see him a little better. "He's a good friend, and I am really, really glad he came to me, because I was probably going to go on pretending your submissive side didn't exist for as long as you let me. But I'm not going to do that anymore, I swear. I don't mind doing some toppy stuff as long as--" She sits up, dragging the sheet with her; Erik backs up as far as he can in her narrow bed and does the same. "As long as that's enough. Is that enough?"

"What did Jason tell you?" Erik asks, trying to keep his voice even, trying not to let his hands clench into fists. "What did he say about me--"

Magda's catching on that something's not right, though. She runs her hands through her hair, pushes it back off her face. "Okay. Okay, calm down. It wasn't much. We went down to the coffee shop, and I got a sandwich and he had a triple espresso. He said he hadn't seen you this happy in a long time, and I said that was nice of him to say. And he asked me if I knew you used to be a sub."

"I told you that--"

"You didn't tell me it was something you still wanted," Magda says, and as gently as she says it, Erik still can't help feeling stung.

"I didn't know. Not at first. I still don't know if I can--"

"I don't know if I can, either. I know I never would have picked up on it without Jason stepping in, so I told him yes, I did know you used to be a submissive, and at that point it was pretty obvious why he was there, you know? I got it." She reaches out and puts her hand on his knee. "He didn't say anything else. I'm pretty smart, Erik. I can add two and two and get four, most of the time."
Erik shakes his head. "Leave it to fucking dominants," he mutters. "We were all right. We were doing all right without that."

"Were we?" Magda squeezes his knee. "I'm trying not to push, here, but I need an answer to that. Were we doing all right?"

Grimacing, Erik looks down at her hand on his knee. "I thought it was as good as it was going to get," he says, and she takes her hand off him and slides out of bed, crossing to her dresser and pulling on a sweatshirt and a pair of sweatpants.

"Okay." She doesn't turn around to look at him. "Okay. So--"

"Wait, no--" Erik vaults out of bed, follows her over to the dresser. He puts his hands on his shoulders, and she leans back against him, her hair soft against his shoulder. "Not because of you. Not even because of us."

Oh, fuck, it would have been so much easier to just let her down easy, let this all stay in the past where it belongs. Jason owes him for this. "I told you I used to be a submissive; I didn't tell you why I stopped."

"I'm listening."

"I stopped submitting after... well, by the time I'd been separated from my bondmate for a year, I was through with it. It didn't take me anywhere I wanted to go."

"You never talk about your bondmate," Magda says quietly. "You don't have to, if you don't want to. If it was bad enough to make you want to give up submission..."

"I see him once a year on our anniversary," Erik says, hands tight on her shoulders, "and the rest of the time... I don't remember the last time I gave a damn about sex, or dating, or even trying to scene. Maybe never." He lets out a shaky breath, trying to steady himself. "This is as good as anything's ever been for me. I don't know what 'all right' is supposed to look like."

Magda pulls away from his grip, turns around to look up at him. "That fucking bond," she says, and the expression on her face is hard, angry—but not at him, thank God. "Sometimes I swear, I think we'd all be better off without it."

He can't keep his expression still, not at that. She blanches, visibly, and he turns away, but not fast enough. "Well. Or maybe not," she says, pulling away from him. "So-- what, he drags you back for an anniversary scene when you don't even want him, and you don't think you'd be better off without that?"

Erik's looking around for his clothes now; he's got a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, and he doesn't want to be thrown out of her apartment naked. "It's not that simple," he says, tugging on his jeans.

"He's got a name! Well, hey, we've only been dating for a month and a half, I really didn't need to know something important like your bondmate's name--"

"You have no idea," Erik snarls, and Magda actually stops in her tracks, lips pressed tightly
together. "You don't know what my bond meant to me when I was growing up, how much I needed him--"

God. He's backed into a corner; there's Sebastian, and as far as Magda knows there's no one else. Who would believe it? No one can have two soulmates; it doesn't work like that.

"Erik," Magda says, at length, "you're not that guy anymore. You need to figure out what you need now."

Erik looks down at his wrist, at his windcatcher. He can feel the metal, the steel of the rings and the silver in the chain, and he reaches up, presses the inside of his wrist to the center of his chest. Are you out there? Can you hear me? I need you. I still need you. Now. Today. Where are you? Are you still alive? Please...

"God, I swore I wasn't going to do this," Magda says, reaching up and rubbing at her temples. "But okay. Okay, look." She comes over, puts her hands on his shoulders, slips her hands up to curve gently at either side of his neck. "Erik, listen to me. I'm sorry I didn't come equipped with the right-- psionic energy, or the right orientation," she says. And as steady as her voice is, her eyes are filling, tears already clinging to her eyelashes. "I'm sorry I can't be the perfect domme for you, your domme--"

"I never thought you needed to be," Erik says, putting his hands over hers. She could move in so easily, she could wrap her thumbs around the front of his neck and hold onto him, she won't, he barely has to remind himself that she won't. "I feel safe with you, you have no idea what that means to me--"

"God. Erik. Safe is the last thing I feel with you sometimes," she says, but she's breaking his grip as easily as she breathes, reaching up, hands leaving his neck so she can run her fingers through his hair. "You really don't get it, do you? People fall in love at first sight all the time thanks to the soulbond. Some of us need a few weeks."

He can't breathe; he just stares at her, eyes wide, mouth open. Magda catches his face in her hands, and she says, "I love you. And you don't have to say it back, okay, just please don't tell me I can't. Maybe I don't have the bond, but--"

"I wasn't," Erik finally manages to say. "I wasn't going to tell you that, I don't think that." He feels something tingling all the way through his body, and at first he wonders if it's about hearing I love you for the first time from someone who could actually mean it.

But that's not it, not at all; as soon as he takes another breath, he realizes what he's feeling is all the metal in the room. The sensation isn't lit up and alive the way it is when he's facing another anniversary with Sebastian, but there's enough of it for him to feel the aluminum miniblinds, the brass clock on her nightstand, the screws and bolts holding her bedframe together. He catches her wrist in his hand, her wrist with the beautiful multi-metallic chain wrapped around it, and he can feel all the metal singing for him, copper and gold and silver and brass and iron, the complicated swirls of alloys, the clear bright tones of nearly-pure single elements.

"Erik?" Magda reaches up with her other hand, cups his cheek in her palm. "Are you all right?"

"I've never been better," Erik says, eyes shining, and when Magda leans up, tentative, it honestly takes Erik a moment to remember she's in the room.

It's almost noon the next day before Erik gets home. Jason's lying on the couch this time, sheets
and blankets covering him, staring up at the ceiling. There are rainbows streaking out of his eyes, and the room's covered in sparkles and fireworks and-- tiny colorful frogs, as well as butterflies.

Erik heads for the couch and glances over the coffee table. There are three empty Gatorade containers, plus a small pill bottle. Erik sits down on the coffee table and picks up the pill bottle.

"Mega-Seek Boost Plus?" Erik asks. He rattles the pills-- at least the bottle's still mostly full-- and snaps his fingers over Jason's face. "How many did you take?"

"Not enough," Jason says hoarsely. He blinks a few times; the rainbow vision cuts out, and most of the frogs and butterflies disappear. "Hey." He looks at Erik, grinning. He's also flushed red, as if he's been drinking, and his hair's a mess. Erik takes a quick sniff; it doesn't smell like he's showered since last night, and it smells like he spent the night sceneing-- sex and sweat, mostly sweat. "Hey, when did you get in, what time is it--"

"Noon," Erik says. "Come on. Let's get you into a cold shower."

"Do I smell that bad?" Jason lifts an arm, sniffs his armpit. "Can't tell. I don't know. What do I smell like to you?"

"You smell fine," Erik says, reaching out and getting an arm around Jason's waist, pulling him upright. "You're just high, apparently."

"Yeah, well, guess who found his soulmate," Jason says. Erik starts moving him over to the bathroom. "Did you guess not me? Because right you are, my friend, no fucking sign of em in more than a fucking year."

Erik gets Jason propped up against the bathroom counter and starts running the shower. "It doesn't necessarily mean anything," he says, all too aware that he sounds like a made-for-TV movie. "Maybe ey's just out of range. Scaling Mt. Everest."

"Dead," Jason says.

The pipes creak, and the cold water knob rips off the wall. "Fuck," Erik mutters, diving into the bathtub and grabbing for the knob. It fits on with a screw, he's been able to tell that by feel since the first time he used the shower here, it's just going to be a matter of getting it back on. It figures. His powers aren't coming back, they're just going crazy. "Fuck."

"Wait, wait--" Jason reaches over Erik, turns off the hot water and slams his palm down on the shower valve. It's a good idea in some respects. It stops the shower from blasting water all over, prevents Erik from getting any more soaked than he already was, but now there's a new problem. Cold water races out of the faucet; Erik shivers, feeling the torrent streaking past and through metal. Oh, God, all that rushing water-- suddenly his bladder feels uncomfortably full. "Was that a freak plumbing accident or was that you?"

"It's me," Erik says tightly. "Would you shut up a minute, I need to get this back on before I explode--" He fits the knob over the post in the wall, but apparently when he ripped it out of the wall, he mangled the inside of the knob. It turns freely, with no effect on the water at all.

"What do you mean, explode--"

"Water. Rushing." Erik points at the faucet. "I can feel that."

"Erik!" Jason's beaming now, slapping Erik on the back. "That's so great, man, I am so fucking happy for you--"
"Get out of the bathroom," Erik says, coming to his feet and pulling Jason along with him. "Please. Right now."

"What, why--"

"Oh, for God's sake," Erik mutters, and he flips up the lid on the toilet and gives up trying to be modest; right now, pissing is the best idea he has ever had. After he's relieved himself, he's actually a little lightheaded, but that's probably his powers, and the way he can still feel the plumbing.

He flushes, puts his clothes back together, washes his hands; when he turns back to Jason, Jason's just staring at him appreciatively. "You are really high," Erik says, rolling his eyes. "Or into watersports, but I think I'd have heard about that by now."

"Never rule anything out. Is my motto," Jason says. "Can you do something about the faucet, actually I do kind of want a shower..."

"You can take a cold one right now if you want," Erik says, picking up the knob again and looking inside it. There's a square notch that fits around the post that comes out of the wall; right now that notch is flattened, and the hole where the screw should attach the knob to the post is twice its normal size.

Erik fits the knob over the post and concentrates. He can feel the notch, the hole; he might not be able to be precise about this, but he can probably fuse the knob onto the post, just a little tighter, tighter, squeeze hard, you can do it, hard, hard, yes, fuck, yes, right there--

He feels the metal fuse into place and ends up groaning from the effort, and the results are not pretty-- but the knob turns, and Erik collapses onto his ass, breathing hard.

Jason plops down on the floor next to him. The floor's covered in water, Erik's soaked, Jason's mostly dry, but Erik can't stop laughing. When Jason tips over and snorts into his neck, Erik puts both arms around him and just keeps laughing, laughing to the point of tears.

After a shower and some lunch, Jason's more or less back to normal. There are still occasional sparkles in the air all around him, but that seems to be the only lasting side effect. Erik can almost understand what got Jason into that kind of mood; apparently he took Linden out to lunch as a "good-bye and good luck" gesture, and on their way out of the restaurant, Linden and his soulmate finally met face-to-face. Linden went down on his knees right there on the sidewalk, and Jason was the first one to congratulate them.

"Sorry about--" Jason makes a vague gesture around the living room, off toward the bathroom. "That. After Linden took off with his soulmate, I got kinda..." He shrugs. "Lonely. I don't know. It was never for me what it was for you, I know that, but I used to be able to feel em. And now it's just... not there. Just gone. Those are supposed to be the good pills, the ones that make you feel your soulmate the most..."

"I'm reasonably sure they're the 'good' pills because they get you high," Erik says dryly, "and you have to admit, they definitely did that."

"Rainbows out of my eyes? Seriously?"

"I'm only surprised you weren't playing music."

Jason laughs. "Anyway. So there's the sorry-ass state of my love life. How about you, how did it go with Magda...?" He sobers up a little and scoots closer to Erik on the couch. "You were home
really late. What happened?"

Erik looks down at his hands. "She bought me flowers."

Jason just keeps leaning in, shoulder warm against Erik's. "Yeah?"

"I hear somebody went and told her I'd been itching for a little more submission lately."

Jason sits bolt upright, crackling sparks and puffs of smoke appearing all around his head. "I didn't say that. I barely said anything--"

"Relax. I'm not pissed off at you." Erik winces. "I'm a little pissed off at you. But not very much."

Leaning in again, Jason nods. "Not very's good. I can deal with not very. So you're going to work this out, huh?"

Erik sighs and rubs his hands together, reaches for the windcatcher with his power and feels it tug against the chain on his wrist. "She said she loves me."

"Yeah, like anybody didn't see that coming," Jason mutters. He sighs. "Okay. So. That makes the submission thing easier...?"

"No." Erik shakes his head. "She doesn't want it. She said she's willing to try some toppy things, but..." He leans his head back against the back of the couch. "I don't know how much longer either of us can pretend it's what we want."

"She could still find her inner dominant," Jason offers. "You should try. You should really try. Give this your best shot and see what happens. Go back to Salem with her when the summer's over." Jason slides an arm around Erik's waist, and suddenly it's raining, just a little; Erik can feel the water on his hair, coming down on his shoulders. Jason's wristband is so warm and alive on his arm, so rich; Erik slips his hand over it, feels the alloy and breathes and remembers.

Jason turns his hand in Erik's grip. "No changing it," he warns Erik. "It's mine. If you want to make me something else, then you do that, but no changing this one."

"What if it's because of her?" Erik murmurs. "My powers. I'm feeling things more than I have in years. I wrecked the bathtub."

"So much for your security deposit," Jason snorts. "Why would it be because of her?"

"I don't... she's a mutant. She's another mutant. I've been seeing a lot of her."

"You're living with me. What does she test at, Theta? Kappa?"

"Theta," Erik murmurs.

"I'm still testing Phi. If it's just being around another mutant, why didn't your abilities come back because of me?" There's a little roll of thunder. Erik closes his eyes; he knows he isn't wet anymore, knows the rain isn't real, but he can smell the ozone from miniature streaks of lightning in the air. "She says she loves you. Do you love her?"

Eyes still closed, Erik gets an arm around Jason's shoulders. "How would I know?"

"You'd know." Jason slides away; he bends forward, pressing his hands hard against his temples. The rain finally goes away, thunderclouds dissipating. "You've loved people before. Family. Friends. Your soulmate."
Erik traces his windcatcher with his power, feels the smooth curve of it. He reaches over, glances his thumb across Jason's wristband. "Yes."

"I want you to be happy. If she can make that happen, I want that for you." Jason turns back to look at him. "But you know what I'd like? I'd like to have you back in Pittsburgh with me. I want to see you taking your language classes, kicking my ass in whatever language you feel like speaking this week. I want to watch you climbing back up to Omega-level again." He takes a deep breath. "I want to be there for you in April, when that motherfucker calls you back to him. If you decide you want to start scening as a sub again, I want to vet all the dominants you think about going home with, to make sure nobody fucks you over. And--" He catches Erik's hand. "And if you ever find out your soulmate's still out there somewhere, I want to be there when you acknowledge him."

Erik looks at their hands, linked together; his windcatcher, Jason's wristband.

"I called my landlord back in Pittsburgh on my way home," he says quietly. Jason's hand tightens on his. "My apartment's waiting for me."
Chapter Summary

Charles's stepbrother Cain has just found his soulmate, and Charles has to go home to wish him well. Raven comes home for the acknowledgment ceremony, too, and Moira joins Charles as his guest, for reasons she can't quite put a finger on.

Charles wouldn't spend this much time in the library for anyone but Moira. They've been here for hours, and while Charles enjoys his studies, he hates the building.

He signed an agreement not to use telepathy in any of the libraries. Students revising for their courses, researchers finding sources... god forbid Charles get a waft of any of that. He's glad his thesis is proving to be such a lot of work; if it goes anywhere, someone's apt to claim he lifted the idea from em. But even if he nicked the idea, he's putting in the massive amount of research and analysis, and he's documenting all of it. No one can pretend he stole that.

Locking his telepathy down this completely reminds him of his time in hospital, when he couldn't feel anything at all. All other things being equal, he usually allows himself to pick up moods, the sort of thing that other people can tell from body language and expressions; he's not very good at deciphering those cues, because when he was growing up, before he learned to shield, he never had to notice that sort of thing. He got it all directly from people's minds. He's working on that. He took a kinesics class, he's taking one on nonverbal communication this summer. He tries to pay attention.

Meanwhile, though, to make sure he doesn't pick up any thoughts, even forceful ones, he has to shield against nearly everything. It's alienating to him, all these people around, their emotions shut out. At least he can feel their presences, though. At least he doesn't feel completely cut off.

"Take a look at this case study," Moira passes him an open journal. "Latent X-gene activated by psionic trauma."

Charles scans the page. "Self-reported."

"But documented, full exams before and after."

"Bit cagey about that trauma, though, isn't it? Psionic surgery. That could be all sorts." He hands the book back. "I wouldn't use it if I were you. Dr. Maeda's quite tough on source data."

"Then I need to find another case like it to shore up my argument..." Moira rubs her temples. "I need a break."

"We could go to mine."

"A break. I don't want to quit for the day."

"Ah. A walk, then?"

"That'll work." Moira stands, sighs, rolls her head on her neck; he comes round and massages her shoulders in passing.
It's beautiful out. Sunny, a nice breeze, a wide stretch of grass before them, people playing football. Charles turns away before he can start getting maudlin, casting about for something else to focus on. "I rewrote my proposal. Again," he says. "Can I run it by you?"

Moira holds out her hand, and he gives her his Moleskine notebook, the latest version inked in green across several pages.

"It's good," she says eventually, handing it back. "Have you floated the idea to your advisor yet?" She considers him as they walk along the pavement. "Do you even have a dissertation advisor yet?"

"Not yet. Still working on my Masters. And I'm not sure I'm going to do my doctorate here. I've had some other opportunities come up."

"If you can find the data to back that up, you can probably write your ticket," Moira says. "If. It's a big idea, Charles."

"Nothing wrong with thinking big."

"And you know people are going to think you're some kind of mutant radical."

"Probably. I don't suppose membership in the Mutant-Human Student Alliance will help much..."

"Charles, this boils down to the idea that the purpose of the soulbond is to promote X-gene mutation," she says. "I don't think any student groups are going to get you out of that one."

"Purpose is already a misnomer--"

"For pete's sake, I know that, I'm talking about how this is going to be perceived."

"Bonded parents produce significantly more offspring with X-gene mutations than unbonded parents," Charles says. "All the numbers I've put together so far bear it out. And distance between the bondmates correlates to X-gene mutation frequently enough to signify as a factor. The reason we saw an observable increase in mutation in the last century wasn't higher radiation or climate change or whatever nonsense people dream up. It's not because all the mutants were in the closet til the sixties. In random sampling we've seen an appreciable uptick in numbers from one generation to the next. It's improvements in communication and transportation, bringing together bondmates who otherwise likely wouldn't have met in their childbearing years."

"I don't think you're wrong. But you know what it sounds like?" Moira asks. "It sounds like that theory about the joining spot. That it's at the back of the head because our ancestors used to stand back-to-back with their soulmates to defend each other from sabertooth tigers, or whatever."

"You mean it sounds fanciful, untestable and unverifiable?" Charles sighs. "Thanks."

"I'm sure you'll prove it's a viable theory," says Moira, and more insistently, "Hey. I'm sure, okay? But I think you should be ready, because you're going to take some flak for it."

They've made a circuit of the quad, arriving back at the library again. Charles steels himself to go back inside and shut down again. He glances over at Moira. "We could go to dinner when we're done here."

"I promised my roommate I'd meet her."

"What about tomorrow?" Charles suggests. "I was thinking we could hop over to Boston for
Shakespeare on the Common.”

"Charles..." Moira says, in a tone of voice that never means anything good.

He stops and faces her. "Yes?"

"I'm not single," she tells him. "I'm feeling the bond more and more lately. You're acting like we're emfriends, and I don't think that's going to work for us. I can't be your girlfriend."

"I don't expect anything," says Charles.

"Yes, you do," Moira says. "You expect me to go places and do things with you all the time, and don't say that's just what friends do, because I don't see you doing that with other friends."

"And you see your other friends as often as you see me?" asks Charles. "Scenes after nearly every class we have together, study sessions in the library twice a week, and usually dinner after? I know we've never dated per se, but you have to admit, you've been giving some mixed signals."

"You know what it really means when a dom complains that a sub's giving mixed signals?" Moira demands. "It means you don't actually want to hear what I have to say or deal with me as a person, you don't want to hear anything from me but green, yellow, red."

"That's not what I meant!" Charles protests, but she looks at him doubtfully. "Or, all right, I see what you're saying. But that's not what I intended to mean."

"I'm not saying we can't see each other," Moira says. "I just need you to back off a little."

"Okay," Charles says, because it's not as if he can say anything else. "I think I'll skip the rest of the study session, then." At her dissatisfied moue, he adds, "I'm not being stroppy about it. I was thinking of begging off anyway. If I spend much more time in there I'm going to wind up with a migraine from shielding that much for so long."

Moira hugs him. "All right. Call me, okay?"

"Sure. In a completely platonic, not at all emfriendly way." He lifts his hands, showing his palms. "Maybe I'm a little stroppy about it. Sorry. I'll get over it."

"It's okay," she says, squeezing his shoulder. "Talk to you later."

In the interest of backing off, Charles doesn't ring Moira for a long and boring week. His classes don't take up that much of his time. He's just knocking out a couple of required core humanities courses; there were a few he couldn't test out of, but they're easy enough.

He visits XS, the most mutant-friendly club near campus, and has a good flogging scene-- he really did get a lot out of his Concordance classes-- but afterward the sub he's playing with says, "I'd love to stay later, but I need to get home to my soulmate," and it's not such a good night, after that.

His phone rings Tuesday evening, and he answers fast without even looking... with nearly everyone gone for the summer, who else could it be but Moira?

"Hello, Charles," says his mother.

"Mum?" He scours any disappointment out of his tone. "Hi. How are you?"

"We're fine, darling," she says. "Can you come home this weekend?"
"Has something happened?"

"Cain's come back from his seeker trip. He's found his soulmate. His name is Tom Cassidy, he's Irish. He was seeking as well. He came all the way across the pond. Just like your father and me," her voice grows distant and sentimental.

Brilliant. "Mum..."

"They're going to acknowledge in the fall. We'd like to receive him into the family this weekend. Please say you'll come."

"Is Raven coming?" he asks.

"I was hoping you'd ring her about it. You know she's much more likely to come if you ask."

Charles rubs tension from the back of his neck, reluctant. But he's nineteen, he's been away from home for years now, he's independent. There's no harm in going back, and perhaps it's time to try to patch things up. He can't resent Kurt forever for keeping him from seeking. He can't keep holding a grudge against Cain for harassing him when he came home from hospital. Everybody was hoping you wouldn't get it back, you know. Now the only way you can find out how anyone's feeling is to fuck with eir head.

...All right, that's not going to be easy. But he should try.

"I'll come," he says. "And I'll talk to Raven."

"Wonderful, darling. I'm looking forward to seeing you."

He rings off and tries to get back to the paper he was reading, but the evolution of latent genes in subdivided populations just isn't holding his attention right now; he gives up and phones Raven, extracts a promise that she'll turn up this weekend to help receive Cain's soulmate.

It's almost like a karmic reward when he answers a knock on the door not long after, and it's Moira.

"Thanks for giving me space," she says in the kitchen over tea. "What do you think? Are you up for a scene tonight?"

"Definitely."

"And I feel like I probably went overboard last week. We should still be able to do things together. If you still wanted to take that trip to Boston..."

"I can't this weekend," says Charles, "I have to go home to Westchester. My stepbrother's found his soulmate, we're doing the family reception."

"You don't look happy about it." Moira slips her hand under his, strokes his fingers. "I guess that's hard sometimes. When people around you find their other half."

"I'm not looking forward to it," he admits. "We've been at odds most of our lives anyway, so this is less than ideal on multiple levels."

Moira's quiet for a little while, and surprises him by finally saying, "Would it be better with moral support? I feel like I should go with you."

"Really?"
"Yeah," she says, looking surprised herself. "I don't know. I guess I just feel like, we're friends, I should be there for you..." though she's frowning like that's not quite it. He wishes he could open up enough to get a sense of how she's feeling, but she doesn't like to share that outside of scenes.

Whatever the reason, he's not about to turn down a chance at an ally. "That'd be fantastic," he says. "Thanks."

It's evident right from the start that this isn't going to be the beginning of a beautiful reconciliation.

"Oh, it's you," Cain says when he first sees Charles. "All half of you."

"Congratulations on your successful trip," Charles answers as if he's reading it off a greeting card.

"Thanks. Congratulations on your... oh, sorry, forgot. Never mind." Cain loops the leash around his hand another turn, tugging. "Let me introduce you to my soulmate and submissive, Tom Cassidy. Tom, this is my stepbrother. Charles Xavier."

Of course Cain already has his sub collared and leashed, even though it's customary to wait at least until after the family reception. Still, it's not as if Charles really cares much about tradition himself.

"Pleased to meet you," says Charles, and looks to Cain for a cue. As he'd expect, Cain scowls. No shaking his sub's hand. He's probably not pleased Charles spoke to him at all.

Tom seems to be taking cues as well; he doesn't answer Charles. He looks up at Cain devotedly and says, "May your boy get you anything, Master?"

"Not right now, boy," Cain says, glaring at Charles with fierce pride.

Moira pokes her head in. "Oh, here you are," she smiles. She wanted a shower after the trip, and she looks spectacular, fresh-faced with her hair blow-dried straight and shiny. She takes in the situation, looking from Cain and his sub to Charles, and when she walks into the room, she's rather more poised than usual.

When she reaches Charles, she kneels gracefully at his side.

Charles is surprised, but if telepathy's good for anything, it's certainly given him practice at maintaining a poker face. "Let me introduce you to my friend, Moira MacTaggert," he says. "Moira, this is Cain Marko, my stepbrother, and his soulmate, Tom Cassidy."

Moira brightens. "Glad to meet you," she says, lowering her eyes decorously. Moira's not normally any more interested in everyday formality than Charles is, so he knows she's doing this for him, and he smiles at her gratefully.

"Oh, you brought a little emfriend," Cain says. "To the family reception. Everyone's barging in all over today. Tom's little American cousin managed to invite himself along on Tom's seeker trip, so he's here too. Reception is supposed to be for the dominant's family."

"Yes, I can see traditions are very important to you," Charles says politely, and the leash creaks in Cain's grip.

"Why don't you and your friend come with us to the club," Cain says. "My boy is ready to show me he knows who he belongs to."

"No, thank you," says Charles, "I promised Raven I'd be here when she arrives."
"Then we'll see you tomorrow," says Cain, and yanks the leash, leaving the room with Tom crawling alongside him.

Charles offers Moira his hand and pulls her to her feet. "Thanks," he says. "You didn't have to do that."

She steps closer, arms coming up around his neck. "My pleasure."

"One of these days you're going to give me RSI," Charles jokes, sitting on the bed next to Moira.

"Oh, shut up," she grins, poking him.

"I mean it, if I weren't ambidextrous I think I'd fear for my rotator cuff," he rubs his shoulder dramatically.

"I'm not even that heavy a masochist!" she nudges him more emphatically.

"It's not the force, it's all that repetition." He traces his fingers lightly over her back; she shivers. "You almost look as if you're sunburned."

"Nice and even," she wriggles happily. "Bet it won't show a bit in a couple of hours. Thanks."

"Any time. I'm going to get some water, would you like anything?"

"Water sounds good."

Raven's in the kitchen when Charles comes in. "Hey," she says, casting an annoyed glance his way. She started boarding at school when Charles went away to Harvard, and like him, she signed up for summer classes rather than come back; neither of them have been here since Christmas.

Charles checks the time. "I thought you weren't going to be here for another two hours," he says. "Sorry."

"I came as soon as I could because I figured this whole thing was going to really suck for you," says Raven. "I didn't realize you were going to bring along a sub, I wouldn't have rushed."

"I said I was sorry."

"Yeah," Raven turns to face him. "Why are you sorry? Because you weren't here to meet me when I got here. When I got here to what's supposed to be my family's house."

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened!" she says. "Sharon did her gracious hostess thing. We sat around making small talk. Everyone was all smiles and company manners. Kurt shook my hand. Because it's like I'm a guest here, when you're not around."

"It's not as if I feel at home here either," he tells her. "We've always just had to make the best of it."

"I wouldn't have come this weekend if it weren't for you," she says, leaning against the counter. "I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you. You know what that makes me feel like? Like your pet. Sharon used to try to make me feel special, talking about how Brian met all these kids and out of all of them, he picked me. But he picked me for you. Your dad had a mutant son, so he thought, oh, better go find him a little mutant friend to keep him company."
"Or maybe when he had a mutant son, he realized things aren't always easy for mutants, and he wanted to give another mutant kid a home." Charles tries not to be sharp, but it's hard.

"I like how you say 'maybe' like you don't know for sure," Raven says. "You know! You have to. You know what he was thinking. What was he thinking, Charles? When he chose me?"

"What brought all this on?"

"Just answer me!" Raven slaps the counter.

"It was both, all right?" Charles says. "Nothing's ever just one thing or the other. He didn't want me to feel like a freak, he wanted me to know there were other kids like me. Mum had a difficult pregnancy and he didn't want to put her through that again, but he still wanted more children. Dad always wanted a big family. If he'd lived, we likely would've had all sorts of mutant brothers and sisters. He wanted to give other mutant kids a good place to grow up."

"Yeah, this house was fucking magic," says Raven. "Did you get to pick? Did he take you around to choose?"

"You know it wasn't like that."

"I don't remember. I barely remember him at all," she says. "Maybe he had me jump through little hoops, it wouldn't surprise me."

"Would you stop?" Charles says. "Maybe to you he's just some guy who died, but he was my father."

"Sharon used to say he traveled all over, met like twenty kids," says Raven. "Why did he pick me?"

"What difference does it make now?" he retorts. "Especially if you've already decided he was purely being selfish, what do you care what he thought?"

"I want to know," she says. "And if you know, you don't have any right to keep that from me."

"A hundred reasons," Charles says. "He thought you were clever, he thought you were cute. You have a visible mutation and he thought it might make you vulnerable, he thought you might need a safe place more than other kids. You'd been having a hard time in foster care, you'd already tried to run away once."

"Great. It's not that I was the best teddy bear for you, it's that he felt sorry for me," says Raven sourly.

Charles knows he's coming down off the high of dominating Moira, that this unexpected argument is giving him more of a drop than he usually experiences after a scene. He knows he's on edge because Cain found his bondmate. Because Cain found his bondmate; he's still the same short-sighted, belligerent ass he's been since they were teenagers, but his bondmate didn't renounce him. Tom flew over from Ireland seeking him, took Cain's collar within days after they met. There was nothing in Cain that made Tom want to get free of him.

He knows it's not really Raven making him this angry, but he can't seem to stop himself snapping anyway. "You want to know why he met so many mutant kids? He was trying to find a mutant with resistance to psionics. He didn't think it would be right to bring another kid here if they didn't have some kind of defense against me. He couldn't find anyone with a mutation like that, but when he met you and found out you'd tried to run away, he thought that if you were scared of me or something went wrong, you wouldn't just take it. You'd tell someone or try to run. With you, they'd
They stare at each other for a long moment. "And you didn't want me talking shit about him?"
Raven finally says.

"He's still my father," Charles says. "And he had a point."

She comes to put her hands on his shoulders. "You were never dangerous."

"They didn't know that then." He tilts forward, rests his head against hers. "We don't know that
now," he says quietly, once they're so close Raven's face is nothing but a blur. "I don't know what
happened with the bond, Rae. Maybe it was me. The more I tried to reach him, the more fear I got
from him. He could've been afraid of me."

"Don't be crazy," she says. "You wouldn't have kept doing it if it was like that."

"I'm not so sure," he confesses. "Reading minds doesn't make everything as clear as people seem to
think. Nothing's ever simple. It felt like he was happy to hear me, but that doesn't mean it was
good for him. I could've been hurting him somehow, and maybe he knew that, and got scared..."

"Maybe, maybe, maybe," she shakes him a little. "How about, maybe not. We've got most of the
world telling us our mutations make us boogeymen. If you start buying into it, you're fucked. So
knock it off. Maybe he got struck by lightning or hit on the head with a clown hammer, and it
screwed up your bond. Maybe you'll meet him tomorrow. No telling. Right?"

Charles pulls himself together. "Right." He draws her in and hugs her, and after a moment of
tension, she hugs him back. "I don't care how it happened," he says. "I'm glad you're my sister."

Raven squeezes him. "Why'd you have to go back to stupid Harvard? I miss you."

"I miss you too." He kisses her hair. "Let me take some water up to Moira and check in with her,
see if she's up for meeting you. And then I'll be right back, and we can talk."

"Tell me she's not one of those dippy girls you pick up at clubs," says Raven.

"I met her in class," he says. "She's studying genetics as well."

"Great, another one." Raven rolls her eyes. "I was just thinking about how I haven't been hearing
enough about diploid-gamete-homozygous-allel-el-el-eles lately. I changed my mind, I don't miss
you."

"Too late," he smiles, "you're stuck with me now."

Family receptions can be casual or formal, traditional or freeform. The only part that doesn't vary is
that the nominal head of household welcomes the new submissive to the family.

They're doing Tom's reception as a late lunch, and everyone's dressed up a bit. Kurt decided that he
wanted to receive Tom traditionally, dominant's family only, so they begin with just Kurt, Sharon,
Cain, Tom, Charles and Raven.

Kurt gives a brief speech about the fathomless importance of the soulbond, probably something he
got from a Toastmasters book. Considering that most of it seems to be making the case that the
soulbond is what makes life worth living, it's a bit hard not to take it personally; Charles tries to
tune him out.
Finally, "Tom Cassidy," Kurt says, "I'm honored to welcome you to the Marko family." He clips the leash onto Tom's collar and hands the other end to Cain. Unsurprisingly, Cain doesn't bend to kiss Tom, instead resting his hand atop Tom's head, the more uncompromising gesture to end the occasion.

Sharon begins uncovering the starters on the sideboard. "We can invite our other guests in now."

Charles goes to open the south door. Moira's just outside, lovely in a navy dress. "Thanks for waiting," he says, lowering his voice. "For being here in the first place. I appreciate it."

She gives a little shrug. "I had to."

They go in as Cain finishes opening the big heavy oak doors that lead to the staircase on the other side of the room, and everyone congregates around the canapes. Charles has no idea why they can't just sit down, but evidently this is meant to make it feel like more of an occasion.

Cain puts down a cushion for Tom rather showily, and comments as he passes Charles, "He couldn't possibly sit in a chair after last night." He glances at Moira. Her dress is backless, her smooth skin unmarked; Charles was careful, knowing what she planned to wear today.

"Guess I'm not surprised you don't leave her with anything to remember you by," Cain says. "Bet she doesn't let you mark her, does she? Since she's not yours."

Charles shakes his head. He's not getting into this with Cain, he's not, but he must still be more frayed than he realizes; he says it anyway. "She doesn't have to be mine to want to be with me," he says. "I don't need a biological imperative to find a date."

"Yeah? You're never going to have the real thing," Cain shoots back. "Dates are all you're going to get."

Charles looks at Moira. She's beautiful, laughing with Raven, and she smiles over at Charles warmly when she sees him watching.

"I think I'll be all right," says Charles, and goes to join her.

Moira leans to kiss him when he walks over. "You said those two were 'unpleasant','" she mutters. "Kind of a massive understatement..."

"And just think," he says, "this is more or less their best behavior." He smiles at her and takes one of the canapes off her plate, a little mushroom and goat cheese tartlet, raising an eyebrow. She smiles back, tilting her head obligingly, and he feeds it to her, briefly resting his thumb on her lower lip; she gives him a mischievous little nip with her teeth.

"Get your own," she laughs, and runs her hand down his arm. "Get extra."

Everything on the sideboard is good for hand-feeding; Charles assembles a plate. Through the open double doors, there's a series of rapid thumps, someone descending the stairs.

"Sorry, sorry," This must be Tom's cousin, Charles realizes, as a skinny ginger kid bombs down the stairs and into the room. He's quite a young teenager, not the usual age to chaperone a seeker trip. "I forgot how to tie the tie, I had to look it up..."

He stops short and stares, looking shocked. Charles frowns and opens to him, just surface feelings. He's nearly flattened by the sense of attraction and love and homecoming that's rolling off Sean-- at the sight of Moira.
Moira gives a glad cry and runs to him. "It's you!"

Sean's laughing as she grasps his arms and gazes at him. "I had to come, I didn't know why, I just knew it was important... I pestered everybody til they let me!" he babbles. "I just knew I had to come."

"So did I, I just had to," says Moira, choking up. She smooths her hands over Sean's red curls; he's considerably shorter than her. "No wonder I only started feeling you a year ago."

"Oh, my," says Sharon faintly. "Well. I suppose this is the season for it."

Charles shoots Raven an urgent look and goes to Moira and Sean. "I imagine you'll want to talk privately," he says to Moira, "let me show you to the music room. Sean, I presume you're not of age. I'll chaperone." Moira's not that traditional, and Charles suspects the Cassidys aren't either, but he has to get out of this room.

Moira tears her eyes away from Sean long enough to look at him unhappily. "I'm sorry, Charles."

"It's fine," he says, "let's just take this elsewhere."

Charles doesn't look around; if he sees Cain's smug face he can't answer for what he'll do. He leads them to the music room.

"You're twenty?" Sean's asking. "What are you doing being twenty?" and Moira laughs, delighted, already in love.

The music room is a good place to chaperone young soulmates, it turns out. Charles turns on the stereo and orients his armchair away from them, and they sit on the loveseat canoodling and cooing; since he's right next to a speaker, he can't hear them over the Ella Fitzgerald playlist he puts on.

He leans his cheek against his hand, and he doesn't let himself realize for quite some time that he's touching his temple, reaching out. He drops his hand, furious with himself. There's nothing to reach for, anymore.

Charles clears his throat and gives them a few moments before he turns around. Moira is sitting with Sean's head in her lap, stroking his hair.

"We should call our families," Moira says.

Charles brings over the phone. "I think I'll leave you to it."

She catches his hand before he can go. "I really am sorry."

He produces a smile. "You gave me fair warning."

Out in the hall, he drops the smile and rubs his forehead. To hell with everyone's privacy right now, he gave himself a headache idiotically reaching out like that, he needs a break. He relaxes and opens to the house enough to get a sense of what everyone's up to. Cain and Tom are sleeping off a scene upstairs; Raven's in her room, and Kurt and Sharon are arguing over the remains of lunch.

He catches that the argument's about him, and that's enough to let him rationalize eavesdropping. Ordinarily he'd resist, he'd never do this, but honestly, what's the point? It's not as if anyone believes him, even when he's as scrupulous and perfect as he can possibly be. It's not as if they
know what it's like for him, trying to respect their boundaries when his mind naturally takes
everything in; it's not like they care. It's not as if anyone will ever know the difference. There was
only one person who ever knew how Charles felt, and now there's no one.

He touches his temple and lets their conversation in. His mother's saying, "There's no use
discussing this. Brian's will is airtight."

"Nothing's airtight once lawyers get ahold of it," Kurt says. "Cain's never had a share in the estate,
and I've let it stand all these years, but now he's setting up house for himself and his soulmate. He
deserves it as much as Raven, she's not a Xavier either. That account's just sitting there."

"I don't see how any lawyer could possibly find a way. The will is very clear, that trust is for
Charles's soulmate. Charles is the only other person who can access it."

"You could talk him into it," Kurt says. "Ask him to sign it over."

"I don't know why you think he would," says Sharon. "Cain hasn't gone out of his way to endear
himself to Charles all these years."

"So tell him it's for you, tell him it's for charity, just put the paper in front of him and get him to
sign," says Kurt.

"No," she says tiredly. "We don't know for certain what happened to Charles's soulmate."

"He's probably either dead or in a home somewhere," Kurt dismisses.

"If something did happen to him, then it's that much more important to keep the trust for him,"
Sharon says. "If Charles ever finds him, they might need the trust fund for his treatment or his
care."

"If. Might," says Kurt. "And what if he wasn't hurt, what if he just did some meditation or started
popping some Aposyn to take a break from the bond? Kids are doing that more and more these
days, they don't think about what it's doing to their bondmates. That kid's probably out there in
Cancun having the time of his life, doesn't give a damn he put Charles in the hospital. We're going
to keep that money from Cain and Tom just in case someday we get a chance to hand it over to
some irresponsible twit like that?"

"I thought you just said he was dead."

"Don't take that tone with me, Sharon."

"If you want that trust so much, you can ask Charles to sign it over yourself," she tells him. "I won't
do it. I'm done talking about this." She leaves the room, and Charles puts his shields up again, but
he keeps tabs. Kurt leaves the dining room as well, in the opposite direction, going to the master
bedroom. Sharon's in the rose red suite; it seems she's all but moved into those rooms now.

Charles wishes he didn't know why his mother stays with Kurt, but Kurt moved in before Charles
had full control of his abilities; Charles knows that back then, at least, they wanted each other
badly enough to make it work. And Sharon lost Brian, lost her soulmate. Anything less than that
would pale in comparison, so why not Kurt? He was there, he pursued her, he knew how much she
missed Brian and didn't seem to resent it. It could be anyone, it might as well be him.

That's quite enough of all this. Charles runs up to his room and gets his gearbag, and turns around
and goes right back out, out of his room, out of the house, out the gates, into town, to the clubs.
It's a bit after ten when Charles comes back to the house and makes his way upstairs. He's glad he showered and cared for all his gear right after his scenes. He came down hard on the drive back, it would be a nightmare trying to take care of all that now.

He stops off in the sunroom and gets into the liquor cabinet, pouring himself a scotch and water. His mum and Kurt never bothered to hide or lock the alcohol. Kurt was only ever looking for an excuse to enforce some discipline, and not even Cain was willing to risk it.

Anyway, Charles and Raven didn't need to nick it from home. With their mutations, they could always get access to booze if they wanted it. But it wasn't until university that Charles drank enough to really feel it, and finally understood what all the fuss was about.

He drinks the whiskey and winces, and pours another, taking it back to his room and stowing his gear. He's lightheaded: endorphins, whiskey, fatigue, who knows. It's enough to make everything feel a little softer around the edges, a little easier to take, and he tugs on soft pyjamas and climbs into bed, his head gently spinning as he curls up under the covers.

Some little while later, the door opens and closes, and the mattress dips. He feels a rush of emotion when Raven tucks herself behind him, bittersweet. She used to do this a lot when they were kids. It was always as much a comfort to him as it was for her.

"I'd better not get used to this," he says into the dark.

Raven tugs at his hair. "Don't be like that," she says. "What happened today was a one in a million kind of thing."

"You think? I had a one in six billion kind of thing, that one didn't work out so well either."

"See, this is why I always rag on you for your Pollyanna bullshit," says Raven. "Everything's always fine and it's okay and at least you got your ability back and you just have to be patient and see what happens and hope for the best and be happy for the five years you had instead of fixating on what you lost, blah blah blah. And I know you're just going to end up feeling sorry for yourself, that much more sorry for yourself because boo hoo, no one knows how you feel, when it's only like that because you make it that way."

"Thank goodness you have all the answers," Charles mutters.

She doesn't say anything, just wraps an arm around his waist and squeezes. The room still feels as if it's spinning, but in a more gradual sort of way, like he's perceiving the rotation of the earth.

"If I just knew," he says finally. "If I knew why, it would be hard, but it would just be that reason. I don't know what it was, so it could be anything. It could be everything."

Raven presses her face against his shoulderblade. "I don't get why you're so sure he renounced you. You were so close to him. Doesn't it make more sense that something happened to him?"

"If that was it... then he's out there somewhere hurt or ill and I've got no way to ever find him." Charles stares at the dimly striped shapes of his furniture in the meager starlight coming through the blinds. "I've read every speck of research I could find about broken bonds, and when they go this completely, they scarcely ever come back. All you can do is wait."

"Not everything ends up in a science journal," Raven says.

"I visited a few so-called psionics who claimed they could guide people to their lost bondmates." He taps his temple; she knows him well enough to infer the gesture from the movement of his arm.
"Lying, to some degree, all of them." He rubs his face wearily. "Does all that really sound any easier to live with? One way or another, I let him down. If he renounced our bond, he's safe. Maybe someday he'll change his mind."

"Thank goodness you have all the answers," she throws back at him. "So thinking you screwed something up is the most rational, optimistic way to look at this, it's got nothing to do with the whole fucking world trying to make mutants feel like we're mistakes."

"You know I don't believe that."

"There's nothing wrong with you, Charles," she squeezes him tightly for emphasis.

Part of him wants to snipe that she's certainly had different opinions when they've argued in the past. But he lets that go. It feels so good to have her company right now. "Thanks."

"I'm glad you're my brother," she says, holding on. That, he can believe. If this is the only sort of love he'll ever find, he won't take it for granted. This is a lot.
Charles meets up with a dashing genius-billionaire-playboy-philanthropist at an awards ceremony, and finds that sometimes misery loves company when it comes to troubled bonds.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Emmanuel da Costa, director of the Mutant Education and Outreach Initiative, and I'm pleased to welcome you to the twelfth annual winter party..."

"MEOI," trills Tony. "Meowww."

"Shhh!" Charles elbows him. "Don't make me laugh right before we have go out there."

"Look, I believe in the cause a hundred percent, but come on, that name!" says Tony. "And it's going to be hours before we have to go out there. This guy's going to keep blowing wind til people's toupees go flying off. Believe me, I can see it from a mile off."

"Last year we honored the Xavier family for establishing the Brian Xavier Memorial Scholarship for mutant education, and we're proud to tell you that this year, in partnership with MEOI, the Xavier scholarship fund will send three deserving young students to Wellesley, Columbia, and Bryn Mawr." Mr. de Costa waits through the wave of applause. "And so without further ado, on behalf of the Xavier family, Charles Xavier will present this year's Benazir Kaur Award for Philanthropy."

Charles assembles his brightest expression and walks out onto the stage, shakes hands with Mr. de Costa, and adjusts the microphone, not just for himself; he noticed Tony's not much taller. "Thank you," he says to the polite applause. "When my father, Brian Xavier, learned of my mutation, he found tutors and assembled an educational curriculum that took my abilities and differences into account."

"From him I learned that individual attention and individual outreach are vital to every child. But too often, for mutant students, that attention is lacking simply because schools and teachers have none of the specialized resources that mutant students need. The Initiative has made tremendous strides in changing that, and we're already seeing the results. There has been a marked improvement in mutant education in my lifetime--" and he didn't expect the gentle laugh that gets, but he senses it a moment in advance and pauses for it, flashing a quick grin. Honestly, more often than not he forgets that the world sees him as a boy of not quite twenty, when the experiences of dozens of lifetimes were flowing through his head before he had enough coordination to tie his own shoes.

Charles continues, "And we owe the rapid pace of change to the tireless staff and volunteers of organizations like the Initiative. And to the philanthropists who recognize the great importance of this work and lend much needed support. This year it's my pleasure to announce that the Benazir Kaur Award for Philanthropy goes to Stark Industries, for generous contributions not just to the MEOI, but to over one hundred educational nonprofits in 2003. Here to accept the award on behalf of Stark Industries, please welcome Tony Stark."
Done. Charles steps back from the podium and watches Tony come out to join him as cameras flash and click. He shakes Tony's hand and gives him the heavy lead crystal obelisk, etched with, of course, a stylized double helix running up its face. It's a relief to offload it. Charles was rather paranoid he might drop it.

"Thank you very much," says Tony, hefting the award into view. "Backstage, before the ceremony, I was fondling this lovely thing, and also admiring the award..." and Tony doesn't need telepathy to pause for laughter, he always knows just how people will react. Charles raises an eyebrow and looks askance at Tony with a reined-in smile just in time to hear another rush of whirring shutters.

Tony manages to get through the rest of his brief acceptance speech without saying anything else to excite comment. A touching anecdote about Howard and Maria Stark teaching him how to read, a bromide about the importance of tailoring education to the individual learner; Charles listened to him run through it while they waited for the ceremony to begin, minus the joke.

Mr. de Costa resumes the stage, and Charles and Tony leave together; offstage, Charles says, "My sister's in the audience. I'm going to get an earful because I didn't tell her about our imaginary assignation."

"You know, the best way to fix that is to scene together," says Tony. "Stock you up with gossip to give her. Problem solved."

"Wasn't that whiskey you were drinking before the ceremony?"

"Yes. Fantastic stuff, did you want some?"

"No, thank you," says Charles.

"C'mon, you're a beautiful, how old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"You're a beautiful nineteen-year-old dom, bright, adventurous, you can't tell me you don't do RAC sometimes."

"Sometimes," Charles agrees. "But I don't mix scening and drinking. Much less with someone I've only just met tonight."

"Ooh, you are a little stodgy for nineteen, aren't you," says Tony.

"I'm a telepath," Charles says. "If your thoughts are erratic it's harder for me to shut them out in an intense situation."

"Intense," says Tony. "I like intense, let's go with that," but his phone interrupts him. He glances at it and clicks his tongue. "The old leash and collar," he says, "hold this for me," and he foists the crystal award right back onto Charles and answers his phone, wandering off, freed hand gesturing widely. "Hi, yes, is this about-- that was fast. You didn't want to come! How long have you been in that bunker, now? How long since you even called me, Rhodey? Of course he's legal..."

Charles isn't that eager to go explain to Raven that innuendo aside, his entire association with Tony Stark consists of introductions followed by half an hour of flirting before the presentation. And there's nowhere to put the bloody award; MEOI's holding their winter party in a small dinner theater, and it's all dropcloths over set pieces and props back here. He doubts going back out to the dining room is going to help him screen out Tony, who's mildly drunk and more than intense, right now, his feelings zinging around Charles's shields while Tony paces, agitated and raising his
voice, "Of course not, when do you ever want to hear about it?"

So he waits until Tony rings off and comes back, taking the award again and attempting to stick it in his pocket. Charles rescues it from him before it can fall out.

"Not up for a scene?" Tony seeks to confirm.

"Sorry." Charles admits, "Three whiskeys ago, I would've jumped at the chance."

"Second chance, then," says Tony. "You don't want to scene with me, you can drink with me."

"The bar won't serve me. Everyone here knows I'm underage."

"Everyone out there knows you're underage. Everyone here," Tony draws him back to the dressing rooms, where a bottle sits before a lighted mirror, "knows you can handle it, you, me and Mr. Glenlivet."

Two shots later, Charles has Tony Stark's number in his phone, and a date for the following weekend.

As he finally goes out to join the party, he feels as if he ought to be more pleased about that. He's had a tiny crush on Tony Stark for a while now, just a superficial interest based on his looks and his accomplishments and his aplomb on occasions like these. Charles let himself fantasize a bit about catching Tony's attention at the presentation tonight, but he didn't seriously expect it to happen.

He also didn't realize Tony was bonded. As far as Charles is aware, Tony's never formally acknowledged, much less recognized, and he's certainly not married. It makes Charles uneasy to think of coming between bondmates. Though at the same time, seeing someone else having difficulties with the bond... misery does love company. It's Christmastime, when it feels as if every shop window and advert and film and television show and public event is harping on families and soulmates nonstop.

If Charles goes home for the holidays, he'll probably be faced with Kurt trying to get him to sign over his soulmate's trust fund; so much for family. And his soulmate... Charles took a two-week seeker trip across the country in August, his second such trip since he lost the bond, just to see if it might make a difference. Nothing, not a twinge, not a flicker.

Raven corners him once he's back, tugging him off to the side, out of earshot of other people. "Tony Stark?" she asks, eyebrows twitching up toward her hairline. "Backstage? Go you, now give me all the details. Is he as picky a sub as everybody says?"

"Don't know yet," Charles says, "I'll find out next weekend."

"Confident!" Raven teases. "I guess that's fair since he hit on you in public about five seconds after he met you. I can't believe you walked away from him!"

"He'd been drinking," he says, almost as if apologizing for not having fallen squarely into bed with Tony, "you know I don't scene if someone's been drinking."

He doesn't mention the rest, that Tony was likely pitching that entendre in a different direction entirely, provoking his bondmate. Charles can never be entirely sure that what he thinks about people's motives isn't influenced by picking up some hint of their thoughts or feelings with his ability. It's much safer not to gossip. He tries not to talk about people at all if he can help it, which is often socially awkward. But it would be much much worse if he were to accidentally disclose
something he'd learned telepathically. Sometimes he wonders how many times he could slip before people stopped wanting to be around him entirely.

Right now he's wishing he was still back there with Tony. He certainly wouldn't mind another drink.


"Not at all. Tony had a bottle of 21-year-old Glenlivet, he was being friendly..."

"Great. You just drank something that's old enough to drink, unlike you." But she gives him a friendly little hug anyway and brushes some lint off his jacket. "Congrats on the date, though. And you were totally dashing up on stage."

Charles smiles. "Thank you. On both counts."

"Come on. We've got a whole lot more mingling to do, might as well get to it."
Chapter Summary

Erik goes to see the Stones, after finding out what Dr. Shaw's "Bound By Choice" procedure did to them. It isn't pretty. Worse, though, is that Shaw's followed him back to Nebraska. Erik's got Jason to lean on for support, but there's only so much Jason can do.

Chapter Notes

Shaw doesn't actually have onscreen time in this chapter! But this chapter may contain a number of disturbing elements anyway. The Stones are not doing well, and are in an assisted living facility due to the mental and emotional toll their failed procedure took on them; for anyone who has triggers around the topic of mental illness, please read with caution.

As for Shaw, he doesn't die in this chapter, either. (Not for lack of suggestion on Jason's part.) >_<

It might be worth mentioning at this stage that we're still pretty sure this will clock in under 40 chapters (pretty sure, but we keep getting ambushed with scenes that Really Need To Be In There). As for where it ends: it will have a happy ending in the sense that it will have a hopeful ending, but if you're waiting for the reunion... the title is pretty indicative of what this part of the story is all about.

"I don't want to be here." Erik shivers. It's not cold out; it's April, it's Nebraska. "I don't want to be here. *Fuck*. Take me home."

"If you really want to go--"

"No." Erik grits his teeth, brings his right hand up so he can clutch his windcatcher with his left hand. "No, I'm here. Let's get this over with."

Jason rubs Erik's back, right between the shoulderblades; it eases some of Erik's tension, although God knows not enough. Erik still feels sick, looking at the sign: *Godwin House*, and in smaller letters, *Assisted Living*.

He isn't sick on the Stones' behalf. He can't feel sorry for them. But his soulmate is lost somewhere, probably dead... and if he's alive, he's probably in a place just like this one.

He needs to see it for himself. There are rumors that Sebastian's technique has done this to a few couples over the last four years, though of course the literature and pamphlets and fucking infomercials all focus on people whose surgeries were painless and easy, and Sebastian's lawyers are quick to write chilling C&D letters to anyone or any website that discusses the risks. It's an appalling sort of irony that the Stones were in that small subset who don't take well to the
procedure. But if they could see what happened to Erik and still want to do it themselves, maybe they deserve whatever they got.

At the front desk, Erik gives his name and Jason's, and waits for the administrative assistant to print out their passes, complete with nametags and photographs. Jason smiles for his; Erik can't. But Jason's always been good at putting on a brave face for things, no matter how he's doing on the inside. Erik wishes he were that strong.

"You guys probably get some unwanted media attention with all this, huh," Jason says. "All your residents with bond problems, especially lately..."

"Well, they try. The reporters, I mean." The admin's nametag reads 'Shirley', and she smiles reassuringly at Jason. "But we don't allow anyone from the media on the grounds. No interviews, no human interest pieces. Part of what people want here is their privacy."

"I'm sure," Erik says tightly. "I doubt Sebastian's settlement would have let them go to any facility that didn't see to it their non-disclosure agreements were enforced."

Jason turns away from Shirley and squeezes Erik's arm. "Still all right with being here?"

"They asked to see me. I'm here." Erik looks over at Shirley. "Where should we wait?"

"If you'll just follow me, please."

Erik nods, and he and Jason follow Shirley down the hall, through a door that requires an employee badge-- all those circuits, even with his power it would take brute force on the tongue of the lock itself to get that open-- and into a small private waiting room, one with two small armchairs spaced widely apart, and a tiny sofa.

"If you two wouldn't mind taking the sofa," Shirley says. "The Stones would like to see you together."

Erik frowns, but he goes over to the sofa all the same. "What difference does it make?" he asks, sitting down.

"I'm afraid the Stones aren't able to be close," Shirley says. "They'll need the distance between the armchairs in order to be comfortable."

Jason takes a seat next to Erik and offers his hand, the one with the wristband. Erik reaches out for it, fingers tracing the studs along the top edge.

"It should only be a few minutes," Shirley says, and she leaves them there.

Erik winces, but now it's not about the facility or the Stones. His head is killing him, and he reaches up, tries to massage some of the tension out of his joining spot. Jason bites his lip, looking away. "Still bad?"

"And getting worse. They really couldn't have picked a worse time to contact me if they'd tried."

"On the bright side-- if any fucking part of this can be a bright side-- maybe it'll keep you from having to deal with Shaw this year." Jason glances back at Erik, but Erik's still rubbing at his joining spot, still hoping the pain will subside into the usual ignorable dull ache. It isn't working. He drops his hand and sighs.

"I'm still dealing with him," Erik points out. "Just in a different way."
It's April 21st. Normally by now he'd be in a car or on a bus, if not already in whatever city Sebastian lives in these days, but when Patricia Wyngarde came to Erik's apartment in Pittsburgh with a letter from the Stones, Erik's plans changed.

"They didn't know how to reach you," she said, handing over the letter-- addressed to Erik but unsealed, unaddressed. "So they sent this to me."

"Have you read it?" Erik asked. His hands didn't shake; he was faintly proud of that. The rings on his windcatcher were spinning, though, fast enough he could feel the air moving against his wrist.

"Yes. Believe me, if they were still being the same mutantphobic assholes they were when you were growing up, I would have told them to go twist in the wind." Her expression is hard, angry; it's never ceased to amaze him how protective the Wyngardes have been, how much they resent Sebastian and the Stones for what happened to him. "But it's not that. I think you should at least read the letter, and then... if you want to do something about it, you can make that decision."

Erik still has the letter, folded up and tucked into the back pocket of his jeans. It's not a long one. Gerald wrote it, by hand, and his handwriting isn't exactly like Erik remembers; it's a little more blocky, as if writing's gotten more difficult. But then, from the content of the damned letter, everything's gotten more difficult.

Sebastian's technique has been catching on. Even though there's quite a lot of backlash, mostly from fundamentalists who believe only a natural bond can be "pure", he seems to have more applicants than he can possibly work with. It took the Stones two years to make up their minds to pursue an artificial bond, and another year to make it through the waiting list to have the surgery performed.

And now, here they are, at Godwin House. Damn Sebastian and his bond-splicing. Bound By Choice, he calls it. No one would choose this.

When Gerald and Aileen walk into the little seating room, Erik and Jason stand up. Erik's reaching for Jason's hand again, for his wristband; Jason gives it over without hesitation, letting Erik curl his fingers around the metal.

They don't look like he remembers them. Both of them are pale, almost grey. It's hard to believe it's been only four years since he's seen them; it looks like they've aged twenty. They've both obviously made an effort to dress up, to neaten their appearances, but the effect is not a pleasant one; both of them look as though someone else had to dress them, comb their hair. Maybe someone else did.

They aren't standing anywhere near each other. Gerald moves quickly to the farthest armchair, and Aileen actually drags her armchair a little further away from Gerald's. They both sit down, Gerald a little more heavily than Aileen.


Erik sits down, Jason going with him. "I can't imagine what you wanted to say to me that required a visit in person, but I'm here. Talk."

At first, Gerald looks pained, and Aileen stifles a sob. Then Aileen's expression ruptures into anger, and Gerald's face contorts with the same emotion. Both of them talk at once then, Aileen's voice a barely-raised whisper and Gerald's halting and stunted, as if the words aren't his.

"It wasn't our fault, we didn't know. Do you think we would have let him do this to us if we'd
known? He said you left to go to school, he said he saw you in the spring, he said you were fine. You never wrote, not that we expected that. We know you hate us.” Gerald's back to looking pained; Aileen really does break down in tears this time. Gerald looks over at her. "Aileen, please..."

She shakes her head, turning to the side and resting her cheek against the back of the armchair. Gerald sighs and turns back to Erik.

"Erik... I know nothing I say is going to make up for what we let that monster do to you. But you have to believe us." And Aileen whispers this last with him: "We are so sorry."

Jason hisses in a breath, and Erik looks down; the wristband's tightened. "God," Erik whispers, "Jason, I--" He focuses, hand shaking, and the wristband curves back into its usual shape.

"It's okay," Jason murmurs. "Do you need to get out of here?"

Erik's not sure if he's ever wanted to leave a place so badly in his life-- even being with Sebastian doesn't hold this kind of horror for him. His bond with Sebastian is an abomination, but it didn't leave him like this.

If there's any mercy in the world, he's dead. Erik feels ill all over again. No wonder Sebastian said that, if he knew what his technique could do to people. Erik's soulmate could be like this, somewhere. But he wouldn't even have the comfort of Erik's presence to help him through the awful grinding days. He'd be alone.

Erik has never hoped his soulmate was dead, but he can't imagine what it would be like to live the way Gerald and Aileen do, now. He presses his thumb against his windcatcher and takes a breath.

"You're sorry," Erik repeats. "Is that what I came two thousand miles to hear?"

Aileen snaps right back into rage, dragging Gerald with her. "You could have fucking told us," she snarls, and Gerald whispers it too, his voice rasping, broken. "You could have told us it was wrong, that he hurt you; you could have told us it was all a lie, we would never have gone through with it, we had enough--"

Only Gerald doesn't say that last with her. He breaks down, and now Aileen's raging and crying at the same time. "We had enough, it was enough," she says, sounding like she's pleading.

"--not," Gerald forces out, "not enough, I would have gone alone if I'd had to--"

"And then I'd be dead and we'd both be better off," Aileen screams at him. "We'd be better off, we'd--"

The noise has finally been enough to attract orderlies, it turns out. Three of them walk calmly into the room and collect Aileen, and she collapses into tears as they take her away. Gerald gets to his feet and looks after her, stunned, shaken.

Erik stands, too, stomach twisted in knots. "Is she always...?"

"Yes. Now." Gerald sighs and rubs his forehead with the inside of his wrist. "It's not true, what she said... about us being better off. From what I've heard... if I'd gone alone, it would probably have killed her. It might have killed us both." He covers his mouth with one hand for a few seconds, and then adds, "She tried, before we got here. I couldn't even call for help. If my sisters hadn't been on their way over--" He shrugs. "We don't touch anymore. We have a room together here, but separate beds. I wish to God we'd never even heard of Sebastian Shaw."
Jason puts a hand on Erik's shoulder and squeezes hard. Erik forces himself to keep breathing. He can't feel anything in this room, not the heavy safety door or the exit sign or the sprinkler nozzles or the fire alarm, but his windcatcher vibrates hard enough he puts a hand over it, afraid it might break the chain it's on.

"Why in person?" Erik asks, whispers. "Why did you need to see me in person?"

"We thought-- I thought." He looks away, into the distance, eyes tracking. "Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference, now," he murmurs. "God. Okay. They've got her sedated... I thought... it might help you, somehow. To know we were sorry." He looks at Erik. "To see us like this."

"It doesn't," Erik says flatly. "None of this helps me."

Gerald gives him a tired look. "You don't hate us as much as I thought, then."

Back at their hotel, Erik tells Jason, "It's not that."

Jason's packing their things, on hold with the airline to try and change their tickets for home. They'd left room for a full day here, but at this point, the sooner they can get back to Pittsburgh, the better. "What's not what?"

"It's not that I don't hate them. How would I ever forgive them for everything they did to me, everything they set me up for?"

"I don't think they expected you to. Maybe they hoped for it, but... hey, hello. My name is Jason Wyngarde, I've got two tickets from Omaha to Pittsburgh for tomorrow morning at 9. Can you get me to Pittsburgh any sooner... yeah, I'll hold."

Erik's joining spot has been killing him for the past two days, but now it's actually easing some. He reaches up to it, probes at it. Still the same pain, but it's getting easier to take. And at the same time, he's shivering. It isn't getting easier, he realizes; oh, God, it isn't getting easier. This is what it feels like when... no, not now, not here. Fuck.

He looks out the window into the parking lot. In the dim glow of sunset, he sees the car pull into a space, the driver step out and look up. Unerringly, as though he knew exactly what he was looking for and where to find it.

"Jason," Erik whispers. "Jason, fuck... he's here."

"What? Who-- oh, Jesus Christ, no," Jason says, pulling his phone away from his ear. "I'll call the police--"

Erik can feel all the metal around him so much more than he usually can; it's child's play to yank Jason's phone from his hands, catch it as it flies through the air towards him. "Don't."

"I can blank you. I can blank both of you. He doesn't have to lay a hand on you this time." Jason stalks over to Erik, grabs him by the arms. "Not this time."

"He came to me," Erik whispers. "He came here. To me. When I didn't come to him."

"And he can go hang. Literally, I hope." Jason shakes Erik, gets his attention back. "We can do it now. Here. End this. Get you free of him forever."

Erik closes his eyes. Free. For a second, he lets himself feel the longing... lets himself imagine
"I'll do what it takes. You don't have to know it, don't have to see it. I can make it happen tonight, while you're here, while you're safe. And you'll never have to deal with him again."

Pressing Jason away from him, Erik shakes his head. "There's no way for it to be foolproof."

"He's here at the hotel. I can go to his room. I can get to him without having anyone see me."

"There are security cameras. You can't fool those."

"I know where they are," Jason says evenly. "You think I'm not always looking for them? I can't fool them, but I can dodge them."

"You'll end up leaving trace evidence. Hair. Fingerprints."

"So you're telling me you think I'd be an incompetent killer. Thanks. I appreciate the faith."

Erik almost laughs at that-- he does crack a smile-- but he shakes his head. "There's no way for it to be foolproof."

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"So you're telling me you think I'd be an incompetent killer. Thanks. I appreciate the faith."

Erik almost laughs at that-- he does crack a smile-- but he shakes his head. "No. Too much is at stake--"

"Too much is at stake now. You. You're at stake."

"I've gotten through three years of this. It'll be an hour or two. He'll go to his room. I'll see him, it'll be fast, I'll get out." Erik catches Jason's wrist in his hand, feels the bronze under his fingertips. "What if he hurts you? What if you're the one who doesn't walk out of there? What if you get caught?" Erik squeezes gently, feels the bronze give just a little, not enough for Jason to even feel. "Don't let him take you away from me, too."

"If I do this, I'll do it right. I promise you that." Jason covers Erik's hand with his own. "I've gotten better with my illusions. I can slip him something. Get in without him seeing me, feed him drugs or poison or something that won't set off his mutation..."

"You really have thought this through, haven't you," Erik says quietly. "Do you realize you might kill me in the process?"

"You'd go into the mourning sleep--"

"Maybe. We don't know how this bond works. Maybe I'd go into shock the way normal people do. Or maybe this fucking wreck of a bond would take me with him. There's a lot about it that isn't normal, and we don't know a goddamned thing about it. Were you listening to what Gerald said? He couldn't even call for help..."

"It could have been the mourning sleep," Jason insists. "It could have been anything. And it's different for you, your bond is different--"

"What if it's not? Maybe you can get away with killing him. Maybe it wouldn't kill me." Erik shudders. "But I bet I'd end up in a place like that. Maybe you could find me one in Boston, have your parents look after me while you're working."

"Oh, fuck," Jason whispers. "Erik, please. Don't fucking talk like that."

"Do you think I haven't considered it? When I'm with him I can feel metal. Maybe I could do it. Maybe I could kill him before he could fight me on it. But if it ended up killing me, or leaving me like that..."
"Okay. Okay, but--"

And then there's the part that means more to Erik than any kind of concern about himself. "What if my soulmate's still alive, Jason? What do you think it would do to him?"

Jason looks away at that.

"What if he's still alive somewhere, and this kills him? We don't know. We can't know. I can't risk it."

Jason rubs both hands over his face. "Goddamnit," he mutters. "I know when I can't talk you into something, and we're there right now. Shit." He looks back up at Erik. "I want that bastard dead, Erik. I don't want you seeing him this year. I don't want you seeing him ever again, God. I'd do anything to get you away from him."

"I'd do almost anything," Erik says quietly. "But not this."

Jason sighs, heading back over to his bed. "I could tie you up," he offers, trying to make a joke out of it. Erik has to take a few steps closer, sit down on the other bed; it's all he can do not to turn around and look out the window again. "See if that keeps you in place."

"You know I don't do that anymore." Erik shakes his head. "But do you want to know what I wish I'd managed that first time? I wish I'd been able to go to him with marks. Let him know he doesn't fucking own me. That's why he's here. That's what he says every fucking time. He thinks the fact that I can't get away from him on April 22nd means I'm thinking about him the rest of the goddamned year."

"Marks," Jason says quietly. He looks over at Erik. "Not too late. If you want that, we can make it happen."

Erik thinks about it. His first impulse is to dismiss it out of reflex-- they've been friends too long, it's too much to risk-- but he can't make himself say no, not that fast. It's been a long time since he's been with anyone. The last person who touched him was Magda, last summer, and the last time he got a good painplay scene... that must have been years ago. Maybe in that first year after he left Sebastian, always assuming Sebastian himself doesn't count. And Erik's not counting him.

He's listened in on Jason's scenes-- hell, he's seen them, or the beginnings of them, sometimes walked in right as things were heating up. It could be good with Jason. He's always known that. It could also be complicated as hell; he's always known that, too.

But he's out of time, and he's out of options. And that's the part that makes him hesitate, more than anything. "I don't want to use you as my last resort," he says. "How fair is that?"

"Because I'm not going to get anything out of striping your ass?" Jason raises an eyebrow. "Do you want to go out, see if we can find someone...?"

"No," Erik says immediately. "No, I'm not-- I couldn't--" He blows out a breath. "I couldn't ask just anyone for this."

"Okay. So. Ask me." Jason leans forward, gaze intent, expression serious. "Think about what you want this to be, and ask me for that. If it's too much, I'll tell you."

"I don't know what it could change," Jason answers, looking right at Erik. "What are you looking for? Handprints? Belt? Cane, crop, singletail...?"

"Hands and belt you've got," Erik points out. "Anything else--"

And to his surprise, Jason actually laughs. "I think you forgot who you're talking to. Erik. Come on." Jason holds up his hands, palms-up as though he's holding something, and suddenly he is: a big, heavy fiberglass cane, bright red with a black nylon handle. "Unless you'd rather stick with the classics--" And the cane disappears, only to be replaced by one in rattan. "About the only thing I can't do for you is metal, and that's because I don't know what metal feels like to you. If you want anything else, all you have to do is ask. Leather tawse? Wooden paddle with holes? Cat, flogger, rubber whip? Name it. I come equipped."

Erik's face feels hot, and he reaches under his shirt collar, tugs a little to give himself breathing room. "I didn't think about that," he murmurs. "I didn't realize you could leave marks with your illusions."

"If you'd asked me four years ago, I probably couldn't have," Jason admits. "I've had some time to practice since then."

"Lucky me," Erik murmurs. "Bet you're good with all of it."

"You'd be right." Jason comes off his bed, and Erik meets him halfway. "Just pain. No sex. No submission. Safewords in place. Nobody gets off, nobody freaks out after. Sound about right?"

"It sounds exactly right," Erik says. "What do you need from me?"

Jason slides his hands up Erik's chest and rubs his thumbs along Erik's collarbones. "I just need you to like it," he murmurs.

Erik shivers and lets his eyes slip closed. "I already do."
Charles, September 2004

Chapter Summary

Charles has a theory that his bondmate might have renounced him because he felt their orientations were incompatible. Charles spends some time trying very hard to switch down and find his submissive side.

Chapter Notes

We're taking a little break from posting for the holidays (and needless to say, we are going over 30 chapters, ahem). We'll be back in a week, with more angst, more confused boys, a few more chapters (we're still estimating under 40!) and the lead-in to Determination, the sequel to Unbound.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charles settles his shoulders and breathes deeply, centering himself on his knees: back straight, toes pointed, and hands clasped behind his back as gracefully as he can manage. He keeps his eyes demurely lowered; all he can see are boots crossing his field of vision, circling him.

He understands some of the appeal, he thinks, sort of. He likes the challenge of presenting himself as he's commanded, fulfilling orders precisely as he's told to do. He's fairly sure he's not enjoying it submissively, though. It's almost competitive, pitting his drive to get everything right against his mistress's demands.

And she knows it. "Charles," she says, almost sing-song. "We agreed when we started this. You said you'd give it an honest effort. Why should I go to all this trouble if you're not giving yourself to me?"

Charles doesn't even know what that would entail. It's definitely not his instinct. He knows it's not his mistress's fault, either. She's taken different approaches with him. She's been strict, she's been lenient, she's been harsh and gentle, she's treated him like a coddled pet and she's posed demands she knows he can't meet to create opportunities to punish him and she's made him strive to earn her favor; Charles admires her ingenuity and versatility.

He's learned a lot, definitely, not just techniques but about himself. He's still not much of a masochist, but he's discovered he likes being restrained, being blindfolded; he already knew he likes bottoming as much as topping and enjoys orgasm control, and now he knows he likes breathplay. She likes to make him cry, and that can be cathartic sometimes, he's found. But after months of this it's becoming undeniable... submission doesn't come naturally to him, and submissive headspace may never come at all.

His mistress clicks her tongue and sighs. "I was going to set up a scene with you tonight, but I don't know if I'll bother. Maybe if you're very good and hold position for twenty minutes. Get the time."

That's another of the few things he genuinely likes about this; she has him use his ability a lot. He
finds someone in the neighborhood checking a clock. “I have it.”

"Twenty minutes," she says. "Not one second before."

Charles bows his head. "Yes, Mistress Frost."

Emma hums appreciatively. "You are turned out nicely today, though, so maybe a little something. Open."

He opens his mouth, and she fits a rubber bit between his teeth, straps it on and pats him on the head before leaving the room. Fortunately, she likes things to look nice, so the bit is small enough that Charles isn't forced to drool around it. He finds that irritating and embarrassing, and so far that hasn't translated into headspace or arousal at all.

He's eight minutes into his twenty when Emma's bondmate arrives home. Peter hangs up his coat, looks over to the sub mat and rolls his eyes.

"Still?" Peter says, and comes over, kneeling opposite Charles. Even without benefit of a mat, Peter's form is perfect, and he sighs a little when he rests into position, as if it feels good to him.

In some ways Emma seems to have a type: Charles has a similar build to Peter, what's most kindly referred to as lithe, and they both have wavy dark hair. But otherwise Charles isn't a patch on Peter's dark Irish looks and submissive self-possession. Sometimes he half thinks Emma decided to take him as a sub because with his phosphorescent skin and silly freckles, he sets Peter off nicely and makes him look even better by comparison.

Peter relaxes so thoroughly while kneeling he looks as if he could fall asleep like that. But presently he opens his eyes and smirks at Charles. "You're really terrible at this."

There's not much Charles can to do respond but raise his eyebrows. Peter's immune to psionics. Some people think that makes him a strange soulmate for Emma, a powerful telepath, but it makes perfect sense to Charles. He's never known anyone who could stand the idea of being subjected to telepathy on a regular basis; when people really think about all it entails, they tend to back away fast. He suspects it's why he was renounced.

He doesn't really know how to feel about Peter Wallace on a personal basis-- the lack of feeling or thought or even psionic presence makes him unnerving, and Charles doesn't understand him at all. But he's sick with envy sometimes at the idea of being with someone who doesn't feel scared or resentful about his ability.

"Don't get me wrong, your form is good," Peter says. "And you've got the right look. You'd make nice leash candy. But you're always thinking and second-guessing. You don't understand. You shouldn't want to get it right because you like getting it right, you should want to get it right because it's pleasing to your mistress. And when you fail to please her... like now. You don't even feel bad, do you?"

It's true, he doesn't. These twenty minutes are meant to be a punishment; Charles is supposed to feel unhappy that Emma doesn't approve of him, he's meant to spend the entire time suffering because he's been cast out of her presence and threatened with abandonment for the night. But he's just concentrating on his form and marking the time.

Peter sighs. "Whoever told you that you were mistyped was out of eir mind," he says. "Why are you still doing this? It's been obvious for ages that you're not getting it."

Charles closes his eyes. He doesn't feel bad about failing to please Emma, he can't even feel bad
exactly about failing to submit. But when he has to think about why he decided to try this, that's when the regret rises up to swamp him.

In those last weeks and months before Charles was renounced, he remembers how much more forceful the feelings through the bond were becoming. There was urgency and frustration, and it felt directed at him in a way the other feelings weren't. He thinks now that it was probably his bondmate realizing Charles is a telepath, trying to stop Charles from seeking him.

But there's an outside chance his bondmate was coming into his dominance. Charles always felt as if his bondmate was submissive: strong, even stubborn, but ready to bend for the right word, the right touch. Maybe he was wrong about that, though.

Maybe his bondmate was dominant as well; maybe he came from a tradition that forbade bonds between two dominants, something right out of a melodrama. And in a melodrama, it tended to turn out that one of the soulmates had been mistyped, and once someone switched down, the two of them fit together like perfect puzzle pieces after all.

He keeps thinking that if he could just find it in him, if he could achieve even one moment of submissive headspace... somewhere out there perhaps his bondmate would sense it and stop blocking the bond, and they could find each other again.

True, Charles has trouble picturing a happily-ever-after that ends with him on his knees. And chances are, it's his ability that prompted his renunciation, not his orientation. But he can't stop being a telepath. He thought there was a small chance he could stop being a dominant. If he could submit, or switch, then maybe.

It's not going to happen. He could kneel here in perfect form for twenty minutes, for twenty hours, and it won't matter. He'll never feel the way he's meant to feel about it. This isn't him.

Emma comes back when the twenty minutes are up. "Good boy," she approves, passing a hand over Charles's hair. He hasn't cut it beyond having it trimmed since he started subbing to Emma; it's grown quite long in the meantime. She runs his hand along the line of his jaw and tilts up his face, cupping his chin. "Peter, you can get him ready," she decides, and breezes out of the room again.

Charles tries to exchange a long-suffering look with Peter, but Peter just shakes his head at him in mock despair. "Bow," he says, pointing, and Charles obeys, pressing his brow to the floor, hands still linked behind him.

It's meant to make Charles feel a bit snubbed that Emma's ordered Peter to do this instead of bothering with it herself, but Charles can't seriously take it to heart. He knows she probably just doesn't want to risk getting lube on her outfit and doesn't feel like taking it off yet. Peter rattles around in the toy drawer and strolls behind him, kneeling properly to attend as commanded.

"Arms," Peter instructs, and Charles grabs each elbow with the opposite hand, his forearms neatly parallel. "Tip up," Peter adds, and slips two fingers into him. He doesn't need to add much lube; Charles is under orders to keep clean and slick whenever he's here. "She's either not very pleased with you or really terribly pleased with you," Peter's voice carries the shape of a grin, "I'm meant to give you the granite plug."

There really is no gauging her mood based on that. Charles likes the sensation of stone and metal plugs, the unrelenting pressure, but the weight of the granite plug can get uncomfortable rather quickly.
Peter gives him a third finger and twists, and Charles has to focus to school his breathing. He can't help thinking how good this would feel if he'd been the one to order Peter to do it, if he could tell Peter how to give it to him, reward him afterward with clover clamps; he'd have Peter hold the chain between his teeth while Charles fucked him...

"Kneel up," Peter says, "arms straight," and he slides the leather sleeves of Emma's favorite armbinders onto Charles, lacing them up tight.

Charles steels himself; the more Emma trusses him up the more likely she plans to put him through an evening of denial. It's always nearly good; Emma enjoys it, she's very skilled at it, and Charles likes working on resistance and stamina. But no matter how desperate he gets-- and she can make him very desperate-- he never begs correctly, not in a way that satisfies her, and he has to admit that if he were running the scene and he heard a sub plead in those tones he probably wouldn't find it adequate either.

He's not wrong. Emma spends ages giving him just enough attention to keep him on his toes while she spends the bulk of her time on Peter. Emma locks Peter into spreader bars, gives him a flogging and pegs him over the foot of their bed, occasionally checking in with Charles to put clothespins on and take them off, loosen the armbinders, make him change position. It's fine, since Charles is frankly more interested in watching her work over Peter than in going through the motions of obeisance himself.

As it gets late, Emma finally finishes with Peter-- utterly fucked out in a happy sprawl across the bed-- and comes over to Charles. She sinks into his mind, not bothering to conceal her presence or her curious ransacking, and picks out all the things that thrilled him most to see, tonight, playing them back for him, teasing him by giving him the same moments from her own perspective, as the dominant in control of the scene. By the time she's done he's so hard it nearly hurts, especially after such a long time cycling through stages of arousal.

Emma walks behind him and releases him from the armbinders; the relief in his shoulders is almost orgasmic in itself. She leans over him, hands sliding down his chest, and plucks the clothespins off his nipples. It hurts, but the sensation is so charged even the pain doesn't detract from it.

She sits Charles back on his heels at an angle that makes him bite back a groan, the granite plug heavy and obdurate inside him, uncomfortable but so good.

«You can touch yourself, and you have permission to come,» Emma tells him. She's taken up a crop, and she taps his right hand with it. «You can touch yourself once. One stroke with your hand.» She flits the tip of the crop over his sore nipples, up his neck, across his lips. «Open,» she orders, and dips the leather keeper into his mouth. It does nothing for him but he tries to make a good show of it, fluttering his eyes shut, sucking at the leather. She tilts it to make him open his mouth further, draws it out and balances it against his lower lip so it's more sightly when he licks the keeper.

«You go through the motions well enough,» Emma tells him, dissatisfaction ringing clear through the thought. «All right. Take your chance, one stroke, whenever you're ready.»

Charles focuses on the stretch of the plug, the heat in his face, the loose warmth of his freed shoulders, trying to line up all those sensations to bring himself off in one go. She's given him a few chances at this, but he's managed to get off this way less than half the times it's been offered.

This time Emma lets him work himself up til he's beginning to feel close, then she takes the crop out of his mouth and wipes the loop of the leather keeper against his hip; Charles only just stops
himself glaring at her, which would lose him his permission to come in a heartbeat, and rightly so. Emma knows he's irritated anyway, of course, and taps the damp leather against his cheek, deliberately meaning to distract him while he tries to get into it again.

She tires of the mischief, or maybe she wants to see him get off, for a change, because she changes tactics, circling him and tapping the crop firmly against the base of the plug-- that gets Charles to shudder-- and when she stands before him again, she trails it up and rests it against the base of his throat, just below the play collar.

Charles drags his lower lip through his teeth and lets all his attention dwell on the plug, the ache of his erection, the pressure at his throat, and it feels like no time at all before he knows he can do it. He licks his hand and squeezes himself, and just that has his thighs tensing; he gives himself one pull, and oh god yes, thank god, this time he made it, the huge heavy weight of the granite anchoring the orgasm: almost more relief than pleasure, but so much relief.

And for a moment he's nearly there, nearly grateful enough to care more about Emma, her desires, her authority, beyond anything else; when she presses the crop against the back of his shoulder and orders, «Bow,» he goes down mindlessly, and he doesn't wait for the order to start licking her boots clean, doesn't screw up his face at the taste or the conceptual unpleasantness of the task. He's automatically clasping his hands behind his back the way she likes to see them, even though it makes his shoulders hurt again after all that time holding that position in the armbinders.

He's scarcely got the toe of her boot clean when he falls right back out of it. He's doing this because she told him to do it, because he agreed to do what she says; not because it fulfills him to follow her orders, not because pleasing her is more important than anything else in his world right now. «Oh, Charles, really,» she sends to him, not even disappointed, just bored with his failure.

If he were her, getting this sort of lackluster response, he'd probably leave the heavy plug in his sub all night, take it out in the morning and tease til his sub was begging to be filled again, use that desperation to levy his sub down into headspace...

«You know that wouldn't work on you,» Emma replies as he finishes up with her boots, «so go take it out, clean up, and come back with something to tidy up this floor.»

«Yes, Mistress.»

Charles comes back scrubbed and much more relaxed, toting the cleaning supplies, to find his sub pallet has been stowed. Peter must have put it away. Somehow he doubts that means he gets to sleep in the bed tonight. He mops up the floor and dries and polishes the varnished wood, and puts the supplies away again.

He returns to the bedroom and kneels unprompted, taking his position and making his arms sore yet again by linking them behind his back.

Emma's sitting up in bed, Peter lying close with his arm thrown across her thighs, her hand in his hair. It's one of the few things about subbing that appeals to Charles in and of itself, that sort of doting attention. At least in theory; so far, receiving it has only made him uncomfortable.

He doesn't realize he expects her to tell him that she's releasing him from his contract early until she says something else entirely.

"I'm giving you away," Emma says.
"Mistress?"

"Another domme has expressed an interest," she tells him. "If you don't safeword out and break our contract, I'll transfer you to her care in three days, at seven in the evening."

"Yes, Mistress."

"Stand."

Charles goes to his feet. He can do that, at least, rise and kneel with some grace.

"Go home, Charles," Emma dismisses.

"Yes, Mistress."

Charles doesn't take the dismissal personally, any more than he does the rest of it. He can only spend so much time at Emma's regardless. In his real life, he's been busy wrapping up both his Master's degrees, in evolutionary genetics and concordance.

That should've been a clue all along... he's always thought of his time with Emma as set apart from real life. It's never been a part of him.

Being given away doesn't seem likely to change that, but Emma must think it will make a difference. Charles considers the proposition on the drive back to his place.

Objectively, it's not much of a commitment. There are only a few weeks left in his contract, which scarcely merits the name. It's just a few simple lines, with a provision that any of them, Emma, Peter, Charles himself, can call the whole thing off at any time.

He gave Emma a checklist in the beginning. He didn't put a hard limit on this, being given to another dominant. Even a complete stranger. He put precious few hard limits at all, and Emma hasn't hesitated to put him through his paces. He's even done a few things as a sub that he hasn't tried yet as a dominant.

She's always pushed him, but it's never been too far or too much. Charles wouldn't have made this arrangement with Emma if he didn't trust her.

Inasmuch as he can. He tried to give her permission to read his mind as much as she wants-- he's always wanted that liberty, he imagined it would be the same for her. But he can't help instinctively blocking off parts of himself from her, and unlike a baseline human, he has the ability to defend himself in an unconscious, involuntary reflex.

She's powerful enough to overcome that, but not without hurting him. She's let him read her as well with relative freedom, but she has the same unconscious defenses, and at his level now, he couldn't get past them even if he did try. After some silent exploration together they tacitly agreed to leave well enough alone.

That much happened the first night they met-- as it happened, it was the same night Charles first met Tony Stark. He was thinking that he'd like another drink when a stunning blonde domme walked up to him and handed him one.

She got his attention at once, not so much for the drink as for the near-total lack of presence, even when he opened his mind. She was shielding much more powerfully and successfully than anyone else he'd ever met.
«Let's not waste time chatting,» she said, pressing an introduction of sorts directly into his head. «Mind if I...?»

«It would be hypocritical of me to refuse,» Charles answered.

«Hypocrisy is a useless concept to people like us,» Emma replied, but she was already taking his assent to heart, sweeping through his mind like a chill wind. «In answer to what you're wondering, no, it doesn't feel like this to other people when you do it to them,» she told him, mildly distracted, «you've retained enough skill to conceal yourself from non-psionics, and your attempts to read me feel something like this,» she shared it with him, a gentle electric tingle. «You are an interesting one. I think you might've been even stronger than me before your unfortunate incident. I'm sorry for your loss, and so on. Aren't you a pretty mess in here, though.»

«I beg your pardon,» he sent, not sure himself if he was being sarcastic.

«Would you?» Emma asked. «You have been thinking about it, haven't you.»

It wasn't as though he had to ask what she meant, or could pretend to misunderstand. She already knew what he'd been thinking, and why.

They didn't bother with putting thoughts into words much after that, too busy finding each others' boundaries, trading experiences, coming to an understanding. His scene with Tony was the last time Charles played as a dominant. On New Year's Day he signed his contract with Emma and went to his knees.

For nothing. Or, no, not for nothing, of course; Charles has learned a lot, it's been valuable in a number of ways. But the way that matters most hasn't happened for him. And if anyone could find this in him, surely Emma could.

But if Emma believes another domme can get him there, he should trust she's got it right and allow it. Allow it, that's not how he should be thinking about it. As long as he's abiding by their arrangement, he isn't in control. He can call red and break their agreement, he can call yellow and renegotiate, or he can obey.

His motives haven't changed. He still can't pass up any chance that this might be it.

As Charles parks his car, his phone chimes a text message alert. It's from Emma, of course, and naturally, she knows what he's decided.

*Good boy.*
*Her name is Lilandra Neramani.*
*See you in three days.*

Chapter End Notes

Character notes:

Emma Frost everyone knows already (although our headcanon for her is more Cate Blanchett than January Jones).

Peter Wallace, aka the Kingmaker, appeared briefly in a couple of issues, with ties to Frost... mostly what we know about him is that he's immune to telepathy, and has
connections. (They call him the Kingmaker for a reason!) Headcanon for Peter is Aidan Gillen, who does a lovely turn as a kingmaker of sorts in *Game of Thrones*.

Lilandra Neramani is not a space alien in our canon. >_> She's being played by Preeya Kalidas, McAvoy's costar in *Bollywood Queen*. 
Erik, September 2004

Chapter Summary

While Charles is off exploring submission, Erik meets a girl who happens to be a friend of Jason's, and gets asked to switch *up* for the first time. The results are... awkward.

Chapter Notes

Jan is more or less Ultimates! Janet Van Dyne, aka the Wasp. (More as in: multiracial Asian-identified double-doctorate [in progress] molecular biologist, with powers given to her by her mutation. Yay for all of that! Less as in: the rest of Millar's Wasp plots, uh, not so much.)

This is also inspired partly by the world's awkwardest one-night stand, in Marvel's Secret Wars I, issues 3 and 4, where Magneto and the Wasp did have an awkward fling. It did not go nearly as well as it does here. XD

Erik's meeting Jason for lunch at Carnegie-Mellon, and he's late; he slides through the crowd, dodges gossiping students, finally gets to the cafe and looks around.

Once upon a time it would have been easy; he could have felt Jason's wristband all the way from here. As it stands, all he can do is look around and see if he can spot Jason visually.

He doesn't see Jason right away, but after a few seconds Jason must notice him: Jason throws up a huge sign reading OVER HERE with an arrow pointing at his table, flashing in bright neon. It catches a lot of attention; some people edge away from the table with the mutant, others just laugh, still others barely even seem to notice. A few wave at Jason, who waves back at them, sending out winks and nods.

Erik, for his part, laughs and makes his way over. As he approaches, he's surprised to find that Jason's sharing his table with a young woman: pretty, dark-haired, possibly of Asian descent given her features and the light golden tint to her complexion... and she's wearing a hot pink Mutant and Proud! t-shirt, one with a fist circled by a DNA strand.

When Erik reaches them, he squeezes Jason's shoulder in greeting and nods at his lunch companion. "Sorry I'm late," he tells Jason. He turns to Jason's... date? Friend? "I'm Erik."

"Jan," she says, holding out her hand. He shakes it and takes a seat next to Jason. "Jason was just helping me out with some German 401 stuff."

"And Erik's my go-to guy for German help anyway," Jason says, and without missing a beat, switches languages. "So there's no reason to stop now."

Jan perks up, looking delighted. She really is lovely. The short spiky haircut might read 'dom' on
someone male, but on someone female there's no telling. He's getting a submissive read on her, and he wonders again if Jason's dating her, or if he's trying. "Really?" She gives Erik a second look, more appreciative this time. Erik shifts a little. Hopefully she and Jason aren't dating, with a look like that. "Are you majoring in German?"

Erik shakes his head. "No, for me it's just a hobby. I'm not in school anywhere."

"Don't let him fool you. He's fluent in four languages and is probably working on a fifth in his spare time." Jason nudges him. "What's next on the agenda, after German, French, and Spanish? Russian, maybe?"


"Molecular biology." Jan flashes him a grin. "I guess that's kind of boring, huh? But my mutation got me interested in both biology and sub-microscopic scales, so..." She trails off, looking a little shy, suddenly.

"I'm a mutant, too," Erik says. "What's your mutation?"

"I can shrink and grow wings. Wasp wings," she says, and now she's positively beaming at him. "And shoot energy bolts. I call it my 'bio-sting'."

"Sounds exciting," Erik says, smiling right back. "I have an affinity for metal. It was stronger when I was a teenager, but I can still sense different metals and their compositions. Usually by touch."

"Oooh." Jan points at the windcatcher on Erik's right wrist. "Is that why you're wearing that? You like the feel of it?"

"It's... more complicated than that," Erik says, drawing his hand slightly out of reach. "But the windcatcher itself is stainless steel, and the chain is sterling silver."

Jan slides her own arm forward, not reaching for the windcatcher, offering up something of her own. She's wearing a bracelet: a simple linked chain, no ornaments or charms on it. "Can you tell what this is made of?"

"It's all right if I touch it?"

"Absolutely," Jan purrs. "I'm a free agent, the bracelet's mine."

"In that case..." Erik reaches forward and runs his fingertips over the links. "Gold, eighteen-karat," he says. "And one of those links catches on the fabric when you wear long sleeves. I can feel the rough edge."

"Can you fix it?" She gives him a playful look. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

Erik takes a deep breath and rubs the one rough link under his thumb. Gold isn't as easy as a ferrous metal, but it's malleable, soft, wants to bend.

_I can do this_, he thinks, _I want to do this, come on, you only need to bend a little, just a little, please..._

The gold smooths out in a warm flow, guided by a quick rubbing press of his thumb. All the rough edges are gone, and Erik sits back, a little lightheaded, grinning ear-to-ear.

"Did you get it?" Jan asks, in English again. Erik nods, and she gives him a softer, more private
smile, for all that Jason's sitting right next to him. "Well. I'll give you a demo sometime when we're alone." Leaning forward, she says conspiratorially, "My clothes don't come with me when I shrink."

Erik actually has to look back at Jason this time, who mimes a look of total innocence at him and flashes a quick GO FOR IT, MAN, NO HARD FEELINGS at him. Erik taps the table a couple of times, and Jason puts an alphabet into place; Erik turns back to Jan and says, "That's... inconvenient," smiling, tapping out IF YOU'RE SURE at the same time.

"Trust me," Jan purrs, "it's so totally not," and Erik takes a deep breath. Okay. Apparently he's got a date.

Or something. When Jan offers to 'show him hers' back at her place, after lunch, Jason laughs and wishes them well and heads off. Erik follows Jan back to her apartment, but along the way he says, "You probably ought to know I'm not too interested in submission these days." She's been fairly aggressive, and not that he has any room to talk when it comes to that, but it seems best to have it out on the open.

"Good thing," Jan says, flashing him a smile. "How about switching up, do you ever do that?"

"Uh..." Erik shakes his head. "Never been asked."

"Let me tell you how happy I am to break in newbie doms," she says, laughing, pulling him into her apartment and drawing him up the stairs with her. Erik raises an eyebrow-- he'd never have classified himself as any kind of dominant, newbie or otherwise, but Jan is very attractive, and, well, then there's the part where she shrinks and grows wings. And bio-stings, that sounded interesting...

In her apartment, Jan gestures vaguely at the doorknob; there's a red ribbon tied to it. "Tie that on the outside, would you? And then go ahead and lock the door."

"Don't you want a safe call?" Erik asks. "You don't even know me."

"I can handle myself," she says, with confidence. "You can't tie me into anything I can't shrink out of, I'll safeword if I want you to stop, and trust me, my bio-stings are not something you want to mess with."

"It's still safer," Erik says. "You could call Jason if you wanted, if you trust him. Or if you have a roommate--" He can only assume that's what the ribbon was meant to indicate. "I'd really be more comfortable."

"When you were subbing, did you do a safe call every time?"

"I... never regretted having one," Erik hedges. "I've regretted not having one much more."

Jan's expression turns sympathetic. "Oh," she says. "I'm sorry..."

Erik shakes her off. "It's not important," he says. "But if you wouldn't mind..."

"I'll text my roommate," Jan says. And she does, and a few seconds later she's got a text back, which she shows Erik. *Have fun, talk to you at 2pm.*

"Thank you," Erik says, finally relaxing. "I don't... I haven't really switched up. What do you want me to do?"
"I'm not into pain or any kind of humiliation," she says, matter-of-fact, hands on her hips. "I like bondage, or being held down, and--" She draws herself upright, looks him in the eye as best she can. "If you still want to see me shrink? I'd really like to hear some nice things about the way I look with wings."

It hardly seems dominant at all; Erik thinks he can manage that. "Well, the last part ought to be easy enough," he says, smiling. "And I'd love to see you shrink."

"Okay," she says, grinning again. "Okay, well, then. Here goes."

And it's so fast it looks more like she's disappeared, because her clothes go puddling to the floor. He catches a fast flash of motion, and then there's a swirl in the air just in front of his face, and she grows a little—six inches tall or so, and she's every image he's ever had of a fairy or a sprite, tiny and gorgeous and adorable all at once, with the kind of sexy pinup curves that no image of Tinkerbell could ever hope to match. Her wings are thin iridescent wasp's wings, just as she said; they look delicate enough it's hard to believe that she can keep herself aloft with them. But she can, of course—she's flying right now, hovering in the air and waving and doing spin after spin and roll after roll.

He can't help smiling; he lifts one hand and cups it, making a little seat for her; she takes him up on it, alighting on his palm and twirling around on one foot. She weighs almost nothing, her wings fluttering and gently brushing back and forth against his fingers.

"You're beautiful," Erik offers. Jan bats her eyelashes at him, tiny as they are, and blows him a little kiss. "And your wings are lovely."

"Like 'em?" She twirls so her back's facing him and looks over her shoulder, flapping her wings quickly enough to blow a bit of a breeze toward his face. Her voice is higher and tinny when she's this size, no surprise, he supposes. Even that has its own unique charm, and he nods at her.

"I like them very much," he murmurs. "They suit you."

Jan hops up, taking off in flight again, and she zips around and around him for a few seconds before finally growing back to her full height again— at which point he can't help noticing something that mattered much, much less on a smaller scale, namely that she's naked now.

Orientation aside, he's going to respond to that. He reaches out, takes her hand in his, and tries to imagine what in the world she might want out of the afternoon. No pain, no humiliation, she wants him to top— it's the opposite of everything he's ever done in bed. Which doesn't mean he can't, or won't... maybe he'll find something in it he's been missing. He can't submit; he can't do basic without falling headlong into submission. Maybe he doesn't have anything left to lose, trying this. Maybe the fact that he's had years and years to think about what he would have wanted his dominant to be like will give him some kind of instinct about what to do.

"I want to take you to bed," Erik says, "tie you face-down, rim you, and make you come. How does that sound to you?"

"Like I should shower first," she jokes. "But I'm definitely up for that. How do you want to make me come? I'm probably not going to come from rimming, but pleeeeease don't let that stop you."

"I won't," Erik promises with a grin. "In order of preference: I'd like to fuck you, or touch you, or lick you, and I'd like you to have as many orgasms as you want and have time for."

"Sounds pretty great." Her eyes are sparkling. For a moment he wonders if there's an iridescent cast
to them, if it has something to do with her mutation, but no, it looks like she's just happy. He smiles at her again. "I like intercourse, so let's go with that. No orgasm control?"

"Do you like orgasm control?"

"Either/or," she says. "I like begging, I don't necessarily want to get micromanaged."

"Fair enough."

"Are you okay with vibrators?"

"Definitely," Erik says. "What have you got?"

"I have a kickass one that I can wear during, if you'd be up for that..."

Erik blinks for a second. "Oh, for you," he says, a little embarrassed. "Of course that's fine. I've never used one like that, that sounds interesting."

Jan laughs. "Wow, you really were a sub for a while, huh? I might have a butt plug or two if you want something for yourself while we're going at it."

"Unless you've got a metal one, I probably won't be able to hang onto it for long," Erik admits.

"Oh, that's right, you're kinked for metal," Jan says, grinning. "In more ways than one, apparently."

"I am," Erik admits. "But let's focus on you, why don't we. I'm sure I'll be completely happy with our plans as-is. Maybe we leave the vibrators out of the picture for now, unless you'd really like them?"

"Depends on how good you are with your hands. Let me have a look," she says, tongue running teasingly over her lower lip. She takes his hand in hers, lifts it up and gets a good look at his fingernails. "Oh, nice... you have these taken care of."

It's one of the few holdover indulgences he has from the days when he really did consider himself a sub; a good manicure in a fairly large city is easy enough to find, familiar in its routine. He likes the look of clean fingernails; he doesn't like it when his hands are ragged or messy.

"Will they do?"

"They will so completely do, as long as you know what you're doing with them."

It would seem ungentlemanly to brag, somehow, so Erik just smiles. "I'm willing to give you my best."

Jan winks. "I'm willing to take it. Speaking of taking, I'm going to take that shower; how about if you look around, pick out whatever you'd like to tie me up with. Bondage gear is in the top drawer," she says, pointing at her dresser.

"Thank you," Erik tells her. She slips into the bathroom, and moments later he hears the shower running.

Topping. All right. So far so good. He hasn't screwed it up yet. It's still a little strange, and he's not even taking that much initiative. How do people do this, he wonders, just step in and take charge without planning out every little detail? Or maybe some dominants do, and Erik just hasn't scened with them. The club scene isn't exactly meant for the meticulous type, and the only doms he's seen at work outside that environment are Sebastian, who was never so much a dom as a selfish bastard,
and Jason, who just seems to inhabit his orientation as a dom like it's as natural as breathing.

He really ought to pick out some bondage gear, though. He opens up her drawer: fur-lined leather cuffs, fur-lined police-grade cuffs, rope, bondage tape, velcro cuffs, locking cuffs, bondage mitts, spreader bars... lots of interesting things. Erik's not especially good with rope, so the second-safest option seems like it might be the velcro cuffs, something easy to get out of if something goes wrong. He looks around for surgical snips, and when a quick visual glance doesn't turn any up, he runs his hand over the front of the dresser, trying to feel around for anything metal of that approximate shape and size.

Nothing presents itself in the dresser; he checks both nightstands and still comes up short. He hasn't even been able to find scissors, although he can feel just enough foil in one of the nightstands to be sure he's run into Jan's stash of condoms.

When she comes out of the shower, naked but wrapped in a towel, drying her hair with a second towel, Erik stops himself before he can ask about the snips. Given how she asked for compliments on her wings earlier, he has a feeling she'd rather hear something else right now. "You look beautiful," he says. She blinks up at him and beams. "I can't wait to have my mouth on you."

"I can't wait for you to have your mouth on me, either," she teases. "Did you find cuffs?"

Oh, good, there's the opening. "I did, but I didn't find emergency snips. Where do you keep them?"

"You are so not cutting my cuffs up!" Jan says, rolling her eyes. "You picked the velcro ones, you really aren't going to need to cut them. If I need out, I'll shrink or safeword, or even just ask you. Okay?"

"I-- okay," Erik says, trying not to frown. "I just haven't done this before, I don't want to fuck it up." Who was the one that said ey liked breaking in newbie doms, again? Something else he's not going to say out loud...

"You're worrying way too much about this." Jan finishes toweling off her hair and drops her towel on the floor; she walks over to Erik and drapes her arms around his neck. "You've been paying all this attention, tell me what I said was off the table."

"Painplay and humiliation." Erik slides his hands up her back, and Jan shimmies a little; the towel falls off her as if by magic. That, or maybe she shrank a little-- not enough for Erik to really feel, but enough that the towel couldn't stay on. Erik can't help grinning; it's such a clever use of a mutation. Maybe Jan was on to something when she said it wasn't inconvenient after all.

He draws both hands up and down her back again, and this time he can feel the slight bump under her skin, where her wings come out. She wiggles against him, rubbing up and almost buzzing with excitement.

"Take me to bed, Erik. Okay?"

"Okay."

He's never paid much attention to how cuffs fit when they're on. He's also never questioned a dominant if ey's fastened something on too loosely, or too tightly. But with Jan, he's intent on getting things right, and despite her friendly eyerolls and overdramatic sighs, he thinks he's onto something when he finishes with the wrist cuffs and rolls her over on her stomach, flattening her out with his body, pinning her wrists with both hands.
"Yeah," Jan groans, "okay, yeah, you still up for that rimming thing?"

Erik laughs, nodding, and he attaches her velcro cuffs together with a double clip. She gives them a light little tug and nods, and he starts moving down her body, licking and nibbling at the back of her neck, going down slowly, an inch at a time. She tastes like warm water, clean soap, a hint of honey and vanilla, and he stops where her wing buds begin, slowly running his tongue over the slight raise and indentation there.

"That's-- nice," Jan pants, squirming under him. "You're into the wings...?"

"I'm into you," Erik murmurs up at her, "but the wings are part of that."

"Nice answer," Jan says, stretching her arms out as far as they can go, curving her fingers around her bedrails. "Bring it on, I'm ready."

One last lick over and against and under and between the wing buds, and Erik sweeps his tongue down, licking all the way down her back, stopping for a moment at the small of her back and carefully nudging her legs apart, sliding between them. He's still dressed, mostly, but that seems fairly standard for dominants; he's used to being naked or wearing nothing but cuffs and a harness while someone in full dress gear-- boots, chaps over jeans, vest over t-shirt, gloves, cap-- works him over.

Maybe it's about control; if he were out of his clothes right now he might be even more intent on getting something for himself out of all this. As it is, he can focus on Jan, on her pretty, curvy ass and the silky skin at the tops of her thighs. He slips his hands up her legs, rubs his thumbs in circles over the insides of her thighs.

She's already wet; he can smell her arousal on her, a little sweeter than he's used to. Her mutation, maybe? He can't really take a guess.

He ducks his head down, slow, and brushes his cheek against the inside of her thigh as he goes. He's clean-shaven, but there's probably just the slightest scrape of stubble; she shivers but doesn't try to move her leg away. Beard burn isn't what he was after, though, and he licks her, high up on the inside of her thigh, just trying to take in a taste.

She groans, which is enough to make him do the same; this is all similar enough to dommes he scened with a few years back, Philadelphia at first and then Atlantic City, doing everything anyone asked of him, learning that he liked to be held by the hair and pushed into position by doms and dommes, both.

And, all right, this isn't like that. This isn't anything like that. But he's still happy enough to be here, glad enough to be tasting her arousal and proud that he's pleasing her; he leaves a number of kisses on the inside of each thigh before coming back up and working his way up her ass, kissing her there, too, giving her gentle little swirling licks on one cheek and then the other, back and forth, taking turns.

"Erik, yeah, please, please," Jan's gasping, right out loud where he can hear it. This is no underher-breath, half-aware series of gasps and whispers, it's outright pleas, meant for him. "Yeah, c'mon, more, please, do it, c'mon, you never said you were a tease--"

Maybe I didn't know, Erik thinks. Maybe I'm not. "Do you mind waiting?" he asks instead, leaning up and rubbing his hand up and down the curve of her ass, imagining what it would be like if it were him lying there, like this, hands caught up in soft fleece-lined cuffs, stretched out and horny and having to wait.

Well. He'd be arching up, pushing his ass back, hoping teeth would be coming into play soon;
that's not happening with Jan. He keeps the contact easy, cozy, no hint that it's going to turn into anything other than this caress.

If it were him he'd be thinking about someone's hand coming down hard, spanking him until he went red. It's not him. It's all strange, like he's scening inside-out, upside-down.

"I don't have all day," Jan says, but she really isn't pushing back to get more, or pressing down against the mattress. Maybe she's not worked up enough, or maybe she's joking about the impatience, or maybe she just doesn't move much... it's all but impossible to read her reactions. He doesn't know her.

Moving things to the next level out of sheer nervousness makes Erik worry about whether he's doing the right thing, but when he cups her hips in his hands and bends his head down, she starts moaning all over again. "Yes. Erik, come on-- Erik, dammit-- yes," she pants, and there she is, ass curving up invitingly, thighs parting just that little bit more. Erik takes a moment to just breathe in and watch all that, and then he's lowering his face, sliding his tongue between her cheeks, holding her open-- but gently-- with his thumbs. He licks in hot broad stripes, the kind he's liked when he's been lucky enough to get them, trying for that combination of urgency and patience that's driven him straight up the wall in no time flat.

He's not sure he has it quite right-- she's squirming, but she's squirming more than he expected, and she's groaning and thrashing and scrambling for purchase on the bedrails, gasping and twisting her hips from side-to-side. He keeps going, still not even trying to put his tongue inside her, just licking hot and smooth up the length of her cleft, but finally Jan gasps and chokes out, "God, touch me already, I want to come, make me come, please, Erik, please please please--"

He slips a hand underneath her, searching for her clit, and fortunately enough she's meeting him halfway, slithering and shifting until his fingers are right where she wants them. He presses in, not too gentle now, and she clamps her thighs together and rides his hand until she's throwing her head back, yelling out loud, gasping and shaking and oh, she's coming and beautiful and slick and soaking his hand with it, he's hard enough he could almost come just watching her.

"Wait wait wait," she pants, "okay, wait," and she lifts up a little, enough that he can ease his hand out from under her. He brings his other hand out, slides it up and down her leg, reaches up to give her a one-handed back and shoulder rub. The muscles just above and below her wing buds are a little tense, but a few minutes of attention and gentle rubbing works out the kinks and gets her moaning again.

"Yeah," she says, a little dreamily, "yeah, that was awesome. Would you fuck me now? Please?"

"You really don't need to ask me twice," Erik says, climbing out of bed and stripping down. He pauses halfway through getting his jeans off to add, "Unless you want to ask twice. Or three times, or four, or--"

"Condoms in the drawer over there," she says, nodding to it, and as soon as Erik's naked, he grabs one out and shreds the foil wrapper, rolls it on.

On the bed, he slips an arm under her waist and helps her up on her knees and forearms, her wrists still tied together in front of her. She wiggles her ass just a little, and Erik shoves down the urge to take a bite out of it; pretty and tempting as she is, that's off-limits. It's never occurred to him to wonder how much accommodation it takes when a dom's interested in something Erik's not, how all the urges and instincts must get harder and harder to push down-- or maybe that's just him, maybe that's his lack of practice talking. Maybe when Jason runs into someone who wants to do a foot worship scene or is really into electrical play, he can switch gears that easily, even to kinks.
he's not that interested in. Maybe when he meets people who don't want even a flicker of roleplay or formal speech, he doesn't mind the lack of it.

Maybe, Erik thinks, he should stop thinking of other scenes and try doing justice to the one he's in. He bends his head down, licks into Jan's ass one last time, and then he's kneeling up behind her, so eager to be inside her that his hands are almost shaking.

"As long as you remember where you're going!" Jan says, laughing it, but he does; he's moving into her pussy, almost shivering: this is a position he's never actually done before, not from this side. It's a little awkward, a little tricky; the angle's not as straightforward as it's always seemed like from the receiving side. Then again, it's not exactly the same angle, and she's a good bit shorter than he is; apparently the least little difference can make for interesting and complicated changes.

But when he's in, he's in, and she sinks down again, grabbing a pillow with her cuffed hands and shoving it under her chest for a slightly more comfortable position. "Holy crap," she pants. "You know what, I--" He draws himself out of her, presses in nice and slow; it breaks her concentration, and she ends up panting for a few seconds. Oh, God, but what was she saying, what was she saying-- it wasn't her safeword, but it might have been important--

"What should I know?" Erik asks, putting both hands on her hips, trying to hold still. Jan doesn't make it easy, pushing back hard against his cock and groaning like she's loving every inch of him.

"I shrink," she pants, "sometimes, if the guy's not very-- you know."

Erik almost laughs. "Really?"

"Nnnnn, yeah, it doesn't have to be much," she says, pulling forward, pushing back hard. There's no way Erik's going to be able to hold still for the rest of this conversation, not unless it's short. "But not with you, God, you're so big, c'mon, please, please give it to me, I've been such a good girl, I totally fucking deserve it, please fuck me, please fuck me, please--"

"Good girl," Erik pants; Jan gasps in response, pressing herself back against him. "You're-- you really do," he manages, "you deserve-- everything-- God, you feel... good, and... hot, and..." He's babbling, it's mortifying, but she's moaning and squirming and shoving back and obviously eating up every word he says. "And you're, you're good, and you're pretty, your wings are beautiful," that part's easier somehow, "so beautiful, you should be so proud, you feel amazing, Jan, this is incredible, do you want it harder, tell me, tell me how you want it..."

"Hand," Jan says, and she struggles with the cuffs for the first time, quickly giving up when she realizes she can't just get one of them between her legs. "Your hand, please, I need your hand on my clit, I need to come again, please, Erik, please please please--"

Easiest order ever, he slips his hand around in front of her to start rubbing her clit in circles again, but of course it's not an order, it's a plea. Erik doesn't care at this point; maybe it's both, maybe they're both doing both, maybe that's what two-sub scenes are always like. God, he's still thinking of himself as a sub, even while he's telling her she's a good girl and getting her off; he's not switched up, he's just letting her top from the bottom.

But Jan doesn't seem to notice the difference, or care; she's just clenching her fists and throwing her head back and coming again, and this time Erik can't hold out. The words that come out of his mouth shouldn't surprise him, they really shouldn't, but when he finds himself saying, "Can I-- please, can I, is it all right if I, can I come, please," he winces, hoping like fuck he hasn't ruined the whole goddamned thing.
It doesn't sound like it, though; Jan just lets out a weak moan and says, "You're domming, you tell me!" Newbie doms, he remembers; maybe she's heard that sort of thing before.

So it doesn't have to be permission, he doesn't have to ask; he keeps going, keeps pumping into her until he can feel and see and hear her building up to a third orgasm, getting close and begging him all over again. "Erik, please, a little faster now, just a little, oh God just like that, please, yes, there, right there--"

He keeps it up as long as it takes, past the point where she has to snap off the double clip between her cuffs and brace herself, past the point where she gets a hand between her legs and starts touching herself, even his instincts not quite getting her where she wants to be. But the minute she starts coming, as soon as her cries get high and shallow again, Erik goes deep and hard, driving into her, letting himself go, letting himself come. He manages a few more aching, blissed-out strokes before he collapses, barely catching himself on one arm to avoid crushing Jan into the bed.

She rolls out from under him-- no shrinking just now, apparently-- and tucks herself up on her side; he falls gracelessly into the wet spot and groans. Jan stays there for a few seconds, not reaching out, and it takes Erik a moment to realize he was supposed to do that, that this is the aftercare part of the scene, and he has no idea what to do. Fuck. It doesn't help that his eyes are still crossed from the orgasm and that he's more or less stuck to the sheets.

"Okay, um," Jan says, and she finally slides out of bed, long before he has the coordination to do more than make a basic attempt at getting his arm around her. She dodges and heads for the bathroom. "Just going to clean up here. Conk out for a minute if you need to, I'm good."

Erik just manages to tilt his head up. "Are you sure?"

"You bet."

He doesn't quite fall asleep. As the shower runs, he rolls over onto his back, and then grimaces and looks around for somewhere to dispose of the condom-- okay, a small trash bin, that's good. There are tissues on her nightstand, so in a few minutes he's all cleaned up, and by the time she comes out of the bathroom again, he's dressed.

"Do you, uh... want some coffee... or something?" she asks. He honestly can't tell if she's trying to get him to stay here a little longer or hoping he'll say no so she can get rid of him as soon as she can. If it were him in her place, he has to admit it'd be the latter.

"I should really go," he says. The look of relief on her face makes him feel better about saying it. "I had a wonderful afternoon."

"It was nice!" Jan chirps, politeness on autopilot now, even he can tell that. "Say hi to Jason for me the next time you see him."

"Right. Likewise," he says, and she shuffles him out the door, and not a word's said about doing it again. Erik's mildly relieved. Switching up, it seems, is definitely not one of his secondary mutations.

When he puts it that way to Jason, Jason spits out half his beer. "Okay, haven't heard anybody put it that way before. But if anybody would..."

"It wasn't meant to be that funny," Erik grumbles, wiping down their table with a napkin. "So did I make things incredibly awkward for you and Jan?"

"You say 'me and Jan' like it was a thing you interrupted," Jason says. He shakes his head. "No, it's
cool. I'm sure it wasn't as awkward as you think it was."

"Well, she didn't actually use her bio-sting powers on me, so I assume I came out ahead," Erik says. And so much for cleaning up the table; there Jason goes again, laughing until Erik buries his head in his hands and can't help but join him.
Chapter Summary

When Lilandra takes over as Charles's mistress, Charles quickly settles in. But is this really what he wants?

Chapter Notes

We've been doing chapters one at a time when they're long, and this one is no exception. But the next three are comparatively short, so our next update will have three chapters to it. ^_^

«Ready?» Emma asks, more to needle Charles than to provoke an answer; of course she already knows.

And even if he's not, it's a little late to say so now. They're outside the house of his new mistress. He drove himself over and pulled in first, parking further up the drive, since Emma and Peter will be leaving after dinner, and Charles will be staying here.

«Ready,» he answers regardless, and tilts up his chin as Emma buckles a play collar around his neck. White leather, not surprising. She does everything in white if at all possible. She's in all white now; she and Peter have dressed up as if it's an occasion, Peter setting her off in all black.

«I'm surprised you didn't insist on coordinating my outfit as well.»

«No need. I knew you'd be boring and wear black and white,» she replies, smirking at him.

They're the clothes that seem to get him the most second looks: a white dress shirt unbuttoned a crucial couple of buttons, close-fitting black waistcoat and black trousers. She knows why he favors them, and he knows she knows. He's not sure why she's amused by that, and she's unlikely to tell him. Like so many conversations with Emma, there's not much point bothering to have it at all.

Emma clips a decorative leash into Peter's collar-- beautiful, done in white gold, of course. And another like it on Charles's leather collar. "Come along, boys," she says, and Charles carefully falls into step, flanking her to the left in step with Peter on her right.

The woman who answers the door smiles at Emma, ignoring Charles and Peter at first. "Good evening," she and Emma shake hand and exchange air kisses. "So good to see you," she leads them into the foyer.

Lilandra Neramani is petite, slim and quite short; Charles feels a pang of sympathy. People are perfectly aware that human beings come in all shapes and sizes regardless of orientation, but still, a great many subs seem to think that dominants ought to always be taller than the sub they're scening with. Charles runs into that a lot... ran. Ran into that a lot.
She's lovely, with dark eyes, brown skin and dark brown hair, and she wears a silky salwar kameez subtly trimmed and tapered to lengthen her silhouette. Charles notices mainly because his own tailor works similar magic on his suits. She's not wearing high heels or platforms to boost her height, though; she has on trainers, actually, and Charles finds that rather charming.

Peter takes Emma's coat and hangs it, arranging it to drape just so before he takes off his own and hangs it alongside. Charles waits for Peter to return to his place and for the nod from Emma before he goes to hang up his own coat. It's not just formality; leashes make everything more complicated, especially with two subs chained to the same dominant.

That done, there's a hesitation til the clock in the hall chimes the hour, seven o'clock. Emma offers the end of Charles's leash to Lilandra, who moves forward to accept it. When she moves back again, Charles follows, and stands before her.

By the traditions Charles grew up with, it's up to Emma to remove the leash and collar and recite, *With respect and appreciation for all you've given me, I release you.* Instead, Lilandra says, "Welcome to my house. Will you walk with me?"

"I will," Charles answers. «You could've mentioned--»

Emma gives him the psychic equivalent of an eyeroll. «Don't whine, Charles, you took all sorts of comparative concordance classes, you know what to do.»

He lifts his chin, and Lilandra unclips the leash and unbuckles the collar. Charles takes the collar off himself, and she gives him the leash, neatly wound up. Charles turns around, bows, and offers both to Emma.

"Thank you for the generosity of your house," he says.

"Our doors will always open to you." Emma accepts the leash and collar and tucks them into her handbag, and gives that to Peter so he can put it away with the coats.

Charles straightens and takes his new place a step behind Lilandra to her right, and waits to see if they're going to carry on. Whatever the tradition, it's generally the case that most concordance ceremonies can be brief or go on for hours, depending on how much the participants want to draw it out. To his relief, they don't make anything more of it. This was already a bit more formal than he was expecting, though really, this was minimal. He supposes he was imagining that Emma would just chuck the leash at his new domme and take off with a negligent wave.

The dinner table is set for two, with cushions for Peter and Charles alongside the chairs, no plates of their own. As a dominant, Charles always enjoyed hand-feeding. As a submissive, he finds it difficult to take. He spends the meal trying to find some kind of enjoyment in having absolutely no control, even down to what he eats and drinks.

Lilandra's obviously taken care to serve food that lends itself to this, and everything is delicious, from the pakora to the gulab jamun. Halfway through dinner she and Emma get involved more deeply in conversation, and she gives him his own teacup while her attention is divided. That, he can genuinely appreciate. It's thoughtful, and seems to signal that she's not really as traditional as all that. In strict hand-feeding Charles wouldn't be permitted to touch anything.

After dinner, he does his best to pace Lilandra as she sees Emma and Peter out. And then it's just the two of them in the lounge, and Lilandra addresses him for the first time since she welcomed him.
"So," she says with a little smile. Charles can't help but smile back.

She's probably not even thirty, he realizes. Her bearing and her immaculate makeup and perfectly chosen jewelry and clothes make her seem more poised than twenty-something. He should've guessed, it's the same for Emma; she's actually Charles's age, though as they discussed once—briefly traded thoughts about, anyway—both of them feel older, from all their secondhand experiences.

"A few rules will hold true for as long as you're with me," Lilandra says. "I know you and Emma read one another's minds. You won't be reading my thoughts. You have permission to read my moods unless I order otherwise."

It's much more than most partners give him. Charles says eagerly, "Yes, Mistress."

"Do you know why you're here?"

He knew why he was at Emma's, but he can't assume things will be the same here. "No, Mistress."

"Emma said she didn't think you were learning to submit properly with her, and she asked my advice, so we sat in on a class you were assisting. The professor lectured, and you answered questions from the students at the end. I told Emma she should sign you over to me." Lilandra rests her palm on his cheek. "I know you were with her to learn to submit, but I don't care if you learn anything with me. You're here because I saw you and I wanted you."

A long moment passes; she looks at him expectantly, and Charles scrambles to reply, "Yes, Mistress."

"You'll call me Lilandra."

"Yes, Lilandra."

"You can undress me."

He practiced valet service with Emma, so he's reasonably competent at helping her out of her clothes with the right attitude of deference, without snagging anything on her earrings, and with care for the clothes themselves, which he folds and keeps until she motions to an armchair and he puts them down.

"Kneel, and give me your mouth."

"Yes, Lilandra," he says as he obeys, and she stands over him, a step away.

"Hands behind you. How do you feel comfortable holding them?"

He folds his arms up at once, grasping each elbow with the opposite hand.

"Good. Keep them that way," and she steps within reach.

She's trimmed but not shaved, her hair soft and crinkly under his tongue, and she tastes amazing, or maybe it's just that it's been a little while; Emma hasn't bothered to command Charles to do this for her for some time, not since the novelty wore off. She always has Peter, who knows what she likes but is still capable of surprising her, as well.

Lilandra threads her fingers through his hair, but she doesn't use it to steer him or hold him in place. She just leaves it there and lets him work, only occasionally murmuring, "Faster," and "More
there," and since she gave him permission to read her moods, he's able to quickly find what she likes, following the unspoken cues of her emotions and reactions.

He's always loved doing this, but he's had to learn how to approach it differently from this side. As a dominant it was about making his sub feel good, teasing em, establishing control by showing how good he could make em feel if ey just put emself in his hands.

From this side, he has to keep reminding himself that he's only here to give his mistress what she wants. Faster, slower, lighter, harder, it's not up to him; he's meant to let her direct him as completely as possible. It doesn't matter if he's sure he could bring her off if he just used his fingers to spread her open a little more; she ordered him to keep his hands behind his back. He should be trying to present a pleasing picture, as well, not letting a frown show between his eyebrows or tension in his shoulders.

Soon he senses she's close and pushes a little deeper, licking more broadly, and he keeps at it as her taste floods his mouth and all those tiny muscles begin to flutter and spasm under his tongue. He eases up only when she slightly leans away.

Charles stays in place as long as her hand remains in his hair, and he schools himself not to expect anything. There's often a stretch of orgasm denial at the start of a new arrangement like this, a test to see what the new sub is made of. It's not going to be easy, if that's what he's up against; he's excited, partly from giving head-- even when he's submitting and self-conscious, he enjoys it-- and partly from being allowed to read her moods, catching her pleasure and bliss when he brought her off.

"Stand," she says finally, and he obeys. Lilandra smiles at him. "That was just what I wanted," she praises, and kisses him; she doesn't mind tasting herself on him, and some of his tension dissolves as she slips her arms around his neck and draws him down to kiss him more intently.

She takes him by the hand and leads him to the bedroom, and for a moment he forgets his good advice to himself and hopes. But there's a sub pallet laid out for him alongside the bed, and she gestures to it. Charles does some deep breathing exercises, calms himself down, undresses, and slips under the covers to spend his first night at his new home away from home.

Submitting to Lilandra is nothing like it was with Emma. Lilandra doesn't put him through exercises, doesn't try to get him into headspace. For the rest of his contract, he belongs to her, and she simply expects him to behave accordingly.

The first morning, at the breakfast table, he moves his cushion from her right side to sit at her left after spending the night in her home, following the same tradition from the previous night's exchange ceremony. He senses pleasure from her at that, and she strokes his hair and hand-feeds him breakfast. Maybe she was paying attention to his reactions the night before, because he gets his own teacup again, and it makes the entire experience much nicer, somehow.

During breakfast, she says, "Emma told me some things about you, but not everything. I'm unbonded."

"I lost my bondmate when I was sixteen," he says. Her mood shifts to sympathy, but that's all; she doesn't ask further.

Since she's letting him read her moods, they don't have to talk much, and she seems to like that about it, the silent obedience. He'll do whatever it takes to convince her to keep letting him have that freedom, so he mostly keeps quiet. She lets him know she'd like to see him most evenings after
seven, so he comes over weeknights, and sleeps over on the weekends, always in the pallet on the floor.

He doesn't have classes on Thursdays, and after the first week Lilandra arranges to work from home that day, so he spends Wednesday nights at her place as well.

Thursdays, he stays by her side while she works. She's an aeronautical drafter, and her work involves long stretches on the computer, creating models in software he doesn't recognize, AutoCAD and CATIA. It's all so technical and detailed that Charles honestly doesn't know what he's looking at most of the time.

He learns a few new massage techniques for heavy computer users so he can give her wrist and handrubs, and she has him fetch and carry for her, and provide tea service in the afternoons. Mostly, though, she just likes having him close. He's not used to this much enforced idle time, but gradually it starts to feel soothing to kneel at her side, his head against her knee, listening to the clicks of her mouse and the soft pop music she plays while she works.

Once he gains confidence that she's not going to withdraw her permission to read her moods, he listens in on her emotions, and soon he's looking forward to Thursdays. He gets to spend hours feeling her concentration, her irritation when she's struggling with a problem or dealing with some quirk of her computer, her pride when she solves one aspect of a design, and her interest and anticipation as she moves on to the next.

She's very even-tempered, but her feelings run deep, and he basks in the privilege of sharing them. When she turns her attention to him, he can sense attraction, fondness, a sort of possessive pleasure. It's not something he ever really imagined he'd feel directed at him.

Lilandra doesn't favor the elaborate scenes and long periods of denial that Emma liked. The second day, she gives him permission to get off, and she allows it during every scene they have together after that. All he has to do is ask. She does like to hear him ask, though; she likes to feint toward kissing him and then make him wait for it, and she likes to tie him to the bed and ride him so she can watch him strain against the cuffs for leverage and hear him stumble and babble when he asks permission to come.

After three weeks, he finally realizes what she's doing. Lilandra's not treating him as if he's trying to learn how to submit. She's just treating him like a submissive, and it's working. Maybe it took those months with Emma to teach him what to do from his knees, but with Lilandra, he's finally learning how to like it.

"I've been thinking. I'd like you to wear a play collar," Lilandra says one evening as they get ready for bed.

"Thank you," Charles says automatically, and hesitates. "May I see it?"

"Of course. You can take it off when you're not with me, if you want. But I'd like you to wear it when you're here." She brings over a case and opens it; on the red velvet there's a thin gold chain and a gold oval charm. On the front is engraved an elegant handwritten L, presumably modeled on Lilandra's own script, and the back is textured; Charles turns it over. It's her fingerprint.

"This is a play collar?" Charles asks. "It's so delicate. Aren't you worried something might happen to it?"

Lilandra smiles. "For as long as you wear it, you're only going to be with me. And I take care of my
Charles looks at it uncertainly. The only thing that marks it as a play collar is the series of larger links at the end of the chain, each big enough to take the clasp, so that the size can be adjusted to different wearers. Otherwise it seems like the sort of thing doms typically give their soulmates, not their temporary play partners. It makes him feel oddly raw to think she wants to see it on him, but it's not exactly an unpleasant feeling, and he can't think of any reason to balk.

He kneels and bows his head, arms locked behind his back. "It would be an honor. Please."

Her fingers are warm against the back of his neck when she fastens it onto him. She centers the charm in front, and when she smiles again, Charles feels himself relax.

It's almost the end of October when Charles gets a phone call from Raven saying, "Hey. I'm in Boston."

"I thought you were on your seeker trip," he says.

"I am, I'm at the bus station. I'm sick of rest stop showers and crappy food and being cooped up on the bus all the time. I need a break. Can I stay with you?"

"Of course you can. But you could've given me a bit more notice, Raven. It's only luck you caught me in, I'm scarcely home these days. Should I come pick you up?"

"No, I'm already at the cab stand. And I didn't tell you sooner because I've been trying to talk myself into getting back on the grid. But I just can't. I've done the outer loop all the way to the West Coast and back and I didn't feel anything different at all."

"Maybe she's in the middle," Charles suggests. "You could do the 50-66?"

"Maybe," Raven sighs. "A cab's pulling up, I'll see you soon."

He starts tea and makes up a bed for her on the sofa in the meantime. He really doesn't have much food in at all... Chinese takeout leftovers and carrots, two boxes of muesli but no milk. Soon enough he senses Raven's presence and goes down to meet her.

"Wow, I guess all these degrees are taking it out of you, you can't even manage to get a haircut!" She hugs him, and tugs at his hair.

He's a little abashed. He forgot about that. "It's good to see you," he says, and carries her suitcase while she weaves up the stairs.

"Tea?" he offers. "It's herbal, no caffeine."

"Sure," says Raven. It's hard to tell when she's tired, with her ability. The little muscles of her face and the tiny scales of her skin don't show fatigue the way a baseline human's would. But her body language seems worn out, to him. He's been slowly learning to pick up on that sort of thing without reading minds for it.

She follows him into the kitchen and melts into a chair while he pours out tea for them both and sits opposite, offering his hand. She takes it and squeezes briefly, untangling to cradle her cup between her palms.

"How was it?" he tries.
"Shitty," she says plainly. "Everyone's strung out on Red Bull and those crazy supplements you get at truck stops. If they're not staring out the window like a zombie, they're crying their eyes out or snapping at everyone who looks at them funny. It's always loud, there's always lights on... I feel like I haven't gotten any sleep since I started."

"Weren't you on Diviner? I thought they had a six-hour lights-out policy every night."

"No, I took Herald."

Charles frowns, "Why?"

"I don't know, I didn't want to be a princess about it, I guess." She sips her tea moodily. "So instead I get to be a washout."

"Taking a break is not the same as washing out."

"I don't know, Charles." Raven runs both hands through her glossy red hair. "The bus I've been on, I wasn't crazy about those people, but they were used to me. I had to tell a couple of mutantphobes off in the first couple of days, but they bailed, and since then nobody's given me any hassle or freaked out when I'm blue. But I talked to this teke guy I ran into about taking the 50-66 and he warned me that bunch of us have had problems on that route. And don't tell me I should take Diviner for that one because that's not the point. I shouldn't have to take the expensive bus line to feel safe."

"No one should," Charles says cautiously. They've fought about mutantphobia more than once over the past year. Raven thinks his charm attack strategy amounts to aid and comfort to the enemy, that he shouldn't smile and make nice with humans who hate them. Sometimes he does feel wrong about putting forth a front of confidence and goodwill, trying to ingratiate himself to people who wish him dead. But one time out of a thousand, he manages to change someone's attitude a little, and that's enough to make him stick to it. Though he has to admit that for all he knows, a different approach might increase that ratio. He's been questioning all his presumptions this year.

Raven gives him an irritated little glare, but she sighs, "I don't want to argue. The point is, I don't know if I can deal with a whole new group of rowdy people freaking out about finding their soulmates. Especially when I'm getting zero direction from the bond."

"Maybe she's overseas?"

"Except we've been to St. Moritz how many times since I first sparked? And I've never felt any difference whether I'm in Switzerland or here or in California." Raven shakes her head.

"Sometimes I feel that she's happy or she's upset, or I get that nice little warm feeling like she's thinking about me. But north, south, east, west? No idea. And there's no point dragging around like this until that gets clearer. Doesn't your research say on average, women start sensing location later than men?"

"Sometimes, but I don't think you should let that stop you," Charles argues. "Raven, if there's any chance... don't waste any time. You never know what could happen."

"I can't put my life on hold to keep looking when I've got no clue where to even start," says Raven. "Believe me, I know why you think I should just stay out there and walk the earth like Caine in Kung Fu until I find her. But the time's not right. I feel it. I feel that as much as people say they feel a pull in a particular direction."

Charles can't really agree with her, he just... can't. But he doesn't have any grounds to keep
disputing her either, so he just nods.

They don't say anything else for a while; he pours them both more tea. Suddenly Raven frowns deeply, and even though her eyes are trained on his throat, it takes him a moment to remember.

She looks at him incredulously. He can feel his face heat when she says, "Wait. You're switching down? Since when do you bend?"

"I thought I should try it." He tosses off a shrug.

She's not fooled for a moment. "Who's 'L'? Jesus, are you under contract?"

Charles fidgets with his cup. "I can break it any time."

"You are." She stares. "I noticed you weren't mentioning anybody lately, but I thought you were studying."

"I have been studying," he says. "Concordance as well as genetics, you know that."

"Oh, don't even. Nobody would have you submit for a class project," says Raven. She reaches for the collar, and without thinking, Charles leans away. Raven's jaw drops. "Seriously?"

"I'm not under orders or anything," he says, "it's just the chain is so fine..."

"Right, because that's not a classic mindfuck."

"It's not like that."

"What's it like?" She shakes her head. "Never mind, it's not really my business I guess, but-- how long have you been doing this? Because I haven't heard you talk about anyone since Tony and that was last Christmas."

"Most of this year," he temporizes.

Raven's too sharp for that. "As in all of this year so far? Ten months? It must be, it looks like it's been that long since you cut your hair last. I hope that wasn't an order..."

"It's not that serious, Rae. It hasn't all been the same person."

"Is that supposed to be reassuring? You've been switching down all this time without telling anyone, you've been under contract for however long, but it's okay because you've had more than one dominant?"

"Yes," he says evenly, "it is meant to be reassuring, and it is okay."

She stops and gives him a weather eye. "Well, that sounded submissive."

"I'm still me," he says, firmly enough to end the conversation.

"I won't be here tonight," he tells Raven the next morning; it's Wednesday. "You can have my bed if you want. The sheets are clean."

Raven's gaze flicks down to the collar and back to his eyes. "You stay the night?"

"Three nights a week."
"This is messed up," Raven says. "Not that you're switching down, but you're spending three nights a week with someone and I don't know eir name."

"Lilandra Neramani."

"Yeah, but who is she?"

"She's an aeronautical drafter, she makes blueprints for planes and engines," Charles says. "Her grandparents were from Bangalore, her parents lived in London, she was born there and grew up here."

"And...?"

Charles could describe every pair of trainers Lilandra owns (nine) and the decor of her house and where everything is in her kitchen (some nights she orders him to dust and do the dishes.) He knows she likes to cook a lot on Sundays and freeze things for later in the week; he knows how she takes her tea. He knows how she feels when she sits down to tackle her work, and how she feels when she finishes for the day. How she feels when her favorite song comes up on shuffle. How she feels when she looks at him.

"We don't talk a lot," he admits.

"Oh. Right."

"Not because it's nonstop scening," he says, though he's not sure why he feels the need to clarify. "It's just... simple. She likes having me there. I like being there."

Raven still doesn't look satisfied, but she just asks, "When will you be back?"

"Tomorrow night around eleven," he says, and hugs her goodbye.

Raven stays and stays. She took a gap year off for her seeker trip, so she's not due to start university for nearly another year, yet. She's positive she doesn't want to do any more seeking, and obviously she doesn't want to go back to Westchester, but she doesn't seem to know what to do with herself.

"You know my lease is up at the end of the year," he mentions finally. He's been accepted to Oxford's doctoral program, scheduled to start in Hilary Term 2005. It's all been settled for a while now. His plane tickets are booked, he leaves January second.

"I know," she says, "you mentioned that." Apparently she's still a bit rankled he didn't tell her about his contract.

"Just checking."

Having Raven around makes his situation seem a bit surreal. He's self-conscious of all the little changes he's made gradually during this year, his longer hair, his different habits, the collar.

It's easier when he's with Lilandra. He opens up his mind to her moods, and everything feels natural, because it feels natural to her. She's never known him any other way.

Charles spends another Saturday at Lilandra's. He wakes up to her teeth nipping at his ear, and they shower together, breakfast on granola and head straight back to bed.
"Slow," she says, eyes dark, and he's glad Emma put him through all that denial. He can do slow. He starts with her ears and her neck, kisses her til she laughs and pushes him down; he spends time lavishing attention on her breasts while she rakes her nails along his shoulders. That sort of pain, he doesn't mind. He goes down and licks her to her first orgasm, and she rewards him by motioning him into reach and rolling a condom onto him. She draws him down to her, wrapping her legs around him. "Slow," she says again as he slides into her body, "slower," and he struggles with it, but he obeys, easing in and out at the pace she commands.

It's one of the things he admires most about her; she's so sure of herself. It doesn't matter to her that he's a dominant who's still only playing at submission. She doesn't add anything to establish her authority-- no cuffs, no toys, and the collar she put on him is too fragile for her to pull to remind him of his place. She just looks at him and puts her hand on his face, and even though it's not easy for him to relinquish control, he knows he's not in charge.

He gets her off a second time, and she slides her hand down and touches herself to reach a third peak directly after; feeling her pulse around him like that again and again has him wrecked, but he holds off til he can manage, "May I come, please," and she gives him a breathless "Yes."

After they've peeled apart and cleaned up a little, she lets him touch her freely, his hands roaming. "You're so beautiful," he says, not for the first time.

She's sitting up in bed to sip at a glass of water, and her mood is pleased and affectionate when he slides down, rests his arm across her thighs and nuzzles at her hip.

She sets the glass down and puts both hands on him. He used to see Emma fondling Peter this way and want it for himself, but it never felt right. He's still just a bit too self-conscious, but it's nice, regardless; it feels good now.

"Just a week left of your contract," says Lilandra, combing her fingers through his hair. "I'm not sure I'm ready to let you go. Maybe I'll just keep you."

He knows how she's feeling, mostly light and playful, a hint of melancholy. And something else, something he can't identify, something tangled that's only getting stronger.

Oh. No, that's him.

Charles reluctantly closes his mind to her to feel only what he's feeling himself. As soon as he does, he regrets it, turning to press his face against her hip. There's too much... he's grateful and humbled and angry and grieving and desperate. Something feels knotted up in him, lodged behind his breastbone. He doesn't care that she doesn't mean it, he just wants her to say it again.

"Charles," she says gently, tracing her fingers along the line of the chain around his neck. "Would you like me to keep you?"

If he keeps his face hidden against her like this, he's going to do something absurd and impossible. Say yes, possibly, or cry. Charles sits up and arranges himself to kneel on the bed, his form as perfect as he can make it.

"I'd like to do something for you. Let me do something for you," he asks, "please."

"You can do everything for me," she says. "Hands and mouth, whatever you like, and I'll tell you if you do something I don't want."

He takes her at her word, and the attention he paid to her body earlier is nothing to how he worships her now. He opens his mind to how she's feeling to guide him, and finds ways to wring as
much sensation as he can out of every inch of her. And even when she's falling apart with his mouth on her clit and his fingers inside her, he doesn't have to remind himself for a moment that he's not in control.

He knows, completely, that he'd do anything right now, just because she wants it. Just to please her. He needs her to be happy with him, happy enough to want to keep him, even though he knows that was never the plan, not for either of them. Even though he knows he can't possibly stay.

Even if he weren't leaving in January, he can't sustain this; as much as he craves her approval right now, as good as it feels with every moment to know that she's pleased with him, it's not untangling the snarl tightening in his chest, it's just making him feel more lost.

Lilandra puts him on his back and rides him, and this time she doesn't wait for him to ask permission; she lets him get close and then commands, "That's it, come for me, Charles," and just like that, he's there, he's hers.

For once he doesn't stay over on a Saturday night, rolling up his pallet and putting it away.

"Are you sure?" Lilandra asks, smoothing her hands over his shoulders. She held him for a long time after their scene, didn't say a word about the way he kept shivering, even though he was pressed up against her, warm under all the linens.

"I'm sure," he gives her a smile. "My sister's staying with me, I should spend a little time there. I'll be back tomorrow."

She kisses him. He's open to her moods, and he can feel that she understands; he'll come back tomorrow, he'll serve her for another week, and he'll enjoy the time they have left and try his best to please her, because that's what he agreed to do. But nothing like today is going to happen again.

When Charles gets back to his own place, Raven is parked on the sofa watching a documentary about birds and eating carrot sticks, the blankets of her makeshift bed kicked down and crumpled.

"Hey," she says, "I thought you were staying over there til tomorrow night."

"I'm back," he says.

"Okay. Here," she mangles the blankets even more to clear a space for him.

Charles sits next to her on the sofa. He reaches for the collar and carefully unhooks the clasp in back and takes it off; he sets it out of the way, under the lamp on the end table. Later he'll find a box to keep it in for the next week, whenever he's not at Lilandra's house.

Raven's watching him with a wide-eyed golden gaze when he turns back to her, but she doesn't ask, and when he drags the blanket around himself and huddles under it, she doesn't ask then either. She just puts her arm around his shoulders and sits with him, watching the birds.
Chapter Summary

Erik tries going clubbing, but there's a particular type of dominant he's always drawn to. It never seems to work out for him.

"You don't have to babysit," Erik tells Jason. "I know what I'm doing, I'll be fine."

Jason gives Erik a sideways look but doesn't push him. This has been working out all right for the past few weeks. Well... more or less all right. Erik's been itchy and edgy and restless since early in January, downright cranky at times. Getting laid has helped, a little, and so here they are, out at one of Jason's favorite clubs, looking around for people to scene with.

Erik has his bracelets on for this, one in the typical silicone that everyone's wearing these days, black to indicate heavy S&M play, on his right wrist to indicate he wants to be on the receiving end. The other bracelet on his right wrist is a thick doubled length of stainless steel ball chain, which indicates an interest in playing with metal toys. There's nothing else on his arm: this is one of the few times he leaves his windcatcher at home when he goes out; he can't stand the thought of anyone else touching it, of it getting lost. He thinks he'd notice, but he's gotten more than a little distracted at these places. Maybe he wouldn't know until it was too late. Not worth the risk.

He's got another length of ball chain on his left wrist, but this one has a twisted-helix charm on it, putting it out in the open. Mutant, ability related to metal. On his right arm, it'd imply he was seeking out other mutants, but here it puts his identity front and center. It's gotten him passed by a few times, but more often it's gotten him approached by other mutants, people who recognize a kindred spirit and who are intrigued by the fact that he's only got two wristbands, the black one and the ball chain. The average person is wearing at least six, and a dozen's not unheard of.

Jason's got a whole row of them on his left arm, everything from heavy S&M to bondage to fisting and breathplay. There's a formal service bracelet, a handfeeding bracelet. The one he's clipped his own twisted helix charm to is the one indicating roleplay.

That tends to get him a question or two, and when a pretty, almost delicate sub with shoulder-length strawberry blonde hair and bright green eyes comes up to him, she points at it. "So what's that about?"

It's a nicer way to ask than a lot of the things they've heard, to say nothing about what Jason's run into on his own. Some people just lead with the fear: You're not a mindreader, are you?

Jason's vented his frustration about that before, away from the clubs, in private. People are so fucking scared of psionics. It's always the first thing they ask. They all want to know if I can read minds. And you know what, a strong enough telepath could do what I do. It sucks that I get less flak because I have less ability.

Erik's never going to argue that. The fact that any mutant has to downplay eir abilities feels personal to Erik, given how much of his own he's lost.

Psionics don't scare Erik, either, not illusionists, not empaths, not even full-fledged theta-and-above
telepaths, though he's never run into one... or he's never run into one who was out of the closet, anyway. He wouldn't balk at sceneing with one, as long as they could handle the mess in his mind. Sebastian's a once-a-year event now, and a short one, usually. But one bad flashback that Erik's learned to live with and suppress could ruin things for a telepath. Erik doesn't want to subject anyone to his past if he doesn't have to.

But it just makes it that much more frustrating watching humans and sometimes even other mutants react to Jason with suspicion. Until they find out what his powers actually are, people tend to be guarded with him, and when they find out he's not a mindreader, they calm down. As if the fact he's not a telepath is a relief.

Most of the time Jason manages to look on the bright side, and tonight is no exception. "I'm an illusionist," he says, creating a tiny bouquet of daisies and offering it to her.

She looks charmed, no surprise there. She even sniffs them and looks wonderfully up at Jason. "Wow, that's cool," she says. "I was wondering if you had an animal form, maybe." Down on her wrist, she's got exactly that marked: animal roleplay with a twisted-helix charm. "I don't go all the way to cat form when I'm sceneing," she clarifies. "Just the ears and the tail, and sometimes the fur if people are into it." The light's a little too low to see if she's blushing, but she sounds shy enough. Maybe it's the fact that both Jason and Erik are mutants that has her a little more at ease. Or maybe she's just found it's better to be forthright.

They need places like this just for them, clubs that only allow mutants instead of happening to be mutant-friendly. In the four years Jason and Erik have been in Pittsburgh, they've run through five or six clubs, and it's always the same thing: humans find out it's a mutant-friendly bar, and then mutant-chasers start coming in as though the mutants in the club are there to be humans' personal sex fantasies instead of people with desires and needs of their own. Pretty soon coming to the club is more like being gawked at than finding someone to spend an evening with.

But that's a thought for another time. At the moment, Jason's projecting cat ears and a tail onto himself, sleek glossy black fur to match his hair. His potential sub actually bounces and squeaks with delight, and her own ears and tail come to the surface, her reddish-ginger cat ears twitching until they find their way out from under her strawberry-blonde hair, her tail swishing out from under her skirt. Where Jason's ears and tail are all one color, hers are striped, dark orange fading to light orange with a few white rings around the tip of her tail.

Jason wraps his tail around her right wrist and smiles at her. "So what else do you like?"

She gives Erik a curious look. "All kinds of things. Is it a package deal, or...?"

"No," Erik says quickly, "no, we're just here as friends."

"Because I really wouldn't mind, as long as you're okay with the ears and the tail..."

"Your ears and tail are lovely," Erik says, "and I'm sure the fur is, too, but no--"

"We're platonic friends; we don't usually scene together," Jason says, and her confusion clears as she nods. Jason turns to Erik. "Let me know if you need anything?"

"Likewise."

He claps Jason on the shoulder and heads off into the crowd, leaving him to what looks like it's going to be a very fun little kitten-play scene; Jason's scene partner starts purring as Erik wanders off, her arms winding around Jason's neck.
Going off on his own, though, there's no reason for Erik not to look for what he really wants, if he can even name it anymore. Are you out there, he thinks, but he stops himself before he can think the rest. Someone out there must be interested in a heavy masochist, even if he doesn't offer submission along with it.

It's a slow circuit around the room, taking in people's bracelets, looking for someone who seems to line up reasonably well with his own interests, and a few people stop him, make the usual offers. A hand on his wrist, a couple of brash dominants who tell Erik they know exactly what he needs... he's polite as he waves them off, but he waves them off all the same. He's looking for something, someone else. He'll know em when he sees em.

And he does. The dom he wants is standing in the middle of a group of younger players, all of them barely old enough to get in here at all; one or two might be underage. It's the one off to the side, on the edge of the group, that's caught Erik's eye. He's a short, slim, brown-haired dom with freckles and huge, pretty eyes, lips that are distracting enough Erik's surprised no one's taking advantage of them. He's got a small backpack slung over his shoulder-- brought his own gear, then. Erik wonders what he's got.

When Erik finally catches his eye, the dom glances behind himself for a minute-- which is a little pointless, he and his friends are nearly backed up against a wall-- and then gives Erik a surprised look, pointing at his own chest with eyebrows tilted high.

Erik nods, already on his way over. When he gets there, the dom says, "Hi. Wow, you're gorgeous, what are you into?"

He's got the bracelets on his wrists speaking for him, but he's practically forgotten them. The dom's licking his lips, shifting his weight, looking into Erik's eyes instead of down at Erik's wrists. Erik's having some trouble thinking clearly.

"Anything you want," he says, which is not what he meant to say, fuck, but here he is again, going after a dom who fits his type entirely too fucking well. He's been looking twice at men like this for years, but here at the clubs it's becoming a problem.

His statement's gotten a little attention from the dom's friends, who are all looking at Erik and their friend with a little surprise. "You're putting me on," the dom says, glancing at his friends. "Someone's putting me on."

"I'm sorry," Erik says, drawing back a little, out of the dom's-- out of Andy's-- space. "If you're not interested--" He can't bring himself to say it, should I go? He already knows he should, but he can't. He just can't.

"Whoa, oh God, no no no, I'm interested." Andy reaches out, catches Erik by the wrist. He licks his lower lip and gives Erik a huge grin. "Please don't go." He pulls Erik a little closer, and Erik goes with it. It isn't a perfect fit, but it feels good. He tilts his head down, and when Andy reaches up and scratches at the back of his neck, Erik has to struggle to stay upright. "Let's try this again, okay? I'm Andy."

"Erik," Erik manages, barely.

"What are you into?" Andy runs his thumb across Erik's bracelets, the heavy play wristband and the smooth ball chain. "You like heavy play, you're into metal... okay." The hand on the back of
Erik's neck gets a little heavier, more insistent. Andy's tugging Erik down. Erik goes with the motion, and Andy kisses him, putting those gorgeous lips to work. He's a good kisser; Erik leaves his right hand in Andy's grip but can't resist slipping his left into Andy's hair, thumb caressing Andy's temple while he teases his fingers through the strands.

"Nice," Andy says softly, when he pulls away, and it sends warmth running all the way up and down Erik's spine, making him grin. "So if you're into the heavy stuff... are you here with anybody? Are you with anybody?"

"Came with a friend," Erik offers. "Same way you did, only for me it's just the one."

"Speaking of friends." Andy looks over at his. Some of them are moving on, shaking their heads and waving; one of them gives him a thumbs-up before he goes. The one who said it was unfortunate that he'd never met Erik before is still there, lingering; he's got a number of wristbands on, including one that indicates voyeurism. "You mind if Dex stays?"

"Just to watch unless you say otherwise," Dex says. "I wouldn't want to barge in uninvited."

"It doesn't matter." Erik looks back at Andy. "It's fine."

Andy exchanges a little smirk with Dex. It doesn't matter; Erik doesn't give a damn about being shown off. It probably ought to be flattering. It might be, if he thought about it. Right now, though, all he can think about is Andy. Getting to touch him, getting to kiss him again. Getting to kneel.

Oh, God, he's already craving that, already wanting to be on the floor. He hopes Jason's busy with his kitten scene.

He's also getting distracted by the feel of Andy's fingertips running gently over the back of his neck. Andy brings his fingers around to the front, little gentle caresses across Erik's throat. "If you're not with anyone... can I put a play collar on you?"

Dex takes up a patch of wall next to Andy, giving him nearly the same view Andy has. Erik couldn't care less, can barely even get himself to notice anything other than Andy's face, his hands, the overwhelming urge to be on his knees for Andy. He takes a breath and nods, looking into Andy's eyes. "Yeah," he says softly. "Yeah, I'm all right with play collars. Do you have one?"

"In my bag. Black leather, is that okay?"

"Yes." Erik takes a deep breath, waiting and keeping still while Andy digs into his backpack, pulling out a classic leather collar and a chain-link leash. Not that he asked about a leash, but at this point Erik's probably not going to say no to anything, least of all something metal. Andy hands his bag over to Dex, who hoists it onto one shoulder and settles back down against the wall; Erik stays still, waiting for instructions.

"Knees," Andy says, eyebrows up, almost a question instead of an order. But Erik just nods to him, folding down, slipping his hands behind his back. Andy doubles the leash over, quickly clips it to his belt loop-- Erik can tell from the motion that he's done that before, a lot of that, despite the fact that he barely looks old enough to drive. And then he has both hands free to buckle the collar onto Erik.

Erik catches his breath as the collar goes on. It's cool to the touch, still, and the leather's stiff and glossy. New, probably. It smells good, strong enough for Erik to catch its scent over everything else this bar smells like. New black leather; Erik wonders if the collar's been buckled on anyone else. He tilts his head forward, exposing the back of his neck so Andy can adjust the fit and buckle it. It doesn't take him very long-- maybe he's had this collar on other people before, after all. Erik
doesn't care. He's here now; that's all that matters.

Andy's fingertips skate up the back of Erik's neck and up into his hair, scratching lightly over his joining spot; Erik jumps, hands coming out of position as he catches himself on his knees. "Sorry!" Andy says. "Sensitive?"

"Yeah," Erik manages; he tilts his head back, drawing his joining spot out of Andy's reach. "Hurts. Not the good way."

"Maybe you're close to finding your soulmate," Andy offers, smiling down at him. "I've heard it can be like that sometimes if you haven't met yet, if you're about to."

Erik pastes that smile on his face; he really wants this conversation to end now. "Maybe," he says. He glances at the chain leash, still on Andy's belt loop. "Did you have something in mind for that?"

"If you're up for it. It's the only thing I've got with me that's metal."

"Okay."

"Put your hands behind your back again, you looked really hot like that..."

Erik does it, and the next part is so predictable he doesn't even need to think about what's going to happen; he licks his lips and leaves his mouth open as Andy unbuckles his belt with a showy little twist of his wrist and then unbuttons his fly, all the buttons coming free neatly with a single quick motion. It really doesn't matter if that's predictable; Erik still wants him, and he looks up, hopeful.

"Yeah, wow, that's hot," Andy says, reaching forward and rubbing his thumb over Erik's lower lip. "You just stay like that for a second, okay? Because damn."

He exchanges a quick glance with Dex, who looks equally impressed, something all too evident since Dex still has his pants done up- though as Erik watches, Dex reaches down and gives himself an obvious, deliberate adjustment.

He should be thinking about what he's getting into; he should be worrying about how far this is going to go, right here on the club floor. He's not. He's just looking up at Andy and thinking about how long he's going to have to wait, about whether Andy's going to use that leash and hold him in place, reel him in and make him feel owned.

He licks his lips and focuses on Andy. "Please...?"

Andy takes the leash off his belt loop and clips it carefully onto Erik's collar. He slips the handle over his wrist; Erik shivers just a little. It feels like he's sinking even deeper, like the weight of the collar is pressing him down. Maybe this is exactly where he should be. Right now he can believe that, wants to believe that. He doesn't need to be anything else: he can just be this, just give this part of himself up and let someone else take it.

He's got a dim awareness of Andy taking his cock out, rolling a condom on, but he's waiting for a tug against that leash-- and there it is, Andy reeling him in, putting Erik's mouth on his cock and then groaning as he pushes forward. The taste of latex is a little overwhelming, but that doesn't matter, not now.

He moves forward as Andy draws him in, and for a little while they're together on it, Andy taking, Erik giving. It's good, surprisingly good; Erik could go on like this forever. He can forget everything else and just be here, be this, nothing else matters, nothing matters at all...

Andy picks up speed, and there's something about the pace that feels off; it's going to be over too
soon, it's all going to be over, oh God, Erik isn't ready for that. He wants to say please, say don't stop, tell Andy please don't go, please stay with me, please, but he can't; his mouth is full, and he can't bear to bring his hands up or give a non-verbal safeword. However long this lasts, he'll hold on through it. Please, please don't go, please don't leave me, I need this so much, I need you, are you out there, can you hear me, I still love you, I still need you, please don't stop, please...

But Andy's young and impatient and ready to burst with the sensations of pleasure and control, and he jerks forward, grunting, cock pulsing in the condom as he comes in Erik's mouth. When it's over, Andy pushes Erik back, leans heavily against the wall while he catches his breath.

And God, that's it. It's over. Erik stays on the ground, leash dangling off his play collar, hands still locked behind his back. It's done, Andy's done with him, it never fucking lasts.

"Hey," and it's not even Andy, it's Dex, "you okay down there? Do you need some water, a blanket...?"

He wants to say, fuck off, wants to shove Dex's worry and sympathy right down the bastard's throat. I don't need your pity, just let me stay here, don't ask me to stop...

"Erik?" Andy drops down next to him, kneeling beside him. "Erik, hey, are you all right? Can you hear me?"

Erik nods, looking down at the floor. Andy starts with the leash, trying to unclip it, but the metal won't move for him; Erik should be ashamed, is ashamed, but he can't make himself explain. Confused by the leash, Andy tries reaching around to the back of Erik's neck to get the collar itself off, but Erik leans away from him.

"Please don't," Erik says, and he closes his eyes, not wanting to see whatever might be in Andy's eyes now: impatience, annoyance, pity, irritation, anything like that. Andy's done, he needs to move on, and Erik's getting in his way. He shouldn't be holding on to this collar; he should never have let Andy put it on him in the first place.

"Um," Andy says, both his hands resting on Erik's shoulders. "Uh, okay... Erik, it's okay, it's going to be okay." He gives Erik's shoulders a light squeeze. "Come here."

Erik leans in, lets Andy pull him into a hug, and Andy strokes his hair, making soft soothing noises. Erik's too stiff to enjoy any of it; this isn't right, it isn't what he needs. Andy's petting feels rote, not about Erik at all.

"He said he was here with a friend," Andy says to Dex. "Did you see who...?"

"The first time I saw him was when he came up to you. I can look around, see if anybody knows him... he's got a mutant charm on, maybe one of the other mutants around here would know him..."

Andy's still petting him, and it still feels wrong. Erik can't bring himself to move, though. It's better on his knees. It's better this way, even if it hurts.

He must zone out for a while, because the next thing he knows, Andy's sliding away, and there's a pissed-off voice saying, "Jesus Christ, what are they teaching in Concordance classes these days?"

And that's wrong, too, it isn't Andy's fault, but suddenly there's a sharp tug on his leash, and the world snaps into focus. Jason's down on one knee in front of him, shirt off, little scratches all over his chest and shoulders, cat ears still on, tail thrashing and twitching.

"Hey," Jason says. "It's me. It's time to go."
Erik just sags, head tilting down as far as the collar will let him. "I can't."

"You can. Trust me." Jason reaches up, rests his thumb on the leash's clip. "You can do this. Let go, now. Let it go." He tries the clip, and when it doesn't budge, he brings his other hand up to Erik's shoulder. "I'm proud of you," he whispers. "You've got this, it's yours, I can feel the way you're holding it on. But it's time to go, Erik. Let it go. Please."

Erik finally loosens the grip he has on the leash, and Jason unhookes it. The comforting weight of metal goes away, and Erik stifles a sob at the loss. "I need you on your feet, Erik. Come on. Come with me."

"I can't, I don't want to--"

"I know. I know you don't. But you need to be on your feet. You need that. Can you get up on your own? Please? For me?"

Erik shakes his head. "I can't." He takes a deep breath and lets it out shakily. "Help me?"

"Of course I will." Jason rests both hands on Erik's shoulders and squeezes, and after a moment's pause, he hooks a finger through the O-ring on the front of Erik's collar. His voice hardens, all strength and command. "Come on. We're getting up now. Up. Let's go."

And Jason stands up, slowly, gently tugging at Erik's collar. Erik goes with him, drawn up by Jason's forceful gesture with the collar and the tone of dominance in his voice; he couldn't have stayed on the ground through that even if he'd wanted to. If... he did want to, he can't deny that now. When he's on his feet again, he sways a little, forward against Jason's grip.

"I'm going to take the collar off you," Jason warns him, and Erik nods, eyes stinging, holding still for it. Jason's quick, and the relief from the heat and pressure is greater than Erik expected.

Jason hands the collar back to Andy and pulls Erik into his arms; Erik clings to him, face pressed hard against Jason's shoulder.

"What happened...?" Andy asks. "I didn't think... did I do something?"

"You stuck a goddamn play collar on someone who wasn't even flagging submissive," Jason seethes. "Just because somebody's into getting hurt doesn't mean they want you to take them over."

"I--" Andy stops, goes quiet for a minute. "I didn't realize, sir. I'm sorry."

"He's the one who said 'anything you want','" Dex points out; Erik cringes, still holding on tightly to Jason.

Jason sighs. "Yeah," he says. "But you should fucking double-check. And you should never try to negotiate with a total stranger who's obviously already in headspace."

Neither one of them has anything to say about that. Jason strokes his hands down Erik's back and then gets an arm around his waist, nudging him and turning him to face forward. "Come on," he says, easing Erik through the crowd. "Time to go."

Erik looks back up at Andy and almost tries to pull away; Andy looks stricken and worried and still like everything Erik wants, almost. Almost.

"I can blank him," Jason says, squeezing Erik's waist.
Erik looks straight ahead, and shakes his head. "I'm all right," he says. "You're right, it's time to go."

On the walk home, Jason finally remembers to get rid of the ears and tail, and he adds a shirt and jacket so as to draw fewer stares. Erik looks over at him, and after a while he pulls away, walking on his own.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not upset with you."

"I'm upset with me." Erik rubs at his forehead. "You'd think I'd learn my lesson one of these days. Fuck."

"I think it might be time to accept that the clubs aren't for you, yeah," Jason gently agrees. "You could do personals, I guess..."

"And say what? 'Looking for someone 5'9" or above, blond or black hair but not red or brown, eyes any color other than blue, preferably squinty or possibly beady. Must be good with a cane, a flogger, and a singletail. No power exchange in-scene, but be prepared to deal with a sub who won't come out of headspace..." Erik shakes his head. "Who fucking wants that?"

Jason sighs. "Sometimes I wonder if you really are this clueless or if you have to work at it."

They're at Erik's apartment now; Erik frowns as he gets the lock open and heads upstairs. "What are you talking about?"

"Five nine. Black hair. Brown eyes. Squinty is kind of uncharitable, but hey, I've heard worse. Good with pretty much any kind of pain work you could want. Long history of peeling you off the ground if your submission circuits get shorted out." Erik pauses at his door, staring down at the doorknob. "You don't have to go clubbing if all you want is pain work. We did that, once. It doesn't have to be an emergency."

Erik unlocks the door and walks in, Jason still trailing behind him. "If you don't think it'd work with me, that's okay. But this isn't what you need, and I know you know that."

"Would you close the door?" Erik asks quietly. "Unless you'd rather go."

Jason closes the door, slides the locks into place. "It can be whatever you need it to be," he says. "Anything you need. It's been my motto since high school, why stop now?"

"I don't want to--" burden you, bother you, annoy you by asking for too much or too often, Erik thinks. He turns back to Jason, who's waiting him out, expression carefully neutral. "I don't want anything to change. You should still get to scene. Date. Whatever you want."

"Okay," Jason says evenly. "So are we talking about platonic with a side of pain work, or are we talking about being open to other people?"

There's a difference. A big difference, even if it's only in words and titles. Erik looks down at the floor for a second before looking back up.

"Platonic with a side of pain work, I think. If that works for you."

"We'll make it work," Jason promises. He comes a little closer. "How are you doing right now? You crashed pretty hard."
Erik nods, reaching up to rub at his face, his mouth, used and taken for granted. He can still taste latex. "It's just the same fucking thing it always is."

"Well. Maybe this'll put a stop to some of that." Jason slides his hands into his pockets. "Worth a shot."

"Okay." Erik sighs. "Will you stay tonight? I don't--" He doesn't want to be alone, but he doesn't want to say that out loud, somehow.

But Jason can read the rest of that on Erik's face, maybe, because he nods. "Of course I'll stay."
Erik and Jason are just doing platonic painplay scenes. Really. Okay, the definition of "platonic" is getting a bit stretched. And Jason has an upcoming career opportunity, but it's taking him to Vancouver... why does going west seem like it's the wrong direction these days?

"Seven," Erik pants, "oh God, wait, hold on, wait--"

Jason stops immediately; Erik can hear him breathing hard, too. Erik closes his eyes, tries to focus-- seven is less than half of what they were aiming for-- but he shakes his head, pushes up off the bed and stands up straight. "Hit my limit," he says, "but thank you."

"Seven. Seriously?" Jason reaches out, presses his hand against Erik's welts. Erik hisses, puts his hand over Jason's and presses it in a little more deeply; to think he used to flag "heavy painplay" before. Nobody he's scened with has ever gotten him where Jason has, over the last few months of on-and-off painplay scenes. "Seven from a cane is nothing for you, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Erik says, finally letting Jason's hand go. "Just getting a little worked up."

"A little," Jason teases. But he turns around, gives Erik space to collect himself and get dressed. "I'm losing my touch."

"Trust me. Getting me worked up after only seven? Your touch is anything but lost." Erik finishes pulling on his t-shirt, gets into his jeans. "You can turn around now. Thanks."

"Uh-huh." The cane vanishes, and Jason puts his hands behind his head, stretches his shoulders out. "Still up for dinner?"

"Absolutely." Erik tugs on his leather jacket and rubs his hands down the backs of his thighs, breathing out softly. "God, you really do hit hard. Thank you for that."

"The astonishing Jason Wyngarde, selfless sadist and fabulous friend, at your service," Jason rattles off, bowing at the waist. "You took it well. But you always do."

"What are you in the mood for? Dinner-wise." Erik follows Jason out of the bedroom and into the living room, where Jason picks up his coat and scarf. "I was thinking somewhere with nice cushioned booths, myself."

"You sure? We could hit up the Greek place with the creaky wood chairs. You could squirm a little longer." Jason wiggles his eyebrows as he wraps his scarf around his neck and ties it deftly in front. "I'm totally altruistic enough to want that for your sake, and not for any ulterior motives of my own."

Erik just laughs. "How about pizza?"

"Fine by me."
Over pizza, Jason says, "So that television thing. I got the job. I'll be heading out to Vancouver as soon as I'm done with my finals."

Erik almost chokes on his beer. "You couldn't have told me that before the caning? Congratulations, that's fantastic."

"I tried," Jason says, rolling his eyes, "but when I opened the door and the first words out of your mouth were 'Do you feel like caning me?,' what was I going to do, say 'Sure, after I catch you up on my career news'?"

"That wasn't the first thing I said."

"Right, you did say 'hey, how's it going' first, in basically the same breath."

Erik shakes his head. "You can always say no."

Jason sober fast. "I'm just teasing. I don't mind. You know I'll drop anything if you want me to hurt you, pretty much any time, right?"

Erik does squirm in the booth now, but it's not about the leftover pain from his stripes, as nice as that is. "I really should try to control myself a little better, shouldn't I? Your emfriends have been nice about it, but--"

"It's platonic, come on," Jason says, lifting another slice of pizza onto his plate. "It's practically platonic. He's talking to the pizza, not Erik, and Erik isn't going to call him on it, not when he's been making the same argument for the last year, both in his own head and out loud to Jason. "Either one of us starts getting worked up, we call a halt to it. If it were fucking with our friendship, we'd stop doing it. There's nothing to 'be nice' about, we're just friends, we scene sometimes. No big deal."

"Right," Erik says, and grasping for a subject change, "so talk to me about something that is a big deal-- your television series? How many episodes, how long will you be in Vancouver?"

"It's seven episodes. I'm playing the new mutant emfriend on The U Word."

Erik blinks at him. The U Word is more or less a soap opera with gratiutous amounts of nudity and sex, coming up on its fourth season this fall. It's about unoriented people, hence the "U", but it's also tackled two-dom and two-sub relationships, threesomes, relationships that are already established when someone finds eir soulmate... anything unusual about orientation or the bond has been a subplot, at least. Almost anything. Erik has yet to see any plots covering "Choose Your Soulmate" techniques, but he's grateful for that.

Erik's been watching it since it started, even though it meant subscribing to a pay cable station; he was curious, and it initially had a mutant character in the cast-- played by a baseline human, of course. The mutant character left before the first season was halfway through, but Erik was hooked on the show by then; he's always liked trashy romance novels, and this is no different. Sometimes the way unoriented people are portrayed bothers him-- one more plot about someone finding the 'right' dominant and suddenly finding eir submissive side, and Erik's sworn he's going to stop watching. He's not sure he can hold to that, though. He's a little too invested in the storylines.

He knew Jason had gone out to audition for something, but Jason is superstitious; he doesn't like to talk about what he's auditioning for until he finds out whether or not he got the part, even down to college productions. But The U Word, that's a much bigger-profile series than Erik expected. "Whose emfriend...?"
"You're going to like this," Jason says dryly. "Jesse."

"Jesse," Erik says, eyes going a little unfocused. "Well, I'll be watching the shit out of that..."

Jason just rolls his eyes. "Saw that reaction coming from miles and miles off," he says. "I know he's your favorite."

Erik fidgets a little more. "Well. I can look."

Out of all the ostensibly-unoriented characters in the series, Jesse Gallaway, played by Neal O'Brien, caught Erik's eye right away. Neal fits Erik's type to an almost uncomfortable degree: short, slim, brown hair, huge blue eyes, gorgeous full lips, freckles that, thanks to all that gratuitous nudity, Erik knows go all the way down his chest. Unlike some of the cast members, Neal doesn't play coy with his orientation off-screen; he's a dominant, but he's said in interviews that he's had relationships with unoriented people. His character's strong and forthright and a sadist, but he's never gotten into a relationship with someone and switched up or down for them; he's had monologues about painplay and roleplay not automatically equating to power exchange. Erik likes his character for more reasons than the obvious.

Of course, the obvious means Erik can never quite look away from the screen when Neal's in a scene. But at least Erik's stopped going out to clubs and ending up on his knees for someone like that before he can even remind himself he doesn't like to sub anymore. And there's no way in hell he's going to pass up an opportunity to watch Jason having fake television sex with someone who looks like that. "I could come and visit you, maybe. In Vancouver."

Even as he's saying it, he can feel an itch going all the way up his spine, centering in his joining spot. Vancouver. He hasn't been that far west since he was fourteen, since he was still traveling from one Pacific Northwest town to the next with his mother. The farthest he's been in the last few years is Park View, and even going to meet Sebastian in Atlanta this year felt like heading in the wrong direction. That was strange...

But with the way Jason's face is lighting up, Erik can't possibly mention any of that now. "I'd like that. I'd like it a lot. Do you have a passport?"

"I don't, but I should," Erik says, and he doesn't even know where that came from. International travel has never exactly been in his plans, not even to somewhere as unexotic as Canada. East, he thinks; maybe he should go east. Europe. Germany, France, Spain... England, maybe. It's a ridiculous thought; he can't afford a European vacation, and what would he do there even if he went?

Still, he lets Jason find him an expedited passport service, and before Jason's graduation he has it in his hands, a passport outfitted with a traditionally terrible photo and his full legal name, Erik Magnus Shaw. He stares at it for a while after getting it back from the service; it's one of those moments when he can't imagine how he got to this point, how this is who he is today.

When it comes time to book his flight out to Vancouver, though, the itch at his joining spot stops him from clicking the purchase tickets button. He tries three times before giving up and rubbing at the base of his skull.

"Fuck you," he mutters, pressing in hard. The pain drags through him, makes him a little dizzy, but when he lets up, he sighs and picks up his phone.

"I'm not going to make Vancouver," Erik tells Jason. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's going on--"
"I can book the tickets for you," Jason says, but Erik's silence must say it all. "Or not," Jason adds, worry obvious even over the phone lines. "What happened? Is your bond acting up?"

"I don't know." Erik puts his hand over his joining spot, closes his eyes. *Is it you? Are you out there? Can you hear me?*

There's nothing. Maybe it's always going to be nothing. He says good-bye to Jason and hangs up, leaning back in his chair and staring up at the ceiling, wishing he could *know*. 
Charles, June 2006

Chapter Summary

Charles is back from Oxford, and it feels so good being back in New York again. Even better when he hooks up with a gorgeous, tall, slender sub with classic features, except for the way this isn't better at all.

Charles isn't sure why he's so happy to be coming home-- home to New York without so much as a post-doc lined up, he'll have to apply and do interviews, and he isn't looking forward to that at all. But the truth is, he's been out of sorts for the last month or so, feeling more and more as if he's done here, as if he needs to be out of England and back in the States.

Not that there's any reason for that feeling; it's just crept up on him, more and more. It was a real distraction as he finished up his thesis, and he's still not certain he developed his idea as much as it deserves, but he's been seeking out data for it intermittently since he was sixteen. He's taken it as far as he can go with it, for now. It's time to put it out there and let the theory rise or fall on its merits.

Linking the soulbond to X-gene mutation has been a fascinating, and yes, controversial topic. His advisor's been encouraging him to develop his dissertation into a book meant for a broader audience. It might help to change the tenor of conversation about the issue. If Charles is right, X-gene mutation's not an aberration caused by radiation or chem trails or whatever the latest notion is; it's a successful adaptation, one that's being perpetuated and proliferated through the bond.

He wants to give it a go. Write the book, make the arguments. But it's tiring. A lot of his passion for his work has faded.

Early on, he was certain that if he only put together enough information about the bond's interactions with X-gene mutation, he would hit upon some magical answer to solve the riddle of his own lost bond. He never quite let himself realize how much he believed that he was bound to find the answer and fix everything, tomorrow or the next day or the next week or the next year.

He was so sure it was only a matter of time. He consulted psionics and therapists, took seeker trips, submitted all those months... when that got him nowhere, he followed his work to Oxford, devoted himself to research almost entirely, and still. Still nothing.

It wasn't until his hope flagged that he realized how much it had been driving him. And every day he felt more isolated, more stretched thin, like he'd left the better part of himself across the water.

It didn't help that he's now four for four on relationships that ended because the other person found eir bondmate. Cal was the only one who lasted long enough to call them emfriends; he joked that he was only sticking around because the last two people Charles dated found their bondmates while they were with him, which was funny until five months in when Cal met Anne. It's not that unusual for relationships to end that way in university, those are prime seeking years for a lot of people, but that hasn't made it any easier to take.

Charles used to be able to lose himself in his work when things like that bothered him. But these days the work just leaves him staring at source after source, wondering whether his own mutation
drove his bondmate off. Whether they would have had complementary mutations if they'd ever met... if he was right and his bondmate was a mutant at all. It leaves him collating information and trying to imagine whether it was more likely that his bondmate was a high-level mutant the way Charles used to be or whether the bond linked one mate with a powerful mutation to one with a less dramatic ability, if perhaps diverse mutations helped both partners survive and achieve reproductive success...

Well, it's a moot point now; Charles hasn't tested above Gamma-level in years.

It would be pushing matters to say that he's sick of even looking at his thesis, but when he boxes up his research to be shipped home, he simply writes "STORAGE" on everything. He'll get it all out again when he has a use for it.

He's not expecting the flight back to be easy. In fact, he's two Scotches in before he realizes he's actually feeling better than he has in a while. After that, he snuggles under three blankets and drifts off, mildly comforted by the hum of minds around him and the sensation of moving rapidly towards home, and by the time the plane lands, he might be cold, but he's sober.

Raven's there to meet him when he comes off the plane; down at baggage claim he pulls her into a hug and delivers a smacking kiss to her forehead. "I missed you," he says.

She beams at him. "You're in a good mood. What's up? Did your thesis go over better than you expected?"

"Yes. Well-- no-- sort of," he says, but the thesis really has been the last thing on his mind for the last few hours. "I don't know. I'm just happy to be home, I suppose."

"I've got your rooms all set up in the townhouse," Raven chirps, as they head out to the car. She flashes a grin at the driver, who loads Charles's bags into the trunk and gracefully holds the door open for Raven. Charles is left to get his own door, but he doesn't mind; in fact, he's actually feeling more and more awake by the minute. Strange, really, after eight hours on an airplane, but after all, it's only three in the afternoon here. Plenty of time to take a shower, have dinner, maybe go out later...

Which is how he finds himself in Twists And Turns, a mutant-friendly club not too far from the townhouse. His left arm's decorated with half a dozen silicone bracelets marking the kind of scene he's into tonight, right arm showing a few as well. He glances over body after body, face after face, and it's not long until he finds someone who catches his eye. Tall, lean, square jaw, bleached-blond hair, a veritable rainbow of options on his right arm.

Charles manages to lock gazes with him across the room, and oh, this is going to happen; the other man shifts and dances through the crowd until he's standing in front of Charles, smiling.

"I'm Dave," he says, and rather than offering his hand straight-on, for a handshake, he offers it palm-up, displaying all his bracelets. "What do you do?"

"I'm Charles. And let's see..." Charles runs a fingertip down the selection, taps a white faux-velvet band that signifies 'exhibitionist' and a light green one that signifies 'dirty talk'. It takes him a moment to reorient, because it's the other way around in England, but typically in the States, bracelets on the left stand for interest in giving, whether it's pain, humiliation, or head. On the right they imply a desire to receive rather than give: Dave wants someone to talk dirty to him. "I think we could do something fun with these..."

Dave has a look at Charles's bracelets as well, and rests his fingertip on one on the left that signals 'oral sex'; Charles is wearing two, to communicate not just willingness but enthusiasm. "Could we
work this one in, too?" Dave grins. "I promise to be really appreciative."

"Absolutely."

There's a 'seeking mutants' bracelet among Dave's collection, but no 'is a mutant' bracelet to correspond with it. Charles, on the other hand, does have that one, and David touches it, looking Charles over. "What's this for?"

"Psionic," Charles says quickly, "telepath. I don't have to, though."

"Oh." A quick expression of disappointment floats over Dave's face, and Charles reinforces his shields; not only does he not need someone to be hostile about his mutation right now, he really doesn't want to feel it if Dave turns out to be one of those people who just frequents mutant bars in hopes of getting someone with mutated genitalia. "Okay. So you won't be reading my mind while we...?"

"No," Charles says. "Not unless I'm invited."

Dave snorts. "Sorry, man. Private thoughts and all..."

"Don't worry about it. Your mind's not what got my attention," Charles says, almost wincing at himself afterwards; that was just catty. But it doesn't seem to have spoiled the mood at all; Dave only laughs, head tilting back to reveal a gorgeous expanse of throat. Really, Charles was telling the truth, he just wouldn't have been so stark about it, ordinarily. He looks Dave over again, drinks in the sight of him: sharp angles, slender frame, but somehow still muscular. Charles's palms itch with the desire to get his hands on Dave's narrow waist.

A quick glance at Dave's bracelets doesn't tell him, and since he can't lift the thought from the surface of Dave's mind, he asks: "Do you like kissing?"

"You bet."

"Then let's start there."

Charles curls a hand around Dave's wrist and pulls him out of the crowd, gets him over to a spot on the wall where they can still be seen, but sexual contact is permitted and expected. "Standard color safewords?"

"Yes, sir."

Charles smirks. "You don't have to call me that, but I won't stop you if you want to."

"I like to," Dave says, grinning right back. "What do you like calling subs?"

"Whatever you like to hear."

"I like 'boy'."

"Open your mouth, boy," Charles fires back, and Dave parts his lips and looks eagerly down at Charles and waits.

Charles has to stand on his tiptoes to get his mouth on Dave's, but at first it's worth it: Dave gives over gladly, lets Charles have full access to his mouth. He's not just giving ground, though, he's passive-- it's as though he expects to just stand here like an object and be done to.

Which is fine, not entirely unexpected. Charles has had his share of subs who don't feel as though
responsiveness is a valuable trait. Charles backs out of the kiss and draws Dave's head down a little, keeps his hand on the back of Dave's head, well away from his joining spot. Charles has yet to understand what the fuss over that spot is all about; he doesn't like to lean on it in scenes unless he's specifically asked.

"You wanted my mouth on you," Charles says, and he has to speak fairly loudly to be heard over the crowd noise and the music, but Dave hears him, he's nodding. "I'm going to give you that. I'm going to get you unbuckled and unzipped, and I'm going to stroke you by hand until you're hard enough to suck. How does that sound to you, boy? Does that sound good?"

"Fuck, yes, sir," Dave gets out, already breathing hard. "Your mouth, oh God, sir..."

Charles draws back and pulls Dave's hand up, licks down the insides of his fingers to the center of his palm. Dave shivers, and Charles gives his palm a swirling lick, drawing back and sucking lightly on two of Dave's fingertips, being sure to purse his lips in order to make it look as obscene and promising as possible.

It has the desired effect; Dave starts rolling his hips forward, gasping. "Please," he groans, "please, sir--"

It's a pity that Dave ruled his mutation out at the outset; without it, dirty talk and cocksucking are mutually exclusive. Charles is mildly tempted to ask again, but he's not in that good a mood; one rejection of his ability is enough.

Charles leans in for another kiss, and this time Dave's a little hungrier, much less passive. He puts his hands on Charles's shoulders, and Charles comes in closer, all but grinding Dave into the wall--yes, this is good, this could be so good, Charles wants this, wants this man, and he slides his hands up Dave's body, starting at those gorgeous narrow hips and moving up his back, now, pulling him slightly off the wall so he can get his hands under Dave's shirt and scratch gently at Dave's bare skin.

He wants this, he's every bit as hungry for it as Dave is--more, maybe, probably, right now it feels like he could dive straight into Dave, lay him out on a bed and have him until he begged, until he was past begging, and it wouldn't be enough. It's not enough. God, this isn't enough, why isn't it enough, what's wrong with you, Charles thinks furiously, pulling away from the kiss and yanking Dave's hands off his shoulders, pushing them against the wall. Stupid move, really; a trick like that and people start questioning Charles's orientation, as

Charles had half-forgotten where he was going with all this, but impatiently he reaches between them now, unbuckles and unzips Dave's fly and draws Dave's cock out of his thin bikini briefs. That last extra layer of fabric just seems irritating, another obnoxious and irrational thought--obviously subs should go commando just because Charles doesn't want to be bothered navigating waistband elastic, that makes sense. But Dave's hard, and thrusting awkwardly against Charles's hand as Charles tries to stroke him, and this is going downhill for Charles so fast that maybe the best thing to do is to drop to the floor and get it over with, suck Dave off quick and rough and go home.

He gets a condom out, slips the latex into his mouth and sheathes Dave up with a fast, rolling move of his mouth, drawing back to take in Dave's glassy-eyed, impressed look. Or he's expecting that look, but instead Dave merely seems confused, and Charles grabs him by the hips, presses him to the wall. Stupid move, really; a trick like that and people start questioning Charles's orientation, as
though he doesn't get enough of that normally.

Fuck it. By the time he's through here, Dave won't give a damn what Charles's orientation is; he'll be lucky if he remembers his own name. Charles ignores the latex taste, focuses on making this good for Dave. He can't listen in to find all the right spots, so he goes by rote: this feels good to Charles, this is good for most of the men he's sucked off, moving his tongue like that, even through the latex... Dave's trying to pump forward now, get even more of Charles's mouth. Charles sucks all the harder, but he doesn't take Dave in any deeper; he's not in a mood to choke.

It's getting good for Charles, too-- whatever irritation is under Charles's skin, this is still pleasant, still satisfying. Getting Dave off is almost like having a contest with himself, and winning: can he draw it out, make it last until Dave is sweating, shaking? He can, and he does, and Dave moans above him, finally reaching trembling hands down and sinking them into Charles's hair. His fingernails catch a little in the strands, he must be one of those subs who doesn't bother with manicures, and suddenly Charles has had enough, he wants to go home.

He pulls out all the stops and slams his mouth down on Dave's cock, and Dave tenses and gasps and comes, cock pulsing over and over in Charles's mouth. The scent of sex rises up between them, but all Charles can taste is the latex on the condom. It's all right; one way or the other, there's been a barrier between him and everyone he's ever been with, for years and years now, ever since he was sixteen and sending his love and want and urgency into his bond while he got himself off...

He comes to his feet, and mechanically goes through all the motions of aftercare; he isn't going to abandon Dave in the middle of a club, even for as small a scene as this one. But the instant Dave's come up from it and is starting to look like he wants to put a second round on the table, Charles begs off. "Early morning," he lies easily, and Dave shrugs and thanks him for the evening.

At home Charles retires to his bedroom with a good bottle of Scotch-- a homecoming gift from Tony, says a note on the box, Charles will have to thank him for his foresight later. He kicks his shoes off, tosses belt and waistcoat to the floor, and stretches out in bed, three fingers of Scotch down before it can even touch the way he's feeling.

It was so right, things could have been so good-- God, Charles doesn't remember the last time he was so attracted to someone. And all he can think of is his soulmate, out there somewhere... he hopes, out there somewhere... he hopes, going on with his life, happy. Not alone, not lying in bed reaching out to a useless bond instead of scening with someone who wanted him, not pressing fingers to temple and sending out thoughts as hard as he can, «I can't do this without you, I can't stand it, where are you, why did you leave me, please come back, tell me what I did, what can I change, how can I get you back, please, please, I just want to know, just tell me, tell me...»

He wakes up when Raven slips quietly into his room with a glass of water and a handful of aspirin, and, groaning, he takes the pills and drinks as much water as he can. She doesn't ask; she just leaves her hand on his shoulder, gentle, until he falls asleep again.
Chapter Summary

Jason talks Erik into submitting his profile to a "find your soulmate" website. The boundaries between "platonic" and "not so platonic" get a little stretched. And Jason has a lot of thoughts about soulmates, and the way his bond's been quiet for four years.

Chapter Notes

There's an Easter egg in this one; feel free to comment and let us know if you find it! ^_^ (We'll update the notes here later tonight if nobody finds it by then...)

ETA: OMG! As Ces pointed out, the vital clue to the Easter egg was, er, lost in edits. >_> It's back now (three measly little letters and a period, I tell you what), and a hint: you'll have to leave AO3 to find it. ^_^

"What are the odds, really," Erik mutters, but Jason's standing right behind him, so he can't back out now. He loads up the site and blinks at it; the background is black with glowing red hearts, and the text is white... and pink.

"I can barely even read this," Erik says, glancing over his shoulder at Jason. "If he's even alive, there's no reason he'd be doing this..."

"Just try it," Jason urges. "There's been lots of them over the years..."

"How about one that looks a little less like it was designed in--" He checks the blinking text at the top of the screen. "God. 'Online since 1996'? That explains a lot. It probably hasn't been touched since then, either."

"I looked around for others," Jason admits. "Most of them are empty, just spam sites. LostSeeker looked really good, but the last time I checked LostSeeker.com, it'd been squatted out from under them, so much for that. This one's been around the longest, people still check it all the time..."

"If they can find it under all the spam," Erik scoffs. "Look at this. 'Great deals on psychitrex psialis brand name boosters...'"

"Yeah, but--"

"'Meet hot soulmates now'?

"I swear it didn't look like this back when--" Jason shuts his mouth. "Anyway. Maybe the admins just haven't been around to clean out the spam lately, that doesn't mean that nobody's checking the thing. The date boards have a better signal-to-noise ratio, they must clean those up more often."

Erik sighs, rubs at his eyes. "This website is giving me a migraine," he complains. "All right, fine. Fine. I'll just... be quick about it."
He goes through the "Find Your Lost Soulmate" pages until he finds the one for April 22, 2000. There are three posts on it already, and even that slight chance makes his gut clench and his heart jump straight into his throat, but the posts come from one domme, two subs, not him. Erik shakes his head. "What the hell's the use--"

"Just paste in the form and fill it out. Maybe nothing ever comes of it, but..."

Name: Erik
DOB: 4/2/83
Gender/gender expression: Male
Orientation: Submissive
Location at time of loss: Park View, Nebraska, United States
Time of loss: Between 12:00pm and 5:00pm, Central Time (-06:00)
Other details: I am a mutant, and have reason to believe my dominant might have been as well.

"That's it?" Jason asks, gently nudging Erik's shoulder. "You can add more if you want. A note or something. Tell him it wasn't your fault..."

"What's the point?" Erik shakes his head. "It's even more of a shot in the dark than everything else. And if he's really dead--"

"Don't think about it that way," Jason says. "Just close your browser and come on, I'll buy you a drink."

"Nothing too strong." Erik looks up at Jason, who raises an eyebrow. "I was thinking we could scene tonight. If you're up for that."

"Sure. So. Coffee?"

"Yeah."

________________________________________

Erik's not counting off the strikes in his head-- getting worked over with a belt is always too fast for that, always takes too long for that-- but he knows it's different this time, and he knows it early on. Jason's belt is decorated with metal studs, thin flat ones, nothing too evil, but it's still covered in metal, and Jason still knows exactly how to use it. Erik can feel the sting of the studs, the zippy little rush of them as they fly through the air on the way to his ass and thighs, and it's better than usual, better than ever, maybe.

The weight of all those blows sinks in, heating his skin, making him want more and more and more, and Erik really should call a time out, worked up is not even close to how good he's feeling, fuck--

His hands clutch hard at the bedcovers, and he jerks forward, strangled groans working their way out of his throat, too late to stop now. He comes while he's trying not to, eyes shut tight, gasping, and Jason backs off immediately, belt dropping to the floor.

"Erik, fuck--"

Erik barely manages a groan, collapsing to his forearms; his whole body's shaking, his legs feel weak. "Sorry," he pants, "sorry, didn't mean to--"

Jason's breathing pretty hard, too, but he doesn't move. "Don't do that, don't apologize, please don't
apologize," he says. He sounds a little strangled himself. He goes over to Erik's nightstand, grabs out a hand towel, and sets it next to Erik on the bed. Erik cleans up some of the mess on the covers and then turns around, taking a very careful seat on a spot at the edge of the bed.

It would be way the hell past cowardly not to look at how Jason's doing after all that, so Erik doesn't shy away from looking. Jason's flushed, tense, hands jammed hard into his back pockets, which means the outline of his erection is that much more obvious under his jeans.

"Are you all right--" Jason starts, and Erik growls with a little frustration and reaches out for him, grabbing him by the belt loops and pulling him over. Jason's eyes go wide, and he stumbles, jerking his hands out from his pockets and grabbing Erik by the shoulders.

"Erik--"

"Want me to back off?"

"That is literally the exact opposite of what I want," Jason says, low and breathless. "Erik--"

"Okay, then." Erik pops the button on Jason's fly, undoes the zipper. Jason groans, head tilted forward to watch, and when Erik gets his hand around Jason's cock, Jason bites down hard on his lower lip and tries to stifle a whimper.

He's seen this; he's watched Jason scening with people dozens of times. Touching him is practically as familiar as touching himself, except that it's not-- it's really, really not. He can't figure out where to look-- the rapid hot pace of his hand working Jason's cock, the flush on Jason's cheeks, the way his teeth have his lower lip caught and held tight... he wants everything at once, and this could be so good, this could be amazing, he could ask Jason for this, could beg Jason to let him push him over--

Oh, God, though, bad idea, such a bad idea, it's probably playing with enough fire just getting Jason off right now. Bringing power exchange in would be like playing with a supernova.

Jason's hands tighten on Erik's shoulders, and he sucks in a rough breath. "I'm close," he says, "you better be ready to dodge."

"I'm good here," Erik says, and Jason laughs, smile spreading all over his face, dimples showing in both cheeks-- God, that's a real smile, the kind of smile half of Jason's play partners never even see.

Erik's got a free hand; he's seen people take Jason apart with this move, and he wants it, wants to get him there. He reaches up and curves his hand around the back of Jason's neck, slips his fingers up and rubs at Jason's joining spot--

--and Jason scrambles for his hand, pulling it off the back of his head. "Leave it," he pants, "you were doing fine, go a little faster--"

It's not actually the order it sounds like, Erik reminds himself, but he drops his other hand and picks up the pace with the one wrapped around Jason's cock, face tilted up now so he can watch the arousal and need and pleasure all over Jason's face. Jason's groaning with the strokes now, mouth wide open, lips wet and shining. It would be so easy to just come up on his feet, get an arm around Jason's shoulders and kiss him. And oh, fuck, he has to be smarter about this, what the hell happened to platonic...

Jason comes with one of those fantastic groans of his, hands on Erik's shoulders again, nails digging in. It's so hot Erik could almost, almost go for another round, could probably get hard again if Jason felt like shoving him flat on his back and kissing him, maybe if he were biting Erik's
neck, pinching welts into his inner thighs.

And maybe it's just as well that Jason backs off as soon as his eyelashes stop fluttering, because who knows what the fuck would happen then.

Jason glances down between them, at the mess he managed to leave all over Erik, and he rubs a hand over his face, covering his mouth while he inhales and exhales slowly and gets his breathing steady.

"I think we could both use a shower after that," Jason says. "How about you?"

"I think I get to go first," Erik says, light, casual, like this doesn't change a thing.

After a pair of quick showers, after they're both dressed again, after they've ordered pizza, Erik brings two beers over to the couch, handing one over to Jason and settling down with his own. Jason knocks the cap off his bottle on the edge of the coffee table; Erik flicks at his with his thumb. Six and a half years without his powers and that's still his first instinct when he's holding something with a metal bottlecap; when all he gets is a scrape on his thumb for his troubles, he grunts with irritation and bends down to use the edge of the coffee table on his, too.

"So," Jason says. "Um. Should we talk about that...?"

"My fault," Erik says, taking a long swallow of his beer. "I haven't-- ah. Taken care of that in a while. And that belt felt really good..."

"You haven't--" Jason's eyes widen. "How long has it been since-- wait, God, don't answer that. You don't have to answer that."

"I've been busy," Erik defends. "I don't know. A week?"

"So maybe you should take care of that before we scene." He's gentle about it, nudges Erik with his shoulder. Erik nods. "I don't mind or anything, I promise. It's just not what we said we were doing."

"We can still be platonic," Erik says, picking at the label on his beer bottle. "It doesn't have to change anything. Call it a one-time fluke, I just didn't realize how close I was getting."

Jason raises an eyebrow at him. "You didn't?"

Erik taps his fingernail against his bottle. "I thought I could hold back," he admits quietly. "Guess I need to work on orgasm control if I'm going to be getting that into it."

"We're supposed to let each other know if we're that into it," Jason points out, still cautious. "Is it like that for you a lot?"

"It's good, or I wouldn't still be asking for it," Erik shoots back. "It isn't always like that." He pauses and raises an eyebrow at Jason. "Is it like that for you a lot?"

"It's always good for me, too," Jason says. "But no, it's not always like that. What can I say, I'm a sadist, I know you know that. Watching you get that into being hurt? Being hurt by me? Watching you come just from taking a belt, my belt? I'd have to be dead not to get worked up by that."

"I'm glad you're not dead," Erik blurts out.

Jason just laughs. "I'm glad I'm not dead, too."
Erik scoots a little closer to him on the couch. "Sorry, that was a little morbid..."

"It's fine." Jason wraps an arm around Erik's shoulders, and Erik leans in. "I know what you mean."

There's a small hint of movement, Jason's other hand coming up behind his neck, and Erik tilts his head away, trying to see what's going on. Jason drops his other hand, away from his joining spot, and gives Erik a slightly embarrassed look. "Sorry."

*I'm glad you're not dead... I know what you mean.* Jason's abrupt rejection of Erik's hand there, probing at it himself... it all finally hits Erik full-on. He reaches out, putting a hand on Jason's knee. "You're feeling em again," he says softly. "Aren't you?"

Jason blinks a few times, shaking it off, settling his hand over Erik's and squeezing lightly before moving Erik's hand away. "Maybe. Kind of." He sighs. "Yeah, all right? Yeah, I can feel her."

*Her.* Erik smiles, and it barely costs him anything to do it. "I'm happy for you."

"I'm not." Jason reaches up, rubs at his joining spot again, harder this time; Erik edges away, gives him a little room. "Four years and *nothing* out of the bond, and then suddenly out of the blue, I can feel emotions, things that aren't coming from me... it's giving me the creeps."

The smile crashes right off Erik's face. All the times the Stones told him things could be going wrong, all the things they were afraid of-- and now Jason's saying his soulmate's emotions are making him uncomfortable.

"You need to find her," Erik says. "And sooner. Instead of later."

"I'm not ready." Jason leans forward, laces his fingers together behind his joining spot. "Four years and now this, I don't even know how to *deal* with this yet. I'm sure as fuck not ready to find the person I'm supposed to spend the rest of my life attached to. I have so much going on right now-- I've got *fifteen* auditions, you realize that? Next week? Fifteen."

Erik stares at him; he knew Jason was flying out to Los Angeles for a couple of weeks, but not how busy he was going to be once he got there. One of these days he's not going to be able to get away with keeping his home in Pittsburgh; he's going to need to move to LA or New York, one or the other, for the sake of his career. *New York,* Erik thinks, *please, let it be New York,* but it isn't up to him.

"My agent's spectacular, I'm glad to have my foot in that door, but I'm not going to get a single fucking one of those jobs. One way or the other I'm too fucking 'exotic' for any role I might actually want."

"You'll get something," Erik insists. "You did great on 'The U Word', you were a fan favorite there, you've done a movie--"

"One *tiny* role in a movie, and yeah, I'm doing a lot better than a lot of people, it's not all bad, but this isn't even about the auditions. It's about networking and making connections, grinding my way through all this shit, getting my face in front of casting directors so they'll think about me later, when they've got an Asian role to cast or a mutant role to cast. And I might get three or four small parts next year, TV, movies, cable, indie, whatever, but the more small parts you do, the more you have to uproot, fly somewhere else to shoot, forget about having a home or a family. It's going to be years before I have time to date, let alone acknowledge, recognize, spend the time getting to know someone. Maybe I should block *her* for a change."

"Jason..." Erik reaches out, gets an arm around Jason's shoulders. "Do you really want that?"
Jason tips over, rests his head against Erik's shoulder. "No," he whispers. "I just got so used to feeling nothing. I thought it was gone. Whether she was dead or just decided it was over before it got started, I was never going to meet her."

"Can you feel where she is now?"

Jason makes a vague gesture off to the west. "She went thataway."

"Anything more specific?"

Sighing, Jason sits up and flicks his hands out, splaying his fingers wide. The coffee table splits in half and folds over, everything on it sticking to the surface as if glued there-- and Erik knows the magazines and books and half-empty beer bottles aren't actually flipping over and getting stored in God-knows-what, but it's a neat trick anyway, worthy of a James Bond movie. Once the surface is clear, a topographical map of the United States shows up, mountains and valleys shifting into place, rivers flowing, state borders superimposed and visible.

"Here's us," Jason says, and Pittsburgh lights up, a bright spark a few inches below the illusionary Lake Erie, a couple handspans from the eastern seaboard. "And here's where I feel her."

The whole left side of the map glows bright green, everything from Ohio and Kentucky and Tennessee over, nothing further north than Pittsburgh. Everything else goes red. "I've been out to LA for work since I started feeling her again," and that makes Erik look over at him, he's been feeling her for a while, "and she's east of that, not too far north or south from there either." The map darkens in the triangle-shaped overlapping area, still a huge wide swath: most of Arizona and New Mexico, the northern half of Texas, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Louisiana, parts of Arkansas and Illinois and Indiana.

Erik nods at the map. "So which routes could you take...?"

"Maybe one of the 40 routes." Jason snaps his fingers, and the interstates start lighting up; I-40 crosses nearly the entire length of Jason's potential seeking area. "Or I could start in Texas, see if there's something on the 35-20." I-35 and I-20 in the Texas area glow for a moment, then fade into the same yellow as the rest of the highways. "I could plane-hop. Just take planes across, Atlanta, Memphis, Dallas-Fort Worth, Albuquerque, Phoenix." A little airplane goes rushing from one dot to the next on the map; it does cover a fair amount of the territory. "Or I could forget it," he wipes everything out with a quick, angry gesture, and the coffee table goes back to normal. "It's not like I've been hard to find-- Pittsburgh, LA, Vancouver for a while. I've been in one place. Where the hell is she, why isn't she seeking me?"

"Maybe she can't." Erik rubs at his arms. The map, the green and red highlighting... something about it seems familiar enough to give him a sense of déjà vu. He's never seen anything like it, not that he can remember, and somehow the placement was wrong-- it should have been a highlight east of the Mississippi, green, fading into red, something that even at the time (was there a time? has he seen this before?) he didn't understand...

But it's slipping away already, and he just looks at Jason, shaking his head. "Maybe she was sick. Maybe now she's in one place because she isn't well enough to go anywhere else. At least you could find out. If you can feel her, at least there's that."

"And then what?" Jason shakes his head. "If she's sick, then what choices do I get-- spend the rest of my life taking care of her? Finding her a good rest home, where she'll have around-the-clock care from a staff that actually gives a damn? Maybe I could buy a house, hire nurses to look after her."
"You might feel differently about it once you actually meet her," Erik tries.

"Maybe. Maybe not. All I know is, I'm not giving up the rest of my life just because biology and neurochemistry say I should hook up with some stranger."

"If I ever find mine..." Erik waves a hand at the kitchen counter, at his laptop. "If that stupid website comes through for me... I wouldn't care what condition he's in. I'd do anything to have him back."

Jason sits up, pushing gingerly away. "I know, man, but it's different for you. You had five years and then he was stolen. Five good fucking years. You were closer to him in that five years than most people are even after they meet in person."

Erik's read about what the bond's really like, but no one's ever told him that to his face before; no one else has ever really known what the bond was like for him. It's probably just as well that he never managed to get that across to the Stones, to Sebastian; maybe he wouldn't have been able to hold them off for as long as he did.

"You really think so?"

"My parents are nuts about each other and they have a strong bond," Jason points out. "They don't have what you did."

"Sets the bar a little high, though. If I never find him." Erik wraps his arms around his chest, hugs himself. "If he's really gone."

"Even if I do find mine, it's not going to be like that. Maybe we'll meet and go our separate ways. People do that." Jason sighs. "Maybe she got married, blocked to keep the bond from interfering with it. People can fall in love outside the bond, you know."

"Four years, though. Blocked temporarily, and now it's back?"

"People can fall out of love, too," Jason says. "Not so sure how that works, but there you go."

Erik just looks at him for a while, quiet. Jason sighs, glances over, looks down at the coffee table again.

"I'd go with you," Erik says. "If you wanted to try."

Jason almost bolts off the couch. He jumps, anyway, turning to look at Erik, incredulous. "Are you kidding me? You can barely hit up the bars on the other side of town without getting itchy, what makes you think you could go on a seeker trip?"

"I don't know." Erik frowns, reaches up to scratch his fingernails lightly against his own joining spot. Jason watches him, eyes narrowed. "I don't know, it just feels... better, lately. Like I could go west if I wanted to."

"Oh, great, now you can go. When it's about a seeker trip."

Erik frowns. "What's that supposed to mean...?"

"Nothing. Nothing. It doesn't mean anything." Jason sighs. "I don't know, Erik. I'll think about it."

Erik sees Jason off at the airport a few days later; Jason hugs him and holds on a little more tightly than usual. Erik doesn't call him on it; he might be holding on a little more tightly than usual...
"Take care of yourself," Jason says, pulling back to look Erik in the eyes. "I'll be back soon."

"Not too soon, I hope," Erik teases. "I hope your auditions go well."

"I hope so, too." Jason sighs and checks his watch. "I need to run. Fucking security lines."

"It'll be fine. You've got plenty of time."

"You'd think." Jason steps back, picks up his garment bag and slings it over his shoulder. "It never seems to work out that way. See you."

Erik waves, and once Jason's out of sight, he heads back to the garage, where he's got Jason's car parked. He's not going to complain about borrowing it for the next couple of weeks; Jason's classic GTO reminds him a little of the cars his mother used to drive. At least with that much steel under him he feels like he's riding in something substantial; he loathes modern cars, aerodynamics of all those plastic body panels aside.

Back at his apartment, he turns on his computer, meaning to send Jason an email he'll be able to get on his phone when he lands.

There's a message from an unfamiliar address, no name, subject line "Found you on MissingOtherHalf.com". Erik's heart jumps straight into his throat. Coincidence. It's a coincidence, it's nothing, it's one of those fucking spammers, it can't be him...

He opens it anyway.

Erik,

On April 22, 2000, you didn't lose your soulmate. You found him.

I'm still here. I'm waiting. I miss you. I love you. Come back.

Sebastian

His laptop was a birthday present from Jason; he's never had a computer before, but this one had an aluminum casing, and it caught Erik's eye when Jason was in the store getting his own laptop repaired. Jason just laughed at him, unsurprised, and Erik shook his head, grinning, fingertips lingering on the chassis for a few moments before they left.

Now it's halfway across the room, twisted and crushed, and Erik's hands are shaking. He might have thrown it, could probably have thrown it hard enough to dent it. He doesn't think so. At least there's that.

It takes a trip to the library to email the website owners, ask them to delete his message. He doesn't send anything back to Sebastian, and by the time Jason's back, Erik's replaced the laptop; he hopes Jason won't notice the difference. He doesn't look into any of the other lost-soulmate websites. It'll just be more of the same.
Charles, April 2007

Chapter Summary

It's not one big thing; it's a lot of little things, one after another, all in the same awful April this year. Charles is wearing down.

Chapter Notes

For anyone who didn't catch the Easter egg from our last update, we actually made MissingOtherHalf.com in all its 1996-web-design glory. :D

If, however, that design makes your eyes bleed (as it was intended to), we now have a version with less eyebleed-inducing colors: see MissingOtherHalf.com/clean. The relevant dates you're looking for are April 22, 2000 (clean version, original version) and, for the Jason fans out there, September 12, 2002 (clean version, original version), but there are fandom in-jokes sprinkled throughout and some copy that cracked us up on the "Helpful Hints" page.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We need to talk," says Ken the moment Charles opens his front door.

"I thought we were meeting at the restaurant?" Charles closes the door behind him, coming through the short entryway into the lounge.

"We were, but we need to talk."

"Established," says Charles, and he puts his satchel aside and drapes his coat over the chair rather than putting it away, sitting and facing Ken, trying to show in every gesture that he's taking this seriously and ready to listen.

"I came to pick you up on campus," Ken tells him, "and I overheard you talking to Dr. Salvadore."

Charles offers his most open, sincere expression. He even means it, more or less. "Yes?"

"And-- you are in some serious denial, you know that?" Ken shakes his head. "The two of you talking about how the soulbond isn't that important."

"We never said it's not important," Charles replies. "We were saying it doesn't necessarily indicate compatibility in an emotional or practical sense."

"What're you talking about, compatibility. It connects you to your other half!" says Ken.

"Bit tautological," says Charles. "We call people who're bonded 'the other half' of each other because we traditionally presume the bond connecting them either indicates or creates compatibility. But just like every other notable quality that progressed us out of the primordial goop, the bond started as a mutation. It was sheer chance two of our forebears happened to develop
it, and thrived, and reproduced, and their descendants spread the successful mutation far and wide. The bond denotes a match on a genetic level, but only that. It's biology. Not destiny."

"I hate it when you go off on a lecture, you know that? Save it for your classes," says Ken. "That's so disrespectful. You're talking about people's souls, here."

"I'm not," says Charles. "I leave souls well out of it. If it were up to me, it wouldn't even be called a 'bond'; I think 'affinity' is more accurate and nuanced."

"Jesus. I get why you downplay it. Okay? I get it," Ken says. "You don't have one, so you don't want to admit it's that important. But this is the deepest, most significant relationship in people's lives, and I can't listen to you insult it just because you don't want to admit you're missing out on something."

Charles sighs. "I do know how important the bond can feel. When I was bonded, I felt very strongly about my bondmate. But that doesn't mean we'd've been at all suited to each other if we'd ever met. I'm sorry, I'm just not sentimental about it."

"You're widowed?" Ken gapes. "You never said that. You said you weren't bonded. I thought you'd never had it."

"I was bonded til I was sixteen," Charles says. "I don't say I'm widowed because I don't know for certain if I am."

"How can you not know?"

Charles has recited the facts of the matter often enough that the account ought to come easily, but it never does. "I stopped feeling the bond, but I didn't experience luctus hypersonmia," he says. "There may have been an injury or an illness. He might've survived whatever happened. The bond didn't."

Ken stares. "Or he renounced you."

"Also possible," Charles answers with all due composure.

"I can't believe you never told me any of this," says Ken. "You know those ads you see for people who say they can teach you to bond to someone by choice? Call me a starry-eyed sub but I actually thought maybe someday we might try that. But since you're so unsentimental about the bond, I guess you think that's a silly idea, huh."

"Of course not," Charles says, "that's--" surprising, for one; he knows Ken isn't actually all that keen on him most of the time, but they're very compatible in the bedroom, and that's been enough to carry them a few months. "Touching," Charles concludes.

"Touching." Ken mulls for a long moment. "I don't think this is going to work anymore."

Charles wonders if he's meant to argue with that. It would be easy enough to sneak a quick look at Ken's feelings and find out, but Charles would feel badly about the privacy violation, since of course from the start, Ken made Charles swear never to listen in on his thoughts or his feelings. Sometimes he hinted that he might change his mind one of these days, but he always seemed to mention it when there was something he wanted; Charles gave up on that ages ago, and he's doggedly kept his word and stayed out. He doubts he'd like what he'd find, anyway.

Breaking that promise would likely bother Charles more than the breakup, since he's seen that writing on the wall for a while. At the start, Ken caught his eye because subs like Ken always
catch his eye. Tall, slim, a long face with defined cheekbones, fair complexion, pale eyes... gets
him every time. But even though Ken fits the template in the generalities, in all the details he
skews off true from Charles's type.

And that's probably why it's worked for a while. Charles is drawn to a particular silhouette, but
men who fit the mold never seem to suit him, once they're close. He didn't feel that painful
disappointment with Ken, the frustration of almost, not enough. Ken only very superficially meets
the almost, so the not enough was just a whisper, easily ignored. But 'lack of dissatisfaction' isn't
really a basis for a lasting connection.

He could likely cheat a bit and prolong the relationship, but he only says, "I'm sorry you feel that
way."

"I'm so sick of how calm you are about everything," Ken bursts out. "If you were any kind of dom
you'd have me down on my knees begging you to let me stay."

Charles holds eye contact steadily until the quality of Ken's gaze changes; Charles stands and takes
two measured, deliberate steps toward him, and Ken hesitates. It's tempting, but Charles shakes his
head."That would work tonight. But you'd still feel the same in the morning."

"We could do one last scene," Ken says.

Goodbye sex doesn't hold a lot of charm for Charles, but he did have a few things he'd always
meant to try with Ken. Might as well run through them tonight. He points at the carpet before him
and raises his eyebrows. "Well?"

Ken folds neatly to the floor.

Charles wakes up alone the next morning and watches the ceiling for a while. It doesn't provide
much in the way of enlightenment.

On mornings like this, he remembers just what it was like to have a bond-- an affinity with
someone. Back in those days, if he felt this way, he could turn his attention to the bond, and his
bondmate would be there; angry and on edge, perhaps, as he was too often, but he was so generous
about setting aside the things that troubled him and reaching back, sending affection to Charles,
keeping him silent company.

And in answer, Charles would try to put across patience and serenity, the lovely feeling of being in
bed, snug and warm and healthy with the sun in the curtains. He used to imagine waking up beside
his bondmate someday, and he would send the delight of that idea through the bond. He'd think,
«Be patient, just be patient a little longer. As soon as we find each other, I'll be able to share all this
with you in person. I want you to feel this way with me.»

Charles often felt worried about his bondmate-- not worried enough, as it turned out-- but he never
felt alone.

Now he lives in one of the most densely populated places in the world. He moved here partly
because he had the opportunity, because the family owns the house and Raven moved here. But
he's stayed because the press of a million and a half minds arrayed around him in Manhattan is
almost enough to keep him company as much as that one particular mind used to do. As much, but
never as well.

Never mind; Charles hauls himself out of bed and dresses for the day.
Raven’s in the kitchen when he comes down, and she leans against the counter watching him make tea. "What’s new?"

"It's a good thing those 'Ken and Charlie' jokes you kept making weren't really funny," Charles tells her, "because we broke up last night."

"Oh, Charles," Raven takes his tea and puts it down so she can hug him. "He was a jerk. You deserve better."

There’s no good way to answer that. He knows, of course, exactly what people think of him. His mutation is spooky and invasive, he's self-righteous and nerdy and arrogant, he likes to hear himself talk and cares more about being right than making people happy. Ken is probably exactly the sort of person he deserves, a companion whose lack of regard kept Charles's feet on the ground.

Raven means well, though. She might even believe it. He promised her a long time ago never to read her mind.

"Here's to better, then," he says, taking up his teacup, and he clinks it against her coffee mug.

He can count on work to distract him, anyway, even if it's only with dull frustration. It's a beautiful day on the Columbia campus, so Charles heads for the green near College Walk, in sight of the sundial, checking his watch.

It's not long before Angel flies in and lands nearby. "Hey, Professor," she says.

Everyone seems to find it amusing to call him that, at his age. Not that Angel's any older. That might be worth inquiry, how many mutants have gone through accelerated schooling, correlations between mutation and academic achievement.

Just in his immediate acquaintance there's himself, Angel, Hank McCoy, Armando Muñoz... but that's anecdotal, and what would it prove exactly if he crunched the numbers and proved a trend? All of them were originally single out for their mutations, their other talents noticed in the process, most likely. And in Charles's case, he knows for certain that his prep school encouraged him to apply to university early and took pains to recommend him to Harvard in part because the school administration was eager to make him someone else's problem.

Meanwhile, Raven certainly had the intelligence and ability to skip ahead, but didn't want to, more interested in exploring the experience than racing to achieve degrees; she's getting her bachelor's this year.

It seems these days that every time he begins to consider research on the scale of his thesis, he finds himself questioning every premise and every idea. Right now he's one of dozens of researchers exploring different expressions of the X-gene, and he's come up with no new insights, made no significant advances. It's just spadework.

It's not worth dwelling on it now. Angel finishes folding her wings down, eyebrows raised expectantly.

"I didn't want to miss a chance to see you aloft," says Charles. "And I wondered if you wanted to get lunch later."

"How much later?"

"One?"
"Sounds good," Angel falls into step with him. "I've been meaning to ask you. You studied Concordance too, right?"

"I have a Master's," Charles confirms.

"Just a little something to keep you from getting bored while you got your doctorate in... what was it again?"

"Evolutionary genetics."

Angel laughs. "Yeah, I knew it was some chumpy no-account thing like that."

"And you ask because...?"

"I could use a spare pair of hands for one of my lab demos next week," she says. "And I heard you're pretty good with a flogger."

"I'd be glad to," he says, "but it seems a bit odd, your asking me. Nobody from the Concordance department is available?"

"I'm getting a rep," says Angel. "A good one, one I want. I'm out, Janos is out... I'm pretty sure most of the mutants studying Concordance are signing up for my classes now. So I'm trying to get as many other mutants in for demos as I can. I'm especially hoping you'll do it because I'm pretty sure I have an empath and a precog in this section, so I'd like to get someone in with a psionic mutation."

"Okay, but am I demonstrating flogging?" Charles asks. "Or scening while psionic?"

"You know, if you happen to get into the psionic side of it, bonus," she says, "but I'm happy if you just come in and give a flogging and happen to mention, hey, out psionic mutant here, doing okay, getting laid just fine..."

"Getting dumped, just like anybody else," says Charles.

"Oh, seriously? Sorry. Is this a bad time then?"

"Let me think," he says, "I'm newly single, do I really want to go up in front of a bunch of nubile college students and show off my flogging technique? Hmm."

"You better not try to get with my students."

Charles passes his hand over his head. "Yes, Ma'am."

The flogging lab goes well. Janos comes in to submit for the demonstration, and while Charles has never scened with him, they're acquainted well enough to discuss things frankly beforehand. Or, that is, Charles discusses things frankly and Janos mostly nods and shakes his head. Charles is glad Angel's not off to her meeting yet, she reassures him that this is par for the course.

"Is there anything in particular I should steer clear of?" Charles asks them. "And do you observe any traditions around playing with other people?"

"I observe the tradition of asking you to do it," Angel says. Janos shrugs and points at her.

"You are going to talk during the demo, yes?" Charles asks Janos.
Janos says, "Probably."

He does still talk as little as possible when they're out there, at first. Charles decides to use it as part of the demonstration. Janos allows Charles to read his moods for part of the demo, they agreed to that beforehand, and they play that negotiation out as part of the scene, Janos answering minimally but making his assent clear.

Charles considers mentioning how seldom his ability is on the table at all, but the psionic mutants in Angel's class almost certainly already know. Anyway, maybe things could be different for them.

Janos takes his position over the bench and Charles demonstrates some basic technique, warming Janos up a bit. He keeps it up til Janos is starting to respond by moving into the blows, and stops to talk to the class.

"If you have a partner who's less than communicative, it may be tempting to rely entirely on nonverbal clues. Those of you playing with your bondmates may feel their emotions through the bond. If any of you happen to have psionic mutations, that could give you insight as well.

"But let me encourage you not to depend on that," Charles says. "Emotions and even thoughts aren't always reliable barometers of what your partner needs. Someone who's feeling euphoric and happy in the moment might be doing something that ey knows ey'll regret later. Someone who's angry or frightened might actually be feeling exactly how ey wants to feel in that scene. Pay attention to everything you sense, of course, and keep tabs on your partner's body language, pace of their breathing, everything else Dr. Salvadore's told you to watch for.

"But bond or no bond, psionic or not, there's no replacement for communication. If you have a partner who's not so chatty," Charles gives Janos a pointed look; Janos smiles angelically, "it's your responsibility to get the communication you need. You can always try to make it part of the scene. Janos here is going to count off strikes and check in after every ten. Verbally. Ready?"

Janos rolls his eyes with a long-suffering look, but he answers, "Yes," aloud, and Charles gets him to say at least a few words after every ten strokes.

They run through some standard aftercare and conclude with the barest formality: Janos kneels and thanks him for the scene, Charles offers his hand to help Janos to his feet, and Janos shakes his hand with a little bow and leaves the dais.

Charles stays after to answer questions. He didn't realize that was going to be part of the lab, but the students seem to expect it, so he goes with it. Before he knows it, Angel's standing at the back of the lecture hall-- at first, he thinks she got out of her meeting early, but no, it's already gone four. He was meant to end the class ten minutes ago.

"We've run over our time a bit, sorry about that," he says. "A last reminder, you'll need to read chapter seven by Monday. You're dismissed."

Not everyone seems inclined to leave til Angel comes up the aisle and says, "Hey. Beat it," and the students quickly pack up and scatter. To Charles she adds, "Seems like it went pretty well."

"I think so. Though I had the impression that about a quarter of them are just here to indulge in a bit of voyeurism."

"Only a quarter? That's better than I thought," Angel says, leaning against the bench next to him. "Especially since some of those kids aren't even in the class-- it got out that you were guesting, so we had some drop-ins."
"Really!"

"Please. Don't pretend to be surprised. You're young and you're hot, even in those tweedy pleasetake-me-seriously outfits you wear."

Charles considers protesting, but he can't really argue the point, since at the moment he is actually wearing tweed trousers.

"I'm not fooling myself that my classes would be half this popular if I didn't look good up there."

Angel's wings flick in an annoyed gesture. "Sometimes it feels like I might as well be doing striptease, the way some of these kids stare-- I don't mind telling you that's another reason I like to get guests in for the labs sometimes."

"I see what you mean." It wasn't quite like scening and it didn't really appeal to Charles in an exhibitionist way, but there's certainly more a quality of being on display than in the classes he's led in his primary field.

"But I love concordance," she says wistfully, patting the bench. "It drives me crazy that so many people just slip into these defaults and never explore past that, you know? People do some time in the clubs, learn a few tricks, they meet their soulmates and that's it, they just do the same four things for the rest of their lives. If you're going to put that little effort into it you might as well have mammal sex."

"Not that there's anything wrong with that," Charles smiles, nudging her shoe with his.

"Yeah, yeah," she says. "I'm serious, though. I teach a section over at Elion College, too. It's not just an elective to those students, it's community college, so if they're taking it, they really want to be there. Reminds me why I do this." She nudges back. "How are you with predicament bondage?"

"Are you asking me to do another demo, or hitting on me?" Charles asks.

"Demo. We don't swap around, I don't share. No offense."

"None taken. And I like it, I've done a few scenes with it."

"How are you with being put in predicament bondage?"

"I'm not a switch. Or a masochist," he says.

"Didn't say you were. But I'm trying to mix things up, get the students to break up some of those associations, you know? I've had in switches who trade off and a submissive sadist and a dom who goes down just for pony play. I heard from a guy who knows a guy that you're okay with getting tied up..."

"If you're trying to teach them to look past orientation, you should get someone in for that who doesn't get mistyped as often as I do," Charles points out.

"Hmm." Angel taps the bench with her nails. "Maybe. Okay, I think I know someone. If I get some big pushy-looking dominant to go in for that, would you be willing to run the scene?"

"Depends. You said I can't get with your students... what about this pushy dominant who's going to let me tie em up, can I proposition em?" he asks, and laughs, ducking the mock swat she aims at him.
The demo is the last good day Charles has for a while.

Later that week he goes to Acid, a new mutant-friendly club. It's barely been open half a year and the gawkers already threaten to outnumber the mutants. But it's a great space with a fantastic dungeon area, lots of elaborate bondage racks and cages and crosses. And Charles likes that Acid provides blank bracelets and markers for anyone who wants to indicate eir exact mutation openly.

Raven tends to mutter dark things about mutant-chasers when it comes to the baseline humans who frequent these clubs, but Charles has had some good experiences. He isn't willing to give up on the place yet.

Tonight starts promisingly enough. The sub who approaches him has short curly black hair and eyeliner, a trace of lip gloss on his mouth; he's in a corset vest with no shirt, and the overall effect is appealing. He zeroes in on Charles's predicament bondage bracelet-- might as well get some practice in while he's at it-- and says, "Look at that," showing his own on the opposite wrist. "I'm Theo."

"Looks like a match," Charles says gamely. "I'm Charles."

"And then there's this one," Theo says, touching Charles's handwritten 'telepath' bracelet. "That's perfect for this. We don't need to negotiate, you can truss me right up, gag and everything, and read my mind and know exactly what I want."

"That's not such a good idea, actually," Charles says, and he doesn't really mean to deliver a précis of his monologue from the demo, but once he starts, it does seem important to get across the point that telepathy doesn't make these things effortless. The fact that his explanation puts Theo off and they go their separate ways doesn't exactly break his heart.

Even as recently as a couple of years ago he was starved enough for what looked like acceptance to go in for those sorts of invitations, but so far, it's generally been some short-sighted person who sees his ability as a way to opt out of talking to him. They've seldom spared a thought for the intimacy of letting him read their minds. They just see it as a magical way to dive right into the scene, expecting him to know their desires and do everything perfectly.

As much as it grinds him down to feel people recoil from his ability, it's nearly as bad to get careless permission to use it from people who haven't thought it through. It's one thing to be shut out from the start, it's much harder to touch someone's mind and only then feel them realize what it means to share that much-- and then he gets all their paranoia and anger directly, his shields down and his hopes up.

By now it feels to Charles like he's experienced every sort of almost... people who haven't considered what it really means, people who were willing to let him try it because they thought he was attractive enough to put up with it, people who offered it because they wanted to trade it for something they thought he'd only do if he were bribed, people turned on by the idea that he could dig into their most shameful secrets who urged him to humiliate them with what he found. Moira and Cal tried in good faith to allow it, but the self-consciousness and anxiety quickly made it too uncomfortable to go on. Barely tolerated or fetishized or frustrated, and that's when it's allowed at all... the only people Charles knows who just take it as a part of him are other telepaths, who can't help defending their minds against each other unconsciously.

Charles approaches another sub, and then another, but the first one is a package deal with a dominant emfriend who comes on too strong for Charles's taste, and the second politely turns him down as too young. It's just not his night. He sheds all his bracelets into the bin by the door, collects his coat, and goes out into the damp chill of early April, fishing his cellphone out of his
Moira and Sean are curled up comfortably together on the sofa with a nearly-empty bowl of popcorn when Charles lets himself in. After the hellos, he asks, "Where's Rosalind?"

"If you sit down, she'll show up," says Moira. "You get to be the first to hear, I'm sending out an announcement Monday. We've set the date for our recognition."

"That falls in the middle of the week. And the next Saturday doesn't work for the Cassidys."

Sean says, "It's my grandparents' golden anniversary. Plus Deidre's baby's turning one."

"So it's the next Saturday, the 16th."

"Sorry, can't make it," Charles says.

"What are you talking about, you can't make it?" Moira demands. "You've known about this for five years!"

"That's when it was going to be on the 6th. If you're going to swap the dates about like that, I'm going to need another five years' notice," says Charles, straight-faced.

"Asshole." Moira throws popcorn at him. "We're putting you in the recognition party, so now you have to show up, eat that."

"Okay." Charles eats the popcorn.

Moira rolls her eyes at him, but she quickly grows serious. "We talked about asking you to be best man, but Sean's family is going to throw screaming fits if he doesn't ask Tom to do it, and I have to ask my sister to be my maid of honor. So... groomsman?"

"I'd be glad to." As promised, Rosalind turns up and hops onto him, and after her customary sniff at his face, she settles down in a warm lump on his lap.

"I was just thinking of you before you called, actually," says Moira. "Not just about the recognition party. I saw an ad today for a website that's for people who lost touch with their bondmates."

"Oh?"

"There's more to the internet than JSTOR, you know."

"I know. I posted to a couple of sites like that not long after I got home from hospital. But those sites vanished in the dot com crash." Charles scratches behind Rosalind's tall ears and feels the low thrum of her purr. "And then there was Pak and Kinberg's paper on reuniting bondmates, you read that one, didn't you? Every success story they tracked down, people who found each other through online message boards or classified ads or missed connections... they were all getting their bond
intuition back beforehand, starting to feel the pull again. The same intuition that lets people look at a map and know where to find their bondmate was almost certainly leading them to check the right sites or papers at the right time." He's set to continue in that vein when he looks over and sees Sean giving a huge theatrical yawn; Charles lets it go at that.

"So that means it's not worth trying?" Moira raises an eyebrow. "They just revamped this site, it looks like it's easy to use and getting decent traffic. What have you got to lose?"

He frowns at her. "Thanks."

"You know I didn't mean it like that. I just mean that it doesn't hurt anything to try. I emailed you the URL."

"Thank you," he says, sincerely this time.

Sean puts in another dramatized yawn. "I guess I'll go to bed," he says. "Are you sticking around?"

"Am I invited?"

"We're still ten months away from anything." Sean makes a face, but it fades into a smile when he looks at Moira. "Long time coming."

Charles refrains from asking if that's a complaint or a prediction. He's not entirely insensible to romance. Just mostly.

"So yeah," Sean concludes, "you're invited," leaning past Moira and crooking his finger. Charles meets him halfway and kisses him; mostly chaste, more Sean's way of taking part than anything serious.

Sean kisses Moira as well-- definitely not chaste-- and says, "Good night," leaving them to it.

Moira curls up next to Charles. "I'm glad you ended up coming over," she says. "It's been a stressful week. Sean's mother still acts like I stole her baby boy out of his crib. We tried again to get their approval to acknowledge, but no, not before recognition."

"If they've held the line this long..." Charles shrugs apologetically.

"Right. His cousin Deidre, on the other hand, pregnant at seventeen and none of them blink an eye. If I were a good Catholic girl I bet they would've let us acknowledge before he was out of middle school, but since I don't believe in those traditions, they're going to make me go by them. Because that makes sense."

"Ingroup dynamics," says Charles. "At least they're letting him stay over here now. Even if you have to keep separate bedrooms."

"At least," Moira sighs. "Raven told me you finally got rid of that jerk you were dating. So we've both got some frustration to work out. I've added a new tawse to my collection since the last time we scened together..."

"Sorry, Rosalind," Charles nudges the cat out of his lap, "I'm afraid I just got a better offer."

The scene with Moira goes smoothly, but now that Sean's staying over, Moira's focus always stays on the bond, giving Sean what she's feeling, getting his reactions. Charles doesn't begrudge them that, and when things are going well, he even enjoys being something of a proxy for the two of
them.

But things aren't going so well. He doesn't miss Ken per se, but it's hard to be single again after months of always having a date to events and spending time with someone who's obliged to pretend to take an interest in what's on his mind.

Added to that, it's April, and every day seems to weigh him down just a little more. On Sunday, he finds himself dreading going back to campus the next day, which occasions a minor panic attack. He's never not loved his work. But he expected so much more from himself than this.

In the afternoon Charles sits with his computer and opens his thesis. He could still use the material as the basis for a book, he has boxes and boxes of additional notes, primary research, anecdotes to illustrate his ideas...

He closes it an hour later, after changing a single comma into a semicolon, and then changing it back.

When Raven comes to ask about dinner, she finds him scrolling endlessly through their iPhoto albums. "What sent you down memory lane?" she asks.

In answer, he clicks over to the site Moira linked him to.

"LostSeeker.org," she reads. "Okay..."

Charles flings his arm around her waist and squeezes her. "Help. They make you put up a photo."

"So?"

"I can't find anything suitable."

"With all those degrees, you must have a hundred graduation pictures."

"I'm wearing esoteric headgear in all those."

"Yearbook pictures?"

"Not scanned in. I think the physical versions are in storage."

Raven leans over and takes hold of the mouse, paging through their photo albums. "What about this one? This is a good one."

"I'm sticking my tongue out at the camera!"

"So he'll see that you don't take yourself too seriously. It'll balance out all the stuffy-sounding stuff on your profile."

"Stuffy-sounding," he throws her an outraged look.

"Dr. Charles Xavier," Raven intones, "Research Associate, Columbia University. Board of Trustees, Mutant Education and Outreach Initiative. Put some hobbies or something!"

"Such as...?"

"Get some hobbies, then put them. At least say you like long walks on the beach."

"I hate the beach."
"I know." Raven pulls a face. "At least you're cute."

"If I didn't have freckles, it would be necessary to invent them," Charles agrees. "Never mind about the profile, can you just help me choose a photo? I pulled out a few..." he shows her three candidates.

"Not the first one," Raven says. "It makes you look like you're about to break into manly tears."

"I know, but Cal had an SLR camera, so the photo quality is good, and it's nice light. I don't look as pasty in that one." He's overheard people thinking that of him, sometimes, when he failed to block adequately. Pasty, beaky, scrawny, short. He's heard nice things as well, more nice things than negative things on the balance. Somehow the nice things don't stick the same way.

"But is that what you want your soulmate to think? 'Here's the guy, he looks sad'?"

Charles leans into her, tucking his head against her side. "Honestly? I want him to think, I made a terrible mistake, if only I'd known; I'll stop blocking the bond at once." He sighs. "Probably not the right attitude to approach this."

Raven squeezes his shoulder. "You feel how you feel about it."

Her sympathy holds out for another few minutes of photo-hunting, but soon she's tweaking his ear and threatening, "If you don't make up your mind I'm going to upload the one of you drinking a yard of beer."

"You're right, I'm being ridiculous." Charles stares at the site, the tastefully saccharine pictures of lovebirds and the legend across the top: Helping lost souls find their mates, lost souls, what rot. "This whole thing is ridiculous. Pak and Kinberg--"

"No no no no, come on, Charles, it's not ridiculous. It's reaching out. It's a good thing to reach out. What is it you always say about mutation, that it's a one in a billion chance..."

Charles aims a little smirk at her. "I don't think I ever say it's a one in a billion chance."

"A one in a billion chance that we are who we are," Raven insists. "That our mutations are what they are. That one person can be a telepath, and one person can be a metamorph, while the sub down the street just has heterochromia or something. The odds of meeting your soulmate again are already higher than the odds were for things you've already had happen. But you might as well help your own chances! Now hurry up and post that thing. I feel weird being the optimistic one."

"Maybe I should just have you take a photo of me now and use that," Charles says. "I've been going through iPhoto for far too long and everything looks awful to me now."

"Good call. I'll get my camera, you go upstairs. We'll take it on the roof."

Once it's taken, Raven insists on uploading the photo herself. "You'll just have second thoughts and we'll have to start all over again," she says. "It's a good picture."

When he sees his updated profile, Charles groans. "You could have told me my hair was sticking up in back..."

"No, that's perfect. It looks spontaneous," says Raven. "Like that's how good you look even when you're not even trying enough to comb your hair."

He lunges for the mouse, but she blocks him nimbly, and Charles resigns himself to defeat.
"It looks great," Raven reassures him. "So now you're on here. I guess you already looked at the other people listed for your date?"

He nods, sinking into the chair next to the desk. "Sixteen matches. Seven women. Only four of the men identify as subs. But maybe he isn't, maybe I was wrong. For all I know, I was wrong about everything. I looked at the photos for all sixteen of them... I didn't feel anything. But I wouldn't, would I. Not anymore."

"What are you going to do?"

"I already sent a form letter to all of them earlier, before the epic photo search," Charles says, and this time she lets him have the mouse when he clicks over to his email to show her the letter.

Hello, fellow seeker,

Like you, I lost contact with my bondmate on April 22nd, 2000. I was sixteen and lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts at the time; before then, I resided in Westchester, New York. I believe my bondmate is male or male-identified and lived somewhere in the United States to the west of my location when we were separated, but I'm not certain where. I'm a dominant male, and a mutant with telepathic ability. If any of this sounds familiar to you, please reply so that we might compare further notes.

Thank you for your time.

Best wishes,
Charles Xavier.

His mail refreshes, and Raven grabs his hand. "You already got an answer!"

"It's probably just someone saying no, it's not me, good luck looking," Charles cautions, but his pulse picks up a little when he clicks on the new message.

fuck off mutie, die in a fire

Charles deletes the email.

"That motherfucker," Raven seethes.

"It's just words on a screen," Charles recites, shutting the program down.

"It's not just words! It's bigotry and hate--"

"At least it's right out there where you can see it for what it is," says Charles, "it's better than everyone thinking you're mad for reacting badly to someone who never says it but thinks it awfully loudly."

"That's your idea of the bright side? Are you getting that, is that happening? Is that on campus?"

It's everywhere, intermittently, but it's only going to worsen the argument to admit as much. "It happened more when we were younger," he says instead. That's also true. He wasn't as good at blocking then.

"I hope to God our soulmates are mutants," Raven says, and mulls silently for a few moments. "You know, reaching out to try to find him, that's great. Keep hope alive. All that. But I heard about this speed dating thing. You should try that too, you should get out there. Look it up on here,
Supersonic Dating. It's all mutants."

"Is it all mutants because we have common experiences that presumably make us more suitable for relationships with each other?" Charles asks. "Or is it mutant-only because the founders think Homo superior should only mate with our own kind?"

"Hey, you're the one who wrote practically a whole book about how evolution wants us to have more mutant babies," says Raven.

"Evolution doesn't 'want' anything, there's no agency involved!" Charles answers, exasperated. "As a species, our most successful adaptations so far have been achieved through genetic diversity, and our reproductive strategies continue to select for advantageous variation in the genome. Changes in copy-number and genome structural variation-- you're setting me off on purpose."

"You seemed like you could stand to blow off a little steam," says Raven.

"...Thanks."

"Seriously," she elbows him, "I think you should try speed dating. Who's better suited to that than you, huh?"

"Why're you trying to matchmake me? Am I cramping your style?" he asks. They don't have to live together, of course; it just seemed natural. Raven wanted to fix up and redecorate one of the Manhattan properties in her spare time from school, and there's more than enough space in the townhouse for both of them. Even when Ken was staying over in a guest room as often as not, it seemed to work out all right.

"No way." Raven says, turning to him, serious. "But you kind of worried me with this thing with Ken. I didn't want to say anything, but since you're not that upset about the breakup, you obviously weren't that into him. And it's like," she pauses, unusually careful. "It reminds me a little of your mom and Kurt. Not that bad, obviously. But-- just because it's not your bondmate, you shouldn't settle for whoever hangs around."

It's too embarrassing to admit that Ken strung him along on the telepathy; Charles says, "Maybe you're right." Usually a safe response to most things.

"So you'll try it?"

"Sure," says Charles. "Why not; it's always good to meet new people."

"Who knows," Raven says. "Maybe you just need to circulate a little more, maybe you'll meet your bondmate again this way. Stranger things have happened."

"Every billion times or so," Charles agrees.

Supersonic Dating seems like a pleasant evening. The hostess presses a cocktail into Charles's hand almost at once, and supplies him with a second just before the dates begin.

The drinks blur him just enough to smooth off his most awkward edges, but not so much that he has any trouble locking down his telepathy and interacting more or less normally for each seven minute date. There's the usual initial hurdle of revealing his specific mutation, but they're all mutants here, no one reacts much outwardly or makes a fuss over it. He's gregarious and smiles a lot, and manages not to talk about his research once the entire time.
He meets eight subs, each one attractive in one way or another. Charles has a type, but he's never limited himself to that; he would've been miserable if he had.

Even if nothing more comes of it, he could see himself at least scening with any of the eight, so he puts a yes next to every name on the form at the end of the night.

The next day he receives an email that politely informs him he had no matches.

The day after that is April 22nd. He doesn't remember much of it.

After calling in pleading illness on Monday and Tuesday, Charles goes back to work on Wednesday, crisis of confidence mostly averted. Just in time for a new one.

His relationship with his PI has always been cordial, if distant. Dr. Winthrop is the principal investigator of this particular research effort on X-gene mutation, which is only fractionally different from loads of other similar projects; it's not even the only one like this at Columbia.

Charles chose this position because the work looked to be a bit more adventurous, but once he landed in the lab, he found that what seemed cutting-edge from a remove looks more like theorizing ahead of the evidence from closer up, with researchers scrambling to generate enough data to back up tenuous conclusions. In that sort of environment there are bound to be errors, sooner rather than later. The effort benefits from the university's reputation and that of the previous PI, but that won't last forever.

He hasn't really felt as if he can speak up about that, though, when he's done nothing to distinguish himself here. His work is solid, and he's on track to publish results, but it's of such limited scope. He's been chafing to do more, but with the way work gets rushed out the door at this lab, he's been leery of extending his reach, and his PI hasn't really given him any guidance. Dr. Winthrop is being reviewed for tenure; he's been preoccupied with the process.

"Can we chat, Dr. Xavier?" Dr. Winthrop asks, indicating his office.

At first Charles thinks it's about his days out, but it's quickly clear that's not the issue. He trades a few pleasantries, growing increasingly tense. Under ordinary circumstances he generally lets himself stay open enough to catch surface moods, and Dr. Winthrop's mood is both nervous and calculating, never a good combination in Charles's experience.

Eventually Dr. Winthrop gets around to it. "I'm sure you're aware I'm up for tenure."

"Yes...?"

"And obviously, the outlook is good. I'm not really concerned. It would be something of a black eye for everyone if I weren't awarded tenure at this point. But you never know. And if I move on, it's going to present a real problem for the lab. For all you research associates."

Winthrop is going to take ages to get around to it and there's no advantage to letting him draw it out. "I'm not going to use my ability to help you influence the tenure committee," Charles says.

"I had no intention of asking you to do anything of the kind," says Dr. Winthrop.

"No, you were just going to hint me to death about it," says Charles. "Offer me a better project if I comply, threaten to assign credit for my work to someone else if I refuse. You're not the first. I'll never understand how people can make this simple mistake. You're asking me to use telepathy to help you spy on other people; what makes you think I won't just use it now against you?"
Dr. Winthrop isn't quite fool enough to say it aloud, but it's clear in his mind: *Go ahead. I'm tenure-track faculty, you're just a research fellow, I'm human, you're a mutant, I'm bonded, you're half a person. Everyone knows psionic mutants go crazy from all those thoughts coming at them all the time. Who are people going to believe? Try it and I'll fire you from my lab, good luck living that down for the rest of your career.*

"I think there's been a misunderstanding," is what Dr. Winthrop says aloud.

"I was ill these past few days," Charles says. "I don't think I'm quite over it after all. I'm going home."

"You do that."

Charles goes.

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Hello, Charles,

I received your email through LostSeeker.org. I also lost contact with my bondmate on April 22nd, 2000. I'm a mutant myself, and I've always believed my bondmate might have had a psionic ability. I've started feeling a little intuition coming back lately and it led me to Manhattan. I could meet with you any time. Tomorrow?

See you soon.

Maybe this is it, why everything seems as if it's going so badly lately. Maybe Charles is getting the intuition back as well, unconsciously; maybe he's been sabotaging himself, with Ken, with those speed dates, in his work, because on some level he's been sensing that he's close to a tremendous change in his life.

Charles reads over the message a dozen times, and calls in to take the rest of the week off. The department admin sounds unimpressed, but Charles finds it hard to care.

After a flurry of emails, the next day Charles goes to a coffee shop called Nova Nation and looks for a man with a red scarf.

Charles spots him, and stands staring for long moments; approaches, sits down.

"Are you confused about what 'telepathy' means?" Charles asks, touching his temple. "Because if so, you're in the wrong line of... well, we can hardly call it work."

"It was worth a try," says the man. Charles reads his name: Remy. "The Xavier estate amounts to how much? And your profile said gamma-level. I did a little research, put in some practice on my mental shields. Not good enough?"

"Not nearly," Charles tells him.

"Ah, well," Remy sighs philosophically. "I'll let you buy me off with just a little something to compensate me for my time."

Charles holds onto the edge of the table. "Why would you expect a payoff after failing to fool me even slightly?"

"I learned something so interesting," says Remy. "Most soulbonds, they can test for them by
measuring psionic energy. Even when a soulbond is blocked or lost, once both partners are found and examined, doctors can verify the bond. Frequencies, resonance, it's all very mysterious to me, but the interesting part is, that's not possible with most psionic mutants. The energy of the bond isn't distinct enough from the psionic energy of their mutations to be measured. Especially a lost bond. So if I claim I'm your lost soulmate, it's not going to be easy to prove one way or the other."

Charles shakes his head. "Any telepath would know the truth."

"Still not admissable in court, telepathic testimony. Not unless it's backed up by forensic evidence or another witness. I doubt I'd win, but I could make a nuisance of myself for a long while. Better just to get rid of me."

"Not really," says Charles. "Didn't your research tell you I'm at odds with my stepfather? And that he's notoriously tight-fisted and litigious? If you go after my bondmate's trust fund you're going to be fighting Kurt, not me, and I don't mind if you want to make his life difficult for as long as you care to keep it up." He stands. "Don't contact me again."

"I will," Remy calls after him.

Charles gets through the next couple of days aided by a constant glaze of alcohol, which works til he drinks a bit too much and Raven decides to cut up rough.

"This really needs to stop," she says, finding him on the sofa in the blue guest room, his legs dangling over the arm. "I know this is your ritual or whatever for the anniversary, but it's been a week."

"New ritual," he says. "This one's for a shitty month."

He came home from the coffee shop indecisive, but he already had another email from Remy pretending to be distraught that Charles wouldn't receive him, several from the other April 22nd seekers he'd contacted who were completely certain he wasn't theirs-- two of them made a point of telling him not to write again-- some come-ons sent through LostSeeker that were transparently from escort services, two from people who found his profile asking about different dates, and one from the 'die in a fire' guy, who sent virus-ridden attachments crudely disguised as apology e-cards. So Charles deleted his profile from the LostSeeker site. If he's right and he was renounced, he's letting himself in for all this for nothing; his bondmate can find him any time if he just stops blocking. If he's wrong... he's not wrong.

Raven sits at the end of the sofa and lays her hand on his forehead as if she's taking his temperature. It's too motherly, he shakes it off.

She says, "The month's almost over. Are you going to quit this then?"

"I don't know."

"Okay, well, guess what, I have my own shit going on, I can't come and soothe your fevered brow every time you decide to self-medicate out of the liquor cabinet. So you need to knock it off."

"Are you going to do an intervention?" he asks. "That would be fun, invite everyone round to say their piece. Charles, here is how your drinking has not negatively affected me. You didn't phone to complain about how that speed dating thing your sister put you onto was a bust. You didn't come round to maundere on about some con artist posing as your bondmate, or whinge about your career woes. We think you should continue treatment." He reaches for his glass. "Don't mind if I do."
"How about, it's affecting me, right now?" says Raven. "I was going to go out tonight."

"Doesn't have to affect you," Charles tells her. "Do whatever you had planned, you know I'm a tidy and considerate drunk."

"No," she says, turning on the television. "I'm just going to sit here and be negatively affected and guilt trip you til you knock it off."

"Suit yourself," Charles says blithely, but he does start to feel guilty eventually, and switches to water.

"What are you missing?" he asks finally.

"Meeting friends at a bar," she admits, and they both end up snickering.

Monday, Charles arrives at the lab to some inquiries of concern over his extended absence, some of them even sincere. It's nice until he gets to his station and discovers Dr. Winthrop has added himself and his favorite protege, Andersen, as co-authors on Charles's paper, the findings now largely attributed to Andersen.

Charles goes to Winthrop's office and tosses the paper onto the desk, righteously enraged, and abruptly runs out of steam. He has no compunctions about using his ability freely on anyone who asks him to use it to spy on other people, and reading it all from Winthrop, he sees exactly what sort of battle he'll be in for if he takes a stand. And suddenly it all just seems pointless. What is he fighting for? Credit for these eked-out findings, work he's not even proud of? A position he doesn't feel he's excelling at?

And if it's not worth fighting for, what is he doing here?

"Consider this verbal notice of my resignation at the end of term," says Charles.

Dr. Winthrop laughs. "You're going to resign a postdoc at Columbia."

Charles can't quite believe it either, but, "Yes."

"I'm willing to overlook this outburst, Dr. Xavier," says Dr. Winthrop. "You've been sick, you had a little disappointment, you got hotheaded. It's a bump in the road. We'll let it go."

"I'll have the written resignation on your desk by the end of the day," Charles tells him, and returns to his workspace to start documenting the state of the project that he'll be leaving behind.

Promptly at 4:59 PM, he delivers his written resignation. Before Dr. Winthrop can start in again, Charles says, "You won't get tenure." That effectively forestalls any further attempts at conversation; he leaves the lab.

Charles doesn't actually know that for certain. He didn't spy on the tenure committee. But from reading Winthrop, he knows enough about him to be sure it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. Winthrop will redouble his efforts now to game the system and get at the committee, and this time he'll leave a trace, beyond Charles's word against his.

The next few weeks promise to be dreadful, because Charles will have to keep coming back to the lab until end of term to get his project in a fit state for someone else to take over. And he has no idea where he's going to go or what he'll do next. But for now, it's enough to know that it won't be here, and it won't be this.
There's a message from Tony Stark on Charles's voicemail when he arrives home, loud clanging and welding noises and a shouted, "Call me!"

It's a little quieter when Tony picks up the phone, but not by much. "Charles! What?"

"You said to call you," Charles half-shouts down the phone.

"I did! Right!" Tony shuts off one of the noisier things in the background. "I had a brilliant idea this morning that completely crashed and burned in execution because physics is a cold and heartless bitch. I'm trying to find somebody as miserable as I am to come hang out with me. How are you doing?"

"This month I was dumped, I've been turned down about a dozen times, I fended off a blackmail attempt, and today I very likely scuttled my career," Charles answers.

Tony says, "Come over."

Tony's workshop is the same barely controlled disaster as ever, currently a bit dim; an exploded holographic diagram of something vastly complicated fills most of the space, glowing schematically blue.

"Over here," Tony's hand floats up from behind a worktable. Charles comes over to find him sitting on the floor with a bottle of Laphroaig, a tumbler and an ice bucket. "Here, you can have the glass," Tony says, pushing it toward him. "I haven't been using it anyway."

"What was this brilliant idea, then?" Charles asks, folding onto the floor next to him and helping himself to the glass.

"Not really the problem," Tony confesses. "I mean, that did happen, and it did piss me off for a while? But that's every day around here. I had a better idea later."

"I did wonder."

"Rhodey's gone," Tony says.

"Yes...?" Charles asks. For as long as he's known Tony, Rhodey's never not been gone.

"No. I mean--" Tony gestures toward the back of his head. "Gone."

Putting the tumbler down fast, Charles shifts to face Tony, grabbing his hand. "Are you sure? Did he say?"

"He kept saying he would if I didn't blah blah this, blah blah that. But I didn't think he'd actually do it!" says Tony. "It's like how he always threatened to move out."

"Tony... Rhodey did move out."

"Yeah, to make a point, but he was always coming back! He was always going to come back." Tony takes a swallow from the bottle. When it's Tony, it's easy to see how drinking like this isn't solving anything, just temporarily dodging some problems while creating twice as many more.

He can apply that to his own situation as well, in theory, but Charles helps himself anyway.
"That's probably what happened with mine," he says later. They've shifted around, against the wall now instead of the table, Tony's head pillowed on Charles's thigh.

"Your... your bond? You think you were renounced? For what?" Tony scoffs. "You were a teenager, you weren't even a real person yet, you were practically a zygote. Why would ey block you?"

Charles taps his temple, and Tony looks abashed, looks away. The people who stick around handle Charles's ability in different ways; Tony's approach is the most common, pretending it doesn't exist, trying to forget about it.

"It's been three months," Tony mutters. "Since he blocked me."

"Tony..." Charles lays a hand on his shoulder. "I wish you'd said. I would've come."

"I thought it was temporary. Scare tactics, right? Take a week, learn how, shut it down. Come back wagging a finger telling me I'm gonna get more of the same if I don't straighten up and fly right."

Tony closes his eyes. "I finally called him, he cut me off. 'We're done talking.' Which is just insult to injury. When am I ever done talking?"

Charles strokes his thumb along the line of Tony's eyebrow. "You know where he is," he says. "You know he's okay. You know how to find him. The conversation's on hold, it's not over."

Tony flicks a look up at him. "You can do this--" he taps his own temple. "At different levels, right? Just feelings, or only the thoughts that I start out with your name?"

Charles dislikes that, actually; he'd much rather people let him give them a quick lesson in projecting mentally, rather than turning their thoughts into some sort of quasi-Simon Says game, so that he has to half-listen without letting himself pick up thoughts that aren't meant for him. But beggars can't be choosers. "Yes."

"So, fuck all this. To hell with Rhodey and definitely to hell with your guy who didn't even meet you. Keep out of the thoughts, okay, but whatever else you get... go ahead," says Tony. "Just don't dig around in my brain. My brain is important. I keep all my best ideas in there."

"All right." Charles relaxes and lets his guard down a bit, bracing himself. It's no surprise that Tony is feeling the loss more profoundly and painfully than he's letting on, but it still hollows Charles out to receive it, far too familiar, the way Charles feels himself every April 22nd and a lot more days besides that than he'd like to admit.

He spreads his hand on Tony's chest, well above the arc reactor. Tony doesn't usually like it to be touched, but this time he covers Charles's hand with his and drags it down, over the cool blue light barely visible through his shirt.

Charles feels just when it gets to be too much for Tony, so it's no surprise to him when Tony says, "That's enough of that. Let's fuck. You don't still hold the line on that no-drinking rule, do you?"

"I do," Charles says. "No scening and drinking."

"We're not going to be doing anything risky."

"Oh? Do you do basic?"

"I'm insulted, I am outraged, that you're implying there's anything beyond me... of course I do basic, I do everything."
"You have sex without submitting?" Charles doesn't try to hide the skepticism in his voice.

"Yes! More or less, probably, what difference does it make?"

"Maybe if we stop drinking now, give it half an hour..."

"Or maybe not. I'm a big fan of instant gratification, that's why they call it gratification, because it's gratifying. And it's better when it's instant because it happens right away."

There are so many good reasons to hold back right now. He shouldn't indulge Tony's self-destructive impulse, or his own. Charles shouldn't be sceneing at all tonight. Even without the drinking, he's not fit to be responsible for someone else's well-being right now. Especially not someone who's hurting as much as Tony is.

Any other night, he'd hold the line, but it's the last day of the second-worst April he's ever had and Charles is sick of his own sanctimony. He crumples Tony's shirtfront in his fist and drags him up by it, pulls him in and kisses him.

"Yeah," Tony gasps, "yeah, come on," and right away he throws a leg over Charles's lap and grinds down against him.

Charles grabs his jaw and pushes him back, and he's open to Tony's emotions, he can feel Tony aching for more; Charles slaps him, puts some force behind it and leaves a pink mark on Tony's cheek. "Don't get ahead of yourself. You go where I put you."

"Okay, Jesus, sorry," Tony rolls his eyes.

"You're asking for it," Charles says, bringing up his legs and unseating Tony, setting his boot to Tony's shoulder and shoving him, hard enough that Tony loses his balance and reels back, catches himself with a hand on the floor. If Charles is honest with himself, he knew this was going to happen. He came over here in Tony's favorite boots.

He rolls up onto his feet and crouches over Tony, forcing him further down. "You're asking for it," Charles repeats, his voice lower, "and you don't have to, not like this."

"This is a fun way to ask, and it's getting results," says Tony, flashing a smirk. "C'mon, we were both enjoying that."

"You're going to ask," Charles says, "or you're only getting whatever I feel like giving you. And I don't feel so generous tonight." He presses his hand to Tony's chest, finds the smooth circle of the arc reactor, taps it gently; he lets his fingers drift to Tony's nipple, rubs his thumb over it, waits til Tony opens his mouth to complain it's not enough, and pinches hard, twisting.

"That's generous, that's plenty!"

"No, it isn't. Not for you." Charles drops his hand and massages Tony's firming hard-on roughly through his jeans. "You won't be happy til you're bound up and tied down and hurting for me, and the faster you give it up, the faster we'll get there."

Tony tilts his hips to get more of his hand, breathing harder, but he's still talking. "You're like that kid from The Omen, you know that? It really works for me, the choirboy look and the demon-seed sadism once you get going. C'mon, show me what you've got--"

"You can talk all night," Charles tells him. "You're not getting a thing til you ask me."
Tony doesn't try to wrestle against Charles, that's not his style, but he twists to try to get into a more comfortable position, and Charles isn't interested in letting him get comfortable. He locks Tony's arm and uses it to lever him down-- it wouldn't be easy if this were a genuine wrestle, but Tony had a considerable head start on the drinking, and he's not really trying to fight.

They end up with Tony on his stomach on the floor, Charles straddling him and bearing down on his hands with all his weight to pin Tony's wrists down on either side of his shoulders. Charles presses down against Tony, lets him feel how turned on Charles is, and murmurs into his ear, "I'm breaking all my own rules to do this with you right now. I want you too much to stop. But you could stand to show some gratitude."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," Tony hisses out, and Charles has to lean back fast to keep Tony from unseating him when Tony tries to kip up.

"Okay," Charles pants, and moves up to pin down Tony's arms with his knees and hold him down with one hand on the back of his neck and the other grabbing his hair at the top of his head, Tony's cheek against the workshop's polished concrete floor. "If this is what you need to get you there, we'll do it this way."

Tony doesn't try to get away, but he shrugs his shoulders, urging Charles's hand upward. "Do it."

"Tony."

"You said ask, I'm asking. You want to hear please? Please."

He means it, Charles can feel that. He lets go of Tony's hair and slides his hand up from Tony's nape to rest his palm at soul's-home, and Tony closes his eyes and goes lax under him.

Charles eases off him, keeping his hand there til he feels a restless twinge from Tony and lifts his hand away, urging him onto his back. Tony looks up at him, red-eyed.

Stroking his dark hair back, Charles says, "I'm not him. But I'm here."

He should make that his motto, print it on a badge, wear it on his lapel next to his circle-M pin. He's never going to be anyone's one and only, he'll never be anyone's first choice. He's just the one who's here, for whatever that's worth.

For what it's worth, he'll make it count. "We're done with this bratty rubbish. Sit up," he demands, and Tony obeys and offers his mouth, wet and yielding as Charles kisses him.

Charles bites his lip with a nip and a drag of his teeth as he draws away. "This is not a good idea," he says. "You and I are going to be bad for each other tonight."

"I'm okay with that," says Tony.

"So am I," Charles tells him, and takes off his belt.

Chapter End Notes

Since we made MissingOtherHalf.com, you may wonder to yourselves, "is there also a LostSeeker.org?" ^_^ Feel free to explore (there's a bit less to this site, as we felt we'd nailed the joke pretty well with MOH), but the pages most relevant to your interests
will be Charles Xavier and Jason Wyngarde.
There's a carnival going on at Helix Youth Center, the mutant youth center where Erik volunteers. Sometimes Erik feels like the mutant community is still his community; sometimes he wonders if he's just chasing something he used to have.

Erik's on his way out the door when he hears a car pulling up outside. Frowning a little, he steps out-- but when he sees that it's a sleek black town car, he stops frowning, and by the time Jason steps out of the back seat, he's grinning ear-to-ear.

He heads down the steps of his apartment building and rushes over, pulling Jason into a hug, laughing at the exchange of hearty back-slaps; when Jason steps back to look at him, Erik lifts his arms to his sides and raises his eyebrows. "Do I pass inspection?"

It's asked lightly, but in a way it's a serious question. Erik's been on his own in Pittsburgh for four whole months now, four months since Jason's work schedule picked up so much he could only get home for occasional weekends, four months since Erik finally convinced him that there was no point in keeping an apartment here that he never used anyway. "You can stay with me whenever you want to come back," Erik said, at the time, and that did the trick; he let the lease run out, moved a lot of his things to Los Angeles, and gave Erik most of his furniture. Erik's really not complaining about that part; Jason's wrought-iron bedframe beats the hell out of the chrome-plated frame from IKEA that Erik was using before.

And on his own Erik's had nothing but his willpower to keep him out of trouble. The clubs are still there, and the kind of dominant who can attract his attention and leave him broken on the floor without doing a damned thing... they're still everywhere, really.

So he took a good hard look at himself and buzzed his hair down to almost nothing, stopped dressing in the meticulous style that's been feeling more and more wrong over the last few years anyway. He shaves when he remembers, but he isn't shy about wearing his ancient Iron Maiden t-shirts anymore, wearing out at the hemline and all. He doesn't pull off a full-out dominant look, he's not deluded enough to think that, but when he says he's not oriented, nowadays people take him at his word.

If anyone was going to look at him oddly for all that, ask him what the hell he's thinking, it would have been Jason. But Jason comes up and strokes a hand down Erik's side, touching the incredibly soft fabric of Erik's years-old Holy Diver t-shirt, and if that's not a positive sign, Erik can't imagine what is.

"You look pretty good to me," Jason says. His hand settles on Erik's hip; Erik lowers his arms and puts one hand on Jason's bicep, tight under his thin white shirt. "Were you headed out somewhere?"

"Carnival at the Helix Youth Center," Erik says. "I have a shift at the ticket booth-- doesn't start for a couple hours, but I wanted to go there early anyway. I didn't think you were getting in until tomorrow. I was going to pick you up at the airport..."
"I wasn't." Jason smiles. "Managed to bump my flight up a little. And speaking of picking me up, how's my girl, you still taking care of her?"

"Your car is fine," Erik says dryly. "I still think you ought to take it out to Los Angeles with you..."

"Maybe at some point," Jason says, waving a hand. "So the carnival--"

"Like I said, I have a couple of hours--"

"No, no, I'll come with you, if you can wait for me to get my stuff into your apartment and get changed."

"Throw in a shower while you're at it. We have time."

Jason groans and rubs at the back of his neck. "Fuck, yeah. There's nothing better than a shower when you've been on a plane all day." He glances behind him; the town car's driver has his suitcase and duffel bag unloaded and out on the sidewalk. "Just a second."

While Jason's picking up his bags and tipping the driver, Erik pulls out his cell phone and sends a quick text to Randall, letting him know he'll be a little later than expected, and he'll be bringing a friend. He's not surprised when the return text asks him if his friend minds selling ride-and-game tickets, too.

"Feel like helping out with the ticket sales?" Erik calls from just outside the bathroom.

"Sure, why not?"

"Maybe you could throw in some autographs while you're at it."

"Oh, fuck off, nobody's heard of me."

"Nobody mainstream, maybe. How many out mutant actors are there at all?"

"Yeah, well, so far my biggest feature film was 'Brain Eaters', in which I die after twenty minutes."

"On the other hand, I bet half the kids at Helix bought your episodes of 'The U Word' on iTunes."

"Oh, good, so they've all seen me naked. Should I just not bother to get dressed?" The shower cuts off, and Erik hears Jason pulling a towel off the rod.

"Your stuff's clean. Bottom drawer--"

"--like always, I know." Jason comes out of the shower in a towel, hair messily fingercombed back off his face. "Give me five minutes."

Erik stares after him as he heads into the bedroom to get dressed. "Don't rush on my account."

Jason glances over his shoulder, smirking. "I'm not. I wouldn't want all those loyal fans to be kept waiting."

Laughing, Erik pulls out his phone. "I could tell Randall you're coming. Maybe they'd give you your own booth."

A floating mouth and tongue hovers in the air in front of Erik, and before he can dodge it, it blows him a raspberry. At least it doesn't leave him wet.
"Keep doing that and you could have your own kissing booth," Erik teases, and the projection Jason tosses at him next has no place at a youth carnival.

The carnival’s been planned for months, and it's open to the public; there are signs and banners up everywhere that read "Helix Youth Center Carnival: A Benefit For Mutant Kids," as if people around here don't know what Helix is. More than one fundamentalist group has brought a lawsuit to the city trying to get Helix disbanded, and in talks with the city officials, Erik himself has spoken about his own teenage years, about the need for community and the potential disaster that can result when mutants feel they can't turn to anyone in authority in times of crisis.

He's never had his past thrown in his face, never had to hear someone argue that what little community he had might have been the inciting force behind his assault on four human teenagers in a high school in Park View, Nebraska. He's never known for sure what happened; maybe Sebastian managed to have those records sealed. In any case, his stories seem to be compelling-- and he has no illusions that the fact that his mutation is invisible and all but harmless plays into people's sympathies. Why, they're just like us, only some of them make better-than-average jewelers.

He is, actually. For all the bitterness he feels at losing his ability, for all his anger at having his ability dwindle to beta-level, he's comfortable with metal, has a feel for it that few other people do- even humans who've been making it their life's art for years. He has a good eye for detail, can tell at a touch when something low-quality is being passed off as high, and he manages to stay current with trends in the jewelry world while still maintaining a clear eye on what's classic and how classic and modern should meld.

He just never feels like he's really touching the metal anymore. Those few months in Boston notwithstanding, he's still just a beta-level mutant, able to discern metals from one another at a touch and sometimes bend or shape them just a little, if it's a good day. Sometimes he wishes he'd never left; he hasn't felt his ability like that before or since, except in limited moments of anger or pain, or with Sebastian, which is both those things plus the added tangle of arousal and urgency.

That sense of remove from metal is why he doesn't design, even though he aches to do it. When the independent jewelry shop made an offer to hire him away from the mall shop, they offered him a job as lead buyer-- after all this time, he has a lot of connections in the business, strange as it seems-- and as a part-time manager. He came in to look at their shop, and they let him see their in-house designers at work. The metalsmith saw him looking at the tools with undisguised interest and envy, and offered to let him sit in, learn from someone who's been doing it for twenty years.

He turned it down; he can't bear to think about needing tools to shape metal, even though it's been seven years and he's running out of hope that he's ever going to have his ability back. He's tempted, but the difference between what he could create with tools and what he managed to make without them-- his windcatcher, Jason's wristband, Patricia Wyngarde's unfinished set of candlesticks-- is too great to bear thinking on.

Still, he loves seeing people bring in new, independent lines, things designed or crafted by hand. He keeps an eye on the raw materials bought by the shop's in-house designers, making sure the quality is at its best. He takes care of the store whenever the other managers aren't available, and he earns enough to live on and to stockpile some savings.

And maybe most important, he doesn't have to wear those submissive's suits and corset vests he had to wear every day at the mall shop. He can't quite bear to get rid of them, the corsets themselves and all their metal boning always felt good, but he's glad he doesn't have to go out in public wearing them anymore. In public, at home, all he has to be is himself: unoriented, mutant,
Jewish, widowed... he has a lot of different identities, these days, but with Jason and with the people at Helix, he doesn't have to justify them to anyone. He is what he is. It might not be the life he was supposed to have, but it's *a life*, most of the time.

Here and now, at the carnival, it's obvious enough what the carnival is and who it's for, and being a part of that feels good. He hopes the other mutants here today get that same sense of community out of the carnival; Erik is grateful for every bit of it.

He's a lot less grateful for the human visitors they'll be getting. No matter what kind of event Helix hosts, some humans will always come to gawk at the mutants. Today their gawking will mean they miss out on classic fair games, magic shows, and acrobatic demonstrations; Erik knows human nature well enough to know that the human intruders will find pointing at teenagers and children, whispering, and laughing to be far more entertaining. *Pathetic.*

Every time, there's some debate about what to do about human visitors to an event. Erik's often been on the side of banning them altogether, especially for more sensitive events, but a lot of the kids who come here have human parents or siblings; his side is always quickly overruled. Some people favored ignoring them, letting them spend their money all they wanted; a few odd looks are nothing the kids don't see every day anyway. Erik wanted, still wants, to see the gawkers thrown out; if they can't ban humans altogether it's the next best thing. The eventual compromise was to play it by ear, which means that the mutants will have to put up with human bigotry and ugliness, *even children.* It's unacceptable, and he has every intention of escorting humans out of the gates himself if anyone's making the kids feel uncomfortable or threatened. Maybe he can't lift someone off eir feet now-- well, not with anything other than his body-- but he can and will get people out of their carnival if it comes to that.

There is a checkpoint at the front gate, at least, adult mutants with visible mutations selling entry tickets. People who are openly nasty to them get turned away, people who set off alarm bells get delayed until someone with secondary mutations for empathy or particularly good body language skills can suss out their intentions, and few of them argue much when they're asked to go. Erik and Jason check in and get their wristbands, Erik nodding to Vic and Roxy; Vic's careful not to tug on the chain Erik's windcatcher is resting on, and Roxy oohs and ahhs over Jason's bronze wristband before sealing the paper fair wristband onto Jason's wrist.

From there it's into the carnival, where they get a chance to look around at the booths, performers, and vendors. There are kids walking around selling souvenirs: trays full of Helix-branded keychains and bumper stickers and buttons, as well as some of the more sedate circle-M items: lapel pins and pendants and cell phone charms. There are also booths with mutant-created artwork, some of which is stunning; Erik doesn't own much in the way of art, but he's bought prints from some of the mutant photographers who are showing off their portfolios today.

"It's great," Jason says, openly delighted. "God, think how far this place has come. When we first got here it was what, six volunteers and a dozen kids? I think every mutant for a hundred miles probably knows about Helix now."

"And every mutant within fifty is here today," Erik jokes. He glances around the crowd; young mutants with and without visible mutations are laughing and walking around and competing at the different fair games with each other. There's a couple holding hands and walking slowly past all the booths, a collar around the taller boy's longer-than-baseline neck, his dominant's pale green skin changing colors slightly when they move in front of different-colored booths.

"Los Angeles has its mutant suburbs," Jason admits, "and it's nice not to be the only Asian-American in any given restaurant, but... when the hell did Pittsburgh end up being home, anyway?"
Because that's what it feels like, being here. Like we're home."

Erik reaches out himself at that, slips his hand into Jason's and squeezes. He's never really felt like this was home, but then he's not sure how he'd know the difference. He didn't have any sense of home growing up; home was his mother, their car, the things he took with him. When he got older, home was his soulmate's presence in his heart and mind. After Sebastian, home was even more of a foreign concept, and for all that he's been here for six years, he doesn't feel that way about it; he doesn't know if anywhere will ever feel like home.

Still... "If it means you end up visiting more often, I'm all for it," Erik says softly. Jason squeezes his hand and grins.

As they're enjoying the atmosphere, Erik becomes gradually aware that someone's watching them: a tiny teenage girl with curled horns at her temples and a mottled pattern on her back, which, today, is on display; she's wearing a pink halter top. Erik gives her a little nod, tilts his head as if to invite her over. She bounces a little and grabs the arm of the boy next to her, dragging him over, too.

"Hello, Nina," Erik says.

"Hi, Erik!" But Nina's eyes are big and wide and not for Erik at all. Erik tosses Jason an amused look. "Um, how's it going..."

"Fine, thanks. Troy." Erik nods to Nina's emfriend and loosens his hand from Jason's so he can offer it to Troy. Troy's hands are tridactyl, two large fingers and opposable thumbs; it doesn't give Erik a moment's pause.

"This is my friend, Jason," Erik says, though from Nina's reaction it's clear she doesn't need him to tell her Jason's name. Jason smiles at both of them, shakes Nina's hand first and then Troy's, equally comfortable with Troy's non-baseline grip.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I just have to ask. Are you Jason Wyngarde?" Nina squeals.

Jason exchanges a look with Erik, who shrugs with a grin and an I-told-you-so expression on his face. "That's me," Jason says.

"Oh my God." Nina clutches at Troy, who doesn't look nearly as impressed. "Oh my God, I can't believe you're actually-- I mean, I heard you used to live in Pittsburgh, but-- oh my God. Can I have your autograph?"

Troy looks Jason up and down. "Shouldn't you be taller?" he asks, wrinkling his nose. "Or do they make you stand on boxes when you're shooting?"

Nina gives Troy a horrified look and smacks him on the shoulder. "Shut up, Troy," she hisses. "He's not short!"

Jason most definitely does not look at Erik this time, which is good; Erik doesn't think he could keep from bursting out laughing. "Like it says on IMDb," he tells Troy, "I'm five foot ten." Which is an exaggeration; Erik's pretty sure Jason never made it past 5'9", and that's being generous. "Tall enough."

"Yeah? How do you know Erik?" Troy asks, chin high, and Erik blinks a little. Troy's never come over as particularly chauvinistic, and he was one of the first people to take Erik's visible change in orientation presentation in stride, but Erik knows a protective tone when he hears one.

He's been around long enough for the kids to think of him as one of their own, to reach out and try
to defend him if a stranger's invading their territory. It's sweet, but that doesn't make it feel any less awkward. "Jason and I have been best friends since high school," Erik explains, leveling a hard look at Troy. Troy at least has the good grace to look chagrined, as if realizing only now what he was doing.

"Sorry," Troy mutters.

"You never said you knew Jason Wyngarde!" Nina says, still delighted. "Why didn't you say, you should have said..."

"I used to volunteer at Helix when I was in school at Carnegie Mellon," Jason says. "But that was before your time..."

"Nobody tells me anything," Nina moans. "You're amazing, I've watched your episodes of 'The U Word' like a billion times. Can you really do that quick-tie thing with the rope--?"

Troy cuts her off, glaring at Jason again-- oh, dear, here they go again, youth at its most territorial. Erik sighs, but he knows Jason can handle himself. "If you're really Jason Wyngarde, project something," Troy says. "You're supposed to do projections, so do one now."

Nina gets a look on her face that says she'd love to volunteer to help out, maybe with the quick-tie rope technique she just mentioned, but Jason lifts one hand and snaps his fingers before she can get her hands extended in front of her. A giant sign unfurls above his head, reading THE GREAT AND POWERFUL JASON WYNGARDE ~ ONE NIGHT ONLY ~ TICKETS 50¢, all in an old-fashioned early-1900s style. As Erik watches, Jason's clothes morph into a tuxedo, complete with tails, top hat, white gloves, and magic wand.

Troy's mouth is open so wide he really might catch a fly or two. Nina's eyes are shining.

"Welcome home," Erik says softly.

"Always good to be back," Jason returns, and he bows low at the waist to Nina and Troy, sweeping his hat off his head as he goes. "Any other requests?"

Jason does stick around for Erik's shift at the ticket booth, and as Erik predicted, it ends up being an unofficial autograph session. Jason's nice to everyone, personalizes every autograph he can, and doesn't balk when people tell him how hot he was in 'The U Word'. He just smiles enigmatically when someone says, "I guess you had some real-life research for hooking up with unoriented people, huh," and gives Erik an envious look; Erik gets very busy making change for the person on his side of the table.

At the end of the shift, a few of the older mutants linger-- volunteers, all of them over eighteen, if barely, all three of them submissives. They're a trio of good friends, and they're all good kids-- none of them were here during Jason's time at Helix, but it looks like they'd like to make up for the lack now. All at once. Erik's more amused than anything; he raises his eyebrows at Jason as if to say, Should I go?

Jason throws up a quick message: OH GOD DON'T LEAVE ME. Erik stifles his laugh and shakes his head, and he doesn't leave Jason alone, even though the three young, submissive mutants who are practically painting "available" on their shirts probably spend the rest of their conversation wishing he would.

"Have you ever thought about going back to school?" Jason asks. "You do so well with the kids; maybe you should think about teaching."
"I don't think I have the patience," Erik admits, pulling two beers out of his fridge. "And I don't think I'm a particularly good influence." He thumbs at the bottlecap on one of them the way he always does, and then grabs the bottle opener off the fridge, irritated as usual that the instinct still hasn't left him.

"You're the best influence most mutant kids could hope for," Jason shoots back. "You're tough, you're smart, you don't just bend over when the humans try to force us to hide in our nice, clean, well-lit closets--"

"You're mixing metaphors," Erik says mildly. He sets both bottles and the bottle opener down on his coffee table; Jason pops both the caps off. "I'm not the kind of person anyone wants teaching their children." Erik's firm about it as he pulls his phone out of his pocket and takes a seat. "Pizza?"

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, not the kind of person..." Jason shakes his head. "Mutant kids need people like you. People who don't compromise just because they can pass for human."

"What about you?" Erik counters. "You could be in the closet, too. You're not. You never have been. You're a better influence than I am. At least you still have your abilities..."

"Don't you even fucking start with that," Jason says, and Erik blinks over at him; he sounds completely serious. "If you can look me in the eyes and tell me you think a beta-level mutant deserves less protection than an omega-level--"

"I didn't say that. Fuck, you know I don't think that way. I just--" Erik tilts his head back, rests it on the back of the couch. "Sometimes I feel like I ought to be wearing the mutant charm on the right instead of on the left."

The reference goes right over Jason's head; he sits up and stares at Erik, wide-eyed. "You said you're not hitting the clubs these days--"

"I'm not. That's not what I meant--" Erik runs his fingers through his hair, still so much shorter than he's used to. "I mean sometimes I feel like it's not my community anymore. Like it's just one more thing that was taken from me, and now I'm just a goddamned mutant-chaser--"

"No, fuck that. This one you took back." Jason reaches over, grabs Erik by the shoulders. "Those kids know you. Every single one of them. Not because you have a flashy mutation, or because you've been on TV. Because you give a damn. They can count on you. They know that."

"They shouldn't." Erik shrugs out of Jason's grip. "Did you know he's touring the goddamned country now? He's got three books, he gives seminars. He doesn't have to tell Jason who he means. "He stays away from Pittsburgh like he knows I'm here, but if he tried coming after me, there's no way I could stay."

"There's a solution for that," Jason says evenly. "There's a lot of solutions for that, but you know the one I'm talking about--"

"And like I said the first time you brought it up: we don't know what that would do to me." Erik reaches up, rubs at his joining spot; it still hurts, all these years later. "It could kill me. Or worse. You saw the Stones." He takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. "Maybe that's why nowhere's ever felt like home to me. Maybe I just don't want to give him one more thing he can take away."

Jason doesn't say anything to that; he stares at Erik for a while, and then slides an arm around his shoulders, pulls Erik in close.
"If you ever change your mind," he whispers, "say the word. I'll drop anything I have to. I want to be there for it."

Erik closes his eyes, presses his face to Jason's shoulder. After a while, he nods.
Charles, September 2007

Chapter Summary

The LostSeeker boards had one good result: a teleporting mutant named Amelia. It's a different sort of relationship for Charles, but he's willing to give it a try.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everybody for being so patient about this! We're coming up on the end now (it looks like 46 chapters total... we think...), so getting the last pieces into place is proving to be a bit of a challenge. *g*

Next chapter will go live on Monday, February 20. (And the next chapter is: Erik, December 2007.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Amelia Voght 4/25/2007
Hi Charles, I saw your Lostseeker.org profile looking at all the April

Charles Xavier 5/7/2007
to Amelia Voght

Hello Amelia,

I'm sorry it took me so long to reply. I'm afraid my date is quite certain. There's no doubt that I lost contact with my bondmate on the 22nd. I understand why you'd feel it's important to double-check, especially when you're skipping across time zones on a daily basis.

I wish you all the best of luck in your search.

Sincerely,
Charles Xavier

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Charles Xavier 5/7/2007
Hello Amelia, I'm sorry it took me so long to reply. I'm afraid my
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to me

Hi Charles,

Thank you for the answer, it was great to hear something nice after getting a lot of rude responses. Did you get hit by the "die mutie" guy who was sending virus attachments? What an asshole.

When I got your email, I looked you up on LostSeeker again, but your profile is gone. I hope it's not because of harassment like that.

--

AV

Amelia Voght 4/25/2007

Hi Charles, I saw your Lostseeker.org profile looking at all the April

Charles Xavier 5/7/2007

Hello Amelia, I'm sorry it took me so long to reply. I'm afraid my

Amelia Voght 5/9/2007

Hi Charles, Thank you for the answer, it was great to hear something

to Amelia Voght

Hello Amelia,

I did unfortunately receive email with viruses attached from someone on LostSeeker. That's not the main reason I deleted my profile. Someone posed as my bondmate, not a mistake but a deliberate lie, and I didn't want to afford him any more chances to contact me. I hope you've been having better fortune.

--

Charles Xavier

Amelia Voght 4/25/2007

Hi Charles, I saw your Lostseeker.org profile looking at all the April

Charles Xavier 5/7/2007
Hello Amelia, I'm sorry it took me so long to reply. I'm afraid my

**Amelia Voght 5/9/2007**

Hi Charles, Thank you for the reply, it was great to hear something

**Charles Xavier 5/11/2007**

Hello Amelia, I did unfortunately receive email with viruses attached

**Amelia Voght 5/12/2007**

to me

Hi Charles,

I'm so sorry! I can't believe anyone could do something so horrible. It's awful that it's driven you off the site. If you've stopped checking, though, you might want to go back... LostSeeker just added notifications to let you know whenever someone new signs up on your separation date, and they don't require a public profile for that. FYI!

I think the redesign attracted some creeps and trolls, I'm hoping they'll drop off again soon. The forums have been a nightmare. They've taken them offline twice because they were getting hit with so much crap, but they fixed the security last time, it's gotten way better since then. Hopefully they'll keep upgrading and get a better process to screen out people like the virus attachment guy and the liar who bothered you. LostSeeker isn't perfect but it's the best site I've found for this and I really want it to succeed.

Anyway, I'm glad I saved your picture when I had the chance ;-)  

--

AV

**Amelia Voght 4/25/2007**

Hi Charles, I saw your Lostseeker.org profile looking at all the April 8 older messages

**Charles Xavier 6/2/2007**

I'm enjoying the novelty of corresponding like this. I don't often

**Amelia Voght - 6/3/2007**

to me
Me either. Teleporter... usually I just mist over and talk in person! It's kind of nice to talk this way instead. Like kids with tin cans and string. Did you ever try that as a kid? The only way I could hear anything through the can was if my friend was shouting loud enough that half the block could hear her anyway.

--

AV

Amelia Voght 4/25/2007

Hi Charles, I saw your Lostseeker.org profile looking through all the April 16 older messages


I'm getting my concordance teaching certificate, it's a ten week program

Amelia Voght 7/7/2007

to me

Trying not to fixate on the "teaching concordance" thing, but wow, talk about the ultimate dating brag.

I visited those websites you linked me to and downloaded some of the MP3s. Even if this doesn't teach me psionic shielding, I like doing it for the meditation! It seems like a good program. I misted over to Ernie's and asked him to try to read my mind. He said I kept him out for about five seconds. But that's five more seconds than I could manage a week ago!

--

AV

Amelia Voght 4/25/2007

Hi Charles, I saw your Lostseeker.org profile looking through all the April 29 older messages


The new position at Elion is going well, thanks. The demo was a bit nerve-
We should meet up and celebrate your first demonstration going so well! I was so tempted to pop in, you don't even know. But of course I wouldn't do anything to disrupt your class or show up anywhere without asking first.

So I'm asking! I think I have a handle on shielding. I'm ready if you are. Can we meet?

--

AV

Charles hesitates before answering his latest email from Amelia, but eventually he types, 

_Certainly, I'd be happy to see you. You mentioned that you've been to the mutant community center on 70th Street? I could meet you there by the front doors tomorrow at 2 PM EST._

The reply, later, is _See you then!_

Meeting Amelia for the first time is rather abrupt and unceremonious. Charles arrives five minutes early and waits, and promptly at two, Amelia fades into sight a few feet away.

It's always a delight to see a mutation in action, especially one he's never seen before; he's met teleporters, but no one whose ability worked the way Amelia's does, by dispersing herself into a mist before transporting across great distances. It's very fast, and then Amelia's solid and she's there, colorfully dressed in a red and white checked shirt, a yellow skirt and a red belt, with sunglasses pushed up on her head, holding back her hair.

Once she solidifies, she says, "Hello, Charles!" and rather neatly takes his extended right hand in her left and redirects him into a hug. She's a bit shorter than him in her heels, and her perfume or shampoo or something has a clean scent, like aloe vera.

"It's so nice to finally meet you in person." Amelia stands back from him, smiling. "How are my shields?"

"Good," Charles says after a moment of dropping his own defenses a bit. He senses her presence, of course, and a hint of immediate mood-- she's ebullient right now, and slightly more nervous than she's outwardly letting on. But it feels as if he'd have to exert himself considerably to get anything more. When he was younger, before, shields like these would've been nothing to him, translucent paper walls. But they're quite adequate against him now.

"It's good to meet you too," he says. "Your photo's black and white, I didn't realize you have such a lovely MC1R mutation. Your hair," he clarifies when she lifts her brows. "Auburn hair."

"Ohhh. That's not a mutation, it's Natural Instincts Spiced Tea," she laughs, "but thank you."

"Is that why your photo on the website is black and white?" he asks. "So your bondmate won't be thrown off, if intuition is telling him he's looking for a brunette?"

"Exactly," she gives him a little smile. And then there doesn't seem to be anywhere further to take that line of conversation.
"I like your dress," he tries, and realizes it's not a dress, strictly speaking. "Outfit. Ensemble." He goes all in on the awkwardness with a try at a smile and a shrug. "What you're wearing."

Fortunately Amelia takes it in stride, smiling a bit more widely. "This is kind of weird, isn't it? I mean, we've kind of covered a lot of ground in email. You already know all my family stuff and my dating history and favorite songs and childhood pets and that I broke my little finger twice. This is basically the equivalent of our fifth or sixth date."

"Are we dating?" he asks. "That would be good. If we are. I'd like that." She's shaking her head at him; Charles says, "I warned you..." He's tried to learn, but body language, expressions, tone of voice, it's all still tricky for him to decipher without using telepathy at all, and it's particularly difficult when he's meeting new people.

"You warned me. But seriously, don't worry about it. It's just nerves. You're not that hapless, you were fine in email and you couldn't read my mind then." It's a relief to hear her talk about it casually. She doesn't appear to be unnerved or worried. It seems it was a good idea to point her toward resources to learn to shield before they met; better to take it off the table entirely before it has a chance to sour things. She's already moving past it with a lovely smile, asking, "Is that coffee place still going, up a couple of blocks from here?"

"They moved," Charles says, falling into step with her, "but only around the corner. Any interesting parcels lately?"

"Since the last time I talked to you about work, yesterday?" She takes pity on him this time. "No, today was just the usual. I'm on call, though. Kind of morbid. I'm supposed to deliver a kidney for a transplant when the donor dies."

Amelia does a fair amount of that sort of work, he knows from their correspondence. She uses her ability working as a courier, teleporting time-sensitive items from place to place instantaneously. And few things are more time-sensitive and crucial than organs for transplant.

"What about you? Your first lab demonstration in your own class, that's a pretty big deal. Congratulations."

"I'm really pleased it went well, yes, thank you," he says. It was Angel who told him about an opening at Elion, the community college where she teaches a section in concordance herself.

He's only an adjunct, teaching just two classes, and he's getting the worst hours and the fewest resources. But through a quirk of scheduling, Elion wanted to hire someone for summer, fall and winter terms; they have enough instructors to cover the spring term offerings. Considering how bad his Aprils have been getting, a break in the spring seemed like a sign that he ought to try this.

It's not what he saw himself doing, and he's had misgivings. But his passion for research has faded, or he wouldn't have been so quick to leave Columbia. He does still like to teach, and he's enjoying concordance instruction.

He plans to work on turning his thesis into a book for a lay audience, when he's off in the spring. Maybe by the time he's polished that up, in a year or two, he'll feel inclined to move back into his primary field. In the meantime, Elion College has more self-identified mutant students enrolled than any other school in the CUNY system, and there are quite a few out mutants among the teaching staff. Charles feels better about working there than he did at Columbia, no matter how accepting the lip service or prestigious the lab.

The coffee place isn't just in a different location, it's under new management as well, and Charles
does a quick check to make sure there's still a circle-M symbol on their signage; it's there, along with promises that at least some items on the menu will be kosher, halal, and/or vegan.

Amelia sees him looking at the sign and smiles, "New York! Most places, you take your chances."

"Certainly makes me glad all over again to live in Manhattan," he says, opening the door for her.

"You seriously didn't think this was a date?" Amelia asks. "When you suggested I learn how to shield my mind, I thought for sure that was a big step in that direction. I didn't think you'd have me learn to meditate and block just so we could meet up and play chess or whatever."

"I was hoping," Charles says. "I didn't want to assume."

She beams at him. "Assume."

Charles finds his feet a bit once they're sat down together over coffee and tea. He keeps the conversation moving by asking Amelia to elaborate on things she mentioned in passing in email, and soon they're swapping stories fluently. She's easy to be around, cheerful and open.

It's going well til there's an unfortunate lull in conversation just as the cafe's sound system begins playing a song Charles particularly despises. The music drones, "Soulmate, in the good and bad and even through the heartache, we've got a special bond that'll never break," and he and Amelia look at each other, uncertain and uncomfortable again.

"I hate this stupid soulmate song," Amelia confides finally.

"I hate every soulmate song," Charles answers, surprising himself with his vehemence.

Amelia bursts into a laugh. "But you're not bitter or anything."

He smiles back. "No, of course not, don't be ridiculous."

She scoots her chair a bit closer to his and drops her voice. "Me too. Every song on the radio. Every romantic comedy. Every novel at the checkout stand."

"All the magazine headlines," Charles nods. "All the adverts. Find your soulmate, keep your soulmate, spice up your bond, renew it, make it stronger, make certain everyone knows how much you feel it all the time..."

"Valentine's Day."

They both shudder.

"You know, let's get out of here," Amelia says, less as if she's irked at the music, more as if she's too energized to sit still. "Let's just go."

Charles stands, donning his coat and leading the way out to the street. "Where to?"

"Where would you like to go?" Amelia asks. "Anywhere in the world. I'll take you there. Assuming you're up for teleporting with me."

"Absolutely."

"Okay, then: open ticket. Anywhere at all. First thing that pops into your head."
"Pittsburgh," Charles answers at once.

Amelia laughs, "What's in Pittsburgh?"

"I don't know. Steel?" Charles smiles back. "I have no idea, I've never been. You asked what popped into my head first..."

"Funny," she says. "But okay, why not? We can do Pittsburgh." Amelia offers her hand.

Charles takes it readily. He feels a bizarre sense of dispersion and movement, but it's gone almost too quickly to register the sensation.

And then they're on the top of a tall building in the sunshine, looking out over a cityscape. It could be anywhere, Charles doesn't recognize anything. He really hasn't the foggiest why he named this place.

"U.S. Steel Tower," Amelia says. "Highest point in town."

"It's quite a view," says Charles. At this distance, the buildings gleam and shine; the air seems to shimmer. The sky is a vast depthless blue, and the wind is bracing. "Thank you. Your mutation is amazing."

"I do feel lucky, mostly."

"Only mostly?"

She tilts her head, looking up at him. "Mostly. You'd think seeking would've been easy for me, wouldn't you? I could just look at a map, follow my bond intuition, go straight there. But it didn't work out that way. I hopped all over the world and I never felt a pull in any particular direction. Closer, further, I could never tell."

Charles squeezes her hand. "I'm sorry."

"Maybe my mutation interfered somehow," Amelia says. "So I don't always feel so lucky, if that was it. But I don't like to think of it that way. I don't want it to be that. I love what I can do." She smiles. "Can I show you someplace else?"

"Did you have anywhere in particular in mind?"

"Yes," she says. "But first, take off your coat."

"Where are we?" Charles breathes in awe.

"Cueva de los Cristales." Amelia fiddles with her watch, sets a timer. "We can only stay a few minutes."

"The heat?" he asks, and she nods. It's seething and steamy here, the air feels thick and it's hot as blazes. He unbuttons the top few buttons on his shirt; he's already running with sweat, but even so, he's sorry they can't stay; this place is incredible.

Giant cylinders of milky, translucent gypsum crystal jut around them in all directions, like the trunks of enormous petrified trees, like toppled pillars or massive shafts of cloudy ice. The walls and floor are likewise studded with large knobs and spears of crystal, and the entire cave goes on and on, so much bigger than his mind wants to accept.
"We probably shouldn't touch anything...?"

"It's okay in this spot," Amelia says. "There's not much risk of anything shifting, it's all been checked out. We've been here before, that's why there's lights. They're motion-activated. Anyway, if something happens, I'll port us out right away. I don't even have to be touching you, I can teleport anything in my line of sight. And," she smiles, "I've got my eye on you."

Charles grins back and reaches out, resting a hand on the nearest crystal beam. The texture is like smooth stone, a bit soapy... nothing special, but feeling the curve under his palm, he has even more appreciation for the sheer size of the thing. He wouldn't be able to get his arms all the way around it. He doubts he'd even come close.

The heat feels beyond oppressive, though, his shirt sticking to his back, the air sodden and scorching in his lungs. Amelia's watch beeps, and he takes her hand again.

This time, perhaps because the heat made him so aware of himself physically, Charles feels the process more acutely, the way his body thins, vanishes, reappears as if he's being born of smoke. It's disorienting, existentially troubling-- he knows there's a sound working theory for how mutant teleportation functions, even if the science isn't completely codified yet, but it feels impossible, magical.

Of course people think the same thing about his own ability, which feels utterly ordinary to Charles. He shakes off the dizziness with an effort, looking around.

It's dawn here, wherever here is, and they're at the summit of a tremendous height, the rocks around them rusty red and orange. Beyond a drop, there's nothing for miles but flat plains patched over with grass and studded with bushes.

"Uluru," Amelia says. "Australia. We're about a thousand feet up, half a mile above sea level. The color's even better at sunset, but dawn is nice too."

"It's stunning," Charles says. And refreshing. It's quite windy, but after the stultifying heat of the crystal cave, the heavy breeze feels sweet and welcome.

Amelia fishes in her handbag and comes up with a bottle of water, offering it to him. "The cave takes it out of you, I know. But the thing is... what's the point of being able to teleport if you can't go to the most beautiful places in the world? And when you think about it, why stop at beautiful? Anyone can go to the Pyramids or the Grand Canyon, or visit Mt. Fuji or Kilimanjaro or Mt. St. Helens. So we've made a circuit of the most gorgeous places that are inaccessible for baselines."

Charles takes a long draught from the bottle and hands it back. "We?"

"Teleporters," Amelia says. "It's pretty easy for us to get together. You know. By definition. A lot of us can only teleport places we've been before, so when a porter manifests, ey gets in touch... there used to be a phone number for it, now it's the internet... anyway, once you manifest and send up a flag, someone meets up with you, and takes you on this circuit of porter hangouts. Special places that other people have a hard time getting to. It's kind of an initiation. And then once you know the places, you can go back any time. So we meet up pretty regularly."

"That's brilliant. I wish psionics had a sense of community like that."

"Why don't you? I know you're a little more limited by distance than we are, but it should be easier for you to find each other than, I don't know, flamers or icers or tekes or whatever."

"We can find one another, but we instinctively shield our minds against each other," Charles says.
"It doesn't feel very friendly."

Amelia reaches for his hand again and squeezes it. "I'll take you to a teleporter party sometime."

He smiles. "I'd like that."

They whip to Alaska next to stand atop a glacier, and to the top of Parakupá Vená, a waterfall in Venezuela that has, Amelia tells him, the highest plunge in the world.

Charles has never really had much reason to notice before, but he finds himself rather leery of heights as they peer down over one spectacular landscape after another. Though really, anyone would be fretful at these elevations... except Amelia, who's fearless, well accustomed to teleporting out of any danger she might encounter on these jaunts.

After one last jump, to a plateau amid the rock formations at the Garden of the Gods in Colorado, they return to Manhattan. Charles seriously considers kissing the ground, but he's grateful for the chance to be so overwhelmed.

"After all that, dinner seems anticlimactic, but I'd love to take you out," he says. "I made reservations, but we can cancel and do something else, if you're in the mood for anything in particular."

"You've been a pretty good sport about porting around with me," she says. "Surprise me."

He takes her to Tuck Inn. It's so self-consciously kitschy that Charles can't keep track of the various layers of smirking irony involved, but more to the point, it's mutant owned and mutant friendly.

There are tables in the dining room, but lining the room, where some restaurants would have booths, there are canopied beds, with dozens of pillows to prop up with and trays for the meals. Each bed is themed-- one is built into the chassis of a classic Cadillac, one is fashioned to look like a weathered fairy-tale bed for Sleeping Beauty, another is cluttered with Star Wars items and has the opening scroll text printed in yellow on the diaphanous black canopy.

It's probably a bit forward for a first date, but Amelia did say it was more like the equivalent of their fifth or sixth date, and though Charles made a reservation, he didn't request any of the beds. Though that was partly because if the date went sour, he was planning to bring Raven here to commiserate with him instead.

The maître d' smiles when he spots Charles's circle-M lapel pin, takes his name and shows them to the dining room, pointing out the open tables and beds.

Fortunately, the place is a hit with Amelia. She laughs at the sight of the dining room and chooses a bed done up in fussy high Victorian style complete with a complement of eerie dolls clustered on the side tables. Charles can rather see why this one wasn't taken, but it's still comfortable and feels cozy with the canopy pulled shut.

Amelia turns on the little brass lamp to consult the menu. "They gave me the date menu," she frowns. "No prices."

"It's prix fixe." He shifts closer to explain how to order; even the menu fits the Victorian theme, with appropriate typography. When Charles came here with Ken, they dined in the gothic horror themed bed, and the menu was in black letter script and spotted with dried "blood."
They put in their orders and the waiter supplies them with Earl Grey tea. Charles clinks his teacup to Amelia's. "Cheers."

She laughs, "Okay," and drinks, eyeing him. "So this is either a really appropriate or really inappropriate place to bring this up, but here goes." She takes a deep breath. "Have you ever dated anybody without sex?"

"As in...?"

"As in, without sex."

"There's more than one way not to have sex," Charles points out. "Power exchange without sex, painplay without sex..."

"How about nothing," Amelia says. "Have you ever just dated someone as a social, romantic thing, and nothing else?"

"No," Charles has to confess.

"Rats." Amelia screws up her mouth, looking at him. "I guess I have to say stuff, right? That's what you told me. If you're not reading moods, you're not so good with cues."

"I'd appreciate if you could give me the occasional hint, yes."

"Okay... well... here goes. I think you're really attractive."

"Thank you. Likewise. Though you probably picked that up."

"I did," Amelia smiles. "I've really liked talking to you in email, and I had a great time today."

Charles nods, waiting for the axe to fall; it certainly sounds as if there's a but about to come crashing down from somewhere.

"I'm not really ready to get physical yet," she says. "Any kind of physical. Concordance or painplay or sex."

That's new. When he was in school, Charles occasionally dallied with people who were saving themselves for their bondmates, but there was always something: power exchange or sadomasochism or some sort of touching within limits. Truthfully, he thinks of them as physical relationships, rather than "romantic relationships". People tend to believe romance is reserved for bondmates, so Charles hasn't had much of it.

He's not sure he could maintain an intimate relationship without some sort of sex. Not because he's so very libidinous, but without it, he doesn't have a lot to offer. His interests are esoteric, his mutation is a problem.

Sex makes everything so much easier. It's something of an exemption from his struggle with nonverbal communication-- with the context narrowed so completely, Charles can interpret body language with much more success. And partners who aren't willing to let him use his ability at any other time have given him leave to read them for their feelings during sex.

"Not meaning to pry, you don't have to answer, of course, but... may I ask why? Is it an orientation issue?"

"No," she frowns. "I told you I'm a switch, right? Right, yeah, of course I did, you knew that from
the start, from LostSeeker, it was on the website. Is that a problem for you?"

"Not at all," Charles says. "I only ask because," he makes an apologetic face, it seems a bit in poor
taste to bring it up, but, "my father was a switch, and it created-- problems. With his family. They
didn't approve."

"No problems with that here," says Amelia. "It's my mutation. Every now and then, not often, but
often enough to-- sometimes-- you know, things get to a certain point, and I lose it. I mean... literally. I lose shape. Go misty. Sometimes I end up reforming somewhere else."

"So you're literally transported by--"

"Or," Amelia interrupts, "you could not make that joke."

"Sorry." Charles bites his lip, considering. "You know... I might be able to help with that. I've
worked with other mutants before on honing their abilities, using telepathy to help guide them to
better control. Mainly my sister, when we were younger, but not only."

"So is that a condition?" Amelia asks unhappily. "We can date if I let you shuffle around in my
head to make sure we can get physical?"

"No, no, no, I apologize, that's not what I meant," Charles says. "I'd like to see you again. If there's
nothing physical... that's all right with me."

"Really."

"It's not ideal," he allows, "assuming you'd like to be physical if it weren't for this difficulty with
your mutation."

Amelia considers, reaches over and takes the lapel of Charles's jacket in hand, tugging him closer.
He goes willingly, and she kisses him, quickly yielding when he strokes his tongue over her lower
lip and takes over. She winds her arms around his neck with a little sigh; it certainly doesn't seem
as if orientation will be an issue at all.

"Yeah," she says, prettily flushed when they part. "I'd like that."

"If you ever want to try to work on it with my help, I'd be delighted," Charles tells her. "But if you
don't, it's all right. If you just want to spend some time together socially, no sex on the agenda, I'd
like that. Really."

"Hold up, though. Before you agree. Because I was kind of hoping you wouldn't keep scening with
those friends you told me about, as long as we're dating. Or go to clubs."

That gives Charles more pause. It probably shouldn't surprise him; it's more conventional to date
exclusively. Even without the bond, the one-and-only ethos prevails. In his previous relationships,
such as they were, Charles agreed to monogamy, but he was also having sex with those partners.

And none of those relationships lasted long or ended especially well, so perhaps he should try
something different.

"All right," he says. "Let's try it," and Amelia's smile makes him feel he's made the right choice.

Since there's no travel time involved, it's easy to make dates with Amelia, and soon they rack up
quite a few more expeditions together. She takes him to Bolivian salt flats that mirror the sky after
a rain, the old city buried under Edinburgh, a maze of jagged limestone peaks in Madagascar, the top of Devil's Tower in Wyoming. Supplied with special cooling suits, they return to the Cueva de los Cristales for a longer visit.

"I'm a little sentimental about this place," Amelia explains as they get into the suits. It's a bit like preparing to scuba dive, complete with respirators. "We all try to add a new destination to the teleporter circuit, and this one was mine. I had to get special permission to go in the first time. I got a lot of specimens out for the main research team that works in here, and I do some ferrying for them. Even in the suits they can only go so deep before they get overwhelmed by the heat, so I port them further in, to let them start deeper and explore further than they could do on their own."

"That's a marvelous use of your ability. How many people can you teleport at once?"

"It gets a little harder with every person I add," she says. "One person is easy. Four starts feeling like a drag. Eight takes effort. A dozen is basically my cutoff. I can take more but I don't like how it leaves me feeling. I can port a lot of inanimate stuff, though. I can do a car. But I need to take a break after that before I do any more."

"Powerful," he says.

Amelia looks at him thoughtfully. "You're into that."

"I wouldn't put it that way."

"No?"

"No, I'm-- simply fascinated by X-gene mutation in all its various forms, and naturally the more dramatic examples of mutation are particularly compelling..."

"Mm-hm," Amelia hums skeptically, but she smiles a bit; she's mostly teasing him, it seems. Charles rolls his eyes and puts on the hood of the suit.

Amelia teleports them deep into the cavern. The cave is just as dazzling on the second visit, and climbing through it, Charles feels utterly dwarfed and elevated at the same time. It's like being in a cathedral, this huge vaulted space, but it just goes on and on. Their xenon flashlights lance deep into the distance and sparkle on a million shattered facets.

These tremendous crystals have been forming for thousands upon thousands of years. His own life will be an eyelash in comparison, but now it contains this moment, this memory. He had the chance to see this place.

Even with the suit, the cave feels sweltering and more than a little dangerous, spiky crystals underfoot, titanic shafts of crystal skewed at strange angles all around them, like spokes in a colossal wheel. He follows Amelia, feeling clumsy in the suit, clambering over giant crystals lying about like felled trees.

"Are we really safe here?" Charles asks.

"I can port us out in under a second," Amelia replies, which is a bit less reassuring than she probably means it to be.

Still, Charles can't imagine shying away from exploring the cave, even when they pick their way into another, still larger chamber and the size and scale starts to make him feel dizzy. Or perhaps that's the unforgiving environment. They're already coming to the end of the time that the suits afford them.
Something beeps, and Charles assumes it's Amelia's watch signalling they need to stop, but no.

"It's my phone, it's work. I've got to deliver a heart for a transplant," she says. "I need to take you straight home, okay?"

Which is how Charles ends up deposited in the middle of the living room in a rubbery, bright orange cooling suit. Amelia says, "I'll be back as soon as I'm done with this job!" and vanishes into mist.

Raven puts her book aside and laughs at him, only that much more amused when he pulls off the hood; and no wonder, the mirror on the wall shows he's flushed and sweaty, his damp hair sticking up everywhere.

"One of these days you've got to introduce me to your friend," Raven says. "I like her style."

Charles may not always pick up on subtleties without telepathy, but even he knows to heed a cue like that from Raven. He takes the two of them out to dinner at Char, Shiro Yoshida's restaurant, mutant-owned and run.

It seems to go swimmingly. Amelia is personable and warm as always, and while they're all still nibbling at the starters, Raven becomes comfortable enough to relax into her natural blue form, staying that way for the rest of the evening.

Amelia brings them home afterward, hugs Raven, gives Charles a good-night kiss and mists away. Charles turns to Raven. "Well?"

"She's you," Raven says bluntly.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"She's completely you," Raven insists. "I mean, you've toned it down some, but that whole sunshiny smiley hopey dopey put-a-happy-face on everything routine..."

"I am not sunshiny," Charles says. "Or particularly smiley."

"You know what I mean," Raven flips a hand in dismissal.

"I suppose now it would be impolitic to ask if you like her."

"I have no idea. That's the problem with you Get Along Gang types," Raven says. "She was working so hard to make sure I wouldn't not like her, I have no idea what she's really like or what kind of an asshole she is."

"Raven, she's not an asshole, for God's sake."

"Everyone's an asshole," Raven says. "One kind or another."

"Oh?" He folds his arms across his chest. "What kind are you?"

"The cynical kind," she says. "You think I don't know when I'm being a jerk? Like, right now, even? I know. But that's me, Charles. Who's Amelia?"

Charles shakes his head. "Some people really are just nice, you know."

"Right. Let me know when you find out what her deal is," Raven says. "Introduce us for real."
"I'm going to bed," Charles gives up. His phone chimes as he's climbing the stairs.

It's a text from Amelia. [Your sister is lovely. I had a great time tonight.]

He replies with, [We did, as well. Unfortunately not everyone puts Raven enough at ease to show herself. I'm very glad it happened tonight.]

Charles is undressed and changed into pyjamas by the time he gets another text. Amelia sends, [So am I. See you tomorrow, same time? I'll be thinking of you xoxox]

He answers with [Same time tomorrow. Looking forward to it.] and sets his phone on the charger, slipping under the covers. It's still odd to him, forgoing sex. He's spending more time in the gym to make up for the lessened physical activity. And he's teaching concordance now, with labs every week, demonstrating tools and techniques, so it's not as if he's falling out of practice. But even with demos, even with stepping up on boxing practice and lifting weights, his body feels unused, a little restless.

Charles reaches for his phone and activates the screen again, the texts still displaying. Maybe it's silly, but looking at that "xoxox" is enough to soothe him. It's worth waiting. And not just on a promise that being with Amelia will be more special for the wait, or that sex after a break will be that much better for it. Maybe the experience of waiting is worth something in itself.

And meanwhile, someone's thinking of him. That's a thought to warm him as he burrows deeper into the blankets, feeling his shields thin away as he drowses, til the murmurs of a million city voices wash over him, lulling him to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter, Amelia takes Charles to stand on Uluru, a location in Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park in Australia. The Ñangu people who own the land ask that visitors respect their wishes and don't climb or stand on Uluru. That's going to be addressed in the next chapter. Many thanks to commenter samvara for taking the time to explain this.

For more information, see The Outback Australia Travel Guide page on Uluru.
"Come on," Jason says, "come on, please, I don't know anyone here yet."

"And I know people in New York City?" Erik laughs. "Somehow I don't think bringing your high school friend, the jeweler from Pittsburgh, is going to score you many points at a fancy mutant charity ball."

"You never know," Jason argues. "I bet some of the people here have heard of Helix, and if they have, you could talk about your volunteer work there. At least we'd all have one thing in common, right? So come out, I'll find you a new tux, we'll go to the party, we can even leave early if you want. Please."

Erik just laughs. "You act like you're being put on trial instead of going to a party. Relax. You'll do fine, everyone there will love you."

"Easy for you to say. You've known me forever, you're biased."

"Never said otherwise," Erik grins. "But they did invite you, it's not like you had your publicist beg for the invitation."

"This time," Jason mutters. "Who knows, maybe somebody heard I'm in 'Hollow Point', but what the fuck, they only just wrapped filming, and it doesn't come out until next summer. And I'm barely a blip in it."

"You're a supporting character, that's a step up."

"I still get killed."

That's really not a step up, but Erik sighs and decides to let it go for now; if the two of them start ranting, he'll never get off the phone. And at some point he's going to need dinner... "Who's the host of this thing again?"

"Warren Worthington. The third."

"Haven't heard of him."

"That's because you don't read ontd_mutants."

"Oh, God, you know why I don't read those things. The last time they had an article about you--"

"--a post, a post about me--"

"--every third comment included naked pictures of you from 'The U Word'. Which, not that I'm complaining about the view--"
"Thank you..."

"--but could they talk about your acting for once?"

"Well, in fairness, it was a post about 'Brain Eaters', it's not like I did much acting in that."

Erik sighs. "Where the hell was I..."

"You were asking about the host of this party I'm supposed to go to, and I said it's Warren Worthington the third."

"Right, and I still have no idea who that is."

"He's blond, white feathery wings, flies."

Erik's trying to dig through his memory, thinking about wings. "Nope. Doesn't ring a bell."

"Collared four different people in the last couple years, none of whom lasted more than a month."

"Four?" Erik can only boggle. "Does he own a collar factory or something? Get a discount on them...?"

"Nah, he's just one of those celebrities. Like Elizabeth Taylor. My theory is he just likes collaring people." Jason laughs. "I'm sure he has the best of intentions, really. Maybe he just got really unlucky-- hooked up with people who thought they were never going to meet their soulmates, and the next thing you know..."

Erik grunts. "For his sake, I hope not. That has to feel terrible."

"Maybe. But you have to take your chances sometimes. Look at me, I've dated plenty in the last, what, year or so, and it hasn't made my soulmate show up. You can't just wait for it to happen. It might not."

"I hope it does," Erik says quietly. "I hope it does, for you."

"Yeah, well. Not where I was going with all this, which was: I can't actually blame the people Worthington hooks up with. He's pretty hot, you can probably guess how much I dig the wings--"

"Feathers, fur, tails, claws, yes, you have a type," Erik says, smirking.

"--but he-- wait, what do you mean I have a type, I don't have a type," Jason protests. "I mean, okay, granted, there was Maria--"

"Sharon," Erik points out, "Calvin--"

"Calvin doesn't count, he just borrowed other people's wings." Abilities, Jason means; Erik heard all about it secondhand. He never met Calvin, partly by design. Watching Calvin stepping into Erik's abilities would have been hard. If he'd only gotten the beta-level version, Erik would have had to face the fact that his abilities are never coming back. If he'd gotten the near-omega version, Erik might never have gotten over the bitterness. "Actually," Jason goes on, sounding thoughtful, "I wonder if he got the wings from Worthington in the first place..."

"So go to the party, hit on Warren Worthington The Third, have a fun New Year's Eve. I'm not sure where I come in with all this. I barely drink, I'm not much good at parties, it's been years since I traveled much--"
"You never give yourself enough credit. It'll be fine. It's not going to be mutants-only, but pretty much every mutant in New York City's going to be there. You could end up meeting somebody, for all you know..."

"I'm not looking to meet anyone." Erik shakes his head. "I've tried the emfriend thing, you remember how that went."

Jason pauses for a second. "Okay, I know you're not doing the clubs anymore, but I thought at least you were dating."

"And not telling you?"

"I don't know. Maybe?"

"If I were dating someone, I'd tell you."

"So that's, uh... it's been how long since...?"

"Well, you were here in August, we did a few scenes then."

"Yeah, but those were just--""

"They were great. I told you at the time, they were great."

"But--"

"Jason--""

"Yeah, but-- August...? How long since you actually--"

"March, when I was still going to the clubs," Erik snaps, "now can we talk about something other than my nonexistent sex life? I really don't give a damn, to be honest. I don't miss it. More trouble than it was worth."

Jason makes a dissatisfied noise. "Okay, fine. Forget scening and meeting people. But you should still give it a shot, getting out of town for a while. You deserve the break."

"A break from what, I can't possibly imagine."

"Everything. Your life. It's what's called a vacation. People take those, you know."

Erik laughs. "A vacation. Does that mean you'll take me to all the tourist traps? The Chrysler Building?"

"How about the Statue of Liberty, it's a hundred and fifty feet of copper," Jason smirks back. "Or would that leave you walking around dazed for the rest of the day?"

"Dazed with a hard-on," Erik jokes. "We'll figure it out when I get there."

"When!" Jason cheers. "I'm booking your tickets right now, no take-backs..."

"I won't take it back," Erik promises. "I'm already looking forward to it."

He's almost finished packing, ready to be out the door in a matter of minutes, when his phone rings. It's Jason, so Erik answers with, "I'm nearly there, just wait a few hours--"
"Erik." Jason sounds awful; Erik's heart kicks into overdrive. Not Pat, he thinks, not the Wyngardes, please not that... He's so busy trying to remember what's been happening with them-- Jason has a cousin who's in her last trimester, the baby was due this month-- that what Jason actually says doesn't penetrate at first. "Listen. Did you know that Shaw's in New York right now?"

Erik stops, takes a step backward and sits down on his bed. "What?"

"Shaw. He's in New York, has been for most of the month. He's got a lecture series, he's giving talks on his new book--"


"You'll never see him. He won't get within five hundred yards of you."

"Jason--"

"Goddamnit. Let me take care of this, I know where he's staying, he's at the motherfucking Plaza, of course."

"With me all the way out here. No way of getting help if something goes wrong."

"You could park yourself in an emergency room..."

"Because that won't look suspicious at all, later on. And there might not be anything they can do for me..."

"Or you might not have anything go wrong at all. You might just be free."

"And if my soulmate's out there somewhere... What if it does something to him? What if it reconnects us and I kill him? Being separated almost killed me, being connected to Sebastian hurt both of us..."

"It's all a risk, I get it, but how long are you going to live like this?"

Erik shivers, clutching at his phone. "This long, I guess. You were right to call. I can't come."

On the other end of the line, Jason's silent for a good long while. Long enough it starts to worry Erik, who says, "Whatever you're thinking... don't. Don't do it. We've had this discussion before. You know I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to you."

"Erik..."

"You're all I have," Erik says quietly. "What do you think I'd do with myself if he took you away from me, too?"

"He won't." Jason's voice is filled with confidence. But Erik knows Sebastian better than Jason ever will, and for all his illusions, Jason's body is baseline human. "Erik. I'm asking you to trust me."

"And I'm asking you to let it go. Let it go this time. It's one weekend, one party, I'll make it up to you when he's gone, I promise. I'm not ready to take this kind of chance."

"Damn it." Jason exhales sharply. "Okay. Okay. But if you ever change your mind--"

"I'll tell you. You'll be the first person I tell."
"Okay." Jason sighs. "God. I can call you from the party at midnight, at least we can have that..."

"I'm hoping you'll have your hands too full of feathers to make a phone call," Erik manages to tease.

"I'm seriously not planning on anything like that," Jason says dryly. "But I need to make these connections, it's why I'm in New York in the first place. I wish I could've just gone back to Pittsburgh to be with you. For New Year's, if nothing else..."

Erik closes his eyes, rubs a hand over his face. "I would've liked that, too," he admits. "Maybe once he's gone we can talk about having me come out there. I'm not sure the city's going to do much for me, but..."

His voice trails off, and Jason's quiet for a few seconds. "You serious?" he asks, finally. "Because it doesn't sound like you're talking about a visit."

"I'm not," Erik admits. "I know you'll be gone a lot, working, but--" But something about New York feels right to him, though there's no way for him to explain how or why. If Sebastian would just fucking leave.

"I can find a place that's out of Manhattan," Jason says. "Manhattan was what Dad's guy got for me on short notice, but I could go somewhere else."

Erik actually laughs, a little. "I wasn't trying to invite myself into your apartment. I was just thinking that I'd like to be closer..."

"Yeah, well, can't get much closer than roommates," Jason says, bright and cheerful, encouraging. "And you'd save me a lot of trouble finding house-sitters."

"This is your big sales pitch-- 'come move in with me so I don't have to find house-sitters'?" Erik laughs. "What about, 'oh, the mutant community around here is great, you could find another mutant youth center to volunteer at'--"

Jason's chipper attitude drops off fast. "Shit. I don't want to take you away from that, Helix has been so good for you--"

"It's been good, but it's not home," Erik says. "We've talked about this."

"Yeah," Jason says quietly. "So... Pittsburgh isn't home. But you think New York could be?"

"I don't know. Maybe it won't be any better there. But I'd be closer to--" Closer to what? Jason? It's what he meant to say, but there's something else. Sebastian? God, he doesn't want to be closer to Sebastian.

It used to feel like New York was one of the possibilities, back when he could feel his soulmate's presence. When his bond was clear, and bright, and it was everything, every sense of home, belonging, everything he never had while he was growing up, everything he thought he'd find someday.

Maybe it's just that; maybe that's all he's after. Chasing ghosts. But he'd be closer to Jason, too...

"I think," Jason says slowly, "you should probably sit on this one for a while. Figure out if you really want to go. Don't make any rush decisions."

"Same goes for you," Erik says, just as careful. "Especially with things like apartments. We haven't
been full-time roommates in years, not since... what... Boston?"

"And you were dating Magda that summer, so it wasn't like we were together all the time."

"You were seeing Linden..."


"You never forget anything," Erik says gently.

"No, it's kind of a crummy side effect of the illusion power. Some things you don't want to remember, let alone play back in detail, you know?"

"I know," Erik murmurs, reaching down to his lower back, right side, seven neat scars now. Seven years. How has it been that long? "Believe me."

Jason's quiet for a while. "Well, this got morbid in a hurry," he jokes. "Shit. Maybe we shouldn't be in the same place at all right now."

"Fuck you, too," Erik smiles.

"We'll get you out here for a vacation once that motherfucker's left the state. You can see what you think of New York." Jason pauses. "I'll level with you, man. I hope you like it here. I miss you."

"I miss you, too." Erik glances around his bedroom. "I wish I could have been there for New Year's Eve. I'm sorry about the plane tickets."

"Fuck the plane tickets. I'll call the airline, get them changed so the dates are open-ended. Who knows. Maybe once I get you out here, I'll be able to convince you not to leave."

"You're devious like that," Erik says, and the teasing tone comes a little more easily now. "I'll talk to you later. Have fun at the party."

"Take care of yourself, man."

"You, too."

Erik hangs up, stares at his open suitcase. Nowhere to go after all. He might as well unpack.
Charles, January-March 2008

Chapter Summary

Charles works on his relationship with Amelia; they take the step to start having sex, but his ability is still off the table.

Chapter Notes

A note about a certain teleporter: Rather than pulling from the X2 characterization for Kurt Wagner/Nightcrawler, or (obviously) going with the Mystique/Azazel canon for him, we're drawing straight from the Claremont days for our Kurt W.: he's the swashbuckling fuzzy elf that we knew and loved in the '80s, because we are that kind of old-school fan.

Also, if you recognize Silhouette Chord, you get a cookie. She is one of Helens's all-time favorite Marvel heroines, and we were really excited to have an opportunity to place her in the B&D universe. *_*_ She also name-drops a character we'll be seeing more of later.

(We're looking to update on Mondays from here on out, so stay tuned!)

January 2008

"Ready?" Charles asks.

Amelia nods. "Or. Wait. No. Maybe a little more...?"

"Don't mind if I do," he smiles at her, and waits til she catches her breath and smiles back before he drops his head and nuzzles her breast, tongue tracing the areola, lips closing around her nipple, grazing with his teeth. He cups her other breast in his hand and brushes his thumb across the nipple; he's learned how she likes this, easing his touch as her breath grows shallow.

"Oh, God, okay," she says, "close, back off..." and he does, touching fingers to his temple, finding the seat of her ability in her mind. She's dropped most of the mental shields she learned to maintain, but he can feel the boundaries, regardless; he keeps to this one specific area of concentration, reading her power and her control over it.

Amelia clutches his free hand with hers and flicks the switch on the Wahl. It's utterly reliable; within thirty seconds, she's wringing his fingers tight and coming, her hips lifting into it. Charles shivers, getting some of the sensation secondhand, but with an effort, he keeps his focus on her ability.

Experimenting with it, they've found it's almost always just after she hits her peak that she tends to
mist away, possibly because she's highly sensitive just after, and she's instinctively dispersing her body to avoid the discomfort of additional stimulation. (When Charles phrased it that way, she accused him of sentimentality. He took the hint, arranged a night out to her favorite restaurant and gave her earrings that match her eyes.)

This time, she moves the vibrator off her clit, but she leaves it activated and keeps it close; even though she's shaking with the aftershocks, the vibration making her whimper, she stays solid.

Just pinpointing the issue has been half the battle, really. Amelia has a great deal of control over her ability under almost every other circumstance. She's been mastering this quickly as well, now that they've spent these last three weeks trying. At this point it's just a matter of practice.

"Still here," he smiles at her.

"Still here," she laughs, relieved. "And um... I think I might be able to go again... let me try it on my own."

"How much on your own?" he asks, dropping his hand from his temple.

"Just not in my head," she says, "stay... come closer... would you...?"

He stretches out beside her, and she lifts up a bit so he can slide his arm around her shoulders and hold her, kissing her, stroking down her body, her soft skin. She's given him permission to read her for sensations in bed, and he uses that to guide him to touch her now, stroking her breast and mouthing her neck. It's easy to concentrate just on her; they have a bit of a routine with this by now. He got off when they started half an hour ago to forestall that particular distraction.

What's difficult is holding back from trying to help when Amelia shakes through her second orgasm and he can feel her instinct to teleport away flaring up. But Charles keeps out of it, just holding on to her, and she stays solid on her own.

Once the Wahl is off and laid aside and she's curled up close, coming down, Amelia says, "Thanks for waiting."

"My pleasure," he murmurs. "Congratulations."

*  

Charles is rooting around in the fridge for celebratory champagne when he straightens and starts, finding Raven standing near in what appears to him to be the world's most abbreviated nightgown, which barely covers anything and is all but translucent, besides.

It's not the first time lately, either. It's not as if he's missed that Raven's become very beautiful, but it's one thing to note it in the abstract and another to see her in skivvies with violet mouth marks along her collarbone.

"I'm starting to wonder if one day I'm going to look up and you're just going to be standing there completely nude."

"So what if I was?" Raven frowns. "Because Amelia's around? She wouldn't care. So unless she's teleporting a bunch more people into your room for an orgy--"

"Of course not! I'd tell you if anyone else were in the house."

"So...?"
"As your brother, I'd find it disconcerting."

"As my brother, you could suck it up and deal."

"Tetchy. Are you sleeping badly?"

"Because I'd have to be sleeping badly to get annoyed at that?"

Charles leaves the champagne and closes the fridge. "I asked if you're sleeping badly because it's late. Anyway, last time I came home with ropeburn, you made all sorts of faces."

"Yeah, but I didn't tell you it would disconcert me if you came home again with marks."

"And yet, I got that impression."

"Wow, you noticed body language for once, pin a rose on you."

He doesn't want to take that to heart, but it stings a bit. "Thank you for that."

Raven rolls her eyes. "Okay, granted, that was snide."

"There are kinder ways to ask me to move out."

"I don't want you to move out! God! Everything doesn't have to be the end of the fucking world," she says, sitting at the table.

Charles sends a quick sweep of thought toward Amelia to see if he needs to apologize for delaying, but she's fallen asleep. He takes a seat next to Raven. "I'm sorry I said that."

"Which 'that'?"

"Starting from word one, all right? This is your home, you can wear what you want. Or not wear what you want."

"Yeah, exactly," she says. "I need you to be okay with how I look, all right? Because not enough people are, and I shouldn't have to worry about getting that from you."

He beats back a defensive urge to argue, forcing his shoulders to relax. "You're right. I'm sorry."

He shouldn't argue, but he can't help but try to explain. "It's just that when you turn up nearly naked around me, your brother who's not really meant to see you that way, it seems like a bit of a shove-off message."

"Not everything is about you."

"...All right," Charles ruffles a hand back through his hair. "So what is it?"

"Everything," Raven says, slumping back. "Just everything. My choices are, hide or get stared at, and they both suck. And if it's not one thing, it's another, you know? I went to Tigon, where I can actually walk the fuck around without too many gawkers. Humans haven't really found that place yet. I had a good scene, things were going well, and then the guy starts trying to talk to me about my soulmate. I'm sick of people asking about her. It's not time. I can feel it's not time. She sends me love and she sends-- not yet."

He bites his lip to stop himself exhorting her to look anyway. They've had that argument enough times to know it's not going to be resolved. It just upsets Raven and leaves him despondent.
"And work... I thought this outreach education project was going to be a perfect fit. Going around to different schools and teaching kids about themselves, about us. Helping them learn how to use their powers. Like we used to talk about." She shakes her head. "I forgot kids can be such assholes. I can't work one-on-one in some of these places, because if I take my attention off the other kids, they gang up against each other."

"I thought they were sending you out with another instructor."

"He moved upstate, and they haven't replaced him yet. And it might take a while. The program's underfunded. Which is a whole other thing... I feel bad about taking a salary from MEOI when I've got more money than I'll ever need in the trust fund."

"Could you do the same job on a volunteer basis?"

"Probably. It just feels so important to finally earn something for myself, you know?" She props her elbows on the kitchen table. "But that basically means I'm making them pay me just so I can feel better about myself, how selfish is that? And it's ridiculous, with how much the Xavier Foundation's given them over the years. We're, what, a sixth of their annual funding? So I'm still one-sixth in hock to Brian Xavier. I don't even know what the point is. Earning money doesn't make me independent-- the trust fund still paid my way through school, and it's not like I passed up the chance to live here rent-free."

"You have had a lot on your mind," he says, scooting his chair closer. Raven leans over, and he puts his arm around her; she rests against him a bit. "I'll venture to guess that MEOI would rather have you on the payroll, for the work you're doing. An employee is accountable in ways that volunteers aren't. And if it makes you feel better to draw a salary, that's going to come through. If you were a volunteer running into frustrations like these, you might be tempted to bin it all, but you're committed, right?"

"Yeah," she sighs.

"So it's better that it's your job," Charles says. "What's the problem with the kids?"

"Like I said, some of them turn on each other," Raven mutters. "Physical mutations versus psionic, mostly. I guess some mutant activist blogs are even feeding into it. I can't believe I'm hearing mutants say shit like this to each other. Physically mutated kids saying that the psionics aren't real mutants because you can't see it. Psionics saying the physically mutated kids are mistakes. And please don't start in with a genetics lecture, believe me, I know what you'll say."

Charles shuts his mouth to stop himself launching into just that. "Right." He smooths back her hair. "Would it help if I came out with you to the places you're having trouble?"

"What, so we can skip in holding hands to show them that physical and psionic mutants can get along?"

"I was thinking more that I could keep an eye on the group to let you do some of that one-on-one work. My schedule's mostly open til July..."

"I thought you were working on your book."

"I can do that in the evenings."

"If you really think. And you wouldn't have to come out with me every day," she says thoughtfully. "Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Just til they hire someone to take Robbie's place."
"I'll email tomorrow to see about getting some training to volunteer for that."

"This isn't like teaching college students, though," she warns him. "These kids haven't opted in. Some of them have an attitude about being there."

"I don't expect it to be easy," he says. "But if you could use a hand, I want to be there."

Raven slides an arm around him and squeezes. "Okay."

*

Returning upstairs, Charles is enormously tempted to simply get into bed next to Amelia and sleep alongside her, like anyone else.

He's not like everyone else. Their courtship certainly drove that home. These past months, dating Amelia with neither the benefit of telepathy nor the intimacy of sex, he's been almost entirely at sea. He never realized before quite how much he's relied on sex as a shortcut of sorts, a way to connect with people that's immediate and simplified.

Even more reluctantly, he's had to recognize that he's used it as a shortcut to acceptance, as well. He's offered the advantages of his ability in scenes in order to acclimate people to his telepathy, to introduce it in the most desirable light.

It's been hard to admit that to himself, when one of the persistent fears that people harbor is that he'll use his ability to manipulate them. He always told himself that was nonsense. He wants to win people over with reason, he's not interested in finagling them into anything. But he hasn't always been straightforward in the way he handles his telepathy. Maybe those worries weren't so off-base after all. It's an unsettling thought.

As manipulation goes, it's not even particularly effective. Most people still dislike dealing with his ability outside the dungeon or the bedroom. Still, at least during sex he could relax a bit.

His relationship with Amelia has been anything but relaxing. But baseline humans deal with these difficulties all the time. Maybe it's better this way.

During their conversations, he has to focus on her with every facet of his attention, trying to take in her words and the context, her tone and body language, everything about the situation that might be influencing her: the environment, the other people around them, his own reactions and replies. If he were reading her, he wouldn't necessarily know all those details, but he wouldn't need to: all those things are clues he collects to tell him what, under normal circumstances, would be obvious to him. How she feels.

Possibly that's how it ought to be. Perhaps if Charles had been compelled to focus so completely on his partners in the past, those relationships would've been more successful. After all, even if he's felt out of his depth with Amelia these past months, they've made it this far.

And if he wants to keep this going, he can't just join her in bed. He's never yet had a partner who was comfortable sleeping beside him. His ability tends to drift out of his control during the transitions between sleep and waking, and sometimes he reads dreams from people close to him, or projects fragments of his own.

He's been hoping that by giving Amelia the chance to shield against him and more of an active choice about whether to allow his telepathy, he's making it more possible for her to trust him. He has to let her make her own decision about this as well.
Charles perches on the bed next to her and shakes her shoulder gently. "Amelia."

"Hm?" She blinks up at him, rosy and rumpled and sleepy, and gives him a little smile. "What time is it?"

"Just gone midnight," he says. "You could stay."

"Tempting," she yawns. "But I have a big job early tomorrow, I'm teleporting about a ton and a half of stuff overseas. I don't want to shake up my routine before an effort like that. Is it okay if I leave my clothes and stuff? I'm just going to port straight to my own bed."

"Of course," Charles says, and bends to kiss her. "Good night, then."

"Good night," she says, and disperses to mist, vanishing. The covers fall in on themselves where she was; Charles takes her place, and sleeps in the warm spot she left behind.

* 

February 2008

"And that's Clarice, Beth, there's DeMarr... Edith, Pamela... Siena..." Amelia points out her acquaintances clustered here and there along the slope overlooking the sea. It's afternoon on Easter Island, the sun beginning to sink toward the ocean; the giant statues nearly seem to glow, strangely alive in the angled light.

"So... everyone here is a teleporter?" Charles looks around. "I'd've imagined there'd be tourists as well."

"Not many on Sundays," Amelia says. "No tours to this area today. There might be backpackers, but we'll-- A ha! There's Sil... no, over there, from the shadow behind the statue." Charles looks; there are a pair of forearm crutches propped against the statue, as well as a pair of leg braces and a short summery dress. "I think Kurt bamfed in earlier to bring her gear along." A slender, light brown arm emerges from the shadows, and the dress, leg braces, and crutches disappear; a moment later, a young woman steps out from behind the statue, grinning at everyone and taking a quick bow before joining the party, to scattered applause.

Amelia checks her watch. "Kurt better not be late coming back. He's bringing the beer."

With a muffled popping sound, a blue man with a pointed tail appears just up the hill, sitting with crossed legs atop an ice chest. He's wearing an enormous floppy straw hat and a red Hawaiian shirt, and his two-toed feet are bare. Looking around, he pops out and in again, repositioning the chest nearer to one of the moai statues.

"Here we go! Now it's a party," Amelia says, and leads Charles over.

Charles wasn't sure what to expect, but a teleporter party turns out to be more or less like any other party, with the added feature that someone occasionally says "You should see it for yourself, come on," and they vanish-- literally-- for a little while. Amelia gradually introduces him around. Some of the others have guests with them as well, bondmates, emfriends.

"Charles, this is Edith Sawyer and Pamela Greenwood; Pam, Edith, Charles Xavier," Amelia says, and Charles shake their hands. "He's a telepath."

"Yeah? What's your MAT?" asks Pam.
"Gamma," he answers.

"Huh. Touch telepath?"

"No, no contact necessary." Though it's a reasonable question. The MAT scale is deeply flawed, in Charles's opinion, and psionic abilities are a particular challenge to a fixed ranking system. Gamma is mostly defined by the ability to receive, interpret and deliberately project semiotic content as well as emotions and impressions. Many telepaths at the Gamma level can only read and transmit thoughts by touch. For Charles, it only takes proximity and a bit of mental focus.

"I guess if anyone would be okay with being an open book, it's Amelia," says Pam.

"We met on a dating site, and Charles helped me learn how to shield before we ever met in person," Amelia says.

"That's sweet," says Edith.

The next introduction doesn't go so well. Amelia mists off to get drinks and Charles notices a barrel-chested bald man watching him. Charles has gone into party mode, a bit; he doesn't consider himself a particularly social creature, but he's been to dozens of galas and charity balls, mingling and networking to help fundraise for the charities he works with, and it's almost automatic to glide over to the man and offer his hand. "I don't think we've been introduced. Charles Xavier."

"Josef Huber," the man replies, but when he reaches for Charles's hand, there's an odd sensation of repulsion between them before they even get close enough to touch, and Huber steps back. "Telepath?"

"Yes," Charles says, and without another word, Huber turns and walks away.

It's been a while since Charles has encountered a reaction quite that dramatic.

"Oh, Josef. Sorry, I should've mentioned, but he doesn't always come to these," says Amelia, once she's back and Charles asks. "He's one of us and a telepath too, but for some reason he can't be around other telepaths. He's pretty cranky about it, so... nobody asks."

"It did feel strange when we tried to shake hands," Charles says. "Still, even with that, I'd count him lucky, doubly gifted like that. I wouldn't mind being able to teleport along with telepathy."

"Would you trade it?" Amelia asks.

"Telepathy for teleportation? No," he says flatly. Her expression looks like surprise, possibly some annoyance; he knows she's proud of her ability, he may have offended her. "I was-- ill, once, and lost it, and I couldn't stand it," he explains. "I couldn't feel where anybody was."

He's never been able to adequately convey the horror of that, and this time's no exception. "Sounds spooky," Amelia brushes his hand, sympathetic but not really comprehending.

"It's not just an ability, it's a sense," he tries. "Even if I'm blocking as much as I possibly can, I still feel the energy of everyone around me, their presences. Losing that was hard."

She mulls it over. "Like going blind, or deaf...?"

"I don't think so," Charles says. "Not really." He doesn't think it's as potentially life-changing. So many everyday things are designed with the assumption that everyone can hear and see.
But it was devastating to him, and it's not as if anyone's mounting any research efforts into restoring lost telepathy. Most baseline humans probably wouldn't even regard the loss as a problem. For those first few awful days in hospital, he didn't know if it would ever come back, and no one around him seemed to understand why he was so frantic at the prospect, not even Raven.

"If I lost mine, I'd be really scared," Amelia says thoughtfully. "Not because I couldn't live with the inconvenience. I remember what it was like to have to travel baseline. It's suck, but that's not scary. What would get to me is if I couldn't just disappear any more. If something were coming at me, I couldn't mist away-- if I was high up and fell, I'd just go splat-- I'm freaking myself out a little just thinking about it."

He takes her hand. "So let's stop thinking about it. I didn't mean to dwell on something unpleasant in the middle of the party."

She smiles, leaning into him a bit. "Don't worry about it. It won't really get good til later."

"Hey, Amy! Good to see you!" They turn to see the woman who came out of the statue's shadow earlier, the woman Amelia pointed out as Sil.

Amelia kisses Sil on both cheeks; her friend smiles. "Still giving everyone a free show when you come in?" Amelia teases. To Charles she explains, "Sil's clothes don't come through with her when she ports."

"Well, I've got the unstable-molecule dress, but just the one," Sil mourns, "and last night Dwayne managed to get chocolate sauce all over it--"

"I bet he did. Is there video?"

Sil laughs. "And Dr. Richards is still working on the unstable-molecule versions of my crutches and my braces. But they're coming along! Maybe at the next party I'll be able to come through all at once."

"Like anybody minds the show." Amelia turns to Charles. "Charles, this is Silhouette Chord; Sil, Charles Xavier."

Charles offers her a hand out of habit, only realizing afterward that both Sil's hands are occupied. But she slips her right hand out of her crutch, easily balancing it against her side as she takes Charles's hand and shakes it firmly. "Happy to meet you," Sil says, smiling. "Psionic, right?"

"Telepath, yes."

"I know a teke, but I haven't met a lot of telepaths or empath." She looks him over, and the wisp of a song passes by him. It's not one he's familiar with, but it's just catchy enough to be distracting, and he's no longer sensing the usual subtle emanation of emotion from her that he generally allows himself to perceive in social situations. The song she's projecting is part of a shielding technique. It's one of the more pleasant methods he's encountered, actually.

"I hadn't met a lot of teleporters til tonight," Charles says. "I'm glad to have the chance. It's good to meet you."

"Yeah, we're a trip," a newcomer interrupts, sidling in next to Amelia. "Whose idea was Easter Island, do you guys know? I voted waterfall."

"Not sure whose idea it was, but I voted here," says Amelia.
"Why here? Don't get me wrong, it's pretty," says the newcomer-- Amelia pointed her out earlier as Siena. "But I thought the whole idea was to go places that are hard to get to! Any baseline chump can take a plane and come here."

"But it takes a thousand hours," Amelia shrugs.

"And sometimes the really inaccessible places are," Sil taps her crutch against the ground, "inaccessible. I'm not crazy about dealing with a lot of wet spots and uneven surfaces to get anywhere."

"Just port over the rough spots!" says Siena. "Wait, you lose your clothes, right? Never mind. That sucks. What're you?" she asks Charles abruptly. "You are a mutant, right?"

"Telepath," he confirms.

Siena grimaces, her emotions jangling with the typical resentful reaction. She shrugs it off outwardly and smiles brightly at him. "Hey, you're not the only one. Have you run into Josef? He's a telepath too, you should introduce yourself! He'd love you."

Unimpressed, Charles says, "We've met."

"Oops. Bet that was fun. Well, I'm not going to just stand around and gawk like some baseline tourist. I'm going up there," Siena points up the hill. "C'mon, Amelia, live a little."

"Maybe for a minute," Amelia says, and Siena laughs, grabs her hand, and vanishes with her. They reappear-- not further up the hill, but on top of one of the statues.

"Somebody put on some music!" Siena yells down.

Amelia says something to her more quietly and disperses. She returns within moments, not far from Charles and Silhouette again, with a fairly sizable sound system arrayed around her, complete with generator. All around, teleporters disappear from sight and reappear closer to the stereo, voicing requests.

"You'll get what I play and you'll like it!" Amelia says playfully, and she puts on some bass-heavy music Charles doesn't recognize. It seems to go over well enough, half the group starting to dance.

Returning to them, Amelia shrugs at Charles. "Siena's a little wild."

He can't help asking, "She shouldn't be up there, should she? She could damage the statue."

"It's been there this long, I think it'll stand up to a little soft shoe routine," she dismisses.

"I don't think people are even meant to touch them, let alone climb them."

"Charles. Seriously. It's fine. Here, I'll show you." She looks at Sil. "See you later, okay?"

"Don't get into too much trouble," Sil laughs, heading toward the ice chest.

Amelia mists them away, and Charles finds himself rematerializing so near to one of the statues that he almost can't avoid touching it. The party's no longer anywhere in sight.

"Look," Amelia beckons, crouching and running her hand along the base of the figure, a few chips and gouges in the rock nearly hidden by weeds. "See this? Where it's rough, here? Researchers did that in the eighties. They say they're more careful now, but humans fool around with the statues all the time, trying to figure out how they got here."
"With permission from the local government, presumably. And for a reason. Not just to dance on higher ground."

She rises. "I thought your sister was just giving you a hard time, but you really are kind of stodgy sometimes, aren't you?"

"If that's what you want to call it," he says. "I don't think people ought to wipe their feet on historic treasures, no."

She smirks at him. "Okay, art police. If you think you can get her down, go for it."

"I was thinking more along the lines of asking nicely."

"She'll laugh in your face."

"She'll have to come down to do that."

"Are you seriously this stubborn?" Amelia asks. He must look the part, because she sighs, "You have no clue how to handle Siena. Just stay put."

That seems to mean *Stay where I put you*, because she mists them back to the party. She vanishes, reappearing next to Siena atop the statue, and teleports them both into the shallow surf lapping the beach.

Siena shrieks with laughter and grabs her, and they vanish again; half a minute later, they reappear amid the party, both soaked. Siena's draped with seaweed, and Amelia's covered in mud.

"Watch this," Amelia says, mostly to Silhouette, but several others come closer as well. She mists in next to Charles again. "Help me out?"

He puts his fingers to his temple. They didn't limit exploration of her ability to sex, of course, and while Amelia has tremendous power and range, he's been helping her learn to boost her precision a bit. Aiding her focus, he feels himself thin away as she disperses them both and rematerializes them several feet away, leaving the coating of mud to fall to the ground without her.

"Nice!" says Sil, coming over. "Do you think you could help me do clothes?"

Amelia puts her arm around his waist, grinning, "Maybe! We learned that mud trick playing around with teleporting me out of mine."

"I'd be happy to try," Charles tells Sil. "I'm afraid you'd have to stop shielding, though."

Sil shows her teeth, not quite smiling. "Gotcha. Maybe next time."

Another man blinks over to them, demanding, "Who's this? How'd you do that?"

"Damian Tryp, this is Charles Xavier," says Amelia. "Charles is a telepath, he was helping me concentrate."

Charles offers his hand, but Damian just narrows his eyes. "Xavier? I've heard that name."

"Likely in connection with the Xavier Foundation," Charles smiles. "It supports mutant education efforts. Research into mutant abilities, scholarships for mutant students, that sort of thing."

"That's you? So you're one of those assholes who goes around slapping eir name on everything just because you've got money."

"Was he a mutant?"

"He wasn't a mutant himself, but he was passionate about mutant education, so we created the foundation to continue the work he began."

Damian says, "If you're going to name something like that after somebody, it ought to be named after a mutant hero."

"I'm a mutant, and my father is my hero," Charles says.

He's really not sure what sort of argument he's in for, but he's open to moods, and Tryp is definitely hostile. Charles is tempted to scan him for specifics; when someone behaves aggressively, he prioritizes safety over privacy. But under the circumstances, reading him without permission is just asking for more conflict, especially with another telepath here who might sense that Charles is doing it.

The question becomes moot when the blue gentleman Amelia pointed out earlier, Kurt Wagner, poofs in with a cloud of accompanying smoke, asking, "Was ist das?"

He appeared upwind of Damian, so the acrid cloud drifts toward Tryp; the man shoots a dirty look at Wagner, and vanishes from sight.

"Did I hear that you can increase other mutants' powers?" Wagner asks Charles.

"Not increase as such," Charles answers. "I can help people focus to use their abilities a bit more effectively. Generally when I give people a boost, it only takes a bit of practice to pick up the knack and do it on your own."

"So do you think you could help me smoke less? Sometimes it's useful," Wagner waves toward where Damian was. "But more often, a nuisance."

"I'm not sure," says Charles. "I'd have to read your mind. I can be precise, but I can't completely guarantee I won't sense something you'd rather I didn't."

"I have nothing to hide," Wagner shrugs, flashing a lovely fanged smile. People often say things like that, but in this case, Charles is pleasantly surprised to feel that Wagner means it.

"Then I'd love to work on it with you."

Amelia takes Charles's arm in hers. "Could that happen another time? I have a surprise for Charles tonight."

"Of course, of course," says Wagner, and Charles fetches out his billfold and gives him a business card.

"Ring any time, if I don't pick up I'll get back to you," Charles promises, and they shake hands. Wagner's palm is bare skin, the back of his hand shortly furred like velvet.

"See you!" Amelia waves.

Easter Island fades away, replaced by a similar ocean view: they're on a railed wooden platform, looking out on beautiful deep blue waters from high above. Beaten trails wind through the brush, down the hill toward the rocky shore.
"Amazing view," Charles smiles at Amelia.

"Pffft, you think this is my surprise? Come on, give me some credit," she says. "Turn around."

He turns, and stares up at a larger-than-life statue of Charles Darwin in profile, notebook in hand, eyes cast toward the horizon.

"San Cristóbal Island," he realizes. "Yes? The Galápagos?"

"Surprise!" she grins. "I thought we'd start here, and go down to the harbor where the Beagle first landed to watch the sunset."

"Amy! This is brilliant," he sweeps her into a hug, so enthused he lifts her feet off the ground. "Thank you."

"I was hoping you'd like it," she says, "this is basically your Valentine's Day present. Little early."

"It's perfect," he tells her. "Now I feel sort of sorry about earlier, arguing over dancing on the statues and so on."

"Only sort of?"

"Well," he shrugs, "I still think I was right."

Amelia bursts into laughter. "Only you," she says, and she kisses him, so apparently, that's a good thing.

* 

Sunset from the shore of the island is gorgeous, of course, but more beautiful still to Charles are the animals they spot in the waning light: red-pouched male frigatebirds, black and white swallow-tail gulls, sleek red-billed tropic birds, the occasional splashing tail of a sea lion in the water.

"This is only sort of the present," Amelia tells him. "I was thinking you might want to spend a couple of days here sometime. I'll drop you off and let you geek out over everything on your own, because I'd just be," she pantomimes dozing off, presumably in a fit of boredom. "I'm guessing there'd be a lot of staying in one place to look at finches and turtles and things, and staying still... not really my forte."

"Maybe when you come to pick me up, I could take you around to hit the highlights," he suggests.

"That sounds great."

"You've definitely shown up my idea for a Valentine's Day gift," he admits. "I was terribly boring about it."

"Aww, I'm sure it's fine," she tightens her arm around his waist. "What is it?"

"I'm not telling you that, it's a surprise."

"Oh, come on. You can tell me early as part of the present. Waiting isn't really my forte either," she wheedles. "Is it jewelry? You said conventional. Ahhh, look at you, it's totally jewelry."

"You can't know just by looking! Can you?"

"I know you by now, Charles. You always bite your lip when you're caught out on something."
He's about to argue the point when he realizes he's doing it again.

"See?!" Amelia nudges him.

"All right, yes, it's jewelry, but I'm not telling you what it is. You'll just have to wait to see it."

"I'm going to guess," she declares, shifting to face him. "I love how you act like it's some kind of magic trick that I can read your expressions. You already gave me earrings, so it won't be that again. It wouldn't be a collar, you actually get what 'switch' means."

"You could want a collar regardless," he says. "If you did I'd be honored to give you mine. But considering so far you haven't even tried a play collar with me, it seemed precipitous."

"Good call. I like subbing to you, but I'm not ready to go there with it," she says matter-of-factly. "So, not a collar, and probably not a necklace because it could be taken that way. A ring? Not a ring."

"Oh, come on! How can you tell?"

"You look smug when I guess wrong. I know you like my hair, something for that? Barrettes, hairpins? No, smug again, it's not that. A bracelet, then. Ha! That's it."

"I didn't bite my lip that time, I didn't do anything!"

"Dead giveaway," she says.

He surrenders and gets his mobile phone out, opening up the photo the jewelers sent him. "You'll have to take my word for it, it's much lovelier in person."

Amelia takes his phone, looking at the picture. "Oh, it's really pretty! Why don't we just go get it now?"

"It's not finished," he says, accepting his mobile back and putting it away. "That's why the photo's so close up on just one bit, they're still working on the rest. It's bespoke, I talked to the designer about what would suit you. It's going to be quite tough when it's done. It's being made to stand up to all the different environments you visit."

"That's not boring, that's sweet," she winds her arms around his neck. "It sounds expensive. Though I guess from what Damian was saying, that's not really an issue."

He rests his hands on the lovely curves of her hips. "Not really, no."

"Okay, you know... I'm just going to ask," she says. "How much money does your family have?"

"You never looked it up?"

"You had me learn how to shield," she answers, which seems like a non sequitur to him; she seems to realize, explaining, "You let me decide when to tell you things, when you could've known whatever you wanted from the start. So I thought that was what we were doing. If I want to know stuff about you, I ask you."

That hadn't really been his intent, but it's thoughtful of her. "I appreciate it," Charles says. "The answer's sort of complicated. The figure that's bandied about represents the entire estate, but most of it's locked up in the Foundation's endowment. The rest is mostly in earning assets and long-term investments that pay out to the Foundation and the various trusts."
"She taps her shoe against his. "Ballpark it for me."

"Altogether it's something on the order of three and a half billion dollars," he says.

"Whoa. Are you--? Wow," Amelia exhaled. "I knew it was a lot, but not like, with a $a$ lot. Why do I ever pay for anything? No, I'm kidding... mostly..."

"You certainly don't have to," he says. "You've taken us all around the world a dozen times over, the least I can do is foot the bill."

"You don't owe me anything for that. Sure, I take us places, but you come with me."

"Of course I come with you. I'd be mad to pass up the opportunity when you offer."

"Then a lot of people are nuts," she tells him, "because I haven't actually had much of that, you know? People get nervous. And when I have had people willing to teleport with me, they want to use it like a taxi service. Take me to the Bahamas! Let's port a bunch of kegs to the backyard! You let me take you places I want to go."

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It's puzzling to him; it's her gift, she's been traveling that way for years, she'd had a chance to become familiar with the world in a way very few individuals ever have. And she's always so excited to show off her favorite places. He can't imagine missing the chance to see her exercise her ability so eagerly and powerfully. "It never really occurred to me to do otherwise."

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"It never really occurred to me to do otherwise."

She squeezes him. "Well, that's special. So you don't have anything to pay me back for, as far as I'm concerned. Though, you know, if you get a wild hair to buy me an island or something, I'm not going to say no."

"Sorry, no islands, I'm afraid," he says. "Three-point-five billion sounds like an unreal figure, and that's largely because it is. The bulk of it belongs to the Foundation. And when my mother and her second husband became engaged, the family lawyers did their best to Kurt-proof the accounts before the wedding, which makes it tricky for any of us to dip into the capital much. Which is probably for the best, Kurt irregardless."

"So how much do you have?" Amelia asks, and when he hesitates, she huffs at him impatiently. "Put it this way. If you wanted to dig a money pit and fill it full of cash to swim around in like Scrooge McDuck, how much could you put in the pit?"

The image has him laughing. "All told, I could probably lay hands on around four million. Minus whatever it would cost to buy the land and dig the pit. Most of that's tied up as well, though. Raven and I have our trusts mostly in sustainable energy, microfinance projects, things like that... long term, low return. But even at a low rate of return, the interest on that much is enough to live in Manhattan once we add in our jobs. It might be a stretch if we had to make rent, but the family owns the townhouse. So I can't buy any islands. But if you'd like to stay overnight here, or virtually anywhere else that takes credit cards, I can pay our way."

Amelia studies him. "Do I even want to know what those earrings you gave me cost you?"

"Maybe not," he says, but he thinks she looks curious-- her brows are raised, her head inclined a bit-- so he tells her.

Possibly he misjudged. "Charles! You definitely shouldn't have told me, I can never wear those again! What if they got lost?"

"They're insured," he promises.
"Yeah, but... God, I wore them to go jogging. And did you see that Blood Diamond movie? I cried at that movie!"

"They're conflict-free gems," he assures her. "I got the earrings from Tailored Jewelworks. They're mutant-owned, they source their materials responsibly, and they cut the stones and design and create the settings themselves. It's the same for the bracelet. The designer's lithokinetic, actually, he's shaping the stones with his ability. That's why it won't be done til the day. He's still making the cabochons." They're black fire opals; at least that part will be a surprise, unless she can somehow glean it from the angle of his eyebrows.

"Okay, well... definitely don't tell me what the bracelet costs, or I seriously won't be able to wear it."

"Don't worry, they're giving me that one for free because I'm such a nice guy," he says, trying to keep his face completely straight. From the way she nearly chokes herself giggling, his deadpan could still use some work.

* 

He hopes he'll never come to take this for granted for a moment, the spectacular reach of Amelia's mutation. They began in Manhattan, stopped over at the house she keeps in Minnesota, attended the party on Easter Island and watched the sunset from the Galápagos, and still spent the night sleeping in their own beds, after a fashion: Amelia stayed in one of the spare bedrooms at the townhouse. She doesn't sleep over often, but it's nice when she does, so he's encouraged her to consider that space her own. She's left a few clothes and things there, enough to call it hers.

They'd made vague plans to get together Saturday and Sunday, but after she stays Friday night, he's keen on spending the weekend together, and she seems to like the idea. She sleeps at the townhouse Saturday night as well, and it's remarkably nice, going to sleep knowing she's so close.

Their vague plans had, at one point, included going outdoors, but Charles can't imagine why, when there's a perfectly good bed in his room and no compelling reason to leave it for long.

"I was thinking," says Amelia, Sunday afternoon.

"Ominous." Charles noses at her cheek, kisses back toward her ear and gives it a bit of nip. Her hair smells lovely; she's just dyed it again recently, that ginger-brown color that always catches his eye.

"Mm," she purrs, snuggling in closer. "--But! Thinking!" Amelia rolls up onto her knees and throws back the blankets, straddling him. "I was thinking, I've been very good."

"Suspiciously good," Charles agrees, caressing her thighs. When Amelia submits, she tends to be a bit of a brat, but this weekend she's been uncommonly agreeable. "It's almost enough to make one wonder if there's something you wanted."

"Oh, would one," she laughs. "Would one wonder?"

"Affirmative. Alliteratively, even."

"You're terrible." She walks her fingertips up his chest. "There was something. I was thinking maybe I could put cuffs on you. Not that you'd be switching down! But..."

Charles laughs. "First drawer, front row, second from the left. Brown leather with brass fittings."
"Really? Just like that?" She's already moving, though, pulling out the first of his three neatly organized drawers.

He sits up against the headboard and tucks a pillow behind him. The wrought iron bed frame looked right to him when he was choosing his furniture, even though Raven says it doesn't match the other pieces in the room. It's a bit cold, though, and he's prone to chill at the best of times. He's occasionally thought of replacing it with wood, but when it comes to it, those frames just don't appeal to him as much as this one.

He chooses two connection points and holds on there, experimenting with his range of motion. Amelia's coming back with the cuffs in hand; just the sight of him poised there seems to please her, and once the cuffs are on, she smiles brilliantly at him and kisses him soundly.

"There's nothing like a tied-up dominant," she murmurs. "It just feels so wrong." She touches his mouth with a fingertip. "And don't give me your role normativity lecture, I don't want to hear about how everybody can mix it up and it's all hunky-dory yay-hooray. I like that it feels wrong."

"Hm," he nibbles her fingertip.

"Hm?"

"I should probably incorporate that point into the lecture," he says. "Maybe you should fetch me my notes."

Amelia gives him a cheeky smile. "Is that an order, sir?"

"No. I have a few in mind, but that's not actually one of them."

"Good. Then I'm not going anywhere," she laughs, getting into his lap. "And neither are you."

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March 2008

Charles smiles as Amelia mists in; he's just finishing paying for his coffee, but he asks the barista for a café au lait for Amelia as well, handing it over as he greets her. She takes it, but one hand is still held mysteriously behind her back.

Not reading her, it's a complete mystery-- and from the coy smile on her face and the way her body moves from side to side, he thinks she wants it to be a surprise, so he doesn't ask.

"Good morning! You're a bit early, was your delivery canceled?"

"Nope! Just went more smoothly than we were all expecting." She takes her café au lait and smiles at him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He nods to the tables in the back of the coffee shop. "Would you like to have a seat?"

"I've got a better idea," she says, and the hand that's been behind her back comes out, revealing a strong battery-powered lantern. "Why don't I take you somewhere fun?"

"Fun and dark," he observes. "Should we finish our coffee first?"

"We've got lids, it'll be fine." She beams at him. "Just keep hold of it. Are you ready?"
"When you are."

She flicks the lantern on, and they're off, dissolving and reforming in an environment that truly is dark, and a bit musty. The air is cool, slightly humid-- there's a hum of machinery, though, as well. Even with the lantern it's taking Charles's eyes a moment to adjust to the dim light. This place must be completely cut off from any outside air, wherever they are.

Gradually Charles begins to make out the area around him; there are rock walls on all sides, and he begins noticing the paintings as his vision settles. Flat figures of animals in profile, rendered in earthy pigments; these are either very old, or created in imitation of ancient cave paintings.

Amelia touches his arm, and they slowly walk forward. As the lamplight slides over the paintings, the stags and horses almost seem to move. The paintings are familiar, and a particular figure of a sway-bellied, galloping horse helps him place it, something he's seen in the news recently-- "Oh, of course," he says, grinning at Amelia, "Lascaux?"

"Right in one," Amelia bounces in place. She takes a sip of her coffee. "What do you think?"

"It's beautiful," he says. Even in reproduction, the sense of history is overwhelming. The paintings are larger than he would've imagined, filling the walls, even some on the ceiling. The simulated cave seems to stretch on and on, covered with dozens, hundreds of paintings.

Most are stylized and simple, dark brown outlines filled in with red ochre. He wonders if the modern painters dug their pigments out of the ground near the caves to match the unique palette of the originals. The artwork is incredibly faithful, with beautiful details: tufty fur on a bull's enormous head. Bold dark renderings of bison complete with discernible hooves and hairy tails. The delicate branching antlers of a stag. The curving horns of the aurochs, the distant predecessors of domesticated cattle.

It must be air conditioning that duplicates the coolness of a cave. The total experience is astoundingly vivid and immersive. They've even imbued the space with the right indefinable mineral smell, and the surface of the floor is as uneven and rocky as one would expect from the genuine article.

"I can't get over the authenticity of the reproduction. You'd never know this was only made in 1983, these paintings look thousands of years old." Charles smiles. "Thank you for this. I admit, when I first heard of Lascaux II I thought it was faintly absurd to open a duplicate of the cave gallery all of two hundred meters from the original, but I'm amazed. This is stunning." He looks around, though, frowning. "Although I thought it was only two halls in Lascaux II. Have they added on?"

Amelia's grin widens, and she licks a little coffee off her lower lip. "I wouldn't know," she says. "I haven't been there."

Charles carries on smiling at her for a few seconds, until the full impact of what she's saying resonates, and then the joy slides right off his face. He looks around and stumbles back a few steps from the wall, clutching his coffee to his chest.

Unfortunately, that only serves to make Amelia laugh. "Oh, Charles, come on, don't worry--"

"Don't worry? I was only just reading an article on this last week, these caves have been closed down since January--"

"Of course, which makes it the perfect time to come--"
"No, you don't understand. Do you see those black spots on the walls?" He points, from a safe distance. "That's black mold, and it's become a huge problem. They're trying to correct it, but right now the last thing this cave needs is more people tromping around inside it, ruining history."

Amelia's grin has disappeared by now, too, and her nose wrinkles. "Charles, it's just the two of us. I've been in protected areas lots of times, off and on the clock-- remember me telling you about the scientists in Cueva de los Cristales?"

"Yes, but this is different. They allow one person in here for twenty minutes a day solely to monitor the mold--" He steps closer to her. "We should leave, now."

"Why? Why should we leave, we're not doing any harm. If you were throwing your coffee across the room, I'd get you out of here right away, absolutely, but--"

"Our presence could be harmful to these paintings. Look, this is a UNESCO World Heritage site, these paintings have been around for 17,000 years, I don't want to be responsible for making sure they don't last for another generation!"

Amelia's lips flatten out. "Fine," she says, and the cave disappears from around them.

When Charles rematerializes, they're back in the coffee shop, near a table in back. He takes a seat, shaky as if he's had a near miss in traffic. "I appreciate the thought," he says. "But I really would have been perfectly content with Lascaux II, you don't have to try to impress me with the places you take me. Your mutation is marvelous no matter where we go. I was excited enough by Pittsburgh, on our first date." He tries for a smile. "We could always go back."

"Because Pittsburgh is the most special spot on Earth. C'mon." Amelia thunks her coffee cup down on the table and sets her lantern down on the floor. "What's the point of our abilities if we don't use them to do things humans can't?"

Charles actually opens his mouth to say something, but lets it pass, quickly bringing his coffee cup to his lips. It's been months and months, he's known her for longer than any of his previous emfriends have lasted, counting all the time they spent conversing over email, but her shields are still strong and intact every time they're together.

"You can do loads of things humans can't do without infringing on other peoples' boundaries to do them," he says instead. "There are legitimate reasons why some places are off limits, and we should endeavor to respect that."

"I don't see why. Those are human rules. We're not human," says Amelia. "I can port to places where it's illegal to have chewing gum, I'm not emptying my pockets for that, either."

"What?" He's still blinking over the first part of that. "Of course we're human. It's a difference of one gene sequence."

"Yeah, and maybe that still makes us 'Homo sapiens' by classifications that humans came up with, but..." she holds up a finger as soon as he opens his mouth. "I don't want to argue the genetics of it because obviously you'll just hit me over the head with your doctorate, and this isn't about that."

Right, he can't help thinking; why confuse the issue with the facts. "If we're not human, why would you even want to see the Lascaux caves?" he asks. "That's human history in there."

"So? I took you to see that 70-foot spiderweb in Madagascar, I don't have to be a spider to want to look at that."
"Yes, but I hope you wouldn't go kicking in the spiderweb, either!"

"That's completely different, and you know it. For Pete's sake, Charles, going up on Uluru or touching the statues on Easter Island isn't like setting out to deliberately destroy something."

Charles winces. "We've talked about Uluru--"

"Yeah, we have, and you know what? Even humans climb Uluru. All the time. There's a chain handhold, they tell people not to do it during high winds--"

"--and if I'd known before we went, I would have asked you to take us away immediately. It's a place of immense spiritual importance--"

"It's important to me. That doesn't count because I don't happen to be Anangu?"

"Doesn't it take the joy out of it, knowing that you're showing disrespect for their spiritual traditions just by being there? I'm not just being stodgy for no good reason. It's basic courtesy to respect sacred places, it's important to preserve sites that tell part of humanity's story--"

"Humanity," Amelia repeats. "There we go again. When do mutants get to claim any space to call our own? When do we get to have our own history?"

"Human history is our history, it's not as though we sprang from a totally different--" he flails for a moment; she already called him on bringing his genetics degree into it-- "primordial soup."

"Thank you for dumbing that down for me," Amelia says, rolling her eyes.

"Look, suppose mutants did claim-- I don't know, an island somewhere. Something no human had ever set foot on, something that was only ours." Charles crosses his arms over his chest and sets his chin. "If humans built a giant bridge out to it, or brought a ferry there for tourism, would you want them throwing tailgate parties there? Wouldn't you expect them to respect our space?"

Lips thinning into a line, Amelia doesn't answer for a while. "We're just not going to agree on this," she says, finally. "I should've known you'd be like this. The way you only want to go to these supposedly 'mutant-friendly' restaurants and shops and bars."

Those words make so little sense to him, Charles is sure for a moment that he's missed a part of the conversation. "I'm sorry?"

"It's always bugged me, how you're always checking for circle-M signs. Talk about being a good little mutant and only going where we're allowed." She points over at the door to the coffeeshop; there's a circle-M sign there, of course.

Charles frowns, "That's not why! I want to support places that make us welcome."

"Is that what you tell yourself. Or is that a habit you picked up because you have a visibly mutated sister?" Amelia asks. "And now you do it even when you don't need it to stay safe. They've got you trained."

"It's not that." Though now that she says it, he's not entirely sure that hasn't been part of it. He can't remember when he got in the habit or if he ever consciously decided to always check. "Even if there is a bit of that, it still has the effect that I'm giving my custom to places that show they're mutant-friendly, and that's what I want. A number of them are mutant-owned, what's wrong with giving our patronage to other mutants? Surely even the more radical mutants you're acquainted with couldn't object to that."
"Did you just call my friends radical mutants? Hello, scare language?" Her eyebrows are closer together, her cheeks beginning to redden... this is not going well at all.

"I'm reasonably sure any member of the Mutant Liberation Organization can be considered radical, and I don't mean it as scare language. Don't they call themselves that?" This is falling rather far afield of where they started; Charles does his best to redirect. "Mutant-friendly establishments set a precedent for other businesses. I'm not going to stop patronizing them just because some people feel it's some sort of cop-out to go where the owners make a point of welcoming us."

"Some people," Amelia repeats archly. "You know, anyone can stick a decal on their window. If we had horns and scales I don't think those places would be too happy to have us."

"We can't know that--"

"Oh, don't give me that, you could know that," she scoffs. "You could read their minds for it! It's not like humans can hide anything from you. I don't know why you aren't doing that all the time."

"Oh? So I could read your mind, that would be all right?" He winces right after he says it; he never wants to play that card. If he made the telepathy an issue of trust, he'd never be able to be close to anyone, even in the limited way he feels close to people without it. But he won't take it back.

Amelia draws back a bit, eyes widening, no reply.

Charles shakes his head. "That's what I thought."

With an impatient little huff, Amelia waves a hand at her temple. "Fine. Yes. Go ahead."

He looks at her incredulously. The gulf between psionic and non-psionic has never felt so wide; it seems impossible that she can't understand what that means to him or how abrasive that flippan, grudging invitation is, but she couldn't possibly. Despite this disagreement, he doesn't believe Amelia would be deliberately cruel. "I'm not reading you when you're giving me permission out of spite."

"You just don't want to hear all the ways I'm thinking that you're wrong, wrong, wrong," Amelia glares at him.

"That isn't it." Charles rests his head in his hand. "I know if I were to read you, I wouldn't only be getting the things I want to hear from you. It wouldn't even all be related to what we're talking about. There are dozens of things running through anyone's mind at any given time. It's like one of those awful moments when you click the wrong link on a website and your browser pops up seventeen new windows, half of which are pornographic. What you're actually looking for is an article on hamsters; what you get is an article on hamsters, addresses for veterinarians, several ads for hamster food, an ad for pre-killed hamsters to feed your boa constrictor--"

"Oh, that's disgusting--"

"Trust me, the human-- and mutant-- mind contains rather worse," Charles says dryly. "You can go virtually anywhere and port away from any danger-- boundaries don't apply to your experience, so you don't have a great deal of respect for them. I can read minds; privacy doesn't really apply to my experience, but I have to try to respect it-- I feel how much it distresses people when it's threatened. I don't want you to feel that way. I'm not asking you for that." He can see her lips quirk, and even if he's not perfectly skilled at reading whatever that microexpression means, he shakes his head, making the obvious guess. "I'm not. They're your thoughts, and you have every right to expect privacy. And not because you're a mutant, or because you're one of 'my kind', whatever that means."
Because you're a person."

Amelia's nose stays wrinkled as she sits back in her seat. "Okay," she says, finally. "That's a lot to take in."

Charles reaches across the table to her. "It doesn't have to be," he tells her. "I'd just appreciate it if you'd stick to safe places when I'm with you. And," he tries very hard to infuse this with humor, hoping it won't come off as the next stage of a lecture, "consider the impact of adding extra humidity and UV light to closed environments."

Fortunately, this time he succeeds; Amelia snorts and slips her hand into his. "I'll think about it," she promises. "And I'll check to make sure there's no big controversy over the places I take you. Okay?"

"Thank you," he says sincerely.

"But that doesn't mean all our trips are going to be to Pittsburgh," she says, squeezing his hand. "Seriously, I can do a lot better than that."

"I'm never going to live Pittsburgh down, am I?" he asks. He means it as a joke, really, but it doesn't come out as one. He can still remember the view from the U.S. Steel Tower, looking down over the city. Allegheny River and its bridges. Looking east, trying to imagine what on Earth had possessed him to say Pittsburgh in the first place.

He's thought about going back, sometimes, but maybe Amelia's right. Maybe there are better places than Pittsburgh, and he should be looking to go forward instead of retracing steps that he still doesn't understand.
Chapter Summary

While Charles is teleporting from place to place with Amelia, Erik comes out to New York to visit Jason.

Chapter Notes

Stealth update! This is actually not the Monday update; it's a little bonus chapter that demanded to be written after getting this question on Tumblr.

Angst quotient: One cute cat picture's worth.

For the first few minutes after his plane touches down at LaGuardia, Erik feels tense all over. He digs his phone out of his pocket and looks at the schedule again--Sebastian's schedule, what he was able to put together from his public appearances. Thank God, no, he's not here right now; he's in France, giving a lecture and doing his latest book signing.

It doesn't cut the tension any, not really, but at least he can shrug that sensation off now. It's not Sebastian, so it really doesn't matter where it's coming from.

He sends a quick text to Jason: [Just landed. Might take us a while to park. We're coming in at gate D7. No luggage. See you soon.]

The return text comes in a few seconds later. [FUCK YEAH. Here with bells on.]

When he finally manages to get out of the airplane and out from behind the secured area near the gates, up at the arrivals level, he laughs; there really are bells in the air, giant silvery ones. Jason starts ringing them as soon as Erik spots them. No one else reacts, though, so he must only be showing them to Erik. It's still a nice thing to see upon arrival, and Erik heads straight over, dropping his duffel bag on the ground and pulling Jason into a hug.

"Missed you," he says. "How have you been?"

"Good! Better now," Jason says. He steps back and looks Erik up and down. "How's it going for you?"

"All right. Where are we headed?"

"Depends on how tired you are." Jason gives him a critical look. "You look a little beat, and not in the good way. Is there something you're not telling me, here?"

Erik shakes his head. "No, I really am fine. I looked it up. Sebastian's not even in the country."

Jason squeezes his arm. "I looked it up, too," he admits. "Come on. Let's get out of here. We can go see the sights, if you're up for that, or we can just go back to my place. Whatever you feel like."
"Let's just start with your place for now. I wouldn't mind dropping my bag off."

Jason's got a car waiting for them outside; his driver's a younger sub who looks like he's barely old enough to drive. He's wearing sunglasses, even though it's overcast out, and he gives Erik a tentative smile and a nod when they get into the car.

"Kazuo, this is my friend Erik," Jason says. "Erik, Kazuo Ishitaka."


"Thank you." Erik reaches between the front seats to offer Kazuo a handshake; Kazuo smiles a little more and shakes his hand. "It's good to be here."

"Erik's a mutant, too," Jason says. "Metal. Kazuo has enhanced vision."

"Good for driving," Erik says with a grin. "I take it we're safe with you?"

Kazuo tilts his head toward Jason, who gives him an encouraging little nod; Kazuo slips his sunglasses down a fraction. His eyes are silver, and in the dimness of the car, they put out an obvious white glow. Erik grins. "Nice."

"Thank you." Kazuo grins back and slips his sunglasses back on, and turns back around. "Where am I taking you two?"

"Home," Jason says.

"Yes, sir."

Erik glances over at Jason with a raised eyebrow; Jason sighs and nods. "Okay. Blanked."

"Drivers who call you sir," Erik teases. "I take it New York's been good to you."

"You realize you're just falling for the stereotype that dominants fuck everything that moves..."

"He's got gorgeous eyes. You can't tell me you haven't thought about it."

"He's seventeen! He works for me!" Jason reaches over and squeezes Erik's hand; Erik takes a couple of tries to squeeze back. He's still got tension running through him, and it's only getting worse as they start driving. "Are you sure you're okay? The flight was all right?"

"It was fine," Erik says. He blows out a breath, though, and scratches the back of his neck. "I'm glad to be here, I really am. We're going to have a good weekend."

"I should take you to see the statue first," Jason says. "That'll get your mind off whatever this is."

"You just want to drop me in front of a hundred and fifty feet of copper to see what happens," Erik mutters. "You don't have to try that hard, I was already planning on a scene or two..."

Jason blinks at him. "Yeah?"

"If you're up for that," Erik says quickly. "You're not seeing anyone who'd object...?"

"I'm not seeing anyone at all," Jason says. "Going out for a scene now and then, nothing serious. You?"

"Didn't we have this discussion around New Year's? I'm just not doing that anymore." Erik shrugs.
"I'll be fine if you're not interested in scening."

"You'll be fine," Jason repeats. "You seriously don't miss it?"

"We scened last August, it's not like it's been that long--"

"I think I'd go nuts if I were only getting a scene in every six months. I start firing up illusions to work with if it's been six weeks."

"I don't know if I'd even bother doing that," Erik admits.

"We don't have to scene--"

"It was my idea," Erik reminds him.

"I'm just saying. No pressure."

"Thanks." Erik tilts his head back; the tension's getting worse and worse, or... better... he doesn't know. It doesn't hurt, it's not uncomfortable-- there's just something about the city that's making him a little nervous, and relieved to be here, all at the same time. "Same goes for you. No pressure, if you're not into it for whatever reason."

"I'm pretty sure I'd have to be dead in order to turn down a scene with you. And even then I might give it a shot, as long as the zombie factor wasn't a hard limit."

Erik laughs, and just like that, the tension breaks. He looks out the window, tracking east, for no reason he can name. France. It comes to mind again, but he shrugs it off. Or he tries. He's thinking about France for the rest of the ride home.

They make it out to Liberty Island that day. Erik stares up at the Statue of Liberty for a good fifteen minutes before he can even move. He's not even sure he's blinking.

"Better than you thought?" Jason asks softly. He reaches out and takes Erik's hand. Erik feels lit up all over; he can feel every place Jason's touching his hand and his fingers, every fraction of an inch of skin coming in contact with skin. "Okay, seriously, man, you keep looking at that thing and I'm going to end up blanking out certain parts of your anatomy."

Erik finally looks away, shaking his head and laughing. "I'm not that bad." But he glances down at himself anyway. "All right, a little help wouldn't be a bad thing."

Jason's hand tightens on his; Erik can feel heat and a buzz like electricity all the way up to his shoulder. "A little help, or, uh."

"Just blank me while we go in. Or are we going in at all?"

"Do you want to? The statue itself is closed. I wasn't sure if the museum would be too much of a tease, without getting to go all the way."

"I think I'd probably just embarrass myself," Erik admits. "And if we were going up to the crown, you really would have to blank me."

"When it reopens, I will." Jason grins. "They're saying maybe next year."

Erik takes a few deep breaths and nods. Jason doesn't let go of his hand, and Erik's grateful for that; he feels flushed, and he's definitely breathing hard. Jason laughs softly. "So if I were going to
be really, really unfair, I'd ask you about moving here right now."

"I don't ever want to leave," Erik says, all in a jumbled rush. There's something special about the copper, the huge vast bulk of it, the shape of it. All the bends and curves and folds. It's unbelievable; he's never felt anything like this, not even during the MRI he had when he was a teenager. The tension from this morning is back, too, but it feels almost as right as standing here staring up at all that metal.

"Okay, that really was unfair of me," Jason says. "Because I'm seriously thinking I want to hold you to that. I'll bring you down here every week if that's what it takes."

Erik laughs. "I might be here every week with or without you."

"You haven't seen the Chrysler Building yet, either."

"I don't see how it's going to top this."

"It might not, but you should give it a chance." Jason squeezes his hand. "Give this place a chance. You said at New Year's that you weren't sure Pittsburgh was really home. Maybe this could be it, for you. Maybe it's worth a try."

Erik finally tears his eyes away from the statue, looking at Jason. "You know that's half the reason I was here. To find out if I wanted to stay."

Jason nods. He looks like he wants to say something else, but instead he bites his lip and just nods a few more times.

"It might take me a while to settle up in Pittsburgh."

"You don't have to rush it."

"I'm not going to." He takes a deep breath, as deep as he can between the tension in his chest and the dizzying feel of being so close to the statue. "But I think I want to do this. Are you still looking for a roommate?"

"And house-sitter," Jason teases, squeezing Erik's hand. "I know, that's the real draw, right?"

Erik looks up at the statue one last time, and then back to Manhattan. "I couldn't even tell you," he murmurs. "But I think I need to be here."
Charles, April-June 2008

Chapter Summary

As Charles and Amelia's relationship progresses, they reconcile some of their differences. It's growing closer that turns out to be the problem.

April 2008

April sneaks up on him. Between volunteering for educational outreach alongside Raven, dates with Amelia, and planning for the genetics conference in Los Angeles, Charles barely even realizes the calendar's ticked over into April until the fifth.

Amelia hasn't said a word yet about her separation date. He's never been so tempted to try for a glimpse into her mind. He wants to do something for her, whatever would help make that day easier on her. But since she isn't talking, he's lost.

Maybe she wants to ignore it, pretend it's just like any other day. Maybe she wants to be alone; she hasn't suggested any plans. Maybe she's waiting for *him* to come up with something. If he goes by a do-unto-others rule of thumb, he should invite her over and start mixing her drinks. Somehow that doesn't strike him as a good idea.

She's over the evening of the fifth, and he tries to choose a moment carefully to ask, washing up after their scene, the water splashing in the basin. She can pretend she didn't hear it if she wants when he asks, "Would you like to do anything on the ninth?"

Enough time passes that he starts to think she isn't going to answer, but she finishes rinsing and towels off her hands and comes to him, accepting his arms around her, resting her head against his shoulder.

"I don't want to do anything special," she says. "I'm working most of the day. But it'd be nice to see you that night. I could come over at seven?"

"Of course." He smooths her hair back. "We can do whatever you like."

"I'm probably not going to want to," she rolls her hand in a gesture that mystifies him; she steals a peek at him and clarifies, "Have sex, I mean. I just want takeout and an old movie and maybe some cuddling on the couch."

"We can do that," Charles promises. "Let's."

Amelia's in grey sweats and a faded t-shirt when she turns up on the ninth, and after just a few bites of Pad Thai, she's curling under a blanket with him on the sofa.

"I still wonder," she says, almost too softly for him to hear. "I wonder a lot, on the anniversary of..." She tucks her head against him, and he puts his arm around her shoulders, kisses the top of her head. "Because it wasn't very long. They say six hours is what it takes to be sure." She looks up at him, and Charles nods carefully. "But I was only asleep for four."

She's looking up at him, eyebrows drawn up and together, mouth curved into a slight questioning
line-- at least he thinks it's meant to be a question of some sort. He strokes her hair. "Then maybe it wasn't that."

"I remember what it was like, feeling him. He'd send affection... every time I sent it back to him, I could feel this sensation of excitement. I used to wish we could hear each other all the time... it was only fleeting moments, really. But after I slept, there was nothing." She tips her head down. "At first I thought that was my fault. I was so pissed off... all the doctors, my family, everybody telling me that I'd just gone through mourning sleep. I was hearing it from so many people, and I was so mad." She clings a little more tightly to him, her arm going around his waist. "Maybe all he got from me was that anger. Over and over for weeks. I kept thinking, if you love me... show me, prove them wrong. But maybe all he got was me sending that-- I don't know, that childish doubt and anger. And maybe he decided it was too much, that he didn't want to deal with me anymore."

Charles squeezes her. "I'm sure that wasn't it."

"Maybe feeling me move around all the time was too much, and he thought there was something wrong with our bond. Maybe if I hadn't used my ability until after we'd bonded, I never would have lost him."

"Amy..." Charles turns to face her, cups her cheek in his hand. "You felt love from him all those years. Years when you were using your ability to the fullest. Did you ever feel fear from him, or doubt, when you were moving around...?"

She shakes her head, her eyes a little wet. "Never," she whispers.

"Then he didn't leave you because of that."

A shaky breath and a nod, and she hugs him tightly, her cheek pressed against his. "Thank you," she whispers.

"Always." He strokes her hair, careful to stay away from soul's-home, at now of all times. "He was lucky to have you. He must have known that."

"If I could just know."

She nudges him, and after a few awkward moments of sorting out the blanket, they shift, lying down, side by side. She turns around so he's spooning her, his arm around her waist again. "The soulbond should come with, like, innate knowledge of each other's names, at least. Then there'd be something to go on."

"Raven used to play with Ouija boards when she was, oh, twelve or thirteen," Charles offers. "I remember her coming home annoyed because it told a friend of hers that his bondmate's name was Ronny, and all she got from hers was I-A."

"And of course the first thing that came to mind for me was Lovecraft."

"You didn't say so..."

"I tried not to, but when I made a face, she asked me why." Charles soberes a bit. "I felt terrible. Bad enough that it wasn't a name at all, worse that my mind came up with an anti-mutant bigot from the early 20th century..." He covers his face with one hand. "She took it well when I explained it. Sort of. She walked around yelling 'Ia! Ia! Cthulhu Fhtagn!' for months."

Amelia laughs, but quickly stops herself. "Sorry. It's not really funny."

"She gave up divination after that," Charles says. "And her bondmate sends her love. So I'm reasonably sure her bond isn't some sort of Lovecraftian horror. Few are."
Amelia smiles. "You're a good brother."

"I'm not always so sure," Charles admits. "I try."

"I'm glad you're here," Amelia says, later. Her voice is sleepy, and Charles strokes her hair again. "I'm glad I'm here. With you."

"I'm glad we're here, too," Charles murmurs, and soon after that, she falls asleep beside him.

She's out til nearly ten, and when she wakes, she looks strangely bewildered. Maybe she's surprised to wake up at his place, Charles can't be sure. She makes no move to get up, and eventually she turns in his arms and nuzzles his face, offering her mouth.

They kiss for a long while. Since she told him she wasn't likely to want to take it further tonight, he's careful not to push, and eventually she turns away from kissing and puts on another old film, staying awake for this one, keeping close to him til midnight, when she softly says goodbye.

When he sees her the following evening, she's right back to her usual self again: colorful clothes, a bright smile, an eager, "Hey, let's go to New Mexico tonight, what do you say?"

He wishes he could bounce back like that. But as his own separation date steals closer, he doubts he'll be able to manage it.

* 

The weekend before, Amelia mists over, and they manage to have a good two days together, walks in the park and shopping and brunch on Saturday, before Charles gets bogged down by the date. April 20th. It's getting nearer all the time.

"So," Amelia says, "This week, huh?"

"Tuesday," Charles confirms with a wince. "I thought I'd phone you the day after."

"Why not the day of?"

"I won't be good company, to say the least."

She takes his arm. "So let me keep you bad company."

"Not so much bad company as drunk company," he admits. "My strategy for the day is to try to remember as little of it as possible."

"Oh." Amelia tilts her head, lips parted, considering. Slowly she starts to smile. "I have an idea." She offers her hand, and within moments, they're misting to hers.

Amelia's house is sparse, but not neat. Every time Charles goes there, he ends up looking around at every step to make sure he isn't going to trip over something. Here, where everything's hers, Amelia mists around everything. Piles of discarded clothing are no obstacle to someone who doesn't mind using teleportation six times a minute in order to move around.

Her walls are decorated with maps, all sorts of different ones; out in the living room there's a six-foot map with time zones on it. That's the one she's headed for now, and she points up at the top of it, where there are large numbers indicating the offset from Universal Time. "I pretty much have this down by now, I never even get jet lag anymore, but there are some funny things that happen when you're jumping from time zone to time zone. You've probably experienced some of that
"Of course," Charles says, stepping over a brassiere and a pair of silk stockings on his way to the map. "I went from Tokyo to Honolulu once. Left at five minutes 'til midnight, landed at noon. A thirty-six-hour August 18th."

"But if you were going the other way--"

"It wouldn't really work," Charles says, smiling apologetically. "There's still all that time in the air. I'd be thinking of it as April 22nd the whole way, until we landed."

"Oh, but that's where I come in." Amelia points at a strip of the map near the far right hand side, about halfway down. "See this?"

"The ocean?"

Amelia tosses him an amused look. "Yes, the ocean. But this is UTC -12. There are only a few places that are in that time zone. Mostly it's used for ships passing through the water on their way to someplace else. This, though." She taps a dot on the map. "This is Howland Island. Does that name ring a bell?"

"No... should it?"

"Not for you, but it does for me. Howland Island is pretty much best known as the island Amelia Earhart never reached. She was trying to find it when she was lost." She strokes the tiny spot on the map with the tip of her index finger, which absolutely dwarfs the island at this scale. "They knew it was tiny, but they built her a lighthouse-- sort of a lighthouse, it doesn't actually light, it was meant as a daylight landmark-- and an airstrip. She was going to use it to refuel. When I got really into her-- between being named after her, and having an ability that let me do all kinds of exploration myself, I had to go through an Amelia Earhart phase, you know?" She grins. "So I went to see Howland Island. I had this fantasy that maybe she'd been a mutant, too, and her ability was time travel. So if I could just be there at the right moment, there she'd be, flying up above me in her Electra, and I could finally bring her home." She shakes her head. "I know that's crazy..."

"It's a sweet fantasy," Charles says. "We haven't seen much evidence of time-traveling mutants, although there have been quite a number of psionic mutants with the ability to see what's going to happen in the future. A variety of different sorts of precognition, from people who have clairvoyant visions to people who can actually see and perhaps influence different possibilities in the future. I've read about a teenager who could detect approximately ten seconds of the future within a three-foot bubble around her..."

Amelia smiles at him, and Charles realizes belatedly that she's been smiling at him for some time; it's only then that he realizes how far off-topic he's gotten. "Sorry."

"It's fine." She grins. "I've gotten pretty used to it."

"Yes, well." He clears his throat. "You were saying, about Howland Island...?"

"I'm actually amazed you didn't ask me if it was okay to go there," she teases. Charles opens his mouth, and she holds up a hand. "The answer is yes. The island is a national wildlife refuge, but it's not because it's protected so much as because it's been abandoned. The airstrip's in disrepair, nobody keeps up the Earhart Light." She sighs. "I offered, once, but nobody wanted to spend the resources on it."

Charles takes her hand. "I'm sorry to hear it."
"Me, too. But look, sweetheart, the point is-- if you're standing there on April 21st, at 11:59pm, what time is it in other parts of the world?" She goes to the other side of the map and traces a line back through the time zones. "10:59, 9:59, 8:59, so on and so on until you get here, to UTC plus 12." She's back where she started, but now she's pointing at Fiji. "11:59pm again, right? Except you're a full 24 hours ahead, now. So it's April 22nd, 11:59pm. Time it just right, and you aren't cheating. You've just skipped a day." She turns to look at him, her fingers threading through his. "What do you think? Worth trying?"

Charles looks at the map again, the broad dark line separating one day from the next. A year without an April 22nd.

He's touched that she thought of it. He squeezes her hand. "Worth trying," he says. Her smile is enough to seal his mind on it. It's worth a try.

*

They stay in Hawaii all the way up to nearly midnight, HAST. It's not cold there, and along the beach Amelia's chosen for them, there's no light pollution. The stars are so bright that Charles wonders if he's ever seen quite so many before; he can see the sparkling band of the Milky Way all the way from one end of the sky to the other.

"Leo," he says, pointing up. "And there's Virgo, off to the side. I think that dot there is Saturn. I wish I'd thought to bring a telescope. Imagine what we'd be able to see."

Amelia smiles and takes his hand in both of hers. "I like my view here just fine," she tells him, and she leans in and kicks one leg up behind her as she kisses him. He steadies her with an arm around her waist.

The kiss is just getting deep enough to lead somewhere else when Amelia's watch starts to beep. "That's our cue to move on," she says. "Ready to see Haulain Island?"

"Absolutely." Charles curls in close, and Amelia mists them away.

If the Na Pali coast on Kauai seemed remote, Howland Island is positively isolated. There are no lights, nothing-- but Charles can see anyway, and after a moment he realizes it's because where they are on the planet now, the moon is completely unobscured by any clouds or structures, shining wide and bright and full.

He looks up at it, almost gaping; he's never seen it like this, the brightest, most beautiful light in the sky. It feels like it might be the only light anywhere, the only thing keeping the world from blacking out entirely.

He gets his bearings, taking in the crumbling stone tower off to their left, the overgrown grass and scrub nearby. "I wish I could see it during the day," he breathes; somehow he's afraid to disturb this place by talking too loudly.

"It's not quite as breathtaking as you'd think, sadly," Amelia says, just as softly. "Here, I stocked us up earlier. I've got some things." Over next to the tower, there's a metal trunk, and Amelia pulls one of her lanterns from it, setting it down on the ground. "There's enough moonlight I wasn't sure if we'd need it, but if you want to turn it on, we can. I've also got some wine, and some cheese and grapes, and blankets." Amelia pulls the blankets out of the trunk and smiles over at Charles. "We've got a couple of hours. What would you like to do?"

Eventually they end up snuggled together under the blankets, one hand or another sneaking out for
wine or grapes now and then. Amelia convinces him it's all right to lean up against the tower, and for once he doesn't argue; as she pointed out, if anyone were concerned about preservation, they'd have taken her up on her offer to help with the upkeep. They know she comes here, and no one's ever asked her to stop or tried to prevent her from coming. It's a lost place, and for once it strikes Charles as a little sad that it seems mutants can only lay claim to places that baseline humans have abandoned-- but he can't really hold onto the thought, not tonight.

"Thank you for this," Charles murmurs, head resting on her shoulder. She runs her fingers through his hair. "This means so much. That you even thought of this, that you wanted to give this to me-- that you took the time to work out how we could manage it-- I could never thank you enough." He presses a kiss to her palm.

"You're welcome."

They're quiet together for a space. Even the atmosphere seems different here, so far from habitation; it's probably a trick of the mind, but the air feels fuller, somehow, less used up by other people breathing it.

He almost doesn't want to tell her, but he has to say it, his voice low enough to nearly get lost in the night breeze. "I could never forget him. Skipping the anniversary won't change that."

"You know I understand," she says quietly. "If I could just know what happened... if I could just talk to him for one day, just once..." Amelia kisses his brow. "I know you won't forget him. I wouldn't want you to. It's not about that, it's about-- not dwelling on how it ended."

"It never ended," he answers. "Even though I haven't felt anything since that day. The psionic who worked with me at the hospital couldn't find a trace of energy left. I spent a year with a powerful psionic and she never saw a sign of the bond in me. That flight I mentioned, Tokyo to Honolulu, that was in April as well. On my breaks from school, even with nothing to follow, I'd travel... seeker buses, flights to different continents, low-altitude flights... I felt I'd looked everywhere, but since I've been with you, I've seen how much of the world I missed. How huge it is. I don't know if that means I never should've stopped looking, or if there was never any use looking at all."

Here, so far away from everything, no sounds but the wild world around them, water and wind... he's not sure why he feels driven to confess. Maybe it's not this place at all, but the gesture she's making; he needs to give back all the honesty he can offer.

"Every time you take me somewhere new," he says. "Just for that first moment when we materialize, I always think, here's where it'll happen. Here's where I'll feel him again."

She breathes out a humorless little laugh. "All the years I've been doing this," she says, "all the places I've been... every time I fade in, I think that too."

"I'll always wish I could've known him." He's telling himself as much as her, now. "I'm always going to miss him."

She strokes his hair. "I know how lonely it is." Her fingers move back, gentle on the back of his head, near to soul's-home without ever touching it or even reaching for it. "But we're still here. Not just half of us. Us."

"Is it really still April 21st?"

She looks at her watch. "For another fifteen minutes. And then it'll be April 23rd."

He presses his face against the side of her neck and just breathes, taking in the soft floral scent of
her perfume, the smell of her shampoo, the light spicy scent that's just her. Every April 22nd, he's only been able to think about the fact that he's alone-- truly alone, from soul's-home outward, in all the places it matters.

But this year, there's no renunciation anniversary, and he isn't alone. He curls both arms around her, tugging her as close as he can. He's not alone.

"Charles," Amelia says softly, her hand coming up to curve against his neck, her thumb pressed lightly against his lower lip. She brings her mouth up, against his, and they kiss, slow and easy... no destination in mind, no sense that it's leading anywhere. It's just the two of them, and if the rest of the world were to disappear around them right now, Charles might not even mind.

He won't forget his bondmate. He wouldn't want to, even if he could. But if he can feel a little less empty with days like this, endless April twenty-firsts and April twenty-thirds that come right on their heels, maybe... maybe that's all right. Maybe somewhere out there, his bondmate's spending their renunciation anniversary safe and warm, with someone he loves, someone who loves him. Maybe if it couldn't be Charles, it's someone who can make him feel as safe and as treasured as Charles would have wanted to do.

Amelia caresses his cheek as she draws away. "Hey," she whispers. "Everything okay?"

He nods, though his throat's a little too tight to speak. He takes a deep breath and tries again. "I'm glad you're with me. It's better than it's ever been, here, with you."

She strokes his cheek with her thumb, and Charles covers her hand with his, pulls her into another kiss. Here. They're here, together. Not alone.

* * *

It seems as if much more than fifteen minutes pass before Amelia's wristwatch beeps again, and she pulls back with a smile. "Give me just a second to pack all this up so it doesn't blow across the island," she says, and she quickly puts the lantern and wine glasses and blankets back into the trunk. She brushes her skirt off as she stands, and they look at the countdown on her watch together. "Fifty-five," she whispers, the numbers ticking up, "fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine..."

Charles closes his eyes, and everything mists out around him.

"--one," Amelia's saying, "two, three..."

He looks down at the second time display on her watch, the one set for Fiji. 2008-04-23. 00:00:04...

"Thank you," he whispers, hugging her tightly.

Amelia laughs. "You're welcome," she says. She nudges him after a moment, nodding at the huge, lit building in front of them. "Now, then. I think we have arrangements for an early April 23rd check-in at the Westin Denarau Island Resort and Spa, here?"

"Of course," Charles says, catching her hand and smiling. "Of course we do. Shall we?"

"We shall," she beams, and they head into the hotel lobby together.

*
The suite is lovely and spacious; there are two bedrooms, and their things have already been placed there, Charles's in one room and Amelia's in the other. Amelia was here earlier to make all the last-minute arrangements and drop off their luggage, and Charles smiles at the flower arrangement and the chilled bottle of champagne in the sitting room.

"I couldn't possibly," Charles says, "I feel I've been up all night." He tucks the champagne bottle into the refrigerator. "Tomorrow we'll call down for juice and start the day off with mimosas, how's that?"

"Sounds perfect. Do you want some tea?" She flips through the little courtesy tray on the wet bar. "They've got some chamomile."

"I could make some if you'd like," he offers. "Is there an electric-- ah, yes," he retrieves the electric kettle from under the wet bar, "perfect."

"I'm going to go ahead and wash up while you take care of that, if that's okay," Amelia says. "Long day, lots of outdoor locations... I've got sand everywhere."

"That's fine. Take your time," he says. "I'll keep the tea hot for you."

He ends up drinking a cup of it before she's out of her shower. Howland Island was beautiful even in its desolation, but he's looking forward to warming up.

The pajamas Amelia's wearing when she comes out aren't designed to heat him up in a more metaphorical sense-- a yellow polka-dotted bed jacket and capri pants with a cream-colored chemise-- but the slippers, which look like little fuzzy yellow ducklings, make him smile. She smiles back at him. "Never trust a girl who says she's going to slip into something more comfortable," she teases.

"You look lovely. The, ah," he points down at the duckling slippers, "beaks bring out your eyes."

Amelia laughs and takes a seat on the sofa; Charles brings two teacups over, letting Amelia take hers and warm her hands on it. She closes her eyes and breathes over the rim of the cup. "Thank you."

"I'm reasonably certain that's my line for tonight." Charles wraps an arm around her shoulders. She leans in against him, drawing her feet up, knees against her chest, all tucked in nice and neat. "Will you be comfortable here? Is your room all right?"

"It's nice," she allows, drinking some more tea. After a while, though, she sets her cup down and turns to look at him, putting a hand on his shoulder. Charles sets his cup aside and straightens; if she has something serious to say, he's braced for it.

He thought. "My room is fine," she says, "but I thought maybe tonight I'd try out yours."

Charles pauses and then slips a hand onto her knee. "I'm assuming you don't mean you'd simply like to swap..."

She bites her lower lip gently and shakes her head. "I think I'm ready to take the chance," she says. "I want to be with you tonight. Close to you. Is that okay? Because if you want space, tonight of all nights, I'd understand--"

Charles leans in and kisses her, and she wraps her arms around his neck, pulling him close. She tastes a little like her toothpaste, fresh and minty and clean, and a bit like chamomile, and he hopes very much that the night's going to carry on being as good as it's been so far.
Charles wakes up groggy and unfocused, mumbling as he tries to roll over in bed. He can feel her long before he actually rolls into Amelia, and the wistful, sleepy, affectionate feeling sinks into him as he presses his face into her hair and slides an arm over her waist.

"Good morning," Amelia murmurs. "Are you awake?"

Finding words so early is practically impossible; Charles shakes his head and rests it against her hair again. Amelia rolls over, and oh, God, she is awake, and strangely perky-- her cheerful laugh seems at odds with what's going on in her mind, nostalgia and a little sadness, some curiosity she's clearly trying to bury...

Bury. Shields. Charles reaches up and rubs at his temple, trying to force his shields into place. It feels so early, though the sun's up already; he turns over to get a look at the clock.

"Eleven?" He flops back onto his back and tosses an arm over his face. "I thought, maybe, seven..."

"Yeah. You were really out cold. I got up for a little while, had some breakfast, came back."

"I swear, your capacity to avoid jet lag must be a secondary mutation..." Charles lifts his forearm up to peer curiously at Amelia. "Actually, it would be a rather good secondary mutation for someone with your ability."

Amelia traces her fingernails over the inside of his forearm; Charles jerks back, involuntarily, stifling a ticklish laugh. She smiles at him, but it really isn't reaching her mind. And Charles really wasn't meant to know that. He takes a deep breath and focuses, pressing her mind and her thoughts and her emotions back out. He's not used to shielding completely so soon after waking. It has his shoulders tightening, his temples throbbing a bit.

"You don't snore," she's going on to say. "It's nice."

"Thank you," Charles says. "I didn't think so... Raven would never have let me live it down. I don't suppose there's tea?" He looks at her hopefully.

"I could make you some. Earl Grey?"

"Please."

Amelia slides out of bed-- Charles catches a glimpse of her blue skirt as she goes, so yes, she's been up and out already-- and leaves him alone in the bedroom for a few moments. Charles presses his fingers to both temples, taking deep breaths from the abdomen, hoping that shielding this quickly won't leave him with a headache. Though of course, if it does, even if it gives him a migraine, he'll consider the cost well worth it.

By the time Amelia comes back with his tea, Charles is upright-- that helps-- and has the bedside light on, which helps more. He smiles when she hands him his tea, and blows briefly on the surface before taking his first sip.

Amelia takes a seat at the foot of the bed. "I looked at the weather reports. We might get some afternoon thunderstorms today, but it looks like it's going to be nice for the rest of our trip."

"That sounds wonderful." Charles waits until he's sure his shields are firmly in place, and then sets his tea aside. "Did you sleep well?"
"Yes," she answers, no hesitation. "I don't think I got any of your dreams. I'm pretty sure they were all mine."

"I don't remember dreaming at all, so I expect they were," Charles reassures her. "Anything else, other than not snoring and not sharing dreams?" _This time_, he can't help thinking, _but she's still here talking to him; it seems more than possible that there could be a next time._

She bites at her lower lip again, though, and looks down at the bedcovers, tracing a seam with her fingernail. "You always said you sent emotions sometimes," she says softly. "I think you might have been doing that."

"Oh, Amelia, I'm sorry." Charles starts to lean forward, reaching out, but just as suddenly stops himself; maybe he's been invasive enough, maybe more from him is the _last_ thing she wants. Maybe he's been reading her wrong through this whole conversation; it always seems like the worst, most wretched sort of irony that at times when he most desperately needs the use of his ability, his ability itself is the point of contention between him and the people he loves. "You must understand-- of course I didn't mean to--"

"It's okay." She looks up at him and scoots closer on the bed, her hand slipping onto his knee-- or it's meant to be his knee, she grins as she slides her hand a bit further down his thigh until it really _is_ on his knee, now. "Actually, it felt... sort of... I mean, yeah, _strange_. It was really strange not being alone in my head all of a sudden. But you seemed happy, mostly. And it was..." She shrugs, her lips turning up in just the barest hint of a smile. "I thought maybe it was because of me, that maybe I did that."

This, he can answer for certain: "Of course you did. Between last night, and going to sleep beside you...? Everything about being with you made me happy. Most of all sleeping with you near."

"I was happy to be near you, too." Amelia glances away, her expression seeming... not happy, exactly, but not sad, either. It's as though she's remembering something. _Wistful_, he thinks, when he woke up she was feeling wistful... "Feeling you like that, though... I haven't felt anything close to that since..."

Her eyes drop down to the covers again, to her hand on his knee. "Right before I stopped feeling him at all, right before I slept... it wasn't exactly like that, it felt more... integrated, but..." She shrugs. "I'm sorry, I'm not explaining this very well. I just thought..." She looks up. "It wasn't scary or anything. It wasn't like I always thought it would be. It was--"

His stomach's clenching from nerves, waiting for that last word.

"Nice," she finishes. And she leans in and kisses his forehead.

Charles reaches out tentatively and puts his hand on her shoulder, just feeling her close for those brief moments. "I think," he says, and he clears his throat, his voice is a little thick, "I think that's one of the kindest things anyone's ever said to me."

She doesn't come to his bed the next night, or the next, or any of the other nights they spend in Fiji, but even having her so close in the other room of the suite, he doesn't go to sleep worrying about how strong his shields are, and he doesn't push himself into a headache rushing to block when he wakes up. When she gets that enigmatic look on her face over the next few days, he doesn't push. If there's more to what she felt than she was telling him, she'll share it when she's ready.

*
Charles wakes up to an alarm; Amelia reaches over him to hit the snooze button. After three or four tries, she makes it, and when she finally lets out a relieved sigh, she ends up collapsing on his chest, not bothering to roll back over.

Warmth, satisfaction, a slight ache from last night's lovemaking... irritation with the alarm... she feels so real to him first thing in the morning, and Charles has to laugh inwardly at the irony of that. She feels most real to him when they're both pulling themselves out of their dreamstates, when both of them have a grasp on the waking world that's tenuous at best.

He's already building up his shields again, though, piece by piece, putting that wall in between them. Her emotions fade as he forces himself awake more and more, his head already starting to throb with it. He presses his fingers to his temple, exhaling softly.

"It doesn't seem as if it'll be bad this morning; he might get by with only one Psilavon instead of two."

Amelia tilts her head up, mumbling a soft noise, and then her noise turns a little more concerned. She reaches up and pulls his hand away from his head.

"Don't," she mumbles.

"It's all right," Charles whispers, kissing the top of her head. "I'm only shielding."

"You're gonna have a headache again," she murmurs, keeping hold of his hand. "Don't do that today."

"Amelia." He squeezes her gently. "Darling, it's fine, the Psilavon takes care of it--"

"Not this morning." She pushes up on her elbow and squints to look him in the eye. "It's okay, all right? I thought this over." She waves at herself, in the general direction of her head. Charles catches her hand and rests it on his chest, over his heart. "I thought it over before, I just... didn't think last night... to offer..." She yawns. "Before we went to sleep. But it's okay. Take a little time to wake up first, shield later."

He's almost holding his breath. "Are you sure?"

She nods and puts her head back down on his chest, and he breathes in, deeply. With his shields relaxed, he can feel that she was telling the truth: she did think this out before. She's been thinking about this... for a while now, for the past week, and she's thought about it a lot. A lot of back-and-forth, he can sense, but... today she said it was all right, and he puts both arms around her, and smiles so wide his cheeks ache.

"Thank you," he whispers. He gets a wave of affection from her, and then she's asleep again, relaxed.

* *

They still aren't sleeping together every night, and Charles is actually a bit grateful. If it were every night, she'd never give him as much liberty as she's started to do. But since it's one night here, another night there-- since her job as a courier means she's never guaranteed to be on the same schedule he is, as she's always acclimated to whatever time zone her current job calls for-- when she does stay over, she gives him permission to shield slowly on the next morning they share, and the next and the next.

She's nervous about it, the second time around, and he reminds her that it's all right to change her
mind-- "You don't have to do it every time just because you did it once, it's fine, I promise--" but she forges on anyway, kissing his temple and telling him, the third time they try it, "You can have the nights, too."

"The nights?"

"While you're falling asleep. Just sleep, don't worry about it. I'm probably going to be thinking of a bunch of weird things before I go to sleep, I always do, but if you don't mind--"

"I don't mind," he says, too quickly. But instead of taking it back-- God, he really was afraid she might take it back-- she just laughs.

"How about this. You can start relaxing around me when we brush our teeth at night, and shields back up when I brush my teeth in the morning."

It never occurred to Charles that watching someone brush eir teeth at night could be one of the best parts of his life, but after that, the sight of Amelia's little red toothbrush in her hand makes him smile every time. And sometimes, in the mornings, she has to be up and out early-- and he has to shove his shields into place fast-- but other mornings they lie in bed for long, beautiful minutes, for half an hour, for an hour once, and then there's the morning she slips a breath mint into his mouth and gives him a beautiful, wicked grin.

"That bad this morning?" Charles mumbles, sucking on the mint. "Sorry..."

"Not so bad. I just... wanted to try something."

She draws the covers back, and even though it's a little cold in the room this early in the morning, Charles doesn't try to move a muscle. Breath mints-- she hasn't brushed her teeth-- and her mouth moves down over his body, kissing and licking all the way down. He's reading curiosity from her, and determination, and affection, and lust, and he's-- he's got a breath mint on his tongue, she hasn't been up yet, and her mouth is first warm and then cold, from the breath mints, when she takes him in her mouth.

He buries both hands in her hair, brushing it back from her face so he can see her. "Amelia," he whispers, "really?"

"Mm-hm," she hums, which just makes him shake beneath her, trying to hold still. But she's picking up more confidence now, and as fantastic as her mouth is on his cock, it doesn't hold a candle to feeling her emotions while she does it. She wants to, she likes it best when he's not guiding her, he knew that, of course, but now he can tell exactly when to hold perfectly still and when it's all right to rock up just that little fraction of an inch. He feels it when she has a wistful urge to feel his fingertips caressing her face, her ear, and he gives her those touches, swift and grateful, and every time he responds to her thoughts, she feels more and more sure.

She clambers up the bed and digs into the nightstand, a condom, lube, and he rolls the condom on while she strokes just a bit of lube into herself, giving him an apologetic little grin and the distinct sensation of mild embarrassment. "Just in case I'm not, um-- wet enough," she says, "because the thing is, I don't want to wait--"

"I don't, either," he says, holding still while she straddles him. It's a little different for each of them- she doesn't want to wait because she's still a little nervous about trying this; he doesn't want to wait because oh, God, being inside her body and her mind at the same time, it's been so long since he's had that he can barely even remember what it felt like. But she's a lot less nervous as she takes his cock in her hand and sinks down on him, and he puts his hands on her hips, holding on, gasping
as her pleasure floods over him.

"Still good?" she pants, bracing her hands on his chest. Charles has to bite his lower lip when he looks up at her, barely getting out a strangled mm-hm! as she keeps moving. "Okay. Okay, yes," and she's moving fast now, one hand reaching for her clit, "yes, oh, yes--"

She's been good about showing him how she's feeling for a while now; he's put in the effort on his side, paying attention to her body language, listening for every sigh or squeak-- but all those things, the motions, the facial expressions, the moans and the things she says, they all pale in comparison to having her open this way to him, her mind gently inviting him in, even if it's just the first layer of a complicated mass of thoughts. He bites down harder on his lip and keeps himself at the edge; however long this can last, he wants it, and he wants to please her with it, make her feel as good as she possibly can.

"Do you want to--" She reaches for one of his hands and slides it onto her clit, letting him take over, and he can feel just how to touch her, just the way she wants it. Two fingers, tight against her, moving in soft, back-and-forth motions, steady, steady, the same motion over and over again. She's riding him a little harder now, coming down fast and just this side of rough, and she catches his wrist, tugging just as he senses the need to ease up.

He lightens the pressure and looks up at her, and she gasps out, "Close, okay, I'm close, but I think I can do it on my own, I can stay, I won't--" won't mist away, he understands. He gives her the motions and the pressure she needs, faster now, and hard, and there, her mind's screaming for it as beautifully as her body is, and she throws back her head and comes, radiant, lit up with pleasure from the inside out.

Charles stops holding himself back, as if he could hold back through that; feeling her orgasm from her mind would have taken him from a dead sleep to coming right along with her in a matter of moments. After all this, he's got no chance, and he arches against her, inside her, calling out her name as he comes.

She pitches over on her side, snuggling up next to him, giggling. All he can feel from her is excitement, happiness, pleasure... somewhere in there, a little bit of triumph, it worked, it worked. He kisses her nose, and she laughs again, dropping her head down and resting it against his shoulder.

"That was... everything I thought it would be," she says, stretching an arm across his chest to hug him tightly. "Thank you."

He wishes he could say it mind-to-mind, he's not sure he's going to be very good with his voice right now, but he clears his throat and does his best anyway. "Thank you."

* 

It happens a little more often, after that.

Not the part where she slips him breath mints; she offers a different signal, a verbal one, "lights out" for letting him in and allowing him to read her moods, "lights on" for when it's time to stop. Lights out happens at night, mostly, but sometimes she'll look up at him with a coy expression and lean in while they're at a museum, at the symphony, walking through the park, and her whispered "Lights out" makes him wish rather desperately that they were alone.

"You know what we should do?" she says, one afternoon-- a lights-on afternoon-- while they're packing day-trip bags for a hike. It's not really warm enough in New York for hiking today, but in
California, the weather is beautiful.

"What's that?" Charles packs his compass, cell phone, and GPS in his day pack, and adds a water pack and a few protein bars.

Amelia chuckles at the collection. "It's not like I'm going to let anything happen to you," she says.

"I know," Charles says, "but just in case."

"Just in case," Amelia says, rifling through his collection of protein bars, "throw in a chocolate fudge one for me, okay?"

"I live to please," Charles jokes, and adds the chocolate fudge.

They're a good forty minutes into their hike before Charles raises his eyebrows, realizing he never managed to follow up on Amelia's question from before. "I'm sorry, I forgot entirely. You started to say something earlier. What were you thinking we should do?"

"What? Oh!" Amelia comes to a stop, twigs snapping softly under her boots. "I think we ought to plan a full-out lights-out date."

Charles can only blink at her; of all the things he might've expected her to say, that wasn't even on the list. "What did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking, one of those fancy nine-course meals... if that's okay with you!" she adds quickly. "I just thought, how fun would it be for you to read me while I'm trying a whole bunch of different foods I've never had before?"

"It's fun for me to read you while you're tying your shoes," he says, taking her hands. But he can't help being excited about the prospect. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." She wiggles her eyebrows. "You can go lights-out long enough to check if you want."

"I believe you." He's noticed that declining the occasional offer to peek in seems to make her more comfortable with the whole arrangement; a glimpse into her mind once told him it's the same thing as always, wanting reassurance that he still respects her privacy, that he isn't just waiting for the next opportunity to snoop, or the next. And he's tried to be patient, treating every time as a gift and not something he's owed because they're dating. "Did you have somewhere in mind?"

"I thought I'd leave it to you. Tell me where and when, and I'll handle transportation; you can do the rest."

"I'll think it over," he promises. "Anywhere?"

"Anywhere at all." She smiles. "I'm looking forward to it. You can read me for that, too."

This time he doesn't turn the offer down. He closes his eyes as she tightens her hands on his, and he can feel-- the excitement, the elation, the way she really does think it's going to be fun.

A whole date planned around getting to read her. Charles would pinch himself, later, to be sure he didn't dream it, but the mosquito bites he picked up from their hike are proof enough.

* 

"Xavier party? Right this way."
The hostess guides Charles and Amelia to a private table in the back, and Amelia beams at Charles, leaning close as the hostess walks away. "Do you think she was a telepath, too? It was like she knew right where to seat us... and look!" She holds up a small frame on the table, with a little printed label that reads Charles and Amelia... An Adventure Together, May 17, 2008. "Definitely wasn't random. Telepath?"

It wouldn't necessarily be unlikely; as usual, Charles chose a mutant-friendly, mutant-owned restaurant. But he shakes his head, smiling. "Just well-practiced. The reviews I read say that's not an uncommon reaction, but it's part of the service."

A few minutes later, a waiter stops by with little flutes of champagne. "It's the 2003 Argyle Brut Rosé," he explains, setting a flute down by each of them. Moments after that, someone's by with a tub of ice and a bottle of water, filling the silver goblets on their table.

"Metal water glasses?" Amelia asks. "That has to feel so strange..." She reaches for the goblet, but then quickly draws her hand back. "Wait, I should make sure... lights out," she says, eyes sparkling. Charles presses his fingertips to his temple and nods, unable to hold back the grin.

The silver goblet is distinctively cold, smoother than glass, and when she touches the rim to her lower lip, it gives her a metallic flavor and a sensation of chill unlike anything she's felt before. She likes it, though, and she takes a few sips before setting the goblet down.

The whole environment charms her; the lofted ceiling, the ornate linens and charger on the table, the half-dozen forks and spoons and knives on the table, the little printed label that was waiting for them. Trappings like these largely remind Charles of tense, tedious formal family dinners and the schmoozing and brinksmanship of charity events, but through Amelia, he can see it all as gracious and thoughtful; it's different and special for her.

"I chose well," Charles says, leaning back in his chair, pleased.

"You did!" Amelia picks the evening's course listing off the table and pages through it. "Coriandered Tuna Tartare with Tiny Potato Chips, Fennel and Chervil... Grilled Wagyu Strip, Oxtail Terrine with Morels, Carmelized Kohlrabi... Tarragon Meringue, Pickled Pear Gelée and Fresh Pear-Tarragon Salad... is this place real?"

"Entirely," Charles says, smiling. "They do a 'local' menu every so often where all their ingredients, including the salt, come from within one hundred miles of the restaurant, but I thought you might prefer something sourced a little more widely..."

"A hundred miles," Amelia says, shaking her head with a laugh. "Imagine living your whole life in just that amount of space. I think I've had years where I traveled more than a hundred miles every day."

Charles lifts his champagne flute and raises it. "To adventure," he says with a smile.

"Lights still out, right?" she asks, and she gets another ear-to-ear grin out of him before she tastes her champagne. "To adventure."

* 

Nine full courses with wine pairings: it's almost overwhelming just for Charles's own senses, let alone taking in everything from Amelia. She adores the Tuna Tartare, doesn't care much for the Roussanne paired with course three, and nearly cries actual tears when she tries the sage and apple tart near the middle of the meal. It's one amazing sensation after another, for her and for him both,
and when she's through the three unbelievable muscats whimsically titled *The Three Muscat Tiers*, she sits bolt upright for a moment and asks, "What about you?"

"I'm having a marvelous time," he assures her, reaching across the table and taking her hand in both of his.

"No, no, no... you... what about you?" She's more than slightly tipsy; the wine pours have been generous, and there have, after all, been six courses by now-- and the muscat. Charles has a bit more practice; five glasses of wine (along with a second pour of a stunning eight-year-old Bordeaux-style blend) haven't left him too impaired. Amelia waves the hand Charles isn't holding. "You... you're tasting things, too. Is it good for you... we're not even *talking* about what *you* liked... do you hate everything? What do you like?"

"Everything's been fantastic," he reassures her, smiling, stroking the back of her hand. "Can I be honest with you?"

"Obviously," she says, with dignity, attempting to keep from tipping over slightly.

"I'm enjoying your meal more than mine, really. Getting to share this with you is... I couldn't have asked for anything more exciting. Really."

"You just said *really* twice," Amelia says, but then the waiter's coming by with more of those delightful little milk rolls Amelia's been enjoying so much, and she squeaks delightedly. "Yes, just... two... maybe three. Thank you!"

Raven would have followed up on that, Charles knows. *You just said *really* twice. What's going on? Spill it.* He leans back and watches as Amelia nibbles at a milk roll, savoring it right along with her.

He did mean it. It's been a wonderful evening, *really*, but... Charles has the oddest sensation of being behind a panel of one-way glass, seeing into the other side from a dark, closed space, a mirrored surface separating them. Sometimes he wonders how other people know *he's* there, when they can't feel *him*. He wonders what this meal would have been like if he could have sent sensations the other way, the texture of tonight's Silken Saffron Potatoes against his tongue, the Crisp Savoy Cabbage with Caraway *Burre Monté*, the incredible difference he tasted between the first muscat and the third.

Ridiculous, though. This is the best gift any of Charles's emfriends have ever given him; wondering what it would be like if he got to give sensation as well as receive it is pointless. *You've been given a gift horse, and you're counting its teeth,* he thinks, lifting his hand to get a waiter's attention. "Excuse me-- I don't suppose there's more of this lovely 2000 *Clos de Betz*?"

"I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you."

As Amelia tucks in to her first dessert course, Charles savors his wine and goes along with Amelia for the ride. The Bordeaux-style red doesn't pair particularly well with the pears and tarragon Amelia's tasting, but he reminds himself not to quibble over details. It doesn't matter a bit, compared to everything else he's being given tonight.

* 

First thing the next morning, Amelia groans, attempting to struggle out from under the covers at first and then disappearing altogether, the blankets falling into the space she just occupied.
Charles's stomach pitches and rolls, and he struggles to get his shields into place. He can feel cold water splashing onto Amelia's face, his shields aren't coming up all at once, but her emotions are a roiling mass of misery, unhappiness, a desire to be somehow out of her own head.

Shields. He needs better shields. He presses both palms to his face and breathes in and out deeply, from the abdomen, and his shields slowly start to come back. Whatever second thoughts she's having, she deserves to have them by herself, away from him, without worrying what he'll think.

It's not as though he can blame her. Hours and hours and hours of time spent with him reading her, the way she collapsed into his bed at the townhouse after, there's no way she wouldn't be having second thoughts, anyone would have regrets, he reminds himself it's normal-- it's normal to be... to be ill...?

The toilet flushes; water runs for a while, the quick sounds of a cursory tooth-brushing. Amelia reappears, face down in the bed, moaning. She says something, but it's muffled by the pillow; Charles can't make it out.

Charles takes a chance and touches the back of her shoulder. "Is everything all right?"

Amelia tips her head up long enough to say, "I will do anything in the world if you find me two aspirin and a Gatorade," and Charles almost aches with relief. That sense of sickness and despair--that's not him, it's just a hangover. He'd have caught that sooner if it weren't for being a little worse for wear himself.

"I've got some Vitamin Water downstairs," Charles climbs out from under the covers and goes to the closet for a dressing gown. "I'll be back in a moment."

She makes a whimpering sound and nods, and for once he's actually not sorry to have shields in place so early. Whatever headache it gives him won't be nearly as ugly as a secondhand hangover.

Vitamin Water and painkillers secured, Charles stretches out next to Amelia and settles back into bed. If she does have a secondary mutation to repel jet lag, it does nothing for her hangover. Fortunately, after a little while, she's asking him for toast, and once he's brought that upstairs to her, she's able to sit up and clutch at her head a little and give him a sheepish look.

"I overdid it last night," she mumbles. "You look okay..."

"I'm fine." He shrugs. "Really, I don't get hangovers very often."

"I'll trade you," she says. She rubs at her temples. "I need a shower. A nice lukewarm shower. Okay?"

"Okay."

Just like that, she's gone again; he hears the shower start up, and fetches her up another slice of toast and another bottle of Vitamin Water while she's busy.

She comes out of the bathroom draped in a towel, using another to dry her hair, smiling despite the hangover. Charles smiles back at her.

"Next time I need to say no to the wine a little more often," she says, and Charles feels warm all over. Next time.

*
The symphony doesn't do much for Amelia; she apologizes for it, shaking her head as they walk out of Carnegie Hall. "Maybe it's just that it was the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra," she jokes. "We could try something else."

"I didn't mind," Charles protests. Amelia tucks her hand into the curve of his elbow, and Charles presses his hand over hers. "You don't have to be having great, sweeping, exciting emotions for me to enjoy an evening like this. It's still..." He still hasn't figured out a vocabulary for this; he ends up smiling at her, biting his lip. "It's still good for me, whether you're bored stiff or enjoying every last instant. Though of course I'd rather you were having a better time," he says quickly. "Next time, let's just leave if you're not having fun; we can always find something else to do."

"But I don't want to wreck your evening. I mean, you like the symphony..."

"I like you," he says, without really thinking, but Amelia nudges closer to him, resting her head on his shoulder for a moment. They come to a stop on the pavement, and she looks at him, her expression going serious again. He still has permission to read her, it would be easy to find the answers, but he waits it out, this time.

"I wasn't sure how this was going to go," she says, finally. She reaches up and sweeps a lock of hair off his forehead. "Dates like these. Knowing you were in there, reading me."

Charles can actually feel his heart sink, a tightness in his chest. "We can stop any time. Just tell me. I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

But she's shaking her head. "It's not that. It's... the opposite, really. I used to think... I thought a lot of things," she admits, looking down at her shoes. Today they're white, with little black bow ties at the toes, and black heels, matching her mod-style black and white minidress. "I thought it might feel weird. I thought I might feel like you were snooping, or like you were going to end up saying the things I wanted you to say just because you could tell that's what I wanted."

"But...?" God, he hopes there's a 'but' to all this. She looks up at him again, and she's smiling, and he reaches for that emotion, that reassurance: she's here, she's happy, she's happy with him, it's not what he's been afraid of, she's not calling it all off.

"But it's not like that at all. I feel... in tune with you. Like we're really partnered now, if that... does that make sense?"

She has to ask if he's following her train of thought; of course she doesn't know, won't know until he tells her. One-way glass all over again. Charles presses the image away and leans in to kiss her, and she kisses him back, her happiness warm and sunny against his mind.

* 

Amelia's birthday comes at the end of the month, and after everything she's shared with him, of course Charles wants to make sure it's special.

"Okay, blindfolds are a two on my checklist, and sex in a limo would be fun, but I don't know about combining them? I might get carsick," Amelia giggles, but he waits her out with a smile, and she allows the blindfold with good grace.

"We're not scening here," he says, arranging himself nearby and lifting her feet into his lap. "Though I suppose it's always an option for later... but right now, we're just here to relax." He slips off her kitten-heel pumps-- they're green on the outside, and the lining is whimsically decorated in bright pink with black pips, like a watermelon-- and begins rubbing firmly with his thumbs.
"Ohh, you know... I was thinking lights-out would be nice for today, and if you're doing that, let's start now," she sighs, melting in place. Charles grins and lets himself sense her, confident that with the feedback he's getting, he can deliver a perfect footrub.

Soon she's yawning, "Soundproofed car, lots of steady driving, massage... is my birthday present a really restful nap?"

"Feel free to take one if you like. We do have an eventual destination."

"Oh, I don't want to sleep, then. Talk to me so I don't conk out, okay? How's it going with the kids?"

"It's going well, I think," he says, shifting to work on her insteps. "Even the resistant kids are showing more interest in stretching themselves. There's still more division than we'd like to see between mutants with different types of abilities. Most of the physically mutated kids don't seem to think I have anything useful to say to them, and some of the psionic kids aren't receptive to Raven. Between the two of us we can get everyone involved and practicing, but it's dispiriting that it's an issue in the first place."

"I don't get how they're drawing those lines," she says. "Where would those kids put me? I'm not physically mutated, but my ability's definitely not psionic."

"I put that to them, actually. The physical kids said you'd be psionic, the psionic kids said no way. Seems teleporters are neither fish nor fowl nor good red herring. But the example helped, I think, with some of them. One of the main insults thrown at the psionic kids is that they're faking their abilities. You can't see psionic ability generally, and since quite a lot of them have shaky control at that age, they can't consistently prove themselves. But when some of them said teleporters would be psionic, the psionic kids pounced on it-- because you can see a teleporter's ability work. Sort of an accidental tacit admission that psionic abilities are real."

"Aren't you proof of that?"

"You'd think. But it's not really about that. The students want to connect with others their age who share their experiences, but mutants are such a heterogeneous group... I think some of the hostility is misplaced frustration. They're all so close to having so much in common, it makes the differences feel that much more painful. That, and of course no one trusts psionics, especially not at the age when teenagers are becoming self-conscious of everything they suddenly feel they have to hide."

"No one?" Amelia says, jogging her heel against his knee.

"Very few," he corrects, smiling. "A very special few."

It's a bit of a long drive to wear a blindfold the whole time; honestly, when he planned it, Charles had rather expected Amelia to sleep for part of it. But she's a good sport, throwing out topics of conversation to keep herself awake.

"Best mutation."

"If I say anything besides teleportation, are you going to kick me?"

"Yes."

"Then I plead the fifth."
She chuckles. "Okay, how about... worst breakup."

"Isn't the worst breakup always the last one?"

"Not mine," she says. "Mine was the one before the one before. Everything seemed to be going well, and then boom, somehow the subject of unbonded people came up, and she starts calling them 'unsouled'. I didn't wait around to hear her tell me I only have half of one."

His foot massage has ranged afield by now; Charles rubs her calves til he feels the hints of tension ease. "My worst was the last," he says. "Philosophical differences, nothing too surprising or upsetting, but right as it was ending, he said he'd been thinking of asking me to do one of those choose-your-bondmate procedures with him. He wasn't serious, of course, it was just a cheap parting shot. Still. Unpleasant."

"What an asshole. Plus, it's just silly," she says. "Why would you need to go through all that? With your ability you could have something almost just like the bond. At least whenever you were in the same place."

"That was never going to happen with him," says Charles. "Definitely not one of the special few."

"Good riddance," she says, as the limo begins to slow and take the long curve toward their destination.

"Ready to take off the blindfold?" he asks, though he can't resist kissing her first before reaching for the knot.

She keeps her eyes closed as the blindfold comes off. "Tell me when to look!"

Charles gives her another kiss to keep her entertained while the car parks, and eases back. "Open your eyes," he says, and rolls down the window at the same time, letting in the sounds of planes--engines booming nearby on the ground, soaring distant in the air overhead.

She looks out, and around the limo— he's laid out her change of clothes and her trainers for her, next to his own, and his parachute. Her eyes go gratifyingly big, excitement nearly leaping from her mind.

"You're coming with me?" she asks, quickly taking off her earrings and bracelet to put away safely.

He nods. "I even took a few practice dives last week."

"A few?" She grins.

"Enough to certify to jump without a tandem instructor." Seven, total. He'd known from the start that it wouldn't be the same for her, going skydiving with Charles strapped directly to her chest; he looked to see how many completed jumps it would take before he could go on his own, and he'd done all seven they'd required.

"How were they? Did you love it?"

"It was remarkable," he says, judiciously editing out the two hours previous to the first try, when he chewed through his fingernails, and the ten minutes after each bloody jump that he spent trying not to be ill.

"I can't wait," she squeals, throwing her arms around him.
"Everyone jumping today knows to expect us," he says, "so we can teleport directly back to the plane. For liability reasons we can't jump outside the drop zone but otherwise, they're going to let us do as we like. You just need to sign a waiver promising not to sue them. I have done already."

"Gimme gimme gimme," Amelia demands the pen from the nonplussed instructor, and she signs with a flourish while Charles goes over all his buckles and straps yet again. If all goes remotely well, he won't need the parachute, but better safe.

He hears the tinny fake snap of a digital camera, and turns a long-suffering look on Amelia.

"I have to document this for posterity!" she says before he can even open his mouth to complain. "Besides, I think you look great."

"I've worn better harnesses," says Charles.

"But you're wearing this one for me," Amelia grins. "Don't worry. I'll make sure you don't need it."

It's not as if Charles doesn't know how her ability works; he's seen her use it, felt her use it on him hundreds of times by now. He knows she negates momentum with her power. He knows she can reconstitute them standing instead of sitting, lying down instead of standing up. When it comes to her ability, and her willingness to use it to protect the both of them, he trusts her implicitly.

All the same-- trusting her enough not to use the device that he's relied on all seven previous times as a lifesaving piece of equipment... it's a leap in several different senses. But she's been showing him extraordinary trust. He wants to do the same for her.

"It's going to be fine!" Amelia shouts. The plane is so loud he can hardly hear her, even though she's yelling at the top of her lungs. "I promise, you can keep an eye on your altimeter the whole time, I'll get us out of there before you're supposed to pull the chute, and if I don't, you can pull it yourself!"

Charles nods several times, but he's still staring out the window, sweating. He holds onto Amelia's excitement, her confidence-- she's done this hundreds of times before. She knows how to do it. She's teleported him countless times and has never once had even an inkling of a problem doing so. They don't even have to be touching. If she can see him, she can teleport him.

"What if--" he starts, but no; there are no what ifs, not really. There's a parachute with an automatic activation device; if Charles didn't pull his ripcord, it would deploy once they reached the target altitude. On top of that, there's a backup chute; it has an automatic activation device, too. But of course, first and foremost there's Amelia, who'll mist them out of the air and land them safely on the ground, as many times as they can both bear to jump.

There are safeguards on safeguards, Charles knows. This really won't go wrong for them. Only one jump out of every 150,000 results in an injury, often minor injuries sustained in landing, Charles reminds himself, wishing that statistic seemed larger than it does; his mutation already makes him one in millions, let alone 150,000.

According to all reason and logic, there's no good reason for him to be afraid. It doesn't really help. It didn't help on the seven previous jumps, and it isn't going to be much better now. But Amelia loves this, and she's so happy, so excited-- feeling her excitement actually does help, although his own stomach's still in knots.
"Charles!" Amelia yells. "Do you want a freefall safeword?"

"What's that?" It isn't terminology he's heard before; he doesn't recall it in any of the safety lectures he had to sit through while he was training.

"You tell me to get us out of there early, and I will!" She gestures at the plane. "Maybe we just do a short jump and port back, we don't have to go anywhere near the ground. Safeword if you need to be ported out early!"

Charles looks down at his hands, flexes his fingers. The usual hand signals are going to be hard to make in these gloves, let alone while he's falling at terminal velocity. He's not sure he's going to be able to make any obvious gestures, especially if he's meant to keep his arms extended. Seeing a hand or arm gesture might be difficult, too; even though they have goggles, the wind may end up being a problem. "How do I signal you?"

Amelia grabs Charles's hand. "Like this," she says, drawing his hand up to her temple.

Charles frowns at her. "Touch doesn't seem advisable-- I might just end up hitting you in the head!"

"No, like--" She points emphatically at her forehead, and then taps his. "Like this. Thought-to-thought!"

For a few seconds, all he can do is stare at her in shock. Of all the times he's thought they might come to this point, he never imagined it like this: out of convenience and necessity, offered easily, out of the blue. "I've never done that with you before," he says. "I don't want to startle you--"

"Do it now. Do it now, and I'll know how it feels, and I won't be surprised if you have to do it in the air."

It takes him a moment more to gather himself and touch his temple-- habit, even when he can't feel his fingers through the gloves. «I'm here. I--» He's not sure what he was going to say, why the words that he's missing feel as if they're hanging just beyond his reach, frustratingly silent, like an unstruck bell.

He shakes it off. «Will this work? Do red and yellow come through for you clearly enough?»

Amelia's staring at him. Her mood is still bright, but there's a sense of wrongfooted surprise that worries him.

"We don't have to," he starts, but she tugs him close and kisses him.

"No way. I got red and yellow out of that just fine," she says. "Let's use those."

When they reach the right altitude, the skydiving instructor opens up the door and counts them off. Amelia squeezes Charles, then gives him a firm handshake, glove and all. Charles turns to the instructor and pastes as much of a smile as he can manage onto his face.

They go together, and the jump takes Charles's breath away-- and not in the same way it's doing for Amelia. He knows it's not the air rushing past him, he can breathe up here, has breathed normally for the entirety of seven complete jumps, but that sensation of tightness in his chest, the pounding rush of adrenaline, makes him dizzy for the first several seconds of the fall.

There's so much noise, and trying to breathe has left his mouth open to the wind. His mouth feels dry, his throat tight-- thank God for non-verbal safewords, because he could never get words out over this sound. A hundred hair dryers going off at once couldn't be louder; this is a sound that
industrial fans could only hope to achieve.

More and more, further and further, faster and faster-- Charles knows terminal velocity for a human with eir arms and legs spread out this way is roughly 120 miles per hour, far faster than he even likes to drive. He's trying not to think of it, and as he pushes the thought away, he concentrates on Amelia, holding on to him, spinning around and around with him, her mouth shaping an "O" as she whoops all the way down. He can barely hear it over the wind.

But she's delighted, thrilled and happy, her reaction to the rush of air and force of wind so different from his own. She's looking around at the view, looking at Charles, her feelings warm and vibrant. Charles may have room for doubt, but looking at her, feeling her, he also knows why he's doing this. He won't let himself forget that.

The altimeter's number drops and drops, and Charles's eyes end up practically glued to the display. Eight thousand feet. Seventy-five hundred. Seven thousand feet. Sixty-five hundred. They're supposed to deploy their parachutes at no less than five thousand feet, and Charles has had to restrain himself from pulling the cord early every time. But with Amelia here... he grips her arms tightly. Six thousand feet. «Yellow,» he thinks at her.

She nods, and they mist out, and land easily on the ground, standing side-by-side. Charles takes a huge gulp of air, his heart still pounding, his chest aching. Amelia lets him take her hands, and he leans on her, breathing deeply. His head throbs, but Amelia-- she's still happy and thrilled, and proud. Of him? He peeks a little more carefully at that-- yes, of him, proud of him for jumping with her, for trusting her to teleport them to safety. And beneath that, something more... something about the safeword, but he's careful not to dig further, no matter how curious he is to find out exactly what that means.

"Do you want to go again?" Amelia asks. Charles licks his dry lips and nods, and Amelia throws her arms around him, hugging him tightly. "Best birthday ever," she laughs. "Here we go."

* 

Many, many... many jumps later, Charles is wobbly on his feet, and Amelia is flushed with excitement and her mind is dizzy with delight. Still, when Charles checks his watch and finds that it's nearly four in the afternoon, he shakes his head when Amelia asks if he's ready for another jump.

"I had somewhere else in mind for you to take us," he says.

Amelia laughs. "Somewhere better than this? I don't believe it."

He just gives her a little smile and says, "Shall we find out?"

They return the rental equipment to the front office, and when Amelia slips both hands into Charles's and asks, "Where to?" he opens his mouth to tell her. But suddenly she shakes her head and says, "Wait. I want to..." She takes one of her hands from his and strokes his temple, and Charles swallows hard. He's barely sent her a dozen words, but that touch feels warm, and light, like acceptance-- even if tentative-- and he's afraid to move, for fear of losing it. "I want you to tell me this way."

He holds his breath, and sends the words, and Amelia's expression and emotions shift into a delighted, surprised swirl. "Okay," she says, "I don't know what you've got out there, but..."

They mist out, and a moment later they're appearing on Howland Island. Amelia doesn't even have
time to look around before she hears a pair of voices calling out, "Surprise!"

She turns, and standing at the base of the Earhart Light are the two mutants Charles contacted in order to help with this part of the plan-- Kurt Wagner and Silhouette Chord. Kurt's holding a three-tiered birthday cake, the sort known as a "topsy-turvy" cake among bakers; it's decorated in pink and yellow, with stripes at the base layer, zigzags along the middle layer, and polka dots on the top layer. It has a candle in the top layer, but due to the angle that tier's set at, it points more to the side than straight up. Silhouette moves over and rests one crutch against her side while she tugs a lighter out of her pocket, and she sets the candle alight anyway.

But Amelia's hardly looking at either of them. Instead, she's looking up at the Earhart Light, which is far from being the crumbled, red-stained structure it was when they were last here. The sandstone's been restored, or in some cases replaced, and the black bands painted around it are new and fresh. The top of it's been painted black, too, a sharp contrast to the grass and rocks that make up the ground here, and between the paint and the shape of it, Charles knows it can be seen from miles away, by sea and by air.

There's a sizable new plaque above the "doorway" on the light, not that the structure was ever intended to be inhabited. It's shiny now, though the bronze won't stay that way forever, not without maintenance. It reads "EARHART LIGHT", just as it did when the first sign was placed here.

Amelia has both hands to her face, covering her mouth as she gasps. "Charles," she gets out, her eyes filling. "How did you ever--"

"With considerable generous help from Mr. Wagner and Ms. Chord," Charles says, smiling. "And some mutant-friendly construction crews. And a metalsmith in Pittsburgh, of all places; I had to look around for someone who could make a plaque that size online. Four referrals before someone pointed me in the right direction. Kurt picked up the plaque just yesterday."

Amelia dashes over and throws her arms around Silhouette, hugging Kurt more carefully around the cake. "I hope you are planning to blow this out before it drips wax everywhere," Kurt teases. "Should we sing?"

They do; Amelia can't decide where to look, the island or the tower or the plaque or the cake or Charles. She kisses Sil's cheek and then Kurt's before blowing out the candle, and when she turns to Charles, she gives him a long, soft, happy kiss, her overwhelmed emotions nearly bringing up tears for him, too.

She holds him close, and there's a soft, almost-unformed brush against his thoughts. He focuses to catch it as best he can.

«Thank you,» she's trying to send. «Just... thank you.»

"Happy birthday," he whispers back to her. «You're very, very welcome.»

*  

**June 2008**

A few days after Amelia's birthday, she's over at the townhouse for breakfast. He's still in a good mood from how well the birthday surprises went, or perhaps he's just grateful that he hasn't had to leave the ground at all in over seventy-two hours, but Amelia's a bit more subdued. It's lights-on for now, so he'll have to wait and see what's going on with her. She's only picking at her English muffin, though, tearing it into little pieces.
"Charles... if I wanted to ask you for something really big..."

"Bigger than a lighthouse?" Charles smiles.

Amelia laughs, but only for a moment. "I was just thinking about talking to you."

"Good timing. My classes start again in a few weeks, I need to limber up for all those lectures," Charles jokes. "What is it you'd like to talk about?" Too late, he realizes that thinking about talking is one of those relationship buzzwords, the sort of thing that frequently means something dire, but Amelia's already shaking her head. Nothing to do but hold on and stay the course now.

"It's not so much the what as the how." Amelia takes a deep breath and puts the remnants of her English muffin down, pushing her plate away. "We talked about my soulmate, a little. What I used to feel from him."

Charles takes a last fortifying sip of tea and straightens, meeting her eyes. "Yes?"

"I didn't tell you what it was like near the end. Before I stopped feeling him." She twists her fingers together, picking at a chip in her nail varnish. "I got words."

For several moments, Charles is entirely at a loss. "Words?"

"It wasn't anything that made any sense. It was just... one day, I was just finishing up a job, and I ported home, and I heard 'rainbow.' And I knew it wasn't me, and there was no one in the apartment... I felt it through the bond, and I had this tingling," she gestures toward the back of her head. "So I tried to send back a word, too." She smiles a little. "My name. 'Amelia.' Just sending that, as clear and strong as I could."

"And after that?"

"Once in a while, something here or there. Once he sent this phrase I didn't make any sense of until months later. I mean, I'd explored a lot, but I'd never heard of a place called Snoqualmie, I didn't even know how to spell it. But he sent 'Snoqualmie Falls' once. As soon as I figured it out, I went right there. I hung around the area for weeks. I asked around, but they get tons of tourists, no one could tell me anything. I never saw him."

At that, Charles does reach out, taking her hand in his. "I'm sorry."

"So when we were skydiving-- when you sent 'red' and 'yellow' like you did... you know, I always figured you could do it. Not just send words," she says, already waving him off, "but... make somebody feel like the soulbond was there. If you wanted to. When we were together."

And there it is: not quite asked-for, but in the air between them.

"Bigger than a lighthouse," Charles says, sitting back. "Definitely bigger than a lighthouse."

"Maybe I shouldn't have said anything--" Amelia goes quiet for a second, but that sort of restraint isn't really like her; it doesn't surprise Charles when she sits forward, both hands on the table. "But I liked it, when you were talking to me. It really reminded me of him. But in a good way. Something that could... something that could be about the future instead of the past. Does that make sense?"

"I..." Charles bites his lip, thinking. "No one's ever... I've never really considered it. I've never used telepathy that way before."
"I think," Amelia says, standing up and coming around the table, sliding her hands onto Charles's shoulders, "I think it's the kind of thing that only somebody who's really close to you would ever even think about. But I'm just saying, I'm thinking about it these days. I'm thinking about it a lot. I think we could try it. I think it could be worth it." She leans down and kisses the top of his head, and just at that moment, her cell phone starts beeping. "Damn. Hang on."

She doesn't even walk around the other side of the table to her purse, she just mists over. Charles has seen her do it countless times, and he never tires of it. He's admired her mutation since the first day they met. Maybe it's possible that she's come to feel the same way.

The fact that she wanted this conversation to happen without giving him an all-clear to read her emotions, though... it leaves his shoulders wound up tight and tense. Now, of all times, it would have been helpful to know how she feels about this.

He has to wonder how uneasy it makes her to suggest this. Neither of them are traditional, but they've both grown up saturated by the idea that the bond is a sacred relationship.

Desperate people resort to things like choose-your-bondmate techniques knowing that the resulting bond will never be considered true, if there's anything there at all; none of those charlatans ever reveal their processes, none of them are published or peer reviewed, it sounds like so much snake oil to Charles. But people pay for the mirage because the bond is just that prized and vital.

From all sides comes the chorus that no one could possibly be happy without it. And that same chorus of voices insists that any approximation or simulacrum of the bond amounts to blasphemy.

After years of studying the genetic basis of the bond, Charles thinks of himself as having a wholly material, empirical view. He hasn't used the terms soul bond or soulmate habit habitually for years.

Still, it's hard to forget that as a schoolboy, he was called an abomination because he's capable of doing exactly what Amelia's proposing.

Amelia checks her cell phone and silences it, but she's also going pale. "Mining accident," she says. "I need to--"

"Of course, go," Charles says, standing up. "Be safe. Good luck."

"Thank you. I'll call you as soon as I can." She rushes over to him, kisses his cheek. "Think about it, though. Please."

"I will," he promises, and then she's gone.

*

She's gone for two days, and Charles spends every spare moment glued to the news reports as they come in. It seems as though something like this should be so easy, a matter of removing workers all at once, or one at a time if need be. Instead, the scientists on the news stations talk about air displacement, structural integrity, the danger of the mine collapsing or exploding if the contents are shifted too suddenly or violently. The miners are in several different sections, and Charles knows that's a strain on Amelia's abilities; she could probably only save one section at a time. And that would put the rest of them in jeopardy. It has to be done this way, slow and steady. It's still nervewracking for everyone, Charles very much included.

At first he's switching between different news stations, but when one of them shifts its focus from mutant efforts in the rescue to whether mutants might actually have caused the original disaster in order to get free positive publicity, Charles rolls his eyes. He starts mentally composing an open
letter to the news corporation and the so-called scientists they chose for the round table discussion- but fortunately the discussion's cut off abruptly, because the last miner's being brought safely out now.

The camera focuses on him, and on the mutant who brought him out. Amelia looks tired, but steady; she helps the miner onto a gurney and pats his shoulder as the paramedics get to work. As she turns away, a reporter comes up to her, shoving a microphone into her face.

"I'm Carrie Norman with FBN," she says. "Did you have any second thoughts about risking your life to save humans?"

Amelia shakes her head. "Absolutely not. The men down there were in trouble. I could help. That's all I needed to know."

"Is there any truth to the allegations that mutant terrorists such as the MLO may have caused this disaster in the first place?"

Even Charles can see Amelia's face freeze in shock. "I can't-- I don't see what-- of course there's not," she stumbles through. "Look, I've been at this for thirty-six hours, maybe you could give me a chance to wash up before accusing me of being a saboteur instead of a--"

They both turn; there's something happening out of frame. The last worker out of the mine, still on his gurney, is gesturing at the reporter-- a gesture that's being blurred out by the station. Charles can see that he's talking, shouting, but none of the words are audible. They're making Amelia smile, though, and he hears it clearly when she says, "Thank you." To the reporter, she adds, "I need to check in with HQ. Have fun with your hate-mongering."

It's not the most politic response, but Charles can't blame her. He sends her a quick text message: [Saw you on FBN, and other stations. I'm so proud of you.]

He doesn't get a response back-- no surprise, he doubts she's carrying her phone right now-- but when she turns up in the wee hours of the morning, porting right into his bedroom, she tells him, "Thank you," and she tells him, "lights out," and she falls asleep, right there on his shoulder.

* 

Over a bottle of wine, at home, days later, Charles takes Amelia's hand and says, "I think I'm ready."

Amelia squeezes his hand; the smile she gives him is absolutely gorgeous. It's been a lights-out evening, and behind her smile, he can sense excitement, relief, a little nervousness. But not doubt, and no sense that she wants to take the suggestion back. If they can have that sort of closeness, she wants it. It's a little heady.

"How do you think we should do it?" she asks, glancing around the living room. "Here, or...?"

"My room, I think-- for privacy, not," he clears his throat, "for anything else... necessarily..."

She smiles at him, and the mood behind it is sweet, a little coy. "Well, who knows," she murmurs, her fingertip toying with the rim of her wineglass. "If it works-- if it really works-- we might not want to go anywhere for three days or so. So the bedroom might be handy."

"I don't think I'm going to be able to induce anything quite like the seeker rush," Charles says, but he's smiling anyway, drawing his lower lip between his teeth as he does. "Let's start small, all right? I remember..." He takes a slow, unsteady breath. "I remember what it felt like to share
emotions with my bondmate. I think I can do that, at least."

"Okay." Amelia stands up, wineglass still in hand, and tugs Charles gently to his feet. "Come on upstairs. Maybe we finish off our wine, and then... try it."

She ends up stopping after one glass, though Charles has two. "I just want to be sure I can feel everything," she says, tucking her legs underneath her as she settles back against the pillows. "I'm a little nervous."

"I can feel that," Charles admits. "And thank you. Thank you for sharing that with me."

"I didn't know if you'd want it. I mean, would it be better if I could just be one hundred percent sure...?"

"I don't know if anyone's ever one hundred percent sure about anything, least of all something like this," Charles murmurs. Amelia smiles, reaching out for his hand again. Charles twines their fingers together and scoots a little closer. "May I touch your temple? It'd be easier for me."

"My temple? Or my joining spot? I could put my hair up..."

"That might be a bit distracting, this early on. For both of us," Charles says. "Just your temple for now, I think."

"Okay. Will you be sending thoughts?"

"I think so. Just to ensure we're hearing each other." Charles licks his lips; Amelia's not the only one who's nervous. "If you want me to stop at any point, just tell me."

"I will. I promise. But if I'm nervous-- don't take that as a sign that I want you to stop, okay? I'll say 'red' if I want you to stop. I'll say it out loud."

Charles nods. "Thank you."

Amelia closes her eyes. "I'm ready whenever you are."

It seems so soon, somehow-- as though they haven't spent the whole night planning for this, as though this hasn't been on both their minds for days. But they won't get any further if Charles doesn't take the initiative, and so Charles reaches forward, his first two fingers resting gently against her temple.

He starts with only the most superficial of connections, the sort of thing that would drift apart easily if one or the other of them became distracted. But his mind is there, touching hers, and suddenly she seems so much more real to him-- she's beautiful, perfectly in focus, not just three-dimensional but more. He's tried to explain this to people so many times, the way it feels to him when he's blocking everyone else out-- he can see them, sense them, but it's like being a sighted person and talking to someone in silhouette, or being a hearing person who's only getting video signal and not audio. Even at the usual level he maintains socially, shielding against thoughts but taking in moods, it still feels as if he's averting his eyes from everyone he interacts with, never looking directly at anyone.

Amelia's the first person who's been fully real in every dimension for him for a very long time. He smiles-- he can't help it-- and he feels her smile coming through in return.

«Is that you?» she sends. Her words are still soft, much more like muscle memory, words that just aren't being spoken aloud, but he strokes her temple and leans forward, orienting a little more
firmly toward her.

«It's me,» Charles answers. «Can I show you how to project? Would you like to learn?»

Amelia nods with enthusiasm, and scoots a little closer to Charles on the bed. Charles moves his fingertips to the center of her forehead. «Imagine your words just here. Coming across my fingers like the sound through a telephone line.»

«Like this?» Amelia asks. Her thoughts are a little louder now. «I don't know what to say... what should I say?»

«Anything you want,» Charles thinks, taking a deep breath. «Anything you want to think of.»

«I was so happy when you took me skydiving,» she thinks. Her words are coming through more and more clearly. «You were so brave. I love that about you.»

«Thank you,» Charles thinks. «Thank you for sharing that with me.»

«I can't think of anything... okay, what about breakfast this morning? I had oatmeal with raisins in it. And cookies, and a banana... you know how I eat when I'm nervous... What did you have?»

Charles almost laughs, it's such a mundane to think about-- but it means so much to hear it this way. He leans closer and kisses her forehead. «I skipped breakfast. I just had tea,» he admits. «But I went to Alfonso's and had rigatoni for lunch. I'll have to take you there sometime, it's lovely.»

«Am I doing okay? You can hear me, right? I think you can hear me...?» She seems a little worried now; Charles squeezes her hand and nods. «You're sure? You can hear me?»

«Of course,» Charles thinks. «You're doing beautifully.»

«Okay. Can we... can we do it now? I'm ready.» Part of her doesn't think she is, but that part doesn't think she'll ever be ready. Reservations are only natural; Charles has more than a few himself. He takes another slow breath. He was anxious about skydiving as well, and that went well. There's so much to share here, this could be so good. He tries on a smile, and Amelia smiles back tentatively, «I mean... I'm ready if you are.»

"Could you say it out loud?" Charles whispers. "Are you sure about this?"

Amelia has to clear her throat to get words out, but she's nodding. "I'm sure," she whispers back. "Please? I want to feel you that way, please..."

It isn't easy for him, thinking back to what his bondmate felt like. But he's never forgotten it, never wanted to. His emotions were so rich, so full-- more than anyone else's, more than anything else Charles has ever experienced. Sometimes he felt as if he could sense every little nuance of his bondmate's emotions, the love he'd send over and over, every day... sometimes it was confusing, anger that Charles could never understand, could only counter with reassurance and calm. But it always came back to pride and strength and love, and he remembers the way those emotions made him feel safe, encouraged, cherished.

He can't send Amelia all of that-- even now, even eight years after his bondmate tore away from him and left him on his own, he can't just give someone else the sort of love he felt for his bondmate. Apart from everything else, he'll never be sixteen again, and the purity of that teenage emotion isn't something he'd be able to feel for anyone else. Maybe not even his bondmate, if somehow they met again.
What he can give her, though, he does: emotions centered around their joining spots, affection and trust, the growing sense of fondness and devotion he's felt for her as they've gotten to know each other. He opens up, concentrating on making certain the connection can go both ways, that he can feel her as well as she's feeling him.

Her emotions are all over the place at first, but he can understand that. It's been a long time for her, just as it's been a long time for him. He's better braced for it, since he takes in moods from the people around him, and gets whispers of emotions from passers-by often as well, slipping past his shields now and then. But her emotions still feel a little strange coming through this way. It's not like reading her; that connection's deeper, almost more invasive. It doesn't feel as natural as his bondmate did, but he knew it wouldn't. He keeps sending encouragement through their new connection, tenderness, all the sentiments he's tried to express through words and gifts and touch. «It's me. I'm here...»

«I can't feel you,» she sends, worried. «Please, just try a little harder. Please. I'm here, I'm listening... please...»

Charles slips his hand around to the back of her neck, and Amelia moves under his fingers, as if trying to get his hand to soul's-home. He strokes up, just a fraction of an inch more, and she goes still and steady under his fingertips.

The connection strengthens, and he keeps going, sending more tenderness and affection to her. «I'm here,» he thinks. «Can you feel me?»

Her emotions are still moving and changing, but they're brighter now. He can't focus on them head-on; it would be like looking into the sun. «I'm here,» he tries again. «Amelia, I'm here, do you feel me?»

Amelia's beginning to settle on a single emotion, maybe something she can send to him. As it presses through their connection, though, it's not what he expected. Confusion. Everything's coalescing now, confusion quickly swallowing up hope and affection until they're no more than tiny glimmers. The confusion gives way to surprise, and then there's a sudden sensation of a dam bursting, disappointment, a wrenching sense that something's wrong. Something doesn't belong. It's only barely in words at first, but as the connection stays strong, Amelia's pulling away from it, almost repelled by it. Not you not this I didn't want this it was supposed to be different where are you --

Charles jerks out of her mind so quickly they both gasp, his hand falling away from soul's-home, and Amelia reaches for him, shaking, her fingers digging into his shoulders. She's struggling for words; Charles hesitates-- not you-- but quickly puts his arms around her and holds on.

"Are you..." She pulls back, looking at him, the confusion he felt in her mind written all over her face now, so clearly even he can read it. He opens just enough to feel what she's feeling, and all he gets is that sense of wrongness, the horror of not knowing who she's looking at anymore. Not you, not this... She touches his face, his mouth, still trying to form words. "Charles...?"

"I'm here," Charles tries again. "It's all right, you're safe now, I promise. I stopped--"

She sniffs and seems to pull herself together a little. "It's... it wasn't... it wasn't you," she tries, finally, though her words are still nearly lost amid the sobs. "It wasn't you. You didn't do anything wrong, it wasn't you..."

Charles tries desperately to find comfort in that, but she breaks down again, hands twisted into the fabric of his shirt. "It wasn't you," she sobs. "It wasn't you," entirely different, desperate.
What can he say? I'm sorry doesn't seem as if it could possibly mean enough. She sobs against his
shoulder, soaking through his shirt almost at once. "It wasn't you," she gets out, and then, "I
couldn't feel you anymore. I was looking, I was trying to find you, but you were gone, you were
gone--"

"You were--" he struggles with it, "you were afraid, I didn't want to hurt you--"

"Don't leave me," she says, clutching at his shirt. "Please don't leave me again, I love you-- oh,
God, I missed you so much--"

Charles's stomach flips over, and he holds her as closely as he can, because what else could he
possibly do? He rocks her gently, back and forth, letting her cry herself out against his shoulder, but
she's not holding onto him.

His ability can simulate a bond between them, but it was a mistake to try. All that disappointment,
the fear, what he thought was revulsion...

Amelia cares for him. He's never doubted that. But it doesn't matter. He's not the man she lost. It's
not him. He's not the right person to share this kind of closeness, not with her, not with anybody.
*

She cries herself to sleep, and he goes to the bathroom to wash up and pour her a glass of water--
she'll want it when she wakes. He changes clothes while he's at it, shrugging into one of his oldest
cardigans. It's much too big for him, but he needs the comfort.

He doesn't know whether to climb back into bed or not. He wouldn't blame her for needing space,
but he also remembers her saying don't leave me again...

Which she wasn't saying to him. He felt that much at the end, the way her memories took over. He
curls up in the overstuffed armchair beside the bed, closing his eyes and trying to feel something,
anything, through the dead end of his bond.

«I miss you so much. Where are you? What happened? Please...»

Amelia shifts, and Charles jerks his hands away from his temples, strengthens his shields. He's not
tired enough to be broadcasting without intent, but her reaction before... confusion, disappointment,
that sense of something being terribly, terribly wrong...

It was different with his bondmate, but he remembers that horrible sense of dread and terror so
clearly. That, and being shoved away. Pushed out, as he tried to send comfort and protection. The
harder he tried to tell his bondmate to stay, that he'd help, that he'd be there... the further away he
felt, until there was nothing, not the least sign of him. And he's still gone, all these years later.
Maybe it isn't only Amelia; maybe at the height of his ability, his bondmate felt him, really felt
him. And then he was gone.

Charles tucks his face against the back of the chair, and tries to sleep.
*

Amelia wakes him with a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Charles?"

Shields. It's the first thing he thinks when he wakes up, and it means he's snapping upright, shoving
them rudely into place, grimacing at the effort. When he opens his eyes, hers are red-rimmed. She
flinches when their eyes meet and quickly looks away.
"So I'm going home, but I wanted to tell you. So you wouldn't worry."

He squeezes her hand, but only for an instant; they're both pulling back as soon as the gesture's been made. "Thank you for that. I appreciate it."

"Yeah. I... yeah." She blows out a breath. "I'm sorry--"

He's trampling all over her apology as fast as she makes it; not the most gracious thing in the world, but he can't not respond. "It was my fault. I'm sorry, too."

"Maybe we can... maybe we can get together next week? There was that art show I wanted to see. If you're still up for that."

"All right." Charles nods. "That would be-- fine."

"I'll call you. We'll figure it out."

Nodding, more nodding, Charles just keeps nodding; what else is there to say?

"Okay. Good night," she says, and then she's gone. Charles exhales with relief, his whole body sinking back into the armchair. He can afford to relax his shields now, and it feels-- nothing really feels good right now, but it feels better than it did.

There's a good half-bottle of wine going to waste on the bedside table. Charles pours himself a glass before stumbling off to the bathroom, groping in the medicine cabinet for a double dose of Psilavon. It's not meant to be taken with alcohol, but even he doesn't have to follow the damned rules every time. He swallows both pills and heads back for the bedroom, nursing his wine slowly as the painkiller kicks in. It doesn't help enough, but it's something to get him by, at least for now.

* 

Amelia's art show is scheduled for Thursday. On Tuesday, she texts him to cancel. Charles comes up from the daze of his hangover for long enough to be grateful, and he texts her back with, [That's fine. We'll meet up another time.]

But he doesn't call her, not even when he sobers up, not when he's starting to feel recovered from that night. He texts her once-- [We should think about dinner sometime this week]-- but she doesn't text back, and she doesn't call, either.

Two weeks after that awful night, Charles stares down at his phone. It turns out that being grateful the phone isn't ringing feels an awful lot like cowardice, and he grits his teeth and actually dials her number.

She picks up with a hesitant, "Hello?"

"It's Charles," he says, unnecessary in this day and age of cell phones and caller ID, but he's stalling and he knows it. "We should talk."

"I thought so, too. Is now okay?"

"Now would be fine."

"Are you home?"

"Yes."
"Is it okay if we go lights-on for this?"

Charles takes a breath and holds it. He doesn't know why he expected anything different. "Of course."

"Okay." The phone signal cuts out; moments later, Amelia mists into the room.

The wince they both give is in sync, at least. They're together on that.

"I kept expecting the phone to ring," Amelia admits. "I turned off the ringer for most of last week."

It hasn't been very different for Charles, but that still stings. "I wasn't really looking to be in touch, either. Amelia..."

"I shouldn't have asked. I should never have asked you for that, it was-- wrong. It was just wrong of me. I'm sorry."

Every word hurts. I wish I'd never known you that way. I wish I'd never felt you like that. I wish I could take back being that close to you, even for those few seconds... "Oh," is all Charles can get out. "I'm sorry, too."

"I'm... I don't know how to do this." Amelia covers her face with both hands. Charles recognizes regret and grief, they're too obvious to miss, but he doesn't feel them from her. He's blocking so hard that even his own emotions are muted; this all feels like watching a film, light and shadow, no substance. Like it's happening to someone else. "I love you. I just... I don't know if I can..."

"I understand." Charles swallows. Not you, not this. "I don't know if I can, either."

She straightens a little, nodding. "I'd... like to think we could still be friends," she says. "Maybe if we take it slow. Over email."

"Like we started," he says. It still feels like something that someone else would say, something coming from far away. "Full circle."

He offers her a handshake-- it feels like the right thing to do, somehow, if they're coming full circle. But this time she doesn't bring him into a hug. She takes his hand, and she shakes it, and they agree on a time for her to mist by and pick up her things; he knows when they agree on Sunday afternoon that he'll make sure to be out of the townhouse.

"Take care," he says, and he means it.

She nods at him, throat working for a few seconds. When she tells him, "You, too," her voice is hoarse.

And then she's gone.

When Raven gets home in the evening, he's tucked under a blanket on the couch, papers scattered around him, the first chapter of his manuscript-- that wretched book he was fool enough to tell everyone he planned to write-- marked all over with red ink. He meant to tidy everything up when he stopped, but time got away from him.

Charles throws off the blanket and starts shuffling his papers into a rough stack.

"So?" Raven asks uncertainly.

"So," he answers. "How did it go today? Has Laurie made any progress?"
She eyes him, but she answers, "Still putting out pheromones. She's doing better at keeping on an even keel with her moods, but she's a sixteen-year-old, she's *supposed* to have big dramatic feelings sometimes. Everyone in class was antsy today because she's nervous. The school's starting to pressure her to go on Psychitrex."

Charles grimaces. "She's only had a few months to try to get a grip on it herself, and they're chucking pills at her already?"

"I put my two cents in against it, for whatever that's worth. I hate to ask right now, but do you think you could come out to my Thursday schools too until your classes start up again?"

"This is the best time to ask," he says. "I could use something to occupy me, and the book clearly isn't doing the job. Only too glad to tag along, really."

Raven sits next to him and nudges his shoulder with hers. "I didn't think I was going to need help with Laurie. Her dad has the same ability as her, he could teach her. But it seems like her parents' marriage is pretty stressed right now, and she's worried about adding to it, since a lot of the fights revolve around her mom making an issue out of her dad's ability-- the mom's human, of course."

"Of course? It's not as if mutants universally accept each others' abilities either," says Charles. "That's why you asked me to start coming round with you in the first place."

"Was that...?" Raven makes a frustrated noise. "You know you can talk to me about that whole thing if you need to, right?"

"The problem there was more along the lines of an excess of acceptance," Charles mutters. "Right up til we hit the wall. Nothing much to say."

"Have you ever thought about taking Psychitrex?"

Charles looks away, his face going hot.

"No! Charles! Look at me," she shakes his shoulder til he takes a breath and does: Raven's beautiful, familiar face, patterned blue, golden eyes, frustrated and serious. "I'm asking because I'm worried, okay? Do you seriously not hear the tone there at all? Because FYI, that's kind of a 'do I need to lock up the sharp things and sleeping pills' tone. I worry you're going to choose something like that. You're so set on living on baseline terms--"

"What? In what sense?"

"In every sense! You're all about reassuring humans what a good mutant you are, asking permission to use it and making a big deal out of your ethics..."

"You can call that selfishness just as easily," he says. "Better than feeling all that anxiety coming at me."

"You shouldn't have to ask permission to be yourself," says Raven. "I've been thinking about this a lot, and you know, when it's just you and me--"

He holds up a hand. "Red."

"What?"

This conversation is beginning to feel as surreal to him as that last talk with Amelia. Not because shielding is making him feel far away from it all. The blind spot he keeps for Raven is as practiced
and comfortable as a callus.

He feels very much here, in fact. Completely present, all too aware of the space he's occupying and the borders of his skin. Like the air is sizzling with static everywhere it's touching him.

"I would like," he says, "to have at least one relationship where it's not an issue."

"I never should've asked you for that," Raven says. "It was childish. Because I actually was, you know, a child when I had you promise. But when you moved in here, we should've talked about it. I should be able to walk around my own house in whatever I want to wear even if it's nothing. You should be able to feel whatever you'd naturally feel."

"You're my oldest friend," says Charles. "Out of everyone I've known, all the way back to and including my mother, you still... you're still in my life. Let's stick with what's working."

"Charles..."

"Could we do that, please," he says.

"Okay," Raven agrees finally, and she hugs him a little awkwardly.

He's glad he can't sense anything from her or glean it from her body language, whatever she's feeling: what might be regret, or might be relief. Maybe sometimes it's better not to know.
Chapter Summary

Erik is all packed up and ready to head to New York, but he takes a detour to offer Jason moral support at his first big premiere. It's a bigger detour than he expected it to be.

Jason's rushing through Erik's apartment, trying to pull things together. It's easier than it usually is; the apartment's mostly empty, everything packed up in boxes. Almost everything, anyway; Erik's lease isn't up until the end of July, and he's been waiting for Jason to have some free time-- more than just the two days he was able to spare for a visit-- so they can pack Erik up, drive from Pittsburgh to New York together, and settle in to Jason's apartment while they go looking for something with more space.

It might not happen, though. The early reviews for Jason's new movie have all had good things to say about his role, minor though it is. He wasn't expecting to be attending all the various premieres, but now his publicist is saying it's a good idea. That could very well take up most of the month; Erik may have to do the drive himself, with Jason meeting him in New York once he gets there.

But that's far enough ahead Erik's not worried about it just yet. He lounges on his bed, watching Jason's somewhat over-the-top agitation with mild amusement. "One of these days you're going to figure out how to get packed in advance," he says. "Relax. You still have four hours before you need to leave for the airport."

"You say four hours, but you're only leaving me an hour to get there," Jason answers tersely. As if Erik lives an hour away from the airport. "I should have been done with this last night. Whose fucking great idea was it to spend the night playing air hockey and trying to get laid?"

"Yours," Erik grins. Jason just glares at him. "You did get laid. Did you get her number?"

"Are you kidding me, I don't have time to date," Jason says, heading back to the closet and rummaging around for ties. "What am I doing, seriously, what am I doing--"

Erik comes off the bed and heads over, pulling the blue tie out of Jason's hands, rolling it up, and packing it carefully into his suitcase. "You're packing up for your first Hollywood premiere. Enjoy it, for God's sake. You're doing well, you should have fun with it."

"It's not like I'm a leading man," Jason argues. "Twelve days of shooting, minor role, I even get fucking killed, like that's not par for the course with mutants in the movies--"

"At least you're not a bad guy?" Erik shrugs. He and Jason both have a hard time looking on the bright side when it comes to Jason's career, sometimes. There aren't many mutant roles in the movies in the first place, and when they actually exist, the mutant characters often sacrifice themselves to save the humans, the way Jason's character is doing in this one. Half the time they're played by humans, too, as if no mutant actors are out there looking for work.

But there's a time and place for that cynicism; Jason needs Erik's support now, not a lecture, especially not for something he already knows and agrees with. "Down the road you'll have your
own production company, something that focuses on a mutant cast and crew for its films--"

"If I ever have the money or name recognition to get that far. You'd be amazed how far a trust fund doesn't go, and man, ontd_mutants might like me but they are not what's going to get me my next fucking job..."

"For now... you're not the bad guy, and you aren't being saddled with the classic Hollywood mutant-monster makeup. We finally have a mainstream movie where a character with an invisible mutation is being played by someone with an invisible mutation. It could be better. It could be a hell of a lot worse."

"Remember when we were sixteen and we used to walk out of the goddamn theater when a mutant character sacrificed himself for all the innocent humans? And now I'm doing that. Shit."

"I remember," Erik says quietly. Jason looks over at him, but Erik's already shaking it off. "Don't let the inherent mutantphobia ruin everything for you. Take advantage of what you can. Enjoy the limousines."

"Limousines! You are a fucking laugh riot," Jason says, shoving two more dress shirts haphazardly into his suitcase. Erik intercepts them and folds them; at least there'll be fewer wrinkles to iron out if he packs than if he lets Jason do all the work. "Maybe for the premiere itself, but I'm on my own out here."

"I don't mind giving you a ride to the airport. You know, one of these days you probably should reclaim your car, I think it misses you--"

"Not the point!" Jason says. "How is it already July 2nd? How is the 4th only two days away? Fuck, I wish you could go with me."

"I'll be providing moral support from here..."

"Moral support, my ass, what I need is a workout, by the time I land I'm going to be nerves up one side and down the other--"

"So different from how you are right now."

"--and let me tell you, somebody who can take a beating like you, I don't think I can just order that for delivery."

"You'd be surprised," Erik says, but he's very, very aware of the fact that, packing Jason's suitcase for him, he's wound up on his knees.

He comes up to his feet and rubs at the back of his neck. "I could go," he says. "Probably. I might not be able to stay long. I've still got some loose ends to tie up at the shop..." He's going to miss the jewelry shop and the people who work there, and the feeling's mutual. Erik interviewed his replacement himself, though. He's leaving them in good hands.

The last couple of months were exciting around the metal shop; apparently the metalworking half of the business attracted some wealthy buyer who wanted a huge commemorative plaque made. It isn't normally their sort of work, but when the rush job came in, they managed well enough. Apparently having it done by a mutant-friendly business made a difference to the buyer. It's nice having that sort of reputation.

Erik oversaw the bronze manufacture himself; when the mutant who'd been delegated to pick it up came by, Erik introduced himself and probably bored the poor man stiff with details about the
alloy. The man had been charming and cheerful, his fangs showing as he smiled at Erik, his tail waving gently back and forth. Erik wished he'd caught the accent a little earlier; when he teleported away with an "Auf Wiedersehen," Erik could only shake his head. Opportunities missed. It seems like the story of his life sometimes.

Jason's head snaps to the side; he looks at Erik. "I'll take it," he says. "However long you can spare. If you want to come with me, come with me. You're the one who says we have plenty of time to pack, you don't need to bring much, hell, you're already practically living out of a suitcase as it is--"

"As long as you're all right with my staying in your apartment," Erik says. "I don't have anything I can possibly wear onto a red carpet, and I don't belong there anyway--"

"I don't belong there," Jason mutters. "And you still have those suits--"

"I'm not going anywhere in sub drag," Erik snaps. More than a year of dressing like he does, and it finally feels natural to him; the last thing he needs is to take a step back. "You know I don't do that anymore."

"Touchy," Jason bites right back. "So I'll get you something."

"And get asked a thousand questions about why you're in a two-dominant relationship? That sounds like it'd be good for your career."

"We both know you're not a dominant." Jason cuts him a look. "And people go to premieres with friends all the time."

"That's not how the mutant gossip blogs are going to read it and you know it--"

"Why the hell did you even bring it up if you don't want to be there?"

"I didn't say I didn't want to be there, I just said I'd want to stay in the apartment," Erik says, stalking a few paces off. "Why are you making this so difficult?"

"Why do you think?"

Erik looks at him, and Jason sighs, shaking his head. "Sorry," Jason mutters, "sorry, over the line, got it. Sorry. If you want to come, then pack. I'll get you a plane ticket. You can stay at home--fuck, you can stay wherever you want, I'll get you a hotel room near the premiere if you want. I'd like you to be there. You know it's a big deal for me."

"I know," Erik says, sighing. "If you want me there, I'll go."

"Yeah. You pack, I'll call the airline."

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When they get to Los Angeles, Erik walks around the airport nervously at first. He hasn't done a lot of traveling lately, and that strange year when he couldn't bear to go west still haunts him a little. But when there's no itch at his joining spot, he breathes a little sigh of relief and starts to let himself enjoy his time on the west coast. He knows it won't be forever, that he'll be going back to Pittsburgh, making that final move to New York, but he can appreciate this vacation for what it is.

Jason's apartment is nice, if sparsely furnished. It feels like a hotel room--there's nothing personal about it, and when Jason opens the closet, there are only a few suits and a tuxedo hanging up there.
There's also only one bed, and neither one of the love seats in the living room is large enough to
sleep on. Erik isn't going to bring it up if Jason isn't.

Once they're both unpacked, Jason gives Erik an appraising look. "I'm not as nervous as I thought
I'd be, but..."

Erik smiles at him. "But you still feel like hurting someone?"

"If you're up for it."

"I am."

Jason looks around the room, gauges the height of the ceiling. The ceiling's vaulted, lots of room--
probably part of what made Jason choose the apartment in the first place-- but it surprises Erik that
he needs to double-check for height at all. Erik can't be the only person who's come back to Jason's
place for a scene. Jason's had the apartment for more than a year now. Erik knows he's been dating.

But eventually, Jason says, "I could go for something with a singletail. You game?"

That makes a little more sense; singletails aren't everyone's cup of tea. Erik, though... "Yes." He
strips out of his shirt, raises an eyebrow. "Where?"

"Bedframe's got some nice attachment points," Jason says, pointing. "Would you feel okay about
being tied to it?"

"What with?" Erik asks, looking at it. It's metal, heavy wrought-iron, a four-poster with a canopy
frame. The metal's dense enough to make Erik's mouth water; yeah, he could see being tied to that.

"Whatever you want. Me, though, something I'm projecting. I don't want to put you in something I
can't get you out of in a heartbeat."

"Yeah, probably a good idea," Erik admits. "Rope?"

"You got it."

"How far down do you want me to strip?"

"How far down do you want to be stripped?"

Erik laughs, but he starts taking off his clothes, everything, down to bare skin from head to foot.
There's nothing Jason hasn't seen, not at this point, so he's not self-conscious about it, doesn't worry
about the scars and marks on his back and chest and thighs, all from years of rough play with doms
who weren't as careful as Jason-- sometimes weren't as careful on Erik's request. He doesn't tense
up about having Jason see his eight knife scars, one for every year he's gone back to Sebastian.

Jason just looks him over, like he's drinking in the sight of all that bare skin, and suddenly Erik
wonders if he's got something to be self-conscious of after all. He can't watch Jason looking at him
that way and not get hard, and that's pushing it, that's really pushing it. He doesn't want this to be
over before it starts.

He turns toward the foot of the bed, lifts his hands up above his head. "Like this or out to the
sides...?"

"Like that is fine," Jason says, voice a little thick. "Here we go. You can always ask me to let you
down, I always will."
"I know," Erik says softly. "Come on, let's do this."

Jason's illusionary rope slithers into place around Erik's wrists, smooth and cool and strong. The benefit of an illusionary tie is that Erik's supported by more than just his wrists, and the rope won't cut off Erik's circulation unless Jason wants it to, which he doesn't. Erik's secured by what feels like his whole upper body, held tightly; he couldn't feel more safe. Jason loops the other end of the rope around the bedframe, up at the canopy, and Erik tugs gently at it to test for strength-- oh, Jason absolutely has him, Erik's not going anywhere.

"Everything all right?" Jason asks.

"It's perfect." Erik takes a deep breath and tries to relax. "Whenever you're ready."

"Do you want to count them today? I could use a hand gauging how far gone you are. We can do another kind of check-in if that works better for you."

"No, that's fine. I can count if you want." Erik looks up at his hands, stretches his awareness out to the metal bedframe. The metal's incredible, high-quality, not just the bits and pieces of scrap or thin alloys that so many pieces of furniture feel like. "Are you ready to get started?"

"Yeah."

Jason has a routine for any sort of painplay with tools, whether he's generating them or not; he takes a couple of testing swings at nothing, gets familiar with the weight and heft of it. Singletails are lovely for the crack and sting of leather, and Jason has everything right, from the way the leather smells to the nearly-threatening hiss as the whip glides through the air.

"Okay," Jason says. "Warming up to it. No contact, to start with."

"Tease," Erik grumbles.

It's the kind of thing he's said before, good-natured if impatient, but this time Jason comes up behind him, wraps an arm around his waist and squeezes. "I love that you're the kind of masochist that wants to dive in all at once," he says, "but I'm not that selfish about this. I want to make it good for you, too."

"Believe me," Erik murmurs, tipping his head back against Jason's shoulder, "you don't have anything to worry about."

Jason growls softly, half-laughing through it, and Erik grins as Jason hugs him and then steps back. "No contact," Jason says again. "Until you're settled down."

"Come on, then. Don't keep me waiting." Erik stretches and flexes his hands and tips his head down, and Jason gets started, landing the tip of his signal whip a controlled distance from Erik's skin-- close enough that Erik still jumps from the snap and the rush of air, but as promised, no contact. It is a tease, a rush, Erik's pulse racing as Jason moves down from his shoulders to his thighs, all careful strikes, nothing touching skin. For all that Erik complained, tried to get Jason to hurry it along, it's also effective as hell; by the time Jason's done, he's got Erik warm and vibrating with pleasure and excitement, practically in headspace before he's even been hurt.

"God, you're good," Erik pants. "Come on, please, I'm ready..."

"I'm ready, too," Jason agrees; he sounds a little breathless himself. "Count them off."

Erik nods, then steadies himself. The whip comes rushing through the air, and this time it makes
contact, one searing bright line across Erik's upper back, over his right shoulderblade. Erik rocks forward from it, gasps at the white-hot flare of it and the sharp crack in the air. The pain is stunning, absolutely gorgeous, and it feels exactly like the real thing. Jason's illusions may be safer than a physical signal whip, but the sensation is perfectly identical, and Erik's going to have welts to show for it.

"One," Erik breathes.

"Good." Jason's praise makes Erik just a little giddy; oh, they're really going to get each other somewhere good tonight, Erik can already tell. "Ready for number two?"

"Please, yes," Erik answers, steadying himself again. "Please, Jason."

He can hear the whip moving through the air before the strike lands, and the next stripe is lower on his back, slicing a welt beneath the first, at least a handspan lower. Erik sags against his restraints. "Two," he moans. "Please, another..."

"Good," Jason says; the edge of a growl comes into his voice. "Let's go for three."

The third strike hits another handspan down from the last; Erik swings forward against his restraints and just as quickly settles. It's good, it's so good, the pain is gorgeous, he could take this forever... "Three," he murmurs. "Please..."

"Good," Jason says. His voice sounds a little thick, but Erik can hardly blame him. "Other side. Let's get matching marks on you."

Erik counts them off-- four, five, six-- and his pleas pick up between the stripes, everything coming out with whispered words like please, yes and God, more, do it, please, and after six, he's barely managing to remember the count, just asking for more and more and more.

Anywhere else, anyone else, he'd worry about where this would be taking him. The dominants he's scened with have never been very good at resisting a submissive who's actively begging them for things, and it's all too easy to interpret those pleas as an urge to submit.

And that's the hell of it; Erik still has those instincts, still wants to drop to his knees and break. But he knows where it leads, and it's why he swore off submission early last year, why he's not going to let himself chase it anymore. Wanting to sink isn't the same thing as being able to pull himself out of it when he's done; wanting to break doesn't mean he can put himself back together again.

But Jason knows all that, has scraped Erik off the floor time and again, and he manages to balance the harsh, sometimes brutal painplay Erik's into with a hands-off approach when it comes to power exchange, no matter how much Erik begs him to take it further. It's never a matter of feeling turned down; Jason just deflects him, gets Erik's attention back on the pain, back where they can go together, safe.

"Tell me where you want seven and eight," Jason says, reaching out and sliding his hand down Erik's back. Erik hisses; the stripes sting when Jason touches him, but it's good, it's all been good. "High or low?"

"Low," Erik murmurs. "Please."

Jason keeps moving his hand down, past the third stripe and down against the narrow curve of Erik's waist. He brushes his thumb against one of the dimples just above Erik's ass, breath shuddering quietly out of him, and Erik can't help it; he pushes back against that touch, presses his ass back to get Jason's hand there. "Jason. Come on. Need this, please, don't stop now..."
"God, I'm not stopping anything," Jason says. He slips his hand down, cups Erik's ass and gives him a rough pinch. Erik jerks back, then spreads his legs and tilts his ass back, asking for more with his body. "You want something? Tell me."

"Anything," Erik says, groans, sagging against Jason's restraints. "Anything, just please--"

"Do you want me to pinch you again?"

"Yes--"

"Or I could heat your ass up by hand. A good firm bare-handed spanking..."

Erik groans again. "Fuck yes--"

"Or we could take the singletail down over your ass and thighs."

"Fuck, what did you think 'anything' meant," Erik rasps out. "Just pick something, do something--"

"You're in this with me," Jason reminds him, curving his hand around Erik's hip. "Tell me what you want first. What you want most. Right now, right here, what is it you want to do?"

It takes Erik a minute to pull himself up enough to answer. He bites his lower lip, takes a few steady breaths. "Okay," he pants. "Okay, the spanking, then. Until I'm red. Please."

"I'm going to let you down, then. Put you across the foot of the bed. All right?"

Erik nods. Jason reaches up, covers Erik's wrists with his hands, holding on just below the windcatcher, below the ropes. The illusion comes apart, ropes loosening and slipping away, and Jason releases the supportive hold his illusions had on Erik, gently easing Erik's hands back down to his sides.

"Okay," Jason says, "up and over," and he helps Erik onto the bed, almost pouring him in. Erik rolls until he's face-down, groaning as all the motion stretches the stripes on his back, and he slips his arms under a pillow, resting his head on top of it. Perfectly comfortable.

"All set," Erik mumbles. The bed sinks beside him as Jason climbs up, too. "Ready. Please?"

Jason puts his hand on the back of Erik's neck and sweeps it down, lightly over the center of his back, thumb brushing the edge of one of Erik's stripes as he goes. Erik shudders, tries to push up against that, but Jason's already moved past the next stripe, and the next, until his hand rests on Erik's ass, just waiting.

"Do you need me to ask every time?"

"No," Jason murmurs. "No, you don't need to ask. You just tell me if you need me to slow down or back off. Okay?"

"Okay." But Erik doesn't think that's going to happen; even Jason tends to stop before Erik needs a spanking scene to end, and so Erik snuggles down into the pillow, getting comfortable now.

Jason doesn't pull the first blow; he starts up hard, right away, giving it to Erik the way Erik's always liked. Bare-handed spankings always feel so damned good, so intimate, like there's nothing in the world except Erik and his dom. He can feel how hot this is, how hot it's going to be as Jason stays patient and leaves Erik's skin red and tender, and he's purring for it, rising up against every blow, gasping when Jason switches cheeks, changes up the rhythm, alternates sides while he keeps
a steady weight and impact going.

When Jason stops and drags his fingernails down Erik's ass, Erik gasps, back and throat arching, eyes closed. Jason reaches up, gets his hand onto the back of Erik's neck, holds on hard-- but he's keeping well away from soul's-home, thank God, he knows how much that damned place always hurts.

"More?" Jason asks.

"God, yeah," Erik groans.

Jason starts to let his neck go, but Erik quickly pushes back into Jason's grip. "Like this," Erik says, voice thick, "just like this, give it to me like this, please, please."

"Like this," Jason says, and he carefully presses Erik's head back down, keeping him pinned at the back of the neck, "or like this?"

Erik's got enough room to nod, and he does, with enthusiasm. Jason takes a breath; Erik can feel his hand shaking for a second. "Get the pillow out of the way, put your forehead on your arms. You need to have enough space to breathe."

"I can breathe fine," Erik protests, but he shoves the pillow out from under him and tucks his head into his arms, making a space for himself, showing off with a few long, testing breaths before Jason's willing to put his hand on Erik's neck again.


Erik groans, and without thinking about what he's doing, spreads his legs. "Still," he moans out, "want, yes, please..."

Jason's hand goes tight on the back of his neck. "Erik..."

"Please. Jason..."

Jason starts up the spanking again, and it hurts more for the rest Erik got, each blow coming down on already-sensitized skin. But Erik's still loving it, craving it, wanting every impact, every stinging slap. "Please," he groans, "please, oh God, please, need it, more," and there he goes, babbling out everything he's thinking and everything he's wanting, all his circuits blown, all his wires tripped, and he pants out "fuck me fuck me fuck me" all in one breath, as desperate for that as he's ever been for anything.

It stops Jason in his tracks, makes him let up on the back of Erik's neck and pull away. Erik groans, rolling up on his side to look at Jason.

Jason looks wrecked. Flushed, panting, hair mussed, hands reddened from the length of time he's been at this, and there's no way not to notice that he's every bit as aroused as Erik is.

"I think this is the point where we're supposed to call it off," Jason says, wiping his palms on his jeans.

"I was thinking--" and Erik's tongue feels thick in his mouth, but he's staring up at Jason and doesn't want to stop looking anytime soon, "that maybe this is the point where you fuck me."

"We slipped once," Jason protests, but one of his hands glides up his inner thigh, cups himself-- he
rises up a little to give himself a badly-needed adjustment, wincing as he does.

"So this time we don't slip," Erik says. "We don't slip. We fuck. Unless you don't want to?"

"Are you crazy, of course I want to," Jason growls. "But okay, I fuck you, then what. We finish out this trip, you move in with me back in New York? That's still going to work?"

"Might work better than dancing around it all this time."

Jason shakes his head, climbs off the bed. "No, you know what-- no-- this is a bad idea, you're trying to negotiate up when you're in headspace."

"I'm fine." Erik immediately weakens his case by taking a few seconds, and a few groans, to sit up and swing his legs over the edge of the bed, finally standing up. He doesn't sway, though; he isn't dizzy. At least there's that. "God, look at me. Look. I want you."

Jason looks. And for a moment, Erik can tell that he wishes he hadn't. His eyes roam all over Erik's body, lingering at his chest, his nipples, the soft trail of hair leading down to his cock, and when he gets to Erik's cock, he licks his lips-- oh, God, those lips, Erik's thought about them more than once. But he looks shaken. Torn. He's not just going to say yes without thinking.

"What do you think this is, really," Erik says quietly, "just another scene? Just pain work? Do you think I do this with other doms?" He gives an impatient little snort. "When was the last time I scened with another dom?"

"You're..." Jason finally drags his eyes off Erik's body, looks him in the eyes. "You're not the least little fucking bit sure about this, are you." It's not a question, and that's a relief; it means Erik doesn't have to answer. But it also means Erik doesn't know what's going to happen, because if Erik's not sure about this, Jason looks every bit as uncertain. He just stands there, staring at Erik, and finally Erik grits his teeth and tilts his chin up; fine, fine, so much for this.

"Just don't give me the 'better off as friends' speech--"

"Oh, for crying out loud, shut up," Jason bursts out, and then he's on Erik, one hand wrapped around the back of Erik's neck, other hand grabbing for Erik's wrist, and he pushes Erik back against the bed again, crushing his mouth to Erik's, kissing him.

Erik gets his free arm around Jason's waist, tugs him even closer; his mouth opens under Jason's, and Jason thrusts his tongue into Erik's mouth, takes over without even having to ask how, what Erik likes. He knows; all these years, he's been right here, watching, ready. Erik manages a muffled groan and gives in, lets Jason have him; he tugs at Jason, tries to get them both toppled onto the bed. It's been years since Erik's felt this way, cared for and laid bare all at once, and he wants that feeling, wants it so much he's not sure what he'd do if Jason stopped now.

But Jason finally pushes Erik onto the bed, sits him down on the edge of it, and he scrambles for the nightstand, grabs for lube, for condoms. Erik grabs the lube out of his hand and quickly preps himself; he knows what he needs better than Jason does, and he doesn't want to give Jason enough time to change his mind. Jason strips out of his shirt-- fuck, all that beautiful lean muscle, why hasn't Erik paid more attention over the years-- and shoves his jeans down around his thighs, rolling the condom on in one smooth motion.

It occurs to Erik that the bed's just the right height for this-- that there's no way that's a coincidence, that Jason must have done this with other people in the last year, other lucky subs who probably
knew all the right things to do, everything to say, how to beg without feeling like they were either faking it or going to lose themselves to it. That's not him; that isn't going to be him, not this time, maybe not ever.

But he can get his legs up, draw himself into position to get *fucked*; maybe it's been a while, but he remembers how, goddamnit. He remembers how, and he *wants it.*

Jason leans in, one hand sliding up Erik's leg, holding on to Erik's ankle. "Okay," he breathes. "Okay, I've got you. I'm right here."

And he is. He's *there,* pushing hard into Erik's body, making Erik throw his head back and snarl for it. "Come on," Erik pants, "come on, give it to me, *more-*"

"You're-- God, you're killing me already, you know that," Jason says, breath coming every bit as hard and fast as Erik's. "Tell me, go on, tell me you want this, you *like* this, tell me you wanted this, please, need that, need to hear that--"

Erik gets himself up on one arm, reaches out as best he can to get a hand on Jason's hip. "I want it, *fuck me,* please, come on, I needed this, *you-*"

Jason groans and comes to a sudden stop; Erik bites his lower lip in frustration. "I'm just going to fucking embarrass myself, I'm not going to last," Jason breathes. "How do you need it, what do you need?"

"Your hand," Erik tells him. Jason takes his hand off Erik's ankle, and Erik guides Jason's hand into place on his cock, squeezes hard-- groans, then, because God, it's been so long, someone's hand on him that was there by *choice,* someone fucking Erik because Erik *asked.*

And when Jason finally starts moving again, he's got the rhythm down; he jerks Erik's cock in time with his thrusts, everything just rough enough, *just right,* and Erik comes apart for him, comes and all but screams for him, but he's anything but embarrassed, anything but shamed.

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They manage to climb the rest of the way into bed, after; Erik drapes himself all over Jason and doesn't let Jason up, not even to get cream for his welts. "Later," Erik murmurs. "We'll shower, you can take care of it then, don't go, not right now."

Jason wraps both arms around Erik, careful but solid. "Okay," he whispers. "Okay, I'm not going anywhere."

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Later, much, much later, showered and cleaned up, cream rubbed gently into Erik's welts, dressed, Erik drags Jason back into bed and clings to him all over again.

"You all right?" Jason asks. He reaches up, strokes his hand over Erik's hair. "Everything okay?"

Erik nods, but it's not the whole answer. He rubs his cheek against Jason's shirt, soft underneath him. "Do you think it could've been like this from the beginning?" he murmurs.

"Erik..."

"Didn't you ever look at me and wonder, *what the fuck is he doing?*"
"On a daily basis," Jason says, dryly, lightly, following it up with, "sometimes when I'm watching the way you butter your toast."

Erik can hear the strain in Jason's voice, though, as good at hiding those things as he might be. "I think we need to talk about this."

Jason takes a deep breath; when Erik levers himself up to look at him, he's staring up at the ceiling, tense, guarded. "Okay," Jason says, glancing over to meet Erik's eyes. "Where do you see this going?"

"I don't know." Erik reaches up, strokes the backs of his fingers over Jason's cheek; Jason catches Erik's hand and holds it still. "You know I don't have the first fucking clue how to do this. Any of this."

"Any of this," Jason repeats. "So-- we're not talking about a friends-with-benefits scenario, are we."

"How long would that be enough for you?"

Jason's lips curl into a grimace; he looks away. "I've been trying not to ask you for anything you couldn't give me since we were seventeen."

"Maybe it's time to start asking."

Jason's got one arm free; he rubs his palm over his face, exhales roughly. "Maybe. That's not much reassurance."

Erik pushes away, kneels up on the bed. "What do you want me to say? I'm asking you-- what do you want, where do you want this to go, I can't just decide this on my own--"

"No, but Jesus, Erik, we both have so much unfinished business hanging over our heads, how do we make a go of anything when neither one of us knows where the fuck our soulmates are?" Jason props himself up on one arm and flings his other arm off to the side. "Mine's somewhere that way-- I'm closer to her here than I was in Pittsburgh, but that's all I know, I can't feel her any better than that. Yours could come back to you any second, and if that ever happens, we both know where you're going to end up. Who you'll end up with."

Erik's chest feels tight; his eyes are stinging. "He's gone," he says quietly. "Even if he's still out there, even if he can still feel me or anything at all through the bond, he can't find me any more than I can find him. I've tried. I've done everything I know to do."

"Almost everything."

"Don't start with me." Erik launches himself off the bed, paces to the window, puts his hands against the glass. "You know why I'm not willing to take that step."

"I know you have every reason to be afraid of it, but I also know I'm not going to spend every April for the rest of my life watching that motherfucker draw you right back to wherever he is. If we make a go of this, I'm tying you down, and if he comes after you, he needs to get through me first." Jason lets out an exasperated sound. "I should have done that years ago. I should have done that this year, I don't know what the fuck I've been thinking."

"You've been thinking that I know what I'm talking about when it comes to him. I go, I get out, I'm done, it's over, it's a year before I have to deal with it. And otherwise I get to take the risk that whatever we do to him will kill me, too; that if my soulmate's alive out there, this finally kills him."
Or we end up-- *zombies*, like Gerald and Aileen. Living in a home somewhere, living in separate homes, echoing each other's thoughts with no idea where the other one is or how to find him."

"And that scares you more than whatever happens with Shaw. Than adding another dozen scars, watching him carve you to pieces with them--"

"Yes."

"Yes." Erik tears himself away from the window, looks over at Jason with his jaw clenched and his eyes flashing. "Three hundred and sixty-four days a year I'm *free*. At least right now I've got *that*. If my soulmate's alive, at least he's got that, too."

"It was more than one day this year," Jason sits up. "You never told me why--"

"I don't know why."

"I don't know why." Erik grits his teeth. "It was like the day wouldn't end, like I couldn't feel the boundaries of it anymore. It didn't have a start, it didn't have a finish, I couldn't tell what time it was, it was like the day went on forever..." He shakes his head. "The point is, I got back out again. I got out."

"And I spent a day and a half sweating," Jason says. "You think I'm doing that again?"

"It won't be like that again."

"How do you know?" Jason's flashing, too, and not just the expression on his face or the way he's standing. He's crackling with illusionary bursts of lightning, blue tendrils snaking and forking their way across him, anger barely leashed. "You think that's a life. That's what you've got to offer, that's what you want out of me. Three hundred and sixty-four days a year of something you say is freedom, and one day a year when I wonder if he's finally going to fucking kill you this time."

"Maybe you haven't noticed, but that's all I've got left," Erik fires back. "I don't have family, I don't have my ability, I don't have my bond, I can't submit without falling to pieces, but I thought, somehow, that you were willing to settle for that."

They both go quiet; Jason's still sparking all over, Erik's still got his jaw and both his fists clenched hard. It feels like one wrong word could tip the cautious balance they've had all these years, and there'd be no going back.

"All right," Jason says quietly. "All right, look. You know I've been putting off seeking."

Erik nods; almost two years Jason's been feeling her, but there's been one excuse after another not to go looking. Erik's heard them all.

"If I go-- if I can find her-- then at least we'll have closure on that."

"Closure," Erik says softly. "You don't expect it to be more?"

"I don't see how biology and neurochemistry are going to touch ten years of wanting to be with someone else," Jason says quietly, and there it is, out in the open, the thing that's been hanging over their friendship almost since the day they met. Erik wishes he could give that back to him, wants so badly to be able to say it's *been the same for me*, but he knows it's not true, and Jason knows it, too. "But I think we need to have that resolved. One way or the other, if we're going to make a real go of this, I need to know where she is. What happened. What's going to happen, even if it's probably nothing."

"All right."

Erik closes his eyes, takes a deep breath. Before the severing, it was so easy; if he'd run away at
fifteen, at sixteen, he knows he could have found his soulmate.

He can't feel anything now-- just a low, dull sense that Los Angeles isn't where he needs to be, that he should be further east. But he's been feeling that way for years, and it's never given him any better leads than that.

"I can try," he says, finally. "I don't know what I'll find. Maybe nothing. Probably nothing. But I can give it one last shot, to clear the air as much as I can. Will that do?"

"Yeah." Jason lets out a long breath, runs his hands through his hair. "God. Yes, Erik. That's all I'm asking for. Just-- we just try. Give each other as much of a clean slate as we can."

"All right." Erik nods. "When do you want to start?"

"After this trip, maybe. After we get you moved in." Jason looks at Erik, looks carefully. He takes another deep breath, holds on to it. "No, huh? That's not going to happen after all, is it?"

"If you find your soulmate..." Erik sighs, scratches at his neck; he's starting to need a shave again. "You should be able to follow your heart. Not worry about the commitments you already have."

"Right, because if I find her, I'm going to be able to leave you without a second's thought," Jason bites out, but there's no heat in it, not really. They've both seen too many examples of that, heard too many stories about people doing precisely that. Jason's been on the receiving end of it himself; he doesn't talk about his emfriends much-- and Erik's finally having to face the why of that-- but Erik's seen it once, and he knows it's happened more than just that one time.

"I'll head back to Pittsburgh," Erik says quietly, "get my things into storage. And I'll start seeking. Maybe there's something to find, maybe not." He finally manages a smile. "How long do we give each other for this?"

Jason exhales. "I can't just drop everything to seek. Not if I want to have a life to come back to, and Erik, I want that. I've worked too hard to get this far; I don't want to give that up now. I might not find her, I might find her and find out she doesn't want me, and then where would I be?"

"So don't. Work. Seek in between jobs." Erik shakes his head. "I'm going to need longer than you will, anyway. So." He wants Jason to take this seriously; he wants Jason to believe he's serious. A three-month seeker trip isn't going to do it. "A year?"

"A year." Jason draws himself upright, until Erik can see the strain in his shoulders. It's not easy for either of them, this conversation, and Jason's been waiting for it longer than Erik has; he has more to lose. But he manages a smile, shows Erik his dimples. "It's not long. I can wait a year."

"So by the end of next June," Erik says, coming forward, "or sooner, if we find answers. By then we'll know."

"We'll know," Jason agrees, sliding his arms around Erik's neck, curving his body against Erik's. Erik bends his head down, kisses him-- and it's as good and as familiar and as terrifying as it was the first time today, all those desperate things at once.

When they break for air, Jason murmurs, "Are you leaving tonight?"

"My flight's not for another three days," Erik whispers back. "Hate to have you go to all the trouble of changing it."

"Airlines are a pain in the ass," Jason agrees. "Room to spare here."
"Guess I might as well stay through the end of the vacation, then."

"Might as well," Jason says, and then they're done talking for a while.
Erik, January 2009

Chapter Summary

After six months on the road, Erik finally starts to get some answers. Not the answers he was looking for, though.

Chapter Notes

In this one, meet John Everett, as portrayed by Viggo Mortensen (see the John tag on Helens's Tumblr for more of John). John doesn't come from comics canon; he's all ours.

It's been six months now. At least Erik's on his own; at least he's not stuck on one of the seeker buses, looking for his soulmate and having to deal with another twenty or thirty people, some of whom are bound to find their soulmates on the trip. He doesn't have to avoid fights, turn down aggressive offers from single dominants, wave goodbye to the lucky ones and pretend to be happy for them. He takes it slow, rests as often as he needs to. He doesn't usually drive at night. He stays in decent enough motels, places with clean sheets and free HBO.

They said a year; he and Jason agreed on a year to seek, time enough to give it their best shot and still be able to take breaks now and then-- Jason for work, Erik because he doesn't think he could go continuously for a year without losing it.

He's sitting in a Denny's at ten o'clock at night, on a Thursday, with rain coming down outside in sheets, when it hits him: this is what it was like for his mother. No clue if his father was gone because he'd renounced or died or was sick. No idea if she'd ever see him again. Just this urge to be there, to find him, even if all she got to say in the end was good-bye.

He understands his childhood a little better now.

*  

When he was growing up, they'd stay in one place for a while before moving on. Sometimes weeks, sometimes months. Erik realizes now that it wasn't about thinking a place was right-- it was all about knowing when someplace was wrong.

Washington, D.C. doesn't hold anything for him. He tries Philadelphia again, but there's nothing. Boston, nothing. He has to skip New York City on his way up the coastline; Sebastian's there, more fucking conferences. He'll get it on the way back down.

Jason once suggested Erik take a vacation, and now Erik's wondering if this might count. He can't spend every day seeking, doesn't try to send out his thoughts during every waking moment-- although he's started going to sleep thinking Are you out there? Can you hear me?, and he's started waking up thinking much the same. But he lingers, some places; he stops in Portland, Maine for a while, takes a trip up the coast and stops in a number of small towns while he's gathering up the
He likes Maine; he likes the little town he finds there, almost more a community than a town at all. Mill Point, it's called, and it's got a thriving-- if small-- mutant population. When he stops at a used bookstore/coffeeshop for a cup of coffee and maybe something to read, for later, a good-looking, fiftyish man with sandy brown hair shot through with grey comes over to him, sets down a stack of trashy romances tied together with twine. The price tag on top says $2.50 for the whole stack. Erik laughs; it's just his speed.

"Thank you," he says. He eyes the man with the books. "Do I need to tell you what kind of coffee I like?"

"Nope," says the man. "You're gonna ask me for a coffee, two creams, no sugars, and none of that nonfat shit, you want the real thing."

"Nicely done," Erik says. He holds out his hand. "I'm..."

"Erik Shaw," says the man, "and I'm John Everett. Nice to meet you, Erik. Finally." A teasing little smile comes around John's features as he shakes Erik's hand. It's a nice smile.

"So you're a psionic?"

"Kinda-sorta. I'm a precog."

"Ahhh." Erik nods. "I work with metal."

"Metal's good. I like metal."

Erik can't help laughing again. "So do I." He eyes John. "I should tell you I'm on a seeker trip. I'm only passing through."

"No hurry. Mill Point'll still be here when you've found what you're looking for."

Erik's heart leaps right into his throat. "When," he breathes. "I'm going to find him?"

John winces like he wishes he could take that whole sentence back, and Erik's heart thumps painfully; he feels like he's choking. "I can't see that. I'm sorry. I wish I could."

"Oh." Erik nods. "All right."

"But, you know, either way... if you find him, you can bring him back here with you. If you don't, well, there's plenty of us around here who'd be happy to make a new friend."

"Thank you," Erik says softly. "Everyone needs friends."

"That's for sure," John says. "And you need that coffee, so... I'll be right back."

It's hard, that kind of hope rushing to the surface all at once; Erik wishes John had a better idea about his soulmate, wishes he could know now whether it's all going to be worth it or not. But friends... no matter what happens, he'll have the one who matters most. He'll see Jason again soon enough.

*  

Making his way south again feels like it might be right. He's been thinking for a while that whatever he's feeling can't be Sebastian; four years ago when he caught up to Sebastian in Atlanta,
he still couldn't shake the feeling he was going the wrong way.

A lot of time's passed since then, though. Four years. It could be anything. For the most part, that feeling's gone; he could even go all the way to Los Angeles without any side effects. But there's something, maybe... something further south, something that's got him tangled up in knots as he passes through Rhode Island and into Connecticut. South, but not much further. There's something at the end of this road, there has to be.

Time hasn't meant much this trip; he's been everywhere, a week in one place, three weeks in another. It catches him off-guard when he picks up a newspaper and realizes it's already April 21st.

He opens up his laptop, double-checks Sebastian's speaking schedule. New York, Trenton, Philadelphia, Atlantic City... Baltimore, Annapolis, Richmond... and back to New York for a series of engagements lasting from April 16th through the 25th.

Fuck.

That explains it, he guesses. April 21st. New York.

He drives in the next morning, and it's easy to find Sebastian's hotel, even without maps or GPS. Sebastian has a key waiting for him at the front desk.

Maybe something was happening four years ago, maybe not. It's already the end of April. His year's almost up, and all he can think is not about what's waiting for him at the end of that year, but that he's running out of time.

*  
"Erik Shaw? The doctor will see you now."

It's been years since he's been in one of these places. He saw so many charlatans and liars when he was working to undo his bond to Sebastian, and even the psionic he tried couldn't help him.

But times have changed, and technology's had a chance to advance. There are doctors out there now who are capable of working with damaged bonds without simply throwing a seventeen-year-old boy into a cage and mutilating him. Erik's checked this out thoroughly. Dr. Cabrera has a good reputation, and mutant clients who vouch for her.

It doesn't stop the deep visceral shudder that runs through him as he steps into the doctor's Manhattan office. It's too much like that final clinic in Park View, all the fluorescent lighting, the sterile smells, pamphlets in the waiting room that talk about What To Do If Your Bond Is Hurting You, or There's Always Hope: Freedom From Abusive Bonds.

On the doctor's desk, there's a plain, flat file folder stamped with Erik's initials: S, then E M along the folder tab. Erik can't help wondering what it says about him. Maybe he's not the only person to come here whose difficulties started from a case of "Bound By Choice" gone wrong. He'll find out soon enough.

With the benefit of hindsight and adulthood, Erik's been able to look back and realize that the Stones never should've been allowed to take him to Sebastian, whose 'revolutionary' procedures were unpublished and unreviewed. Even then, Sebastian's medical license was under investigation. He lost his license eventually, not that it's stopped him. He just set himself up as a bond therapist and renunciation specialist, sometimes even just an author; no license needed for that, not so far, anyway. He's been investigated a few times, enough that it's hurt his business, and there have been news articles exposing his techniques: patients complaining his treatments were ineffectual, that
despite his exorbitant fees and promises, he didn't create a new bond or successfully break an existing one. But even with all that, Sebastian still seems to find enough desperate people to keep going.

The reports on Sebastian enrage Erik every time-- it's too little too late, it's so easily lost in the noise, and worst of all, reporters always include a blissful couple who claim Bound By Choice worked for them, as "balance." What tortures him most is that he can't give his own account. When the Stones let Sebastian recognize him, when they insisted on the trust fund and the pre-rec agreement, Erik signed. Nothing seemed to matter then. He didn't know til later that the pre-rec included a gag order.

He'd break it, if that were the only thing at stake. He doesn't care if he loses the trust fund he's never touched, and he'd be willing to take the penalties for violating the terms of the settlement if it would get the truth out. But the same language appears in Sebastian's settlement with the Stones. Sebastian's on the hook for their care, but it's conditional; neither the Stones nor Erik can disclose what happened to any of them, or Sebastian stops covering their medical bills.

Erik has no confidence that human courts would rule against Sebastian when the letter of the law is on his side and the Stones aren't competent to testify. Meanwhile, the lawsuits and the appeals would drag on for years, and Erik's run the numbers. Even if he made away with everything in the trust fund, even if the Stones cashed out all their savings... the Stones require 24/7 care and an assortment of expensive medications. And at the same time, they'd have to retain lawyers to battle out their case. He talked to a few ambulance-chasers who seemed willing to take on long shots for a huge percentage of the settlement, but none of them were optimistic that the case would go his way. They'd only take it on at sky-high hourly rates.

Between medical bills and legal fees, within eighteen months, everything would be gone: the trust fund, their savings, all the money Erik's managed to put away. Erik could afford to pay for barely-adequate care for the Stones if he devoted every penny he can spare to it, but he couldn't pay for that and the lawyers. Sebastian would walk away, and he wouldn't even be liable for what he did to the Stones, after that.

Sometimes Erik almost can't believe how much damage one person can do, how much Sebastian has ruined and destroyed. It feels as if nothing can ever begin to fix even the smallest part of it.

But if there's any chance, he's here to try to find it.

Not long after Erik takes a seat in Dr. Cabrera's office, the door opens, and the doctor walks in. Erik turns, stands; Dr. Cabrera nods in greeting and shakes his hand. "Good to meet you, Mr. Shaw," she says, kind but somber. It figures. They wouldn't get many cheerful people, here. "What can I help you with?"

"I'm not sure you can," Erik says. "I'm here because I had questions. Your staff was knowledgeable, helpful, but they couldn't answer everything. Thank you for agreeing to see me."

"Of course. Have a seat, please."

Erik sits, while Dr. Cabrera heads around to the other side of her desk and takes a seat as well. She opens the file folder on her desk; Erik can see now that there's very little in the notes about him. It doesn't surprise him. He didn't have much to say on the phone, and the form he filled out in the waiting room asked for a minimum of detail. Bond formed: April 22, 2000. Reason for seeking treatment: I need to be safely severed from my bondmate. There are complications.

"Your form says that you're here because you need to be separated from your bondmate."
"Yes," Erik says, "but safely. I'm concerned about the damage it might cause."

"Understandably," Dr. Cabrera says. "I'm sure you know this, but there are certainly less drastic ways of blocking a bond. There are meditation techniques, drugs. There are some very good bond-blockers on the market now, much more effective, with few of the side effects that the previous generations of bond-blocking medication had. Xinitac is one of the most effective, and it's what I usually prescribe to patients who need help blocking."

Erik swallows. "I mentioned there were complications."

"Yes. Can you tell me about that?"

"I'm in a situation where traditional treatments won't help me. Renunciation won't take. It can't be blocked chemically." Not exactly a lie; the risk to his real bond may be what's stopping him, but he's heard about people whose "by choice" bonds couldn't be broken with traditional drugs. "From what I understand, you're one of the few reputable doctors who actually uses psionic surgery. I need to know how that works, what the effects might be."

The doctor sits back in her chair, studying him. "Psionic surgery is our last resort," she tells him. "Most of our patients are in drastic circumstances. End-of-life situations, untreatable psychosis, violence between mates... we recommend going forward with surgery only after we're certain all the other options have been exhausted."

"They have been," Erik says.

"You said traditional treatments haven't helped you. Do you have medical records from your previous doctor? Or doctors?"

"I'm afraid finding my records would be impossible," Erik says, heart sinking; he must sound more and more suspicious by the moment. "My previous doctor lost his medical license some time ago." He's certain Sebastian still has his records, of course, but he'd never turn them over to anyone else. Especially not for this.

"Well, you'll need to come in with your bondmate for evaluation," Dr. Cabrera begins, and pauses with a frown as he shakes his head.

"I can't bring him."

"Mr. Shaw--"

"Erik. Please."

"Erik. The procedure can't take place if the other bondmate isn't here. Ey has to consent if ey's capable, or a patient advocate needs to represent ey before our panel. Assuming your situation withstands evaluation, you'll both need to undergo full physical and psionic exams to ensure you're healthy enough for such a major procedure."

Erik's still stuck on the first part, apprehension making his hands shake. He does his best to steady them, one hand cupping his windcatcher for strength. "You can't do it if he's not here?"

"Of course not," says Dr. Cabrera. "That would be incredibly dangerous for both of you."

And there it is: the question he's wanted to ask since that day. "What could happen?" he asks with hungry dread, bracing himself.
"So many things could go wrong, but the biggest danger is psionic feedback," Dr. Cabrera says. "Both bondmates need to undergo sedation before any alteration can be made to the bond; the bond needs to be as inactive as possible, or the level of psionic energy can get out of hand very fast."

"What if..." Erik closes his eyes. "Say the bond was severed without the other bondmate being aware of it..."

"First let me just clarify that there's nothing physically invasive about the procedure. I don't know what you've heard, but nothing is literally severed," she tells him. "The psionic energy of the bond is interrupted by creating a field of powerful electromagnetic interference. Some of us do that mechanically, others employ a telepath-- what's usually called a 'psychic knife' or a 'psionic blade' is an ability on the part of the telepath to project the interrupting electromagnetic field. Immediately before the interrupting EM field is removed, one or both partners undergo electroconvulsive therapy, which alters brain activity."

Erik remembers the physical pain and convulsions during the procedure under Sebastian. At the time he thought that was caused by losing the bond, but it was part of what caused the severing--the interruption.

It might be more technically correct, but "interruption" isn't a strong enough word for what happened. Maybe nothing was literally cut or torn, but it felt as if a part of him was ripped away, that day.

"If the EM field interrupts the bond, that effect can be transient," Dr. Cabrera goes on. "Remove the EM field, and the bond can potentially reconnect. But ECT changes brain activity temporarily. So when we drop the EM field, the psionic energy remaining in the bond finds no resonance with the altered brainwaves of the partner, and the bond dissipates. In almost all cases, the interruption is permanent." She takes off her glasses and cleans them with a rub of her sleeve. "I'm sorry, I lost track of what you were asking to begin with."

It was hard enough to ask once. Erik struggles to get it out again. "What if this was done to someone, just one partner, and-- eir bondmate didn't know."

"We would never do that here. No reputable doctor would," she says. "It could easily cause brain damage, or even kill them both. Certainly the bondmate who's unaware would be at terrible risk. Ey would feel the first interruption of psionic energy and ey'd instinctively respond by focusing more of eir own energy on the bond."

Right before the end, Erik felt his soulmate so strongly. He could finally make out words. How much energy would that take?

"At the second phase of the interruption, all that energy would be lost. Most of us just don't have a lot of psionic energy to spare, the body can only produce so much at a time. A sudden loss like that could easily cause seizures, brain damage. Death."

Immediately after it happened, Erik just accepted it when Sebastian told him his soulmate was dead. Erik felt dead inside himself, felt the absence so powerfully it didn't seem as if his soulmate could have lived.

But in the nearly ten years since, he's felt just enough signs to give him hope. All those feelings that going west was wrong, even when Sebastian was west of him; all this time on the East Coast, certain that some places weren't right, that there was nothing in Hartford or Montpelier or Bangor that he was looking for. That summer in Boston, when his power felt like it might actually be starting to come back-- six years ago now, but he still remembers what it felt like to rip the faucet
off the bathroom wall, how it felt to fuse the knob back into place. Maybe his soulmate was out there, somewhere. Maybe Sebastian was wrong.

Dr. Cabrera goes on, "In a worst case scenario, all the energy from the unaware bondmate would still reach eir other half as ey was undergoing ECT-- the one undergoing the treatment would receive the energy, but with eir altered brain activity, eir nervous system would no longer be able to process it. You'd have one person who's being drained and another who's overloaded and both states are almost certainly deadly without immediate, drastic psychic intervention," she says. "We simply won't perform this procedure without both partners present. It would be hugely unethical and unacceptably risky."

That sounds like exactly what happened to Erik. Drastic psychic intervention... the bond with Sebastian that he and Steed claimed was the only thing that kept Erik alive. "Is there," he swallows. It feels like scraping his throat with a rusty knife. "Is there any way he could've survived in that case? The one who didn't know what was happening."

She frowns at him deeply, and Erik realizes that speaking in past tense, gendering the pronoun, took this out of the realm of theory for her. He won't answer the questions in her gaze, but he doesn't flinch away, either.

Her voice is gentler as she says, "I don't know of any way he could survive it, no. Can I ask...?"

"No," Erik says, standing. "Thank you for seeing me. For the information."

"Wait." Dr. Cabrera stands and offers him a card. "If you pursue this separation and you can persuade your bondmate to permit it, call me. If I can't help you, I'll refer you to someone who can. Someone who'll perform the procedure safely."

Erik takes the card and nods to her, and goes. It's foolish to tuck it into his wallet; he can't imagine that Sebastian would ever allow their bond to be severed. It's foolish, but he puts it there anyway, and the next time he pulls bills from his wallet to pay for gas, he slides it into the inner pocket, somewhere it can't fall out by mistake.

*

He's been meaning to call Jason, talk about the appointment with Dr. Cabrera, but somehow he hasn't been able to pick up the phone and do it. There've been a few text messages, back and forth between them, almost every day since they both started to seek. Jason took time off to film another project, a sequel to a movie that Erik's fairly sure he was killed in. [Hollywood,] Jason's message read at the time, [nobody's ever really dead, I guess. Script looks good.]

Erik wishes life were more like the movies, sometimes.

There's nowhere left for him to go, anymore. Any leftover pull he feels from his bond is just wishful thinking, ghosts from his youth. He puts the city behind him; the faint draw feels like a mockery now.

Maybe his soulmate was from New York, originally, and that's why Erik still feels something calling to him from there. There's a lot of that in books and films, characters whose bond intuition leads them to their soulmates' graves, and now and then a "News of the Weird" style article about real-life instances when something like that seems to happen. Or maybe it's just Sebastian, leaving the stain of his presence everywhere he's been. He's been in New York a lot.

Erik's not even sure where he's going until he ends up back at that same coffeeshop, the one with
the attached used bookstore. Mill Point, Maine. It's a good place. It's home to a lot of mutants. Two more months until the year's up and he and Jason have some decisions to make. It's as good a place to wait it out as any.

"Welcome back," and there's the precog he met last time, John. He's got a mug in hand, and he gives it to Erik, who manages a little smile and nods to him. "How's it going?"

"It's all right," Erik says.

"It's okay if it's not. If it's not all right, I mean." John reaches out, squeezes Erik's shoulder. "Take a seat. I've got some more books for you, if you want them."

"Please."

Erik sits down at an out-of-the-way table, and as he does, his phone chirps at him. Text message from Jason. He slides his phone out of his pocket and looks at the screen.

5/7/09 2:45pm
Jason: [FOUND HER]

He's still staring at it when John comes up to him with another stack of books. "Here you go."

"Thank you." Erik puts his phone away. He'll congratulate Jason later, just... later. Not yet. "Have you looked ahead to see how long I'll be staying?"

"It doesn't really work like that," John says, "but if you're looking for an honest answer... I hope it's a while."

"It might be," Erik admits. John smiles at him, and that's good. That's something.
Chapter Summary

Charles, April-May 2009

Charles has another rough April 22nd, and some chance encounters.

April 23rd, 2009

"Oh my God," someone groans, much too loudly, much too close to Charles.

Ah. That's him, actually.

"Not my fault," says Tony, also too loudly and too near. "Just want to establish that from word one."

"I don't believe you," Charles mutters, both hands on his head, trying to compress his skull between his palms. It feels as if it might pop out of his head if he doesn't hold it in.

"I didn't think you would. Probably fair. I mean, it was your idea to get drunk, and your idea to come here, but in between those bad ideas I think I probably contributed four or five or... nine or twelve bad ideas of my own."

"How many of your bad ideas were shots?" Charles asks the ceiling. His voice sounds congealed and crackly. "Wait. The real question is, how did I drink enough to get this hung over without dying?"

"One of my bad ideas was a bottle," Tony admits. "And two of our mutual bad ideas were sangria, and more sangria."

"We need water. A lakeful," says Charles. "And something with electrolytes... and tea. Call room service. Electrolytes. Hot water. Tea. Dry toast. No, cancel the toast, I can't have food in sight yet."

"Slight problem with all that. Let me remind you again: your idea to come here."

"Why? Where is here?" Charles asks with dread.

"The Pod Hotel. You said we should stay at a cheap hotel with no room service to teach ourselves a lesson. I said they don't have cheap hotels in Manhattan, and you said 'They must do.' See, it had to be you saying that, it's all Englishy. 'Must do.' I don't say that. Anyway, you challenged me to find a cheap hotel in Manhattan, and you know how I like to rise to the occasion, so... this place. Some of this has to sound familiar."

"Sort of," Charles creaks. "I just don't want to believe I was that idiotic."

"You were. With my able assistance."

Some of it's coming back. "I told you if you insisted on sticking with me on the twenty-second, something like this would happen."

"Please. For you, all that adds up to the worst day of the year. For me, that's every Wednesday."
"It's not drinking that makes it the worst day of the year." Charles finally struggles up onto his elbows. He has to drag himself to the toilet somehow, climb into the shower. Possibly while still fully dressed, because his clothes are in a state. He looks over at Tony. "Did we--?"

"Do we ever not?" Tony's mouth stretches, not quite smiling.

"Tony, you know I adore you..."

"Uh-oh. You say things like that, it always starts out sounding good, but it never ends well. I'm starting to suspect it's a spoonful-of-sugar kind of approach to constructive criticism, which, I appreciate the good intentions, but I think I'll stay unreconstructed."

Charles wants to continue this conversation, he really does, but-- no. Quite suddenly getting to the toilet has become the most important thing in the world, and Charles bolts... mentally he bolts, dragging his body along with him in a stumble, as best he can.

* 

"You really aren't hung over at all. Even a little," Charles complains, later, hours and hours later, after he's showered, and funneled enough water down himself to slosh when he moves, and brushed his teeth with the horrible substance the hotel front desk says is meant to be put in his mouth. He isn't so sure about that. He thinks it might be an all-purpose gel, lube and toothpaste, and maybe it could scrape some plaque off his teeth, but he doesn't see how. It's foul, and his mouth still tastes like it even after Tony's mixed up a Bloody Mary for him. What Tony calls a "third base" Bloody Mary, vodka rinsed around the glass before the mix gets poured in.

It seems impossible that they can still have vodka, or any sort of mixers, but apparently they didn't polish everything off, last night. Or they planned ahead for the morning. Charles might believe that of Tony; he's reasonably sure he wouldn't have planned on a morning with a hair-of-the-dog cure. But it was the twenty-second...

"Hangovers aren't one of my failings," Tony says. He comes out of the bathroom neat and clean, showered and shaved, the points on his goatee shaped just so.

"Lack of hangovers, then. Your failing is lack of hangovers." Charles isn't often prone to them either, actually, which is one of the ways he knows last night must have been truly, madly excessive.

"Complain, complain, complain. It's like being back at home."

Charles pauses in trying to button up his shirt, which he's been working at for some minutes now.

"Home with...?"

"Are you about ready for breakfast? I'm about ready for breakfast."

The very thought of breakfast doesn't send Charles hurtling off to the toilet again, so he nods-- and then pauses. "It's," Charles checks the alarm clock beside the bed, "three in the afternoon."

"I know a place. Steak and hash browns. Hash browns makes it breakfast. You'll love it."

"Are we dressed for this place?"

"We're dressed, good enough."

Hesitating, Charles runs his hands through his hair. "I should be getting back..." He looks at Tony
for a few moments. "And you didn't answer my question."

"Mm. A noun and a preposition don't constitute a question, even if you turn your vocal inflection up at the end of those words and trail off."

"Who is at home waiting for you?" Charles clips out, breathing in and out through his nose. *Tony, I adore you, but you may be one of the most trying people I have ever met.* There's one of the many possible ways he could have finished that sentence, before.

"Nobody," Tony says. His voice softens a little. "Rhodey left night before last. Work."

Ah. And suddenly it all makes sense: Tony's phone call, how eager he was to get Charles out of the house, anything, *everything*, the bars they hit, the ones they closed down, this hotel room. "Not good news, then." He doesn't have to turn his vocal inflection up at the end of those words.

"When he gets back we're going to talk about having him come off the Xinitac," Tony says. A sensation of gloom settles around him like a raincloud. "But he didn't exactly say he was coming home to stay." Tony shoots a sharp look at Charles. "And before you ask if I asked, yes, I *did*. This time."

Charles reaches up and strokes Tony's arm. "Tony..."

"So breakfast, come on, up and at 'em, we're going. My treat this time."

"Oh?" Charles lets himself be pulled to his feet. "Why's that?"

Tony smirks at him. "You got the room."

*

The place Tony has in mind really is just around the corner. Three in the afternoon on a Thursday hasn't put much of a dent in the foot traffic; as they reach the corner of 3rd and 50th, a man strides down the block, almost knocking Charles over when their paths cross.

"Sorry," Charles says instinctively. He winces; it's too bright out, his mouth feels fuzzy, and his head aches. He's getting so many surface thoughts right now it's overcoming even his ability to process information, all of it blending together into a solid wall of noise, barraging past his shields. Even migraines don't usually affect his telepathy this way. It's like all of Manhattan has swarmed much closer to him.

The man before him is barely even taking notice of him, too busy scanning the street, searching for someone. He looks as though he tore out of his apartment-- or around here, more likely his hotel-- and didn't even have time to fully dress. His light brown hair is mussed, his shirt buttons are askew, and the squint to his blue eyes along with his tip-tilted nose... none of that's doing him any favors. And his mind-- Charles blocks harder. His shields are usually so much better than this; he can't help sensing an angry, selfish petulance coming off this man, a possessive grasping emotion, a swollen sense of entitlement.

"Hey," Tony says. "You all right?"

Tony's asking Charles, but the man answers, snapping, "I'm looking for someone." He zeros in on Tony, and if he recognizes Tony from all the profiles and magazine covers, there's no sign of it in his face. Just as quickly, Tony's dismissed, and the man's moving on to Charles. Charles actually takes a step back. Not for fear that the man's going to touch him or reach out for him, precisely, he simply... doesn't want to be too close.
The man's gaze has lit upon Charles's lapel, though-- his pin, of course, the circle-M pin. "Mutant," he says. "So am I. What do you...?"

"Telepath," Charles answers. For once, he's hoping that will repulse someone.

The man's gaze sharpens. "Could you find a specific person?"

Ah. Seeking. Charles shakes his head. As if his ability's ever been a damn bit of use in finding even his own soulmate. "No, I'm sorry, I can't help with that. Good luck."

This time the man does reach out, his hand brushing against Charles's arm. Charles feels his skin crawling all the way to his shoulder, and steps away again, just as the man's saying, "My sub's not well. He only slipped away a few minutes ago, he can't be far. I wouldn't ask if it weren't important..."

Ordinarily, asked for help like this, Charles would probably try to assist; certainly for a fellow mutant. But he doesn't want to help this man find anyone. As far as Charles can tell-- can't help but tell, right now, with the strain on his shields-- the missing sub is well out of it. Charles hopes this man never finds him.

"Hey," Tony snaps. "Are you done playing tour guide over there? Because I am starving. I might actually buy a hot dog from this stand and I'm pretty sure those aren't really meat, I think they're Play-Doh, or possibly tubes of algae. Yeah, looking at me, hot dog guy, hi, I see you too. Also seeing some mildew growing around your trays there. And now you're pretending like you don't see me, huh. Charles, any eon now?"

"Yes, let's go," Charles says. The man's face creases into a scowl, and he keeps walking; Charles tugs his coat a little more tightly around himself.

"What was that all about?" Tony puts an arm around Charles's shoulders and keeps steering him toward the restaurant; Charles leans in, oddly grateful for the touch.

"Someone whose sub thought better of their arrangement, I gather."

"You 'gather'? As opposed to--" Tony reaches up, twiddles his fingers toward his temple. "Gathering."

"I don't do that," Charles answers, the words feeling mechanical and rote.

"You did it last night."

"That's different." Tony opens the door for them; in a few moments they're in a booth in the darkest corner of the restaurant. Charles sighs with relief.

"Different, how is that different? You were all over my brain last night."

Charles pauses. "Tony..."

"You really don't remember."

Thinking back-- really thinking back-- what Charles mostly remembers is struggling not to reach out for his soulmate. Where are you, where are you, just tell me... no, I'm not doing that, not thinking of that, you, you're here, you're right here, show me, show me what you want, I can give you what you want, I can do that, at least, Tony, Tony, that's it, there, that's good, isn't it...?"
"I didn't--" Charles hesitates. "I didn't overstep...?"

"You were a perfect gentleman," Tony reassures him, and then more seriously, "You respected every limit in my brain all night long. Scout's honor."

Charles tries for a smile. "Were you ever a scout?"

"No. So, you know, if you feel like signing an NDA in case you tripped over any proprietary Stark technology..."

"I'm reasonably sure I was only looking at some of the more fruitful interconnections in your limbic system," Charles says dryly, finally looking at the menu.

"You say that like there's no overlap! Honestly." Tony shakes his head. "If you were on the verge of perfecting clean-energy arc reactor technology, trust me, thoughts of it would filter into your pleasure centers now and then."

"I have no doubt," Charles says. "Though unless you plan on using arc reactors to power sustainable fucking machines, I don't think there's much to be concerned about."

Tony's quiet for a suspiciously long time. "I'm gonna fax you an NDA," he says at last, while Charles shakes his head, almost able to laugh.

* 

Charles feels significantly better after the meal, rehydrated, the full-body ache easing off. He finally feels ready to deal with the world again, turning his mobile phone back on. No important messages; of course, everyone who knows him knows better than to contact him on the 22nd or the 23rd.

His head still bothers him, though. He's still having a hard time maintaining his shields. Everything feels louder right now, more. He's used to the tides of city life, the buzz of minds at work in the daytime, the jangle of minds at play at night, more clamorous still on Fridays and Saturdays. It's a Thursday morning; he can't sense any reason for the song of the city to feel as if it's crowding in, more intense and immediate than it's felt in a long time.

It's irritating, but if anyone in his acquaintance is sufficiently distracting to get his mind off the issue over lunch, it's Tony.

He and Tony split dessert, Tony trying to induce some sort of complicated cutlery fight over the bourbon pecan pie, explaining the strategy allowed to each utensil. Charles is getting interested despite himself when his phone rings.

Glancing at the screen, Charles says, "I have to take this, it's Jean. The teke I helped out a bit when her telepathy got stronger, you met her at a MAD-L dinner--" Tony still looks blank. "Red hair, bondmate with sunglasses asked you to back off..."

"Oh, her!"

Charles rolls his eyes and answers, "Hello, Jean."

"Hi, Professor."

"You really don't need to call me that anymore, Charles is fine," he says warmly. "How are you?"
"I'm good, Scott's good; I was calling to ask about you, actually. Are you okay?"

"More or less. I'm embarrassed to admit I have a bit of a hangover. Why?"

"Because I can sense you," Jean says. "I thought maybe you were just closer than usual, but I can feel where you are now, and I sense you much more strongly than I'd expect."

"Your ability and potential were growing by leaps and bounds last time I saw you. Perhaps you've advanced again."

"I wondered that too, but nothing else has changed for me. And you haven't been moving, but I felt you even more strongly about an hour ago, and since then it's been tapering off again."

"I can't think of anything that would account for that. I was in a hotel room most of the morning and part of the afternoon, then Tony and I headed to breakfast..."

"Breakfast? You did have an eventful night."

"But not an eventful day," Charles says quickly. It's the twenty-third, he'd rather not think about the twenty-second now. Not until next year, if he can help it. "Nothing's been happening for me, apart from the hangover. And I sincerely doubt that's responsible for any momentary surge in ability."

"Still... you always said to call if I felt something unusual happening..."

"I did, yes," Charles agrees, "I'm glad you got in touch. As I'm fairly certain this isn't anything on my end, I think we should probably assume it's something to do with you. Perhaps you're sensing me more strongly because you've been attuned to me in the past, and your latest ability 'growth spurt' caused your telepathy to reach out for someone familiar."

"Do you really think so?"

"I really do," Charles says firmly. "Why don't we make plans to get together soon? We can talk about it and explore where your abilities are, what you're capable of now."

"Yeah. Scott thinks I should try taking another MAT..."

"MATs don't always tell the whole story behind a psionic mutation, though," Charles says. "Not to mention the fact that your telekinesis would skew the results in any event."

"All right, well-- I might do it anyway, just to see. But when are you free? I've got some time next week."

"How about next Monday evening?"

"Fine. It'll be good to see you again, Prof-- Charles," she laughs. "Take care."

"You, too." Charles puts his phone away and raises an eyebrow at Tony's smirk. "What?"

"Guess ol' One-Eye didn't tell you to back off."

Charles takes up his fork again and gestures at their dessert plate. "Are you going to finish that?"

Tony pushes the plate forward. "Be my guest."
May 2009

May is always better than April; two weeks pass without Charles even thinking much about it. He signs Tony's tongue-in-cheek NDA, noting the clause about total confidentiality regarding any arc reactor-powered fucking machines, and faxes it back to him.

After nearly a year, MEOI has finally pulled together funding to replace Raven's partner on the outreach program. Charles will keep working with them both for a while yet, and of course he'll be available if Raven needs him, but the previous semester was a bit hectic with both his classes and the volunteer work. It's a relief to meet Raven's new co-worker.

"Charles, this is Sally Blevins," Raven introduces them, "Sally, I told you about my brother Charles."

He offers his hand and Sally hesitates momentarily before taking it, a golden energy field fizzing between them when they touch.

"That's a beautiful effect, as well as a useful one," Charles tells her.

"It's probably saved my life," she says. "I know they were hoping for someone with a psionic ability. But I majored in mutant studies and I've worked with psionic kids before, and I thought if you could talk me through some of the issues..."

"He will. Charles will talk and talk and talk about mutation until you really wish he wouldn't," says Raven. "And don't get him started on concordance."

"Really?" Sally looks at him with an unreadable expression. He's just about to ask permission when she catches herself. "Oh! You can read me for moods, of course-- that's what Raven says comes naturally to you?"

"It does, yes, thanks," he says, and now that he can sense her, the feeling behind that expression is curiosity. Interesting.

The day goes well-- Sally has good intuition as far as creating a rapport with the psionic students, and she can relate to them on the basis of having an invisible mutation that she usually has to reveal to anyone she interacts with one-on-one.

Best of all, she's passionate about support within the mutant community. "I was attacked in high school," she explains to one of their rowdier groups. "If it hadn't been for other mutants stepping in and helping me, I don't know what would've happened to me. I know all these arguments and differences seem huge to you right now, but it's really important that you're all there for each other. Because someday that might be all you've got."

When the day is done, he and Raven take Sally out for a congratulatory drink.

"This is going to seem really forward," says Sally when Raven's getting another round.

"I like forward," he encourages.

"Raven says you've worked with people to get more control of their abilities."

"I have. I'd be happy to work with you," he says. "What's the issue?"

Sally flicks her fingers against the tabletop, and gold sparks over her skin briefly. "I know some of what I do is psychological, because," and she snaps her fingers: no shield appears. "When I'm
comfortable with people, I can let them touch me, but my soulmate and I can't do any kind of painplay. I'm a masochist, but my shield kicks in anyway. It's starting to put kind of a strain on things. She thinks it means I don't trust her. And I mean, this is kind of concordance and mutation both, so when Raven said that earlier..."

"I hope I can help. Let's get together for dinner sometime, the three of us," Charles proposes. "And see what happens."

* 

Despite the prospect of potentially scening with Sally and her partner, Charles doesn't have much going on as May comes to a close. Moira and Sean recognized a year ago, he's seen them exclusively on a platonic basis since. Tony's making a renewed effort to work things out with Rhodey. Perversely, he's been inviting Charles over more often, but Charles recognizes Tony's self-destructive streak at work. He's steering clear.

He's getting dressed for a night out when Raven knocks on his bedroom door. "Charles? Got a minute?"

He opens the door. "I have a few. What's going on?"

"I just wanted to let you know I have a date tonight." She looks him over. "And apparently so do you."

"Just hitting the clubs," he says, heading back to the mirror and running a comb through his hair. "Nothing planned. Yours is, though?"

"Yeah. I hit it off with a dom I met at the gym. He's a little on the hardcore traditional side, though, so I wanted to give you a heads-up. We might be doing some stuff with formal language, that kind of thing, so if you come home and I'm on a cushion on the floor saying 'yes, Master, I'd love to watch Top Gear', try not to look at me like I'm an alien, all right?"

"I think I'd worry more about the Top Gear bit than the formal language bit, but thanks for the warning in either event," Charles says. He brushes his hands down his vest and turns toward her. "How do I look?"

"Like you don't expect to bring anyone home," Raven says, nodding over at his closet and his bed, which have exploded with books, papers and rejected outfits. "Everything okay?"

"It's fine. You know I'm not looking for anything serious." Charles waves a hand. "Have a good date. I'll be back... whenever I'm back."

"Hey." Raven grabs his sleeve as he tries to slip by her. "Safe call at midnight?"

"I'll have my phone on," Charles promises.

Raven nods, and Charles heads out, sparing one more glance at himself in the mirror by the door--but he can sense the cab driver outside, perfectly willing to be patient since the meter's running. Best to be on his way.

* 

The little circle-M sign on the door to Nine Tails isn't the only thing about this club that marks it as mutant-friendly; there are also wristbands that have a write-in space to describe one's mutation. Charles writes PSIONIC on his, adds a few more bands-- oral, painplay, looking-for-two, conduit,
co-domination, bondage-- and heads further in.

A few people catch his eye right away. There's a sub with his shirt off, over by the bar, a glass of pineapple juice in hand; he's got an interesting combination of obviously flagging submissive, having his upper body on display, and wearing a fairly dominant buzzcut, sending all sorts of complicated signals. It's eye-catching, but he isn't really Charles's type; he's a little more broad-shouldered and muscular than Charles usually goes for. Then again, his usual type isn't always so good for him. He takes a more careful glance at the sub's wristbands: painplay, fisting, watersports, serving as furniture? Interesting set of kinks. Charles keeps looking.

An older woman with wristbands marking her as a switch catches his eye for a moment; she's wearing wristbands for bondage, service, and on both wrists, mutation: she's a mutant looking to play with other mutants. She has gorgeous red hair, cut short and styled with gel, leaving it spiky. She's rather past the usual age range for this club. Charles is getting there himself; most people have found their bondmates by his age. So it's nice to see that the redhead has her share of admirers. As Charles watches, one of them makes her an offer, and she beams and nods, going off with a pretty blonde domme.

The crowd is still growing at this time of night, even with people pairing off and leaving for the back room, or leaving altogether. Charles has plenty of time to find someone to scene with; he doesn't have to rush this.

And apparently patience was a good strategy, because when he next turns, someone's smiling at him, making solid eye contact. He can feel interest radiating off her, and he makes his way over to her table, smiling back at her and her sub, closing his mind off to the emanations of their moods and surface thoughts.

"Hello," he offers a hand to the domme. "I couldn't help noticing your lovely brown eyes from over there." Her fingers linger against his palm for a moment before she draws back. "From all the way across the room? You noticed my eyes?" Her words might be skeptical, but she's smiling, still, and she gestures slightly toward her sub, indicating that it's all right for Charles to offer him a hand as well. The domme glances down at his wristbands, zeroing in on the one for mutation. "Is your ability enhanced vision?"

He chuckles. "No, I'm afraid not. I noticed your eyes partly because, as I said, they're quite lovely, but also partly because they were focused on me." He glances over his shoulder. "Or possibly on the dom behind me at the time, the fellow in the orange t-shirt, but I'm given to optimism, I was hoping you meant me."

It makes her laugh. "Definitely not the dom in the orange t-shirt. I'm Candy."

"I'm Charles."

"So what is your mutation? If you don't mind my asking..."

"I don't mind at all," Charles assures her, twisting his wristband so that the write-in label is turned up. "I'm a psionic mutant. I can read emotions and sensations, and I can send and receive words." It goes over better to say words, not thoughts. In typical day-to-day interactions, he feels it's better to be clear and precise about his ability and how he uses it. But he's finally decided that everyone puts eir best foot forward at clubs, and he ought to be able to do likewise. "In practical terms, I can sense what you want and how you'd like it, and nonverbal safewords are a cinch."

"That sounds convenient," she says, one of her eyebrows curving up, her hand draping with casual
possessiveness on her sub's shoulder. "But I like communication. I mean, I'd want to be able to negotiate for things, not just have you assume you know what I want and how I want it..." Her chin tilts up a little.

"I'm in favor of communication and negotiation myself," Charles says. "We can negotiate up front in as much detail as you'd like. And the primary benefit of my mutation in a scene is that I have access to additional forms of communication, above and beyond baseline."

"But you still have to be willing to listen," she says.

He's starting to feel as if he's going to spend an hour on negotiation just repeating himself. But this is already going better than most of these sorts of negotiations do; she doesn't seem disturbed or put off by his ability, just cautious, and her sub looks interested. "Of course."

"You don't see a lot of dominants out for this," she touches his conduit kink wristband. "Unless ey's hoping to get both soulmates giving way to em." She taps his co-domination band. "Have you tried this before?"

"Extensively," he says, and he may as well play this card too: "I teach concordance, so I've done quite a bit of co-domination in the course of that, as well as on my own time."

Candy nods. "I like the rest of what you've got going here." She reaches down and strokes a fingertip over his light blue wristband, the one for 'oral'. It's on his right wrist, no mistake there, but she turns questioning eyes on him. "I'm definitely into this," she says. "Maybe with some of this for my boy," she glances her touch over the left-hand 'bondage' wristband he's wearing. "And you said nonverbal safewords are easy for you? Not that I'd expect to safeword out of that, but sometimes when it's really good," and he's reasonably sure that look of hers is a challenge, "I have a little trouble staying verbal."

Charles offers carefully, "If you're willing to let me use my ability, I can get a sense for the things you'd say if you weren't--" he smiles, "tongue-tied."

"Would you be up for playing without it?" she asks.

"Sorry," Charles says, "no." After his last disastrous relationship, he's given up on seeing anyone seriously, and he's not willing any longer to be intimate with anyone without his ability, not even for a one-off.

Candy's considering it. She draws her lower lip between her teeth, her brow wrinkling just the slightest bit. "I wish there was a way to know what that would feel like..."

Charles gives her his best reassuring smile. "We can try something small before you make up your mind. You don't need to do anything, or go anywhere with me; we can stay right here in public space."

"Okay," she says, and Charles lets himself take in their moods. He can feel a little nervousness from her, but stubbornness, too, defiance, and some curiosity.

Her bondmate is more intrigued: Charles has come across that particular cluster of emotions before, a submissive interested in feeling vulnerable and exposed in the presence of a telepath. Sure enough, when Charles looks more closely at the sub's wristbands, he has two for humiliation play, as well as one for bondage and another for voyeurism.

"What do I need to do?" asks Candy.
"Would you be comfortable letting me take your hand?" He strokes his own light blue wristband. "Some very light play with this, if you'll permit it."

"I... yes," she says, finally. "All right."

"May I?" Charles reaches for her hand, hesitating before touching her. If she needs to be asked every time-- and right now, he can sense she does-- he can give her that.

She nods, and Charles cups her wrist between both hands, sliding his fingers over her skin and reading her for sensation, for emotions and associations, rubbing his thumb gently in the cup of her palm. That's the spot, for her, not the fingertips or the wrist; right there between the fate and heart lines. Charles keeps his gaze steady, meeting hers, and dips his head, presses his lips there, opens his mouth and traces those lines with the tip of his tongue.

He straightens, brushing his thumb over that spot a last time and letting go. She's still a bit uncertain, but she's also turned on; Charles can feel now that he has every reason to be optimistic. "I'll be in the main playroom, the corner with the St. Andrew's cross," he says. "Come find me if you like."
Chapter Summary

In Maine, Erik waits by the phone for news from Jason... and tries to make a life for himself, with a little help from an understanding mutant with a little bit of precognition.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 47 (the bookend to this part of the story) is actually coming Wednesday, not next Monday. We figured it'd be good to get the angst out of the way in one week instead of two. (Chapter 48 is a lot more cheerful!)

We've also got an outtake from Unbound we can post -- the first versions of the John chapters were actually the first chapters of Unbound written, back in September, and have been completely and utterly Jossed now, but if people want to see them, we can put them up. :D

(As we hit the last few chapters, this might be a good point to remind people that Unbound was always supposed to be the prequel and Erik and Charles won't be meeting in person until Determination, so... ahem, the first week of July will be a good week for them? To those of you who have been sticking around for the whole massive epic of a prequel, THANK YOU. All the hearts!)

5/7/09 2:45pm
Jason: [FOUND HER]

*

The coffeeshop's not very busy; John comes over with two cups of coffee and takes a seat across from Erik. "You want to talk about it?"

Yes. No. Erik shakes his head and runs his thumb down the stack of books John brought him. "Friend of mine just found his soulmate."

"Ah." He's kind enough not to ask about Erik's search, or astute enough to realize that if Erik's back here, the seeker trip didn't go well. "Mixed news, huh."

"Changes some things," Erik admits. "I thought I'd be going back to New York."

"New York's a good place." John glances around the coffeeshop. "But I like it better here."

*

5/7/09 3:18pm
Erik: [I'm so happy for you. Tell me all about it when you come up for air?]
5/7/09 3:20pm
Jason: [Arizona. She's a doctor. Her name is Anne. Seeker rush! :D The only reason I can even text is because she's peeing... gtg, xoxo]

5/7/09 3:23pm
Erik: [:) Then call me when you can.]

*

"Want to get some dinner?"

Erik's torn through nearly a full book, just sitting here and drinking coffee. He's not sure whether he's waiting for a phone call or not... he shouldn't be. It could be two or three days before Jason unwraps himself from Anne. He just hasn't had anywhere else to go.

"Sure," he says, finally. "Let me put these in the car... where did you have in mind?"

John stands still, eyes tracking from side to side for a moment. "Well," he says, "there's Donatello's, if you're in the mood for pasta. Or there's the Grill, if you feel more like steak."

"Either. The Grill, I guess." Erik gathers up his books while John takes the coffee cups off his table. "Are you closing for the day?"

"Might as well." John grins, and Erik wonders if he's seen enough of the future to know he won't be getting any more business today. "I'll be right out."

*

5/7/09 6:05pm
[No new messages]

*

"Widowed," John says. "If you wondered."

"Ah. I'm sorry." Erik rolls his shoulders, tries to decide if he can actually make himself say it. So am I. He doesn't think so. Too soon.

"Ned wasn't a mutant," John goes on. "But he was a good guy. He found me when he was twenty-three and I was twenty-four."

"Did you ever go on a seeker trip?"

John just grins. "Nah. It was easier for me, though. Usually I can't see anything years out, but with Ned... I knew he was coming. I mean, I knew. I could pinpoint the date. So I just hung around here, enjoyed my early twenties." His eyes sparkle. "There were some good years in there."

"I bet," Erik says, and he wonders for a moment-- is this flirting? Maybe it is. They're out to dinner, John's been open about hoping Erik was planning to stick around... it could be something like that. He wonders if John knows where that's going to end, if John's seen Erik's disinterest in sex and romance in the cards. Or maybe John's seen Erik change his mind on it. Maybe... it could be anything. This could be going anywhere. All his plans are over, scattered to the winds. He doesn't know anything anymore.
"Hey!" John says, coming out from behind the counter. "I was just about to call you. I was thinking we could have lunch."

"I was afraid it might be too late for that," Erik says. "Morning errands took longer than I thought they would. But I talked to Gary Fields, like you suggested. His house is still for rent, so I put down some money on that. When my credit check clears he'll call me and we'll meet up so I can get the key. It'll be nice not living in my car anymore."

"Sounds great." John beams. "I had a mid-morning donut, I knew you'd be a while. How do you feel about checking out the taco truck a few blocks down?"

"I'm game."

"God, it's late, I'm sorry," Erik says. He clears the remaining pieces off the chessboard, packs everything away in the travel case. "Can I give you a lift home?"


This conversation was going to have to happen sooner or later; sooner's probably better. "I'm not really... I'm not oriented," Erik says. "I'm not a dominant. I can't--"

"Not asking for that," John says, calm and serious. "I'm not asking for anything. I just wanted to put it out there. If you're up for something, then we can give it a shot. If you're not, I'm fine just hanging out with you. Being nearby." He shrugs. "I like your company. I like you."

"You barely know me."

"I know a little more than you think," John says, reaching up and brushing his hair back off his face. "When I look around at things-- people, places, objects, whatever-- I don't just see the present. I get glimpses of the future. But not just the future that's gonna happen. A bunch of different possible futures. So when I'm looking at you... I've got something like five times as much information to draw on than somebody baseline has." He smiles. "I know you about five times as well as you think I do. Good and bad."

"So you--" Erik doesn't know how to bring this up without getting painfully awkward about it; in the end he doesn't try to avoid the awkwardness, he just says it straight out. "So you know I'm not... It's been years since I've been interested in sex."

I was thinking that maybe this is the point where you fuck me. He pushes the memory away.

"You've got your reasons," John says. He reaches out, puts a hand on the back of Erik's wrist. "It doesn't have to be about sex. Have you ever been in a relationship that wasn't sexual?"
"I..." So are we talking about platonic with a side of pain work, or are we talking about being open to other people? "Yes." Erik looks down at his hands. "Maybe. Something like that... I don't know. I don't think I was ready to admit that was what it was, at the time, but..."

"Settle down a minute," John says. He draws his fingertips down the back of Erik's hand. "You don't have to figure anything out right now. You don't have to figure anything out anytime soon. I just want you to know I'm interested, and the option's there, and we can take it at whatever pace works for you."

"Do you... I mean... why?" Erik can't help asking. "What's in it for you?"

John's eyes track over Erik's body, and he raises an eyebrow. "Not to put too fine a point on it, Erik, but you're not half-bad to look at, whether touching's ever on the table or not." He sits back in his kitchen chair. "But other than that... I think we could be good together. I'd like to find out."

"I'll think about it," Erik promises. "Can I take you home?"

*

5/9/09 9:17am
[No new messages]

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"It's really unfair, I should be able to bring you coffee sometime," Erik teases. John's already got a mug on the counter, still steaming. He must have poured it just seconds ago.

"You could always bring me a sandwich," John offers with a smile. "There's a deli down the street, have you found it yet?"

"Saw it, haven't eaten there."

"It's great. They make their own bread, they have this rye bread that's to die for. Pastrami on rye with some stone-ground mustard..."

"I'll keep that in mind." Erik leans against the counter. "I've been thinking about what you said last night..."

"Yeah?" John has an amazing poker face, but then he'd have to. "And?"

"I'm still thinking," Erik admits. "It'd be new territory for me."

"Me, too," John says. "But we can take it slow. Like I keep saying, we don't have to decide anything right away."

"How about... for now, I'm happy to have a friend in town," Erik says. "And whatever happens, happens."

"You're kind of talking to the ultimate in whatever will be, will be people," John points out with a grin. "Works for me."

*

5/10/09 9:40pm
Erik: [Hey! Things must be going well. Call me when you can.]
"One... two... three--"

"Got it, I've got it, back it up a little, swing around to your right, just a little more--"

Erik grunts and holds onto the dresser with everything he's got, hanging onto it by the legs and the bolts and the screws and the nails. It doesn't help. The thing's fucking heavy. At least they don't have to get it up any stairs; the house he's renting is all on one level. But they still have to get it into the house, through the doors, around corners.

John volunteered to take the back half, joking that he didn't need to see what was coming up behind him, he'd catch it in the threads anyway. But it's turned out to be handy. If it had been Jason, he'd have offered to walk backwards, too; with that spatial sense of his, the one that lets him feel all the different angles of an environment so he can replicate them in his illusions, Jason always took the back half of any given heavy box or piece of furniture.

Maybe he's out there picking out furniture in Arizona. Maybe he's moving in with his soulmate right now. Erik bites down hard on his lower lip and clutches the dresser a little more tightly. With a little more effort, he and John get the dresser into Erik's new bedroom, pushed up against the wall in the back.

"That was the easy part," John says, drawing the back of his wrist across his forehead. "Now we have to get that fucking bed of yours in here."

"Bed?" Erik blinks at him in confusion. "I haven't found a bed yet."

John smacks himself in the forehead. "Shit. Blame the exhaustion."

"What kind of bed am I getting?"

"Nuh-uh, I already said too much." Shaking his head, John wipes both hands on his jeans. "I can't believe I slipped like that, I never slip like that."

"Never?"

"Not since..." John stops there, and Erik realizes what he was going to say. Not since Ned.

It's a little strange to hear that John's getting comfortable with Erik the way he was comfortable with his soulmate, but Erik's not complaining. He comes forward, claps John on the shoulder, and squeezes.

"Bed or no," Erik says, "I've still got bags full of clothes and sheets and towels in the car. Take a breather if you want. I can handle them."

"I'm good to go," John says, but he stops Erik anyway with an arm around Erik's waist. Erik realizes what's happening, and he holds his breath as John leans in.

Their first kiss is a tiny thing, the barest brush of lips against lips. It doesn't leave Erik aching for more, but it's good. It's a good feeling. It could be something to build on.

* 

5/12/09 3:32pm
[No new messages]
"You were right about the bed," Erik says, slumping into a chair at the coffeeshop. "I found it. I'm going to have to rent a truck to get it back to the house, there's no chance it'll fit in Jason's car."

"I've got a truck," John says. He looks at Erik for a second, then gets him a glass of ice water and brings it over. Erik takes it, drinks half of it in a few long, thirsty swallows.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." Erik taps at the side of the glass, looking down at the ice cubes. "Jason's my friend. The one who just found his soulmate."

"How's he doing?"

"Fine." Erik shrugs. "I guess he's fine. He's pretty wrapped up in his soulmate, I haven't heard from him in almost a week."

"That can happen," John says, trying to be gentle. It still stings. "I wouldn't know."

He stops himself; his story never makes sense to anyone, it's better not to even start. But John takes a seat next to him and catches Erik's hand in both of his. He squeezes lightly.

"It wasn't like that for you."

Erik looks at him again. "I guess I don't need to fill in the story."

"You did, in one thread. You don't have to do it in all of them."

It's a bit of a relief, being able to cheat past the explanation that way. Erik looks down at where their hands are joined. "It's a mess," he murmurs. "Maybe it's a good thing you and I aren't-- that we're only friends. Things are complicated for me."

"I don't mind." John rubs his thumb across the back of Erik's hand. "Complications go with the territory sometimes."

"There was a time I thought I might find my soulmate. My real soulmate." Erik rubs one hand over his face. "You don't see that happening for me, do you?"

John hesitates for a while, but finally he shakes his head. "It's not that kind of precognition," he says softly. "I see what's around me, and past a certain point in the future I don't see anything worth taking notice of. Too many possibilities, all weak. When you were here at first, I saw you coming back, but I saw you staying away, too. No way of knowing why you'd stay away." He rubs Erik's knuckles this time, gentle, always gentle. "I don't like to tell people about the future. It gets ugly. A lot of second-guessing. A lot of trying to find ways to avoid outcomes they don't like. I struggled against the threads for the first couple decades of my life, and all it did was get me tangled up in them. So I stopped struggling. Whatever happens is going to happen, no matter what I do."

John's widowed. Erik wonders if he put up a fight when he saw Ned's death coming, or if he saw it at all. He won't ask. He doesn't think there's any version of him that would. He wonders if John can guess the question anyway.

"Is it hard to let go that way?" he asks instead.
John shakes his head. "It's not hard to let go. What would be hard for me is putting up a fight. I don't have that in me anymore." John nods down at their hands. "Something to keep in mind."

"Okay." Erik squeezes John's hand. "If that offer about the truck still stands..."

"Ironworks doesn't close until seven. We should be able to stay here until I close down at five and still get out there in plenty of time."

Erik smiles. "Thanks."

* *

5/12/09 11:54pm
[No new messages]

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"Last screw."

"Thank God. Why the hell didn't you tell me to buy a power screwdriver? Fuck."

"Would've taken as long to charge up the first time as it took to screw everything in." John tightens the screw a little more and glances at Erik. "And you didn't look all that happy about buying one. You hate power tools...?"

"I never used to need tools at all. I could..." Erik grabs for one of the extra screws that came with his bedframe. He can make it stand up on his palm, and he can turn it, but even that sets his hands to trembling; after a few too-brief seconds, it falls over. "I could do everything at once. Something like this--" he nods at his wrought-iron bedframe; it's four-postered with a connected canopy, all solid heavy iron, vertical slatted headboard and footboard, and every piece of it needed to be screwed together-- "would have taken seconds."

"I think we did okay," John says, coming over and settling his hands on Erik's shoulders. "Come on. Let's tip the mattress onto it and celebrate not having to put together any more furniture for one day."

"Celebrate--" Erik heads for the mattress with John, and they struggle it onto the bedframe. "What exactly did you--"


"Sounds perfect." But Erik reaches out anyway, tentative, cupping the side of John's neck in his palm. John takes a deep breath and holds it; Erik stays put, looking at John, wondering.

He's nothing like the doms Erik used to chase after, and that's not a bad thing. He's nothing like Jason, either. If there's ever been a point in Erik's life where he could start over, start fresh, maybe this is it. A new town. New friends. Someone who's not asking him for anything, but who seems to want to be there all the same.

"I'm not going to want to switch down," Erik says softly. "I'm not going to want to sub."

"I'm a pretty terrible dominant," John admits. "I don't have the knack."

"I've switched up. Once." Erik meets John's eyes. "I probably couldn't do it every time. And 'every time' is going to be rare enough as it is..."
"I'm not in it for the sex," John promises him. "I'm in it for the company. It's been a long time for me."

"Me, too," Erik says, and he squeezes John's shoulder as he draws away. "Why don't we go get that ice cream?"

*

5/14/09 12:05am
Erik: [Did you elope? Call me!]

*

Erik thought having a couple of drinks would make it easier to talk. It hasn't, but he has to say it anyway. Even if John's already seen it in his threads. Here and now, Erik needs to tell someone.

"I guess... I'm..." It's even harder than he imagined. "I was told I'm widowed too." All this time. How is he ever going to accept it, when there's nothing to prove it?

He has to, though. His soulmate, his magnetism, his submission, his sex drive... Jason... he has to take these losses and find a way to move on. "I was told that he died. When it happened." He looks at John and gets a brief nod in return. John knows what happened from the other threads, and that part, Erik will gladly skip. "I didn't believe it at the time. But a few weeks ago I saw a bond specialist. She told me that being separated the way we were, without any warning, would've... that he wouldn't have made it through."

He thought he'd done his grieving, but the memories haven't lost their power over time. He remembers not trusting Sebastian, not trusting any of them, when they told him about their "test." And he remembers giving them his arm to inject the sedative anyway. Sebastian tore Erik's bond apart and killed his soulmate, and it all started when Erik let them put that needle in him.

He did what they told him because he was afraid. And what happened next was so much worse than anything he'd ever been afraid of.

"Did I talk about that, in the other thread?" Erik asks, his voice creaking. "Did I tell you I let them do it?"

John nods slowly, covers Erik's hand with his. "You've said that a few times, to my sight. And every time I've told you, you couldn't have stopped them."

"I could have. If I'd fought, if I'd tried. Back then, I could control metal, I--"

"Broke a kid's arm with a metal locker, I know," John says. "They knew that too. You think they weren't prepared? You know you can get anesthesia masks that're all plastic, and needles made out of glass? Probably they didn't start with that because it might've tipped you off that something was up. But I bet they had one waiting, in case you fought."

Erik stares at him. He never thought of that.

John just keeps rubbing his hand, slow and warm. "You want to learn to let things go," he murmurs. "Let that go. There was nothing you could've done. It wasn't your fault."

"He's dead," Erik says. There is it, flat and final. "He's dead because of me." It's the real reason he's never been able to give up or let go, isn't it? Because accepting his soulmate's death means taking his share of the blame.
"Tell me about him," says John.

Maybe John saw it in the threads, what Erik didn't know himself til this moment... that Erik wants someone to know this, too. "He talked to me," Erik says, and he looks at John's face closely for signs of doubt or worry, readying to pull away at the slightest sign. "I'd hear him almost every day. A voice. I couldn't make it out."

John just nods, his hand soothing on Erik's.

"Sometimes his feelings would come to me so clearly, it was like a presence in the room. We could communicate a little, that way. I could even tell when he was exaggerating or teasing. It was so strong." Erik looks at their hands. "Later... after my mother died, I was in a foster home. I was angry a lot. I missed my mother, I felt alone, but when I'd reach for him, he'd be there. He'd send calm... I wouldn't always want it." Back then, Erik felt so isolated, so full of rage, sometimes he'd hurl his fury back to his bondmate, thinking *No, I want to be angry, stop trying to calm me down.* He'd get back worry, sadness, frustration, that sense of distant speaking... but always, more than anything, love.

Erik has so many regrets. It aches now to remember those times he rejected the comfort his soulmate tried to offer. Even when it felt tone-deaf, overbearing, there was love with it. It wasn't that Erik ever took that for granted, but he always thought there would be time. That someday he'd meet his soulmate and explain. *Sometimes I need you to let me be angry. You don't always have to try to make it better. I just need you to be there. That's enough.*

It hurts to accept that he'll never have that chance.

"What you want to take away from that is," John says, "whatever else he felt when you sent that to him, if it confused him, if it stung... he always loved you."

Erik rubs his eyes. "Can I ask...?"

"What it was like to meet my soulmate?" John nods. "Different for me than most, maybe. I knew when he'd be here. What he'd be like, how he'd look, a lot of possibilities about our life together." He shakes his head. "But when he showed up, all that just blew away. Nothing mattered. Before that, I'd spent a lot of time trying to get things to turn out right. Once we were together, I finally started to realize, who am I to decide which thread is the one where things 'turn out right'? I'd use my ability to avoid fights, then I'd realize we'd needed to have them. I'd use it to try to make things better, but down the line, past what I could see, I'd realize I'd just made things worse."

Erik's not sure he would've been able to accept that himself, but it's John's power, no one has a right to second-guess how he handles it.

Unexpectedly, John gives him a crooked smile. "I've had this conversation, or seen it happen, a lot of times with a lot of people. This is usually where they ask if I saw what was coming for Ned. I don't see any threads where you ask me that. It's one of the things I like about you."

"You loved him," Erik answers.

"I did. I thought it would kill me to lose him." John shakes his head. "Still here."

Erik squeezes his hand.

"Nobody likes to hear this," John confides, "but love isn't the only important thing in the world." He shrugs. "You ask me, it's not even the most important thing. Not the kind of love people talk about, the way everyone feels those first few weeks after you meet your soulmate when ey's all
you think about, the seeker rush, the acknowledgement high. Can't be that way that forever."

It's not just that nobody likes to hear it; it runs contrary to just about everything Erik ever seems to hear. When he says he lost his soulmate, half the time people treat him as if his life is over. As much as Erik misses his other half, it still rankles. He's worked hard to make a decent life for himself after everything that happened; he thinks he's succeeded. There's more to him than his broken bond.

"I loved Ned more than I ever thought I could love anybody," John says, "but I wouldn't have left Mill Point for him. The ties I have here are too important, the history. As much as I felt for him, if it came down to one person or a whole community, I'd've stayed. Ned never really understood what this place meant to me. What any of it meant to me, especially back when I was more," he lifts his hand in the Mutant Power sign, a fist with thumb tucked between ring and pinky finger, making the American Sign Language 'M'. "I don't think he ever really got the precognition either. Love can do a lot, but it's not everything."

"I don't know if there's anything I wouldn't have done," Erik says. "Anything I wouldn't do to have him back."

"Say you'd met him and he asked you to take Psychitrex to suppress your mutation."

"He wouldn't," Erik says immediately, and grits his teeth. He knows John's only making a point, but it still takes tremendous effort to keep his temper. Erik's soulmate never would've asked him to do that, he's completely certain.

John just lets him steep in it til the anger eases. "For the sake of argument," he says finally.

"I wouldn't have done that even for him, no," says Erik.

"There are some things that matter more. Sometimes I think nature gave us the soulbond so we wouldn't spend a lot of time on love. It's not supposed to be the focus of everything. You know who you're meant for, you find em, you live your lives. If we were meant to fuss about it, we'd all be unbonded, and who knows how long it would take to find someone and fall in love, or if it would last."

That hits a little close to home for Erik. He and Jason never got started, let alone lasting.

Back when Jason stopped feeling his soulmate, Erik began to just take it for granted, the way Jason was always there for him. They were both cut off from their other halves, they were looking out for each other. Jason did so much for him, and Erik... he'd do anything for Jason, too. It's only now he's realizing how rarely Jason ever asked. Maybe when it came down to it, there wasn't really much Jason wanted from Erik, after all.

"My friend, who found his soulmate," Erik says. "I guess... I've leaned on him to fill that space my other half left. But now he's found his own, and I've got to learn how to live with this. Jason's with his soulmate now. I always believed I might find my other half someday too, but he's gone." His eyes brim. After these past few weeks, he can't believe he has tears left in him.

But he's not just grieving for himself now. Telling John about his soulmate... he used to wonder so often about him. Where was he, what was he like, how did he look, how did he move, the sound of his voice, the people he cared for, the things that mattered to him... Erik will never know, and he's mourning that.

But he knew his soulmate deep down, how he felt, everything that came rippling through the
bond... compassion, fascination, stubbornness, confidence, mischief, love. Not just love for Erik, but all the affection he used to feel for the people around him. Erik hopes they loved him back.

It's not only Erik's loss. That person, that vibrant, patient, affectionate person... he was kind and strong and complicated and caring, and he's gone from the world. It's not just Erik who'll never know him. Everyone he might have met, every life he might have touched, whatever he could have done in his life, all those possibilities. His soulmate's death left a hole in more than just Erik's life.

It's not only his loss, but he knows it best, the soul who was meant to fill that space. "I miss him," Erik's voice catches. "I've been missing him for so long, and I still miss him so much."

"That's never really going to stop," says John. "But there'll be other things. There always are."

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5/22/09 2:13am
Jason: [Didn't elope. I'll call when I have a chance.]

*

"Getting late," John says, but it doesn't actually get him off the couch. His head's resting on Erik's lap; Erik's been reading, and John's been thumbing through a magazine. He sets the magazine down and looks up at Erik. "Should I go?"

Erik strokes his fingers through John's hair. It's been two days since Jason's last message, and maybe he hasn't eloped, but he still doesn't have time to talk to Erik. It's not like Erik wasn't expecting something like this, Jason all wrapped up in his soulmate for days, even weeks... but two weeks now. More than two weeks. And he's not calling. He's barely texting.

This might be what it's like from now on. He needs to stop checking his phone; it's killing him to see that there aren't any new messages, over and over and over.

"I'm not up for--"

"It's okay." John reaches out, catches Erik's hand, and kisses his knuckles. "You've got a spare bedroom. I can stay there, if you want."

"I--" Erik takes a breath. "I don't want. I don't want that. But if you want it to be more than sleeping, it's not-- it's early for that, yet.""I--" John grins. "I could swear I've had this conversation with you before..."

"It's not 'early'," John points out quietly, squeezing Erik's fingers. "You don't have to tell me it's too early, you don't have to make any promises about the future. I know what it is. It's you. It's okay. If you're up for it sometime, I'm sure we can work something out. If it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen." John grins. "I could swear I've had this conversation with you before..." And then he pauses, frowning. "Wait, we have, right? I'm not just remembering something I saw in the threads...?"

"We've had it before," Erik assures him, untangling his fingers from John's so he can go back to petting John's hair. He keeps it long, but not too long; chin-length. Even when Erik had a sub haircut, it never got to be this long, and Erik's hair curls if it grows much past his ears, anyway. "I just want to be sure. Most people don't sign on to be with someone who can't..."

"You know what, I like this," John says. He closes his eyes. "I like that we can be close like this. This is working for me. And you know what, yeah, if I stay over-- probably in the morning, probably in the shower, I'm going to want to get myself off. That's part of the daily routine, for me.
And you can leave me to it, or you can watch, or you can curl up with me while I do it, whatever your speed happens to be that day."

It seems unreal; he can't possibly want so little. "John..."

John opens his eyes and looks at Erik again, sideways and upside-down. "I'm serious. I'm not going to ask for anything you don't want to give me. Besides which--" He smirks a little. "I'm a sub. I'm used to waiting on somebody's lead. This is different, kinda, but... I'm still ready to follow you on this. It doesn't feel weird to me."

"Okay." Erik strokes John's hair one more time. John knows, Erik reminds himself; John knows what's coming, or what's not coming, and he's still here.

I'm a sub. I'm used to waiting on somebody's lead. That tells Erik what's coming, too. If they keep going with this, he's going to be leading; John's going to be following. He can't help remembering Magda-- how hard it was for her to take the lead even when Erik was trying not to ask her for that.

But maybe it'll be different for them. If things were only going to crash and burn, surely John wouldn't be here in the first place.

"Then..." Erik takes a breath. "Why don't you stay?"

"Why don't I?" John smiles, and he turns his face into another long stroking touch.

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5/25/09 7:34am
[No new messages]

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"Hey," John murmurs. "Going to go take my shower."

Erik sets his phone down and looks John over, head to foot, eyes lingering as his gaze travels past John's cock. Erik's morning erection is almost always gone by the time he settles down and has the first piss of the day; today it was the same as usual. But...

"You could stay here. This morning. If you wanted."

John looks at him-- careful, in the dim light-- and nods slowly. "I could. If you wanted me to."

"I'm not... I'd just want to watch," Erik says, but John's already nodding. "You knew that..."

"I knew that." John smiles. "It's fine by me. Here, let me..."

He draws the sheet back, and it's not like Erik hasn't seen him naked before-- John's been here for three nights in a row now, and he isn't modest. But it's different, seeing him this way: not toweling off after a shower, not stripping down to go to sleep. Out of his clothes and about to touch himself, get himself off. Erik bites his lower lip, stays out of the way as John closes his eyes and does it.

He's quick, and watching him... it gets Erik's pulse going, it gets him half-hard just to see it. It doesn't make him want to take it further, not this time, but... maybe someday. He could want John, if he ever finds himself wanting anyone again.

He sets a hand on John's shoulder after, squeezes lightly. "Thank you."
"No problem," John moans, stretching. "Could you grab me a towel...?"

"Yeah." Erik slides out of bed. "I'll be right back."

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5/28/09 9:46pm
[No new messages]

5/29/09 8:12am
[No new messages]

5/29/09 10:38am
[No new messages]

5/29/09 12:50pm
[No new messages]

5/29/09 2:07pm
[No new messages]

5/29/09 4:13pm
Erik: [Everything still okay? You're not going to forget about me, are you?]

5/29/09 4:14pm
Erik: [Kidding. Call me?]

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"You should call him," John says. Erik's had his phone out of his pocket every couple hours for a few days now, checking. It wouldn't take a psionic or a precog to figure out why.

"He said he'd call me when he can."

"You should call him anyway. It's making you nuts." John settles both hands carefully on Erik's shoulders and starts to rub. "Just touch base. Find out if everything's okay."

"I can't." Erik rubs at his forehead. "Everything's fine, and I'd just end up yelling at him for keeping me wondering all this time."

"Is there someone else you could call?"

"I could call his mother," Erik jokes. And then he's not so sure he was joking, after all. "If he's not talking to me, he'd have to be talking to her. She's the one who--" He has to get the rest past the lump in his throat. "Who'd be handling the recognition ceremony arrangements."

John leans in, wraps his arms around Erik's shoulders and hugs him. "Call her," he says.

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5/31/09 8:38am
Erik: [Hi Pat, it's Erik. Have you heard from Jason? He found his soulmate 3 weeks ago & I haven't been able to get in touch. Last text on 5/22.]

5/31/09 12:11pm
Patricia Wyngarde: [Hi Erik, yes I've heard from Jason. Don't worry. He'll call you when he's able.]
"Do you feel that?" Erik asks, which is ridiculous, of course John can't feel it. Copper pipes, water... there might not be much to his mutation anymore, but he can still detect leaks. Worse yet, this is something steadily dripping behind... is that wiring?

He opens up the cabinet under John's sink and reels back, horrified. "John-- what the hell is this?"

"I call it the monster in the deep," John says, finishing with the glass he was drying and putting it away. "It's no big deal. I needed another power outlet to power up the always-hot tap, so my brother installed it for me when he was up here last."

Erik hasn't been sending out his awareness to the walls, he almost never does that, it's hard and frustrating and tends to leave him with a headache, but he sweeps his hand over the kitchen counter, walks to the wall and starts feeling it out, too. "What... other improvements did your brother make to this place? They're not code..."

"Seriously." John kicks the cabinet under the sink shut. "Trust me, I'd see it if anything was going to happen."

Erik's thinking about standing up on a chair to get to the ceiling; now that he's feeling out for the wiring by the can lights, he's not sure it's a good idea for these lights to be on at all. "You can't rely on your threads for everything," Erik says. "What if you can't see your own death?"

"Erik, c'mon, a little loose wiring's not going to kill me." John pauses. "Okay, I've seen a couple threads that say the house might catch fire, but that's why I have fire extinguishers here, and in the guest bathroom."

Erik walks over to John and grabs him by the arms. "Stop that," he says, low, fierce, even angry. "There's a point where even you have to stop saying whatever happens, happens. I'm not risking your life on the wiring in this house."

"You're not," John snaps back. "What gives you the right--"

"I don't know, what about the last month," Erik says. "What about the last two weeks? We're--" It's going to be the first time either one of them says it, but fuck it; even without sex, even without compatible orientations, it's what they are to each other. "We're emfriends," Erik says. That gets John's attention; his eyes go wide. "You've been sleeping in my bed, you're practically living with me anyway-- there's no way I can spend every day you're not with me worrying about you in this death trap."

"I think you're overreacting," John says softly, but he moves his hands up to cup Erik's face anyway. "I swear to God, every thread I had a handle on said I was going to say that first."

"Emfriends?" Erik asks. His hands slip around to the small of John's back as John nods. "Is it all right that I said it?"

"Oh, yeah. I've been wanting to hear it for a while."

"Yeah?" Erik grins. "How long a while?"

"Since you came back to town."
Erik laughs. "Precognition has to be a horrible tease sometimes."

"Tell me about it," John groans. "But it's okay. It's okay. I like watching things fall into place. Waiting for things to happen the way they're going to happen. It never gets boring."

"No," Erik leans in, careful, slow so John could see this coming even without precognition-- and he kisses John, easy, light. John lets Erik set the pace, but Erik doesn't stop right away. Not this time.

"Let's get out of here," Erik murmurs, when he comes up for air. "I don't really want you staying in this place anymore."

"Did you just ask me to move in with you?"

"I--" From admitting they're emfriends to moving in, all in the space of two minutes. It's rushing things... it's probably rushing things. But God, how much time did he waste, how many years did he waste hoping for a soulmate who was never coming back? How many years did he waste, never taking a chance with Jason when he had the opportunity? And now Jason's found his other half, and he isn't even talking to Erik anymore. Pat says he's fine. And he might be fine, but. But he's gone.

He's not in love with John, but maybe they're not meant to look for that with each other. Maybe Erik's chance came and went... maybe it came and went twice. Maybe John's not looking for that, either. A lot of maybes, a lot of questions that might never even need to be asked.

"I think I did," Erik says. "What do you say?"

"I say let's blow this pop stand," John says, smiling. "It was about a week from burning down anyway."

*  

6/17/09 4:02pm  
Jason: [Hey, what's your address right now? Are you in one place?]

6/17/09 4:04pm  
Erik: [114 N. George Ave., Mill Point, ME, 04079. Settled in one place, yes. Planning a visit? :)]

6/17/09 4:08pm  
Erik: [Holy shit, you are planning a visit. I can't wait to see you. Drive safe.]

6/17/09 4:15pm  
Jason: [So much for the surprise! Who told? Mom?]

6/17/09 4:17pm  
Erik: [I'm dating a precog. :) Is your soulmate coming with you? My EF says he doesn't see her in the threads.]

6/17/09 5:45pm  
Jason: [Last stop for gas and then I'm there. No, she's not with me. I'll explain when I see you.]

6/17/09 5:48pm  
Erik: [CAN'T TEXT, FRANTIC CLEANING]

6/17/09 5:49pm  
Erik: [Just kidding. Miss you. See you soon.]
Erik, June 2009

Chapter Summary

Jason finally arrives in Maine to pick up where he and Erik left off, but things don't go as planned for either of them.

Chapter Notes

We've been talking up Acetylene forever, and it branches off right after this chapter. We've got some of that ready to post, so it'll be coming along later this week.

Next chapter, Charles ends up at a charity auction! Who's he bidding on? Find out Monday! :)

Fluff links, as promised: CORGI. Also corgis. And corgis. And a kitten, if you prefer kittens. :)

Erik opens the door the minute he hears Jason's rental car pull up. When Jason climbs out of the car, stretching a little, Erik doesn't hang back. He jogs down the driveway, past Jason's GTO and John's pickup truck, gravel crunching under his feet, and pulls up short when he's standing face-to-face with Jason again.

"Hey," Jason says, looking Erik over.

"Hey yourself," Erik answers. "God, I missed you."

"I missed you, too." Jason pulls Erik into a hug, arms around Erik's neck, holding on hard. Erik hugs him back, lets Jason press his face against the side of Erik's neck.

And then Jason's kissing his neck, biting him a little, teeth scraping gently, and Erik draws back, frowning as he looks at Jason again.

Jason's looked better. He's in good shape; the muscles in his arms and shoulders are stronger than ever and more than obvious under his t-shirt. But his face is a little more lined than Erik remembers, and there are circles under his eyes.

"What's going on?" Erik asks quietly. "What happened with your soulmate?"

"She's still in Arizona," Jason says, drawing away entirely and reaching up, rubbing at the back of his neck. Not quite soul's-home, but close. "What's going on here?"

"Nothing much. I moved here back in May, I--" Jason's eyes flick to the side, and Erik glances behind him. John's in the doorway, waving. "Why don't you come inside, I can introduce you to John."

"John." Jason catches Erik by the wrist, holds on hard. "You said you were dating a precog, you
said you had an emfriend--" He looks up at Erik, brows drawn together; he takes in the two cars in the driveway besides his own. "Is he living here? With you?"

Erik pulls his hand gently out of Jason's grip. "We should go inside--"

"Are you fucking serious? All this, and you-- what, you couldn't wait ten minutes?"

"You said you'd found her. You stopped texting. I didn't hear from you for a month and a half. I thought--" Erik sighs. "John's been good to me. Can I at least introduce you?"

Jason jerks away from Erik, puts one hand on the door of his rental car. For a few seconds, Erik thinks he might actually get in it, turn around and leave. Go back to Arizona, where Anne's waiting. But eventually he sets his jaw and narrows his eyes and nods, shutting the car door, and Erik takes him inside.

* 

John takes the frosty greeting in stride, but then John's taken everything in stride. He's almost impossible to surprise, but he doesn't scare off easily, either. It's one of the things Erik likes most about him.

He sets out coffee and sits down with the two of them at the kitchen table; like usual, he's waiting on Erik's lead. It's a little strange, always being the one to take charge, but that's what comes of being the more-or-less unoriented one in a two-sub relationship, Erik supposes; in the past few weeks, he's mostly grown accustomed to it.

"You're welcome to stay here as long as you like," Erik says. "We've got the spare room made up for you."

"Thanks," Jason says. His eyes flick from Erik to John and back again. "So this is why you picked Maine, huh?"

Erik looks down at the table, taps his knuckles on the surface of it; nothing happens. No alphabet, nothing. Jason hasn't flashed any illusions, come to think of it; he's been quiet since he got here.

"I picked Maine because I finally had the closest thing I'm ever going to get to answers about my soulmate," Erik says, "and this seemed like the kind of place I could start over. We should go into town later; I think you'd like it here. The town's been a gathering place for mutants for-- how long now...?" Erik turns to John.

"Since the sixties," John fills in. "My parents came here when I was little, they were part of the first generation of mutants to live here. And it's pretty much like any other small town, except when you walk down the street, the kids aren't afraid to use their gifts."

"You always said you thought I should teach," Erik offers. "John's been trying to talk me into it, too."

Jason turns that rough, dark look on John for a split-second before staring at Erik again. "And now you're going to go for it."

Erik hesitates. "I was thinking about it," he says. "I've kept up with my languages. I could get my certification and teach part-time, or I could tutor. I'm buying a jewelry store in town--"

"Great," Jason says abruptly, pushing away from the table. "Good. Good for you. I'm glad you have a future here."
"Jason--" Erik comes to his feet, too. "Can we at least do this in private, for fuck's sake." He glances over at John, then raises an eyebrow. They've been friends for so long they have their own language about these things. Usually Jason responds with a nod and blanks them, and they can say whatever they want, then.

This time there's no answering nod. Instead, Jason snaps back, "No, we cannot fucking do this 'in private', Erik. Not this time."

"It's okay," John says, standing up. He puts a hand on Erik's shoulder. "I'll head out for a while. Run some errands."

"Thanks," Erik murmurs. John grabs his keys from the hook near the front door, and then he's off.

It leaves Erik on his own with Jason still tense and angry, and Jason's not the only one feeling frustrated. "No?" Erik asks. "What the fuck was that about, no? You're that pissed off, you want to have all this out in front of John?"

"It's got nothing to do with John," Jason almost snarls. "If you want to talk about what the fuck-- what the fuck are you doing out in Maine? What the fuck are you doing with an emfriend-- living with an emfriend?"

There it is, out in the open. "I'm sorry," Erik begins.

"Oh, you're sorry," Jason retorts. "You're sorry that after a fucking year you couldn't even wait to move on, you couldn't even wait for me to come back and explain what happened. What the fuck, Erik? Was it love at first sight? Did the heavens open up, tell you 'this is the guy'?"

"Don't be absurd, you know nothing like that is ever going to happen to me--"

"Then what? He was a convenient excuse to jump ship? You could have fucking told me if you were having second thoughts about being together, I would have listened. I would have backed off. Fuck, it's not like I haven't spent half my life hearing I'm not good enough for you."

Erik's mouth actually drops open in shock. "You-- what--"

"High school, you won't go out with me, you're spoken for. Junior prom, I back off, you're saving yourself. Pittsburgh, you need space; Boston, you lie to my face about why you're kneeling; a million fucking painplay scenes where you use me to get off but wouldn't dream of letting me hold you after, did you think I didn't know why you'd run off to the bathroom alone to 'clean up'--"

"I-- wasn't--" Erik takes a breath. "I didn't know--"

"Bullshit. You've always known, you always knew. You've been stringing me along for years, and now this-- did you just need to rip my heart out one last time, what--"

The most disturbing thing about Jason's anger isn't the anger itself; it's the fact that it's just words, gestures-- no illusions, not so much as a rumble of thunder. He should be seeing lightning, rolling stormclouds-- once, in one of their fights, Jason swirled a tornado through the room at their feet.

But now... he's halfway to shouting, he's clearly hurt and furious, and there's nothing.

"Jason-- what's wrong, what's the matter with you--"

"What's the matter with me?" Jason gets in Erik's face, chest bumping against Erik's; Erik stands his ground, but he doesn't shove back, not yet. "What do you think? This whole thing, this year of
seeking, seeing where it left us-- goddamnit, this was your idea. What happened? What the hell have I been waiting for all this time? Did you just-- change your mind? Stop wanting me? What?"

"You're the one who found your goddamn soulmate," Erik says, and now he's every bit as angry, leaning down and yelling right back. "You couldn't even call me--"

"I told you before I left, that wasn't going to make a difference--"

"A month and a half, it sure as hell looked like it made a difference! You finally got a better offer, is that it?" He regrets saying it the second it's out; he doesn't want to know, he doesn't want the answer to that question. But it's too late to stop now. "Don't you fucking dare tell me you've been waiting all this time. If you'd ever really wanted me you would have said so years ago."

"You--" Jason chokes out a laugh, almost. "You were my best friend. I couldn't risk that--"

"I wasn't worth it. I'm still not worth it. You have no idea, do you? I know I can't-- I know I can't do half the things you need," Erik gets out, all these things he's never been ready to say out loud, "but when I came here, I thought, I'm waiting. I'll wait. Two months, and then-- I sat down, and there you were, head over heels for your soulmate--"

"Stop. Don't," Jason says, backing up a step. "Erik--"

"--and a month and a half goes by and I keep checking the goddamn phone--"

"Erik."

"--and you want me to feel guilty about finding something a little like happiness after all this time? God, half the reason I'm here is because he's willing to settle for someone like me, someone who's still grieving and who walks away every April--"

"It hasn't even been April since you've been here, we'll see about that--"

"--and who forgets about sex most of the time and can't stand to have soul's home touched--"

"Do you think I don't know this shit by now, do you think I wouldn't have been willing to do anything--"

"I think you would have tried," Erik says. "I think before you found your soulmate, it might have worked." Jason turns away, covering his face with one hand. "Because now you know exactly what's missing with me, what would always be missing."

"Nothing was ever missing with you, God, you've been the one and only person I wanted since I was sixteen. It took me ten years to finally get a shot with you, so I thought, hey, what's another year? Shows what I fucking knew," Jason glares at him. "And if you're here because you think I couldn't have 'settled' for what you could give me, shows what you fucking knew, because I would have made it work."

"You can't do everything," Erik snarls. "You could do a lot, but could you make me forget I'm half a fucking person?"

He realizes too late that he shouldn't have said that-- he's been trying so hard to make progress this past month and a half, he's been trying to take John's talks to heart and remember that there's more to him than his broken bond. And of all the people out there, the one who's argued most that Erik's more than half a person is Jason.
He's expecting anger, or sarcasm, or bitterness in response; he's expecting to hear And John makes you feel whole? Because if you're only up to sixty percent with this guy, well, fuck, I remember the trip to L.A. that kicked this off. I know you were a hell of a lot better than sixty percent then.

He's known Jason for eleven years now, nearly all the years that matter. He's been close to Jason for so long he could practically have arguments with Jason even if Jason wasn't there, and he's sure Jason's come up with illusions of him just to yell at him.

So it's enough of a shock that he got this wrong, but it's even more of a shock when Jason barks out a laugh, reaching up to cover his face with both hands now. "Half a person," he says, muffled; he brushes at his eyes with the back of one hand and straightens, looking at Erik. "Join the fucking club."

* 

They end up in the spare room, sitting on Jason's bed; Jason leans into him, and Erik gets an arm around Jason's shoulders. Jason dug into his backpack for something before sitting down, and Erik was startled to see Jason's old childhood teddy bear. It still has the little button pinned to it, the three-eyed smiley face marked "MUTANT" just below; it still has a sewn-on set of felt fangs. They look brand-new, bright white.

"He's been getting some use this past month," Jason says. "Mom sewed new fangs on him just before I left to come here."

This past month. Erik holds Jason a little more tightly and waits.

"I'd show her to you if I could," Jason goes on, after a while. "The doctors say the side effects from the Xinitac shouldn't last forever. When they can dial my dosage down to a long-term level everything should pretty much come back."

"I'm so sorry," Erik murmurs. "I wish I'd known. I would have come out, you know that..."

"And leave all this behind?" Jason turns his face into Erik's chest. "Sorry. Sorry. I want you to be happy... God, I want that for you... and if this is what does it, if this is what it takes, then okay. Okay."

"It's as close as I think I'll ever get," Erik murmurs. "It's not just John, it's this place. I've never been somewhere where mutants outnumber humans before. A lot of them are second-generation at this point, although there are any number of kids with latent or recessive genes."

"My soulmate had a recessive gene," Jason says. Erik can feel the way Jason cringes, eyes closed tightly, face still pressed to Erik's chest. "She said we could never have kids. They could end up being mutants."

"Shit." Erik gets both arms around Jason and holds on.

"Anne's a mutantphobe," Jason forces out, one hand on Erik's arm, the other still clutching his little mutant teddy bear. "If it'd been anything else... anything at all..."

"Is that why she blocked you all those years? Did she know, could she tell..."

"She was in med school. Said she couldn't handle the distraction. She didn't find out I was a mutant until we met." He grips the bear even more tightly. "Until after we met. I didn't tell her until after the seeker rush. Something just kept telling me not to-- some instinct-- so I just shut up about it, collared her, we talked about what our life was going to be like. Living in Arizona when I wasn't
It doesn't seem like any words could possibly help, but Erik has to say it anyway. "I'm so sorry. God, I'm sorry."

"She asked if I'd go on Psychitrex. We still couldn't have kids... I said, hey, we could adopt." Jason shudders out a breath. "Yeah. I was that crazy, I was bargaining when she was saying Psychitrex was the only way. And then she said she didn't want to pretend some stranger's baby was hers."

"Oh, fuck her."

"Yeah. Straw that broke the camel's back. I should've put a goddamn camel in the room. Made it spit. But she was freaked out enough..." Jason takes a deep, shaking breath and finally steadies himself. "And so now I'm on these goddamn pills to block her, and I can't even-- I can't--" He pulls away, spreads his hands wide; whatever illusion he was trying to project doesn't happen. "She might be able to tolerate me now. I'm practically human."

"You're not human," Erik says, gripping Jason's arms. "You're still you."

Jason smiles at him, and under the red eyes and the lines of strain, there's actually something real in that expression. "I feel like I've been telling you that for years."

It would be so easy to reach for Jason now-- kiss him, hold him, let Jason take over and make love to him. Erik hasn't given much of a damn about sex in a long time-- hell, the last time he remembers really wanting it was a year ago, with Jason-- but Jason knows him as well as anyone ever has, and he could do everything right, get Erik where Erik needs to go in order to find anything about sex worth having.

But he'd still want to stay in Maine when it was done, and he's disappointed Jason enough over the years. It might be what Jason wants right now, but he can't give Jason what he wants forever. And right now... he can't let this be about what he needs. Jason's been putting Erik first all these years; now it's Erik's turn.

He brushes Jason's hair off his forehead, but he doesn't let it turn into more.

"You can stay here as long as you want," Erik says. "Anything I can do..."

Jason doesn't push him on that. "Okay," he says. "Okay."

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Jason turns in early, apologizing all the while. "It's the meds," he says, "I sleep a lot these days."

It probably isn't just the meds, and they both know it. "Come knock if you need anything," Erik says. "I don't mind."

"Yeah, but will John mind," Jason says. It's only a little more pointed than Erik would have liked; Jason's not quite toning it down, exactly, but some of the fight's come out of him. It's better that he isn't actively looking to antagonize John-- John's very difficult to antagonize, and Jason's typical response to being brushed off is just to get more agitated-- but a part of Erik wishes he were seeing the real Jason through all this, the one who slams down lightning bolts and goes bright red with smoke pouring out of his ears when he's too angry to speak in words.

As Erik and John head into the bathroom, get ready for bed, John asks, "How's he doing?"
Erik finishes brushing his teeth before answering, "Not that great." He rinses his mouth a few times, trying to decide whether or not he wants to ask. He does, this time. "How much did you know, before he got here?"

"I knew you'd need your privacy. I wasn't sure what might happen while I was gone. A lot of threads saying nothing; a lot of threads saying I'd be coming back to a note on the counter." John shrugs.

A note on the counter. There are versions of reality where Erik was brave enough to hold onto Jason, take what might be his last shot at having a lover who'd walk through fire for him. Even Erik's not in enough denial to miss that what he and Jason have had over the years isn't something that happens every day. That kind of connection without the bond; that kind of love and loyalty without being hardwired together... he's read books where people feel like that. But even in the books Erik reads, it doesn't happen often. This is more than friendship. Maybe it always has been.

In other threads, Erik was that brave. In this one, he shakes his head. "I can't. I've only got so much to give. I could never be enough for him."

"Maybe, maybe not. You're doing fine by me."

"That's you." Not the most tactful thing he's ever said, but he and John didn't get where they are by trying to be romantic. They shoot straight, even when other people would flinch, and they take what's offered instead of focusing on what could be.

Erik knows Jason down to the ground. Jason's never going to be able to stop thinking about what could be.

John's different. John's ability has given him an almost fatalistic sense that the things that are meant to happen can't be stopped. John doesn't get upset about much, and he warned Erik early on that ever since his soulmate died, he hasn't been the kind of guy who fights for much, either. Erik doesn't mind that. In a way it makes them a good fit; relationship-wise, Erik doesn't have a lot to offer, let alone the kind of passion people seem to expect from relationships. The kind of passion Jason would expect, if they gave it a shot. He doesn't have that in him anymore.

"I love him," Erik says, and John nods like he saw that sentence coming. Erik bends down to the sink again, washes his face. "Always will. I can't say he's like a brother... it's more than that. But if we fuck things up..." He sighs, dries his face off, dries his hands off. "We're both so goddamned stubborn. I can't imagine our friendship would ever be the same."

"You don't have to explain it to me."

"Maybe I'm trying to explain it to myself."

John flicks the light off as they come out of the bathroom. He looks Erik over as Erik heads for the dresser. Erik tugs on one of the oversized white t-shirts he sleeps in, trading in his jeans for a thin grey pair of pajama pants.

"You up for something tonight?" John asks softly.

Erik gives him an apologetic look. "You know I'm not usually... and today, God..."

"Didn't mean for me, actually, though I wouldn't turn that down, either. Just thought maybe if you were... your friend's a little lost right now."

Erik blinks at him. "I thought I just got through explaining..."
"I thought that was less an explanation and more you talking yourself out of taking a chance."

"Don't second-guess me on this," Erik says, expression darkening as he climbs into bed. "Your threads don't know everything."

"Nobody knows everything," John says, and he strips down to bare skin and climbs into bed, too.

* *

John's a light sleeper. When the soft whirr from the coffee grinder starts, John wakes up, head tilting up, squinting into the darkness. Erik rolls over to face him, reaching out to put a hand on his shoulder.

"Everything all right?"

"Yeah. Not used to having houseguests, I guess."

He ends up slumping back into bed, where Erik realizes he's frowning, like he's trying to figure something out. Erik tucks an arm underneath his pillow, rests his hand on John's chest. "Something else?"

"I don't know yet. I don't think... Maybe. Maybe." John sighs. "It's too early for this."

"I can get you some coffee."

"Please."

Erik climbs out of bed with a last quick squeeze to John's arm, and heads out to the kitchen. Jason's mussed, doesn't look like he slept well, and he's staring at the coffeemaker as though he's ready to kill it if it doesn't produce coffee faster.

It's hard not to feel a little pang of familiarity at that. Jason pulled enough all-nighters in college that this moment seems like it could have come straight out of their past.

"Morning," Erik offers.

Jason glances over at him. "Hey. Did I wake you up?"

Erik shakes his head. "No..."

"Ah. Woke the emfriend up. Gotcha."

"Jason..."

"I'm making enough coffee for everybody. Sorry about the noise-- I would've blanked it if I... well." Jason makes a face. "Fuck it. I guess we're all up now."

"Can I make you breakfast?"

"You don't have to wait on me..."

"I'd be making something for myself anyway. Eggs, probably."

Jason makes a face. "Eggs without my power..."

To his surprise, Erik actually laughs. "I know, I know. Boring. I could do scrambled with
cheese..."

"You know what I want? I want an omelet with all the trimmings, and I want to have it out on a balcony on the beach, at sunrise, with a breeze happening." Jason rubs at his arms. "I'm sick of not being able to make things taste the way I want them to taste, not being able to project the places I want to be. You realize I'd just about forgotten what it's like having to put up with an elevator ride? Turns out I'm still claustrophobic in those things. I don't even want to try getting on an airplane while I'm on Xinitac. This is all such bullshit."

"I'm sorry." Erik slips his hands onto Jason's shoulders. "I wish I could do more for you."

Jason shakes his head. "Another six weeks and they should be able to dial me down. It'll be back then."

"I'm glad."

"You're glad. God. When it was at its max dosage back in mid-May and everything went away, I thought I was going to go nuts. I was this close to chucking the pills in the garbage."

_Mid-May, Erik thinks. You went that long without telling me. Why couldn't you have told me?_ He doesn't ask. Jason had his reasons. "But you didn't stop taking them?"

"I would have been back on her doorstep in a matter of hours." Jason's mouth twists. "The doctors say I won't have to be on the pills forever. Just long enough to keep the bond muted while I--" his grimace deepens-- "adjust to being without it. I'll be able to augment with meditation after that, I guess. We'll see how it goes. They don't see a lot of Psi-level psionic mutants."

"I hope it's easy on you," Erik offers.

"Me, too. Thanks."

Erik reaches out for Jason's hand, and Jason lets him take it. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you," Erik murmurs. "I would have been, if I'd known."

"I know." Jason doesn't look at him. "I went back to Mom and Dad's place. Spent some time licking my wounds there. Get this: I finally had the birth-parents talk with them."

Erik tightens his grip on Jason's hand. "You what-- when did you start getting interested in who your birth parents were?" Erik always figured that would've happened in high school, or maybe before Erik even met him, if it was going to. According to Jason, it hadn't. His parents said to ask, if he ever wanted to know; he said he would, if he ever gave a shit. Apparently the time came, over this last month and a half; Erik wishes more than ever that he'd been able to be there.

Pat's text message hurts, in retrospect: _don't worry, he'll call you when he's able_. At least she didn't tell him Jason was _fine_; it's what he thought her message said at the time, but when he looked back at it, he could see the way she was avoiding saying just that. But not to hear any of this at all...

"It wasn't some big thing. I didn't go back to Los Angeles to track them down or anything." Los Angeles is pretty much the only thing Jason's ever known for sure about his birth parents: from Los Angeles, both Japanese-American. The Wyngardes have medical records, but there's nothing of note in them; neither of Jason's birth parents had expressed X-genes, no history of disease, no health issues.

"So... what...?"
"I wanted to know if my X-gene was why," Jason says. "If they kicked me to the curb because they didn't want to raise a little freak baby."

Erik's nearly crushing Jason's hand now; he can tell when Jason's quoting someone. "I'm so sorry--"

"Turns out it wasn't that. My birth mother was fifteen. Birth father was sixteen. They weren't even dating, just fooling around. High school kids. It didn't have anything to do with my mutation."

"I can't see how-- I thought you always said you weren't identified until you were four--"

"I wasn't. But getting the mutantphobic line from my so-called other half--" Jason takes a breath. "It knocked me sideways for a while. I'm better now." He rolls his eyes. "Well. Not better. But I'm not holed up in my room piping shitty emo music through the walls right now, which is something." He slides a little closer to Erik, presses his cheek against Erik's shoulder. "You said you found answers."

"As close as I'm going to get," Erik nods. "I talked to a doctor-- someone with a medical license that isn't under review-- about surgical separation. Psionic interruption of the bond, she called it." He shakes his head, stares at the coffee as it drips out of the coffeemaker and fills the coffeepot. "She said both soulmates needed to be there and sedated or it wouldn't be safe. That if one partner wasn't aware the procedure was happening, he would have responded by pushing his psionic energy at the bond. And that most people can't spare it. Seizures. Brain damage. Death. It was all he could hear for days after talking to Dr. Cabrera. "He would have lost everything when the bond went. She said she couldn't imagine any way he could have survived."

Erik gets his arms around Jason, too, his forehead coming down to rest against the top of Jason's head.

"You should have told me," Jason whispers. "I would have been there for you, if I'd known..."

"I would have been there for you, too." Erik holds on, chest tightening, clinging to Jason until his arms are straining from it. "You shouldn't have had to face that--"

"--alone," Jason finishes. He nods against Erik's chest. "Tell me he's been good to you."

"He's always been good to me," Erik murmurs. "He's patient and he's kind and he's nice to small animals..."

Jason manages a laugh, stepping back and brushing at his eyes. "Okay. All small animals, like mice and birds and squirrels, or are we just talking about dogs and cats here?"

"Pretty much whatever critter turns up," and both Erik and Jason jump a little, Erik turning his head to see John coming out of the bedroom, Jason leaning to the side to take John in. "Sorry," John offers. "Didn't mean to startle anybody."

Erik glances at Jason, and it's only now that Erik's really startled, watching Jason taking in early-morning John-- hair mussed, shirt off, pajama pants slung low on his hips. Most of John's tattoos are visible with his shirt off-- the circle-M on his right shoulder, the raven on his left forearm, Never Without You on the inside of his right wrist. There's one more, his late soulmate's name, but it's up high on the back of his neck, just under soul's-home.

John's beautiful; even Erik's been noticing that from the start. But when Jason looks him over, John straightens, like iron filings to a magnet-- or a submissive noticing a dominant's interest. It leaves
the air charged, even when Jason turns away.

"Coffee?" Jason asks.

"I'll get the cream," Erik says, crossing behind Jason to get to the refrigerator. On his way by, he rests a hand on Jason's shoulder, squeezes lightly. Jason catches Erik in one arm and squeezes back for a moment before letting Erik go.

It's hard not to think about the possibilities, after that. It's not as though Erik doesn't at least know-- he knows what John likes, what turns John on, and in the handful of times their closeness has gotten all the way to sex, he's done his best to deliver. He's pinned John down at the wrists, bitten John's earlobes, pressed the heel of his hand down against John's cock until John struggled against him but reassured him with green, it's green, still green, tugged John's hair while driving his cock into John's body.

He's better at switching up than he used to be, but domination's never going to come naturally to him. It's better for him than switching down-- it doesn't leave him wrecked, wanting, and lost-- and in a lot of ways it's easier than basic. The rules are all still in place. Even if he's on the wrong end of the equation, he knows what to do. It just isn't easy, and it doesn't call to him the way it does to other dominants, real dominants. Jason.

Erik knows what John likes, and he knows how good Jason is at all the things that drive John crazy. That look in the kitchen was the first, but it hasn't been the last; John's been straightening unconsciously all day long, as if the urge to submit's right there at the surface, needing to find an outlet. Jason's calmed down just seeing that: every so often he just pins John with a look, watches John rest his hands flat on the table, and goes on with the conversation. He's been breathing in John's responses like they're a first, badly-needed step toward something he has to have before he can move on.

The atmosphere in the house isn't as tempestuous as it was yesterday, but it still feels like they're all on the verge of something. And if no one else is willing to name it, maybe it's up to Erik.

"I don't blame you," he tells John, when they're alone again. Jason's off to bed early for the second night of his trip. Erik wonders if he's really getting any sleep.

"No?" John stretches out in bed, hands curled around the bedrails, toes pointed. He's undressed, sheet draped loosely over his midsection, covering him from just below the navel to just above the knee. Someone with half an ounce of real dominant leanings or something approximating a real sex drive would probably be all over him. Erik runs a hand down his arm, just to feel the warmth of his skin and the firm strength of his muscles. He doesn't need to take it further.

But John might. "I don't blame you," Erik says again. "I've known him forever, you know that. We've been close now and then."

"I know you've scened together," John murmurs, eyes closing. "Tell me about it?"

"He's good with pain work."

"What kind of pain work?"

"Every kind I ever asked him for. He knows how to leave marks that last."

John keeps his eyes closed, but he strokes his hands up and down the headboard rails, like he's
seeking a little more touch. Erik reaches over, lets John take one of his hands. John threads their fingers together, and his other hand sweeps down, slides under the sheet. Erik doesn't look away.

"We've been together twice," Erik says. "The first time was sort of by accident, I was more into the belt work than I'd let on, and I didn't tell him in time to have him stop. After that I thought... it wouldn't be fair to leave him hanging. So I held onto him, gave him my hand."

"Just your hand?" John's arm is moving now, the sheets above his hand moving, too. "Which hand?"

"The one you've got," Erik admits, squeezing John's fingers between his. "I know I don't-- we don't-- always match up the way you might have wanted. I wouldn't get in your way if you wanted... if he wanted. If the two of you wanted something. Together."

"Would you stay?" John breathes, clutching at Erik's hand now, voice pitched low, a tremor in it that's almost enough to set Erik's pulse to racing. "If it happened. Would you stay, would you watch, would you watch him hurt me, dom me, would you want that, want to watch that...?"

"If both of you wanted me there," Erik says softly, "I'd stay," and John's grip tightens as he bites down hard on his lower lip, other hand stilling, hips jerking faintly under the sheet.

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There's something John can do when Jason's around that apparently fires all of Jason's circuits. Erik's not even sure what it is-- something about his posture, something about his breathing, something about meeting Jason's gaze and then deliberately putting his eyes on the floor-- but he's managing to push forward an attitude of I want it, come take it from me without saying a word. It's another one of those things that Erik never managed to learn, back when he was submitting. It's impressive to watch, but he can't imagine doing it himself.

It has the desired effect on Jason, though-- or at least Erik assumes this is the desired effect. Jason looks twice, looks hard. He gets closer to John than he's been getting so far, stepping forward while John holds his ground, reaching around John for things instead of asking John to pass them over.

John keeps coming out for coffee in the mornings in just a pair of low-slung pajama pants; Jason's started getting up early, collecting himself, showering before Erik and John are even out of bed. By the time John appears in the kitchen, Jason's fully dressed-- and contrary to what he looked like when he first got here, he looks perfectly put together every morning now, hair blow-dried and styled, jeans looking like he's been poured into them, t-shirt tight across his shoulders and narrow at the waist. He's still wearing Erik's wristband on his left wrist, and he's got a thick wallet chain on the left: he couldn't be telegraphing dominant more unless he were wearing leather half-gloves or a cap.

It all breaks into the open one day when Erik spills his coffee at the kitchen table. Jason's up and moving, heading for the cabinet where they keep the kitchen towels. "I got it," he says.

John's closer, though, already turning to the cabinet. "It's okay," he starts, pulling it open and reaching to the top shelf for a towel.

And just like that, Jason's tight up against him, slamming him hard into the counter. It ought to draw some kind of startled cry out of John-- it almost gets one out of Erik-- but looking at John, Erik can see it. John was braced for that.
He's breathing hard again, face slightly sheltered by his hair, but the strain in his body carries all the way down his arms. *That*, Erik's familiar with: that's the way Erik used to look when he was trying his best not to push back and get more. John's hands are tight fists on the countertop, and he's pressing his hips against the edge of the counter, unable to stay still entirely.

"I said," Jason murmurs-- and God, Erik could never have pulled off that tone, the hint of unaffected distance; he'll never be able to dominate anyone that way, that severely-- "I've got it."

John nods, eyes slipping closed. Jason reaches up to the cabinet shelf with the towels and pulls one down; John turns his head when he does, breathes in when Jason's arm is up and his body's stretched. And that look is familiar, too: John looks like that when he's trying to take in every second he can, when he's reaching for everything he can get without moving a muscle.

Too often, Erik's wondered if that look meant John needs more. John's never been demanding about sex, never pressured Erik for more than Erik could offer. But when they have it, John looks just like this, like he's plunging himself as deeply into the moment as he can so he'll be able to remember it later on.

It takes seeing John with Jason for Erik to realize: this is part of how John drops. This is part of his submission in action. This is the first stage in falling into headspace, and while with Erik it's pretty much the end of John's line, with Jason it looks like it's only the tip of a very, very big iceberg.

Jason puts the towel down on the counter and takes John gently by the upper arms. "We haven't talked about this," Jason says. "Me and Erik. You and me."

With an effort, John gets his eyes open and eases away a little from the counter; Jason takes an extra step back to let him. "We have," he murmurs. "Erik and I have."

"This doesn't go any further until we have the rest of that conversation," Jason says, and when he steps back this time, it cuts the contact between them: everything but Jason's hands on John's arms. "But I can feel what you're trying to offer here, and... thank you. Thank you for that."

"Thank you for wanting that," John murmurs, and maybe that should sting, but it doesn't. John can't offer himself to Erik this way; Erik couldn't take him up on it even if he did. But he cares about John, and seeing John get something he's been needing makes Erik feel glad for him that it's there, not sorry for himself that he can't be the one to give it.

"I do," Jason says quietly. "But not now." He's firm about it, using the same tone he's always used when he's starting to pull Erik off the floor, if it's not so bad he's got to break out the big guns. It's gentle, but there's no arguing it. "Not until we have that talk."

John nods, takes a breath. "Okay." Between Jason's tone of voice and what he's saying, it's enough to get John standing on his own again, enough to stop what looked like it could have been a beautiful slide down. As good an idea as it is, Erik aches for John at the interruption.

Jason looks over at Erik, though, and after a moment, he brings the kitchen towel over to the table. "I think you needed this," Jason says.

"I think we all still need it," Erik answers, and he takes the towel gently out of Jason's grip.

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"I need to know whose idea it was," Jason tells Erik. "Did he ask you for this, or..."

Erik waits, hoping Jason's going to finish that sentence. When he doesn't, Erik know he has to fill it
"You were pretty clear you didn't want me. I don't need you offering up your lover as a consolation prize."

Erik's glad John gave them some privacy for this conversation; he winces on John's behalf at that. "I wouldn't have expected anyone to think of John as a consolation prize." He meets Jason's challenging look with one of his own. "You're not acting like that's what you think of him."

"I didn't mean it that way," Jason admits. He scratches at the back of his neck for a second, just glancing off soul's-home, then drops both hands into his lap. "But I don't want it to be some kind of... 'You can't have the man you came out here to be with, but hey, here's this other sub, he's willing'..."

"It's not that," Erik says, but he's flinching again, wishing all those cards weren't out on the table that way. With them out there, though, he's got some honesty of his own to vent. "I didn't know that was why you were coming. I thought-- when you texted, I thought you were bringing up your bondmate. To introduce her."

"If you'd just waited-- God, do you think I would have recognized anybody without you standing right at my side? Do you think I would've left you in the dark without something going wrong?"

"I didn't know," Erik says, staring down at the floor. "I know how romantic you are; I thought maybe if you'd eloped..."

"You don't think my mom would've filled you in? She would have told you that. If it'd been that, she would've told you. But she would have been the second to know, because goddamnit, I would have told you first." Jason reaches over and takes Erik's wrist in his hand, and for once he isn't so careful to avoid Erik's windcatcher. "I still want you. And if you want to stay in Maine-- hell, if you want John in your life-- then we can make that work, somehow. But you know how I feel about you. You know how long I've wanted this for us."

Erik turns his hand in Jason's grip, slips his fingers through Jason's. "I can't. I wish... I thought, maybe someday, if I just knew, if Sebastian were gone, but..."

"But something changed in the last year? Because it was your idea to try. Your fucking idea. I never would have pushed you for that--"

"I know. God, I know. I'm sorry. Maybe it would have been better if we hadn't tried, maybe we both would have been better off not knowing."

Jason looks away, shuts his eyes like he's trying to shut away a memory. "I needed to know," he says, his grip on Erik's hand tightening. "I hate knowing. But you were right, a year ago. I needed to know." He leans over, rests his head on Erik's shoulder. "But you--"

"No. You're right; I needed to know, too. I could have spent the rest of my life waiting. Holding onto a hope for something that could never actually happen. I'm trying to let go, now. Trying to really have a life instead of waiting for lightning to strike, something that tells me I can have my bond back or my life back or my ability back if I just... end up in the right place at the right time, somehow." He takes a deep breath. "This is who I am. What's left of me. Maybe I've got something to contribute up here. Maybe I can finally tell Sebastian to fuck off, for good, and stop losing the back half of every April to that tug of his."

"That'd be good," Jason murmurs. "Whatever it takes... I'll help you, if I can."
"I know you would."

Jason keeps hold of Erik's hand as he looks off into the distance. "It's so weird being trapped in my own head," he says softly. "I'm used to-- at least if I'm alone, at least if I'm with you, I'm used to--" He sits up, takes a deep breath... but there's nothing, no illusion to illustrate his point, and he shakes his head as he exhales. "I feel like I can only say half of what I mean, this way. Like nothing makes sense. When I was back home, Mom said it was okay if I felt like flinging plates around, or stuff like that. Dad put away the good plates first, though."

"Did it help?"

Jason smiles. "A little."

Erik squeezes Jason's hand. "You're going to get through this," he promises.

"I know."

"But you don't have to do it alone." Erik rubs his thumb over the back of Jason's hand. "I'm not in any kind of shape to be there for you that way, but John is. He's interested. He'd like to."

"I don't know how you keep your hands off him," Jason says bluntly, shaking his head. "Just looking at him-- he wants to go to his knees so bad, you can read it off his skin. You can see it in the way he breathes."

"I know." Erik looks carefully at Jason. "It's just a question of whether you want to put him there."

"I don't want to fuck anything up for you two."

"I wouldn't be offering if I thought it would. We wouldn't be offering." Erik's not entirely sure of that. John and his tendency to believe that what's going to happen is going to happen, and can't be fought against... maybe he'd just go for it anyway. Maybe it's in the cards, and it can't be stopped now. "We're not possessive about each other. Not like that. It's just never come up before. We haven't been together that long."

"Long enough to move in. Long enough to start over together."

"Jason..."

Jason shakes his head. "Sorry," he mutters. "Look, I'll think about it. If it happens... do you want to be there?"

"If you want me there."

"I'll think about that, too." Jason leans over a little, rests his head on Erik's shoulder. "I didn't mean for things to go this way," he murmurs. "This isn't where I thought this road was leading."

Erik wraps an arm around Jason's shoulders, holds onto him. Whatever he might have said, it gets caught up in his throat, choked off along with the tears he can't seem to shed anymore, either. But he's still there, what's left of him, and he can hold Jason tightly, offer him that.

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It's only a matter of time, at that point. A matter of timing. Waiting for the right moment, knowing John and Jason are waiting for the right moment... it's a little heady, actually, watching a seduction play out over days and days. Nothing like this has ever happened to Erik-- it's all been a race to the
finish line, doms in clubs, the two relationships he's had, the practically transactional way his scenes with Jason used to play out. This sort of thing happens in books, in movies, but Erik's never seen it live and in-person before.

He doesn't feel left out; he feels like he's a part of it, even if his part is just to watch and wait and hold onto both of them when it's done. But it all looks so alien to Erik... he can't imagine this ever happening to him. It's fascinating.

Jason's there another week, another two weeks, having breakfast with John and Erik every morning, taking walks with them, heading out to walk along the beaches, going into town. "I can keep myself occupied while you're working," Jason says, so Erik goes back to work, meets up with Jason for lunch, lets Jason keep him company in the jewelry store on lazy afternoons. He knows that in the mornings, Jason goes to the coffeeshop and bookstore with John; he knows they're sketching out the limits there, negotiating on their own. He could ask to be a part of it, but he hasn't; they should have space, something that's just theirs. They should get to figure out what they want together, without Erik looming over the negotiations, too.

Maybe that's ridiculous. Maybe Erik would take up a lot of their focus, whether he's in the room or not. Either way, he's glad they have their space.

And he's glad to have Jason with him, when the afternoon rolls around and Jason stops by. Mutated Metals started out life as someone else's store; Erik's taken out a loan to buy it from its owner, a quiet man who's looking to retire. He's using Sebastian's trust fund as collateral. He might not be willing to spend Sebastian's blood money, but he understands how banks work, that they need proof before they'll give someone a chance to start over. Sebastian's money can guarantee him a chance at a new life somewhere else. It's almost ironic enough not to turn his stomach. He's going to be cautious about keeping the store in the black, once the loan clears and the store's his.

Fortunately, the books indicate he'll be able to do well with that. There's a fair amount of mutant tourist trade, and Erik still has contacts in the industry, even after a year away from work; he can finally go out of his way to source jewelry from mutant artists. Beyond that, there are always promise collars and lifetime collars, earrings and necklaces and bracelets, standard pieces that make up many subs' collections. He's decided to start stocking a fair amount of dominant jewelry and jewelry that isn't meant to evoke an orientation, too; in his store back in Pittsburgh, the unoriented jewelry was always surprisingly popular. It might be the same here.

Erik had a quick talk with the staff when he took over operations-- a bit early, the store isn't quite his yet, but the fact that it's a small town means that John's word-- and probably his ability-- went a long way toward reassuring the owner that Erik would take care of it. As a result, the store's shifting from its typical high-end jewelry store wardrobe that requires suits and ties and dress clothes, and heading more for a smart-casual look. That's pure selfishness on Erik's part, since he's going to be front end, sales floor as well as management and buyer. He's damned if he's going to get back into corset vests, even for his own business. He'll be sticking to turtlenecks or loose button-down shirts over pressed trousers, depending on the season.

When Jason's keeping Erik company, his t-shirts and designer jeans don't exactly mark him as an employee, but then he wasn't going to be entirely incognito in a primarily-mutant town anyway. Erik has to struggle to keep a straight face the first time someone shopping at the jewelry store recognizes Jason. Jason's entirely authentic salesman voice as he says "Can I help you?" would make anyone think twice about whether the good-looking Asian-American man behind the counter could really be Jason Wyngarde.

"I was just in to see if... I mean..." The customer's name is Keith; he glances over to Erik in the
middle of his babbling, his feathery eyebrows twitching up. When Erik just smiles, Keith turns back to Jason. "Has anyone ever told you... you look just like my favorite actor," Keith says, eyes wide.

"Jason Wyngarde is your favorite actor?" Jason asks, smiling just a little.

"Well, yeah," Keith says, and Jason's smile gets a little wider. "I'm sorry, you probably hear that all the time."

"Not as often as you might think," Jason deadpans.

"All right, enough of that," Erik says, coming up behind Jason and wrapping an arm around his waist. "Keith, this is my friend, Jason. Yes, that Jason. Jason, this is Keith Mulligan. He runs Nuts and Bolts, down the road."

"Nice to meet you," Jason says, offering his hand.

Keith takes it. "You're kidding," he says. "That's. Amazing. What in the world are you doing in Mill Point?"

Jason looks up at Erik, and Keith takes that in, looking at Erik with new respect and a little bit of envy. Erik's lips turn up in one corner. "We've been friends since high school," he says. "Jason's in town visiting me."

"For a minute there I thought maybe you were doing some kind of movie... or, I don't know, mini-series... that takes place in a small town jewelry store. Research," Keith says. "And I was kinda going, 'damn, too bad it's not a small town hardware store...'"

Jason laughs. "No work on the agenda just now. I've got something I just finished--"

"Brain Eaters 2!" Keith looks altogether too gleeful, considering the phrase he just said. "It's going to sell out here. We're counting down the days."

"Not that there's any competition for that opening weekend," Jason says dryly. "November 13th? That's halfway between Halloween and Thanksgiving. It's like they're saying, 'We're giving it a theatrical release, but we're sure not--'" And then, abruptly, he shuts up. "Okay, sorry, wow. That was really ungrateful. The fact that I'm opening something with a national release at all is pretty huge. Sorry."

He levels one of his best smiles at Keith, and Erik has a feeling Keith isn't going to remember his own name after that, let alone Jason's less-than-tactful slip. "Pretty exciting to hear that people are revved up for it, though," Jason continues. "I'm not that much of a headliner."

"You are here," Keith promises. "How many out mutant actors are there? There's pretty much just you and that other guy, Brad--"

"--Findley, yeah," Jason finishes, his expression neutral.

Keith's expression is a lot less neutral. "Talk about your closet cases. I still think he came out because his career was stalling, and he thought the publicity from being a mutant might jump-start it. And he still waxes his dorsal stripe off in half his roles."
"It's too bad," Jason says. "It's damn good-looking on him, when it's there." Erik elbows him; Jason glances up, grinning now. "Yeah, yeah, I know, visible mutation envy..."

Keith's eyebrow feathers actually fluff up a little; Jason catches it, smiles. Keith smiles back at him. "You've always been open about your mutation. Even though it can't show up on film..."

"I wish it could." There's a long pause-- Keith trying hard not to ask Jason to demonstrate, live-and-in-person; Jason's fingers working as though he's trying to project something, anything, now and here while someone wants to see it. Nothing happens.

"You said your movie had a good script," Erik says, nudging Jason gently with his shoulder. Jason nods and snaps out of it, looking at Keith again. "It does. It's not like the first one, where I'm the first one to hit the floor. I'm still a mutant, and I'm the hero-- even if it were going straight to video I'd be proud of it. And, I mean, for what it's worth, horror movie sequel or not, I really did work my ass off on it. We had a good cast-- a few kids who were on their first movie set, but they all brought their A-game, every single day. The crew was outstanding. A lot more mutants than I'm used to getting to work with. That was awesome."

Keith beams. "Is it true the director's a mutant? I mean, you don't have to tell me if it's a secret, but a lot of people think..."

Jason shakes his head. "He's not," he says. "But his daughter morphs gills and flippers when she's in the water. He says it's a pain to keep their swimming pool clean without chlorine, but at least she can take in fresh water and salt water."

Keith goes a little liquid-eyed. "Okay, that has to be adorable. How old is she?"


"Little League," Jason repeats. "Do you have to have flexible rules for kids with physical mutations...?"

"Yeah, and that gets complicated. But it's worth it."

"You can see why I wanted to settle down here," Erik says, very quietly, and for the first time, Jason nods. "You're not thinking about moving here while you're between jobs, are you?" Keith asks. "Settling down here, even? I heard you found your soulmate..."

Jason flinches-- and then he flinches harder, turning away. Couldn't blank, Erik thinks, wondering how often he's blanked or tried to blank out that reaction to any mention of Anne. Erik steps in, shields Jason a little with his body as Jason tries to get control of himself. "I'm sorry, where did you...?"

"Oh. Oh, God, I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have--"

"Was there a blog post somewhere?" Jason asks. He sounds strained to Erik's ears, but he's doing a reasonable job covering for it now. Even without blanking, he's still got his instincts as an actor; he has a decent poker face when he's trying. "Somebody said something?"

"I really shouldn't have--"
"Could you tell us, please," Erik says, quiet but firm, and Keith takes a deep breath and stands up a little straighter.

"There was something on one of the message boards, I forget which one originally, it's kind of gone around in the rumor mills now," Keith says. "A kid said he met you and your soulmate out in Arizona. There was a picture... he had blond hair, blue tentacles..." He gestures behind an ear.

"Didn't work out," Jason says, finally. "We're not together."

Keith nods, expression sympathetic; Jason's jaw tightens just a little, just enough that Erik can see the effort it's taking not to bolt. "I see mine maybe once a year," he offers, reaching up and brushing at one of his eyebrows. "I love him, but... I need to be here. And he needs to-- not be here." He shrugs. "Sucks sometimes."

Some of the tension comes out of Jason, and he nods. "Yeah. So."

"Anyway. I'm so sorry, that was really rude, I didn't mean to--"

"It's okay." Jason sighs. "It really is. It's fine."

"I really love your acting," Keith tries. "I wasn't kidding when I said you were my favorite."

That gets a little smile out of Jason, who nods again. "Thanks," he murmurs. "I appreciate that."

"So-- I'm gonna-- I'll see you later, Erik," Keith says, and then he rushes out the door.

Jason sits down heavily on the stool behind the counter. "I haven't looked at any of the blogs since... yeah. There was a kid. Anne took a picture. Sweetest kid ever, shy. Tentacles, like he said..." Jason gestures just behind his ear. "A fan. And she just-- got as far away as she could. Pushed herself so far into her chair that it left marks on her back." He shrugs. "Don't know how he does it."

"Who?" Erik glances through the open door. "Keith?"

"Once a year to be with someone who hates you the other three hundred and sixty-four days. I don't know how he does it."

Erik comes over, stands behind Jason and sets his hands on Jason's shoulders, squeezing lightly. Jason reaches up, wraps his hand around Erik's wrist. "You just do it," Erik says softly. "Because you have to." Jason's grip goes tight. "Because sometimes the bond makes you forget you're supposed to hate someone, at least for a while."

"Erik." Jason keeps his hand on Erik's wrist. "I know I don't exactly look like a reason to renounce right now, but--"

"Don't." Erik shakes his head. "I know what you're going to say, and... just don't. Not yet."

He doesn't. But his hand stays on Erik's wrist, and Erik leans into that touch, closing his eyes and letting himself take some comfort in it.

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Jason starts staying up a little later, and then a little later still. It gets to a point where most nights Erik's the one yawning and trying to decide if he should turn in, but he can't bear the idea of missing it, when it happens. So night after night he stays up, bleary-eyed, curled into one end of the
couch, while John and Jason play speed chess and manage to set each other off without even talking about it.

Tonight, fourteen moves in, Jason meets John's eyes and then flicks his gaze to the floor. John takes a deep breath and stands up, walks around the coffee table, and goes to his knees.

They play out the rest of the game like that, and Erik squirms on the couch, blanket wrapped around him, desperately, achingly hard. Last year, he got to-- last year, before he and Jason agreed on a year apart to seek-- for the first time since Erik was a teenager, sending thoughts and emotions to his soulmate, it felt good to be on his knees. Safe.

It's so difficult not to envy John that ease. Erik misses submission sometimes, more than he'd want to admit to anyone. He could have admitted it to Jason...

He draws his windcatcher up against his palm, holds onto it, but he doesn't let himself ask... doesn't let himself close his eyes, think the words Are you out there? Can you hear me? He's not there; he can't hear anything anymore. Nine years is a long time to hold onto false hope.

He sits up as the game ends, as John clears the pieces off the board and sets them up for another round. The move catches Jason's attention, and where Jason's attention goes, John's follows, until they're both looking at Erik, watching the blanket fall away from Erik's shoulders as he stands.

"Do you still want me in this?" Erik murmurs.

Jason reaches out a hand to him, and Erik takes it. Jason stands up. "More than anything," Jason says quietly. "Tell me how you need it to be."

Erik squeezes Jason's hand and then looks over at John. "Come up," he says. John climbs to his feet, comes close and slides an arm around Erik's waist. Erik tips his head against John's for a moment, and then slides behind John, shifts out from between them, makes space. He draws Jason's hand to John's and lets them take hold of each other, and he heads for the bedroom, giving them some time alone before they follow.

They don't need much. Erik's only just had time to turn on the lights and draw back the covers when Jason and John walk in. Jason puts his hand on the small of John's back and murmurs out, "Bed. On your back. Relax, be comfortable."

"I can be comfortable," John says, eyes down on the floor. "I don't know if I can relax. It's been a while."

"Me, too," Jason admits. "But we're going to get there together. Go to bed. I'll be with you soon."

John takes a deep breath and nods, and he climbs into bed, still in his t-shirt and sweatpants, barefoot, trembling. He lies down where Jason asked him to, stretched out on his back, and he leaves his arms down at his sides, his wrists upturned, his fingers loose.

"Where do you want me?" It's Erik's turn to ask. Jason looks surprised at the question, and Erik quickly adds, "I'm not asking as your sub. I just don't want to get in your way."

"You won't," Jason assures him. It's stunning, watching his confidence pick up moment-by-moment, and Erik can only wonder if John is having the same reaction to it. Does it mean as much to John as it does to Erik? Erik isn't the one who's going to be scening with Jason, but John doesn't have the history Erik does with him.

Erik glances back to the bed. John's got his eyes closed now; he's breathing deep, nice and even,
and Erik knows him well enough to recognize it as a sign that he's having to work to stay calm. Erik inclines his head, a quick question, asking permission more than anything, and Jason nods. Erik heads over to the bed, takes a seat next to John, and brushes John's hair back off his forehead. "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay," John says immediately. He doesn't open his eyes. "I'm all right. The threads are all over the place, I can't tell one from the next. I can't see what's coming."

"Is that good or bad?"

"It's good." John looks up at Jason. "It's a little intimidating."

"Not my goal," Jason reassures him, coming over to the other side of the bed and taking a seat at John's side, too. "There's just so much I want to do. So much I've wanted to do."

"I could leave," Erik's throat feels tight as he says it, but it's true. He could leave. It'd take one factor out of the scene, at least. "Do you want me to go?"

"Please don't go," Jason tells him. Erik meets Jason's eyes and nods. When John reaches out a hand for Erik's, Erik takes it, grounding him, grounding himself. Holding on.

*

"You okay?"

Erik's been curled up on the couch for the better part of an hour, ever since daylight started creeping in through the mini-blinds and he slipped out of bed, letting John have some time curled up to Jason by himself. He doesn't look up at Jason, now that he knows Jason's there; he just nods.

Jason comes over to the couch, settling down within reach. For a few seconds, he hesitates, not reaching out for Erik, but then he makes a soft, impatient sound and slides a hand onto Erik's knee.

Erik doesn't jump, but he doesn't relax, either.

"You were right about all this," Jason says softly. "I needed that. I think it was good for John, too. I hope it was good for John."

"I don't think you have anything to worry about there," Erik murmurs. "You don't, huh?"

"If I could still give that to anyone..." Three days, last July. They both knew Erik could only go there because it was temporary. He could never have kept it up. Erik looks up, finally, and meets Jason's eyes. "I wish I could."

"I could tell you I'm not in a hurry," Jason says, slow and careful. "For any of it. Would that make a difference?"

He means it. Erik can feel it in the way Jason's touching his knee; he knows it from ten years of friendship and looking out for each other.

"Is this it?" he asks. He slides his hand onto Jason's and squeezes. "Is it the end of the road, if I say no?"

Jason's mouth twists, and he looks away. Erik wonders if he would have blanked that expression, if he'd been able.
"It's not what I came up here to hear," Jason admits quietly. "But there's no 'end of the road' for us. Not if it's up to me."

Erik takes Jason's hand in both of his, and turns to look out the window again. The sun's hanging low in the sky so far, but it's rising. It's coming up.
Charles wins a date at a Mutant Anti-Defamation League auction. A lot of things are happening for Raven at once, all of them good. And when the people you're scening with are friends, they might coax you into being happy, at least for a little while.

"Were you waiting up for me? How nice," Charles has time to begin, before Raven cuts him off.

"Okay, really? You're just now getting home from the club?"

Charles tugs his sleeve back and looks at his watch. "Oh," he says. He grins. "It was a good night. That turned into a good morning, and then a good day."

"Save it," Raven says. "I know you probably didn't sleep much, with all--" she gestures at his rumpled shirt and open waistcoat-- "that, but we have that charity thing in, like, an hour. Didn't you get any of my texts?"

"My phone ran out of power," Charles admits. He's already heading up the stairs, though. "Okay, I'll be ready in--" He pauses at the landing. "We're going to be late."

"See, I can pull shit like this because I can get ready in literally five seconds, but you, not so much."

Taking the stairs two at a time now, Charles calls back, "I know, I know, I know... I'll be down ASAP..."

He can hear Raven sighing as he goes, but he can't exactly be sorry. He plugs his phone in before stepping into the shower; at least it'll have a little time to charge, while he gets ready.

*  

They make it out the door by 5:08. "I still don't see why it's auction, then dinner," Charles says, tugging out his phone and searching through his email archives for the auction pamphlet.

"You don't-- did you even read the email?"

"Of course I read it," Charles scoffs. "Skimmed it. All right, I glanced briefly at the subject line. What was I going to do? Say no? It's a MAD-L fundraiser, of course I'm going. I have to go, I'm being drafted to run for the board of directors this year."

"You could bow out of that if you wanted..."

"It'd be more trouble to do that than it would be to just step in and serve my two years and go back to quietly signing checks," Charles shrugs. "There, there we are, found the PDF of the pamphlet... oh."

Raven just laughs at him. "So you totally missed the part where it's a bid-on-dates kind of auction."
"I most certainly did," Charles says. "I hope you're not actually expecting me to bid, that would be- hmm."

Raven peeks over at his phone. "Hmm, huh? Cute, if you're into the tall, skinny look..." She raises an eyebrow. "How about you move on?" She pages past him to the next one, and the next, and the one after that.

"You could just ask me for the phone," Charles says. "Wait, no, stop, go back--" He swipes the screen a few times until he reaches the ad that caught his eye, and when the name and description confirm it, he laughs.

"Someone you know?"

"Mm, someone I've met several times, yes. Alex Summers. I've been working with his dominant on and off for years and years-- you've met him, haven't you? Armando Muñoz?"


"A bit of a handful. I've never known anyone to get the 'don't get above yourself' gesture so often." Charles demonstrates, flattening his hand and resting it on top of his own head.

"Kind of hardcore," Raven sniffs. "And old-fashioned. I didn't expect that from Armando..."

"It's not really serious," Charles says quickly. "Armando isn't the strict type at all. Alex is just..." He grins fondly. "He's just Alex."

"How well did you say you knew this guy?" Raven stares at Charles for a moment. "Wait. You've been scening with Armando?"

"Not on any sort of regular basis..."

"You didn't tell me! God, I came this close to hitting on him this week, that's the closest call ever!"

"Er," Charles says, looking back at his phone. 

"Please tell me that's the closest call ever."

"I can honestly tell you that I haven't knowingly scened with anyone you scened with first," Charles says, still looking at his phone.

"Oh God," Raven groans. "Okay, likewise, obviously, but we crossed the streams somewhere, didn't we?"

"Only once or twice. It's not as though I go round asking potential partners, 'By the way, have you ever scened with a gorgeous blue metamorph?' before we get started."

"Hmph." But the compliment does seem to mollify her a bit. "I think we need to agree on full disclosure from now on, though. I don't want to find out after, that's just... ew."

"But finding out before would be all right?" Charles asks, genuinely curious.

"At the very least I could make a, you know, informed decision."

"Wait. When you say 'full disclosure'... how informed do you expect these decisions to be?"
"Oh, God, not that informed!" And she's back to sounding scandalized. "Look, just tell me who, and I'll keep my hands off, and I'll tell you who, and you do the same, okay?"

"I reserve the right to change my mind under extraordinary circumstances..."

"Fair enough, I reserve the right to change my mind if you get to Jason Wyngarde before I do." Charles laughs; Raven scoots in close and nudges him with an elbow. "Please, like you didn't eat Brain Eaters 2 up with a spoon. I noticed my DVD was back in the player again."

"Don't mention eating in conjunction with that film, all that gore is disgusting. And I'm still not all that fond of live-action films," Charles says. "The audience at one of those things is usually more interesting than the film itself..."

"Uh-huh, even in one of those dominant-gets-striped-and-takes-a-beating scenes?"

"A small amount of flatware might have been involved for that scene," Charles concedes. "But it's interesting that no matter how supposedly enlightened humanity becomes, we still keep coming up with flimsy excuses to put dominants in so-called submissive positions in popular entertainment, and vice versa. There's nothing explicitly submissive about bondage or beatings; it's only that we're so--"

"--we'? How about 'they'?--"

"--humanity and mutantkind, then. We're so accustomed to thinking of sadism as strictly a dominant trait and masochism as strictly a submissive trait that people who don't fit the paradigm are unwilling to talk about it. Which just reinforces the stereotypes. Films and television shows tiptoe around role flexibility and hint at it, but when it comes down to it, they always throw in something to reiterate that doms are capital-D dominant and subs are small-s submissive and imply that when people have the choice, everyone conforms to type. The sub only acted sadistic because she was undercover, the dom only pretended to like that beating to confuse his captors..." Charles makes a face. "The excuse for that Brain Eaters 2 scene was so flimsy it was almost like a comment on the convention. But Wyngarde certainly played it to the hilt."

"Lot of words there for what was essentially, 'Hell yeah, I could watch that fine piece of mutant ass looking like he's about to come from a beating six times a week and twice on Thursdays.'"

He raises an eyebrow. "Did you seriously just use the phrase 'fine piece of mutant ass' in a sentence?"

"Not unironically," Raven defends. "Anyway, maybe this is something you could go into in your book. He's done lots of roles like that... maybe mutants are more inclined to push the envelope with concordance norms."

"I don't know that it's really in keeping with the topic, my book's more about genetics and the bond than concordance..." Charles sighs, looking for a way out of the topic of his book, the quicker the better. "Lots of roles like that, did you say?"

"I keep trying to get you to watch them. He did a stint on 'The U Word'."

"Isn't that the show where most of the cast isn't unoriented at all?" Charles frowns. "You'd think they could find unoriented actors."

"Okay, okay, fair point. But at least they cast real mutants when they need a mutant character. Wyngarde was the first."
"That's good," Charles concedes. "So there were more of these dominant-taking-a-beating scenes in these episodes...?"

Raven laughs. "There was a lot of everything in those scenes. Anyway, he doesn't play an unoriented character, but apparently he's said in interviews that he's close to some unoriented people. Broad-minded. Like I was just saying about mutants," she finishes triumphantly.

"True enough. But ultimately not very relevant to the topic at hand. I don't think we're likely to have Jason Wyngarde propositioning us anytime soon. Armando's tried more than once to get him involved in MEOI events and the timing's never worked out."

"Sadly. Are you going to bid on your friend?"

"I might. I'll have to check in and see how he and Armando are doing, at the very least."

"It's for a good cause," Raven teases. "The MAD-L can never have enough general fund donations. It'll even be tax-deductible."

Charles laughs. "There we are, the argument that pushes me past the tipping point. Tax-deductibility."

Raven smiles sweetly. "My brother taught me never to judge a person by eir kinks."

She leans over then and ruffles his hair, but Charles is laughing enough that he doesn't really mind.

* 

At the Promenade, Charles draws out his cell phone again and sends a quick text message.

[Just got here. Didn't realize Alex was up for bid! Can I sneak back and see him?]

[ Heck, yes, I could use a hand calming the boy down. I'll tell them to let you through.]

Raven raises an eyebrow. "You're texting someone?"

"Mm-hm."

"The auction's not enough to keep you busy? Is this the guy from last night?"

"Guys from last night," Charles corrects absently. "Which way is backstage?"

Raven points at a door off to the left. "Last night was that good?"

"Hm? Oh, no, no, no..." Charles laughs. "I was texting Armando. I can't really..." He wiggles his fingers demonstratively at his temple. "He blocks it."

"Aw." Raven nods. "On purpose, or is that part of his mutation?"

"It's his mutation," Charles reassures her.

"Well, that's good. Why are you headed backstage...?"

"To see how Alex is doing. Apparently he's a bit excited."

"Great. Okay, then, have fun." She leans over and kisses his cheek. "I'll see you at our table."

As promised, Armando's informed the security personnel at the door that Charles belongs
backstage, so it's easy enough to slip back and find them. He's not the only one back here early, either; Charles spots Warren Worthington III, Roberto da Costa, Jamie and Betsy Braddock, Jacqueline Falsworth, Emma Frost and her sub-- oh, that could be awkward-- along with a few other members of the glamorous mutant set.

But even without telepathy and his general sense for people, he'd have easily picked Alex out of the crowd. Alex is bouncing.

"How do I look, how do I look," he's asking Armando, who really does seem to have his hands full. He's trying to smooth out Alex's tux and straighten his tie; Alex isn't making it easy for him.

"You look like a million bucks, baby," Armando says, leaving a smacking kiss on Alex's lips.

It makes Alex glower at him. "Now you're gonna make me disappointed if I only get, like, a hundred."

"Well, let's see if we can tip the scales a little." And Armando bends his head down, biting a nice heavy mark just above Alex's shirt collar. Alex groans, eyelashes fluttering, hands reaching out for Armando's gorgeous slim hips and tugging him close. When he's done, Armando reaches up and rubs at his mark. "There. See anybody resist that."

"I'll certainly bid," Charles offers. Both Alex and Armando turn to look at him, and Alex beams, heading over and hugging him. Armando's a little more reserved, just rubbing Charles's back. "How are you two?"

"Well, somebody's a little nervous, although considering Warren made some noises like he wants his very own pretty boy for a night, I don't know why..."

"I just really want him not to be the only one bidding," Alex moans.

"He won't be," Charles promises, "but why precisely...?"

Alex gives a quick look around and then leans forward, lowering his voice. "I like him, but I'm ticklish, and dude is covered in feathers, okay?"

Charles levels his third-best mock-stern look at Alex. "We should all strive to be more accepting of each other's mutations."

Alex's lower lip comes out in a pout. "I accept it just fine, but he does it on purpose!"

"And seriously, look at this." Armando lifts one arm and concentrates, and a thick line of pinfeathers sprouts, followed by another layer of coverts and primary remiges. He takes his arm and flutters his feathers against Alex's neck, and Alex yelps, batting at Armando's arm and feathers. "Ain't pretty," Armando says cheerfully, "unlike usual."

The fond look on Armando's face melts the sulk right off Alex's. He smiles at Armando, everything else forgotten for a moment. But soon enough Armando's reabsorbing his feathers, turning back to Charles. "He did seem serious, though. Worthington, I mean."

"Well, he has deep pockets; I'm going to have to bid high," Charles points out, smiling. He looks Alex over, a bit showily. "How are you going to make it worth my while?"

Alex plucks a downy feather off his shoulder. "I'm always worth your while!"

That gets him another hand-on-head gesture from Armando, which brings up another pout. "I am!"
Alex protests.

"You're always worth my while, but I can't get by just bidding that," says Charles.

Someone with a clipboard walks up to the three of them. "It's time to line up, Mr. Summers."

"We can work out details during the other auctions," Alex offers, reaching up and tapping his temple. "I gotta go, though..."

"Of course." Charles waves to Armando and takes his leave, heading out and catching one of the valet staff, who shows him to his table. Raven's got a printed brochure out, and she's paging through it. A few pages are dog-eared. "See something interesting? Or I should say, someone."

"Maybe." Raven grins. "How about you, are you bidding on Armando's boy?"

"Definitely."

"See? Aren't you glad you didn't miss it?"

"Of course." Charles gestures at a waiter and orders a bottle of Veuve; Raven asks for a Pellegrino. Maybe the bottle is a bit much, then. He was assuming she'd share it. "I wasn't planning to start scening tonight..."

"I might." She flashes him another grin. "Depends on who I get."

"I'm riveted with curiosity."

"Oh, I'm sure."

The auction is lively; while some dominants and submissives up for bid are in tuxedos like Alex, others are in full clubbing gear, complete with armbinders, corsets, whips, a variety of other accoutrements. Alex is around the middle of the program, and Charles resists bidding on anyone else until it's his turn on the block. If Worthington really was serious about wanting to bid on Alex, Charles had better keep his budget unencumbered.

As it turns out, Worthington does bid on Alex, but he and Charles aren't the only ones involved in the bidding war. There's another domme in the mix, one Charles recognizes from several different events. She doesn't seem to have a submissive with her now, but she's been strict with the dates she's brought to fundraisers and nights at the theater; she's one of those dommes who doesn't think a submissive should be off eir leash or on eir feet unless absolutely necessary. Charles remembers seeing a submissive on hobbles with her, once, so she could only crawl along at her mistress's side. Nothing odd about the hobbles in particular, but he sensed unhappiness from the sub, no enjoyment or satisfaction of any sort, and something felt off about that.

Alex looks at Charles and sends out a mental signal flare. «Charles? Yo! Professor!»

«I'm not a character on Gilligan's Island,» Charles protests.

«Whatever that means. So maybe we should talk about stuff you want me to do, 'cause oh my God I really want you to win me right now.»

«I'm flattered,» Charles thinks dryly. «I also suspect this is mostly because Dr. Steed looks intimidating, and we've established Worthington's going to flutter at your ticklish spots.»

«Hey, it's not just that and you know it! We've scened together before, it was great!» Alex protests.
«Steed? You know her?»

«A bit. I've seen her around. Never scened alongside her, but I've watched from a distance. Near as I can tell she's quite strict, very traditional.»

«So not like you, then.»

«Not like me,» Charles thinks, «although she is a psionic...»

«Telepathic?»

«No, she's actually telepathy-resistant. She does something with psionic blades; I haven't seen it in action, but I'm told it's a bit like mental knifeplay.» He raises his bid by another $25. Worthington's starting to slow down, but Steed's determined to stay in the running, it seems. «You can always ask me to back down if you think a date with her would be fun...?»

Alex's heartfelt «PLEASE WIN» has Charles laughing. He raises his paddle again, recapturing the lead. Across the room, Worthington catches Charles's eye and shrugs, fluttering his wings. He's out.

Charles turns his attention back to Alex. «Ah, just me and Dr. Steed, then. I'm sure if the knifeplay isn't something you can deal with, there are other things you could learn from her...»

Now Alex sounds a little intrigued. «About?»

«How to comfortably breathe with a six-inch stiletto on your Adam's apple, for one.»

«I'll pay you back! Just keep bidding!» Alex thinks frantically. A moment later, his voice comes back to Charles's mind: «Though, I don't know, that does sound kind of fun.»

«Shall I stop, then?»

«No no no no, please!» The considering tone in Alex's thoughts has disappeared; he's all earnest desperation now, and a little chagrined honesty. «C'mon, it's been forever, you know we always have a good time together. I really want to see you again. And...» His eyebrows tilt up, his expression growing a little concerned. «I trust you, I know we can keep a lid on my Hula Hoops Of Death, but with a stranger, I don't know, what if she scares me, what if I freak, what happens then, fuck...»

«You'd be fine,» Charles reassures him with perfect certainty, but he raises his paddle again and calls out, "Six thousand!"

Raven says, "Damn!" There's a collective gasp from the crowd. Steed nods to Charles and shakes her head at the auctioneer.

"Sold to Dr. Xavier, for six thousand dollars!" The auctioneer slams his gavel down. "Congratulations!"

A round of applause breaks out, and Charles stands up, heading to the stage to collect Alex, hand over his credit card, and sign the contract. «Good luck with yours, whoever ey is,» Charles sends back to Raven.

«I'll need it! See you later!»

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The paperwork takes very little time; despite that, Alex is a bundle of nerves, one that Charles can feel distinct among all the other minds, all the way from this side of the stage. By the time Alex actually gets brought out to him, led on a leash, he's so tightly-wound that Charles actually unclips the leash altogether, unbuckling the work collar so Alex can breathe.

"Should I text Armando?"

"He's on his way," Alex says, reaching up to the back of his head-- and quickly thinking better of it, giving Charles a sheepish look as he lets his hand fall away from soul's-home. "I don't know why I got so nervous up there, I can totally fucking do this, I just--" He shakes out his shoulders. "I'm glad it was you."

"I'm glad it was me, too," Charles smiles. "You promised to make it worth my while, but I can't think of much you haven't been willing to give me for free. Six thousand dollars ought to buy me something special, don't you think?"

"I was thinking about that." Alex flashes Charles a grin. "How about if we try the tea service thing again? I can sit still this time."

Charles leans in and kisses his cheek, ruffling his hair a bit, though he stays well away from soul's-home and any intimation of the 'don't get above yourself' gesture that Armando uses so often. "That's sweet. I'm only joking, though, of course I was happy to win you. It was for a good cause." He smirks. "Not to mention the MAD-L general fund, that as well."

Alex backs Charles up a few steps, easing Charles back into the folds of one of the curtains. "You know I'm the best sub up there. Like you could resist."

Slipping an arm around Alex's waist, Charles turns them, pressing Alex into the curtain and reaching up to tweak his bow tie. "You were definitely my favorite in the lineup."

Appeased, Alex beams, and then his gaze shifts to over Charles's shoulder. Charles turns, too, smiling at Armando, and-- behind Armando, several yards away, there's the man who first caught Charles's eye in the pamphlet: tall with light brown hair, slim, dressed in a chest harness and leather jeans, being laced into armbinders as Charles watches.

It takes an effort to get his attention back on his friends after that, but Charles manages. "That was more exciting than I expected," Armando says, reaching out and squeezing Charles's shoulder. "Glad it was you, though." He turns to Alex with a smirk. "Guess that means no tickling scenes, you're off the hook."

"Oh, not necessarily," Charles says. Alex gives him an alarmed look before catching the smile on Charles's face, and Charles has to duck a swat after that. "Well, how am I meant to get six thousand dollars’ worth of value out of you without at least some attention to my tickling fetish--" He ducks again, but this time he catches Alex by the wrist, and after a quick glance to Armando for permission, keeps hold of it. Alex squirms and settles down. "He'd better be worth it," Charles tells Armando, tongue still firmly in cheek.

"How about we get together for lunch the day after, and you tell me all about it."

"Oh, hey, not fair--" Alex looks from one to the other of them, shaking his head. "C'mon, what happens in the auction scene stays in the auction scene--"

Armando snorts; Charles doesn't do anything quite so undignified, but he does shoot Alex a look. "You know I'd never hide things from your dominant."
"And you also know I'm alllll about the juicy details," Armando adds. "So don't even try it. If you brat it up while you're with Charles, I'll hear that."

"And if you're a perfect angel, he'll hear that, too."

"You guys are no fun," Alex grouses, but he can't stop himself from smiling. His smile fades a little as he catches sight of someone over Charles's shoulder; Charles turns, surprised to see Dr. Steed backstage.

"Just wanted to pass on my congratulations," she says, extending a hand to Charles. "Dr. Xavier, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. Dr. Steed, I believe?" Her grip is ice-cold, her fingers very thin; it isn't a pleasant handshake. It's over fast.

"Yes, Emma Steed. Pleased to finally meet you. I think we've run into each other at a few of these things...?"

"Now and then," Charles allows.

She turns to Armando next, probably due to that traditionalist mentality again-- always acknowledge the dominant first, whether one's actually intent on talking to em or not. "Hello. I'm Emma Steed."

"Armando Muñoz," Armando says, perfectly polite. "This is my bondmate, Alex Summers."

"Hi," Alex says. He offers his hand next. Dr. Steed raises an eyebrow, but finally takes it.

"You were absolutely darling up there." She looks back at Armando. "You must be very proud."

"You betcha," but that's not Armando, that's Alex, who's grinning at Dr. Steed, almost bouncing on the balls of his feet. "He was just saying so."

Armando passes a hand over Alex's head, and Dr. Steed gives him an approving nod, as if she thinks he's making the gesture in all seriousness. "I'm always proud of Alex," Armando says, "even when he's a handful."

"Excuse me, Mr. Muñoz?" All four heads turn as a young domme with a clipboard steps in to get Armando's attention. "If you have a moment-- oh, Dr. Xavier, you're here, too. That's great. We've got someone with a question about that mutant youth project you two are heading up next month, can you spare a couple of minutes to--?"

"Sure," Armando says, and Charles nods as well. "You okay here by yourself, babe?"

"I'm fine," Alex says. He leans over and kisses Armando's cheek. "I'll be right here."

It takes scarcely any time at all to answer questions about the urban gardening project they've been planning, but while they're talking, Armando cuts a look over to Alex. Charles follows that look-- Dr. Steed's still talking to him, and Alex's jaw is set, his expression cold. Dr. Steed heads off as Armando and Charles come back over, and Armando immediately pulls Alex into a hug. "What was that? I felt you getting freaked out..."

"Nothing." But Alex takes the hug gratefully. "She's just one of those dommes who comes on really strong. Really strong. She backed off when I said I wasn't going to be on the market anytime soon."
"On the market--"

Alex gestures up at the stage. "You know. Again."

"Ah." Charles reaches out, and Alex grabs for him, pulling him into the hug, too. "Well, maybe I should be more glad than ever that I rescued you."

"Maybe," Alex mutters, holding onto both of them. When he finally lets them go, he beams up at Charles and says, "So. When are you free?"

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The uniform is easy enough; Alex even enjoys getting into it, laughing, cheerful, wearing the bowtie and collar piece around his neck, but buttoning it over his real collar himself. He lets Charles add the cuffs with their cufflinks. The black satin thong gets a high-pitched yelp out of him, but once he gets a look in the mirror and sees the whole effect, he settles down. "I look like I'm actually going to be good at this," he says.

But for all of that, and for all that he manages to stay still on his knees while Charles goes out for the tea tray, he gives a dubious look to the tray itself and all its accoutrements once Charles brings it in.

"It looks heavy," Alex says, eyeing the whole package as Charles sets it down. It's a classic antique silver tea service set, of course, teapot and coffeepot, creamer and milk jug and sugar bowl and waste bowl, plus a small plate of lemon slices to go along with the tea. There's also a plate of scones, as well as a dish of clotted cream and a bit of jam. "Why are there two pots?"

"One for coffee," Charles points it out, "one for tea."

"But there's just you, you're only going to want the tea--" Alex closes his mouth and gives Charles a sheepish grin. "It's not about who I'm serving right now, it's about the whole experience..."

"Good boy," Charles says, sweeping a hand over Alex's hair. Unexpectedly, it makes Alex straighten, his shoulders settling back. Charles manages to repress his double-take, but only with some effort. "Do you need a refresher course in how this works?"

"I'm supposed to ask you about everything in turn, right?" Alex looks at the tray again. "Is there an order?"

"Coffee and tea first, and then whatever items are relevant. Then scones."

"What if I can't hold the tray up that long?"

"Then set it down. But you'd be surprised how long you can keep something like that aloft, if you're not thinking about how heavy it is."

"What am I gonna be thinking about that's gonna outweigh a full tea tray?"

Charles shoots him a look, but bad as the pun was, Alex has an angelic, innocent look on his face now. In the interests of preserving momentum, Charles decides to let it go. For now. "Service," Charles says lightly, and Alex breathes out carefully, looking at the tray again and nodding.

"Okay," Alex says. "I think I'm ready."

Charles takes a seat in the armchair, and gives Alex a nod. "Then let's start."
Alex moves more smoothly than the last time they tried this, going down to all fours without his traditional arf! arf! It's not so much that he and Armando are into puppy play, at least not as far as Charles knows... Alex has just never been able to resist the urge to mouth off.

But tonight he's doing none of that. He's crawling, carefully, and when he reaches Charles's feet, he turns to the side table and slips the tea service carefully off it, holding it out so Charles can take whatever he'd like. "May I offer you coffee, sir?"

"No, thank you."

"Tea, sir?"

"Yes, please."

Alex looks down at the tray, which does have an empty teacup on it; he frowns for a second and then looks back up at Charles. "Uh, should I--"

"Put the tray on the table first, and then go on and pour out tea," Charles offers gently.

"Okay." Alex sets the tray back on the side table, and as carefully as he can, pours a steaming cup of tea from the teapot. He glances up at Charles for guidance, and Charles nods at the milk jug.

"Milk next..."

"Right, okay." Alex blows out a breath and then settles down on his knees again. "May I offer you milk, sir?"

"No, thank you."

"Sugar, sir?"

"No, thank you."

"Lemon, sir?" Alex frowns again. "I wouldn't offer someone lemon for coffee, right? Armando puts it in all kinds of stuff, even Coke, but coffee..."

"No," Charles smiles down at him. "You're doing very well, Alex."

Alex grins for a second, but then he's right back to concentrating on the tea service. "Okay," he says, "you've got the tea, you didn't want anything for it..." He takes the teacup and saucer and offers those to Charles from his knees. "Your tea, sir?"

"Thank you, Alex." Charles takes the tea and sips at it for a moment, more for the ritual than because he's thirsty; he sets the teacup and saucer on the side table when he's done. There's more than enough room for that as well as the service tray, but Alex quickly picks up the tray anyway.

"This is kinda getting heavy," Alex murmurs. "I'm okay, though, I got it. Um..." He scans what's left on the tray. "Do you want a scone?" He winces at himself. "Scratch that, no-- May I offer you a scone, sir?" His face scrunches up even more once he says it. "Am I really doing this right? It sounds so repetitive..."

"That's part of the point," Charles reassures him, reaching out and cupping Alex's face with one hand. Alex's expression smooths out a bit. "Rituals can be relaxing, fulfilling... even sensual. We don't need to rush things. Set the tray down for a bit, just stay where you are."

Alex slides the tray cautiously back onto the side table and stretches his arms down at his sides,
then moves them behind his back and stretches them out there. Charles doesn't try to hide his appreciative look. "You've been working out lately."

He's expecting a smirk, but it doesn't happen. Alex just nods, and keeps his hands folded behind his back. "Yes, sir."

There are times when all his practice keeping a calm expression comes in handy; this is certainly one of them. "You look nice."

"Thank you, sir."

"You really are doing very well tonight." Charles leans forward and strokes a hand down Alex's chest. "I'm looking forward to rewarding you."

That gets Alex to break character for a moment; he smiles, big and broad, and licks his lips. "I bet you are," he says, but then he rolls his eyes at himself and straightens again. "I mean... I'm looking forward to it, too. Sir."

Charles sits back in his armchair, picking his teacup up and sipping at it some more, all while watching Alex as he kneels in place, perfect posture, shoulders back. It's a very pretty picture.

It's also beginning to occur to Charles that, while he was the one who initially teased Alex about getting 'something special' out of the auction scene, doing tea service was Alex's idea. And Alex really is being remarkably well-behaved tonight... for certain stereotypical standards of 'well-behaved'.

"Would you like a scone, Alex?"

"Isn't that supposed to be my line?"

Charles takes a scone, breaks off a piece, and holds it in his palm, smiling wickedly at Alex. "Not necessarily."

"Oh." Alex looks down at the bite-sized piece of scone in Charles's hand. "Okay, tell me if I'm doing it right."

Alex bends his head down and carefully nibbles the bite of scone up, licking Charles's palm afterwards. He looks up at Charles, eyebrows raised.

"You're doing wonderfully," Charles says. "Another bite?"

"Yes, please."

Charles breaks off another piece of scone for him, and after Alex eats this one, Charles finally has to ask. "If I may, Alex... is there a reason you were looking for service play tonight?"

Alex looks up at him, eyes a little rounded, and then some of the formal posture comes out of his shoulders as he sits back more casually on his heels. "It seemed like a good way to figure it out," he says. "Is that all right?"

"Of course it is," Charles soothes, reaching out and petting Alex gently, his hand sweeping over Alex's hair. "I'm always happy to scene with you no matter what we're doing, you know that."

"Yeah," Alex says, flashing Charles a grin, "but it's different without Armando here. You know what I mean? It's kind of nice to have you all to myself for a change."
Charles pauses, finally reaching out to smooth his hand over Alex's shoulder. "Is it?"

"Yeah, because..." Alex shifts on his knees. "I mean, the thing is, Armando loves me. I know he loves me. And he's been really great about letting me figure out what I want, what I need... you know I didn't really know anything when we first got together, right?" Charles nods; he knows about the seeking trip that led Armando to Alex, the juvenile detention center Alex was in at the time. "Okay, well... the thing is, I still don't know a lot of stuff. And if I get it wrong with you, you'll be nice and you'll tell me what to do..."

"Armando would do the same thing," Charles begins, but Alex shakes his head.

"He'd do the same thing, but if I got something wrong with him... it's different," Alex says. "You teach people how to do this kind of thing all the time, it's not a big deal to you if I screw it up. I don't want to look like a noob with him. Especially with this stuff. Service stuff. The kind of stuff most subs just pick up automatically..."

"I can tell you for certain that very few subs pick up service skills automatically," Charles says firmly. He strokes Alex's shoulder again. "But if you'd like to spend the evening practicing and getting feedback, I'm all in favor."

"Okay," Alex says, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. "Okay, yeah. That sounds good."

"Well, then." Charles reaches back to the tea tray. "More scone?"

"Yes, please," Alex says politely, and kneels up straight again.

*

In the morning, when Charles heads down to the kitchen, he finds it crowded with Jamie Madroxes. They're everywhere: digging in the refrigerator, searching the cupboards, handing each other ingredients to deliver to the four who are actively engaged in cooking. Charles knew he and Raven had ended up arranging their auction dates for the same night, but the townhouse is huge; he'd expected to have plenty of room. Of course, he'd expected Raven to have one date, not twelve. Or however many it is; who know how many are still upstairs.

"Good morning, Mr. Madrox," Charles says to the one who's relaxing at the table, reading the Times.

"Morning, Dr. Xavier," he answers pleasantly.

Raven's comment about needing good luck at the auction suddenly makes sense; Jamie must have gone at a premium, considering. MAD-L probably did very well the other night. He wonders, for a brief moment, who ended up going home with Dr. Steed, and hopes ey was someone well-suited to her. Everyone at an auction like that gives feedback about eir winner, though, and people who've made their partners uncomfortable are quickly blackballed from future events.

Alex, at least, won't have any complaints, and it seems Jamie won't, either. Several of him are smiling, a few whistling. As one of his t-shirts slips to reveal a mark on his neck, Charles wonders if he's stayed in separate bodies all night or if a primary Jamie got the mark, if it duplicated over several different instances of him.

"Is Raven still, ah... asleep, then, or..."

The Jamies chopping vegetables shake their heads in unison. "No, we woke up pretty early this morning."
"Some of us woke up early," says a Jamie who's washing dishes. "A couple lucky bastards are sleeping in."

"Understood," Charles says. "You really didn't have to cook, we could have ordered something--" He gestures vaguely at the accordion file on the kitchen counter, leaflets and menus tucked haphazardly into it.

"It's fine," one of the Jamies says with a grin. "Can I get you some coffee? Tea?"

Oddly enough, the offer makes Charles nostalgic for Alex's tea service, and that was only last night. He wonders if Alex is starting to stir just yet. "Not at the moment, thank you," he says. "If you'll excuse me..."

Back upstairs, Charles starts toward his own room, but a shaft of light from further down the hall catches his eye. He's a bit surprised to see Raven's door ajar: he sort of assumed that if she wasn't asleep, she was continuing to take advantage of her date's gifts. The dozen or so working downstairs are far from Jamie's maximum.

Charles pokes his head in, prepared to give her a bit of friendly needling about her gross-for-the-price-of-one auction win. But the moment he sees her, all jokes are forgotten; he rushes to her, taking her by the shoulders. "What's wrong?"

Raven blinks the tears from her eyes. Her hand's covering her mouth; she looks as if that might be all that's holding her together.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes..." Raven drops her hand. "Charles, it's her. She's ready, it's now, it's her."

Charles stares back at her for a long moment, and pulls her into a fast, fierce hug. "Go," he says.

"There's so much I need to--"

"I'll phone your work and arrange your seeker leave. Give me your password so I can access your calendar, and I'll cancel everything you have scheduled and explain why. If there's anything else, you can text me, I'll take care of it. You don't need to pack, you can buy whatever you need at airports on the way. Just go, Raven. Find her."

Raven's nodding as he speaks, changing skin under his hands to give herself clothes. "Jamie," she remembers.

"I'll make your apologies and see that he gets home." Charles has his phone out, already ringing for a cab for her.

She only has to throw a few things into her handbag, and she's ready to leave, that fast, rushing for the door-- she hugs him on their front pavement.

"I don't know when I'll be back," she says.

He falters. "As long as you do come back."

"Of course I will! I won't elope-- I won't recognize without you, Charles, I promise."

Charles kisses her cheek. "That's all I need to hear," he says, and waves goodbye as she goes.

*
Caught up in making Raven's preparations, Charles doesn't wake Alex; Alex probably needed the extra sleep, anyway, he justifies. He explains what happened to Alex when he sleepily tromps downstairs.

"Holy shit," says Alex. "I mean... good for her. Fuckin' finally." He winces. "Uh... sorry."

"I hope you two like vegetarian Eggs Benedict," one of the Jamies says, "breakfast was included in the auction."

"Vegetarian?" Alex asks dubiously. "No Canadian bacon?"

"Tomato and avocado," Jamie says. "Raven's idea."

"Raven's not here, could you scare up some bacon?" Alex asks hopefully. "Doesn't have to be Canadian, even."

"Alex," Charles chides. "It looks excellent, Jamie, thank you," he adds, "please, do sit down and join us."

One of him eats with them while three others clean the kitchen. Alex leans over to Charles and mutters, "This is like being in a roomful of magic broomsticks."

Of course one of the Jamies was close enough to hear that, and he snickers. The others glance over at him. "What?"

"Well, at least Raven didn't morph mouse ears or a pointy wizard's hat."

"I don't know, a wizard's hat could be fun." The Jamie who said that grins over at Charles and Alex. "Let us know if you guys decide you need a stick up your ass."

Charles nearly spits out his tea. "We're fine, thank you."

"Yeah, you usually have that territory covered," Alex says. Charles raises an eyebrow at him, and Alex quickly backpedals. "No, no, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I meant in the good way, I didn't mean anything, the whole safe-play-only thing is really important, I know, I just--"

"Dig, dig, dig," one of the Jamies teases. Alex shoots him a look.

"You know what, maybe you could pat yourself on the back in another room," Alex says, a bit moodily. Charles nods slightly in confirmation, and as they're done with cleanup, the Jamies sheepishly file out the door.

"Everything all right?" Charles asks gently, reaching across the breakfast table to brush his fingers over the back of Alex's hand.

"I'm good. I'm just still thinking about last night. Some of the stuff we talked about. And I mean, I was serious when I said it's a good thing you're... uh, responsible," Alex says. Charles smiles at him. "Because if you were serious about doing edgeplay-- I mean, if you were really, really serious about it--"

"I was serious," Charles assures him. "But that's definitely something we should arrange with Armando."

"Oh, God, yeah, I want him to be there. I still..." Alex turns his hand over, takes Charles's hand in his. "I still want it to be the three of us."
When this came up last night, it didn't sound like Alex was talking about just the one scene, and it doesn't sound like that now, either. Charles slips his hand gently out of Alex's and nods. "We'll talk to Armando this afternoon. And speaking of that, I'm going to be at least a couple of hours, cancelling everything in Raven's schedule and offering explanations," he tells Alex. "It's all right if you'd like to head home in the meantime. I could always take care of this and join you later."

"I'll stay."

* 

It's afternoon by the time the two of them take a cab back to Alex and Armando's place. Alex called to let him know they probably wouldn't make lunch, but Armando's always flexible; when Alex got off the phone, he said, "He made another 'adaptation' joke. He'll 'adapt' his schedule to fit us."

"Wouldn't it be nice if one's mutation could actually affect appointments on a calendar," Charles muttered at the time, but now that all the arrangements are made, everything should be easy enough. Raven texted from the airport, having booked a flight to London. It never ceases to amaze Charles when someone can pinpoint eir soulmate so precisely. Only once, in those years knowing his own, was he certain he could sense where his bondmate was. And even then he was interrupted before he could trace his bondmate's thoughts back to wherever they were leading. West. West, and slightly north...

He tries not to think about what he'd do if his own bond called to him that way. Would he drop everything, catch a flight halfway across the globe for no reason other than getting the sense that the time had finally come, finally, after all these years...?

It's almost mortifying to admit it, even to himself, but he knows the answer. It's a moot point, though. He hasn't felt anything from his bondmate in... God, it's going to be ten years next month. Even Tony won't be able to make that anniversary any better.

With some effort, he gets his mind off it. They're nearly to Alex and Armando's place by now. Armando's waiting at the door when the cab pulls up, and of course he's smiling broadly; Alex runs up the front steps and launches himself into Armando's arms.

"Hey there--" Armando laughs as Alex's hands roam all over him. "Wow, something got into you."

"Nuh-uh," Alex says, leaning in and kissing Armando's neck. Armando rolls his eyes skyward and then gestures at Charles, beckoning him in. Charles waves to the driver and heads inside with them, Alex's hand in Armando's back pocket.

"We talked," Charles begins.

"And talked, and talked, and talked," Alex adds. Armando rests his hand on top of Alex's head.

The three of them end up in the living room, Armando on one end of the couch with Alex stretched out along the rest of it, head in Armando's lap, and Charles takes a seat on the armchair just to the side of the couch.

"We thought we'd wait for you before doing anything more serious than service play," Charles says.

Armando strokes a hand through Alex's hair and smiles at Charles. "Yeah?"

Alex nuzzles Armando's knee and suddenly flips over, face pressed to his thigh, squirming up, and up, and-- Armando gets a gentle hand into Alex's hair and holds him in place, rolling his eyes a

"For some reason it just felt as though things would be better with three," Charles says, smiling back.

On Armando's lap, Alex is still doing his level best to nuzzle into Armando's crotch. Armando gives his head the lightest of reprimanding shakes. "Hey. I got you some of that cinnamon coffee ice cream you like."

Immediately distracted, Alex tips his head up. "You did?"

"Uh-huh. It's in the kitchen."

"Don't think I don't realize that's a nice way of saying, 'Run along for a minute while the dominants talk,'" Alex sniffs. But he kneels up on the couch and flings his arms around Armando's neck, hugging him. "Thanks." He peels himself off the couch and saunters into the kitchen.

"Whew," Armando says, shaking his head once Alex is gone. "So how was he, really?"

"He was almost excessively well-behaved," Charles reports. "A very nice tea service, didn't let me lift a finger for myself in the bath, a long massage after, a lovely conversation."

"And what's the point of being good!" Alex yells from the kitchen. "I didn't get anything! I'm going to change my checklist and put a zero for denial!"

"You say that every time, and you never do," Armando calls back to him.

"I'm not sure the whole thing wasn't all a long-term brattiness strategy," says Charles. "Knowing I'd be telling you how good he was last night, while today he's tearing around catching up on all the bad behavior he held back on yesterday."

"Nah," Armando says, cheerfully, easily. "He's not really a planner."

"Well," Charles tells him, leaning forward a little with a smile, "I am."

"That sounds promising." Armando stretches an arm out across the back of the couch. "You know we always love to hang out with you, scening or not. You've pretty much been there for us from the beginning-- it's meant a lot."

It seems like an oddly sentimental thing to hear just now, but Charles nods, going with it. "I always enjoy my time with both of you as well."

"And-- here's the thing. There aren't a lot of people who get along with Alex the way you do. That Alex trusts the way he trusts you." Armando leans forward, too, finally. "So if you want to see him on your own, I'm completely fine with that. I trust you, too. And you two are great together."

"I appreciate that," Charles says. "And I did enjoy last night very much..."

"I don't want you thinking you need to invite me in just because Alex and I are bonded," Armando says, carefully meeting Charles's eyes. "I know things are always a little different with three."

Charles almost wants to laugh-- he and Armando shared several excellent scenes together before Alex was even in the picture, of course it's not only because the two of them are bonded-- but something about the way Armando's looking at him feels more serious than Charles expected. He can glean a wisp of emotion from Armando, just the slightest hint of it; it's different to most people,
reading Armando's moods, because his ability tends to obscure them. But Charles still manages to grasp that Armando isn't just talking about logistics.

"Things are a bit different with three, yes," Charles says slowly. He reaches out a hand to Armando, who takes it without hesitation. "But Alex and I both wanted that difference."

Armando's smile is beautiful. "I'm really glad to hear that," he says, "because Alex and I feel the same way about you."

Feel the same way. Charles sits up, not sure what to say about that, but fortunately he's saved from any potential awkwardness by Alex's swift re-entry into the living room. He comes right over, vaults over the back of the sofa, and flops down beside Armando, dropping his head into Armando's lap. Armando has to sit back, breaking eye contact with Charles, and he shakes his head at Alex, who just looks up at him with a grin.

"Enjoy your ice cream?" Armando asks.

Alex licks his lips ostentatiously. "Uh-huh."

"Charles and I were just talking about the three of us."

"Then it's a good thing I came out, huh," Alex says. He turns his head and smiles over at Charles. "Did you ask him about the thing?"

"I hadn't got that far yet," Charles admits.

Armando glances at him with a smile. "What thing is that?"

"It's the thing we'd like to try that could use some planning," Charles tells him.

"I'm all ears."

*

Despite Alex's bouncing enthusiasm, the plan calls for patience. They make a play date for a week from Friday. Tonight, Charles stays over for dinner, and it seems only natural to end up snuggled between them on the couch afterwards, Alex kissing his shoulders, Armando's gag reflex completely adapted away as he takes Charles's cock in his mouth. Charles turns his head so he can kiss Alex. He has permission to take in emotions and sensations from them both, inasmuch as he can read Armando, and what he's getting from both of them is wonderful-- Alex's pleasure and enthusiasm, occasional flickers of the same from Armando.

It doesn't keep him from trying to outdo Armando when it's his turn, though, and with Armando stretched out on the couch and Charles between his legs, with Alex down on the floor watching them both and jerking off while Armando watches him in turn, rubbing his joining spot and murmuring, "Next you're going to give up your mouth for Charles while I'm fucking you; how do you want to be?"

"Face down..." Alex flushes as he imagines it, just a little embarrassed to say it, with a mingled rush of vulnerability and pleasure.

"I'm going to cuff your hands," Armando tells him. He's not even breathing hard. Charles would be a bit offended if he didn't know how readily Armando adapts even to this sort of exertion.

"Please," Alex gasps, pressing his head against Charles's shoulder, looking up at Armando. "Can I
Armando raises his eyebrows at Charles, a bit of co-domination courtesy; Charles nods, turning it into a more forceful bob of his head as Armando says, "Yes, Alex," and Alex moans, long and low and heartfelt.

Charles is glad they saved this part. Being close to that much affection feels good, being near Alex and Armando in particular feels good. No pressure, no complications, just friendship and affection and excellent sex. He's more than in favor; he could do much, much more of this.

Still, at the end of the night he kisses them both goodbye and heads back to his townhouse. It feels empty here without Raven, but when he settles in to bed, he relaxes his shields, lets the hum of all those nearby minds soothe him to sleep. If he's listening for one voice in the crowd... his sister's on her seeker trip, finally. Maybe he can be forgiven for holding out his hope, all these years later, imagining that someday he'll feel that mind again.

* *

When Friday comes, Charles can't help tingling a little with anticipation. It's been a long time since he's had a scene like this one, not since... well, a while, at least, never mind with whom. He's lucky Armando's used to calming down people who are bouncing off the walls, although when they actually get down to brass tacks, tangled up in bed together, Charles does take a little friendly teasing from Alex at the way he looks.

"I thought I was the one who was supposed to be all excited and stuff."

"If I weren't excited about this, it wouldn't have been on the table in the first place," Charles points out.

"Fair enough," Armando agrees. "Ready?"

No reason they wouldn't be. They've discussed it thoroughly. They're all three here and undressed and recovered from the first round out in the hot tub. The bed's more than big enough to accommodate the three of them. The toy chest at the foot of the bed is thrown open.

Though what they're planning to try next doesn't require accessories.

Alex hesitates for a fraction of a second, but both Armando and Charles are so attuned to him that they notice even that small pause. Alex looks from one to the other of them and swallows. "Okay, now that we're here, I'm not so sure about this," says Alex.

"It's fine," Charles strokes soothingly up and down his chest. "Don't worry, Alex. It'll be just like we talked about. You've imagined every bit of it already, you told me."

"Yeah," Alex admits.

"You know what to do."

"Yeah, but..."

Charles takes both Alex's hands in his. "If you've really changed your mind, it's all right," he says, bringing them to his mouth, kissing Alex's knuckles lightly. "We don't have to. But if you want it..."

"I want it," Alex says, eyes wide and pupils blown, "it's just fucking scary, okay? I'd never forgive
myself if I hurt you."

"You're not going to," Charles says. "I know you won't."

"I'm right here just in case," Armando reassures Alex, rubbing his shoulder.

"You'll know straight away if we need to stop," Charles sends. "I can tell you directly mind to mind. You won't even have to watch for my safe gesture."

Armando says, 'I'm going to be watching for it,' and Charles leans his way and kisses him, smiling appreciatively.

Straightening again, Charles resumes his position straddling Alex, who lies back, propped up a bit on the wedge cushion, staring up at him.

"See?" Charles says. "I have both of you looking out for me. Safe as houses."

"Right," Alex calms himself down. "Right. Okay."

"If it makes you feel better, you don't even have to close your hands," Charles tells him. "But you can."

"You know I was in juvie, right?" Alex blurs. "I know we told you about it, but you get that's not just some cute story. It's not like Armando sprung me from a night in the drunk tank. I'd been there for months already. They only paroled me because they thought he'd be a good influence."

"I know. And I know that was years ago," says Charles. "You've come a long way since then."

"Yeah, it's just, I don't know if I've come far enough for this..."

"I know," Charles says definitively. "I know you can. It doesn't have to happen today. It doesn't have to happen ever. But I know you can."

Alex looks at Armando. "Nothing really bad's happened since you found me." He grimaces a bit. "I mean, some lousy shit's come at us. But we've been okay. You always make things okay."

"We make things okay," Armando says, and Alex goes up on his elbows to kiss him.

Lying back again and taking a deep breath, Alex looks up at Charles. "Okay. I still want to. So if you're sure. Then I'm ready."

Charles guides Alex's hands to his neck. "You won't really be cutting off my air this way," he says, "you're not going to press hard enough for that. I can get a breath if I need it. This is something we're doing together. I trust you. When you squeeze, I stop. When you let go, I breathe."

Nodding rapidly, Alex says, "Seven seconds."

"Seven seconds," Charles agrees, and he tips forward into Alex's hands.

Alex squeezes lightly, but he doesn't wrap his hands completely around Charles's neck; it doesn't matter, it's so good, those few floating moments of pressure, not letting himself inhale, going light-headed. Alex lets up before seven full seconds. That feels every bit as good, the relief as the blood rushes in again and Charles fills his lungs with a long, shuddering breath. He's hard, from the anticipation as much as the act, but even that's secondary to the way it feels just to breathe right now.
Armando leans in and peers at Charles, checking his eyes and touching his wrist to feel his pulse. Seems a bit much for seven seconds, but Charles would rather scene with people who are over-cautious about edgeplay than cavalier with it.

"That's really hot," Alex confesses in a hush.

"Another?" Charles asks Armando as much as Alex.

"Yeah, okay," Armando says.

Given permission, Alex adds, "Yes. Please. Seven seconds again? I think I'm going to close my hands, I can do it without pressing any harder."

"Definitely, you can," Charles says, tilting forward again so Alex can reach him.

Just feeling Alex's hands settle around his throat is enough to spark a little euphoria, and when Charles gives over a little more of his weight to Alex's grip, he's right there-- it's such a rush that it feels almost as if he's going to lift right out of himself, and at the same time, he's more embodied than ever, profoundly aware of his heartbeat pounding in his ears, the lurch of his stomach when he catches himself just before he instinctively tries to inhale.

Alex lets go. "Fuck, I felt that," he rests his fingers lightly on Charles's throat, trails them down to play across his collarbone. "I felt you try and not do it. Your face went a little red that time. That should not be that hot." He glances down. "Doing it for you too, huh."

"Did you think I was joking?" Charles smiles.

"I had no idea about any of this," Alex says seriously. "I didn't think it was going to be anywhere near as good as the fantasy, but even if you didn't want me to put any pressure at all, just having my hands there, knowing I could, watching you hold your breath..." He looks at Armando. "I'm really going to need you to fuck me soon... please?"

"Please, huh," says Armando, raising his eyebrows. "Let's see, when is 'soon'?"

"Can we do one more?" Alex asks. "Charles, can you get off from that? From seven seconds? May I please bring you off with that?"

"We could step it up a bit," Charles suggests carefully, directing it toward Armando again. "Ten seconds, a bit different hand position, like we talked about."

Armando looks down at Alex and back to Charles, shaking his head. "You think I could say no to that face? Look at him."

"Ten seconds," Alex repeats, a bit dreamy.

Charles guides Alex's left hand to his throat again, but his right to press flat over Charles's mouth, positioned so he can easily pinch Charles's nose shut between his thumb and the base of his forefinger.

"I don't know if I can," says Alex. "I mean, hands like this, that's good, really good, but I don't think I can cut you off completely like that..."

«Then just don't press with your thumb,» Charles sends to him, «and you won't. You can. But if you don't want to, then don't.»
"You know I want to though, you know I really fucking want to, and you're still going to let me come that close to it? Are you crazy?"

Charles peels Alex's hand off his mouth. "You can. I trust you," he says, and replaces it firmly.

"I wouldn't have let you do any of this if I thought for a second that you'd let anyone get hurt," Armando tells Alex. "I'm up for it because I know you better than that."

Alex looks at both of them, uncertain one moment, determined the next. "Okay." He asks Charles, "Are you close?"

Charles gets a loose easy grip on his cock and gives himself a few careful strokes, gauging where he's at; he pushes into Alex's hand on his mouth, humming the groan that draws from him, and nods, "I am now."

"Fucking hell," Alex says, "okay, ten seconds. Go," and he squeezes gently with his left hand, presses with his right.

It's not two seconds before Alex projects to him clumsily, «Oh fuck okay now I really really want to please please?»

«I said you can,» Charles answers through the roar of his blood flowing, the ecstatic buzz filling his head, «I meant it. Yes.»

Alex presses with his thumb, closes off that last possibility, and Charles tests it, tries to inhale and can't-- it goes to his head so fast the orgasm's abrupt and terrifically intense and just a little painful. Charles automatically gasps when it hits and he can't get air for that either, his mouth opening against Alex's palm, covered and held, amping him up even higher, his heart galloping with it. And then it must be ten seconds, because he can breathe again, the last few spasms still shaking him.

He keels over to one side of Alex, listening to Alex beg for Armando, watching Armando move into place and thrust into him, pinning down his wrists. Charles likes seeing people scene, but fucking is often the least interesting part. Even when the participants are beautiful, intercourse tends to look haphazard and graceless. But Armando and Alex are so in sync, so absorbed in each other, they're spectacular together, and when they come together Alex throws back his head and shouts with it.

There's a nice drifty interval in there and then Alex is touching Charles's face, looking mostly blissed but a tiny bit worried.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Fantastic," Charles says, rousing himself. He covers Alex's hand with his and smiles. "That was wonderful, Alex. Thank you."

"I really wasn't going to do the whole thing this first time," Alex says, "I know you said it was okay but you were like half a second from coming, of course you said it then..."

"I said it before, as well," Charles reminds him gently. "Armando was right there, he wouldn't have let you put a foot wrong. That was just right."

Alex nods and leans back. Armando's right there, spooned up behind him, holding him, kissing his shoulder. "You did great," Armando reassures him. "We planned it out beforehand, you talked about it during, you didn't miss a step. I'm proud of you."
At that, Alex finally relaxes. Presently he says to Charles, "With the," he gestures toward his chest, "you know. And all the trouble and everything... nobody ever trusted me until Armando. So... it's kind of a big deal to me."

Charles shares a quick look with Armando and moves closer to Alex, hemming him in between them, both of them caressing him.

"It's a big deal to me as well," Charles tells him. "I haven't had this in a while. And I'm really glad to have it back. I mean it: thank you."

Alex grins, looking back at Armando and to Charles. "That means we get to do it again, right?"

Armando snorts and rests his hand on top of Alex's head. "I don't know why I ever take my hand off you," he murmurs, turning it into an endearment, and Alex's grin softens into a smile.

* * *

While they're cleaning up, Armando invites Charles to stay for dinner again, and Alex weighs in with some pleading. "Of course, I'd like that," says Charles.

"Good," says Armando. "We've got everything made up ready for three."

It'll be a bit before any of them are hungry, though, and Charles knows them well enough to be aware that aftercare for Alex usually involves some sleepy cuddling after a scene. He's not surprised when Armando inclines his head toward the bed once they're all tidied up, and he climbs back in gladly. Another half-hour lazing about in bed sounds perfect right now.

He assumes they'll fall in with Alex in the middle, but as they're getting situated, somehow he's between them. It might be coincidence or it might be kindly meant, but Charles has to ask, "Could I switch with one of you, please?"

Of course Alex inquires outright, "How come?"

"Because I asked you nicely," Charles says. He keeps his tone mild, but it's still enough to get Alex scurrying to trade places with him. They settle with Alex in the middle, Armando's arms around him, Charles threading his fingers together with Armando's.

"Listen," Armando says. "We take a trip up to Maine every spring. There's this little town up there, Mill Point, it's practically an all-mutant place. Alex loves it. It's restful; there are cabins on the beach you can rent, we take long walks..."

"Long walks on the beach?" Charles asks, smiling. "I've heard of Mill Point, but I've never been there."

"The thing is..." Armando slides his hand onto Charles's shoulder. "I know the end of April's never been all that good to you, but if you wanted to try for something different this year... Alex and I would love to have you there with us."

It's generous of them, tremendously kind. But Charles has learned the hard way that a little of him goes a long way. And he wouldn't wish himself on anybody in the last week of April.

"I appreciate the invitation," he says. "The destination and the company both sound lovely, but the timing... I don't think I could. I'd only ruin your holiday."

"I bet we could take your mind off it," Alex says, and Armando palms the top of his head.
"We'll take that chance," Armando says. "We'd like to see more of you. Doesn't always have to be for scenes, you know? We can do other things. And it doesn't have to be all good times. When things are tough on you, we'd like to be there for you for that, too."

"That means a lot to me," Charles answers quietly. "Thank you." He squeezes Alex, leans over and kisses Armando. "I'm not quite ready for that. I'd like to be, but..." He offers a smile, gets the same back from Armando, with Alex looking a bit sullen but brightening when Charles concludes, "Maybe next year."
Chapter Summary

Erik's finally willing to try and block the anniversary pull that brings him back in contact with Shaw every year. But there are side effects and consequences for that, none of them good.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this section (spoilers, skip to avoid!):

The return of Shaw, some onscreen scuffling between Jason and John, some onscreen scuffling between Jason and Shaw, offscreen but referred-to dubcon (there are those who have been saying that Shaw/Erik in this series is inherently noncon; if you're in that camp, then offscreen but referred-to noncon) between Shaw and Erik, onscreen scuffling between Erik and Shaw... basically, Shaw and all the bad things he entails.

Expecting to have Chapter 50 (THE LAST OMG) up Monday, but please no pitchforks if it comes a little later in the week! ^_^;;

John comes in from his trip to the mailbox laden down with junk mail, a few envelopes, and a priority mail box he's already opened. The bulk of the mail gets dropped off on the table near the door, but he brings the box over to Erik, who's sitting on the couch, checking email on his phone.

"We need to talk about this," John says.

Erik raises an eyebrow and pockets his phone. "Catch me up," he says. "What do we need to talk about?"

John reaches into the box and pulls out a simple brown leather collar, with a gold-toned D-ring in front. Erik frowns, reaching out; John hands it over.

The leather's fine work, expensive, and the D-ring isn't just gold-toned, it's actual gold-- rose gold, with a heavy tang of copper in the alloy. He recognizes the design, now that he's gotten a closer look at it-- Tailored Jewelworks, based in New York. Boutique shop, one he's been working with for the past few years.

"Probably just a sample," Erik says. He glances up at John. "I didn't... I wouldn't have bought something like this for you without talking about it first, and you would have seen it coming in any case, wouldn't you?"

"It's not a sample," John says tightly. He hands the box itself over.

Erik looks down at it and shrugs-- Erik Shaw, 114 N. George Ave., Mill Point, ME, 04079, return address Tailored Jewelworks, Saratoga Springs, New York... "I don't see anything out of the
ordinary, I get samples all the time, they're just usually sent to work instead of here at home... is there a note?" He digs into the box to find the invoice; there's always an invoice for insurance reasons if nothing else. Strangely, this one's in a gift envelope. "All right, a little out of the ordinary--"

And his voice cuts off, because the note starts with Happy 10th anniversary, and Erik's up and across the room, all the metalwork on the collar twisted to pieces as the collar flies away from him. The collar knocks heavily into the wall and drops to the floor.

He stares down at the note as he paces. It's hand-written-- God, Sebastian went to Tailored Jewelworks in person for this.

Happy 10th anniversary, Erik.

What we've had together this decade has been beautiful... what we'll have in the next decade can only be better. I love you, always.

Your soulmate,
Sebastian.

Erik's hands are shaking, and he looks up at John. "Get my phone for me? And the earpiece."

John comes over, digs Erik's phone out of his pocket. Erik takes a few steps back-- too much metal in the chassis, he can't touch it or let himself reach for it with his ability. The earpiece is much better, mostly plastic. When John comes out of the bedroom with it, he hands it over, and Erik's able to slip that into his ear and flick it on, voice-dial Tailored Jewelworks while he hugs himself and crumples that note into a ball.

He's still got the invoice in hand, but it's a gift invoice; he doesn't know when it was printed, when this was planned. Sebastian might be in New York right now. But better New York than Maine. Please, God, let him stay there.

"Tailored Jewelworks, this is Stanley, can I help you?"

"Stan, this is Erik Shaw from Mutated Metals in Mill Point--"

"Erik, hey, good to hear from you. How's it going?"

"Could be better," Erik grits out. "I just received a package from your shop--"

"Hold on, let me give the phone to Nick, if this is a sample thing--"

"It's not. This was a gift order."

"What, really? From us? I had no idea, hang on, let me pull it up. Do you have the invoice number?"

Erik reads off the invoice number, and adds, "It was in person at the shop. Do you know who actually sold the collar to the man who bought it? I need to speak with em directly."

"Looking it up now," Stan says. "Let me see, it was March 23rd, that was a Tuesday. Tuesday, late March-- Allison probably took that order."

"Allison," Erik repeats. "I'm not familiar with her, is she new?"

"Yeah, she just started here in early March. She's not in right now, but I can have her call you the next time she is."
"Do that," Erik bites out.

"Okay, no problem-- hey, listen, are you all right? What's going on?"

He's so sick of being ashamed of this. John comes over and rubs between Erik's shoulderblades, and that support opens the floodgates.

"My ex placed that order."

"Your ex?"

"My psychotic, delusional, and apparently now stalker ex. Yes."

"Shit." Stan grunts. "Shit, Erik, I'm so sorry." And the penny drops; Stan says, "Oh, God, and she gave him your address--"

"No, don't worry about that--" Erik rubs at his forehead. "If he knew enough to go to your shop for this, he probably already had it." Which is not something he wants to think about, but now he can't really help it. Sebastian knows where he is. How long has he known? Erik wasn't trying to cover his tracks, but he thought Sebastian was busy-- he's always been so far away when Erik met him for an anniversary--

"Do you want me to call the police if he comes back in?"

"There's nothing they could do for me. But if he comes in and he asks you to send something--"

"We'll refuse. Email me his name and description, I'll make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Thank you." Erik's throat tightens. "I-- thank you."

"Not a problem. Erik, God, I'm so sorry about this."

"So am I," Erik manages, and he reaches up to his earpiece to disconnect the call.

John gets his hands on Erik's shoulders, rubs gently, and then harder. "Asshole," he mutters. "Come on. Let's get out of here, let's go take a walk. Get some of this out of your system."

"I don't think a walk is going to do that," Erik says, but he tosses his earpiece onto the coffee table and grabs his jacket anyway, letting John guide him out the door.

Erik takes that walk with tension leaving his shoulders tight, his joining spot an aching, searing pain that's worse than usual. After he's calmed down, he has a quick talk with Allison from Tailored Jewelworks. He's hoping to get something from Allison's conversation with Sebastian that will tell him what Sebastian wants or what he's up to, but there's nothing.

John takes care of the collar; Erik doesn't see it again, doesn't even sense it again. But two days later John walks in from getting the mail, again with a grim look on his face and a package in hand. "Maybe you shouldn't open it."

It's smaller than the one from Tailored Jewelworks. Erik can already feel the metal inside it. It's a snake chain, and he senses a lot of silver, 950 sterling, probably. The return address is one of his wholesale suppliers, 14-24-925 in Florida. It could be a sample, but again, it didn't come to him at work, and the look on John's face says he already knows who sent it. Erik can't pretend he doesn't know, either. He takes a few deep breaths and tears into the package.
Erik,

A year after we were bonded, you came home to me. I knew you were coming... probably before you set foot outside your door in Philadelphia. We were meant to be together, and on our anniversary, you felt it too. I remember seeing you in your collar, thinking I should have had a new one to give you, something to show you how much you meant to me. How much you'll always mean to me.

Happy anniversary, baby.

Love,
Sebastian.

"Erik..."

Words are standing out in the letter as though they give off a glow. *Your door in Philadelphia.* "He knew. He knew where I was." Erik holds onto the box, can't bring himself to touch the collar. "Happy anniversary, baby." It's been years since he heard that word; doms in the clubs tended to go for 'boy', and it wasn't as though Jason or John needed to be told that 'baby' wasn't something Erik could stand to hear.

Sebastian knew about Tailored Jewelworks; he knows about 14-24-925. Erik reaches into the box for the collar, finally, and feels the slightly-rough, seamed metal as it slides through his fingers. He can't feel Sebastian on it, but maybe he couldn't, no matter what. Back when he still had his ability, he didn't get traces of other people when he reached out for metal objects, not unless they'd been touching them recently or were still wearing them.

It still feels like this chain ought to be tainted. It seems wrong, not sensing anything but silver and the slightest hint of copper under his fingertips.

At least this time he doesn't damage the metal. He drops the collar back in the box and crumples up Sebastian's note. His skin's crawling, but this time it's not just from the shock of seeing Sebastian's name and handwriting. He can feel it now: the urge to seek, the need to find Sebastian and reconnect. It's low, but it's there. He isn't going to be able to ignore it for long.

John takes the box from him and closes his eyes for a second, head tilting back. Erik's seen that look on him enough times to know what it means. He's feeling through the threads.

Erik doesn't usually ask about them, not often and certainly not in earnest. This time he has to. "How many more of these are coming?"

"Eight," John says, eyes still closed. "But I don't see him with them. I just see the collars." He opens his eyes. "I could offer to get rid of them for you, but--"

"--but you know I won't take you up on it. I need to see the notes."

"You really don't. You *really* don't--"

"You can see them?"

"No, not--" John makes an impatient noise. "I see what they do to you."

"Are there any threads where I don't look at them?"

John's ironic grin doesn't carry any humor at all; it's just a twisted expression that mirrors how
Erik's feeling all too well. "No."

"You know I don't like to ask," Erik says, "but I need to know. Can I stay away from him this time?"

John rubs at his face with both hands, taking a long, deep breath. "I don't... I don't even know what to say to that, Erik. I've been braced to deal with this all fucking year, I was expecting you to go, but it was always so far away, I could never be sure, it was always shadowed..."

"It's not far now." The first collar came on April third; today is April fifth. "Seventeen days."

Looking back up at Erik, John says, "I don't want you seeing him this year. And before you ask, that's not about seeing the goddamn future. It's because I don't fucking want you seeing him. But I think-- and this isn't the threads either, this is just me-- I think if you're going to keep away from him, you're going to need help."

"I can call Jason." Erik's throat tightens; he hasn't seen Jason in person since Jason's visit to Mill Point last year. They talk on the phone, but it hasn't been the same since then. Still. If anything could cut through the awkwardness that's been following them around, this is it.

"Jason's good, Jason would drop anything for you, you know that. But I was thinking about somebody else."

Erik frowns. "Who could I...? Who could possibly help me with this?"

"Who have you asked before?"

Erik thinks about that for a few seconds, and then he tugs his wallet out of his jeans and pulls a year-old business card out of the inner pocket.

To: Dr. Rosario Cabrera [rcabrera@nybondtech.org]
From: Erik Shaw [pb822072@gmail.com]
Subject: Advice requested
Date: 2010-04-15 16:00 -0500

Dr. Cabrera,

You were kind enough to consult with me on the topic of bond separation in late April last year; I wondered if you could offer any advice on a difficulty I've been experiencing over the past decade.

I am bonded but separated from my bondmate. Every year at the anniversary of our bonding, I'm compelled by the bond to seek him out and reconnect, against my will. For a variety of reasons, bond-blocking drugs are not an option. I remember that you said you can't surgically separate me from him without his consent and presence, but I wonder if there's anything that can be done to block the compulsion to find him.

I'm afraid time is of the essence, as the anniversary is April 22nd, and I'm already beginning to feel the compulsion. If there's anything you can do for me, please contact me through email or via phone.

Erik Shaw
pb822072@gmail.com
551-555-3543
To: Erik Shaw [pb822072@gmail.com]
From: Dr. Rosario Cabrera [rcabrera@nybondtech.org]
Subject: Re: Advice requested
Date: 2010-04-15 16:55 -0500

Erik,

There are several different physical technologies available that may be able to block or partially block energy from moving between bonded pairs on a temporary basis. Most of them are impractical as ongoing solutions, but could work for long enough to avoid anniversary compulsions. Your situation may complicate matters, but I believe it would be worth your while to come to our office and work through a consultation and examination with us. Please call my office at your earliest convenience, and we'll schedule a time as soon as possible.

--
Dr. Rosario Cabrera, M.D., B.Sp.
New York BondTech
New York, NY 10029

"We're here. Buzz us in?"

The door buzzes, and Erik pushes it open. John's carrying their duffel bags; Erik holds the door for him, but even that's an effort right now. Sebastian must be close; part of Erik feels like running right back out to the street and hailing a cab to find him. If he needed any more evidence that this procedure with Dr. Cabrera is necessary, he's got it.

Jason's apartment is a quick elevator ride away, and when they get to his floor, he's waiting outside the elevator door. For all their distance, for all the ways their relationship's been different since Erik moved to Mill Point, Erik doesn't hesitate; he throws himself into Jason's arms, and Jason catches him.

There's a slight pause, and John says, "Eight total, so far." Another pause. "Tell him that."

Erik pulls away. "Don't do that," he tells Jason, rough, impatient. "Don't leave me out of the conversation."

"He asked how many collars you'd gotten," John fills in, while Jason sets his jaw and narrows his eyes. "And told me I should just be ditching them before you get home."

"I want to know what he has to say."

Erik's not surprised when there's a roll of distant thunder. Jason sighs, though, and shakes his head. "Let's just get into my apartment, all right?" And he keeps his arm around Erik's shoulders as he guides them down the hall.

Eating Chinese food out of the cartons while watching something on television feels normal enough, for all that it's not a normal visit. Tonight it's an episode of Top Gear, something all three of them can appreciate-- Jason for the cars themselves, Erik because there's never going to be a time that the shining metal chassis of a vehicle doesn't make him pay at least a little bit of attention, and John because, with Jason and Erik, no one minds if he's laughing at the outtakes that only he can see. It's as comfortable as the evening can possibly get.

Until there's a buzz from the outside door, and John sits bolt upright as Jason walks over to the
"Yeah?"

"I've got a package delivery for a Mr. Shaw?"

John reaches over, poised to catch Erik's container of noodles as Erik drops it. Erik stands up and heads for the door before Jason can stop him; he doesn't wait for the elevator, just bolting down the ten flights of stairs, Jason's footsteps fast on the steps behind him.

"Erik," Jason calls out. "Erik, wait--"

He gets one more flight down, and then slams into a padded wall, bouncing back onto padded stairs. Jason catches up to him, grabbing him by the arm.

"Whoever's down there, you're not doing this alone."

John's there a second behind Jason, hand on Erik's back, rubbing between his shoulderblades. "It's okay," he says.

"Is he there?"

"No."

Erik takes a deep breath and nods, and Jason takes the wall out of the staircase. The three of them head down to a very confused bicycle courier, who hands John the package while Erik signs for it.

"Where did you pick this up?" Jason asks.

"At the office," the courier says, frowning. "Is something wrong?"

Erik hands the clipboard back to him and grabs the box out of John's hands. It rattles violently, and the courier jumps back. "What is that?"


"Were you expecting...?"

"Yeah," John says, and both Jason and Erik look up and frown at him. "Yeah, we were."

"Okay. Uh... if everything's all right..."

"You can go," John says. The courier gets back on his bicycle, and John gets an arm around Erik's waist.

"Upstairs," he says. "C'mon."

"You could have warned me," Jason says tightly. "That son of a bitch knows where I live?"

"Where is he?" Erik asks, looking up at John. "Where is he? Right now."

John shakes his head. "Erik--"

"Where?"

"Look, tomorrow morning you're going to go in for treatment, okay? And he isn't going to be there. It might work. It can work. I've seen that much."
"But in the meantime, you're going to put Erik through all this bullshit," Jason says. "Glad he's got you in his corner."

John sighs. "You guys want to go back upstairs or what?"

"He knows." Erik clutches at the box. "He knows I'm here. He knows I'm here. He looks at Jason. "It was one thing when it was just me he was coming after, but--"

"If he gets anywhere near me, if he gets anywhere near my family, he's going down," Jason says, meeting Erik's eyes. "You've been putting me off for ten years. But if he gets anywhere near me or my family--"

Erik nods. "Agreed. It's time to end this."

Jason reaches over, and Erik threads his fingers through Jason's. "Come on. Let's get back upstairs."

No one has an appetite for dinner after that; no one can stand to look at some inane television show, no matter the topic. Erik pulls the titanium chain out of its box and looks at the note Sebastian left. It's worse than the rest; it just has today's date, the 18th, and the barest minimum of words.

Erik,

Soon.

Love always,

Sebastian.

It's easier being in Dr. Cabrera's office than Erik remembered. Last time he was still looking for answers; this time, there's a plan.

Last time he was alone; this time he has Jason to cling to, and John standing behind both of them. That helps more than anything. He needs that support right now; the bond's pulling at him so hard he's afraid he might stand up and walk out of the office if Jason and John weren't there to keep him in place.

"As I mentioned in our email conversation, we've made advances in the last several years involving physical technologies that can be used to block the bond on a temporary basis. For anything other than an anniversary pull, it would be an impractical solution, but it shouldn't be a problem for a few days." She turns her computer monitor so it's facing the three of them and clicks through to a photograph of what looks to be a helmet, black with grey trim around the front. It looks more than vaguely threatening; Erik squeezes Jason's hand.

"You weren't joking about physical technology," Erik says, finally.

"How long would he have to wear it?" Jason asks.

John grunts. "I liked the red version better."

It draws a brief look from Dr. Cabrera, but they've all explained their mutations; she lets it go. "To answer Mr. Wyngarde, I'd plan on wearing it through the entirety of the 22nd, and possibly for the days before and after as well. As soon as the compulsion is too much to resist, it should go on. It's even heavier than it looks, so it isn't going to be comfortable, and it necessarily has to cover so
much of your face and head that it'll cut off your peripheral vision, so we'd advise you not to try to move around much while it's on. You'll probably be pretty bored, to be honest."

"Uncomfortable and bored sounds like a step up from most of my April 22nds," Erik says. "If there's a chance it's going to work, I'll take it."

John reaches out and squeezes his shoulder. Erik looks back at him.

"Something the matter...?"

John's not looking at him, though; he's looking at Dr. Cabrera. "I think he needs to go through a full exam to pin down any risks. It's not a procedure you've done a lot of, am I right?"

"We've had four people come through looking for a solution like this one, and in three of four cases it's been successful," Dr. Cabrera says. "In the fourth, we eventually resorted to a combination of mutation-suppressing drugs and bond-blocking medication, and that worked for our patient. If it comes to that with Erik..."

"It can't." Erik pulls away from John. "I can handle three days in a helmet if I need to. Let's go ahead and get started with the exam."

"All right. I'll get the room set up. It'll just be a few minutes. If you'll wait here, please..."

After she leaves the office, Jason glares back at John. "Full exam to pin down risks? Like what?"

John grimaces, rubs at his forehead. "I'm not getting anything clear enough to talk about," he says. "I just think... if there's anything we don't know about, if there's anything they need to know about, we need to find that out now. Right?"

"Right," Jason says, but he slips his hand into Erik's and squeezes. "Sure. We all need to be on the same page."

A wary look passes between them. Erik can't help but wonder what Jason said, in other threads.

"I guess we just sit tight for now," John says, finally, and until Dr. Cabrera comes back for them, that's what they do.

Right away it's awkward, when they go in for the exam. There's room for one person to be right there, next to Erik, and before Jason and John can face off about it, Erik makes his choice.

"I'm sorry," he tells John. "But--"

"No, trust me, it's okay." John hugs him. "I saw it coming."

"You see a lot," Jason says. "How's this going to work out?"

"Jason," Erik cuts in. "It's not as simple as that..."

"I know, I know, it can work out-- or not work out-- in a thousand different ways, you don't want to share because we shouldn't be fucking with destiny." Jason grimaces.

"No, it's not about fucking with destiny, it's-- there are things that can change and things that can't, and sometimes when you struggle, it just makes things worse."

"Yeah, but some things are still worth struggling against."
"If you've got a scale of one to ten, and one is rocks fall, everyone dies, and ten is everyone goes home and eats ice cream and has puppies and kittens, maybe I see a dozen scenarios and we've got a range between three and six. Maybe you want to push for seven. But pushing for seven means the range expands to two and seven. I'm not the kind of guy who pushes for eight, let alone nine." John's explained that to Erik, but it's the first time he's put it in those terms for Jason. Jason doesn't look happy about the explanation, but he backs off.

"Okay," he says, finally. He reaches out and takes Erik's hand. "Are you ready for this?"

"As I ever will be." He squeezes Jason's hand, reaches up and rubs his thumb against Jason's wristband. "I'm glad you're here."

"Always."

Once they've gotten Erik set up on the operation table, it all happens quickly. Erik squeezes Jason's hand as the cage settles over the back of his head, the edge of it slotting into the metal band they've wrapped around his neck. It's almost like a collar, and it brings up the same sick sense of loss he's always felt when someone puts a play collar on him in a scene. I'm sorry, he can't help thinking. I'm sorry for what I let them do to you.

"We're going to start the electric field now," Dr. Cabrera says. "If there's no appreciable difference in your energy levels after fifteen minutes, we'll unhook you and try it again with the full skull-shield. Okay?"

Erik's throat is too tight to speak; he pulls his hand out of Jason's grip and gives Dr. Cabrera a thumbs-up. He isn't okay-- how could he be, with all the memories this is drawing up-- but the procedure isn't hurting him. He's going to be all right.

"Starting up the current in three... two... one... now."

He feels a buzz, more through the metal than anywhere else, and that makes sense, of course: where else would the current be conducted? But there's something happening, something at soul's-home... a movement of some kind, an aligning, something's pulling and tugging and stretching...

"We've got the electric field in place, and your bond is having to compensate for the decreased throughput by aligning itself as precisely as possible," Dr. Cabrera explains. "Your bond may be feeling tight now; are you sensing any tightness or constriction?"


"Is it uncomfortable?"

He has to think about that. Two squeezes. "No."

"Excellent," Dr. Cabrera says. "Erik, are you still comfortable with the idea of allowing us to handle the bond?"

A much more complicated question than can be answered with 'yes' or 'no'. Erik takes a deep breath and tries to speak.

"Can you..." He takes another breath. "Can you see... the real bond. What..." And another, his head beginning to ache now. "What difference... is there a difference... can you..."

Dr. Cabrera comes closer, her hands moving over the mesh. "Yes," she says, and she doesn't say anything else for quite a while. But then she makes a low sound in her throat, and goes on with,
"They're both orienting. The artificial bond is orienting slightly to the southwest, and the original bond is orienting slightly to the southeast."

"How--"

"I don't know, Erik." She touches his back gently with one hand. "They're very close together, indistinct from each other in places. Moving them apart would--"

"Please."

"--it would cause you a great deal of pain, and I don't think it's advisable."

He closes his eyes and squeezes Jason's hand. But-- both orienting. Both. Does that mean the true bond leads somewhere...?

God. What if they were wrong, what if they were all wrong? What if his soulmate's alive? He's always wanted to believe it, he's never given up hope, but hope is an anemic thing; this could be the iron of proof.

"You're stable now," Dr. Cabrera tells him. "We're going to let the test run its course, and if you're still stable at the end of it, we'll get the helmet on you and see about blocking the anniversary impulse."

Erik whispers, "Thank you."

Afterward, Jason looks as twitchy as Erik feels. They both find several more ways to say Are you sure this will work and is there anything more and get the same answers: nothing's certain, and this is the most and the best they can do right now.

Jason looks over when Erik's words run dry, and Erik's grateful when Jason sees the question sticking in his throat and voices it. "What about Erik's-- his original soulmate. You told him his real soulmate couldn't have survived."

"I said I didn't know any way he could survive it," says Dr. Cabrera. "And I don't. Your bond is anomalous in many ways, Erik. This apparent energy in the original bond could just be another side effect of the B2C procedure."

"Okay, maybe. And you don't want to give anybody false hope, I get that," says Jason, "but-- you don't know of any way he could still be alive, can you think of best-case scenarios where he might have? What was it that you said would've hurt him-- loss of psionic energy?"

"That's right," she says. "And I suppose if Erik's soulmate had been able to keep extremely calm and was abnormally capable of manipulating their bond, there might be a slim chance he could've kept from reacting instinctively to the trauma. If he hadn't reached out at all." She looks at Erik.

Erik shakes his head, his eyes falling shut. "He was reaching for me. He was trying. I could hear him." He's never told anyone before, not since Selene guided him to remember. But right now, everything's so hard, it all hurts so much, it almost feels good to let that secret go.

"Hear him...?" Dr. Cabrera's saying in confusion, and Erik opens his eyes to see Jason taking that in, staring back and forth between them.

"What if Erik's soulmate was a psionic mutant?" Jason asks. "Could a psionic survive that kind of energy loss?"
Dr. Cabrera's much less certain now. "Study of psionic abilities is still a very young field. We have very little reliable information on how psionic mutations interact with the bond. And psionic mutants are so rare..."

Jason puts his hand on Erik's shoulder, squeezing, exhaling hard. "You didn't tell her."

"So she could tell me that the real bond was malformed?" Erik tenses. "That I was better off without it?"

"I know why you didn't. I know," Jason rubs across Erik's shoulders soothingly. He tells Dr. Cabrera, "That was the whole bullshit justification for interrupting Erik's original bond. There's reason to believe Erik's real soulmate was a psionic mutant-- Erik was getting more than emotions from the bond, he sensed his soulmate was trying to communicate with him."

Dr. Cabrera absorbs that. She's trying to be gentle, Erik can see, as she tells him, "It's a very long chain of suppositions. Malformed bonds can give the impression of thoughts and words transferring between soulmates, but in almost all cases it's not conscious thoughts that come across, it's subconscious unformed ideas-- 'psychic junk mail', we call it sometimes. And rare as malformed bonds are, they're much more common than psionic mutants. So the odds are against it there. Even if you were right and your soulmate was a psionic mutant, the level of power he'd need in order to withstand that kind of trauma is immense. As unlikely as it is that he was a psionic mutant, it's even less likely he could've been strong enough to survive an almost total loss of psionic energy."

Erik nods, tries to look accepting, but he can feel a bittersweet hope rising in him again. Strong enough to send thoughts across the bond might mean strong enough to survive their separation. Erik knows he heard words, and they weren't subconscious junk mail, they were thoughts, meaningful thoughts, sent to him, calling to him. Please, don't go. Stay with me.

"But this is why you didn't want to use drugs to block the bond," Dr. Cabrera says, finally. She reaches up and rubs at her forehead. "Erik-- this is incredibly important information, you should have told me this from the start."

"I know," Erik says. "But please... if there's even a chance my real soulmate's still alive, I can't let anything happen to what's left of that bond."

"There are a thousand reasons your true bond could be orienting to a direction," Dr. Cabrera says. "It doesn't mean your soulmate's still alive."

Erik tightens his grip on Jason's hand. "But if he is. If he is. Then--"

"Then the helmet shouldn't have any effect on him." She sits back in her chair, considering. "It might dampen his psionic energy while you're wearing it."

"What little he'd have left?" Jason asks. "But would that be harmful to him?"

"Over the long term, it might be. But for the few days it'll take to shield you from the anniversary pull, the most he'd likely feel--" She frowns. "Erik, I'm not sure I can make a realistic judgment about the risks to your original soulmate. I don't see any reason he'd be in danger for these few days, but what was done to you was criminal malpractice at best, and the leftover effects are--"

"I know what they are," Erik says quietly.

"I was going to say... unpredictable," Dr. Cabrera finishes. "We'll be as careful as we can, and we'll monitor the psionic energy going through both bonds as best we can. But there is a risk. I'm sorry
to have to say it, but there is.

Jason looks at him, and Erik stares down at his lap for a while, considering.

"Nine collars," Jason reminds him. "The last one sent to me, the day you arrived in New York."

Erik looks back up at Dr. Cabrera. "I'm ready to take the chance," he says. "Let's get started."

They put him in the helmet late in the evening on the 21st, when Erik's struggling so hard with the pull he's shaking. "I could stand it another hour," he tells Dr. Cabrera. "Maybe another two."

"You're not here to prove how much you can stand," she reminds him gently. "You're here to get the help you need with this. I won't do anything with your explicit consent, but in my professional opinion, the time has come."

Erik looks to Jason, who nods. "I'll be right there," he says. "I won't leave for anything."

"We're sure this won't hurt my original bond?" Erik asks. "If it does, we have to stop. Immediately. If I can't answer for some reason, I need everyone to know that. Any damage or strain to the original bond and we stop everything." He gives Jason a weary look. "There's always the old-fashioned way. Tie me down and gag me for a couple of days."

"Dude." Jason prods him in the shoulder. "Now is so not the time for dirty talk."

Erik actually laughs at that. "No," he agrees. He turns to Dr. Cabrera and nods. "Let's get started."

In theory, he'll be able to move around for limited amounts of time once the helmet's in place; he'll be able to sit up long enough to feed himself, make use of the restroom, even take sponge baths. But once they get the helmet onto him, the primitive nature of this technology couldn't be more obvious. It's a young technique, using a helmet to block psionic energy; maybe someday they'll have it down to a headband, something lighter and more easily ignored, but for now, what he mostly feels is trapped within his own mind.

All these years he's tried to send out thoughts to his soulmate, even when he didn't have the energy or the heart to believe his soulmate could hear him. Now... even if he tried, even if his soulmate were little more than a few blocks away, it wouldn't do any good. Inside this helmet, no one is out there. No one can hear him.

But that means Sebastian can't feel him, either, and for all that he might feel trapped inside this helmet, he's stopped shaking.

This could work. For the first time since he got here, he believes it: this could actually work.

At first, Dr. Cabrera's prediction that Erik might find the next few days uncomfortable and boring turns out to be accurate. The helmet's heavy, and Erik has to be hooked up to several different monitors. He's able to rest in a private room, but he's exhausted at first, barely able to stay awake for more than twenty minutes at a time. The helmet doesn't make sleeping easy, so it's a rough night. But he's had rougher. It could be so much worse...

By morning, though, things feel different. He's doing better; he can tell that even without being able to read the monitors. The helmet feels lighter somehow. He doesn't feel tired, even after a night of interrupted sleep; he feels alert. He feels strong.
He feels strong in any number of different ways, and when Jason walks in after a trip to the vending machine for coffee, Erik recognizes one of them for what it is.

"Hey, you're awake-- whoa," Jason says, stumbling forward a little. In his chair at Erik's bedside, John sits up, coming awake himself with a grunt. Erik can feel every piece of metal on Jason's body: the wristband he made for Jason when they were teenagers, his belt, his zipper, the button on his jeans, his wallet chain, the eyelets on his boots. He can feel the metal John has on him, too: his zipper, his belt, the change in his pocket. He can feel the bedframe, the monitoring equipment off to his left, the helmet itself... everything, the whole room, it's like everything is suddenly, brilliantly real again.

Jason rushes over, hops up on Erik's bed. "What's going on?"

"I can feel you," Erik says, reaching for Jason's wallet chain. He gives it a light tug, and the ends separate from Jason's belt loop and his wallet. It rises into the air, and when Erik gives it a soft whirl with his ability, it forms into a curving spiral. "I can feel everything."

"That's fantastic," Jason says.

John stands up. "We need to tell Dr. Cabrera," he says, and he's off before Erik can even nod his agreement.

Jason stares after him. "I don't like that," he mutters. "He should tell you first."

"He isn't going to do that," Erik murmurs. "I understand why, why can't you?"

"Because it's bullshit." Jason turns back to Erik, takes his hand; Erik sweeps his fingers over Jason's wristband, feeling the alloy, remembering. He remembers swirling tin and copper together to make it, remembers the almost-orgasmic feeling of blending those metals and sensing it when they became one, something different and stronger than the sum of its parts.

"Erik? Hey. Don't zone out on me," Jason says, and now he looks a little worried, too, his brows drawn together. "Look, I don't know what John saw, but I know if he's not telling you, then he's pulling an option out of the game. You should get to make decisions yourself. I don't like the way he doesn't ask you..."

"His ability," Erik says, "his rules." He rubs his whole palm against the outside of Jason's wristband. "I need metal. I need metal I can work with. Please."

Jason holds his hand steady. "I don't want to leave you here alone."

"Jason, please. I don't know how long I'll have this." Erik looks at him, the edges of the helmet clear in the sides of his vision. "Please."

Grimacing but nodding, Jason climbs off Erik's bed. "You can keep the chain," he says, and Erik immediately reaches for it, letting the heavy links swirl back and forth around his fingers. "I'll see what I can find for you. Whatever I can turn up in half an hour."

"Thank you," Erik whispers.

As Jason's turning to go, Dr. Cabrera comes in, holding a clipboard. She looks at the chain moving through Erik's fingers and nods. "We suspected that could happen. We're going to need to run some more tests, Erik, do you think you can handle that?"

Erik wraps the chain around his wrist; it goes around three times before he pries the last link open
to seal it on. "I can do anything you need me to do," he says. "Just tell me where to start."

Jason comes back half an hour later with a box full of stainless steel silverware. Erik reaches out with greedy hands, and before Jason even has a chance to ask what he missed while he was gone, Erik has a chorus line of dancing forks.


"Tell me what?" Jason looks from John to Erik and comes over to Erik's hospital bed, looking him over. Erik's got a bandage on the inside of his elbow where they drew blood; Jason grabs his arm and stares down at it. "Erik. Tell me what?"

"It's nothing serious. I'm drawing a little extra psionic energy through the bond, just like Dr. Cabrera said I would."

"Okay. And that's not a problem...?"

"Tell him the rest," John says, impatient. Erik turns his head; by now he's almost getting used to the weight of the helmet, almost doesn't hate it. For the first April he can remember, he doesn't have to give a damn about Sebastian.

"It's a little more psionic energy than she expected."

"That still doesn't sound bad." Jason looks up at John, eyes narrowed. "If you know more than you're telling us, now's the time to pony up."

John drums his fingertips against his thigh. "I'm worried," he says flatly. "I want to know if she's sure she can stop this drain from happening."

"Does it need to stop?" Jason asks.

"It'll stop as soon as the helmet comes off. You know that, you were there, she told us that." Erik's forks form a line, all of them suddenly pointed toward John. "We just need to wait out the anniversary, and it'll be done."

"He's going in for another series of tests in six hours," John says. "In the meantime, we're supposed to keep an eye out for any sudden surges of power, which I think someone--" he frowns at Erik-- "is enjoying a little too goddamn much to think they're a problem."

"Imagine if this were you," Erik shoots back. "Imagine if you lost your ability, and for ten fucking years, you felt like you were a shadow of who you were supposed to be. So I'm draining Sebastian's psionic energy-- he owes me. I'm not going to be sorry."

"You don't even know it's draining him," John says, with just enough emphasis on him that Erik stills. His forks snap back into their original shapes and tip over on the bed. "Come on. This doesn't scare you at all?"

"She doesn't even know if it's still connected to him," Erik whispers. "She doesn't know."

Jason comes around to the side of Erik's bed and takes a seat, rubbing Erik's shoulder. "Okay," he says softly. "So we're going to keep an eye on you while you're wearing this." He raps his knuckles against Erik's helmet; Erik turns and glares up at him. Jason tilts his head to the side. "Nope, sorry. You don't really look all that badass in that thing. Not scared."
Erik sighs and lies back, reaching for one of the spoons. He softens the metal, draws it all together into a sphere. "I'm not with Sebastian. I can feel my ability again." He looks up at John. "Just let me have that for now. Please."

John looks at him, and at Jason, and he sighs, scratching both hands through his hair. "Jason. Have you got this for a while? I need some sleep, or I'm just going to be sorting through threads that don't exist."

"It's fine," Jason says. "Go back home, get some rest."

"Thanks."

Once John's gone, Jason squeezes Erik's hand. "A few more hours before your next test?"

"Yeah."

"Make those forks joust or something. They can ride the spoons." Jason conjures up a small army of plastic cutlery. "I think I can take 'em."

Erik laughs. "Thank you," he says, and his silverware lines up, ready to do battle.

Erik doesn't have to ask to know that the answers are bad. He reaches up to the helmet. "It needs to come off, doesn't it."

"Yes. But I want to get you under the observation cage first."

"All right." Erik looks over at Jason, who's gone grim with worry. "It's going to be all right," he says. "If the pull gets bad again, you can strap me down this time."

"Don't think I won't," Jason says, but his attention's all on Dr. Cabrera. "Are you sure taking the helmet off is going to stop the psionic drain?"

"There's no reason to think it won't. The psionic drain shouldn't be happening on the level it is at all; the helmet is the only new element."

"But if it doesn't help--"

"Then we'll run more tests." Dr. Cabrera turns back to Erik. "We're going to need to keep you under observation for the next few hours to see how this affects you. If you feel any discomfort, any pain, if your abilities change in anyway, let us know immediately."

"Under observation-- does that mean in the cage, or--"

"The cage, just for the first few minutes. If we're not seeing any serious anomalies, we'll attach a freestanding monitor to you and go from there."

"All right. Then let's get started."

John comes back in the morning, refreshed. Jason's slumped over in a chair next to Erik's hospital bed, and Erik hasn't slept much himself.

He can feel every piece of metal holding the building together, not just the seventeenth-floor office and its rooms. He can feel steel girders, rebar, nuts, bolts, nails. He's starting to feel as though he can sense metal from the buildings next door.
John doesn't have to ask. He comes right over to Erik's side and takes his hand.

"What can I do for you?"

Erik shakes his head— at least the motion's easier, now that the helmet's gone. "Nothing. I'm still--"

"--still draining energy. Yeah. I can see that." John leans down, kisses Erik's forehead. "What's our next move?"

"I'm going in for another observation round in--" Erik glances up at the wall clock. It's mostly plastic; he can feel the gears inside, but he doesn't have them memorized the way he'd need to in order to tell the time with his ability. "Twenty-six minutes. I tried to get Jason to leave, but--"

John snorts. "Every thread I've got said he'd still be here when I got in. Trust me, you weren't going to get anywhere no matter what you tried."

"I guess not." Erik looks up at John and reaches out to him; John takes his hand. John's only jewelry on that side is a hemp bracelet, a few wooden beads woven into it. Erik can touch that. He's been afraid of what he'll do to Jason's wristband, but Jason won't take it off.

"I want you to be okay," John says, finally. "I really want that for you."

"I want to be okay, too." Erik squeezes his hand. "You don't have to talk right now. Just stay here with me until it's time to go in for the next round of tests."

"Okay." John glances behind him for a chair; Erik doesn't even bother gesturing to pull it close enough for John to sit. John looks warily at it for a second, but in the end he sits down anyway.

Erik winces. "I'm not going to crumple it, am I?"

"You could," John admits. "But the worst that happens is I end up with a bruise on my ass. I'll take that chance for you."

"Thanks."

"I'd take a lot more chances for you," John tells him, and they sit there together to wait out the next half-hour.

After another trip into the observation room, after another skin-crawling episode with the cage surrounding soul's-home and Erik nearly squeezing Jason's fingers til they break, after Erik's back in his hospital room, Dr. Cabrera comes in with a patient folder that's growing thicker by the hour.

She flips through paper after paper and finally shakes her head. "I don't understand this. There's no reason for you to be draining energy at this rate, not after removing the helmet. Your bond, though..."

"My bonds." Erik reaches back to soul's-home and presses at it. Under the circumstances, no one looks oddly at him for it. It still hurts, but less than it used to; it's like that spot has gone partially numb. "Maybe I should have known."

"Someone should have known," Jason says, but he's not looking at Dr. Cabrera; he's looking at John. John meets that look and doesn't flinch back. "What can we do now?"

"Erik, how are you feeling?"
It's getting harder and harder for Erik to speak aloud. Energy crackles through him—nothing visible, but he can feel metal everywhere. He could tear this building to shreds. He could float on the magnetic fields of the earth. If he isn't careful, he'll start drawing metal toward him.

"Magnetized," he says, finally.

"Could we use Psychitrex to tone down that effect?" John asks. Jason glares at him.

"We could use it to treat the symptom," Dr. Cabrera says. "But it wouldn't do anything about the cause behind that extra boost to Erik's ability. And at the rate he's draining psionic energy, a dose strong enough to suppress Erik's ability for very long would likely be harmful. The dry mouth humans get from Psychitrex would be the least of it."

"Throw out a hypothesis," Jason urges her. "What's happening to Erik has to be because of the way that extra bond is spliced into him, right? So if we severed that bond now--"

"It would almost certainly be fatal to Erik's spliced bondmate. The only way we'd do that is if it were life-and-death for Erik, or if the spliced bond weakened enough to signify that his spliced bondmate were already dead."

"The real bond," Erik gets out. "What would it do to that?"

Dr. Cabrera closes up her file folder and tucks it under her arm. "Erik, to be honest, I can't tell whether your original bond is attached to anyone at all. But if it is, he's contributing psionic energy, too—-that may very well be the problem behind all this. You may be receiving twice the amount of psionic drain you should be, which would account for some reawakening of your ability—-but not on the scale you have it."

"Then he's alive," Erik says, eyes closing. "He had enough psionic energy to survive the original separation—-and now he's giving me what he has left."

Jason's there in an instant, his arms around Erik, holding onto him. Erik buries his face against Jason's shoulder for a few seconds and then looks back at Dr. Cabrera.

"What happens to both of them if I--"

"Erik," Jason whispers. "Come on--"

Erik gently presses Jason's arms back. "What happens to both of them if this kills me?"

"You understand this is on a hypothetical level. Even in medical journals I've never seen anything like this."

"Your best guess, then."

Dr. Cabrera sighs. "My best guess is that your spliced bondmate will survive. If any component of his ability is psionic, he'll likely lose it. The bulk of what's connecting you two is on your end, and he likely won't receive much in the way of returned psionic energy—-what he's giving you now will probably be one-way."

"And my soulmate?"

"If he's alive, all that psionic energy will probably rush back to him. There aren't very many people who could survive that influx of psionic energy—-when your spliced bondmate claimed that his presence in your bond diverted enough of that energy to save your life, it's possible he wasn't
completely mistaken."

"What would his soulmate need in order to survive the return of that much psionic energy?" Jason asks.

"Again, let me tell you all that this is purely a guess, and basing any actions on that guesswork is irresponsible at best. But I believe his soulmate would need to be at least Chi-level, or above, to reintegrate that much psionic energy. Even then it would be dicey. There are probably only twenty-five Chi-level psionic mutants in the world."

Jason looks at John, and John grimaces. "I'm Tau-level," he says. "What are you?"

For the first time, Jason slips his wristband off. There's a small Psi symbol on the back of his wrist.

"So if he's one of the other twenty-four, maybe he'll live if you die," John says. "Not good odds. And you know I can't see him. If I could, I'd tell you."

"Erik, there are still more options," Dr. Cabrera says. "Unless you're going to refuse treatment, I don't think we should waste any time in trying them."

"I'm not refusing," Erik says. "I'm not going to get any more sleep at this rate anyway. Let's get started."

By the time they've exhausted every possibility, Erik's had enough needles stuck into him to feel a bit like a pincushion. He never used to mind injections-- hell, piercing play was something he did a lot of, back in his clubbing days-- but his sense of the metal is so keen that every imperfection drags against him. He can feel every rush of blood through a needle or press of medication into him from both sides, and it's eerie.

And it doesn't matter. Nothing works. Dr. Cabrera hasn't put a number on the time Erik has left, but Erik can feel the overload tearing him to shreds. It's not going to be much longer.

Are you out there? he thinks, as hard as he can. There's a psionic component to his ability; he's always known that. Maybe now, with this much power, he's got enough psionic power to get past the fact that he's never been a telepath. Maybe he can push those thoughts out with sheer brute force, if he concentrates. Can you hear me? I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I never meant to do this to you. I never meant to do this to you. Please, if you're out there... I'm sorry. Forgive me.

"Listen," Jason says quietly, late that night. Erik's exhausted, but he can't possibly sleep, not like this, not when every piece of metal in the building-- hell, the block-- is calling out to him.

John's staring out the window, like he has been for most of the day. He won't even look at Erik, hasn't been able to for hours. Erik wonders if seeing him like this is reminding John of Ned. He should send John back home, really; he should ask John to go back to Maine. John shouldn't have to watch this.

Jason's at Erik's side, though, and Erik knows better than to ask Jason to go anywhere.

"Listen to what?" Erik murmurs.

"I've been thinking about something. I want you to tell me if I'm crazy."

"You've always been crazy," Erik says, closing his eyes. "What is it this time?"
Jason slips his hand under Erik's, lets Erik take it and squeeze. Erik can feel the blood running under Jason's skin, the iron in it. He wonders if that would have felt natural, if his ability had kept growing at the pace it was in high school. Is this what his power was meant to feel like? He wishes there were some way to know.

"I want to talk to Dr. Cabrera again."

"I think we've gotten all the answers we can from her." Erik squeezes Jason's hand, but not with his muscles: with his ability. The iron shimmers lightly; Jason hisses, but he doesn't sound hurt, just startled.

"You need someone to offload psionic energy to," Jason begins, and John makes a strangled noise, his head whipping around, blood draining from his face.

"Erik," John manages, barely audible, "oh, Christ, I didn't know. I didn't see it. I didn't know."

Jason's hand tightens on Erik's. "I wasn't going to tell you first," he snaps, but Erik can feel the tension in him. "Wait-- what do you mean, you didn't see it--"

"I didn't know you could ask, I didn't know you could do it-- if I'd known, if I'd seen it--"

"If you'd seen it," Erik repeats, closing his eyes, breathing. He can't get tense along with them now; he'll tear the room to pieces. "If you'd seen what?"

"I was so sure," John whispers. Jason carefully lets go of Erik's hand and comes to his feet. "It was the only way, it was the only thing I saw, I looked at everything, everything I could get my hands on, I swear to God, I'm sorry--"

Erik hears it-- feels it-- as Jason moves, and he gets his eyes open just in time to see Jason rush him, grabbing John by the shirt and shoving him into the wall. "What did you do?" Jason snarls. "What the fuck did you do?"

John looks over at Erik, defeated, sorry-- God, he's sorry, he said it out loud, I swear to God, I'm sorry.

"When," Erik whispers. "When is he going to be here?"

"In the morning."

Jason slams John into the wall again. "No."

"I'm sorry--"

"You son of a bitch, no--"

"I didn't see it!"

"You called Shaw, how could you do that, do you know all the things that bastard's done to him--"

"Yes," John fires back, and that stops Jason cold. "I know everything. He didn't have to say word one to me in this thread; I've heard it all in the rest. I've held him while he cried in one thread, I've taken it when he threw a punch at me for even asking in another. I've been kicked out, screamed at, broken up with a thousand times, but I know the whole ugly goddamn story from start to finish. I've heard things he'd never tell you, so don't say it's because I didn't know what Shaw's done to him. I know."
"You--" Jason just shakes his head. "Then why?"

"Erik was going to die! Christ, the doctors said so, everyone said so, I saw it in every thread I could find! Could you have let that happen? If you saw thread after thread that said, nope, he's not going to make it, if you had to watch him die over and over again?" John pushes back against Jason and rushes to Erik's bedside. Erik grips John by the belt, by the rivets in his jeans, by the iron in his bloodstream, and holds him away. "You had one shot. One. It was Shaw. Hell, yes, I called him. I couldn't keep watching you die."

"You were wrong." Jason's hands are curled into fists, the overhead lights flickering with his anger, thunder heavy in the room. "Your fucking threads-- you said yourself they don't catch everything, I would have done anything, I would have--" He turns to Erik, comes forward. "It's not too late. Let me talk to Dr. Cabrera. I know where Anne is. I know she'd let me go. If she were here, if you could push that energy into me, I'd take it for you. I'd do anything. You know that."

Erik's still entirely focused on John, though, and his ability's screaming for retribution. He could tear John apart with just the metal inside him; he could destroy him with just the metal he's wearing.

He drops John into the chair at his bedside and shakes his head.

"When we met," Erik whispers, "you said you didn't have it in you to fight for anything."

John leans forward, his hair falling into his face. He brushes it back and looks up at Erik, his eyes brittle, angry, shining. "I guess I had one more."

In the morning, Sebastian walks into the clinic under his own power. Erik's heart twists when he sees that. He shouldn't be upright; he shouldn't have that much energy to give.

That leaves one place it could be coming from, just one, and Erik's hands clench into fists as Sebastian walks up to his hospital bed, flanked by Jason on one side and John on the other. There's a dense weight of metal in one of his pockets, and Erik struggles not to be sick, all too certain what that metal has to be.

"I hear you got yourself into some trouble," Sebastian says, smiling down at him. "Don't worry, baby. I'm here."

He jerks back as the flesh on his face seals, his mouth warping into a smooth unbroken mask. Both of Sebastian's hands come up to his chin, nails scratching down from nose to jaw, and Jason crosses his arms over his chest.

"You're done threatening him," Jason says. "Here's how this is going to work. We're going to shoot you up with Psychitrex, because if you think you're getting your hands on him when you're full of stored-up kinetic energy, then fuck you. You're going to do whatever Erik needs you to do, and if that involves making contact, then it's on his terms, start to finish."

Sebastian's eyes have gone wide, wild, and he's drawing in air through his nose so fast he sounds like he's in danger of hyperventilating. John cringes, but he doesn't do anything to stop what Jason's doing, much less what he's saying.

"When you're done here, you leave. You want to make my day, you turn yourself in to the authorities for everything you've done to Erik, to Gerald and Aileen Stone, and to God knows who else. But I'm not going to hold out for that. You're here to save Erik's life. That's it. When he's out of danger, if you ever even fucking think about him again--"
Jason moves forward, and Sebastian starts to reach up-- only to be caught up in a straitjacket, pressed back against an illusionary board, strapped down. He struggles, as if trying to charge himself up so he can break those bonds, but there's nothing to push against. Just illusion. Jason's been saying for years he could take Sebastian in a fight, and maybe he's been right all this time. Or maybe Sebastian's weaker than he looked. And either way, it doesn't matter. Erik doesn't know what would happen to his soulmate if he let Jason loose on Sebastian. All these years, and he still doesn't know.

"I think he gets it," John forces out. "Let him down. You're not going to make this easier on anybody by giving him the means to charge you with assault, Jason."

Jason doesn't take his eyes off Sebastian. "Erik?"

"Let him go," Erik whispers. "It's all right."

The illusions all disappear at once, and Sebastian doubles over, wheezing, hands going straight to his face. He rounds on Jason with a snarl, and Jason puts up a hand, boxes Sebastian into a clear plastic cage.

"You don't want me for an enemy, boy," Sebastian whispers hoarsely.

"I've always been your enemy," Jason snaps back. "I--"


Jason flinches, but nods, dropping the plastic cage illusion. Erik wonders what Jason was going to say. Sebastian looks from Jason to John and finally to Erik, and he draws himself up straight and narrows his eyes.

"I love you," he says flatly. "I'm here for you. Have them get the Psychitrex, if that's what you need. But I've got conditions, too."

"I'm not coming back to you." Erik says it almost before Sebastian's finished his sentence. "If that's what you were going to ask for--"

"No. You'll come back when you're ready. I can wait." Sebastian reaches for something in his pocket, and Erik shakes his head at Jason before Jason can retaliate by doing God-knows-what to Sebastian's hands, or his pockets. Erik already knows what this is going to be.

The collar's heavier than the first one Sebastian gave him, but it's the same adamantium-silver alloy Erik remembers from back in the beginning. His skin's crawling just feeling it, but he knew. He knew the moment Sebastian walked into the room.

"Number ten," Erik whispers.

"I'm doing this for you," Sebastian says, too calm. "You know why. You know what we are to each other. Stop pretending."

Erik stares at him for a long time. He's standing upright. Rocked as he was by Jason's tricks, he hasn't faltered since Jason let him go. He's strong. He's healthy.

The psionic energy that's killing Erik isn't coming from him. It's coming from someone else.

"Jason," Erik says, "get the Psychitrex. John-- you know how this is going to go. Leave me to it."
"I'm not leaving," Jason says immediately. "John, get the fucking Psychitrex."

All it takes is a quick nod toward Sebastian and John and a raised eyebrow. Jason sets his jaw and nods. "We're blanked."

"Get over here."

Jason doesn't hesitate; he climbs onto Erik's hospital bed, dragging Erik into his arms. "Say the word," Jason whispers. "Say the word and he'll be dead before he hits the floor. We can do this. We can give you a bond that'll keep you alive, keep your soulmate alive. Please, Erik."

"We're out of time," Erik whispers back. "And if Anne says no--"

"Goddamnit. I should have just called, I should have had her waiting right here for us. I'm so fucking sorry, Erik, but for God's sake, let me drop that motherfucker."

"It might kill me. And my soulmate. You'd go to jail--"

"Worth it."

"No." Erik eases Jason back. "I want you to give me half an hour. I have my ability. He won't touch me if I don't want him to, and I can stop him if he does anything that hurts me. But I want you to walk out of this building, far enough away you can't sense what's going on in this room."

"Like hell--"

"I want you to do that for me," Erik says firmly, "because I'm walking back out of this, and I don't want you having to remember this for the rest of your life." He reaches up and raps his knuckles gently against Jason's forehead. "Your memory's too good. I want you far enough away you won't be playing it all back forever."

"And I just want you safe."

"I'm safe." Erik laughs, shaking his head. "I could tear him apart with his own blood, Jason. I'm as safe as I'm ever going to be."

"I hate every single fucking part of this," Jason says. His hands are shaking, now. "You know that? I hate everything about it. And I especially hate John for making you do this."

"John and I are over. He knows that already. Whatever we were to each other-- he picked the wrong side in that fight." Erik grits his teeth. "If you want to do something for me, get him on a plane back home, and tell him to pack my things in Maine and send them back here to you. I'm not going back there, not after this." The anger's good, it heats him from the inside out, but he can't sustain it. He's so damned tired. "Give me half an hour with Sebastian and it'll all be through."

"Thirty minutes. Starting now." Jason slides back off the bed. "If he hurts you, all bets are off."

"If he hurts me, you won't have a chance to touch him." Erik flexes and clenches his hands, shaking his head. "I don't think I could stop myself from fighting back."

"Good." Jason takes a deep breath. "Bringing everything back in three. Two. One..."

When the room fades back in, Dr. Cabrera's standing next to Sebastian, drawing a hypodermic needle back and nodding at Erik. "Done," she says. "Erik..."

"It's all right," Erik says quietly. "Thank you."

The door closes behind the three of them, and Erik looks up at Sebastian. Sebastian still has that damned metal in his hand.

"I love you."

"Shut up," Erik says. He reaches for the collar, takes a deep breath, and seals it on with his ability. Sebastian smiles as he walks over, and Erik reaches out to take his hand.

"You've got me all wrong," Sebastian says, near the end of their thirty minutes. He still has his hand on Erik's joining spot. It still hurts, being touched there. It's worse having Sebastian touch him there, because as much as it hurts, a part of Erik wants Sebastian's hand at soul's-home. It's not a feeling of wholeness, nothing like a sensation of completion, but in a way it's less empty somehow. He wants that as much as he hates wanting it.

I belonged to someone, once. Are you out there? Please, be out there. Please, let this be enough...

"Erik," Sebastian murmurs, leaning close again. Erik doesn't flinch away. "Baby. You've been on your own so long. You need me."

"You have no idea how deluded you sound," Erik says. Sebastian incares the back of his neck, scratching down his nape. Despite himself, Erik shivers. "I need you once a year. Once. To keep my soulmate alive. I'm not here for you. I'm here for him."

Sebastian reaches around to the front of Erik's throat; Erik grabs him by the wrist and shoves his hand away. After a moment's struggle, Sebastian pulls back, and then-- for the first time in ten years, for the first time Erik can remember-- he climbs out of bed first, and starts getting dressed.

"He's not yours anymore," Sebastian says roughly, buttoning his shirt. "He never really was. You just couldn't see it."

All Erik has here is a set of hospital scrubs, but he pulls those on anyway. "You don't have the right to say a damned thing about him. You don't know what we were to each other."

"You're still so convinced he loved you." Sebastian snaps his watch on, and Erik realizes his power's gotten weaker. Not as weak as it normally is, not as weak as it's been for the past ten years, but it's going away.

Thank God. Please... are you out there, are you all right...?"

He's so distracted, thinking of his soulmate, that he almost misses it when Sebastian reaches out for him again. He shoves Sebastian's hands away.

"He was just like everybody else," Sebastian goes on. "He wanted a normal life. A normal bond. You took that chance away from him."

"You took that away from us," Erik whispers. "Not me. You."

"You're so different from him," Sebastian says, and something about the way he says it makes Erik go cold all over. "You spend all your time blaming me. He didn't."

"What," Erik gets out. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Sebastian's on his way to the door now. Erik leaps for him, grabs him by the arm and yanks him
back. He can't pull Sebastian by the metal he's wearing; he can grip it, but he can't exert enough force to make a difference. His power's fading. His soulmate's alive, somewhere. *You spend all your time blaming me. He didn't.*

"It wasn't that long ago. Just a few weeks back." Sebastian turns in Erik's grip. He reaches up to stroke his fingertips along Erik's collar-- God, this fucking collar, Erik can feel every last poisonous link around his throat. "He came to see me. Had this sweet, sad little story about what happened to him in April of 2000."

Erik closes his eyes and focuses on the collar. He can't get it off. He was moving this metal as easily as breathing just a little while ago, and now he can't move it. It won't come off.

"He just fell into a coma one day, didn't feel the bond break, didn't feel anything. He was confused. A little lost. I asked a few questions. It was so strange, baby; being around him felt so *familiar.* It was like being near you, like being near another part of me." Sebastian's smile is horrifying; it's gentle and sweet and charming and affectionate... all of it lies, masking one form of cruelty after another. Erik sees that smile in his nightmares sometimes. "He felt it, too. So instead of just giving him a consultation... well."

When Sebastian bends his head forward, Erik stays perfectly still. He doesn't move when Sebastian puts his mouth on the collar. He doesn't back away when Sebastian traces that metal with his tongue.

"After that..." Sebastian's breath is warm against Erik's skin; Erik swallows down all his revulsion, forces himself to stay steady while Sebastian finishes telling the story. Sebastian could be lying about that part of it; hell, he could be lying about all of it. But if he isn't... God. If he isn't...

"He said he just wanted to feel like he was living his life again. He wanted the chance at a normal bond. I said I'd see if there was anything I could do for him, and baby, I tried. I tried so hard for him, believe me. He deserved a better life than being tethered in to some horrible parody of a bond."

*Like ours.* Erik breathes, slowly, and he clenches his fists as Sebastian reaches up again, cupping the nape of Erik's neck in his hand.

"I tried to set him free," Sebastian murmurs, cheek-to-cheek with Erik now, his lips brushing Erik's ear. "I severed as much of his bond as I could. I thought I was giving him a chance. But," and finally, *finally,* the bastard draws away from him, "I guess you'd know as well as anybody... sometimes things don't work out like we plan."

"What happened?" Erik whispers, bracing himself. Sebastian just shakes his head sadly. "I know he's alive. *What happened to him?"

"I did everything I could for him. He ended up with the best care anyone could ask for. How he's doing after that stunt you pulled--" Sebastian's eyes narrow, and for the first time, Erik steps back. "I mean, hell, baby. He didn't have a whole lot of psionic energy left in the first place. If it's even coming back to him now, he's probably hanging on by a thread."

"Where?"

Sebastian smirks at him. "It's funny-- ever since I started feeling this weird emptiness around the bond, I've been losing some memories. Did I meet him in Vienna...?"

Erik snarls, grabbing Sebastian by the shirt and shoving him back against the bed, knocking him
into the rail along the side. If he could bend the safety rail around Sebastian, he would; for now, all
he can do is rattle the steel. "Where, damn you--"

Sebastian puts both hands up, shakes his head in a facsimile of total innocence. "Don't know, baby.
Like I was telling you, I've got these gaps in my memory now--"

Erik bangs Sebastian against the safety rail one more time, but instead of flailing or tipping over,
Sebastian sucks in a deep breath, the tension running out of his body, his eyes sliding closed. "Now
we're getting somewhere," Sebastian murmurs. "You know something, baby, I think that Psychitrex
is on its way out."

He's bluffing. He has to be bluffing; the dose should have lasted for hours. But... oh, God. If the
psionic energy isn't going back to his soulmate, if it's going back to Sebastian...

"Tell me where," Erik says, one last time, easing his hold on Sebastian. "I need to see him. I need
him." He almost can't make himself say it, not to Sebastian, but he gets the word out anyway.
"Please."

Sebastian's eyes narrow, and he pushes back against Erik. It doesn't feel like more than baseline
strength, but Erik's been so exhausted and sick these last few days that he goes stumbling back
anyway. "Now you'll beg. Now. For some stupid little punk who never should have been sniffing
around our bond in the first place?"

"If you want me to believe you love me, then help me. Give him back to me. Please--"

Sebastian reaches out and hooks his fingers into the collar, twists it. It cuts into Erik's neck, and
Sebastian's knuckles dig in to the front of Erik's throat. "I'll kill him before I let you find him," he
snarls. "And then you'll have nobody left to kneel for but me."

Erik can't tear the chain off his neck, but he focuses everything he has into the metal. The links
sharpen under Sebastian's hand, razor-edged and deadly, and Sebastian jerks away from Erik,
hissing, his blood spattering Erik's chest. Erik remembers being able to hurt Sebastian with the
bond, once, remembers how he tugged hard at Sebastian and nearly knocked him over, but he can't
find the strength to do that, can't get a hold on their bond anymore. He backs up a step while
Sebastian cradles one hand in the other, staring down at the wound.

"You're going to regret that," Sebastian warns him.

"I already do," Erik says, reaching up to stroke his throat. He dulls the edges of the collar, just
enough to keep from cutting himself as well. He can feel the power fading; soon he might not have
enough left to do even that much. "I regret I didn't take your whole fucking hand off."

"Maybe I took the wrong approach with your false bondmate," Sebastian grits out. "Maybe I should
have put him out of his misery. I guess it's not too late."

"If you touch him, I'll kill you." Erik steps forward. "If you come after me or anyone I care about,
I'll kill you. And maybe I don't have enough left of my real bond to find him. But you know damn
well I can find you." Erik grabs Sebastian's injured hand and squeezes; Sebastian gasps, flinching
and curling forward against the pain. "If anything happens to the other half of my bond, you'll have
until April to run from me. But you can't hide from me forever."

"You're the one who's been hiding." Sebastian grits his teeth and yanks his hand back. "You know
who your real soulmate is. And when you come back to me, I'll take you back. I'll forget about all
of this. I've always loved you, Erik. I always will."
Erik takes a deep breath. "Get out," he whispers. "We're done. Go."

Sebastian walks to the door, and if he looks back, Erik doesn't see it. He's got his eyes closed, his hand cupped over his joining spot.

*If you're out there-- if he was telling the truth about any part of that-- I swear to you. I'll find you.*
Losing all that psionic energy to Erik's failed attempt at separating from Shaw wasn't easy on Charles, but he has friends who are there for him. Friends who want more than just a casual relationship with him. Friends who understand when Charles has to take a leap of faith.

Chapter Notes

First of all, like we've been telling everyone from day one: THEY DON'T MEET IN THIS ONE. This is the prequel! They come face-to-face for the first time in Determination. <3

Second, OH MY GOD THANK YOU GUYS FOR STICKING WITH US. This story grew to take seven months and 200,000 more words than we expected, and it's changed SO MUCH in all that time, it's hard to believe. We've gotten to know all these characters so much better than we ever imagined because of this story... it's been amazing working on it.

Determination is requiring a little rewriting (man did we ever-so-heavily Joss ourselves over the course of writing Unbound), but we should be ready to start posting it either this Monday (the 16th) or next Monday (the 23rd). It's in good shape, though, and we're really chomping at the bit to show everyone how Charles and Erik actually manage to meet. So in the endnotes for this chapter, we're going to paste in a teaser...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It feels as if he's been awake a long time, drifting here in the dark, conscious, but disinclined to do anything about it. He doesn't want to move or feel or see. Everything is fine just like this. He doesn't remember how this started or why he's here or... really, much of anything. But it's fine.

He should probably know his name. It's not quite coming to him just now. It seems as if that ought to be alarming. For that matter, he's not sure he could open his eyes even if he wanted to, and that seems like it should frighten him as well. He's alone, utterly alone in his mind, no one else's thoughts or feelings anywhere. Conceptually that strikes him as terrifying. He knows he was devastated when that happened to him before. But he's not bothered now. He feels insulated. Peaceful.

There is something niggling at him. At the back of his head, at soul's-home. Normally he doesn't feel much of anything there. In scenes and during sex, sometimes people touch him there, expecting it to turn him on or bring him off. Even people who've never had soulbonds often have a psychosomatic sensitivity there. It's not like that for him, and being touched there just reminds him there's something missing.

What felt like null before has now gone down to negative numbers. It's as if someone took a scoop
to the back of his head and gouged his joining spot out. It doesn't hurt, but it feels less than merely empty, less than blank. It feels lacking.

Where it used to be, there's a nothing, a vacuum. A drain. If he's lying on his back-- he's not sure--then he's probably losing a lot of blood and brain matter through the gap in his head, without the missing occipital bone to stop it up. He can't feel it, though.

It's not a physical lack, he finally realizes. It couldn't be. He'd be long since dead. It's been ages. He's been awake such a long time.

He's feeling something now, though. A tickle at the roof of his mouth, that's a strange place to have a sensation. Movement. He doesn't really want to move, does he? But it's happening, he's moving his-- tongue, and it's cold, and his lips are cold, because they're parted and he's breathing, more and more shallowly, coming faster because he's waking up. Whether he wants to or not, he's waking up.

Charles opens his eyes. He sees the flecked white ceiling overhead, feels sheets and blankets, a cannula curving under his nose. Soreness in his arm, soreness everywhere, a hollow feeling at the back of his head...

Maybe he's still sixteen. Maybe he's had one of those long, involved, extraordinary dreams that's made him feel as if he traveled and sought and studied and worked and lived, and now he's coming back to reality.

This is a poor sort of reality, though. The thoughts and emotions of the rest of the world feel so far away he's not sure he's really sensing them at all. Perhaps he's only remembering how they used to feel, like a song stuck in his head.

He was leaving the dorm, walking across the grassy quad. He had a cardigan, he remembers someone covering him with it once he fell. And now he'll turn his head, and Raven will say, "Charles, you're awake."

Instead, a man says, "More flowers. I guess somebody didn't get the email."

Another male voice answers, "Once he's up maybe they'll let us bring them in. Make this room look less fucking bleak. What is it with hospitals? Even in a ritzy private clinic like this. I thought at an expensive place they'd put something on the walls. At least slap up a poster. 'Hang in there, kitten.' Or those motivational posters with the landscapes and shit."

"That's one way to push people to get better. To get away from Successories."

"Is that seriously what they're called? Uugh. That's just--"

"Hey, whoa, shush. Charles?" A hand touches his.

He licks his lips; it takes more effort than he expects. "Where..." he has to swallow, his voice is dry and broken, the word lost. And it doesn't really matter right now where exactly he is, they already said it's a clinic. He whispers, "What happened?"

"You've been out for a while," fingers lace through his and squeeze, slim, strong, warm...

Armando. Of course, and the other voice is Alex. Armando's saying, "Text Raven."

"Text her?"

"It's three in the morning there."
"Okay, okay."

"You want some ice?"

It takes Charles a long confused moment to realize Armando's talking to him. He does want ice, water, something, but he needs an answer first, struggling to focus his eyes and see Armando, his kind eyes and tensed mouth.

"I didn't sleep...?" Charles asks, a fist around his heart.

Armando shakes his head. "No. It wasn't mourning sleep." He lets Charles take that in, before quietly adding, "At first they thought it might be. You had a pretty serious psionic energy drop. But you've got none of the chemical markers of mourning sleep. It wasn't that."

"Thank you." Charles mouths it more than he says it, already fading again.

The next time Charles wakes up there's a nurse in the room. Alex is asking her, "Can we bring his flowers in now?" He was saying something about that before, Charles thinks, so maybe it hasn't been long.

The nurse sees he's conscious and comes over to shine a light in his eyes and ask him questions, and after a few nods and headshakes, she gives him a remote control to raise and lower the head of the bed, and a paper cup of ice chips. For a disorienting moment, Charles doesn't want to take them, because wasn't he worried he might be drugged...?

But that was years ago. The intervening time wasn't a dream, he understands that now. He's feeling better, more solid in his skin. The din of the world is still remote, but it's definitely there.

He lets ice chips melt in his mouth and takes inventory: hospital gown, IV in his left arm, ankle socks on his feet. The room is spare, but it has a plush sofa and chairs for guests.

Alex drags his chair over and fidgets with something-- a mobile phone. "It's in airplane mode," he says when he sees Charles looking at it. "They won't let us use it as a phone in here because blah blah electromagnetic something or other. That's where Armando is, he went back to the lobby to call your mom."

Charles thought he had a handle on reality, but that throws him. "Armando's talking to my mother?"

"He had to get her to sign you out of the hospital so they'd release you to here," Alex explains, not terribly helpful; Charles is still boggling at the idea of Armando speaking to his mother at all. He hasn't introduced any friends to his family in years. "He's been keeping her looped in. She's at a hotel down the block but your stepfather keeps trying to come in here with her, and she said she knew you wouldn't like to wake up and find him in here, so Armando just keeps calling her."

"Why did I need to be signed out...?"

"They sucked," Alex says flatly. "They were all like, psionic mutant? Passed out for no reason? Must be his mutation, dose him with Psychitrex. They were giving you like, an IV of that stuff and pretty much nothing else. So Armando got you transferred to Weeks Memorial."

"Oh." Charles says faintly. The pieces are starting to come together more and more now, but they still don't add up to a whole. "What happened to me?"
"Something with your bond." As soon as Alex says it, Charles lifts his hand to the back of his head, remembering that sensation of loss and emptiness, the feeling of being drained. He's intact there... at least so far as he's been since he was sixteen.

It still doesn't feel like much of anything when he touches it. It's a bit of a rude gesture to make in front of someone else, but Alex isn't fazed, going on, "You're stable now, everything seems to be getting better. For a while, though, you had psionic energy just rushing out there. Like a faucet."

"Rushing out," Charles repeats. Instantly he's recalling everything he's ever known about the bond, all the research he's done. Stress or injury to one bondmate can cause a loss of psionic energy within the bond itself, but to have it actively diverting energy from eir partner... that's rare. It's psionic shock that causes mourning sleep, not a loss of energy per se.

Then again, research regarding the bond and psionic mutants is rare as well. The only supposedly in-depth material Charles even remembers glancing at belonged to some sort of radical bond-creation group, one whose reputation for unethical methods of research was so bad that its founder lost his medical license. Needless to say, none of that material was peer-reviewed, and much of it read more like Scientology than science.

Sometimes, in Charles's more bitter days, he used to entertain ideas of writing a paper on the effect of renunciation on psionic mutants, but of course with no idea what sort of renunciation his bondmate used, he could never get started.

This doesn't feel precisely like it did when he was sixteen, but there are too many common elements for him to ignore it, and whatever answers there are to be had, he needs them. "Rushing out to what?"

Alex makes a face. "They don't know. Armando asked all the questions, you can ask him when he gets back in, but when I got him to do the explain-like-I'm-five translation, he pretty much said that the energy must have been going somewhere outside the bond. Because if you were passing that much energy to your soulmate, you really should have slept."

But he didn't; he didn't sleep for his bondmate ten years ago. He didn't sleep this time. Thank God for that. In fact, this new incident with his bond surely proves, if nothing else, that his bondmate is alive. He must be alive and well...

His throat feels too dry to swallow; awkwardly, he reaches over to the rolling table beside his bed, but Alex gets there first and hands over the ice chips again. While they're melting, the door opens, and Armando walks in. He smiles as he comes over to the bed, leaning down to offer Charles a hug. "It's so good to see you up and talking," he says. "How are you feeling?"

"I don't know," Charles admits. "The same... I think."

Armando nods, expression growing serious. "You're going to need to take it easy for a while. Nobody thinks the psionic energy drop is going to be permanent, but you'll probably be a little off-balance for a while as things come back."

"Understood." Charles slips his fingers into Armando's offered hand, and Alex hops up on the foot of his bed, squeezing Charles's ankle. "Alex said you were speaking with my mother...?"

"Yeah. She's been worried. But your stepfather's been trying to butt in on every damn phone call, so it's all been kind of bits and pieces. I'm starting to understand why we've never met the rest of the clan before." Armando squeezes his hand. "Don't worry, we won't let his sorry ass in here. You've got enough to deal with."
"Rest and plenty of fluids," Alex says. Both Charles and Armando look at him; Alex scrunches his nose up and shrugs. "I don't know, it's what everyone's supposed to do when they're sick."

To Charles's surprise, that actually makes him smile, if only faintly. "Thank you," he says. "For being here." He remembers, from before, vaguely... "You let Raven know?"

"Yes. Not that we really had to," Armando says. "She found her soulmate. Her name's Irene Adler, she's a precog. Really strong, from the sound of it. Right before we called Raven to tell her you were in the hospital, Irene told her the call was coming, and not to worry, that you were going to be all right."

"That's good." That Raven didn't worry, that Raven found her bondmate... last time Charles spoke to her, she wasn't sure she was close. He frowns. "What day is it...?"

"The 25th," Alex says.

"Your trip." Charles's heart sinks a little. "You were meant to be..."

"Mill Point's still going to be there next month," Armando says, looking down at Charles seriously. "You know how we said we wanted to be there through the rough times, too? Not just talk."

"So now you have to come with us," Alex says, jiggling Charles's foot a little. "Because it's not the 22nd anymore, and you're definitely going to need a vacation after all this."

"Alex!" Armando passes his hand over Alex's head. "Boy, let the man get to a point where he can sit up on his own before you start demanding vacation time out of him, all right?"

Alex rolls his eyes. "Like he didn't know I was going to ask," he mutters.

Charles didn't, actually. And the longer he stays semi-upright, the more tired he is. He should tell them to go while he rests, he knows, but this is the second time in his life he's been hospitalized because of his bond; maybe it's all right to be selfish this time, and let them stay.

The next time Charles wakes up, it's dark, only a few low lights illuminating the room. Armando's sitting on the sofa, the glow of his mobile phone shining on his face. Alex is curled up on the cushions, his head against Armando's thigh, Armando's hand gentle on his hair.

"Hey," Armando says quietly, putting the phone away. "You need anything?"

"No. Thank you," Charles murmurs. His voice is better, and more of the world clamors just outside his mind, again. Nearly midnight on a sleepy Sunday. He's grateful for that; he probably doesn't quite have the strength to fully shield right now. He's glad it'll be days yet before he has to deal with the frenzy of a Manhattan Friday night.

Of course, he's assuming his telepathy will return to the same level he's had since he first lost the bond at sixteen. There's no guarantee of that. This may be all he gets back. Perhaps every ten years he'll be felled like this, and lose a little more, and a little more...

Armando slips off the sofa and comes over to perch on the hospital bed. "I can see you worrying," he says, reaching out and stroking Charles's hair. "Don't. It's only been a few days. You're still recovering."

"You're not picking up empathy, are you?" Charles asks, half-joking.
Armando shakes his head with a smile. "Just reading your microexpressions." His thumb traces down Charles's forehead, resting lightly between his eyebrows. He strokes that spot between Charles's eyebrows, and much to Charles's surprise, it eases a little tension. Just the smallest bit, but even that feels good right now.

"Raven's been going crazy that she can't be here," Armando says. "But her bondmate, Irene..." he briefly studies Charles's face again and nods to himself. "Raven found her in a hospital in Germany, Klinikum Stuttgart. Irene's had vision problems all her life and she lost her sight completely as a teenager. She's had some procedures and therapy to restore some of her vision... she wanted to wait to meet Raven because she decided it'd be harder on them both if they were together. That she might not have been able to go through with everything she wanted to try, if Raven were there worrying about her. Raven was kind of pissed, but it's hard to argue with a precog."

"Though if anyone could..."

Armando smiles a bit. "Yeah. Well, Irene wanted to meet her now because she's having the last surgery, and even she doesn't know how it's going to turn out." He glances at the clock. "It's today. They're probably going into the operating room in about three hours. So you can imagine, with you laid out here and her bondmate going under the knife, Raven's been morphing herself extra hair to tear out." His smile widens and warms. "But I guess Irene told her you're in good hands."

The head of the bed is still inclined up somewhat, enough that when Charles pushes up on his elbow, he can tip his head and meet Armando's mouth. He only means to give him a quick kiss, an affectionate gesture, but when he sinks back against the mattress, Armando follows, and Charles winds his arms around Armando's shoulders, not kissing now so much as staying close, sharing breath. It's a bit more awkward for Armando to get his arms around Charles, but when he does, the comfort of it rushes right to Charles's head, and he holds on, not sure how to explain why he's affected so deeply by something so simple.

"You're okay. You're going to be okay," Armando soothes, and it's only then that Charles realizes he's shaking.

Gradually they drift out of the embrace, holding onto each other's hands. "We're going to have to get Irene a hell of a reception gift," Armando says. "It helped a lot to hear it from her that you pull through this fine in every future she sees. I always say I can roll with anything, but it turns out I can't really evolve to deal with seeing someone I care about hurting while doctors try to come up with professional-sounding ways to say 'Fuck if we know.'"

Charles rubs his thumb across Armando's knuckles. All that power to adapt, and his body always goes back to baseline... albeit an utterly flawless baseline. His hands aren't tough as iron or scaled over with stone unless they need to be. The most powerfully adaptable person in the world, and this is his body unstressed, this human form is his foundation; his resting state is as miraculous as his ability.

"One of these days," Armando goes on, quiet, serious, "we are going to have to ask. When it was your past, it was different, we weren't going to pry-- well, Alex was going to pry, I had to tell him to back off. If it was something you didn't want to talk about, something you kept close, I wanted to respect that. But this isn't just in your past anymore."

"I know. You deserve an explanation." Charles swallows. "You know my bond went when I was sixteen. It took some of my ability with it."

"That's already news to me," Armando says. "What was it like before?"
"I used to be able to sense people nearly a hundred miles away if I tried."

Armando whistles. "Okay, then."

"I didn't sleep," Charles says, "no indication my bondmate was hurt or ill-- of course you can't always tell, but inasmuch as you can. He'd been stressed for a long time. Angry. For years. Maybe he found out we were incompatible somehow, maybe he knew what he was going to have to do."

"You think he renounced?" Armando frowns, but for a mercy, he doesn't go on to say something along the lines of No way, nobody would renounce a nice guy like you. That doesn't make Charles believe it any less; it only makes him feel as if whatever's wrong with him must be sunk down deep, if he seems on the surface to be such a nice unrenounceable guy.

"I've tried to keep an open mind," Charles temporizes. He didn't succeed very well, but he did try. "But now? If it had been illness or injury that damaged the bond, it hardly seems likely that the same thing would happen again exactly ten years later."

"I've never heard of any kind of renunciation technique that gets turbo-charged every ten years," Armando says, just a bit dry.

"Nor I. But loads of them are strengthened yearly, to fight any sort of anniversary pull. I don't recall any that call for more at the decade mark." That doesn't mean they're not out there. When he studied the subject, Charles was less interested in the cultural trappings and more concerned with the psionic and physiological mechanics of renunciation.

It's always hurt to think that his bondmate is blocking him, but even so, more proof is as much a relief as it is an abiding ache. Even at his most bitter, Charles would rather believe that his bondmate turned away from him than imagine that he's out there somewhere beyond Charles's reach, hurt or ill, or even simply as lost as Charles is. Better if he chose this. Charles has spent most of his life sensing that people want him out of their heads and away from them, when they know what he can do. He's learned to live with that; he can live with it from his bondmate.

Though he could've done Charles the courtesy of meeting him first. Charles sighs, rubbing his mouth. He tries, but he's still not as philosophical about it as he'd like to be.

"So I'm not trying to suggest, I'm just saying. You could block on your side," Armando tells him.

"I can't," says Charles. "If there's any chance..."

"I can't," says Charles. "If there's any chance..."

"Yeah," Armando says softly. "Yeah, I know how that goes."

"It wasn't always anger and ill will. It wasn't even mostly that," Charles tells him. "He was passionate in good ways as well. Everything he sent me was strong. Pride. Happiness." Not often enough, but strong when it came. "Loyalty. When I needed him, he gave me all the devotion anyone could ask for. We'd never met, but he was there for me. I'll always be grateful for that." He sighs. "It's foolish, I know, but I've always hoped there's an explanation. A tradition he was bound to observe. A demand from his family. He might change his mind. I can't close off that possibility."

Even with the risk that this might happen again. Even if he loses another fraction of his ability to it. He can't hope to articulate what it meant to him to feel the unreserved love he used to receive from his bondmate, what he'd give to have even a portion of that back. But looking at Armando, seeing the way he glances over at Alex... he knows he doesn't have to explain.

He tries not to be jealous of the bonds that other people share, certainly not the bonds between his
friends. But of course it's a lost cause right now. When Armando turns back to him, Charles tightens his mouth in chagrin, knowing the envy must be written all over his face, to Armando's discerning eyes.

"Hey," Armando reaches for him again, his hand warmly spanning Charles's jaw, thumb dotting the corner of his mouth. "Give yourself a break. Enough memory lane for a while, huh? Just relax, let it go for now. There's got to be something we can do to get your mind off it."

Charles tries a smile. "I'm afraid I'm out of commission for most of the traditional ways of getting one's mind off someone," he says. Armando smiles back at him and leans down for one more kiss before he slides back onto the couch. Still fully asleep, Alex makes a pleased noise and squirms close again.

"Are you sure you don't want to take him home?" Charles asks. "I hate to put you out. That can't be restful."

"Sure it can. Look at him, he's doing fine," Armando chuckles, indicating Alex, who snoozes on. "And you know I can adapt to this as much as anything. Don't worry about it."

"How much sleep do you need?" In a way it's amazing he's never asked before, but Armando already gives up some time to letting his mutation be studied under lab conditions. Charles never wanted to irritate him by inquiring about all the details of his ability to adapt. He knows he has a tendency to lose sight of everything else when he indulges his fascination with mutation.

"I played around with that in college," Armando says. "I can go about five days without sleeping, and then I need to get at least twelve hours, or I start getting a little strung out. I run best on about four hours a night, but I can knock that down to two or three in a pinch."

"Imagine how much more you could get done with an extra four hours a day," Charles says. Armando laughs. "You'd think. Mostly I end up losing hours on Wikipedia or something."

"At least you're well-read," Charles jokes. For all that he thinks it falls a bit flat, Armando smiles warmly at him.

"Now there's a good idea for a distraction. Ask me something else."

"Ask you...?"

"About my mutation." Armando props his head on his hand, smiling over at him. "Sky's the limit. Don't tell me you haven't been sitting on some questions for years, because I know you have."

"Do you realize what you're getting yourself into?" Charles asks. "I could talk about anyone's mutation for hours, and yours! Yours potentially encompasses every other X-gene mutation. If anything could get me to deal with all the rubbish involved in getting back into the lab, it would be studying your genome--" his voice starts to give out. The ice chip bucket has been replaced with a pitcher, and he pours himself a glass of water carefully. He feels better, but even trying to maneuver something as simple as a cup and pitcher, his motor control is a bit chancy; his hands tremble.

He manages, though, and he's glad Armando doesn't jump up to try to help. It gives him at least a bit of a sense of normalcy to get it himself and bring the cup to his lips, drinking deeply.

"Maybe we should try--" Armando touches his temple in the gesture Charles uses when he's actively employing telepathy. "Spare what's left of your voice."
"I don't mind trying," says Charles. He still does sound a bit creaky. "But it doesn't seem likely to work now, when it never has before. Or are you thinking that since I'm weaker now, your mind won't perceive mine as a threat, and won't adapt to keep me out?"

"I wasn't thinking of it that way, but it's possible," Armando answers frankly. "That's not what I had in mind, though. I've been doing some reading. Ideas for being more open to telepathy. Some techniques that might keep me from evolving in response to every little thing."

Charles stares at him. Privately he's always thought Armando makes a good match for him in part because Armando's adaptive ability takes telepathy off the table entirely. Certainly with Armando and Alex, he received the kindest refusal he's ever experienced; Armando let Charles try to read him, and when it failed, Alex explained that he didn't feel he could share more with Charles than he could with Armando, not if Charles and Armando couldn't share that much as well. Put that way, it was actually rather sweet. The moods Charles can sense from Armando are muted, sometimes obscured, but they're enough to be going on with. And Alex gave Charles permission to read his emotions. He even learned to project thoughts. It's been less an issue with them than it ever has been with anyone else.

Armando studies him. "You didn't think we were serious."

"I didn't know that being serious would include that," Charles admits.

"It does," Armando says simply. "Do you want to try?"

"Now?" Even to Charles's own ears, that sounds like stalling. It's a huge gift Armando's offering, and one not likely to come around again if Charles missteps. But just communicating words, that won't be a misstep, that's just conversation. And if Armando's mutation keeps it from happening despite his new techniques, then at least they'll know.

"Go on," Armando murmurs. "I'm here, I'm listening." He closes his eyes for a moment and takes a deep, slow breath through his nose. It almost looks as though he's starting a meditation session.

Carefully, Charles lifts his fingers to his temple. «Hello, Armando.»

Armando frowns; Charles immediately drops his hand, wringing his fingers together in his lap.

"I didn't quite get that," Armando says. "Try again?"

"We don't have to--"

"I want to." Armando sits up a little straighter, angles his head more precisely toward Charles. "I didn't quite get that," Armando says. "Try again?"

"Just once and then we'll stop."

"Okay. One more time, then."

Charles's hand goes back to his temple, and he bites his lower lip. He can't just push harder, not with Armando; that won't work. It has to be easy, gentle... Armando's mutation has to see telepathy as another way to talk, an advantage, not a threat.

He floats the words to Armando as cautiously as he can. «It's me, Armando... I'm thinking of the color blue. Do you see it?»

Armando smiles, then, big and wide. "Blue," he says out loud, and then, nose wrinkling, "Shoot, I said that out loud. Okay, let me give that another shot."
His thoughts come across in a way that's almost completely unfamiliar to Charles, walled off in a bubble of sorts. Charles can read that thought, but nothing surrounding it; it's as though only the thoughts Armando's sending him are real, and the rest are shrouded in darkness.

«Blue,» Armando sends. «We'll bring you a sweater when we go...»

The rest of the phrase fades too far for Charles to hear, but Armando looks hopefully at him. "Did you get all that?"

"Most of it, I think," Charles says. "Something about bringing me a sweater?"

"Yeah. We were going to go to your place for some of your stuff tomorrow. Did I close you out at the end?"

"I'm afraid so." But Charles is smiling anyway. "I'd still call it a success."

"First of many," Armando says with a grin of his own. "If we're lucky."

Charles wouldn't have thought of any of this as lucky before... he's in a hospital, he's only just now recovering from a psionic energy drain, and his rejected bond is putting him through an ordeal yet again.

But he has friends. Good friends. Friends who are waiting with him in recovery, friends who aren't frightened off by his ability... it's not what he hoped for, when he was young, but it is something worth hoping for.

"So Mill Point, right?" Alex says when Charles walks in.

"Charles, hey-- Mill Point? You've still got weeks before you need to get back to teaching..." Alex adds as they sit down to dinner.

"I don't even know yet if they're going to need me next term. One of the full professors is looking to take on more classes. They may not hire me back for a while yet, unless one of the other instructors lightens eir courseload unexpectedly," Charles confesses.

"So you're totally free? Perfect," Alex says.

"I didn't say that. It's up in the air."

"Well, you could probably use a vacation to take your mind off it," Alex says, with consummately unconvincing innocence.

Alex shows the immense restraint of waiting all the way through dessert before bursting out with, "You know what's a great place for a vacation? Mill--"

"Babe," Armando says, finally, passing a hand over Alex's head, "chill." Alex turns to Charles with a sheepish look on his face, and Charles shakes his head, almost laughing. "Forget he spent all of dinner asking about Mill Point and just tell us how you're doing."

"Better," Charles says. It's been a few days since he was able to be released from Weeks Memorial, and the doctors were right: his ability's come back, at least back to the level he had before the recent stay in hospital. Although he's been taking it easy, when Armando suggested a nice dinner in at their place, Charles was more than happy to oblige. "I really am feeling more-or-less normal again."
"Normal," Alex says. "Bor-ing. You're a little bit of a weirdo, but that's okay, we like that."

"Alex!" Armando buries his face in one hand while passing the other over Alex's head. Alex makes a face at him. "Don't think I don't see that."

"Did you develop some sort of extrasensory perception just now?" Charles asked, instantly curious, but Armando laughs, shaking his head.

"I meant figuratively," he says. "Okay, Alex, how about you put some of that energy to good use? You could--"

Alex hops up from his seat, walks around the table, and drops to his knees between Armando and Charles. "Great! I was wondering when we were going to stop all this talking and get to it."

Over his head, Armando exchanges a look with Charles. Charles's grin goes impish as he says, "May I?"

"Oh, absolutely."

This time it's Charles who passes a hand over Alex's head, ruffling his hair a bit as he does. Alex turns around to look at him and smirks. "Now we're talking," he says. "Do I get a spanking for this?"

"No, but you can clear the dishes," Charles improvises, looking up at Armando for an all-clear. Armando nods quickly, and Charles bends down and kisses the top of Alex's head. "Go on."

"Crap," Alex moans. "I was really hoping for the spanking..."

"You get that for being good," Armando says. "And you know it."

Alex takes to his feet, gathering up the dishes. "I thought I got it for having a great ass." He bends over the table a little in demonstration, but quick enough he's carrying the dishes off to the kitchen. "Don't get started without me! I'll be right back!"

Armando shakes his head, but he's smiling as he watches Alex disappear through the dining room door. "He's a handful," he says. "Glad you're here to help out."

"You wouldn't really need my help," Charles says, glancing away for a moment before looking back at Armando. "You've been happy together for years, after all."

Armando reaches out and slides a hand onto Charles's knee. "You've been there for us almost from the start. It feels right to have you here. There's some things that work a whole lot better when you're around. It's one of the reasons we like having you close to home, when we can get you."

This time Charles manages a smile. "Thank you," he says. "Do you mind if I ask-- why exactly is Alex so determined about Mill Point? Is it just because he didn't get to go in April, or...?" It doesn't really explain why he'd be determined to have Charles go to Mill Point; that's the part which leaves Charles confused.

"He loves it there. I know how he feels; I love it there. And I think he wants to make sure you love it, too." Armando shrugs. "We talk about getting a vacation home up there sometimes."

"Oh." Charles blinks several times. "Am I meant to... is there part of that you're leaving out, because I'm afraid I'm not very good at reading between the lines, and--"
«We want you there with us,» Armando projects, thoughts forming as if in bubbles and floating over. It takes Charles completely by surprise; after that night in the clinic, he wasn't sure if Armando would want to try again.

Apparently he does. And getting projected thoughts now, while Armando's doing his best to send reassurance... it's remarkably effective. Charles swallows, throat feeling suddenly tight. «How do you mean that?» he sends, as gently and easily as he can. «I mean...» He touches his temple, raising an eyebrow at Armando. «It feels as if you mean this, too... not just the trip.»

«Yes.» Armando nods, in case his meaning wasn't clear enough. «Come with us. We really want you to be a part of it... us... this...» Armando's words are getting fuzzier, his adaptive ability occluding his thoughts. He reaches over and takes Charles's hand, squeezing it lightly. "We want you," he says aloud. "Spend two weeks with us in Mill Point. Find out if we drive you nuts, or if it's something you want to take a chance on. We'd both love that."

"That's why Alex is so intent on it," Charles blurts out. "It's a trial run."

"It doesn't have to be," Armando says immediately. "It can just be a vacation. It can be whatever you need it to be."

Charles winces a little. It's probably a good idea to offer each other an out like that, ensure that everyone knows things can always go back to friendship-- or simply stay friendship-- if they change their minds and decide they don't want him after all. It still hurts a bit to have that laid out so plainly.

But... it was only three weeks ago that Charles felt so close to losing everything all over again. And perhaps he isn't meant to have the kind of relationship that Alex and Armando have-- that everyone seems to have, that even his bloody stepbrother Cain has.

But if he's careful, if he doesn't make the same mistake he made with Amelia, if he accepts the friendship and closeness he's offered instead of always wanting more...

"I think," Charles says carefully, "I'd like to see Mill Point with the two of you."

"Whoooooooooo!" Alex pokes his head back in from the kitchen. "Fucking awesome! Armando, go book our cabin right now before he changes his mind!"

"Or," Armando counters, "I could wait until we pick out a time to go, and book a cabin then."

Alex lets out an impatient little huff of breath, and passes his hand over his own head. "Okay, okay, fine," he says. "But if you guys want to take care of all that now, I'll do all the dishes and clean the kitchen. By myself."

"I'm not sure what it says about me as a dom that he bribes me with housework instead of sex," Armando says, rising up from the table. "You want to go compare our calendars, see what we've got available?"

"Just a moment." Charles walks over to Alex and slips his hands onto Alex's shoulders, smiling at him. "Thank you for the enthusiasm," he says. "I appreciate it."

Alex bounces on the balls of his feet, nodding. "You're welcome," he says. He tries to press forward for a kiss, but Charles dodges. "Oh, come on! You were just praising the enthusiasm two seconds ago!"

"I was," Charles agrees, "but now I'd like you to ask nicely."
"Will-you-please-kiss-me-please," Alex belts out, all in one breath.

"Yes," Charles says, cupping Alex's face and leaning in for that kiss.

When he draws back for breath, Armando's right there beside him, smiling down at the two of them. Charles turns and strokes his thumb over Armando's cheek, and when Armando tips his head down, Charles doesn't make him wait before giving him a kiss, too.

"I cannot believe the amount of stuff you packed," Armando teases, arms laden down with duffel bags and suitcases. Charles tried to hold onto at least one of them, but Armando claimed that he could adapt to the weight, and so far he isn't groaning or complaining, just laughing. "And here I thought Alex was bad."

"He needs a cardigan for every day of the week," Alex says, grinning at Charles.

"Maybe I just needed armbinders to color-coordinate with all my various outfits."

"Does that mean you have tweed armbinders?" Alex shoots back.

"I also have plaid."

"No way!"

"To match the kilt I bought you."

"You-- uh, really?" Alex pauses. "That could be kind of fun..."

"If he's not just fooling with you, I'll take pictures." Armando nods toward the self-check kiosks. "Let's get checked in, come on."

As soon as they've got their boarding passes printed, Armando muscles the vast pile of luggage over toward the baggage check desk. Alex is nearly bouncing with excitement; he brandishes his boarding pass and says, "Portland! We're almost there already!"

Portland. Charles's breath catches, hard, and he looks down at his boarding pass. Portland, Maine. PWM. He knew that. JFK to PWM, it's a little over an hour-long flight, and then there's an hour's drive between Portland International Jetport and Mill Point.

The letters swim in front of Charles's face. Portland. PWM. It's wrong.

"Charles?"

He doesn't know how, but it's wrong. It's the wrong Portland, somehow; he closes his eyes, thinking about Portland, Oregon, and a rush of satisfaction comes over him... accomplishment. Happiness. Something familiar, but nothing he can remember personally; he only went to Oregon once, on a West Coast seeker trip that took him up and down Interstate 5, and he certainly didn't end that trip with a feeling of accomplishment and happiness.

He looks back at his boarding pass. It still looks wrong.

"Charles, hey," Armando drops his bags and reaches for Charles's arm, "what's up?"

"Nothing," Charles says faintly. His voice feels as if it's coming from far away. He looks up at the Departures board, scanning the city names, and one of them stands out. It's almost as though it's in a brighter font than the rest, highlighted, bold. He couldn't miss it if he tried.
It isn't Portland, neither Maine nor Oregon. It's another place he's never been, and he can't imagine why it's calling to him. He takes a deep breath and blinks several times, fully expecting it to fade. Maybe it's something to do with his vision. For that matter, maybe it isn't just him. He points up at the screen. "Do you see that?"

"Uh, yeah," Alex says, though his usual attitude is a bit subdued with concern now. "It says Portland, Maine, 10:07 A.M., which means we should check our bags and go."

"What do you see?" Armando asks, stroking Charles's arm. He pulls Charles slightly to the side so that the people in line behind them can go ahead; Alex glares daggers at them, but doesn't argue. When Alex looks back at Charles, his brows are drawn together, and his emotional sphere is full of worry.

"I see..." Charles blinks several times, and tries looking at another screen. It's the same way on that one, too. "Omaha," he murmurs, confused. "I see Omaha. It's brighter, somehow."

"Omaha?" Alex repeats dubiously.

"What about it?" Armando squeezes Charles's arm gently. "Does it look different from the other cities?" Charles nods. "Like you can't take your eyes off it?" Another nod. "Is it the same no matter what board you're looking at?"

"Yes," Charles whispers. "It's the same on all of them."

"Charles," Alex says, reaching out for his other hand. "Are you okay?"

"Do you feel anything at soul's-home?" Armando asks carefully. "Any kind of pull or tug?"

"No. Nothing," Charles replies. "You know that. I never have." He glances around; there are far too many people here for him to actually reach up and try touching it. He looks at the screen again. *Omaha. 9:20 A.M.* He can't stop looking at it.

"How about," Alex says, "how about if we go, if we just go, and if you still feel like you want a trip to fucking Omaha after our vacation, we'll go with you?"

It's completely reasonable. It's the sort of compromise Charles might have offered himself, if someone had told him he might be in this position someday. Wait those feelings out; see if they're real. Maybe it's a mistake. An illusion, or a coincidence.

He might have thought that, before, but not now. Not with the departures screen all lit up around the word *Omaha*. Not the way he feels, thinking about Nebraska and remembering that one day, when he was younger, when he felt the bond leading him west. *Illinois, Missouri, Iowa...* He stared at maps for weeks after that, trying to imagine where the trail was leading before he lost it.

Nebraska could have been on that path. He went to Denver on his seeker trip; it seemed like the right direction. He tried Los Angeles, he covered most of the seeker grid, he hopped all over the globe with Amelia, but he never went to Nebraska.

Armando puts his hand on Charles's shoulder. "We can go with you now," he says softly. "All three of us."

"That's a great idea," Alex bursts out. "After this guy put you in the hospital I want to know where he gets off dragging you to meet him now--"

"Alex," Armando snaps. Alex goes quiet, but his lips tighten, and his eyes are bright, his emotions
brittle. Armando turns back to Charles. "Just say the word," Armando says. "Tell us we can come, and we'll be there every step of the way."

Charles closes his eyes, touching his temple. He reaches out as far as he can, tries with everything in his mind and bond to feel something, anything, at soul's-home. He remembers that mind; he remembers the emotions, the connection, everything about it.

«Please. I'm here... Where are you? Is it Omaha? Give me something, anything, a lead, a chance, I'll take it... I'll come to you. Please.»

He holds his breath, waiting, and finally opens his eyes. When he looks at the screen, Omaha flashes, and the display changes from 9:20 A.M., On Time to Departed. Charles grabs hold of Armando's arm, staring up, and it's absurd, ridiculous, if Omaha's the right place then there are plenty of flights, there have to be, he can't have missed this-- God, all these years waiting for bond intuition to give him any slightest sign of his bondmate, and he can't have missed his chance because he was too late to get on the flight--

The display flashes again. Omaha, 10:03, On Time.

"I have to go," Charles says, his grip on Armando's arm too tight. "I have to go."

"Okay." Armando reaches up with his free arm and brushes back Charles's hair. "Then you go."

"Wait, no--" Alex takes hold of Charles's arm. "Charles, no, what if he's not even there, what if--" Alex struggles with words for a second, shaking his head. "What if he sucks," he says, finally. "Can't we go with you, please, what if you need us?"

Armando looks right into Charles's eyes, his hand gentle, his voice calm and certain. "We're going to be right here for you," he says. "You've got our cell phone numbers. Call us when you land, and call us when you have any news, good or bad. If you need anything-- anything-- you say the word, and we'll be there."

"I'm--" Charles swallows past a lump in his throat, nearly too choked up to speak. "I'm so sorry," he gets out, finally. "But I have to do this."

Armando slips gently out of the grip Charles has on his arm, and he wraps both arms around Charles's shoulders. Those thought bubbles come through to Charles one more time, and Charles grabs hold of Armando's shirt, hanging on.

«Don't be sorry. We understand. Go find your boy, Charles. Find him and bring him home.»

«It won't be that easy. It can't be, not after all this time...»

«You don't know that.» Armando's thoughts are slipping away, already, too soon. Aloud, he says, "Maybe it can be."

Alex leaps on both of them, wrapping his arms around them, hugging them both. "You can't live in Omaha," he whispers fiercely. "You have to come back home. Tell him he has to come home with you."

"Nobody wants to live in Omaha," Armando jokes. His voice is getting a little hoarse. "New York is a way better place to live."

Charles almost laughs, almost. "I'll do my best," he promises. It might not be good enough. It never has been before.
But up at the counter, Charles asks to have his ticket exchanged for one going to Omaha, Nebraska, and with a few keystrokes and a flight itinerary change fee, he's got his bags checked in to the Omaha flight, and he's holding a ticket with the right airport code on it. OMA. It's absurd, it makes no sense, but it's the right place. He can feel it.

"He doesn't get my kilt," Alex says thickly, at Charles's gate. "Or my armbinders. Those are mine."

"Of course they are," Charles promises, ruffling Alex's hair. "I wouldn't dream of sharing."

Alex clings to him. "Me neither," he whispers. "But I have to, don't I?"

"Maybe not." Charles holds onto Alex just as tightly, and Armando puts his arms around the both of them. "He left me ten years ago. Why would he--"

"Shhh." Armando risks a kiss to the back of Charles's neck, too low to be truly lewd, but high enough up that Charles knows what he meant by it. "He'll love you. Anybody would."

Charles doesn't have nearly that much faith, but he has to take this chance. He swallows, trying to catch his breath, as the gate agent calls for his flight to begin boarding. "That's me," he whispers. "That's me, I need to go, I need to go--"

"Okay," Alex whispers. "Okay okay okay. Go. But come back. You have to come back, come back--"

"Godspeed," Armando tells him, rubbing his back firmly. "Go on, now. Go."

Charles hefts his messenger bag over his shoulder and nods, and he's one of the first in line as the passengers begin boarding. He turns to look over his shoulder as he heads onto the jetway; Alex and Armando are waving, Alex's teeth sunk deeply into his lower lip. He lifts his hand in a last farewell.

He takes his seat and looks out the window; he's on the other side of the plane from the terminal, though, so he can't see Alex and Armando from here. His phone chirps as he's reaching to turn it off, and he smiles at the message there.

It's from Armando: [Don't forget to call when you land. We're going to miss you.]

Charles texts back quickly, [Of course I will. I'll miss you too.] He puts his phone away, closing his eyes again. Of all places, Omaha, Nebraska. Maybe nothing's going to come of this. But he's on his way.

Chapter End Notes

DETERMINATION
(coming soon!)

April 21, 2011

New York. Again. The plane circles around, ready to land, and Erik leans forward to look out the window. These unwanted anniversary meetings with Sebastian have taken place in New York more than once over the years; it was New York just last year, for all Erik tried to keep that meeting from happening. The year before, as well. But he's
had more than just that inexorable, inescapable connection to Sebastian drawing him to New York, over time. The few times he's been here to visit, it's felt right. Three years ago, Erik almost moved here.

Maybe today it should feel like he's coming home, or coming full circle. Maybe there's something about New York he should have been paying attention to all these years. It would be just like Sebastian to bring Erik back here, to New York, knowing full well that Erik's soulmate has been here the whole time.

**What happened? I know he's alive. What happened to him?**

His soulmate's somewhere. Alive, for all that everyone tried to tell Erik that wasn't possible. Erik doesn't know where, hasn't been able to feel his real soulmate in years... but last year, for the first time in a decade, he finally got evidence that his soulmate survived the rogue medical procedure that separated them. His soulbond isn't dead; there's something, someone, on the other end of it.

And Sebastian confirmed it, the last time they met.

*He came to see me. Had this sweet, sad little story about what happened to him in April of 2000. He just fell into a coma one day, didn't feel the bond break, didn't feel anything. I did everything I could for him. He ended up with the best care anyone could ask for...*

He's been traveling since last April, trying to put all the pieces together. Sebastian didn't give him much to go on, not that Erik expected him to.

*Tell me where. I need to see him. I need him. Please.*

*I'll kill him before I let you find him. And then you'll have nobody left to kneel for but me.*

But Erik didn't have a choice. If there was even a scrap of truth in the things Sebastian said about Erik's soulmate, he had to know.

If Erik had ever met his soulmate in person, if he'd ever known his name... maybe he'd have found something, by now. Every time he's walked into a long-term care facility, whether it was the one in Nebraska he started at-- the one his foster parents are still at, and doing no better than they were seven years ago-- or the ones in Geneva, in Argentina, Florida... each time, he's taken in a breath, the whisper of something from his bond making him wonder if this is the place.

By now he's started to wonder if that feeling is psychosomatic, if he simply wants to find his real soulmate so badly that he's imagining a flicker of his presence. He always starts feeling it after he arrives somewhere, sometimes a few hours later, sometimes a day or two. It's worse here in New York than it's ever been before, though: not even landed yet, and he can almost feel the bond tugging him in two different directions. One of them is Sebastian, here in the city, probably giving his salesman's pitch to desperate mutants and humans. The other...

Maybe it's a lie, some kind of trick Sebastian invented with his end of the bond. Erik's best friend thinks Sebastian was just inventing that story about meeting Erik's soulmate. Jason pointed out that Sebastian's story has been doing a good job of keeping Erik busy this year: it's kept him from researching ways to get the bond
Sebastian forced on him blocked or severed once and for all. But if it's true... if Erik's soulmate is sick, damaged... he can't afford to leave him in Sebastian's hands. He can't.

All that travel, though, has been for nothing. Erik's hunted down every lead he could find, searched and gathered up every scrap of information he could for the past year, but there's still no sign of his soulmate. And here it is, April again, the anniversary dragging Erik back to Sebastian's side, however unwillingly. Fine, then. Fine. If Erik has to see Sebastian again, then by God, this time he's getting answers. One way or another. Whatever it takes.

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