A Curious Carriage of Crystal and Cold

by Etharei

Summary

Charles, a miner from a poor village in the countryside, saves the life of Erik Lehnsherr, scion of a successful business family and the richest man on the planet Eisen. Charles is a telepath and somewhat anxious about it, while Erik abstains from relationships because the lights flicker and doors open and electronics vibrate when he gets too excited.

Also featuring a long-suffering sister, a foul-mouthed bodyguard, and a best friend with a heart that is definitely not gold.

In which there are princes, spaceships, long journeys, and old secrets uncovered. (An AU sci-fi fairytale)

Notes

All the love in the world for my ridiculously talented artist Celectis, who is a joy to work with and very possibly my soulmate in another life, (wherein our song would be "Not Done Yet" to the tune of Spamalot's "Not Dead Yet"). To see all the art in one place: The Art of Carriage fic. [NOTE: the links in that post are broken; if you'd like to view the art, please go to this tumblr post. However, please continue to leave your kudoses and comments for the artist in the Art of Carriage Fic post.]
Many thanks to xsilverdreamsx for reading this over and providing helpful feedback. All remaining mistakes are mine.

Written for the X-Men Big Bang 2011 challenge.

For a full serving of Author Notes, please go HERE (on LJ).

• Inspired by Art for "A Curious Carriage of Crystal and Cold" by maimo
The lovely and fantastic Kae (tumblr) presents, for your listening pleasure:

FANMIX FOR PART 1

1st Waltz
From a distance and, indeed, certain sectors of space, the rich rust red of the planet Eisen was notable against the common greys and blue-greens of its neighbours, and tended to be associated (by those who believed in such things) with portents for love, war, or the start of heroic journeys.

**PROLOGUE**
Its sun was of medium size, settled comfortably in the middle of its middling lifespan; all the planet-satellites had established their orbits quite early on and, despite the efforts of a yearly handful of asteroids, comets, and assorted celestial bodies traveling at great velocity, did not seem inclined to budge from the schedule long dictated by physics.

The color of Eisen was, many argued, its most salient and singularly noticeable feature, as the planet had little else in the way of interest or appeal. It did not have the iridescent waterfalls of Ruska, or the razorback races of S'Hara, or even The Galaxy's Biggest Ball of Yarn, which the planet Maddox got an unerring amount of mileage out of. Its position at the very edge of Ten Sol - the name presently in fashion for the ten sun systems colonized by mankind - meant that the ships that docked on Orbital City tended to carry either refugees, disoriented tourists, or businessfolk of dubious work ethics.

This wholly unremarkable planet, in a lonely corner of space, was known mostly as the place where ships were built, and where metal was mined from the rocky, inhospitable terrain, only a small area of which was habitable. An old world, worn and rusty; the forgettable stage of small stories.

{ PART ONE }

"Consider, always, the origins of things."
- Xavia saying

CHAPTER ONE
THE METAL MAN MEETS THE PRINCE

Fire.

(There is always fire.)

Shouts in the distance. Someone is nearby; a presence both new and known, and all sharp edges.

Pain. It strikes deep. Loud noises (like a storm)

around him, around them, cracks and bursts and sharp splintering.

He is there, and he is not, and then he wakes-
Charles couldn't feel anything.

Not his arms or legs or any part of his body. Not the fullness of a breath or the rushing of blood under his skin. He was neither warm nor cold. He was in the dark, but that bothered him less, after a lifetime of working in the deep mines.

Panic seemed to be the only possible reaction. He let it surge through him, like lightning, hot and white and tightness, time-breaking, and to his relief there came something else, a reaction, that shone warm and smelled of space-metal, gleaming, and he realized that he must still have his other sense, because this was another person, oh hello, could they be so kind as to find out where Charles' arms and legs have gone?

Twinkle, twinkle, blinked the space-metal, amused.

Go back to sleep.

Why, that seemed a lovely idea. Charles considered asking if they'd met before, because there was something familiar about all of this, in a bones-deep way. Not that he could feel his bones. But he was quite tired, it would be embarrassing to drop off in his chair again, so he let the soft, bitter-edged dark draw him under once more.

Quiet. Too quiet, suddenly, both in and outside of his head.

It was strange, and wholly unfamiliar, because there was always somebody awake somewhere in the village. He had a momentary fear of loss of hearing, brain damage, but then he caught the sound of breath whistling through his nose, the soft workings of his throat.
Sleep still lurked around the edges, but his next inhale drew in the scent of clean sheets, a hint of antiseptic, and this further evidence of strangeness was incentive enough to tentatively crack open an eyelid.

He'd braced for an assault of brightness, but the light was not as harsh as he'd been expecting. It emanated from a window at the far end of the room, over which a tint had been considerately applied, damping the harsh natural sunlight and bathing the room in a golden glow.

Not the hospital, then. Or, at least, not a hospital he had ever been to. But something about the calm air of the room, details such as the carpeting and the compscreen set into the wall next to the bed, declared it a private home instead of a public institution.

The door slid open with a bare whisper of a sound, admitting a sleek mauve medbot. Charles couldn't help but stare. The medbots he'd encountered before, in the rural hospitals, tended to look like mechanical spiders stacked into a bulky tower, every functional limb brandishing two or three sensitive instruments at a time. This one had a narrower circular casing for its body, streamline; all its limbs hidden away, save one, which now held out a scanner-wand and, with it, ran a med-scan over his body.

Scan finished, the medbot emitted a series of chirps, and asked, in smooth, polite tones, "What is your language of choice, sir?"

"SpaceBasic is fine," he replied quickly, before the medbot could start rattling off the same question in all the common languages and local dialects.

"Very good, sir." Another burst of chirping. "Commencing report. Your rate of healing is within acceptable parameters for a young adult male. The fractures of the clavicle, left ulna, and left tibia have fully reknit. The breaks in five ribs were more severe, but the setting-fibres have integrated well and they should only take another week to heal completely. One of the broken ribs punctured your left lung; this was patched in the first treatment, but there may be some residual shortness of breath for a few weeks."
The medbot paused and, without warning, sharply prodded him in the thigh. Charles instinctively jerked away. The movement sent a jolt of pain up his back, like a white-hot steel rod right in his spine, and he yelped in surprise.

The medbot's chirps this time sounded approving. "Excellent, sir. There had been extensive damage to the lumbar vertebrae, which presented a possibility of paraplegia. Initial testing showed little neural and motor response to stimuli. Fortunately, as a Nova-Class Medical 5XT, I am equipped with neuro-needles and experimental regrowth protocols, and my most recent data chip update included extensive new research on nerve repair. That said," the medbot added conscientiously, "the brain and nervous system are unpredictable even under controlled laboratory conditions, and the result could not be fully assessed until you regained consciousness."

Charles' breath caught. For a second, he was trapped between the desire to check that he still had the use of his legs, and the fear that the sharp jab of the medbot's metallic finger had been a lie that further movement would uncover. The decision was taken out of his hands when the 'bot's finger-like extensions descended on his leg again. He let out a sigh of relief, while grimacing in pain, when he could feel each poke and pinch all the way down his leg, and again on the other leg, and dutifully reported the strength of the sensations to the 'bot.

"Walking would be inadvisable for at least another week," the 'bot stated. "No strenuous activity for two months. Try not to sit up on your own for two to three more days. The bed is adjustable. This is a critical period, and there is a high possibility of injuring yourself worse if you are not careful."

Charles sighed, tempted to tell the medbot that all its efforts were likely in vain, since there was no way he could afford to just lie about for a month.

"Thanks," he said instead. "Can I ask where I am?"

"You are in Lehnsherr Estate, sir," answered the medbot promptly. "In one of the convalescence rooms of the Lehnsherr private residence."

Oh. Did that mean... "Master Lehnsherr - is he all right?"

"Yes," the medbot affirmed. "He sustained only minor injuries, thanks to sir's assistance."

"That's good," Charles said, feeling genuinely relieved. "At least I didn't severely damage my back for no reason."

He closed his eyes, tried not to think about things like consequences and the future. Especially the possibility that the latter was going to be fairly short, now, barring a miracle or a heretofore unknown healing ability.

Behind his eyelids loomed the long trip home, forcing himself to go back to work, working until his back gave way for good.

What the fuck have I done?

He tried not to think about Raven, oh God, Raven, who'd always said that his tendencies towards heroism and helping complete strangers would get him into trouble one day.

She would shout at him for risking his life like he had, to help the man who practically owned the planet and, probably, could afford to repair whatever damage short of death a minor hovercar crash would have inflicted.

And she'd take care of him when their hard life took its inevitable toll. She'd go into the 'combs in his
place, get herself mired in the hardships he'd worked hard to spare her from. She'd point out that he'd taken her in when he'd barely had enough food for himself.

Tiredness crashed through him. A mechanical voice asked, sounding a long way away, "Master Lehnsherr requested to be informed when you awoke. May I have your designation?"

Thinking was difficult, the inside of his mind feeling slippery and indistinct. But most children learned their designation right after the names of their parents; that string of letters and numbers encompassed one's entire existence on the planet. He mumbled, "CF-4256-CSTR40," right before sleep pulled him under again.

When Charles next awoke, there was a man sitting next to his bed, reading a book.

An actual book, a thing of paper and ink and creased covers that Charles had never seen outside of a museum. If Charles had truly been suffering doubts about the wisdom of his heroics (for he recognized the reader as the hapless driver of the runaway hovercar), the reverent way in which the man was holding the antique was a strong argument in favor of Charles having made a good decision.

It also did not hurt that Erik Lehnsherr was even more handsome in person than he was on photographs and video. Not that Charles' morals were easily swayed by aesthetics, of course.

"Ah, you are awake," said Lehnsherr. Charles forced himself to look away from the book - Lehnsherr was actually touching it, the paper - and met his eyes.

"Um," Charles said, intelligently. No one had ever told him how one was supposed to address the Master of the Estate of Eisen. "Master Lehnsherr."
Lehnsherr didn't explode into an indignant rage or fine him for social impropriety, so Charles assumed that he hadn't made a grave misstep. He was about to push himself up, when his back twinged sharply and he remembered the medbot's advice against sitting up on his own. But he couldn't see a control panel for the bed.

"It's voice activated," said Lehnsherr, apparently divining his intention. "Bed, assist our patient in sitting up, please."

An affirmative beep came from somewhere under Charles' back. The soft mattress began to move, slowly, the upper half curling up gently to follow the natural line of his spine. Even his feet were repositioned, angled down slightly. Even such gradual movement sent little spikes of pain up Charles' back, and his hands tightened around the sheets. The bed stopped before it got high enough to put his weight on the damaged area. It might be his imagination, but he thought he could feel the very surface of the mattress adjusting further to cradle his back.

"Do you need anything?" asked Lehnsherr, once the bed settled. His eyes kept shifting from Charles' face, down to the book, then to the bed, as if he wasn't sure where he was supposed to be looking.

"Maybe some water, if it's not too much trouble?" said Charles. The words were barely out of his mouth when a beep came from the wall next to the bed, on which a panel slid back to reveal an empty box-like hollow. There was very faint whirring of machinery from inside the walls, then a glass of water appeared in the box. Lehnsherr passed it to Charles. "Thank you."

Lehnsherr watched him drain the glass. The man wasn't quite fidgeting, but he looked as if he dearly wanted to. If he had been Sean or Alex, and sat a little less rigidly, Charles would have thought the man was uncomfortable. But Charles had no idea what on Eisen the man could be uncomfortable about, when Lehnsherr was in his own home, dealing with a penniless country boy. It did help to calm Charles' own nerves.

"What do you prefer to be called?" asked Lehnsherr. The angles of his face, particularly the sharp cut of his cheekbones, looked especially fine in the dim lighting. And faintly flushed. "I'm afraid I'm not familiar with planetside customs."

As the only people who addressed Charles regularly were his sister and neighbors who'd known him for years, if not his whole life, he wasn't entirely sure, either. The mines and the factories never cared. "At work, people usually go by their designations. Which - mine is CF."

Frown lines appeared on Lehnsherr's not insubstantial forehead. "Is that what you prefer?"

Charles blinked his surprise at being given a choice in the matter. "Not really?"

"What about your family name?"

"Francis?" Charles shrugged. It wasn't, strictly, his family name, but he was fairly sure Lehnsherr wouldn't care for the long explanation. "I can answer to that."

The man nodded and carried on. "The medbot says that you should be fully healed within a month's time."

"Yes, that's what it told me," said Charles, instead of what immediately came to mind - something along the lines of 'yes, if I lay around and don't move much, which is highly unlikely since, in that case, my sister and I will just starve to death'. "Thank you very much for the medical attention. Sir."

Lehnsherr was staring outright, as if he couldn't figure out what Charles was saying, or perhaps what someone like Charles was doing in his fine house. It made Charles worry that he'd lapsed into 'combs
brogue, or something, but he mentally replayed his words and, no, still in SpaceBasic.

"I should be the one thanking you for- for saving my life," said Lehnsherr after a short silence. "It was- I greatly appreciate it. Obviously." A look of annoyance crossed Lehnsherr's face, but Charles could tell, with growing amusement, that it wasn't directed at him. "The use of my medbot was the least I could do."

"To which I owe the continued use of my legs, I'm sure." Charles assayed a small smile, testing, and resisted the urge to laugh when Lehnsherr appeared even more flummoxed. He wondered if everyone from spaceside was this odd, or if Lehnsherr just came that way.

"Yes," Lehnsherr finally said, clearly unable to come up with anything better. "You, ah, are to remain here until you are fully healed. If this room is not to your liking, you may choose from the other guestrooms in the main house."

Charles blinked at him. His first instinct was to point out that this room was the size of his home, but there were far more pressing matters. "Thank you, Master Lehnsherr, but I'm afraid I can't. I need to return to my village."

Again, Charles was treated to the are-we-speaking-the-same-language expression. A detached part of his brain pointed out that this was a ridiculous amount of conversational fumbling for two grown men; he told it to shush, because Master Lehnsherr was probably distracted by far more important business, and like as not, Charles had to be under heavy medication.

Master Lehnsherr appeared to consider several responses before settling on, "Did the medbot not stress the serious nature of your injuries?"

"It did." As if to remind him that all was not well, an attempt to shift position sent spasms of hot pain down his back, and there was a deep echo of hurt in his legs. "But. I have a sister. If I don't work, I don't get wages." He paused, and added, in case it wasn't clear, "We need my wages for food. And other necessities."

Lehnsherr's frown deepened. It made his face look more forbidding - though not, Charles despairingly thought, any less appealing. "But. Your injuries."

"A week without food and we starve," Charles pointed out blithely. "If I get back tonight, I'll be able to rest until tomorrow."

The other man glared, as if he thought Charles was being difficult and spine-damaged on purpose. "Ask your sister to come here."

Charles gave Lehnsherr an incredulous look. "She has school, she can't miss any days, there are only a few months left 'til graduation." There were other reasons, too, for why he refused to inflict his sister on an unsuspecting and well-meaning human. Emphasis on the human. "I appreciate your kindness, Master Lehnsherr, but if you can please return my clothes, I shan't trouble you any longer."

Lehnsherr crossed his arms, most of the initial awkwardness abandoned in favor of imitating a (gorgeously chiseled) statue. "At least stay the night."

Startled -because the words fitted the sort of thoughts he'd been entertaining, except likely not in the way Lehnsherr meant them - a spot of saliva went down the wrong pipe. Charles coughed hard, and winced at the ensuing pain. He managed to force out, "I can't."

"For fuck's sake, you can't even walk yet," Master Lehnsherr snapped. (Charles, instead of being alarmed, had to remind his libido that it was supposed to be under medication.) "You are staying in
that bed. I will damn well pay you to stay the night, and tie you down for good measure."

Charles thought, faintly, *it just gets worse*. It was some comfort to see that Master Lehnsherr had caught the unintended innuendo and was manfully ignoring it by simultaneously blushing and radiating an impression of an immovable rock.

Charles gave up. But mainly because of the not-being-able-to-walk thing. "All right."

"Good!" Master Lehnsherr huffed. He stared at Charles for another minute, nodded, and marched out of the room.

"Rich people are very strange," Charles said to the closed door. Under his arse, the bed chirped in agreement.

Charles was halfway through "The Once And Future King" when Lehnsherr reappeared again that night. The Master of Estate paused diffidently in the middle of his own guestroom, seemed about to ask Charles something, then stopped when he spotted the paperback cradled carefully in Charles' hands.

Worry rose up in Charles, *I should have made sure it was okay to touch these*, then Master Lehnsherr barked, "did you leave the bed?"

"Um. No?" Charles hesitated, and put the book down on his lap. "One of your maids came in to find out what I'd like for dinner, and she saw me looking at the shelves. I asked her to hand me this one - I'm sorry, I should have asked if I can read them." Actually, young Alyse ("Oh, Master Lehnsherr doesn't like the designation thing, you'd best call me by name too") had assured him he could, but he didn't want to land her in trouble in case she was mistaken.

But Lehnsherr was already waving his hand dismissively, like it was no matter to him if Charles wanted to paw at his priceless antiques. "It's fine. You can. Read whatever you like."

"Thank you." Charles smiled and looked down at the paperback, not quite believing that he was actually holding a genuine book. "I've always wanted to read a real book."

Lehnsherr cleared his throat, his eyes doing the shifty-dance again. "I came to ask - how much are your wages?"

Charles blinked, taken off-guard. He'd heard that some City-dwellers could be sensitive about being asked such a question. But everyone in Chester worked at the same places he did, so it'd never mattered to him. "Um. Depends on where I go to work? Most of the time I go to the mine, and that's ten half-credits an hour. But if they have openings at the processing plants, it's a full credit per hour."

Lehnsherr stared at him outright. Charles felt a pressing awareness of being in an opulent home - wealth evident in even the one small room that was all he'd seen of it - surrounded by items that likely cost more than he would make in two lifetimes, and braced for pity, condescension, or misplaced embarrassment.

But the other man eventually nodded, taking the information in, and asked his next question, "How many hours a day do you work?"

*As long as they let me*, was the correct answer, but not especially helpful. "Twelve, on a good day. But openings in the factories are usually only for a few shifts, and the mine 'combs close once there's no daylight."
Another nod, and a pause. Lehnsherr adopted a look of determination not unlike a sports-runner faced with a particularly challenging uphill route. "If I paid you a day's wages for every day that you are here, will you stay until the medbot clears you?"

Charles stared at him. It was becoming a familiar habit. "Can I have time to think about it?"

"There you are!" Raven's voice was perfectly audible over Lehnsherr's state-of-the-art compcall system, which was quite unfortunate in this case: Charles' eardrums winced in protest from being subjected to pitches unknown. "I thought you said you were only going to be gone for a few days. Let me guess - you met someone tall, dark, and handsome?"

"Yes," Charles answered, with no trace of humor whatsoever. "I seem to have been kidnapped by Erik Lehnsherr."

There was huffing sound from somewhere beyond the screen that had been positioned in front of Charles; indicating that Lehnsherr, who'd left the room after logging into the compcall network for Charles, had at some point returned.

Charles manfully resisted the urge to bash his head against the shiny console, then resisted wincing from the burgeoning ache of sitting up with his back straight for even this brief length of time. He waited for Raven's disbelieving squeaks to die down, then dutifully gave her the bare details of their arrangement: he was going to be at Lehnsherr Estate for at least two months, working on a project, and Raven was to contact him if she needed him home for any reason, and his daily wage would be added to their household account as per usual.
Charles was fairly sure that no one else in the history of Eisen had ever had to exclaim, "not a single credit above my regular wages or I'm leaving if I have to crawl out of here!")

"How did you even meet Lehnsherr?" Raven asked, after her fifth are you serious?

"I ran into him at the New Market," Charles answered as casually as he could. He was very thankful for the medbot's miracle work on his face; most of the cuts and abrasions had been gone by the time he'd woken up, and it was only when he'd asked for the pre-treatment images that he'd realized just how banged up he'd been.

"And you can't tell me what he's got you working on."

"No, sorry. You know how it is." She should. A few of their former neighbors had been able to move better homes, even to one of the four Cities, after landing jobs in the fineries or shipyards; types of work that sometimes involved information they couldn't share with people outside. It was painfully clear that Raven was hoping for a similar windfall.

"I bet it's something boring. Like archiving. I bet you used your horrible pick-up lines on him, and he's plonked you in a dusty database locker somewhere to keep the general population safe from you."

"Raven." Now Charles could feel the amusement rolling off Lehnsherr like the heat on his own face.

"You know, I totally wouldn't believe you if I didn't have the Estate insignia flashing here on my end. Sean's already run off to tell everybody you're calling from the Estate."

"I wouldn't expect any less." He leaned forward. "Are you sure you're all right there? It's been a while since you've been on your own."

"I'll be fine, Charles," grumbled Raven. "I'm legally an adult now, you know."

"You can be a wrinkly grandmother and you'll still be my baby sister. I'm sending you my temporary contact ID here, put it on your compad. Call me if there's any problem, all right? I'll try to check in every few days."

Charles managed to end the call after a few more reassurances of wellbeing on both sides. He tried to push the compscreen back into its frame on the wall, and Lehnsherr, who'd been leaning casually against one of the bookcases, came forward to help him. His expression was as neutral as ever.
"She seems a charming young woman," Lehnsherr said, once Charles had settled back into bed in a more comfortable position. An innocuous statement from an innocuous face. Charles raised an eyebrow. One end of Lehnsherr's lips twitched. In a quieter voice, he added, "You didn't tell her about the accident."

"I don't want to worry her with things she can't do anything about," Charles admitted. "On that note, I appreciate my name being kept out of the Networks." He'd reluctantly gone on the 'Nets and done a search on the incident earlier, and was relieved to find that there were only a few vague mentions of it; and these simply stated that one of Lehnsherr's vehicles malfunctioned and crashed into another vehicle at New Market. No deaths had been reported, and Lehnsherr had made a public appearance soon after, clearly unscathed, so it didn't seem to have gotten much attention. Some of the articles were even worded in a way that made it sound as if Lehnsherr hadn't been anywhere near the accident at all.

"We try to keep as much as possible out of the 'Nets, if you can believe it." Lehnsherr said wryly. "I'm a very private person. Unfortunately, privacy is a... vintage concept, spaceside."

"Is that why you've come home?" Charles asked, and immediately realized that this could be a bit of a personal question. "Oh, sorry, I'm naturally inquisitive? But you don't have to answer if you don't want to. Obviously."

"It's a fair guess, and not particularly inaccurate." Lehnsherr wet his lips in a thoroughly distracting way. "I mean, that is, it was part of the reason."

"Well, you'll certainly get a lot of privacy here," Charles carried on, hoping to smooth the small wrinkle of awkwardness over. "The Manor's grounds are over five hundred square feet, I believe, and guarded to the west and south by the West Canyon Range. Three hundred and forty rooms, if I remember correctly, including five wings and four ballrooms. Historical societies agree that this is the oldest existing structure in this system, built for the Eisenhardts when the planet was first colonized. Back then, of course, the Manor was only what is now known as the North Wing, though the East Wing was constructed within a hundred y-"

Lehnsherr looked taken aback. "You seem to know more about my home than I do, Mr. Francis."

Charles flushed. From anyone else, Lehnsherr's words would be a reprimand, a blunt reminder that he was a guest, regardless of how little he wanted to be one. But he could tell that Lehnsherr didn't mean it that way at all, nor seemed the least bit insulted or reproachful.

Perhaps the man wasn't aware of how he came across to other people. Charles had no idea how, but then he could not imagine going through life without sensing the mind-presence of others around him, without being able to read people's surface thoughts and emotions. Though he did try not to do the latter too much. Not that he could help it, it wasn't something he could turn off completely, and oh dear, "it's the drugs. The gogginess is wearing off."

Lehnsherr arched a well-groomed eyebrow. "Hm," he said, in a tone that suggested he wasn't entirely convinced by the excuse. Charles was just deciding that he didn't have to take this from someone he'd just met when Lehnsherr added, magnanimously, "Well, you did just come out of extensive surgery."

Charles smiled. "About the - knowing about the house thing. I did a report on it, once, for school. My sister calls me an information junkie, or sometimes a sponge, depending on the situation, because I like learning about things, and I have excellent memory. I can probably give you a blow-by-blow account of the Migration -" Focus. He was sure it wasn't this difficult to, normally. Why was Lehnsherr staring at his mouth? "Anyway, she calls me that, as if it's a bad thing to be curious and
interested in a wide variety of different subjects-

A sound came out of Lehnsherr, interrupting, and Charles wasn't sure if he lip-read or mind-read the unspoken *oh good fates save me*. Lehnsherr's mind was all amusement, though. "I'm sorry," said the other man, chuckling, "you... remind me of someone I know."

"Right." Charles looks away, and grabs onto the book on the bedside table like it was a lifeline. "I think I'll go back to reading now, before this gets worse."

Alyse had been bringing Charles' meals since he woke up, despite his appetite being dampened by the medication. That night, Alyse was followed in by Lehnsherr - who was, unexpectedly, carrying his own tray of food.

Lehnsherr pulled up the sole chair in the room to where he could sit right next to Charles' bed. The trays had flexible but strong locking attachments that could be used as short legs on the bed, in Charles' case, or clipped onto the arms or backs of chairs, like in Lehnsherr's.

Dinner was nice, their small exchanges comfortable and unforced, and Charles ended up eating more than he'd expected to. Once he was done, however, he noticed that Lehnsherr seemed a touch tenser than normal.

"Hard day?" he couldn't help asking.

"Somewhat," replied Lehnsherr. "I'm being pressured by Sepor to increase our exports of shipmetal and up the production of all L-class ships. The Prime is also requesting a greater presence of Sepor in this system."

"Oh?" said Charles, shoving a potato in his mouth to prevent himself from gaping at the casual references to Ten Sol's government. In the next second, he realized the disadvantage of this. "Whaf did you fell vem?" he managed, and tried to act as if bits of potato flying out of his mouth was a perfectly acceptable thing in polite company.

On the plus side, Lehnsherr's stern mien broke, and he blinked repeatedly at Charles, likely wondering anew why he'd allowed someone so uncivilized under his roof. "I told him that we are already exporting more shipmetal than anybody else in Ten Sol, and there are already too many of his cronies around as is. He claims that he's worried for our safety, being an outer planetary system, but we're not subjected to banditry any more than Maddox or S'Hara, and I know for a fact that they aren't getting this kind of special attention, so he must have another reason to be sniffing around our homespace. And then I hung up on him."

"Ah." Charles swallowed. He carefully avoided thinking about the fact that he was eating dinner with a man who could *hang up* on the elected leader of the galactic government. He was also taken aback: this was the largest number of words he'd heard Lehnsherr speak in one go. "For what it's worth, I'm glad you did. I can't speak for the 'Yards, but the mines and factories are already producing as much as they can. But, obviously," he waved a fork, "I am biased on the subject."

He fully expected Lehnsherr to tell him that it was none of his business, or to politely nod and change the subject, but the man tilted his handsome head to one side and asked, "The mines and factories you're referring to, Mr. Francis - do you mean the ones in your region, that you work in? Or for the whole of Eisen?"

"The whole," answered Charles. "All the workers are told the numbers, every quarter, and most of
us keep track of them. A supervisor told me it's an old law on Eisen, though no one knows why. All thirteen mines are operating at full capacity, or close enough to get the same effects on the labor force. In some regions, there are more miners than space in the mines for them, and the factories never want for workers."

"And the Vines," said Lehnsherr. "There is no way to produce them faster?"

"Nope." That was another mystery of Eisen - the thirteen mines were the same thirteen established when the colony was first founded. There could never be a new one, until someone figured out how to create a new batch of Vines. "And if there's any other way to get the metal out of the ground, at the depths we work in, I haven't heard of it."

"Hmm." Lehnsherr appeared occupied by some thought. "What do you think, then, about the yield percentages over the past two years?"

Charles frowned, and put his spoon down. "I can't remember the exact figures off the top of my head. Iron, copper, platinum, and silver have been the most consistent in terms of harvest. The far northern mines saw an increase in aluminium last year. Vines extract the metals at different rates, you know-"

Lehnsherr looked surprised. "No, I didn't know that."

"Well, there are a number of factors involved. Last year, for example, was a pretty bad one for strummers - mines eight and eleven saw a record number of casualties. I'm pretty sure strummers affect the Vines too, because if you compare the - hang on, have you got your compad on you? Thanks. Oh look, you've got some of the numbers here. Now, if you compare the yield percentages from the first ten weeks and the yield from the following weeks, during which we got a load of strummers all at once..."

Charles confirmed that he'd been right about the high quality of his medication when the medbot began to wean him off them. He didn't feel any withdrawal symptoms or bad side-effects. He just ached, all over, and found that sitting up even with the support of the bed was uncomfortable after an hour or so. But the rest of his body, used to constant and often grueling activity, was already protesting being confined to a bed for so long.

The wheelchair that Lehnsherr brought in on the eve of Charles being released from bedrest was a thing of sleek curves and shiny metal. Lehnsherr parked it at the foot of Charles' bed, and left very stern instructions that Charles was to ring for the staff to assist him when he wanted to get into it in the morning.

"Nonsense, I'm sure I can manage," Charles said.

"And put your back out again in the process?" Lehnsherr retorted. "Just as well that I programmed a lock into the chair. The staff will know the code."

Charles glared at him. "You are insufferable." A detached part of his mind reminded him, this is the man who owns the land you live on, and that of everyone you know, and possibly the air you breathe as well. It was getting harder and harder to remember that, though.

Especially when, like now, Lehnsherr reacted to insults by looking positively cheerful. "I would say the same of you. Are you done with that book? Which one would you like next?"

"You are a brute of a jailer. I'm surprised you can even read." Alice's Adventures In Wonderland"
please.” Charles handed over the finished novel, and tried not to look too eager when Lehnsherr passed him the requested paperback. Its faded cover, distinctly worn around the edges, made him reluctant to open it, to touch it more than the absolute minimum. "Are you sure it's all right for me to be handling these?"

Lehnsherr, unexpectedly, smiled. It softened the planes of his face, lit up his eyes; Charles hadn't noticed before how beguiling their shade of blue-green-grey was.

"Books are meant to be handled," Lehnsherr said quietly, "My mother used to tell me, 'books need to be touched, breathed in, cried into; the pages folded and stained, the ink smudged, because this was what made them books. Otherwise, they are only sheets of organic pulp stuck together'."

Charles could only stare. His heartbeat sounded strangely loud in his ears, and his chest felt tight. He blamed it on withdrawal from the meds. Lehnsherr gave no indication that he noticed Charles’ attention, or minded - he was gazing at the bookshelf, obviously fond, his eyes caressing the spines of the books in a way that he did not allow his hands to.

Lehnsherr's expression rarely strayed from its polite, polished smoothness. Of course, Charles had other advantages, but for some reason he'd been unusually reluctant to use them on Lehnsherr.

Not because it would be wrong, when the other person didn't even know about his tricks, though this was usually the reason he gave Raven; nor because he feared discovery or rejection, because he wasn't exactly helpless. No, his reason was terribly, terribly indulgent - in a myriad of different ways, Lehnsherr was something new, something different. Charles had brushed his mind a few times, the lightest touch he could manage, and there was something intriguingly complex about Lehnsherr's mind - a texture, almost, that Charles had never encountered before. And Charles wanted to savor it, to keep Lehnsherr a mystery for as long as he could.

It was, also, possible that, deep down, Charles had gotten extremely bored. He'd never say it, because he knew how lucky he was to have the sort of community he had back home, but he suspected Raven knew why he'd been taking more and more trips out of the village lately.

So he was learning to read Lehnsherr's little tells and tics; the difficulty therein, as the man hardly had any, compared to the habitual expressiveness of people back home, only made it more interesting. (For all that Charles had resolved not to cheat, with Lehnsherr - to a reasonable extent, of course, it wasn't as if he could completely turn his ability off - the man was surprisingly controlled on that front, hardly ever radiating his emotions the way other humans did.)

This was, obviously, the only reason why he'd acquired a habit of staring at Lehnsherr at the slightest opportunity.

Now, an unfamiliar sense of recklessness itched under his skin. To the abyss with you, he thought.

"Mmm, I'm afraid I've grown quite a headache," Charles groaned dramatically. He flopped back, hid a wince, and asked the bed to lower him down.

A worried frown appeared on Lehnsherr's face. "Should I get the medbot? Perhaps its program of withdrawal for the painkillers is too steep for your body mass."

"I'm fine, just need to rest my eyes for a bit," mumbled Charles. He fixed the other man with the look Raven liked to call I-am-a-kitten-please-give-me-cuddles. "Read to me?"

Lehnsherr's expression smoothed out. There was a pregnant pause, during which Charles wondered if the Master of Estate was going to march off in a huff and let the staff take care of Charles from
thereon. But Lehnsherr just pulled the chair towards the bed and sat down, taking the book from Charles.

"Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do..."

The following morning, it became evident that Lehnsherr had cottoned on to Charles' stubborn streak and put further measures in place. Charles had barely begun to make his bid for freedom, using his arms to carefully scoot himself to the end of the bed and ignoring how sensation in his legs was still a transient thing, when the door slid open and Alyse, uniform still fresh and crisp, swooped in with tsk, tsk.

She unlocked the wheelchair and helped him into it with smooth competence, though. From her easy chatter, Charles learned that the Manor had ten permanent on-site staff, mainly maid-technicians and valet-programmers who kept everything running smoothly.

"The ‘Keeper asked Master Lehnsherr if he wanted us to hire more, now that he's in residence," Alyse said, adjusting the chair until Charles was leaning back a little, the soft interior molding perfectly to his spine and supporting it like the bed had done. "But the Master said he likely wouldn't need it. And it doesn't seem like he does. He's a neat one, keeps to himself."

"Have you ever met him before?" asked Charles, curiosity piqued.

"A dozen times or so, he used visit for a few days if there was urgent business with the Yards or the mines. I've only been here for about five years, mind. Kit, the cook, has been here almost fifty - she started out as an errand-runner - and she remembers his parents, when they lived here."

"Does she know why they left?" Charles tried not to look too eager to know. He didn't get to watch the channels much back at home, the lone compscreen in the compound being communal property.
Even so, he was aware of the months-long speculation on the 'Nets over the reasons for Erik Lehnsherr's return to his ancestral home, which involved dredging up the old theories on why the family had left in the first place.

"No, no, people have been asking her since it happened, but no one here had any clue," Alyse replied, smiling like she was not fooled by Charles' casual act. "They just upped and left. I think they just wanted to live shipside, doesn't have to be a big conspiracy theory. Master Lehnsherr - the current one - was only three or four years old at the time." She shook her head. "Anyway, it's a bit of a change, to have him around all the time, but it's not bad. My sister works for the Krane family, over at North City, and she'd rather they move shipside already, since they act like their feet don't touch the ground. Master Lehnsherr might have lived out there all his life, but I always tell people, he was born down here on the ground, to natural gravity and a true sky, like a normal person."

Charles just nodded and smiled, not really wanting to be drawn into a discussion about the prejudices that people spaceside and planetside had about each other.

She showed him how to use the controls on the armrest, and pulled up a map on the compscreen to give him a general outline of the Manor. Charles thanked her profusely for her help. She beamed at him, her short hair bouncing. "It's not a problem, 's nice to have a new face in the 'ole house."

"I'm just a miner, you know," he said, unable to stand the possibility that the staff thought him some important visitor. "I'm not entirely sure what I'm doing here."

"I'm from Ginia," Alyse said, shrugging. Charles nodded. Ginia was a large factory town, right next to Yard Three. "Don't worry, there's a protocol. The Master has said that you're here as his personal guest, so we're going to treat you as such. Personally," she added with a conspiratorial wink, "I'd take advantage of it. Seeing as you're here anyway."

Daylight lit up the tall, narrow hallway outside, when Charles finally ventured out of the convalescence room. He made his way through it with great care, the chair rolling soundlessly over the soft carpeting. He stayed well away from any of the paintings or objects on display, and even the elegant windows along one wall, out of an irrational fear that he would, somehow, accidentally damage them. The chair responded to his slightest touch; he spent a few minutes getting used to the controls, figuring out how to change direction and alter his speed.

He reached the end of the hallway and executed a smooth turn around the corner. A whoop of success was quickly swallowed down; he could sense someone ahead. He looked up, and promptly forgot how to breathe.

This hallway was wider, and Lehnsherr was standing in the middle of it, gazing somberly out one of the windows. It looked like a scene straight out of a film. Unfiltered sunlight brought out the sharpness of his features, flattering his profile; with his height and in his white knee-length formal coat, he cut a rather dashing figure, like a war-prince or a general out of legend, caught in deep thought.

*Now that is a well-made man*, said a voice in Charles' head. It sounded distressingly like his mother.
Before Charles' gaping could be discovered, Lehnsherr took what looked like a slim palm-sized compad out of one of the coat's pockets, looked through it briefly, and hurried away. In the opposite direction, thankfully. Charles waited for him to disappear into a door before moving on.

Lehnsherr Manor, Charles quickly found, was surprisingly wheelchair-friendly. Even the narrowest hallways and rooms had space enough for the sleek model that was toting Charles around. The convalescence room was on the ground floor, and there was an old-fashioned elevator to take him up to the other levels. He pointed this out to Lehnsherr over their next shared meal.

"I never really noticed before," the man admitted, frowning. "You are right, though, it seems as if it had been built with this need for access in mind. Perhaps someone involved in the design of the house was a paraplegic? I don't know much about the family history, but the Manor has been more of an ancestral property than a place of residence for the last few generations. My parents only came to live here when my mother was pregnant, and evidently they changed their mind after I was born. It is very possible that the foundation of the house, and the grounds, has remained exactly the same since it was first built, and all the additions since had to follow the original scheme."

That evening, after Alyse had come and taken the dinner trays away, Lehnsherr wordlessly picked up "Alice's Adventures In Wonderland" from the sidetable, and sat by the bed just as he had on the previous night. Charles, feeling strangely warm and short of breath and a little like his very excellent dinner had taken up acrobatics in his stomach, got the bed to lower him, and laid back. Lehnsherr's warm voice started up, steady and warm, and he picked up exactly at the point Charles last remembered hearing, as if Lehnsherr had known, to the word, when Charles had dropped to sleep the night before.
Staying in the Manor was very much like living in a half-forgotten museum. The depictions of the rich in movies tended to emphasize their predilections for luxury and state-of-the-art equipment. But the Manor didn't look like it had anything more sophisticated than electrical lighting, at least on the surface. The compscreen terminals were set right into the walls, the automated cleaners looked like tasteful sculptures that happened to be wandering the elegant hallways. Everything was refined, classical, straight out of the pre-space era.

Charles was admiring a painting that was probably worth more than his entire village when he felt an unfamiliar mind approaching him. It wasn't exactly hostile, but there was an edge to it that set it apart from the peaceful, quietly purposeful minds of the staff.

"I hear you're responsible for that fucking idiot still walking around and breathing," growled the newcomer.

Several minutes later, Lehnsherr's familiar mind hurried down the corridor, steaming anxiety. "Wolverine, please do not traumatize my guest- oh," Lehnsherr stopped, and looked between Charles and the man looming over his wheelchair. "I see you two have met?"

"Wolverine was just telling me that he's your bodyguard," said Charles cheerfully.

"Is that all?" asked Lehnsherr. But he was staring at Wolverine, now, his expression unreadable, and his bodyguard's face was similarly hard to read. The two were clearly engaged in some kind of complicated, silent communication - more likely an argument, judging by the excitable vein in Lehnsherr's neck - and it was the height of temptation for Charles to listen in. Even their emotions
were walled off, at least to the surface scanning that Charles could never completely stop.

"This is what happens when you sneak off without me, you arrogant fuckhead," Wolverine finally growled, fists clenching. "I knew there was a reason you sent me to deliver that package to Stark personally."

"To be fair, it was a very important and sensitive delivery," said Lehnsherr. His tone was not quite apologetic, but his stance relaxed into something mildly diffident.

"You could have waited for me to get back. Like you were supposed to." Wolverine turned to Charles and said, as if it were a threat, "for what it's worth, bub, I owe you one."

Charles stared after Wolverine as the man stalked off, the coiled lines of his body resembling that of a pissed-off wild animal. "He seems... nice."

Lehnsherr looked at him incredulously. "Of all the descriptions I've heard for Wolverine, nice has never been one of them. Are you sure he didn't do anything... untoward?"

"He shook my hand?"

"I was going to warn you about him, but I suppose it's too late now," Lehnsherr muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Really, Master Lehnsherr, he was perfectly civil. I'm sure he means well. He's supposed to be concerned about your wellbeing."

"Some days, I suspect he hates the idea of someone murdering me only because he's planning to do it himself, eventually."

The thing had the appearance of a chair, except that the surface of the seat was covered with what looked like a very squashy purple cushion, which turned out to be damp when Charles tentatively poked at it. He would have thought the room was a small closet or drawing room, except for the sink and mirror near the door, the soap and towels, and for good measure he'd even checked the map on the compscreen.

Besides, Charles really, really needed to piss.

He reminded himself that he had an adventurous spirit, and grabbed the sidebar. He bodily hauled himself out of the wheelchair, gritting his teeth against the expected pain. At least the facilities in the Manor didn't require him to attempt turning around; the toilet seats were shaped so that the user could sit facing away or towards the wall, and even had adjustable compscreens on said wall in case he was inclined towards a spot of toilet reading.

The toilet in his room, though, was perfectly familiar, like the ones at home but much cleaner. This one, the moment Charles awkwardly sat down on it, suddenly sprang to life by enveloping his-groin regions, the squashy damp purple cushion-like material spreading and growing and climbing nearly down his thighs and up to his hips.

The purple material, once Charles unwillingly got a closer look at it, was squishy because it was made up of a million soft wriggly tubes, all ending in gaping suckers.

Charles swallowed an instinctive scream. He told himself to think of one of those sea plants, he remembered seeing videos of them at the library (anemones, his brain supplied, or was that the tiny
He flailed and got hold of the side bar, his legs suddenly finding themselves able to support his weight after all. The purple toilet sucker-tubes let him go quite easily, thank goodness, and he struggled back onto the wheelchair. The chair banged against the darkly polished walls a few times before he convinced it to turn around, and he squeezed it back through the narrow doorway. He remembered the fragile vase parked right across the door just in time to avoid it by swiveling sharply to the left.

There was a startled shout, a confused flurry of movement. Charles released the controls entirely, which stopped the forward movement of the chair; a mere second after Lehnsherr, with obviously faster reflexes, had scrambled out of the way before Charles could crash into his shins.

"I think your toilet just tried to eat me," Charles declared into the stunned silence.

It turned out - once Lehnsherr stopped the mysterious wheezing that he refused to admit was laughter - that the toilet Charles had wandered into was modeled after shipside toilets, for guests who were unfamiliar with planetside facilities.

"The dispensers," said Lehnsherr, meaning the purple tubes with suckers, "absorb the organic material you produce and break it down into base chemicals that the ship can use. You can see how this saves on water - it actually helps to synthesize more water, which may be the only reason living shipside is possible."

"Lovely," said Charles. "'s not every day one gets groped by space toilets. Now, could you please direct me to the nearest toilet that uses liquid and a regular flushing mechanism?"

A few days into his explorations, Charles found a sun-lit atrium on the top floor. It had beautiful floor-to-ceiling windows with delicate, metallic ornamentation around the edges. The view looked out onto the grounds. But unlike the views from other areas of the Manor, this one also included Yard One, and beyond that, the distant country hills. Something inside Charles relaxed at the familiar palette of reds and browns and ochres, and he realized that a part of him had been unsettled by the
picturesque but alien greenery of the garden that surrounded the Manor.

The best part of the room, though, was a beautiful antique chess set.

He asked Lehnsherr about it over dinner.

These shared meals were now officially a kind of routine. They often ran into one another a few times during the day, but the breakfasts and lunches and dinners were when they could talk for longer than a couple of sentences. So far Lehnsherr had missed only two meals, for work or social obligations, and Charles was strangely unsettled after both of them; the next time he'd sat down and eaten with Lehnsherr, it'd felt as if he hadn't seen the man in weeks.

"Oh, it's a family heirloom. Another one," said Lehnsherr, about the board. There was something exaggeratedly casual about the set of Lehnsherr's shoulders, which told Charles that this was anything but. "My father taught me how to play. He wasn't very good at it, though; mother always trounced him."

"You know," said Charles, smiling, "it was my father who taught me how to play, too."

They adjourned to the atrium, where the view was just as lovely at night, the stars glinting like mine-gems overhead. Charles soundly defeated Lehnsherr on their first three games. He punched the air in a way he thought of as virtuously triumphant but Raven called ridiculous, please stop doing that, I refuse to be seen in public with you.

Lehnsherr, a full smile teasing his features into a different, beautiful thing, drily said, "I think you should start calling me Erik."

To which the only possible response was: "hello, Erik, my name is Charles."
Fire is a relief and a luxury in the freezing nights. When the irregular shipments of fuel actually make it all the way down to their little nowhere-nook, the entire compound turns up at the Circle. People haphazardly arrange themselves among their neighbors, sitting or lying down on the hard floor. Battered kabasha mats insulate them from the chilly shipmetal beneath.

"Tell us more, Honorable," calls one of the younger women. She's partially lying on one of her neighbors, using his stomach as a pillow, and another neighbour's two small children are tucked into her side.

An older woman, sitting on cushions on a raised platform in the middle of the gathering, bows her head in acquiescence. There is an air to her, like a gnarled but sprightly tree, strong in her years, sure and stately like one who has lived to old age in a land where few green things grow.

Her voice is as warm and sonorous as burnished copper. She reads aloud with no text in front of her, like someone holding a book in their mind.

*Much knowledge was lost when Xavia died. The makings of the vines of Eisen, the passage through the Shatter Reef, many techniques in the arts of healing. But most grievous of all losses was the ships of the Xavia fleet. Such ships came in all shapes and sizes, each suiting only their pilot and none other. The attachment between a pilot and their ship was such that many believe it was the main reason Xavia never chose a planet-home, but gave the habitable worlds they discovered to their allies. For Xavia would never abandon their ships. There is a very old saying: 'to be Xavia is to have a ship, to be a ship in Xavia is to live'. It is said their ships were the best to have ever been built, perfect, and none could match them then or since.*
"When the medbot says you are ready and not a moment before," Erik said the last with a stern wag of his finger, "you can use this room to build up your strength, accustom yourself to walking again."

Charles drove the chair further into the room, taking in the various exercise equipment, and saw himself in the mirror that stretched all along one wall. He'd never been inside a gym before, but he'd seen them in the films. It occurred to him that he'd never really thought about how Erik kept in trim shape. He'd been under the impression that people with Lehnsherr's wealth just went for regular body sculpting.

"Thank you," Charles said quietly. There was a square mat right in the center of the room. "Is that for gymnastics?"

"Sparring," answered Erik. "Wolverine insists on it. It's come in handy in the past, I won't lie, so I guess he knows what he's about.″ He gave Charles an inquisitive look. "Speaking of - you are still the only person I know who actually enjoys spending time with him."

Charles shrugged. "He's not a bad sort. I'm sure he has many hidden depths."

Wolverine was rude and obnoxious and didn't have so much a temper as periods in which he was less blatant about his homicidal tendencies. He acted like a typical thug, and seemed happy to be seen that way. But Charles could tell that, underneath the bluster and bristle, Wolverine's mind and his powers of observation were the sharpest of the many edged weapons he liked to keep on his person.

Charles came across Wolverine watching a news segment on a compscreen near the kitchens. It was a running daily report on the mines, factories, and 'Yards. Wolverine sniffed, twisted around, and growled at Charles, "There was something about your mine earlier. Mine Three, right? Some kind of cave-in, in the southern shafts. No casualties."

"Thank you." Charles blinked "How do you know which mine I work at?"

"Wolverine" answered Erik. "You seriously don't think I didn't run a check on you the moment Erik contacted me about the- the accident?"

Charles frowned. He sensed that Wolverine had meant to say something else. But he wasn't reading any hostility from the man, just general distrust towards everybody; getting anything more would require him to actively dig for it, which he refused to do without a very good reason. So he simply nodded, and went to see if the Cook had any more of the sweet bread they'd been served at breakfast.

Now that Charles had gotten free of the convalescence room, he informed Erik that they should henceforth have their meals in the dining room, like regular people. It seemed unfair to make Erik trek over to his side in the East Wing of the Manor every time, when Charles could see on the map that the main family suites were all in the North Wing

He got an idea why Erik seemed to prefer that, though, when he saw said dining room. "By the Gods. How big is that monster?"

"It can seat twenty fairly comfortably," Erik answered dryly, already situated at one end.

And this is the private dining room, he thought. Alyse had told him that larger events were often held
in one of the ballrooms. Charles came closer and saw that a place for him had been set at the opposite end.

"Hm. If you'll forgive me for being presumptuous," said Charles, coming up to the table, "I'd like to make this marginally less ridiculous." He neatly and carefully picked up his plates, piled up the silverware on top of them, balanced the whole thing on his lap, grabbed his wine glass, and directed the wheelchair over to Erik's end of the table.

Erik's teeth gleamed in the light. He smoothly stood and pulled out the chair to his right, allowing Charles to park his wheelchair in the vacated spot. He gave Charles an impressed look when Charles was able to duplicate the correct placements of the plates and cutlery.

"I maintain that it is quite ridiculous to have this many utensils to help you eat," said Charles. A server materialized and opened a bottle of wine. Instead of letting the boy pour it, however, Erik took the bottle and poured Charles' glass himself. "Thank you. I mean, I'm sure it's all the same to your stomach, regardless of how many forks you use to get the food there."

"Indeed," said Erik. "But, my dear Charles, dinner with Society is never actually about eating."

Charles finished sipping the wine - the last time he'd had any was Raven's coming-of-age dinner, and this one was much nicer, without any hint of sourness at all - and looked at Erik. Erik was staring at Charles' glass - no, Charles' mouth, and then those blue-grey eyes traveled upwards, locking with Charles'.

The heat that rushed over Charles' face and chest was, probably, not from the wine.

What felt like a long time later, Erik looked away. And downed his glass of wine in one go.

Charles cleared his throat. "This isn't where you usually have your meals, is it?" He gestured down the rather intimidating length of empty table. "Before I came, I mean."

"No," Erik admitted. "I usually eat in my rooms."

The server, joined by another, began bringing platters to the table. Charles' nose picked out grilled vertifish and mashed lochan and quality imported beef. Each little click and clack of quality porcelain sounded disproportionately loud in the otherwise quiet room.

"I'd like for you to join me," said Erik haltingly, staring at his refilled wine glass. "In my rooms. For lunch. And dinner. Tomorrow."

Charles could only reply with, "That would be- that's only fair, I suppose. Since you keep invading my room."

The small quirk of Erik's lips was a victory Charles hadn't realized he'd been looking for.
"There must be some work I can do around here," Charles said, after he ended one of his regular check-ins on Raven. "It doesn't feel right for you to be paying me to just sit about and heal."

"You're already helping me with some of my work."

"Being your sounding board, while a pleasure, is not exactly work," said Charles. Unfortunately, it missed the plaintive tone he'd been aiming for and came out sounding more like, I really enjoy listening to you. He pushed on. "Isn't there anything else I can do around here?"

Erik raised an eyebrow at him. "Spaceside, workers who go on sick leave are paid their daily wage while they're indisposed."

Charles couldn't even imagine that. There was a part of him not entirely immune to planetside bias that wanted to say, yes, life out in space is magnificent, those of us down here on the ground must be barbaric compared to that. But Erik had yet to show any of the assumptions or prejudices that people who lived spaceside tended to have for those planetside, and there was nothing condescending or judgemental on Erik's face now. In fact, his surface emotions seemed to consist mainly of mild confusion.
It occurred to Charles: maybe Erik was simply telling him that this was an arrangement he was used to? Initially motivated by gratitude for Charles saving his life, but not particularly remarkable in the system he was used to living in.

It even made sense. In long space voyages, there wasn't an infinite supply of bodies for a labor force. Workers, especially valuable ones, had to be taken care of.

"Nevertheless," said Charles, "I'd like to be able to contribute in some way."

Erik gave him a considering look. "As I recall, your sister mentioned you're one for archival work."

"Are you sure you're all right in here?" asked Erik. Again.

"Hmm. What?" Charles blinked up at him. "Yes. Very, very much." He waved at the circle of database terminals, the central immersion platform, and the rows of bookshelves extending out in two directions. Apparently some idiot of a historian during the former Master Lehnsherr's time had been given the task of collating important 'Net articles relating to the family's business and political affairs, and had made rather a big mess of it. Charles was more than happy to sort it out, especially since his talks with Erik had given him a good foundation on the current state of said affairs. "I can't believe you have your own personal library. An actual library."

Erik blinked. "But. This is only-" A speculative look appeared on his face. He suddenly gave Charles a warm smile, something tender and private in his expression that briefly diverted the bibliophilic ecstasy gripping Charles' mind. "I'm glad you like it. You may use it whenever you like."

The expression slipped away before Charles could be completely sure about it, and Erik politely excused himself to attend to work; but it left something in the air, warm and like the ghost of a touch. Charles, eagerly diving into the Estate's database, found himself inexplicably smiling at odd times for the rest of the day.

Erik's rooms consisted of a comfortable and spacious sitting room, a small office in the corner, a
bathroom, and large double doors that led, presumably, to the master bedroom. Erik welcomed Charles in with a small smile and an offer of a drink. ("Tea, please.") The compscreen in the sitting room was on. It looked as if Erik had been working from the large couch that dominated the space; digital screens floated haphazardly in the air above the coffee table in front of it. It was difficult to tell which were projected from the compscreen and which came from his delicate-looking compad, sitting in a charging station.

The main compscreen channel was set to SolNews, which tended to focus on political and inter-system news rather than strictly local.

"To this day, many in the mutant community still believe that the attack on Xavia was a government conspiracy against mutants. The tragedy known informally as the Great Blinding, which involved the death of the entire Xavia Family Fleet nearly thirty years ago, has been officially attributed to anti-mutant extremists. Its coincidence with the first recorded outbreak of the m-sickness is often quoted-"

"You can change the channel, if you like," Erik's voice cut into the anchor's soothingly compelling delivery. Charles started; he'd parked the chair in front of the compscreen, to one side of the couch, without having any memory of doing so.

Erik's words sank in, and he froze. "What- what do you mean?"

"Your hands," said Erik dryly. Charles looked down and was surprised to find them clenched around the armrests. "Also, SolNews hides its anti-mutant bias very poorly."

_He still may not know anything._ "You are not... anti-mutant yourself, then?"

"I think that mutants are just as dangerous as any other human," said Erik. He brought Charles his cup of tea. "Just as an example - humans may not be able to spontaneously explode on their own, but I'm sure there are far more humans carrying weapons than there are mutants who _can_ explode. When someone loses control, the aftermath looks the same either way."

Charles nodded. He didn't try to pretend to himself that he hadn't been worried; of course he had, he was wheelchair-bound for at least another few weeks regardless of his powers, and he'd been getting along unexpectedly well with this strange, serious man.

"And clearly all this business with the m-sickness being some form of divine punishment or sign of overall degeneracy is equally ridiculous," continued Erik. "It is difficult to believe that mutants have existed alongside humanity for this long only for nature to suddenly inflict a disease on all of them. Not all mutants have m-sickness, anyway, like they claim. _You_, for one, are obviously fine."

Hot tea burned in his lungs. "You-" he coughed hard "you, ah, you know, then?"

Erik gave him a disbelieving look. "Charles," he said slowly, "have you been under the impression that I did not know about your..." He made a vague gesture towards his head.
"Telepathy," admitted Charles. "Um. Yes?"

The man stared at him. Really, Charles thought faintly to himself, *I'm usually much better with people than this.*

"So... you don't mind, then?" Charles asked. "I try not to use it at all, to be honest. It usually just gets in the way. I'm very conscientious about the use of my ability!"

"Clearly," said Erik, in the driest tone imaginable. The corner of his lips started twitching.

Less panicked and more curious now, Charles asked, "How did you find out?"

"Right when we met." Erik's eyes took on a distant look. "I'd lost control of the hovercar, couldn't get the top to close back over, and suddenly you were there." He tapped his temple. "You told me to calm down, to let you help. I could hear you perfectly clearly, even though the wind was so strong I couldn't even hear *myself.* And you kept... projecting, I guess, this sense of calmness."

"I'm sorry. Normally, I ask before I touch someone's mind."

"I'm not. You saved my life."

And, knowing that he was a mutant, Erik hadn’t turned him in to Sepor, or checked him into one of the supposed ‘mutant-oriented’ facilities, but had taken him home and tended to his hurts. Charles wanted very much to run away, right then, because he was going to have to acknowledge, quite soon, that medical causes were fast becoming an obsolete excuse for the warmth and tightness in his chest, the tumbling in his stomach, the way he felt inexplicably lighter and right within his own skin.
when Erik was around.

So, escape, except- wheelchair.

"You are all right, though?" asked Erik, probably to diffuse the weighed silence. "You don't have..." He nodded at the compscreen. SolNews was cheerfully presenting a slideshow of happy mutants in pleasant-looking buildings that had an aggressive cleanliness and strong preference for the color white, as well as heavily fortified fences.

"No, you're right. The m-sickness doesn't afflict all mutants," Charles replied. "Most, but not all. No one knows why. The only pattern is that the seriousness of the symptoms correlates to the strength of the subject's ability."

Erik nodded, absorbing this. He scowled at the work-related screens cloistered around him, all begging for his attention, and looked at Charles. "Chess?"

"Sooo," Raven said, her eyes gleaming alarmingly. "What's he like?"

Charles tried to give her his best what are you, five? look. "I'm not sure who you mean."

"Do you want me to try calling his office line? I found the public number on the 'Nets pretty easily."

His eyes widened. "You wouldn't."

"What else am I supposed to do when my own brother won't tell me anything? For all I know, he's secretly a deviant who's keeping you under lock and key as his bed-slave."

I wish, Charles thought morosely. "I knew you've been sneaking out with Angel to watch those films."

"Hey, the guy who knows which films these are doesn't get to take the moral high ground." She leaned into the screen. "Well?"

Charles sighed. "He's..." Ah, right, maybe he should have planned this conversation out. It wasn't as if he couldn't have predicted Raven asking eventually. His brain raced to find something to say that wasn't gorgeous, very lovely in person, or, universe forbid, perfect.

Evidently, he was taking too long. Raven gaped at him. "Charles. You haven't."

"No, I have not," he said.

A blonde eyebrow arched up. "Okay. But you want to, right?"

"Raven."

"I mean, why didn't I see this coming? The guy is totally your type."

"Ra- what? I don't have a type."

"Yes, you do. Tall, dark-haired, hiding deep personal issues."

Charles spluttered, nearly forgetting the wheelchair she didn't know about and his own inability to stand properly. "I'm hanging up and not calling back until you start talking sense again."
"The sad thing is that this is so not the first time I've had to deal with your denial act." She sighed. "Fine, you're there for totally non-sexual reasons and you've not been trying to find ways to get Master Lehnsherr to mine your ore - which I can't believe you've actually used on a real person, by the way - and mooning over him while the two of you drink tea and discuss shit nobody else cares about. Not at all unlike that time you fell for that hot archivist in the visiting bibliopod."

Charles decided then that his sister must never ever find out about Erik owning books, much less letting Charles handle them. Okay, that sounded far more sexual in his head - maybe Raven had a point. "I hate you."

Raven laughed the laugh of a cheeky whorlspawn who fed on the misery of her sibling. "Just - take care of yourself, Charles, all right?"

He smiled. "You too."

Days later, Charles drove his wheelchair into Erik's room to find the Master of Estate lying insensate on the couch. "Bad day?"

"Mnhng."

This close, even keeping back and shielding himself, Charles could feel a dull pressure in the back of his head, throbbing outward. "Headache?"

"Hmm. I use to have these terrible headaches when I was younger," said Erik. "I don't get them that often. It hasn't been this bad in a while."

"I can try to make them better, if you'll let me," Charles suggested. He waggled his fingers before Erik could think that he was going to do it with his ability. "Raven says I have a gift for curing headaches. She had them, too, when she was younger." He remembered his overwhelming fear at the time, imagining his little sister getting the m-sickness after all. But they'd gone away eventually.

Erik seemed disinclined to notice anything beyond his pain, but he mumbled something that sounded like assent. He relocated to the recliner at Charles' urging. Charles considerately turned on the compscreen, on mute, so Erik could have something to watch.

Ten minutes later, Charles was convinced his face was on fire, but any attempts to ease up on the massage ended with Erik making plaintive, wordless noises. It absolutely did not help when Wolverine, face like he had an enormous bone to pick - bad choice of thoughts right now - halted one step inside the room, as if he'd just registered the absolutely sinful noises Erik was making, and marched right back out again, yelling "FOR FUCK'S SAKE, GET A ROOM" for all the house to hear.

"THIS IS MY ROOM," Erik half-heartedly yelled back, and then, "oh Gods, yes, right there, Charles, harder, g'me your fingers, fuck..."
"Did you know that your family is descended from the Eisenhardts, after whom this planet was named?" Charles said, without looking up from his compad. He could hear Erik puttering around in the adjoining room that was his office.

"Yes," replied Erik. "Neither of my parents were very interested in that kind of thing, thank the Gods, but certain parts of Society require me to be able to recite my lineage accurately. And then, of course, I will be reminded on occasion that Lehnsherr is but a minor side-branch, not enough ties to the main line to be considered a First Fleet family."

"Really?" Charles frowned. "But it says here that the main Eisenhardt line died out generations ago. Why don't they pass the distinction on to you?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't work that way, at least not for Fleet Society." The couch dipped slightly with the introduction of Erik's weight on the other end. "It doesn't matter. My family is known for being very practical. The last few official Eisenhardts passed the Estate and other properties to the Lehnsherrs. A direct transfer, legally ironclad - none of that vague business about elite blood purity."

"The Estate as in..." Charles made a vague gesture that he hoped indicated the Manor and the carefully tended grounds around it. "Or Estate as in, Master of the Estate of Eisen?"

"They're actually the same thing. The Manor was intended to be the Master's seat of power, and the physical Estate, in a way, represents those parts of Eisen not owned by other entities, which fall under the Master's responsibility. Of course, the power of the Master of Estate is balanced by Ten Sol's government now." Erik tilted his head at Charles. "Why the interest?"

Charles, distracted, barely stopped himself from saying, I want to know everything there is to know
about you. "I enjoy history. Information junkie, remember?" was what he said instead. It had the
added value of being true. "Your libraries here have a more detailed history about the settlement's
origins than anywhere else I've seen, even the big library in East City." He hesitated. "And- I barely
know anything about my family, you see. Not that there's much to know. But my parents never
recorded anything or told me much about our family before they died, and even the local database
only goes back a few generations. It just seems... amazing, that you can trace your family all the way
back to these names in the history books."

Erik's expression gentled. "Family matters very much to you."

"Of course," said Charles, "how can family not be important?" Where he lived, family was what
kept people from starving, from living out in the harsh open lands, from fearing that their children
would have nowhere to go if something should happen.

Erik looked thoughtful, then said, "I suppose it is another thing I've had the luxury of taking for
granted." Neither apologetic nor accusing - just a statement of fact. "Not that losing my parents
wasn't... maybe it is because I live with different fears than you do."

*Feet on the ground or heads in the sky*, the old saying went. And yet- Charles gazed at Erik while
pretending to be engrossed in his borrowed compad and the bibliochip he'd gotten from the library
earlier. Erik, for his part, looked deeply occupied with whatever was on the compscreen.

Charles wished that he could find it in him to ask, *is everyone spaceside as lonely as you?*

Later on, while exploring the basement levels, Charles found a long hallway lined with portraits. The
somber men and women captured within the solid frames were, presumably, notables in the
Lehnsherr and Eisenhardt line. There wasn't one of Erik, and the one of the late former Master
Lehnsherr was on display in the main foyer opposite his wife; Charles wondered if Erik would ever
make one of his own.

The portrait on the very end, with an elaborate iron frame, was simply labeled 'MAGNETO'. The
man in it was wearing a large helmet that obscured most of his features, but his nose and the hints of
his eyes looked astoundingly familiar. Charles rolled up and down the hallway, trying to see other
hints of Erik in the progression of faces. The broad forehead and jawline seemed to be a dominant
trait.

At the very end of the hall, a crest hung on the wall rather than a portrait. Charles drifted closer and
saw that it a large circle, the color and distinctive sheen of shipmetal. It looked quite plain at a
distance, but once one got close enough, the eyes realized that the circle was actually comprised of
an intricate, interconnecting series of wavy lines, very reminiscent of the Vines, and intricate designs
towards the middle, bordering a stylized X, with more wavy lines were carved into the center, right
over where the straight lines crossed.

He wasn't sure why he stood there for so long, looking at it. His hand itched, as if it wanted to touch
his skin to the center of the 'X', and the elegant, endless loop of Vines.

"I never quite realized how complicated walking was," said Charles through gritted teeth. He
carefully slid his grip along the balance rail and shifted his left leg forward.

At least he could *feel* his legs nearly all the time, now. But his muscles were still wont to ignore the
signals from his brain; he'd take two steps and then a key muscle in one leg would suddenly decide to cut ties from the rest of him. His arms trembled from taking his weight.

"Your progress is satisfactory," cooed the medbot from somewhere behind him. "The movement in your left leg appears to be less cohesive than the one in your right. I am making adjustments to your daily strengthening exercises now."

"Sod walking," Charles huffed. "I've got a pair of arms. Modify some stilts and I'm gold."

"I don't think Ten Sol is quite ready for you to be taking up circus stunts," said Erik, appearing at the door and leaning against the frame. He was in only a light shirt and trousers, similar to what Charles had taken to wearing around the Manor after several sets appeared in his room overnight. The formal coat seemed to be making fewer and fewer appearances.

More importantly, Erik was now directly in Charles' line of sight. Charles tried to pretend that the medbot's chirping didn't somehow sound smug and knowing when he found his second wind, after all.

The moons were easily visible in the clear night, one barely a sliver and the other a gibbous. The familiar sky felt strange to Charles after all the new things in his life of late.

Beside him, Erik sprawled himself out on the ground like it was his mattress. Charles bit his lip and refused to look at the long, lean spread of limbs, lying close enough that Charles could sense the heat radiating from him.

"Wolverine used to play this tracking game with me, when I was younger," Erik said. It was a bit out of the blue, but that was how Erik preferred introducing more personal topics. Charles turned his head to give the man his full attention.

"It's as simple as it sounds," Erik continued, "one of us would go into hiding, and the other would track him down. We were supposed to use clues to follow the other's trail, but he just uses his nose. 's not like I can stop breathing, an' that's the only way of turning it off, he'd say when I complained about it. And, I have to admit, I think I was cheating too, somehow, because I always knew where he was. He could be on the other end of the ship, ten decks between us, and I could still find him. He said that was a good thing, in case we ever got separated. We still played every few weeks, or so, no matter how ridiculously easy it was."

Charles blinked. "There's a similar game here, too, except it's called hide-and-seek." And it's usually played in a group, he would have added, but for the image in his mind of a young Erik running around an enormous deep-space ship with no one of his own age to play with, and only his adult bodyguard for company.

Erik made a vague noise of agreement. He was quiet for a while. Charles thought he'd drifted off, when he said, "That's how I survived, you know. In the... accident that killed my parents."

"I don't know," confessed Erik. "The investigation said it was. But there was nothing wrong with our ship. I would have known - I always knew if there was something wrong. And I'm sure there was another ship nearby. Don't know how I know, but there was, even though the investigation said we were alone in that quadrant. Wolverine is the only one who believes me; there is no evidence, nothing on the scans, which the explosion scrambled anyway."

"You don't believe it was an accident?"

The chord of disbelief plucked at Charles' attention. "I don't know," confessed Erik. "The investigation said it was. But there was nothing wrong with our ship. I would have known - I always knew if there was something wrong. And I'm sure there was another ship nearby. Don't know how I know, but there was, even though the investigation said we were alone in that quadrant. Wolverine is the only one who believes me; there is no evidence, nothing on the scans, which the explosion scrambled anyway."
Erik took a deep breath, eyes aimed unseeing at some distant star. "Most of the auxiliary systems went critical after the explosion. I was trapped under a lot of debris. I could see my parents, enough to know that they were dead. They told me, after, that I must have been in shock. The only thought in my mind was get to Wolverine." He chuckled mirthlessly. "I told him about it later and he just said, why the fuck did you think we played all those games for? I don't remember how I got out of the bridge. I just focused on where I knew Wolverine was and headed for him."

Charles made a quiet noise, to show that he was listening. There were no words, he knew, to ease that kind of horror, and it wasn't his place to, besides. Erik didn't give off a lot of emotion normally, and there was a very obvious wall up now. Charles didn't dare try to soothe its trembling; for all that Erik had never seemed bothered by his telepathy, he hadn't given Charles permission to use it on him.

In any case, Erik didn't seem to be expecting an outright response. They continued to watch the moons, the stars, the occasional glimpse of the City-in-Orbit somewhere far above. This kind of quiet and solitude was something Charles could never get, back home.

"You're shivering," said Erik, an unknown length of time later. Charles blinked, wondering if he'd dozed off, and realized that, yes, he was. One of the moons was blocked by Erik's fairly formidable silhouette. "Here." Charles heard the swish of heavy fabric, and in the next moment, the very familiar formal coat was draped over him, body-warm and smelling wonderfully of grass and Erik.

"Thanks," Charles murmured. His smile at Erik turned into an undignified yelp when Erik kneeled down and picked him up, lifting Charles from the ground bridal-style. "Erik."

"We should get back inside, it's getting cold," Erik said reasonably, as if this was the sort of thing they did every day. He didn't seem to find Charles' weight much trouble, easily crossing the few steps to where the wheelchair was parked.

Charles was set to complain, very loudly, about being able to walk now, thanks, due to the grueling physical therapy that Erik was inflicting on him every day, and one should be asked first if one wanted to be manhandled in such a manner. But then he was distracted by the feel of Erik's body pressed against his side, and the deliciously firm muscles of Erik's arms, and by the time he rallied his wits, he was already in the wheelchair and being pushed back indoors.

"I'd forgotten that Eisenhardt was one of the First Fleets."

"Oh?" Erik mumbled, sounding half-asleep next to Charles on the couch.

Charles grinned down at the crop of brown hair resting almost on his lap. He kept both hands on his compad - the one he was loaning from the library, technically, but no one seemed inclined to ask him to return it, and Erik had started referring to the device as Charles' - to prevent them from carding through Erik's hair. "I've always been fascinated with, you know, the Migration. I've always been fascinated with, you know, the Migration." He let himself sink further into the couch, a luxury he hadn't known he missed until he was out of the chair. "Can you even imagine it? Fleet after fleet, assembling and departing for worlds unknown. They didn't know where they were going, or what they would find. But they needed to leave, so that Earthworld could survive, and so they went."

"Mmm," said Erik agreeably.

"You know what the strangest thing is, though?"
"Hm?"

"I don't remember where I first heard the story. Of the Migration."

"Oh?"

"I remember being really excited about Eisen being the first successful planet colony - I mean, that was a big deal, when nobody knew if humanity could really survive on another planet, and Eisen doesn't really have a lot of things to be excited about, historically speaking. I was telling my father about it, and I thought he was the one who'd told me, but he looked surprise and said that he hadn't known - he's not from here, you see - so it couldn't have been him. Then I thought I must have heard about it from one of the child-minders in the compound, but the Honourable gave me a strange look and said that they don't talk about that such things children so young. Not sure why, you'd think it's the kind of thing people here on Eisen would hold over everybody else." Strange; he hadn't thought about this in years. "It doesn't matter, I guess, but it's just odd. I have a fairly good memory, as I've said before, though I suppose childhood memory is hardly infallible."

He was tempted to tell Erik about all the other things he'd known without remembering how the information could have gotten into his head. Raven just rolled her eyes and called him "sponge", and he was wary about telling her that sometimes knowledge really did just turned up in his head, like it'd always been there even though he could remember not knowing before, and it hadn't stopped after puberty like she believed.

But then he realized that Erik was fully asleep, now, and snoring lightly. It'd been a busy week for him. So Charles chuckled to himself and went to fetch a blanket from the bedroom, and soon forgot about the whole thing.

"Charles? You wanted to see me?" Erik's voice drifted in from the hallway. The door slid open. "Oh."

Charles knew that he must be grinning like a fiend, his face was starting to ache from it, but he couldn't help the delight surging through him at being upright, on his own two feet, entirely without assistance. It belatedly occurred to him that he could have called Erik from something important. "I just - sorry if I interrupted anything, but I wanted you to see."

"No, no, I'm glad," said Erik. His mouth slid into a smile, ramping up until he was full-on beaming at Charles. Charles, remembering when he could barely get Erik's lips to twitch, felt a little breathless, and also like he might be able to conquer the universe next.

Which was why, despite his initial intention of heading back to the balance beam, he angled his body towards Erik and took a step. And another. Erik's eyes widened. Charles' legs got a bit wobbly at one point, but he kept on, solid and slow. He was so focused on his legs that he didn't stop until he was right in Erik's space. He looked up, worried, but Erik didn't look put out at the sudden proximity.

In fact, the look on Erik's face was very much not put out.

And now Charles' brain was stuck on putting out and please ask me to.

"I," Erik started. His voice sounded strangely hoarse. "There's a cane that my grandfather apparently used. I had it brought out of storage."

"That's very kind," Charles said. Oh, his voice was not much better. "Thank you." Erik's eyes were
very close and really quite, quite lovely. "I wouldn't have been able to, you know, do any of this, without your help."

"Charles." It was probably meant as a gentle rebuke but came out sweet with need, and Charles' blood roared in his ears, a resounding yes.

He was already leaning in, head tilted back, when they heard a loud crash from the hallway. Erik straightened up like a whip, head turning to look over his shoulder. Charles caught a slap of terror, and realized that his telepathy had somehow started sinking into Erik's mind without him realizing. He abruptly pulled back, horror at his loss of control dampening his curiosity at Erik's reaction.

"I should see to that," Erik said, smiling apologetically. "The cane is in my suite. Should I have someone fetch it now?"

"No, I'm sure it'll keep until I come by later," Charles replied. Even without his telepathy, he could see some of the tension leaving Erik's body. Had the man feared that he'd scared Charles away?

Erik nodded and hurried off, the door closing behind him. Charles returned his focus to walking - the balance beams looked really far away without the incentive of Erik waiting at the end to spur him on, and Charles wanted to sit down. He consigned the aborted moment with Erik as something to figure out later.

He had the growing but fairly sure suspicion that Erik had never pursued - or been pursued by, as unbelievable as that seemed to Charles - anybody before.

Charles let out a small noise of surprise.

"What?" Erik asked absently.

"It says here that this planet was first found by Xavia, and they helped Eisenhardt to settle it."

Erik nodded. "Yes, what of it?"

"The text lists Polo Xavier as the one who finally navigated through the Frostline to reach the Eisen sun system and determine this planet as habitable."

"It's been a while since I had my history lessons," said Erik. "But I believe Polo Xavier discovered all three outer sun systems."

"But. That name. And, 'Polo and his sister Mera were the first to step foot on Eisen soil'. As in, Polo Marker and his sister, Mera of the Middle-Sky?"

"Yes?"

"But those are tales for children. You know, the wandering sorcerers of Xavia. Magic and heroes and such. I've always thought that it was some kind of coincidence, or maybe a family took the name because of the associations."

A shrug. "I don't know about magic, but even shipside, Xavia was quite legendary. One of the First Fleet - some say they were the First Fleet Family." Erik let out a derisive huff. "Ten Sol and the Sepor government like to pretend that the galaxy is past that aristocratic nonsense, and yet you won't find anybody in Society - or shipside, for that matter - who doesn't still think of Xavia like they were royalty. Their enemies go on about how monarchy is tyranny, while their supporters and sycophants
jealously count their bloodties to the Family, and try to set themselves up as the heirs of Xavia."

"But I thought Xavia was destroyed in the Great Blinding?" asked Charles.

"The Fleet and main Family line, yes. But nearly everyone shipside has a connection to Xavia in some way, and all the Society have bloodties. I, myself, have at least one great, great grandmother in the Xavia line, and probably a few distant cousins. The Book keeps track of the whole mess."

"Oh." Charles thought of the colorful tale-figures of his youth: Ansa the Truth-Finder, Jerome with his Hands Of Stone, Wendy Sting-Wings. It'd been a hobby, almost, to learn of the different variations of the myths in different parts of Eisen, to hear the versions that left S'Hara or Kemalash or Roen on the mouths of the refugees that occasionally washed up in Eisen's countryside; he'd never thought to find out if they'd been real.

"Xavia was the most technologically advanced of all the colonies and the fleets - it's not surprising that people thought they could do magic," mused Erik. "Especially the planetside populations who were cut off from spaceside life and the other worlds."

Charles hummed thoughtfully. "I did notice that, historically, a good deal of folklore and supernatural beliefs tended to arise during periods of isolation, both planetside - as in the case of the Blockade of Ruska - and spaceside, as in the Frost-Eisenhardt Impasse."

Erik was staring at him. "What?" Charles asked.

"Did you attend university?" said Erik. "I never thought to ask. You talk like an academic paper sometimes."

"As if I'd have the money to travel off-planet, let alone pay for a formal education," said Charles, his voice coming out little sharper than he'd intended.

Erik didn't seem the least put off. "I'm sure there are scholarships for that sort of thing. Someone with your skill set and fondness for knowledge would have no trouble gaining one."

"Younger sister still at home."

"Ah."

"It's not so bad," Charles said after a minute, eager to diffuse the tension. "A nearby town gets bibliopods visiting all the time, and I go to the City libraries whenever we can afford for me to take a free-day."

"Was that what you were doing, when you saved my life?"

Charles ducked his head. "Yes, I'd heard that there was a big bibliopod in the New Market, selling old 'chips for cheap."

"And when Raven is done with school?"

"She's applied for a scholarship to attend the university in Collard Fleet, but I suspect she'd prefer to get a good job in one of the Cities instead. She's not really the academic type, but she tries hard for my sake."

"I meant, what about you?"

"Oh. I'd like to get a job in one of the City libraries," Charles admitted, playing with a loose thread
on his shirt. He wanted to think that his current clothes - clothes that were regularly washed and pressed for him by unseen staff - were only on loan, because he was only a guest, but it hadn't escaped his notice that they fitted him better than his clothes at home, which suggested that Erik had had them made for him.

And now Erik was asking him about his life.

"Hmm," was all Erik said. Charles wanted to know what was behind the thoughtful gleam in his eyes, and he could if he cheated - but a low, fluttering feeling in his gut told him he wouldn't know what to do with what he'd find.

"What's it like, living planetside?"

Charles didn't even think before responding with, "What's it like, living shipside?"

He shook his head immediately after the words left his mouth. Erik wasn't being condescending, or supercilious; the man genuinely wanted to know. "I'm sorry. That's too pat - makes it seem like there can be no common ground between the two." He looked down, contemplating the tame grass of the Estate garden.

Eventually, he said, "Living planetside is... it's knowing where the horizon is, every day. It's knowing that the sky is above you and the ground is below. It's knowing you are a part of something much bigger than yourself - some parts of which are untamed, beautiful, older than you and, if you are careful, will outlive you and be there still for those that come after you."

Erik cleared his throat. "Well, it's only fair. Shipside is... feeling that there are no horizons. Never being tied down, going to sleep knowing that the stars will be different when you wake up. The light, the air, the very gravity is within your power to change. It's being able to move only several hundred square miles, at best, and living within that area for years - but all of it is completely yours, and your life depends on it utterly."

The next time Charles happened to pass through the hallway of portraits, he paused in front of the large metal circle and its stylized "X".

There was no explanatory plaque or name card. And yet, Charles knew without needing to be told: Xavia.

Some of the Shipyard workers were still at their jobs, because some of the machinery couldn't really be left unattended - Charles could see one dangling from a tall frame, another carefully monitoring a complicated switchboard, and a few harried-looking ones running around everywhere - but most had been assembled in the large central courtyard. Charles could feel a few eyes glancing his way, curious, and for the first time, he was glad that Erik was naturally an eye-magnet, his charm and refined good looks engaging everybody's attention.

Charles huddled behind Logan, happy to be ignored as some kind of assistant. It was the first time he'd accompanied Erik on one of the Master of Estate's public duties, and he was quite willing for it to be his last. But he'd let out that he'd never visited a 'Yard before, and Erik had invited him. Not that they went far, seeing as 'Yard One was practically on the Estate's doorstep. He was sure 'Yards weren't like this normally, either: quiet, the general motion of the place arrested.
Thank goodness he could leave the wheelchair behind, now. The cane was quite unobtrusive, and might come in handy if he had to clobber someone with it.

Erik, at the front of the assembly, gave a brief speech praising the 'Yard for its recent productivity and quoted figures of the ships' distribution throughout Ten Sol. The workers, who Charles was sure must be itching to get back to work instead of standing around for what was mainly a PR stunt for the local media, were outwardly attentive and clapped politely when he finished. Actually, quite a few gave off a sense of nervousness. Charles had to admit that Erik did look quite stern at the moment, in full formal regalia with the Lehnsherr medallion on his long coat; these men didn't have his advantage of having witnessed the Master of Estate accidentally spilling coffee all over himself that morning because he'd forgotten he was holding a full cup when he started waving his hand around.

The media that had gathered for the official visit were, however, far less courteous than the workers. It was the first time Charles had ever seen so many of them together in one place, as they usually stayed in the Cities and tried to pretend the countryside didn't exist. The courtyard area was barred, but Erik needed to walk through them to get to the 'Yard offices.

As soon as Erik was within range, a barrage of questions and recording equipment descended upon him.

"Master Lehnsherr, what are your thoughts on the Prime's motion to increase Sepor presence around Eisen-" "Master Lehnsherr, why have you returned to Eisen after all this time-" "Lehnsherr, there are rumors that there are fewer incidences of m-sickness on Eisen-" "Master Lehnsherr, are you currently involved with-"

The crowd surged, trying to follow Erik down the makeshift path that a few hapless workers were doing their best to keep clear. Wolverine growled and dove into the mass of them, bullying his way through like a breakball player. Charles, lacking his bulk and utter disregard for other people, found himself being forced back. He pushed himself up with the help of the cane, trying to spot Erik, but the next surge shoved him sideways. He lost his footing, and flailed about a bit, before colliding painfully with a metal column that came out of nowhere.

Suddenly, Erik was there, his thunderous expression at odds with the gentleness of his hold on Charles' arm. "Get us through this," he ordered Wolverine.

Wolverine nodded and moved ahead of them. The crowd didn't exactly part, but they clearly picked up on Erik's mood, and didn't offer too much resistance to Wolverine's efforts.

Charles, however, didn't miss the number of recording and flashes trained on him, tucked as he was against Erik's side, with Erik's arm curled protective around Charles, heavy and warm.

"Charles, there is something I'd like to show you."

Erik looked a bit uncertain when he held out the blindfold. Charles just grinned at him and presented his back so that Erik could tie it on.

"You are far too trusting, my friend," grumbled Erik, the contrarian that he was.

It was surprising for Charles to discover that he did, in fact, trust Erik implicitly. They'd grown close, of course, but there were people Charles had known all his life whom he'd be reluctant to let himself be blindfolded by. He thought himself a good judge of people (having, that was, the advantage of
being able to detect hostile intent from far off) and Erik, somehow, had become someone he trusted with his life.

Once the blindfold was in place, Erik gently guided him out of his room and down the hallway. Charles didn't think the man had to stand quite so close; the warmth of Erik's palm on the small of his back was a little distracting.

This was his excuse for losing track of their route.

He could tell, regardless, that this was a part of the Manor that he had not yet explored. There were so many smaller passages and hidden nooks, he still came across hitherto unseen closets or disused rooms every other day or so. Plus, spending a month in the wheelchair meant that he still tended to head for the elevator instead of searching out previously unusable stairs.

They took several sets of said stairs, now. Charles stumbled a few times, his legs not yet coordinating with his spatial processing as well as he'd like, but Erik kept a steady grip on his arm.

A long hallway. Then large doors opening. There was a trace of staleness in the air, a hint of long human absence despite a recent dusting and airing.

Beside him, Erik was leaking nervousness everywhere, despite his mind feeling distinctly walled off. Like someone worried that the surprise would be ruined by a stray thought.

A click, the faint whirr of machinery and whisper of cloth, and Erik whispered, "You can look now."

Charles eagerly tugged down the blindfold just as sunlight spilled into the room.

"Books. Hundreds- no, there must be thousands, stacked neatly in hundreds of shelves that stretched all the way to the high ceilings. Hardcovers, paperbacks, atlases; there was a whole section kept in protective glass-like cases, likely rare or first editions; stacks of pamphlets in transparent sleeves, next to volumes bigger than Charles' head; there were a number of comfortable couches with an assortment of cushions, inviting Charles to sprawl upon them with a warm drink and a chosen text.

"This is the Eisenhardt-Lehnsherr Library," said Erik, startling Charles out of what might have been a stupor of ecstasy. "It's part of the original house, and thus one of the oldest standing sections of the Estate. Most people assume the Library is the one in the Lehnsherr flagship, but that is a condensed, modern version of this place. Its preservation and upkeep has been one of the most important duties held by my family. Every generation has added to it. My mother introduced a whole section of Earthworld classics. I was, well, hoping that you would help me look after it."

Charles opened his mouth, then closed it. He couldn't remember how his throat worked.

"Charles?" Erik appeared in front of him, tall and gorgeous, his face scrunched up in concern. "Charles, say something."

"I," Charles tried, because right then he would have done anything Erik asked him to. "This is. Erik."

Either the weeks of association had given Erik better instincts on how to read other people or he was at least familiar enough with Charles to discern that Charles was on the positive side of the spectrum of struck speechless, because the worry faded and Erik gave him a small, shy smile. And then he stepped closer, enough for Charles to have to tilt his head back a bit, and took Charles' hands in his.

"Charles," he said, tone low and right out of the more saccharine of Charles' recent spate of
inappropriate dreams. "Stay here. Make this place your home."

"Um." Charles fervently hoped that medical literature was right and it wasn't actually possible for one's heart to beat itself out of one's ribs and chest cavity. His seemed to be giving it a good go, nonetheless. What is he-? What is Erik asking?

"You can invite your sister to come here, once she is finished with school," Erik continued. "And. You said. You want to work in a library. Well," he gestured around them. "This is the best library on Eisen. The database terminals have unrestricted access to literature from all over the galaxy."

So. Erik just wanted to employ Charles? But Charles knew he wasn't imagining the blush on Erik's face, the nervousness tinting the air around him even though the man usually had a tight rein on his feelings. Erik looked like someone entering very unknown territory - fearful and brave and brilliant for it.

It wasn't hard at all to read what Erik was trying to say. Stay, stay, stay.

Charles, true to form, just wanted to run.

On the other hand, it wasn't as if he could even physically run, yet. There was still a chance he was reading the situation completely wrong. And, well.

Nobody before had ever offered him books.

"Yes."

Charles halted in the middle of the corridor and stared at the lamp on the wall. It was shivering. He couldn't feel the floor or walls shaking, but he could hear other objects nearby rattling. And since Erik's door was right there, he approached it. It didn't open automatically, but Charles remembered that the hour was quite late, and doors in the North Wing had to be opened via keypad after a certain time, even by recognized individuals. Possibly as some kind of futile effort to get Eisenhardts or Lehnsherrs to go to sleep at a reasonable hour.

"Erik?" he called out, "I think there's a strummer- I mean, a minor earthquake going on."

The rattling abruptly stopped. Charles released a long breath. He hadn't felt in danger, precisely, but the mine had left many habits. He heard footsteps on the other side of the door, approaching, and a moment later it slid opened partway, revealing Erik in a silky bathrobe. Charles resolutely kept his eyes on the man's face, instead of double-checking that, no, Erik didn't seem to be wearing anything else under the robe.
Charles slammed his mental shields up, and felt extremely grateful for his hard-won control; who knew what his libido would be telepathically leaking out all over the place without it.

"Um. Earthquake?" said Erik. His hair looked like it just had a very fun time in bed, and there was a distinct blush high on his cheeks. Charles felt his traitorous skin attempting to mirror it.

"Yes. Um. I think?" Charles fidgeted. "I could have been mistaken?"

"Yes. No. I mean - I definitely felt. The planet moving," said Erik, and Charles couldn't even begin to determine if the innuendo was deliberate or not because, oh God, Erik was staring at his lips.

"Ah. Good. Or. Not good?" Charles bit his tongue before he did anything else inadvisable with it, like sticking it down Erik's throat. "I should... bed. Mine."

"Yes," breathed Erik. His eyes widened and he stuttered, "you mean you're going to sleep, of course. Yes, I should as well. It is late. Goodnight!"

Erik made an abortive wave that would have been hilarious in a time when Charles wasn't uncomfortably semi-erect and feeling as hot as a refinery. He rested his head against the wall and took a deep breath, then went to his room to drown himself in a cold shower.

"Erik, some of these files seem to have been categorized under the wrong year brackets, and- oh."

Charles halted mid-step, in the middle of Erik's private rooms.

He really should learn to knock.

Erik was in the act of closing the door to his bedroom, evidently having just come out of it. He looked freshly showered, dressed in a perfectly tailored suit, and absolutely devastating.

"Hello, Charles," he said, his tone echoing agreement with Charles' belated thought about knocking. Erik shifted uncertainly and brushed down one of his sleeves. "How do I look?"
"Hmng." Charles cleared his throat and found, to his alarm, that his normally very dependable vocabulary was under siege by his libido. "Good. You look. Really good."

Erik gave him a smile, and Charles clung desperately to every ounce of control he had lest he began streaming very graphic thoughts about what he'd like to do to Erik directly into Erik's head.

"It's an opening for an art installation," said Erik, after an awkward silence. "The ship is only in the Eisen system for two weeks, and it's come all the way from the Yonoki fleet out near Roen."

"That sounds fun," said Charles, buoyed up by social convention. "I'm sure you'll have an enjoyable evening."

Erik shrugged. "The feature artist is an acquaintance of mine, at least, so it won't be completely unbearable."

Was that why Erik was all dressed up? Or perhaps Erik had a date waiting for him at the event. Charles sternly reminded himself that interrogating Erik about his plans for the evening would be a rather conspicuous thing to do.

It occurred to him that this was the first time he'd encountered Erik right before one of the many events he was purportedly obliged to attend. He'd known that Erik went to them, because Erik would mention it beforehand and Charles would then not see him at dinner, and occasionally he'd see clips or pictures of Erik on the 'Net afterwards. Somehow, his brain hadn't quite filled in the gap from one to the other; it was too easy to think of the Erik he saw every day as a discrete being from the public figure known by many people.

"That's good," said Charles, when he remembered that it was his turn to speak. "I look forward to hearing all about it."

Erik nodded. Glanced around, then headed for the door. He clapped Charles warmly on the shoulder along the way. His hand lingered. "If I don't see you later - goodnight, Charles."

"Goodnight," replied Charles, a little faintly. Erik's cologne had deep undertones of sandalwood, with a hint of spice, and made it incredibly hard for Charles to think.

Erik's eyes seemed especially bright; Charles wondered if he'd applied something to them. He couldn't quite look away, and evidently neither could Erik. It took Charles a long while to register that Erik's hand was still on his shoulder, the heat of his skin seeping through the light material of Charles' shirt.

They both blinked. Erik seemed to remember his hand. He withdrew it quickly, and nodded at Charles, vanishing out the door. Leaving Charles all alone in his rooms.

"And he calls me trusting," muttered Charles under his breath. It was better than thinking about what the fuck just happened. He shook his head and escaped to the database archives, where the search algorithms were infinitely less confusing.

"I haven't been up here for a long time," Erik's voice floated from above. A minute later, the man slid easily down the ladder, a thick volume cradled in his arm. The Lord of the Rings, Charles read.

"My father used to read that to me when I was a child," said Charles from the couch. "He'd inherited the bibliochip from his family. It was so old that the compad could barely interface with it, and our compad is ancient."
"Was he a miner as well?"

"Yup. He loved the story."

"As did I." Erik sat on the other end of the couch, and looked fondly down at the book. "Is it true, then, miner? All that is gold does not glitter."

"What do you think, space-man?" Charles responded, smiling. He seemed to be doing that a lot, these days. "Not all those who wander are lost."

The Library was quiet. So was the rest of the house. It was very easy to believe that they were alone in their little pocket of time and space. Awareness of the private, intimate air settled on Charles’ skin like a warm cloak. The dim lighting, carefully formulated to avoid harming the books, was deliciously flattering to Erik’s features. Erik looked up, and his eyes met Charles’. The distance between himself and Erik suddenly seemed a great deal less; easily covered in one good slide and lean-

- "Intruders," Charles whispered. His eyes widened. "There are intruders on the grounds. And they’re after you, Erik. They’ve come to kill you."
The m-sickness is proof, they say, that mutants cannot live alongside regular humans. It is nature correcting her mistakes. It is punishment from - insert deity/spiritual force/belief system - upon those who would suffer abnormals to live.

SolNews, in particular, dedicates a portion of its daily stream to appropriately gruesome footage of mutants losing control of their powers and injuring people - regular people who could well be their dedicated audience - or damaging property. Being a 'Net that prides itself in providing a fair coverage, it balances the violence with clips of healthy mutants in the Sepor facilities, or the few rehabilitated ones in the collars that kept them safe by dampening their abilities.

One of the reasons Sepor has won the elections over the last two terms is because of its efforts in protecting the public from the mutant threat. People no longer need to fear their neighbor suddenly burning up their house, or their children being put into a coma by one of their classmates.

- 'The Media: A Critique' by Professor E. Kemala, Contemporary Conservation

It was somewhat gratifying that Erik, after his initial surprise, seemed to accept Charles' statement at face value. "How many? How far away are they?" He also, however, seemed utterly unconcerned about the part where there were people coming to kill him.

"I count four, no, five minds," answered Charles. His fingers were on his temple. "They... they're scaling the canyon wall." It made sense, in a way - far easier to sneak in than through Yard One. "I've never really used my power to judge distances before. Erik, what's-

"Can you see what they are seeing?" Erik suggested. "That can give us some idea of their location. And if they know where we are."

"I, well." Charles bit his lip and pushed out in a way he hadn't done in a very long time. "Wait, there is one, he's more nervous than the rest. He's thinking very loudly. He's anticipating reaching the Manor in... five minutes."

"That is enough information; don't overtax yourself. Wolverine?"

Charles' head snapped around. He hadn't even noticed Erik's bodyguard entering the room. He wondered if Erik had some kind of panic button. Wolverine simply nodded, and left.

"How would he know where to meet them?" Charles asked.

Erik shrugged. "Logan probably knows this house better than any person alive. He'll know where they're most likely to strike. Also," he glanced at Charles, "you were staring in one particular direction; presumably, the one these intruders are coming from." He quickly put his book away and carded a hand through his hair. "I was under the impression that these things don't happen planetside."

Charles blinked. "Do you mean this is a common occurrence up shipside? Instead of arguing over a meal or brawling in the streets, your opponents simply hire assassins to kill you?"

"Society doesn't like to get its hands dirty," replied Erik without any hint of irony.
"Is that why you're being so calm about incoming assassins?"

"Let's just say I've been... anticipating something like this." He looked at Charles, beseeching. "I'm just sorry that you have to be pulled into it. Don't worry, they're only after me. As long as you don't get in their way, they'll leave you alone; collateral damage is considered bad form.

A frustrated, mangled-cat sound came from Charles' throat. '"Do you expect me to just sit here and watch you be assassinated? No, come on, there must be something we can do."

Erik had the gall to smile at him. "My dear Charles. If it helps, this is one of the most secure rooms in the house."

There was a loud thump on one of the glass windows. Charles saw something long and sharp fall to the ground.

"The walls and windows are reinforced, and the Estate's comsystem has a self-defense protocol. Some of its programs are particularly aggressive."

A muffled shout. Charles thought he saw a brief spurt of fire on the upper edges of one of the windows. A lumpy, smoky shape flew past the window on the opposite side.

It was quiet for several minutes, then a rather high-pitched scream had Charles half-leaping out of his chair.

"Seems like Wolverine has made contact with the intruders," Erik commented.

They listened to the noises for a while, which were varied and somewhat suggestive of the violence taking place in various parts of the house. Charles was just beginning to calm down again, settling back in his seat, when he gasped. "There are more - Erik, another group of five are climbing up the canyon. There's - there's a small ship that's depositing them."

"Your range is quite impressive," said Erik.

"Thank you." Charles realized that he'd once again turned towards the direction that the new intruders were coming from. "We have to let Wolverine now."

"Already done," said Erik. At Charles' surprised look, he held up his compad and explained, "there's a basic communication device on Wolverine's gear. It'll beep my message to him. We made up our own code."

"I don't know if it makes me feel better or worse that you have plans for this sort of thing."

Erik grinned mirthlessly at him. "It's not as common as I'm making it seem, and hardly something people talk about. But there's always a darker side to a life of wealth and influence. I'm fairly sure my parents kept us isolated to make me less of a target for kidnappers, but even so, Wolverine foiled about a dozen attempts before I came of age." He looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully. "This is a bit of an extreme act, though, and I don't even know what it's for."

There was the faintest of thumps from somewhere on the roof. Erik sat still as a statue, listening. In the same way that Erik had noticed Charles' eyes looking towards their attackers, Charles now saw Erik's eyes drifting upwards, as if tracking something through the walls. Wolverine? It seemed to be, though he was always particularly slippery to Charles' telepathy. The beating of his heart and the adrenaline coursing through Charles' system was oddly out of place in the quiet, implacable calmness of the library. The books on the shelves seemed to tell him, we have witnessed the rise and fall of dynasties, the turn of human time, all manner of bloodshed and more; your fear is nothing to us.
He wasn't sure, in the end, how long they waited there for, but Charles didn't think either of them moved much beyond breathing.

Charles jumped when someone knocked on the door, but Erik held his hand up, signaling for him to wait. A series of three slow knocks and two quick ones - clearly a code. Erik got up, gesturing for Charles to follow him, and went to the door, where he opened a panel on the wall next to it and keyed in a series of numbers. The door must have been locked.

Wolverine's face, on the other side, was grim and a little blood-streaked. "I got a couple of them, but they're good. Slap a uniform on them and I'd call them government Agents." He gave Erik a significant look.

Erik sighed. "They'll expect me to head for the shuttle, and to the flagship."

Wolverine nodded. "I can sniff out any bugs or bombs. Probably. But doing what the enemy expects is not the way to win a war. Especially when you don't even know what the fuck the fighting is about."

Definitely ex-military, Charles decided. He kept quiet. Half of the conversation between Wolverine and Erik seemed to be taking place via facial expression, anyway.

"You want me to go into hiding," Erik stated flatly.

"I want to follow the trail and figure this out, maybe cut it off at the source," Wolverine said. "To do that, I need to not be following you around."

"Logan."

Wolverine's face didn't exactly soften, but for a moment it was a little less vicious. "For years, people have been calling me your bitch, your worry-dog. I've never given a fuck. Wolves, see, know how to hunt. And now you gotta let me."

"While I stay out of sight." But there was a resigned note to Erik's voice, indicating that Wolverine had already won.

"Charles can watch your back."

Wait, what?

Erik joined Charles in staring at Wolverine. "Are you - you don't even like me going for a drink with Stark without you lurking in the shadows!"

"That's because it's Stark and alcohol," Wolverine said, deadpan. "Charles?"


"Whoever's after you won't be expecting this," continued Wolverine. "Get out of here, head for the country. The Cities won't be safe, either."

And then Charles was being dragged along, down the corridor and up the first flight of stairs they came to. It took him a few minutes to figure out that they must be heading for Erik's rooms. Fortunately, the Library was in the North Wing with all the old family suites, so they didn't have too far to go.

They were finishing off the last set of stairs when Wolverine suddenly shouted, "Cover!" and leapt
up ahead of them to the top. Erik spun and slammed Charles flat against the wall.

Something hot and bright shot past behind Erik, hitting the wall high above the landing. Charles expected it to burn right through, but the wall remained intact, barely a dent in the center of the wider scorch mark.

"Oldest part of the Manor," Erik said right into his ear, "The original house has withstood over a hundred sieges, attacks, and familial fights. She's a sturdy girl."

There was a shout. Above them, the bulky figure of Wolverine was locked in conflict with a figure in dark clothing, the two of them exchanging blows fast and hard. Wolverine was bleeding in a few places, but didn't appear to have noticed, while his opponent was noticeable listing to one side. The slightest of pauses allowed Charles to see that Wolverine had long, claw-like blades in his hands - no, coming out of his hands, exactly like claws - then Wolverine lunged forward, grabbed the would-be assassin around the torso, and the two of them toppled and rolled down the stairs, leaving a trail of cracked banisters in their wake.

The moment they were past, Erik grabbed Charles and started running up again. "Wait, what about Wolverine?"

"Trust me, he'll be fine!" Erik assured him.

Once in the rooms, Erik darted into his bedroom and came out with a small bag. He grabbed his compad from where it was charging on the coffee table, random items from his office, then opened the keypad next to the door and punched in a series of numbers much longer than the usual one Charles had seen him use around the house. The keypad retracted, revealing a lit panel, which Erik pressed his palm against.

"I'm locking the house," Erik explained. He beckoned for Charles to come closer, and when Charles did, grabbed Charles' right hand and pressed it against the panel as well. "It takes two people recognized by the compsystem to lock it, and two as well to unlock. Normally, I use Logan."

They were back out in the hallway, the door closing behind them with a very solid-sounding click, when Charles picked up on a mind coming down towards them. And it was not Wolverine's.

"Someone's coming," he hissed at Erik.

Erik started down the other direction, pulling Charles along (rather unnecessarily). They took a different set of stairs, cutting across to the East Wing on the second floor. Erik opened what looked like a closet door, except it had a narrow set of stairs on the other side, which they took down to a dusty, unused storage room on the ground level. Charles blocked his nose to stop a sneeze.

The room had a side-door to the outside. Erik tried it and found it to be locked. He swore under his breath, rattling it hard, and Charles joined him in pushing at it. Something must have given way, because it suddenly opened, spilling them out onto the night-cool ground outside.

Charles and Erik picked themselves up. Erik was slinging his bag over one shoulder when something went barreling past him, pushing him into Charles.

It was Wolverine. And the reason became horribly clear when, in the next moment, the hilt of a dagger protruded from his chest. Charles instinctively looked up to where the dagger must have come from. One of the assassins, in dark clothing like all the others, was swinging himself out of a third floor window. He somersaulted and landed neatly behind Wolverine.

Wolverine, who'd staggered and crumpled, suddenly lashed out, metal claws gleaming in the light
coming from the house. Evidently he hadn't crumpled, but gone to a crouch. The claws caught the unsuspecting assassin right in the gut. Blood splattered over the grass. The dagger was still in Wolverine's chest; as if remembering it, the man grabbed the hilt and *pulled it out of himself*, grunting right before a wicked hook at the end of the blade slid bloody from his flesh.

In films, this would be the part where the valiant knight protector finally succumbed to his mortal wounds and fall to the ground, but Wolverine just made a face at the dagger and drove it into the chest of the assassin who'd thrown it.

"How'd you like *that*, bub," spat Wolverine. The assassin, who'd been as good as dead from the initial gut-wound, fell limply to the ground.

He turned and glared at Erik and Charles. "What the fuck are you waiting for? You should be hauling ass already." Wolverine wiped a hand over his face, spreading the blood there even further, to grisly effect. "I'll track down who sent these guys, find out what's going and make sure they won't just put another hit out on you when you re-surface, and then I'll track you."

"But- you're injured-" protested Charles.

"Fuck's sake." Wolverine threw Erik a loaded look, then pulled open his jacket. There was a great deal of blood where Charles *knew* he'd seen the knife set deep into the man's chest, and Charles was about to look for something to bandage it with when Erik said, heavily, "*no, Charles, look*". Erik pulled apart the tattered pieces of Wolverine's undershirt.

Charles stared. There *was* a wound, but it had already scabbed over. Shallower cuts all around it were closing right in front of Charles' eyes.

It could be really advanced micro-biology tech, but Charles knew instinctively that it was not. "Oh, you're a mutant as well, how *marvelous*," Charles beamed at him. This explained Erik's nonchalance about Charles being a mutant; after all, Wolverine had been his bodyguard ever since he was a child.

Wolverine rolled his eyes at Erik. "What did I tell you? Can you just drag him off? I'll see you both later."

"He'll be all right, Charles," said Erik as he dragged Charles away from the house. "Seriously, he'll probably be in better shape than the two of us when he finds us again. Nothing can keep him down for long, and I mean that very literally."

Charles stuttered out a few protests, but it wasn't as if he had a better option. And surely getting Erik, the assassins' target, away from harm was the logical thing to do. He felt grateful for the sparse woods encircling the gardens, separating the inner Estate from the perimeter of Yard One.

There was a small road around here, somewhere, mainly used for the regular deliveries of supplies to the Manor. It was difficult to see anything in the night, but one of the moons was still out, and Charles' eyes, used to the dark of the 'combs, eventually spotted it when the unnatural grass grew sparse. They followed the road on foot. Charles' body had gone a little soft over a couple of months of easy living, but not enough to erase a lifetime of clambering about the countryside. Erik, for all that he probably hadn't walked ten continuous miles in his life, followed close behind with apparent ease and making as little noise as Charles.

The road made a wide half-circle, at one point skirting past the edge of the canyon range that bordered the Manor grounds to the north and east. Charles made sure to keep as far away from it as he could without losing the road; it was dark enough that he couldn't be sure of the ground, which meant that he might not notice a sudden absence thereof either. He couldn't even see the other side of
the canyon. If he didn't know better, he could believe that the sudden drop to utter darkness went on
forever.

He also half-expected one of the assassins to catch up to them, or more to pop out over the canyon
edge. But there was no whine of a gun powering up, or an assailant leaping unto them, and
eventually the road brought them downhill and right into the sprawling enclave of Shipyard One.

"Shouldn't there be fences?" whispered Erik, the sound of his voice startling after the long stretch of
silence. "I mean, there are ships just sitting there. Not to mention sensitive equipment."

"There are fences," Charles whispered back. "Several lines of them, and patrol-teams, and automated
defenses. They're on the other side." No point in setting up security measures on the Manor's side,
after all; getting clearance to enter the Manor was far more difficult than clearance to enter a 'Yard.
Plus, from what Charles had read of the Eisendhardts, they would have protested at the implication
that the Master of Estate couldn't waltz into a business he owned and commandeer any of the
vehicles within whenever he damn well pleased.

He decided not to bring this up with Erik - but it did give him an idea for their next step.

They wound their way past piles of spare parts and half-finished ships hanging in their cradles, until
they reached a convoy of haul-carts and landwagons parked in their own wide clearing. Charles
picked a landwagon that was painted in the familiar red-and-silver pattern, the Lehnsherr family crest
emblazoned on the back.

"Come on," he urged Erik. Charles ran a hand low across the back of the vehicle. He tapped
experimentally at a couple of points, until he heard what he was looking for. "Ha!" The ground was
inconveniently clear of scrap metal, but there was a piece of metal peeling off the landwagon's side,
probably a casualty of too many storms and inconsiderate fellow drivers. Charles wrapped his hand
with a bit of his loose top shirt - and he couldn't remember when that happened, him wearing more
than one layer, though at least it wasn't as bad yet as Erik's three - and carefully pulled off the thin
strip of metal. He slipped it under the landwagon's cargo door, and worked it sideways until he
encountered the latch. A bit of jiggling, and a well-timed thump - the manual lock came loose,
allowing the both of them to push the door up enough to crawl under.

"Something you need to tell me, Charles?" Erik teased, after they'd closed the door back down
behind them. It was pitch black.

"It's something that people in the country do, when they need to go a long way but can't afford the
usual transports," Charles said. "I mean, I've never done it before, but most of us know about it, back
home." He tried to move further into the cargo hold, and stubbed his toe on something. "Ow. The
trick is to get into a locked lot, like this one, because after a long day the drivers don't want to bother
with all the electronic securities and nobody's supposed to be able to get into the lot. They just use
the manual lock, which also tend to get a bit loose after a few years." Charles slowly reached out,
encountered a flat surface, and knocked on it. Ah, a storage box. "This one's loaded already. They
won't even look inside in the morning."

"I have to admit - I'm very impressed," said Erik dryly. "But I could have gotten us past an electronic
lock. My compad has a universal access key for all Lehnsherr property."

Charles scowled into the dark. "At least this way you won't leave a trail. You know, for the people
out to kill you?"

"Ah. Good point."
They slowly, and a little painfully, picked their way over whatever the landwagon was carrying for
cargo, until they made out a small clear area in which they could both fit, if they sat close together.

"So," Charles said, an indiscernible length of time later, "you don't know why someone could have
hired assassins to kill you?"

"I'm starting to think you just enjoy saying that out loud," grumbled the other man.

"Erik."

Erik shrugged, his shoulder knocking lightly against Charles where their sides were pressed against
each other. "There are any number of possible reasons." The man's tone sounded absurdly
reasonable. "The question is, in fact, why now? I haven't done anything out of the ordinary in the
last few months. Well, other than my decision to move back to the Manor. But that wasn't a sudden
thing; I've been considering it for a while, and made the announcement last year. I'm fairly confident
I haven't mortally offended anybody. And there's nothing coming up that could be affected by my
absence."

"How many times has this happened to you?"

"Charles, there's a reason I employ a full-time bodyguard. I usually get about a couple of attempts on
my life a year." Erik made a thoughtful noise. "Granted, never a whole team."

"What happens if you-" Charles swallowed, "- if these assassins had been successful?"

Another shrug. "Not much, to be honest. The Estate will be held by the government - which is a
good reason as any to remain alive, I refuse to let Sepor touch a single inch of my family's property -
until the legalities are sorted out, and then the title and ownerships will pass to distant cousins over at
the Capital."

"Would - I mean, not to imply anything about your relations, but could they have put a hit out on
you?"

"I'd considered that," said Erik. "But no, I'm on decent terms with them, and getting the title would
mean that they would have to, the fates forbid, move out here. They're more likely to hire a squadron
of bodyguards to ensure my continued survival."

They lapsed back into silence. At length, Erik said, "Charles, I - I do not mean to put you in danger.
Wolverine put you on the spot, back at the Manor. If you will just help me get to any of the Cities,
my family has allies who will take me in, and I will contact you at home when the situation has
passed-"

"Shush," said Charles. He tried not to dwell on how Erik had said allies - not friends, and not even
his own allies, but that of his family, no, his family name. "It seems to be my lot in life to pull your
arse out of the fire. It would be remiss of me to stop doing it now."

"Charles, the longer you stay with me-"

"Do you trust Wolverine to sort it out?" It belatedly occurred to Charles that it must be unusual, for
someone as strong-minded and self-sufficient as Erik to let a mere bodyguard sort out his trouble, no
matter how sensible a solution it was or how long he'd employed said bodyguard. "Do you trust him
with find your enemies, and to keep your enemies from finding you?"

"Of course." And there was not a single doubt in Erik's mind, either.
"Then I trust him to take care of me." *And mine.* Which mean that, at some point, Charles brain had gone ahead and decided on a course of action.

As if he was the one who could read minds, Erik asked, "Where are we going, anyway?"

Charles chewed on his bottom lip. But there really hadn't been any question - he wasn't familiar with this region, or any of the Cities, and this was hardly the time to be blundering about. Wolverine would want him to take Erik somewhere no one would associate with Erik or the Lehnsherrs or the Estate. The revelation that Wolverine was a mutant, which was further proof that Erik was perfectly fine with mutants, had just made the decision much easier.
"It's easy to tell who's a mutant," says GYK, age 28. "They're all driven mad by the m-sickness, aren't they?"

"The very worst are the telepaths, of course." Tul764, age 15. "They mess with people. Steal secrets right out of someone's head. Make you believe whatever they want."

"Because of their ability, telepaths can take down whole communities; just being near one can incite symptoms of mental illness in a regular person." Wren-Lay, Medic, age 40.

"There are documented cases of telepaths spreading the symptoms of m-sickness to humans." - Jefferson Frost

- 'Life Under Sepor', a compilation for comparative study by Far S'Hara University.

"We're here." Charles' warm voice slithered through the haze of sleep, accompanied by a gentle shake of Erik's shoulders. Erik peeled his eyelids apart, and winced at harshness of the sunlight. His body ached. He could feel the start of bruises, and possibly bruises on top of bruises, from where his arms and shoulder had been banging against the side of the rusty haul-car; clearly, good suspension was an unneeded luxury in this part of the world.

"Where's here?" asked Erik, following Charles out of the vehicle. Their fellow passengers didn't give them more than a passing glance. Erik was glad for the deisich that Charles had made him put on before they left South City, even though the fabric itched something awful and the heat on top of two layers of clothing was making him light-headed. Everyone seemed to be wearing the same rough fabric - from which had been fashioned trousers and long tunics - though there were small differences like the addition of a belt or a patterned neckline.

"This is Hattan, the closest town to my village," Charles explained, waving a hand around them. "We're going to have to walk from here, I'm afraid."

Charles got them both a bottle of kass-juice each from a street stall. It was barely cool, but it was sweet, and at that point the most refreshing drink Erik had ever tasted.

"I can reimburse you for everything," Erik mumbled, after downing half the bottle.

Charles rolled his eyes. "You do realize you practically nursed me back to health after the accident? I can spare a damn deisich and some kass."

Erik wanted to point out that he was the reason Charles had been injured in the first place, but he recognized that argument as one neither of them would ever concede. Besides, it was far too hot to speak.

They walked past rows and rows of worn though well-kept residences, following a street that got narrower the further they went from the town's center. Eventually it became a dirt path, and there was nothing around them but bare rock, and the odd copse of hardy bruuni.

Erik sipped his drink slowly, knowing he had to make it last. He felt soaked in sweat, each breath scraping over his lungs. His comfortable shoes, made for the indoors, were heavy as manacles,
baking his feet; he envied Charles his sandals. The path stayed level for a while, then started climbing, but smoothly enough that Erik didn't realize how far they'd gone up until they rounded a large rock formation and the ground on his right side disappeared. He stared for a long moment before his brain caught up with his eyes; a pebble, dislodged by his previous step, bounced down the sheer cliff face.

His thoughts gradually disintegrated to nonsensical slivers under the heat and exertion. Charles was his sole focus, the constant presence a few steps ahead and to the side. The rest of the world arrived in disjointed pieces: the air took on a sharp, unmistakably metallic quality, a distant sonorous sound, different voices calling out to Charles, parts of the landscape on either side looking vaguely like mangled vehicles.

"Erik, we've made it- oh, damn," said Charles, from a very long way away. "Raven, Raven, can you lend us a hand here-"

Charles' face loomed over him. This was strange, because Erik was usually the one looking down at Charles. The urge to reach for him, to touch his lips to Charles' skin, rose up, like the heat he'd stopped feeling a while ago. Tamping down that urge was instinctive by now, for all that he was so very tired.

"Your eyes are very blue," Erik told Charles, and passed out.

He's wandering a ship, a ship he's never seen before. Strange; the only ship he's ever lived in is his family's, and there is not an inch of her that he doesn't know to his bones. He is not afraid, though, he never is around ships, and something about this ship is safe, welcoming.

The place he is in looks like a bridge. It's devoid of people, but not exactly empty: there is a presence here that's somehow part of the ship. It feels familiar.

He thinks he can hear voices, far-off, but the ship is more immediate to him. The elegant shape of it appears in his mind, and he lets himself explore the range of textures: the sparkling hum of the engines, the protective strength of the hull, the eager lines of energy snaking around the frame like vines.

The fear that's always dogged him has yet to make an appearance. It makes him want to be reckless, want to pour himself out, finally free and unfettered. For what are the purpose of dreams, but to provide respite from reality-

His eyes snapped open.

The room he was in was tiny, lit only by moonlight spilling in through a high window. There was just enough floor space for the shabby mattress he was lying on, plus a rickety table squeezed into one corner.

The mattress squeaked as he moved. A warm body curled up against his shifted along with him. Erik only had time to register the familiar flop of brown hair before Charles' eyes opened.

"Hello," said Charles, blinking up at him, "would you believe me if I said that I hadn't meant to fall asleep, much less molest you while you were unconscious?"

Erik chuckled. "What were you doing lying on the bed, then, if not to sleep?" He tried not to think
about how often he'd yearned to be in this position: in bed with a warm and pliant Charles. Of course, in his head there'd been far less clothing involved.

"I was sitting up!" protested Charles. "I'd merely intended to remain nearby in case you woke and found yourself in an unfamiliar place." He paused. "How are you feeling?"

"I don't think I've ever walked so much in my entire life," Erik admitted. "For a time, there, I was convinced that we'd be walking forever."

"Things are a bit further apart here than in the Cities. Hank said it was probably just dehydration, maybe a touch of heatstroke." Charles seemed to realize that he was still lying somewhat on top of Erik, and sheepishly put a bit of space between them. Doing so, however, involved his body twisting and rubbing against Erik in a teasingly thought-scattering way, and left Erik biting down hard on his own tongue.

Also, the mattress was barely big enough to fit one full-grown man - to fit Charles. Which meant that there was, at best, a three-inch gap between them, even with Charles pressed against the wall on his side.

Erik's reckless and touch-starved brain tortured him with thoughts of rolling over and pinning Charles to the wall and ravaging him to within an inch of his life.

Years of conditioning dragged those thoughts back into the dark of his mind and smothered them.

"I had a strange dream," Erik blurted, a touch too loud in order to crowd out the rebellious stirrings of his libido. "I was in a ship. It wasn't mine. And not one I've ever been in, either."

Charles stared at him. His eyes were, somehow, still criminally blue despite there barely being enough light to see more than the outlines of everything. "I think that dream might have been mine," he said.

Except, his mouth didn't move.

Erik was certain of this, because those damn lips were magnets for his eyeballs.

*I'm terribly sorry, it's been a while since I projected my dreams.*

"That's how I heard you, the first time," said Erik. "Before the accident. I'd wondered - but that was your voice, in my head." His mind flitted, insect-like, to gossip, news reports, folk tales; he would be the first to admit that he knew next to nothing about telepaths. In fact, most of the time he usually forgot that Charles was one.

*I can project thoughts as well as read them.* A quiet, always-working part of Erik's mind wondered, idly, if Charles' thought sounded like his voice because Charles thought in his own voice, or if Charles made it sound like his voice deliberately. *I do my utter best not to read people's minds, unless I'm given permission. Though, when you're thinking about me, it's like ignoring someone calling your name. And I can never completely turn it off.*

It occurred to Erik that there was a chance Charles had glimpsed some of Erik's fantasies involving him. Erik should be more concerned about this, but Charles blushed at the slightest things, and likely would be constantly red if he saw the very explicit contents of Erik's brain. Besides, in the face of the many new developments in Erik's life within a very short span of time, it was easy to boot *abject mortification* down the priority list. Way, way down.

*What else can you do?* Erik asked in his head, deliberately aiming the thought at Charles.
Charles blinked, then his entire face lit up. _Oh! You really don't mind? Most people get unnerved by this. Um, I'm not really sure. I can make it seem as if time has stopped. Well, it won't be very impressive right now, since there's only the two of us here._

Charles also babbled when he was nervous.

"Can you control people?" Erik asked curiously. "Create illusions in their minds? I've heard that some telepaths can do that."

"Yes." Charles looked miserable, for some reason. "But I won't unless I absolutely have to. I try to use my power as little as possible. But it can be handy. Remember when I, um, showed you how good I am at head massage? I learned that trick from helping the others."

Erik frowned. "The others?"

"Raven." Exasperation lent a hard weight to Charles' voice that Erik had never heard before. "I told you I wanted to introduce you first—"

"As your cute, blonde baby sister, I know. But I don't care if he's the fucking Prime himself - if he's staying here, he's gonna have to deal with the real me." Bright yellow eyes glared at Erik. "So. You're Erik Lehnsherr."

"You must be Raven," Erik said, mostly on automatic. He wondered if this was too forward. He didn't like some planetside customs, but was conscious of being an outsider looking in, and he knew better than to antagonize people by ignoring them. Said customs still left him floundering a lot, and the day had already been especially heavy on the floundering - to the point where he was sorely tempted, as it were, to just let himself sink to the bottom.

He saw Charles stepping closer, as if ready to bodily haul Raven off Erik. _Relax, you're doing fine,_ Charles assured him. _We go by first-names at home and with close friends. Everyone in Chester has lived here for years. It will only make you stand out if you don't use our names. Besides, you'll be living under our roof, which makes you family._

"You know it's rude to butt in when somebody's already talking to someone, right?" Raven glared at Charles.

"It's also rude to assault our guests, but I don't see that stopping you," Charles retorted.

"It's fine," Erik said quietly. Now that the initial shock was past, he could take in more details about Charles' sister beyond the overwhelming impression of... blueness. "I'm pleased to meet you, Raven."

Raven let out a huff. "You're a handsome one, at least. And you've got good nerves; the last person Charles brought home who saw me like this screamed and ran out the door. Or would have, if Charles hadn't frozen him first."

"That was because you jumped him while holding the kitchen knife."

"I was cooking, I forgot it was still in my hand," Raven said airily. "Anyway, I'm pretty sure Erik here didn't even blink," she narrowed her eyes, and the stress on his name suggested that she expected him to react to her use of it in some way; she seemed disappointed when he did nothing. "Which leads me to think that you'd primed him beforehand, Charles."
"Forgive me for not wanting to subject a guest to your campaign of proving that all of Ten Sol hates your natural appearance," Charles said, "but, as a matter of fact, I didn't. Because I had the strange idea that you are past these kinds of stunts, or at least won't try it on someone who has just regained consciousness."

In fact, lingering exhaustion and the accompanying fogginess of mind were probably the only reasons Erik hadn't reacted much to Raven suddenly appearing right in front of him. He was sure that the siblings' argument here was an old one, and didn't feel up to being the lone audience while brother and sister rehashed every little point.

"Really, it's fine," he interjected. "I'm used to this sort of thing. Wolverine is a big believer of keeping people on their toes. I've woken up a few times to metal claws right in front of my face." He nodded at Raven. "You, at least, are a lot easier on the eyes."

Charles chuckled. "Oh, Gods, I can just imagine. Raven, will you let him go now?"

Brilliant yellow eyes gave Erik a last, searching look. "Fine, fine," muttered Raven, throwing up her hands as she backed off. Erik took a deep breath. She was a few feet away when her form rippled, almost like a wave was travelling over her body, and suddenly there was a blonde, blue-eyed girl staring at him.

He stared back. "That's beautiful."

She gave him a bitter smile. "Yeah? A lot of people like it. Do you have any special requests? You don't seem like a boobs kind of guy. Ass, then. Don't think I didn't see you checking out my brother's. You should have seen him when he still looked like jailbait." Her form blurred again, and Erik was looking at a much younger version of Charles. Who was very distinctly shirtless. And smirking at him.

"Raven," Charles cried out, face red like a tomato had exploded on it, at the same time as Erik said, "What? No, no - I meant, what you can do. Your ability is beautiful."

"Oh." Raven went back to blonde girl, only now she looked uncertain and distinctly young. "Um."

Erik said, "You must have a great eye for detail."

"Thanks." A spot of blush appeared on her cheeks.

He stared at that peachy, wholesome complexion. "Actually, if you are still taking requests... I'd prefer the real Raven."

The change was slower, uncertain; but he smiled when she was blue, scaled, and yellow-eyed again. She looked a little taken aback, but also thoughtful.

She grudgingly said, "all right, he can stay."
"Welcome," said Raven the next morning, "to the biggest scrap heap in the galaxy." She drew back the faded pieces of *kabasha* they were using as curtains over their dwelling's 'windows'.

The sky was just changing color. Charles and Raven's dwelling was fairly high up, and afforded a
decent view of the surrounding area. The shape of the landscape looked very odd to Erik, not quite natural, as if irregular chunks of rock had been swept into neat, shallow dunes. Light raced out from the eastern horizon, casting fiery tones over sky and land.

It was only then that Erik realized he was, in fact, looking at ships.

Miles and miles of ships, in the form of wreckage or scraps. Some were whole, though most were in recognizable pieces like a wing or a chassis or an engine shell, and the gaps in between filled by innumerable metal chunks. Eisen's countryside was a landscape of metal scrap, bodies upon bodies, a graveyard of space-things and star-dust; and people had made their homes on top of it.

After Raven and Erik's chat the night before, they'd had a very meagre dinner that consisted mainly of valdeis, dried and salted. Erik had seen that he clearly been given the largest portion, which he wanted to protest but couldn't think of the polite way to do so. He'd thought of the galas he'd been to, the hub parties and charity balls and opening nights, their limitless food and drink. He was suddenly, fiercely thankful for Wolverine, for insisting on constant exercise and sensible portions at mealtime. Charles had looked worried all through dinner.

"It's more than enough, Charles," he'd assured him.

Tiredness practically knocked Erik off his feet as soon as they had finished eating. He and Charles had ended up sharing the bed again, since there wasn't anything fit for sleeping on in the outer study/dining/kitchen area, and the only other room was Raven's. Fortunately, neither of them had the energy to be embarrassed about it.

"I need to get going," Charles announced presently. He rushed out of the tiny toilet between the two bedrooms and headed straight for the door. Erik was glad for his hurry; Charles was wearing a pair of trousers, which looked worn and scruffy, paired with dark, thick boots - and nothing else. Images of that pale, nicely muscled back burned merrily into his brain; Erik ended up staring at the door to the outside for a full minute before he realized that Charles was long gone.

Raven was rummaging around the kitchen, humming something unrecognisable. He hoped she hadn't noticed, but a certain degree of smug knowing hung in the air when she took a seat across from him at the table, so he suspected he wasn't that lucky.

The West compound of Chester village looked, from the outside, like a hillock, rising gently above the surrounding field of scrap. Some of the dwellings, like Charles', were legitimate government-issued base-homes, while others had been pieced together from various ship bodies and available parts. The overall effect was that of a mismatched stack of metal boxes piled on top of one another, in some areas partially welded together, and assorted pieces of metal stuck into, on top of, and occasionally through random sections of it.

It was... surprisingly charming, actually, once one got past it being in a metal scrapyard and made of broken ships. There was a small path that wound around its vague, bumpy cone shape, leading up to the top where there was a flat open space, which must be this compound's Circle - the locals' name for a multi-purpose communal gathering place. Erik could even see a tactical advantage to the arrangement; from the air, the compound would be indistinguishable from any other pile of in the wide, endless expanse of scrap.

"When I was younger," said a throaty voice, "we used to call it the Field of Fallen Stars."

Erik turned, and met a pair of smiling hazel eyes. They belonged to a woman who could be
considered elderly, from the thinness of her limbs and the lines around her features, but held her body like she was in the prime of her years, and her cocoa-dark skin retained a healthy richness of color.

"That is a poetic name," he said politely. After a pause, remembering the things he’d learned, he added, "I am grateful to be greeted by you, Honourable."

She beamed at him, revealing a full set of bright teeth. "An old form, but I like those best, just between you and me." She patted him on the arm. "You are a sharp one. Few survive to my age out here, and there are fewer who will leave their home to speak to a stranger, so it was a logical conclusion. The important part was that you know local custom, and showed respect."

"Do you know who I am?" he asked. It was only after the words had left his mouth that he realized she might take them for arrogance, when he merely, genuinely, wanted to know.

She did not appear to be insulted. Or, possibly, just didn't care enough to be. "Does it matter? Here and now?"

Erik thought about it. "No. I guess not."

She patted him again, like a grandmother to a precocious grandchild.

"The Field of Fallen Stars?" he echoed, after a moment.

The Honourable, who would have no name beside her title for as long as she wore it, waved her hand to indicate the sprawling, disjointed field around them. "Most of those used to be ships, you see. So many ships are born here - coaxed out of the rock by the Vines and our sweat, then shaped and joined by our hands. We send them out, to explore the wilds of space, to take a part of ourselves out among the stars. Then, one day, if they are lucky, they get to return here, bringing a part of the stars back home. Some are melted and reshaped and reused, but there are always too many, and those who have tired metal, damaged metal, are put to rest here, for the rock and the water and the winds to take back." She tilted her head. "Eventually. Shipmetal is notoriously stable, takes forever for it to start rusting."

Erik pulled in a breath, drawing the sharp tang of metal right into his lungs. He’d lived in a ship for nearly all his life, and he’d never thought to consider a ship's existence independent of the humans it carried.

The Honourable cleared her throat. "Everything in its time," she murmured. Leaned in towards Erik. "And while that brain of yours is working away, I advise you to reflect, by the by: do you know who Charles is?"

Charles returned home just as the sun touched the horizon in the distant west. He brought with him a couple of sets of clothing in Erik's size. Erik had barely changed into the relatively clean shirt and trousers when he heard several pairs of footsteps passing by the dwelling at considerable speed. Raven, fresh home from school, poked her head out the window and yelled questions at whoever it was.

Erik heard, "The Summers' roof just collapsed."

"Oh dear," said Charles. "We should go and help."

The dwelling in question was on the other side of the compound and a couple of levels down. There was already a small crowd around it by the time Erik, Charles, and Raven showed up. Raven
immediately ducked inside, ignoring how the place looked like a minor disaster. A glance through the open door revealed twisted metal piled up in the back of the main room; in Charles and Raven's dwelling, that was where the kitchen was located.

At least the crowd didn't seem to be nosy rubbernecking type. Most of them were helping out: clearing up the debris, checking the stability of the remaining roof, bringing food and drink. Erik saw that there were a couple of figures standing on the roof, presumably inspecting the situation from up there. Charles, evidently noticing the same thing, made for the ladder propped up on the side.

"Let me," said Erik, gently moving ahead of him. "You've been working all day."

Charles grinned at him. "So has everyone else here, Erik."

"Even more reason to let me help." Erik climbed the ladder easily. The two men already at the top nodded at him, then went back to contemplating the large hole in the roof.

The problem was not particularly hard to make out: some kind of energy beam had blasted a hole right through the metal. A gun? The inside layer was touch more damaged than the outside, suggesting that the beam had come from inside. Scorch-marks suggested the beam was shaped in a line rather than a circle, which Erik had only encountered on ship weaponry before. The beam had sliced through the supporting structs, causing the panels inside to collapse. The roof itself must not have been particularly stable to begin with.

"This is an L-class two-fifty, yes?" he asked aloud, referring to the model of the ship that the Summers had made into a dwelling.

"Yup," one of the men answered. He made the Roen sign of greeting. "I'm Darwin. This is Azazel."

"Erik."

"You know about ships?" asked Azazel.

"A little. Grew up around people who were obsessed with them." Between his father and his best friend, Erik probably knew more about ships than most people who flew them for a living. He carefully knelt down and frowned at the damage. "It would probably be easier if we just replaced this entire group of panels. Cut the structs on that side, disengage the corner columns, and the whole thing should lift off. The model's been obsolete for ten years, there should be some of them amongst the scrap that we can use for replacement."

Darwin hummed. "I'd agree. Azazel?"

"I will go and locate the replacement panels." A puff of red smoke, and Azazel was no longer there.

"Yeah, that's his ability," said Darwin, sounding amused by Erik's shocked stare. "You know, most people are surprised by his appearance first, and the teleportation part kind of washes over after."

"You mean, the red?" said Erik. "Some people on Ruska have a similar skin color, because of the local diet. I didn't think anything of it."

"Really? I didn't know," Darwin grinned outright. "Maybe he's from there. I've never asked, kinda always assumed that the looks were part of his mutation."

("There are a number of mutants in this village and in surrounding areas," Charles had explained, the previous night. "Nobody cares or looks too closely in the mines. And I can help out, with my telepathy, if they have trouble controlling their mutations."
They climbed back down the ladder and went inside, where they explained to Alex what they wanted to do. Alex waved his hand irritably and said, "fine, go ahead, it's about time we got the roof replaced anyway."

"Was it an accident?" asked Erik, peering up at the hole. A right through-and-through. He could see a good patch of the darkening sky, the glint of early stars. "I've never seen anything cut like this."

There was an embarrassed cough from the corner of the room. A boy, in his early teens, was slumped down in a bedraggled armchair that appeared, itself, to be slumping around its occupant. It made the very picture of misery.

"Yes, it was an accident," Alex replied fervently. "So certain people should get over themselves and cut the puppy eyes crap."

"I'm really, really sorry," mumbled the boy. He was fiddling with the sunglasses he was wearing. Sunglasses indoors at night?

"And we heard you the first five times. Look, get up and help us fix this. Where did you guys say you wanted to cut?"

Darwin and Erik pointed out the first support struct. Alex nodded at Scott. Scott stood up, his determined expression oddly incongruous on his young face, and carefully twisted something on his glasses. A beam of red light shot out for half a second.

Erik shoved aside his surprise this time and examined the result. "A little bit more," he said to Scott, "it didn't cut all the way through. You don't have to worry about hitting the panels behind - all of this will be coming off."

Azazel reappeared, and took Darwin, plus a handful of the other neighbors back with him to help carry the parts he'd found. Charles poked his head in when Erik was showing Scott where the second support struct was.

"Excuse me, gents," said Charles. "But, as I understand it, once you sever that piece, that whole half of the roof will no longer be attached to the rest of the hull?"

"There's a frame that's connected to these corner columns," answered Erik. "But most of the panels will be loose, yes."

"And these loose panels will, judging from what has happened already to Alex's kitchen, obey the pull of gravity and collapse in a heap of twisted metal, yes? Right where you are, in fact, standing?"

"Ah." Erik turned to the brothers. "Perhaps we should move to the... actually, Scott, how good is your aim?"

Helping to repair the Summers' roof evidently convinced the compound that Erik was not a menace to their little community. He wasn't lauded with applause, which Erik always found hard to bear with good grace, but there was a certain feeling of approval in the air when Charles, Raven, and Erik made their way back to Charles' home.

Erik was fairly sure that most of them knew who he was - and the ones who didn't would be informed quite soon - but Charles didn't seem worried about it. Erik supposed that no one would take it seriously if someone claimed that the Master of Estate was hanging about a tiny village-compound in the middle of rural nowhere. A compound that only had one compscreen.
Said communal compscreen was showing one of the News 'nets - not SolNews, Erik was quick to notice - and a crowd had gathered around it to watch, when the three of them went up to the Circle after dinner. It looked as if nearly the entire compound was there, and people ordered themselves with the familiarity of those engaged in a nightly ritual. As the hour grew later, attention drifted away from the News feed, until the compscreen was eventually switched off. Someone lit a small fire that could hardly be felt in the night's chill. Children were herded away to bed. Those who remained behind spoke amongst themselves, moving in closer together and sharing body warmth and blankets.

Erik ended up squeezed between Charles and someone he vaguely remembered from the crowd outside the Summers' home. It wasn't particularly comfortable, especially when he saw how Charles was practically curled into a tight ball to give Erik space. Erik looked around them, noted how most of their neighbors were casually pressed against or draped over each other, while Charles seemed to be taking care not to touch him too much. Raven was ignoring them, conversing with a gangly-looking boy wearing thick glasses.

Making a decision, Erik casually stretched his legs, slipping them between the bodies of those in front of him. People shifted obligingly, not seeming to mind a stranger's limbs showing up out of nowhere and intruding into their space. Once Erik was sitting properly, he took Charles by the shoulders and pulled him over to sit between Erik's legs. Charles squawked, which earned him a few glares, and twisted his head to stare disbelievingly at Erik. Erik simply raised his eyebrows.

It was dark, despite the handful of lamps around the Circle, yet Charles' blush was perfectly visible. Erik kept his hands on Charles' shoulders. Gradually, he felt Charles relax. It helped when Darwin and a few others in their vicinity quickly engaged Charles in a quiet discussion.

In fact, Charles got so absorbed by whatever he was talking about that he leaned back against Erik all the way. Which was when Erik realized that he might not have thought this whole thing through.

Not that he could have anticipated how well Charles fitted against him, or how good it felt to have Charles so close. He could smell Charles, could pick off the sweaty labour and underground gloom on Charles' skin.

He'd never been more thankful before for practically being an expert at willing away his own arousal.

It took him a while to refocus on his surroundings, and by the time he did, the Circle had gotten quiet. The woman he'd met earlier, the Honourable, was sitting in the middle of the gathering on comfortable cushions.

"What shall we have tonight, younglings?" she asked, resting her hands on her lap.

"Can you tell us the one about the star-man who fell from the sky?" a young woman called out from nearby. The last few lingering conversations died down.

"Aw, Angel, you always ask for that one," complained a voice at the back. Erik craned his neck and saw a shock of curly red hair.

"Hush, Sean, nothing wrong with having a favorite," the woman said, smiling like a fond grandmother in the midst of her brood. "Unless someone has a valid objection? Very well."

Erik had met and been given private, personalized concerts by musicians famous throughout Ten Sol; had attended award-winning seasons at the Celestial Symposium; had attended premiere nights and screening galas ever since he could walk unattended; he himself owned countless movies and music-sets for his state-of-the-art VR entertainment system. Nothing, in all of that, had prepared him
for this: the crackle of a fire and a knowing voice made rich with age.

One warm, quiet night, many sun-turns ago, a family traveling a roadless land looked up at the sky and saw a sudden, far-off flash of light. They thought nothing of it, having come from a different world themselves and being familiar with the displays of ships. They continued their journey.

Hours later, a small point of light appeared above them. The family was resting, at this point, and watched with alarm as the light grew brighter, bigger. Yet they did not run, for something about the light called on them to stay, to not be afraid. They'd seen the angry red of missiles before, the blue and green of deadly beam-guns. This was white, sparkling, like a star's teardrop.

The light seemed to slow as it neared the ground. And still down it came, falling, leaving a trail of pale smoke. It eventually landed, and lo! It was a man, grievously wounded.

He saw the family and tried to go to them, but fell - for his injuries were great, and he was on the verge of death. But this family was kind, and good, and they came close and gave him water. In payment, and because it was all he had left, he passed onto them a secret, greater than any treasure, perfect and powerful, and with his last breath, he tasked them to guard this secret, lest great misfortune befall all the known worlds.

The star-man died, and his body turned into a lump of metal, remaining as a reminder of the promise made. Some say it will be summoned back to life one day, to be the faithful guardian to whomever knows the secret.

Someone prompted another story, and the voice continued, the thread of tales unwinding into the night air. It was palpable, the way these stories seemed like old friends to Charles and his people; familiar and cherished.

At some point, a gentle hand woke Erik from a half-doze. Erik got to his feet and allowed himself to be led away from the dimming fire, down dark steps and coldness, until they passed through a door and entered a more comfortable darkness. Familiar voices, one of them Charles, but Erik was gently directed into a room. His feet hit something that his muzzy brain suggested was, bed, and he gratefully let himself sink down into it.

He heard, a long way away, a familiar voice saying, "oh Charles, what have you gotten yourself into" before the last shreds of wakefulness dissolved from him.

The next day went much the same as the first. Erik wandered further from the compound, intent on exploring the scrap field. Field of Fallen Stars, he remembered. He discovered that the name was fitting in another way when he carefully clambered up a high pile and looked around.

Metal glinted in varied patterns under the harsh sunlight. The Fields went as far as the eye could see; if he ignored the occasional crop of mountains on the horizon, he could believe that the Fields continued forever in all directions. On and on, the scrap creating landscapes that bore no similarities the contour of the rock underneath.

Erik was not alone in wandering the Fields. He passed a group of children and their adult childminder; the woman looked liked she couldn't wait for her brood to be old enough to attend school. Erik could see why - only half the group was diligently clearing the path with long-handled rakes. The other half was running around, screaming at the top of her lungs. Two elderly men, coming the other way, winced at the sound. Two scrap-dunes on, Erik encountered three teenagers who likely should have been at school.
Not every face he saw was familiar. Erik realized that some of these people must have come from
neighbouring compounds. Charles had said that Chester village comprised of five compounds, and
the Fields surrounded them on all sides.

He was just making a wide circle back towards the compound when he ran into the same group of
children. One especially unruly child was running fast enough that Erik would not have discounted
him having a mutation. He tore up and down the piles of unidentifiable ship wreckage with no care
for the loose pieces falling on his fellows below. It was a blatantly dangerous situation.

There was a long length of beam stuck between two pieces of hull from different ships. Erik knew,
even before the boy placed his foot on the beam, that it wasn't stable. The moment he put his weight
on it, the hull-piece on one end came loose from the general pile. The boy pitched sideways,
narrowly escaping getting a jagged beam through the leg. Below him, on ground level, a much
younger girl was pushing a small pile of scrap into the bigger pile; the handle of her rake was taller
than her.

A moment of uncertainty. Then the boy somehow caught himself by grabbing onto a piece of engine
nearby - an instinctive reaction that could have cost him his hand if he'd grabbed the wrong thing,
despite the gloves. He looked a little shaken by the near fall, and meekly descended to receive a
scolding from the child-minder.

Erik blinked, letting out a breath he hadn't been aware of holding. Then he realized that he had his
hand out. Ready - ready to what? He lowered it and shook his head. It'd just been - an instinctive
response - nothing more.

Somehow, he was not at all surprised to see the Honourable waiting for him when he returned to the
compound. They walked together awhile, and Erik waited for her to speak.

"You seem quite at ease with our little community here," she commented lightly.

"You have been very welcoming," Erik said with perfect sincerity. "I am grateful for the hospitality
all of you have shown me."

"Well, it is not as if Charles would have brought you home if you'd meant us any harm," said the
Honourable. "He holds the unofficial duty of vetting visitors and newcomers."

Ah. "He is very... gifted, in that sense."

She seemed to take this as confirmation that Erik knew about Charles' telepathy, and changed gears.
"People everywhere, spaceside and planetside, live in uncertainty, if not outright fear, of those they
call mutants. Yet you are perfectly comfortable among them."

There was something uncomfortably knowing about her expression. Erik looked away and tried to be
as honest as he could. "I've had the good fortune of knowing a mutant my whole life."

"Hmm," said the woman.

"If you don't mind me asking - why are there so many mutants here?"

"The m-sickness is rare on Eisen."

"Really?" said Erik in surprise.
"Yes. In some worlds, every mutant gets the m-sickness. Here, only very few cases, and none now for years. No one knows why Eisen has been spared the disease - some have suggested that it's something to do with the high percentage of metal in the planet's crust. In any case, word spread, and families with mutants have been trickling into the planet for years."

"Oh."

"It is hardly something that is talked about outside of home. Sepor won't believe that people are perfectly healthy; they will take them away as a 'precaution'."

"I never knew," Erik admitted with a frown.

"No ." The Honourable suddenly subjected Erik to such an intensely searching look that Erik had to force himself not to fidget. He'd faced down a wrathful Prime with nary an eye-blink, he was not about to start feeling like a schoolboy who'd misbehaved. Finally, she sighed, and the intensity in her eyes faded to sadness. "You really don't, do you? You've hidden it even from yourself."

She muttered something under her breath that sounded like "bloody Eisenhardt blood" and stalked off, leaving Erik staring after her in total confusion.

Erik was standing by the lone front window, oddly restless, when Charles arrived home. Raven called a greeting from the kitchen table, where she'd been bent over their battered old compad since she walked in. Her distracted, "Hey, you're back," was followed by, "good Gods, Charles, did you roll around on the ground?"

Charles laughed. "Had a strummer today, I must have been standing under a lot of loose rocks."

Erik thought that his and Raven's synced looks of horror would have been funny, if his mind wasn't filled by images of Charles being buried under rocks. Charles rolled his eyes at their faces, likely sensing their perfectly valid alarm. "Oh, now it's in stereo - don't worry, you two, it was mostly dust and small chunks of rock that came down. Nothing dramatic."

He noted the 'mostly'. Erik cleared his throat and asked, "Strummer?"

"It's what we call it when we get a tectonic event, because they make the Vines down in the 'combs vibrate. Like a string being strummed," Charles explained. "Sorry, I tend to forget that you've only been on Eisen for a couple of months. Sometimes it feels like I've known you for years. Maybe it's from being in the Manor. It has a lot of you in it."

"I haven't lived here since I was four," said Erik with a slightly raised eyebrow. "I barely remember it." This was preferable to bursting out with I know, I feel it too - like you are someone I've known always.

"Your parents, then. They lived here for a while, and they raised you. It's a connection."

"Guys," interrupted Raven from the desk. "Figure out if you're leaving or staying in, I've got shit to finish."

Charles sighed. "I can take a hint." He looked down at himself. "I suppose I should go to the river."

"The river?" asked Erik.

There was water for the toilet, from the tank up on the Circle, that Erik had been advised against
drinking. It was good enough for a cursory wiping down of the hands and body and feet. (The drinking water was stored in a different tank.) "But if you want to clean your whole body," said Charles, with a silent and you or your sibling needs some alone time, "it's much better to go to the river."

Half an hour later, they were trekking out of the compound. Charles bore the lamp and Erik carried the light bag packed with their towels. "Raven and I do this every few days. We're lucky up here to have our own river."

Erik wasn't sure how much one should trust a river surrounded by a slowly rusting field of metal, and wondered where one could be hiding amidst the endless scrap piles to begin with. But eventually they came upon a tight outcropping of rocks, covered by scrap so that it appeared like any other part of the Fields.

There was a hole in the ground right in the middle of the cluster of rocks; lamp-light revealed a series of roughly hewn steps leading downwards. Charles gave the lamp to Erik and went first, holding onto a rope tied to one of the rocks. The stairs were smooth with age.

Erik carefully followed Charles. The rock walls rose high on both sides, and finally closed over their heads as they entered a cave. After the steps was a steep path. A small family on their way out passed them. The children, barely higher than Erik's waist, greeted Charles excitedly.

"Charles! Look at how clean I am!"

"Dad says we get extra candy tonight if we washed our hair!"

Charles laughed and confirmed that they looked very clean indeed. Erik found himself smiling at the sight. He could see why young mutants - and people in general, really - easily took to Charles. Charles eventually extricated himself and continued leading the way.

Erik heard the river before he saw it. They came to an underground cavern, long and spacious, with lamps positioned atop various high boulders to illuminate the space. The air was cold and damp. There didn't seem to be anyone else in there with them.

"Come here first," called Charles. Erik followed him to a shallow depression in the rock, where a trickle of water from the river had turned what must have been softer dirt at the bottom into mud. Charles abruptly pulled off his trousers - Erik didn't look away fast enough to avoid getting a glimpse of a pale, delectably firm arse - climbed down, completely naked, and began covering himself with the mud. He looked up at Erik and grinned. "It's perfectly lovely. The mud scours away the dirt, and there's a type of bacteria in it that feasts on our organic waste. You know the local 'soap' you have in the Manor, SureClean and Body and all those brands? They're diluted forms of this." He paused, looking thoughtful. "I wouldn't be surprised if that purple space toilet was based on this process, too."

Erik frowned doubtfully, but slid himself down after removing his clothing with quick, utilitarian movements. The mud was pleasantly cool over his skin, and smelled of rich earth, with a hint of the pervasive metallic tang that Erik no longer noticed half the time.

"The river will wash it right off," Charles continued. "Some complain that it's not the same as being scrubbed all over by a Bather, but I don't see the point when I'm going to get dirty again in the 'combs tomorrow. At least this method doesn't introduce foreign agents to the local ecosystem."

Once they were generously covered by the mud, they climbed out of the depression and half-slid right into a shallow part of the river, a cozy alcove partially shielded from the worst of the current.
The mud washed off, like Charles promised, with very little help on Erik's part. He brushed a hand over his face and realized, belatedly, that he hadn't shaved in a few days.

The two of them splashed around for a while, and Erik allowed himself to drift further on. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been in a body of water bigger than a bathtub. And the carefully regulated pools of Kemalash was a different thing entirely from this: a wild river in a wild country.

"Hmm," said Charles, sounding far closer than Erik was expecting. "The current's a little strong, here, let's move back to where we went in."

They moved back up the river, guided by the light of the lamp. They were just about to slip back into the sheltered alcove when Charles let out a sound, slipped, and disappeared under the water.

It was pure instinct; Erik turned and made a grab for Charles, caught Charles' arm. He felt Charles pushing himself back out of the water, recovering easily; he probably hadn't been in any danger at all. But Erik's heart was already beating fast, and he continued pulling Charles towards himself as he backed into the safety of the alcove.

"Erik, thank you, but it's quite all right," Charles spluttered, his free hand brushing his hair away from his face. Erik's back hit the outcropping of rock. Momentum kept Charles moving; by the time he realized Erik had stopped, their faces were inches apart.

Charles' body radiated warmth like a furnace. It'd been much easier to ignore, somehow, when they were just sharing a bed, with Charles' sister right next door. Much easier, anyway, than when he had a wet and naked Charles in his arms.

Their faces were so close that Erik could watch, fascinated, the dilation of Charles' pupils. Black crowding out the blue.

"I'd like to go to the mine with you," he said. His voice sounded faint, likely because he was finding it strangely difficult to breathe. "Take me with you tomorrow."

Charles sounded dazed. "All right."

It was - like falling in, inexorable, his fraying resistance to the draw of Charles' mouth giving way entirely. Charles' gasp was barely audible above the whisper of the running water, but Erik felt his surprise all over his body, on all the deliciously heated parts where their skin - bare and wet and hot - made contact. There was a moment of uncertain tension, in which fear-desperation-need sat poised above Erik's pounding heart like a sharpened edge,

and then Charles melted against him, kissing Erik back like it was the most urgent task in the world.
"I thought you didn't -" Charles mumbled, between brief breaks for breath, "- you never thought -" Erik's back slid against the hard bank, but that was a minor detail compared to the weight of Charles all down his front, warm and gorgeous and pliant. "- not that I looked, but -" Charles seemed to remember that he could still converse even while his his mouth was occupied. *Told you before, 's like people calling my name - it still gets my attention, even if I block them out after.*

This reminded Erik that there was a very good reason for his iron-hard control over his desires.

The old fear rushed through him. He had to remind himself that they were not on a ship, and so the situation was a lot less dire. As a teenager, he'd had to excuse himself immediately and go through a series of mental exercises that a soldier-doctor had once given to him. Now, the sense-memory was enough; fear triggered the response he'd conditioned in himself, body and mind killing the heat that had started to build under his skin.

*Erik?* asked Charles, clearly picking up that something had changed.

He kept kissing Charles for a little while longer. It would not do for Charles to think that he had done something, when the issue was entirely Erik's. Even with the ardor gone, there was a sweet, uncomplicated pleasure to being in such close contact with Charles. Erik thought, even, that he could be happy with just this, which was already so much more than he'd ever dared to hope for himself. Which made everything better and worse - because, of course, Charles deserved so much more.

"I'm sorry," he eventually whispered. "I can't - I can't do this." And then he belied his words by stealing a last, deep kiss.

Charles' eyes were wide, and his lips looked like they'd just had a very thorough ravishing. "What do you-" He stopped, his head tilting as he looked at Erik intently.
Erik wondered if Charles was rummaging around in his mind. He knew Charles wouldn't, not without asking, but how would he ever know for sure? He found himself far less concerned about it than he should have been.

In fact - he had to admit that a part of him hoped Charles would look, would dig deep enough, connect the pieces between the thoughts and fears, assemble the secret that Erik had never allowed himself to even think about directly.

He realized, with a start, that he wanted Charles to know.

Charles finally shook his head, and said, "All right, then." Even worse than the sad tone in Charles' voice, worse than the disappointment in his features, was the quick acceptance, as if Charles received this kind of rejection all the time.

Which made no sense to Erik. How could anyone even think of denying Charles?

They got out of the water and dried off and made the dark, meandering way back to the compound. Erik tried to not look at Charles and found that he couldn't, so he tried to look only when Charles wouldn't notice, which was easy since Charles was leading the way. He couldn't help but take in the weary slope of Charles' back, the occasional and likely unconscious roll and stretch of shoulders and arms. He remembered how thin Charles had been, right after the accident, not quite malnourished but not too far from it. The months at the Manor had filled him out.

How long would that last, though? Erik was a light eater on the best of days, but his food had always been of the best quality. Two days in and he was already aware of the ache of hunger, always lingering at the edges, and he hadn't even been engaged in hard labor.

Any lingering doubts about his going into the mines vanished. If he couldn't... care for Charles like Charles deserved, then the least he could do was help him, and look out for him.

Getting to Mine Three required riding two fly-carts over three deep canyons, then a haul-car over a perilous road that followed the edge of a ridge. Erik peered over the side to see the first canyon, and found it to be so deep that the dawn light didn't penetrate past a few hundred feet.

In the crowded transport vehicles, he recognized the older Summers boy from the compound, and the one called Darwin, and a few other faces. Nobody seemed to pay him any attention. It was refreshing, and a bit of a relief; every time he'd visited mines in the past, work slowed down and the miners stared at him, and he'd always felt ridiculous, wondering what he was doing there in his immaculate coat while everyone waited for him to leave so they could get back to work.

Erik did his best to not look too out of place. It helped that Charles had scrounged up a pair of 'work' trousers similar to his own - deisich cloth, soft and worn and surprisingly comfortable - and a loose grey tunic with leather panels sewn down the back and around the upper arms, which Erik remembered was called the aulass. Erik had seen both before, as they were considered the national costume of Eisen. He was sure he even owned a set, from his father. He'd only worn them once, and recalled that they'd been stiff, difficult to move in. The delicate-looking metal links of a tracker encircled one wrist.

Charles, next to him, was distractingly shirtless again. It seemed to be a popular choice, as half the miners around them were the same. The effort it took not to stare at Charles' bare chest kept Erik from looking around and gaping like a tourist.
Things had been easy between them this morning, after the awkwardness at the end of last night. There was something to be said, for having been friends first. Erik also suspected that Charles had never actively kept a grudge in his life, nor maintained negative feelings for longer than a day.

The haul-car joined a long stream of other vehicles down a narrow ravine. After a while, the path leveled and they entered what looked like a wall of dust. Erik could hear great engines rumbling all around them, and the very ground seemed to hum, but it was hard to see through the gold-red dust that stung his eyes and scratched his throat.

He felt more than a little half-blind when the vehicle stopped and everyone piled out. The ground was humming beneath them. Charles hand closed around Erik’s arm and gently guided him to where most of the miners were heading.

The cave entrance appeared suddenly, a huge yawning gap in a jagged red-brown wall, like something had scooped a neat semi-circle of rock right out of the cliff. The miners immediately formed lines, and Erik followed Charles into one. At the front of the lines were little computer terminals - vertical metallic beams jutting out of the ground, with a box secured to the top of each. It wasn't until it was Erik's turn that he realized the boxes were very old compad models.

He keyed in Charles and Raven's household account. He wondered what would happen if he used the Lehnsherr account. Would anybody be watching it? Would the system question why the Master of Estate was in a random mine out in the country? The compad beeped. Erik held his borrowed wrist-tracker over the terminal until it flashed green, indicating that the tracker had been assigned to the account for this day, or until he removed it.

Once past the terminals, there were more queues. It wasn't as noisy as Erik had expected. Most of their fellow miners looked bored, half-asleep. Charles glanced at him every now and then, and his hand never left Erik's arm. They queued to get gear - a helmet and a belt-pouch each - and queued again to get rations. The very last queue was for the elevator carts that would take them down to the actual mining levels. Erik climbed in after Charles,

The cart descended, rattling up a ruckus. The speed was not unlike hurtling through the Domesque brining tunnels atop a light-cannon; Erik's helmet vibrated despite the sturdy strap wrapped down his chin, and the loose deisich cloth flapped about his legs. He could smell the other men, so closely were they packed together.

It's a bit unsettling, at first, Charles whispered, steady and warm, both inside Erik's brain and pressed against his side. But you get used to it.

Erik wasn't unsettled at all. As the cart whipped down, sideways, swinging around a curve, something solidified under his skin. More than a feeling - a certainty, a deep dive into a place he'd somehow known all his life. It washed over him, at some unknowable point in the dark: electric, the marrow in his bones replaced by quicksilver, cold and hot and sharp. And a whisper, as from a dusty, distant corner, I know this place.

He did not register the cart stopping, only Charles tugging on his arm and the rest of the miners filing out. He followed the group, in a daze, and forced himself to pay attention as a supervisor wearing the Sepor white slash directed the small groups to different shafts.

"You lot," the supervisor pointed at Erik's group, barely glancing up from his battered compad, "level fifteen, shaft five-eight-delta-three."

The group trotted down a tunnel that, to Erik's eyes, looked identical to all the other tunnels. The air was a little stale, permeated by the tang of metal plus something else, but seemed quite breathable.
He was looking around so much that it took him a moment to realize that there were no lanterns hanging on the walls here, and the lights installed in everyone's helmets were off, yet he could still see perfectly clearly.

The Vines. They were literally running through Vines. What Erik, with eyes used to ships, had initially assumed to be a metal corridor was, in fact, a round tunnel covered by overlapping Vines. The long metal-like limbs, their thickness a sign of great age, emitted a gentle light that illuminated the tunnel.

Erik remembered annual presentations by the Sepor-appointed Mining Board, numerous tours in the mines close to the cities. He'd watched, from afar, miners working a Vine, and had developed the vague impression that Vines were a kind of equipment that the miners pushed into the ground to extract the metal.

The reality was - far different.

"Erik!" Charles called him. The group had just made a sharp turn down a tunnel. Erik hurried up to keep from getting left behind.

They moved through the tunnels at a brisk pace, turning down a different branch every now and then. The tunnels themselves were different in size, occasionally becoming wide enough to fit a landwagon through, and at other times, required them to go single-file. They paused before one of the latter, to let another group come through from the opposite direction. Erik knew that he should try to figure out how the shafts were arranged, but there was too much new information, and these tunnels were nicknamed the 'combs for a reason. He fervently hoped he wouldn't get separated from Charles. The other miners, at least, seemed to know exactly where they were going.

He noticed that the Vines grew fewer and thinner the further they went. He also realized that the tunnels weren't as level as they seemed when a miner from another group, crossing a junction of tunnels in front of them, accidentally dropped a round, wrench-like tool, and it rolled down the way they'd come from.

How deep down are we? he wondered. He glanced at Charles, but the other man didn't look like he'd picked up on the thought.

They began passing tunnels that were full of activity. Here, there seemed to only be a handful of Vines running along the roof of the tunnel, the rough rock walls exposed. Were the Vines providing structural support? There were metal supports at rare intervals, usually attached to some equipment, but far too few to actually be the only things holding up the tunnels.

"It's a seeking one," announced a woman at the front of the group. They slowed down. There was a murmur of acknowledgement from the rest.

Erik felt a quiet, hovering presence at the edge of his mind, and recognized it as Charles giving a metaphorical knock on the door. Erik gave a small nod.

Seeker shafts are tunnels that are ready to be extended. Most of the work will be exposing the Vines as they mature, clearing away the debris, and keeping the Vines from getting tangled together.

They entered a tunnel that branched off the main one - shaft five-eight-delta-three, presumably - and kept going. The tunnel became smaller and smaller around them, until they could only walk two abreast and the ceiling brushed Erik's head at times. At the very end of the tunnel, the five Vines closed together to a central point ahead of them, which burrowed into the rock.
One of the miners in the lead reached up and touched a Vine. The limb was slender, shiny new, and its glow grew momentarily brighter at the contact. Four other miners did the same to the remaining Vines. Erik's eyes had had time to adjust to the dark, now, and the added light allowed him to take in the roughness of the tunnel, the chunks of debris. There was a pile of equipment arranged neatly down the side.

A subtle vibration began in the Vine closest to Erik, which ran along the ceiling right over his head. The other Vines followed suit. At the end of the tunnel, the limbs began to move. Erik once visited the shipwrecked city of Azu, which drifted on the deep ocean currents of its turbulent planet; he was reminded, now, of the enormous dark water squids propelling themselves through the water. The motion of the Vines was similar, though less forceful, and mainly to free itself from the rock it'd burrowed into; but, nonetheless, like watching a squid's tentacles from the center of its body.

The Vines flexed and wiggled, pulled inward slightly, and sent crushed rock spilling into the tunnel around their legs. Charles shoved a battered shovel into Erik's hand. Explanations were hardly necessary, especially when a couple of the other miners were already bent to the task. He started shoveling the displaced rock into a cart designated for that purpose.

From Erik's observations, the work was divided thus: each Vine had a miner assigned to it, and they maintained physical contact with the Vine while it worked. Erik noted that the transparent layer on the Vines' surface gradually lost its glossy sheen. The miner assigned to it would scour the surface with a rounded metal tool, scraping off the substance building up there, which fell off in small dust-like flakes. At regular intervals (but never all at once), a Vine-miner would uncap one of the big tanks and pour a dark sludge over a seemingly random part of the Vine.

The rest of them shoveled, or helped one of the Vine-miners clean until the Vine was glossy again. Erik couldn't figure out how they knew when the shifts changed, but they likely all had some kind of internal clock. Every now and then, Charles sent little bits of information straight into Erik's head, like nobody knows how far the Vines go, or how deep and the Vines only glow when they reach maturity, and must be left in the rock until then.

It was easy to lose himself in the familiar, repetitive work. Charles even offered to let him take a turn minding a Vine, but Erik declined, feeling it a bit too much responsibility for his first day in the 'combs.

After what felt like a year, their team moved up the shaft to help secure a breach in the tunnel, where a minor overnight strummer had nudged a couple of Vines along the roof of the tunnel out of place, leaving a gap that could impair the structural integrity of the shaft later on.

Erik had to wear a flimsy face-mask and watch as Charles and half of their team sprayed something on the Vines overhead. A couple of miners had compads out.

"Erik," called Charles, "hoist me up towards the ceiling, will you?"

Erik gamely stepped closer to Charles and, after a quick estimation of the height of the tunnel, knelt with one leg forward so that Charles could step onto his thigh. Charles did so without hesitation, though he flashed Erik a quick smile, and balanced himself with a hand on Erik's shoulder. Erik automatically held onto Charles' hips.

A miner passed Charles a thin length of metal. Charles inserted it into the gap between the Vines. Minutes passed without anything happening. Erik started to sweat, and he could feel Charles' body starting to tremble from the effort of staying in that position. They didn't move, though. Erik wondered what they were waiting for.
Look, whispered Charles.

Erik looked up. To his surprise, the Vines had moved back in, closing the gap and returning to their previous position. Erik expected Charles to pull the metal back out before the Vines closed around it, but instead, someone passed Charles a small energy-saw. Charles cut off the longer part of the metal free, leaving the small section in between the Vines.

*The Vines will absorb the metal,* Charles explained, as they transferred to a different shaft. *That's what they do, you know. They are drawn to metal, which they break down and absorb. They pass what they absorb along the network, thousands of tiny streams of ions, and it comes out at the Roots as a liquid, in elemental form or the nearest stable compound. I suspect we won't get a shift there today, but I'm sure you'll see it sooner or later.*

His arms and back ached. The rations they were given would have been barely adequate for someone working eight hours in a sedentary position; after twelve hours of manual labor, Erik was too hungry to even feel it anymore. And he had a fairly well-nourished body to start with; this was a way of life, for these people.

Erik pulled his shirt off and nearly hissed at the flow of air over his skin. He was wiping the dust and sweat off his neck with the *aulass* when he became aware of Charles' quietness. He turned, and saw that Charles was staring at him. Or - no, staring at his chest. Half-expecting a gruesome wound of some kind, Erik looked down at himself. Nothing seemed injured or unusual.

"Charles?" he asked.

His friend made a strange, half-choked kind of sound, and those blue eyes snapped up to meet his. A taller man appeared next to Charles - Alex, the one whose roof they helped fix - and gave a low whistle.

"They sure make them fine around these parts," drawled Alex, in an exaggeration of his Maddox accent.

The blush on Charles' face must be really deep if Erik could see it through a thick layer of mine-dirt. On the other hand, Charles' eyes were straying back down Erik's body, as if he couldn't help himself.

Erik didn't bother holding back his smirk.

Erik, to his embarrassment, ended up falling asleep the moment they got back to the compound. It was fully dark when he woke up, but he was alone in Charles' room. He got up and wolfed down the dinner Charles and Raven had left him on a plate on the dining table, then stepped outside to look for them.

They were seated around the heater in the Circle, with the same crowd that Erik had seen on the previous nights.

"Plenty of things are wrong," Darwin was ranting when Erik arrived. "We're all so caught up in how hard life is down here, and with all the fear about the m-sickness, that we don't pay attention to all the other shit. Which is what Sepor wants, of course."

"My gran says it was the death of Xavia that did it," said Sean. His gestured as he talked, and Erik found himself sleepily mesmerized by the boy's wild red hair. "She says that the world was a lot
different when she was little, happy and prosperous and all that good stuff, because of Xavia's magic. But Xavia was betrayed, and laid a curse on all of humanity because no one came to help them. Since then, war and sickness and misfortune have plagued the ten systems."

"But that's the kind of thing the old folks like to say," Alex scoffed. "Come on, curses and magic? We're not kids anymore. Just because some spaceside douches named themselves after myths, didn't make them magic."

"I assure you, Xavia the Fleet and Xavia of the stories were one and the same," Erik said, remembering a very similar conversation with Charles at the Manor. He didn't question why Sean and Angel moved to give him space to sit next to Charles.

"Erik!" Charles beamed at him. "I'm glad you decided to join us." He nodded towards Sean, likely remembering their conversation as well, if his see what I mean? look was anything to go by. "Most kids planetside grow up on stories of Xavia as a mythical nation of tricksters and sorcerors and heroes." To the others, he said, "I just recently learned that most of the stories have a historical basis."

"Many of the old Fleets liked to spread propaganda about themselves," Erik said. "Build up the glamor and mystery of spaceside life."

"Right," said Alex. "So, Xavia was just another richer-than-life bunch of snobs."

"A bit of respect, please, Alex," said Charles. "Without Xavia, there wouldn't be a Ten Sol."

"Did they really make the Migration possible?" asked Angel. Erik nodded. "Well, if I was the reason mankind didn't die out completely, I'd make myself into a hero too."

Erik shrugged. "To be fair, even spaceside, Xavia was quite special. For one thing, a large percentage of the bloodline were mutants."

"What?" the boy with the thick glasses, who'd been quiet all this time, suddenly looked up. "It's true? They were mutants?"

"Hank," hissed Raven.

Erik blinked. "Oh, is this not common knowledge?" The answer was evident from the surprise on everybody's faces. "It's not exactly a secret. Though it's understandable why people don't talk about it now."

"We've heard rumors," said the boy, Hank. "Do you know the percentage?"

"I don't think anyone outside the family knew. But from what I've heard, for them, mutation was the rule rather than the exception."

"Hank has all kinds of conspiracy theories," Alex drawled.

Hank sighed and rolled his eyes, but it seemed a familiar disagreement. "It's not a conspiracy theory. The collated data clearly show that the m-sickness started immediately after the destruction of the Xavia fleet. The very first subject to show the symptoms turned up exactly two days after the Great Blinding. Oh, suggestions have been sprinkled here and there about how this sort of thing has been building up for a while, but all the sources that say so are pro-Sepor. The anti-Sepor and neutrals, what little remain of their works, were puzzled over what was a relatively sudden onset."

"So you think the government has something to do with the m-sickness?" Erik asked.
"Maybe not directly. But I cannot believe it is a coincidence that a family of mutants was completely wiped out, then something as debilitating as the m-sickness shows up, seemingly out of nowhere, and hits every single planetary system and space fleet at the same time."

Erik tilted his head, curious despite himself. He glanced over at Charles. "Well, Hank, if you really want to pursue this, there's another detail you should know."

"Hmm?" said Hank, clearly already off in his own world. "What?"

"Xavia were not just mutants. All of them, or near enough for it not to matter, were telepaths."
Small rocks bounced down the heap of debris and fell into the chasm beyond. If they made a sound upon hitting bottom, it was too distant to hear. Erik, grown used to the occasionally treacherous and dimly-lit landscape of the 'combs, merely shuffled back a little from the edge.

Charles sat down next to him with even less care, passing a skin of kass-juice. Erik's internal clock was fairly accurate; he estimated that they were approximately halfway through the day now. Far above, the noon sun would be baking the bare ground, the scrap fields casting up mirages. It was cool in the 'combs, at least.

"You seem to have adjusted well," said Charles. "Working here, I mean."

Erik hummed in agreement. "I wonder if my parents ever took me down one of the mines, when I was young."

"Oh?"

"I don't remember such a visit, but this place," Erik waved a hand to indicate the whole subterranean area, "it... feels familiar, like the family flagship, or the Manor. And it feels safe. I mean - if I lean too far forward right now, I can fall to my death. The other day, that miner, you said he'd been working mines for forty years, but he still caught a gas pocket."

"It is a rather hazardous occupation, yes," agreed Charles.

"So why do I feel safe?" Erik leaned back. Stared at the jagged ceiling, somewhere above them; only the tips of several stalactites were visible in the gentle Vine-light. "I think - it's one of those times where you know there's something, well, more, and you want to know it just as much as you don't want to know."

He knew he was rambling, now, but Charles just smiled. "If it helps, that is usually how I feel all the time."

_How do you stand it?_ Erik wanted to ask. Instead, he said, "That humming. That you do, when you work on the Vines themselves. Is it... a cultural affectation? Religious?"

Charles tilted his head to one side. "I've never thought of it that way, but I suppose there is a spiritual component to it. 'S just a habit, really. Most miners come from a mix of different backgrounds, you see, so religion means different things to each person. At the same time, we who labour daily under many, many tonnes of rock need to have something to bolster us, to make the very literal weight of the world hanging over us bearable.” Charles shifted closer to Erik. "The humming - it used to be a working song, I believe, but the words have been lost to the passage of time. It's very useful. The sound of it helps one keep track of the different shifts, it reminds one that we're not alone down here, and it's something to do that isn't quite as distracting as talking. There's even a local folk tale from the North that says the Vines themselves taught it to the first miners."

"They can produce sound?"

"No, no, just light, at least as far as I've seen," Charles assured him. "The Sepor officials don't like the humming, but the supervisors who are actually down here with us all used to be miners themselves, they understand how important it is. Anyway, I've heard many variations of words set to its melody - a dedication to the ground to world-mother to keep us safe, a lament for those who've been lost to the dark - they all mean something. You hear about people who've gotten separated from
the rest by a cave-in or fallen down a hole - and found their way back by following the sound."

Erik looked out over the distant wall and saw, in his mind's eye: lost, fear-filled figures, bodies battered, struggling against the rocks and the dark - the familiar humming, like a beacon - a reminder of hope, resonating through seams and pockets unbothered by man, echoes caught in stone alongside the ghost-light of yet-to-mature Vines.

"And no one knows where the Vines come from, either," Erik said distractedly.

"The generally accepted history is that the first colony included extraordinarily gifted engineers and xenobiologists, who tried to make something out of a fairly inhospitable planet. They knew that Eisen had a particularly high concentration of metals in its planetary composition. They created the perfect device for extraction. Then the knowledge was lost, so there were no more mines after the first thirteen. I've seen a very old account that stated there'd been fourteen mines, in fact, but perhaps the fourteenth was a symbolic representation of Eisen as a whole."

Charles patted him on the shoulder. "Come, my friend, I believe the next shift will take us up to level six. There's a beautiful wall of crystal on the way that I'd like to show you, and the shafts on that level are lovely and cold."

His semi-regular chats with the Honourable continued. There was no schedule to them; the woman simply showed up, passing by the front of Charles' dwelling just as Erik happened to glance out the window, or beckoning to Erik in the Circle while Charles was distracted.

When he mentioned it to Charles, the man just beamed and said, "that's her way of showing that she accepts you as one of us. Every Honourable is different. Ours is a bit of an odd one, but she means well, she just likes to know what's going on in everyone's lives."

Erik also suspected that she was trying to teach him about Eisen.

"These days, in Ten Sol, the Master of Estate is an outdated and powerless title," the Honourable began in her abrupt way. "Useless, quite useless..."

"Yes, thank you, I know this," said Erik.

"Powerless. That is, in every world but this one." The Honourable fixed him with a meaningful look. "Why do you think this is so?"

They would have been powerless, Erik knew; the Eisenhardts and, later, the Lehnsherrs, would have been no better off than the Masters of Estate in other worlds, if not for the foresight and careful investments of their predecessors. Historical opinion was divided on whether the Eisenhardts had only sponsored the early mining and ship-building operations on Eisen or actually built all thirteen mines and four shipyards. The result was the same: the Masters of the Estate of Eisen had ownership and control over the planet's primary export and source of wealth. Of course, Ten Sol got a high percentage of the raw metals and finished product, and the elected government had a lot of influence, but Erik still held the controlling interest.

There should have been a war over that. On any other world, there would have been. But nobody cared about dusty little Eisen, the smallest and most isolated of the ten colonized systems. Erik himself hadn't cared, until recently. He'd tried to do his best by it, because that was what his parents had raised him to do, but he'd always known his home system in figures and graphs and dreary reports, in still images and video, in week-long visits where he'd dreaded the sun and heat.
Now he knew the quiet wildness of the jagged canyons and impassable valleys, the coolness of the deep mines where the Vines glowed, the gentle hillocks scavenged out of the scrap fields by communities consisting of the same. Most insidious of all, Erik knew the burnished look that the red dust gave to Charles’ skin, the way his eyes looked almost unnaturally blue under the glow of the Vines.

"My ancestors were very practical people?" he guessed.

"They were," the Honourable agreed. Seemingly out of nowhere, in her storytelling voice which could hold people's attention hostage until she was ready to release them, she said, "When you were young, though you didn't understand why, your mother took you aside and told you that you had to be careful, that you had to keep yourself safe."

Erik stumbled mid-step. He generally tried not to think about his parents at all. The pain of the loss had blunted over time, and yet - it always made him feel nauseous. He opened his mouth to say that his mother had never done such a thing that he could remember, though there'd been a general sense of take care, take care over the years, understandable since he was an only child and sole heir - but something shifted in his mind, like a tiny block among thousands had moved ever so slightly and let a sliver of light pass through.

There had been - once - different from the usual protectiveness of a parent - his head hurt. He pressed knuckles against his temple. Felt an irrational surge of irritation, tinged with nausea, at the smell-taste of metal that got into bloody everything out here.

"Eisenhardts," the Honourable scoffed, seemingly to herself. Something shiny in the shape of a circle glinted between her fingers. "Practical to the last."

Erik mumbled some excuses to her that he didn't even hear, and was the one, this time, to leave first.

Likely because of that exchange, Erik dreamed about his mother that night.

He couldn't tell if it was a memory. Her face was clearer than he'd seen it in years. The only other aspects that held any immediacy were her hands, warm and gentle, and her voice.

You mustn't lose control, liebling. Listen to Logan. Don't draw attention to yourself.

Alles ist gut.

"I met one of the Xavia before, you know," the Honourable said, one night in the Circle. "Back in my girlhood, when there were more lights in the sky."

"They came here?" asked Angel excitedly.

"They were everywhere." The older woman reached a gnarled but steady hand into her scarf, and drew out a shiny round disc hanging from a length of arbahn-hide. "No lands were barred to Xavia. They became fewer in number, as the years went on, but even when they weren't nearby, you could still feel their presence, their influence. It is difficult to explain to those who've only lived after their time."

Erik found himself leaning forward, alongside everyone else, to examine the disc. It was a plain circle, the diameter a little longer than his thumb. The distinctive, stylized 'X' in the center was
"What did the Xavia-" Alex hesitated, clearly swallowing the *witch* that usually came with that tone of voice, "*person*, what did they want?"

The Honourable smiled. "Directions. She seemed quite young, though of course it's hard to tell with them, and she said she'd never been to Eisen before."

"Directions to where?" Charles asked, clearly intrigued.

"The usual landmarks. The cities, the 'Yards, the mines." The Honourable shrugged. "It was nothing more than what everybody else on Eisen knows. I know how young minds work, you'll be speculating amongst yourselves later, but if you hold any value in the wisdom gained by eighty years of life - I am sure, as I have ever been, that it was simply a young Xavia traveler who'd gotten a bit lost. I told her all I knew about the surrounding area, and pointed her to the road. She thanked me, gave me this token, and left."

Then it was time for the night's story. She gave them The Prince Who Parted The Sky, which even Erik had heard before, albeit under the title of The Planetary Pilot. He noted that the 'Prince' - or the 'Pilot', depending on the version - was another figure of legend out of Xavia. In fact, now that Erik thought about it, he realized that practically all the stories he'd heard since he arrived had involved Xavia in some way. Most of the popular myths and folk-tales did, so it wasn't too unusual, but he had a feeling that the Honourable was doing it deliberately.

After the story, Erik got ready to stand up and head back to - Charles' dwelling. (He resolutely did not think about how his brain kept wanting to call it *home*.) Raven had left before the story, citing tiredness; the glances between Darwin and Charles suggested that she and Hank were on the off portion, again, of whatever strange arrangement teenagers these days made with each other. But Charles didn't look like he intended to leave any time soon, and kept sending uncertain looks at the Honourable.

The people in the Circle slowly trickled away, until only about a dozen were left. The Honourable stood up, stretching her legs. "Well, good night to all. Charles, you may escort me back to my home."

Erik followed, taking the lack of objection from Charles and the Honourable as implicit permission to come along.

Once they were on a lower level, Charles and Erik diligently guiding the Honourable down the uneven, winding steps, the Honourable sniffed and said, "Now, what was it you wanted to talk to me about, Charles Francis?"

It was difficult to see Charles' expression in the dark, but Erik heard him clearing his throat. "I was just curious - why did you lie, when you were telling them about what you told that Xavia traveler?"

"Been rooting around in my head, have you?" the Honourable chuckled. It made Erik blink and slip slightly, and he fervently hoped the other two didn't notice; despite the number of mutants in the compound, it was still not usual for people to address someone's ability without due cause or explicit invitation. It helped to maintain the open secret.

"You know I don't do that," said Charles, voice fond instead of indignant. "And it's not like I have to, when you were practically shouting *this is a lie, Charles* at me in your head."

"Hmm, I might have done that," the Honourable said with an ambivalent nod. "It wasn't exactly a lie,
but I did leave out one thing. We did speak about the cities and the mines, but she was mainly
interested in the Lehnsherr Estate."

Erik blinked. "What about the Estate?"

"How far away it was, how big, how long it's been there. She had some information about the
colonization of Eisen, and she wanted to compare it with what I knew. I meant what I said - it wasn't
anything anybody else on Eisen couldn't have told her." She was, Erik saw, fiddling with the Xavia
token. "In fact - yes, I think it'd be best. Charles, you should-" she gestured at her head.

Charles stopped. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." The Honourable's hands tightened around the token. "You know I wouldn't do it for anyone -
but it's you, Charles-lad, I watched you grow up." She took a deep breath. "And it's important. You
need to see." To Erik's surprise, she looked right at him. "Both of you."

The young woman looks younger than she is, and feels older. She's wearing the deisich and the
aulass and the henga correctly, moving in them like she's been doing so all her life, and yet... there's
something about her that suggests she comes from somewhere else.

"Thank you for your help, Honourable," she says.

"You're welcome, lady, but I'm afraid I'm not the Honourable, that's old Raymond Gills," the much
younger would-be-Honourable replies, whose name is still Lorna Karl. "I'm only just turned thirty."

The woman gives him a piercing look. "There's plenty of time for you to be used to the honorific,
then."

Lorna gapes. "Can you really see the future, lady?"

This earns a laugh, but it is not unkind. "No more than anybody else. My kin are called many things,
Honourable, but usually the only true thing is that we are telepaths." She smiles. "But here is a tip,
for your future responsibility - it is remarkable how much people know of their own future."

A token is pressed into Lorna's hand. It feels smooth and slick, as if wet, but Lorna looks down and
sees that her hands are completely dry. She's heard that the Vines are like this, though she hasn't seen
them herself, her ear condition preventing her from working at the depths of the 'combs. The disc
easily reflects the light of the traveler's lantern; against Lorna's skin, which is the color of bruuni
bark, it shines like a star.

"Here is something to remember me by," says the traveler. "If you meet any of my people, show
them this, and they will know you as a friend."

The traveler starts to move away. She pauses, and says over her shoulder, casual as someone
discussing recipes in the Circle, "One day, you will meet the Master Lehnsherr. Do not seek him out
- he will come to you. He will stand in the hold you'd chosen as your own, dressed as one who
works the Vines. And when he does, tell him-"

A minute of silence passes, and Lorna finds herself impatiently asking, "Tell him what?"

Keen eyes look directly through her - through her, as if addressing someone else. "There is a useful
saying, here in Eisen: all secrets turn into stories."
She's heard it before, a bit of cryptic jumbo the elders like to throw about, and can't see how it's relevant to anything. "What are you doing in a nowhere-place like Eisen, good lady?"

The traveler's smile is small, with a hint of sadness. "I have seen the end my world. I wish now to pay respects to its beginning. Perhaps there will be a chance to bring it about again." She turns and, suddenly, is no longer there, but a shrinking speck down the road towards town.

Lorna's feet ache, like they do when she's been standing still for too long. She clutches the token tightly in her hand, and goes home.

When one worked deep underground, dangers such as unstable ground and falling rock and tectonic events were a fact of life. Anything that sent vibrations through the Vine-carved shafts was called a 'strummer'. Some strummers were minor, isolated events - a shudder of the Vines and the ground rumbling around them for a short while. Other strummers, according to Charles, had force enough to bring down entire sections of the 'combs.

The first time Erik experienced a strummer, he wasn't entirely sure what was happening. Everything shook for a minute or so, raining dust and crumbled rock on them. But the other miners didn't appear concerned, didn't even leave the shaft. They merely paused the work, and everyone moved to hold onto a Vine.

"Easier to find people if something collapses," explained Charles.

The first signs of a strummer was always a shift in the movements of the Vines. Just a subtle one, barely noticeable. Erik only picked up on it because he was working on a Vine at the time, helping Darwin scour the build-up until the Vine's surface was glossy again. He didn't say anything, but had a hunch; sure enough, within minutes, the miner who had the team's locator clipped onto their pouch was activating it, right before a hard but short tremor jostled them about.

From thereon, Erik was always the first to notice, even when he wasn't in direct contact with a Vine.

They were near the end of a shift when he caught one. "Strummer coming," he called. That was another thing he'd learned: shouting outright was not a good idea, but there was a way to pitch and project one's voice to make it carry through the shafts.

A few of their group looked at him doubtfully, but the rest began putting down their equipment and moving towards the nearest Vine; after the second time Erik called an incoming strummer correctly, long before anybody else noticed, the others seemed to accept that he could somehow detect the change in the Vines. Charles, on locator duty this time, hurried to sit by the Vine Erik was holding on to; he wouldn't activate the locator until the actual tremors began, but he'd trusted Erik's judgment even on the first time, and his hand hovered over the button.

This one seemed to take longer than the others. A few slanted doubtful eyes at Erik, but soon the change in Vine's glow was unmistakable. Normally, the time between Erik hearing the change and the start of the tremors was quite short. Now, though, looks of fear apprehension on the other miners' faces as each of them felt the change too.

"A slow build like this usually means it's a big one", Charles said grimly.

The ground shuddered under their feet. The walls shook. The miners didn't make any noise, watching in silence, but there was something angry about the vibrations travelling through the Vines. Unsecured equipment fell over. There was a faint crack, like a distant sigh. Sounds of things
crashing, voices from the neighboring shafts.

A short, piercing whistle. The locator on Charles' hip was flashing red.

*Evacuate,* Charles told Erik, straight into his mind, with an aftertaste of urgency, danger, move move move.

Erik sprang forward, along with the rest of their team, and they were swallowed up by the stream of miners hurrying up the main tunnel. Not panicking, though - Erik would remember that later. Some faces were drawn, tight with fear, but no one was pushing or shouting or confused, even when a much narrower portion of tunnel caused the inevitable blockage and everyone had to stop and wait.

The shaking, which had eased down, suddenly returned in earnest. Everyone in Erik's vicinity was packed in too tightly to do more than wobble in place, but there were shouts of alarm further back in the line.

Erik noticed that the other miners instinctively reached out for a Vine when there was a tremor. He also realized that the prevailing sense of safety that continued to perplex him was still there, seemingly unconcerned with the possibility of being crushed by falling rocks or trapped underground.

The stream moved forward. He slipped through the narrow tunnel himself, which was only big enough for two people at a time. It was only on the other side that he realized that he'd lost track of Charles.

*CHARLES!*

*I'm here, don't worry, I'll be through in a moment.* Charles' reply was accompanied by a calming touch, familiar.

And then the world shook again.

Erik wasn't sure how he knew; there was nothing for him to see, too much noise to pick out any singular one. And he'd lived all his life in *ships,* with none of the instincts of the old miners. But he could *feel* it, somehow: a new fissure in the rock disturbing the stability of the layers above them, sections of the 'combs crumpling under the added weight.

The Vines, for all their perplexing and mysterious ingenuity, worked by a careful balance of pressure and weight distribution. Each limb was sturdy, but this far down it took a group of them to hold the roof up, to keep the shafts clear, and if the weight or shape of the rock changed around them, the limbs could separate, or crumple inwards, leading to a collapsed tunnel.

Dust and rocks rained down on them, and someone was urging Erik to keep following the steady tide of evacuating miners. But all he knew was that he was being taken *away* from Charles, and he shook them off. He couldn't leave until Charles was safe. He shouldn't have let them be separated.

More ominous crashes, a bone-rattling groan - *and the Vines around the narrow tunnel are straining,* straining, *there are eight of them but still slender-young and they're not positioned for the change in the distribution of weight -*

And Charles was passing through the narrow tunnel now.

Erik ran back to the small opening, shouting, "*GO BACK, GET OUT, IT'S COMING DOWN*" though he knew it wouldn't be fast enough, not with Charles in the middle of the deadly passage and unable to move fast either way.
He might have screamed. The world was full of noise, chaos, and he was reaching out, searching, he must have grabbed onto a Vine out of instinct because his vision was suddenly full of that warm light, the slick surface humming eagerly under his fingers, as if entreating, *use us, use us, we can help* -

*Erik!*

You mustn't lose control, liebling.

"Shit, did he do that?"

"Everybody, back to work, nothing to see here."

There was pain when he came to, and alarm, but this was swiftly followed by a warm grip on his hands and, *Hush, it's fine, I'm all right.* Charles. Charles was all right, and with him.

"Head. Hurts," Erik croaked.

"Yes, I'm glad you woke on your own, I wasn't sure if it's a good idea for me to be in there right now," Charles said, somewhere nearby and vaguely above. A hand rested gently on the side of Erik's head.

"Why's it. Dark."

"You've got your eyes closed, love."

Oh. Erik pried his eyelids open. Watery Vine-light and the uneven, rocky ceiling told him that they were still underground. Seeing, blurrily, Charles' upside-down face allowed him to calm down the rest of the way.

"What happened?"

Charles's warm fingers stroked his forehead. "Can you sit up to drink?"

Erik obligingly pushed himself up, and sipped slowly from the skin that Charles held for him. Water, this time, not kass-juice, and still cool; somebody on another shift must have given Charles their ration.

"I want to know," Erik insisted, once he couldn't drink anymore.

Charles bit on his lips. "Look around you."

Erik did, forcing his eyes to focus. He was lying on the ground, Charles was crouched down beside him. They were off to the side so that they weren't obstructing the other miners. Back to work, then. Erik could hear the humming of a working team somewhere nearby. He was leaning against a wall, and there were Vines around him - no, there were Vines literally *encircling* him. One slender limb lay over his shins. It looked a little like being in a giant, glowing bird's nest.
"What the-?" Erik muttered.

"Apparently, you ran back to the tunnel like a madman, shouting for everyone to get out." Charles' fingers carded gently through Erik's hair. "But there wasn't enough time, not when people in the back were pushing and people in the front couldn't move any faster. Anyway - it's all a bit hazy, to be honest, but inside the tunnel, the Vines suddenly shone like the sun. I thought they were going to explode. And more Vines came out of the walls and the ground and - well, you can't even see the rocks now. It's possibly the most strongly inforced mine tunnel on the planet."

Erik shifted to the side, away from the wall, until he could see a bit of the tunnel entrance. Vines clustered thickly around the narrow opening. Some seemed to be going the opposite direction; usually, Vines grew from the central shaft and spread outwards.

"I... I did that?" asked Erik numbly.

"You saved a dozen lives, including my own," Charles said quietly. "And prevented hundreds more from getting trapped."

Erik stared at his hands. It seemed surprising to him that they looked exactly the same as before, as always. He felt the same, except for the headache.

But now - after so many years, he'd thought - and all these people had seen. There was no way to pretend it could have been something else, that it was natural. He should have left the planet, should have known better-

"Erik!" exclaimed Charles, enveloping both of Erik's hands with his own. The work-rough skin felt solid, grounding. "It'll be all right. Trust me, please - it will be all right. But you have to calm down."

Dimly, Erik heard the rattling of equipment, the translator on Charles' belt vibrating, could see the Vines glowing brighter.
Calm, Erik, said Charles, evidently forgoing his caution from before, you need to calm your mind. Trust me. Calm your mind.

Trust Charles? Erik closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The Vines dimmed down again, the metallic noises stopped.

He wasn't sure how long they sat there for. Nobody asked them to move.

Erik caught a few wary looks cast his way, discreetly, but for the most part people acted as if - whatever he did - happened all the time. Amazingly, once he and Charles were drawn back into the rhythm of the work, the whole incident - the strummer and terror and impossible actions - lost their bright shine of immediacy. By the time Erik followed the weary trudge back up to the surface, he felt removed from it all. He could have believed it had happened to somebody else, if not for the faint sonorous warmth that tingled under his skin.

Or he could be slipping into shock.

He wondered what people were saying about it. If everyone knew by now, if there would be a News team waiting in Charles' compound, if Wolverine was sweating curses at him somewhere for being so stupid.

You are a very pessimistic man, aren't you? came Charles' dry thought-voice.

Get out of my head, Charles.

Clearly, Charles could tell that he didn't mean it. A lot of the miners here are mutants, or have loved ones who are. You - ah, the Honourable has told you. About Eisen. The 'combs are a high stress environment; you're hardly the first one to lose control.

It didn't make Erik feel any better.

Don't you understand yet, Erik? Charles' presence in his head expanded, as if stretching, and sank down into the many tiny cracks that had opened up in Erik's presently brittle mind; the mental equivalent of a hug. We take care of our own.

Charles never left his side for the rest of the day. If it helps, I had no clue about it, none at all, he stated casually while sliding in next to Erik on the haul-car out of Mine Three. Erik had tried to put some distance between them, but the other man was having none of it. This shouldn't come as a surprise, Erik thought. Charles was single-mindedly well-meaning and endearingly persistent, and Erik had clearly been doomed from the moment the blue-eyed bastard decided to save his life.

Erik didn't respond until they were on the first fly-cart. "You must think me a coward."

Charles' eyes were round and looked even bluer, if that were possible, in contrast to the reddish purple of the soon-to-be-sunset sky. "No, of course not," he replied. "Erik, you are the only person who gets to decide what to do or how to feel about your ability."

Erik felt a trickle of unease, out of habit, the long-ingrained reaction to any reminder of this-thing-he-did-not-think-about in a public place. The fly-cart looked just as crowded as it had been that morning, on the way to the mine, as crowded as any other day. And yet, somehow, there was a distinct sense of the other miners giving him and Charles space, respectful.
It really didn’t help against the pinball of thoughts in his head, racking up scores on suppression collar and Sepor and facility.

They didn't speak further until they were let off the fly-cart at the station in Chester, to cover the rest of the way home on foot. Charles finally angled those painfully earnest eyes away, and started to walk ahead, giving Erik the space he wanted.

Except, Erik realized he didn't want that space, after all. Not between him and Charles. His hand had whipped out and grabbed Charles by the arm before he was fully aware of it.

He could read the uncertainty in Charles' face, the anxiety and the fear. Somehow, Erik could distinguish that it was fear of Erik's reaction, not his power. Erik wondered if this was some odd way in which Charles was trying to compensate for his telepathy: by broadcasting his emotions on his face.

"I'm," Erik swallowed thickly. "It was always going to. To show. Sooner or later. Thought it'd be sooner." He stepped closer to Charles, or maybe Charles let himself be pulled in. "But. If I had to choose, between you and keeping it secret." Erik let out a breath. "Well. I guess I did."

Charles' features softened. "Oh, Erik." His hand, warm and callused, came up to rest on top of Erik's. "I'd have preferred you to not have to make a choice at all, and come to the decision freely."

But it hadn't even been a choice, Erik realized. He could not remember a point at which he'd decided to throw away a lifetime of dedicated ignorance and a secret he'd never acknowledged having. There had only been Charles, and Charles in danger - and only one course of action possible.

Erik avoided the Circle that night. Charles didn't press the issue, and even brought Erik a cup of hot tea. Charles' supply of tea leaves was sacrosanct, punishable by day-long pouting and mysterious mild headaches, so Erik made a point of grabbing Charles hand and squeezing it gratefully before the siblings went out.

He tried to read a novel on his compad, but after an hour he found that he really was tired, after all. He went to bed, and stared up at the ceiling, wondering what they were saying about him.

The slide into sleep was as smooth as breathing; he might not have noticed, but for the feeling of his mother's fingers stroking his hair, and her warm voice. He knew it must be a dream because she couldn't be here, doing that, because she was dead, he'd watched life fade from her eyes, helpless, the rage caught in his chest.

he'd always told people that his parents had been dead when he'd looked over to them after the blast, but that was another untruth - his mother had been alive, had looked straight at him, fearful and sad, as the wreck of the ship groaned and shrieked around them. There couldn't have been air for her words to cross the gap between them - if Erik had been standing even a foot closer, they told him later, he would have been hit by the blast as well - but he could read the warning on her face. *Don't lose control, don't ever lose control, liebling.* Right before death came, the death that he maybe-please-wanted-to-could-have stopped-

Erik fought against the dream, the suffocating grip of old grief-anger-pain-loss that he'd ruthlessly crushed down over the years, because even the possibility of losing control had been unthinkable. He felt feeble, lost. *Impotent.*

And then something intruded - something warm and strong and known.
Come back, it called, come back, Erik.

The dark dream abated. Erik started to surface all the way, smell and sounds and scents infiltrating his sleep in slivers, but that same familiar touch came back and calmed him, hush, I'm here, and I shan't leave again.

Erik slept.

In the morning, they woke up to find half of the ceiling of Charles' room curving inwards. As if something had pulled it down from the inside. Erik gave Charles a stricken look.

Charles grinned. "I like it. I think it adds something to the place."

Raven poked her head in, and gave an impressed whistle. "Charles, when I said, 'try not to bring the roof down', I didn't think you'd take it as a challenge." She leered at Erik and winked.

Charles blushed a bright red and didn't manage to splutter a retort until she'd ducked out again, laughing.

Erik couldn't quite bring himself to go into work that first day. Charles didn't press, only advised him to sleep some more if he still felt tired and to remember to eat something.

He did feel... blurry, around the edges, so Erik slept.

He didn't go to the Circle that night, either.

But the next day dawned bright and clear, and Erik felt as if his skin had resettled over him; not quite the same fit as before, but like something half-new, like something he could break in again.

Several days later, they arrived home from the mine to find the compound as busy as the 'combs had been: lots of people milling about, everybody above the age of five carrying dishes or kabash mats or fixing something. "What's going on?" asked Erik.

"Oh, it's the Evenfeast tonight," replied Charles. "Didn't you notice Raven cooking the roothoney yesterday? It's all the kids have been talking about for a week."

Now that Erik thought about it, he had heard Raven and their various neighbors discussing an upcoming occasion, but he'd neglected to absorb any of the information. "What's the Evenfeast?"

Charles gave him a disapproving look, but he softened it with a fond smile. "It's a mid-year celebration, to give thanks for, well, having a community and a family and being alive. Not aimed at any particular deities, though people are welcome to dedicate their merry-making however they wish. Haven't you ever heard of it?"

Erik shook his head. "I don't think they celebrate it in the Cities. And, well, I've been spaceside before this year."

"Of course." Charles' arm looped around his own. Had Charles always touched him this much before? "I'm glad you're here for this one, then."
They cleaned up as best as they could with the dodgy toilet water and changed into (relatively) fresh trousers, and made their way back up to the Circle.

If anything, things looked even more chaotic than they had earlier. There was a pile of tubes and cylinders on one side of the Circle, and what looked like half a table, and the cleaned kabash mats had been laid over the metal floor but in such a disorganized way that people kept tripping over them. One group was having a very fervent discussion about the food; one of their number was Sean, which meant that all the glassware that had been stacked on the floor, dear Gods, were shivering ominously.

Before he could think about what he was doing, Erik marched up to the group and asked, loudly, "What's going on here?"

The arguing stopped. Darwin looked sheepish. "It's gone kinda chaotic, I know."

"Normally, the Honourable organizes everyone and tells us what to do," said Angel.

Darwin nodded. "But no one's seen her since she left for the North compound this morning. Something about a dispute over an empty dwelling, and they needed an outside opinion."

There was a crashing sound. Erik turned and saw that Scott Summers had tripped over one of the cylinders, fallen, just barely kept his sunglasses on, and two other people had tripped over him.

"Right." Erik planted his hands on his hips. "Let's have a bit of order, shall we?"

The Honourable hooted and clapped at the start of another energetic round of group dancing. "And this is a dance of thanks, from the far north," she said to Erik, waving at the figures weaving about the Circle, "a bow to thank for water, the clasp of hands to thank for warmth, and a hop-skip to thank for words."

She'd shown up just as the sun had begun to set, and seemed nonplussed to find that all the preparations for the Evenfeast had been completed in her absence. She'd glanced at Erik in a very knowing way, though, and sat down next to him on the kabash mats after the bonfire was lit and the food table declared open.

"Isn't the bonfire a bit high?" asked Erik.

"It's been a good few months, we have plenty of fuel left. And it's bad luck to skimp on the Evenfeast bonfire." They watched another dance. "That was good work, young man, organizing everyone."

"You disappeared on purpose," he said, accusingly.

"I did." She smiled enigmatically at him, and he knew that that was all he was going to get from her on the subject.

"Honorable," said Erik, after another dance, "how does one in your society - that is, what does one do if one were, ah, interested in another?"

He could feel her gaze boring into the side of his head, but he had not quite the strength of will to move his eyes from he'd fixed them on the dancers. Finally, she said, "first, a dance, to show that you
wish your union will bring joy. Many times it is also seen as a willingness to risk embarrassment and misstep before others. Then, a gift of some kind is expected, to be delivered with a formal declaration of intent. Those are the only common practices - in some places, the pair go on a journey, or live together for a certain time, or seek blessing from a certain number of friends. This is up to them." The tension seeped out of Erik's shoulders; he snuck a glance to the side and got a full blast of her toothy grin. "We who live day-to-day try not to needlessly complicate our affairs."

"Thank you," Erik responded sincerely.

"I remember when Charles' parents first arrived in this place. Nice folks." The Honourable sighed wistfully. "Charles couldn't have been more than six months old. They doted on him, called him their miracle baby."

Erik smiled, unable to help himself, and was about to say something pleasantly mindless like oh that's nice, when the Honourable said, "they couldn't have kids, you see. I found out later, in the epidemic that killed them both. The illness struck them hard because they'd had a similar strain of it many years previously. They'd survived the first round with weakened lungs, and a sadly permanent case of infertility."

Erik stilled, and this new piece of knowledge sat awkwardly in his mind. Did Charles know? Did he have biological family out there that he didn't know about? Knowing Charles, he would have tried to find them.

"He knows they were not his biological parents. But they didn't tell him anything about how they came to have him, deciding he was too young, and then it was too late." Erik could only nod. He remembered Charles mentioning a wish to learn more about his family. "I have known Charles all his life," continued the Honourable - the note of warning in her voice unmistakable, "he has a big heart, and he truly cares for people. But." She paused, as if searching for words. "This is not an easy world, for your kind. Especially for him. He can tell when someone doubts him, even if the person doesn't realize it themselves. He's always been able to, do you understand?"

Her hands moved with her words, like they did when she was telling a tale. "Imagine being a young child and hearing the poison being spread by the 'Nets and Sepor about you and other people like you. Well." She glanced at him. "Perhaps you don't need to imagine that. But Charles heard it all the time, inside his head. People acting kindly and thinking hateful things. And later, when he started to share his secret - even others with abilities distrusted him, and he always knew." And had to pretend he didn't, Erik read between the lines, because this was Charles. "If he'd been older, he'd have known that people get stray thoughts, people don't always mean the things they think about, and sometimes people can't help their first reaction, but that doesn't mean they're not willing to see different. He knows now, but the damage, I'm afraid, has already been done."

She smiled sadly at Erik. "He holds others at a distance. Even his own sister, though he loves her above everything." Unexpectedly, she took Erik's hand in her own; her skin was warm and dry. "You seem like a nice young man, Erik."

"I'm the Master of Estate, you know," he said, unthinkingly.

"Yes," she said, in the tone of one acknowledging a flaw and graciously accepting it as part of the package, "admitting the truth is a good step. Now, Charles is a stubborn one, and set in his ways, but I think you might just be mule-headed enough to stand against him." She winked. "If it helps, I'm rooting for you."
Erik reached the food table in time to hear Raven snarling, "just because you want to pretend to be normal and play nice with humans doesn't mean the rest of us are happy to do the same!" He barely avoided getting bowled over when she stomped off.

"That went well," sighed Charles.

Erik debated asking about the argument - Charles and Raven had a row every few days, it seemed, so there were a number of possibilities - and decided that he didn't really want to know. "She's young and she's angry," was what he said instead. "And it doesn't help when she thinks you're not taking her anger seriously."

"But I am taking it seriously," Charles protested. "Or else I wouldn't be worried about her all the time."

"The important part is that she feels like you're not taking her seriously," Erik said. "We can't read your mind, Charles."

Erik hadn't made a conscious decision about the dancing, really, but then there was a laughing Charles with his hand outstretched, skin golden in the firelight - actual fire, not a projection or a screen, what an incredible, wild thing - and his body was moving, being pulled into the fray.

There was a light, skittish melody coming out of the compscreen on one side, but the main body of the music came from a set of improvised drums near the food table. Two men and a woman, middle-aged, pounded out a complicated rhythm, of a pattern that Erik recognized as being native to the Roen and Kemalash regions. There didn't seem to be any specific dance steps, now - Erik glimpsed pieces of other types of dances - just a general rule to keep to the beat. It seemed as if most of the compound was up dancing, which Erik largely blamed on the jug being passed around the Circle - the drink it held, if one could even call it that, eviscerated a few layers of cells off the inside of his mouth and grew even more potent going down. Erik couldn't remember ever being part of something so unstructured, but it somehow felt like exactly what he needed right now. Besides, he was... respecting the local traditions.

He'd always been told that he didn't get out enough, after all.

Grabbing Charles and pulling him in until, due to a somewhat slippery grasp of depth perception at the moment, they were pressed flush against each other down the front, from chest to hips to thighs, and then skirting his hand down the delicious curve of Charles' back, drifting dangerously low... Erik would put that down as 'bettering relations with the natives'.

"Why are you muttering about reports, you strange man," Charles chortled, face pressed into Erik's shoulder.

Erik thought that he picked up the steps to the dance quite well, considering, but an inordinate number of people kept getting in the way of his feet and arms. Charles wasn't faring much better, more deadweight than active participant as he clung to Erik, and kept kicking Erik in the shins.

Eventually, a blurry figure that looked and sounded like Darwin said, "All right, lovebirds, take a break," and gently led them to a quieter corner. There was a pile of kabash mats upon which one could sit for a bit while one's insides tried to determine if they were still functioning.

Erik was willing to call it the best party he'd ever been to.
Much later, in the darkness of Charles' room, Erik felt more uncertain than he'd had in the 'combs, when the Incident had been fresh in everyone's minds.

He'd been surprised, and equal parts grateful and apprehensive, when Charles opted to go back home with him rather than continue enjoying the bonfire at the Circle. Now that it was just the two of them, Erik wished, absurdly, that they had a chess set to occupy their hands. The room had never felt smaller.

*A gift of some kind is expected,* the Honourable had said.

He could feel Charles waiting. Could Charles read his intent? Probably. Not that it took a genius, after the dancing. Not that it mattered. Charles would never push. He was waiting for Erik to make the next move.

Only... it was one thing, to stand and accept your friends as mutants, and celebrate their uniqueness with them; and quite another, to step over that divide and *be* as they were, to feel fully a life defined by what he was *not*.

He knew, obliquely, that this was an illusion, because the fact of his mutation had been decided long before he could've had any say in it.

"You know already," he whispered. "You know."

Charles' hands came up to cover Erik's, warm and steady. "But *you* need to acknowledge it. Claim it for yourself."

"I don't want to hurt anybody."

"You won't. If you learn to control your powers, embrace them, you have a much better chance of avoiding accidentally hurting someone else." Charles grip tightened until it felt as if he was trying to meld their hands together. "I will help you. I've helped all the others. You're not alone, Erik."

If it was to be a night of reckless choices, Erik decided that he might as well go for one more. He leaned in, and followed the line of Charles' jaw with the tip of his nose. Charles shivered from Erik's breath hitting his skin, but didn't move away. Erik stopped upon reaching Charles' ear, pressed his lips against the tender skin under the lobe.

"Charles?" he whispered. Charles' skin carried the scent of sweat and dirt and sweet, sharp metal.

"Yes, Erik," Charles breathed.

"I can manipulate metal and magnetic fields." Erik had to breathe through his mouth. "I'm a mutant."

Charles trembled, twisted, and they were kissing, lips open and gasping and desperate. The taste of Charles, *finally*, pulled a groan out of Erik; he felt drunk already, and at the same time starved for more. Charles tongue sought out his, stroking, wet. Erik's hands grasped at Charles' shoulders, pulled him in close, until Charles was straddling Erik's lap, those strong fingers gripping Erik's hair.

As if it wasn't overwhelming enough, having so much of Charles pressed up against him, feeling the heat between Charles' legs on the tops of his thighs, Charles let out a breathy, choked sound, and suddenly Erik was overcome by a deluge of *wantwanttouchmoreneed*. It lasted for mere moments, before cutting off suddenly with Charles whispering, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, fuck, Erik."

Erik sealed their lips together again in order to forestall any more apologies. *Don't be. I've never minded. Please.* Charles moaned, shuddering against Erik. Erik greedily ran a hand down Charles'
front, flicking a nipple with his thumb. Charles conveyed his approval by sucking on Erik's tongue.

He was perfectly happy to continue like that until sunrise, or even forever, but then Charles released his lips in order to kiss and lick down Erik's neck. Somehow, Charles managed to find a patch of skin that seemed to be directly connected to Erik's cock. When Charles grazed his teeth lightly on it, Erik let out an embarrassingly needy sound and bucked upwards. Charles threw his arms over Erik's shoulder, hanging on, and began to suck.

"Fuck, fuck, Charles!" swore Erik, right before he practically bore Charles down onto the mattress.

And, oh, this was even better: Charles sprawled out under him, dark hair fanning the light sheets, his legs spreading to cradle Erik's hips. Charles cried out when Erik ground down, both their erections obvious under the worn material of the *deisich* trousers; there was a slight stinging on Erik's neck where Charles had been working at the skin.

Erik reached down to loosen their trousers, why were they still wearing so much clothing, and Charles' hands slipped under Erik's shirt, teasing the small of his back, and *dear Gods* that was a finger sliding down-

*Creak.*

Erik froze. Below him, Charles did the same, though a tentative "?" prodded into Erik's mind. Erik turned around and looked towards the direction of the sound.

It had come from high up on the ceiling, where there was now a crack in the metal, in the middle of the giant dent Erik had put there in his nightmare.

Erik quickly rolled off Charles. He found that he was breathing hard, and rubbed a hand over his face. There was a faint series of *thumps* on the other side of the bedroom door; as if, for example, a number of small, metallic items had been floating in mid-air and had now fallen to the floor.

Still sprawled out like a tempting, decadent offering, Charles frowned worriedly at Erik. "What's wrong? Erik?"

Erik pointed at the dent. He took a careful look at the rest of the room, and found three smaller cracks and another dent on the walls. Also, one corner of the small table had curled down, as if half-melted, and now hung like a peeled banana skin.

Charles' eyes widened. "Oh."

"When I," Erik said haltingly, "when I... lose control, things happen."

Charles' expression switched to one of concern. "What kind of things?"

"Just... things. The lights flicker, furniture rattles, small objects start floating, dents on the walls."

"And by lose control, you mean... during sex?"

Erik nodded.

"Wait, does this mean you've never..."

Erik made a tight, annoyed sound in his throat. "Yes, I've had sex. But I've had to be very careful about it. I have to maintain control at all times." He picked at a wayward thread on Charles' sheets. "Mainly, I just avoided... climaxing, while my partner was present."
Ships, after all, were *made of metal*.

He peeked out of the corner of one eye. Charles looked thoughtful, clearly absorbing the new information. To his surprise, Charles brightened up and asked, "So this is why you've been-?" and gestured between the two of them.

Erik nodded.

"Oh, thank goodness," said Charles. "I was starting to wonder if I'd been imagining - well. A lot of things make sense now. I must admit that, half the time, I was convinced you're asexual and just sparing my feelings."

"Charles," Erik said, finding a trace of humor despite himself, "I don't typically spare *anyone's* feelings." He blinked. "Wait - feelings?"

"Well, yes. You're, you know, you," said Charles, quite incomprehensibly. "Whereas I'm, well, me, and I was terrified that I would slip and reveal my, yes, feelings, and I could never tell if you just liked me or *liked* me - oh Gods, I'm babbling, aren't I? So I'm very relieved to find out that you're, ah, interested."

"Of course I'm interested," Erik growled. "How did you not know this? By the stars, you are the worst telepath ever."

The nights seemed to grow colder after the Evenfeast. To Erik, that just meant more opportunities to 'share body heat' with Charles. No blankets, no heating systems, not even his very expensive bed up on his ship could compare to wrapping himself around Charles at night, or huddling together with a shared cup of tea.

The Circle, open to the sky as it was, tended to be the coldest area of all. It didn't stop the nightly gatherings, though.

Charles tentatively shuffled back, still careful, and then Erik muttered deprecations under his breath and yanked until Charles was sitting between Erik's thighs, his back a broad, warm line down Erik's front. Both of them caught their breath. Raven snorted and cheerfully laid down on their legs.

"Comfortable?" Erik asked, voice low, directly into Charles' ear. The delicate shell brushed over his nose, and an unmistakable shudder traveled down Charles' body.

"Yes," Charles breathed.

Having Charles so close was intoxicating. Erik could smell the sweat on his skin and the dust in his hair. The tempting curve between neck and shoulder was right *there*, its paleness inviting Erik's teeth to turn it dark. Erik could feel every breath Charles took, wanted to press his lips against the throb of Charles' pulse-

*It's rather difficult to block out your thoughts when you're practically shoving them into my brain, you know.*

Erik jerked back, blinking. And if he'd thought Charles was tense before, the man felt like a block of stone in his arms now. Waiting for his reaction.

Smirking, Erik thought very, very hard about - *breathing in the scent under Charles' jaw, kissing that throat light enough to tickle, then taking his teeth to those collarbones, working them red, sucking*
Oh God, please, do not get me hard when my sister is right here, Charles pleaded in his head.

Erik chuckled, taking pity on him and pulling back, though not before twitching his hip to press the hardness between his legs against Charles' ass. Charles let out a small sound and pointedly dug his elbow into Erik's torso.

Relenting, Erik let himself relax. The Honourable's story that night was a truncated version of Swan Lake, which he'd seen at the The Dahlia with his parents, and he closed his eyes, letting the words wash over him.

He must have dozed off. He woke up to hear Hank asking Charles, "Are you absolutely sure that you've never had any of the symptoms?"

"Yes, Hank," Charles replied patiently, "I went through puberty without fanfare, ask anybody. Some tension headaches from too much reading or too loud a crowd, but nothing like extreme and protracted head pain."

"This planet is skewing all the data," complained Hank. "I mean, if you take out Eisen - there's a clear decrease in the severity of symptoms all across the board." He waved something that looked like a compad. "But telepaths always get the severe Level 5 symptoms, regardless of strength," Hank continued. "Those have been the only cases of m-sickness on Eisen, you know. Telepaths."

Erik let out a low, displeased grunt.

"Not that I want you to get the m-sickness, Charles!" Hank quickly added.

Does he do this quite often? asked Erik.

Well, it's part of his job, answered Charles, which made Erik realize that he didn't actually know what Hank's job was. He'd assumed that he went to the mines with the rest of the compound; he hadn't seen him before, but he didn't see Darwin or Alex or Angel all that often either. Oh. He works at a small research waystation in Hattan. Currently he's a lab tech, he's saving money to pay for an application to Thornton University, but they let him access the databases on his off-time.

Erik frowned. I didn't know he was a mutant.

Oh, goodness, I have to stop outing people. He's quite embarrassed about his mutation, poor lad. It's no secret that he's trying to find a way to... camouflage it.

A physical mutation, then? Erik let his mind drift again, pondering mutations and this damned m-sickness and-

"Charles," Erik said suddenly. "When did you actually manifest?"

Hank froze. "Oh my God."

Charles blinked. "What?"

"The m-sickness. It stands for 'manifestation-sickness', correct?" said Erik. "When did your telepathy manifest?"

Charles' eyes widened. "I don't know."

In the background, Alex and Darwin were looking between Hank and Charles. "I always thought
the 'm' stood for 'mutant.'

"You already had it when you took me in," said Raven, ignoring the two. "You must have been, what, fifteen?"

"Wait, manifestation happens at puberty. Everyone knows this," said Sean.

"That's clearly untrue," argued Hank, shaking his head exasperatedly. "A lot of physical mutations are present from birth, like mine and Raven's. The other types of mutation usually manifest due to stress. It just so happens that puberty comes with a lot of stress-inducing factors."

Charles bit his lower lip. "I actually don't remember a time when I didn't have my telepathy."

"I've never heard of a telepath having their powers at birth, but considering how little we know about telepathy, it's perfectly possible." Hank looked thoughtful. "It's close, but guessing from your age, maybe you got lucky and manifested before the outbreak of m-sickness."

"Why don't we know more about telepathy?" Erik asked.

Hank blinked. "Because the greatest store of knowledge about telepathy - and mutants, for that matter - was with Xavia." He looked at all of them. "I mean, 's kinda obvious, isn't it?"

"There's something I want you to see."

An hour and a leisurely trek through the Field later, Erik was staring at a misshapen lump of metal. It had a vaguely round shape, and taller than he was. "What is it made out of?" It wasn't just one color - one side was mostly the darker grey of shipsteel, there was a patch of burnished-brass, another patch that glinted like the clear crystal casing of the Vines.

"Nobody knows," said Charles. "The village had a couple of Sepor officials over to investigate it, when I was young, but they said that they couldn't find anything interesting about the metal, claimed we'd melted a bunch of scraps together to make it."

"You have a different theory, don't you?"

Charles grinned. "You know that story you heard, the Star-Man? Angel's favorite, I think we heard it on your first night, and a couple of times again since. About the man that fell from the sky and turned into metal after he died?" He nodded at the lump. "I think this was it. I think this used to be a ship, and it crashed here. See that crack over there? When I was younger, there wasn't so much debris around it, and you could see an opening that's just big enough for a man to crawl through. There were all these scratches around it. I think the ship crashed and the pilot crawled out, and died after babbling half-delirious things to whomever happened to be in the area. And people made a story out of it."

Erik tapped at the milky-white surface, tried to imagine what kind of ship it could have been. "It doesn't look like anything I've seen before," he said truthfully. He didn't want to puncture Charles' childhood imaginings, though. "But it's entirely possible."

Wolverine showed up the next day.

"It was that bastard, Harold Norrey. Sepor. Owns that tool-making business? You met him months
ago." Wolverine wolfed down the plate of roothoney and steis that Raven had put in front of him. Thankfully there were plenty of leftovers from the Evenfeast. Raven looked a little perturbed at Wolverine's total disregard for her very blue form. "Got caught in some kind of scandal, business going sour, ended up owing some shady folks. He hired the two teams on you. Could have been unhinged for a while. By the time I got to him, the man had already killed himself. Plasma shot right to the head."

Erik nodded, and told Wolverine to get some rest. Raven, still eyeing Wolverine, offered her bed, and left to spend the night at Angel's. Or possibly Hank's, if the way Charles frowned after her was anything to go by. Wolverine grumbled about being able to stay awake for weeks on end, but minutes later his familiar snoring was shaking the door of Raven's room.

Charles was in his own room. He had his compad in his hand, like he was reading, but his eyes weren't moving. Erik went to sit beside him on the mattress.

"You'll be leaving soon, then," said Charles.

Erik nodded. His jaw felt tight, locked. I've been away long enough.

Charles let out a long breath. He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, Erik found that he had words to say, after all. "Come back with me," he said, almost tripping over the consonants. "You have a job at the Manor, remember?"

"You're asking me to come work for you?"

No. Oh, Charles probably heard that anyway. "No. No, I want you to come back with me. As..."

"Erik."

"Please." Erik swallowed heavily. "Just a chance. Raven is graduating in two weeks, right? Bring her with you." He fumbled for Charles' hand. "All I'm asking for is a chance."

It seemed an eternity, or maybe two, or enough time for the universe to die and be reborn again, before Charles answered, voice thick, "Well, you do need someone to help you with your powers."

"And to play chess with," said Erik. He suddenly felt able to breathe again.

"And to read your books for you. And to mmph-"

This must be what they mean, thought Erik, when humanity scaled mountains or crossed canyons or flew through the wilds of space to find a brave new world. Reaching the pinnacle, where all around lay the past and the future and the present, clear only for a moment because that was all a person could stand and remain sane; it made his breath hitch, his heart pound, and yet there was nothing uncertain in the way he kissed Charles, drawing him in and knowing that he would always only want to be closer, closer, never close enough.

Perfection.

{ END PART ONE }
But then, there are those who argue that there is no such thing as a small story.
Getting ready for a Ball

Chapter Notes

Another amazing compilation by the wonderful Kae (tumblr):

FANMIX FOR PART 2
Finding Beauty

{ PART TWO }
"All secrets turn into stories."
- Xavia saying

CHAPTER SIX
GETTING READY FOR A BALL

Eisen is a quiet planet at the edge of known space. Its population ranges between 2 to 3 billion; less than some Fleets and moon-colonies. It is also the galaxy's prime source of metal and mineral wealth.

It has never, in all of its history, been successfully invaded or conquered. Has anybody ever wondered why?
- 'Ten Histories: A Commentary'

Clouds. Layers of clouds, and probably layers of smoke as well, rushed past them like a billowing deluge of fog. He'd never seen them so thick; from the ground, they tended to look like thin, weedy things, if any could be found at all. He knew that the shuttle was travelling at great speeds, but the plush interior was calm, quiet, nothing at all like the careless jostling of the transports in the country. If it weren't for his telepathy - the great swirl of minds on the planet getting steadily further away, like an unseen sea roaring far beneath his feet - he'd have thought he was in a particularly well-crafted Immersion Film.

Both cloud and sky peeled away, the atmosphere releasing them, and Charles let out a gasp.

Eisen was a planet of umber and ochre, clay and rock; toxic seas and underground rivers and interconnected landmasses that rippled with jagged mountain ranges and deep canyons. Lights dotted the inhabited areas, which was the small percentage of marginally flat, or at least manageable, land. It must be early evening on Lehnsherr Manor - Charles could see the sunlight slowly retreating over the curve of the planet.
Further away, the rusting expanse of the metal scrap fields, seemingly endless. Somewhere in there was Chester, and their little West compound, and their neighbors tucking into dinner before heading up to the Circle.

Darkness crept into the upper edges of the viewing-window. Charles looked up, and it suddenly struck him: he was in space.

Those were stars, hard and distant, their light steady now above the curtain of atmosphere. Those were ships, of all shapes and sizes; some of them looked as big and immovable as the two natural moons, while others were tiny, flitting like insects from ship to ship amidst the glittering flotilla. This was Eisen's fifth City, the City-in-Orbit.

"And this," said Erik, drawing Charles closer to the window of the shuttle, "is Magneto."

It was a beautiful ship, in as far as Charles was a judge of ship aesthetics. Black and red and magenta, with all the sleekness that Charles had seen in the more modern equipment of the Manor. The main body was the standard elongated egg shape, trailing off at the end into the engines and primary thrusters. The wings were curved sharply, rather than straight, almost like stylized bird wings; or, Charles noted after tilting his head to one side, like the outer arches of the Greek 'M'.

"Magneto?" Raven echoed, eyes round and excited, pressing herself right up against the window of the shuttle.

"Perils of a fifteen-year-old renaming the family flagship," Wolverine said mournfully from somewhere behind them.

(Charles' mind traveled back to the long hallway of portraits in the Manor, and the mysterious figure who had hidden his face behind a helmet.)

A chance, Charles repeated to himself. He'd agreed to give this a chance, to see if this thing between himself and Erik could work. It shouldn't, by all accounts; they were two very different people who lived in very different worlds. But Erik had taken his weeks out in the country with admirable grace and aplomb - which meant that Charles had to try living shipside.

It wasn't entirely a personal decision. Erik needed to learn to control his powers, and reverse a lifetime of active repression, and Charles had become somewhat of an expert in helping other mutants.

He was somewhat surprised that he hadn't picked up on Erik's secret earlier, actually, because in his experience, secrets were furtive, guilt-ridden things, and ironically people tended to think about theirs all the time. But Erik had pushed his so far down that he deliberately didn't even think about it, his mind unconsciously skirting around a mutant-shaped hole. At least, when it came to himself. How he managed to avoid internalizing a fear or hatred of mutants, Charles wasn't sure. Likely Wolverine had a lot to do with it.

So, here Charles was.

He was doing this for Raven, too; the look on her face when she'd learned that they would be living spaceside for a while was one he hadn't seen in far too long.

And if he was to be honest with himself... he was here because Erik had asked. For once, the thought of letting someone go turned out to be slightly more unbearable than the possible consequences of keeping them close.
Still. He chewed meditatively on his lower lip. *I just know this will end up being a very bad idea,*

"I'd like you to meet the ship's pilot, Max," said Erik. The man in the somewhat worn-looking red and black uniform shook Charles' hand amiably. "He holds our lives in his hands, so if you want to throw anything at him, make sure it's not lethal. Our navigator and weapons specialist, and his wife, Magda," the woman next to Max smiled warmly at Charles, "and their nieces Dinna and Marie."

"I'm pleased to meet you," Charles said earnestly, smiling at the crew of Erik's ship.

"We've been wanting to meet you, too," said Dinna. Marie, evidently the shyer of the two, nodded her head emphatically. "It's been forever since Erik's brought anyone new on board. And you're all he talks about."

"That is patently untrue," Erik protested gruffly.

"No, you usually don't even talk," agreed Magda. She winked at Charles. "So Erik mentioning anyone at all was pretty big.

"And you didn't tell us he's a cute one." Max aimed a roguish grin at Charles. "Twenty years off me, lad, and I'd be taking you out on the sub-ship and showing you a few moves, if you know what I mean."

Charles, face burning, glanced wide-eyed at Magda, but the woman just laughed and slapped her husband on the arm. "As if you won't try it anyway."

An arm slung around and splayed possessive fingers over Charles' hip. "Why I didn't throw all of you out and upgraded the ship to a full AI system, I'll never know."

"Because we've got incriminating photos of you?" said Dinna. She grinned at Charles. "He probably hasn't told you *anything*, has he? Uncle Max is his godfather; I think he and the old Master Lehnsherr were second cousins or something."

"Second cousins, third cousins twice removed, and possibly second cousins on another line if what they said about Old Jacob was true," said Max. "Family trees get a bit complicated, spaceside."

"Here," said Erik, pushing a pile of clothing into Charles' hands, "I can lend you some of mine, until we get you your own."

"Space is a lot colder than I expected," said Charles. "Explains all those layers you used to walk around in." He went into the bathroom and took a quick shower. Erik's ensuite looked every bit like the regular bathrooms in the Manor - thank the Gods - down to the tile and the wooden frame of the large mirror. If he ignored the ever-present hum of the engines, and a few details like the extra options on the taps for when the ship no longer had constant access to water, he could have been back in the house.

He donned one of Erik's white shirts and two jackets on top of it, and squeezed into trousers made out of a thick, tough fabric. For all that Charles was smaller than Erik, Erik had a far leaner build overall, and was noticeably thinner in certain areas.

Charles shuffled out of the bathroom, tugging awkwardly at the white shirt, which was too tight over the shoulders. He also had to leave the top button of the trousers open; Erik was trimmer around the
waist than he was.

Erik made an approving sound from where he was sitting on the side of the bed, eyes raking hotly down Charles' body. "On second thought, perhaps you should continue to wear my clothes."

Charles grinned at him, drifting closer. He didn't need his telepathy to know what kind of thoughts were playing out in Erik's head, but the man might as well be shoving them directly into Charles' mind. Though, "I'm fairly sure that one is not physically possible, Master Lehnsherr."

"Physics may yet surprise us, Mister Francis," purred Erik. The metal ornamentation on the jackets and the fastenings on Charles' borrowed trousers suddenly twitched.

"Oh!" exclaimed Charles, delighted. *I see you've been practicing.*

"It helps to have clear... goals," said Erik. The lower register of his voice sent a shiver down Charles' body.

"And what sort of goals would these be?" Charles teased. He bumped into Erik's knees, and slid closer, parting his legs to straddle Erik's thighs.

Smooth, slender hands came up, teasing the cut of Charles' hips. Fingers slipped under the jackets to play with the stretched material of the shirt. Erik leaned forward and brushed his lips up along Charles' jaw, which Charles hadn't thought to be so *sensitive* before. "They are varied and many," Erik murmured. His thumbs began pushing up Charles' shirt, and Charles breath stuttered at the tiny points of contact over bare skin. "I have prodigious *use* for a man in your current... position."

Charles broke; he surged forward and up, capturing Erik's lips with his. The pervasive coolness of space was momentarily forgotten. In fact, he felt too hot, the arousal spreading like fire under his skin. He yanked off the shirt he'd just put on, impatient, and curled his arms around Erik's shoulders, pressing their upper bodies together as he sucked on Erik's bottom lip.

They were interrupted, suddenly, by a loud banging on the door. Wolverine shouted, "Erik, get a fucking hold of yourself. The painting frames and weird tree statue out here are floating in circles."

Charles burst out laughing. "Seems like we need to start on your training, darling."

He always knew when he was dreaming. People in dreams had no real minds, for one, though in particularly vivid dreams they sometimes carried the ghost of minds, which Charles would recognize as manufactured by his own, in the same way his mind manufactured faces and clothing and behaviors.

This one was odd, because it felt *old*, and yet he was sure he'd never had this dream before.

A scrap of paper stretched out from under his feet towards a shapeless horizon in a way not unlike a path. There was a weight resting on his hair, like a heavy band encircling his head. He lifted his hands to it, but could feel nothing other than skin and hair, as if his fingers passed right through it.

On the paper was written, over and over: *It's time to go home.*

"This place is *huge,*" exclaimed Raven. "Was the Manor anything like this?"
"The Manor's bigger, actually," replied Charles. He felt an absurd sense of pride about that, even though he'd only lived in the Manor for a couple of months, and as a guest besides. "But the overall appearance is the same."

Raven cast him a look that he couldn't read. But she didn't say anything, and continued poking her head into various rooms. Though the ship wasn't quite at the scale of the Manor, it was still rather enormous. There were five habitable levels, and guest rooms enough to fit half of West Chester. It was clearly intended house an extended family in comfort. Since it was just Erik and the Maximoffs living there at the moment, there were many unused rooms on every level.

"Oh good, a toilet," said Raven, somewhere up ahead.

Charles blinked, "um, about that," and hurried after her.

He'd expected (hoped) to spend a great deal of time with Erik, now that they were both spaceside instead of Erik commuting to and from the Manor, like in the week after Raven's graduation. But, in fact, he barely saw Erik for the rest of the week. Apparently, hiding out in the countryside for over two months led to a pile of work approaching infinity, and rescheduled meetings that needed some judicious bending of the time-space continuum to fit in with the already scheduled commitments.

Charles assured Erik that he and Raven were fine with being left to their own devices. They had a whole ship to explore, after all, and it was hardly fair to demand more of Erik's time when the man practically collapsed into their bed every night, barely awake for an exchange of sweet, lingering kisses.

On the plus side, that also meant Erik was too tired to wield his powers when the petting got a little heavy; the down side was that he usually passed out before things could get really interesting, leaving a sexually-frustrated Charles to take care of himself.

There was still an overall benefit - the sleepy interactions got Erik used to physical contact, after a lifetime of distancing himself from others, and in particular got him used to Charles' closeness.

It was a revelation for Charles, too: lying in the dark, curled against Erik, the brush of his lips and the murmur of his sleepy thoughts both welcomed, cherished.

All of Magneto's public rooms had names. Charles' favorite was 'Prospero', one of the smaller reading rooms. (He took this as a sign that Erik's mother had done most of the interior decorating and structuring of the ship.) He found himself spending most of his time in that room, despite he and Raven being given free rein of the ship. It had a bookshelf, a compscreen, a terminal for downloading reading material right into his compad, a comfortably squishy armchair, and the largest viewing windows of all the reading rooms, transparent pseudo-glass stretching floor-to-ceiling along nearly the entirety of one wall. Charles repositioned the armchair so that it was facing the windows, and he merely had to look up from his reading material of the moment to enjoy a spectacular view of the stars, or of Eisen.

Raven had shaken her head and muttered that of course Charles would find himself a little nook to read in even when they were in space. She tried out the chair and agreed about the view, but complained about the armrests; Charles found it reminded him of his wheelchair, of which he had grown unexpectedly fond.
He eventually acclimatized to the coldness of space life, but he could never get completely comfortable with the median temperature of the ship, and usually brought with him the one piece of clothing for low temperatures that he owned - a thick jumper that Raven despised and regularly threatened to incinerate.

Once, Erik stopped by and spotted him wearing it. For all that Erik seldom hesitated to share his opinions, he seemed to choose that instance to act too well-bred to comment on the jumper, and instead asked Charles why he didn't just adjust the temperature of the room to what he was comfortable with? The bookshelf was sealed and had a separate ventilation system, so he needn't worry about harming the books.

That was how Prospero became one of the warmest rooms on the ship, aside from the kitchens and the docking bay.

He still kept the jumper with him, though. Who knew when he might get cold walking down the corridors?

One morning, over breakfast, Marie came in with the mail as usual, and grinned shyly at Charles when she handed the pile over to Erik. Charles smiled back, but remained confused until Erik snorted and announced, "We have been invited to the Reece-Mains charity ball for their Traveling Hospitals program."

"We?" asked Charles.

"Yes." Erik met his eyes somberly. "Charles, I won't lie - attending these kinds of events is part of this lifestyle. I'll understand if you need a longer to settle in, but it'd be better if you made a public appearance with me now rather than later. Doubtless some people already know that I have a personal guest on board Magneto, and perhaps they also know that this same guest had stayed in the Manor. I would not be surprised if there are rumors about my 'vacation' really being a romantic sojourn with a lover."

Erik held up the envelope. "Dame Mains herself handwrote the invitation." When Charles clearly failed to grasp the significance of this point, Erik clarified, "Most invitations are a printed card with the host's signature at the bottom. She's indicating, with appropriate tact, that she has a personal interest in my attendance, and the only possible reason she could have one now after I've been attending her charity events since I was old enough to drink is that she's heard something about you."

"Oh. I see," said Charles. He absently bit at his bottom lip. "I'd like to go. As long as you are all right with it, and you make sure I don't make a fool of myself."

Erik's smile was worth the new knot of anxiety in Charles' gut. "Of course I want you to go. We'll come up with a plan."

Charles was prepared to throw himself into learning all that he needed to know for the formal occasion. He pulled all the relevant books from the Lehnsherr private database and rented a number of documentaries on the history of the Ten Sol elite.

"I'm afraid this won't be enough," Erik said somberly, shaking his head and sharing a look with Wolverine.

The next day, a woman with the somewhat auspicious job title of Protocol Instructor appeared on the
ship. "Moira MacTaggert - you may call me Moira," she introduced herself, shaking Charles' hand firmly. Then she dragged Charles into one of the unused rooms, had him stand in the center, and prowled around him with narrowed eyes while writing notes on her slim compad. It was all a bit terrifying, and made Charles think about the predatory fish he'd seen in the nature documentaries, circling its prey to see if it was edible.

"Well, I've worked with worse," was her final assessment.

Charles sighed. "Is this really necessary? It's only a charity ball, and people will be looking at Erik, not me."

Moira tapped him on the forehead with her compad, making him blink. "And that just demonstrated why Master Lehnsherr has hired me. Mister Francis -"

"Charles, please."

"- Charles, they may play it to the 'Nets as a simple, modest charity ball, but the fact that it is the first event of the latter half of the year means that it'll set the scene for all the business and political maneuvering for the next few months. Also, it's being hosted by Reece-Mains, which means it'll be bloodier than the hunting grounds of East Maddox. In a social and political sense, of course." Moira shook her head. "And if you were going with someone else - one of the Verrow twins or the younger St. Etoile - you might be able to get away with acting the arm candy. But you're going with Erik Lehnsherr."

"...Yes?" said Charles, after a moment's pause.

Moira rolled her eyes, as if Charles was being obtuse on purpose. "In all the time Master Lehnsherr has been in the public eye - since the age of five, I believe - he has never ever brought a formal companion to an event. Occasionally, he'd meet someone at the event whose company he'd share for the rest of the evening. Or he'd attend with a business associate, or a school friend, or an attempted match, which everyone agrees doesn't really count. People will talk, and ask you inappropriate questions, and try to get you to reveal private details about Master Lehnsherr."

Charles shook his head and gloomily resigned himself to an excruciating week. "All right. What's first?"

"You'll be pleased to know that, physically, we won't actually have to do more than the usual grooming." Moira went back to circling him. "You have very fine features - don't be insulted if someone implies that there must have been a bit of Society hidden away in your family tree. Your skin is quite rough, but the paleness will look right at home on the red carpet..."

The basic etiquette, he understood. The names of the current First Fleet Families and their rankings in the Books, he drilled into his memory. Even the ridiculous number of utensils, he mastered after one demonstration, having had prior lessons in the Manor. At least his information junkie-slash-sponge skills were good for something. He didn't tell Moira about his telepathy, and did his best not to cheat by peeking at the answers she expected, but he knew he could fall back on that if he really got stuck. His efforts seemed to help in thawing out Moira's demeanor towards him, in any case.

The dancing, though - Raven had always said that he had the coordination of a rock.

"Try again, Mister Francis," said Moira, adjusting his grip on her arm. "This is meant to be an elegant dance - you are still rushing the turn and the bow. I know it's a little difficult now because
you are taller than me, but Master Lehnsherr is taller than you, so it is important for you to learn all the different turns and the poses for the shorter partner."

Charles tried not to sigh too loudly and returned to the starting point, facing Moira. His back and shoulders were starting to ache. He was finding this more tiring than working in the ‘combs.

Moira started the music again. Charles waited the requisite number of beats, straightening up when she glared at his drooping shoulders pointedly, and stepped forward to take her hands.


He was used to faster, unstructured dances, where energy and spirit were more important, usually coming down to a test of stamina. Good improvisations were applauded. He was not used to having to get every move and angle of the arms precisely correct.

"Pay attention, Mister Francis," snapped Moira, stepping neatly past him as he pivoted back on one foot.

Most of his mistakes occurred when she was behind him, when he couldn't use her movements to prompt his own.

He was concentrating so hard on the beats in the music and the *step-forward, step-forward, side-step, bow-* that he visibly started when familiar hands, gentle and warm, came to rest on his shoulders; as they gently guided him forward into the next step; a warm voice said, "A little slower, hold for a breath."

A hand closed around Charles' right; he stepped back, a quick turn with a complicated swap of hand-holds, and the diagonal step with the arched arm suddenly made sense now that he was looking up.

Erik's eyes shone bright and amused. "Hello, Charles."

"Hello," replied Charles, not bothering to hide the swell of joy and relief at the mere sight of Erik. Although, *Oh, goodness, Moira said I shouldn't do more than a small, polite small, I'm probably showing far too much right now.*

*A ridiculous amount,* agreed Erik, *but I don't mind.*

A close pass - possibly far too close for a formal dance, but with Erik's scent filling his nose, Charles found it hard to be concerned. Or to step away.

"Did you have a good meeting?" asked Charles, trying to rally enough functional brain cells. His voice came out huskier than usual, causing Erik's gaze to darken.

" Barely tolerable," replied Erik. His hand changed its grip on Charles' hand. A minor detail in a larger, complicated shift of positions: switching from holding Charles' fingers to pressing their hands palm-to-palm, then entwining their fingers. It was a fairly small point of contact; so Charles had no idea why his skin on that hand suddenly felt a several magnitudes more sensitive. Erik's thumb somehow managed to stroke the inside of his wrist, and Charles hoped that his legs were following the program because the rest of him was quite thoroughly distracted.

Erik smirked, clearly enjoying his effect on Charles. "You're actually doing much better now that you're not overthinking it."

Charles naturally tried to bring his brain back online, and subsequently stumbled, banging his knee against Erik's leg.
"I'm sorry," Charles said automatically - but Erik simply moved them both into the next step, leading with a confidence and natural grace that would make Charles envious if he wasn't so busy being aroused by it.

"Just move with me," said Erik. *Come in here, if you need to.*

Really? Charles didn't bother hiding his surprise. He normally only entered the minds of others for important reasons; to do so just for dancing felt wonderfully frivolous.

Erik's mind continued to give off welcoming signals. Charles, tentatively, slipped in. His breath caught a little at the delight bubbling on the surface, Erik's enjoyment at using his body in this way, and a deeper note of contentment-joy-awe at getting to share it with Charles. Charles found himself drifting closer to Erik, their eyes locked. His body, of its own accord, started to follow and step and turn in tandem with Erik's-

The music ended. It felt like some time had passed. Charles found himself gazing up at Erik, breathing fast, their bodies facing each other, one hand on Erik's shoulder and the other holding Erik's hand. Erik's free hand was on the small of his back. The air between them felt thick and heavy. They should step back and bow, that was the correct ending to a dance, he just had to make himself look away from Erik-

"Dear Gods, does this happen a lot?" Moira's voice cut through the fog in Charles' brain.

"Every fucking minute," replied Wolverine, in the tone of a man with many burdens. "Now you know what I have to put up with."

*Why is it that all the people I hire just give me grief?* grumbled Erik.

*You'd be bored if they didn't,* Charles pointed out. He wondered if he could get away with a small kiss. He risked it, pressed his lips against Erik's for a moment that was only painful for its briefness.

He expected Moira to squawk about Appropriate Behavior In Public, but when he finally turned towards her, she was wearing an expression of surprise. Which turned considering, and she gave Charles the first smile he'd seen on her.

She didn't say anything, though, until he was accompanying her back to her shuttle; the lessons were done for the day. "I won't lie, when Erik first contacted me and told me about you, I was shocked - as will everyone else be, at the charity ball. And I thought- but no, I guess you are the real deal, and turns out he's as human as the rest of us."

Considering Charles knew the reason for Erik's former reticence about relationships, and how the human part of it was so very much not the problem, he merely shrugged and said, "I don't blame you for thinking me some kind of opportunist. I suppose that's hardly unusual, up here shipside. But I do care about Erik."

"You'll find that people will be just as baffled about that," said Moira, though she was smiling. "I'll see you again tomorrow, Charles."

And then, it was Erik's turn to train.

"You've always been able to sense metal," said Charles. "I think that was why you felt safe in the 'combs, because a part of you knew that you could feel all that metal, and the Vines too, and use them in case of danger. When I took you to see the Egg, I noticed that you kept looking in its
direction even before we saw it - like you knew there was something different there. That's likely why you always know where Wolverine is, too."

A grunt from the direction of the door. "Don't go rooting around in my head."

"I haven't," Charles said to Wolverine, startled, "Erik mentioned that he could always tell where you were, and your claws are clearly metal. I just meant that it'd be pretty easy for him to track you by them."

Wolverine grunted again, but without hostility this time. "Whole skeleton." He sucked on a foul-smelling cigar.

"Pardon?"

"My whole skeleton is fucking covered in metal," said Wolverine. "Adamantium."

"That's-" Amazing? Useful? Barbaric? Charles was staying out of Wolverine's head, but the man's deliberately casual air was quite telling on its own. By the Gods, his extraordinary rate of healing...

"-probably what Erik picks out, otherwise on a ship you'd be lost in the noise generated by so much metal. Or not - we don't know how fine his senses are yet."

"What do you want me to do?" Erik asked, frowning. The faint rumble of his mind's surface layer felt thoughtful, though.

Charles pulled out the extra bag he'd brought with him, full of scrap metal from the fields at home. "I'd like for you to learn how to identify the metallic types just through your power. It'd be interesting to see, for example, if you can determine the exact composition of an alloy. You need to get comfortable with your metal-sense, so that you can use it as easily as you use your eyes or ears or nose."

"All right." Erik took a deep breath.

For Erik, Charles knew that it wouldn't be so much a matter of reaching out, as coaxing his mind to stop blocking off his power. Charles tried to project a sense of it's all right, there's nothing to fear, all is well. "Alles ist gut," slipped out of Erik's mouth, to Charles' surprise. He seemed to find comfort in the phrase, as he kept repeating it under his breath.

"How is it?" Charles asked.

"Just - come in here," Erik said impatiently, pointing at his temple.

Charles' breath caught. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, it'd be easier than trying to describe it."

Charles took a deep breath and plunged into the swirl of Erik's thoughts, not bothering to hide how eager and excited he was to be invited in.

At first, it was as if Charles had merely opened his eyes again. The view through Erik's eyes was only a little bit different from his, closer to the window and, yes, a little higher up. Charles carefully drew back; he'd only meant to peek and ride along, not exert any control. It alarmed him that he'd even done so, and unintentionally. But then, his powers did seem curiously attuned to Erik.

Erik, ironically, was not even the least bit concerned, as if Charles taking over his body was an everyday occurrence. He simply blinked when Charles returned him the ability to do so. It took
Charles some adjusting before he was receiving the same sensory input that Erik was, without taking over the associated body part or, indeed, any function of Erik's nervous system.

Sight, sound, smell, even taste. Different from Charles', in endlessly fascinating ways, and oh, he should have thought to try something like this sooner, and maybe linking with a non-mutant for a more thorough comparison-

And then the extra one hit, the layer of awareness that Charles could only call magnetism-sense or metal-sense. Would giving it a term matter if no one else had it? It overlapped with the other senses, much like smell could sometimes translate to taste or sound could sometimes be felt. He could feel Erik concentrating, reaching out haphazardly to the metal all around them. The hull, when focused upon, seemed to give off a faint, sonorous chiming, while certain metals underneath the floor (the gravity wells, Erik's mind whispered, in a flash of instinct plus working knowledge of his own ship) tasted almost-bitter and clay-like. But it was a sense all on its own; Erik could pick out every metallic item nearby, could sense the magnetic field generated by Eisen, could reach out and grab either of those and manipulate them at will.

He wasn't doing the latter, though. Charles had observed enough fledgling mutants to have witnessed a wide range of responses to extra-human ability. Some feared it from the start, unable to look at themselves or anyone else, while others crowed with joy at the possibilities, the freedom that their ability represented. The ability was a factor, as well. Alex had been terrified of his - still was, really - and it had taken the entire compound to convince him that secluding himself was not the solution, especially since he had a little brother to take care of. Angel had arrived bruised and battered, but the joy she took from her mutation was bright enough to rival the sun.

Erik was somewhere in the middle. The fear he'd lived in for most of his life was still there, palpable, but Charles could feel him pushing it to the back of his mind, resisting the self-trained instinct to pull back, to ignore the metal-sense and not think about his powers. He was deliberately scanning all the metal in the room, as if learning them, studying what they felt like through his ability. Not quite pushing, but not hiding, either.

"This is," Erik breathed, and Charles could feel him fumbling for a word to describe all the conflicting emotions evoked by this experience, all the ways in which the world was suddenly new.

"Yes," said Charles, smiling, and touched Erik's mind with his own delight, I know.

Time to come home, was written on a piece of metal that was floating in space.

Come home, child, read the back of the wheelchair he'd used in the Manor.

The City-in-Orbit was, officially, the fifth City of Eisen. Charles had read that it had originally been built for planetside workers whose jobs regularly took them spaceside, but who were unwilling to leave planetside life entirely. Now, it was considered full-on spaceside territory.

The City, also known as the Orbital, consisted of a flotilla of ships locked in geosynchronous orbit over Eisen. Three quarters of the ships were super-atmospheric models built for such a station; able to enter the planet's atmosphere, and travel around the Eisen sun system, maybe make a limited number of jumps onto the InterSol in case of emergencies, but little else.

The remaining quarter were the true space-faring ships, like Magneto, which could handle long
journeys lasting months between refueling, and didn't need the InterSol to travel faster-than-light.

The City had everything its planetside counterparts could boast of: sports-rings, entertainment plazas, even a couple of malls. A veritable fleet of shuttles moved from ship to ship, delivering supplies and carrying passengers to other ships or the public platforms. Charles was quite impressed with such convenient public transportation.

When he asked about ordering a shuttle to take himself and Raven to Orbital Mall, however, Erik raised an eyebrow and declared that he would drive them. "I need a break, anyway."

They went on the subship docked on Magneto's side.

"What's the difference between a pod and a subship?" asked Raven, after they were seated and strapped in.

"Think of a subship as a condensed version of your main ship," replied Erik from the pilot's chair. "But it's still an independent vessel, able to do most of the things the parent ship does. In ships that aren't part of a Fleet, like Magneto, it can double as a fighter ship, or a guard. A pod, on the other hand, only has basic life support and limited motion. Cheap and easy, and completely temporary."

It took less than half an hour to get to the bloated bulk of the Orbital Mall and find parking in the open hangar bay. Charles' apprehension began when he got close enough to pick up on the sheer mass of minds inside the great structure - even worse than the most stressful days in the 'combs - and only grew as they took the lifts up to the shopping area.

The crowds in the Mall were terrifying.

Raven, predictably, absolutely loved it. Erik appeared content to trail after them, a stately shadow who was himself shadowed by his bad-tempered and unshaven bodyguard.

That was, until Raven audibly exclaimed, "you need to get new clothes, Charles, or I swear I'm going to shoot your old-man jumper out into space, Erik's just too nice to tell you how embarrassing you look." An unholy gleam appeared in Erik's eyes.

Charles sighed in defeat and let himself be dragged into a clothing store.

It was in a quiet part of the mall, at least. But Charles quickly realized that it was quiet because no one could possible afford to shop there. The shop only had a few items on display, and half of those didn't even have prices listed on them.

"Master Lehnsherr," a sales associate greeted them, materializing out of thin air.

Her cool brown eyes traveled quickly over their little party. Charles sensed her distaste at his and Raven's appearances, and her dismissal of Wolverine as the bodyguard that he was. (Though Wolverine in space looked far better put together than Wolverine planetside, despite the stubble; here the man wore several layers of black clothing, and the topmost coat was embroidered with the Lehnsherr family crest in discreet gunmetal grey.)

"Please help the young lady," Erik said coolly. His manner was distant, stern, totally unlike how he was with Charles and Raven normally. Charles wondered if Erik had seen him flinch at the sales associate's reaction, or if this was how Erik usually behaved with other people. "Raven," and the warmth in Erik's voice was unmistakable, now, "get whatever you'd like. A few formal things, at least."

Another sales associate appeared. Erik acknowledged him with a small nod. Charles realized that
Erik looked, somehow, like he was the one in charge, not just a customer in a store. "I will be helping Mr. Francis," he said, in a tone that brooked no argument, and the second associate gave him none, but led them into a partitioned area at the back of the store.

Charles pointedly refused to notice the way Raven was *smirking* at him.

He ended up standing on a raised platform, keeping still so that a 'bot could take a million measurements of various body parts. An older, well-dressed gentleman, apparently the tailor, materialized out of the ether, or wherever it was that all the employees lurked in between customers, and engaged Erik in an intense discussion while they walked up and down a long rack displaying fabric samples and clothing styles. Charles considered being annoyed at not being consulted about any of it, but he had to concede that he was well out of his league.

Eventually, he was given a pile of sample shirts and trousers and coats to try on, while the tailor and the 'bot pinned and marked the fabric around him.

Charles was in the dressing booth, struggling with a pair of sample trousers - he knew how to work a zipper, damn it, his one piece of formalwear zipped up the front, but the damn thing refused to stay up and closed - when he gave it a frustrated yank and accidentally caught his finger on the teeth. He swore under his breath, sucking the hurt bit of skin into his mouth, and mentally cursed at the whole sodding enterprise, blasted thing, stupid metal and its stupid edges-

Metal zipper. *Oh.*

He leveled Erik with a dark glare when he came out of the dressing booth, after getting the trousers and shirt on. Erik gazed back innocently.

The tailor immediately started fussing around Charles, so he reached and gave Erik a mental poke. *Very good. Clearly you do have a fine level of control, when you want to.*

*It was quite difficult,* Erik admitted. *I had to concentrate on the zip-pull for a long time before I could grasp it.*

Charles tilted his head. *We know that you can feel the metal. I wonder - can you feel what the metal feels?*

Erik's eyes narrowed. And then widened. *You minx.*

The zipper twitched fractionally. Erik frowned, and the zipper track *moved,* pushing back into Charles, to the side, and Charles' breath caught when the line of metal curved, cold, against his skin underneath. His *bare* skin.

"Mr. Delor," said Erik, in the same commanding voice he'd used outside, which was definitely *not* affecting the situation in Charles' trousers in the least, "please give us some time alone."

The tailor turned and left the room without so much as a flicker of curiousity. Then again, Charles' attention was mostly on Erik; a group of Sepor agents in bright knitwear could have trooped through the small room without him noticing.

*Is this a rich people thing, to expect that you'll get whatever you want?*

One corner of Erik's lips quirked up to an undeniable smirk. *Are you planning on denying me what I want?*

*What about security cameras?*
All inexplicably turned away. Delor is very good at not questioning the whims of his regular clients.

There was a pointed tugging at the crotch of the trousers. Charles let himself be pulled towards Erik. He reflected that his mock glare would have been more effective if Erik had actually been looking at his face. Then again, the decidedly hungry look in the man's eyes was making the situation in said trousers even hotter and tighter.

Charles' breath hitched when the zip was practically yanked down without the help of any hands, fast as lightning. The accompanying thunder was in his ears, when he felt a gust of heated breath from Erik's mouth brush over his flush, bared skin. Charles let out a whimper.

"Oh, Gods," moaned Erik thickly. "Please, Charles, let me." And then the trousers were caught around Charles' thighs and Erik's mouth was on his cock.

Charles would have stumbled, knees failing him, if it weren't for Erik's hand gripping the back of his thighs, hard enough to bruise, and oh, wouldn't that be gorgeous, Erik's long elegant fingers imprinted into his skin. "Oh, oh, yes, Erik," Charles sighed. He felt caught, Erik's grip holding him firmly in place, while Erik licked, tongue flattened, a broad line along the underside of his cock, and closed his lips around the heat, sucking, hot and wet and eager. As if Charles was the most delicious thing he'd ever tasted.

Erik, Erik, babbled Charles, unable to take his eyes away from where his cock, hard and glistening, repeatedly disappeared into Erik's mouth. You're so, I want you to- He let out a squeak when Erik pulled him forwards, the movement pushing more of Charles' length into Erik's mouth. Erik made a pleased groan, the vibrations chasing all the words out of Charles' head completely.

You taste so good, Charles, floated over from Erik's mind. Erik's thoughts were hazy with desire, disjointed impressions rather than anything of coherence; full of you look beautiful and mine and want to touch all over.

Another pull, sending Charles off-balance, and his hips jerked forward; he sank all the way into Erik's mouth, had to bite down on his lip to contain his shout. Erik moaned unabashedly, taking Charles down his throat like he was practiced at this, spit spilling down his chin, his tongue doing lush, obscene, impossible things.

Those large hands slid up, cupping Charles' arse, and one finger slipped between to tease at his perineum. Charles struggled against the trousers, now down to his knees, wanting to spread his legs and invite more of Erik's explorations.

The finger slid back, and up, and traced the skin around his hole. Erik's mouth pulled back slightly, but sucked harder, head bobbing. Charles hands wound into his hair. Erik looked up, loosened his hold on Charles. Raised his eyebrows - inviting.

"Fuck, Erik," Charles whispered. The first thrust of his hips was more instinctive than deliberate, his body chasing after the heat and pressure of Erik's mouth. Erik moaned, heavy-lidded and encouraging, and the following thrusts were very much deliberate, Charles holding Erik's head steady with hands while his hips pumped forward, heart hammering and heat building under his skin as he fucked Erik's mouth.

Erik, I'm close, he warned. He felt a tide of arousal and yes, give it to me from Erik's mind, and never mind close, the edge was right there, and then the tip of Erik's finger pushed into him, dry, and Charles came with a strangled shout, sparks lighting up his vision, practically collapsing on top of Erik.
He panted, feeling like he was trying to re-inflate his lungs, only distantly aware of Erik wiping him up, tucking him back in. *We should probably buy these trousers now,* he thought blearily.

There was an odd, burnt smell in the air, faint over the stronger smell of sex. And a vaguely sheepish look on Erik's face. Charles twisted his head around. One of the light fixtures was dark, faint scorch marks on the ceiling around it, as if it had exploded.

Ah, so those sparks hadn't just been him.

Charles gave it a mental shrug and leaned into Erik's warmth. At some point, he'd cuddled up to Erik and was now sitting on his lap. Erik's neck was warm, a little salty with sweat, and *Gods,* Charles could smell his come on Erik's mouth. Erik's lips were red, slightly swollen; Charles pressed his lips against them, whimpering, and drove his tongue into Erik's mouth, thinking, *my cock did this* as he tasted himself.

He could feel the bulge in Erik's trousers, so hard that it must be hurting. He shuffled himself forward, reaching to undo the clasp, but Erik caught his hands.

"No," he mumbled, wetly tracing Charles' lips with his tongue, "can't, Charles. Seeing you come... I did that to the light..." Charles nipped at Erik's lower lip in protest. "Don't know what will happen if you touch me right now."

"Damn powers," groaned Charles. He rested his forehead against Erik's. Theoretically, he should be able to suppress Erik's ability for him, but in his post-coital state his own control was probably not at its best either. Plus, he was supposed to be helping Erik find control on his own. "Right. We'll finish up here, get Raven, get back to Magneto, and then," he grazed his teeth, promisingly, over Erik's jaw, "we'll do some more training."

Erik gasped, his hands digging into Charles' back. Charles looked up and saw that the metal scraps above him were still revolving, a loose circle, but a couple were drifting lower, and they were no longer equally distant from one another.

"Come on, Erik, *focus,*" he cajoled.

Erik muttered a number of uncomplimentary phrases under his breath and squeezed his eyes shut. Charles couldn't blame him; he kept getting distracted, himself, watching his fingers slowly pumping Erik's cock. It was a lovely specimen, he decided - longer than his own, though not as thick, and it felt amazing in his hand, all hardness and soft skin, so slick now around the head. Maybe he should have gone with his mouth - except, right, training.

The pieces of scrap were back in their circle, the turning steadier now.

"That's it," said Charles, encouragingly. He wiggled closer, spreading his legs more, his bare arse scraping over Erik's equally bare thighs. He wondered if Erik was losing feeling in his legs. The hands clamped down on Charles' hips clearly communicated that the man wanted Charles to stay where he was, though.

It was the exact position they'd been in at the store, with the added bonus of privacy and a bed, because Charles believed in consistency. Or something. And because he would have loved to have done this at the store.

Charles altered his grip, adding a swipe of his thumb over the slit at every up-stroke. Erik's breath stuttered. Charles leaned close, pecked at those lips - usually stern and tense, but it was soft now, for
Charles - before drawing Erik into a full kiss, his tongue sliding lazily into Erik's mouth.

*Good,* he caressed into Erik's mind, accompanying it with heat and a sense of the slow pleasure building inside him. Desire tinged every part of Erik's mind. It was intoxicating - everything about Erik was *intoxicating,* it seemed, to Charles.

He tried not to compare lovers, as it wasn't fair on anyone, but neither could he forget how many had decried *too intimate* of something that came as natural as speaking to Charles; and here, Erik's mind felt his touch and *purred* at it, the want in him only growing stronger, unashamed of Charles seeing it.

As if, went the dangerous thought, he wanted Charles not *in spite of the telepathy,* but *including it;* unequivocally and without reserve.

Charles quickly shut off that line of thinking.

Erik's breaths were coming faster, his face contorting in concentration. He was struggling, Charles could tell - he'd trained himself to hold back, to keep everything down, and he was trying to convince his body that *it was all right,* while maintaining his hold on the metal scraps.

*You can do it,* he told Erik. *I believe in you.*

*What if- the ship-*

*So concentrate on the pieces of scrap. Let your power go into them and nothing else.*

Charles reached down with his other hand and gently massaged Erik's balls. Erik whimpered, bucking, and Charles started pumping him faster, leaning forward to suck on Erik's neck.

*You can do it, Erik. When* Erik whispered, *"No, no,"* Charles occupied his mouth with his own. *Yes, you can. I want you to. I want to see you come, Erik. You look so beautiful, like this. Come for me, love.*

Erik let out a sharp, sudden cry, his entire body jerking upwards. Charles whispered, "*yes, yes, that's it,*" and watched, greedily, the come spurting onto his stomach, between his legs, one streak landing on his own neglected arousal.

He looked up and laughed. "*Well, you definitely poured your power into those scraps - they're one big ball of metal, now.*" He inspected the room. "*But everything else looks intact,*" well, a few things had shifted, like the lamp, and he was fairly sure the ornamental work on the bedframe had not looked like that before, "*and I'm not sensing any alarm from the rest of the ship.*"

He beamed proudly at Erik. Erik smiled back, shaky, and Charles realized that the trembling in the man's body might not entirely be from the orgasm. He pulled Erik in for a kiss, sweet and soft, and held on to him, tight, for a long time after.

It was a testament to how stealthy Wolverine could be, and how accustomed to him Charles had gotten, that Charles (and, he suspected, Erik) frequently forgot about him until he pointedly coughed (in public places) or stomped off outright (in the privacy of Magneto), his mind blaring complaints about working for Erik being *cruel and unusual punishment* even for someone of his checkered past.

Sometimes, Charles got the impression that Wolverine was watching him as well, staring at him oddly. It was a little hard to be sure, though, what with all the bristle and perpetual scowling.
He was glad, anyway, that Wolverine was genuinely protective of Erik.

"I wonder how my parents found out," Erik said aloud one day, looking out of Prospero's windows in a familiar pose that Charles had mentally labeled Brooding And Beautiful. "About my powers, I mean."

"When you started walking," rumbled a hitherto-unremembered voice from the corner closest to the door, "you kept pulling down any random shit that had metal in it every time you fell over."

Erik looked over his shoulder and frowned at Wolverine. "I thought you didn't show up until I was four."

"Yeah. Your mom told me about it. Said that was when they started looking for a mutant to hire, to help look after you. So you wouldn't feel like such a freak growing up."

"What, did they put out an ad?" said Erik. His voice carried the usual bite of his conversations with his bodyguard, but there was a stillness to his stance, and he kept his face turned away.

Wolverine shrugged, playing with a toothpick. "Nah. I just turned up. Was in the area, but in a bad way. Your folks were good people. Didn't even charge me for the carpet I bled out on."

"We left soon after, I think. I can barely remember, now, but it seemed that way."

Erik radiated a sharp sense of loss, and Charles caught an impression of a small, kindly woman with gentle hands, and a faint thread of miss my parents wish I could remember more of them. He couldn't help but sympathize, which was why he said, "if you like, I can have a look?"

Erik turned to stare at him. Charles was sure that Erik would politely decline, of course Erik wouldn't want anybody poking around in his memories, Charles wasn't sure why he said anything in the first place except he was a big sap-

"All right."

Charles blinked. Erik gazed at him steadily, expectant. Charles wanted to ask, no restrictions, no warnings not to mess with your head? "Um," he said, then sighed and closed his eyes.

If the active surface of Erik's mind already felt wonderfully textured to Charles' telepathy, the deeper layers and memory systems were even more fascinating. Charles had to force himself to stay on track. He searched for familiar threads of Wolverine and mother and leaving, and allowed Erik's mind to guide him to where, if this were a garden, the paths had become faded and overgrown.

"Erik, this is Logan. He's going to make sure that you are safe. Why don't you show him around the house?"

Charles could feel the swirl of sadness and joy from Erik, at a memory rediscovered and at a memory that added to the loss. He was about to withdraw, when another memory, quite close by, unfurled.

The voices are muffled, and he can only see the top of Father's head from up here, but the words are clear enough: "You heard what he said, it's not safe for Erik to stay here. I can protect us better spaceside, Edie."

He and Erik stared at each other for a minute. Erik turned to Wolverine. "You were the one who told them to leave Eisen."

"Yup."
Erik frowned in confusion. "But why?"

"Because they were fucking coming after mutants," snapped Wolverine. "The m-sickness was a handy excuse, but mutants were being rounded up before then. Sometimes stuff got out, and people would blame the crazies. Spaceside thought the planetside were barbarians, planetside thought the spaceside were inbred cloneshit. But do you think a bunch of ragtag anti-mutant bandits could have brought down a whole fucking Fleet? Could have brought down Xavia? No, there were real big guns gunning after mutants. I told your parents all of that, and they decided to take their chances spaceside."

Ex-military, Charles thought with a sickening lurch. Was this why he was so dedicated to Erik? He'd sensed, sometimes, the mental equivalent of a steel wall in Wolverine's mind, locked tight. Nothing he could push through, but that would be crossing a line that Charles had long vowed to never, ever touch.

As if guessing his thoughts, Wolverine's gaze snapped towards Charles. But instead of anger, there was something wild and fiercely questioning in his eyes, as if Charles knew some answer that he desperately sought.

Eventually, Wolverine turned away, and, swearing loudly, stomped out of the room.

Charles' final session with Moira involved being poked and prodded in painful or alarming ways. It was the day before the charity ball, and evidently that was the right time to start on the cosmetics. Everybody else was summarily banned from the guest room that Moira had appropriated for this purpose, and where Charles would be sleeping that night.

"Master Lehnsherr will be having his treatments tomorrow," Moira informed Charles. "His program has been set for years, though, while you will need a bit of testing. Also, if something goes wrong or we discover that you have an allergy, there's time to counter the effects."

Charles squeaked in alarm, but was unable to protest properly due to the contraption that had been placed over his face. He felt sure torture victims in pre-space 15th century AD had enjoyed a similar view.

Many hours and a significant loss of skin layers, hair follicles, and personal dignity later, Charles was faced with the final task: getting dressed. He was glad for Moira's thorough and exhaustive instructions, in the end, since he'd insisted on getting dressed on his own. The formal outfit took a painstakingly long time, and on several points he had to undo the fastenings on a layer and put it on a different way.

The bottom layer, which went right over skin and was not meant to be visible, was a skintight space-suit that he'd seen on Erik before. It was black, for this outfit, and apparently provided minimal protection from potential shipside hazards such as leaking gas or unbuffered solar radiation. A beige undershirt went on top of that, looking a little bit like the aulass without the leather bits, and then a proper shirt, white and crisp. The trousers had to be put on after that, so he could tuck the shirt in, and he was impressed by the fit, which felt a lot like his practical dreisich trousers, only far softer and with a puzzling number of buckles down the side. Then, a waistcoat that had fastenings on the back as well as the front, so that it fit his figure, and to top it all off, a luxurious formal coat, maroon with elaborate gold embroidery, the bottom hem just brushing his knees. It did not escape his notice that it was the same shade as his favorite of Erik's formal coats.
"You look-" Erik cut off, trailed fingers down the richly textured coat. Charles felt a bolt of heat run through his body at the possessive, hungry expression on Erik's face.

"Not too ridiculous, I hope," Charles said. He intended it to be light-hearted, but the slight breathiness to his voice spoke well of the effect Erik had on him.

_By the Gods, Charles, the things I want to do to you_, thought Erik, loud and clear. This was quickly followed by very heated and very graphic images of exactly what Erik wanted to do to him right then. Charles' new wardrobe held a starring role. _The metal buckles on your trousers... want to pull them, spread your legs apart... want to suck you off right now... have you wear only the coat and fuck you..._

"Erik," Charles whispered, or tried to, but only a low whimper left his throat, and somehow his hands had made their way to Erik's broad shoulders.

There was a furious banging on the door. Which meant that Erik must have locked it while Charles was changing. "Cut it out, you two," shouted Raven. "Charles, come wait in the bridge so Erik can get changed. Erik, don't make me throw a bucket of ice at you - you're making the lights blink."

The _Ceri Amee_, from the outside, looked like a blunted, bloated starfish. It was a hub ship, built to play host to thousands of temporary guests and their various methods of transport. By the time Magneto crossed the contact-perimeter and provided ID, she was surrounded by winding lines of smaller ships, a queen in the midst of her attendants.

Charles stared, wide-eyed, through the main windows in the bridge, as Max piloted her smoothly through the three-dimensional traffic. He'd never seen so many ships in one place, before. The scrap fields hardly counted - the rusting tail of a L-Class 433 was a completely different thing entirely from a functional and free-flying L-Class 433. There were so many _colors_; on the ships themselves, on the occasional projected banner, on the glow of engines.

Magneto waited patiently for the ships to figure out where they were going, and then headed for one of the blunted starfish 'arms'. There was an opening on the stubby end, and Magneto slipped inside. After a moment of adjustment, Charles could see what looked to be an enormous hanger, already half full of docked ships.

Charles was glad for Moira insisting that he be ready before the ship made its approach, and thus didn't have to do anything else now but wait. He felt no small amount of apprehension, tempered slightly by excitement and curiousity, as their ship made its careful, stately way through the hangar, following a queue of many others.

"Charles," said Raven. He blinked, and realized that he must have grabbed onto her hand at some point, because he was currently squeezing it in what must be a painful grip. "Charles, just _breathe._"

Excellent idea. Charles made a good effort at it, sucking in air and forcing his lungs to inflate. There was nothing to be worried about. He would be with Erik, after all, and the only thing expected of him was to stand around and seem pleasant, both of which he'd been reliably told he was good at.

Even from here, he could feel the faint buzz of hundreds and hundreds of minds, moving about the enormous hub-ship. It was actually quite familiar, like visiting one of the Cities.

Then he felt Erik entering the bridge. Charles smiled in relief, turning to look at him - and promptly lost all the breath in his lungs again.
Erik was in a suit, with a crisp white undershirt and a long, formal jacket, the fabric embroidered like Charles' and elegant in an understated way. It was like that moment at the Manor, when he'd first seen Erik in formal attire - except much better, because this time he was staring right back at Charles, and there was a soft, inviting smile to his lips. Charles' fingers itched to run over all the solid, sharp lines of him. To feel Erik's warm body under all that cloth (such a shame to keep it hidden), to pull him to bed and rumple him up a bit-

Raven's fingers appeared in front of Charles' eyes, clicking sharply and making him flinch.

"Don't make me shoot you both with the freeze-dryer."

Magneto slowed smoothly to a halt in front of the reception platform a few minutes later. Erik went to stand at the main side-door, shoulders squared and tall, his presence commanding in an easy, unconscious way that made Charles want to obey any order that might come out of his mouth. Memory flickered, of Erik organizing the Evenfeast back at Chester with frightening efficiency, and Charles realized that it was this - not the wealth or the title or the pedigree, not really - that made Erik seem like something more at times; like a leader men would follow.

And then Erik turned towards him, smiling. He held out his hand. A question, an invitation - but not a command.

Charles beamed at him, and stepped forward; their fingers interlocked.

Magneto sped off, presumably to dock, after Erik and Charles stepped out onto the reception platform, Wolverine trailing after them. A smiling crewmate of the Ceri Ame took their names and directed them to a waiting carriage.

It looked like a cage made of ornate golden bars, but with gaps on the side to let guests in and out. The seats were soft, red, and Charles could feel the hum of the hover-engines through the floor.

"Are those real gold?" Charles asked, curious.

Erik blinked, and appeared to concentrate for a moment. "No. Gold-plated, maybe. There's a thin outer layer that's different from the inner structure - steel, I think."

Charles grinned and rewarded Erik with a soft kiss. Raven had pointed out that his 'teaching method' seemed to consist of bribing Erik with sexual favours into using his powers. Erik hadn't complained thus far, though.

Wolverine, who'd sat across from them, made a plaintive noise and swung himself out of the carriage. "I'm not subjecting myself to this for a moment longer than I fucking have to. I'll make my own way up to the ballroom."

Charles blinked at Wolverine's departing back. "Is he allowed to do that?"

Erik shrugged the shrug of, who am I to decide what the bodyguard who'd raised me from childhood can or cannot do?

The carriage took off, hovering a foot above the floor and traveling a sedate pace down the passageways of the hangar. Eventually, it entered an elevator beam that pushed them up several levels, until they popped up in the middle of a wide, marble-floored avenue.

A different crew-mate stood in wait to help guests out of their carriage. Erik passed her a small,
round token, and she scanned his hand with her compad. Her eyes, when they slid to Charles, were professional and politely questioning.

"This is my guest, Charles Francis," said Erik.

The crew-mate nodded, smiling at Charles, and invited him to enter his designation into her compad for their guest log. When he finished, Erik thanked the crew-mate and guided Charles towards a series of doors, following the flow of the crowd. Charles did his best to look at ease, or at least not on the verge of being ill, and tried not to ogle the ostentatious appearance of both the venue and their fellow guests.

The entry points to the event area were all on an upper level. Attendants, dressed more formally than the regular crew, stood ready to take hats and coats and, on one occasion, someone's protective boots. The stairs, with their polished banisters and rich carpeting, swept elegantly down to the spacious ballroom, which Charles suspected his entire village-compound could fit into, with room to spare. Round tables of varying sizes filled the room, except for a rectangle of clear floor in the middle; kept free, presumably, for dancing.

He wouldn't remember, later, how he made it down the stairs. All of Moira's careful instructions coalesced in his brain to form a vague jumble of \textit{stand straight think tall try not to pass out}, and the gold-tinged world with its tinkling dinnerware and hushed voices receded into the distance, unimportant. The only real thing was the weight of Erik's hand on his arm, and Erik's presence by his side; it was no effort at all to follow both.

The Dame Reece-Mains greeted them near the bottom of the stairs. Charles knew it was her because Moira had very determinedly forced him to memorize datasheets and accompanying images of all the notables expected to attend the charity ball.

"Master Lehnsherr!" she exclaimed, extending her hand for Erik to shake. "I'm so pleased that you are able to be here tonight."

"Thank you for your invitation, Lady Mains," replied Erik. "Allow me to introduce Mister Charles Francis, of Eisen."

"Good evening, Dame Reece-Mains," said Charles, smiling lightly and bowing.

"Good evening, Mister Francis." Their hostess smiled back, a distinctly speculative gleam in her eyes. Charles could feel her looking him up and down and possibly estimating his weight, without actually moving her gaze from his face. "It's lovely to see my cousin bringing a new face to one of our little outings. Most of us are too used to seeing the same faces, as I'm sure you can imagine."

"I am honoured to be here, my lady," Charles said neutrally. He could hear the advice that Moira had repeated to him in the last few days: \textit{the newcomer's best defense is to be as aggressively polite and vague as the situation allows.}

Erik lightly touched the small of his back, indicating that it was time to move on. A last of exchange of nods, and then they were following the gentle counter-clockwise drift of the room towards the remaining empty tables. Erik seemed to know exactly where they'd been seated.

\textit{YOU DID WELL, CHARLES.}

Moira's painfully effective conditioning prevented Charles from smiling any wider. \textit{Thank you, darling.} \textit{You don't need to shout, though, I can pick up your thoughts quite easily.}

\textit{I wasn't sure you were paying attention.}
Erik, I am always paying attention to you.

Erik turned and smiled at him. It startled Charles for a moment, since it seemed as if such an unwarranted acknowledgement would fall under Moira's list of Things Not To Do Under Any Circumstances, if she'd known about his telepathy.

Oh, they'd reached their table, and it merely looked as if Erik was helping Charles into his seat. Only someone as close as Charles was could see the shy tilt of Erik's lips.

*I'm sure it's only because I'm the one person you know in this room and you wouldn't know how to get back to the ship without me,* Erik eventually responded.

*Nonsense, I'm sure Wolverine is around here somewhere, he'll take me back. He likes me better than you, anyway.*

The burst of amusement from Erik was as good as a laugh. Charles tried to look as if he was admiring the table centerpiece: a colorful display of fresh flowers, arranged artfully in a shiny vase made out of a material he didn't recognize but was likely very expensive, with a couple of flowering vines also spilling out and curling in a loose circle around the base. Any prolonged gazing at Erik would, Charles was sure, look unmistakably amused and fond.

*Be wary of the ones wearing the striped sashes,* Erik reminded him. *They are people from the media and the 'Nets.*

At the end of the multi-course meal, one of the servers caught Charles' eye. She wore the pleasant smile that seemed permanently fixed on all the faces of the crew and event staff, did not make eye contact with any of the guests, and carried her tray with the grace of long practice. Charles smiled politely at whatever the lady at his table was saying, doing his best to cover up how little attention he was actually paying her.

*Raven,* he sent out admonishingly, *what are you doing?*

To her credit, his sister showed no outward sign of any change, smoothly refilling the glass of a somber military gentleman at a nearby table. *Did you think I was going to sit out my brother's big debut?* she replied, unrepentant. *Glad I didn't, too. You clean up real nice, big brother.*

*Thank you. Focus on maintaining your cover, please, so we don't get into trouble for this.*

*Like any of these people are actually keeping track of the hired help.*

*You really shouldn't underestimate them.*

His sister bustled off. Charles returned his attention to the conversation at the table, or tried to; then Erik leaned in and whispered, *"Raven knows that impersonating someone is illegal, right?"*

*Yes, I suspect that's part of the fun, for her,* Charles replied gloomily. He tilted his head at Erik. *Remarkable - your lips didn't even move.*

*Can you hear me?*

*Perfectly, my dear.*

*Well, this is much easier than pretending to take a sip every time.* Erik caught his eye and subtly twitched an eyebrow. *Some of these nosebodies can read lips.* Erik's thought-voice changed, sounding like a woman's; a memory, judging by the blurry edges of it: *Remember - one is expected*
to be cruelly polite to one's enemies, and politely cruel to one's friends.

Goodness, no wonder this whole place is so chilly.

Charles saw Erik looking at a portly man seated three tables away, and then a tall, matronly woman walking back from the dance floor on the other side of the room. Master Jocas and Admiral Brown have just concluded a negotiation over one of the Sepor checks on his trade route, explained Erik. Charles got a brief flash of what Erik had noticed: a minute-long exchange when the Admiral passed Master Jocas' table, a series of signals via hand placement while in idle conversation with other people, the order of individuals the Admiral had stopped to speak to. Relatively minor, they weren't particularly discreet about the whole thing. There's also the possibility that it's a distraction, and the real negotiation is something else entirely.

Is this much secrecy truly necessary? asked Charles.

Erik's shoulder twitched - a shrug. Good business practice. Security reasons. Circumventing the laws about verbal and written contracts. Take your pick. Personally, I suspect it's to show off more than anything else. Erik was a contained cloud of weariness, annoyance, and scorn. The lives of thousands affected by the vintage of wine someone selects, the way one leaves the napkin on the table. Oh, Sepor holds committees and meetings, but the real maneuvers take place here, out in plain sight. They say that the best plays, the most important accords, occur without the parties involved ever coming into direct contact with one another.

Charles couldn't help but think of their chess games, reinstated since they'd moved shipside. He'd been surprised at first, because Erik's personality did not seem suited to the patience that the game required. But the limited rules of chess and the low stakes of their games must be easy, compared to this.

"Charles," said Erik, holding out a hand, "my kingdom, for a dance?"

You'll certainly lose your kingdom, for subjecting all these unsuspecting people to my dancing.

For all of Charles' apprehension and the very public setting, dancing with Erik was a world away from what dancing with Moira had been like. Erik's movements were graceful, purposeful, long limbs gliding with the ease of someone born to this - this very visible demonstration of command and control. Charles couldn't help wondering what Erik's powers would be like, once he'd had the time and training to grow into them. It was such a different creature from Charles' power, which worked through subtlety and forces unseen; a fully-powered Erik would be a formidable force, impossible to overlook.

Charles took a step a half-beat too early and might have crashed into Erik's shoulder, except Erik had somehow noticed his mistake and angled his body as Charles passed him, so that his arm brushed teasingly across Charles' chest while his eyes held Charles' gaze; what should have been an embarrassing mistake turned into an unexpectedly seductive pass. Charles' breath caught in his throat.

It happened again, when Charles forgot to let go of Erik's hand in time. Erik just smirked and pulled him in, improvising a quick quarter-turn, and Charles definitely whimpered a little at the press of Erik's thigh against his, warm and firm, Erik's other hand curling possessively over Charles' hip to guide him.

Charles eventually decided he'd given it his best effort and tentatively asked, may I? and had to refrain from diving in completely when Erik's mind reflected back a warm wave of welcome. Slipping in carefully, he was not surprised to find that Erik wasn't even thinking about his
movements, the patterns of the various dances settled solidly into muscle memory. *Could you show me?* he had to ask.

A tickle of fondness, then Erik was visualizing the moves of the dance.

It got a lot easier after that. Erik must have felt the difference, because after the first set, he asked, *why didn't you just do that from the start?*

Charles could tell that Erik had liked the little improvisations, though, and resolved to keep throwing in a couple of 'mistakes'. Wouldn't do for the man to get too comfortable. To his dismay, Erik got into position for the next dance.

*Didn't seem like a good idea to become dependent on it,* Charles replied. *Moira harped on about not getting used to only you and thus not being able to dance with other people.*

Hot jealousy surged through Erik, detectable through their linked minds. Erik didn't quite articulate it, even in thought, but Charles could pick up the sub-layer of intent, which was a stream of *good mine not dancing with others mine no one else mine mine.*

He was about to assure Erik that, really, he didn't intend on dancing with anybody else, not ever, and then the rest of his brain caught up with the thought and-

*Oh.*
"It's not that they were all wonderful. There were some really bad apples in that barrel - don't get me started on Kurt Xavier and his child-sized oven - but they did a lot of amazing stuff, stuff that nobody else has ever been able to duplicate and, for the most part, didn't take advantage of their wealth and position. They established the InterSol, for crying out loud. Any good businessman would have set up some kind of toll, or at least charged for the building of the anchors. But, conspiracy theories notwithstanding, historical records show that they went, 'oh, let us develop this amazing new technology to enable people to travel between sun-systems, and then let us build it for you, and in return, just make sure everybody can use it!' I mean, who does that?"
- Larry’s Oracle, SolNews

"So, Lehnsherr, have you registered your darling paramour yet?" asked the Second Duchess of Belgia Fleet. "You know how the process can take weeks."

A lifetime of experience made it easy for Erik to bite down his first, honest response - which was that he'd like to. He would love nothing more than to register Charles' name in the Books, connected to his own, make Charles a permanent part of his life. But he had to wait for Charles' decision. He'd been deciding things for himself ever since the death of his parents, years short of his coming-of-age, and it was strange to have to wait on someone else. For the chance to have Charles, though... he could wait. He could wait forever.

He tried not to think too much about what that meant.

"Bureaucracy tends to take its time, I've found," he responded neutrally, adding in a socially correct smile in deference to her extensive political influence and the journalist in the next group over. He kept an eye on Charles, who was several feet away, unsuspecting as a lamb and thus deftly cornered by the more shameless of the Society gossips. He reminded himself that Charles was more than capable of taking care of himself, and in an emergency he could easily summon Erik to his side with a mental tap. "Excuse me, I see an old friend across the room; I must go and greet him."

He could, in fact, see a familiar crop of dark hair lurking near - where else? - the drinks bar. The man was dressed in what was either the height of fashion over at Nebu-Malibu, or one of his personal contraptions, badly disguised. (Granted, the line between the two was fairly negligible at times.)

"Stark," Erik greeted as he came up behind the man.

The man turned. The signature smirk on his lips shifted to a more genuine smile. "Lehnsherr!"

Tony's grip was strong, his eyes clear and, if not entirely well-rested, at least not as sunken and haggard as the last time they'd met in person. "Have you actually been sleeping?" Erik asked.

"Yeah, yeah, stop sounding so surprised," grumbled Tony. "Honestly, between you and Pepper, it's like you don't believe I know what the word means. I do, by the way."

"You just seem to think it's optional." Erik turned and peered over the crowd. Fortunately, Charles happened to be glancing his way. Erik was amused to see a look of relief cross Charles' face when Erik waved him over. "There's someone I want you to meet."

"Yes, so I've heard," said Tony, visibly intrigued. He smiled brightly when Charles reached them.
"Well, hello."

Charles, predictably, blushed at Tony's appreciative once-over. Erik was torn between laughing and glaring at his friend. "Charles, this is Tony Stark, whom I've had the misfortune of knowing since childhood. Tony, I'd like you to meet Charles Francis."

"How do you do, Master Stark," Charles greeted Tony, holding out his hand.

"Mister Francis," said Tony, giving Charles a firm shake. "Please, call me Tony. Well, Stark for now, we wouldn't want to scandalize our hosts, but Tony for," he winked, "later."

Charles grinned, clearly able to tell that Tony wasn't serious about his open flirtation.

Erik couldn't help but loom over his shoulder a little, anyway.

Tony gave him a very unimpressed arching of an eyebrow, and said, unsubtly, "Remind me to tell you about that time when Erik hid all his toys and pretended he didn't have any because he didn't want to share them with other kids."

Charles' grin grew wider. "And how did you overcome such a warm reception?"

"I figured out where he'd hidden them. There's only so many places you can hide things on a spaceship." Tony raised his glass, sloshing around the purple liquid inside. "And then I built him new toys. Better toys, if we're being honest." He tilted his head thoughtfully. "Huh, that's not too different from how we still do things, now that I think about it. Except he usually gives me the toys outright so I can upgrade them, and tries to hide everything else."

"Pepper tells me each and every time you nearly blow your ship up, you know," Erik said. "She even has a message template and everything, just changes the date and location."

"I've been good this year!" protested Tony. "Hardly any explosions. So far. Meanwhile you," he pointed an accusing finger at Erik, "don't get room to talk, Lenny. You fell off the radar for weeks. And did I get so much as a compcall when you came back? I had to hear it from Tam, of all people, that you were alive and in one piece and spaceside again."

Erik fired back with that time Tony decided to test drive one of his extremely experimental fighter ships, and what about S'Hara? To which Tony volleyed with, "nearly getting pulverized at Shatter Reef because you wouldn't believe me when I said that Hammer's new nav-system was full of glitches."

There was nothing quite as relaxing as a bit of argument whenever he and Tony saw each other again after a long time apart. It was good to see his friend, Erik reflected. He was used to the occasional compcall; most of their early years had been spent seeing each other on the compscreen in their shared school classes. The only sons of wealthy businessmen received the best education on Ten Sol - private tutelage via scheduled compcall sessions. But it was a different to see Tony in person. Better.

He saw Charles looking amused but also glancing oddly between the two of them. He remembered Charles' arguments with Raven back in Chester, the boisterous debates on the Circle after dark - all raised voices and large gestures. He and Tony were arguing - all right, bickering - but they still retained their mildly pleasant expressions, their voices pitched not to carry very far. Erik wasn't even conscious about raising his glass to his mouth to obscure the movements of his lips.

Thinking about Charles reminded him that there were other new things in his life now, too. Erik tentatively reached out with his power, and found the circular device on Tony's chest, divined its
structure from the different alloys used. Erik drew in a sharp breath.

He'd known about the device embedded in his friend's chest, right over his heart. Tony had shown it to him, the first time they'd talked after the Radiant Desolation. But he could feel it, now, the elegant contraption keeping his friend alive.

What if Tony went up against somebody with powers similar to Erik's? Tony made plenty enough enemies in his regular job, never mind the other one he thought Erik didn't know about. The ease with which Erik could have reached out and disrupted the arc reactor powering the device was more than a little terrifying. He was torn between the old thought of, don't think, ignore it, push it back to the new realization that if he hadn't met Charles, hadn't started learning to control his ability, all it would have taken was a strong emotional reaction at the wrong time and he might have killed Tony.

"Can you find another? Another old memory of mine, I mean."

Charles' head lifted from where it'd been resting on Erik's chest. In the dark of his bedroom, he couldn't see those blue eyes, but in the next breath, Charles' touch was in his mind, familiar and dear.

Are you sure?

Yes. Please.

"Erik, what are you doing in- oh, Tony, I didn't know you were visiting today."

"Sorry, I didn't meant to disrupt your observations, Mrs. Lehnsherr, I wasn't thinking."

"Nonsense, I was just about to ask Erik to invite you over." Erik can see that his mother is making it up, but she's using that special power she has where she'll say something and her kindness will make it true. "Are your parents away again?"

"They're hoping to get back in time for Solstice."

"Well, since you clearly read my mind and got here early, you can help Erik set up the table and the candles."

"But. Isn't this a ceremony for family only, Mrs. L?"

"Exactly. Now go, and make sure Uncle Max doesn't get to the food early."

"That's a beautiful memory, Erik. Thank you."

He pulled Charles close, finding his lips in the dark, and kissed him until he couldn't taste salt anymore.

Erik was not the least bit surprised when, the next day, the ship compscreen beeped to indicate that he had an incoming call. The caller ID read: STARK

Erik accepted the call, and without preamble said, "Let me guess, you're almost here."
"Took my new subship out for a light equator-run and figured, since I'm already out of my pyjamas," said Tony, apparently determined to present his excuse anyway.

Erik rolled his eyes, "like you actually wear pyjamas," and called Max. "We seem to be picking up a stray in a minute. Feel free to shoot at him, though." Max only laughed. Erik was fairly sure Tony was behind the deliveries of Maddox liqueur, addressed to the Maximoffs, every few months. He didn't even bother to leave his office; Tony was more than familiar with the ship, having redesigned most of it. His only concession to the impending arrival of a guest was to leave his desk and wait by the pair of leather armchairs near the door.

After several minutes, the door slid open and Tony breezed in. He was wearing worn trousers and an oil-stained shirt, which indicated he'd been spending time in his workshop, though the coat on top supported his claim that he'd gone for a short flight first rather than travelled straight from his climate-controlled flagship, Stark Tower.

"Good morning!" Tony greeted Erik cheerfully. "Or is it afternoon? Haven't been in geo-synchronous orbit for a while, I usually just judge by how many people are wandering around the Tower. Can I have a drink?"

"Help yourself," said Erik. Clearly unnecessary, as Tony was already pouring himself a drink from the crystal bottle on the sidetable. "So, why are you really in this part of space, Tony?"

Tony gave him a sad look, as if he was disappointed by Erik getting down to business before Tony could make himself comfortable. "Can I not simply be missing my old friend and checking in on him?"

"To the outside world, yes." Erik sat, and met Tony's gaze directly when the other man settled down on the armchair opposite. "But I've always thought we know each other too well for that."

Tony sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. "It's not entirely a ruse. I really was concerned. Sepor seems to be fixating on Eisen lately, and for no obvious reason. I thought I should check things out."

Erik nodded. "I've gotten the same impression." He frowned. "The Prime's been pushing me to produce more ships, more raw material. But that's hardly new. And there's nothing unusual going on in the system itself, I've kept feelers out ever since I went planetside."

"Speaking of going planetside. I hear you took a two-month sabbatical before coming back up here. It wasn't the romantic vacation out in the country that everyone's making it out to be, was it?"

"No," admitted Erik. He recounted the attack on the Manor, and going to hide in a village out in the country. "And that wasn't the only time, either."

Tony seemed like he was about to ask further, but the door slip open right then and admitted Charles. He blinked at the two of them. "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm interrupting something-"

"No, not at all," said Tony, waving his glass. "We were just catching up."

"Speaking of catching up," Erik said casually, "Where is that bodyguard of yours?"

"Left him in my sub-ship. He can punch out and blast into here in about ten seconds if it's an emergency."

Charles looked politely confused, so Erik explained, "Tony here is guarded by none other than Iron Man."
"No way!" said Raven, poking her head in behind Charles. "Seriously? As in, the hero of Nebu-Malibu? He's your 'bot?"

"Yup," Tony smiled lazily at her. "Well, hello, Miss."

"Baby sister," Charles said levelly.

Raven scowled at him. Tony just shrugged, still smiling. "Anyway, yes. I'll introduce you to old Shell Head later, if you like."

"You know, I hate to play the devil's advocate," Tony said, later, walking beside Erik on the way to the bridge, "Which, by the way, is something we need to re-watch, it's been too long - but, Erik, are you sure Charles isn't...?"

Erik blinked. "What? No."

Tony held up his hands. "Easy, big guy. I just had to float the possibility by you."

"No," Erik repeated vehemently. "Just - there are reasons, but they are not entirely mine to tell. By the Gods, have you always been so suspicious of everyone?"

A pause. "Lately, I've had to be," Tony said, voice flat. He rapped his knuckles against his chest. Erik heard, faintly, the knock of fingers against glass.

Erik grimaced - regretting, not for the first time, arriving too late to help Tony with the Obadiah Stane debacle - and gave his friend an apologetic look.

Tony released a long breath. "It's fine. I just - I don't know your reasons, and as your friend, I'm keeping all possibilities open, all right?"

Erik nodded. "Fair enough."

Now that he'd become aware of it, he found that he couldn't not sense the contraption in Tony's chest. He dared not think about it too hard, lest he accidentally nudged something he shouldn't; except, of course, trying not to think about it only made him even more aware of it. Was he going to be able to track Tony anywhere, like Wolverine? Might come in handy.

Perhaps he should give Charles something metallic to wear all the time.

He suggested the idea to Charles, later on. They were in bed, Charles reading a book while Erik's eyes ached from going through reports on his compad. It belatedly occurred to him that someone who was used to the relative freedom down planetside might be unsettled by the idea of someone knowing where they were all the time; ship compsystems tracked all bio-signatures on board, and Wolverine's nose was keen enough to identify a person's most recent meal; Erik was used to having his movements known.

But Charles simply smiled and looked thoughtful. "I might have just the thing," he said, putting his book down and padding over to the chest where his bags were stored. Charles usually wore only the bottom half of his sleep-clothes, out of habit, which Erik hadn't made much of an effort to break him of. Charles bent over to rummage through his bag, and Erik unashamedly enjoyed the view.
"Found it!" announced Charles. He straightened up, grin growing wider when he noticed Erik's ogling.

Really, Erik, you're insatiable.

Erik quirked an eyebrow. "Because you are such a paragon of modesty?"

"Of course," Charles said primly. He walked back to the bed. The sleep-trousers, though his size, seemed to hang loosely off his frame; even the short walk had somehow pushed them down further, so low on his hips that the trail of dark hairs down his navel was quite visible. His voice, when he spoke again, sounded a little huskier than usual. "Do you see something you like, Erik?"

Erik brought his eyes back up to Charles' face, but took his time about it. Charles tended to dress as if he was sporting a paunch from a lifetime of desk jobs and hearty drinks - Erik should have banned all thick jumpers and coats from his new wardrobe - but hard work at the mines had given him good muscle definition. He still tended towards compact and slender, and a certain fineness of features; perhaps there was a part of his genetic makeup that didn't come out of the mines of Eisen. Charles now stood next to Erik's side of the bed. His chest flushed lightly under Erik's attention, or perhaps due to the extremely lurid images doing acrobatics in Erik's mind.

"Erik?"

And that damnably distracting mouth. Erik was tilting up and mentally asking for a kiss before he was really aware of it. Charles hummed and obliged, and at the first slide of Charles' tongue into Erik's mouth, Erik was ready to leave the rest of the reports for tomorrow. He placed his hands on Charles' hips, thumbs stroking the sensitive skin over the hipbones. He swallowed Charles' soft moan, sucked on Charles' tongue until Charles was panting.

"Wait," said Charles. He brought his hand up, and something small and shiny dangled in front of Erik's nose. Erik leaned back a little before his eyes crossed. The object was a pendant, delicate, and hung from a similarly delicate chain. Erik peered at it. It looked relatively simple: 'Charles Francis' in a flowing, connected script, made out of shipmetal.

"I've had it for as long as I can remember. I think - my mother never gave me a straight answer about it, so I've always assumed it's something from my biological family. The only remnant I have, aside from my genes," said Charles. "I don't normally wear it - it'd be easy to lose in the 'combs. But jewelry seems fairly common up here."

Erik nodded. He'd thought about buying something for Charles, but wearing something of his own would be better to start with. "It's beautiful," he said, with complete honesty. Not the kind of thing miners could normally afford. He wondered if Charles' biological family had been wealthy, if they were still alive, if they knew that the people who'd raised Charles had died and he'd been left alone to support a young sister.

The one and only time Erik had brought up the matter with Charles, he'd been told, "I know who my parents are - the people who raised me. I'm happy enough with that."

If Charles picked up on any of Erik's thoughts, he showed no signs of it. "Put it on me." Erik reached up to take the chain. Charles batted Erik's hand away. "No, with your power."

Erik frowned. The clasp was the kind that required the metal to be unbent, looped together, then bent back. "That clasp is too small."

"You can hold it, right?" asked Charles, and promptly let go of the chain. The necklace remained
hanging in mid-air. "Now concentrate on the ends. Put the necklace on me."

Erik floated the necklace up. Draping the length of chain around Charles' neck was fairly easy. Charles shuddered at the brush of metal over his skin, which was - unexpected. Erik filed that information away for later. "Can you turn around?"

"I can, but I won't," said Charles, grinning. "Try to work the clasps without looking, Erik."

He hadn't even been sure he could do it while looking. Still, he tried to sense every part of the chain with his power, located the links at the very ends. He closed his eyes. Slowly, slowly, he eased one of the links open, unbending it. He could feel that there was another way for him to do this; right now he was pulling at the metal, acting an external force upon it. But there was a part of him that seemed to be in the metal, too, and he thought he had an idea of how he could change the form of the metal itself, to re-shape it or heat it or alter its very nature. Unfortunately his current task was too delicate, and his own skill too unpracticed, to attempt it.

He was just threading the unbent piece into the loop of the other end when, suddenly, Charles hand slipped into his trousers and tightly gripped Erik's cock.

"Charles," he growled, eyes flying open. He breathed deep and tried to keep his hold on the chain. The small drop in attention had dislodged the ends.

"I have every faith in your abilities," Charles said cheekily. Right before he knelt and took Erik into his mouth.

Erik yelped, loudly. The chain went taut for a moment, pulled the other way by the movement of Charles' neck before Erik thought to lower them as well. On the one hand, he could see the clasp now, over the back of Charles neck.

On the other hand, the wet slither and slide of Charles' tongue along the underside of Erik's cock, and then dear Gods the tight, hot grip of Charles' mouth, made it a challenge to hold onto the necklace, let alone attempt any delicate operations.

Come on, Erik, Charles encouraged him, because of course Erik would take up with the one person who could mouth off even while his actual mouth was stuffed full of Erik's cock. Mind on the metal.

"Mind too busy being sucked out through my dick," retorted Erik.

Charles pulled off with an obscene pop. "I could stop."

Erik swore. "No - it's fine. Back to where you were." Charles grinned and bent back down.

Metal. Mind on the metal. Mind on the metal, and not Charles' tongue licking around the base of his cock. Erik brought the two ends together again. He could see it, if he looked down, but looking down would also mean seeing his flushed, glistening erection rubbing against Charles' cheek. He could feel Charles mouthing at his balls, and oh fuck oh fuck Charles was humming, the vibration against the base of his cock causing him to buck up.

Focus.

Through gritted teeth, Erik slipped the unbent piece of metal through the loop of the other link. He bent it back, until it was curled like before and secure around the loop on the other end. Well, it was as secure as he could have made it with his hands. But as he had other advantages, why not make it even more secure?
Charles paused with the head of Erik's dick in his mouth. *What did you do? It felt different, at the end.*

"Take a look," panted Erik. He immediately regretted it, as of course Charles pulled off and brought his hands up to the chain.

"The chain - it's unbroken," said Charles. "There's no clasp anymore, no opening, just a continuous length."

"You'll have to cut it to take it off, now," said Erik. "Or ask me very nicely." When Charles continued to frown, running the chain through his fingers, Erik quickly added, "I can take it off now, of course. I just wanted to see if I could reform the clasp, make it just like the other links."

"Oh, no," said Charles. "It's just - strange. But - I think I like it." He looked back up at Erik, and the smile returned to his face. "And now I won't have to worry about losing it."

"I'll have no trouble sensing it, after that," said Erik. "I could feel metal before, but that was - I changed it, just a little, but it's like I'll always know I touched this little piece of metal."

Charles stood up just far enough to kiss Erik. Erik groaned at the taste of his precome on Charles' tongue. He pulled Charles in, hands roving over Charles' chest, turned his body and scooted backwards, encouraging Charles to sit astride him. He slipped one hand down and palmed Charles' erection.

"That was very good," Charles murmured, voice hitching. "Now it's time for your reward."

He pushed Erik to scoot further onto the bed, then slid back, dipped his head, and swallowed Erik's cock all the way down. Erik let out a strangled gasp and tried not to thrust his hips up. Sometimes Charles would drag it out, but tonight Charles was relentless. His throat worked the head of Erik's cock for several seconds at a time, then he pulled partway off and used his hand around the base while sucking lightly. Erik swore and moaned, and tried to keep his powers from reaching out or grabbing anything.

*Very good, Erik,* Charles thought approvingly. *You're starting to move the compad - just ease up a little.*

"Fuck!" shouted Erik, because Charles was deep-throating him again, swallowing around the head of his cock. His legs widened of their own accord. He looked down just as Charles pulled back; saliva and precome dotted Erik's pubes. "Charles, oh God, you'll be the death of me, Charles."

Charles kept only the head in his mouth, tongue rubbing the slit over and over. Erik's hips jerked up, despite his efforts. Charles didn't restrain him, instead hollowing his cheeks further; Erik saw the bump made by his cock pushing against the inside of Charles' cheek. Charles caught Erik's gaze with dark, lust-blown eyes. His red lips looked red and swollen, shiny with spit. Charles tightened his lips around Erik's dick and made one last, slow slide down, and Erik came.

"Well, your compad has slipped to the floor and the frame of the lamp looks a little twisted, but there's no other visible damage," said Charles, after Erik could feel his body again. Erik shivered at the tell-tale hoarseness of Charles' voice.

He gave himself a few seconds to catch his breath, then he rolled over and pinned Charles to the bed. Charles made an indignant sound, but his legs parted easily under Erik's weight. Erik slid down and nosed over the bulge in Charles' trousers. Time for the flimsy things to go; he yanked them down and off, and drank in the sight of Charles completely naked aroused.
He met Charles' eyes. "My turn."

The next time he visited, Tony invited them onboard his subship and happily showed her off. "I designed every part of her," he said, patting the pilot-chair fondly. "And built a lot of the separate parts, too. She can cruise on the InterSol for a month before she needs to refuel. Enough weaponry to face-off against any battle-class ships, and her shields are stronger than a lot of the command-class models."

"She is a beauty," said Charles, eyes bright and laughing. Erik found himself quite unable to look away.

"Well, she's no Xavia," Tony said modestly. "But not a bad effort."

Charles turned to Tony. "What do you mean? What does Xavia have to do with it?" Erik didn't need to be the mind-reader to guess that Charles was wondering, _Xavia, again._

Tony blinked. "Didn't you know? Xavia was said to possess the best ships ever created. The _perfect_ ships, for the poetically-inclined. The things they said those ships could do... Though, personally, I think that they just had the most advanced ships of their time, and our present technology has already surpassed that. Hard to say, since no ship survived the Great Blinding."

"No ship survived?" Charles looked surprised. "Not a one?"

"Nope. What few reports came back said the mothership self-destructed, at the end, followed by all the remaining ships and subships. Took a big chunk of their attackers with it, at least." Tony shook his head, evidently disapproving by the waste. "The most we have now are videos. Which are unbelievable enough; people have tried to claim that the videos must have been doctored, but those who've seen them in action swear that they're real. Maneuvers like you've never seen. A handful of them bringing down a fully-armed armada. In one footage, it looks like the ship changes shape mid-flight. So Xavia is kind of this imaginary yardstick we engineers measure all ships against."

"Even you, Mr. Stark?" Charles grinned.

"Oh, hey, let's not be modest. I mean, I can build amazing, state-of-the-art ships, but they're one-offs, not exactly cost-effective. Whereas, apparently, every Xavia ship was unbelievable. But I guess a small but ridiculously awesome collection like Stark Fleet is better than the shit they mass-produce these days." Tony gave Erik a wink. "If anything, you should be proud of your guy here. The only place now that comes close to Xavia-like consistency of quality is Eisen."

Later, while Erik was in the middle of a meeting with the Estate managers and 'Yard liasons, an icon in the corner of his compad began flashing, alerting him that he had a message. He discreetly opened it and was not at all surprised to see Tony's ID. (The actual name it was stored in the inbox under was, however, another remnant of questionable adolescent thinking.)

_MyLittleTony: You've been taking Charles out on dates, right?_

(He always intended to change it, right before he remembered that, on Tony's end, Erik was labeled as 'AirDick'.)
(It had always seemed, to Erik, that the two of them were careful about keeping their private files secure more out of worry that they'd never be taken seriously as adults again if the contents were discovered than any legitimate issues about privacy.)

MyLittleTony: Those are social obligations, sunbeam. They're practically work.

Erik tried not to frown at the compad. The liaison for Yard Four was in the middle of her presentation, and apparently his frown made people think, in Raven's words, "you're about to announce that they are unworthy human beings and boot them out into space to die".

MyLittleTony: Take a half-day off, go have a meal at a nice restaurant or show him a nebula or something.

Tony's advice often either failed spectacularly or exceeded expectations. Erik could concede that, between the two of them, Tony was the one with people skills and relationship experience. In fact, compared to Erik, Tony was a veritable expert.

He ended up calling Tony once the meeting finished.

"You want to seduce him over to a spaceside life of star-hopping and Society shindigs, right?" said Tony. Erik could hear something metal hitting something else metal in the background. "He needs to see the good parts of it. Not that your cock isn't magical; I'm sure, as an argument, it's worth a few pages of bullet-points and graphs, thank Mother Universe for the Eisenhardt genes. But there are a lot of really awesome things about living spaceside, and it's up to you to show them to him."

They exited the InterSol with a faint whump. It was the first time Erik had flown inter-system since he started developing his powers, and he couldn't help but reach out, spreading himself over the metal of the ship, sensing the action of different forces upon it. The shift from faster-than-light hyperspace tunnel to regular space felt like a punch to the lungs spiced by a measure of electric shock. Momentarily distracted, he was glad for the InterSol anchor's repulsor field automatically herding the subship out of the way in case there was another ship coming out behind it.

"There's writing on it!" Charles exclaimed, his face pressed right up against the glass. The boyish delight in his expression, coupled with a squashed nose, really should not be as endearing to Erik as it was. "What does it say?"

Erik obligingly brought the subship closer to the anchor. For all that it was a marvel of technology, it looked quite innocuous: a large half-circle of metal, the ends bulging out slightly. From certain angles, it looked as if blue sparks were traveling over its surface. Erik reached out for it with his power, curious. It appeared simplistic in structure, but the moment he touched it, he could sense an astounding number of smaller parts inside the smooth casing, and a set of parts in the end that was constantly shifting. Though he could sense the metal well, he also found it impossible to actually hold any part of the outer structure, and he didn't dare interfere with the inner parts. He wondered if the repulsor field was affecting his powers.

Charles tried to read the writing on the anchor's outer shell. "This is the Road that Xavia made. Let none be barred from it, and no payment be required for its use." That seems fairly straightforward."
Erik chuckled. "You'd be surprised at the number of people who try to get around it, anyway, and
install some kind of toll. Fortunately, no one's yet found a way to make the anchor more selective,
and the repulsor field won't let ships linger too close to it. Hard to blockade an anchor when you
have to burn fuel just staying in place, and whatever toll you'll get is not worth the number of ships
you'll need to enforce it."

He rotated the ship a bit. A loud gasp told him that Charles had spotted the nebula: a majestic deep
red cloud, shaped (to his eyes) a little like a knight chess piece, electric blue around the edges, the
densest parts of it obscuring several clusters of stars in the background. Erik flew for an hour to get
close enough to appreciate its size but far enough to still see most of it. He could feel a faint... tickle,
or a distant hum. Ionized particles, Erik thought.

Charles’ smile was as radiant as the view when Erik brought out the little food basket Magda had
packed for him, and turned a little watery when Erik also brought out a kabash mat, which he might
have packed from the Manor's vast storerooms in case of such eventualities. They set up the mat and
the food on the floor of one of the viewing rooms.

Charles was quiet through the meal; Erik didn't push him, remembering the first time he'd seen a
nebula, a supernova, a black hole. Eventually, Charles said, "I think it would be worth it, to travel for
years through space, just to be the first to see something like this."

Charles found that having an ally to lurk corners with while Erik did his schmoozing duties made all
the formal events significantly more bearable.

"Who is that man with the very colorful-" Charles made a flapping gesture "-um, coat. Ensemble."

"Remy LeBeau," answered Tony. "Oh, I forgot – he’s the Merchant Prince, officially, and may the
dogs of the underworld eat your balls if you call him by anything else, you know how it goes. The
coat’s a bit much, isn't it? I guess you don't see many Merchants on this side of space, they're usually
out around Maddox and Roen and the Silver Fleets."

"Are they a Fleet?"

"Not officially, which I believe is a source of resentment among them. They're more of a collection
of tribes." Something else caught Tony's eye, and he made a disgruntled noise. "I can't figure out if
Baron Panameriks just told Justin Hammer to up his offer or present more options. Of course, it's
totally possible that his nose was just itchy. Someone didn't do their homework tonight - there are
Kissinger tulips in the table display, and I believe the Baron is mildly allergic."

Charles couldn't help but be impressed, despite himself. "Do you know so much about everybody?"

"Not really. Pepper's a walking encyclopedia. She can probably tell you if the Baron's allergy is
遗传, which side of the family he gets it from, etc. She refuses to let me leave the mothership until
I could demonstrate a working knowledge of all my fellow attendees, though."

"Why would you need to know any of that?"

He'd worried, at first, that Tony would get irritated or bored by his constant questions, but it became
clear that, if anything, Tony enjoyed showing off his own information-junkie tendencies. Charles
further suspected that the man found it relaxing to listen to the sound of his own voice. "Well, take
the good Baron, for example. Say he turns up with someone who looks like an elderly female
relative. Chances are, it's his mother or older sister. Say his allergy is genetic, it comes from his
mother's side. High likelihood that his female relative is allergic as well. The host might decide to ban all tulips from the premises, in case she's highly allergic to the entire tulip family."

"Wait," said Charles, frowning. "You're telling me that it's perfectly acceptable for one of this lot to send trained assassins after Erik, right to his home, but it would be, what-"

"Uncivilized," supplied Tony.

"- uncivilized to cause accidental anaphylaxis at a party?"

"Very. Cause for exile. Better to be drawn and quartered than commit a social faux-pas. Heads will roll from tonight's tulip oversight alone." He grinned at Charles. Or, bared his teeth, not looking particularly happy about it. "The worst part would be that it's accidental. Demonstrating a lack of information, or lack of control. Might as well shoot yourself in the face."

Charles absorbed this. "And you and Erik play this game?"

"We kind of have to, it's part of business," said Tony.

"I just - it seems so ridiculous. And needlessly complicated."

"Of course it is. That's the perk of being rich - you can be as ridiculous as you like."

"But - why?"

Tony sighed. He said, quietly, "Consider, always, the origins of things."

Charles frowned. "What?"

"I have a theory," Tony said. "See, shipside, sooner or later everything leads back to Xavia. They were the First Fleet: first in space, travelled the furthest, most of the protocols and traditions we have today were first established by them. It's hard to explain to somebody who hasn't lived shipside for long, but Xavia is," Tony made a vague, totally incomprehensible gesture, "everything. They founded Ten Sol. They were royalty. Xavia meant power. And so, of course, everybody wanted to be like them. They've been dead for thirty years, and I don't believe for a second everybody in this room was clean of that; and yet, we are acting like we're part of Xavia. How did that poem go - 'Those silent lords and ladies on their starry throne; a look, a smile, and the world is changed.'"

It took a moment for Charles to exclaim, bewildered, "But they were telepaths."

A real, beaming smile appeared on Tony's face, not unlike a proud father's. "Good job, you got there faster than I expected."

"So all of this - the posturing, the silent maneuvering, the complicated negotiations - they're all because your Society is trying to emulate a Fleet Family that didn't need spoken words to communicate."

Tony chuckled quietly, and gave a shrug that was apparently meant to convey his feelings about the excessive absurdity of life. "I suspect people who admired Xavia - or were jealous of them, it's a fine line - saw that they were, you know, rich and powerful, and they'd be all silent and mysterious at social gatherings, and these admirers thought, 'oh hey, that looks like a really elegant way to do business,' and it kind of spiraled from there. Besides, I've long observed that people, given half the chance and a spat of boredom, will happily make life more complicated for themselves."

Charles looked at Tony thoughtfully. "You know, when I was younger, my father would read me all
these stories about Xavia. When Erik told me that many of those figures of legend were real, I kind of thought... but they're just as, well, *mythical*, to you people shipside, aren't they?"

Tony smiled, eyes twinkling. "If it helps, Master Lehnsherr sometimes read us those kinds of stories, too."

*But not Master Stark*? Charles didn't have to delve, though, to know better than to ask. Instead, he said, after a bit of thought, "You're looking for Xavia."

"I'd love to figure out how they made their ships do the things they could do."

Charles gave him a searching look. "No, you're not just looking for the ships. You're looking for Xavia. For the myth, the fairy-tale."

Tony looked away. Before he could say anything, though, Erik showed up muttering about *gossiping harpies*, and dragged Charles away - somewhat more handsily than necessary, but no one was complaining - to act as a buffer.

Erik realized that Charles was looking at him strangely. "What is it?"

"Nothing," said Charles, "just, you and Tony look good together, that's all."

"We're childhood friends, Charles," said Erik, a touch surprised. He knew he did not have to point out that Tony had been his *only* real friend as a child. "It's not - it's never been like that, with us."

"So, what is it that you do, Mister Francis?" asked a greying gentleman in a haughty, borderline lewd tone that also managed to impart his utter distaste for Charles' person.

"I'm, um, currently an archivist in the Eisenhardt-Lehnsherr library, sir," answered Charles. He could tell that the man didn't really believe him, and got a flash of *look at those lips Lehnsherr smug bastard not as clean as people think he's been hiding this bit of rough* before he could slam his shields up fully.

"Hm," said the man, and strode off in a way that was undoubtedly meant to be insulting, but only left Charles letting out a sigh of relief.

"Just say the word, Charlie-boy," said Tony, popping up next to him. "And the contents the Magistrate's private databanks will be inexplicably left unlocked for his very nosy wife to peruse at her leisure."

*You're doing very well,* said Charles. Erik looked down, and the sight of those bright blue eyes looking playfully up at him from between his legs nearly caused him to drop one of the pieces altogether.

"Charles," he muttered through gritted teeth.

*Keep them going, or I stop.* To illustrate his point, Charles backed off Erik's cock, the flushed head slipping out of that very talented mouth with an obscene, wet sound. A string of precome clung to the corner of Charles' mouth.
Erik groaned, and his hips jerked upward of their own accord, as if chasing the heat of Charles' mouth. "Fuck, Charles, I have them, please. Please."

The little trinkets - a gift from an inane betrothal party where Erik got to enjoy a drunken Charles while sober - went back to their slow mid-air revolution. Charles seemed to take pity on Erik and went for the finish - sucking hard, greedy, quick shallow bobs of his head. You love this, don't you? I've seen you watching my mouth. How many times have you imagined this? Let me have it, Erik.

A low moan left Erik's mouth. He could, he knew, and most of all he needed - he'd figured out the trick to it, kind of, letting himself go a little going out of his mind, splitting in half, and expecting the way his power surged with his climax. He curbed it, keeping only the stream holding up the trinkets, while Charles drank him down, continued licking him; Erik caught a glimpse of Charles hand working his own cock and felt a twitch of aftershock.

He had to tilt his head back, and he saw: the metal trinkets were still in the air, still circling lazily in the air. And a quick scan showed no damage or change to the room.

"Charles," he gasped, clumsily pulling the other man up. He indulged in a celebratory kiss, happily spreading the mess on Charles' face to his own. "I did it," he whispered into Charles' mouth, "look, they're still going."

I knew you could, responded Charles, smiling against his lips. Erik dipped his head down and found the patch of skin on Charles' neck where he was the most sensitive. He tongued it, before closing his lips over it and sucking hard, relishing the way Charles bucked against him; he batted Charles' hands away and gripped his cock tight, pumping it hard and fast.

When Charles came, spilling hotly over both their bellies, Erik drank his own name from Charles' lips. Above them, the metal kept floating, revolving, perfectly controlled.

That night, Charles' dream was full of fire, and a bird that burned at the heart of it.

Come home, it whispered, in a woman's voice. No, not a voice - a thought, telepathic, and it touched not only his mind but every fiber of his being.

Come home.
"These new safety features will further ensure the wellbeing of our citizens, by preventing unauthorized access to critical areas of space-faring vessels and alerting our systems to the presence of such individuals. The issue of unauthorized off-planet travel has been growing over the last decade, and it is well-documented that a high percentage of space-flight deaths related to sabotage are perpetrated by unauthorized individuals passing as trained personnel. We are confident that our new measures..."
- speech by Prime Sebastien Shaw to the Honoured Assembly of the Capitalia

"Just ease up on the thruster - that's right." Tony beamed at Charles. It came as no surprise to Erik that Charles got the hang of the ship's controls so quickly; but he didn't think Tony should be smiling at Charles so much.

He didn't think it was necessary for Tony to drape himself so thoroughly over the pilot's chair, either, his head hovering right over Charles' shoulder.

"This is amazing." breathed Charles.

"Yeah," agreed Tony. There was an uncharacteristic softness to his tone. "Flying is - there's nothing like it. Skipping from star to star. Navigating an asteroid belt that no one's ever gotten through before. Doing non-standard jumps off the Intersol and discovering pockets of space that no one's visited since the Migration. Going beyond the known systems, even."

"That's your dream," said Charles quietly. "That's what you've been working towards, all these years."

Tony grinned, but it was full of boyish cheek instead of his usual swagger. "Erik doesn't believe I'll ever do it. But I will. I know it."

Raven and Tony, not surprisingly, got along like a house on fire. Charles was a little wary, at first, because Society happily filled him in on Tony's public reputation after the first time he and Tony were seen keeping company at an event, and he didn't want Raven to get unrealistic expectations. He suspected they did sleep together at least once, but as time passed, their dynamic seemed closer to that of a student and mentor: Raven seemed more interested in making Tony teach her about ships than pursuing anything romantic.

"People spaceside are sticklers for rank," he overheard Raven commenting one evening, as he passed the bridge. The two could often be found there at all hours of the day, or in Erik's private sitting room.

Tony made an agreeing noise. "It makes sense, if you think about it. A hierarchy means that everyone on a ship knows what they're supposed to be doing, and what everyone else is supposed to be doing. If someone is incapacitated and can't do their job, there is somebody else in line to step in."

Raven made a thoughtful noise. "What's the difference between a flagship and a mothership?"

"A flagship is leader's ship, the ship of the head of a fleet or group. For example, my ship, and Erik's Magneto, are flagships. The term 'mothership' is usually used only for the ship of the head of a
Family Fleet. They're huge things; the motherships of the First Families are the size of hubs, because most of the family live in them.

"I think Raven's getting a hankering to become a pilot," Charles told Erik later, when it was just the two of them in the sitting room.

"Does that bother you?" asked Erik, looking away from the compscreen.

"No, of course not." Charles shuffled closer to Erik, a silent request, and Erik obligingly draped an arm over Charles' shoulder. "I'd just never thought about it. Becoming a pilot wasn't really a possibility for people like us. Before."

"Oh." Erik breathed out into his hair. "Everyone spaceside is taught the basics. I got the full fighter training, even did a stint of peacekeeping over at Roen and rose up to Lieutenant. It's somewhat expected of family heirs." His hand squeezed Charles' shoulder. "Would you let Raven go, if that's what she chooses?"

"Yes," Charles said without hesitation. "If that's what she wants."

"Even if it's to be a fighter pilot?"

Erik's hand began stroking his hair. Charles sighed happily. "I will worry about her, of course, but I only want her to be happy."

"Then you should tell her, Charles."

Charles blinked. "She knows she has my support in everything. She must know."

"Mmm," Erik said noncommittally. "It still means a lot, to hear it."

"She's never acted like she needed my approval."

Erik looked askance at him. "Charles, you are the entire universe, to her."

"I thought I'm the telepath, here."

Erik's snort belied his opinion of Charles as a telepath. He hesitated, his hand pausing in its soothing lines through Charles' hair. "Don't be angry. But you said that she asked you, a long time ago, to not read her mind, so you actively block her out."

"Yes?" Charles butted his head against Erik's hand, pointedly, and the stroking resumed.

"I think - it's good of you to respect her wishes, of course. But. Ever since I started using my powers, the world has been different for me; that extra sense with which I can feel metal adds to and shapes the way I perceive the world. I suspect it is the same for you and your powers, only you've always had your powers, so you don't notice. But, I believe, by consciously blocking Raven's mind, you've also developed the tendency to... overlook her. Even if you don't mean to."

Charles pressed his lips together, scowling. "I'd rather not talk about this right now, please."

Erik let it go, and they lapsed into a comfortable silence with a pleasant side of petting. Charles decided that such wisdom in a leader of men ought to be properly rewarded, and to that end climbed into Erik's lap, kissing him hungrily.

Raven's shriek when she and Tony walking in while Charles and Erik were on the couch, lying in a sated heap with Erik's fingers still inside Charles' arse, made the mortification entirely worth it.
"You're right."

"Of course I am," said Erik, planting a kiss on the back of Charles' neck. "But what about, specifically?"

Charles swatted him. "Raven. Me overlooking her." He buried his face in the pillow. I always register a person's presence by sensing their mind, first. What you said about how our powers influence our behaviors and perceptions - I've thought the same, before, but never really applied it to myself. By blocking Raven, I think a part of me doesn't perceive her as a whole person. Remembering that he had to breathe, he turned his head to the side. Also, the last time I was able to read her, she was but a child, and perhaps my brain is somewhat stuck on that last impression.

"Charles, don't overthink it," said Erik. Warm, long fingers, a couple of them tellingly sticky, traced the line of Charles vertebrae, making him shiver. "You've done well by her. And she understands; maybe more than you give her credit for."

That wasn't entirely it, of course. Erik had entered their lives only recently, though it didn't feel like it from all the changes he'd instigated. The disagreements and issues between Charles and Raven were manifold, and some of them, he suspected, would never be truly resolved. Additionally, Erik had a peculiar sort of blindness towards certain things, like Raven's skin color; it genuinely made no impact on him, or none that Charles could detect, whether he saw her in blue or beige.

Still, the insight deserved some kind of acknowledgement.

He lurked outside of Raven's room the next day, hoping that she wasn't entertaining a guest, thus leaving him out there for hours or subjecting him to the awkward hello-I-am-the-big-brother-of-the-person-you-just-had-sex-with encounter. (Especially if it was Tony. Please Gods let it not be Tony.)

The door slid open. She was, he felt relieved to see, alone, and wearing a yellow sundress, which looked even brighter against her natural blue skin.

She spotted him, and before he could say anything, the peachy complexion of her favorite blond guise was spreading over her body.

He'd had a whole speech prepared, about how he loved her regardless of what she wanted to do in life, and agreeing that it was unfair to have to hide oneself when no one, not even he, ever truly stopped using one's powers, and though he still thought they had to be careful, she could wear whatever skin she liked around him and their other friends. The words were poised to be spoken, but all he registered was that she was afraid, and he wondered how her blue skin could have ever bothered him so much that she would react in fear to him, no matter how instinctive.

"Don't," he said instead, soft, and carefully took one of her hands. "It's all right."

She blinked at him, uncertain. He tried a smile. That relaxed her somewhat, and the slowly peach and blonde melted away. When she was back, herself again, he let the smile grow into a full one, and nodded at her outfit.

"Nice dress," he said. "It matches your eyes."
And then she was hugging him, tight enough that his ribs protested, and he hugged her back. He had a feeling that, now, no matter what - they would be all right.

Charles' head snapped up when someone barged into Prospero. He'd tensed for a moment, berated himself for getting so absorbed in his book that he'd failed to notice someone's approach. But it was only Tony.

"Is-?" Tony leaned against a shelf. "Is Erik-?"

He sounded oddly out of breath. Had he been running around the ship? "Erik went over to the Anishi ship for a meeting," said Charles. "Are you all right?"

Tony's head listed to one side, as if he was about to fall asleep right there. He blinked and straightened up, only to sag a few seconds later. "Yeah. Perfectly peachy. Just - tell Erik -" but whatever he was about to say was derailed when he collapsed all the way to the floor.

"Tony!" yelped Charles, rushing over to him. The man was mumbling, incoherent non-words, when Charles rolled him onto his back and supported Tony's head on his lap. "Are you - wait, we probably have a medbot on board, let me get it -"

"Don't," groaned Tony, and a trembling hand clutched at Charles' sleeve, in case he didn't get his meaning across. "S nothing you can do."

"Why don't you tell me what it is, and let me decide that," said Charles. But Tony just shook his head, muttering, "no, no, can't" under his breath. Charles sighed. He pulled Tony over to his armchair, and set it to recline. "For the record, I hate you for making me do this." He brought a finger up to his temple.

Tony's head was a roiling storm of bodily weariness and hurt, enough to make Charles gasp and almost pull back. He forced himself to stay, to weave past the dark fog and the heavy foreknowledge of death, Tony fears thinks accepts he's going to die does Erik know he musn't, trying to be gentle; it helped when he sensed, despite all the turmoil, the sharp sparkling lines that constantly parsed and measured the world, the unrelenting drive of Tony's genius. There was an internal heaviness, poison, now he just had to follow it, an inward trail that Tony's mind tried to obscure and simultaneously push him along on, spiraling round round round down to-

"Your heart," gasped Charles. His eyes flew open. "Tony, what have you done to yourself?"

"The only thing I could do, at the time," said Tony through gritted teeth. He gave Charles a baleful look. "So. Telepath. I didn't expect that, to be honest."

Charles blinked at him. "I'm sorry, I wouldn't have done it if you'd just told me." He blinked again. "Wait, expected?"

Tony shrugged and struggled to sit up. He still looked pale, haggard in a way that Charles wasn't sure how he'd missed it. Then again, Tony had been sick for a long time. "Figured the mutant part out fast enough. Your sister is not the most discreet person in the world, and she's also not related to you by blood. Now that I know you better, I know that you'd have taken care of her no matter what, but at the beginning, your close and mutually protective relationship seemed best explained by two mutants looking out for one another." He paused and took long breaths, winded even by talking. Though it was a comfort to see that his talking could not be impeded even by possible impending
death. "Plus, Wolverine looks at you like you're his special duckling, it's seriously creepy - and he only ever cares this much about fellow mutants."

"He does not," Charles said incredulously. "He probably suspects my motives towards Erik, which is part of his job." Tony sat up, his body visibly trembling from the effort. Charles stood and got him a drink of water from the nearest port.

"Thanks," said Tony, accepting the water. "Anyway, I'll save you the anxiety: I don't care that you're a mutant. I built my first rocket when I was eight, I'm plenty dangerous despite being plain old human, whereas you can't tell a lie without your face looking like a tomato. A gorgeous tomato, but nevertheless. Try not to pull Stark Industries secrets out of my head, but feel free to peruse the bits with nudity in them; I can even give you recommendations."

There was a moment of quiet as Charles absorbed this. Then, refusing to be derailed, he asked, "You're not really just going to sit and wait to die, are you?"

"No." Tony sighed. "Look, I've tried everything, okay? But this thing," he pointed to his chest, "that's keeping me alive is also slowly pouring a toxin into my bloodstream."

"And there's no other way - it's the reactor core, right, waste product from the reaction? Can't you find a different metal for the core?" Charles asked. But he knew, he'd seen glimpses of it in Tony's head: Tony spending hours and hours in his workshop, visiting databank after databank, fleet after planet after fleet.

Tony's look suggested that he knew which pieces of his memories Charles had rifled through. "Nothing. I've tried every possible combination, every permutation, of every known element. Still can't find an acceptable substitute. At this point, I'm pretty sure there isn't one."

But there is something else, slipped out of Charles. It should worry him, really, that it took him a few seconds to realize he hadn't said it through his mouth.

"A footnote," mumbled Tony. He looked woozy again, eyes fluttering close. "Just a... thing. Said, back in Migration... a bunch of fleets waiting to see if the colonies would take... it mentioned that all the rarest metals could be found on Eisen." He fixed Charles with a bitter gaze, as if expecting Charles to criticize his choice to come to Eisen on such a scant lead. "Sat on it for a while. But nothing else worked. What would it matter? If I'm- bread, no, toast, then a' least I get to say bye to Erik. Owe him that."

"He doesn't know how sick you are," guessed Charles. "You've let him think you've just been overworking again."

"What can he do?" Tony waved his hands around. Or tried to - they flopped unconvincingly instead. "No point... being a downer. No Starks 're party pooper."

Charles swore under his breath when Tony's eyelids fluttered close. He prodded the man sharply, got only an incoherent mumble, and decided, right then, to take matters into his own hands.

Half an hour later and a mental call across the ship to Raven, Tony was lying on one of the guestroom beds. Under the brighter lights, it was much more obvious how sick he was: Tony's face was gaunt, the shadows under his eyes well-advanced of what sleep-deprivation could explain, and his skin was sweaty and pale. Charles had sent Erik a short message. Raven looked worried; with all the time she'd been spending with Tony, she was likely blaming herself for not noticing his ill health.

"Erik didn't realize how bad it was, either," Charles told her gently. Her yellow eyes flashed anger,
and he added, reminding, "I don't need to read your mind, Raven, to know what you're thinking."

She slumped. But the self-recrimination subsided, to be replaced by fierce determination. Atta girl.

Erik stormed into the room. "Tony."

Charles caught Raven's eye and nodded sharply towards the door. They managed to slip out right before the shouting started.

He'd meant to stay up and wait for Erik, no matter how long his 'discussion' with Tony took, but one minute Charles was curled up in bed, reading on his compad, and the next thing he knew, the room was dark and the compad was being eased out of his slack hands, Erik's mind brooding and familiar next to him.

Charles watched his compad float over him and settle gently on the bedside table. Erik's mind radiated tiredness, with blotches of fear that he was trying to suppress.

"Tony?" asked Charles.

"Resting."

Erik's touch found him in the dark, asking, and Charles turned easily, kissing him. Erik let out a sigh, his body welcoming the press of Charles'. It was familiar now, this way that they moved together, yet it still sent Charles' pulse speeding, his nerves alight.

He kissed his way down Erik's chest. Teased one nipple with just the tip of his tongue, blowing on it, kissing it and feeling it harden between his lips. Erik let out a stuttered breath. Those criminally long legs spread to cradle Charles between them. Charles groaned at the feel of Erik's cock filling, hardening against his stomach.

"I don't want to lose him," confessed Erik, at the same time as his mind pleaded, take me, please, make me forget, to which Charles could only whisper, "yes" and think, we'll find a way; and only minutes after, hands slicking on protection and lubricant, would he realize the switch.

Erik sighed at the first breach, one finger, Charles' name on his breath. Charles' eyes could barely make anything out in the gloom, yet all he could see was Erik, regardless, brighter to Charles than any bonfire on Evenfeast, and it seemed unbelievable still that he so openly welcomed Charles' touch, all the ways in which Charles touched him.

He was impatient now, urging Charles to get inside him already, please, his body clenching around three of Charles' fingers. Charles pulled out and pushed in, smooth, and Erik took him easily, the heat and press of him around Charles' cock exquisite.

"Yes, yes, exactly like that," grunted Erik, impatient, lifting his hips to let Charles slide in even deeper. "Oh Gods, Charles!"

Charles mashed their lips together, to shut him up, but that just unleashed a torrent of words from Erik's mind: so beautiful perfect I love you filling me like this you were made for me. And he could tell that Erik wanted him to hear it.

Surely he couldn't have this - surely he wouldn't be allowed to keep this.

His body thrusted, wild, a little out of control from the depth of feeling running riot under his skin,
and Erik stuttered out "yes, yes, yes" with every slam of Charles' hips, hands clawing at Charles' back. Charles fucked him shallow and fast, one hand stripping Erik's cock, their faces damp from sweat and open-mouthed kisses; both of them glorying in the mess of it

And Charles could see, despite the desperation and fear and spiking pleasure, that Erik was still perfectly in control. Charles had never been this intimate with one of the mutants he'd helped, before, had never been familiar with them before and after the process. There was a sharpness to Erik's mind now, a fledgling confidence that tasted of freedom.

How far would the power change him, Charles wondered. Metal was cold, after all. (A quieter thought: how until Erik no longer needed him?)

As Erik came, the surge of raw power stole Charles' breath away. He thought, a little giddily - Erik had been right to be afraid. The sheer strength of it, like an explosion on the other side of thin glass - yet the glass didn't break, and it was this, Erik's newfound control that lit his mind up like a constellation, that sent Charles over the edge.

Erik's arms closed around him as he shuddered, his hips giving one last jerk, his cock twitching and spilling inside Erik.

*Power enough to change the world,* Charles thought giddily, despairingly.

"Erik." Charles blinked into the dark. He grabbed at Erik's arm, sticky from sweat. "What if - the problem is that Tony needs a different compound for the core of his arc reactor, yes? One that won't create a toxic by-product?"

He was sorry to feel Erik's relaxed, post-coital glow tense up all over again. "Yes?"

"Can't you - if it doesn't exist yet, can't *you* create it? Between Tony's knowledge and your ability, you might be able to create something that his arc reactor will accept as a substitute."

Erik didn't say anything, but his mind lit up; the idea like a bright spark in a dark room that grew brighter and louder. The man might have gotten up, right then, if not for Charles' grip on his arms and a voiceless admonishment to let Tony and himself rest for a while. Erik settled back, thoughts still a-buzz, and pulled Charles close until more of their bodies were touching than not; grateful.

The dream this time was full of glowing lines. Vines, Charles thought at first, except these looked a little different. And the little lights in the darkness around him weren't minerals reflecting the glow but stars.

*Come home, child,* repeated the message. *It is time to come home.*


“What, Tony?”

“Look, you know how I hate emotional thingies as much as you do. Talks. But we need a heart-to-arc reactor. Now.”
“Don’t make me bring up that time you cried your eyes out after Sound of Music,” Erik warned, though he dutifully sat on the chair next to Tony’s bed.

It reminded him sharply of Charles in the Manor’s convalescence room. Erik had spent far too much time sitting by friends’ bedsides this year.

“Shut. That was… a bonding. A bonding thing.” Tony made a distasteful face. “And the wine from that night is still the most awful thing I’ve ever put in my mouth. No wonder I was crying.” He started wheezing, one hand pressing down tight on his chest.

“You should rest,” Erik said gently.

“Fuck that. I had points I ‘s making.” Tony coughed. “One. If this doesn’t work-“

“Tony.”

“Shut it, sharkface. If this doesn’t work, or if something blows up, if we get sucked into an alternate dimension where everyone has, has tentacles, or whatever – it’s not your fault. Got that?” Tony glared at Erik. “The calculations were all mine. Don’t go hogging the spotlight with your emotionally stunted angst.” He held up two fingers. “Two. Stick to Charles. You and I know there’s some weird shit going on. You need all your friends around you.”

Erik narrowed his eyes at his friend. If the man wasn’t such a genius, or the only son of an industry tycoon, he would have made a killing as an actor. “You know something.”

“I suspect a lot of things.” Tony shrugged, and winced at the movement. “But I’m not telling you anything yet – some of it sounds crazy inside my head. And, you know, it’s my head.”

Tony drifted off, and looked nearly unconscious by the time Erik had him lying down on the med pallet, the ship’s medbot on standby and screens showing his real-time vitals floating helpfully in a ring around them.

“Are you ready?” asked Erik. He felt he should be wearing something more appropriate for a life-saving operation, or at least be thoroughly sterilized. But no part of him was going to be physically in contact with any part of Tony. At least, that was the plan.

He’d seen healthier corpses, yet Tony was still lucid enough to meet Erik’s eyes and nod.

“All right.” Erik breathed in deep. Touched the power that was never too far away, like it lurked just under his skin, and drew it out, cast it over Tony. The arc reactor was a bright globe to Erik’s metal-sense, cool and ozone-scented and bitter-sweet. He could feel the corrosion at the very core of it, the incomplete and inefficient reaction that was producing the toxic waste product.

He visualized the compound that he and Tony had worked out between themselves. For some reason, he thought about the Vines, the glowing limbs spreading quietly through the rock, seeking out metal and absorbing it.

A piece of unused reactor core was sitting on a petri dish – one of the many replacements Tony kept on hand after the corrosion reaction in his chest started affecting the energy output of the reactor. A flick of the hand, and it floated up towards Erik.

He focused on it. He sank his power deeply into it. This is not the one I need, Erik thought. He let himself be drawn into the core until it was as if his body was vibrating along with the particles, and willed the compound to change.
Raven and Charles leapt to their feet when Erik emerged from the room. He felt the brush of Charles’ mind, impatient, and a tendril of it rushing past him to seek out Tony.

Charles smiled even before Erik did.

“It worked?” Raven squeaked, fingers digging into Charles' arm.

Erik nodded. “It worked.”

With Tony still on the mend - and possibly heavily sedated, if the conspiratorial looks between Erik and Raven were anything to go by - Charles had no choice but to actually circulate in the next event he accompanied Erik to.

"So," said a matronly woman, whose title was only marginally less pronounceable than her name, and both completely slipped Charles' mind a minute after the introductions, "you and Lehnsherr seem to be getting along well. Should we be expecting a happy announcement soon?"

Maybe it was because she seemed the kind, grandmotherly sort, and also Charles had a habit of scanning surrounding minds when he was stressed; he was caught completely unprepared, and narrowly avoided outwardly reacting by sheer strength of will, throwing up all his shields to block out the stream of, filthy land mongrel oh General Frost poor man doesn't deserve his freak of a daughter nice of Shaw to give her work but better lock them all up before they spread-

Charles coughed, hoping it was a good excuse for the pause and the flush on his cheeks. "Excuse me. Um, it's early days yet, ma'am."

She sighed. "Well, I'm sure Lehnsherr will come to his senses."

Charles watched her move on to a man wearing a general's uniform. He felt as if he'd swallowed heavy chunks of ice.

"Yes, I'm sure he will."

Moira had dropped by a handful of times after Charles survived his first Society event, going over any mistakes he remembered making, and recommending further reading and viewing material. The visits had petered out to brief social calls, until one day she informed him that she was leaving the Eisen system, as she'd been hired for a debutante heiress in the Capital.

"I'm sure your new client will be in the very best of hands," said Charles, over tea.

"Very good," Moira grinned. "It did help that the elusive and famously particular Master Lehnsherr wrote me a glowing recommendation; please thank him for me."

"Of course." Charles hadn't known about the recommendation, and he sent a pleased tendril of thought across the ship, to where Erik was working diligently on the endless pile of reports.

Moira tilted her head. "I have to say, you've taken to this like a duck to water, Charles."

The back of Charles' head throbbed, as it'd taken to doing, lately. He blamed a shortage of proper sleep. "I do pride myself in being a fast learner."

"It's more than just that," said Moira. "I can only hope that this next girl will be as easy to teach."
"I thought you said that my dancing should be banned from all ten galaxies?"

She laughed. "Except for your dancing. But even that is quite charming - nobody can like a newcomer who is perfect at everything." She shrugged, and picked up her purse. "Well, you'll soon be circulating with the top of the food chain. I hear that Prime Shaw himself is coming here."


"It's not public yet, but I expect there'll be a formal announcement on the 'Nets. I just heard it from my friends at the Capital." She stood, and laughed again when Charles belatedly remembered etiquette and stood as well. She held out her hand. "I hope we meet again, Mister Francis."

"I hope so too, Miss MacTaggert."

"There's something big going on. There has to be, for Shaw to be coming here."

Erik looked to where Tony was lying, in pride of place, on the most comfortable couch in the sitting room. Charles and Raven were in the other armchairs, while Erik was at the desk he'd set up in one corner. It occurred to him that, if one didn't look out the windows, one could mistake this for Erik's private rooms in the Manor. "You talked to people?"

Tony shrugged. "My usual sources."

"Have you found out why he's coming here?"

"No official reason. He's making it sound like he's doing the usual rounds, preparing for his farewell tour as Prime before he has to give up the office next year."

"Tony," Erik said impatiently. "Out with the rest of it."

Tony rolled his eyes. "I've been talking to Charles about Xavia, lately," he nodded at Charles, who lowered the volume on the compscreen despite Raven's protests, "and that got me remembering a rumor from a few years back. Well. There's always a million rumors around Shaw and Sepor. But this one was just - unusual."

"What was it?"

"The rumor said that Shaw was looking for the Crown of Xavia."

Raven tilted her head questioningly. "Crown?"

"The head of the Xavia family was called Rex Xavia. That translates to 'King' in one of the Old Languages," Erik explained. He looked at Tony. "Is it a title? An artifact?"

"It's hard to find anything useful when half the information out there is myth-inflated," said Tony, shifting position. He was still a good ways from convincing anybody that he was in the prime of health, but he'd improved enough that he wouldn't be tossed out of a social gathering on account of being a cadaver, so naturally he'd attended an exhibition opening the previous night, and looked even worse this morning. "My money is on it being an object, though. An actual crown."

Erik frowned. "Why would Shaw care about some piece of jewelry? The man's wealthy enough to own whole planetary systems."

"Status symbol?" guessed Tony, being someone wealthy enough to own whole planetary systems.
"You said it yourself, he's taken an unhealthy interest on Eisen of late. The request for more raw materials, the increase in ship orders. A little bird told me that Shaw commissioned a new Commander-class cruiser from Hammer -"

"- he what?"

"- which practically screams 'future flagship'. It's pretty obvious: Shaw is looking to start his own personal Fleet. Guess it's hard to give up all that power."

Erik pinched the bridge of his nose. "Hardly the first time a Prime tried it. But Shaw - the Firsts won't stand for it. Not after he somehow managed to extend his tenure by two terms."

"Which may be why he wants the Crown," Tony pointed out. "You know how superstitious those old coots are."

"Okay, kinda lost here," interrupted Raven. "Why would getting this Crown help Shaw?"

"The Firsts - the heads of the First Families - they all have ties to Xavia," explained Erik. "For one thing, they wouldn't be where they are today if it weren't for Xavia. In return, they pledged their loyalty to Xavia and its heirs."

Tony took over. "Everyone knows that Xavia and all its treasures are gone. It's a pretty good bet that this Crown had been on the mothership, and is now part of the giant floating field of scrap that is the deathspace. But if Shaw somehow got hold of it, and claimed to be an heir of Xavia, then even if the Firsts don't really support him, they at least won't directly oppose him."

"How would they know if it's the real Crown?" asked Raven.

"I guess there's some way of authenticating it, that only they know about." Tony threw his hands up. "Like I said, superstitious old coots."

Erik eyed Tony. "You wouldn't bring all this up for an old rumor, Stark."

"No." Tony leaned forward, his voice dropping low. "But I've been keeping an eye on the Sepor transmissions lately -"

"- meaning, you've hacked into their systems and have been listening in."

"- no need to get technical, you don't get good channels this far out, what am I supposed to do all day - anyway, there was a short, heavily encrypted message - took me five minutes to crack it, they're getting better - and it just said, the crown is close."

After a momentary silence, Erik asked, "You think they've found it?"

Tony shrugged, while Raven wrinkled her nose and said, "what would something that valuable be doing on Eisen?"

"That would make it a good hiding place, then," said Charles quietly.

Tony turned to look at Charles. "Is something wrong? You've been pretty quiet."

"Headache?" Erik asked quietly.

Charles' shoulders slumped, stress lines appearing on his brow. "I'm sorry. I'll just have a bit of a lie-down. Please, keep discussing."
Erik would think, later, that he should have seen it coming.

Charles still looked withdrawn when they had to attend the old Colonel Frost's birthday gala. It was on *The White Queen*, a hub-ship that had parked in the orbit of the outermost planet of the Eisen system. Erik had never visited it before; it was fairly new, the layout standard for medium-sized hubs, with the inclusion of guestrooms. The location was far enough away from Eisen and the City-in-Orbit that most guests were staying overnight.

Tony met them at their assigned guestroom and went to the ballroom with them, but disappeared once they were through the main doors. Erik happily left him to schmooze, recognizing Tony's 'information-gathering' mode. Tony had a talent for it, and could probably find out about Shaw's movements without ever directly talking about him. In fact, Erik had seen Tony learn the details of a top-secret weapons contract between his rivals in a lengthy conversation about the native beetles on S'Hara.

Charles was quiet, quiet, avoiding Erik's eyes. Until Erik, at a loss, wordlessly invited him to the dance floor. Charles finally looked up, and Erik saw on his face all the fears he'd been steadfastly ignoring.

He almost turned and marched off, then, as if avoiding it could put off the inevitable, prolong this space in which Erik had allowed himself to think of... new things. Potentials.

But Charles held him fast, his eyes alone keeping Erik there with him while their bodies slid into graceful patterns, fairly well-practiced now, in what felt like a different world entirely.

"Thank you for sharing your world with me," Charles whispered. "I am-" Swallowing, words seemed to fail Charles, for once, and his mind touched Erik's in that familiar inquisitive tap, requesting permission as always.

Maybe that should have been a clue, that Charles couldn't or wouldn't see how Erik always let him in, how Erik didn't even want him to ask permission.

Their minds linked, Erik saw flashes of all the times they'd spent together, cocooned in warmth, treasured. Unmixed pride in Erik for learning to embrace his ability, delight in watching Erik revel in his discoveries, his hope that Erik will continue to train and grow strong, stronger even than the shadows of his past.

"I'm sorry, Erik," Charles' voice ghosted over, genuinely remorseful and so damnably *kind*. "I appreciate- everything, and- the way I feel hasn't changed. But our lives are too different, and one day you'll-" *You don't need my help with your powers any more. You saved Tony's life with it.*

*Charles.*

*I need to go home, Erik.*

Erik nodded stiffly; his jaw ached from the effort of keeping his face still. It took all of his concentration to keep his posture from faltering, to keep dancing calmly in the middle of a nest of vipers when all he wanted to do was crumple every piece of metal in the ship. He would be proud, later, that the chandelier didn't even twitch.

The dance ended. Erik realized he'd wrinkled the parting of Charles' coat with his hands, but Charles
didn't seem to mind, only smoothing the fabric down and giving Erik a sad smile. They walked to the
door of the hall, slipping into the deserted passageway outside.

"I think I'll go back to the room," Charles said. Both their eyes glanced out of a nearby window, at
the red spot in the distance that was Eisen. "You should stay. I'll see you later."
The Clock strikes Midnight

Connecting mind-to-mind, the storm-raiser and the fire-master and the speedster and the shapeshifter, on and on, a chain of many strengths and many voices.

This was how Xavia did battle, long ago.
- Chronicles of Rex Eliza

Sudden ear-splitting sirens very effectively pulled Erik back to the present. He spun around, bewildered. He'd stopped paying attention to anything after Charles left the ballroom, and his feet seemed to have taken him to one of the observation decks. The main lights had been dimmed and the mauve emergency lights came on. One of the large viewing windows faced the sun - a ball of light made small by distance, faintly illuminating the handful of planets in the system.

Charles.

Without even thinking about it, Erik sprinted for the elevators that would take him to the section of the guestrooms. He cast about for Wolverine. Hard to be accurate, at this distance, but the man seemed to be near Erik's room, which was exactly where he needed to go.

He literally ran into Charles right before the final corner towards the elevators banks. "Charles!" he gasped, grabbing him. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine." Charles hands came up to gently take Erik's. Erik realized that he'd been digging his fingers into Charles' arms. "Erik, what's going on? Is this an evacuation?"

Evacuation. Yes. He started walking in the direction that everyone else seemed to be heading towards. There were no elevators or shuttles on this route, in case the problem was electrical or in the ship's software - just long ramps downwards to the level of the emergency escape pods. Even here, though, the floor was carpeted, and there was gilded ornamentation around the compscreens, which showed a woman in a neat crew uniform advising people to proceed calmly and follow emergency procedures. It made Erik think of the 'combs, of the strummer that had outed him - the miners hadn't panicked, then, either.

They were almost to the escape level when Charles said, "oh, Erik? I'm not sure I'll be able to get into the pods."

It took a few minutes for Erik's brain to parse the sentence.

What? No. No. But when they got to the first section of pods, dark and already deployed, Erik's chest tightened with fear and anger.

There was a scanner in front of every door. This was a new hub, likely only launched the previous year, which meant that it incorporated the new 'safety features' that Prime Shaw had made into law. Namely, that pods would only admit people who were registered in the Books.

They could... they could head for the hangars, though Magneto had undoubtedly been ordered off by now.

A rough, familiar hand grasped his shoulder tightly, enough to hurt. "Logan, I'm not leaving Charles here!" he snapped, keeping his eyes on Charles. There was a not unreasonable part of him that was
convinced Charles would wiggle away from his grip on some misguided idea of forcing Erik to seek safety without him.

"If you were born on spaceside, you're automatically on the Books, right?" Wolverine growled.

"Yes?" Erik reluctantly tore his gaze away from Charles, sensing an odd note in Wolverine's voice. The emergency lights brought out the sharp angles of Wolverine's face, making him look almost skeletal.

"Take him to a pod," said Wolverine. "He'll get in."

"What- did you do something?" Had Wolverine registered Charles anyway? It would make Charles incandescently angry, but at that moment Erik didn't care, as long as Charles could be safe.

"No." Wolverine sighed, rubbed a hand through his hair irritably. Erik realized the man was avoiding looking at Charles. "Just do it, all right? Trust me."

To his surprise, Erik felt Charles tugging at his hand. There was a bewildered look on Charles face, and those blue eyes were narrowed at Wolverine, but he said, "Come on, Erik. It's at least worth a try, yes?"

No, it would be even worse if the scanner rejected Charles; Erik had known, all along, that the system was ridiculous and unconscionable, that being born on a ship did not make someone more honorable or of better quality or, especially, more deserving to live. He'd known the injustice of it, in an abstract way, but now he felt the weight of it, the crush of limitations.

They finally reached an unoccupied pod. Charles slapped his hand onto the scanner without any preamble. Erik edged back; he wouldn't put it past Charles to somehow incapacitate him and shove him into the pod-

The compscren flashed an affirmative, and the opaque grey door developed a narrow transparent strip right down the middle. For a long moment, Charles and Erik could only stare.

Erik regained his senses first, and summarily pushed Charles towards the door. The system accepted him, again, force-field parting around a Charles-shaped hole as he passed through, and the door sealed opaque behind him. Erik impatiently waited for his hand to be scanned, mind whirring, and practically leapt into the pod the moment it let him through.

Magneto was waiting just outside the regulated safety zone. Erik set the pod for it and docked without any trouble.

Max's worried face greeted Erik as soon as he was inside the ship. "We heard that something happened, and all the ships were shuffled off the hub before we got any information."

"I'm afraid we are as much in the dark as you are, Uncle," said Erik. He clapped a hand on Max's back. A second later, he frowned hard.

"What is it?" asked Max.

"Did we get any new tech deliveries before I left?"

Max frowned deeply. "No. "
"Even just a small item? Something innocuous?"

"Not that I remember. Why, what's wrong?"

In a steady, calm voice, Erik said, "Max, Magda, get everyone and your most important things, then go into the pod. The one we just arrived in."

He could see that his pilot was bursting with questions, but Max must have picked up on Erik's tone, because he quickly turned and directed Magda to find the girls.

"Erik?" asked Raven, looking between him and her brother. "What's wrong?"

"I'll tell you later," Erik said. "You should get in the pod as well."

"No, I'm sticking to Charles," Raven said determinedly, and hooked her arm through her brother's for emphasis. "What happened on the hub?"

"Emergency evacuation," said Charles. He sounded strangely vague, and Erik felt a spike of worry that Charles was going into some kind of shock. Then Charles announced, "Tony's coming. On his subship."

How far away was he? How far was Charles' range? The day seemed to go from one important question to another. But Erik had important decisions to make, and no time to wonder. "Right. Max," he called, when his pilot reappeared, now carrying a large, metal-lined box that likely held valuables, "take the pod and get everyone over to Stark Tower. The rest of us will get on Tony's subship."

"But what's wrong?"

Erik waited until he could see Magda and the rest of his crew piling into the pod. He glanced at Charles and Raven, and looked at Max. "There are three bombs on this ship, and I don't know when they'll blow."

"I was coming back for you, anyway," Tony said in greeting, nodding towards Charles. "Thought the escape pods wouldn't take you."

"They shouldn't have," said Charles. He met Erik's eyes, and both of them glanced over at Wolverine - who had been aboard Tony's subship, which meant he'd gotten on it at the hub, and was now doing a fine job of ignoring all of them.

Tony's face grew grim when Erik told him about the bombs. "You would have noticed if someone came on board with bombs, right?"

"Of course."

Raven's eyes narrowed. "So they must have done it after you two left. Could they know about your ability, Erik?"

The old fear reared its head. Charles' warm hand came to rest on Erik's back, soothing; Erik refused to meet Charles' eyes, though his traitorous body leaned back into the familiar touch.

"Likely not," said Charles, after a moment. "It makes sense for them to wait until the ship was docked. All the crew would have been more occupied with stretching their legs, and there are more hiding places in the hangar."
"What about I get old Shellhead to disable those bombs for you, Erik?" suggested Tony. "Won't do for the Eisen flagship to be blown to smithereens. In its own homespace, no less."

Erik frowned. "Will it be able to withstand the blast if all three of them explode?"

Tony gave him a flat and somewhat eloquent stare. Right, stupid question.

"All right," said Tony, rubbing his hands together, "you guys, make yourselves comfortable. This baby has four sleeping cabins, a full bathroom in the back, and a kitchen, if you're hungry. I'm just going to - ah, contact my bodyguard, and also Pepper -"

"Tony," Erik interrupted. He felt, suddenly, very, very tired. He gave Tony a pointed look. "You don't - I know, all right?"

Tony blinked. "Oh. Really?"

Erik resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Even when I was repressing my ability, I could still tell certain things - like, for example, how Iron Man is not a full robot, but has hollow space inside it to fit an adult human. I guess it's more of a robotic suit? Then, there's that watch you always wear, and also your arc reactor, both of which I can track pretty easily."

Charles’ eyes widened. "Wait. So you're Iron Man?"

Tony laughed, somewhat louder than the situation warranted. He patted Erik on the back. "You figured that out, and you couldn’t tell why I kept calling you metal-man? Or Mags? Or never questioned why you chose to name your ship after your mysterious and highly questionable one-name ancestor?"

Erik glared at him.

Watching Tony get into the suit was - simply amazing, frankly. Tony's creations always had an element of beauty in them, particularly in the execution and the aesthetics, and Erik was willing to call the Iron Man suit his friend's best work to date. Tony simply had to stand in the middle of the bridge floor while robotic limbs coming out of the floor and the ceiling assembled the suit around him, a complicated orchestra of movement that Erik couldn't even keep track of. The whole operation could not have taken longer than a minute and a half – and then the recognizable figure that was Iron Man was standing in front of them, gleaming hot-red and as tall as Erik.

“Pretty cool, huh?” said Iron Man’s electronic voice. He tapped the metal chest plate, in the middle of which glowed the arc reactor.

“It’s very… shiny,” Erik conceded.

The Iron Man suit was space-worthy, so Tony literally just walked out of the airlock and fired his repulsors until he reached Magneto. They watched him disappear into one of the flagship’s emergency access doors. And waited.

Tony gave a running commentary, at first, which mainly consisted of complaining about how inconveniently small the service shafts down to the engines were. “These stairs are definitely not Iron Man-friendly,” Tony complained, while in the background something heavy and metallic hit something else that was metallic and sent up an almighty clang. “Oh, I am so refitting this section. Remind me to make it a requirement that any ship I spend a lot of time in has to be completely suit-accessible.”

"You're the one who redesigned it," said Erik. Also, Stark Tower, unless Tony had had a go at it
very recently, had even smaller service areas, but Erik decided not to point that out when the man was about to defuse bombs in his ship.

The commentary died down when Tony located the first bomb and started working on it, though Tony made random noises and muttered under his breath at odd intervals, like he always did when he was concentrating. Finally, he announced, “first one’s dead. It looked like a standard Spitter until I opened it up and found a few surprises. The other ones should go faster, now that I know what to do.”

“A Spitter?” asked Raven.

Erik rubbed a hand over his face. “It’s a type of bomb that’s wired into the engine, set to detonate once the engine reaches a certain speed or temperature.” And it’s the same one that killed my parents.

He kept his eyes on the main window, the slowly rotating body of Magneto, but he felt Charles’ attention shifting to him. Over the call, Tony swore and crashed into something else.

“Oh no,” said Tony, slamming his well-earned glass of whiskey down on the table. “I did not clean up your ship for you just so you can run off and play hermit.”

“Tony.” Erik sighed. “Look – someone’s after me. It’s not your usual assassination threat; the bombs in my ship would have taken out all the crew and anybody else I had on board. Whoever is behind this, they don’t care about collateral damage.”

Tony was quiet for a moment. “Wolverine told me that the evac at the hub was because of a toxic gaseous substance detected on board. In the room that had been assigned to you.”

That was probably why Tony had hung back to pick up Wolverine in the first place. “Yeah, he told me. Which proves my point.” Erik’s hands curled into fists. “What if Charles hadn’t gone back early?” There were no air quality sensors inside the private guestrooms; it was only when Charles had opened the door that the toxic gas particles escaped and had been picked up by the ship’s computers. “What if the ship’s sensors hadn’t detected the gas until it’d built up to fatal levels?” That must have been the intention – if they’d gone back to the room after the party, like everyone else, they would have gotten a lungful of the gas at the fatal concentration before the alarm outside kicked in.

“If you’re trying to convince me that it’s too dangerous for me to be around you,” said Tony. “You do realize who you’re talking to, right?”

Erik rolled his eyes, but in truth he was... warmed, inexplicably. “Maybe not you,” he said, voice quiet. “But Charles. And Raven. I can’t knowingly endanger them. Charles is right to want to go home.”

"Seriously? After the way you two have been carrying on, forcing your poor, helpless friends to put up with your lovesick ways, you're just going to let him go at the first hiccup?" Tony leaned forward. "Look me in the eyes and tell me that you're okay with never seeing Charles again."

Erik swallowed. He looked Tony in the eyes. "I would rather not see him again than have him come to harm because of me."

“Okay, whatever is going on between the two of you, it’s none of by business,” said Tony, the biggest nosebody and micromanager of other people’s lives. “But if you’re planning on fucking off into the void and abandoning him here for his own good, you need to tell him about it yourself. He
"Erik?" Charles stood by the door. Erik was clearly more distracted than he thought to not have heard it open. "What's this about you leaving?"

"I thought you said you wouldn't read our minds without permission?" Erik said, though his voice held no bite.

Charles took his lack of protest as invitation and stepped inside, the door sliding shut behind him. "Yes, but Tony's been thinking about your plans really, really loudly. I think he was ready to start muttering under his breath if that didn't work."

Ah, Tony. Erik chuckled mirthlessly. "It's the logical thing to do. Shipside, the possibilities for collateral damage are minimized. My presence on Eisen will only endanger people needlessly. I can do most of my work from a distance; the planet's been fine for the last thirty years without my presence."

"Damn it, Erik, stop making decisions just to protect me." Charles stomped over to stand right in front of Erik. "You are not responsible for every hurt I take."

"But I am," Erik said, stilling. "For the important ones. Look." He reached into a pocket of his one of his bags, pulled out a clear glass capsule. "Do you remember how we met?"

"The accident?"

"It certainly looked like one. Except, this-" he shook the capsule, sending the piece of metal inside rattling, "- this was what the medbot pulled out of your spine. Do you know what it is?"

"Yes. Old-fashioned projectile. An archaic assassination method, chosen deliberately to show that the one who paid for it can afford this kind of customization. Wolverine figured out that someone tampered with my hovercar, probably planned to shoot me while I was distracted with the controls. But then you were there, trying to help me. In the chaos, I must have deflected it on instinct, sending it into you."

Angry red stained Charles' cheeks, but what he said to Erik, through gritted teeth, was, "So you'd known, all that time in the Mansion, that somebody wanted to kill you?"

"Charles." Erik felt like tearing his hair out. "Don't you see, I sent a bullet into your spine. And several hours ago, you could have died." Erik stepped away. "If I had - if I'd stayed away from the start, you would not have been in danger. You are right to want to go home."

Charles made a frustrated noise. "That's not what I- But, surely, if you apply to the authorities-"

"Sepor is behind this. The authorities are the ones behind this," Erik said abruptly. After a moment, he continued, "Tony thinks it's Shaw himself who put out the hit. The man Wolverine tracked down after the assassins was probably just a cover, killed to make sure no one traced it back to Shaw."

Charles' eyes widened, and turned distant, and Erik wondered if Charles still had it in him to be shocked at these kinds of things. He had no idea why Charles was still here - no, of course Charles would stay and make sure Erik was all right, plus there was Raven, and any minute now Charles was going to leave, this may be the last time Erik ever saw him-
And then Charles' attention returned to the room, back with Erik, and he said, "Wolverine wants to talk to us."
Wolverine was in the room next to Erik's, of course, and Charles blushed a little at the thought that the man had probably heard every word of their conversation.

Then again, Erik's bodyguard had been subjected to the two of them for months now, and had likely overheard far worse than a fairly civil domestic.

"Wolverine, I was just telling Erik that this scheme of his to run away and live like a hermit is utterly ridiculous," said Charles. "Surely you can talk some sense into him-"

"This has got nothing to do with Erik," Wolverine interrupted. "'s about you."

Charles blinked.

"Let me - I need to tell you something." Wolverine looked between Charles and Erik, and waved irritably for them to sit down on the pair of chairs he must have dragged in from other rooms. "Might as well be to both of you. Think of it like a, a story."

Charles could hear Erik thinking, clearly, *Is this really the time?* But there was something in the set of Wolverine's shoulders, in his obvious discomfort - from a man who acted however he wanted and never seemed afraid of anything or cared for anyone's opinion - that told them this must be something important.

Erik seemed to realize it shortly after Charles did - worry suffused the already complicated nest of his emotions. He nodded.

"Say there was this soldier," Wolverine began, "and he'd been a soldier for a damn long time, longer than the two of you have been alive. And he'd seen some awful shit. Done some of his own. Soldiers either die or hit their limit; the first never seemed to stick, and he thought he was too old for the second. Well, turns out he wasn't - turns out, he was not so far gone as to kill a whole fucking *family* without batting an eye. He won't lie and pretend he hadn't killed women and children, before, but this was - they weren't even given a chance."

Charles could feel how tightly locked up the man was, right then, and didn't dare move himself.

Wolverine let out a choked sort of grunt. "Everyone's got things that push 'em over - the bastards, you see, they killed the kiddies *first*. We heard them. One kid must have gotten to the open comm system - she warned that she could see the kill-net closing in on the fleet. We heard the air squeezed out of her lungs. I wasn't the only one shook up. Some tried to back out, but they were shot down as soon as the bosses saw them hesitating."

Charles was, selfishly, glad that he'd stayed well out of Wolverine's head. Even the thick walls Wolverine had built around himself were not enough for this - horror and anger and remembered pain were leaking through.

"I found a side-corridor, slipped away from the main troop. Got a whiff of someone hiding, female. Followed my nose, and found one of them, the targets, hiding in a room. She was about to shoot me in the head. I ripped off the special helmet we were all given, and told her to read me, so she could see that I wanted to help."

"Read you?" asked Charles, at the same time as Erik said, "special helmet?"
Wolverine met Charles' eyes. "She was a telepath," he answered, in a deceptively mild tone.

Charles fingers dug into the thick material of his coat - the formal one he'd worn to the gala. He sensed Erik glancing sharply at him. There was a feeling, of puzzle pieces hovering in the air, waiting for all the edges to be revealed so they could begin fitting together.

Wolverine grinned at them. It was devoid of his usual humor - he just looked like an old forest predator, bitter and tough with age. "Did I forget to mention? All the troops were given special helmets, and told that we would be shot if we took them off, and all the ships had a special kind of shield - because, you see, the target wasn't one person or one ship. It was a whole fleet - a whole family. A family of telepaths."


"Myth has as much guts and gore as anything else when you're on ground level," said Wolverine blithely. "So this woman, she reads my mind, sees that I want to help her. She says that she needs to get to her ship. I told her that I'd get her there. She got her pack - and I remember thinking that she was carrying it kind of funny. We made it down to the docking bay pretty easily. Too easily, but she said that whatever's left of her family tried to keep the way clear for her. We got to the ship, and-" Wolverine stopped. He grimaced, lips pressed together. His fists were balled tight; Charles could see where his skin was stretched over the retracted claws.

"Wolverine?" Charles asked gently. They watched, for a long moment, as Wolverine took deep breaths.

"I-" Wolverine tried, an interminable length of time later. "No, you'll need to-" He wagged his fingers over one temple. Evidently Charles' habitual gesture was becoming the universal signal for read my mind.

"Are- are you sure?" asked Charles. "Maybe - you can continue later, if you'd rather."

"What the fuck - you don't pull out a knife stuck in your gut only halfway and then take a nap," snapped Wolverine. Annoyance returned color to his face. Charles hadn't realized how pale he'd gotten, and this was a man who didn't even blink at receiving severe traumatic injury. "Just do it. And take him along," he nodded at Erik, "'cause I don't want to watch him get an aneurysm while you're in there."

"All right," said Charles. He locked eyes with Erik, waited for the nod of permission; linking their minds was always so easy, like they were both only a breath from it all the time. Then, he reached out for Wolverine. There was something unnerving about Wolverine's steely gaze, though. What could have been so horrible that this man couldn't even tell them about it?

It's all right, Charles, murmured Erik. I'll be with you.

Charles didn't try to hide the comfort he found in Erik's presence. He twined their thought-streams together tightly, not unlike a comforting squeeze of the hand.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," grumbled Wolverine. He grabbed Charles' hand and pressed it against the side of his face, and there was a desperate push of take it, take it, I've been carrying this for you-

A small sound escapes the package in the Xavia woman's arms, distinctive. There's a what the fuck ready on Wolverine's tongue, when the woman turns and - the package isn't a package at all, she must have done something to his mind to camouflage it.
She's holding a fucking baby.

"He should have been on the safepods, with the other children," the woman says, adjusting the blankets around the child. "But he gets sick easily, and he's so small." Her eyes meet Wolverine's. "And now he's - he has to live, do you understand that? He's the only one left. He has to live."

Wolverine can only nod. "Sure, lady. Get in the ship with your kid, and I'll hold them off here as long as I can."

"Oh, he's not mine," says the woman, starting forward again even as she smiles down at the wriggling bundle. "His father is my uncle, my mother's brother. Both parents dead, now, poor lad. And all the rest of us, soon."

"Whatever," Wolverine says, because he honestly doesn't care. "You can tell him all about your family tree once you're out of here, just get in the ship."

Her eyes go distant and her expression hardens. Wolverine recognizes the look of someone reaching a decision. "They have surrounded the Fleet with kill-nets, you know. No ship can get past the energy barrier. What remains of our fighter ships are regrouping for a final, concentrated attack. The plan is to target one of the small ships maintaining the net, at the weakest point. The net itself will simply close in when the ship is destroyed, reattach to the next ship in the transmitter line, but there is a small window - Grey will be able to fly through the targeted ship as it explodes."

Wolverine frowns. "You'll take a lot of damage." The plan is gutsy, though, and he can admire that.

"But at least the electrical systems, the navigation, the life support, all the important parts should still be functional after."

While the kill-net would have fried all said systems, and kill everyone inside the ship to boot. Wolverine grudgingly admits that he can't think of a better plan, right at that moment. "Great. So, are we waiting on them or what?"

"No, they are waiting on you." The woman smiles grimly. "Please drop your weapons, Mr. Creed."

There's a touch of command in her voice that has him lowering his guns before he's even aware of it. He growls at her, remembering why he hates telepaths, but continues the motion, and ends up with a pile of guns and knives on the floor.

Then, to his utmost shock, she gives the baby to him.

"What the-?" Fuck, but while Wolverine has never been shy about using whatever language he pleases, there's something about swearing in front of the baby's big fucking blue eyes and serene expression that's just... wrong.

Wolverine shouts something, anyway, because what the fuck - but the words are lost in an explosion that's followed by a roar of fire and destructive force. He keeps his feet, barely, while the woman bounces between the walls like a ragged doll. He finds, with no small amount of surprise, that he's curled himself around the baby, hands that tremble with the urge for violence curving protectively to support the tiny head.

He has to hand it to the woman - she's back on her feet the moment the shaking stops, bruised but defiant, Wolverine's rifle in her hands. She even, to his surprise, looks like she knows how to use it, competently checking the energy clip and disengaging the safety.

A haze settles over the memory, softening the sharp edges that hadn't seemed so until now.
Wolverine struggles, but she's backing him into the open door to her ship, and he can feel the weight of her mind in his, apologetic but determined to salvage something out of the catastrophe.

"A last blessing, such as a dying world can give." A hand came to rest on his forehead, soft and cool. He can't remember kneeling; the floor is hard under his knees. "Forgiveness, we grant you, for your part in our doom. Hereafter, may you find safe harbour with our allies; may the burden of guilt on your heart be eased; may you find a purpose with which you can be content." Her touch withdraws. He looks up, into green eyes that regard him sadly, kindly. "It is not our custom to provide Guidance unless it is asked for. But today has seen the breaking of many things. So I tell you now, as Jean who is called Phoenix: Logan, may you hereafter find peace in defending life, rather than taking it."

And then he's in the ship, safely ensconced in the pilot console. He feels the sharp jolt of the ship launching. It doesn't occur to him to grab the controls until after he realizes that he doesn't have to: the ship is piloting itself. He can still sense the woman's presence in his mind - Jean, Jean - and there's a second presence, different, like a refraction of Jean's, but it feels much closer. He looks up and sees that one of the ship's screens is showing the corridor he'd just left - a security camera, it must be.

The ship is watching her, he realizes. It sounds absurd. He knows it's true.

He sees the black-garbed troops marching down the corridor towards her. She doesn't move, just picks up more of his weapons. One of the soldiers opens fire. His shield, the emitter looking huge on her arm, deflects the beam of energy. She fires back, and keeps firing, must have switched his rifle from semi to automatic. Two of the soldiers go down. She throws one of the knives, one of the Maddox specials, and it goes right through the shield of another soldier. She takes fire from the opposite side of the corridor, where the camera can't see.

Bright light draws Logan's eyes to the main window of the ship. He thinks, for a moment, that he's about to fly right into a sun. Then he remembers the plan; the remnant squadron had followed the ship, Grey, and had taken out the target ship, without Logan even noticing. They're about to fly right through the exploding ship.

He doesn't blink. His eyes burn, he's blinded, but Jean is still inside his head, somehow. This is a reminder, though unintentional, of all the times he's faced the end of the world alongside far better men and women, and been the only one to get back up after. He folds himself over the bundle in his arms, taking the heat and the shards of glass and metal and hoping that he absorbs it all.

"You were a baby," said Wolverine, hushed and strained and far into the future. "Could barely hold your own head up, but you stared at me, steady as anything. I was a stranger, covered in blood and smoke and I must have looked like an animal, but you never looked scared. You fucking smiled at me. We crashed on Eisen. I don't know how you could have survived that. I was barely alive, I'd been dying half the way, and I wondered if that was it, I'd hit my limit of what I could heal. But you were all right. A little hot and sweaty, and there was a cut on your palm when you fucking grabbed my claw, fucking crazy kid, but you were alive."

He's not sure if his eyes regenerate in the middle of the inferno. But he sees her, and she's hurt. There's blood over her chest and gushing down one arm. She's still standing. She's also - glowing, she's glowing, especially her eyes, and there's a ring of weapons around her, floating in mid-air, guns and knives and grenades, mostly Logan's but some taken from fallen soldiers, her red hair blazing fury about her head, the bodies of her enemies piled around her feet. It's a vision from the end of
times: a circle of death, and she, a goddess of war.

It's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen, and will ever see.

Right before the end, she looks up, gazing at him right in the eyes.

*Go, with all our hopes.*

{ END PART 2 }

And the man gave unto the good family his secret, and instructed them to keep it safe.
"How long have you known?"

Charles voice sounded sudden and strange, after the silence that had befallen the small room. He was dimly aware of Erik to his side, but his gaze was focused squarely on Wolverine, who met his eyes without flinching.

"I started wondering when I tracked you and Erik to your village-compound," was the eventual answer. "I couldn't be sure. The place looked different. It's been thirty fucking years. I told myself, what were the chances?" Wolverine waved a hand in a helpless gesture. "But. You were a telepath. And then you started wearing," he pointed to Charles' neck, "that necklace, out where I could see. That's when I knew for sure."

And you didn't tell me, then? the thought lashed out faster than his mouth could form the words. Raven hated it when he did that, claimed it was a bad habit of his when he was angry or afraid and trying so desperately not to let on that it bubbled out through his telepathy.

Wolverine didn't even blink. Charles felt oddly grateful for that. "What was the point? Xavia is dead."

At least the man was as ruthlessly honest as ever. "So why are you telling me now?" asked Charles, taking extra care to use his voice and not his mind.

Wolverine gave him raised eyebrows full of, you're kidding, right? "I'm Erik's bodyguard. Someone's trying to kill him. This same someone," he cast an ugly look at Erik, "may also be after an artifact last owned by. Well. Your biological family."

Put it like that...
Tony's voice sounded over the comm system. "Guys, we're being hailed by a Merchant ship. Caller ID says it's the Merchant Prince himself."

Charles met Erik and Wolverine's eyes. Wordlessly, all three of them left the room and trooped down the central hallway to the bridge.

"What do they want?" Raven was asking. Charles was surprised to see her at a side-console, hand moving confidently over the screen hovering in front of her. She looked like she knew what she was doing, and Tony clearly believed she did, as he wasn't even glancing her way. Charles had known, sort of, that she'd been learning to pilot, but now realized, with a twinge of guilt, that he had no idea she was this far along. He really was an awful brother.

"The only way to find out is to accept the call," said Tony, from the pilot-chair.

A moment later, a screen appeared, floating over the central window. Charles remembered catching the Merchant Prince's gaze on him a few times during the various events he'd attended with Erik, but he'd thought the man had only been naturally curious about his presence, and at least he hadn't bothered Charles the way many of his peers had. His eyes zoned straight into Charles now, though; so maybe it wasn't just curiosity.

"I see that you have company, Stark."

"Don't I always?" Tony said with mock sweetness. "So you understand why I'd like for you to get right to the point, please."

The Merchant Prince inclined his head. "Very well. I would like to invite you and your guests aboard my ship. There are things I wish to discuss."

"Are you serious?" exclaimed Tony. Charles saw him rubbing a hand over his hair. "Look, we appreciate the thought, but this is really not the best time-"

"The Merchants have existed for as long as any of the First Fleet," said the Merchant Prince, as if Tony hadn't spoken, "yet we are not recognized as one, because we do not have a single Family name. We are sneered at, even though we are the reason that trade between the colonies was possible in the early days of Ten Sol. But we overlook such minor indignities, because we know where we come from, and we know the trust that has been placed on us." The Merchant Prince lifted his head. "The Merchants, you see, were the first branching of the Xavia line; and we are Xavia's oldest ally."

Charles' back stiffened, despite himself. The man knew. Somehow, he'd known, maybe all this time, what Wolverine had revealed to him and Erik only minutes ago.

No, not Wolverine - Logan. Charles couldn't even begin to untangle what he felt about, well, everything, but most especially about this man who'd been in the background all this time, and yet had saved his life, on top of repeatedly saving Erik's.

And Charles might never have known, if not for a split-second decision one hot day at New Market. Which had only happened because Logan hadn't been around to rescue Erik from the rogue hovercar

What were the chances, indeed.

Charles? Raven asked, clearly noticing his reaction. Raven, who hated communicating telepathically and avoided doing so if she could help it. He couldn't quite look at her, his dear little sister.

*I'll explain later. Trust me?*
Erik stepped up to the pilot-chair and proceeded to have an argument with Tony entirely through facial expressions. There was no indication of who won; Tony simply looked up at the screen and said, "We accept your gracious invitation."

The Merchant flagship was smaller than Charles had expected, but it seemed as if they tried to compensate for that fact on the inside.

Their little group was led through hallways that would have been comfortably wide, if not for the all the stuff lining both sides. Vases, sculptures, outfits displayed on mannequins, even the odd weapon. There didn't seem to be a system of organization, and most of the items had flashy appearances that drew the eye. Charles deliberately kept his gaze on the path, and on the crew member leading the way, and scanned the minds around them for hostile intent.

He mostly got mild confusion - nobody else knew why the Merchant Prince had invited them on board. But no one was completely surprised, like this was something their leader did on occasion.

Charles sensed Erik pausing behind him at one point. A glance back showed Erik frowning down at an elegant bowl, in the center of which lay a shiny metallic ball resting on a cushion. Erik didn't touch it, though, and after a moment, moved on again.

The Prince was waiting for them in a large, circular room that had a severely formal look to it. Fewer paraphernalia, but the rich carpet and sparkling chandelier matched the spectacle out in the hallway.

"Master Stark," the Merchant Prince nodded at Tony, then to each of them in turn. "Master Lehnsherr. Mister Howlett. Miss Darkholme." He met Charles' eyes squarely. "Master Xavier."

Hearing it like that, straight out of someone else, was like a shock.

At the same time, it felt right, like putting on a new coat he'd never so much as seen before, and finding that it effortlessly fitted all the contours of his body.

Charles and Erik had been able to give the quickest run-down of all run-downs to Tony and Stark while waiting for Tony's subship to dock. He could feel the cloud of disbelief radiating from his sister right now, regardless of how hard he was trying to block her out, but if anyone could adapt to new situations quickly, it was Raven. Tony - he had just taken the revelations in stride, not demonstrating any surprise at all.

Had Tony known? Suspected?

There had been the faintest hint of a questioning lilt in the Merchant Prince's voice when he'd named Charles. He looked pleased when no one corrected him.

"All right, Remy, we're here. What do you want?" Tony said, less than graciously.

*Bumpy history with the Merchants,* Erik silently explained to Charles.

"To see with my own eyes," the Merchant Prince boomed, coming to stand in front of Charles, looming a good foot taller, "the last child of the old Xavia. Do you know, young man, that you're the spitting image of your grandfather?"

Charles' eyes widened. "I am?"
The Prince made an affirming sound, looking over Charles while giving off an odd mix of sadness and warmth.

Tony cleared his throat pointedly.

After throwing a glare at Tony, the Prince said, "My caravan traveled here following a rumor. A rumor about Prime Shaw. The man's inner circle is impenetrable, so it has taken some time. Finally, earlier today, our contacts gathered enough corroborating information for us to feel that the rumor is, in fact, true."

"The Prime is after one of the oldest and most important of Xavia's secrets: the Crown." There was a flicker of surprise when none of them reacted to the information. "I see that this news is not, in fact, news to you." The Merchant Prince's eyes were grim, steel-cold. "It is crucial that he does not come to possess it." He looked at Charles. "As Xavia's sole living heir, it is your responsibility to prevent him. I wish to offer my help."

"Let me guess - you want to use Charles to find what's left of Xavia? Get to the Crown before Shaw does?" Tony said skeptically. "Sorry, but the Coalition was very thorough. There's nothing in the deathspace except wreckage, even if Charles does have some way of accessing Xavia treasure."

The Merchant Prince made a scornful sound. "Wealth, knowledge, and ships - that's all everyone associates with Xavia. Maybe it was Xavia's fault, at the end, when they let their myth overcome their presence in Ten Sol's affairs. But that was not what Xavia meant, not how Xavia began." He held up a round disc - the now-familiar metallic token with the stylized X in the center. "Once, Xavia meant unity."

Imagine, he said, a vast network of mind-speakers, neurons in a brain system, spread over all ten systems. They had led the First Fleets beyond their struggling, solitary world, and brought humanity into space; they had acted as an anchor back to the planets, and a connection between the fleets. Xavia, at its peak, had been the greatest knowledge-seekers: explorers, scholars, scientists. The main bloodline consisted mainly of telepaths, but they drew in people with other gifts, seeking them out and providing a haven.

The mechanics of the InterSol, for example, was based on studies of people who could travel at great speeds, and the routes had been built with the aid of those who could teleport. Shatter Reef had been the plaything of those who controlled fire, ice, lightning. Between these groups, between factions that might have turned on each other and dissolved into war, even between human and mutant - Xavia had been there, mentor and mediator both.

"And then, who knows - maybe it was fear, distrust, some deeper reason. Xavia withdrew from all the worlds, and then all of the fleets, and people forgot. How easily people transform fame and legend into myth when the subject is no longer seen in the flesh."

Then, without warning, the Prince's hand whipped around, faster than the eye could follow, and he flung something at Erik; there was too much speed and force behind it for physics, which made Charles realize the Prince must be a mutant as well. The object froze in mid-air, gleaming gold, a foot in front of Erik's face. It looked like the ball in the bowl that Erik had paused to examine earlier, out in the hallway.

"Forgive me," the Prince grinned, "I saw Lehnsherr taking notice of this. My sister said you were all mutants except for Stark. I must commend you, Master Lehnsherr, on doing an exceptional job of keeping this information out of the 'Nets and Society gossip."

"Your sister?" asked Charles, surprised, at the same time as Erik said, "it's a fairly recent
The Prince's grin grew bigger. "Yes, my sister has the ability to sense mutants. Quite a minor mutation, thankfully, so her migraines are not as severe as some. I have an uncle who ended up in a vegetative coma after the m-sickness hit him. My family is only a handful of degrees removed from Xavia, you see; puberty, for us, is a lot like Ruska roulette."

"What about-?" Raven started, but then snapped her mouth close and flushed.

"Sepor doesn't bother the Merchants," the Prince explained. "It's an understanding we have - as long as none of us demonstrate mutant ability in public, they leave us alone. A Merchant would rather fight to the death than be taken away from the caravans."

Charles glanced at Erik and saw that he was frowning at the ball, which was still floating in front of him. "Erik?"

"There is more than one type of metal in this," said Erik in a distracted tone. He lifted a hand, palm facing the ball but not touching. The ball began to spin. Charles heard a tiny click, and suddenly a layer of metal peeled off from the ball as if skin from a fruit. The underlying smaller ball had the color of brass. It kept spinning. There was another click, and the brass layer peeled off.

What remained was a small sphere lattice, delicately intricate and hardly bigger than his palm. Charles assumed it to be silver, at first, but after a longer look, he could see the hint of white, the pearl-like sheen, the familiar faint transparency of the outer coating.

The Merchant Prince was staring at Erik, the caramel color of his skin noticeably paler. He radiated shock and disbelief.

"It is real," breathed the Prince after a long, pregnant pause. "We've always thought that calling it the Key was an affectation, or a long-forgotten riddle, but it's actually true."

"What do you mean?" asked Erik. The sphere flew into his hand and was subjected to closer scrutiny. The Prince didn't seem to mind.

"That is just one of the millions of little trinkets in my familial heritage," answered the Prince. "We have antiques that can be traced all the way back to Earthworld. That one is just known as The Key."

"What is it a key to?" asked Charles.

"Nobody knows, either. The only thing said about it, that I have found, is that whomever uncovers the key must keep it against a future need." The Prince shrugged. "So it is yours now, Lehnsherr."

"Thank you," said Erik. He floated the key into one of his coat's inner pockets.

The Merchant Prince eyes turned shrewd. "You are full of unexpected surprises, sir. We have known each other for many years, and I knew your parents. They were good people. Your line is as old as mine, but Eisenhardts are known to be quiet, serious. Focused on goals. Quite unremarkable - and I do not mean that as an insult. By all accounts, you're a solid, successful businessman, and thoroughly human. The only gossip about you was your unattached status. Then you take up residence in your ancestral home. A few months later, you reappear in society with a beau from planetside, who happens to be a telepath. I thought you have some minor telekinetic ability, but that's incorrect, isn't it?"

"I can manipulate metal," Erik admitted. "And magnetic fields."
The Prince’s gaze grew more intent. "How strong are you?"

Erik shrugged. "I don't know. I used it as little as I could, until recently."

"Why the interest in Lehnsherr, all of a sudden?" Wolverine asked.

The Prince was silent for a long while, thoughtful. "I suppose none of you are aware that the ability to manipulate metal is extremely rare. Oh, there's always a wide variety in the nature and scope of mutations, but there are general types that appear regularly. Telepathy, teleportation, shape-changing, flight - the categories of nature's creativity. But mastery of metal, and of magnetic fields - for some reason, it doesn't appear as often. There is only one other person in recorded history who'd possessed this mutation, and that was a very long time ago."

"Magneto," whispered Erik.

"Yes." The Prince smiled. "I wonder what they say about him in your family."

"That he was mad. That he'd done a terrible thing, and was haunted by it for the rest of his life."

"And yet, you named your ship after him."

Erik looked away. "I was young. And he was a war-hero."

And the only person of legend in Erik's family, Charles read between the lines. The Eisenhardts were, after all, known for being quiet and industrious, and they’d disappeared entirely in their forgotten corner of space with as little fanfare as they’d existed. What must it have been like, to be the heir of that kind of legacy?

"I don't understand what you want from me," said Charles, eager to pull the Prince's attention away from Erik. "I don't know where this Crown is, or how to find it."

"There is one way to get more information," the Prince said, tone delicate.

Tony and Erik's minds radiated a stereo blast of NO. Neither of them said anything, though, and Charles appreciated that they were leaving it up to him.

_Time to come home._ Had this been the message, all along?

"Why don't you want Shaw to get the Crown?" Charles asked the Merchant Prince.

"I cannot tell you," said the Prince regretfully. "It is part of the secret. Shaw is a thief, and an opportunistic scavenger, and those are the kindest terms one could use. If the Crown should belong to anybody, it would be you, by birthright."

The bridge of Tony's sub-ship was silent. Outside, the Merchant Prince’s retinue of ships drifted away, moving towards Eisen and the glittering cloud above its atmosphere that was the City-in-Orbit. They wouldn't enter the Orbital itself, not feeling comfortable there, but the Prince promised that they would stay until Charles returned, and keep an eye on Shaw when he arrived.

It was Tony who finally said, into the thoughtful silence, "Well?"

"Charles?" said Erik.

Charles looked up, gazing at each of them in turn. "I want to do it. I think- I owe them this, at least."
The people who died, while I went on and lived." And he'd been dreaming about something calling me there, though he hadn't known it meant the Xavia deathspace. He hesitated. "But, I can't ask the rest of you-"

"Nonsense," Tony interrupted with a casual wave. "I can't remember the last time I had so much fun! And this is a real mystery, true-blue living-history stuff. No way I'm sitting it out. My ship is your ship. Think of me as your glorified chauffeur." He peered over his shoulder at the main window, which was showing the City-in-Orbit in the distance. "Also, the longer I can delay getting back to Pepper and her compad of torture, the better."

"I go where he goes," said Wolverine, jerking a thumb over at Erik.

Raven echoed with, "I go where you go."

Charles looked at Erik. Erik answered in both look and thought: do you really need to ask?

"Thank you, my friends," said Charles quietly. "I guess we go to find Xavia."

After Tony had set their course, and the subship had popped into the InterSol, Erik and Tony retreated to Tony’s room to keep his ever-present bottle of whiskey company.

“You need to talk to him, Erik,” Tony began, after he’d poured them both a glass.

“He’s got a lot on his plate right now,” said Erik quietly. “The last thing he needs is me trying to split his attention even further.”

“The last thing he needs is to feel that he’s alone, that you don’t care about him now.”

Erik frowned. “How can he-?” But, of course, this was Charles, who was so damn careful and afraid, Erik realized. Of his power? Or of other people’s reaction to him? He remembered the Honourable’s words about Charles, who knew how many days-and-nights ago.

“Talk to him.” The antique bottle of whiskey glinted in the light, the shine of the crystal a testament to the resilience of the craftsmanship and the dedication of Tony’s cleaning staff.

Erik had no idea how Charles would react. He had no idea how things stood between them now. But Tony had a point. He nodded, tiredly.

They sat in silence for a while, just drinking. Tony poured himself more whiskey, and said to his glass, in a contemplative tone, “Far be it from me to have an opinion on your private life, but in my vast and somewhat capricious experience, sometimes people, especially telepaths with charming compunctions about reading people’s minds, need to be surprised, to be broken out of old behavior patterns that they cling to like a safety blanket because people, overall, are dicks.”

Erik had only had less than one glass of whiskey, compared to Tony’s three, but he felt like he was the one who was drunk-slow. “Tony, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“I’m telling you, my friend,” Tony leaned forward, “that Charles is acting like he’s always acted, in relationships. Takes one to know one. He has this pattern, and he expects you to fall into it, because everybody else has, and Charles doesn’t know different. It probably confused him when you turned out to be different from the rest. Him trying to move back planetside might have been a pre-emptive
strike of some kind.”

Erik rubbed a finger over his temple. He scowled when he realized that the movement just reminded him of Charles’ habitual gesture. “I don’t know what you want me to do.”

“What I want, sharkface, is for you to finish the rest of your drink.” There was a clink of crystal against glass when Tony topped off Erik’s whiskey, anyway. “As for Charles – I think Charles just wants you to not give him up too easily.”

"You know that I only have approximate coordinates, right?" said Tony. "And this is from countless hours of digging through contradictory files and corrupted data."

"Isn't the Great Blinding supposed to be some big historical event?" asked Raven. "Are you telling me that no one knows where it happened?"

"Funny how often that happens, in history," mused Tony. "Besides, first thing you learn when you start flying in space for real, young'un, is that things tend to be really fucking far apart. Space is huge, and full of, you know, space. Locating things is more complicated than 'turn right after that red dwarf'. Unless you have exact coordinates, you could end up wandering for decades without finding so much as an asteroid. Actually, that's exactly what happened to most people who've gone looking for Xavia. Doesn't help that the old Xavia territory is on the outer fringes of Ten Sol."

Wolverine spoke up from somewhere behind them. "Take us close enough and I'll fucking guide you myself."

"It's been thirty years, Wolverine-" Charles started.

"Thirty years or a hundred," the bodyguard said quietly, "I won't forget that day."

He and Erik still played chess, on account of Tony inexplicably unearthing a gorgeous antique set and there being little else to do on what was estimated to be a week-long journey.

Their matches were usually silent, with either party disinterested or too interested or resentful of the other's silence in various, cyclical turns. The few times they spoke never ended well.

"Of course, you are far above me now," Erik said, not meeting Charles' eyes.

Charles nearly dropped the knight in his hand. "What? Erik, how can you think that?"

The worst thing was, Erik didn't even look angry, or annoyed. Just sad. Resigned. "You're the one who's always been concerned by the difference."

"Erik, I'm the first person you've been able to... be intimate with. In the real, lose-control-of-bodily-functions way. While I care about you a great deal," too much, far too much, even the thought of Erik leaving or loving someone else made it hard for him to breathe, "I can't help but wonder if the way you feel is merely a reflection of that." It was hard enough to break away from Erik now; it would be impossible, it would kill Charles, to lose Erik after years of closeness, when Erik's attachment inevitably faded, or Erik realized the full extent of Charles' powers.

"Perhaps you could trust people to know themselves better than you know them - though goodness knows we are aware of your confidence in your gifts."
"Alas, but people very rarely know themselves so well as that. Even our shared history bears evidence." Charles arched an eyebrow pointedly at the rook piece that Erik was levitating over the board.

Erik brought the rook down with a dull 'thunk', displacing Charles' bishop and nearly knocking it off the table. "Such wisdom, Charles. I hope that one day you will be able to apply it to yourself as well."

Charles wasn't entirely sure how he ended up in Erik's room instead of the one he was sharing with Raven, but he highly suspected a conspiracy, involving Tony and his well-stocked bar, his sister locking their room, and Wolverine deciding that Erik was perfectly safe in the Stark subship and thus not needing within shouting distance. He was fairly sure that none of these factors had happened independently.

"Charles?" Erik sat up on the bed. The sheet slipped down, revealing Erik's enviably toned upper body. Charles' libido, woefully unprepared, started taking an interest, and he had to remind it that Erik was no longer on the menu.

"Raven won't let me into our room," he said plaintively.

Erik sighed, and rubbed a hand over his face. He muttered something that sounded like, "kill them all" and patted the bed. "I suppose it's hardly scandalous now."

Ten minutes later, he asked, "Charles, why are you naked?"

Instead of answering, Charles stuck his tongue out and licked at a piece of skin that wandered temptingly close, which turned out to be Erik's shoulder. "Mmm. I like to sleep naked."

"Yes, I know, but this is hardly - Gods, are you drunk?" Long, warm fingers touched Charles' face, the gentle movements at odds with the sharpness of Erik's voice. "I can smell Tony's expensive whiskey. I told him you're a lightweight - oh, of course he did this, because I told him you're a lightweight."

Charles made an agreeing sound. "You smell amazing. And you're also naked." He remembered when Erik used to wear clothes all the time. Layers and layers. But not since Charles took him to Chester. Clearly, Charles deserves an award for services to humanity.

A sigh. "Charles, go to sleep. You will regret this in the morning as it is."

Erik's voice was more amused than annoyed, though. "You're never scared of me," mumbled Charles. "Even when I can do things. Even when - like now. I want nothing more than for you to fuck me. Feel your cock inside me. Or suck me off; that's good too. And I could," he waggled his fingers, "I could make you. You'd have no way of stopping me, if I really put my, my brain... power... thing into it. I could make you beg to fuck me, and believe that you mean it." He jabbed at the unfairly gorgeous chest in front of him. "But you're never scared."

Hands covered his own. Gentle. "I'm not scared of you, Charles. And yes, I know what you can do. But I won't ever be scared of you."

"But why?"

Lips brushed over his forehead. "You'll have to figure that part out yourself."
Just as Charles drifted off, he heard, "And for the record, I do want to beg to fuck you, and mean it, and it has nothing to do with your powers."

Charles groaned even before he opened his eyes.

"Ah, you're awake."

At least Erik was no longer in bed with him. That would have been even more awkward. "I'm so, so sorry."

"Before you duck back into your turtle shell of shame and self-doubt," said Erik. Charles cracked an eye open and saw that the man was standing over the bed. "I just want to point out that you were so drunk that you walked into a wall twice on your way to the bed, and apologized to the lampstand when you bumped into it."

"Yes, all right," grumbled Charles.

"I'm not finished. You were that drunk, Charles, and you wanted sex so bad you were projecting it, and yet," Erik paused, and leaned down closer, "you didn't force me, didn't use your power. You can, and I know that you can make me believe that I'm giving consent, but you didn't. " Charles didn't think he could move under that hard glare. "And I know you never will."

Charles and Erik stared at each other.

The moment was broken by Raven barging into the room. Her eyes flashed guiltily between the two of them. "Um, you know what, it's not important-"

"Raven," Erik said softly.

Something in his tone of voice, or maybe on Charles' face, made the edges of her expression brighten up, though most of it was still nervous and somber. "We're here."

It was so quiet. Charles was still getting used to the different nature of sounds in space: the steady hum of engines, the total vacuum on the other side of the ship walls, the muffling of noises when ships were transitioning into or out of a planetary atmosphere, the underwater-like quality of sound when they traveled on the InterSol.

From the moment they arrived at the coordinates Tony had entered, Charles could tell that this was yet another kind. It was a silence, but coming from more than just the vacuum of space; there was a chill to it, an unsettling texture. Like something beyond the capability of Charles' ears to pick up but could nonetheless be felt in his bones.

Without speaking, they all gathered in the bridge, an audience around Tony's pilot-chair. Tony appeared too focused on the controls to be worrying about the situation, but Charles noted that he'd turned up the protective force field and quieted all the unnecessary operations that would normally be whirring and clanking all over the ship. On the main bridge window, Charles saw them entering a loose asteroid belt.

Or so he thought, until he got a good look at one of the pieces floating past them.

"Oh," whispered Raven. "That's a ship."
It was a battlefield that been left as a deathspace, a graveyard. Charles, who had grown up surrounded by the detritus of unwanted ships, felt distinctly uncomfortable to be among these broken and abandoned remnants. He couldn't help but think that each was a fragment of his own past, the past that he was still trying to reconcile himself with, and his gaze took in the obvious signs of conflict and violence.

"And those are bodies," said Tony. "Thirty years in an icy vacuum, drifting in what is essentially a field of shrapnel." Charles heard him swallow thickly. "If I hadn't already shut down my company's weapons-making operations, this would have done it."

*They'd just been left here,* Charles thought. Another floated past: *this was my family.* Half of him felt numb to it all, viewing the images from a distance.

The mothership was fairly obvious, being the biggest vessel and at the center of the gruesome cloud. It looked small, at first, as most ships did when there wasn't a nearby planetary body to provide a sense of scale. It was only after many minutes had passed, and the ship didn't appear to be getting any bigger, that Charles realized they were still a long way away from it. He could tell, now, which ships were Xavia and which must have been the attackers. The greatest concentration of the latter was around the mothership. This may have been due to the evidence that the mothership had exploded from the inside.

*Self-destruct,* Charles remembered.

Curiously, enough of the mothership's internal frame survived that they could get an idea of what it had looked like. Tony kept his approach slow and steady. The mothership grew and grew on the window, until they could no longer see the whole without expanding the range of the ship's visual capabilities. Tony's ship fitted easily between two decks.

"It's enormous," breathed Erik. He went to a side-console and pulled up a holographic screen.

"It was the biggest fucking ship I'd ever seen," said Wolverine. Charles could feel the reminder settling over everyone: that here was someone who'd actually seen the ship before it was destroyed, who'd stormed the great hall through which Tony's subship was now drifting. Not all of the debris here was metal. Wolverine's mind was caught up in remembrance; Charles knew that he only had to touch the surface to see the paintings on the walls, the carpet on the floor. Perhaps Wolverine wanted him to.

But he'd barely dealt with having lost something he hadn't known he had to begin with. To see ghosts of it through someone else's memories, plus the sour mix of anger-regret-wonder tumbling about in Wolverine's head...  

"Tony," Erik suddenly spoke up. "Can you do a deeper scan of this part?" Charles saw a glowing grid flit out the side of Erik's screen and into Tony's.

Tony made an affirmative noise. Seconds later, he said, "You're right, there's something... huh."

"What is it?" asked Raven.

"Most of the remaining structure is basically a weak shell," said Tony. "I mean, if we accidentally hit the side right now, our shields alone will knock a hole clean through. But there's a part, deep in the center of the whole thing," the pilot-console projected a vague grid outline of the mothership up onto the window, faint red lines overlaying the real images, "that's still structurally intact." A circular shape glowed in the distance, highlighting the object of Tony's attention. "That's probably the safe-core, or whatever Xavia called theirs. Meant to withstand anything short of falling into a sun. It's got
the most important databanks. In the old days, they would have called it the black box."

"And it's in the middle of a tangle of twisted metal that's a nudge away from falling apart," Raven surmised. "Guess we're going to have a look, then."

"No, I kinda thought we'd just turn around and leave after we'd gone all the way to the edge of the known galaxies," said Tony.

"Raven has a point," Erik interrupted. "Tony, I've plotted a course based on where the remaining framework seems the most stable. Sending it to you now."

Charles frowned at Erik's back. The man could be pragmatic to a fault, but once, he would have bantered a bit with Tony and Raven as well. Wolverine was still staring out the main window, lost to the past - no help there then.

It seemed unbelievable that anything could have survived the fiery violence of the attack, much less all the years since, but one of the medium-sized screens flickered to life after Tony poked around the control panel. Charles tried not to look at the jagged holes where star-sprinkled space was perfectly visible in the overall darkness of the dead ship.

He had to hand it to Tony, though - the spacesuits Tony had provided were remarkably comfortable to move around in. Even the necessary tank of gas didn't hinder his movements. Miniature gravity wells under the boots kept him from floating off. He noticed Erik's were turned off, and nearly said something out of concern when he remembered, right, walking magnet.

"There's not much," Tony said, backing away from the panel, "But this part of the ship was made to survive beyond all else, and clearly Xavia didn't mess around with their engineering. Grab anything that looks intact - if they'd been made to last, they're probably important."

There was a soft whine, and then the central column in the room lit up. Charles barely had time to move closer to Raven when lines of light burst out of the column, painting the ruined walls - no, there was something changing, the room shifting around them. It was not unlike an Immersion Film; the virtual environment gained clarity, gained depth, technology reconstructing the Xavia ship around them. Charles thought they were in the bridge. People were added last.

There was a man standing in the middle of the bridge. Bald, a little soft around the middle, but he'd aged well, regardless. The lines on his face and his deep blue eyes hinted at a character more suited to joviality, but right now, his expression was grave, his posture straight and tense, like a general before a battle.

A thick circlet sat on his head, made of countless delicate intertwined threads the color of fresh-polished silver.

Charles met Raven’s eyes. This must be the infamous Crown.

_They are coming._

All of them had heard the announcement, and it took Charles a few seconds to realize that it hadn’t come through his ears.

“But how can you record telepathic messages?” asked Tony, who’d evidently reached the same conclusion.
“Memory,” said Wolverine. He was staring up at the reconstructed bridge. “They’re telepaths, right? They must have found a way to record memories.”

“I guess the next question is – whose memory is this?” said Raven.

“His,” Erik said gravely, nodding at the man wearing the Crown. “He must be the Rex. The Last King.”

Erik was right. Charles could feel the ghost of other minds – no, the memory of sensing other minds, like the whisper of many voices in a distant room. It was a weak ghost compared to his own power.

“Charles? Are you all right?”

He looked at Raven and was surprised to find his vision blurry. He rubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand. His hand came away wet. “Yes. It’s. I’m fine.”

“Damn, Charles, is this what you hear all the time?” said Tony, who was dodging the apparitions of people around the bridge in order to have a closer look at the consoles and the pilot-chairs.

Charles didn’t miss the silent exchange of looks between Erik and Raven. The concern on Erik’s face didn’t abate, though, so Raven finally said, “He’s never met other telepaths before.”

He saw when Erik got it, and looked away before those grey eyes could turn to him. Of course he hadn’t met another telepath – the m-sickness affected them the worst. Charles would likely be a gibbering mess in some Sepor facility if not for the chain of circumstances that had brought him to Eisen.

The recorded memory continued – they felt the warning spread through the mothership, an echo-ripple of *they are coming* *they are coming*, leaping the gap of space to reach the adjoining vessels, all the way out to the littlest scouts and fighters. If Charles concentrated, he could even pick out a few faint reactions reflected back over the long link of minds: people had suspected, but many had held on to hope.

Now they were out of time.

Fortunately, the Rex Xavia was a pragmatic sort. He thought about how the children had already been loaded into the safepods, to be taken far from the fighting and, if the worst befell, be given refuge with one of their ancient allies.

“Rex,” said a young page. It was disconcerting to feel the Rex’s thoughts - William’s thoughts, the Rex’s name was William – flicker through recognition and what he knew of the girl: bright, a little too earnest but she’d only gained bridge duty a week ago, hoped to qualify for fighter training. “Rex, the S-Captain reported that the squadrons are deploying, as per your instructions.”

“Excellent,” said William. “Thank you, Van. Please attend to the comm officers, I suspect they’ll need as much help as they can get soon.”

He was just turning to Belmont, his first officer, when the man stopped abruptly. Every person in the bridge did. Charles heard shocked breaths from everyone as they yanked along the memory. Heart racing, William stumbled over to a viewing port in the direction of the mental flash of -

cold, the deadly space-cold, at ten standard years Edward is old enough to recognize it, his fear bleeding through every thought but still contained, brave like the Rex his father; he knows he has only seconds, so he pushes out the memory for all to see:
"Everyone all safe and snug?" asks Doctor Schmidt.

(There’s a tremor of shock from a mind nearby, jarring, but it’s overwhelmed by how very, very urgent and important this imparted memory is.)

All the little heads in the chamber nod, each child strapped securely to a protective chair that will act as a life-unit if the pods enter an emergency situation.

"Good." Schmidt smiles at them, and some of the younger faces brighten up.

Then Schmidt does something that Edward, at first, doesn’t understand. He opens a panel on the floor, exposing one of the pods’ lifevines. Edward had just been learning about them the other day, and his mind dutifully regurgitates Dame Irene’s explanations of how the lifevines circulate power and vital materials through the Xavia ships.

Before any of them can question Schmidt, the Doctor plunges his hands right into the lifevine. Its mild, pleasant glow bursts into painful brightness, and Edward remembers that Schmidt’s gift is in absorbing energy. What is he doing? he thinks, but he already knows, because the ‘pod is shrieking in alarm, lights flashing.

"Your elders should have learned to share. Otherwise, Knossos credits become very persuasive,” Schmidt’s voice floats out of the miniature star that’s too painful to look at directly. “Xavia is doomed, either way, and in exchange for this little service, I’m nowhere near this quadrant of space.”

The ‘pod is plunged into darkness and cold. Schmidt’s still glowing, a little, and he gives a small salute before marching out. The door closes and seals behind him. Edward has never felt a ship so cold, like mere metal, and he's struggling to get up but the edges of his vision are darkening -

William worked to swallow the pain in his throat, in his chest, to gather enough coherence of thought to send, Sleep, son, you have done well. I love you.

On the heels of that, came a weaker tendril from a different ‘pod, in little Prana's voice: "kill-net, a kill-net closing in, we can... we can see them..."

All the adults on the bridge felt each pod die - a thready, soundless sigh before there was a sudden, terrible void where dozens of young minds had glowed.

"All of the children?" whispered Belmont. He was pale, mind in shock. His own children, Karla and Patrick, had been on the pods.

Treachery! someone's mind screamed. All is lost, what is there left now but death. The wash of loss and rage was nearly overwhelming. William brushed a hand over the Crown, nearly sick with the urge to pull it off; he felt the touch of the mothership, who he still called Rowan in private. Zie was angered by the loss, too, but the way hir kind processed it was different enough that Wiliam could escape the mourning of the entire fleet.

“We should not have set ourselves apart for so long,” William told hir, in the private space of their linked minds. “We should not have become so separate that we stand alone against an alliance of our enemies.”

"Your caution has proven to be well-founded," zie pointed out. "Schmidt was one of the few outsiders we have allowed in."

"Our gift has made us arrogant," he persisted. "We think we have the measure of someone because we can read their thoughts, penetrate their secrets. But this does not make us omniscient, and perhaps
a person more used to their eyes and ears could have realized the kind of man he was."

The warmth of hir affection enclosed him, attempting to soothe him, even though zie shared the pain that was the worst of all pains. Zie'd loved the children, and the pods had been hir offspring.

Then a new noise penetrated even the fog-like barrier that muffled the outside world when the Rex was communing with the mothership. William didn't even get to ask – zie released him from the link, allowing him to spin around and take in the impossible sight.

The first thing he saw was Jean, hair in disarray and face wet. She had obviously geared up for combat, but clumsily, and the likely reason for the unusual lack of care was peeking up from the bundle of clothing in her arms.

"I didn't want to leave him, he's so small, no one takes care of him as well as I do," the words left her in a rush. There's a barb in there about his mother, and normally William would not tolerate any slight towards his marriage-sister, bless her soul, no matter how true, but Jean keeps talking, "I hear the minders calling him the runt of the litter, which is unfair, he'll be as strong as any of the rest when he grows up. He's such a sweet baby, doesn't even make a fuss, so I kept him with me when they were gathering up the kids, and -"

She squeaked when he embraced her, as tight as he dared with the babe still between them. His nephew, Charles, just gurgled, and batted a chubby hand at the fighter-pilot rank ornaments on the Rex’s coat.

"You darling, stubborn girl," gasped William, blinking hard and squeezing her shoulders. "I am glad you never listen to me."

Jean stared at him, still somewhat bewildered, then tentatively smiled. William felt a pang of regret that he'd never before noticed how much she took after his mother. "But, Uncle, what are we to do now? The blockade is closing in."

"You must keep him safe," Belmont interjected. William's first officer stepped close. There was a tremble and tightness to his movements, loss too new to be called grief - but there was also a fledgling fervency in his gaze, and he beheld six-month-old Charles with terrible, desperate hope. "We must find a way to get you past the kill-nets."

The mind-network was already passing on the news. Despair was dissipating under the weight of gathering resolve. To William, it was a chorus of many voices, a vote where none was needed: no way out, save the child, save him save him save him

A quick check with the comm officers confirmed that, on the outer fringes of the fleet, the first lines of scouts and sentries had engaged with the attackers. What one knew, all knew, in Xavia - the pilots of those ships were aware that their fighting was only a delaying action, that the best they would be able to do would be to keep the enemy from the mothership for a little while longer. But the news of the child, the wild swing from despair to hope, thoroughly transformed the feeling throughout the mothership, and more distantly, the squadrons gearing up for the battle. William heard the unspoken message: buy more time for the child to escape.

"Jean," said William, considering the field of battle with both eyes and mind, "Get down to where your ship is docked."

"Yes, Uncle." Her face said that she knew this must be farewell, one way or the other. She slung an arm over his neck and briefly rested her head on his shoulder. Little Charles regarded them both with somber blue eyes, as if he understood the gravity of the situation.
Jean nodded at Belmont and the others in the bridge. He felt her descend down towards the docks.

I don’t want to see anymore, Charles thought, and just like that, the recording stopped.

Everything disappeared, until it was the five of them blinking at each other in the ruined wreck of the mothership. Rowan, Charles remembered.

"Oh shit," whispered Raven. Charles tried not to tense up, but he was sure her eyes, so good at picking up behavior and tells, noticed the aborted movement. Her next words, however, were, “that was Shaw. I wasn’t imagining that, right? It was the Prime. who-“

“Yeah,” Erik said, roughly.

"There's never been anything linking him directly to Xavia,” said Tony. “He didn't appeared in political circles until years after the Great Blinding."

"It sounded as if Shaw had been on the mothership for a while, under the alias of Schmidt,” Charles pointed out. "Maybe he’d been trying to get his hands on the Crown even back then. He said the Xavia “elders” didn’t like to share.”

"Guys,” said Raven. "That's not just it. Did you guys not look at the recording?" She met Charles' eyes, grim. "This was thirty years ago, and he looks exactly the same."

All of them were silent for a good few minutes.

"Well, we definitely know he’s a mutant,” said Charles. “It could be a secondary mutation. Or absorbing energy somehow keeps cell replication at optimum adult levels, thus keeping him from aging.”

“That’s just great,” groaned Tony.

They'd been unsure about disturbing the room further, but with a bit of care, Tony was able to extract the intact databank from the central column. They were on their way back to the subship when Erik's voice suddenly roared over the open line: "Drones! Duck!"

An invisible force shoved Charles down to the floor, just as gunshots streaked brightly over his head. Sound couldn't travel through vacuum, but he could feel the vibrations in the wreck of the ship. A hand yanked him up and pushed him towards the subship. He saw Raven ducking into the open door ahead of him.

That was Wolverine right behind him, and Tony was already inside the ship, which left-

"Erik!"

One shot came close to his feet. Charles felt the gravity well in the boot flickering - only briefly, but it was enough to disrupt his balance as he tried to run. He felt himself twist awkwardly, not quite falling over but legs tangling, and there was a whine of a gun powering up-

He felt something pushing, and suddenly he was inside the subship, struggling to his feet. Wolverine roared something, the subship lurched - surely they wouldn't leave without Erik - and then Erik was through the door, Wolverine slamming it shut behind him. The airlock activated, filled with air.

It wasn't until Charles took off his helmet that he realized Erik wasn't getting up from the floor.
Oh Gods, please no. Wolverine was bending down, and he could hear Erik groaning, which meant he was alive. Charles scrambled closer, saw the dark scorch mark on Erik's side; he'd taken a hit.

Wolverine carried Erik to the bridge, where Raven had set up a pallet for him. Tony was in the pilot-chair, swearing at "fucking drones" and exchanging fire with said drones, which were evidently pursuing them.

"Got the scans running," reported Raven. Screens appeared in the air above Erik's body.

Too slow, Charles thought; he needed to know how Erik was now. His hands were at his temple before he could think about it.

He hadn't known how much he'd missed the familiar swirl of Erik's thoughts, until he was plunging back in, sliding through the push and pull of emotion-thought-memory, the beautiful layers of Erik's mind, past-

-pain, not fiery or consuming but a small dark point that bleeds out and spreads over everything, an infection, etching away until all that is left are hard edges and bitterness; the seed of apathy already setting in, his body hurts but he doesn't care, not about his own survival, especially now that he has to keep Charles alive; Charles, who doesn't love him back but it doesn't matter, as long as Charles is safe-

Charles gasped, loudly. "Erik."

"What is it?" demanded Raven.

Charles shook his head. "He's in a lot of pain." Erik was teetering at the edge of consciousness, now. There was blood all over Wolverine. Charles was the reason they were in this, so he should be the one to get them out, if he could just think about anything other than the wound on Erik's body, or the way Erik had deliberately placed himself between Charles and their attackers, or-

"CHARLES." A ringing slap jolted all thoughts to a halt. He stared at Raven, not quite comprehending the stinging pain on his cheek. Her brilliant yellow eyes glared fiercely at him "Charles, we need you to see if there’s anything in that databank we recovered that can get us out of here. Tony can only hold them off for so long.” She grabbed his hands. “Do that, and trust us to take care of Erik, all right?"

He nodded mutely. Raven pointed towards the front of the bridge, and he must have obeyed, because he suddenly found himself standing behind Stark's pilot-chair. The man appeared to be monitoring three separate screens and two weapons arrays at once with perfect ease. Just watching his left hand dance over the controls made Charles' eyes cross.

"Any ideas?" asked Stark.

"Raven wants me to try the databank we took."

"I put it down somewhere over there." Tony nodded towards the small drinks bar installed discreetly along one the side of the bridge. Sure enough, the small, spherical databank was nestled in one of the high-backed chairs. "You'll need to find a power source. I don't know if anything I have will be compatible with Xavia-make, but give me a few hours with it and I'm sure I can knock something together."

"We don't have a few hours, I'm afraid," said Charles. "The good news is, it won't be necessary."

He heard, distantly, Tony asking him what he meant. But the rattle of the subship and the explosions
against their shield faded into the distance once the databank was cool and smooth in his hands. Slick, like it’d been bathed in oil, even though it was perfectly dry. It wasn’t as heavy as he’d expected.

It’s almost dead, some instinct told him. He frowned, dismayed, but—there was something there, prickling his sense of telepathy. An echo, a mind-shadow. He reached for it with his mind, the most gentle he’d ever been, fearing it would disintegrate at the lightest contact. Fortunately, it seemed to strengthen, gaining cohesion, as if his mind was providing it with a framework in which to, briefly, recreate whatever had been left behind.

Hello, came a thought that seemed like his own and yet was not, hello, lost and last and littlest. Hello, child unlooked-for.

Hi, he tentatively replied. Who are you?

I am the Heart of the one who was Rowan. I am faded, free, a-following my pilot beyond the sight of the oldest stars. He was your blood, through your father. A pause. You feel like him, in his youth and at the end.

Thank you. The presence flickered and dimmed. Wait, please. My friends and I need your help.

The dead should not help the living overmuch. I am merely a fragment, left behind in the desperate, impossible hope that the lost child would one day return. I am the message and the messenger; the gate and the gatekeeper.

Naturally, when they didn’t have time and Erik could be dying—the universe would decide to be cryptic. What is the message, then?

All things die in their own time. Xavia was gone long before the death-stroke came. Perhaps it should be left to the past, to history and myth.

The Heart - the name used for the Xavia ships’ memory cores, the knowledge appearing in Charles’ head as if it’d been there all along—went silent. Charles wondered if, by some cruel twist of fate, the mind-shadow had faded, after all this time, before it could deliver the entirety of its message. His head felt curiously light and heavy all at once, the stress of the last few hours finally hitting him.

But if Xavia is needed again, the Heart whispered. Charles snapped his eyes open, not realizing they’d slipped shut, and when did he lie down? If myth must return to life once more, then there is a planet that we do not name, where the first mothership awoke. It is one of our oldest secrets, which not even our pilots are told, but every ship of our line can find it, following the song of our metal. You know it, because my seed-ship, on the brink of death, would have brought you there.

Someone was calling Charles’ name. He nodded his head, to show he understood, or tried to, but his body felt a long way away. Thank you for the message, he replied. It was curiously hard to think, but he knew that he would remember everything that was being told to him. Will you tell me more about my family?

Everything you wish to know that can be told to you, you already possess. I am the gate, who blocked memory and knowledge that would have altered a young babe’s mind beyond repair. And now I am the gatekeeper, returning to you that which was always yours.

Bright lights, and Charles couldn’t tell where they were coming from. Somebody was gasping—he suspected it was him. The Heart-presence withdrew, a tired old tide receding, leaving behind an aftertaste of affection and regret and, unexpectedly, peace.
"Hail, Rex Xavia.

"- way out -" managed to penetrate the splinter-stack of Charles' mind. Charles knew he was overloaded, on a scale he'd never experienced, but a deep, unshakeable part of him pointed out, sensibly, that all this new knowledge had been in his head all his life, if he believed what the Heart had said. He'd just been unable to access it. This awareness allowed him the mental wiggle-room to remember - ship, attack, Erik, escape - and just like that, easy as breathing, he also knew several different ways out of the system.

"Charles, for fuck sake, open your eyes before Erik busts an artery and bleeds out all over the floor."

Erik. Charles' eyes flew open, and he turned his head, seeking, wincing at the bright light still flaring in his vision. It was faster to find Erik in his mind, and send a calm, *I'm fine, I'll explain later, please don't hurt yourself.*

He heard a hiss, followed by swearing from multiple sides. It was Raven who said, "Damn it, Charles, can you rein it in a bit? You haven't been this loud in my head since you hit puberty."

He hadn't tried to be loud, nor intended to broadcast his thoughts to all of them. Perhaps he should stick to verbal communication. If only his tongue and mouth would work. "Erik? Awake?"

"Yes, Wolverine got the bleeding to stop and he came back around. Just in time to see you pass out, by the way, thanks for that."

Charles coughed hard and decided his voice wasn't really up to this. Very carefully, in the mental equivalent of a whisper, he asked Erik, *I know of a way out that can get rid of our pursuers. May I borrow your powers?*

*Of course,* replied Erik immediately.

*Tony, can you get on the InterSol?*

*Yes, but they'll only follow us.*

*I need you to head for these coordinates.* Charles sent the numbers. They meant nothing to him, but he felt the flash of recognition from Tony.

He heard the rumble of Tony's voice, swearing, but couldn't distinguish the words. He could pick out the echo of it in Tony's thoughts, though: *Are you sure? This will take us to Shatter Reef.*

*I'm sure.* His brain felt bigger than his body, bigger than the ship he was in. In fact, his power wanted to forget about *physicalities* altogether. He was barely holding it in check, but - Erik. Raven. He needed to save them.

The drones following them - no minds for him to seize, all machine.

That was all right. He would take them into old Xavia territory.
Shatter Reef. Charles had only ever seen it in pictures, and so was unprepared for the expanse of sharp, crystalline white and deep, night-sea blue that appeared ahead of them when they popped back out of the InterSol. It was beautiful, like so many things he'd seen since all of this started. But now there was also a deep wrench of recognition.

"It's an asteroid cluster surrounded by a nebula," said Raven. Or she might have thought it. Charles could no longer tell between her voice and her thoughts, and wondered if he should be worried about that.

Erik was remembering their date at that nebula. Wolverine was thinking about the sub-ship's weapons store. Tony's mind, as always, was helpfully informative. Some people say that there was once a small sun at the center, and the nebula is all that's left of it. "But some say that the two existed separately, and the nebula merged with the asteroid belt just as its sun died." Or there was no sun at all, and the asteroids are actually pieces of a planet that was repeatedly hit until it was all destroyed, but it happened gradually enough that the pieces remained in a cluster.

Memory, faint as a whisper: Xavia ships weaving through the deadly chunks of rock and ice, making a race of it. What was deadly to any other ship was a playground for Xavia, a place to hone one's skills. The nebula intereferred with regular navigation and communication systems. Xavia had had no need for either.

Focus, Charles. Erik! Erik wasn't ignoring him. There was a reason why Charles shouldn't be quite so open about the burst of warmth and happiness he felt at the slightest contact with Erik's mind, but he couldn't remember it right then, so it must not be important.

"Oh, wow," said Tony. Charles had a moment of confusion because Tony sounded as if he was on Charles' left, except Charles was fairly sure Tony had been on his right before. "That's, that was like being stabbed in the face by a hundred Valentines love-arrows. Tipped with lightbulbs."

Raven's voice, incongruously coming from in front of him, even though he couldn't see her, said quietly, "See, how could you think that he didn't care?"

Charles felt a flutter of concern, and knew it wasn't his own.

Charles?

I'm here.

"But where is here?" Hands, hands rubbing over skin. I think he's confused. "Charles, you're-

You need to get us through the Reef right now, Wolverine interjected, decisively. All your other shit can wait until later.

Oh, right, the Reef. Charles hadn't stopped looking at the main window, which was odd in some way he couldn't define, but he dutifully rummaged through the new piles of information that had been shoved into his brain. Tony's ship wasn't Xavia-born, yet neither had been every ship in the Xavia Fleet - they'd had other ways of guiding ships through the Reef.

Erik, called Charles. There are little metal markers on some of the asteroids. He visualized an image of one. They used to transmit a coded signal, but after so long, I can't be sure all of them are still working. But you should be able to feel them.
"Yes, I can sense a few already."

Good. Just follow them and guide Tony, they'll lead you to the center of the belt and back out again.

"Hey, cool," said Tony. "I can sense Erik's... thing. Very faintly, but maybe if you concentrate - oh, this can work."

Asteroids filled up the main screen. What had looked like large spaces between each piece turned out to be almost negligible once they were zooming through the thick of them. Barely a few seconds in, there was a small explosion behind them.

"Lost a drone," reported Raven.

Oh, whoa, whoa, what's going on? cried Tony.

"I think-" there was a brief flash of blue, a glimpse of Raven. Except, Charles was sure she'd been standing... somewhere else. "The heat from the explosion caused the ice on some of the asteroids to melt. Some of them shot off in different directions - I'm guessing the ice isn't just water - and hit other asteroids, and... basically, there are asteroids flying everywhere, it's like one of Alex's crazy pinball machines."

Do not worry, Charles reassured them, feeling weirdly serene. The path was designed to remain intact even when the asteroids go live. You just need to dodge them.

Great, drawled Tony. So, Erik, remember all those hours we spent on my dad's flight simulator?

"I am glad you can now feel vindicated about skipping out on our lessons," Erik said dryly.

Charles smiled, or tried to. There was the Erik he'd been looking for! Too-Serious Erik was... not right.

Oh, jeez, can someone stop him doing that? I feel like I'm crushing on my brother.

"Charles?" Raven! He wondered where she was, as he couldn't see her. "Charles. Listen to me. You're, you're really open, okay, or projecting, I have no idea; I've never felt your telepathy do this before, but you need to, to cool it down a little."

Maybe not all the way, because I'm pretty sure this link between me and Erik through him is the only reason we've been able to get through the Reef so far.

There was a faint boom, and the entire ship shook.

"Just focus on your damn flying and leave my brother to me, all right?" snapped Raven. "And Erik, stay where the fuck you are, you're still bleeding."

I don't..., Charles tried to shake his head, but found that he couldn't. There was something heavy on it, like a helmet, then it was gone in the next second, and his hair felt longer. What am I doing, Raven?

Where are you, Charles? What can you see?

He looked. Asteroids. On the main screen. He paused. Aren't the drones supposed to be behind us?

I call it a loopy-loop, said Tony cheerfully. The man's sheer joy and excitement at getting to fly like a kid again, his life in his hands, this is what living is about was like candy-flavored lightning in Charles' head.
A drone got caught between two asteroids when they collided head-on. One of the asteroids shot off in their direction, and Tony let out a whoop when his ship narrowly skimmed over the side of it, close enough that Charles could see chunks of ice casting rainbows on the surface.

*Charles!* Raven called him again. Charles heard her fingers clicking in front of his face, but he couldn't see them.

*Am I in Tony's head?* he asked, finally recognizing the view from the pilot console, the multiple control screens, and a vague itch to shave his face.

"Not quite," said Raven. "Charles, you're in all of our heads."

*Oh,* thought Charles. "That would explain why I feel like I have breasts.

"All right," announced Tony, "I think we got the last of them. Get us out of here."

"Charles!" Raven's shout had them all turning towards her. She was leaning over her brother's prone form. He didn't appear to have moved from the makeshift pallet they'd put him into, tucked away in the back of the bridge next to Erik. Erik opened his mouth to ask her what was wrong, but then felt Charles' presence in his mind dissipate.

"What's happened?" he demanded, wincing when pain lanced through his torso. Fortunately, Tony's spacesuit had absorbed the worst of the shot, and apparently the gel from Tony's well-stocked med kit was a miracle worker when it came to burns and open wounds.

Raven was anxiously checking him over, peeking under his closed eyelids and feeling the temperature of his forehead. "I think he's unconscious. He didn't seem to be in pain, he just... conked out."

Wolverine appeared and sniffed the air over Charles. "Yeah, I don't smell any blood or injuries. He probably overloaded."

"Guys, seriously, what century are you all living in?" Tony complained from his chair. A holographic screen appeared above Charles' body. Erik reached over, dragged it closer to himself and set it to scan Charles.

He read the results as they showed up. "Slightly elevated heartrate, but already slowing down to baseline. Blood pressure, glucose, all the basics are within normal parameters. The injury to his spine doesn't seem to have resurfaced."

"Wait, what injury to his spine," Raven interjected.

"- and brain activity is showing unexplainable fluctuations but are otherwise consistent with an unconscious person." Erik frowned. "Is that all you have for a neural scan? The general information
is helpful, but it wasn't his body that was under stress earlier."

"Sorry, I didn't equip my subship to provide hospital-level medical care to telepaths, it's terribly remiss of me." Tony took off the pilot helmet, evidently just so he could turn and glare at Erik. "And that was a really quick analysis of raw data, my friend, considering Charles isn't even on file for you to know what his baselines are."

"Trust me, he can recite Charles' medical file from Eisen at this point," Wolverine said gloomily. "He probably has a scrapbook full of Charles' x-rays. It's a little disturbing."

"O-okay, clearly I'm missing something here," Raven spoke up, while Erik sputtered his indignation. "When did Charles get injured bad enough that you pulled up his medicals?"

"I'm going to sleep, need give Tony's miracle healing gel time to work," said Erik, opting for the path of cowardice.

Charles was fairly certain that he was dreaming.

He also knew that he was waiting for someone. But they were coming from a long way away, and time was such an imprecise thing here.

He wandered, waiting.

Charles didn't stir the entire trip home. They decided, without actually talking about it, that it was better for Charles to remain in the bridge instead of being sequestered away in one of the rooms. Erik and Raven traded turns sitting next to him. Once Erik was well enough to be let out of bed himself, anyway.

Erik knew it was common practice to keep comatose patients company, but had never seen the point in it. True, Charles was not exactly comatose, but the onboard medsystem declared him perfectly healthy in body. He thought he understood now, though; nothing seemed quite so important as being near Charles, making sure he was safe and comfortable and constantly watching for any sign of awakening, despite all the expensive medical technology dedicated to doing the same.

Tony, being the pragmatic soul that he was, dragged out a couple of beds from the four sleeping quarters and installed them in the bridge for the rest of them to attempt to sleep in. The beds had been bolted down, like most furniture on ships this small, but Erik simply pried them off the floor and floated them over to the bridge.

"You have the most useful mutation ever, I swear," said Tony.

Erik could have secured them to the bridge using his ability, too, but his friend was already clutching his toolkit with a familiar look on his face. They were on the InterSol, after all, which the ship's autopilot was more than capable of handling. Erik shrugged and left Tony happily drilling holes into his own floor.

Raven looked up when he approached the pallet. He'd never seen her this quiet. Her natural skin looked pale and wan compared to its usual deep blue.

"He'll be all right," said Erik.
She shrugged, let go of Charles' hand. "I'll go and-" she made a vague gesture towards one of the side-consoles. Max taught her about the standard operating systems on ships; Tony always ended up creating his own for the ships he personally piloted, so he had to teach her his software first. But, by all accounts, her inexperience was making her a fast learner in this situation, since she didn't have any habits or expectations to be trained out of.

"I expect she'll be in the pilot-chair soon," he told Charles. "Maybe you'll wake up out of sheer terror."

He refused to contemplate the possibility that Charles never would.

How strong is the strongest telepath? Strong enough, maybe, to reach across time itself, a ripple focused out and forward; to touch, briefly, the ripples of a mind reaching back.

_Do I do this every time?_

All the ones that matter, yes.

_But how do I get back?_

Depends.

_On what?_

If you have someone to go back for.

A pause.

_Do we ever get it right?_

Every time.

Eisen home-space, however, appeared greatly changed when they popped out of Intersol.

Instead of the orderly flotilla of ships that made up the Orbital City, what looked like at least two battle-class fleets had moved in. Erik counted three Command Cruisers, much shinier and sleeker than Admiral Tam's semi-retirement model.

There was a beep from the pilot-chair. They were all treated to Ms. Pott's shouts of "WHERE THE HELL HAVE YOU BEEN, TONY-" before their esteemed pilot was able to mute it.

"Sorry, everyone!" said Tony sheepishly.

"Did you just _fall asleep_ at the helm?" asked Raven.

"Maybe? Oh, hey, we're here!" He clearly felt Raven's glare without having to look at her. "Relax, it was on autopilot, and we got out at the right stop." As if to demonstrate that his subship was fine even without his input, Tony took off the helmet and rubbed a hand over his hair. He frowned up at the main window. "Is it just me, or is it a lot more crowded here than it was when we left."

"It's Sepor," said Wolverine from the corner. Erik was so used to having a bodyguard that he hardly ever even thought about Wolverine's presence. He noted now that Wolverine's chosen spot also let
him keep an eye on Charles.

"Hmmm, yeah, I see the monstrosity that Hammer built for the Prime," grumbled Tony. "Is this what Shaw's been working up to? A siege on Eisen?"

"Don't impugn my planet," Erik said mildly.

"Is this why people have been trying to kill you, Erik?" Raven asked.

"Oh, are we talking about this now? Why did nobody tell me that it wasn't Erik's big lonely-burden secret anymore."

Erik sighed heavily, but he wasn't at all surprised. And, in hindsight, it would have been unfair if Raven had been the only one left in the dark, seeing as she'd thrown her lot in with them and would never abandon her brother, anyway.

"Nobody tells me anything," Tony continued, pouting.

"Raven's right," Wolverine pointed out. "It's not a siege if Erik's out of the picture. It could take years for the legalities to be sorted out. Meanwhile, Sepor steps in and takes temporary ownership of the 'Yards, the factories. Shaw gets an exclusive supply of ships and raw material."

"But Erik's not dead."

"He disappeared during an emergency evacuation, and has been missing for two weeks." Wolverine shrugged. "That's enough for reason to suspect. Besides, if Shaw really is the one behind this, there'll be another nasty surprise for Erik the moment he resurfaces. And he might not bother with being subtle, this time."

It occurred to Erik then, and probably all the rest of them, from the way Tony yanked his helmet back on and the pilot-chair lit up completely, that this meant they were in very real danger.

"No one's noticed us, yet," Tony reported. "One advantage with all these new ships arriving all the time - a quiet little subship doesn't get any attention."

"Where should we go? Should we look for the Merchants?" asked Raven.

We need to get down to the planet.

"Charles?" Erik strode over to his pallet. Charles' eyes were fluttering, glimpses of blue showing through the slits of his eyelids. It seemed to take an age for them to open all the way.

Erik felt the familiar touch of Charles' mind, hovering at the edge of his own. The touch felt different. Bigger, somehow. But it was still Charles, waiting for permission.

"Welcome back," he whispered, voice hoarse, and as always, let him in.

This time, the Merchant Prince was the one who boarded Tony's subship, while the rest of the Merchant caravan hovered like a cloud around it, screening the subship from anyone in Sepor who may be on the lookout.

Erik could tell that Charles was still weak, but the stubborn man wanted to be on his feet again. The combined forces of Erik and Raven got him to compromise on sitting in a comfortable chair, as long as the rest of them were similarly seated. Thank goodness for Tony's tendency to go overboard on
everything; the bridge of a regular subship would have been cramped with all the additional chairs, plus a table for tea and biscuits. (Charles shared a similar commitment to we-might-as-well-go-all-the-way. Erik wondered what this said about the type of people he kept company with.)

The Merchant Prince was uncharacteristically silent while the refreshments were doled out, bright eyes never leaving Charles.

Finally, cup of tea in hand, Charles said, "I know why Shaw wants the Crown." He takes a sip. Slow and calm as if he didn't have half a dozen pair of eyes trained on him. "And I agree; he must never have it."

A nod from the Merchant Prince, who looked satisfied with that. Of course, the rest of them weren't, and it was a toss-up who was quicker between Raven and Tony to cry out a plaintive, "Charles!"

Charles paused. For some reason, he looked at Erik. Erik met his eyes calmly. He'd tried not to think too hard about how Charles seemed different, now, after waking up. But he knew that Charles would give them the information they needed.

I begin to see why people keep referring to how practical and bloody-minded you Eisenhardts are, commented Charles. You have faith in me, even when you doubt - but it's different from the others. Erik received a series of impressions: Raven's belief in Charles mingled with affection, bright as an Evenfeast bonfire; the reflective quality of Tony's, supported by confidence in his own abilities to gather information; the obscure constancy of Wolverine, who seemed to have no personal stake in anything and yet held fast to the duty that had been laid upon him by a long-dead memory. You simply trust that I will tell you.

You saved my life, when you didn't need to. When we were strangers.

Would you think it crazy if I said that we've never been strangers? Charles tilted his head, nearly imperceptibly. Is that all? The only reason you're here?

You know it's not, Erik retorted shortly, letting a bit of the burn slip through. It's just the simplest.

We really are quite awful to one another, said Charles, indecipherable. Out loud, he told the Merchant Prince, "I need to tell them about the Crown."

The Prince frowned, but he didn't look surprised. "It's Xavia's most closely guarded secret."

"It is my right," said Charles, in a tone that brooked no disagreements. The Prince nodded.

Charles let out a sigh, finishing his cup of tea. "Xavia built this machine - no, I'm doing it wrong, aren't I?" He cleared his throat. Erik was reminded, strangely, of the Honourable at Circle. "One of Xavia's most important pursuits, even before the Migration from Earthworld, was the education and training of others like themselves - mutants. They offered a safe haven to mutants who needed one, helped mutants to manage their powers, and integrated mutant abilities into their scientific and engineering studies."

"In aid of this, Xavia built a machine that would enable a sufficiently powerful telepath to detect and seek out mutants. The machine amplifies the telepath's strength and range. At first, the machine could only reach within a fleet, or over a couple of cities planet-side, but then they integrated it into the Xavia ships, the ones of legend, and each ship boosted the machine's effects even further, it was really quite marvelous." Charles stopped, and Erik could practically see him swallowing the informative lecture he'd been about to give. "-anyway, this technology proved to be quite useful during the Migration, as it allowed the Xavia Fleet to communicate over long distances. It was part of
the reason they became so powerful. Before the InterSol, the other Fleets had to rely on Xavia to communicate with one another. Xavia, by default, became the mediators of conflicts. They could go further than other Fleets dared, because they were always connected to each other."

He nodded at the Prince. "This is what the Highness meant when he said Xavia represented unity. If one feels up to philosophizing, one could examine the unrest and discord that has befallen parts of Ten Sol ever since the Great Blinding - and now I understand how apt a name that is - due to the disconnect felt by -" Erik cleared his throat. "Right. Um. The technology's official name is Cerebro. I understand that it used to be this giant machine, but once it was made part of the ships, the user only had to wear a headpiece to be able to access it. By tradition, the user was the head of the Family, the Rex."

"So this technology, this Cerebro, that's the Crown?" said Raven.

Charles nodded.

"Wonderful," Tony said flatly. "I can see why Shaw wants it. Wait, hang on, it amplifies your powers?"

"Yes." Charles' eyes skittered away. Erik sent a questioning look at Tony.

"Including," Tony said slowly, "just as an example, the ability to control people?"

Charles didn't say anything, but the look on his face was answer enough.


"This tea set is exquisite," said the Prince. "Where is it from?"

"Family heirloom," snapped Tony.

"And you just happened to have it lying around? In your subship?"

Erik, who knew that Tony really would have a priceless family heirloom just hanging around in his subship, turned to look at Charles. "But the Crown - Cerebro - was on the Rex when the Fleet was destroyed."

"Cerebro is the technology," Charles said morosely. "The one in the Fleet was destroyed, yes, but what if Shaw, somehow, found a way to duplicate it? Built his own?"

"He would still need a telepath to use it," Raven pointed out.

"He has one," said Erik. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Emma Frost. 'Rehabilitated' mutant, wears a suppression collar and everything."

Raven frowned. "Is she strong enough?"

"There's no recorded information about it," answered Tony. "She manifested very early, one of the first cases. Her own father turned her in. Good 'ole General Frost."

"Shit."

"Well, he was an old pal of General Stryker's, so no surprise there."

Erik saw Charles flinch at the mention of the man who'd led the massacre of his family. The bridge lapsed into a tense silence, most of them lost in their own thoughts. Though, absurdly, they were all
still politely sipping tea.

After a long while, Raven voiced the question that was hanging in the air. "What do we do now?"

Charles smiled wobbily at her, and took a deep breath. "Is there a way to get in touch with the Firsts?"

Tony and Erik exchanged a look. "I have the contact IDs for all of them," said Tony. "It can take a while for the message to pass through the ranks and get to the head of the Family, but they'll speed it up when they see the message-"

"Perhaps this is the way in which I can be of use to you, Master Xavier?" the Merchant Prince said mildly.

"What do you mean?"

"In the time of the Migration, when my ancestors first took to the stars and left the safety of our parent Fleet, the Rex Xavia of the time named us Merchants, which in his native tongue meant The People Who Negotiate. We have brokered peace and war, and all manner of things between. We have the right to address the Firsts directly." The Merchant Prince drew himself up. "Allow us to claim this right, and to call a Summoning in the name of Xavia."

"Will the Firsts come?" asked Charles doubtfully.

"Perhaps some may not, but refusal would violate their oaths of loyalty to Xavia."

"And they will listen, just for that?" asked Raven, her expression skeptical.

The Prince smiled. "I've found that those whose traditions and status are becoming obsolete tend to cling all the more tightly to the shreds that they still have."

After the Prince went back to his flagship, Charles agreed to return to bed and rest for a little while. The rest of them watched the caravan of Merchant vessels head off: the seemingly chaotic cloud of ships quickly fell into a surprisingly effective sort of order, faster ships in front and around the edges, slower ones behind, all of them different models and ages. They reached the anchor and winked out as they popped into the InterSol one by one.

"Where do we go now?" asked Tony. "It's not safe to hang around here without that circus to hide in."

*Planetside. Lehnsherr Manor.*

"Won't that be, like, walking right into the Prime's hands?" Raven asked.

Charles didn't volunteer anything further, so it was Erik who shook his head. "No, the Manor is a private family residence, separate from the Estate. They probably searched it, but only someone in the family can put in a claim for the property, so they can't legally seize it, or even stay in the grounds overnight. I doubt they'll waste resources trying when they know we're off-planet."

Tony, not surprisingly, was indignant at the slightest suggestion that he would not be able to sneak his ship down to the Estate unnoticed. "It's one of my designs," he protested, already starting the descent. "It can sneak anywhere I want it to."
"I really hope you're right," said Raven, "because, you know, there's an army right over our heads."

"Fleet. Or armada," Tony corrected absently. "And there are two."

"Whatever."

They watched, silent and tense, as the ship entered the atmosphere, the heat and friction making it vibrate. It was not as smooth as the shuttles, but most spaceside subships weren't even equipped for atmospheric travel; Erik felt grateful that Tony had overachieving tendencies and with a dash of paranoia. The subship even had a cloaking device.

The trickiest part was when they were hovering over the Estate itself. They could see Yard One, bustling with activity in the distance, and every few minutes a ship would pass by overhead, either traveling to or from the Yard, or a patrol from the fleet.

"There's a hanger on the east side of the grounds," Erik instructed Tony.

"You have your own hangar?" asked Raven. "Charles never mentioned that."

Erik realized that they were all speaking quietly, as if using their normal volume would somehow alert the other ships to their presence. "It hasn't been used in a few generations. I don't think he knew about it."

"Speaking of, I think he's fallen asleep."

"What?"

"Relax, it's not-like before." Raven leaned over her brother and gave him a hard poke.

"Nghfkl," grumbled Charles, and the tension seeped out of Erik's shoulders.

"Give me a minute to hack into your household network," Tony said.

Erik almost nodded, before he remembered himself. "No need." He went to stand next to Tony, and pulled the window showing the scans of the area closer to himself. He looked at the position of the ships. "A ship flies over every twelve to fifteen minutes, right? So that's how long we have to open the hanger, get inside, and close it again."

"Yes, so how are you proposing to open-" Erik raised an eyebrow and held up one hand, waggling the fingers; Tony's eyebrows hopped up towards his hairline. "Right, your metal thing. You can do it from this high up?"

"Only one way to find out." Erik took a deep breath. He needed to find it, first, and feel it, before he could confidently say that he could open it. He thought that he could, though.

All the metal from the ship and the Manor, plus the busy brightness that was the Yard, made it hard for him to focus on the eastern grounds. The bit right next to the Manor was a garden; Erik caught sight of it, and remembered lying on the grass next to Charles, the bright moonlight gaining life on Charles' pale skin.

Mind on the metal. Erik found the hangar entrance a good distance away from the garden and the Manor. It was a rectangular shape under the grass, with a split through the middle, and hollow space underneath. "I've got it."

They waited for the next pass of ships. A pair of Sepor patrol ships, this time. The moment they were
beyond sight of the eastern grounds, Erik reached down with his power and **pulled.**

"Whoa, warn me next time," said Tony, when the subship dipped alarmingly. It corrected itself in a matter of seconds.

"What was that?" Wolverine demanded.

"Equal and opposite reaction, my friend." Tony seemed to be keeping an eye on four separate screens at once, in addition to the feed from the pilot-helmet. "I'm using the engines to compensate for it now, though."

"Sorry," said Erik through gritted teeth. He could feel the hangar entrance opening - but slowly, far too slowly. He divided his energies, bracing down on the doors on one side and twisting the gears that had probably rusted in place by now. It was a little easier than prying the two halves open by brute force.

_Mind on the metal, my friend,_ mumbled Charles, a sleepy tickle at the back of Erik's mind.

A crack appeared on the carefully maintained grass. Erik couldn't hear if it made any noises, but surely it was creating a racket. No one ran out of the Manor, though, or flew out from the Yard. Maybe the Manor was empty.

Once he got a hold on the doors, it was easier to pull harder. Grass and topsoil crumbled to the ground on either side, sliding right off the opening doors. The moment the opening was big enough to fit Tony's subship, Tony flew them in, tilting sideways for a moment to avoid grazing the wings of the ship on the heavy, surprisingly intact doors.

Erik let the doors fall close behind them. It was pitch dark inside the hangar, save for the lights on the subship. Erik reached out, searching; he found the power switch, one outside and the other inside, and flicked them on. Lights flickered to life all over the cavernous space.

Tony carefully parked his subship near the door that led to the Manor's basement level. "Home sweet home?"

Charles knew, logically, that he didn't have a body here and thus could not be affected by physical burdens. But he was so **tired** of everything.

He was aware of a wall that he could not see, but nevertheless stood between him and this thing that he'd been pursuing. He could breach it, he knew - he just wasn't sure if it'd be worth the effort.

Behind him, there was an emptiness that was wider and deeper than anything he'd ever seen in the 'combs. Yet, it wasn't, to his surprise, entirely empty.

"What do you want me to do?" he said into the abyss. "Am I supposed to restore Xavia to its former glory? Is that why you saved me?"

_Dear child,_ came an answer, faint and fragile. _We meant for you to live. To grow, to love, to choose your own future. Nothing more._

Quiet. Too quiet, suddenly, both in and outside of his head.
He opened his eyes, and found himself in a very familiar room. Those were very familiar bookshelves, full of very familiar real books, and this was a very familiar adjustable bed.

His very first instinct though, before even checking that he has all body parts accounted for, was to search the Manor for Erik. He found him, up in his rooms, talking to Raven and Tony and Wolverine. At the first faint touch of Charles' mind, Erik stopped mid-sentence, and started heading towards him.

The sudden burst of warm feeling in his gut told Charles all he needed to know.

"I think I've been going about things the wrong way," he told the ceiling. The bed chirped at him sympathetically.

The first time Charles escaped the convalescence room without any of the others dogging his steps, he found himself back in the hallway of portraits. He'd glimpsed a similar hallway in the Xavia ship, in Logan's memories, vague shapes in the dark; would those silent portraits have imparted their blessing on the figures stealing through their midst? A repentant soldier, and one of their own who refused to give up on the future.

Charles stopped in front of the Xavia symbol. A whole house full of Eisenhardt history, and here was a space set for Xavia. Why? It couldn't have been some long-forgotten union; the Eisenhardt line had crossed with numerous other Families, and there was no sign of their devices in the house.

The last time Charles had been here, he'd still been in the wheelchair. Which, while a beautifully-crafted aid, had still altered his movements in certain ways: for example, he had been closer to the ground, at sitting-height, and it hadn't been easy to turn around.

Now at a more conventional eye-level, under the bright lights, Charles could see a faint shadow reflected on the metal: a blurry ghost of an image bisected by the arms of the 'X'. He turned, and realized that at the other end of the hallway, directly opposite, was the formidable frame labeled MAGNETO. Charles knew, without question, that this placement had been deliberate; this part of the house, according to the records, had not been disturbed in centuries, and may have been one of the original sections from the first construction of the Manor.

Erik's ancestor, the founder of his line, would have been gazing perpetually at the symbol of Xavia all through the ages, while the world outside rusted and failed and was recast.
The Manor, which Erik had grown used to, now felt both familiar and new. He hadn't realized just how much *metal* there was in the place. It was somewhat expected, up shipside, because ships were made of metal. But surely normal planetside dwellings didn't have this much?

Erik, Charles called him from somewhere in the house. It was an easy matter for Erik to reach out and locate Charles' necklace. This mutation thing really was useful. Why was Charles in the Hall of Pictures? *I think I've just figured out a puzzle. Bring that Key you got from the Merchant Prince*.

*What for?* asked Erik, even as he dug in his bag for it.

*Well, my friend, I think I've found what it opens.*

"Whoa," said Tony. His voice echoed down the long tunnel. "What is this, an old escape route?"

Erik didn't bother affecting surprise; his friend had had enough time playing with the home system that he could probably recreate the Manor schematics from memory at this point. The tunnel wasn't in any of the plans. There'd never been any sign that the Xavia symbol in the Hall of Pictures had been concealing this.

Besides, something else caught his interest. Charles picked up on it, too. "It's sloping downwards."

"Really?" asked Raven.

"I've spent half my life in the 'combs, I can tell."

"Maybe it's trying to avoid going too close to the Yard," suggested Wolverine.

"Wrong direction," said Erik. "And there's something else." He frowned, reaching out with his power. There was *old* metal, but old in a sense that was closer to how humans conceived it, rather than the sense of fatigue or corrosion. Which didn't really make sense. Erik pushed a little harder, trying to suss out the structure, and familiarity hit an instant before there was a flash of brightness, and a line of light raced down the tunnel, revealing the downward slope when it sank down and disappeared from view.

"It's a Vine," gasped Charles.

"Wait, isn't that the machine you use to mine the metal here?" asked Tony.

Erik couldn't help the laugh that bubbled out of him. "It's much more than a machine." He could feel the Vine drawing power from him. But it was a slow, gentle pull, and some instinct told him that it wasn't dangerous, that the Vine didn't mean any harm. Perhaps it was the name, but the sensation made him think of a plant quietly absorbing water.

The tunnel was packed dirt; the Vine was the most likely reason it hadn't collapsed yet, after the centuries since the last time the door had been opened. *Why had the key been with the Merchants?* He doubted there was a copy in the Manor, he'd seen the inventory of all the artifacts and antiques stored there. And he would not have even made the connection between key and door without his ability. Even though they were made of the same metal, the door and its lock had been painted red and magenta, the colors of Eisenhardt, while the key was gold.
It hadn't escaped his notice, too, that the key was in the shape of the Xavia symbol.

He reached out with one hand. The Vine was protruding right out of the top of the door, running along the ceiling of the tunnel; it lowered obligingly and glowed brighter when it made contact with his hand. Behind him, he could hear Charles explaining a bit about the Vines and how they were used in the ‘combs.

_They're not really for mining_, Erik realized. _At least, that's not all they'd been made for_. The Vine had felt dry at the first touch, which was an odd way to think of the smoothness of normal metal. But the longer he kept in contact - and he belatedly realized that he was *stroking* it - the shinier it got, until it'd developed the clear crystal-like shell that made its surface feel like it was wet, despite his hand coming away dry. Five minutes after he started, Erik was staring up at a normal-looking Vine. _A healthy Vine._

"Where do you lead to?" he said quietly, still touching it.

To his surprise, the Vine twitched under his fingers, and two thin limbs emerged from its main length. They lengthened and descended in front of the door, until they reached the floor, and then they turned and curved towards each other, meeting in the middle. On instinct, Erik pushed a bit more power into the Vine; the process sped up, the joined limbs thickening and the part hanging right above the floor flattening, until a pulley-cart that looked a little bit like a sling hung in front of them.

"Oh," said Charles, eyes widening. "I think," he paused, fingers flying up to his temple, "it's mildly telepathic. Which I did not think was possible, considering it doesn't exactly have a brain. Why didn't I notice this before? Though I don't think it grasps words, just impressions and intent." He looked at Erik. "It was probably all the practice you've been getting with my telepathy."

Erik tilted his head. "So when I wondered about it..."

"It's answering you in the only way it knows how." One end of Charles' lips quirked up. "I think this one likes you better. Or maybe my thoughts are too grounded in words."

"Maybe it responds only to the Master of the Estate," suggested Wolverine.

"You mean, it can tell?" Tony asked doubtfully.

"It's very old, might have been here since the Manor was first built," said Charles. "And this is Family property. In that era, bloodline tended to be the most important identifier. Maybe the Vine can recognize that Erik is an Eisenhardt- Raven, what are you doing?"

She gave him a flat look. "I want to see where the tunnel leads to, and the nice metal plant wants to show us."

Erik decided that this was a perfectly reasonable argument, and climbed into the cart-sling after her, followed closely by Tony. Wolverine picked his way over the rough ground and pointedly passed Erik and Raven, climbing in at the front. The floor of the cart was just wide enough for a pair of feet to stand comfortably, facing forward.

They all stared expectantly at Charles.

He sighed, but didn't argue further, and climbed on.

Erik looked up at the Vine. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do next. He thought, _I think we're ready to go_, but there was no response. Too grounded in words, Charles had said. Erik looked ahead, at the dark, narrow tunnel. He focused on his curiosity about what was on the other end,
tried to project an impression of *movement* and go.

That seemed to do the trick. The cart-sling slid forward, slow for a few seconds, then rapidly gained speed. The slope wasn't noticeable until the furthest part they'd been able to see from the door, after which point it became a lot like the thrillcoasters of Ruska. In the front, Erik heard-felt Wolverine's claws come out. At this speed, if they encountered any dangerous creatures or, even, Sepor agents who'd found the other end and were trying to sneak into the Estate, Wolverine wouldn't even have to swing - just hold out his fists and the enemy would be kebab.

Raven and Tony whooped. Charles whimpered. Erik, feeling somewhat responsible for the outcome of this journey, focused on *maintain speed* and *not dying*.

They came to a cave.

It was dark, so Erik and Wolverine went back up to the house to fetch a lot of lamps. Once they had light to see by, they discovered that it was an enormous cave, the ceiling at the middle point arching beyond the reach of the weak lamplight. It was probably more of a cave system; smaller caves branched off the central chamber.

Erik was reminded of the 'combs, though this cave was a great deal neater and mostly level. He could see glimpses of Vines on the walls, dormant and dark.

"Erik?" Charles called. "Tony said you wanted me to see something?" And then had scampered, not very subtly.

There'd been what looked like a cave-in at the furthest end of the cave system. Erik had stated that there were more chambers on the other side. It looked as if he'd managed to clear the blockage.

Erik was standing in front of a wall. The chamber looked the roughest and smallest out of all the spaces they'd explored, but the large strip of wall that Erik was inspecting was distinctly flat. Charles couldn't see what was particularly special about it, but he was happy to look at ancient cave drawings, if it meant getting to spend time with Erik.

The man hadn't been *avoiding* him, exactly, but neither had he seemed particularly happy to be around Charles.

The wall was flat, he quickly realized, because it was made of metal, though had accumulated enough dirt over time that it looked like a part of the cave. There was writing on it, smooth as a formal inscription, except there was just enough irregularity that Charles believed it was handwriting. He stole a glance at Erik, wondering if Erik was able to do something like this now.

Charles read the words, struggling at first before memories of learning the Old Languages swam up - Gods, that would never stop feeling strange - and he was able to comprehend the words. He gasped.

*In my pride, I harmed the one most dear to me in all the Universe. These I stole from my beloved: the feel of the ground under his feet; the joy of running over grass and sand and rock; dances under twin moons that will never be.*

*In repentance, and in hope - I will give him the stars.*
Erik stood unmoving, his body tense and his mind walled up, cold and impenetrable as metal. Charles couldn't remember ever standing so close to him and yet feeling so far away.

"Perhaps unhappiness is my family's legacy," whispered Erik, in a voice so tired and hollow that Charles knew he hadn't been meant to hear it. Erik stiffened, confirming it, and, not looking at Charles, started to walk away.

Every instinct in Charles' body cried out, stop him. And then he could not think of a reason not to, not in the face of this, when another piece of the past was reaching out to him. To them.

Fuck this. Charles lifted up to the soles of his feet, trusting Erik to keep him steady, and pressed their lips together. Slightly too hard, but the twinge of pain just spurred Charles on. He decided to forgo words altogether - that had never been their strongpoint, anyway. Instead, he pushed with mind and skin and breath: poured out every emotion Erik inspired in him. How every contact sent sparks over his skin, how every word that passed between them was hoarded in his memory. Charles dragged out the broiling mess that had been living under his ribcage, the knot of fear and distrust that had led him to try and break it off, the fear he felt at the possibility of losing Erik threaded tightly with disbelief and wonder at Erik still being here.

He did his best to show how he wanted to crawl into Erik's mind and never come out again; how maybe he'd wanted Erik to fear what he could do because, in many ways, he was under Erik's power just as completely, if Erik would but realize it.

"I thought you didn't want me," he mumbled into Erik's mouth, while Erik near-carried him into one of the narrow pallets in the small chamber they'd designated as the communal sleeping area. "I thought-" His words sounded garbled, probably because of Erik's tongue in his mouth, so he switched, you'd gotten over me, that I'd lost this. Never, Erik's mind pulsed back, all needy edges and shining lust. A wave of possessiveness and desire swept into Charles' mind, along with something deep and unflinching and true that, perhaps, had always been there but Charles had not dared to acknowledge before.

Their clothes disappeared in a flurry of movement. Charles couldn't remember it ever being this clumsy, this desperate; Erik had had to be so careful, before, when the fragile metal of ships was all that stood between them and deadly space. He was like a wild thing now, panting and rutting against Charles, and Charles met his desire with equal fervor.

"Turn over, Charles," gasped Erik, and didn't wait, but flipped Charles over onto his front. Charles gasped, arousal spiking at the hint of aggression. A warm hand pressed down between Charles' shoulder blades; Charles flushed hotly, but dutifully lowered his upper body, conscious of how he must look with his arse sticking out, as if waiting to be taken. "Beautiful."

And mine, Erik said, straight into Charles' mind. His body felt huge against Charles' back - Charles had never been so aware of their differences in size before.

"Yes," Charles replied, already panting, and Erik hadn't even touched him yet. "Yours. Only yours."

He felt Erik's hands spreading his thighs further apart, Erik's breath against the soft skin. He braced for Erik to slide a finger in him - and was caught unprepared when Erik's tongue, wet and hot and shocking, licked a line down the valley between his buttocks, stopping at his hole and lapping at it.
Charles let out a high, needy whine, caught between wanting to push back and pull away. Except Erik wasn't letting him do either; a strong, unrelenting grip kept him there, kept him where Erik wanted him, Erik's stubble scratching against Charles' arse.

"Oh Gods, that's- I haven't-," Charles gasped, fisting at the thin sheets on the pallet. "Erik!"

Erik hummed and took hold of the fleshy globes, pushing them apart, exposing Charles further. He blew lightly over Charles' entrance, sending shivers all the way up Charles' body. *Fates save me*, came his thoughts, *the sounds you make, Charles. Do you realize what you do to me?*

Charles felt like crying in relief when Erik reached around and took him in hand, jerking him hard and fast. Erik kept *licking* him, tasting that most intimate part of him, pausing occasionally to bite or suck on the soft skin, until Charles was squirming, banging on the pallet. Then Erik's tongue, pointed, thrust into and past the tight ring of muscle around his entrance, and Charles came with a groan, spilling into Erik's hand.

He slumped over, senseless. But Erik slapped at his hip and growled, "Not done yet, Charles," and practically yanked him back, positioning his arse even higher than earlier. Charles gasped at the treatment - then caught himself thinking that he wouldn't mind Erik being even rougher. Charles' back and arms burned slightly from the position, but he wiggled his arse and threw a heavy-lidded look over his shoulder.

Erik's eyes darkened further. Without warning, he pushed a finger into Charles, all the way to the knuckle. Charles let out a shocked sound; Erik's finger was slick with Charles' come, and Charles was still relaxed from orgasm, so it slid in easily. It was followed quickly by a second - this burned a little more, the semen not quite lubricating enough, but Charles let out a pleased sigh at the stretch. He moaned loudly at the third finger, pushing his hips back and begging, "do it, Erik, please, fuck me already."

Erik gripped his hips tightly, steadying; there was the slick of preventative, and then the blunt head of Erik's cock was against Charles' entrance, stretching him, pushing in. Erik didn't stop, sliding himself slow and steady into Charles' body; Charles was breathless from the feeling of being split apart.

*Oh Gods, Erik, you're gorgeous.* He felt Erik shuddering, pausing once he was fully inside. *I love feeling you inside me.*

"Charles," groaned Erik. He felt Erik's larger body blanketing his; Erik's hands slid up along his sides, down his arms, finding his hands and interlocking their fingers.

*Fuck me, Erik. Please, fucking fuck, make me yours.* Erik gave a powerful roll of his hips, pulling out and sliding back in, hard. "Like this?" Charles whined, pushing back. *Yes, please, harder.*

The pallet shook and shivered from the motion of Erik's hips; he fucked Charles hard into the thin mattress, while his mouth sucked marks into the back of Charles' neck. "You feel so good, Charles," Erik groaned. "So damn tight. Perfect. Mine." He punctuated the last with a sharp bite on Charles' shoulder.

*Yes, yours, Erik. Take me, make me feel it.* Erik's thrusts grew harder, more erratic, his hips slamming into Charles, his hands keeping Charles from jerking himself off.

"No, I want you to come just from my cock," Erik growled into his ear. Charles whimpered, spread his legs further, tried to get Erik deeper inside him. Erik nipped at his ear and warned, "Stop wiggling." He changed to slower, deeper thrusts, brutal, the thick length of him filling Charles up again and again and driving the breath out of his body, repeatedly touching the spot that sent shocks
of pleasure up Charles' spine.

The second orgasm roared through Charles like a wave, unexpected. He shouted Erik's name, back bowing; felt himself tightening around Erik's cock, squeezing his climax out of him. It was like being hit by a strummer, and for what felt like forever afterwards, his whole body shook with the aftershocks.

"Erik? Erik."

He mumbled something uncomplimentary and batted at the hand trying to shake him awake.

_Erik, you have to see this._

Charles' thoughts weren't tinged by fear, exactly, but there was an urgency to it that chased away the tentacles of sleep even further. Though Erik wouldn't put it past Charles to telepathically ease his way to full waking, the bastard.

*Tch. I've been told, recently, that I am of a prestigious pedigree.*

Well, if the way he moaned and spread his legs for Erik was any indicator of good breeding...

"Stop being vulgar and open your eyes already," laughed Charles, slapping Erik on the hip.

Erik grumbled a little longer, but eventually cracked an eyelid open.

"Um," he said, eloquently.

The cave ceiling was covered in Vines. In fact - Erik rolled to peer over the pallet and confirmed that, yes, the floor was covered in Vines, too. There was barely an inch of the dirt-and-rock walls to be seen, though there was a considerable quantity of loose dirt and crumbled rock all over the pallet, and the two of them.

Charles was grinning at him amusedly. "I thought we'd trained you out of this."

"I don't-" He would have notice if he'd pulled this many Vines, wouldn't he? And that the ground would have been _literally_ moving under them. "Where did they all even come from?"

"I've been wondering. There may have been fourteen mines, after all, before the Manor was built," said Charles. "And the Vines had just... gone dormant. I would not put it past the Eisenhardts to have been true miners themselves."

"The Vines are definitely awake, now," Erik pointed out. They were glowing happily, like the ones in Mine Three, outshining the measly glow of the lamp set in the corner.

There was a thoughtful look on Charles' face. "They're very responsive to your power," Charles said. He swept a hand down Erik's bare arms, raising a tingle, and shifted against him in a way that reminded Erik of how naked they both were under the thin sheet.

"They're... distinctive," said Erik, tangling their legs together. He felt almost boneless. "The range of my experience is still fairly limited, but I've yet to come across any type of metal that feels close to what the Vines are made of. It's all one type. And, when we were at the deathspace..."

"You're thinking of the lifevines," said Charles. "I noticed the similarities too."
"And the mothership, or the memory of it, said that Eisen was where the first mothership had been built."

"No, not built. Born," Charles corrected, the familiar frown line appeared between his eyebrows. He grabbed Erik's hand and pressed Erik's fingers against his temple. "This will be faster-

*It was all connected*, came Charles' thoughts. Erik heard himself gasping, at a distance, at the barrage of information and memories and thoughts, Charles' mind scrambling desperately to put all the pieces together.

Eisen's mining Vines and Xavia's lifevines. People had forgotten, the knowledge had been lost. Yet - Eisen, Eisen, Eisen was the origin point.

The ships of Xavia had been made of the same metal as the Vines, which could move and change shape, and which can heal and grow by absorbing all the required materials, particularly a select combination of metallic ions, and creating the unique alloy it was made of. Only someone with Erik's power could have managed such a feat. And then, taking that extra step further, because Xavia believed in combining powers to create something greater- and in the end, they'd made a ship that was *alive*, a separate entity, *sentient*. The perfect ship, which could heal damage by creating its own metal, and understood flight in a way that a pilot never could (no more than a pilot could understand a bird's experience), and most of all could *learn*; of course Xavia would never settle planetside, not when half the population had been the *ships* themselves-

*Charles!*

The both of them gasped. Erik's eyes flew open. There was a long moment of disorientation when he seemed to be looking at both Charles and his own face. He took a deep breath, centering himself, and felt Charles' presence in his mind receding.

"The Xavia ships were alive," Charles whispered, eyes bright.

Erik let out a breath. He chuckled. "You know, the Honourable told me that there used to be a saying, 'to be Xavia is to have a ship, to be a ship in Xavia is to live'. I guess that was a clue."

When Charles next emerged into the large central chamber, he found the others gathered around a table that they must have brought down from the Manor. The table was covered with large sheets of paper. No, not paper - some kind of plastic? There were detailed drawings on each sheet. Schematics. Charles saw a wing, an engine, some kind of window, something that would look like the Heart if the mothership had been intact around it. The very largest sheet of plasticy-paper featured...

"A ship?" Charles frowned. "Where did all this come from?"

The others were strangely quiet. "Remember that wall, with the writing?" said Erik. Charles nodded. "I went back to look at it. The metal slab was thick, and there didn't seem to be any reason for it to be, so I looked closer. With my power. And there was a very thin hollow space inside. Just enough to store all of these plans."

"I took a look," said Tony. "No tech scanner could have detected these, with that thickness of metal and these inert materials."

"What he means is, only someone with Erik's mutation could have found these," said Raven. "I mean, that's kind of been a theme, right? All of this was specifically meant for mutants to find."
"As the token non-mutant in the room-" said Tony mildly.

Raven's eyes widened. "Shit, I didn't mean-"

"- I have to concur." Tony gestured at the table. "I thought this secret society, Illuminati thing was a hobby for the Firsts in between their epic political tragedies, but mutants clearly have their own thing going."

"Most importantly," said Erik, while Raven stared at her lap, "there's a very good chance that these plans haven't been moved since they were stored in that chamber."

Charles pulled the largest sheet towards himself. He didn't have to struggle with the antiquated script and long-dead language to know what the plan was for. Eisen was the point of origin. The birthplace.

"The first mothership of Xavia," he said quietly. "The first true Xavia ship."

There was a long silence. Charles wondered if they could feel it, too, the tense weight of possibility hanging in the air, too unformed as of yet but could one day, in a certain light, be called destiny; he hoped it wasn't just him.

"You are Xavia," said Raven.

To be Xavia is to have a ship, Charles remembered.

Charles abruptly sat down, his knees feeling wobbly. He didn't question how there was a chair there to catch him, just patted Erik's hand in thanks.

"How?" he finally asked. "How can we even begin-?"

It seemed like they'd been waiting on him, for something, and his choice of words had decided the course of the immediate future.

He tried not to think about it, feeling more than a little queasy.

But then Tony was explaining, the writing implement in his hand flying competently over a piece of actual paper that must have also come from the Manor, "according to this, the metal that the ships were made of - including the lifevines and your local Vines - was a very unique compound they called crysteel. Nothing close to actual steel, of course, it just sounded nice paired with the 'crys-'", which was for the crystal-like surface that develops after it 'matures', whatever that means-

"Wait, you read," Charles squinted at the sheets, "pre-Migration Continental English?"

Tony gave him an of course, who do you think I am? eyebrow. "Erik can, as well, you know."

Charles blushed, because no, he hadn't.

"This one is all about the Vines, and has instructions on how to get them to produce this crysteel," said Erik, looking over a sheet. An odd look came over his face. "Raven was right - the Vines need to be directed by a mutant. But not my power." He turned to Charles. "I can move them around, or start a new Vine network, but to redirect what they absorb and produce requires a telepath."

"Really?" said Charles, accepting the sheet from Erik and reading it over. After a few calculations, he frowned. "But, assuming that I can get the vines to start producing the crysteel for us to use, it will be years before we'll have enough for even a pod."
"What if you had a large amount of this metal to begin with?" The sound of Logan's voice, quiet all this time, drew their startled gazes.

"That would be a big help," Charles said uncertainly. "But where would-"

Logan met his eyes. "There's Grey."

Raven and Wolverine set off the following morning to get the Egg. Erik made to go with them, and Charles was surprised at the strength of his own dismay; he should have expected it, though, as Erik would be a great deal of help in transporting the Egg. Besides, it wasn't as if Erik was going away.

"No, no," Raven said to Erik. "You are staying right here."

The plans, though highly informative about the shipbuilding process, were woefully lacking in the metal production aspect. Charles scoured every sheet for some clue about how to communicate with the Vines.

"Maybe you should just ask them?" suggested Erik.

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," said Tony. He looked at Charles. "Try it."

Charles shrugged to himself and reached out to the Vine with his mind. He thought he could detect a thin humming sound emitting from it.

I would like you to make crysteel for us, please, he tried. There didn't seem to be any change. Please produce crysteel. Crysteel? Metal that can hold life.

"I'm feeling something," said Erik. Charles listened hard, but couldn't detect any change in the Vines. "It's a small shift. Perhaps that was enough."

"Guys," called Tony, "I think part of the floor is melting."

It was the kind of statement Tony would make, likely in that exact same, calm, matter-of-fact voice, if he'd just discovered that he was floating above a river of magma, so Charles put down the compads and portable databanks he'd lugged down from the library and hurried over in the direction of Erik shouting, "I left you alone for ten minutes, Stark!"

"I didn't even touch anything?" protested Tony. "No, I'm telling the truth this time, I was literally just standing here, trying to decide if I wanted a snack or if I should play around with those plans a bit more, and then I thought, 'feels kinda warm in here'. Next thing I know, one of these Vines of yours had melted."

It was true, to an extent - there was a puddle of something shiny near where Tony was standing. Tony, of course, had not stepped to a safe distance away like a sensible person, but was trying to inch closer, grimacing when the heat from the puddle started warping the expensive leather of his shoes.

Charles huffed a laugh. "Well, we did ask them to make us some crysteel. That's a Root, Tony."

The term clearly meant nothing to Tony, but Erik's eyebrows jumped up. "But the ones in Mine Three looked different."
The Roots in the mines took up a sprawling complex. Each Root led into an enormous vat, called a Melter, where it subdivided into smaller tendrils, like its namesake. Their function was directly opposite that of plant roots, though; each Root yielded molten liquid metal in elemental form. Iron, copper, aluminium, the precious metals, depending on what the Vines absorbed. No one knew how the Vines decided which Root would produce which metal. Some Roots only ever gave out iron, for as long as the records could trace, while other Roots would drip out copper for a few hours, and then switch to gold, woe betide the miners on shift if they weren't attentive enough to change out the Melter.

Erik and Charles had pulled several shifts there. Erik was presently remembering the overwhelming heat, the tricks to keeping the Root surface clear of the build-up without getting scalded or falling into the vat, how to guess which metal each Root was dedicated to based on its temperature.

"Erik, perhaps you should get the Vines to form a Melter around it," Charles suggested. He sent an image to Erik, of weaving and piling the Vines to make a sort of nest, into which the new crysteel could collect. "That is how, ah, it used to be done."

Erik frowned slightly, considering, but didn't say anything. Charles wondered how Erik could be so unperturbed by the knowledge that kept popping up in Charles' brain, out of nowhere. Tony, at least, was sneaking him curious looks. Erik raised his hand, and some of the Vines disentangled themselves from the floor, twisting around each other and curling around the puddle.

"Is Tony all right?" asked Charles.

Erik looked over at the corner where Tony had seated himself in front of the large desk and two powerful lamps. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen someone working on real paper. It was a good thing they had some in the Manor. Tony insisted that he worked best "old school", especially in a crisis. He'd gotten that look on his face that Erik associated with his ordeal in the Radiant Desolation, so Erik didn't push.

"Once he gets like that," he told Charles now, "the best thing to do is to wait it out and let him finish. He should be fine for another couple of hours. If he's not done by then, I'll shove some toast into his mouth."

"Erik, he'll need a few days just to understand the old schematics, let alone begin designing," Charles said skeptically.

Erik shrugged. He could see that Tony understood enough to begin drawing preliminary plans. Charles really was an abysmal telepath, though maybe he just couldn't understand the engineering chatter inside Tony's head.

In fact, Tony resurfaced six hours later with a fairly detailed and functional schematic of his own.

Erik, obviously, would be the one doing most of the 'building' of the ship. Tony would make sure that they didn't do something ridiculous like put the engines in wrong or set up the wiring in a less efficient layout.

They practiced on a few pieces of scrap Erik scrounged up from somewhere, Charles acting as a conduit between their minds and, more reluctantly, as a mediator for their tempers.

Apparently, while Erik and Tony could be a terrifying team when things needed to be done and
genuinely enjoyed each other's company, outside of immediate life-or-death situations they could only tolerate each other in small, carefully planned doses. Charles wondered how he could have ever thought the two of them could be more than friends.

After a couple of sessions, Tony cleared his throat and glanced between Charles and Erik awkwardly. "Hey, is there a way you can just pull the information you need right out of my head? As much as I appreciate you respecting my right to be a controlling bastard, being in a mind-link with the two of you is like watching you have sex - actually, scratch that, watching you have sex would be fine, not like you're both not disgustingly attractive. This is more like being trapped in a small room with the two of you making eyes at each other. Which, granted, is pretty much what it's like down here. But on the telepathy level, it's embarrassing and distracting, and I'd much rather you just grab the information you need, no need to ask permission."

When Raven and Wolverine came back, they brought familiar faces with them. The Egg's awkward bulk and not inconsiderable weight certainly warranted the extra muscle - though, perhaps, not what looked like all of the West compound.

Erik was ready to voice his complaints when Charles interjected, _they're hardly strangers, Erik._

_But these tunnels lead right back to my house._

_For goodness' sake - telepath, remember? I can tell if someone's about to run off with your things._

Or run to report them to Sepor, was implied. Erik reluctantly subsided. _You're hardly the most diligent about such things._

_I'm paying attention now, don't worry,_ responded Charles, and Erik had the fleeting impression that they were talking about something else now.

Charles' home community, it turned out, hadn't just come along to see Charles again or lend a hand in transporting the Egg.

"They raided Chester," said Alex, his expression haunted, "And all the villages and towns, even the Cities."

"Who is 'they'?" Charles asked gently.


"Hank got a warning out to the village," Raven said proudly, inciting a blush on Hank's face that was visible even in the dim lighting of the lamps.

"Advantage of working for the enemy, and for not being known as a mutant," Hank said, shaking his head. "Anyway, most of people were in the 'combs. Those who could, hid there overnight."

"But they got Angel," said Darwin. "And Azazel. And lots of others. Even kids. Officially, they're claiming that they're protecting people from mutants."

"It's the same old spiel. But it's not working here as well as it has in other places. Too many people know someone who's a mutant, or have worked with one." Hank smiled, unexpectedly. "It's... pretty amazing, actually. I've always thought that most humans will turn on us the moment they have an excuse. But the Keyes in the south compound hid Scott in a panic room under their dwelling, and when Tina's dad got taken their next-door neighbor took her in even though she kept accidentally
setting fire to everything because she was upset - "

"The whole planet's pretty pissed off, if you can believe the stuff passing through the Circles," said Sean, whom Erik remembered as the most enthusiastic passer of stuff (namely, rumor and gossip) in their compound.

Alex made a dismissive sound. "Yeah, what the fuck good is that gonna do? There are moons out there hosting a bigger population than Eisen."

Erik exchanged a glance with Charles. He wasn't sure if Charles was actively reading his thoughts; their minds had been, if not linked, then in contact since Charles had woken up after the visit to the Xavia deathspace. He suspected that Charles was reluctant to let him go entirely in fear that the next time he asked permission, Erik would decline. That was the way Charles thought - as long as Erik didn't actively objected, as long as the weight of his presence remained at the back of Erik's mind, this still fell within Erik's explicitly given consent, like a houseguest refusing to leave unless asked. Which was amusing, and ridiculous, and part of why Erik never, ever worried about Charles having the powers he did - the limits of which still remained undiscovered.

In any case, a by-product of the constant maybe-link was that sometimes the both of them would arrive at the same thought, and there would be a strange kind of resonance, usually followed by a struggle to disentangle their thoughts and matched which belonged to whom, as if for one instant they'd been a single mind with a split personality.

Like now, with the simultaneous thought: We should probably tell them that we have a bigger problem - Cerebro.

Perhaps it would have daunted them, had they known exactly how long it'd been since a ship of Xavia had been created rather than birthed by another ship. They felt the significance, anyway, especially after Wolverine unearthed a ship-builder's cradle hewn out of rock that would help the chassis keep its form while the bones and sinews of the ship took shape, sculpted by Erik's power.

Then began the delicate fibres, like nerves, spread out from the central point where the central console would eventually stand, rising up from the protective and impenetrable cage, as if ribs, that would hold the Heart.

Later, neither of them would be able to say when it happened, exactly, because the days of the ship's creation were obscured in a strange fog. Erik's fatigue was understandable, after hours and hours of crafting the many working parts of the vessel. Charles could not explain, then, why he felt similarly foggy; he only found out later that the process was drawing from him, too.

It was what separated the Xavia-ships from the Vines: that extra spark imbued into the crysteel from his telepathy.

Charles had just assumed that Erik's tiredness was leaking into him through their linked minds.

One night, he was woken from sleep by a touch on his mind. Erik, next to him, sat straight up. "Charles?"

"It's not me," said Charles. He rolled over and got to his feet. "I think... I think the ship is awake."

The central chamber was aglow with Vine-light; the Vines had gradually crept up to the surface,
drawn to Erik or the building of the ship, and the surfaces of large cave was practically covered with them now, just like the sleeping chamber. With a start, Charles realized that none of the others had slept down in the Cave since they’d started building the ship. He dug through his blurry memories and remembered Raven informing them that they would all be staying at the Manor, where there was plenty of room and real beds. Erik had mumbled assent without taking his eyes off the hull flowing into being under his hands.

There had been no question about Charles and Erik staying down here while the ship was in-progress.

Come to think of it, every time someone visited them, they didn't stay very long and tiptoed about as if making loud noises was a punishable offence. Even Alex. And they all called it the Cave, the capital letter audible There was something... serene, about the this space, now. Sacrosanct.

The new presence in his mind was very unfocused, tentative. It gained coherence the closer Charles and Erik got to the ship.

It was nearly done. All the functional parts were, well, functioning, and they'd done a thorough test of the rudimentary systems earlier.

And then, like a light coming on in a dark room, the ship said, { Hello. }

Charles felt his dry lips cracking from his sudden, giant smile. "Hello," he replied, and heard an echo from Erik.

He could feel hir reaching into him, not just his mind but every part of his being, curious. Like a newborn, he couldn't help thinking. He let it happen, letting hir see what zie would. He felt, distantly, his heard racing under his chest, but he felt as calm as if he were just floating in space; perhaps it was exactly that, air and water being squeezed out of his lungs while his mind was transfixed by the glorious view of a sun burning into life.

The thought came, unbidden: may this be an union of our strengths, and forgiveness of our weaknesses.

From close by, a mind that would never be a stranger to him: may this be but the best of both of us.

{ You are my pilot. }

It was a simple statement of truth, in the same way one would say "the sun is hot" or "space is vast". The mental connection enabled Charles to sense that the "you" was meant in the plural, addressing Erik and himself.

Beside him, Erik started. "But Charles is the one who is-"

"Xavia is more than about bloodlines," said Charles gently. Unity, the Merchant Prince had said.

Charles felt as if there was something huge and hot in his chest straining out, as if his skin wasn't quite big enough for this thing that'd been growing ever since he met Erik; filling up all the gaps he used to take refuge in when the world grew too much, too harsh, too loud; it hurt, almost, except even the thought to going back to how it was before was utterly unbearable.

"What would you like to be called?" he asked, an uncertain amount of time later.

Their ship pondered this question for a while. Charles could feel it quietly exploring both their minds, learning them. Learning the world through them. { Phoenix. The flame at the end that is also the
beginning. }

He and Erik, together, touched the nearest part of hir that they could reach. There was the faintest of
glows, under their linked hands, and then the surface of the hull, which had looked like
unremarkable shipmetal, was suddenly wet to the touch despite being dry, covered by the clear,
glittering shell.

*Hello, Phoenix.*
"Charles?" called Raven, a week after Phoenix was born. "It's the Merchants. They've brought the First Fleet."

"I'm not going anywhere that Erik and my sister aren't allowed in," Charles announced. After a moment, he added, "Er, not that Tony and Logan aren't just as valuable."

He heard Wolverine snort. "Kid, don't sweat it." At the same time, Tony moaned, "And I thought we had something special, Charlie."

They had been invited on board Spearing Star, which turned out to be the flagship of Al Zadeem Fleet and the meeting place unanimously agreed upon by the other Family heads. The ship's exterior didn't look particularly possessing, but the inside exuded a wealth and formality that reminded Charles unequivocally of Xavia. He didn't have time to examine much of it, as they were escorted by polite but distant crew members to a spacious meeting room.

The room was lit only by a few muted wall lamps, casting most of it in darkness, except for a circular podium in the center. The podium was lit from both the floor and the ceiling. The room appeared fuller than it really was, and the atmosphere gave a strong impression of mysterious, hooded figures gathered in secret. When Charles' eyes adjusted, he thought that the assembled were wearing deep hoods. Charles and his party were, evidently, the last to arrive.

One of the figures had cleared his throat and suggested, politely, that as this was a War Room, it would ease proceedings for Charles' companions to wait outside, being not of the Firsts as they were. Charles, naturally, was having none of that.

"Well said," another figure said after his announcement. "Actually, in the old days, the War Room was mostly for show. It wasn't as if any conference involving Xavia needed a separate room to have privacy."

Someone cleared their throat. "You have called us, Xavia, and we have come."

"It's been a long time since we've heard a Summoning," said one of the figures.

"And even longer since all of old allies have been seen together," commented another. "We even have a complete roster of Ten Sol, if Master Lehnsherr stands for Eisen."

"As he should, by all rights."

It was nearly impossible to see in the darkness, especially with the bright illuminated circle in the middle of the room. Charles was fairly sure this was on purpose. Faith and loyalty were one thing; but these families had not survived centuries of perilous politics by being stupid.

And yet. They had all come.

He took a deep breath, and stepped into the circle of light.

"My name is Charles Xavier." It hit him, then, that this was the first time he'd said it. He thought he'd accepted the knowledge, though it lay on him stiffly like a brand new suit, but it was a different thing altogether to present it to others. To await acceptance or rejection. "I have no proof, beyond other
people's memories, and a broken necklace, and being a telepath."

"Your ship," one of the figures interrupted, when Charles would have gone on. "She is a Xavia ship, is she not?"

Charles couldn't help his smile; it broke out whenever he thought about Phoenix. "Yes."

"How strong is your ability?" demanded the gruff-voiced one.

"I'm not sure, to be honest." Charles did his best to estimate where the figure's eyes would be, and kept his gaze steady. "I haven't encountered my limit, yet."

"And what is it that you require of us, young Charles?" This voice was new. Charles couldn't help but note that it had remained silent and let the others react first.

"Prime Shaw," said Charles. "It is our belief that he plans to build an armada to challenge all of Ten Sol, to take down the Fleets and planet-systems one by one. He will begin on Eisen, because it will provide him with the resources to build more ships and weapons. He will likely also test his machine here, which will function as a demonstration for those who seek to oppose him."

"You have proof of this?"

"There are reports that show an increase in battle-class ships commissioned by Sepor from all manufacturing planets, and a concentration of Sepor forces in the Eisen system." Charles took a deep breath.

"Those are heavy accusations," commented the first speaker.

Charles inclined his head. "I would not have called on you if I did not believe it was necessary."

And you would not be here, he wanted to add, if you did not already suspect what Shaw is doing.

He heard Tony shifting behind him. You know you broadcasted that one, right?

Oh.

"He does have a point," said the third voice dryly. "Losing time loses us options, and we have few enough of those to begin with. I, for one, accept young Charles' claim on the name of Xavia, and thereby accept his right to the Summons. Let any who object speak their peace now."

"He is but a boy," said a voice somewhere in the back. "I can accept that his family was great, once, but they are dead, and he is asking us to go against those who'd killed them."

"Yes, it does sound quite familiar, doesn't it," said the gruff voice. "You might do well to remember how your line came to power. Yes or no, Tarida."

A pause. "Yes."

The first speaker jumped in with her own enthusiastic, "Yes."

"Yes," echoed all around the room. A few didn't sound particularly willing, but their response was still clear, unmistakable, and Charles' heart leapt to his throat as he counted up to eight.

The last, the fourteenth, was the gruff-voiced one. "Tarida did raise an interesting point. Do you know how Xavia was defeated, Charles?"
Before Charles could respond, the figure stepped into the light. It was a tall man, with a pale, yellow-tinted complexion and dark, slanted eyes. Admiral Tam, Charles vaguely remembered from the Society events. He had a helmet in his hands. It was slightly dented on one side, and had a hint of scorch-marks. Wolverine made a startled noise.

In one smooth move, the man placed the helmet on Charles' head. It was too big for him, and wobbled loosely. But the moment it covered his head, the world-
-
-went empty.

He didn't realize he was reaching up to take it off until he couldn't move his hands. Tam was holding on to his wrists, his face markedly somber.

Charles struggled, panicked.

He couldn't-t there wasn't- it was like what Charles imagined suddenly losing his limb, or his hearing, would be like. Something was just gone, his sense of reality broken in an altering, inescapable way.

Suddenly, the helmet flew off his head. He released a pitiful, hurt sound, and Erik was there, shoving off Admiral Tam.

"Charles, are you all right?" Erik demanded. The helmet was floating in front of him; Erik glared at it with such vehemence that Charles was surprised it wasn't a ball of scrap metal already.

"I'm fine," responded Charles. "It was just... very unexpected." He regained enough of his pride to be slightly embarrassed at his reaction.

"Enough with these theatrics," growled Erik. He was tensed to strike, waiting for a target to present itself. Charles instinctively touched his arm, felt the tremble of his muscles from keeping his temper in check. Erik gestured towards the ceiling.

The lights came on. Well, most of them did, save a few that sparked and emitted a low whine of death. Charles waited for his eyes to adjust. He could see every Head-of-Family clearly now. He'd thought, in the dark, that they were wearing hoods. They weren't; just the long, luxurious coats embroidered with Family crests. Most of them looked old enough to be his parents, if not grandparents. Their faces were difficult to read. Charles could peek, of course, and they might be expecting him to. But that wasn't him, that wasn't how he went about with things. It was important to begin as one meant to continue.

More than half of them were staring at Erik.

"Master Lehnsherr," said Admiral Tam. There was none of the deliberate disinterest that had been on his face earlier when he'd first looked at Erik. "I was not aware that you are one of the gifted."

"Now you are," said Erik, flatly.

"Not meaning any disrespect," the gruff one piped up. "But... telekinesis?"

"Metal." The helmet floated to his hand. "What is this device?"

There was a rash of whispering in the back of the room. But Admiral Tam met Erik's gaze and said, calmly, "That was how Xavia was defeated. The alloy blocks telepathic ability, you see. Stryker commissioned such helmets for a whole battalion, and lined their fighter ships with it. More than a king's ransom in rare metal, just for the helmets alone. But I suppose that is the only way to bring down a king."
"And we see now how young Master Xavier will avoid that danger," said the first, enthusiastic speaker. Charles saw that the voice belonged to a dark-haired man of medium height, whose wide green eyes were shining brightly at Charles in a rather worrying way.

_I can't touch the metal either_, Erik informed Charles. Ah, that explained why it was still in one piece, then. _I'm lifting it using one of my cufflinks, on the inside. But best to let them believe it won't be a problem._

_I agree_, responded Charles. He was still a little shaken from the brief taste of being _cut off._

A tall, wispy old man sighed heavily and lowered his head. When he spoke, Charles recognized his voice as the calm, less excitable one. "I'd long warned William that Xavia's separation from the rest of Ten Sol would be their downfall."

The whispering at the back got louder, and somebody said, "So what if it's all old folk's tales, they must have started from _somewhere_. And this one was an old story, it stated clearly, 'he who is master of all that is metal', it's definitely a sign-"

"He is an unknown to us. He is young and untested."

"Oh, come off it, Vin," said the gruff one. "Like you weren't ready to agree the second he stepped into that light. The boy is the _spitting image_ of his grandfather."

Charles blinked. "You knew my grandfather?"

Vin Al Zadeem smiled gently. "Yes. We were good friends, as boys. Before my family went questing for our scattered kin, and his family decided that isolation would be their safety. We still kept in touch. I was heading for a visit, in fact, before the attack. If it had taken place but a week later, Xavia would not have stood alone."

"Master Lehnsherr, you are known to all of us here," said an unfamiliar woman at the back of the room. "If you will vouch for Master Xavier, then that would settle the remaining doubts."

There was a general murmur of agreement, though one or two looked at her askance. "He's an Eisenhardt," she said, as if that explained everything. "No, don't look at me like that, Herri, I don't care what the Book says. Is he or is he not the Master of the Estate of Eisen? Once upon a time, it was the holding that made the lord first, before the bloodline."

Erik looked as if he wanted to roll his eyes, but he didn't hesitate. "I do vouch for him. He is a Xavier, and worthy of the name besides."

It was Al Zadeem who nodded, strangely somber. "Then we will help you."

"That is not all," said Al Zadeem, appearing in the hallway that led to where the ships were docked. Charles signaled for the others to go ahead without him. "There is something else, that Shaw is doing."

"He possesses a technology that puts the life of every person in the Eisen system at risk." Charles said. "I think you know of that which I speak."

"Are you sure?" the man demanded.

"I have a reasonable suspicion that he stole the plans from the Xavia mothership during the Great
Blinding. I have people knowledgeable about ships who state that a section of his ship, The Submarine, has been designed in a way that resembles that of a similar structure on the Xavia mothership."

Al Zadeem nodded gravely. "You must make sure that this machine is destroyed. I disliked the Old Rex possessing it, so much power, but Shaw - no. Avenge your blood, Charles, and make sure Shaw does not get to use this technology."

"You are not getting into this," said Erik, to a much smaller audience after they got back planetside. "There will be hard fighting. This could lead to a war. People will get hurt."

"It's been a war," said Darwin quietly. "It was a war when they raided our homes and shut down the mines."

"We have to get our people back," said Alex. "And if Shaw has this mind-control machine, then he needs to be stopped, or Eisen is just gonna be his testing ground."

There was a clatter from the corner that had unofficially become Tony's workshop. Erik refused to look at his friend's projects out of a healthy interest in maintaining plausible deniability later on when things began exploding. "Look, if even hotshot's figured it out, everyone else must think it too," said Tony. "A testing-ground is exactly what Shaw wants to use Eisen for."

"Not helping, Tony."

"This is our home," argued Alex. "We've actually lived here all our lives, unlike you and your friends, and when you've fucked off spaceside again after this, we're the ones who'll still be living here."

"We have more right than anyone," said Hank, much more quietly.

"Gentlemen," said Charles.

"You're letting Charles fight with you," Sean pointed out. "Why can't we help, too?"

Because you're children, he wanted to say. But these were children who'd worked in the mines, every day, laboring deep under the earth and risking life and limb to produce the very wealth that their planet was known for, every damn day.

Our planet, Charles reminded him. You have supped with us and bled for us, Erik. You are not a stranger.

"We thought," Hank spoke up, deftly dodging an elbow from Alex, "that we - those of us planetside, I mean - could seize back the 'Yards, take the ships. That way, you have help against the armada, and the spaceside forces don't need to worry about being shot at from below."

Erik blinked. That was - not a bad idea, in fact. "We're going to have to hit all 'Yards in one night. Otherwise, they'll get a message to the Sepor armada and the rest will get reinforcements."

"We may or may not have already spread the word," said Hank.

"Shaw has his army," said Sean. "We need ours."

"That's why we have asked the Firsts to help us," said Charles.
"What the fuck are you talking about? We're not following some random spaceside starshitter -"

"Alex," groaned Charles.

"- like they don't say worse about us," Alex retorted back. He nodded at Erik. "You're leading us."

"But," Erik frowned down at Alex, "you hate me."

"Nah, that's just how he is," said Darwin. "Anti-authority. He actually does hate Sepor, though."

"If it makes you feel any better," said Alex, looking uncomfortable himself, "we're really following Charles. But we're listening to you right now because Charles still gets lost on his way to Hattan and I hear that you're a walking compass."

Erik stared at them, unable to help it. Eventually, he said, "I guess it makes sense. I am also taller and easier to see."

Darwin beamed at him. "Yeah, exactly."

Charles cleared his throat. "We'll have to train. All of us – yes?"

In the end, it was surprisingly easy to organize the whole thing. Tony warned that the 'Nets would be watched, so the Eiseners capitalized on the already-established chain of news-and-gossip dispersal that was the Circles. It also helped that they had a telepath, a teleporter, and a bored engineering genius who somehow cobbled together secure locked-network communication units from "bits of stuff I found around the Manor".

On the chosen night, the small group consisting mostly of people from Chester crept out from the Estate grounds, and stormed Yard One.

Most of the mutants were in the front, searching out guards (Charles) and disabling them (Erik). They were halfway through the compound by the time the first gun went off; the guard had been standing still down a far avenue, and Erik had mistaken their gun for a one of a ship's weapons. Charles, maintaining the telepathic connection to all the mutants, sensed the weapon going off from Erik and relayed the information to Darwin, who managed to shield several of their people with his body.

A moment later, the gun was a twisted length of metal shackling the guard's hands together.

*Seize every ship*, Erik ordered silently, which Charles dutifully relayed. *All vehicles. And take weapons, too, but do not use them unless you know how.*

There was a commotion, and suddenly there was a Sepor squad trotting up to meet them. Charles hadn't felt a whisper of their presence, and discovered why when they got close enough to see the helmets they were wearing. Black-clad Sepor agents stood in front. One hadn't buttoned his coat all the way up; Charles caught a glimpse of a suppression collar, and understanding hit him, right before the man twirled his fingers and sent out a damn *whirlwind* towards them.

Charles acted on instinct, or maybe it was an echo of something he'd seen from his coma-dream. He connected with Sean and Erik, easier than breathing; he *knew* their powers, because he'd trained them both. Sean opened his mouth to scream just as the tornado hit, the sound waves breaking up the
winds a little. Erik, casting his power out, grabbed hold of zippers, jewelry, belts, and kept people on the ground.

His surprise was quickly followed by worry. But neither Sean nor Erik seemed to mind. A sharp burst of plasma came from behind Charles, close enough for Charles to half-expect the smell of singed hair. It hit the whirlwind-man on the side, tossing him backwards into some of the Sepor soldiers. And now the mutants on the Eisen side were stepping to the front, Raven and Darwin and Sean and Hank and Lisa and Kel.

When it was over, more than one ship was a wreck, and the surviving Sepor guards and agents were tied up and de-helmeted and given a very strong suggestion of go to sleep by Charles.

He noticed Raven sitting by the side. She was hunched in on herself, and he had a brief moment of panic that she'd been hurt - though he'd checked, right after the last guard went down - before he sat down next to her. She looked unharmed. She was also in her blonde disguise.

"Raven?" he tentatively asked.

"Hmm? Oh, hey Charles." She sniffled. Her voice sounded like she was crying, except there was no sign of tears on her face. "Do you need anything?"

"No. Gods, Raven - are you hurt? You said you weren't hurt."

"I'm fine. Perfectly peachy. See?" She held up an arm. The fleshy beige looked strange, after seeing it blue and scale-covered for so long.

"Raven."

"It's." She bit her lip. "I killed someone."

"Oh." He stared at her, for a moment, and the next thing he knew he was hugging her, her face tucked into his shoulder.

"No, seriously, I'm okay," said Raven, even as she squeezed his arms hard enough that he worried the bone would actually break. "I chose to do this, and I'm still in, don't you dare try to take this away from me. I was just - I'd just realized that I don't even know if I'd meant to kill him. Or her. Hard to tell with those damn ugly vests. He had a knife, so I threw him as hard as I could, and he hit one of those scaffolding things. There's a dent there now. I guess Erik can pay for the damage."

"Of course," Charles said. He held on to her, and kept holding on, until her trembling stopped, and she was a drowsy, exhausted weight on him. He remembered when she'd been small enough for him to carry; he had to discreetly wipe his cheek on her hair. "Darwin killed someone too. He's been puking behind a landwagon."

Raven took in a deep, shuddering breath. "Good. I hope it's this horrible, every time. I hope it never gets easy."

Charles stroked soothing circles on her back. It was the only kind of medicine he'd ever given her; she never really got sick, thanks to her mutation, and the only time she felt sick was after a bad nightmare. "Me too, love. Me too."
Crown and Sword

Erik was surprised when Charles - who was the unofficial communication line between the spaceside and planetside forces, since they weren't confident about the security of the 'Nets and were trying to remain unnoticed for as long as possible - relayed a message that Al Zadeem wanted to meet with him. He borrowed Tony's subship, slipping past the armada and using his ability to locate the Spearing Star on one of Eisen's moons.

"That was a very inspired move, Lehnsherr," said Al Zadeem, once Erik had been shown into the War Room. Which now befitted the name: maps and charts and holographic screens were scattered along one wall. "The others were most impressed. Of course, it was your prerogative as Master to defend your Estate. Many of the younger generations of Society tend to forget about the power of such things."

"Thank you, sir," said Erik, uncertainly.

"Please, sit."

The room had acquired a table and a pair of elegant, formal chairs since Erik had been in there last. Erik took a seat.

"You know, I can't remember the last time a Master of Estate rode at the head of the troop, leading his countrymen into battle," Al Zadeem mused. "The others, I assure you, share my sentiments."

"Sir?"

Al Zadeem passed him a datachip. "Here are all the estimates from the other Firsts on what forces they can muster in the limited timespan we have. Barely a fraction from what it would have been, two hundred years ago. But I suppose the golden days are gone."

"Thank you," said Erik, accepting the datachip. "But - why are you giving this to me?"

The other man raised a well-groom, darkly curving eyebrow. "Why - because you're our general, Master of Eisen."

{ You wish to oppose this Shaw and destroy his version of Cerebro, yes? }

Charles nodded absently.

{ Then perhaps you should wear the Crown yourself, and locate his that way. }

Charles frowned and reluctantly tore his eyes from the messages on his compad. "I'm afraid you've lost me."

{ If you wear the Crown, you will be able to find him. }

"And what Crown is this?"

He heard hir sigh. But then zie went quiet, so he shrugged and returned to his compad. He'd just finished drafting his replies when something heavy landed on his head.

"Fucking OW."
"Charles?" Erik appeared in the door.

It was hard to explain, how both of them couldn't seem to stay away from the ship for long. Whenever one of them had business to attend to, the other stayed behind. So it was probably a good thing that no one asked them to explain.

Unfortunately, every other hour at least one of them had to go meet with the Firsts, or talk to what they referred to as the 'Eisen contingent' because Charles couldn't handle the idea that every able-bodied individual on Eisen was now involved in this. They looked to him as some kind of leader. Well, they had their own leaders, but those leaders then deferred to him, so in effect it was the same.

Charles rubbed at his head, squeezing his eyes shut for a few seconds until the pain faded a little. He was going to have to talk to Phoenix about the fragility and relative squashiness of human bodies. And check that he didn't have a concussion.

He squinted at whatever had hit him. It was lying on the floor. It looked like a metal circle. A circlet? Made of crysteel. "Phoenix, what is that?"

{ The Crown } replied the ship, with a hint of smugness. It added, helpfully, { you wear it on your head. }

Erik walked over and floated up the circlet, inspecting it. "Wait, does this mean you have Cerebro?"

{ Yes? }

Charles gaped. "I'm fairly sure we didn't include a telepathy-amplifying machine in your design. I mean, I think I would have remembered that."

{ It is } The ship hesitated. { My metal remembered. }

Erik let out a breath. "All the ships of Xavia were part of Cerebro. That's what you said."

"Including Grey," said Charles, understanding.

They stared at the circlet. Charles glanced at Erik uncertainly.

Erik lifted the circlet higher, brought it to hover above Charles' head. He gently lowered it. "The crownless again shall be king," he murmured.

"Erik."

A warm, wonderfully large hand came up to cradle Charles' jaw. "I trust you."

He intended to close his eyes, remembering the overload of his senses at the deathspace. But he looked into Erik's eyes instead, their gazes locking. Charles wasn't actively reading his mind. He could still feel Erik, though, in some integral way; like the weight of one's bones, unnoticed until they are damaged or gravity isn't acting upon them.

He suspected that he would never be truly separated from Erik again, and couldn't even bring himself to mind.

The Crown rested lightly on his head - he would not have known it was there, if not for the slight disturbance of his hair. This experience was a far cry from linking with the Heart. There, he had been flooded by information, raw data poured into his head with no moderator or filter of any kind. Phoenix was very obviously easing him into the system.
Awareness began with sensing the glow of nearby sentient minds. It felt like his normal and constant low-grade scanning, except on a much larger scale, picking up everyone milling about in the Manor and Yard One and even a couple of Sepor ships passing overhead. Then Charles started hearing fragments of thoughts, which he tried not to notice. His power grew, on and on, until Charles realized that he could push further - far into the Sepor fleet above, even, if he concentrated.

There was no obvious change, but between one moment and the next, Charles knew instinctively that he could no longer just read minds, but also influence them, direct them - with one little push of power, control them. He recoiled from that far limit - though some part of him couldn't help noticing that it didn't feel like a limit at all, his power flowing as easily as always.

Fear threatened to crawl up his throat and strangle him. The memory, old but hardly faded - he smothered it, mastering himself. It had been a mistake, when he had been barely old enough to comprehend what he'd done. He was an adult now, and he'd not lost control since, and Erik needed him to focus.

Never again, never again, his mind chanted, in a regular rhythm. He was so focused on calming himself that it took him a while to register that there was a similar kind of... something, pulsing, far past the horizon. Like a beacon.

He followed it, cautiously. He soon wondered if it had a source at all; it seemed to wax and wane at random, or changed direction. There was also something familiar about the feel of it, that reminded him of Phoenix, and the dreams he'd had when he first went spaceside; time to come home...

And then, a fragment of memory.

Near the end. The very end. Rowan is fading fast. He can feel hir mind trying to curl around his, trying to protect him even now. He gets the idea. It's foolish, and dangerous, when all systems are failing. But death will stop for him soon, and the Rex has a duty to more than his Fleet.

Cerebro feels broken, dim, but Ten Sol unfurls in his mind like always. Countless billions of lives, and that is just within the ten colonized sun systems. Who knows where the Lost Four ended up, the foolish Fleets who'd valued their too much to accept the aid of mutants.

Rex William reaches out, and out, stretching his mind the furthest he'd ever dared, and then pushing more. He feels... burning, distantly. He feels himself being dragged back. No. No! He has to send a warning, he has to, and he does, throwing everything he has left and all the power of Cerebro behind it. Feels it echoing out, silent, a ripple on the psi-fields. Ten Sol is littered with thousands of amplifiers, discreetly left behind by Xavia on the worlds they'd discovered; the beacon will bounce forever-

"Charles. Charles!" Someone shook him. Charles blinked his eyes open, and saw Erik leaning over him, face pinched with worry.

"Oh," he said, and barely managed to get into the ship's toilet before he threw up noisily.

Much later, with Charles bundled up in a blanket and a cup of tea in each of their hands, Charles relayed to Erik the experience of accessing Cerebro, and then the memory that had popped up because of it. "It must be one of the ones from the Heart, because it was the Rex's memory, near the end." He rubbed at his temple. "I think I know what the m-sickness is. It was meant to be a warning. But Cerebro was damaged, and the Rex was fading fast."

"That is why there are no physical symptoms," said Erik wonderingly. "It's not a disease. It's a... telepathic attack, of a sort."
"Unintentional, but yes."

Erik frowned. "Why was Eisen the only one not affected?"

"It's isolated. And Xavia placed no amplifiers here," Charles stared into his cup. "This world held so many of their secrets. They would not have wanted to draw attention to it. I suspect - you know."

The both of them fell quiet, thinking of a man generations into the past who'd created that first ship out of living crysteel, disregarding all known limits of science to fashion a miracle, for the one person who'd meant most to him. Had they been preparing for a war, then, too? Had he felt as Charles felt now, that there was so much to do and too many problems to fix and the future was all sorts of insurmountable; and yet, and yet, Erik was here, steady and bright of faith - in him, though Gods knew why - and all the horrors of the world could only be dashed, as waves upon rocks, against this behemoth of feeling and meaning and hopes that was lodged inside of Charles, growing day by day like a crystal.

"I am not wearing some kind of armour," Charles protested hotly. "The rest of you can wear whatever you like, of course. But I'm hardly going to be at the thick of things."

"Charles, please," Erik pleaded quietly. He stepped into Charles' space, touching their foreheads lightly as he rested his hand low on Charles' back; exactly where, under Charles' shirt, lay a faint knot of scar tissue, still relatively new. A reminder of how Erik could have lost Charles before he'd even known him.

"Fine," Charles huffed. He wagged a threatening finger at Tony. "But no suits."

"Oh, don't worry," said Erik, grinning. "Only I get to put metal on you."

In the end, they agreed on a pair of vambraces for Charles' arms, and fine wire threaded into the deisich fabric of his shirt and trousers, which Erik would be able to manipulate to either catch/throw/lift Charles out of harm's way, or flatten and melt into fine metal plating.

Several other applications occurred to him, as well, of the non-combative sort; which was why their 'fitting' session, meant to last only a quarter-hour, ended up taking two hours, and from which they emerged decidedly rumpled and glassy-eyed, much to the open exasperation of their friends.

"Fucking kids," groaned Erik, dropping inelegantly into bed. It was his bed, at least, in his private rooms in the Manor. They'd moved Phoenix to the hangar proper, which meant he and Charles could move back to where there was sunlight and fresh air and real furniture.

He'd put the Cave back to the way it'd been when they found it, or as close to it as he could. He'd even put the ship plans back into the wall slab. He planned to seal the whole thing back up.

"You do know that I was the one who trained them when they manifested," said Charles, wholly unsympathetic.

"They are idiots who should keep out of this mess before they get themselves killed."

A quick kiss landed on Erik's cheek, leaving him blinking. "A little raven told me that you helped Hank build a chestpiece for Alex. And I'm sure the materials for the wings for Sean didn't just appear out of nowhere."
To be fair, Erik hadn't known about the materials - he'd just given Hank free reign to plunder the archives and seemingly limitless storage rooms secreted all over the Manor. "If I'm going to be in a fight next to them, I'd rather not get caught some accidental friendly fire."

"Quit fretting about the children, Erik, and come to bed."

Erik had expected most people to go back home once they'd siezed back the 'Yards and the mines and basically driven Sepor out of Eisen. Planetside, at least.

But, if anything, the numbers continued to grow, people arriving on the grounds around Yard One and setting up camp there. And when Erik went out to talk to them, he learned that apparently these were just representatives.

"We had to draw lots, everybody in the compound wanted to come. But we figured there wouldn't be space for so many," said one man reasonably. He had a good point - it was getting cramped, and this was just a couple of people per village-compound.

"But why are you here?" asked Erik.

The man looked at him as if he were an idiot. "Well, sir, you're gonna need manpower to get rid of the rest of 'em, aren't you?" He pointed to the sky. "We're not resting until they've left our homespace."

"What about the rest of you?" Erik looked at the crowd that had gathered around them. "You're determined to do this?"

"Charles is one of us," said one woman, her pale complexion and muscled arms suggested she was a miner. "And you - people say that you called on the Vines and they grew at your command, that you held up a collapsing shaft during a strummer and saved miners' lives."

Erik flushed. A voice from the crowd said, "It's true, I was there!"

"Then you are one of us, too."

Charles was not surprised to find Erik standing on the roof of Phoenix, his tall, handsome profile outlined by one of the moons. Charles had noticed that Erik seemed to draw a lot of comfort from the ship, appearing the most relaxed when he was near hir, which pleased him in ways he could not clearly explain. He whispered a quiet Hello to Phoenix when he entered.

{ He is sad tonight } responded the ship.

I know. It is a thing of humans'. I shall care for him, he reassured hir.

Erik didn't look around when Charles climbed up from the bridge. His head was tipped back, though he stood straight and tall, and his loose robes flared out around his legs; he looked like a warrior of wilder days communing with the heavens. Charles swallowed, the thought of old tales heavy on his mind.

"They follow me into battle," Erik eventually spoke up. "They follow me, even though I neglected them, didn't care for them as I should have." He nodded in the distance, where the campfires of the homemade troops dotted the area for miles. "I don't understand."
Charles didn't say anything. There was no easy way of explaining, how the ties of community had already claimed Erik as one of theirs. A person from the furthest reaches of habitable Eisen had village-neighbors and mine-mates who knew someone from the Field-lands or knew someone who knew someone from the Field-lands, and these people would know someone from Chester, and most people in Chester someone in the West compound, and everyone in the West compound knew Charles, and through Charles and Raven, they had a tie to Erik. It was another world entirely from Family bloodties; spaceside was where siblings and cousins, parents and offspring, might be separated for years on end. And yet, perhaps not as different as those like Alex wanted to think.

So instead, he said, "once, a man risked his life to save a stranger on a runaway car in the middle of a market day. The rescuer later turned out to be a prince, and the man he rescued became his general, whose loyalty could never be broken."

Erik stood very still. "What is that?"

Charles found himself drifting closer. "That, my friend, seems to be the myth of our time." He took Erik's hand in his. "The tale is already being passed around, growing in the telling. The prince, who rides on a phoenix reborn, and his lover, who commands the living metal."

He knew now, what this was. Him and Erik. Inexplicable and inevitable.

They drifted together. Erik was warm and solid, his mouth hot against Charles'. Time seemed like such small thing compared this, the solid shelter of Erik's body, the exquisite warmth of Erik's mind, ever-welcoming; Charles couldn't help but be awed by it, by the promise hovering, wordless, between them.

He remembered: power enough to change the world.

Some time later, Charles glanced around them and gasped, "Are we flying?"

{ I have never flown before, } said Phoenix. Charles was sure he wasn't imagining the sullen note in hir voice. { If you are worried about those little ones up there, they cannot see me. }

Phoenix was the same size as Tony's subship, so Charles wasn't sure how zie could get away with calling the Sepor ships 'little'. But then he realized - Xavia ships could grow. Phoenix had the potential, given enough time, to reach the size of a mothership.

"You're cloaking yourself?" asked Erik.

{ Yes? Raven showed me how to change shape. }

And they could learn.

{ I just tell their scanners that I am not here. }

There was a pause. Charles said, "Can zie do that?"

"Evidently."

{ Come, my pilots, } crowed the ship. { Let us go flying! }

A warm smile spread over Erik's face, the last of the moroseness in his features melting away. He sat down and dangled his legs over the side, not seeming to care that the roof was curved. Of course he
wouldn't, Charles thought to himself, *he's a giant magnet.* Charles, far less blasé, crouched down and scooted towards Erik.

*We'll be fine,* he thought. *We'll take care of each other.* He laughed when the side of the ship, where they were sitting, seemed to straighten, popping up little handles. *We're learning already.*

Erik slipped into his pilot-chair, and waited for Charles to do the same before he started speaking, "This planet is called Eisen, and that house below us is the Lehnsherr Manor, the seat of my family for many generations..."

They were in the middle of a chess game in Erik's rooms when the door slid open and admitted Raven. "Just heard from Tony," she said, "Sepor is assembling. It's a matter of hours, now."

Their forces consisted of a hodge-podge collection of ships - mostly ships from the Yards, all the Yards, though there were a dozen or so old models that looked like they had been dwellings less than a day ago. Charles spotted one that he thought was flying some kind of brown flag, until he realized that it was *laundry* hanging forgotten from the roof.

More ships rose than Charles could have expected, points of light taking flight in all directions, horizon to horizon. All of Eisen rising, rising to meet the intruder.

Erik wouldn't be able to remember much of the actual battle.

Afterwards, he would hear about Sean's ship getting hit, and the boy having the presence of mind to dive it into breathable atmosphere before it broke apart completely, and he'd been able to fly out using his ability plus the wings Hank had made for him, but instead of landing to safety he'd stayed and grabbed people out of the air where he could.

There would be stories of Alex's fighter ship losing its weapons, and Alex burning a hole through the hull and discovering that, despite the lesser accuracy, his plasma was stronger than the shields on the enemy ships could cope with. And when his ship failed entirely, Sean snatched him out of mid-air and the pair of them proceeded to wreck merry havoc on all the fighter ships not trained to watch out for human-sized threats, which happened to be all of them.

Erik would remember gazing out of the bridge's central window in open wonder, as they lifted up with their makeshift home fleet, at the array of hundreds of models and metallic compounds clashing cacophonously to Erik's metal-sense, a complete contrast to the sleek, white-cold hum of the Sepor armada waiting for them. But all that noise and clamor and mess was *home.*

Charles sat beside him on their twin pilot-chairs, the circle of metal resting on his dark hair looking very much like a Crown now; Erik may or may not have added a bit of subtle ornamentation to it.

Erik would remember telling Phoenix, *Please look after Charles,* because Erik would be the one doing the actual fighting with the ship while Charles took care of the bigger picture, and a strange, breathless kind of pause,

and then waking up to chaos.
Charles could feel the ship moving around him, Erik and Phoenix twisting and dodging and occasionally chasing the enemy. He trusted them to keep themselves safe.

*Darwin, Lisa needs a bit of support on her left - yes, starboard, fine, you know what I mean*

Charles was sure that, without Cerebro, he wouldn't be able to keep up with as many of their forces as he was. He suspected Phoenix was also buffering some of the effects, keeping the noise in his head manageable. The hardest part was trying to make sense of looking out of at least a dozen pair of eyes at any given time; as he couldn't reach the pilots inside the Sepor fighter ships, he used all the mutants to get an idea of the battlefield.

The Eisen contingent kept the Sepor armada occupied. Most of them couldn't go head-to-head with the weapons on the new fighter ships, so they simply harried them. With Charles' direction, two or three ships would converge on one Sepor fighter, taking turns shooting at it while the others evaded the fighter's guns.

And then - the goal of the distraction, the hum of thousands of ships, descending on the Sepor armada from above. It was the Firsts, and the combat-ships of their Fleets; in the lead was Stark Tower, carrying Tony's latest engineering feat, which he'd described as "the biggest fucking cloaking shield anybody's ever seen". Charles could see the Tony's familiar subship, and hoped that Raven really was ready to be piloting it.

A red humanoid shape detached itself from the side of Stark Tower.

Charles said, "That's our signal."

The plan had been to creep up on Shaw's flagship, the Submarine, and board it as stealthily as possible. It was right in the middle of the armada, but the arrival of the spaceside forces had pushed most of the ships down into the atmosphere, and all the ships around the flagship were engaged in the fighting now.

Somehow, Shaw must have detected their approach, because his flagship abruptly abandoned its station and sped off.

"Oh, no they don't," growled Erik, over Phoenix's outraged squawks.

Phoenix put on a burst of speed, trying to get closer. Erik stood up. Charles looked at him, questioning; Erik held his hands out, and Charles could feel what the flagship felt like to Erik, a hulking behemoth of metal. Erik was scanning it, searching. Then, suddenly, Charles felt Erik pulling.

"Erik!"

Erik was gritting his teeth from the effort, his outstretched arms trembling. Amazingly, the Submarine actually began to slow.

Charles got to his feet. "You don't know how turned on I am for you right now," he said, with perfectly genuine amazement.

Erik grinned at him, teeth gleaming.

Then the rear guns on the Submarine glowed red, powering up. Phoenix evaded the shot fairly easily, but Charles could tell that the move cost Erik some of his concentration. A door opened at the
top of the submarine. Charles saw a head poking out, wearing that hated helmet, and in the next moment something hit the ship.

"Phoenix!"

{ I'm all right. Concussion blast. }

"We're not going to get in there like this," Erik said to Charles. "Come on, I have a plan. Phoenix?"

{ Already going in. }

A few minutes later, Charles was staring at the smooth curve of the Submarine's hull over their heads. The unrelenting white color hurt to look at under the full sunlight.

*Ready for this?* Erik asked. They were going too fast for sound to carry well.

He grinned. *I guess we'll find out.*

Phoenix surged up, getting within scant feet of the hull, hir force shield and the larger ship's neutralizing where they touched. No other ship would have dared come so close.

Charles held on tight, arms squeezing Erik's waist. His stomach dropped when their feet left the hull of their ship's. But Erik never faltered - his power carried the both of them over to the larger flagship, and slid them up along the side until they came to a narrow ledge they could stand on.

*Access hatch down that way*, Erik informed him. Charles nodded and followed Erik.

Erik opened the door by the simple expediency of yanking the whole thing out. The two of them climbed in, and discovered themselves in some kind of service sublevel, the roar of the engines drowning out all other sound.

From here, Charles realized that he could sense the minds inside the ship. Mainly crew, as most of the guards were equipped with the helmets. Of course - it would have been unfeasible to provide the helmets to all the crew of a ship this large. There was probably something in the hull - if Shaw had gotten hold of the plans for Cerebro, he could have also picked up the research on psi-negation fields - that blocked him out when he was on the outside. Now his sense of what was going on outside the ship was a bit muffled, though he wasn't completely cut off - possibly due to the circle of metal still sitting on his head, forgotten until now.

He shared the possibility with Erik. *I can try and see if any of the crew have Shaw in their line of sight.*

Erik looked reluctant, but nodded. "Be careful."

Charles closed his eyes and cast his mind out, imagining his telepathy spreading like a network of Vines, looking for thoughts of Shaw or telepaths or machine.

"He's up in the bridge," Charles finally said.

The journey up through the ship consisted mainly of both Charles and Erik constantly scanning their surroundings and ducking into empty rooms or side-corridors when they detected people, and making their best guess of the quickest route to the bridge. Twice they were in the middle of a long corridor with nowhere to hide when people came their way; fortunately, they were crew, and Charles
was able to mask himself and Erik from their awareness, projecting an illusion of empty space. After the first close call with a couple of helmet-wearing guards that they barely ducked in time behind a row of lockers to avoid being seen by, Erik realized that he could pick out the guns and other weapons carried by the guards.

They'd gone a handful of levels up when he sensed a couple of familiar minds entering the ship. Charles?

Raven! Did you and Tony get in okay?

Tony's thoughts were all breathless exhilaration. Brainy! Do you know many places I can break into with someone who can perfectly replicate someone else? I may have just proposed to your sister right now.

Tony, you are not dragging my baby sister into a life of espionage and crime.

What if she just imitates me? Can't be a crime if I ask her to, it's my body - I've even got the copyright to it.

You want to marry my sister and ask her to make herself look like you.

Tony paused. You know, that didn't even occur to me, I was just thinking she could pretend to be me so that Pepper thinks I'm at places I'm supposed to be. You are a filthy-minded man, I should have snatched you from Lehnsherr while I had the chance-

Shut up, Raven cut in. Charles, can you get Erik to point us the right way?

Erik, who'd been listening in the entire time, reported, Assuming you're near Tony's armor, you are two levels up from the bridge. Shaw is in the bridge, so we're heading there. You two should go down that corridor towards the big stairs, but don't go down that way, there are soldiers patrolling below. There's a service chute at the very end of the corridor.

Charles and Erik moved steadily up the ship. Erik discovered a circular service staircase that was dusty from lack of use and seemed to go all the way up, so they climbed it, while the ship began to shake around them. Was it taking fire? The steps were tiny, and there was no railing to help keep one on their feet when the ship jostled them about. It reminded Charles, strangely, of the 'combs during a strummer.

Erik seemed to have the same thought. He grinned at Charles. "Remember that time we had to scale a wall of crystal because the strummer had let loose a river in the shaft?"

"Angel was a hero that day," said Charles. The mention of her reminded him that they had a job to do. "I hope the others got our people back okay."

They heard voices from a level far above, so they left the stairs and picked their way through what, unfortunately, looked like some kind of barracks, likely for the soldiers stationed in the ship.

Erik had to give Raven and Tony more directions, and Charles was worrying about what they would actually do when they get to Shaw, so that may be why neither of them noticed a couple of Sepor agents waiting in the next corridor. Charles only had time to register that they were wearing helmets and no visible weaponry, and then there was a sharp sting on his neck, followed by the ground rushing up to say a sharp hello.
Erik came to with sharp gasp and a full-body jerk. There was a coldness in his head, like a bucket of water had been dumped over his brain; the experiences of the past months had him knowing, *telepath* and *not Charles*, and he slammed up every wall he'd learned to make from Logan, who disliked telepaths on principle.

A beautiful blonde woman stepped back from him. "He's all yours," she said to the man standing in the middle of the empty bridge.

Shaw. The man was in his trademark white outfit, a glass of amber liquid in his hand, a sleeker version of the helmet on his head. He smiled at Erik but turned to look at other side of the room.

Erik followed his gaze and saw Charles, tied up in a chair, head slumped down. He immediately tried to stand, to go to Charles and make sure he was all right, when he realized that he was tied up as well. And there was something heavy around his neck.

**Suppression collar.**

Shaw had fucking *collared* him.

Charles let out a small noise. Erik looked up and saw the blonde woman - Frost, Emma Frost, Shaw's personal aide - stepping away from Charles. She wore a suppression collar, too, but judging from the fact that she'd woken them both up telepathically, and also just transformed into vaguely humanoid chunk of crystal, her collar must just be for show.

"You can stop trying to read my mind, sugar," she said to Charles. "You're never going to get anything from me while I'm like this."

*Charles,* Erik thought. *Are you all right?*

*I'm fine. I'm trying to warn Raven and Tony, and I don't know if Ms. Frost knows about them.*

Charles' eyes slid down to Erik's neck. *Oh Gods,* Erik.

It was now Erik's turn to say, *it's fine, Charles. You can take it off me, later.* He was surprised to discover that it really was fine. The instinctive reaction of disbelief and old terror, of a lifelong fear finally made true, was suddenly secondary to his fear of the way Shaw was looking at Charles. And he could see, out the windows, the battle that was still raging. Fine, he'd been collared, all the efforts of his parents and his own willing repression gone to waste - but his people were being hurt out there, may be dying, and Eisen would only be the first, if Shaw wasn't stopped here today.

His stomach lurched when the view out the window changed angle and he realized that they were no longer planetside. The Submarine had escaped the atmosphere and gone into space.

Ignorant of Erik's inner turmoil, Shaw walked over to Charles and smiled. His face was that of a man who'd gotten something he wanted; it sent a chill down Erik's spine. "Well, if it isn't the lost little prince. I put a lot of effort into bringing your family down, Xavier, but I guess there's always one that gets away."

"Speaking of the one that got away - Lehnsherr," Shaw turned, a grin on his face and his arms spread, "I didn't know you were one of us. If I had, I would have invited you to join my little club."

He exchanged a smile with Frost.

"Not interested," growled Erik.

"Ah, I'm sure you're pissed off about the collar." Shaw put down his drink. "But it's only a safety precaution. Once you understand what we're trying to do here and join us, we'll deactivate it, and
you will have your powers again." He leaned forward. "I don't want you to be a captive, Erik - may I call you Erik? I want you to be my ally. We are brothers, you and I. Mutants are the next step in human evolution, and the time comes for us to take our place as leaders of a new world order."

Erik stared at him in disbelief. "How can you sit there and tell me that you want to help me, when you are the head of the human government that's been locking up mutants?"

"But that is exactly why I took this job!" Shaw beamed, as if pleased that Erik was being an active participant. "Sepor was rounding up mutants and putting them in facilities, spreading the propaganda that all mutants get the m-sickness. Once I was in power, I started approaching the mutants in the facilities, and inviting them to join my cause."

He nodded at Frost. "Emma here manifested when she was twelve, and her own father put her in a top-security facility. Can you imagine? I'll let you talk to anyone in the facilities, I want you to hear the stories. One boy hasn't spoken since his mother tried to drown him, because she thought that the way his skin changed color was a sign of evil."

"Then why Xavia?" demanded Erik. "They did what you're trying to do. They were mutants, and the humans admired and respected them."

"They were fools, and they abandoned us," said Shaw. There was shift in his voice - less of the polished politician. Erik could see Charles watching closely, too. "They may have been great, once, but at the end, they were a bunch of privileged cowards. I told them that our people were being hunted, that the anti-mutant groups had gotten strong in the years since Xavia withdrew from the public eye. They refused to do anything about it."

"And Cerebro? You didn't have plans for that technology?" cut in Charles.

"Not at first - I simply asked the Old Rex to use it, to see how bad things had become." Shaw looked grim. "He refused. He was afraid of the technology, of what it could do. So yes, I stole the plans."

At least Shaw wasn't pretending that he would only use it to find mutants. That was one consistent thing about him - he never actually lied outright.

"You're a murderer," hissed Charles.

"You're in the middle of a warzone, Xavier. Have you never hurt a man? Killed one? Lehnsherr has. Stellar military record. You think the blood being shed in fighting out there isn't on your hands? I know how powerful your family's telepathy is - I know you can kill someone with only a thought. And I was one mutant in a force of over a hundred thousand humans - where is your anger for them?"

"You were the one who led the coalition to the Fleet," shouted Charles. "You betrayed them."

"Xavia betrayed us first!" roared Shaw.

There was silence in the room.

Eventually, Shaw spoke again. "I would give you time to sort your thoughts out, Erik, but you've brought an armada to breathe down my neck. So, decision time - will you join us? In our new world, you will never have to hide your power again, you will never have to be ashamed of what you are. You will be among your own kind."
There was a burst of noise from outside, and the shaking of the ship grew even more violent. Somewhere, he could hear Tony shouting at Wolverine to "give it some backbone, you call that a punch?" right before something exploded. It sounded big and heavy and, from the subsequent fireball visible through the window, highly flammable.

Tony, as human as they came and so very fragile, who'd walked out of the Radiant Desolation under his own power despite a failing heart. Max and Magda, who'd been faithfully visiting their twins at an m-sickness facility for ten years. The Holmes brothers, whose very human brains could outwit computers and telepaths combined, and their Doctor Watson, who had a soldier's body and a doctor's heart.

For most of Erik's life, in all the ways that mattered, he'd been human; and with all the humans he'd known, he could not conceive it as a misfortune.

"You may be right about evolution, Shaw," said Erik. "But I will never join you."

Shaw shrugged. "Suit yourself."

A ball of fire appeared between his hands. He stood, confident and unconcerned, believing that everything that could kill him would be something he could absorb.

Erik was starting to pull all the metal in the room towards himself, most notably the small chandelier on the ceiling, when it occurred to him, I shouldn't be able to do that.

Shaw and Frost didn't seem like they'd noticed. Charles did, though, and in the next instant, the world froze around Erik.

The most eerie thing was the silence. Sorry, I just needed time to talk to you. Erik, I think they assumed your power is telekinesis. And those collars are specific to the ability of the person. The Merchant Prince said that your ability is extremely rare - I don't think that collar is actually working on you.

I hope you're right, Charles. There was no way to test, though, in the frozen reality inside his head.

Everything snapped back into motion.

The fireball roared towards him. He pulled every loose bit of metal in the bridge and whipped up a round metal shield forcing it to maintain structural integrity despite the heat.

He heard Charles shouting. Charles was in pain. Erik was yanking metal from all around them before he even registered what he was doing, throwing them at Shaw.

Erik, be careful, admonished Charles. Erik caught a flash of pain before Charles blocked it out. He wants you to lose control. If you damage the ship too much, we are all dead.

I can't let him hurt you. But Erik forced himself to focus, to avoid yanking on anything that was still part of the ship.

He could hear Shaw demanding how Erik was still able to use his powers. Erik saw the gleam of crystal, had a nonsensical stray thought wondering if Phoenix had somehow hied himself on board, and then Frost was barreling into him, shiny fists punching him hard in the stomach. Ah, not crystal - fucking diamond.

Shaw and Charles' voices sounded briefly. Erik, from the floor, saw Shaw's shoes moving, standing in front of Charles. He could sense something small in Shaw's hands, used his ability to see the shape
of it. A gun, no, a pistol, antique projectile weapon, and Shaw was aiming it at Charles.

Charles was going to die. Charles was going to die, and Erik wouldn't be able to save him. He might have screamed, raged; he knew, in a bone-deep way, that he was willing to pull apart the very planet below them to keep Shaw from hurting Charles.

Erik, no- Erik caught a flash of panic and horror, before everything cut off. His heart stopped, he couldn't breathe.

No, no, no. He somehow threw Frost off himself, and got to his feet, ready to destroy everything-

And then he saw that Charles was alive, still alive. Shaw had gotten hold of one of the anti-telepath helmets and had placed it on his head. Charles looked pale, but he was alive.

Shaw seized at Erik's distraction and sent another fireball at him.

There was the sound of something crashing. The next thing Erik knew, he was staring at Iron Man's back; the fireball hit the suit, and even the wave of heat seemed enough to singe Erik's hair. Iron Man was unfazed; he rushed at Shaw head-on. Shaw's lips twisted contemptuously. (Erik noticed, with a disproportionate feeling of satisfaction, that Shaw's crisp white suit was now covered with ash and grime.)

The man must have absorbed a small sun's worth of power - he easily flipped Iron Man over and slammed him into the wall behind him. Iron Man crumpled to the ground. But he'd given Erik enough time to snatch a piece of metal from the floor, shape a knife-like edge on one side, and start cutting the rope Charles was tied up with. He only got through the main part, right next to the knot, because it turned out to be some kind of plastic and Erik had to heat the blade-edge to melt it, but Charles should be able to work himself free.

But Shaw's attention was back on Erik. He threw two fireballs next, leaving Erik nowhere to dodge in the bridge, so Erik brought his shield back up.

Movement to his right. Erik looked, and saw an older gentleman standing next to him, white-haired and a little portly. His blue eyes were bright and familiar.

He turned back to Shaw, and saw the color drain from the man's face. Behind him, Iron Man's mask was open, and a very sweaty Tony was holding a length of wire in his teeth. He looked at Erik pointedly.

After using his power in such a brutish fashion so far, Erik wasn't sure if he would be able to grab the wire, but he did it. Erik flew it over to Charles, hooked the bottom of the helmet, and pulled the helmet off Charles' head.

"Sebastian," said the man next to Erik.

"You- you're not," stuttered Shaw. He looked angry, losing the composed look he'd maintained all this while. A fireball appeared in his hands, aimed at the newcomer. Erik easily blocked it with the shield. The wire was now floating behind Shaw. When Shaw was distracted building another fireball, Erik yanked the helmet off his head. The fireball went out.

Shaw shouted, turned, and -

Charles threw himself at him. Erik blinked as Charles grappled with Shaw. It was baffling, it was bizarre - Charles hated physical forms of fighting. He'd half-expected Charles to do something like freeze Shaw or put him to sleep. But, well, Shaw had destroyed his family. Erik would definitely
want to get at least a few punches in, if he were in Charles' place. There was something in Shaw's expression that gave Erik the suspicion that Charles was telepathically taunting the man.

It occurred to Erik, *He's distracting him.*

Charles punched Shaw right in the chest. The impact sounded harder than the blow had looked.

Suddenly, like somebody had flicked a switch on reality, it was Wolverine standing in front of Shaw, instead of Charles. Wolverine's fist was still planted in Shaw's chest.

"Oops," said Wolverine. "Look at that, I left my claws out."

The ends of the thin metallic blades were sticking out of Shaw's back; around them, red bloomed and spread over the man's white coat.

Erik blinked, the scene clearing. Charles was still in the chair, still tied up, looking askance at Wolverine, but did not appear particularly surprised that Wolverine would go for a kill. Shaw, face slack now from more than surprise, tumbled heavily to the ground.

"That was possibly the coolest sleight of hand I've ever seen," said an awed-looking Tony from the floor. "Also, could somebody help me up?"

"You should make a suit that doesn't, you know, turn you into a turtle lying helpless on its back the moment the battery dies," said Raven, leaving Erik's side to help Tony. Erik could feel how much the Iron Man suit weighed and showed his surprise when Raven easily hauled Tony to his feet.

"Wait, what about your heart?" exclaimed Charles.

"Still ticking," said Tony, tapping at the glow on his breastplate. "I've got reserves, I'm good for another couple of hours."

Erik swore, ready to call Pepper and wrestle Tony back into Stark Tower. Raven, likely anticipating this, whistled sharply to get their attention. "Guys, we found the room with the - I guess it's the equivalent of your Crown, Charles? For Shaw's Cerebro. Let's just get a move on and finish this."

They filed out the door. Belated, Erik remembered, "Oh hey, what happened to Frost?"

Raven shot him an impatient look. "You have a serious tunnel-vision thing when it comes to Charles, you know that? I hauled her off you and knocked her out."

Right after they discovered the connection between the Xavia Cerebro and the m-sickness, Charles had called in Hank, introduced him to Phoenix, and explained the whole situation. Hank had stared at them both afterward, but the shock only last approximately ten minutes, and then he was clambering around the ship and firing off questions that Charles, lacking the language for astronomy and advanced physics despite his inheritance of knowledge sitting in his head, had to link their minds to answer.

After a few days, Hank had re-emerged from the Library and said, "I think I know how to fix this."

The explosion was strong enough that Phoenix shook from the shockwaves.

"A pity for the soldiers who got caught up in it," said Charles, watching from his pilot-chair in
Phoenix. "But I'm glad that technology is out of Sepor's hands."

All the survivors inside The Submarine had been bundled into Stark Tower and Spearing Star, both of which were now floating in view. What remained of the Sepor armada had surrendered.

Erik wasn't sure what was supposed to happen next.

"The Old Rex was trying to send out a warning, yes?" Hank had said, waving at a screen full of incomprehensible equations. "Think of it as a kind of frequency, like soundwaves, though psi-field physics uses a completely different set of fundamental—right. To get rid of the very powerful signal that the Xavia mothership broadcasted—and I can't even begin to imagine how strong a signal a ship that large, at maximum power, could have generated—you can set something else to absorb it."

"Like what?" Charles had asked.

"What about another Cerebro?" Erik had suggested.

Hank had nodded enthusiastically. "That could work. Um, I should mention—unless you build something the size of the old mothership, absorbing this strong a signal, even after thirty years, will probably destroy the second Cerebro."

"Well, Hank was right," said Charles presently, letting out a long breath and slumping.

Erik breathed in relief. "All quiet?"

"All quiet." Charles touched the circlet on his head. "Rest in peace, Xavia."

They stared at each other. They'd both seen better days, Erik thought. Both of them had bruises, cuts, soot and blood and heavy memories. And yet—alive and well, and just out the window, Eisen shone red under the sunlight, quietly triumphant.

He wasn't sure who moved first, but they met, on their feet in the middle of the bridge, hands clutching and lips kissing and quiet breaths finding each other.

Maybe one day, Erik thought with wonder, caught in bliss, kissing Charles would feel a little less like a miracle, the victory at the end of a long campaign.

Not today, though.

{ END OF PART 3 }
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It still felt strange, to Erik, to be dressed like he was about to head off to the 'combs or up to the Circle at West Chester when he was, in fact, wandering around the gardens of Lehnsherr Manor. But Charles had declared that spaceside fashion, while very nice and quite appropriate spaceside, was supremely unsuited to the planet's climate. Erik had to agree.

He'd insisted on them wearing formal-styled deisich shirts in addition to the trousers, though; they often had guests, these days, and unexpected visitors. Plus, their productivity apparently suffered if one or both of them wandered around half-naked.

Phoenix was parked right out on the open grass, overlooking the canyon range. Erik thought he could hear voices inside her; a patch of grass nearby had a scorch mark in a now-familiar pattern. He sighed. At least she'd keep the Summers boys from 'testing out' more of the Manor's structural integrity.

When he glanced at Charles, he saw that Charles was looking at the top of his head. Again.

"Don't," he said, warningly.

Charles grinned. "I told you that you'd get used to it."

Erik touched his power over the metal circlet resting on his head, self-conscious. Perhaps he shouldn't have teased Charles about always forgetting to take off his Crown, at least where Phoenix could hear - though he'd been rather tired of waking up to it poking him in the face. But zie'd gotten it into hir head that Erik was jealous, and soon after presented him with a Crown of his own. So that he and Charles would match, apparently. And of course zie expected him to be wearing it every time zie saw him.

Raven hadn't bothered to hold in her laughter the first time she saw both of them wearing theirs. She had curtseyed.

"It makes you look rather dashing, actually," said Charles.

Erik scowled at him.

They walked a circuit around the grounds, waving at Hank through one of the library windows. Erik could tell that there was something on Charles' mind; he normally didn't have a lot of patience for people who couldn't just say what they needed to say, but it was a gorgeously sunny day, and he'd come to accept that he had a worryingly endless well of patience when it came to Charles.

Eventually, looking pensive, Charles broke the silence. "Shaw was the one who killed your parents, you know."

Erik turned to Charles sharply. "What?"

"I read it from his mind," Charles said. "Near the end, when you got the helmet off. That was why you couldn't sense anything wrong with the ship. He overloaded one of the engines, and escaped on a tiny subship. He'd been trying to get hold of Eisen for a long time. I can't help but find it ironic that he never knew just how significant this planet was to Xavia."
When Erik could speak again, the only thing he could say was, "Why didn't you tell me then?"

Charles met his eyes squarely. "I didn't want you to be the one to kill him."

Erik looked away. "That blast should have killed me, you know. No, wait, listen. That was why I was. You know. About my powers. Before I met you." Erik took a deep breath. His hand twitched; Charles covered it with his own. "The whole bridge of the ship was destroyed, Charles. I felt all that metal crumpling, ready to crush us. I didn't have a scratch on me, after, but I wasn't thinking. I must have deflected them. But, I remember - there was this one piece, this long beam with a jagged end."

He could still see it, as clear as that moment, and that meant Charles could see it too. He knew that he could just let Charles view the memory. But this wasn't about that; the important part was his telling of it, and he suspected Charles understood.

"It was heading towards my mother. My father was already dead. I could feel the beam, and a part of me knew that if I could feel it, I should be able to push it away. But I couldn't. I pushed and pushed, and it kept coming. And then it didn't matter." Erik closed his eyes. "After that - the only way I could live with myself was to believe that I didn't have any powers. Otherwise, it meant that my mother had died when I could have saved her."

"Erik." A light touch on his cheek; Charles deftly wiped away the tears, there, and then wiped away his own.

Some time later, Erik cleared his throat and said, "Heard from Tony. He's on his way to Ruska - apparently, one of his submarines discovered something in the polar ice that needed his immediate attention."

He saw Charles' face wrinkle in confusion, conveying why does Tony have a submarine? before clearing, obviously answering his own question with why wouldn't Tony have a submarine.

Erik felt a smile stretch across his face. Gratefulness bubbled up in him, for the power of small things.

He let the smile grow, and asked, "What does it feel like to finally be in university?"

"Oh, fates save me." Charles grinned. "I'd like to start a school some day, you know. A free school, for the children of Eisen. It will also have a training component for young mutants who need to learn to control their powers." He shrugged. "It's a long ways yet, though."

"Maybe not too long." Erik shifted. "There's plenty of space at the Manor, you know."

Charles stared at him, eyes wide and evidently speechless.

"I talked to Phoenix about it," Erik continued, "and we figure that during the school breaks, we could travel Ten Sol, help out mutants where we can and bring home those who want to come with us."

The kiss was practically a tackle, and the two of them ended up laughing and rolling and indulging in dirty tricks, and there was shouting in the distance about how there were other people around, if they'd forgotten, and then they were kissing properly, tangling together, the grass crushed unnoticed beneath them.

One night Charles would dream, and he would dream of the future. And the future will ask, did we
ever get it right?

And he would say, *every time*,

and hope the other will understand, as he eventually did: that the past could no more help the future than know it. And that was *just fine*, because he would only need to get it right for himself, just as he and Erik would only need to get it right for them, and no one else.

Judging by their track record, he was pretty confident they would.


{ THE END }

\[\text{an unseen sea by slanted-edges, originally posted here on tumblr ♥}\]

Chapter End Notes

And we have reached the end! Thank you very much for getting here; working on this has been a joy and an adventure itself, and I hope reading it has been the same.

Of course, I didn't do it alone, and so I invite you to wander over to the longer Author's Notes and Appreciation post on my LJ. If you prefer commenting on LJ rather than on AO3, feel free to do so there ♥

I also invite you to admire and give all due appreciation to my lovely and highly talented artist at The Art of Carriage fic ♥

This fic has been a long time coming, in many ways. Sci-fi/fantasy has been my escape of choice since I was a child, while the grittier sort of fairy-tales and superhero mythology have captured my attention now as an adult (this is the sensible order in which to tackle such things, I believe), so this fic is kind of a tribute to those genres. Of course, this would also not have been possible if not for the marvelous characters created by Marvel, and later translated into film by the team and talent behind the X-Men: First Class movie.

I appreciate all your comments and kudos and love-via-lurking (goodness knows I've done all three before, sometimes for the same piece of fanwork). Thank you for joining me in exploring a distant rusty world and soaring into the stars and finding, somehow, love and destiny and friendship in between.

Stories live by being read, and grow by being shared; may you never lose your love of them.
Cover for “A Curious Carriage of Crystal and Cold” by Etharei by RunawayMarbles

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!