Strict Machine

by euphorbic

Summary

When Professor Charles F Xavier accepted a visiting professor position in Arizona, he did so in order to be geographically closer to his sister. What he did not expect to find was the living, breathing specter of the sportbike gang-oriented past he’d been trying to put to rest.

A tale of sport bikes, consequences, and sacrifice.

Notes

Hopefully the technobabble isn't too alienating. I'm happy to answer any questions you might have!

See the end of the work for more notes
“Is Newton’s gravitational a natural law?

Naturally not, more likely a crime,
because I didn’t ask for it.”

*Newtons Gravitätlichkeit, Einsteurzende Neubauten*

**Strict Machine**

Professor Charles Xavier was doing his best to not think foreboding thoughts as he waited with his luggage at Phoenix’s Sky Harbor Airport. His ride was quite late and there was no reply when he called his contact's phone. He had heard Phoenix’s traffic could be terrible, but that didn't put the late arrival out of his head. Even with that, he should have been able to reach the university’s driver.

An ill auspice, he supposed, but not one that could outweigh the real benefits of his move. He expected Phoenix’s desert climate to be a vast improvement to Blighty’s dreary weather. Plus, it placed him an ocean and most of a continent closer to Raven, who had landed a paid internship in Burbank, California.

Though it was Saturday, he was loath to call Raven. His adoptive sister’s hours were long and often unpredictable. Instead, he busied himself with the welcome task of rifling his luggage for clothes befitting the warmer temperatures. It amused him to see the Phoenix locals wearing clothes fit for colder climes.

An hour later, Charles had placed a few more fruitless calls to his contact number, bought several magazines from a newsstand, and had finally pulled out his laptop. He was searching for an outlet convenient to his luggage cart to charge the laptop’s battery, when he noticed a harried young man with glasses. The tall brunette was holding a hastily scribbled sign that read: *Charles Xavier, PhD*. The sign was written in black Sharpie on a manila folder.

Smile indulgent, Charles passed the laptop to his left hand and raised his right. “Here.”

The young man, all gawky long limbs and youthful awkwardness, sighed visibly and approached swiftly. “Thank God. We thought you might have taken a cab or something. I’m sorry you had to wait. Darwin's car was stolen while he was paying for gas and his phone was inside. We didn't know he wasn't on his way, because he didn't have any of the numbers for the university memorized.”

"I see,” Charles replied, content to let the young man ramble. "Is he alright, this Darwin?"

“That’s right, you probably know him as Armando Muñoz.” The young man nodded, breathing coming under control from his frantic search. “Oh yes, it wasn't at gunpoint this time."

A frown appeared on Charles face. “Did you say gunpoint?"

Folding the manila folder backward so Charles’ name was obscured, the young man shrugged slightly. “Don't worry; it isn’t common. Car thieves don't usually use guns; only the amateurs do.”
“Car thievery,” Charles said, lowering his laptop, “is beginning to sound common here.”

“It is. Phoenix is number two in the nation for car theft,” the man’s smile was somewhat apologetic. “And number one for motorcycle theft.”

The laptop, though a light model, weighed Charles’ arm down like an anchor. It hung precariously in his fingers mere inches above the terminal's floor. “Is that so?”

“Are you okay, Professor Xavier?” the man asked, a crease forming between his blue eyes. “Really, it isn’t that bad! You haven’t seen Darwin’s car. If you saw it, you’d understand; it has a lot of popular upgrades. It’s a good thing he doesn’t have college debt or he’d never be able to afford the insurance. He’s like—like—a target for this sort of thing!”

Fingers clenched on the laptop’s flat corner, Charles hauled his hand back up and rested the fragile equipment protectively against his chest. It was unclear whether he was protecting the computer or himself. He summoned a brilliant smile to cover the unease that had clenched his heart at the mention of motorcycle thievery. With any luck, he could gloss the moment over.

Charles proffered his free hand. “No, I’m not worried, just tired. Please call me Charles. I don’t think I caught your name?”

“Oh,” the young man’s concern for Charles vacated in favor of the prior insecure awkwardness. He took Charles’ hand quickly. “No, I didn’t—I didn’t give you my name. Hank McCoy, but please call me Hank. I’m doing my doctorial work while assistant teaching in the physics department of the university.”

“Nice to meet you, Hank,” Charles said. “I don’t think we’re in the same department. How were you selected to pick me up?” He let go of Hank’s hand and stowed his laptop and power cord back in their case.

Hank shrugged, “Darwin had my card in his wallet; I don’t think he ever got around to putting my number in his phone. I left as soon as he called.”

Charles found the statement about Hank’s number not making it into Darwin’s phone sad. He could see it, though. The young man was as tall as he was awkward. There was a deeply unsettled feeling about Hank that most young people had outgrown by his age. His insecurity was oddly endearing, but Charles suspected most of Hank’s acquaintances didn’t have the patience to endure it. At least not long enough for the young man to relax.

“Thank you for coming,” Charles smiled. He already planned to feed the young man a steady course of encouragement.

Smiling back, Hank ducked his head in acknowledgement of the gratitude. “Let’s get your bags out to the car.”

The two resituated Charles’ luggage on the baggage cart and guided the burden out to the parking lot. Charles spent the short trip to Hank’s car trying to calm his nerves. Part of damage control, he told himself, would be to gather information on the subject. Even if he didn’t want to confront the issue, it would be for the best.

Charles could smell the parking lot before the automatic doors slid apart for them. The smell of exhaust was a little different from what he was used to in England; the fuel had different additives. When the doors opened, the scent intensified, but so did the wind. The air carried a scent of dust in from the desert, but Charles found the intense dryness of it more noteworthy.
In the parking lot, Charles frowned at the sight of several motorcycles taking up a single space near the entrance. There were an equal number of sport bikes and cruisers. His heart heaved in his chest at the sight of an older model sport bike with red paint and plastics. He was going to have to get acclimated quickly; the issue was no longer content to be ignored.

Hank led him to a sensible beige Toyota Corolla and began fishing out his keys. Charles noted the car was an automatic transmission. Perhaps ease of operation was more important to the young man than fuel efficiency and the joy of driving. Charles couldn’t find it in himself to make the same sort of trade off.

“Good to see your car is still here,” Charles joked. “And a solid little car at that.”

Another tentative smile formed on Hank’s face. “Reliable and never stolen. I try to park next to expensive cars as a passive form of theft deterrence.”

A small chuckle escaped Charles at the thought. “That’s brilliant. I’ll remember that once I get a car leased for the year.”

“Darwin told me to do that,” the younger man said, his smile gaining strength.

Once the luggage was stowed and the baggage cart returned, Hank started up the car and they were on their way. It wouldn’t be long, he told himself, before he could get a closer view of the desert city than the airplane had afforded him.

Charles waited until they had pulled out of the airport and were on the highway before casually making his foray into the uncomfortable topic of Phoenix’s motorcycle density. “So, number one with motorcycle theft. Is that due to the population of motorcycles in Phoenix or the population of motorcycle thieves?”

“Both,” Hank returned. “Phoenix is home to a couple technical schools that train automotive mechanics, including one that specializes in motorcycles. Most of the students come from out of town and many decide they like the weather here. Especially the motorcycle students, since they can ride all year round if they like.

“That’s where things go south. Elementary economics: with so many motorcycle techs saturating the Phoenix market, the cost of labor plummeted, because it outstrips the demand. So, what do you get when you take a bunch of motorcycle techs with school loans to pay off and give them minimum wage jobs working on bikes or working on the line at In-And-Out?”

“Bike thieves?” Charles ventured, looking out his window at the desert landscape. The presence of saguaro cacti fascinated him. They dotted the landscape; bristling green figures in an ocean of dry orange earth. The barren landscape was a departure from England and the East Coast. He found a lonely sort of aesthetic within the arid lands as they sped along the highway.

“That’s my theory,” Hank nodded, oblivious to Charles’ observation of the landscape. “I mean, I think a lot of the techs probably have problems already, trying to pay off their bikes. Those Harley Davidsons are really expensive, you know?”

“Harleys?” Charles’ thoughts stuttered for a moment; he hadn’t been thinking of cruisers at all. “Oh, yes, I suppose they are. So most of the thievery involves Harleys?”

Hank shook his head, “No, there’s probably even more sport bike thievery.”

Carefully, with as much control as he could manage, Charles put forth the question that he was the most interested in, and dreading, having answered. “Are there quite a bit of motorcycle gang
“Hells Angels and Vagos come to mind,” Hank replied, “but I think that’s just something between gangs.” Charles was relieved to see the young man take no special notice of his question. The answer itself was a bit of a relief; the gangs sounded cruiser-related.

“Vagos?” he queried. “I’ve not heard of them.”

“Having been in England so long, I don’t know why you would,” Hank shrugged. “I don’t know much about them, either. I think they’re involved in meth amphetamine production and distribution.”

“What about speed tribes,” Charles pressed, picking his words carefully, “does Phoenix have any of those?”

“Speed tribes?” Hank looked perplexed. “I don’t think I know what that is.”

“Sport bike gangs,” Charles clarified. “I don’t know the proper terminology.”

“Well, it’s certainly an accurate title,” Hank nodded. “Is that what they’re called in Britain?”


“Oh, okay. Well, to answer your question: yes. You should ask Darwin more about it when you meet him. You can even ask the sport bike people that do tricks in the university parking lot on Sunday mornings. They’ll be there tomorrow. Darwin’s invited me to watch, but it isn’t something I’m interested in.”

Charles shook his head, “I don’t think I’d care to watch, either. A bunch of hoodlums doing wheelies? That sounds far less interesting than my research.”

It was the right thing to say. To his left, Hank’s eyes crinkled with a sudden grin. “I totally agree.”

Thankfully, the university wasn’t far removed from the airport, but the traffic was sluggish all the same. Despite his fascination with the desert terrain, Charles dozed most of the way to the school, only waking when Hank tapped his shoulder hesitantly.

“Professor,” the young man said, “we’re here. I know you’re tired, but security has to get you set up. Somebody from your department will meet with you on Monday and show you around.”

Charles rubbed ineffectually at his face. Traveling had been tiresome, but he felt wearier than the trip could account for. Noticing a few motorcycles in the parking lot, one of which was chained to a light pole, he guessed why. He really didn’t want to revisit the troublesome past, though he had the courage to do so.

“I hope they aren’t taking my photo today,” he sighed, getting out of the car and stepping into the relatively warm air. He stretched his arms over his head, trying to straighten the cumulative kinks in his back. A wind was picking up, blowing dust and tiny yellow flowers across the asphalt from trees clustered near the building.

“I’m pretty sure that’s what they’re doing,” Hank replied, staring at a suitcase in the car’s backseat. “Why don’t we leave your luggage in here for now? I’m not sure if they have you in a hotel tonight or somewhere off campus. Darwin should be back before long, but if he isn’t, I’ll give you a lift.”

“There’s an apartment off campus for visiting professors,” Charles returned, dragging out his laptop
case. “You know, it is positively inhuman to force a person to submit to security photographs after almost ten hours of travel. I’ve had my fill of escalators, moving walkways, baggage carts, nosy customs agents, and criminally deficient airline legroom.”

“That’s understandable,” Hank said, though he didn’t sound as if he sympathized. “Just try to make a good impression on the security personnel. Maybe they’ll let you retake the photo.”

The security team did no such thing. It was as if Charles’ vast charisma worked in the opposite direction with the group. The more charm he exuded, the more annoyed the security officers running the equipment became. When he was finally given his security tag, he stared at the photo distastefully. Surely his lips weren’t that dark, nor his cheeks so pasty, nor his eyes so… colorless. The likeness was only his in outline, and barely that, as the printer had softened what sharp lines his jaw and chin boasted.

“That’s a terrible picture, Professor Xavier,” said somebody that wasn’t Hank from his side.

“Isn’t it?” Charles snapped, his temper flaring. “How small-minded this so-called security team is. And rude. I shouldn’t think that taking horrid pictures of staff would make up for all the childhood years of being last-picked for sports.”

The other laughed smoothly, “I think you’re just tired from your trip and taking it out on the locals.”

Charles looked up and to the side at his new guest. “And I suppose your photo was better?”

The thin young man brandished his tag at Charles. The photo was so dark that the only feature Charles could make out was the white of the man’s eyes. Rather than the photo, though, the name beside the dark photo was of note: Armando Muñoz.

“Yeah, my photo is better,” the young man chuckled, and then held his hand out to Charles. “I’m Darwin. Sorry I couldn’t pick you up on time today.”

Charles took the offered hand and shook it. “I’m sorry about your car. Mr. McCoy told me that you had personalized it quite a bit.”

The younger man shrugged slightly, “Cars are like relationships, Professor; there’ll be others. Best not get hung up on the ones that get taken.”

The response pulled a chuckle from Charles. “I like your philosophy. We should get drinks when I’m less cranky. You must know several of the best places to imbibe a little liquor around here.”

Darwin flashed a smile at Charles. “I can see you’re going to be trouble, Professor. Security team’s already got you pegged as the type that fraternizes with the student body.”

The roll of Charles’ eyes would not ease the team’s fears had they seen it. “While student bodies are often tempting, I do have a modicum of professional policy which I strictly adhere to.”

“We’ll see how long that lasts,” Darwin said with mock dubiousness. “Why don’t I take you to your apartment so you can rest? The location’s pretty good, a lot of shops in walking distance. The school’s not too far, either, but a bit of a trek on foot.”

“Sounds brilliant,” Charles agreed. “Shall we locate Hank and collect my luggage from his car?”
With his eyes shut, Charles couldn't always tell the difference between tuner cars and motorcycles. He did, however, know the very specific sound of an older model Kawasaki ZX6R when he heard it. At least, that's what he thought every time he heard a transverse in-line four cylinder engine with a Yoshimura exhaust pipe.

The motorcycle revving ridiculously in his apartment complex’s parking lot at 3AM, was just such a combination. The sound ripped him from his bed and onto the floor in a wretched heap of gasping breaths, pounding heart, and trembling limbs. He huddled a moment on the floor, trying to regain some semblance of normalcy.

He lifted his head and looked swiftly around the room. There was fake hardwood flooring beneath him. White walls all around. Everything spoke of apartment living. This was not the east coast. There was no cacophony of nighttime creatures filling a humid summer’s night. Still, Charles crawled on hands and knees to the window and parted the venetian blinds to look outside.

There was no Max Eisenhardt waiting outside for him. Even in the dark, Charles could see the young man sitting on the older model black Ninja was on the balls of his sneakered feet. With his long inseam, Max would be sitting lean and flat-footed. He would have a battered Arai helmet on his head and a flawless Nolan helmet waiting behind him beneath a bungee cargo net.

However, Max had died that horrendous night in August. Charles’ step-father had been furious at losing the chance to press charges against the older boy. The accident had been so bad, the authorities said, that there was nothing recognizable left. All Charles had left from that night was terror, laughter, and the sound of an engine.

And the feel of Max’s lips pressed firmly against his.

If he’d thought he’d hear the sound of Max’s engine in Phoenix, the thought would have promoted the production of a list of pros and cons concerning his visiting professor opportunity. He hadn’t given motorcycles any thought when he accepted the offer that took him from his comfortable, and often motorcycle-free, tenure in Oxford. If he were honest, he would have balked, but would still overcome his misgivings in order to be closer to Raven.

Shakily, Charles reached out and shut the window to muffle the enthusiastic revver. He rose up and then fell back into bed. He hoped the Ninja’s owner wasn’t going to be a frequent visitor. Once ensconced back in the warm safety of his sheets, he took up his phone and typed a simple text to Raven.

There are too many motorcycles in Phoenix. He didn’t expect a response, so he pushed his face into a pillow and tried to sleep. To his surprise and vague delight, the phone pinged its receipt of a reply only seconds later.

How many times do I have to forgive you?

“It isn’t just you,” Charles sighed, “but always once more than the last.” Before he could type the response, a new text arrived.

You should get another bike. Legally this time. Then ride the shit out of it until the old memories don’t crop up every time you see a red Ninja.

It wasn’t the first time Raven had made the suggestion. Usually he disregarded the advice, but this time he nodded to himself. I’ll do it, just as soon as I get back to Oxford. Bike thievery is too prevalent to buy one here.
After a few moments Raven’s reply arrived. *Get something sexy. A Ducati. And two helmets! You will be taking me out! And stop staying up so late on school nights, Professor!*

Charles breathed a sigh that was half laughter and set the phone aside again. He was the one with the PhD, but Raven was always teaching him something new.
Charles inadvertently helps Alex incur a great deal of vehicular property damage.

Obscure references. There are many.
Bad formatting? The good thing about deleting the damn thing; fixed some of the formatting.
Specific car and motorcycle model references; I have those, too.
Disclaimer? Check: I know more about doing motorcycle burn outs than I do cars. Did my best to keep the motorcycle part names simple, even changed them at times.

“My hair is fire,
Your hand is kerosene.”

Wir Werden Sehen, 2raumwohnung

triple impact

The first time Charles had been to the university on a Sunday, he had barely registered the hooligans practicing various stunts in the parking lot. He had glanced out the window of his shared office to watch the group of four riders swap between a red-and-black dirt bike with street tires and a stripped down motorcycle Charles had been unable to identify. The group was far enough away from the building that the only identifying features he could pick out happened to be breasts and long black hair on one and height on another. The engines weren’t annoyingly loud and the squeal of tires was usually short-lived.

A month later, it was as though they were demanding that all the residents of the science building pay attention.

The sound of screeching tires would not have bothered Charles to the same degree had the noise not stuttered so much nor lasted quite so long. As it was, the screeching continued off and on for well over a minute. While waiting aimlessly for Hank to finish helping organize the underside of his desk, it was impossible to ignore for Charles to ignore for long.

Charles closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. He wasn’t sure why security allowed motorcycle gangs to use the university’s parking lot for their mischief. Were he in charge, knowing what he knew of such people, he would never have allowed it. It seemed absolute hypocrisy in the face of the security team’s insistence that he be photographed without a decent amount of sleep. Any sleep at all
would have improved his chances of a photogenic ID badge.

Curious despite himself, he took another calming breath and walked to the window where he could see clouds of smoke billowing up from the parking lot. He frowned as he got closer; he knew from experience there was far too much smoke for just one tire.

It was little wonder. The vehicle doing wide, drifting figure eights and 360s, was not a motorcycle. It was also close enough to the building that he could make out a young man’s angular face and pale hair. Head tilting to the side in contemplation, Charles stood, transfixed by the sight.

“Hank,” Charles asked, voice pitched to carry over the screaming tires, “is this normal?”

The young PhD candidate didn’t look up from underneath Charles’ desk when he answered. “No, I’ve never heard them that loud before. Is it a new motorcycle?”

“No,” Charles shook his head reflexively, bemused, “it seems to be a Honda Civic.”

The next thing he heard was something hitting the bottom of the desk’s wide drawer. “Civic? Is it black?”

“As a raven,” Charles smiled fondly.

“Black and silver rims? Plastic cover over the license plate?”

Charles turned toward the desk, eyebrow raised in query as Hank emerged, one hand held to the top of his head. “You seem to know this car.”

And then it hit him. Darwin’s car.

He jerked his face back to the window. “Darwin isn’t driving it. Hank, call security!”

Without further thought, Charles pelted from the room. He wasn’t sure what he would do once he got outside, but that didn’t slow him. Ignoring the elevator, he took the stairs two at a time and jumped halfway down the last set.

The thick smell of burning rubber swallowed Charles the moment he threw the outside door open. The Civic had stopped its rotation and was sitting still, facing the school. The light-haired driver was grinning wickedly as he revved the engine and spun the wheels. He ripped a prolonged growl from the Civic the moment his eyes lit on Charles. It certainly didn’t sound like any Honda Civic the professor had ever heard.

“You there,” Charles called. He stepped off the sidewalk’s curb and headed across the asphalt at a jog. “Turn that engine off!”

It was unlikely the driver heard him over the throaty revving he was wringing out of the engine. But just to make sure Charles knew he saw him, the dark blond threw his left hand out the window, middle finger extended in a meaningful salute.

Charles continued his advance, undeterred. Some people, he knew, did not listen to reason. The young thief looked to be exactly the sort that respected actions over words. Action hero was not Charles’ preferred role, but he could play the part.

The hooligan pulled his arm back inside the Civic. Gunning the engine, he began another billowing burnout. Then he launched the Civic forward, toward Charles. It halted just as quickly, the driver quickly throwing the emergency brake again to put the rear wheels back into a spin.
The initial surge startled Charles, feeding him an adrenaline spike. He came around the side to the driver’s side, heedless of the youth’s cocky grin.

“Turn it off,” he ordered calmly, despite the rapid beat of his heart. He looked the tow-headed boy in the eyes. At that moment, he reminded Charles strongly of somebody he’d known in his youth. “Turn it off.”

“Yeah?” The grin turned into an annoyed sneer. “Fuck you.”

Faster than anyone would expect from an academic like him, Charles punched his right hand forward and grabbed the steering wheel. He wrenched it hard to the left. The hooligan’s eyes stuttered wide in shock. His right hand had shot forward simultaneously, but it was to release the emergency brake.

Luckily for Charles, when the back of the Civic spun suddenly around, ripping the wheel from his grasp, its momentum was immediately arrested by one of the light poles. It hit with a hideous crunching sound and a strange sort of double impact before bouncing back the way it came by nearly a foot.

“Holy mother fuck!” The blond howled, immediately killing the engine, and throwing the door open.

“Alex, you fucking asshole!” Another person shrieked from the other side of the car, their voice breaking halfway through.

From the direction of the building, another voice rang out, “Charles! Leave them alone, its okay!”

Charles stood, stunned, left hand gripping his right in shock. Everything was confused. He looked back to Hank, who was running across the lot to him. “Did you get security?”

Hank shook his head, “No, you don’t understand! These are Darwin’s friends!”

Blue eyes widened. “They are? But why would they steal his car?”

Hank frowned severely. “I don’t know. A prank? But they obviously brought it back.”

“Help me lift it up! Oh shit, help me lift it up!”

“For fuck’s sake, Sean, grab the fucking brake lever!”

“I am, asshole, I am! Brake fluid’s dumping all over the place!”

Grimacing at his mistake, Charles carefully picked his way around the Civic. On the other side he found the blond young man helping a redhead lift a blue and white motorcycle upright. They were likely barely out of high school, Charles realized, perhaps freshman at the university. The redhead, Sean, was especially young-looking, but it was likely his distress making him appear so youthful.

“Oh my God, Alex, he’s going to kill us. He’s going to kill us with death.”

“Shut up, Sean, just shut the fuck up.”

“Guys, I’m sure Darwin will forgive you,” Hank ventured. “He’s on his way over from the admin building right now.”

The blond, Alex, whipped his head in Hank’s direction, his eyes narrow and measuring. His lips compressed into a thin line, but he didn’t say anything. Sean, however, had none of the same tight-lipped recalcitrance.
“I’m not worried about Darwin,” the redhead whined miserably. “He’ll get over a little bodywork. The R6, though? The R6? Killed by death…!”

“I told you to shut up, Sean,” Alex shot, keeping the blue and white motorcycle upright, “and go get some water before the brake fluid starts eating the paint.”

“Hank, why don’t you take him inside for water to dilute the brake fluid,” Charles suggested in his best professorial voice, absorbing and processing information as quickly as possible. “Quickly, DOT 4 fluid is corrosive. I’ll help with the Yamaha.”

Hank nodded obediently and gestured for Sean to follow him. Sean sprinted right past the taller boy in his haste, demanding that he hurry faster.

Charles looked at the motorcycle critically. The Civic had hit the front left side of the bike, propelling it into the light pole. The bike’s front cowling was cracked, both sides of the tank were dented, but the left was scraped where it impacted with the asphalt. The brake lever was broken in half, the front brake fluid reservoir was still attached, but the brake line was punctured. The side stand had snapped, hence Alex was stuck holding the bike upright.

“Does the owner know Sean borrowed it?” Charles asked, looking for more damages. He sighed, seeing the Arrow exhaust. At least it wasn’t a Yoshimura; he didn’t think he could have handled that.

Alex stared hard at Charles. “I’m the one that borrowed it. But then I needed somebody to ride it so I could get Darwin’s car over here. Should have had Sean drive. I’m fucked.”

“You should probably give your friend a call,” Charles sympathized. “Perhaps Darwin’s insurance will cover it.”

The young man snorted in disgust. “You have no idea how bad you’ve fucked me over,” the dark eyes flicked down to Charles’ lanyard, “Mr. Charles F. Xavier, Ph-fucking-D. The F stands for Fuckwad, doesn’t it?”

“Fuckwad may be an improvement,” Charles returned evenly, refusing to be baited into an argument with the hostile young man.

Alex paused and visibly reassessed Charles, a little respect appeared in his eyes. “Huh. Okay, Dr. Xavier, didn’t see that coming. Never expected a guy in a sweater vest to pull that sort of stunt, either. This,” he pointed down at the R6, “could have been you.”

“I’m glad it wasn’t.” Charles agreed even though he thought turning the wheel to the left had made it less likely to happen the way Alex hinted. Of course, he wasn’t certain; physics was Hank’s realm, not his. He made a mental note to ask the doctoral candidate later. “And please don’t call me doctor. Now, would you like me to hold the bike up while you call your friend? Or we could lean it against the light pole. Will it roll?”

Relaxing a little, Alex sighed. “It’ll roll; that’s one reason Sean couldn’t pick it up, but the fluid will spread all over the rim if it does.”

“So I’ll hold it for you,” Charles offered again. “Don’t worry; I used to have a Ninja.”

The boy’s eyebrow rose dubiously. “You used to have a Ninja?”


“Slip on, bolt on, or full system? Aluminum, carbon, or titanium?”
“Carbon fiber slip on, I think.”

“You think?” Alex gave him a hard look. “You got it used?”

“Yes,” Charles nodded. “It was somebody’s track bike. It had some sort of carburetor kit, too.”

“That old pig was somebody’s track bike?” Alex smiled grudgingly. “Wow, hope you didn’t pay much for it.”

It came as a shock that the insult hit a nerve even though Charles had been trying to forget that very motorcycle for almost ten years. “That bike was an excellent model!”

“No way, Mr. Xavier,” Alex chuckled. “That thing was a pig: heavy and slow. The Yosh pipe you had wouldn’t make a lick of difference. Might have made it sound better, but that’s about it.”

Charles opened his mouth to further defend the ZX6R’s honor, but Alex was already offering him the R6’s left handle bar. Cross for being goaded so thoroughly and unexpectedly, Charles took Alex’s place without a word.

His temper smoothed out when he realized that sacrificing the ZX6’s honor had bought Alex’s first smile and then a brief laugh. For the first time in years, the Kawasaki’s ghost seemed useful.

The blond pulled a battered phone from his front pocket, stabbed a few buttons, and started pacing. After pacing a few moments, he stopped, thumbed another button, and then typed on the number pad again. He had just started to resume his pacing when he received a response.

“Ah, hey Erik,” the young man said, his voice pitching suddenly deeper. He stopped moving and stood at attention. “You free?”

There was a pause as Alex listened intently. “…That definitely had to hurt. Well, this sure isn’t going improve your mood. I just pinched the R6 between the Civic and a pole here at the lot.”

The boy’s head lowered and shoulders hunched up as he listened to the response. “I’m sorry. I really fucked up. I haven’t checked the frame, no. So, about forty-five minutes, if you stop at the drug store? Hey, there’s a doctor here and I bet they have a first aid kit. The doctor used to have an old ZX6, so he’s sort of like, okay, you know?”

Alex turned and looked at Charles with a smirk. “Yeah, I told him that. Cool. See you.”

“You told me what?” Charles asked dryly. “That my bike was a pig? The owner of the R6 agrees?”

Snapping the phone shut, the blond nodded. “No wonder you’re a doctor; you catch on fast.”

“And I’m not a medical doctor,” Charles continued. “PhD means doctor of philosophy: in my case, genetics. If the man that is going to kill you with ‘death’ needs a medical doctor, he should likely be going to a hospital or a clinic.”

“Nah,” Alex shrugged, “Erik’ll never go to a hospital, no matter how busted up he gets. He’s saved Sean and I visits there, too. He’s pretty hardcore.”

A campus security car pulling up saved Charles from deeply pondering what a hooligan like Alex considered truly hardcore. The young man bristled visibly at the car’s presence until the tinted window rolled down and Darwin smirked out at them.

“Hello there, Professor,” he said. “Not sure what to say about the company you’re keeping. Car
thieves, gang-bangers, and strippers, oh my.”

“I’ve somehow missed the exotic dancers,” Charles sighed, unable to make himself to repeat what he considered a slur. He had a fine respect for dancers which rose as their clothing fell. “However, this car thief seems to have a present for you. I dearly want to hear how you’ll explain this to your insurance company.”

“I dearly want to see somebody fix my car’s bodywork.” Darwin said lightly as turned off the car’s engine and stepped out. “That body kit was not cheap. As for the ‘exotic dancer’, she had to work last night.”

“Fuck your car,” Alex seethed. “Look at the R6! Erik’s on his way right now and he is pissed. Besides, do you have any idea what we had to do to get your fucking Civic back?”

Darwin shook his head. “I didn’t ask you to get it back.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” Alex snarled. He stalked over to Charles and motioned brusquely for him to move. “All of this is my fault anyway. Though, Professor Xavier here sure didn’t do me any favors. If he hadn’t grabbed the Civic’s wheel, none of this would have happened.”

Charles raised an inquiring eyebrow, but said nothing. Though Alex kept throwing blame around, he had obviously taken the entire incident onto his shoulders. Hotheaded and under pressure, the blond young man seethed and lashed out at everyone, but in his head the incident was already resolved. He was a rash young man, but he had a grave sense of responsibility.

“You mean, if you hadn’t been showboating in my car,” Darwin said evenly and without venom.

The blond nodded, jaw tight. “I know. That’s why it’s really all my fault.”

There was a commotion at the school building again as Sean came charging through the door with a gallon of water in one hand and paper towels in the other. He made it back to them breathlessly. Of Hank there was no sign; Charles wondered at that.

Charles held his hand out for the water when the redhead neared. “You don’t need paper towels. The fluid has been on the paint too long; you would end up wiping the paint right off.”

Uncertainly, Sean handed the gallon over to Charles. The redhead looked at Alex quizzically but the blond just shook his head. Sean then turned to Darwin and cheered up considerably, “Hey! Are you happy to see your car? That is, despite the motorcycle-shaped dent in your body work.”

“I’m happy, yeah,” Darwin admitted at last. “But I’m more surprised. It’s been almost a month and the damn thing is still in one piece. I figured it was chopped the same day it was stolen.”

“It was, but you got lucky,” Sean grinned. “The whole club was on the look-out. Erik put word out to the Ruff Ryders and Angel told her ex in the PMS crew. It was like the United Colors of Benetton of motorcycle clubs!”

Charles listened closely to the chatter as he diluted the spilled brake fluid with handfuls of water. The casual banter about motorcycle clubs and thievery was all too familiar and disturbing. It worried him enough that he didn’t find the mention of a group called PMS amusing initially.

The brake fluid on the tank was of no consequence; the tank would be trashed or be repainted, anyway. Charles focused his efforts, and more water, on the wheel’s bronze paint, instead. If he remembered Max’s lectures correctly, brake fluid was hydroscopic; it called water to it. Therefore, Dot 4 brake fluid diluted beautifully.
Vaguely, he recalled the lean older boy; shirtless and dirty despite the black butcher’s apron. It was his standard uniform for working on the ZX6. Charles had once dared him to wear the outfit to one of the industrial clubs in the city. Max had readily agreed, on the condition that Charles would steal his stepfather’s Mercedes for the night. And Charles had done exactly that.

Resting his head against one of the fork tubes, Charles tried to banish the memory. In order to distract himself, he tuned back into the conversation going on above and behind. He only caught the end of Sean’s explanation.

“--it apart. It took awhile to negotiate it free and then to get it reassembled.”

“PMS already call in the debt?” Darwin asked, his face thoughtful in his concern. Charles took Darwin for the type that liked to keep all his accounts settled.

“Yep,” Sean nodded. “Erik’s going to do some engine work for them or something.”

Darwin took in a deep breath and let it out just as slowly. As he did so, he relaxed visibly. He slapped Sean lightly on the back. “You guys. Next time, don’t bother, okay? I don’t want to owe anyone. I don’t want to get sucked into thug life.”

Sean rolled his eyes. “Please. We’re not thugs. Well, maybe Alex.”

“Shut up, Sean,” Alex sighed. He looked bored while he waited for Charles to finish with the brake fluid. Until Charles was satisfied, they couldn’t roll the bike forward and lean it against the light pole.

“Erik then,” Sean shrugged. “Anybody that does their own stitches is a thug.”

Charles frowned at the thought and looked up at Alex. “Is that what you meant by hardcore?”

The blond looked down at him and sighed. “Professor, don’t listen to Sean. We’re not thugs. Not any of us. We protect each other.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Charles replied, remembering. “Don’t we need a first aid kit? I should run and have Hank get that.”

“Yeah, where’d that geek go, anyway?” Alex straightened up and looked around. “Sean, did the geek stay inside after you guys found the water? We need a first aid kit.”

The redhead nodded, “Yeah, he was looking for some sort of absorbing mat. Said he had to check the chemistry lab. I think he thought the radiator cracked.”

“Radiator look okay?” Alex asked Charles, since he was closest.

Shifting back on his haunches, Charles searched the radiator and hoses for any damage. “Dented, but serviceable on my side.” He reached up for the bent handlebar above him. “I can hold her, if you want to look at your side of the radiator.”

“I already did,” the blond returned. “You done over there? I’m tired of holding this thing up.”

Charles nodded and stood up, wincing a little at staying in a crouch for so long. He handed the water gallon back to Sean. “Thank you for that. I better run in and find that first aid kit.”

“No need,” Darwin interjected, jerking his thumb at the security car. “I’ve got one in there.”

Gingerly, Alex rolled the R6 toward the light pole. It moved easily, but there was a scraping noise that came and went at regular intervals. Nobody looked to see what could be scraping; it was likely a
warped rotor rubbing against brake pads, or the brake pads were at a strange angle inside the calipers.

Once he had the R6 leaned as securely as possible against the pole, Alex turned to Sean again. “Two things, Cassidy.”

Sean raised a pale eyebrow in inquiry. “Just two?”

Alex ignored the lip. “First, and most important; at no point do you mention your ass warming the R6’s saddle.”

Sean snorted. “Blackmail material.”

“Second,” Alex continued, still ignoring Sean’s playful attitude, “where did you put the first aid kit that’s usually in the Tacoma?”

Sean’s eyes scrunched up in confusion. “What? Why? I had it in the game room. Remember? I had that evil headache.”

Then Sean’s face stretched into another look of horror. “First aid kit! Erik! Fuck!”

This time, Charles was less concerned than amused. He chuckled under his breath as the young man verbalized his thought process. Sean seemed to have very little in the way of a brain-to-mouth filter.

Charles wasn’t the only one laughing at Sean’s pain. Darwin had a hand to his mouth, laughing silently. He shared a kindred look with Charles and then pointed at the security vehicle. “I’m going to get that kit and then I’m going to drive my car back to my parking spot. I’ll be back for the security car.”

“Good sir,” Charles said, taking on a concerned look, “How could you leave me with these hooligans?”

“I think you’ll be fine with these goons for now.” Darwin grinned, “You can re-enact Aesop’s tales with Erik. Pull the splinter out of the lion’s paw.”

“A mouse, am I?” Charles asked, losing none of his humor. “If only I am Wibberly’s mouse, armed with a Q-bomb of charm.”

The gaffe was obvious when Darwin cocked his head to the side and gave the Professor a tolerant look. “Right, Prof. Q-bomb of charm. You keep that thing ready.”


Pressing his lips together and nodding shallow and vigorously, Darwin headed for the campus security car. “Got it, Prof. Of course. Mom used to read it to me all the time.”

“It isn’t a children’s picture book…” Charles finished lamely as Darwin ducked into the car to grab the first aid kit. He tossed it to Charles, a grin on his face.

Charles caught the spinning box without thought, suddenly rueful. Darwin had been teasing him. Though he still doubted ‘The Mouse That Roared’ was anything more than obscure to young people.

When Darwin brought the Civic back to life, he drove smoothly, with none of Alex’s vehicular animosity. It was the first time Charles had seen the car move in a sedate manner. It was still loud,
but Charles had heard worse; ZX6s with Yoshimura exhausts, for example. Better yet, most of the debris on the asphalt was the R6’s blue rather than the Civic’s black. It seemed the R6 had absorbed most of the impact.

Good for Darwin, perhaps not so good for the owner of the R6. Thus far there was no talk of car insurance, which led Charles to believe that there would be no claim on the motorcycle. That would be an expensive option. He looked at Alex and tried not to let sympathy filter from his heart and through his eyes. He doubted Alex would appreciate the sentiment.

The two boys had crouched together next to the motorcycle, trading what was left of the water between them. They were looking at the radiator again. Sean trailed one of the hoses with the tip of his index finger. He’d stuffed the wad of paper towels under the bike’s cracked windscreen to prevent them from blowing away.

Sean looked miserable. Alex looked the stoic side of worried. Charles shook his head and, reminded by the water and radiator, decided he should check on Hank.

“Gentlemen,” Charles said, “I’m going to run inside for a few minutes to check on something. I’ll be right back.”

Alex nodded solemnly and Sean threw Charles a half-hearted salute. The professor gave them back over to solemnity and headed for the university’s sciences building. Sean’s explanation about the absorbent mat would place Hank in the chemistry lab, but Charles returned to his office instead.

It came as no surprise to find Hank half under his desk again, zip-tying the last of the cables. It was the final step in bringing civilization back to the rat’s nest of cords that had precipitated a printer crashing to the floor a previous in the week.

“Almost done here,” Hank said, without looking up. “It isn’t any trouble, so if it starts getting out of hand under here, let me know.”

“Thank you, Hank,” Charles replied. “Did you find that absorbing mat?”

Though there was nothing left to do under the desk, Hank paused there. “Yes, but then I saw it wasn’t needed, so I returned it.”

The pause was far more telling than any verbal response. Why wouldn’t the physicist want to come back out? Surely he wasn’t frightened of Sean. Alex, perhaps, though the ruffian’s name-calling seemed like good-natured teasing. “Hank, what’s troubling you? Why didn’t you come back out?”

For another few moments Hank made no sound or any moves. Then he scooted back and looked up at Charles with wide blue eyes. Charles saw an ocean of turbulent naïveté behind Hank’s eyes. “Professor, those guys are dangerous. They stole Darwin’s car and then crashed it in the parking lot.”

Charles’ chin jerked to the side at the change in Hank’s attitude. “They didn’t steal it. Besides, weren’t you the one that told me to leave them alone, because they’re Darwin’s friends?”

Hank turned his face toward the windows. His expression was apprehensive and conflicted. “I’ve seen them before, but I haven’t talked with them much. They seem nice, but… reckless and frightening.”

A wave of comprehension and nostalgia washed over Charles at Hank’s words. It was like seeing a version of himself from the old days with Max. God, everything was reminding him of Max, he thought to himself.
Calm, dedicated, and controlled Hank was probably attracted to the dangerous aspect of the hooligan boys outside. Hank was feeling the irresistible pull of entropy on his orderly world, right in the midst of his PhD work. Of course he was frightened, Charles reasoned; his comfort zone resembled a Cold War bunker.

“They are, you know,” Charles sighed, “all those things. You’re right, but I don’t think you are scared of them, Hank. I think you’re afraid of yourself.”

Laughter was Hank’s first response, but it was not a lovely thing, rather it was ugly and turned inward. He stood up and brushed dust from his lab coat and hands with an air of finality. “Professor, your doctoral work is in genetics, not psychology.”

Charles nodded his agreement. “Yet I don’t need a PhD in friendship in order to talk to you as a friend. This is no lecture, Mr. McCoy. Take it as you will.”

Hank looked down for a few seconds and then shook his head in exasperation. “I need to get back to the lab.” He brushed by Charles with no further words.

Charles watched him go. Absently, he brushed his thumbs in circles over the surface of the first aid kit’s plastic case. He would have to give Hank space to think; the young man would definitely mull things over. A month of acquaintance was more than enough time to notice that Hank often thought deeply about things sometimes only said in passing. His comment about fear would likely occupy the physicist’s mind. That was perfectly fine with Charles; he was of the opinion that all conclusions were best made for oneself.

Scraping a thumbnail over the plastic first aid case, Charles walked to the window and looked into the parking lot. He supposed his timing was good. The two boys were standing up to greet a silver Tacoma coming down the lot toward them.

The truck had an orange and black dirt bike strapped down in the back; the dirt bike looked like it only had the right hand-guard installed. The truck’s windows were tinted, which was common enough in Phoenix. The truck and the motorcycle were covered in a fine layer of orange dust. Charles supposed the R6’s owner had been riding out in the desert earlier.

Charles smacked the first aid kit against one hand, wondering what kind of terrifying beast this Erik person was. Sean was obviously awed and terrified of him. He inspired a sort of hero-worship in Alex. Darwin was cautious. A figure took shape in Charles mind that took equal parts inspiration from his stepfather and popular media.

What stepped out of the Tacoma turned out to be worse.

Chapter End Notes

ZX6 and ZX6R are interchangeable names. Arguably the most popular form of the Ninja. The specific bike mentioned is based on my old ZX6, which was totaled not long after I sold it.

Honda Civic: very popular among tuner/drifting crowds.

Toyota Tacoma: the Corolla of trucks!
Kiss with a Fist

Chapter Summary

Charles kisses Erik.

Chapter Notes

low-side: a fall that takes place when the rider is close to the ground (usually a slide out); 'least' injurious of falls.
high-side: a fall where the rider becomes airborne; the most dangerous and injurious of falls.
Headers: the first length of exhaust pipes that ‘head’ directly away from the engine; these are ridiculously hot even after running a bike only a few seconds.
Fork tubes: telescoping front suspension that holds the front axle and runs up to the handlebar yoke. These tubes are often extended (called a rake) on Harley-style cruisers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“A kick in the teeth is good for some,
A kiss with a fist is better than none.”

*Kiss with a Fist*, Florence + the Machine

*Kiss with a Fist*

Initially, Charles’ lips quirked in a smile at the man. Though he was still half-dressed in dirt bike protective gear, he was dirtier than the truck and motorcycle combined. He was several years older than the other two. Handsome even, with a strong jaw and German… Charles’ stomach fluttered queasily; the man was familiar.

Charles’ grip on the first aid kit spasmed. His hands clenched hard enough on the box’s slick surface that it slipped from his fingers and was given to gravity. His heart constricted hard. One hand, clenched in a fist, pressed awkwardly to his chest, the other uncurled and splayed against the window. The first aid kit clattered on the floor.

His strangled gasp was audible even to his own suddenly stricken hearing, but he paid no mind. He was too busy using the air he had sucked in. “No, no, no… bloody hell, *no*!”

His hair was lighter than Charles recalled, his skin far more tan, but there was the same harsh beauty, the same symmetrical face. Though his features had sharpened with maturity, they had not changed
drastically.

Obviously, Max Eisenhardt was not, and never had been, a victim of terminal velocity and unforgiving asphalt.

A corner of Charles mind was having a heart attack. Another portion was wondering why the police had lied about Max’s death. A truly manic part was wondering why Max had showed up for Erik’s R6. Underlying the chaos, self-preservation whispered Charles’ life had been better for Max’s death.

Charles whipped around, placing his back to the window, and fought panic. He half fell to a seated position on the floor. His foot clipped one side of the first aid box and sent it skidding. Pressing his forehead to his knees, he brought his hands up to his temples. For several moments he concentrated on just breathing.

“What the bloody hell?” he gasped into the heart of the ball he had become. “Max Eisenhardt? Max bloody Eisenhardt?”

With another start, Charles realized he had placed himself into a fetal position. Pride taking over from panic, he raised his head from his knees, and ignored the wet blotches on the knee of each pant leg. Angry with himself, he unfolded into a crouch and seized the first aid kit.

He shoved the free hand into his pocket and withdrew his cell phone. He tapped the screen a few times with his thumb to bring up Raven and dialed immediately.

Charles hung up after one ring. He didn’t want to transmit his panic to his sister. Knowing Raven, she’d drop everything and drive all the way to Phoenix at unsafe speeds to make sure Max stayed dead. She’d worked too hard to get her internship and there was no way Charles would ruin it for her. He would tell her, but only after he had calmed down and talked to Max.

*Talk to Max?* he asked himself. *Really?*

Pulling his spine straight, Charles took a steadying breath and headed out of the office. He was terrified, yes, but he hadn’t let fear stop him for over a decade. He wasn’t going to let fear stop him from confronting his past. He wanted the specter laid to rest.

When he stalked out into the desert air, he didn’t feel ready to meet the man, but he pressed forward. Max had his back to him. Charles read no tension in the set of the broad shoulders, but he didn’t really care if he had. Alex, however, was practically as boneless as Sean in his dejection. Max had likely already dressed Alex down.

“You and Sean get it loaded. I’ll have the doctor look at this.” The voice had matured, as well, and his accent had faded considerably. Max gestured with his left hand. For the first time, Charles noticed the man’s hand was held awkwardly, the outer two fingers were swollen, the knuckles inflamed.

“But first: Sean. You are welcome to use the Tacoma’s first aid kit whenever you like. You still are.” The man’s tone did not reveal anger or even irritation, which somehow made it all the more terrible. “But if you don’t immediately put it back where you found it, I’ll break your fingers.”

All color beneath Sean’s mop of unruly hair fled. If there had been any doubt before whether he would keep riding the R6 a secret, it was certainly all erased.

Max’s conversational threat, Sean’s fear; together they tipped the balance between Charles’ caution and recklessness. He didn’t know Sean well, but the boy seemed well-meaning and he wasn’t going to let him be intimidated.
“It takes a brave man to threaten somebody ten years his junior.” Charles’ voice was soft, but strong and it carried. The young men turned to look at Charles with incredulity rounding their eyes. Alex’s surprise turned to an expression of warning; he shook his head at Charles subtly. Sean’s expression was tortured, as if he thought Charles would be massacred on his behalf. Charles wasn’t sure, perhaps he would.

Max turned on one boot’s rigid heel. His grey eyes didn’t widen like the others’; they narrowed subtly and his face tilted forward, which made his expression more intimidating. Then his head jerked back and he gave halting ground. Charles watched Max blink several times. He watched his face twist into an expression of abject disbelief.

His uninjured right hand rose slightly toward Charles, as if he wanted touch him. “Das bist Du, Charles?”

Despite the German and the quiet tone it was delivered in, everyone heard Charles’ name. The level of incredulity in the parking lot spiked sharply.

Lacking coherence for a sensible reply, Charles said the first thing that came to mind. “You never told me the ZX6 was a pig.”

It took the taller man a moment to comprehend and then answer the ridiculous comment. When he did, it was with palpable disbelief stamped on his features.

“Compared to your Gpz…” Max said slowly, “it wasn’t.”

“You’re saying that my turbocharged bike was more of a pig than yours.”

“That’s… what I’m saying,” Max breathed.

“I call shenanigans,” Charles whispered in reply, anger beginning to immolate fear.

A semblance of a smile touched Max’s eyes, but never made it to his contoured lips. “I thought you were in England.”

“I thought you were dead,” Charles stated, and all his nervous energy fled down his right arm and fed his muscles violence along the way. The right cross took Max by surprise. He jerked his head back too late; Charles’ knuckles struck a glancing blow across one prominent cheekbone, whipping Max’s head to the side.

Max took the impact calmly, slowly turning his head forward again. Behind him, Sean and Alex both gasped, waiting for Armageddon to unfold before them.

“Shenanigans,” Max sighed, touching his cheek to assess the damage. There was no malice in his eyes, but the mystification had vanished.

“What happened that night?” Charles replied, his voice gaining strength. Over ten years ago, he drew strength from Max, having little of his own. Max was the catalyst that helped obtain his own.

Max raised his right hand again. It was a call to wait rather than prove Charles real this time. He held Charles’ perilous blue eyes, but barked orders to the onlookers. “Alex. Sean. Load the R6. Now. Tie-downs and ramps are in the Tacoma’s bed.”

The two boys rushed to the R6 as one. They glanced back often, expressions differing iterations of incredulity. Yes, Charles thought, the man in the sweater vest just decked your idol.
“What’s going on Max?” Charles asked firmly. “What are you doing here?”

“Don’t call me that,” he replied. “My name’s Erik. Erik Lehnsherr.”

“Erik,” Charles nodded, grudgingly, “I’m still Charles. And you still haven’t answered my question.”

Erik shook his head. “You’ve asked several. I can’t answer them all; not this morning. I’ve too much to do and I need to be in the right frame of mind to get it all done.”

The deflection did nothing but add more questions to Charles’ mental queue. So many questions, so many emotions, wanted to flood out of Charles. He was hardly ashamed of any of them. He was caught again between caution and recklessness, but decided at last to favor caution.

Charles held up the first aid kit. He tried for nonchalant, but his simmering anger made his words sound mocking. “Shall I medicate you? It will be just like old times.”

A pause and then a bare move of his head forward was the only indication of Erik’s acceptance. Charles strode forward, dreading to get closer, yet wanting to get closer, to the man with whom he had spent seven life-altering months.

He pushed the first aid box into Erik’s right hand and reached for the left. His knuckles were red. The valleys between the last three knuckles were swollen and purpling. He touched the skin; it felt tight and hot. “What happened?”

“Clipped a boulder at speed,” Erik replied. “I thought the hand guard took all the impact when it broke. By the time I got back to the truck my hand was swollen. I had to cut the glove off.”

Charles blew a soft snort and took Erik’s injured hand in his. It was rough with calluses and far warmer than he remembered. Momentarily, Charles felt faint, but fought off disorientation by digging his fingers into Erik’s palm, making the other man flinch at the unexpected sharp pain. “You can at least answer one of my questions.”

Erik was silent at first. When he began to speak, his voice was hushed, though in no way did his quietude compromise the rich tone maturity had granted. “I had to leave the East Coast. I was good as dead, but my sponsor was in town and he stepped in.”

“I’m not a medical doctor,” Charles commented tersely, unimpressed with the context-less information, “let’s just assume they’re both broken. There are tongue depressors and tape in the kit we can use.”

The older man nodded. “That was what I had planned.”

Charles nodded back. He let go of Erik’s hand and took the first aid box back momentarily to retrieve the sticks and tape. Avoiding eye contact, he returned to his questioning. “I know you crashed the ZX6; I saw the fireball from the back of the police car.”

“I did,” Erik replied, “but I wasn’t on it when the tank exploded. I couldn’t avoid the tractor trailer, so I low-sided the bike to slide under. I tried to grab the underside of the trailer, but going that fast, it was an idiotic move; it knocked me free of the ZX6 and broke my arm in the process. The upshot was that when the sparks from the bike lit the fuel spilling out, I was nowhere near.”

“The police told us there was nothing left,” Charles said. His voice was hushed with old emotion as he taped Erik’s fingers to the first aid kit’s wooden sticks. “They said there wasn’t enough left of your body to fill an urn. That your body was spread over the debris field.”
Charles looked up for a moment and saw Erik’s profound frown, then refocused on wrapping the tape around the injured fingers. It was too nostalgic to see Erik’s features composed in that expression. It was just like when he’d been a lanky teenager frowning thoughtfully around a cigarette. His lips would be clamped, squeezing the end into a flat ellipse. Charles inhaled lightly; did Erik smoke? He only smelled dust, gasoline, and exhaust fumes.

“I can’t talk about that right now,” Erik sighed, his accent taking on strength. “It’s a stupid idea, but if you want to know more, I’ll meet you here at eight on Wednesday. We can go wherever you want and you can ask me anything within reason.”

Charles put the tape back in the box after cutting the roll free. He was inclined to agree with Erik; it wasn’t a good idea. He also knew that without answers, the situation would never be resolved and would haunt him for the rest of his life.

“Thursday,” Charles countered. Wednesday was just as good, but he needed to exert some control over the situation in order to feel safer. “And come prepared with a definition of ‘within reason’, because I somehow doubt you and I define the term in the same way.”

Erik studied his left hand, closely observed Charles’ handiwork. “Thursday is less convenient; I have somewhere I need to be at ten.”

“When did you start adhering to a strict schedule?” Charles scoffed, not liking the threat of being thwarted. He clearly remembered Max’s prior devil may care lifestyle. He’d had work, none of it legal, but he had usually performed it during Charles’ school schedule. Until Charles had abandoned such responsibilities; then there had been no further need.

“When I began to care,” Erik replied, eyes suddenly flicking up and burning into Charles’, “about not being exempt from laws of cause and effect.”

Despite his anger, despite fear’s lingering teeth, Charles was struck by the intensity of Max’s grey-green eyes. It was a gaze that had captured his attention in the past and had only become stronger in the decade that spanned between them. Countless dreams and nightmares had featured, but never captured, the subtleties of Max’s tightly contained intensity.

The weight of the words, combined with the heavy look, coalesced within his psyche. Max… Erik had admitted something just then. Charles must have had a hand in adding importance to the laws he’d just given voice.

“Thursday,” Charles surprised himself with the strength of his reply. “Surely an hour will be sufficient for the discussion.”

“I will make my definition of ‘within reason’ appropriately stringent, then,” Erik snorted, relinquishing his hold on Charles’ eyes.

Aided by Erik’s strange admission, the tacit understanding went straight to Charles’ sense of security. Erik had capitulated. The meeting time was a tiny thing, but it helped Charles believe that Erik would not seek to drag him back into that old lifestyle. Whether Erik knew it or not, it was what Charles needed: the tiniest sliver of confidence. He didn’t mean for it to happen, but a wan smile moved the corners of his mouth by a fraction.

In reaction, Erik sighed and looked away. He pointedly glanced over his shoulder at the young men working together to situate the dirt bike and the R6 side by side in the back of the Tacoma. “What happened to the GPz?”
Incredulity bubbled up Charles’ chest, “Are you kidding? It was impounded and eventually returned to the original owner! Not that they’d want it with—with—”

“With human flesh baked onto its headers?” Erik supplied, momentarily looking back at Charles. There wasn’t the slightest hint of regret or discomfort in his expression. “They could always get new headers.”

“You told me you bought it,” Charles deflected, not wanting to remember the screams or the smell of seared flesh.

“I did,” Erik nodded. “I bought you a stolen GPz. I’d had my eyes on a Ducati 750 SuperSport, but I couldn’t buy it. Turned out you were better off without it; it had electrical issues and a cracked swing arm.”

“You stole it, anyway?” Charles asked, but he already knew the answer: it was too rare a model for Max to resist.

“I stole it, anyway,” Erik stated, turning his body so he could more comfortably look between Charles and the young men tightening the straps in the back of the truck.

“Don’t worry about over-tightening the R6’s front suspension,” he called to Alex. “Fork tubes are shot, anyway. Just focus on keeping it from bleeding on the KTM.”

The blond nodded, gave another yank on the straps and stood up. “It’s all good back here. I know you’re pissed at me, but you want me to drive?”

Erik gave Alex the benefit of a sardonic expression. “Until you fix or replace the R6, the only reason you’ll touch any of my vehicle will be to wash them. Sean will drive.”

Sean’s face fell, but he nodded minutely and held out his hand for the keys. Alex handed the keys over, his expression grave once again. They hopped out of the truck. With the ease of familiarity, each took an aluminum ramp, folded it, and stowed them back in the truck’s bed with the motorcycles.

Charles was struck by the oddly domestic quality of the scene. He wondered again about Erik’s comment concerning cause and effect. Max had never cared about the others in his old gang; they had often complained of the trouble he caused them. Had that changed? Considering the tempestuous protectiveness Max had exhibited over Charles in the past, he thought it possible.

Their disastrous last night together had been a perfect storm created by the anarchic love affair between Max’s recklessness and rage. Perhaps, Charles mused, Erik had tamed both. It would be a vast improvement.

“Thursday at eight,” Erik said quietly, breaking Charles from his thoughts. Still filthy and wearing most of his protective gear, the dangerous man began to limp stiffly toward the Tacoma.

Charles frowned at the way Erik walked, his right knee flexing awkwardly. He closed the distance between them in a few long strides. He grasped Erik’s shoulder to halt him and came just abreast of the taller man. “Wait, what about your leg? I thought it was just your hand.”

Erik’s shoulder stiffened under Charles’ gentle touch. He stopped walking, but did not turn his body toward the professor. His head turned slightly and he gave Charles another strangely intense look. There was something uncomfortable in the unreadable expression. Charles’ eyes slipped down and he suddenly had a good view of the bruise darkening under the dirt on Erik’s face. Charles’ knuckles still tingled.
“It’s old,” Erik said simply.

“Oh,” Charles said. “Thursday, then.”

Erik nodded and walked the rest of the way to the truck a little more normally, possibly minimizing the limp as much as he could. Charles shook his head slightly. It was more like the Max he used to know; always quick to downplay an injury.

As the Tacoma pulled away, Sean at the wheel, Charles let himself into the security vehicle and stowed the first aid kit. He sat within, letting the desert’s spring breeze tousle his hair and waited for Darwin to return. As far as Charles was concerned, Darwin could take his time; there was a lot for Charles to think about.

With only his aching knuckles to remind him of Erik’s presence, the situation lost a sense of reality. It was like the dreams he used to have not long after he’d been told Max had died. They had lost power and frequency over the years, but they had been so strong to start out with that, even at eighteen, he had occasionally taken midnight refuge with Raven.

Thinking of Raven, he ghosted his fingers over his right trouser pocket, where the rounded corners of his phone jutted. He would call her, but not until later. Then again, having tried to call her earlier, he was sure she would call him.

Raven had liked Max. In fact, she’d had a crush on him before Charles had run away with him. It didn’t help that Max had managed to pick her up from middle school on the Ninja on three separate occasions. Two of which had occurred after their stepfather had threatened call the police. Max’s flagrant disregard of their stepfather’s authority had been intoxicating.

Charles closed his eyes and concentrated on the conversation, backtracking through the memory until he found the beginning. He smiled deprecatingly; he’d never asked Erik the most important question. Why? Why did he allow them to believe he was dead?

At least he had been shocked to see him. He’d thought Charles was in England. That would be easy to ascertain with a simple internet search. There was nothing on the internet yet about his status as a visiting professor, because he wasn’t really official until the autumn semester. He’d arrived early, having tied up business in Oxford not long after the holiday recess and hoping Raven would have time off before long.

“Oh, my friend,” Charles sighed, “you’ve been keeping tabs on me.” He wondered idly how many embarrassing Facebook pictures the man had seen before a few crazy exes, and amorous students, had led him to make it private. Had Erik laughed? How much did he know about him? What was he even doing there?

He’d said he couldn’t go back to the East Coast. He’d gotten into serious trouble, if he’d been cast out of an entire coast.

Then there was the mention of Max’s mysterious sponsor. Max had never used the man’s name and mentioned him only in connection with stealing motorcycles. He supposed the Ducati Erik had mentioned ended up with the mysterious sponsor instead. The thought rankled, somehow, but he let it go; Max’s sponsor had likely prevented him from being killed.

Relocation to Phoenix, with all her motorcycles and thieves seemed like the doing of the sponsor. Did that mean Erik was solely a thief now? Or was he still running drugs, warring with rival gangs, and aiding in extortion for the upper echelons in the organization’s infrastructure?
His mind wandered back to ‘why’ again. Perhaps Max had more than just a broken arm when he’d crashed the ZX6, running from the police? He’d been wearing his old Arai helmet when he should have been wearing Charles’ unblemished, stolen, Nolan. Possibly he’d suffered a head injury and hadn’t been able to remember the Xavier’s unpublished number? Neither of them had cell phones at the time; though Max had carried two pagers. Max’s gang considered him too destructive for a cell phone.

The most likely reason, however, was tied into Max’s protectiveness. He hadn’t really wanted to sponsor Charles into the gang at first. Perhaps his apparent death was the perfect opportunity to protect Charles from another violent night like that one had been.

Then another thought popped into his mind. The officers that had taken him in and ultimately turned him over to his stepfather; whom did they work for? They said Max had died, but he’d obviously survived the incident. Why had they told him Max was dead?

Opening his eyes again, Charles leaned forward and dropped his chin into his hand. Now that was an interesting question. Either his stepfather had some dubious connections, which Charles hardly doubted, or the Xaviers were too high-profile for Max’s sponsor’s tastes. Charles instantly threw out his stepfather’s involvement; the man had been enraged that he was denied the opportunity to have Max thrown into jail where he hoped the teen would be gang-raped.

The soft sound of Darwin’s footsteps suggested that Charles put his extrapolations aside. He looked up as Darwin leaned against the car. The university’s driver looked as calm as ever.


“You, professor, are a regular comedian,” Darwin returned, chuckling despite himself. “The Deus boys leave already?”

“Deus?” Charles asked, feeling quite tired. “They’re god? And also, yes, they are gone.”


“God inside the machine?” Charles smirked, reminded of a failed attempt to teach Max Latin. “At least they didn’t use deus ex machina; then they’d just be a poor plot device. Hmm, and Deus sounds much better than DiM. Or PMS, for that matter. My God, Darwin, PMS?”

“They did that on purpose,” Darwin grinned. “All-girl stunting crew. Red bikes required. Think the name is something like Pinche Sociedad de la Muerte, but they switched the letters around. They’re also crudely nicknamed the Mexican Lesbian Stunting Crew. Deus has an unofficial alliance with them that often involves drinking at Cherry Bomb. Which reminds me, you get that thorn out of the lion’s paw?”

Charles closed his eyes and leaned his head against the seat’s headrest. Cherry Bomb sounded interesting. “How well do you know Erik?”

“Well enough to be worried when I hear a question like that.” Darwin replied, voice losing the playful tone. “Don’t try to make friends with that guy, Professor. He’s kind of a beast on a long lead.”

“Does he come here every Sunday?”

“Frequently; you could call it family time. Professor, I’m serious. You might be safe with his club, but you are definitely not safe with him. People sometimes get it in their heads to kill Erik.”
“I can’t imagine such a gentleman riling up the locals. How did this start?”

“He instigated a game of cruiser dominoes,” Darwin drawled.

Cruiser dominoes. Charles could only guess that Erik had kicked over the first in a line of parked cruiser-style motorcycles and started a chain reaction of sickeningly glorious property damage. It certainly was no way to make friends.

“That’s pretty beastly,” Charles admitted, “but I think trying to kill him is grievously unjustified.”

“Then he walked down the line from gas tank to gas tank, kicking mirrors and gauges. According to legend, he proceeded to open the door to the bar and yell that some asshole had tipped a bunch of Harleys. When the SS started coming out of the bar, Erik was waiting. They couldn’t all come out at once, so he beat them up one at a time. Supposedly, this went on until a few of them went out the back.”

Eyebrows raised, Charles nodded speculatively. “You say this gang is called the SS?”

“Not originally,” Darwin shook his head, rolling his eyes. “They all have the Nazi ‘SS’ on their bikes for shock value or, maybe, because the Hells Angels used to. They think they’re One Percenters, but nobody really knows. The incident named them more than they named themselves. At any rate, if they weren’t before, they’re pretty anti-Semitic now.”

“Or just anti-Erik,” Charles sighed.

Chapter End Notes

KTM: Erik’s dirt bike (undisclosed model). KTM is an Austrian motorcycle manufacturer.

GPZ: Kawasaki GPz750T (T for turbo) Pretty revolutionary for its time. The turbo version of the 750 was just as fast as the 1100. The turbo was well-integrated into the bike. Bike will end up being a collector’s item one of these days.

Ducati 750 SuperSport: Not that special, though collectible. In fact, few Ducatis are special from a mechanical perspective. Constant mesh gears that are supposed to reduce valve float, but don’t? Laughable electrical engineering? Frames and swing arms that crack? What’s so special about that? Well… okay, the modern Ducatis’ open clutch is sexy as is the stock exhaust. Beyond that, it's all marketing.

If you have questions about the technobabble, please ask! I'm concerned I'll alienate readers with this stuff, even though it is important. (Geh, and I'm totally passing out now I can get this posted. It is late.)
Target Fixation

Chapter Summary

Raven and Charles text, Erik stares a lot, and a collision course for what Charles wants to avoid is set.

Chapter Notes

CC: Cubic Centimeters measure the volume of engine displacement. Erik's R6 has something like 599ccs, but everyone just rounds up to 600. The R1 is about 999ccs, hence 1000. 1000cc bikes are also called Liter Bikes. The more ccs, the more power. The lighter the bike, the more performance you get. However, loads of power and a light bike do not make for stability.

“Oh, its evil babe the way you let your grace enrapture me

When well you know, I’d be insane
to ever let that dirty game recapture me”

Shadowboxer, Fiona Apple

Target Fixation

Charles didn’t go to the university on Monday, which wasn’t a cause for concern on anyone’s behalf; he wasn’t on the payroll until June. The university had allowed him to set up early as a courtesy. He told himself he wasn’t going in because he’d accidentally destroyed a printer, not because of the expected stink eye looks from security after the ‘parking lot fracas’. Charles wondered again how Darwin managed to intervene on Deus’ behalf and keep the parking lot open to the group.

When Raven called he didn’t tell her about Erik-who-used-to-be-Max. Though, he did finally mention the presence of a group that stunted motorcycles at the far end of the parking lot. She found the prospect thrilling, especially when he admitted that one of the stuters was female. When he told her about PMS, the all-female stunting club, she choked on laughter and demanded photos.

He kept busy half the day shopping around for bicycles and eventually bought one for his commute. He spent the rest of Monday exploring the area for local cafes that had decent coffee and ambience. He was ready to do anything to keep his mind off meeting Erik on Thursday, because Charles Francis Xavier did not like dwelling on things that were apt to drive him insane. The resulting caffeine overdose threatened him with anxiety attacks and kept him up half the night.
Tuesday morning, he opted to drive out of the valley to Sedona, where it was much colder and more conventionally beautiful. He took an easy, but picturesque hike, admired patches of snow in the woods, and chuckled about the presence of a purported metaphysical vortex in the area. Charles wasn’t curious enough to investigate the vortex any further than reading signs and book covers.

He did end up blaming the so-called vortex when Max’s phantom did its best to haunt his mind on the long drive back to Phoenix. It took several changes between flickering radio stations and singing loudly to himself during dead air to exorcise thoughts of the past.

He spent Wednesday in Tucson, hiking in the much warmer Saguaro National Park, trying not to think of Max-who-was-now-Erik. His subconscious, however, had other ideas and had treated him to a night of twisted dreaming.

The hike helped clear his head, despite a nasty brush with cholla cactus, he discovered when he leaned against a rocky outcropping. He managed to knock the spines out of his pant leg with his sunglasses and pull the rest out of his skin with tweezers from a multi-tool.

Even in the early spring of the desert, Charles was thankful he’d come prepared with plenty of sunblock, which he faithfully reapplied every hour and a half. Smoothing the cream over his skin had the unfortunate effect of making him think even more about Max. They had spent most of that fateful summer outside and where Max tanned, Charles’ pale skin burned quickly.

Charles could have easily afforded sunblock, but Max took great delight in stealing it at every opportunity. It wasn’t that Max didn’t have money; he simply enjoyed the challenge and flaunting authority. Life was a game back then with escalation the only rule.

While it was still morning, Charles updated his Facebook with pictures of various desert flora and fauna. By the trickle of comments on the pictures, he managed to amuse some of his acquaintances back in the Oxford biology department. Their familiarity tipped him into a more confident mood. He finally admitted to himself he needed to reexamine his relationship with Max one more time.

There was no relationship in Charles’ life that he had dissected more thoroughly, more obsessively, than the one with Max. He knew his attraction had been one born first of admiration. Max smoked, rode motorcycles, got into clubs without ID, and picked fights with people that out-sized and outnumbered him. The older boy was constructed of things meant solely to fly in the face of authority. And while he had the social graces of a felon, Max had introduced Charles to the many wild girls that liked to ride on the back of his Ninja.

Charles’ had lacked all authority after his father had died and Kurt Marko came into his life. While his mother sought support from the bottom of a bottle, Kurt undermined Charles’ confidence with constant belittlement and emotional sabotage. He had gone on to threaten Raven’s place within the Xavier home, though she had long since been adopted. Marko often stated that her presence within the family was contingent on Charles’ behavior.

In hindsight, Charles knew Max represented everything he wanted to throw at his stepfather: the whole nine yards of teenage rebellion. However, his admiration had only been a stepping-stone into understanding the frustration of a rebellious teenager with no foundation or polestar. Max rebelled because he thought he had nothing to lose: after he died, it was the only idea that had ever brought Charles peace. At the price of forever trying to disregard the lingering, though chaste, kiss he’d pressed hard against Charles’ red lips.

How long Charles stood staring at the sunblock was beyond him. He checked the time on his phone and resumed applying the cream. There was still plenty of water and trailmix in his pack, but he decided to rest a few more minutes before heading back.
Over ten years ago, he needed Max to fan the embers of his lost self-esteem. Now, he had everything he needed; his own strength, self-confidence that often ran into arrogance, and control. Hell, as a professor he had authority over his own life and a surplus of authority over others’. The new version of Max, this Erik, probably had little more than trouble to offer once answers were delivered.

From what he’d seen and heard of Erik, his social graces hadn’t improved. If anything, the adult version of Max was twice as grim. There was just one problem. During the seven-month period he had known Max, the greatest beneficiary of the relationship had been Charles.

Taking a deep breath of dry air, Charles released a slow sigh and accepted the results of his soul-searching. If Erik was not reduced to a dog on a leash, if it would not result in undue danger, if Erik was amenable, Charles would try to give back.

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It was only thanks to the physical and emotional exertions in Tucson that Charles was able to sleep well that night. He cut himself off coffee when the morning was over and submerged himself in a multitude of online genetic forums, articles, and research papers. Seeing his name and articles referenced in a few of those resources improved his mood exponentially.

Over the course of the day he traded nonsensical texts with Raven; a game that eventually devolved into increasingly obscure or amusing English words. A quarter past seven, he texted ‘masticate’ to Raven, before taking his bicycle out of the apartment’s balcony and heading for the university to meet Erik.

The sun had already set, but he wanted to burn a bit of his rising nervous energy. As an extra measure, Rachmaninoff was a soothing presence in his ears on the way there.

The older security guard making rounds at the university was not soothing; his disapproving stare had not lost any intensity. Charles smiled at the curmudgeon with great cheer and waved at him with gusto. The stare became a narrow-eyed glare that would have looked natural had laser beams shot forth from his eyes and burned the genetics professor to a crisp.

Feeling immensely pleased with himself for being annoying, Charles pedaled over to the light pole the R6 was smashed against. The concrete base wasn’t damaged, but it would likely keep the streak of blue paint for several years. Of the R6’s plastics and other bits and pieces there was no sign. He wondered if Sean had been sitting on the Yamaha when the Civic had bucked. He’d been so focused on Alex and the Civic that he’d never seen Sean or the R6 until the action had ended. Likely the redhead had not been on the bike, he supposed. It was doubtful anyone had the reflexes to escape a vehicle moving so fast and unpredictably.

Charles checked the time and found himself fifteen minutes early. Max’s punctuality had been a thing of flux, so he wasn’t sure what to expect now he was Erik. Much of that unpredictability had been a matter of Westchester being on the other side of a rival gang’s turf. Max had often crossed into the territory to initiate high-speed chases and he had quickly discovered that his notoriety occasionally got in the way of meeting Charles on time.

It was that notoriety, in fact, that had led to the high-speed chase that precipitated Charles’ first and only visit to a holding cell.
His phone pinged as he waited, alerting him to Raven’s newest entry: *onanism*. The leap from masticate to a synonym for masturbation was natural enough, he figured, but wasn’t sure what to use as a follow up.

A throaty rev alerted Charles to a motorcycle’s presence. He looked up from his phone’s screen into the fox eye-shaped headlights of a black sport bike. It looked like another R6, which brought a frown to Charles’ face. Did Erik steal a replacement?

Though a colorful helmet obscured his features, Charles knew the grey-green eyes on the opposite side of the clear screen. Erik pulled up smoothly, placed both feet flat on the ground, and switched the key off. He flipped the visor up with the gloved fingers of his right hand. He looked pointedly from Charles to the bicycle.

“Are you planning on talking here?” came Erik’s muffled voice. “I’ve only the one helmet.”

Blinking, Charles turned to his bicycle and then back to Erik. “I thought you’d be in the truck given your hand injury. I figured we’d put my bike in the back.”

Erik held up his left hand, which was bare of leather. The rudimentary brace had been replaced with a metal one that held his last two fingers straight and secure. Charles didn’t think the metal braces were available in stores. “I only need the first two for shifting.”

“Let’s talk here then?” Charles suggested. “At least take the helmet off so I can hear you clearly.”

Making no move to get off the motorcycle, Erik freed his right hand from a gauntlet-style racing glove to better get at the D-ring buckles that fastened his chinstrap. He pulled the helmet off his head and rested it on the black tank. Charles noted that Erik smelled faintly of exhaust fumes and aftershave. With a little guilt, he also noted the fading bruise on one sharp cheekbone.

“I had hoped to eat,” Erik admitted. “I’ll end up having a few drinks tonight and something greasy would help keep me sober.”

“There’s plenty of greasy food within walking distance,” Charles offered. “This is a university, you know.”

Erik stared blankly at Charles for a moment then shrugged his leather-clad shoulders. He took the helmet off the tank and offered it to Charles. “The suspension isn’t set for two-up, so expect a bumpy ride.”

“Walking distance,” Charles repeated. “Besides, I don’t ride two-up anymore, remember?”

Erik continued to stare and kept the helmet proffered for a couple more beats before setting it down on the tank again. He sighed. “Fine, but you’re buying.”

“Happy to,” Charles grinned. “I’ll lock up my bike.”

Erik nodded back and started the black Yamaha again in order to park it next to the light pole. While Erik secured the motorcycle, Charles rode over to the closest bicycle rack and locked the new mountain bike up. Erik was finishing threading a chain through the Yamaha’s front wheel and around the light pole when Charles returned to his side. He snapped a heavy padlock shut and stood.

“You wouldn’t be so paranoid, if you hadn’t been a thief,” Charles quipped, though his use of past tense begged correction.

“A chain discourages casual thieves,” Erik replied, ignoring the cleverly hidden question. “If
somebody really wants your bike, they’re going to get it no matter what you do.”

“Spoken like a true professional,” Charles returned, not letting go of the subtext.

Erik shrugged again. “Lead on, we don’t have much time.”

Impressed that Erik hadn’t taken the bait, Charles shook his head ruefully and began to walk across the parking lot. “Did you come with your definition ready?”

Carrying his helmet by the re-buckled strap as he walked, Erik nodded. “Less a definition and more a set of criteria.”

“How German of you,” Charles remarked. “Care to let me in on the criteria?”

“I won’t tell you anything that could get either of us in trouble,” Erik stated bluntly, without looking at Charles.

Charles nodded, having expected the criteria before Erik had even set it forth. “You mentioned a set of criteria? That’s only one.”

In return, Erik glanced at Charles and then resolutely forward. “You don’t need to know the rest.”

“I distinctly remember a more light-hearted you,” Charles admonished gently, “but fine. Let’s start. What did you do to get kicked out of the East Coast?”

“Broke a fragile truce by attacking the wrong people,” Erik replied without hesitation. His tone was casual as he continued, “Killed two of them in the process.”

Despite how hard Charles was trying to be calm and withhold any sort of judgment, his eyes rounded at the second half of the explanation. He glanced quickly at the taller man beside him and found Erik’s as expressionless as before. “Is that a rehearsed answer?”

Walking between the parking lot’s islands of illumination, light came and went, but there was enough to see the barest twitch at the corner of Erik’s mouth when he looked at Charles. “Charles, why are you always the most perceptive asshole?”

“Good genes,” Charles deadpanned. “I shouldn’t really be surprised that you killed people; not with the crowd you introduced me to. Your sponsor must like you.”

“Not really,” Erik replied, holding up his injured hand and studying it, “but I have talents that keep me alive.”

It didn’t take long to arrive at the outer edge of the university and on the wrong side of a busy road filled with four and two-wheeled traffic. The eateries across from the university were many and happily varied.

“You have a preference?” Erik asked, paused on the sidewalk.

“Mexican,” Charles ventured. “Do you know any good places around here?”

A bit of a smile appeared on Erik’s face. He shook his head slightly, “That’s right; there weren’t any good Mexican places in Westchester. And the chances of Oxford having decent Mexican food had to be low.”

“Let’s get something authentic,” Charles nodded, “to make up for my years of ignorance.”
Charles could practically see the gears working in Erik’s head as he considered the possibilities. “The most authentic food will show up around midnight in trucks,” he began, “I recommend you find the Tacos Sahuayo truck, just don’t get the cabesa tacos until you can withstand the grease.”


Erik bit his bottom lip in an old and well-known attempt to avoid a smile. “There are much better ways to spend an hour in a bathroom. You should know considering how many of my pillion girls ended up in them with you.”

“You know,” Charles admitted, a little chagrined, “throwing away one’s virginity in a cramped bathroom, with a girl that had fingernails like talons, isn’t really an improvement on food poisoning.”

Erik’s eyes narrowed a fraction in suspicion and then eased as he gave in to a sudden derisive snort. “Das Idioten! I didn’t think of it. I can’t even remember her name, but I swore the gouges she gave me would scar.”

Charles grinned with wry amusement. “I don’t think any of us knew any better back then. We were trying too hard to be cool and we ended up unskilled, inelegant, and awkward. Even Max Eisenhardt.”

“Especially that guy.” Though he didn’t say where he was going, Erik started across the street in a lull between traffic. “I hope you’re doing better than romancing girls off another man’s bike.”

Charles shrugged though Erik couldn’t see him and hurried to catch up. “I do well enough.” It was an understatement, but he didn’t feel the need to brag. He also saw no need to mention that his flings were not confined to the opposite gender. Of course, Erik might have learned that from back when his Facebook was public. What Erik wouldn’t know was how their kiss had led Charles down that path.

From behind he noticed Erik’s limp again. He was reasonably sure Erik was trying to suppress it, but had more trouble doing so over longer distances. It was little wonder why he had been hesitant about walking far. It looked like he had trouble extending the leg into a fully straight position.

“What happened to your leg, anyway?” he asked, when he caught up on the opposite sidewalk.

Erik’s cautiously open expression shuttered, his eyes turned opaque and unfriendly. “That isn’t within reason.”

The response threw Charles for a moment. “Why?”

Erik didn’t reply, but corrected his limp as thoroughly as possible. He managed to walk normally, though Charles noted the muscles in Erik’s jaw bunched as he did so. “Ask something else,” he suggested through clenched teeth.

The dead end frustrated Charles. Why would anyone be so recalcitrant over an injury? Embarrassment wasn’t really in Max’s limited emotional set. Pride? That was more likely. Perhaps it was information that was dangerous to know?

“Fine,” Charles said, ready with the question that had bothered him most of all, “Why didn’t you tell me you were alive?”

The question eased the bunching in Erik’s jaw and the limp made a subtle reappearance. “It was better for you that I didn’t. Until that night, nobody really knew who you were. When they found out, there were two camps; those that wanted to kidnap you to extort Marko and those that didn’t
want the attention yet. Not that they wouldn’t, just that the timing was wrong.”

It was hard to keep the skeptical look off his face. However, Erik wasn’t looking at him and the taller man’s face stayed perfectly serious. “You’re not joking.”

Erik gave Charles one of his blank looks. “No, I’m not.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes as Charles digested the information. The police had known right away who he was. Kurt had filed kidnapping charges against Max, though the police had decided to treat it as a runaway situation. Charles turned seventeen while on the run and they only had Kurt’s word that Max was nineteen.

Neither Kurt nor the police had ever been able to produce records for a teenager named Max Eisenhardt. Charles knew they wouldn’t; Max had entered the country illegally under mysterious circumstances. In all likelihood, Max was an alias, too.

“But why would they?” Charles finally exclaimed. “I was a prospect! I wasn’t a full member yet, but I was an official prospect!”

No disagreement came from Erik. He finally turned into a slightly rundown strip mall. Among the many businesses lurked a Mexican restaurant with décor that had seen better days. Erik didn’t pause to answer. He walked up to the door and opened it wide, his hand lingering as he went through to keep it open for Charles.

“All it takes is one dissenting vote,” Erik finally said, as if that was answer enough. Which it was, once Charles thought about it. All the club would have to do was call a vote and then the person that wanted to hold him ransom could object to Charles’ entry.

Even with the slight limp, Erik was oddly graceful as he strode to order from the young woman smiling at them from behind the worn counter. Charles saw familiarity between them; Erik had likely been there a few times before.

He let Erik order for both of them and then tried to pay with his credit card. Laughing slightly, the woman pointed to a hand-written sign on the counter that clearly said CASH ONLY.

“I need an ATM,” the professor blurted, turning to Erik.

Erik handed Charles his helmet and withdrew a wallet from the interior of his black Alpinestars jacket. “You can owe me.”

He put down a couple of crisp bills and turned to sit down without waiting for change or taking back his helmet. Charles followed, helmet in his hands. He looked down at the design as he placed it on the table. It was a little flashier than what he expected from Max; a black spade above the forehead with red, black, and gold lines radiating over the top of the white background.

“What time do you have?” Erik interrupted Charles’ study of the helmet.

“Half past,” Charles replied and then chuckled seeing Raven had texted him again.

*Stumped? I win!*

“What’s so funny,” Erik asked, leaning forward. He reached out with his splinted hand and pushed his helmet from between them.

“Raven,” Charles sighed happily. “We’re playing a vocabulary game. We text each other obscure
“Raven,” Erik said and leaned back as if to enjoy the lingering taste of her name on his tongue. The expression struck a nail of peevishness straight through a corner of Charles’ gut. Erik’s greenish eyes cast up thoughtfully, likely remembering Charles’ energetic sister. “Well, Charles, you can’t let her win. Your honor as an Oxford alumni and professor is at stake. Did she go to university, too?”

The peevishness began to wane; obviously Erik hadn’t kept tabs on Raven. “Yes, and she was exceedingly popular. She’s a gorgeous and sharp-witted young woman.” Proud of Raven as only a doting brother can be, he opened a picture of her on his phone and turned it to show Erik. It was from Christmas the year prior.

“Perfection.” An unfettered expression of satisfaction filtered onto Erik’s face. It wasn’t a wide smile by any means, but it carried a softness that Charles often felt when thinking of Raven. “Tell her zaftig.”

“Zaftig…” Charles turned the phone in his hands and typed the word out. “Isn’t that like… curvy?”

“In the best of ways,” Erik snorted softly. “If you ever need to threaten her boyfriends, feel free to use me. With your cardigans and sweater vests, I don’t think you have the right image for it.”

“Does this mean I can take your picture?” Charles asked, ignoring the slight against his dressing habits. Max had never allowed anyone to do so. In fact, he’d used his cigarettes to burn his face out of Polaroids and even broken cameras in his vehemence.

“Better I let you than you get one from Sean,” Erik muttered cryptically.

Charles wondered at that, but had no chance to pry when a plastic tray with food-laden Styrofoam plates, plastic utensils, and a cup was placed before them. The young lady from the counter smiled particularly at Charles. “Are you going tonight?”

Stymied for a moment, Charles glanced at Erik in bemused curiosity. Erik shook his head in response. “No.”

She didn’t question the blunt reply, but threw a wink at Charles as she walked away.

“Does she mean wherever you are drinking tonight?” Charles asked, staring at the three tacos set before him. Each one was double wrapped in soft corn tortillas; nothing like what he was used to. There was no tomato or even cheese. Erik had ordered him three different kinds: carnitas, pastore, and barbacoa. All looked equally delicious.

Erik made a noncommittal noise and started in on his own greasy cabeza tacos. At one point he gestured inelegantly at the cup on the table and then at Charles. So, the drink was his.

The food was much better than Charles expected. He said nothing, content to do little more than open his mouth in order to shove more food within. The drink Erik had ordered him was a delightful rice milk confection that tasted strongly of cinnamon. It was perfect when he mistakenly poured hot sauce on one of his tacos. Charles had never developed his tolerance for spice, despite a love for Indian food. Three tacos were a little much, but Charles put them all away without regrets.

Erik finished his food first and sat quietly, observing Charles. Erik’s staring wasn’t an uncomfortable weight, even knowing how dangerous he could be. Charles was satisfied that his former friend had no designs to draw him back into the outlaw lifestyle. The next step was to find out how dangerous it was to be around him, because, if he was going to be honest, he could already feel himself being
sucked back into orbit around Erik’s personal gravity.

Wiping his mouth with one napkin and his hands with another, Charles returned Erik’s quiet gaze. “So, what do you do for a living now?”

Erik drew in a long breath and slowly sat back. He had grown into a man that used silence as an eloquent part of his answers. After a moment he twitched one shoulder in a shrug. “Motorcycle engine and performance work: Japanese models only. Cash up front.”

Then he leaned forward just enough that both shoulders came off the seat’s backrest. “But what you really want to know is if I’m still a full member of the Hellfire club.”

As ever, Erik went straight to the heart of the matter. Charles nodded. “That’s it, exactly.”

“But why would you want to know?” Erik continued. “Simple curiosity gets you in trouble in this world, Charles. Knowing things gives you an unhealthy value.”

“Personal reasons,” Charles replied, “and you know my curiosity has a thirst that cannot be easily slaked.”

“You’re funeral,” Erik said, shaking his head slightly. “I don’t think you’d be in more trouble than you already are for knowing. My club is Deus intra Machinam; I’m the founder. I’m affiliated with my sponsor still, but nobody else in the club is. I plan to keep it that way.”

“So,” Charles pressed, “you don’t do anything illegal anymore?”

The comment caused Erik to roll his eyes. “Just being in this country is illegal. Though I never get pulled over for my skin color nor carded for my accent. Working under the table is illegal. But I don’t run drugs, guns, or participate in extortion. I’ve specialized in the work that keeps me valuable to my sponsor.”

“You’re still stealing motorcycles,” Charles confirmed quietly. “Collector models.”

“Mostly European models,” Erik nodded. “Collectors are elitist bastards, so it doesn’t matter who has what. My sponsor prefers Ducati: he lacks taste.”

They were interrupted by Charles’ phone pinging with a text. Erik’s expression softened slightly, assuming it was Raven. As Charles checked the message, Erik picked up the tray and stood to throw the plates out.

Callipygous.

Charles couldn’t help it: his bright blue eyes darted swiftly to Erik’s jeans-clad backside as he cleared the tray into the trash. It was definitely an appropriate adjective. Thumbs moving swiftly over the surface of the screen, Charles typed back.

Do I win, if I send you an appropriate illustration?

“What did she say?” Erik asked, sliding back into the seat across from Charles.

“She made a play on zaftig; callipygous,” Charles replied casually, looking down at his phone still. Raven always inspired him to behave badly; it was even worse when they were together. The bad behavior usually devolved into increasingly infantile antics, which Charles would defend with adamant claims of ‘The maturity just isn’t taking.’

“I have no idea what that means,” Erik admitted, reaching across the table for Charles’ drink. He popped the lid up and drank from the edge rather than the straw. Charles wondered if, perhaps, Erik
feared his cardigan was a contagious disease. When they were teens they had never feared drinking from the same cup.

“Nice ass,” Charles stated, trying to play cool while contemplating how to fulfill his quest should Raven take up the gauntlet. Though Erik had granted him permission to take photos, he very much doubted the older man would be keen on modeling for a definition of callipygian.

Erik’s conversational silence dragged long enough that Charles finally looked up at him. The man was staring at Charles with one eyebrow slightly raised, the Styrofoam cup in a holding pattern near his mouth. “Was that a compliment or a definition?”

The phone’s answering ping and the beginning of Charles’ flush were in perfect synch. Charles dropped his face down to read the screen and to conveniently hide his embarrassment. He focused quickly on the phone.

*New game: whoever takes a pic of the best booty wins! And don’t you dare send me one of yours.*

Charles’ blush felt like it could become life threatening. Without looking up at Erik, he croaked, “Definition.”

His face was still a bit flushed when they got back across the street. However, Erik seemed to take no offense. If anything, his overlying grim attitude had lightened considerably. Charles admitted to himself that sacrificing his dignity was an acceptable price.

The curmudgeon security guard that always gave Charles dark looks split his usual glare between them as they walked past his car. Erik didn’t give the man so much as a glance and Charles followed suit. He liked being on the good side of security teams, but he saw no discernible way to scale the battlements currently between them.

At Erik’s motorcycle again, Charles ran his fingers across the Yamaha’s clutch lever. He could see scratches in the aluminum lever’s black finish that were likely from the metal brace. “Is this another R6?”

“R1,” Erik replied, placing his helmet on the tank. “They look alike. By taking all the decals off, I made it harder to tell.”

“1000ccs?” Charles mused, “But this thing looks so light. Isn’t it hard to control?”

“I only really use the power in a straight line or sweeping curves,” Erik nodded. “I doubt anyone can take a liter bike to its full potential. I’ve got soft tires on it, though, so I try.”

“Please don’t try,” Charles sighed, “if you’ll be drinking tonight. You know, why don’t you take my number and call me, if the tacos don’t shield you from whatever rotgut you’re drinking?”

The long gaze Erik settled over Charles was uncomfortable, but the professor saw it through. He wished he knew what Erik was thinking. His grey-green eyes were never so hard to read. It was like Erik had something to protect. “Charles, I’m not nineteen anymore. I’ve hit thirty and I’m in far less danger than I was when we met.”

“Erik,” Charles returned, weight creeping into his voice, “you have a gang of anti-Semitic idiots trying to kill you.”

The older man’s head cocked slightly to the side, his expression grew far more opaque. “You’ve been talking to Darwin. What else did he tell you?”
“Your exploits,” Charles huffed, “have never been well-kept secrets. People talk about you amongst themselves, you know. That’s never changed, even if your name has.”

“I can handle the idiots,” Erik relented. He didn’t stop staring, but the character of the look was less hard. Charles wished again that he could read the man’s mind. What did Erik see when he stared at him like that?

“Fine,” Charles decided on a different tactic. “Where are you drinking tonight?”

“I’m not sure that’s within reason.” This time Erik’s suspicion was obvious.

“I still have questions,” Charles pressed. He knew he was pushing his luck, but a little over an hour simply hadn’t been enough time, after all. Damn his pride for pushing for Thursday.

“I’ll be here Sunday,” Erik countered. He crouched down and unlocked the chain from the front wheel and post. He looped it loosely around his left arm so when he stood he had his hands free to pop the pillion seat off the bike’s tail. With the seat in one hand, he stowed the chain inside the tiny space beneath. A space that was considerable enough for drug running.

“One last question,” Charles stated, seeing he was getting nowhere. He would just have to be patient.

Erik replaced the pillion and threw his bad leg over the side of the motorcycle. Sitting comfortably, he returned his full attention back to Charles. “Let’s hear it.”

Ready to take in the dangerous man’s every movement, Charles fired his best shot. “Why did you kiss me that night?”

Though he must have tried not to give any reactions away, Erik’s brow furrowed and his lips thinned slightly. “You ask too many questions.”

“Sunday, then,” Charles said. It wasn’t a question.

No answer was immediately forthcoming. Erik pulled the helmet over his head and awkwardly threaded the chinstrap through the D-rings. Forgoing the one gauntlet-style glove, he inserted the R1’s key, turned it, pulled the clutch lever in, and hit the ignition. He pulled his right leg up, kept the left one planted, and blipped the throttle in first gear. The R1’s rear tire spun as Erik muscled the bike to the left, peeling out and away in a brief cloud of burning rubber.
Tutorial: Simple Motorcycle Anatomy Primer

Chapter Summary

As it says on the label.

Chapter Notes

I hope this makes everything easier, even though it is a bit craptastic.

Pictured is a Triumph Speed Triple. I used it because it is 'naked' (no plastics/fairings) and because Fassbender had one. Also, I've always liked them and their weird three-cylinder engine.

After I made this, I realized I have a ton of typos. Neither of the bikes pictured have been run very much. Their headers have no discoloration at all. What a waste. Especially the titanium full-system Arrow exhaust.
Surveillance

Chapter Summary

Everyone harasses Charles in one way or another, except Erik who is content to brood. Also, Sean gets his close up.

Chapter Notes

Warning: a singular racial slur appears in this chapter.

Strict Machine Tumblr crap can be found here, including one really awful crack fic thingie for Keyanna. Keyanna spoofed my 'Simple Motorcycle Anatomy Primer' and inspired me to write badness.

Apologies to people that read the raw words over at the kinkmeme! I totally confused an alternator with a magneto.

Finally, I plotted the fic out and this seems to be the halfway point. The smut starts happening within a chapter or so.

“I’ll break your heart
To keep you far from where
All dangers start…”

Elephant, Warpaint

Surveillance

Charles went to the university on Friday morning intending to rework his syllabus for the coming school year. At least one new textbook would come out in time for the new school year. Plus he had several updated articles to pull off EBSCO host before he added them to his list of required reading. The prospect of losing himself in work was a more attractive proposition than saturating in thoughts of Erik. Additionally, he had a little unfinished business in the physics department.

The security team’s regard for him had not improved since his visit thirteen hours previous, but he was getting better at ignoring them. Before going to his shared office on the third floor, he stopped by the physics lab to see Hank.

He wasn’t sure when Hank’s assistant and tutoring hours were, so he counted himself lucky when he managed to find him alone at a computer. The screen was filled with an array of mind-boggling functions and graphs. Charles didn’t look at them, for fear his greeting would start out cross-eyed.

Hank stared at the screen in rapt attention, his fingers flying over the number pad and occasionally keying in letters from the keyboard. His eyes were obscured by the glare from the computer’s
backlighting across his glasses. The same luminous blue light reflected off his pale skin.

“Good morning,” Charles said gently, not wanting to startle the young man. Gingerly, he set a brown paper bag next to the keyboard. “Peace offering.”

Hank turned to the bag, then looked up at Charles. His bright blue eyes were blinking away a glazed look that habitually came to him when he was absorbed by his research. “Professor Xavier. Good morning.”

The young man turned back to the bag. Under the manipulation of long fingers, the paper bag’s folded top gave way and yielded its occupants. Hank reached in and withdrew a large cranberry-orange muffin, studded liberally with walnuts. It was followed by a small carton of milk.

A smile chased confusion from Hank’s unblemished face. He blew a short sigh and held up the muffin, looking past it and up at Charles. “Professor, there’s really no need to give me a peace offering. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Charles nodded, “but I’d hate to jeopardize our friendship with unasked for advice.”

Hank swiveled in his chair, facing Charles properly. His expression was so earnest that Charles felt his heart constrict in sympathy. “I shouldn’t have made the comment about your PhD not being in psychology. Especially when, well, after I thought about it, I started to see you weren’t entirely wrong.”

While the earnestness was surprising, Hank taking the time to think about what Charles had said was not. He had figured the doctorial candidate would examine the possibility from every imaginable angle.

Doing his best to project encouragement, Charles nodded and raised his eyebrows in query. “You know, I was mainly assigning my experiences to you. I had a similar problem when I was a bit younger than you are now.”

The young man smiled ruefully through a fleeting look of understanding. “You were afraid of yourself? I find that difficult to believe after seeing you punch the German terror.”

Charles blanched and then felt the slow burn of embarrassment begin to infuse his cheeks. “You saw that?”

“Darwin showed me the security tapes before they were wiped on Monday,” Hank admitted. “It was educational.”

“Ah,” Charles replied. “Educational in that you see that as academics, we don’t have to think of ourselves as weak or ill-suited to bold action?”

“I suppose there’s that,” Hank nodded, “but I really meant that I used the confrontation to create a problem set for one of the classes I help with. I couldn’t use the security tape, but based on height and weight of the combatants, speed of swing, and—”

“Hank!” Charles gasped, one hand gripping the back of the doctorial candidate’s chair. “You used my idiocy as a problem set in a physics class?”

The brown-haired man nodded, a look of apprehension starting to arrange itself on his features. “Was that one of those times when I lost sight of a person’s feelings, because I only saw the math?”
A vehement shake of Charles’ head put Hank more at ease. “Are you joking? That’s brilliant! How hard did I hit him?”

While truly regretful for hitting Erik, Charles couldn’t help but exult a little in his destructive behavior. His time with the Hellfire club had taught him that much. There was a simple animal pleasure in violence that he doubted human beings would ever evolve past.

“Well, your swing looked good, but I’m not sure because the camera was behind you,” Hank said, suddenly grinning like a conspirator. “The tape quality was kind of poor, too. There are a lot of variables I had to just fabricate, but I guessed your weight and Erik’s and calculated how much force —”

“The solution, Hank,” Charles laughed, noting the use of Erik’s current name. “Please tell me the solution.”

“Oh,” the other laughed back, “I get carried away sometimes. Possibly 120 pounds of force. Not bad, professor.”

“Not even a fraction,” Charles replied with false modesty, “of the force a professional boxer can mete out. Pretty good for an academic, though, wouldn’t you say?”

Hank nodded, his grin still in place. Charles secretly hoped he could keep the reserved young man laughing over his time at the university, but thought his next question might place the mood in jeopardy.

“Have you talked to Erik before?”

The smile faded, but did not drop away. Hank didn’t seem threatened by the question rather he seemed curious. “Only once, but he’s kind of famous among Sean’s professors.”

“Sean’s professors? He attends university?” Charles mused thoughtfully. “How do they know Erik?”

“Sean gave Erik’s number as a guardian,” Hank laughed quietly. “So when he gets in trouble with financial aid or anyone else, Erik gets a call.”

“That must be dreadful,” Charles grimaced. He had only called on his students’ parents in extreme cases. He couldn’t imagine having to talk to somebody like Erik in those situations. “What about Alex? Does he also attend?”

When Hank looked away slightly, Charles noted and underlined the small tell. It seemed Hank was not indifferent to the blond hooligan. He wondered if it was an interest born of dislike or affection. “Alex might start during the summer semester. He wants to learn physics. He thinks it will help him become a better motorcyclist and tech.”

*Curiouser and curiouser,* Charles thought. Perhaps he wasn’t wrong to see similarities between he and Hank after all. “You know, motorcycles are more immediately demonstrative of physics than almost any other form of transportation. They behave more like airplanes than they do cars.”

The young man dropped his gaze, “I suppose. But I have a question for you, if that’s okay?”

“Turn about is fair play,” Charles agreed, though the change in subject was as telling as Hank’s awkwardness.

“Why did you do it?” Hank asked, looking up just enough to see Charles’ face. “Why would you punch a guy like that? And why didn’t he hit you back?”
It wasn’t like Charles hadn’t anticipated the question. He’d rehearsed his answer a thousand times over the past few days. Girding himself, he replied, “About that. It’s complicated.”

Which wasn’t at all the answer he’d repeated aloud and in his head. He’d intended to say something about the threat to Sean’s fingers. It wasn’t going to be a lie, just a sort of subtle misdirection; a change in topic that happened to sound like a reply. It was futile, he knew, but he instinctively shied away from the truth. Like it or not, his past was going to come out; all he was doing was delaying it.

Hank shrugged slightly, wise enough to respect the non-answer. The expression on the young man’s face, though, was telling. There was a connection being formed, Charles guessed, between his earlier comment about his early history and his recent actions.

“It looked complicated,” Hank finally said. “And cool. Darwin may have erased the tape, but I’ll always remember. You’re a brave man, Professor Xavier.”

Feeling a little deflated despite the compliment, he straightened up and gestured lamely at the door. “Thanks, Hank. I’ll just go to the library now. I have some articles to print from EBSCO.”

The mirror of Charles’ previous encouragement on Hank’s features was a little ironic, but Charles took what he could get.

The curmudgeon security guard found him while he was retrieving and printing documents in the library. Normally the guard had nothing to say to Charles, but he noticed the uniformed man was headed straight for him. In response, the professor turned to meet him with as friendly a look as he could fake.

“How can I help you today?” Charles asked congenially. Perhaps, he thought, he could smooth the choppy waters between them. Who knew? Also, respect the station, his mother would say, if not the man.

Charles remained seated, but swiveled his chair to face the man when he neared. He read the security guard’s name to himself: Stryker. Even his name was aggressive.

“Good morning, Professor Javier,” Stryker said, pronouncing his name in the Spanish fashion.

“It’s Xavier,” Charles smiled, pretending to be nonplused and brandished his security tag. “Pronounced like a Z rather than an H. We went over this last month when you took this awful picture of me.”

“Whatever,” Stryker shot, ignoring the name issue completely. “It isn’t a problem yet, but I’ve noticed you seem to come and go to the university without rhyme or reason. Now, of course you’re welcome here, Professor, even though you’re not on the payroll, but could you give us an idea of when you’ll be dropping by? A schedule of some kind?”

The man’s sincerity was seriously compromised by his sarcasm. Charles knew then that salvaging any sort of pleasant working relationship with Stryker would be impossible.

“A schedule,” Charles repeated, scarcely believing his ears. The corners of his mouth turned up a little more. “Why certainly, Mr. Stryker. I’d be delighted to do so; just as soon as everyone on leave does likewise. I’m sure the many professors that come in on their days off won’t mind. In fact, I think the two or three professors you have out on maternity leave will be happy to submit to your sensible request, too.”

Stryker’s response to mockery was, understandably, mute ferocity. He could do nothing, knowing his request was outlandish and unfair. So he stood, glaring hell at Charles. “How about this? Can I
assume we’ll be seeing you every Sunday, since you seem to have a taste for property damage and physical violence?”

Now that, Charles realized, was an unexpected threat. Leaning back in his chair, Charles folded his left arm across his stomach and placed his right hand thoughtfully to his lips. The question was, of course, whether the security tape’s recording was still around. Or, perhaps, Stryker didn’t know it had been erased. Charles decided to play the situation as if a recording existed, in case Darwin’s job was at risk. He would have to talk to the university’s driver later.

The stunt with Darwin’s car could play out heroically, but the issue of punching Erik was far less clear. If it came down to it, Darwin would probably speak on Charles’ behalf concerning the Civic. Unfortunately, there was no satisfactory way to explain the seemingly unprovoked swing.

“That sounds like an accurate assumption,” Charles replied loftily. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to continue researching for my upcoming classes.”

Stryker nodded, lips purse in thoughts of his own. “That sounds like a good plan, Professor.”

***

The problem with Raven, Charles decided, was that she had an uncanny ability to tell the difference between magazine and online asses from real life ones. So far, he was losing. He tried to defend himself by insisting that he couldn’t take photos while he was at the university, but she overturned him by taking photos while she was on the job. Being in Burbank, her supply of shapely asses was never in short supply. Shameless as Raven was, she shot famous and infamous backsides with impunity.

Though, Charles mused, being the recipient of all those images rendered losing a largely philosophical point.

As of Sunday morning, she had him beat by a 3 to 1 ratio, including his pictures from magazines and online sources. The images had stopped during the night except for a 4AM naked and slightly hairy image he wished he hadn’t seen. It wasn’t that he minded a well-shaped masculine ass, but the idea that Raven was seeing it at 4AM on her turquoise bedspread turned his stomach. Raven was beautiful, but thinking of her in a sexual manner was beyond him.

Charles woke around 9AM from fitful sleep and spent half an hour staring at the white ceiling of his apartment. Normally he would have hit the bars in Tempe the night before, but he wasn’t sure he could trust himself under the influence of seeing Erik on Thursday or talking to Hank on Friday.

Thoughts of Erik weren’t difficult to come by; he continually wondered what had happened to the man in the past decade or so. Charles was usually more forward with his relationships. His emotional intelligence was advanced and never the source of any shame, which helped propel him along tricky emotional territory. The question remained; what was his angle with Erik? Of course he wanted to help him, but there was more. Had always been more, or the simple press of Max’s lips would not have haunted him for so long.

With no small amount of frustration, Charles overturned his sheets and headed for the en suite shower. On one hand, it was probably a waste since he was just going to get sweaty again by bicycling to the university. On the other, the shower pounding on his back was usually a lovely meditation. With a plethora of complications beginning to pile up, he sorely needed the respite.

Deus intra Machinam was already at play when Charles made it to the mostly deserted university parking lot. Erik’s silver Tacoma was parked with the tailgate down. The tailgate supported two
collapsible aluminum motorcycle ramps. Next to the Tacoma were two sport bikes. A turquoise Suzuki SV650 and another bike Charles couldn’t readily recognize thanks to the custom orange, black, and grey paint.

The parked motorcycles were not as interesting as the ones in motion. While Sean and Erik stood by, their helmets sitting on the ground, a dark skinned woman with tattooed arms ran a naked sport bike through what looked a wide circle on the rear tire. She stood on the back passenger pegs as she carefully maneuvered the bike. Charles noted that the rear tire didn’t look completely inflated and the rear sprocket was far larger than could be practical.

Nearby, Alex was setting down the rear of a Honda dirt bike after coasting it for several feet on the front wheel. It was a bizarre sibling to the age old wheelie.

Charles settled his bicycle next to the parked motorcycles and walked casually over to stand on Sean’s side, effectively using him as a barrier between he and Erik. Not that a barrier was effective with the height Erik had on Sean.

Erik glanced at Charles for a moment before looking back at his club members without even pausing for a greeting. Sean looked startled seeing Charles, but then grinned in welcome and gave the professor a playful punch in the shoulder. It was heartening, but didn’t make up for Erik’s mysterious snub.

“Come to watch the stunting?” The redhead asked loudly, trying to be heard over the oscillations of two different engines.

“I suppose,” Charles smiled back, thanks to Sean’s enthusiastic greeting his cautious attitude was impaled by a spike of self-satisfied arrogance. “How are your fingers?”

Laughing, Sean raised both hands and wiggled all his fingers. “All good, so far. Um, how about your knuckles? Erik’s face is pretty hard.”

A laugh at Erik’s expense was fine with Charles. “They’re just fine. They were only sore for a few hours. How’s Erik’s face?”

Erik finally turned back again and fixed Charles with a warning look. It was enough of a turn of his face that Charles could see no evidence of the prior bruise. “You’ll have to try harder next time.”

“Next time,” Charles returned cheekily, “I won’t sacrifice my knuckles on the altar of your cheekbone.”

No response was forthcoming from Erik; he turned to the two motorcycles again. Sean, however, gave Charles a thumbs up motion and sidled a little closer. “Hey! Is that a Trek? Or is it something else?”

Charles turned to his bicycle. “Trek, actually. I have yet to use it for any trails.”

The young man made a beeline for the bicycle, but before placing his hands on it, as he obviously intended, he looked back at Charles for permission. “Can I try it out?”

Before Charles could bring his head up from the first downturn of his nod, Sean was already on the bicycle. He pedaled hard and pulled up on the handlebars until the front wheel came up. He laughed as he performed the unmotorized version of a wheelie. He then proceeded to stop and balance the bicycle in place, before bouncing it a little on the back tire.

Another smile crossed Charles’ face. He laughed easily, clapping as Sean dropped the bicycle back
down to both tires and performed a bunny hop. “I doubt anyone can bounce a motorcycle like that. Excellent balance, Sean! Brilliant.”

The smile Sean gave in return was nearly blinding. He jumped off the bicycle and set it back against Erik’s Tacoma. “I have a fixed gear bicycle back at the house. You should see me ride it backwards. Angel, though, she kills that shit. She’s been doing it way longer than Alex and I.”

Charles waved his hand toward the stunting behind him. “Is that Angel? I think my sister would love to meet her.”

Sean’s eyes lit up. “You have a sister? Is she hot?”

The warm expression on Charles’ face died slowly. “She’s as lovely as my uppercut is strong.”

Sean shrugged, “Sure thing Professor X.”

Charles cringed slightly at the name, “Please, call me Charles for now and Professor when we’re in the university.”

“Okay, Charles,” the redhead replied, mischievousness in his eyes. The professor all but cringed. “So, how do you know Erik? Enquiring minds want to know.”

A glance over his shoulder confirmed that Erik wasn’t looking their direction. Charles looked back to Sean, his expression wry. “That’s why you wanted to look at my bike, isn’t it?”

A grin and a careless shrug was answer enough. “Maybe.”

Charles was fine with the response; information flow could be a two-way street. “I could ask you the same.”

“But I asked first,” the redhead retorted, losing none of his good humor. Charles made a note to be careful of underestimating him. For all Sean looked spacy, he had just demonstrated more savvy than he’d given him credit for.

“We were friends as teenagers,” Charles admitted, observing Sean’s thoughtful acceptance of his answer. “How long has he been in Phoenix?”

Slowly, Sean sank back, leaning against the Tacoma’s rear wheel well. “Don’t know, but maybe about ten years or so? Were you in Erik’s old club?”

“No.” It wasn’t exactly a lie since Charles was just a prospect. He’d been allowed to wear the club’s colors, but nothing more would be permitted until he could be voted in. “What’s wrong with Erik’s leg?”

“Don’t know much,” Sean admitted. “His knee has a few old scars, some stitch lines. Some days it bugs him worse than others. Some weeks he pops hydrocodone like crazy. He’s a lot more fun when he’s doped up on a Cherry Bomb night.”

An old wound? If it was causing stoic Erik to resort to the chronic use of hydrocodone, the pain was likely incredible. Charles wondered if it was possible the injury had eventually triggered a cartilage die off. If that were the case, Erik could be suffering from osteoarthritis. Then the comment about hydrocodone and Cherry Bomb sank in.

“He’s mixing alcohol with hydrocodone?” Charles’ brow furrowed in concern before he could stop himself.
Sean shrugged, “It feels pretty awesome, Charles. I have some low dosage, if you want to try it. I can’t get rid of it, so I give it away.”

Why was this conversation derailing into utter madness, Charles wondered? He barely restrained himself from reaching across the distance and taking Sean by the shoulder. “Sean, are you selling prescription drugs?”

“C’mon, where’s your entrepreneurial spirit?” Sean defended, unoffended by Charles’ growing censure. “I’ve gotta subsidize my club somehow. Erik and Angel go through that stuff pretty quickly. When I bought small supplies, it was almost five bucks a pop. Now I’ve wised up and buy in bulk and it’s more like a buck a pop.”

“This is mad,” Charles exclaimed. He had all but forgotten his fact-finding mission. “Does Erik know about this?”

The lack of offense did not preclude Sean’s expression losing its smile. The young man was beginning to look confused. “Yeah, of course he does. Look, hydrocodone is a prescription drug. It isn’t illegal. Besides, Erik doesn’t have a legal way of getting it. And I sure as hell do not want to return to the days when he was taking over-the-counter pain meds. Alex was freaking out because he thought Erik might buy opium from the Angels.”

“It is still illegal, Sean,” Charles explained in his professorial voice. “And if you were to be discovered, the university would have you expelled. You could even be reported to the police and formally charged.”

“Whoah, professor,” the redhead balked. He moved away from the Tacoma to stand straight. “I thought you were Erik’s friend from the old days. Are you actually going to report me? ‘Cause, seriously, I don’t ever take hydrocodone into school. That’s a rule. The only time it comes here is when I forget to take it out of my SV.”

Sympathy welled up in Charles’ heart, but he knew he would have to be firm. “I know about Erik’s legal status. Did you consider the implications of using him as your emergency contact here? Think about it. Don’t you think he might be questioned, if you were caught? What if the police decided to investigate him?”

Honest concern manifested in Sean’s lean body as he considered Charles’ words. His usual fluid bonelessness evaporated and left him standing rigidly before Charles. His head titled down and his pale eyes darted left and right as he worked through the many implications. Sean finally looked back up at Charles, his expression gutted.

“It seems like such a small thing, though,” Sean protested weakly. “It’s just hydrocodone. I need to think about this.”

Charles did reach out then and touch Sean’s shoulder. “Thinking is good. I promise you, Sean, I will never breathe a word to anyone about this. No matter what you decide.”

For a moment Sean remained unmoving. Charles slowly withdrew his hand from his shoulder, letting the boy have a little space. He was totally unprepared, therefore, when Sean surged forward and embraced him.

Eyebrows speeding for his hairline, Charles awkwardly returned the hug. He’d had students in Oxford breakdown and cry in his office, but usually he could see it coming. Those were the only times he reached out to a student with a comforting hug. Many of his colleagues would never do so; between the stiffness of academia and the concerns of fraternization, it was de rigueur to avoid
physical contact. Charles, however, had never been able to withhold his warmth and support.

Sean was not crying, just expressing relief and appreciation, but there was no way Charles could hold back. His side of the embrace lost awkwardness and simply became comfortable.

As abruptly as he surged forward, a few moments later, Sean jerked back, face stained pink with embarrassment. He looked down at the asphalt, and shifted weight from one foot to the other. “Yeah, I’m going to think about it, Prof. Promise.”

“It’s Charles. Remember?”

“Nah,” Sean replied, a lighter look brightening his face again. “If you can fuck up Darwin’s Civic, Erik’s R6, and then punch him in the face, you’re practically a member. That means you need a club name. So, Prof will have to be the placeholder until we find a better one.”

“You’re kidding,” Charles protested. “I don’t need a club name. But since you mentioned it, what are the names in Deus?”

“I’m Banshee,” Sean replied, “because I got pulled over in Cave Creek so many times when I had a Two Brothers exhaust on my GSXR.”

“Are they that loud?” Charles asked, curious.

“Yes,” Sean shrugged, “but D&Ds are way louder. The Ruff Ryders once got together with one of the cruiser clubs to punk the Cave Creek police. They sat outside the city limit and gunned their engines for like an hour. The decibel law is kind of stupid; I mean all the old people in Cave Creek probably can’t even hear it.”

“You’re getting side tracked,” Charles chuckled. “What’s Alex’s name?”

“Oh, Alex is Havok,” Sean returned, “because he used to cause so much trouble. He’s calmed down since he got a job. Angel’s is just that. She brought her name over from PMS. It is kind of a play on her tattoos, but also pretty sarcastic, I guess? She’s more of a devil.

“And Erik’s Magneto to us, but he’s got way more names than that. PMS call him all sorts of shit, but all in a sort of sadistic love fest kind of way. He only answers to Magneto, though. The SS call him the Angry Kike which I think he sort of likes.”

“Magneto,” Charles mused. It was somewhat fitting, in that vintage motorcycles used magnetos for firing spark plugs. Erik was definitely a good candidate for an ignition metaphor, even if he was only vintage by the standards of the company he currently kept.

“You know,” Sean continued, “you should totally come out to Cherry Bomb. We usually go on Thursdays to hang out with PMS and watch the dancers. Why don’t you come this week?”

“Well…” Charles sighed, putting on his best diplomatic expression. Across from him, Sean’s hopeful eagerness dissipated. “Since you put it so nicely. I’ve been wanting to pay a visit anyway. Thursday is as good a day as any, but if you have classes on Friday, I better see you leave by midnight.”

A smile broke over Sean’s face. He pumped his fist once, spun on the ball of his sneakered foot, and raced over to the stunt area. Angel was picking her motorcycle up off the asphalt where she’d dropped it. Alex was paused on the dirt bike, pointing at the rear sprocket and explaining something to… Hank? Charles wondered when the shy doctoral candidate had turned up. Erik was watching the two without any apparent interest.
“Hey guys! Guys!” Sean exclaimed as he took the bit of asphalt that was roughly the most central between them. “Prof’s totally coming to Cherry Bomb on Thursday. He goes there sometimes, anyway!”

Charles’ right hand slowly gravitated to the lower half of his face. Why was Sean making this an announcement? Moreover, why was he lying about him having been there?

Reactions were mixed. From under her floral helmet, Angel started to laugh. Alex’s raised eyebrows were the only visible part of his expression. Hank’s careful smile hinted that he knew far more than he had let on when they’d spoken on Friday. As for Erik, his jaw tightened for a moment and thunder was low on the horizon of his eyes.

Charles spread his hands in a helpless motion. How was he to know he’d just been caught up in some juvenile game Erik’s club was playing? He’d definitely been correct in telling himself to be wary of Sean. The boy had a ruthless manipulative streak that belied his stoner façade.

“I thought he looked familiar,” Angel said, her voice muffled under the helmet. “I must have seen him when he was sticking money in my garter.”

Charles couldn’t help it, his jaw dropped slightly. Angel was the stripper Darwin had mentioned the week prior. As he gaped slightly, she kicked the bike’s stand down and pulled her helmet off, revealing a beautiful Latina face. “Yeah, you were wearing khakis and a blue cardy that matches your eyes. You tipped me a fifty for a lap dance. I wouldn’t have remembered except you make a cardy look sexy.”

The blatant lie, combined with an accurate depiction of his wardrobe made Charles sputter. How could she know? What was going on? Why was she implicating him?

He glanced at Erik, his hands going from spread innocence to up and defensive. The other man’s expression wasn’t helping; he looked positively annoyed. It was as if Charles had engaged in carnal activity with a friend’s little sister. Charles didn’t want to think about the repercussions that could come from betraying Erik’s trust like that.

Racking his memory, he tried to remember the last time he’d worn the light blue cardigan. He only wore it when he wanted something, because it brought out his eyes dramatically. Then he remembered; he’d worn it Thursday when he and Erik had gone out to eat. The cashier at the Mexican dive had been a little too friendly.

“I’m offended you don’t remember,” Charles suddenly shot back calmly, “what happened after the lap dance. You know, the private show I didn’t have to tip you to get?”

She winked and played a long with him. “Oh, well, I only remember, you know, memorable things. If I don’t remember, it doesn’t reflect very well on you. However, I do have some video of the most critical moment, if you want to see.”

Angel reached into one pocket of her baggy, low-slung jeans and retrieved a phone. Grinning broadly, she sauntered over to him as she tapped and slid her finger across the screen. Nodding with satisfaction, she turned the screen toward Charles.

It was a short video taken at the Mexican place. It began showing the back of Charles head and Erik in profile while he stood at the trash receptacle. The feature, of course, was Charles turning from his phone to gaze at Erik’s ass. The expression of appreciation was, in Charles’ opinion, remarkably clear despite his face being in profile.
“That’s interesting,” he deadpanned. He was going to kill Raven. “Also, it isn’t what you think.”

Angel’s eyes lit up in unholy glee. “Does it matter what I think?”

Oh, that was really not the response he wanted to hear.
Chapter Summary

Wherein Charles experiences PMS.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for lateness. Next chapter should be on time. Also, there are tons of OFCs in this chapter, because I'm not aware of many Latina characters in the X-Men universe. Though the name 'Machete' seems popular, the characters use it here mostly for laughs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Assassin, she dominates me
she hangs out in cars, motorcycles, and limousines,
she fills her tank with adrenaline...

Gasolina, Daddy Yankee

Ignite

“Charles, a word,” Erik cut through both Charles’ apprehension and Angel’s mischief. He beckoned the professor to him with an abbreviated flick of his fingers. Though he still wore an annoyed look, his baleful expression was focused on Angel.

Curious, but also relieved, Charles walked toward Erik and fell into step with him as the taller man moved away from the group. Charles kept his tongue, if Erik had something to say it would behoove him to let the man make the first move.

“If you give Angel an opening,” Erik began, managing to sound only slightly exasperated, “she and the piranhas will eat you alive.”

“Did you see that video?” Charles asked calmly, while feeling anything but. It seemed a little ridiculous to worry, but ridiculousness had never stood in his way before.

Erik shook his head once in negative. To Charles’ immense relief, the man betrayed no interest in the video whatsoever. “I don’t need to. You have no idea the vast catalogue of video they have of everyone. If she thinks they hit a nerve, they’ll mine it.”

Charles’ relief at Erik having not seen the video died as he processed the words. “It gets worse?”

“There’s a reason I got rid of texting,” Erik replied firmly. “I could handle being sent videos they’ve made of me, but then they started text-bombing me pictures and videos of kittens. Five hundred texts with attachments in five minutes, Charles.”

There was a war being waged within Charles. He was torn by the horror of just what the so-called
Mexican Lesbian Stunting crew could do to him and the utter hilarity that was texting Erik five hundred pictures of kittens. Fearsome Erik of Deus intra Machinam, the German Terror, the former Mad Max of the Hellfire club; his texting forced into surrender by an army of adorable infant felines.

“Were they different kittens or was it the same one?” Charles asked innocently. One fun thing he’d loved about Max had been his occasional inability to tell when somebody was teasing him. Charles had always assumed it was part of his mysterious German up-bringing. He was aware that he was dangerously close to bursting into laughter. The warm tingle of tears threatened to encroach his vision.

“How should I know?” Erik snorted. “I didn’t open them all.”

“What were they doing? Wearing costumes?” Charles continued in feigned seriousness. “Were they sleeping? Playing with puppies?”

“I don’t know. Doing kitten things,” Erik shrugged, exasperation coming back into his voice. Charles found his mounting irritation tantalizing. “There may have been puppies.”

“Just how many of these pictures did you look at?” The professor continued, tilting his head to the side and giving his best impression of concern.

“Why are you so interested,” Erik finally returned, his brow furrowed in growing annoyance, “in pictures of kittens?”

“I just wanted to see how long I could get a so-called thug to talk about them,” Charles shrugged. A smile migrated from his bright blue eyes to his lips where it nearly burst forth as laughter. “I hoped it would make you look softer, but it seems to have done quite the opposite.”

Erik’s hands were roughly at waist height as he spoke, but when he twigged to Charles’ teasing, they dropped minutely in defeat. For a moment he went back to his wordless staring, which was disappointing. Then a slight twitch at one corner of his mouth announced the taller man’s smile.

“Charles,” he sighed, shaking his head, “you’re on your own with Angel. Her membership in Deus was contingent on not taking any pictures of me, but you? You’re fair game.”

“God forbid she and Raven ever meet,” Charles chuckled. Then he recalled what Sean had said about the hydrocodone. He didn’t want to bring up Erik’s usage yet, but he was curious about Angel’s. If Raven ever did meet Angel, he wouldn’t want her to pass Raven any bad habits. He made a mental note to ask Erik about it over drinks at Cherry Bomb, providing Erik didn’t take hydrocodone Thursday.

“Have you told Raven?” Erik asked suddenly. Charles almost didn’t hear the question, it was pitched so low. He didn’t have to be told what Erik meant.

“Not exactly,” Charles sighed. “She knows I’ve met a group of stunters here at the university. She’s excited that there are women stunting here.”

“Better you tell her,” Erik said firmly, “than she show up thinking she’s going to surprise you. I can’t imagine she’s changed that much.”

“She’s too busy right now,” Charles commented thoughtfully, “but as she is little more than four hours away, depending on traffic, it is a distinct possibility.”

“Four hours?” Erik asked. “Is she in LA?”
Charles nodded, pushing a stray lock of hair out of his eyes. He didn’t really want to talk about Raven. She was trouncing him on their perverted little game. How she would react to learning Max was still alive didn’t bear thinking about. “More or less.”

He abruptly turned away, signaling the end to that topic by indicating Sean and Angel. Sean was wearing his helmet and facing Angel from across the stripped down motorcycle she’d kept on the rear wheel. “What are they doing?”

“Practicing,” Erik provided. “Angel’s former club are stunters. We’re not, but learning how to use a motorcycle unconventionally improves general riding skills. Increases muscle memory and develops balance.”

“Can you do that?” Charles asked, gesturing at Angel and Sean, though they weren’t doing anything interesting yet. It would be a treat, he thought, to see Erik move a bike around like Angel or Alex had. The man had never lost his natural grace or animal dignity. Erik in motion was a joy to behold. Like many of the dancers and athletes Charles had met over the years, Erik fully inhabited his body, injured or not.

“I prefer racing,” Erik replied, which was neither a yes nor a no. Charles knew very well Erik would leave it at that if allowed. He was beginning to think ‘evasive’ was the man’s new default.

“Can you do it or not?” It was anyone’s guess if Charles was more stubborn than he was intelligent. He possessed untapped wells of both traits.

“That’s my Honda F4i,” Erik shrugged, gesturing to the motorcycle Sean was gassing into a wheelie. “With that pizza-sized sprocket, it isn’t good for anything but stunting. It redlines at 45MPH. Despite all 599ccs, a 50cc Yamaha Zuma could beat it in a race.”

“I wondered about the sprocket,” Charles admitted. “How does it help?”

“It wheelies easier, among other things,” Erik explained. “McCoy can probably explain it better to you. He and Alex have been discussing gearing since he showed up.”

“I think Hank likes Alex,” Charles said quietly. Beside him, Erik remained unimpressed. “By the way, either you give me your number or I get it from Sean or Angel.”

“Why would you call me?” Erik replied, the beginning of a scowl edging into his voice. “You know you can usually find me here on Sundays.”

Erik also had stores of stubbornness rarely seen in modern society. Luckily, Charles was used to dealing with stubborn people; Raven was every bit as bad as he. “That’s a ridiculous question. Frankly, I’m uncomfortable that our association is being kept to my employer’s parking lot. Security hates me enough as it is.”

“I don’t think Cherry Bomb counts as your employer’s parking lot,” Erik countered. “If you survive the experience, I’ll give you my number.”

He sighed and placed his callused right hand on Charles’ left scapula. The warmth of his uninjured hand quickly bled through his cardigan. The physical heat had nothing on the havoc Erik’s presence was playing on Charles’ senses. So close, he could smell the faint scent of exhaust fumes, tire rubber, and cigarettes. It should have been an awful mélange, but it was intoxicating.

“The piranhas will probably eat you alive.”

Blinking his way back to sanity, Charles focused on Erik’s chiseled face with some difficulty.
“Piranhas? Who?”

“The exhaust fumes must be getting to you,” Erik smirked, taking his hand back and crossing his arms nonchalantly. “Angel’s former club, PMS. I don’t know what they have on you from dinner the other night, but your reaction was enough to indicate their long-term interest. You better hope they never get your number.”

“I like kittens,” Charles smiled back, all his arrogance and cheek loading the statement like a gun. A gun, he hoped, that was not going to be used to shoot him in the face.

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It looked like bike night at Cherry Bomb. There were a score of motorcycles out front of the club, predominantly red, stripped of most of their plastics, sporting engine guards, with grip tape plastered to the top of their tanks.

Within the ranks of crimson Sean’s SV stood out like a beacon. The SV’s turquoise paint was especially prevalent, nestled as it was within the midst of red. Both Sean’s green helmet and Angel’s floral helmet were hanging from the helmet loops like fiberglass saddlebags. Charles couldn’t help but wonder which of two had played pilot.

Less noticeable was Erik’s black R1. It was near the end of the line and his helmet was nowhere to be seen. Charles supposed he’d taken it inside the club with him. Between people trying to kill him and everything he’d heard of PMS, Charles could hardly fault him a little paranoia.

There were several women loitering around the bikes, smoking, laughing, and arguing. None of them were wearing red, but their ease around the bikes made their ownership obvious. Most of them were wearing hoodies in the evening chill, but a few were proudly sporting tight, sleeveless, shirts with plunging necklines. Cleavage and impressive biceps were displayed in abundance.

Responsible man that he was, Charles had taken a cab. Bicycling wouldn’t have been a problem, but he was worried his Trek would be stolen. The thievery in Phoenix was rampant, not relegated to automotive pursuits. Darwin had explained the meth problem in Phoenix was practically at epidemic levels and spurred most of thievery.

He approached the club on foot, pleased to see Sean standing easily around all the Latina women, getting teased. It was obvious the redhead enjoyed the attention. Occasionally they would show each other the faces of their phones and laugh.

When Sean glanced past his phone and saw Charles, the professor braced himself internally for the coming greeting and resulting piranha-like attack Erik had warned him about.

“Prof!” The redhead called, needlessly raising his arm for Charles’ attention.

Many of the women followed Sean’s look. When they saw Charles, laughter began to ricochet around the group. Rapid fire Spanish followed, far too fast and overlapped for Charles to try to decipher.

Charles smiled congenially at the women and advanced on Sean. “Hello. I don’t suppose a translation is forthcoming is it?”

Sean’s read hair swung about with the force of the negative shake of his head. “Probably not. That might be a good thing, though, ‘cause all I can hear is a lot of swearing.”

One of the women, sporting a wide pink-tipped mohawk and thick eyeliner, looked about Sean’s
age. She grinned at Charles. A diamond sparkled beneath her lower lip as she laughed, “Sexy librarian! Holy Mother of God, a sexy librarian punched the gimp shark!”

A few others came closer, crowding around to look Charles over. Charles looked down at himself. He wasn’t wearing anything dowdy, he thought. He’d opted for jeans, a pair of Italian leather shoes Raven had bought him, and a casual button up. Of course, the night was chill, so he had opted to wear a black cardigan, but he didn’t see how it made him look… bookish.

“I couldn’t believe Lupe’s video,” another woman laughed, slapping her knee. “But look at him!”

“You like Jaws’ ass!”

“Shut up, puta-face, you like Jaws’ ass, too!”

“Si, guey!”

“Pinche shark doesn’t have an ass! More like hinges! Sexy Librarian has ass!”

“Can I touch it, Sexy Librarian? It might make me straight!”

“Touch it, Banshee! It might make you homo!”

Charles was every bit as overwhelmed as he suspected he would be, but he kept an open smile in place. The ecstatic teasing was ridiculous enough that he was finally overcome with laughter. The women of PMS were so enthusiastic in their teasing, that it failed to offend him. It was good-natured orneriness, not mockery, and it did him no harm.

His laugh infected many of the women near him as well as Sean. Soon the whole group was laughing hysterically. Through her hilarity, the woman with the mohawk, pounded Charles on the shoulder.

“You’re okay, Sexy Librarian!” she declared. “Most of the gimp shark’s dates don’t survive Thursday night, but you might.”

“We’re not,” Charles smiled, patting her shoulder back. “We’re not dating. He brings dates—?”

“They’re not dating! Sexy Librarian’s ass is fair game!”

“Make pinche shark touch it! It might make him bi!”

The pink-mohawk girl smirked conspiratorially up at Charles, “Oh, c’mon, Sexy Librarian, you should hit that.”

“Cupcake,” another woman hooted, “he already did hit that. With his fist!”

The woman, Cupcake, clapped her hands in glee, “That’s right! Holy fuck, Texas, when you go back inside, make ‘em play ‘Smack That’ by Akon!”

Another girl, this one with a stylishly battered straw cowboy hat, only nodded. She was wearing, perhaps, the biggest belt buckle Charles had ever seen, depicting a rodeo scene. If stereotypes were to be believed, she was well-nicknamed.

“Erik’s already inside,” Sean finally managed to tell Charles. “He and Machete are having drinks. If Don Julio is on the table, Machete probably has serious business. If you see Negra Modelo, all is well. Erik doesn’t have an alcohol tell, but he keeps some really old whiskey locked in his tool box, if you want to impress him.”
Charles chuckled, “Why are you telling me this?”

The redhead’s face grew earnest and he took Charles’ hand in an overhand grip. “Because, Prof, he’s a scary motherfucker, but he’s our scary motherfucker. And since you showed up, he’s going through a pack a day and all but sleeps in the garage. Fuck, he’s repaired three transmissions, ported two cylinder heads, and rebuilt a Hayabusa engine. Never mind all the dynotuning out by the Glendale airport.”

“Productivity is a good thing,” Charles hedged, though he was secretly thrilled to find out Erik was indeed affected by his presence. “I’m sure he has good reasons that have nothing to do with me.”

“He usually only gets that way when he has a situation with the Black King,” Sean pressed. “This is different. We think you could help.”

It was impossible for Charles to not react to the mention of a Black King. His eyes narrowed for a moment, remembering the Hellfire club’s mysterious founder. Charles was sure he’d been called the Black Bishop, though. Setting the thought aside, he turned his narrowed eyes into a catlike smile. “I’ll try to help. Can you tell me what he needs help with?”

“His sense of humor,” Cupcake snorted. “Tell him you want to text him. He’s such an old guy that he doesn’t know how to text.”

“I think he’s allergic,” Charles retorted, “to texted kittens.”

The crowd broke into yet more riotous hilarity. Cupcake leaned forward, grabbed Sean’s hand from Charles’ and turned him toward her. “Banshee, please tell me you’ve shown Sexy Librarian some of our gifs!”

Sean shook his head, “I will CC, but my club founder comes first. You know the sort of sacrifices he’s made for us. For Angel.”

The young woman sighed and though she kept Sean’s arm in her hands, she turned to look at Charles. “Okay, seriously, Sexy Librarian. We fuck with Magneto all the time, but we also consider Deus our brother chapter. And pinche Magneto is like the biggest asshole brother ever, but he’s still a brother. So, remember; PMS can destroy your life.”

“So my sister tells me,” Charles smiled softly. “I consider myself warned, if that’s what that was.”

“Texas,” Cupcake continued and released Sean’s arm. “Can you take him in to see Magneto?”

The girl with the cowboy hat nodded, “Si, guey.”

Charles looked over at Sean, “Are you two not old enough to go inside?”

Sean sighed and held his hands up in melodramatic surrender. “Nope, but soon. Alex is, but he had to work tonight. Angel is working tonight, too, but she’s already inside.”

“I’ll see you a bit later then,” Charles replied, taking Sean’s hand since it was free again. He shook the redhead’s hand firmly, as if they were making a promise, which, Charles decided, he was.

Texas took him to the main door which was flanked by two bouncers with flashlights and excess muscles. There was a line of male university students waiting outside, looking impatient. None of them knew Charles, which was probably fortunate, but they gave him dirty looks as Texas led him past the queue all the same.
One of the bouncers gave Charles a mocking look before turning to Texas with an indulgent smile, "Male to female ratio is borderline. You go in there with this guy and I can't let you out without him."

The girl shrugged, "I can leave him here and get Machete or Magneto to bring him in."

Both bouncers raised their eyebrows at that, clearly reassessing him. Charles chuckled at their reactions, his arrogance renewing its residency. "Don't worry, gentlemen, I'll convey your erstwhile vigilance to the appropriate people."

"ID," the first bouncer stated. Charles already had it out of his wallet and handed it over quickly. The man shone his flashlight on it and pursed his lips. "East Coast, huh? You sound British."

"I just enunciate very clearly," Charles explained facetiously. "People mistake my pronunciation all the time."

The bouncer looked back up from the ID skeptically. "Right. You must be friends with Machete with a line like that. Try to behave in there, Mr. Javier."

"Xavier," Charles sighed, finding Phoenix's predilection for Spanish pronunciations beginning to wear on him. "More Z and less H."

Cherry Bomb was the sort of club that tried to bludgeon the senses with its full arsenal at all times. The music was loud, the bass pounding. Multiple sticks of sandalwood incense were burning behind the two main bars. The light rig above the dance floor flashed with enough contrast-colored lights that Charles was shocked nobody was falling into epileptic fits.

The dance floor was sunken, punctuated with small lit platforms with poles. These circular platforms were occupied, not by staff, but by drunken patrons. Despite the relatively early hour, the floor was packed with writhing bodies. Multiple girls were crowding the pole platforms and gyrating for the assembled crowd. Occasionally, Charles would see men laughingly stuff dollar bills into some of the women's pockets, boot tops, or whatever was handy.

Every night at Cherry Bomb was amateur pole-dancing night. Charles didn't see any public nudity, but he had no doubt that such things happened. For that very reason, he supposed, the security presence in the club was strong. He wondered what sort of insurance the place had to maintain; a fall from one of the platforms would likely be financially cataclysmic.

There were two more platforms flanking each bar with lit floors that were each impaled with metal poles. They were elevated enough that none of the patrons could scale them. Rather, each pole was staffed by Cherry Bomb's own, provocatively-clad, women. They enthusiastically displayed expert knowledge on how to best spin, climb, and slide around the poles.

Above the bar was another platform, sans pole. It had silver curtains behind it and a long loop of crimson fabric hooked to the wall from the ceiling between the edge of the dance floor and the bar. Charles supposed special displays were likely performed there.

Though he searched all the platforms, Charles did not see Angel. He leaned in to ask Texas where she was as she led Charles around the perimeter of the dance floor, toward the showcased bar. He hesitated, though, when he saw Erik at the corner of the bar.

It was easy to spot the man since he was taller than most of the people present and far more striking in his habitual intensity. There was something about Erik that always seemed tight, as if he was forever poised on the edge of springing.
Erik was wearing his black Alpinestars jacket again and his spade helmet was on the bar under one elbow. He was standing with all his weight on his left leg, which could mean his right knee was acting up again. Next to him sat a hard-looking woman with deeply scored laugh lines around her eyes. Shaded black-work tattoos depicting well-dressed skeletons covered both her arms. She shared some of Cupcake’s facial structure, Charles noted. He wondered if they were related.

Erik was in the midst of pouring a shot of Don Julio for the woman as Texas and Charles drew up to the bar. They both looked up as the tequila was set back on the bar. Erik’s expression remained serious, but the Latina woman’s expression turned from stern to considering.

“Is this the professor?” she asked, her Mexican accent stronger than Erik’s German.

Texas nodded, but didn’t elaborate. The older woman reached out and pushed the younger woman’s hat down over her eyes. “You never shut up. Get out of here, I can’t hear myself think.”

Texas flashed an embarrassed grin, turned, and all but ran into the crowd. Erik and the woman both watched her go.

As soon as Texas was lost to sight, the woman turned back to Charles and looked him over. The professor waited, letting her make her assumptions. Without looking away, she reached over to Erik’s empty shot glass and filled it with more Don Julio.

“Wolf in sheep’s clothing,” she stated at last and slid Erik’s glass to Charles. “You can dress like a sheep, but there’s something more in there.”

“Thank you for the drink.” Charles took the glass in hand, but did not remove it from the bar. “You have me at a disadvantage; you already know me, but I don’t know you.”

“Call me Machete, miho,” she smirked, raising her glass. “Erik and I are blood, but I hear you and he are blood, too. That makes you part of the family.”

“Please call me Charles.” He raised his tequila to match, and added quickly, “but I’m not a part of any club.”

Her brown eyes crinkled with an easy grin. “Did I say shit about pinche clubs, Charles? Fuck no. What kind of professor are you? Some guerro that thinks he knows better than a little brown chola?”

“Well,” Charles replied, hoping he was saying the right thing, “considering the company we keep, I’d say we’re equally foolish.”

The woman paused, her eyes tightening and her lips thinning. Too late Charles remembered Sean’s warning about the presence of Don Julio at the table. But then Machete burst out in a laugh and clinked her glass against his.

“To foolishness,” she laughed and tossed the glass back.

“Foolishness,” Charles agreed, relief flooding his body before he flooded his mouth with the expensive shot of blue agave alcohol.

Tequila wasn’t Charles’ drink of choice and never would be, but he found the Don Julio surprisingly smooth and complex. He swished the burning liquid around his mouth a moment to appreciate it before he swallowed. It burned on the way down and warmed him as it went.

When he looked back at Machete she was nodding approvingly at Erik. “He knows how to drink. I think I like him.”
Erik shrugged, a hint of amusement hovering over his lips. “He’s improved since last we drank together.”

Charles snorted. The last time they had drank together had been when they crashed a house party. All the guests had brought bottles of whatever they had stolen from their parents’ liquor cabinets. They had poured everything in the house’s bathtub. The flavor had been foul, but Max’s grin had been wicked as he’d handed Charles a full plastic cup of the toxic concoction.

“I hope I can say the same of you,” he replied.

Machete nodded and stood away from the bar. She pushed the Don Julio across to the bartender’s side of the bar. “Angel’s up soon so I need to go bribe the DJ. You two have fun.”

Charles grinned, “Yes, ma’am. Play something she hates.”

Machete’s grin in response was full of wickedness and gold. “Oh, there’s no doubt of that, Professor Charles. No doubt of that, at all. Before I go, though…” She withdrew her phone from the front pocket of her jeans. “I want a picture of you two.”

Erik shook his head. “No.”

Charles, however, was game. He moved right into Erik’s space and looped his hand under the taller man’s arm and up to the leather covering his back. “You better hurry. He hates having his picture taken.”

If anything, Machete’s smile intensified into a near-psychotic grin. Her eyes were obscured, however, by her phone as she held it for the picture. “Now, I know I like you.”

She lowered the phone when the picture was taken and turned it about for them to see. Erik didn’t bother looking, but Charles laughed at the image as he took the phone from her. It was a good picture of him. Each corner of his mouth pointed to slightly flushed cheeks. His blue eyes were bright and his hair charmingly disheveled.

By contrast, Erik looked terrifying. His head was tilted down slightly, foreshortening erasing the distance between his piercing eyes and his serious German brow. His mouth was set in a firm line of displeasure. He looked absolutely murderous even though he wasn’t looking at the camera.

“I’m glad he’s not looking at me,” Charles admitted, delighted, and handed the phone back.

“Give me your number,” Machete said, “and I can send it to you. That is, if you want a picture of a murderous-looking vato in your phone.”

Laughingly, Charles complied without hesitation, “And I can send it to you. That is, if you want a picture of a murderous-looking vato in your phone.”

Next to him, Erik snorted a laugh of his own. “So trusting, Charles.”

Machete looked straight up at Charles and winked. “Don’t worry; I’m not going to send you a thousand kittens. I’ll see you boys later.”

Erik nodded, his eyes flicking to Charles once she was lost to the crowd. “You’ll regret giving her your number.”

Charles shook his head and raised a hand to get the bartender’s attention. “No, I won’t. You realize this will be the first time in my life I’ll have a picture of you?”

“You won’t be the last,” Erik replied sardonically. “You can count on that.”
Shrugging, Charles gave Erik a smile, “That will be a nice change.”

The bartender approached and took the Don Julio and Charles’ request for whatever passed as the best bourbon Cherry Bomb had to offer. He admitted that his expectations weren’t very high. The woman nodded and promised to see what she could do.

Moments later, Charles had a tumbler of decent bourbon in hand. Following tequila with bourbon didn’t seem like a good idea, but he craved the courage and lowered inhibitions alcohol could grant.

“How much Don Julio did you have?” Charles began, looking to Erik.

Erik shook his head, his expression serious again. “Two. I would have had a third, but you showed up.”

Charles took a slow sip of his bourbon, savoring the smoky burn on his tongue. It gave him time to decide on how best to phrase his next question. He went with blunt. “Have you taken any hydrocodone today?”

“That’s why I would have had a third,” Erik replied smoothly. “Sean told me he’s not going to sell it anymore.”

The up swell of pride in Sean’s decision was far more potent than the liquid courage Charles was beginning to feel in his veins. “He’s a good boy, that Sean.”

“You do know he doesn’t get it from a pharmacy,” Erik continued, watching the progression of emotion on Charles’ face. “It doesn’t change anything.”

“Yes it does,” Charles retorted. “Buying for someone who can’t get it over the counter is completely different than selling it to people that don’t need it. Can’t you go to a free clinic, Erik?”

Sighing, Erik shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about this. Ask me something else.”

“I’m not asking you what happened,” Charles soothed. “Tell me what kind of problems you’re having with it. Maybe I can help. The university has a physical rehabilitation section in their medical department, you know.”

“Unless you can schedule me in for a knee replacement,” Erik scowled, “there’s nothing you can do. All the glucosamine and collagen Angel forces on me hasn’t done anything.”

“Glucosamine and collagen,” Charles repeated, far too quietly to be heard over the music. Angel was a smart girl, Charles thought fondly, for plying Erik with products that would best promote healthy joints.

Bonus points for her, he mused, looking at Erik’s face, since collagen also did wonders for the skin. Not that he could really tell if it was having any sort of effect. It was darling, in a way, how Erik’s club tried to take care of him with pain killers and supplements. He wondered what part Alex played in all that.

“So the joint is wrecked?” Charles persisted. “Are you still taking the supplements Angel’s giving you?”

Glancing at Charles in exasperation, Erik turned back to the bar and raised his empty shot glass meaningfully. “I told you to ask me something else, Xavier, now do it.”

“Does Angel have a reason to take hydrocodone?” Charles sighed.
“She told me she takes it for her monthly,” Erik replied. “She’s an adult, Charles, and I’d be a hypocrite to dissuade her.”

“No,” Charles responded, his voice taking on heart-felt emotion, “you wouldn’t. Erik, if your knee is as bad as I think it is, I don’t think there’s room for comparison. Certainly, Raven also has terrible cramps, but your knee is quite different. Here, let me see.”

Charles took a step back from the bar. Careful of the crowd around them, he sank down into a crouch and gingerly laid his hands on either side of Erik’s right knee. “Flex it.”

Looking at Charles like he was mad, Erik paused as his glass was filled, likely with more tequila. He said nothing, but his expression conveyed all Charles needed to know. Erik threw back the shot then looked back down, clearly incredulous. Gradually, he bent his leg to a 135-degree angle.

Erik’s face became stoic as ever, but Charles’ did not. Beneath Erik’s jeans, beneath heated skin and sinew, Charles felt the jagged vibration of bone rubbing bone. His frown was profound. “Now, straighten it.”

Erik shook his head, “Enough Charles. Stand up.”

“Straighten,” Charles commanded, his voice pitched to brook no disobedience. Erik, however, never took well to orders. Charles saw his jaw tighten, felt the muscles in his leg go taut. “Please, Erik.”

The man placed his glass back on the bar, his eyes narrowed at Charles. Under his hands, the professor felt Erik comply. He was certain, had they been outside, that he would hear the grating and crackling of the man’s bones as they scraped together. The injured leg did not completely straighten. Charles doubted it was obstinacy that kept Erik’s leg slightly bent, but pain and possibly even atrophy of ligaments and tendons.

For a moment, Charles remained crouched, his hands feeding on Erik’s warmth and radiating back comfort. It was painful to think of somebody as vital and physical as Erik being constrained by a hobbling injury usually found in people more than twice his age.

He didn’t know what happened, why Erik wouldn’t talk about it to anyone, but Charles wanted to fix it. Face still frowning, Charles stood back up, finger tips absentely trailing up Erik’s thigh before parting from denim to take his bourbon.

Erik pressed the tumbler into the professor’s open hands. His expression had become carefully neutral. “I have a brace at the house. I should have worn it.”

Charles nodded, still processing the injury. He was already thinking about whom he could talk to back in Oxford about treatment. Money wasn’t an obstacle, and probably never would be, but getting the work done in America was. If only Erik wasn’t illegal. He wondered if he could hire lawyers for that, too.

Then the lights over the dance floor dimmed and a spotlight came up on the platform behind the bar. The music mixed into an alternating rhythm Charles didn’t recognize. It was hip hop, but with another influence he couldn’t place. The lyrics, when they were finally belted out, were in Spanish and timed with Angel’s explosive burst from behind the platform’s silver curtains.

Chapter End Notes
Tech post: So, what is a magneto, anyway? There's more than one kind, but chances are good you have one in your home.
Three of Hearts for the Ace of Spades

Chapter Summary

Old reggaeton, nipple roulette, motorcycle hooliganism, and foul language in three different languages. Three chaste kisses. Four lighters. Five gears out of six.

Chapter Notes

Me: “I want them to get it on, but they just want to be hooligans.”

Eilidh: No matter what [Erik and Charles] do, please make sure this line is in the chapter notes! XD It’s been cracking me up since yesterday!

Because the porn is in the next chapter even though I thought it would be in the previous chapter. This... This is the chapter that turned into three chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“She likes gasoline – Give me gasoline

She wants gasoline – Give me gasoline”

Gasolina, Daddy Yankee

Three of Hearts for the Ace of Spades

She leapt straight out from the platform, hands leading like she was diving for distance. Several people in the crowd screamed. Charles’ grip on his bourbon tightened. Next to him, Erik didn’t seem at all concerned and that lack of reaction put Charles immediately at ease.

Angel did not fall. She had snagged the red loop of fabric in her death-defying leap and swung out. Her long legs took the lead as she reached the end of the loop and swept back toward the bar. Swinging her legs up and arching her back, she leapt back onto the platform and performed a provocative spin, seemingly propelled by her undulating hips.

The crowd pressed forward, cheering, the loudest voices were female and screaming in pidgin Spanish. Charles craned his neck, trying to see if PMS had its own cheering section, but he was crushed against Erik.
Annoyed, but in control, Erik raised his right arm and drove his elbow into the poor bastard that had accidentally shoved Charles. The man fell backwards into the crowd.

Another club patron moved to take the fallen’s place and though Charles was fully capable of taking care of himself, he let Erik do it for him. Erik’s arm straightened as he reached for the next patron. With a curl of his fingers, he took a fistful of the new person’s shirt. He pulled the man in to achieve more leverage, then shoved hard, propelling the second person back. After that, nobody moved in to press against Charles’ place beside him. Which was fine, Charles didn’t need anyone to press him closer to Erik when he could do that himself.

“You’re a right bastard!” Charles shouted over the press and pound of bass.

Erik nodded, “Part of my charm.” Then he looked up at the platform where Angel was dancing furiously.

Charles didn’t add his eyes to Angel’s audience right away. With Erik’s gaze averted, the professor looked down, to make sure of the placement of his feet in order to reposition himself. He planted a foot on either side of Erik’s right leg, keeping his stance wide and stable. His move effectively protected the knee from being jostled by the crowd. Consequently, it also placed him close enough to the taller man that he could catch his scent.

Breathing in notes of exhaust fumes, aftershave, and cigarette smoke, Charles turned his face up to Angel. For all that she was beautiful, charged, and performing what amounted to an interpretive dance of filthy sex, it was Erik’s body heat that was getting under his skin. He didn’t notice he’d drained his bourbon until he brought the empty glass to his lips. With everyone focused on Angel, it was easy enough to signal another.

Angel was nothing less than sensational in her black gogo boots, red-and-black striped stockings, and painted-on hot pants. More than once, Charles found himself hypnotized by the jiggle of her breasts within the constraints of her loose top. The bounce of her ass, it seemed, had similar hypnotic powers.

It was the first time he saw most of her extensive tattoo. Lovely and delicate, the depiction of dragonfly wings looked like a pain-staking reproduction of a detailed scientific diagram. The forewings wrapped around her arms like fishnet stockings while the anterior wings wrapped around her back.

In the crowd, PMS members were singing ‘Na na na na~h!’ to the chorus and, Charles suspected, changing the lyrics of the song into something more provocative. Their phones were adding to the sparkle and flash of the lighting reflecting off Angel’s glitter-dusted skin.

When another song began to mix in, the smile left Angel’s face. Her dance steps faltered. The song sounded a bit dated, even to Charles, though it retained the changing beat of the prior song. The only word Charles could reliably make out of the rapid fire Spanish was ‘gasolina’.

“Pinche Machete!” Angel spat. She pointed into the crowd and stamped one foot. “I already danced to Daddy fucking Yankee!”

“Baila baila!” came the howled response, strangled and choked as it was by laughter.

Charles looked up at Erik for an explanation. “I don’t get it.”

“Gasolina used to be Angel’s song.” Erik shouted over the music. “Supposedly, it’s a Puerto Rican song about a girl that likes cars and motorcycles. However, a Puerto Rican joined PMS and told
everyone gasoline is slang for semen.”

Charles’ lips formed an ‘Oh’ that he never pronounced. When he’d suggested Machete request a song Angel hated, he didn’t think she would go so far. Then again, from what he’d seen of PMS’ founder, she’d likely had that song in mind from the outset.

The song did not abate. Angel had little choice but to dance on whether she was happy or not. After the initial tantrum, she soldiered on, firing her hips back and forth like a Kalashnikov in heat. Charles found himself impressed with her showmanship, though if she’d been anyone else, he’d be pleased with a flash of nipple. He suspected her breasts and her shirt were not governed by the same laws of physics. Charles chuckled to himself, wondering how Hank would take to researching the notion.

Angel dove another few times for the red fabric, swinging across the crowd in graceful circles. At the end of the song she leapt one last time, spun, and with a flourish dropped to hang by her knees. She spun in slow orbits, the tips of her hair trailed over some of the crowd. Her music slowly mixed out, the volume of the speakers above the bar reduced, while the dance floor began to pulse with greater urgency.

The circumference of Angel’s swing reduced gradually until she was close to Charles and Erik. Heavily made up eyes sparking wicked intent, she reached out to them. Snorting, Erik lifted his hand to take hers, but she ignored him and reached past to tousle Charles’ hair.

Angel’s former club erupted in laughter and catcalls. Somebody whooped, “Don’t touch his ass, Angel! He’ll make you straight!”

The young woman grinned and writhed sinuously, running her hands suggestively from breasts to hips. “I’ve got way too many curves to ever be straight!”

Charles quirked a brow at her, “Curves were made to be ridden.”

Her brown eyes widened in delight before stealing a quick glance at Erik’s neutral expression, “Keep that up and you might get a private show, Professor.”

Having never lowered his arm, Erik placed his right hand on Angel’s left shoulder and pushed, spinning her around. She giggled adorably; a far cry from the skilled stunter and ferocious dancer Charles had already seen.

“Hey, don’t touch her.”

Charles saw a man reach for Erik. Concerned for the interloper’s safety more than Erik’s, he grasped the back of the encroaching hand and twisted it around into an unnatural angle. The man’s eyes rounded in surprise and pain; he had clearly not noticed Charles.

“This gentleman is Angel’s friend,” Charles explained kindly, releasing the man’s hand. “I’m sorry if I hurt you, but it’s for your benefit. He’s a bit violent about maintaining his personal space.”

The interloper gave Charles a measured glare, rotating his wrist to work the pain out of it. “Stay out of my way, prick.”

Before anymore words could be exchanged, Angel waved her hands around as she spun. “Hey, boys. Let’s all behave. Erik, don’t kill him. Charles don’t… whatever it was you were doing.”

Still hanging upside down, she grabbed Erik’s proffered hand to stop her spin and indicated the new comer. “He’s the one I told you about.”
“This is the last one,” Erik said, turning to look at the man with annoyance. “After this, I’m shooting them all.”

Charles and the young man both looked at Erik as if he were touched. Angel rolled her eyes. “If I lose this job, I have to go back to stripping.”

“You ride,” Erik stated, ignoring Angel’s comment. “What?”

“Gixxer,” the man stated. “One thousand.”

Erik blew a slow snort of derision at the answer. “You know how this works?”

The man nodded. “Yeah, I’m parked out front.”

“I’ll meet you there,” Erik replied, his patience sounding perilously close to expended.

The man nodded firmly, “I’ll be waiting just outside.”

Hooking her ankles around more fabric, Angel pulled herself back up the red loop and swung herself to and fro, until she could build the momentum to return to the platform above the bar. As soon as she was back up, she sighed and waved at Charles and Erik. “Nobody’s tried for three months, I bet this is the last time.”

“It better be,” Erik muttered, picking up his helmet. “I need to come on a different day. I’m getting too predictable.”

Charles moved out of Erik’s immediate personal space. The professor doubted Erik would get tangled up in his subtly protective stance, but he also didn’t want his shielding to be obvious.

“What’s going on?” Charles asked, following alongside Erik as he picked his way through the crowd.

“Getting in fights isn’t good for business,” Erik explained tersely. “Mine or the club’s. So Machete and I settle differences with challenges. This guy has been after Angel for a few months, but this is the first Thursday he’s shown up. He’s probably been working up a plan of some sort.”

“He’s been avoiding you,” Charles mused. “Does the SS know you come here Thursdays, too?”

A humorless smile took Erik’s contoured lips. “If it weren’t for the guns, I’d invite them myself. Machete and I were talking about them when you showed up.”

The bouncers stopped Charles at the door, causing Erik to pause and look back. “You can’t go out there with a drink,” the man said, gesturing at Charles’ second bourbon, which had been delivered during Angel’s second song.

Charles was torn; he knew about open container laws. Either he had to put the drink down inside or knock it back. “One does not chug good bourbon,” he complained.

Erik gave him an amused look. “I’m not following tequila with bourbon. Just leave it.”

“That’s wasteful,” Charles retorted.

“I’ll have to call you a cab if you don’t,” Erik smirked. “Or you can wait inside while I settle this.”

Scowling, Charles took a generous swallow of the bourbon. It was nice, but not excellent. “I can hold my liquor. It takes more than a shot of tequila and two bourbons to put me down.”
Shrugging, Erik turned away. “I’m not waiting.”

A thought came to Charles, likely riding on the waves of coming inebriation. Turning quickly, he placed the half gone bourbon on a table, and raced to catch up with Erik. He could see Erik’s challenger just outside, waiting with a group of three other men.

“Let’s make this quick,” Erik stated, when he finally cleared the door. Several members of PMS whipped out their phones the minute they saw Deus’ founder. “Get your bike and we’ll have a simple challenge. I’ll meet you on my R1, in front of the line of red stunt bikes.”

“Sounds reasonable,” the man nodded. “My Gixxer is at the far end. Be just a sec.”

Erik nodded and made his way over to his R1 where Sean was already waiting for him, likely alerted by PMS member texts. Erik tossed him his helmet.

“Is that the guy?” Sean grinned, catching the helmet. PMS members continued to keep their camera phones trained on Erik.

“It is,” Erik snorted. “Says he rides a Gixxer.”

“Squid,” Sean chuckled and then translated for Charles. “Squids are guys that are more into the sport bike image than into the sport. They usually check themselves out of the gene pool not long after buying a liter bike. You can pick them out by all the flashy Icon brand gear they wear.”

“What is a Gixxer, anyway?” Charles asked, while Erik swung his leg over the R1.

“Suzuki GSXR, squid bike of choice.” Sean supplied, as Erik slotted his key into the ignition and then zipped up his jacket. “When I had mine, I called it a Gixxer once. Alex and Erik called me a squid for weeks. They would always order it for me when we went for sushi, too. Then they’d call me a cannibal when I ate it. Because they’re evil. You may have noticed.”

“I have noticed,” Charles agreed. “Deus intra Machinam’s propensity for evil is a well-established fact.”

Erik turned the key, pulled in the clutch lever, and then hit the ignition. Pulling up lightly with the toe of his left boot, he eased the bike into neutral and let go of the grips. On cue, Sean passed back the helmet.

“Hey, Sexy Librarian,” Cupcake laughed, shoving her phone mere inches from Charles’ face. “Give your knight a kiss before he rides off into battle!”

Charles snorted. “It isn’t my favor the challenger is seeking. That dubious honor belongs to Angel.”

“I’ll do it! I’ll do it! I’m like his squire, anyway,” Sean laughed, waving one hand as if volunteering for a special duty. As soon as Erik had the helmet over his head, Sean leaned forward and lowered the visor halfway. He then proceeded to kiss the spade on the helmet’s brow as Erik fished around his chin for the straps. “My hero!”

“C’mon, Sexy Librarian,” Cupcake grinned, and kissed the spade next. Erik made no reaction. Instead he started to fasten the D rings. His splinted fingers were still making the movement difficult. The metal splint clacked against the fiberglass covering Erik’s chin, so he finished the job one-handed. “Third one’s a charm!”

He couldn’t hear Erik’s sigh, but the way his chest rose and fell was indication enough. “Idioten.”
He’d later blame it on the alcohol, but Charles leaned forward. “Since we’re all doing it,” and gave the helmet’s spade a quick peck.

Whoops and riotous cheers went up from all over the sidewalk and street. Many of the PMS members turned on their bikes and twisted their throttles. Shaking his head, Erik stepped on the shift pedal and eased on the R1’s throttle. The engine growled readily as he pulled out into the street, just in front of the long line of red stunt bikes.

The GSXR rider advanced from the opposite direction. He pulled in his clutch to rip a roar out of his engine then let it out slowly to meet Erik halfway along the line. Cars passed the two bikes slowly, honking horns. People yelled incoherently at the face off.

The GSXR1000 was a handsome, if ostentatious, bike. The plastics and tank were clad in orange custom paint depicting an airbrushed scene of pale mist and cream-colored skulls. Its aluminum frame was polished and both seats were upholstered in leather. In contrast, Erik’s factory-black R1 looked drab.

Sean shook his head and laughed. “Total squid. Erik’s going to eat him.”

“I smell chum,” Cupcake agreed, adjusting her phone. “Angel’s going to love this.”

The two pulled up side-by-side, facing opposite directions. They both flipped up their visors. It was hard to hear the two riders with the background noise, but it was possible.

“All you have to do is beat me one for two,” Erik shouted.

The challenger’s helmet bobbed in agreement. “You’re on! And I’ll go first. No hard feelings, Kraut, but I’ve got you.”

Erik shrugged; the gesture was amplified by the protection built into the shoulders of his leather jacket. He raised his gloved hand to indicate readiness and the other man snapped his visor back down. The challenger pulled past Erik and turned aside in a wide circle until he was facing the R1 again, but with plenty of distance between them.

Quick and efficient, the man grabbed his clutch and front brake lever, stomped down on his shift then toed it up. With apparent ease, he threw the bike into a smoking burnout. He planted both feet on the ground and swayed the bike slightly from side to side. The rubber burned and billowed up in noxious, yet impressive, clouds of smoke.

Sean snorted in disgust. “You have got to be kidding. Erik can burn his tire out until it fucking pops. This is sad.”

Charles, however, could see what the man had planned in the months of avoiding Erik. The GSXR rider’s plan was clear to him. “No, Sean, this is not good.”

As Charles expected, the challenger leaned his bike to the right, his left foot resting on its peg as he swung the bike out. Using his right leg as a pivot point, he began to inscribe a slow circle on the asphalt.

“What a jerk.”

“Circle Jerk,” Cupcake snorted and turned to her clubmates. “Pinche Circle Jerk!”

It took a little time to place a burned circle on the asphalt and it was by not an easy feat doing it the way he’d chosen. By leaning to the right his wrist was cocked at an awkward inside angle on the
throttle. His right leg was doing double duty between keeping the bike from falling down and
goosing out and away. Most burnouts were done upright and clockwise. Charles had seen Max
perform stationary burnouts on the ZX6, but he’d never seen him move the bike during one.

The circle was complete the moment the GSXR was facing Erik again. The challenger switched off
his ignition and flipped up his visor. “Hey, no hard feelings, man. All’s fair in love and war.”

“This is juvenile,” Charles said to Sean. All the anticipated jubilation of seeing Erik in action had
curdled into bitterness. “He shouldn’t have to use his right leg.”

Sean shook his red head. “He might be okay, Prof. Though I do have hydrocodone in the SV.”

“No, Sean,” Charles shot back, “he’s had three shots of tequila. You’d kill him.”

On the street, Erik flipped his visor down and threw his R1 into a burn out as well. Traffic again
slowed to a crawl as new clouds of smoke began to billow up from the R1’s rear tire. Horns were
going off all over the street. Motorcycles were roaring down the PMS line. People were lending their
throats to the deafening noise. The R1’s engine and screaming rear tire drowned much of it out, but
not entirely.

Erik used his heel, but Charles couldn’t imagine that it helped much when he planted it on the
asphalt. His circle burn out was slow and inexorable. He did not stumble nor did the engine’s
revving deviate, despite the awkward angle. The RPMs Erik applied were constant; a testament to
the fine control of his wrist on the throttle.

When the circle was complete, he straightened the bike and switched the ignition off matter-of-fact.
He sat the R1 easily, feet flat on the ground due to his long legs. The crowd was getting a little wild,
but when he flipped his visor up the volume only increased.

The GSXR rider shook his helmeted head and pulled up next to Erik again. The crowd quieted
down a little to hear the coming exchange. “Are you sure you’re not her dad or something?” He
shouted.

Erik undid his chinstrap and pulled the helmet off his head. A sheen of sweat laid across the bridge
of his nose where the helmet’s padding had not wiped it off. He ran a hand through his hair,
straightening it from the helmet before gesturing for Sean.

Sean charged away from Charles. He caught Erik’s helmet when the older man tossed it at him. As
Sean held the helmet, Erik unzipped and reached inside his jacket. He withdrew a pack of cigarettes
and then fumbled one out. The GSXR rider produced a lighter and leaned over his bike to offer a
flame to the German, since Erik still had on a glove.

Erik sucked the cigarette to life and inhaled a long breath of smoke into his lungs. When he finally
released the smoke, it poured from his nose like incense. “Let’s finish this.”

The challenger agreed. “I’m pretty sure there’s nothing you can do at this point that I can’t.”

Erik nodded, took another long drag on the cigarette and made a small gesture to the GSXR. “Paint
looks expensive.” Smoke clothed all the words.

“It was, yeah,” the other man replied. “Took forever, too.”

“Did it? What did it cost?” Erik continued, his breaths evening out so it no longer looked like he was
sucking the life out of the cigarette.
“Almost a couple thousand,” he admitted. “Anyway, you going to get on with this?”

Erik nodded again. “Of course.”

The other nodded back. “Let’s do it.”

Placing the cigarette between his lips, Erik toed down the R1’s side stand. Keeping his weight on his left leg, he dismounted carefully, but his right foot still dragged slightly across the seat. He took a hobbling step away from the R1 and looked at it quietly. He took another deep drag the cigarette; it was almost half burned.

“You’re watching?” He asked the challenger needlessly. Charles supposed Erik was either stalling to recover sufficiently from the burn out or purposely creating dramatic tension. Perhaps even both.

“Of course I’m watching,” the GSXR rider huffed. “Get on with it already.”

Erik nodded yet again and blew smoke out his mouth in a long, steady, stream. He paused, considered his black motorcycle thoughtfully for a moment. Then he shrugged, placed his right foot against the tank, and pushed.

The R1 fell to the asphalt with a clatter.

The crowd grew quiet with confusion. Deus’ founder took his helmet back from Sean’s nerveless fingers. “Pick it up,” he murmured around the cigarette. The redhead complied without hesitation, eyes wide and an awe-struck expression spreading across his face. For extra emphasis, Sean brushed rocks and dirt from the R1’s new scratches.

Twigging to Erik’s ploy, Charles sucked in a breath of surprise and then cheered into the relative quiet. “Brilliant!”

The man on the GSXR yanked his helmet off, revealing an expression of shocked incredulity. “Are you kidding? That’s it? Kick over a bike?”

Erik shook his head and tucked his helmet under one arm. He gestured at the GSXR, using his cigarette as a glowing pointer. “No, kick over your bike.”

“Everyone knows I can,” the man protested loudly. “There’s nobody here that can’t kick over a bike.”

“Everyone knows I can do a circle burn out,” Erik continued. “But I had to show you. Kick over your bike.”

“I’ll kick over somebody else’s bike,” the man tried, looking around at the crowd. “Any of those stunt bikes.”

“In your dreams, puta-face!” came a cry from the sidewalk.

Looking down at his GSXR, the challenger shook his head in disbelief. “That’s fucking unbelievable.”

Erik took another drag on the cigarette, effectively dismissing the man. “Go ahead and park it, Banshee. We’re done here.”
“Really?” Sean choked, taking Erik’s helmet again, “You’ll let me ride the R1?”

“Of course. Five meters, engine off.”

“Hey,” the challenger spoke up, trying to recapture Erik’s attention. He thrust his hand out to Erik. “No hard feelings, right? You beat me square.”

For a moment Erik looked at the other man’s hand with the same long consideration he gave the R1 before kicking it over. Switching the cigarette to his left hand, he took the gloved appendage.

He didn’t shake it nor did he let go.

“There are definitely,” Erik said, wearing a sudden good-natured smile that was far more frightening than his scowl, “hard feelings.”

The other man tried to pull his hand back, but Erik continued to hold him in place. Meanwhile, Erik’s left hand, holding his cigarette between his thumb and first two fingers, descended in an arc that terminated on the brow of the man’s expensive Arai helmet.

“Next time I see you,” Erik continued, through the eerily pleasant expression, “it won’t be your helmet.”

When he finally released the man, the other pulled his hand away like it had been burned rather than his helmet. His face was livid. “You’re fucking crazy.”


Turning his back on the man, Erik limped for the R1. Sean was setting down the side stand after carefully maneuvering the black bike back into its original parking spot. Having nowhere to place Erik’s helmet, he had it on his own head. He pulled it off and set it on the top of the tank.

Charles, Cupcake, and several other members of PMS met him by the R1. The women cheered as he drew near. Charles stood amongst them, smiling quietly instead. Erik shook another cigarette out and three lit lighters were all shoved near him before he could replace his pack.

Blowing a snort of pained amusement, Erik leaned forward and took a light from the closest flame.

“Angel’s going to freak the fuck out,” Cupcake babbled. “That was almost as good as the time you tricked that one guy into blowing up his friend’s engine.”

“No, this was better,” Sean grinned. “None of us actually knew the engine blew up until Erik told us. You have to text Alex the footage!”

“Wait on Alex,” Erik said, breathing out smoke, Charles noticed the tall man turn his head in an attempt to keep the smoke from the group. “Don’t disturb him at work. Last thing he needs is to get agitated and have no way of expending the nervous energy.”

“Would you like some ice for your leg?” Charles asked, pointing back toward Cherry Bomb.

“No,” Erik shook his head and took another long drag off the cigarette. “As soon as soon as I’m done with this cigarette, I’m going. Angel will have to ride with you, Sean. If you can’t wait, call Alex; he’s got the Tacoma on a one-time reprieve.”

Sean and the women groaned and called Erik various names that Charles guessed had something to do with leaving a party too soon. It was all in good fun, they obviously liked the German despite the
merciless harassment.

They stayed to chatter a bit longer, but Erik wasn’t up for conversation which didn’t surprise anyone. Sean and Cupcake helpfully inspected the R1 for any damage other than the superficial ones. After giving the liter bike a clean bill of health, they wandered away to compile footage of the incident and discuss future gifs.

Charles waited everyone out. As soon as Erik was alone, he joined him by the R1. “Which way are you going?”

“Taking the 51 through Paradise Valley,” Erik replied, stubbing his half-smoked cigarette out on the bottom of his boot. “Why?”

Wetting his lips carefully, Charles replied, “Two glasses of bourbon and a shot of tequila are not good for driving.”

Eyes narrowing, Erik brought the cigarette butt halfway to his mouth before looking down at it. He threw it over his shoulder, back at the club. Charles winced at the littering, but kept his eyes on Erik.

“I thought you didn’t ride two up anymore,” Erik replied quietly. “Besides, I’ve had three shots of tequila.”

Making a show of checking his watch, Charles asked, “When did you start? Ten? It’s after midnight. You’re a safer bet than I am. And if you brought Angel down, then the R1’s suspension is set for two up.”

“Two up for Angel and I,” Erik countered, “and you don’t even have a helmet.”

“I have a hunch,” Charles murmured, “that I could borrow one, just this once.”

Erik’s jaw worked, but he didn’t say anything immediately. He leaned back on the R1 and crossed his arms contemplatively. His body language was not inviting.

Normally Charles knew when to press and when to cut his losses. He had an innate understanding of how people worked and when they would capitulate to him. Even when he was wrong, he had enough confidence to accept losses gracefully and enough arrogance to forget them the next day.

It was different with Erik. He knew he’d been in love with Max over ten years ago, could feel a powerful attraction to him even though he was Erik now. So why the hesitation? Why the pussyfooting around? Why couldn’t he tell if he should press or back off?

“Erik,” Charles said, placing a hand on the top of the R1’s tank. He leaned in close enough that he was certain Erik would smell the alcohol on his breath. “You’re going my way, won’t you give me a ride?”

“Scheiße,” Erik breathed. He placed his hand on Charles’ chest, the heat of his palm burning like an illicit brand, and pushed him back. “Find a helmet and I’ll take you, but don’t think the piranhas are going to let this go.”

The R1 was running and Erik already had his helmet on when Charles came back with Angel’s floral helmet. Cupcake had all but ripped it from Sean’s SV in her haste to enable whatever she thought was going on with Charles and Erik.

As Charles fit the helmet over his head, the German shrugged out of his leather jacket and held it out for him. Charles shook his head; it was too much like old times.
“Just take it,” Erik commanded loudly. “It gets cold over by Camelback Mountain and you’ve always been cold-blooded.”

Charles hesitated a moment longer before reaching out to take the leather. He wished he didn’t already have Angel’s helmet on; he would have preferred to smell it if he was going to be encased in Erik’s scent. As he pulled the leather on over his cardigan, his bright blue eyes fell on Erik again.

Under the leather, he’d been wearing a double-collared black fleece jacket. The garment’s presence assuaged Charles’ burgeoning guilt. However, at the small of Erik’s back, the fleece rode up and the fabric bunched behind the grip of a handgun. Gaping slightly within his helmet where nobody could see it, Charles gestured weakly at the gun.

“There’s a gun in your jeans, Erik.”

“No, there isn’t,” the man’s muffled voice replied smoothly. “I’m just happy to see you.”

“In the back, idiot,” Charles blurted. “You have a gun stuck through your belt and your jeans.”

“Ich gehe jetzt,” Erik replied. “I’m leaving now whether you’re coming or not.”

Letting the not inconsiderable amount of alcohol in his blood propel him along, Charles threw a leg over the pillion. It took a moment for him to locate the passenger pegs and fold them down. The pillion seat was several centimeters above Erik’s, which would Charles’ head and shoulders above the taller man when he leaned over the tank to take the grips. Charles quite liked that; in the old days he’d always needed to lean to the left or the right to see past Max’s head. It also kept him further away from the gun at the small of Erik’s back.

It wasn’t until Erik put the R1 into first and began to pull forward that Charles realized the Yamaha didn’t have any grab handles. The undertail exhaust made grabbing at the tail’s subframe dangerous. He grasped Erik’s broad shoulders awkwardly, then his waist as the R1 moved into traffic.

At the first stop, Charles slid forward into Erik’s back. The other man sat up, and his helmet collided with Angel’s. It didn’t hurt, but it was uncomfortable. In response, Erik flipped his visor up and twisted in the saddle.

“Lean over me,” he explained curtly, “and place your hands on the tank. It’ll put strain on your wrists, but it will lessen once we get on the highway. When we get near your exit, tap my thigh. If you need me to stop at any point, tap the top of my helmet. If any cruisers come up on us and act suspicious, pass the gun under my left arm.”

The light turned green and Erik cracked the throttle far harder than necessary. Charles seized Erik’s waist as the R1 surged forward, nearly leaving the professor bathed in exhaust on the asphalt. Even as he held on, he could feel the front end of the bike come up a bit, like a horse fighting its reins.

Erik brought the wheel back down so smoothly, Charles could hardly tell it had been in the air at all. He carefully leaned over Erik’s back, lining his shoulders up right below the taller man’s scapula. He reached under Erik’s arms and braced his hands on the R1’s tank. The position left his chest pressed to the other man’s spine. He wondered idly if Erik could feel his heartbeat through the fleece, leather, and wool of his cardigan.

The start-and-stop traffic through the side streets out of Tempe wore terribly on his wrists. It made him think fondly on the ZX6’s one piece seat and grab bars. The change of attitude toward the Ninja brought a rueful smile to his face: he’d only ever hated it because he thought it killed Max.

When the ramp to the 51 came into view, Charles kept right hand on the R1’s tank, but the other
moved according to old muscle memory. He pressed his left tight to Erik’s solar plexus and molded his chest against his spine. If Erik was anything like the rider he had been back on the East Coast, he would read Charles’ body language for readiness and treat the ramp accordingly.

As he’d hoped, Erik cracked the throttle as he took the ramp in second gear. He cycled up the R1’s gears at each successive redline, and fed them both the adrenaline surge that came with a roaring engine and tangible power.

Each time Erik up-shifted, Charles’ grin became wider, freer. At second gear, they shot onto the highway. At third, they blew past cars as Erik maneuvered to seize the HOV lane. At fourth, they were ripe for a speeding ticket and Charles was laughing harder than he had in nearly a decade.

He wasn’t sure if Erik heard him or felt the vibration of his laughter through his spine, but he responded, cracking the throttle once again. The R1 roared in response and pulled forward even faster. The turbulence of their flight jostled Angel’s Suomy helmet less than his Nolan had. It was terribly loud, but the helmet’s venting fed him far more air than he expected.

The speed felt vital and natural. Looking over Erik’s shoulder to the instrument cluster, he could barely make out the digital display. 85 MPH and accelerating. They had gone so much faster on the ZX6 in sixth gear. He wondered what the R1 was like in sixth. Looking at the tachometer, he chuckled to himself, they were just above 3,500 RPMs in fourth and Erik was still rolling on the throttle.

90 MPH at night was stupid. Charles knew it was stupid in broad daylight. Sanity told him Erik was gambling with both their lives.

Sanity would never know of the ecstasy of speed.

They broke past 100 MPH just as Erik shifted to fifth. They were shooting past traffic with reckless abandon, coming up on cars, trucks, and other motorcycles with little reaction time to spare. And still, the engine and Erik promised there was more to come. The R1, after all, had one more gear.

However, Erik eased back on the throttle once they hit 115 MPH, which was still not the 125 they had wrung out of the ZX6 in days past. Charles didn’t mind, because Camelback Mountain was approaching and he knew that meant a long sweeping turn. He had no doubt the R1 could take the sweeper at higher speeds, but Erik was playing it safe. Likely the German was concerned about Charles’ state on inebriation.

When they were deep into Paradise Valley with no signs of pulling over, Charles knew Erik had figured out his ploy. Charles’ apartment was, of course, back in Tempe, near the university. It was up to Erik to interpret what ‘going my way’ meant and the taller man, for all his lack of education, had always been a quick study.

They were toward the northeast corner of Paradise Valley when Erik eased off the throttle and crossed three lanes to take an off ramp. He cycled down through the gears and took a right at the top of the ramp. Despite the darkness of night, Charles could see some scrub and the orange of the earth by the occasional streetlamp when they turned left down an outer road.

After a few minutes, Erik took them down a dimly lit and sparsely populated street. He finally pulled into the driveway of a beige house. The R1’s headlight illuminated one of two off-white garage doors and halted just in front of the one on the right. Erik put the R1 into neutral and reached back to slap Charles’ right thigh.

Charles took the cue and dismounted, but before he could move away, Erik was pulling him close by
the leather jacket’s edge. He held the hem between his left hand’s index finger and thumb and reached for the zipper tab with his right.

“Are you undressing me in the drive?” Charles laughed, still full of giddy adrenaline.

“The garage door opener is in the inside pocket,” Erik snorted, shaking his helmeted head. “Do you want me to undress you in the drive?”

Finding Erik’s suddenly relaxed manner comforting, Charles reached up for the helmet’s chinstraps. “As long as you finish the job somewhere comfortable.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Erik replied. He easily unzipped and retrieved the garage door opener from the jacket. As the garage door began to slide up, Erik popped the R1 back into gear and eased it forward, the headlight illuminating a wide array of equipment and motorcycles as he pulled within.

Charles pulled Angel’s helmet off and walked inside, only glancing at the packed, yet orderly, interior of the garage. Erik parked the R1 next to five other tightly assembled motorcycles. Charles recognized Angel’s bike and set her helmet on the tank. He also noted the F4i, the Honda and KTM dirt bikes, and a yellow R6 he didn’t recognize. There was also what he suspected could be the rolling chassis of Erik’s R6.

“Come here,” Erik beckoned, setting his own helmet on the R1’s tank. He offered his left hand to the professor.

Charles came close to take Erik’s hand, but the taller man slid it over the professor’s closest shoulder, across his neck, and gripped the opposite shoulder. He then dragged his right leg over the bike, using Charles as leverage.

“Let’s get you inside,” Charles frowned, his speed-released euphoria melting into concern. “Your hip’s fine, yes?”

“Hip is perfect,” Erik agreed, “just don’t trust putting weight on my knee right now. I’ve got a couple braces in my room.”

Stumbling through the dark house, Erik led him across a large open space, to a hall faced with windows, to a door at the end. Charles supported much of Erik’s weight until he pushed the door open. The taller man reached across Charles to turn the room’s light up.

Erik’s bedroom was every bit as Spartan and orderly as the garage had been. Hobbling carefully forward, Erik made it to his closet and slid aside one of the doors to retrieve a bulky looking brace. It was more of a contraption, Charles thought, with hard plastic pieces spanning up and down from a central joint. The plastic supports had several black straps attached to them. Just by looking at it, he wasn’t certain how it worked.

“Did you forget to put it on?” Charles asked, joining Erik when he moved to the edge of the bed.

“No, I don’t like wearing it,” Erik admitted. “It helps when I do. For six hundred dollars, it should be less bulky. Wearing it under jeans is practically impossible and wearing it over my jeans doesn’t work. I wear it with shorts, so never when I’m riding.”

Placing one hand on the bed for balance, Erik leaned over and loosened the technical laces of his short riding boots. He had to sit to remove the left, but even then needed Charles for the other. “What do you do when it gets this bad? Sleep with your boots on?”

Erik shrugged, “On the couch. If one of the kids is around, I make them help.”
Charles blinked a few times, paused in the act of pulling the boot off. “Do they live here?”

“Just Alex,” Erik replied, pulling the brace’s Velcro straps apart. “Sean and Angel sometimes spend the night here. There were another few members that used to stay here, too, but Alex is the only one who’s lasted.”

Once his boots were off and the brace laid to the side, he reached back for the gun in his belt. Charles frowned at the weapon until Erik placed it inside the drawer of his bedside table. His hands paused as he unbuckled his belt and he raised his face to settle his eyes on Charles’.

“You’re not as drunk as I thought,” he accused quietly, pulling the leather from denim belt loops. “And you’re not so drunk that you don’t know what you’re doing.”

Charles’ felt himself smile in reply. “You’re right, I know exactly what I’m doing; I didn’t finish the second bourbon. You have no idea what you started when you kissed me that night ten years back.”

Erik glanced away at the words. He formed no verbal reply and his body stilled for a moment beyond the initial rejection of his glance.

“When I thought you died,” Charles admitted, “it was as if no—”

“I don’t regret it,” Erik interrupted, gaze still averted. “I don’t regret anything about that night. I’d do it all again, but I don’t want to talk about it. If you want another kiss,” he looked up, his eyes struck with terrible intensity, “stop talking and come here.”

Charles stopped talking.

Chapter End Notes

**Burn out video reference.**

I took many liberties with the burnout performed in this chapter.
Intermittent Short Path to Ground

Chapter Summary

Charles and Erik delve into into ignition, manual transmissions, and emissions. In bed.

Chapter Notes

I request a stay of execution for being a colossal tease with this chapter. A pardon would be even better. Between unproductive insomnia, house guests, and a general lack of words, this chapter was elusive.

I was going to upload it on Wednesday, but today's my birthday, so... have some birthday sexy times.

“Pulling away from the funeral of flowers,
With my hand between your legs
Melting...”

*Melt!* Siouxsie & the Banshees

Intermittent Short Path to Ground

Though a nigging suspicion that they should talk first was pestering him, Charles ignored it in favor of returning a decade of unrequited emotion. He moved forward as Erik’s right hand traded his belt’s leather for the jacket’s leather.

Somewhere between two advances, their mouths met. There was a moment of teeth clattering like enemy swords, followed by the cushioning blow of lips. Charles disengaged just enough to lick across Erik’s lips then pushed forward again, tongue slipping past the other’s teeth.

The taste of cigarettes was stronger than he liked, but desire overrode distaste. Instead, he focused on the slick feeling of Erik’s tongue as it twisted over his. He noticed peripherally when Erik’s hand left the jacket in favor of pulling at his black cardigan. On the back of his neck he felt the touch of warm fingers and metal.

Charles’ hands smoothed straight into Erik’s short hair. One rested against the side of his head, the other cradled the back. He pushed forward, seeking to topple Erik backwards onto the bed. Simultaneously, he felt Erik pulling to the side in order to use Charles’ momentum against him. The ploy worked; Charles fell on his side and Erik quickly bent his torso over him.

When it came to sex, Charles usually preferred dominance if equality wasn’t on the table. He had a healthy appreciation for any sexual role, though. He was no shrinking violet; he knew what he liked and he had no qualms seeking it out. It seemed Erik was more interested in dominance. Charles considered capitulating, but didn’t want to set a precedent.
Their mouths came together again, open-mouthed and lacking subtly. Charles felt like he could 
drown in Erik’s wet kisses, but he did not relent until the other did. Once parted, they filled the 
minute space between them with panting breaths.

Pulling back further to give Charles space, Erik pushed at the edges of the leather jacket. Charles 
needed no encouragement; he sat up and unsheathed himself from the other man’s protective leather. 
Erik watched and made no complaints when the professor dropped the jacket on the floor. He 
reached across the short distance and slowly took a fistful of Charles’ cardigan.

Charles allowed himself to be dragged forward. With Erik’s hand fisting his cardigan, Charles had 
more of an advantage: he slipped both hands up Erik’s firm chest. His left hand split off and roamed 
across the taller man’s ribs to seek out his back. His right came up to the fleece’s zipper.

“You…”

Charles looked up from the zipper to Erik’s lips to see if there would be more words from the 
recalcitrant mouth.

“…want more than kisses.”

One corner of Charles’ mouth pulled up in an arrogant smirk: due south, his quickening pulse fed his 
cock hot blood. Erik probably had no idea what he really wanted. Kisses had not been a priority, so 
much as a fixation. What he wanted most wasn’t skin. It wasn’t even sex. What Charles wanted was 
something far more necessary and primal. There were pathways to that intangible thing and he took 
them instinctually.

Charles said nothing, but he nodded and drew the zipper’s tab down. The sound of the zipper’s slide 
on metal teeth was comforting in its familiarity. He glanced back from Erik’s kiss-swollen lips to his 
face.

The carefully constructed neutrality was back, but slipping. His lips helped to crack the façade, but 
there was something else in the cast of his eyes that was coming through. Was it uncertainty? If so, it 
was a short-lived moment of weakness.

The hand gripping his cardigan unclenched and withdrew. Erik’s lips pressed together in a firm line 
as he came to a decision. He reached up to his fleece and pulled it off, tossing it from the bed. “Turn 
off the light.”

Charles saw little of the long-sleeved t-shirt underneath the fleece. Between getting up to turn off the 
light and turning back around, it was gone. The garment was forgotten in the darkness and shadows 
of the floor, for what lay beneath the t-shirt was nothing less than one of the most perfect athletic 
figures Charles had the pleasure to admire.

Max had always been a whip-thin teen; all long limbs, especially long torso, and wiry muscles. 
Charles had loved watching him work on the ZX6 and the GPz, because he was prone to doing so in 
little more than Dickies and a butcher apron. Watching the play of those young muscles was an 
appetizer: penny chocolate to the 85% dark that was the older specimen. Charles found his hunger 
for skin ramping up to higher heights.

Why Erik would have him cast such perfection in darkness was beyond him. He itched to turn the 
light back on, to see more than what moonlight gave him, but he refrained. Instead, he unbuttoned 
the cardigan, pulled it off his arms, and dropped it close to the bed. He left his button up on, because 
having Erik remove it was certainly within the realm of possibilities, and toed his shoes off.
Joining Erik on the bed, Charles pulled close, and suddenly saw the reason for turning out the light: Max had never had so many scars.

In the space of ten years, Erik had collected what looked like hundreds of injuries of differing types and severities. It was as if a war of attrition had once been waged across his skin. The sight gave him pause, but he did not focus on any one scar; the one (well, maybe two) he was most interested in was still under denim.

Swift as it was callused, Erik’s hand took Charles’ chin and tilted his head back. The desired affect was twofold: Charles’ eyes were averted from the blemishes and his mouth easier to take.

Talk of the scars would come later, if ever. The professor gave such thoughts up to the hot mouth that was on his. He lost himself to wet tobacco-tinged kisses, content for a few moments to let Erik take the initiative and bring the battle to him.

He found Erik’s technique lacked skill and finesse, but made up for both with power and single-minded effort. He skirted the edge of brutality in his kisses, which made his obscenely wet mouth a blessing. Charles was delighted; it was like being devoured by the very fruit one was eating.

Charles slid his hands across Erik’s hot skin and pulled him down to the bed. He was careful to keep on the man’s left, to prevent jostling Erik’s painful knee more than necessary. It was unavoidable, but he trusted Erik had done this sort of thing enough to handle most of the logistics.

While Charles explored skin, noting the texture differences when his sensitive fingertips skimed the more serious scars, Erik relented. Charles took the upper hand, delving his tongue past the man’s lips. As he stroked Erik’s tongue with his own, the other man started unbuttoning Charles’ button up by feel just as he had wanted.

The line of buttons ended at Charles’ pants, but Erik was undeterred; he simply moved his nimble fingers to the fly of Charles’ jeans.

A sudden new rush of blood into his cock nearly made Charles light-headed. This was definitely going beyond the make out session he had originally envisioned. He could feel, ridiculously, a damp patch growing against his boxers even as Erik negotiated the button and then drew down the zip.

Charles gasped hard into Erik’s mouth when the other, betraying no shyness whatsoever, peeled back the corners of the jeans and felt directly for his cock.

“Christ,” Charles choked, fingertips digging into skin as Erik dragged the professor’s cock from the leg of his boxers. It was like the sensitive head was being used to draw a line of burning pleasure up the inside of the thin material.

He pressed his lips to the side of Erik’s face and mouthed his sharp cheekbone for a mindless moment. “Do you even know what you’re doing to me?”

A low thrum came up Erik’s chest. “Don’t be sacrilegious. Bad enough that you’re goy.”

Charles chewed on the cheekbone lightly, then muffled a chuckle against it. “Erik, before you said that, did you…? Did you laugh?”

Long fingers stroked firmly over the boxer-clad length of Charles’ cock in response. A protracted groan left Charles throat without permission. Another low rumble vibrated Erik’s chest. It was definitely a laugh, if only a small one.

“Oh, God,” the professor chuckled, shivering with emotional and physical pleasure. “Not a machine,
but human after all.”

“You have no idea,” Erik murmured. He turned his head and licked a wet path across Charles’ parted lips. He sucked the lower one into his mouth and bit it urgently before releasing it again. His strokes against Charles’ cock were only slightly gentler.

Erik’s touches felt more amazing than they had any right to feel, but Charles was impatient to be free of his clothing. Lightly, he pulled back from the conquest of his mouth, laughing at the brief trail of saliva that connected them a second longer.

“Let me get these off,” he smiled. Slipping off the bed, he hooked his thumbs into the waistband of both jeans and boxers. Pulling down, he shucked both off along with his socks. The cool air in the bedroom was a little shocking to his heated skin, making him that much more interested in getting back onto the bed with Erik.

He hesitated, though, when Erik started in on his own pants. With his knee being as painful and overworked as it was, he decided to step in and help even though the thought of watching Erik strip was tantalizing.

He stepped forward and placed his hands on Erik’s shoulders. “Let me help.”

“Why don’t you just take care of it?” Erik smirked back, eyes smoldering with what could only be barely contained desire.

“Only to a certain point,” Charles replied, and took his hands from the other man’s shoulders in order to pluck Erik’s hands from his pants.

The taller man’s wicked look was his only reply. Charles resumed the work Erik had begun, only to find that the man’s jeans were button fly and hampered by a tautness that could only be explained by an equally excited cock.

“Mmm,” Erik hummed, as Charles fumbled with the buttons. The sound heated Charles’ blood all the more. His cock felt impossibly more sensitive and miserable with neglect in the open air.

It was not alone for long. Charles swore under his breath the moment Erik’s warm, rough-skinned hand, found the length and stroked carefully from base to tip. Charles’s forehead drifted down to rest against Erik’s as he panted and continued to negotiate one button free at a time.

Erik huffed a shaking tequila and cigarette-laced breath against Charles’ mouth when the professor finally managed to overcome the button fly and palm his cock through his briefs. It was a pleasing weight.

“Help me,” Charles husked, “so your knee doesn’t kill this lusty hard-on of yours.”

Foreheads still touching, Erik’s nod moved Charles’ into a mimicked expression. It brought a smile to the professor’s lips as he pulled back.

Removing the jeans and Erik’s boxer-briefs was a trick and while Erik made no noise of discomfort, his breathing became a bit harsher and his cock flagged. Charles quickly saved the failing erection by taking the man’s balls in one hand and stroking his shaft lingeringly with the other.

Another shuddering breath puffed toward the ceiling as Erik’s head slowly fell back under Charles’ skillful fingers. Erik’s right hand rose and sank into Charles’ hair where he gripped tight.

Though very much involved with teasing Erik’s rising dick, Charles cast his eyes down Erik’s legs to
his right knee. Just as Sean had said, it was marked by old scars, many of which were haloed with smaller scars from precise stitches. Whatever happened, it seemed likely those stitches were not self-administered. Erik had likely received medical care for the injury.

“Scheiße,” Erik breathed and pushed down on Charles’ head, directing his face toward the first beads of precum oozing from the tip of his circumcised cock.

Charles chuckled at the obvious signal and let go of him. “Erik, have you been tested since the last time you had sex?”

“Tested…?” He replied, eyes slitting open. “No. Have you?”

“Yes, and unless you have condoms that don’t taste awful, I’m not giving you a blowjob.” He placed his hand on Erik’s head in turn and pushed down. “You can do me the honor, though.”

“Actually, no,” Erik chuckled breathlessly, overcoming Charles’ grip. “I don’t think goyim are kosher.”

“Long pig is just an expression,” Charles smirked back. “I’m definitely kosher.”

“Since,” Erik laughed quietly, “I’m not sure about the taste of the condoms and I’m not going to let you fuck my face,” Charles’ balls tightened with pleasure at the thought, “we’ll have to make do.”

He ducked under the hand on his head and let go of Charles’ hair to reach for the bedside table.

“Shooting your sex partner,” Charles drawled sarcastically, “is only safe sex for one of us.”

“It isn’t lead I want to fill you with,” Erik snorted. He opened the drawer and retrieved what looked more like a bottle and less like a gun. Erik flicked the top back and squeezed lotion into his hand.

Charles eased onto the bed as Erik set the bottle aside. The German gave Charles a predatory look and rubbed his hands together to warm the lotion. He didn’t seem to care that he was making a mess of his splint.

Feeling every bit as wicked as Erik looked, Charles reached again for Erik’s shaft. It was a handsome specimen, elegant in its subtle curve. Circumcised cocks always looked woefully naked to him, but Erik’s physicality was so complete that the lack of foreskin did nothing to diminish his cock’s presence.

Grasping it just below the head, he placed his thumb on the tip and smoothed precum all around the tip. Erik jerked in his grasp, sucking in air through his teeth as Charles continued, coating the entire head in slick musk.

“You should get tested,” Charles said, leaning down so his breath brought a chill across the wet flesh.

“Ich schwöre,” Erik groaned. “I will…”

Erik lapsed into his native tongue far less than he had as Max, which made the slip more satisfying. Grinning at the use of German, Charles pumped Erik’s cock for good measure and was rewarded with a breathy growl.

In retaliation most sweet, Erik fumbled blindly for Charles in return. A slick stripe of lotion followed Erik’s fingers from Charles’ jutting hip, down the join of his leg, and in a titillating line to one side of his balls. From there, the aggressive man took swift hold of the base of the professor’s cock and
pulled back, up to the head, with a twisting motion.

The delicious sensation of friction across sensitized skin had Charles gasping in pleasure. His balls ached by increments with building tension. Even with reason clinging tenuously to his consciousness, he wanted to drive Erik just as crazy. He wished Erik had not already resorted to using lotion; not when the man had such a pornographically wet mouth.

Moaning under Erik’s ruthless hand, Charles’ continued his ministrations one-handed. He raised his right, curling all but the first two fingers, and placed them on Erik’s bottom lip. It took the German only a moment to read the appendages’ purpose and lean forward to suck them into his mouth.

It was pure porn. Pure and filthy and painfully arousing. Erik jerked him with slick lotion and sucked his fingers with the terrible determination with which he did everything. The man bit ungently, sucked, and laved Charles’ fingers in rough time with the hand on the professor’s cock.

Charles watched, toes curling into the bed’s comforter, as Erik pulled back. The retreat freed the wet fingers from his mouth. Saliva dripped down the professor’s palm. It was what he’d wanted, but he was loath to lose the heated, wet, suction of Erik’s mouth. Still, he manned up and switched his dry hand with the slick one.

He wasn’t sure when they fell over together, but it was with Erik’s arm around his neck and their mouths joined in increasingly erratic kisses. The musky scent of sex was heavy in Charles’ nose and the sound of skin slapping skin was erotic to his ears. And though the exquisite pleasure of Erik’s lubricated hand rubbing his cock was crucial to his pleasure, it was the way the man’s kisses would stutter as he came closer to orgasm that were doing him in.

The arrival of his orgasm was sudden and devastating. His body began to shudder as the first incendiary waves coursed from his cock. His balls pulsed painfully and he began to jerk involuntarily in Erik’s grasp. He tried to keep his mouth on Erik’s, but he was arching bodily, head thrown back under pleasure’s onslaught. He was unable to continue his miserable attempt at kissing. Vaguely, he knew he’d released Erik’s cock and that the other man was stroking him through the orgasm while ravishing Charles’ bared throat.

The orgasm was not merciful. It wrung every bit of sensation out of Charles’ body, sending hot jets of ejaculate across Erik’s arm, stomach, and chest. The extra lubrication did him in on the latter edge of the orgasm, making last moments longer.

When the sharpest waves were past and the tertiary throb on him, Charles brought his suddenly weak left hand up to bat at Erik’s ruthless strokes. “Stop,” he slurred. “My God, Max, stop.”

Erik lifted kiss-swollen lips from Charles’ throat, his expression starting off surprised and quickly shifting to something too complex for the professor, senseless as he was, to discern. He took his wet hand from Charles’ softening cock and seized the professor’s right one once again. With purpose, he splayed Charles’ hand across the rigid muscles of his abdomen where the cum was warm with their combined heat. Thus coated, he closed the hand around his cock again.

With Erik’s directing him, Charles grasped the man’s cock under his own power, but it was the German that set the speed and power. It was a motion born one half of their pumping fists and one half Erik’s thrusting hips. Still disoriented, Charles was aware that it was a hell of a ferocious wank
and if not for saliva, lotion, and cum, it would have been too painful to work through. Erik, however,
knew what he wanted and he showed Charles how to administer it.

When Erik came, his mouth was half open, his jaw taut, the lower line of his teeth apparent, and a
growl strangled from his tight throat. He directed the stream of semen up his own body, a fresh shot
across the coagulating coating Charles had given him.

Charles reached out with his free hand and stroked Erik’s face as the man finished coming. The
Erik’s expression was not undone, not how he’d imagined it would be.

Far too quickly, Erik pulled away. He sat up and away and leaned on one hand as his gasps for air
evened out. Charles’ hand was still around the man’s cock and could feel its diminishing pulses.

“Lay back, Erik,” Charles sighed, his senses slowly returning, but lethargy there to stay. His balls
ached deliciously with the force of orgasm. “Lay down with me.”

Erik shook his head irritably. He edged off the bed and out of Charles’ grasp. “Not now.”

The moment Erik stood, weight on his left leg, Charles defied the lethargy and heaved himself up.
“Erik, please sit. I’ll get whatever you need.”

“I’m not a cripple,” Erik snapped, his tone distinctly unkind. “I don’t need your help.”

“I never said you were a cripple,” Charles shot back, confused. Where was his post-coital bliss
getting off to? It was tremendously stupid to sabotage such a profound afterglow.

“Lay there and shut up,” Erik growled through grit teeth, limp looking every bit as crippled as he had
denied. “Just stop talking.”

Confused, and not sure whether to be hurt or angry, Charles subsided slowly to his side, propped up
on one elbow. He watched Erik hobble to a door and swing it open. He stepped past and a moment
later Charles heard water running. The splashing of water flung against skin followed.

Cleaning up was a good idea, he decided slowly. Though most of his semen had landed on Erik, he
had come within and over Erik’s hand. A good portion of his ejaculate had overflowed the other
man’s fingers and was congealing on his flaccid cock and his well-trimmed pubic hair.

“Would you give me a wash cloth when you’re done?” Charles asked. Both because he wanted to
get clean and in order to gauge Erik’s sudden flare of temper. Was he really so upset at the offer of
help? Getting irritated so quickly after orgasm was bizarre.

No response was forthcoming. When the water stopped running, Erik hobbled back, skin glistening
with moisture in the moonlight. He tossed a washcloth, warm and damp, onto Charles’ ribs and then
eased himself back onto the bed.

Charles took it and began to carefully scrub himself clean. It was difficult; his skin was still over
sensitized. “Are you always an ass after orgasm?”

Erik grew still and thoughtful and did not respond right away. Charles finished cleaning himself and
set the rapidly-cooling cloth across his thigh. He wasn’t sure Erik would respond, but he wanted an
explanation and was stubborn enough to wait.

Finally, he heard the man sigh and move. He took the cloth off Charles’ leg and threw it into the en
suite bathroom. Then he patted the bed next to him. “Just forget about it.”
“Just this once,” Charles replied honestly. “If it happens again, I won’t stop talking and neither will you. I can’t read your mind Erik, so you’ll have to tell me when and why you get angry.”

As was normal, Erik didn’t respond verbally right away. He rolled onto his back, crossed his arms behind his head, and shut his eyes. “I’ll think about it.”

Making demands of Erik and receiving anything less than belligerence was a victory in Charles’ eyes. He pulled himself up next to the other man’s handsome nude body and pulled a sheet across them. Carefully, he leaned over Erik and pressed a chaste kiss to the man’s lips. Erik’s eyes opened.

“I would have liked to share the afterglow of orgasm with you,” Charles admitted. “But we can always try again.”

Erik’s chest rose and fell with a deep breath. When he looked up at Charles’ face his brow knit and his eyes became serious. “I don’t try anything without the determination to succeed, Charles.”

The professor smiled tiredly. “It’s your defining trait.”

He then lowered himself beside Erik to sleep. Things had not gone smoothly, but they had not gone horribly. However, he felt he’d finally struck a crack in Erik’s dogged recalcitrance.

***

Charles woke in the night, confused at first, by the warm line of body heat running across his calf, up the outside of his leg, terminating at his hip, and reinstating itself under his wide flung left arm. He opened his blue eyes to a dark room, tangled sheets, and the smell of sex. Moving cautiously, he turned his head and followed the trail of his left arm as it led across the broad muscular shoulders of the man next to him.

Erik. Erik was asleep next to him.

Smiling, he leaned up to appreciate the view. Nudity agreed with Erik, despite the scars blemishing his skin. Starting at his broad shoulders, Charles followed the long channel of the man’s spine to narrow hips, across the plains of his flanks, to his muscular ass. He could beat Raven for all eternity with a picture of Eric’s ass.

Biting his lip to keep from laughing, Charles brought his arm off Erik’s shoulders. He twisted at the waist, reaching over the bed to where his cardigan lay crumpled on the floor. Fishing it up, he retrieved his phone. Using his body and the cardigan’s wool to keep the phone’s backlight from waking Erik, he turned the device on.

Once it loaded, Charles saw he’d missed a call from Raven and sixty-three texts.

Sixty-three? His heart thudded painfully, worried suddenly that something had happened to Raven. Then he saw only four of the texts were from his sister; the rest were from numbers he didn’t recognize with a variety of area prefixes. Most were prefixes for Phoenix.

He groaned when he saw them: Machete had shared his number. Sighing, he only checked Raven’s texts. One asked him what he was doing. Another told him he was lame. Two were beautifully plush derrières. Remembering his mission, he turned down the phone’s backlight, killed the volume, and twisted back to Erik.

There was a momentary conflict concerning Erik’s privacy and his desire to win against Raven. Considering how bad he’d been losing to her, he opted to compromise Erik. The man’s ass was a work of art, so he didn’t feel as guilty as he could. The trick was taking the picture from the most
flattering angle, without getting any scrotum in the frame. Not that he minded scrotum. Nor was there truly an unflattering angle. Charles felt the sudden pulse of his heart rate cause his cock to stir. The circulation of blood brought familiar tantalizing sensitivity.

He took a shot and typed up the message: *Quality over quantity. Beat that.* He sent the text before he could think better of it. He turned the phone off again and dropped it back into the cardigan’s pocket.

Continuing with the theme of low self-discipline, Charles turned back to Erik and ran his hand across the length of the man’s thigh. His hand trailed up the muscled ass and paused. It was hard to believe Erik was really under his possessive touch. Smoothing his fingers across warm skin, he laid his hand over the man’s hipbone and held it.

He wondered if Erik would let him fuck him. If, perhaps, Erik had ever been fucked? It was doubtful. For that matter, had Erik even shared sex of any sort with another man? These were questions he had wanted to ask before they became sexually intimate. It had only been mutual hand jobs, but what if it was the first time Erik had stimulated, and been stimulated by, a man?

Charles pressed a kiss to the warm skin of Erik’s scapula in mute apology. Between his desire for Erik, the sex-charged atmosphere of Cherry Bomb, and various adrenaline highs of the night, he had capitulated at the wrong time. Instead of trading understanding in for sex, he should have foregone the sex until they had understanding.

He gripped Erik’s hipbone a little harder and kissed the opposite scapula in further contrition. It was obvious Erik wanted the sexual release, but it might have been precipitated by the same things that had charged Charles. Max had always appeared to be more honest with his body even when he wasn’t straightforward with his words. Erik seemed to be the same. If nothing else, he had a clear desire for Charles’ body.

In the end, Charles was convinced sexual activity had been a mistake. It was like having anonymous sex with somebody he actually knew. Erik probably knew it had been a mistake as well; it could explain his behavior at the end. He wasn’t sure exactly why the other man wanted such angry stimulation or why he carried the anger through orgasm, but anger at a lack of self-control was a good explanation.

Determined to prevent the same from happening again, Charles silently promised to restrain his physical desire from getting the best of him.

Charles pressed his lips against Erik’s warm skin one more time. He set the kiss on the back of Erik’s neck; a seal to bind the promise. He removed his hand from the other man’s hip, trailing his fingers lingeringly across skin. It had been a mistake, yes, but not one he would regret. No matter what else, it had been an amazing indiscretion.

Settling back against the bed, he pressed close to Erik’s heated body. He smiled ruefully. It would be hard to keep his hands off the man’s body, but the reward would be sweet. He fell back asleep, fantasizing about the many ways he could make his sexual greediness up to Erik.

***

The next time Charles awoke, sun from the windows was bathing his face in warmth. There was no longer a line of body heat bracketing him on one side. He opened his eyes blearily and turned to look for Erik. The man was nowhere to be seen. Max had been an early riser, so the initial moment of concern melted faster than it arrived.

Sighing, Charles stretched languorously, enjoying the sun on his skin and the light friction of the
bedding. The smell of sex had abated somewhat, but he still made a note to open the windows when he got out of bed. Rolling over once, he reached over the side of the bed and grabbed his phone again.

Charles swore softly. Thirty more messages. He didn’t think the women of PMS would find him so interesting. Again, he bypassed the lot of them and homed in on two from Raven.

If by losing, I am winning a chance to hit that, then I concede! Are you fucking an Olympian? And I don’t mean the competitive kind!

He couldn’t help laughing at that. Raven was brilliant. She would probably kill him when she learned just whose ass it was. A frown replaced the laugh. How was he going to tell her? She wouldn’t approve. No, she would be furious.

If he’s a bi one-night stand, you MUST tell him about your hot, movie industry, blond adoptive sister. Emphasis on hot and adopted. Dude, that ass could totally stand in for A List actors’ asses. I could get that ass a job.

The text was far less funny than it should have been. Had it been anyone else, he would be laughing until he hiccupped. Not only would Raven be furious, she’d likely throw a fit. She might even attack Erik.

Raven had blamed Max for stealing her big brother away for three months. For those three months, she’d had to weather the traumatic household of their childhood alone. Only news of Max’s death had kept her from hating the German youth outright. Raven could only hate people that betrayed her and she had trusted Max implicitly. Until Charles had run away, she had looked up to him with innocent idolatry.

Discontented, he dropped the phone back on the pile of clothes and swung his legs over the bed. He opened two of the windows to get the morning breeze through the room and then invaded Erik’s en-suite bathroom. The bathroom was tidy and unremarkable, but once he had the medicine cabinet open, it had much more character.

Inside the cabinet he found a half full prescription bottle of hydrocodone with a patient’s name he didn’t recognize. There was another prescription bottle with a different name that had a few tabs of vicodin. There were also a dozen other over-the-counter painkillers that ranged across a desperate line: everything from aspirin to Aleve to Motrin.

Charles nearly emptied the bottle of vicodin into the toilet. He paused and put it back on the shelf. He wondered if Sean knew about the collection of pills within the cabinet. Perhaps the vicodin was only for emergencies? If Erik had pain medication for menstrual cramps, then it stood to reason that he had known some desperate moments. Or, perhaps, they were Angel’s. Perhaps they were even left behind by one of the dates he’d taken to Cherry Bomb. Did Erik still pick up pillion girls?

Shutting the cabinet, he finally turned the shower on. While he waited for the water to get warm, he brought his hands to his face and inhaled. They smelled of musky sex. The scent, so intimately associated with his hands and Erik’s cock, had him half-hard as he stepped into the water.

There was still no trace of Erik when Charles got done with the shower. When he went to his clothes, he saw Erik’s clothes and brace were where they’d fallen in the night, but the leather jacket was gone. It was beginning to look like Erik had left.

He dropped his damp towel on the unmade bed and dressed. Before buttoning his shirt, he opened the bedside table’s drawer. The gun was gone. Curious, Charles rifled through the other contents. He
found a box of condoms, a shallow jar with assorted bits of hardware, the bottle of lotion, a small brown paper bag filled with letters, and a DVD.

The letters were familiar. They used to be addressed to a New York PO Box and always lacked a return address. Max guarded them jealously. Charles did not pry into them; it would be too grievous an invasion of privacy.

The DVD was in a blank case. Someone with had written on the surface: Max’s Hits in a spidery-neat hand. The handwriting was completely unfamiliar; nothing like Max’s formal-looking script. Curious, he looked around for a DVD player, but saw none. There wasn’t even a television or a computer present within the room.

He placed the disc on the corner of the table for later and headed for the bedroom door. When he opened it, he was hit with the smell of spicy food. His hopes picked up again as he wandered forward, buttoning his shirt as he went.

The hall opened up on an open living room and kitchen. Somebody was at the stove. With long black hair and a tank top that displayed her tattoos, that somebody was not Erik.

“Good morning,” Charles said carefully.

Angel turned, and gave him a strange smile. “If you say so. I sure don’t.”

Tilting his head in confusion, he walked to the kitchen’s island where two plates of food were waiting. He identified mashed beans, red breakfast sausage, and two eggs with uncooked yolks. Angel was currently heating tortillas and placing them inside a round container filled with linen.

“Why don’t you say so?” Charles asked cautiously.

She turned back to her tortillas with a vulgar oath. “You see those two plates? One’s for you and the other’s for me. Still think it’s a good fucking morning, Prof?”

“No,” he breathed. Erik had left.

Angel switched off the heat and pinched up the last three tortillas off the iron skillet. “Really. I’d tell Machete, but she won’t do a damn thing. Erik’s gold to her.”

She turned around and slammed the tortilla container on the island. “I’ll be damned if I don’t at least give you a good breakfast, even if it is, all jokes aside, chorizo con huevos.”

“Angel,” Charles sighed, looking at the plate of food, “I don’t think I can eat all this.”

“I know, I know,” she shrugged. “Twice in one morning, right? Yeah. Fuck, I cannot even laugh at my own jokes this morning.”

Charles didn’t even understand the jokes she was making. He shrugged back. “So, is this the walk of shame?”

Angel seized a tortilla and attacked her plate. “It isn’t a shame, if you aren’t ashamed, Prof. Hold your head high. I’ll give you a ride after breakfast; pinche Eric left me the keys to the truck.”

Charles took a tortilla and tried to copy Angel’s method of eating. “Does that mean Alex is here?”

She shook her head and swallowed, “No, he took his R6 to go to some physics study hall thing at your school. You probably saw a yellow Suzuki that looked like Erik’s R1 in the garage. That’s
Alex’s R6. He just got it out of impound.”

He didn’t bother to ask how Alex’s bike ended up impounded in the first place. Instead, he focused on the flavorful food Angel prepared and tried not to be too messy about it. The sausage was almost intolerably spicy; he rarely ate spicy food and had a low tolerance for it.

“You think it was a one night stand?” Charles asked, before using a tortilla to soak up the fire on his tongue.

The woman frowned thoughtfully as she chewed. She swallowed and shrugged her shoulders. “Erik’s never brought home a guy before, Prof. Were you guys a thing back in the old days, or something?”

“Almost, I think,” Charles admitted, wolfing down his eggs. “I may have made a mistake last night.”

“Erik doesn’t fuck people he doesn’t want to,” Angel said, her voice laden with what sounded like self-deprecating experience. “He doesn’t fuck people he has feelings for, either. He’s got the emotional intelligence of a block of tofu. I figured the moment he hit it with somebody he liked it would be a long-term thing.”

For several moments, Charles didn’t reply, content to eat the breakfast Angel had prepared for him. He hadn’t thought the situation through at all. He’d wanted Erik, he’d gone for him, and his advances were ultimately accepted. The timing had been bad.

“He’s never brought home a man,” Charles repeated thoughtfully.

Angel smirked with one cheek full of egg and sausage. “He rarely brings women here, either. And only if they’re brave enough to get on the bike with him. I’m pretty sure he’s occasionally gone home with girls or to hotels, but no guys that we know of. We thought he was straight until you popped up. So who topped, Prof? My money’s on Erik, but Cupcake’s got an ounce on you.”

“Are you sure the P in PMS doesn’t stand for paparazzi?” Charles sighed with a roll of his bright eyes.

“Stands for whatever you want,” Angel grinned. She began to mop up her plate with another tortilla. “By the way, you like the picture I sent you?”

“Since I gave Machete my number,” Charles replied after another mouthful of food, “I have received a hundred messages. So if I haven’t looked at yours yet, you’ll have to forgive —Bloody fuck!”

Angel quirked an eyebrow at his mashed up vulgarity. “That’s gross, Prof.”

“I never got his number,” Charles snorted, ignoring Angel and shaking his head in disgust. “Everyone has mine, but I never got his.”

Angel laughed behind her half-eaten tortilla. “I can’t take pictures of Erik, but he never said I couldn’t give out his number.”

Not wanting to be rude, Charles went after the spicy meat on his plate, wrapping it in as much tortilla as possible. He ended up gesturing with it when he answered Angel’s offer. “No, don’t give it to me. I think it would be better if he were to come to me this time. He knows where I work; I’ll be there Sunday. If he wants to see me, he’ll have to let me know.”

The answer widened Angel’s grin by slow increments. “Oh, Prof, are you sure you aren’t from SoCal? Because that is so in a SoCal girl’s playbook.”
Winking back, Charles smirked, “It’s in the Xavier playbook, as well.”

Despite her protests, Charles helped Angel clean up after breakfast. It was readily apparent that even though she had told him not to, that his efforts were greatly appreciated. Her sly looks became open smiles that spoke of approval when he helped her dry the dishes.

“Get your cardy,” she suggested, putting dishes away, “and I’ll meet you at the truck. I’ve gotta go down to Tempe, anyway.”

Charles nodded and went back to Erik’s room to collect his cardigan. His gaze fell again on the DVD, sitting on the table where he’d left it. Curious, he picked it up and folded the cardigan around it. It was probably nothing more than movies Max had once liked. Perhaps the 1979 and 1981 Mad Max movies he’d had on VHS. It couldn’t be more embarrassing than Charles’ previously public Facebook dramas. In that light, borrowing the disc seemed more than reasonable.

Once dropped off at his apartment complex, however, Charles forgot all about the DVD. The videos and gifs the various members of PMS sent captivated him for such a long period of time, he spent half an hour watching them with his phone plugged into the wall.
Smoke Before Fire

Chapter Summary

Talk happens. Again. And Erik reminds Charles of the infamous night the GPz and ZX6 were crashed.

Chapter Notes

There’s a fairly graphic description of disturbing violence in this chapter's flashback sequence. Also, evil bastard cliffhanger. And… last fourth of this is unedited. I redline on paper and I had no access to a printer the last two days. I'll be revising it throughout the week.

I’m not very good at the feels so I would be remiss, if I did not give a shout out to storybinding for much-needed feedback on the first half of this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Fire that's me,
You're super and gasoline."
Wir Werden Sehen, 2raumwohnung

Smoke Before Fire

Charles’ plan was simple: arrive at the school early enough on Sunday morning that, if Erik showed up, he would be forced to ask Hank or Darwin to let him in the building. Supposing Erik would show up and supposing he wanted to sort things out. There was still the possibility that the other man would call Charles’ bluff. It wasn’t a thought that sat well with Charles, but he was determined not to give it room to grow until evidence could support it.

He was surprised, therefore, to coast into the science building’s parking lot and see a familiar black motorcycle already parked next to the sidewalk. Erik himself was sitting on the curb, his Suomy helmet next to him.

In his right hand he held open a battered paperback. The other hand was occupied with a half-smoked cigarette. His lighter and pack of Kamel Reds were between his thigh and helmet.

“When did you start smoking again?” Charles asked in lieu of a proper greeting. He stopped with his Trek pulled sideways in front of the other man, his rear tire close to the R1’s front wheel.

Erik took one last drag on the cigarette and stubbed it out on the sidewalk. Charles followed its trajectory when it was tossed back over the other man’s shoulder. There were quite a few more where it landed, but it was the only one unfinished.

“Right after I wrecked the ZX6,” Erik replied, smoke spilling from his lips.
“No more Lucky Strikes?” Charles asked, feigning interest in the habit. Max had quit smoking during their association and it had been a terribly draining affair for both of them. Though Max had never admitted it, Charles knew he’d quit for him and, to a lesser extent, Raven. His answer, that he’d quit after wrecking the ZX6, meant he no longer had a reason not to.

“Sometimes.” Erik shrugged, closing the paperback and setting it aside, “I don’t usually want to smoke filterless toasted tobacco. Of course, when I do, nobody wants to take them from me.”

Charles hardly listened; he was staring at the book instead. He could barely make out the battered and stained cover. “Mother of God, Erik, you still have that?”

The German glanced to his side at the book and then back to Charles. “Obviously.” He picked it up again and offered it to the professor. “Do you want to borrow it again?”

Charles took the proffered book, Speed Tribes, by Karl Taro Greenfield. The cover was dog-eared and the pages dark along the center of the outer edge from years of rereading. The spine was broken in two places, but kept together with a strip of duct tape. He opened the cover to see if it still bore the marks he’d left on it.

Max’s name was erased, even the indentations from the pencil meticulously scraped, but the rest was there.

_In the event of loss, please return by COD to:_

_C/O Charles F. Xavier_
_1407 Greymalkin Lane_
_Salem Center, NY 10560_

“So are you here to apologize?” Charles finally asked, forcing the cover closed before nostalgia could threaten his startling blue eyes. He tried to lean casually on the bicycle’s handle bars, as if he had not had a near emotional outburst.

“Why?” Erik replied, all nonchalance. “We both got what we wanted.”

“You think I want to be treated like a one night stand?” Charles scoffed, all sentimentality gone in the face of Erik’s purposeful ignorance. “I don’t.”

Erik looked away, his jaw working in anger or intense thought. Getting the man to talk was hard enough, but when it came to emotional topics, it was like speaking a completely different language.

“I left because I needed to think,” the man said, eyes shifting back to seize Charles’ gaze. “I don’t know what we’re doing. It’s been eleven years, a lifetime, and two weeks Charles. I need to understand this.”

It was progress. Charles nearly dropped his Trek in shock, but his anger saved him that indignity. Carefully laying the bicycle against the curb, Charles moved to sit on Erik’s right, away from his helmet and motorcycle.

“Look, even if you needed to think,” Charles replied heatedly, despite the surprise, “you don’t just leave a person like that. That sort of thing is the realm of emotionally immature jack asses. It implies utter disrespect for your partner. I won’t be treated like that, Erik.”
Though his lips pressed together in what might have been anger, Erik tilted his head to the side in an awkward nod. “You’re right. I didn’t know what to do with you and the confusion turned into anger.”

“I know; it always has.” Charles sighed, his expression softening, yet not completely at ease, “So get it over with and apologize to me.”

At first Erik’s jaw tightened again. His left eye squinted slightly and half of the lip below it lifted minutely. Then his face relaxed again. A deep breath expanded his chest as he squared his shoulders like he was readying himself to take or deliver a blow. When his right hand came out, Charles wanted to flinch, but Erik was only reaching for Charles’.

Taking Charles’ hand in an overhand grip, Erik looked him in the face with all seriousness. “I apologize for leaving you on Friday morning.”

“Accepted.” Charles felt his anger dissipate in the face of Erik’s sincerity. He’d never heard Max give any sort of apology during their seven months of association. “And I apologize to you; I sexualized our relationship far too early.”

Erik let go of Charles’ hand. “That’s not what I expected you to apologize for, especially when I never said no.

“Was there something else?” The professor asked, a little of the annoyance creeping back into his voice. He thought for a moment about the sequence of events, but it made him less angry than aroused. “Oh, I came first and didn’t finish you off. I apologize for that, too. I was a selfish prick.”

He wanted to place his left hand on Erik’s thigh, but was wary of both security cameras and making the other man uncomfortable. He settled for sitting so close that his left leg fit snugly against Erik’s right.

The other man smiled slightly and shook his head in amusement. “Sure, Charles. As soon as your will to not ‘sexualize our relationship’ fails, you can make it up to me.”

Charles ignored the comment. He could be strong, dammit, even if Erik was a whipcord of lean muscle and devastating good looks.

Then again, perhaps he was in a little trouble.

“You mentioned confusion turning into anger earlier,” Charles remembered, “and understanding. What are you struggling with?”

Erik’s expression lost its levity. It was like the other man was suddenly drawing far away. “Like I said, I left because I needed to think. I don’t understand what we’re doing. I can understand sex, but there are older feelings too, that make this a bad idea.”

“I know,” Charles replied with feeling. “I’m a little confused myself. I have old feelings for you that will probably never go away. You can’t imagine the agony I felt when Kurt told me you were dead the day after you saved my life and kissed me. It almost negated being saved.”

Erik sat quietly, listening and likely reflecting. When he spoke again, it was with grave seriousness. “I never wanted to sponsor you into the Hellfire Club. I knew it was too much for you. You said you wanted to be more like me, but you never really saw what I was until that night. Tell me, Charles, when you got up from the ground, when you heard the screaming and smelled the char of human flesh, when you looked at me, what did you see?”
Charles has managed to get the Nolan off his head. He feels so nauseous from the vicious kicks to his stomach and side, that he doesn’t feel any of the impacts peppered across his shins and forearms. He attempts, abortively, to stand up; his torso is too limp for his legs to lift upright. Max is nearby, though, so he thinks he’s safe. Max is a whirlwind of fists and elbows and the assailant is within the onslaught of his storm.

When the screaming starts, he renews his efforts to stand. It is an inhuman sound of horrible pain; he’s never heard such a gurgling shriek come from a human mouth. As Charles gains his feet at last, the first wisp of oily smoke blows across his face. He chokes on it, because it is foul, but also there’s a wrongness to it that the screaming alone cannot explain.

That’s when he sees Max. He’s no longer beating the older man with his fists or Arai helmet. No, he’s using the GPz’s frame as leverage as he shoves the man’s face into the headers. The man’s face is bubbling where it touches the super hot pipes that lead from the engine. One hand is scalding as he tries to use the pipes to lever his face from the headers.

Max’s face is contorted in cold fury. There is no mercy whatsoever within his expression. Charles looks at Max and he is afraid. No, he is terrified. But, also, perversely, there’s a base part of him that is elated somebody is defending him.

“I saw you,” Charles replied quietly. He sucked in a shuddering breath of air and tried to push words past the traumatic memory. “I saw you at your very worst. Cruel, terrifying, horrible. But that isn’t all you are. There’s good in you, too.”

“Eleven years was a long time ago for you, but for me, that’s yesterday. Nothing’s changed.” Erik looked sideways at Charles and held up his right hand, turning it so the callused palm was level with the professor’s face. “The hand that forced that guy’s face into your GPz’s headers is the same one that jerked you off the other night. I want you to think about that, Charles.”

Erik’s understanding of events wasn’t so dissimilar to his own. Erik knew his life hadn’t changed much, while Charles’ had grown and gained depth and texture. Charles could do and be whom he wanted, where he wanted. All Erik could do was move across a country and change his name. Erik still resided in a complex cage of illegal status and gangland affiliation, but he had gained an additional tether; he cared.

“No,” Charles sighed, “you’ve changed, Erik. You told me last week you started to care about consequences. As for this hand,” he grasped Erik’s warm fingers in his own. “It has done terrible things, but it also saved my life. It has even taken in several young people. I don’t know much about Alex, Sean, or Angel’s background, but I think you’ve been a positive impact on them. You have a strong instinct to protect.”

He didn’t mention Erik’s negative influence. He’d known Sean was selling hydrocodone and had not stepped in. The young man had quit the activity and that was good enough until something could be done about the illegal buying.

For his part, Erik stared quietly at Charles after his statement. As the silence stretched, Charles noticed his heartbeat in the firm grip he had on the other man’s uninjured fingers. He imagined for a moment that it was Erik’s heart he felt.

When it was clear Erik’s reply was not forthcoming, Charles noticed one thing more: the man had not pulled his fingers out of Charles’ grip. The professor looked at their joined hands and then back at Erik again. That was the reply.

“What would it take to get out of the Hellfire Club?”
Erik gently pulled his hand away as he sucked in a breath through his nose. He scrubbed at his brow with his fingertips before looking back at Charles again. “You never ask easy questions.”

Charles shook his head. “You’re just stealing bikes for your sponsor, right? He doesn’t need you that much.”

“I don’t think you understand how obsessive he is or how good I am at it,” Erik replied wryly. “It’s kept me alive. Since I got to Phoenix, I’ve been something of a free agent. It doesn’t make me a free man.”

“So what would it take?” Charles repeated.

Erik shook his head, “For my sponsor to be satisfied with his motorcycle collection, which is unlikely. If somebody took my place, which I don’t see happening. Or if I were no longer physically capable of stealing them, which is far more likely.”

The response was disheartening; the list of conditions wasn’t much to work with. “Perhaps we could fake a disabling injury. Raven’s a dab hand at that sort of thing.”

The look Erik gave Charles was serious. “Charles, you can’t fake out a guy that makes disabling injuries. Don’t even think about fucking with my sponsor. Even an Oxford professor, with all your laurels in genetics, wouldn’t be safe.”

“What if I could get you a passport?” Charles tried, far more determined than intimidated.

“I won’t spend my whole life on the run,” Erik replied. “You can’t embarrass a man like him by running away; not without consequences.”

“I ran away,” Charles protested, “and I’m fine.”

Erik looked away from Charles, his lips thinning. “Only because you got voted out of the club before they realized you weren’t coming back. Look, Charles, I appreciate your concern, but I made a deal with the devil and those never turn out well.”

Charles wasn’t sure he believed Erik about being voted out of the club, but it did mesh with his previous statement about them thinking about kidnapping him. It wasn’t about him, though. “What was the deal, Erik?”

The other man reached for his cigarettes reflexively, but stopped himself. “That’s dangerous to know, Charles. Even if I wanted to tell you, I wouldn’t.”

“So you just want to live like this?” Charles asked, his voice quiet despite his incredulity. “Stealing motorcycles, living in physical agony, and confined to the desert? I never took you for the complacent sort.”

At first, Charles mistook the sudden grinding noise for Erik moving his knee and looked down. Erik wasn’t moving his leg, though his whole body was tense. Looking back at Erik’s face, he realized the German was grinding his teeth in tightly contained rage. Tension radiated from the man in waves.

His eyes were cold with anger, but he did not look at Charles, as if he might slay him with a glance. When he finally spoke, his voice was low, nearly inaudible, and each word was clipped. “You probably shouldn’t start.”

It was difficult not to soak up the surplus of tension, Charles could feel himself tensing in response. “Erik, no, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said it like that. I…” He wanted to tell him that he was only in
Phoenix on a work exchange. That they might only have a year to figure out what kind of relationship they could have. Such words, though, were too loaded to utter.

“You want out, right?” Is what he said instead. “That’s the only thing I want to know. Maybe you don’t think it’s possible right now, or ever, but you want out.”

Next to him, Erik gradually unwound. He eventually sighed and nodded. “I wanted out before I even met you. If I hadn’t met you and Raven, I probably would have become monstrous from the frustration.”

Charles ached to take Erik’s hands in his, to slip an arm around his shoulders and embrace him. Still wary of the cameras, he leaned into the taller man instead, pressing their arms together in the same way as their thighs. “You don’t know how much I benefitted from knowing you. I actually told Kurt to fuck off and go to hell after I was brought back to Westchester. Raven made an altar out of Pepsi cans and burned incense on it in my name.”

A small smile quirked Erik’s lips at that. “I wish I could have seen you do that. I was worried about him screwing you up further until I got you to steal the Mercedes. Then you got so drunk you puked all over the back seat. That’s when I knew you’d be fine.”

“When I stole it or when I was puking?” Charles laughed. “Oh, and if only all the underage drinking could have saved me from the sight of your dancing! It was horrible!”

“It was supposed to be horrible,” Erik smirked. “I was eighteen. I had bleached hair, I was covered in motor oil and grease, and I was wearing a black rubber apron. How could I possibly act normal? Especially when there were at least two other guys in the same club practically wearing the same thing?”

“They were wearing leggings, though, and you had on your smelly Dickies,” Charles continued to laugh, gasping for air. “And only one of them was a bleach blond.”

“Did Kurt ever get the puke and oil out of the car’s leather?” Erik asked, smile maturing into something with quite a few teeth.

“He had it all reupholstered then sold it,” Charles chuckled, finally calming down and catching his breath. “That’s when he started to look into getting a restraining order against you. I bet you’ve had some fun in the last decade or so, too, right? You’ve got a small community of people that adore you.”

A twitch of his shoulder and a very light snort escaped Erik. “It kind of built up slowly. It started four years ago, when I found Alex. He was a runaway trying to get to California, but got caught up in a lot of trouble here. He brought in St. John, who’s currently serving time. The two of them brought in Sean. Angel was a special case; Machete brought her to us after a break up. After that, PMS adopted us as a brother chapter.”

“Machete is Angel’s ex?” Charles asked, enthralled by the formation of Erik’s community and unsurprised by the mention of imprisonment. “Dare I ask?”

A speculative look entered Erik’s eyes. “I’m not sure how Angel feels about it, though she and Machete remain friends. Machete dumped her for a woman that was more interested in having a family. The other woman doesn’t run with PMS and Machete is a skirt-chaser. She demanded Angel leave PMS or she’d leave Machete. I asked Angel to join us as a favor to Machete.”

Another thing clicked into place. Angel had hinted that she had tried to seduce Erik. “Did Angel ever
“Pursue you?”

“She did,” Erik nodded. “She ambushed me in the shower. I turned the cold water on her and she backed off. She’s a bit like a wolf; she respects people in power and goes for them. Machete wasn’t the first and I doubt I’ll be the last.”

“Daddy issues,” Charles mused. He’d never met a stripper that didn’t have abandonment or abusive father issues. He tried not to think about such things; watching women dance and remove clothing was too much a delight to be burdened with psychoanalyzing the performers.

“She’s never mentioned a father,” Erik replied. “But I don’t ask them about their issues, I just listen.”

“You have changed,” Charles said quietly, “but the good things are still the same. You’ve always been good at listening. There’s something else you’re good at I’d like your help with.”

The compliment didn’t seem to affect Erik one way or another. He looked at Charles, waiting patiently for the request.

“Help me find a motorcycle,” the professor asked. “I’m thinking Ducati or maybe Triumph.”

“I won’t help you get a Ducati,” Erik scoffed, suddenly animated at the latter half of Charles’ request. “I’ll just end up spending a month redesigning the electrical system, breaking expensive parts, and having to make special tools. I’ll sell you the R6 when it’s finished.”

“I don’t want a used bike, Erik,” Charles said, frowning slightly at Erik’s reaction to Raven’s request. “I want to put my own history on it, not overwrite somebody else’s. What about Triumph or BMW?”

“So you have something against Japanese bikes?” Erik countered. “They’re far more sensible, Charles. They have fewer special tools, cheaper replacement parts, and longer maintenance intervals than European models.”

“I like them because they’re different,” Charles insisted. “Everyone in your club and in PMS have Japanese bikes. You have three Yamahas in your garage and two of them are the same model.”

“Sensible is far better than unique,” Erik snorted.

“I’ll pass on Ducati,” Charles said, and his pig-headedness was apparent in every syllable. “But I’m definitely looking at Triumph and BMW. Surely you like BMW?”

“Special tools, overly complicated and faulty accessories, and expensive parts,” Erik replied dryly. “Plus, most of their riders are assholes. Yes, I love BMW. Fine, when shall we start this adventure?”

“Tuesday,” Charles suddenly beamed. He hadn’t been certain Erik would agree, but he was elated he had. “If that works for you.”

“It works,” Erik nodded. “My schedule will start loading up come Thursday. Do you want to meet me here or do you want to give me your address?”

“How about I pick you up?” Charles grinned. “I’ll take you out for breakfast. Or you could come over Monday night and I could burn breakfast for you in the morning.”

“Xavier,” Erik smiled despite himself, “your will to not sexualize our relationship is reminiscent of a priest overseeing a choirboy swim meet.”
The smile Charles turned on Erik was caught somewhere between innocent and thirsty. It was usually the precursor to heading back to his flat. “You’re a little big to be a choir boy, but I’m fairly certain I could give you swimming lessons.”

“No, Charles,” Erik smirked wolfishly, pressing his shoulder harder against Charles’, “I’m a little Jewish to be a choir boy.”

“Au contraire,” the professor replied, pupils dilating at an alarming rate, “there’s truly nothing little about you, my friend.”

Taking the lead, Erik turned his shoulder out, pushing Charles’ so they twisted just enough to bring their mouths close.扔ing his concerns about security watching them to the wind, Charles closed the remaining distance. Let them have a show.

There was no clash of teeth this time. Their lips met and Erik wasted no time opening his mouth and licking wetly across Charles’ lower lip. The professor opened his mouth in turn, sweeping his tongue across the lower line of Erik’s teeth. He placed his left hand on Erik’s leather-clad back just as the taller man grasped the nape of Charles’ neck. Charles deepened the kiss.

And then he was pulling back against Erik’s hand and shaking his head. “Wait, stop. No. I’m sorry, Erik, but your mouth tastes like an ashtray.”

For a moment, Erik’s lips remained parted, as if reluctant to believe they were being denied. Then Erik let go of Charles and sat abruptly back. He stared at Charles in cautious disbelief.

“And if we do indeed sexualize this relationship, with all your smoking,” the professor continued, his hands raised in pre-emptive placation, “your saliva’s not the only thing that’s going to taste of smoke. The smoke infiltrates all your mucus membranes, you know.”

Erik continued to look at Charles like he was waiting for either a punch line or an apology. After a moment he exhaled through his nose in a light snort and shook his head. “I need to get back to the house. The others should be getting up soon and I’ll need to load the F4is. You better take my number this time.”

With a chuckle, Charles did exactly that. After getting the number, he locked his Trek to the bicycle rack while Erik prepared to leave. He joined the tall man as he finished fastening his chin strap. As Sean had on Thursday, Charles lowered Erik’s visor in order to get a clear shot at the spade graphic on Erik’s helmet. He pressed a kiss to it and stepped back.

“You can come down to watch,” Erik suggested, raising his voice to be heard over the R1’s engine and the muffling effect of the helmet.

“I know,” Charles nodded, thinking he would do just that. “I don’t really have much to do here, that I can’t do at home. I have some editing for a paper I’m working on with the faculty back in Oxford and plenty of reading. So, I can come down later.”

Erik swatted Charles’ bicep in nonverbal approval before grabbing the clutch and engaging first gear. He took off smoothly, with no fanfare, but then he cracked the throttle hard and lifted the front end up.

The unexpected show brought a foolish grin to Charles’ face that did not fade in the slightest, when Erik set the front end back down from the brief wheelie. He watched until Erik was out of sight and then headed into the building.

The first thing to do, he thought, as he walked in and across to the stairs, was to make coffee. There
was a coffee maker in the Physics staffroom, but Charles squirreled away his preferred blend in his
desk. It seemed a little rude to keep his coffee in the Physics staffroom when he was already making
use of their coffee maker.

Taking the first set of stairs two at a time, Charles found himself replaying his brief encounter with
Erik from the most recent event and tracking backwards. The second set of stairs had him nearly
breathless with silent laughter; Erik’s expression when he’d broken off their kiss had been priceless.
Not to mention well-deserved, considering all the cigarette butts he’d thrown. He made a note to pick
them up later, though he knew he should have gotten Erik to assist in doing so.

The third flight of stairs he took at a trot. He deliberately avoided thinking about the playful banter
regarding sex. It was a potential morass that he could sink into for long periods of time when
thinking about other issues would be far more productive. Issues such as how to free Erik from the
Black King and the Hellfire Club or how to get Erik to tell him the deal that he’d made as a teenager.
That was the most important thing, he thought as he turned out from the stairs and walked to his
shared office.

If he knew the details of Max’s arrangement with the powers that be, they could better navigate
freedom. Perhaps Erik would even be able to travel to the East Coast or get a passport and visit
Germany. Max had always longed for Germany even though he maintained he had no family left
there. Max cared about somebody in Germany, though, because his viciously guarded stack of
letters, the ones addressed to the New York post box, had German stamps.

Using his security pass, Charles unlocked his office’s door and strode inside. Only to find there was
someone sitting at his desk. She was tapping away at his computer with the casual formality of
somebody that belonged exactly there. In fact, the young woman had such a convincing presence
that Charles had to double check that it was indeed his computer she was on. It was.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but I haven’t had any trouble with my computer since the printer incident. I’m
not aware IT comes in on Sundays?”

The dark-haired woman nodded. “Good morning, Professor Xavier. I’m not IT and I don’t
recommend you speak to them about my presence. It would be a little troublesome for both of us.”

Charles blinked rapidly, stymied by her bizarre statements. “Pardon? Are you a friend of Hank’s?”

She shook her head, clicked the mouse, and then stood smoothly from the desk. She extended her
hand and finally looked him full in the face. “I apologize Professor Xavier. I’m Agent Moira
MacTaggert with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

He took her hand just as smoothly, but with a decided feeling of light-headedness. Her grip was firm.
Commanding. “I’d say it is a pleasure, but you seem to be rifling through my computer without my
leave.”

She released his hand with another nod. “Of course, if this were a social call, I’d be considered rude.
However, this is is business. Please have seat Professor and tell me what you know about a Mr. Max
Eisenhardt.”

Chapter End Notes
Surprise!
Banging Gears

Chapter Summary

Things are far more serious than Charles ever considered. Plus, tamales.

Chapter Notes

I'm going to bi-weekly updates. Work is pretty crazy and I haven't been getting out much. I'm a slow writer.

I'm sorry if this chapter sucks; I had some personal problems and a few days of sickness. Part of this chapter was written through headaches, another through... hell. This chapter also spawned 'cut scenes'. I'll link you to those.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“When u send me a pulse,
Feel a wave of new love through me
I'm dressed in white noise,
U know just what I want so please…”

Strict Machine, Goldfrapp

Banging Gears

“He's dead,” Charles offered coldly. “He died in a motorcycle crash in Westchester county over ten years ago.”

“Actually, no,” she replied, in equal measure, “Max Eisenhardt died in a gun fight in Tel Aviv almost four years ago.”

The statement threw Charles for a loop, but he fought to keep his face from revealing confusion. “Are we talking about the same person?” He ventured, casting his mind back to the police report he’d given that fateful night. Unfortunately, he could remember nothing of the report; he’d been in a cloud of concern and fear. He had lied about Max, but he couldn’t remember specifics.

“Max Eisenhardt was somebody I knew in high school. He was a member of a motorcycle club called Hellfire. His nickname was Mad Max, because of his reckless and violent behavior.”

“Max Eisenhardt never went to high school in the United States; he was born in former East Germany,” the agent stated, her eyes narrowing the slightest bit. “You couldn’t have gone to school with him.”

“I meant that I knew him while I was in high school, not that I met him there. Do you want me to tell you about him,” Charles inquired with heavy sarcasm, “or do you want to tell me?”

The agent smiled ruefully and gestured with one hand that Charles should continue. “By all means.”
“I met him in Westchester picking up girls,” Charles admitted, remembering how easily Max got girls on the back of his Ninja. Like Charles, they were drawn to the handsome motorcycle thug with the heavy German accent. He was everything their parents would hate. Charles had been drawn to Max for the same reasons, but he remained by the older boy’s side where others had not.

“He just sort of showed up and started making the rounds,” Charles shrugged. “He would pick up girls and get in fights.”

“When did he show up?” The agent asked.

“Spring of… 1998, I think?” Charles replied. “Surely you have the police reports? He had a thing for instigating motorcycle chases with other gangs and police. He had a stolen Kawasaki ZX6R.”

“Actually,” MacTaggert said dryly, “I don’t have any detailed reports, Professor Xavier. There aren’t any beyond a misfiled restraining order that was never served. All I have is Kurt Marko’s hysterical account.”

Charles blinked back surprise. “You don’t have the statement I gave the night of the accident?”

“This would be the accident for which you were treated for multiple injuries, the night of September 15th?” Agent MacTaggert leaned forward in interest. “Extensive road rash, broken ribs and clavicle, plus whiplash. Good thing you had a helmet on.”

“Yes,” Charles nodded, his confusion now manifest. “You only have my medical records? Agent, can I see some identification please?”

The woman’s smile was sardonic as she reached into the inside pocket of her blazer and passed a folded leather case across the desk. “You should have asked for that earlier, Professor. There’s a reason I only have a misfiled report and your medical records. The Hellfire Club is nothing less than one of the lowest rungs on a ladder. What you need to ask yourself, is where that ladder leads. Tell me what you know about the Hellfire Club.”

Charles bought time by opening the agent’s case and staring at her badge. This was the sort of information that, if it wasn’t common knowledge, got a person killed. He was suddenly thankful to Erik for being so close-lipped, because the gang was now shaping up to be something far more sinister. “I don’t know much; the man I knew as Max shielded me from the group. All I know is the founder’s club name: Black Bishop. Though he may also be called Black King.

“Agent MacTaggert, please understand that Max sponsored me as a prospect for that club and I saw some terrifying things before I visited the hospital that night. I never went back to Hellfire. Even as just a prospect, the club would have branded me a coward or worse. If they ever discover I talked with you, my life could become quite short: they would assume I ratted them out.”

She leaned forward at his desk, her hands clasped together and tapped against her slightly squared chin. “Then it’s a good thing nobody, not even my contact here at the school, knows I’m here today.

“And, if by terrifying, you mean the two men that died and the one whose face was horribly disfigured, Professor, you know nothing, nothing at all, of what these people are capable of. You have every right to be frightened, but understand that you may have information that could lead to ending a segment of that reign of terror.”

A chill rattled down Charles’ spine at her words. It was still fresh in his mind: the smell of burning flesh, piercing shrieks, the sound of meat as it sizzled and popped on the GPz’s headers. The oily smoke it sent up as it burned. He also remembered Erik’s words on the topic of his exile from the
East Coast: *

Broke a fragile truce by attacking the wrong people. Killed two of them in the process.

Had Erik been exiled from the entire East Coast for protecting him that night? Why such a large area? Unless, the ladder the agent was speaking of lead to a larger crime syndicate. Max Eisenhardt was born in East Germany, a hotbed of Russian mafia activity before and after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

The possibility eroded his ability to defy gravity; Charles sat down hard. What had Max done to end up in America? Who was Max, anyway? Or Erik?

“If you’re trying to convince me to talk based on fear,” Charles said, his voice diminished, “you are going the wrong way. I’m far more worried about gangland retribution than any sleep-deprivation and water boarding you may have in mind.”

Her jaw grew taught, but she cast out her reply, “I’m not interested in enhanced interrogation techniques, Professor Xavier. I find I get far better results without stooping to those levels. I’m not above a little blackmail, though. For instance, I’m sure your British passport makes life easier when you’re in England or any of the Commonwealth countries. But, you know, America’s stance on dual citizenship is very clear.”

Charles leaned back in his chair, observing the agent critically. He doubted she was bluffing. “Revoking one or the other would certainly make my life much more tedious. I’d still have a life to live, though.”

“So, your German friend outside just now,” MacTaggert said, switching tactics. “What’s his name?”

Charles adopted one of Erik’s tactics and stared at the agent for several moments, before answering. There was no telling how much she saw, so he assumed she saw everything, but was careful not to give anything away. “It looks really bad, doesn’t it? My coming to work here?”

“The only reason I’m here today,” she agreed. “But my colleagues in the CIA say you’ve been clean while in England and, so far, I have a good feeling about you. I don’t think you’re a bad guy, Professor Xavier, but there are a lot of innocent people out there that make devastating mistakes. I hope you aren’t that type.”

“That makes two of us,” Charles admitted. Thinking she probably already knew the answer, he answered her previous question. “His name is Erik Lehnsherr. Now, agent MacTaggert, I have a question for you.”

Her head turned slightly and she raised an eyebrow. “I love it when people ask me questions, Professor. Shoot.”

“I’ve given you all I have,” he said carefully, picking his way through the minefield of conversation. “But, if I could get you a little more, could you maybe talk to your CIA friends about a passport for Mr. Lehnsherr?”

The agent leaned back in her chair and cast a speculative look at the ceiling. “I’m going to level with you, Professor. I don’t have to be interested in Erik Lehnsherr or his current little group. I don’t have to plaster their names all over my reports. I don’t even have to mention their gang name beyond a footnote. I’d much rather write about a guy named Shaw, AKA Black King, or his contact, Azazel. You think you can help me with that?”

“I don’t know,” Charles admitted, “but I might be able to get you a lead. As long as you clear my name with your flunky, Stryker, and I never even appear as a footnote in your reports.”
“You get me a lead,” the agent replied gravely, putting her hand out for her badge, “and I’ll see what I can do about a passport. The rest of it goes without saying, Professor. I have no intention of Wikileaks getting you killed.”

Charles returned her badge. “You said Max Eisenhardt died. Did any of his family survive him?”

As soon as the badge was back in her hand, Moira’s expression turned thoughtfully sympathetic. “I think his mother is still in Dresden, but I’m not certain. That should be easy to discover.”

His mother? Charles wondered if it was his mother that wrote the letters. Erik had said he didn’t have any family, but maybe he’d lied to spare himself having to talk about her? Did that mean, then, that Erik was originally from Dresden? It was a former East German city, but he would have been eight or nine years old when the Wall fell.

“I’m going to give you a phone number,” Moira went on, “and I don’t want you to call it except by payphone, just to be on the safe side.”

She opened his desk drawer and withdrew a block of sticky notes and a pen. She jotted down the number and then dropped the pen and pad back into the drawer. “I need to leave before Stryker gets here. Don’t worry, I tell him you’re clean.”

Charles nodded his relief. It was too late to fix his security tag, but it would make dealing with the overzealous security guard easier. “Good, he was getting annoying.”

The agent gave a wry smirk at that, “Yeah, retirees get that way. He was my boss at the Bureau until he retired out here. Always hated the sexist bastard, but now the tables have turned.”

“That explains his bad attitude,” Charles smiled in response, “and his suspiciousness.”

MacTaggert stood from the chair and nodded to Charles. “Stay out of trouble Professor. I really don’t want you to become part of my business.”

“No offense,” he returned, “but I hope I never see you again.”

“None taken,” she agreed. “It really would be better that way.”

For several minutes after Agent MacTaggert left, Charles stared off into space, thinking about the new dimensions she had suddenly brought to Erik. Born in former East Germany, but then gunned down in Tel Aviv? If Max Eisenhardt was his real name, that meant somebody had possibly assumed his identity.

He quickly moved to his desk chair and started to open his internet browser, only to find it already open. Charles froze. Moira had left the browser on the Wikipedia entry for the Russian mafia.

His heart jumped and his stomach turned over with the verification. In a sudden startled rage, his fist hit the desk with force, causing everything not bolted down to rattle and a sheaf of papers to slip to the floor.

The Russian mafia. At the tender age of sixteen, he’d been hanging around with an affiliate of the Russian fucking mafia? What had he gotten himself into? No wonder Max had tried to talk him out of joining Hellfire!

“Fuck!” he snarled and picked up his empty mug. His arm reared back with malicious intent, focus set beyond the wall before him. Yet, slowly, and with great force of will, he replaced the item on the desk again. It wouldn’t do to make things worse that they already were or have people asking him
about dents in the wall.

“Bloody hell,” he said more softly. No wonder. Max should probably have been dead; surely being exiled from the East Coast was a fairly light sentence for breaking a truce and killing two men. Could it be that the Black King was such a passionate collector that he managed to spare Max just because of his talent for motorcycle theft?

All the talk of kidnapping and ransom suddenly made sense. Charles’ naïve notion of a motorcycle gang didn’t hold that possibility as valid. However, add the Russian mafia to the mix and it clicked perfectly.

Charles had never met the Black Bishop, but he knew of him through Max and the other members. Most of the members were respectful, calling the club’s founder both brilliant and disturbing. They far preferred to discuss the man’s beautiful young girlfriend. Max had only mentioned the Black Bishop when he had to break plans with Charles. In the past, he’d suspected that Max was trying to prevent them from meeting, but now it was clear. He’d been protecting Charles the whole time.

What did the Bishop becoming a King entail? He must have advanced in the ranks. If he was willing to save Max’s life by merit of his thievery skills before, what did that mean for Erik now? Was his value just as strong?

He couldn’t even tell Erik that he knew. No, he would have to take the FBI agent’s visit to the grave. If she could get the passport, that would be wonderful, but if they couldn’t find an amicable way of releasing Erik from the Black King’s service, the point would be moot. The planet was too small anymore to really hide from such a widespread organization and he didn’t need Erik to tell him that he wasn’t the running type.

Even though he knew the university’s servers would log his browsing history, he made a few innocent queries concerning the Russian Mafia’s presence in East Germany and then in Israel.

Within half an hour, Charles discovered that the Russian Mafia made a run on Israel’s aliya policy for money laundering purposes. For a time, all a person had to do to gain citizenship under aliya was to prove their Jewish ethnicity by two generations. Once in possession of an Israeli passport, the newly minted Israeli citizen could immediately transfer all their wealth into Israeli banks, no questions asked. The Russians had sent millions of dollars into Israeli banks by falsifying Jewish descent and, in some cases, stealing the identities of Russian and East German Jews.

Sitting back in his seat, Charles held his right elbow and pressed his thumbnail against his lower lip in thought. How likely was it that Max Eisenhardt’s identity had been usurped at a very young age? There had obviously been some faulty decision-making going on, but under what kind of circumstances? And if he had lost or given his identity to the Russian mafia, how did he then come to be in America? Was it again that talent for vehicular theft?

“Are you really that good, my friend?” Charles murmured, swiveling his chair toward the window, even though Erik had yet to return with any motorcycles. For a moment, he wondered what Erik looked like when he stole motorcycles. It was something he’d done for longer than Charles had known him.

He’d stopped Max from stealing bikes many times, back when they were teenagers. Once, he had even stopped him mid-theft, but he never saw what Max had done to get the motorcycle to turn over. The teen had simply moved with too much alacrity.

Turning back to his desk, he queried Google again, this time on how to steal motorcycles. The results he got back were so full of misspelled words, virulent caps lock, and vitriol that he backed away as
quickly as he had clicked in. He quickly turned back to researching other ‘innocent’ concepts, such as Soviet-era anti-Semitism.

He was so intently focused on his researching that he didn’t notice the time, his lack of coffee, or the barking of tires on asphalt. Eventually, though, a combination of outside noise and the internal growling of his stomach brought him up from his intense focus.

Blinking away the fog of research, he noted the sound of engines outside and stood from his chair. He walked to the window and looked across the lot. Erik’s Tacoma was there as was Sean’s SV and Alex’s R6. Erik’s F4i was on its side again, with Sean picking it up. Meanwhile, Angel’s custom-painted bike was in the midst of being run through multiplicities of drifting figure eights. The rider, though, was not somebody Charles knew; the helmet wasn’t familiar and there was no extra bike. The person looked female, but was shorter than Angel, though her skin was darker.


Erik was sitting on the Tacoma’s tailgate, drinking from a bottle of water, which was a fetching sight in a tight grey t-shirt, back protector, and elbow guards. Despite the earlier conversation with Agent MacTaggert, a shot of desire spiked through his veins as he looked at Erik.

If he was smart, he would cut all ties to Erik, because his ties to the Russian mafia were deadly. Only, when he considered how Max had shielded him in the past, he couldn’t in good conscience do the smart thing. In fact, he realized, even if didn’t owe Max his life, he still wouldn’t do the smart thing.

In that moment, he took a step beyond the assumption of teenaged fascination and healthy libido toward the possibility of something far more mature.

The report of his forehead hitting the glass was far louder than he expected, but he didn’t care. Have I always loved him, then? Because ratting out, even a little, on the Russian mafia was enormously not-smart and only powerful emotions were capable of spurring that kind of idiocy. His loyalty to his friends was strong enough to garner the same reaction, but none of his friends were anything like Erik.

Erik had defended Charles against Kurt and strangers. He had shielded him from the Hellfire Club while simultaneously indulging him with the fantasy of Hellfire. He had even been exiled from the Eastern Seaboard for him. Charles wondered how hard it was for Erik to play dead for so many years after kissing him that night. Had he really been content with internet stalking?

He hadn’t really considered the notion closely: he’d thought Erik’s knowledge was superior to his own ignorance. On reconsidering, it seemed more painful. Charles wondered if Erik thought keeping him safe throughout the years had made the separation easier. After all, even if Charles had known Erik was alive, Erik would never be able to visit; he couldn’t leave the country nor travel to Westchester.

It was only two weeks, he firmly reminded himself. Two weeks since he was reunited with the man. How was it possible everything was moving so fast? Fast as Erik’s R1 with each jump in their relationship coming with gut-wrenching exhilaration. If their relationship was a transmission, he mused, they’d be missing gears.

Pulling his forehead away from the window, Charles turned away and followed what he hoped was his heart.
The spring morning had warmed considerably. As he walked outside Charles immediately wished he’d left his cardigan at his desk. Instead he unbuttoned the garment and pulled it off his arms as he approached the Tacoma.

Erik’s blue-green gaze was already on him. The German tipped his water bottle toward Charles and then turned away to the cooler sitting next to one of the wheel wells. When Charles stopped beside Erik’s left knee, the man turned back to him, offering a dark brown bottle of Negra Modelo.

The short-sleeved shirt covered most of Erik’s scars. Up close and in the sunlight, they were less apparent near his hands and wrists, though they grew in number and severity past his forearms. Perhaps the lack of scars around his hands was due to Erik’s gauntlet-style racing gloves.

“Good morning to you, too,” Charles smiled as he took the bottle. He looked at Erik’s bottle of water then to the group clustered around the stunters. “Beer and motorcycles, Erik? Really?”

“Just one is fine, if you aren’t medicated,” Erik shrugged, taking the cardigan from Charles’ free hand. He threw the garment at the truck’s cab. “Do you get those from Goodwill?”

“What if I do?” Charles followed his cardigan’s flight, but then turned back to Erik. “Are you medicated today?”

A brief nod was as succinct an answer as Charles could get. “I have the other brace on, but it doesn’t keep things from grinding like the bulky one does.”

“Did you crash a lot?” Charles suddenly asked, looking back at the scars on Erik’s arms. “They don’t all look like road rash.”

Erik smirked and took another drink of water. “I believe Darwin told you I have a bunch of idiots trying to kill me. That sort of thing has been going on before you and I ever met. Did you forget?”

“So you got all those scars from people that hate you and from crashing?” Charles asked, openly pondering.

“Would I have scars from people that like me?” Erik shrugged. “I’ve had a couple accidents in the shop, too.”

“Wouldn’t shop injuries leave scars on your hands?” Charles responded with curiosity. Erik’s hands were practically unmarked compared to the rest of him. He remembered feeling several of them Thursday night, as his hands traversed the geography of Erik’s naked skin.

“Do you want me to open that beer for you, or do you prefer them warm?” Erik asked, as if Charles hadn’t asked anything at all.

“I’m waiting for the bottle opener,” Charles tsked. It didn’t seem polite to pry when he was keeping secrets himself. “You can either give me another beer or your water bottle.”

The smile Erik gave Charles was lopsided. He handed over neither. Instead he pulled his Kamel Reds out and retrieved the lighter from within the box. “Tempting as it is, I’m not going to watch you douse yourself with my water or waste good beer.”

Charles took the lighter with a laugh. “This way is even harder, Erik.”

The other man’s eyes crinkled with humor. “Out of practice?”

“Hardly,” Charles returned, enjoying the easy give-and-take between them. It felt good, even though
they were keeping secrets from each other. He wished he could have the camaraderie and the secrets, too.

He wrapped his left hand around the neck of the beer and his index finger partially around the cap. Then used the lighter as a lever and his thumb as the axis. Applying sharp force, he snapped down on the lighter so the end struck and pried up the bottom of the cap. The cap shot off, straight at Erik.

The other man snatched it out of the air with unconscious ease. “That was premeditated.”

“It was.” Unrepentant, Charles took a swallow of the dark lager while Erik opened the cooler again and withdrew a plastic container. The beer was refreshing in the late morning. He pulled the bottle away and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Beer for breakfast. All I need now is cold pizza.”

“I don’t have pizza, but if you’re hungry, Cupcake brought tamales,” Erik offered, placing the plastic container on the tailgate. “Sean and Alex say they’re safe.”

Charles’ eyes lit up even before Erik peeled the lid back from the foil-lined container. Inside were dozens of cornhusk-wrapped packets of glorious food. Even after the rich lager he could feel saliva pooling in his mouth. “What kind are they?”

“Chicken and pork,” Erik answered and pointed. “I think the pork has green sauce, which would make chicken red.”

“You don’t know?” He tore his eyes from the food and looked up at Erik’s lean face in confusion. “Shouldn’t you know? I mean, you never used to eat pork.”

“They used lard in the masa,” Erik explained patiently. “They’re good about telling me. Machete’s girlfriend has a book about kosher rules in Spanish. Celia’s better about cooking kosher than I am at eating it. She’s creative; she and Cupcake made me goat.”

Charles couldn’t help but be impressed and touched by the consideration the women had shown Erik. While he had never known Max to be religiously inclined, he had always made efforts to follow some of the rules of his people. “They’re like your family.”

A hard look flattened Erik’s expression for a moment, but passed as the man visibly willed it away. “No, they’re not like my family, but they’re friends. Celia has mothering instincts.”

It was only the notion that Erik’s mother might still be alive that stilled Charles from making any remarks to the contrary. As it was, he was saved that much by Angel’s approach.

“Hey, Prof,” she grinned, pulling off her floral helmet; the visor had been switched from clear to dark smoke. “I see you found CC’s tamales. She made them last night.”

Charles noted Angel left out mention of Machete’s girlfriend. There were likely some hard feelings present or Cupcake had simply usurped all the glory. “I’m trying to decide if I should go with the green or red.”

“Verde,” she assured him, placing her helmet in Erik’s lap. Erik palmed the helmet and transferred it to the cooler. She reached into the container and grabbed a tamale for herself and handed another to Charles.

“So, did Erik apologize for being an asshole?” She asked as she peeled the corn husk away from the masa.
Erik rolled his eyes and uncapped his water bottle, staring off at how his stunt bike was being abused.

Charles shrugged, playing off Erik’s enforced indifference. “I think we have an understanding. Did you have to work last night?”

“Nice change of subject,” Angel grinned, giving Charles a devilish wink. “Why are you asking? Did you want to make like you didn’t come out last night? You shouldn’t keep secrets; you know how tedious they are.”

For a moment, Charles stared at Angel the way he had a week ago. Clueless. Then all the flirting caught up to him and it all made sense. The week prior, the other night at Cherry Bomb; she was trying to make Erik jealous.

He glanced at Erik’s jaw, which seemed to always give him away when he was angry. It was just a bit tight.

To play or not to play?

“I suspected after all your exertions, during and after work,” Charles said gamely, stripping his own tamale of the husk, “you would be too tired to show up.”

Angel’s smile was appreciative, her eyes knowing. “It isn’t the muscles I use for stunting that are sore, Professor.”

“Is that so,” Charles replied, watching Erik’s jaw tighten and then forcibly relax. “Erik tells me stunting works your core muscles. Which muscles are you inferring?”

“It would be easier to show you,” she grinned, nearly ruining the game by laughing outright.

“Again?” Charles winked, watching Erik’s larynx work as he took a vicious pull from his water bottle.

It was too much. Angel lost her composure and made an undignified noise in her attempt to smother a laugh. Her laughter infected Charles, who chuckled along with her.

“Will you two just shut up and eat,” Erik commented, sounding as annoyed as he looked.

Angel laughed harder, bending over double with her hilarity. “Oh, Erik, please don’t chase him off. Charles is the coolest cat ever. Even Alex likes him. Wait, no, even you like him.”

“I can’t chase him off,” Erik deadpanned. “He works here.”

“Right,” Angel grinned and slapped the outside of his left thigh. “Well, I’ll just go coach Alex a bit more on the best way to destroy your F4i. He’s got this talent for crashing your bikes.”

“Have fun,” Charles smiled warmly. He couldn’t help admire her spritely gait as walked off. There was a kick in her walk that came straight from her mischievous nature. Even though he knew her too well to be interested, she was one of many types of women he looked for when he frequented the clubs convenient to him.

The tamales were still too spicy for Charles, but he toughed the heat out; they were too delicious not to. He and Erik sat on the Tacoma’s tailgate as Charles worked his way through the homemade food. They said little, content to watch the others interact. Charles made a play to get Erik to let him try one of his goat tamales, but German gave him a flat, “No.”
The lack of conversation gave Charles time to enjoy Cupcake’s tamales and to think more about Erik. He glanced at the man, who was absorbed in his observation of his young club. It was hard to believe that such fantasy could sit next to him. An East Germany-born Jew, tied to the Russian mafia, with a gift for motorcycle thievery. How could somebody like Erik come into his privileged Westchester life?

It didn’t really matter, though; it was enough that he had.

After his third tamale, he reached for the cooler to retrieve another beer. Erik took the hint and pulled another out for him. Once he had it open, he finally returned Erik’s lighter.

“I’m going back out,” Erik said, placing the lighter back in with the remainder of the cigarettes in the Reds pack. He stowed the pack by rolling it up in one short sleeve. With his free hand, he grabbed his helmet by the chin.

Charles saluted him with his bottle. “I’ve been waiting to see this.”

Erik slipped off the tailgate with a dismissive tilt of his head. “Don’t expect too much. I’m better at going fast than I am at stunts. I’ve spent more time on bikes than Angel and Cupcake, but they’ve hundreds more hours logged in stunting. I spend most of my time throwing the F4i on the ground.”

“Just as long,” Charles replied earnestly, “as you don’t hurt your knee, I could watch you throw motorcycles on the ground all day. You seem to have a reputation for doing so.”

Giving Charles a sardonic smile and an amused slap on the shoulder, Erik walked away, his limp minimal. Charles’ bright eyes traveled from Erik’s broad shoulders, past his slim waist, and settled on the familiar terrain of the jeans covering Erik’s lean ass. He pulled his gaze away and took another pull of Negra Modelo.

If not for the beginnings of a slight buzz, he would follow Erik and give the F4i a try. Charles wanted to get the feel for riding back in his muscles. After riding with Erik on Thursday night, he knew he hadn’t lost it completely. He’d had a general sense of when Erik would be shifting, even if he’d relied heavily on checking the RPMs. When Erik leaned into a corner, Charles had instinctively leaned into it as well. The knowledge was there, it just needed to be reawakened.

Chapter End Notes

*Erik and 'medicine head'*

is a cut scene that doesn't happen. I was forcing myself to write when I shouldn't have.

*Cupcake's Favorite Gif* is basically Strict Machine canon, but didn't fit with the flow of this chapter. I hated cutting it, because I really like Cupcake and I was hoping to fit in a description of a PMS gif.
Kicking Tires

Chapter Summary

Charles and Erik go shopping.

Chapter Notes

Kicking tires refers to shopping for a vehicle, but it can also mean looking for a boy/girlfriend.

Also, for the fun of it, I'll tell you what motorcycle you are most like over here.

I am very happy I got Erik on a Triple in this chapter! I really didn't think I could do it, so I am extremely pleased!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“We've gone a long way while learning,
still our hearts kept on burning,
we've gone right,
we've gone straight
and ended up far out…”

Love to Blame, Apoptygma Berzerk

Kicking Tires

Despite his flirtations, Erik surprised Charles with the mature decision to be picked up at his house in the northeast corner of Paradise Valley on Tuesday morning. Charles was chagrined that Erik seemed to be doing a better job at restraining his sexual desires. The professor had to remind himself that he’d made a promise not to resexualise their relationship until he had a deeper understanding of Erik’s sexual tastes and experience.

Charles made the drive at 8:30 in an Acura TSX he leased the first week he’d been in town. The mass of cars trying to head south into Tempe and downtown Phoenix was sobering. He was happy to be headed north.

The garage door was open when Charles arrived and the Tacoma parked on the street. Alex was pushing a bike devoid of plastics into the driveway. His face clouded over with menace the moment Charles pulled up, but the expression cleared when he recognized him. He even lifted his closest elbow toward Charles in greeting.

Clad only in shorts, sneakers, and a hoodie, Alex started up the naked motorcycle and threw a leg over it. He passed Charles and took the bike up the street at a leisurely pace, then picked up speed. Charles paused in the driveway, near the garage door. He listened to Alex run through the motorcycle’s gears when he could no longer see the young man. Judging by his lack of helmet (which was never smart) and the long basketball-style shorts, Alex was only taking the stripped bike
for a test ride up and down the street.

The sound of a door closing inside the garage caught his attention. Charles turned in time to see Angel walk out with a duffel bag under her arm. She stopped when she saw him and turned on a grin. “Prof! Hey, you’re early!”

“Don’t judge me by it,” he smiled back. “This is a rare occurrence you may never witness again.”

She punched his shoulder lightly. “I’m glad you two worked some shit out, even though the smoking thing is going to drive us all crazy.”

“Smoking thing?” Charles thought back to the last abortive kiss he’d shared with Erik. “Oh, really?”

She nodded, spinning the Tacoma’s keys around her index finger. “Yep, this is day two and he’s being a total douche-bag. He’s chewing through toothpicks and matches. I think you should take advantage of this terrible oral fixation while he has it.”

Charles pinched the bridge of his nose. Time to change the subject. “Angel. I thought you didn’t live here?”

“Sean and I have a place,” she shrugged, “but CC came over and that usually means a movie marathon or something that devolves into shrieking laughter, like when they watch Erik troll the BMW forums. I knew I’d never get any sleep so I came here.”

She snapped the keys into her palm with a flick of her fingers. “I want to stay and talk, Prof, but I’ve got lessons to give and money to make. Erik’s in the shop, I think. There’s chilaquiles on the stove that Erik made from dinner last night; fry yourself some eggs and dig in before it gets cold.”

“Have a good lesson,” Charles bade her as Angel hurried down to the Tacoma. He wondered both where Angel’s motorcycle was and what kind of lessons she was giving. And how exactly did one troll a BMW forum? Being around Erik’s club was an endless state of being outside all the inside jokes.

Walking through the garage, he found Angel’s motorcycle next to Alex’s R6. Quirking his head to the side in interest, he looked the bike over before noticing the size of the rear sprocket. Angel’s rear sprocket was just as big as the one on Erik’s F4i. No wonder she wasn’t riding it; according to Erik the bigger the rear sprocket, the faster it topped out. Angel’s engine would likely blow up before reaching highway speeds.

Pleased with himself for figuring out the mystery, he went back outside to find the shop Angel had mentioned. Gravel crunched under his feet as he made his way around the house. The back was fairly expansive and dry as only Phoenix could be where people didn’t care for spending money on water for grass. There was a tile veranda with a small pool, fire pit, and hot tub. Beyond that, in the northeast corner of the property, stood a building that was intended as a second garage.

Erik’s voice emanated from the structure. He sounded terse with irritation, but Charles heard no answering voice; likely he was on his phone. At first, Charles thought he couldn’t understand what Erik was saying because the building was muffling his voice. Then he realized Erik wasn’t using English, but German.

Who would Erik talk to in German? The only answer made his heart speed. He spun on his heel in order to put distance between him and discovery. Alex was pulling up again when Charles made it back to the driveway.

“Hey, Prof,” Alex bade, turning the bike off. “You don’t have to hang around outside. There’s food
inside if you want it, and Erik’s got a bunch of motorcycle magazines for you to look through.”

“I was just going in,” Charles replied, more than happy to have a normal conversation with Alex. “Do you work today?”

The blond shook his head and dismounted the naked motorcycle. “No, I have Tuesdays and Sundays off. Let me park the R6 and I’ll show you where breakfast is. Erik made chilaquiles from last night’s leftovers. It’s kind of like a tortilla casserole.”

Charles stared at the bike as Alex pushed it back into the garage. It was hard to believe it was Erik’s R6. It looked completely undamaged. “That’s Erik’s R6?”

“Yeah,” the blond snorted. “It’s pretty much done. Just waiting for the plastics to come back from paint. Erik hasn’t decided if he’s going to keep it or not. He should probably keep it and sell the R1; he’s a fucking menace on the R1 and he knows it.”

Once inside the garage Alex pointed at the tail of Erik’s R1 and the conspicuously missing license plate. “He needs to start smoking again. He only takes off the plates when he can’t behave himself.”

“Who are the plates registered to?” Charles asked, staring at the empty plate holder.

Alex sighed. “Sean; he’s got the cleanest records. The house, though, is actually in Erik’s name. Not exactly on the up and up, but according to him, he paid for it in cash plus a little extra. Of course, with the housing crash, the place lost most of its value.”

“When you think about,” Charles mused, thinking of the shadow economy Erik’s illegal status forced him to inhabit, “it didn’t really lose any value to Erik. That’s the important part.”

Alex stood quietly, absorbing Charles’ statement. Then he nodded. “Yeah, Prof, that’s a good point. I never thought of it that way.”

The young man went back into motion, toeing his shoes off in the garage, before walking into the house. He padded barefoot across the hardwood floors to the kitchen island. Charles hesitated before taking his shoes off as well. Neither he nor Erik had done so Thursday night. His socks made walking on the slick floor precarious for the first few steps, but his sense of balance quickly overcame the logistics.

The room was well-lit and smelled heavenly. The open kitchen and living area benefited form the natural light a skylight in the vaulted ceiling provided. The telltale smell of spices and garlic, plus the earthy smell of freshly brewed coffee mingled with the light. The air itself seemed warmer for the pleasant atmosphere the light and aromas.

Charles met Alex by the kitchen island much in the way he had Angel five days prior, only under better circumstances. It seemed Mexican food and motorcycles were the lingua franca around Deus intra Machinam. On the island there was a stack of recent motorcycle magazines.

Alex lifted the lid off one of the pans sitting on the stove as Charles fanned the stack of magazines out. “Still warm. It’s really good with eggs and beans. Beans are here,” he tapped a sauce pan on a different burner, “but eggs are in the fridge. Coffee’s on the counter.”

“Have you eaten?” Charles asked, pulling aside the magazines that had BMW or Triumph motorcycles or text on the covers. “I’m happy to cook some eggs for you, too.”

“Nah,” Alex smiled, gratefully. “Thanks, I ate. Erik hasn’t; he’s in the shop. Anyway, I gotta call the paint people, so I’ll see you in a bit.”
Alex replaced the lid on one of the pans and withdrew his phone from his loose shorts. “Tell me if you need anything, Prof.”

Charles nodded and watched the young man go. It was hard to believe he was the same belligerent hoodlum that called him a fuckwad over two weeks prior. Leaving the magazines, Charles went around the kitchen island and got to work on pouring coffee and frying eggs.

He was in the midst of turning the eggs when Erik came in through the back door, bringing a miasma of tension with him. When he looked up and saw Charles, much of the tension dissipated. Charles watched in satisfaction as Erik’s fight-ready shoulders eased. It was a good feeling to have a calming affect over the object of his affection.

He was dressed down in a black tank top and long utility shorts. His feet were bare. For the first time, Charles saw Erik wearing the expensive brace that supposedly did the most good. It didn’t cover much of his knee, but wide straps wrapped around the thigh above and the top of the calf below. Charles could see the brilliant device took all the pressure Erik’s knee normally received and redistributed it, if a little awkwardly, between the thigh and calf.

“Good morning,” Charles nodded, carefully finishing an egg flip. “Do you like your eggs over easy or sunny side up?”

“Either way,” Erik shrugged. He walked closer without his previous limp and glanced at Charles’ redistribution of magazines. “You’re early. Do any reading?”

Charles shook his head and shot a mischievous grin. “Not a bit. That’s what you’re for.”

Erik redirected his gaze to Charles. In the filtered sunlight, his eyes looked grey and they simmered. Unconsciously, Charles chewed his lower lip; he never knew Erik had such an intensely sexual expression in his oft times limited facial vocabulary. In appreciation of the tight tank top’s enhancement of Erik’s muscular chest and broad shoulders, Charles felt a powerful jolt of lust lance between his heart and his cock.

The taller man prowled around the island and reached forward, his hand at Charles’ waist level. His fingers brushed against Charles’ hip. The professor drew in a low breath in anticipation, but Erik only turned the burner off and pulled back.

“You ass,” Charles hissed laughingly at Erik’s deliberate tease. He let go of the pan and snagged Erik’s wrist.

Charles intended to pull Erik back, but Erik was the stronger, and dragged the professor to him instead. There was no other warning before the taller man’s open mouth was on Charles’. He sucked the shorter man’s lower lip between his own, bit it in parody of Charles’ former abuse, and released it again. “Burning breakfast this morning after all?”

There was no mistaking the lack of cigarettes on Erik’s breath; that was even more arousing than the rough kiss. Being manhandled was novel, fun really, but Charles pressed back on the attack.

He stepped on Erik’s left foot for leverage and to keep him in place, and bit the underside of the man’s jaw. His free hand came up behind Erik’s back and tried to take a grip on the man’s auburn hair. Unfortunately, it wasn’t long enough in the back for a hold when he grasped at it.

The moment he caught onto Charles’ ploy, Erik ducked and pulled his foot from under Charles’. He slipped just out of reach, but not before he ran one hand firmly across Charles’ abdomen and hip on disengagement.
“Save that energy for the bike,” the German said wolfishly, one side of his mouth pulled upward in a poorly restrained smile. “Do you even know what models you like?”

Charles smiled innocently, despite his true nature, and began transferring food onto plates. “German. I like to ride German models.”

“If you’re thinking of the BMW S1000,” Erik returned, feigning ignorance where Charles played innocence. “I think you should go with something less deadly: a six hundred. BMW has some nice motards. If you favor Triumph, they’ve got 675s and Triples to look at.”

“If you were a motorcycle,” Charles mused, setting a plate in front of Erik, “what would you be?”

“That will always change. For now, though, the S1000RR. German for one. For two,” Erik’s quirked lips were self-deprecating, “BMW has a history of terrible suspension.”

Charles sipped his coffee and chose to not address the allusion to Erik’s knee. He would have to take a closer look at the BMW. “So you’re a deadly German motorcycle. And what about me? What am I?”

Erik took a bite of the food he’d prepared earlier as he considered. He chewed thoughtfully before replying. “Triumph, since none of the American or Canadian manufacturers fit. Plus Triumph is on the pretentious side. Maybe the Thruxton for its classicalism, but I think the Speed or Street Triple since they look good naked.”

Charles’ fork paused halfway to his mouth at the plainly-delivered innuendo. “Yes, I rather do. But if that’s the case, the S1000 should be a naked bike, as well.”

After breakfast, Erik walked back to his room to take off his brace and change clothes. Charles amused himself by texting Raven before looking through the magazines Erik had bought him. It was probably too early in the morning for her, unless she was still awake.

_I changed my mind; I’m buying a motorcycle today. I’m probably going with Triumph rather than Ducati, though._

When Erik emerged again, he was pulling his Alpinestars jacket on over a tight grey V-neck. Charles smiled at exposed skin along Erik’s stomach as he hiked his shoulders to shrug the jacket over his arms. The sound of creaking leather was an aria to his ears.

He was disturbed, though, to see Erik’s limp more pronounced and tension in the man’s brow from pain. He tried not to give his concern away, instead inhaling as the man drew near. Charles could smell coffee, home-cooked food, the lingering scent of old cigarettes on Erik’s jacket, and the ever-present mélange of exhaust and rubber.

“I thought you were riding with me,” Charles asked, nodding to the leather jacket.

Erik nodded, “I am, but you don’t have your M-class license. They won’t let you test ride without it. My ID will pass as long as they don’t do a background or credit check.”

The sense in the statement was undeniable. On the way out, Erik collected his helmet, gloves, and riding boots. He caught Charles’ concerned glance as he limped out to the car, but said little. With his helmet and gloves in the back seat, Erik slid his seat back and started putting the boots on.

“I have osteoarthritis,” Erik commented, as if he hadn’t been keeping his knee’s condition a viciously guarded secret.
Charles’ hesitated, stunned that Erik was finally talking to him about his knee injury. Then he pushed the key into the ignition and started up the car.

“I’m not a medical doctor, so I’m not sure what that means,” he said carefully. It was a lie: he had done his research.

“It means my joint’s cartilage is shot,” Erik explained, callused fingers working at the technical laces on one short boot. “I have bone spurs from bones rubbing together. When I use the unloader brace, it keeps them from rubbing.”

“Did you take hydrocodone?” Charles asked. He was careful not to inquire directly about the mysterious injury that precipitated osteoarthritis.

“No, but I have some with me in case it gets to be too much.” Erik answered, finishing his boots and sitting up. “I don’t want to spend my life medicated or always in pain. You wouldn’t want to see me without the brace or hydrocodone.”

“But, you still take hydrocodone all the time,” Charles responded. “The side effects aren’t pleasant. It can destroy your liver. And there’s always addiction.”

“Cigarettes are far more addictive and I’ve quit them before. I use cold water extraction to get rid of the paracetamol, which is what hurts the liver,” Erik replied, reaching into his jacket’s inside pocket. “I only take tablets when I’m out and about.”

The creative chemistry was hardly surprising to Charles. Once he’d become a prospect for Hellfire, Max had revealed his drug running for the club. Other than stealing motorcycles for Black Bishop, Max used to pack the inside of the ZX6’s plastics with a variety of illegal drugs. At the time, he mostly ran ecstasy and cocaine, but he was never limited to the two.

A rustle of paper sounded as Erik pulled a folded paper out of his jacket. He opened it, looked it over and then refolded it. “I don’t need my right leg much for riding on the street. The only kind of riding I have trouble with is dirt. The Sunday we met, I didn’t know I broke a finger, because of the hydrocodone.”

Charles kept his eyes on the road for the most part, but glanced at Erik’s left hand at mention of a broken finger. He had never really asked what the damage was. The glance, though, revealed an absence of the metal splint. The last two fingers were simply taped together.

“I see you took off the splint,” Charles commented, pleased. In combination with his limp, the splint just added to Erik’s grim appearance. He was the sort of person that looked more intimidating with injuries.

Erik nodded and stared out the window. “I didn’t think they’d let me test ride with it on; it scratches the shift lever.” He said little else, seeming content to watch the scenery and give the occasional direction to Go AZ in Scottsdale. It was the only dealership in Phoenix that carried both Triumph and BMW.

When they arrived at the dealership, Erik left his gear in the car. There were few customers in the expansive showroom, which meant the sales staff immediately took notice of them. Charles noted that their eyes were on Erik rather than him. Part of it was Erik’s motorcycle jacket, the rest of it was Charles’ inability to dress casually. Charles found his invisibility amusing.

They made a circuit of the different brands. It was a little overwhelming for Charles; the variety of motorcycles had broadened dramatically since he and Max had run roughshod all over New York
State. Still, some things were the same: the bright green that announced Kawasaki, the Honda’s wings, the blue and white roundel for BMW. They were constants that would never change.

When they came to BMW, Charles couldn’t help but chuckle. The intended overview segued into a slow descent into German engineering territory. Erik was slowly drawn to one of the many S1000s. They were odd-looking. Odd in that their headlights were not symmetrical; one was round and the other slanted like the R1’s fox eye-shaped lights. It gave the machine a somewhat psychotic demeanor.

It was the signal the sales staff was watching for. A young blonde woman sailed past Charles and left him in her lightly-scented wake. Charles felt sorry for her: Erik didn’t like salespeople.

She barely got a word out before Erik interrupted and pointed at Charles. “He’s the buyer, not me. Show him Triumph.”

Without missing a beat, she turned to Charles and gave him an impishly apologetic grin. “I’m sorry, your friend’s jacket threw me off. You’re here for Triumph?”

She was, of course, an almost typical example of a Scottsdale resident: dyed blonde, tan, and perfectly white teeth. There was a tiny diamond glittering from one side of her lightly made up nose. Her enthusiasm and sex appeal were likely ruthless assets to be used against her male customers. Internally, Charles applauded her tactics.

“Yes,” Charles confirmed, raising a brow, “would you be a dear and give me the tour, since my friend’s objet du désir has arrested his forward progress?”

The saleswoman’s smile grew more sincere with Charles’ request. He figured two could play charm offensive and he knew his eyes and accent were lethal, even if his professorial word choices only worked on academics.

“Oh, of course,” she winked. “Let’s get over there! Triumph is having an exciting year and there’s a lot to see.”

He wanted to be more interested in the saleswoman’s spiel, but Charles couldn’t. Instead, he watched Erik prowl around the showroom and stare at the S1000RRs.

Though he wore no revealing expression, Charles knew Erik was appraising the bikes with a sharp eye. He was tempted to ask if Erik could test ride it for him, but after Alex’s talk about Erik’s lack of control on the R1, he didn’t think it would be a good idea; he didn’t want to end up buying the BMW.

He was more interested in the Speed Triple, though with its 1050cc displacement, he was ready to opt for the 675cc Street Triple. They were practically identical in looks, but the Street Triple was far less likely to get him killed.

“Each dealership only got one of the limited edition matte khaki green Street Triples,” the saleswoman was saying when Charles tuned back into her. She was spouting specs that had no real meaning to him. The truth was, even though he loved riding motorcycles, Charles wasn’t interested in knowing them the way he knew genetic markers. He just wanted to ride.

In the other show room, Erik finally looked up from his inspection of the powerful BMW. “He doesn’t want a special edition.”

“Don’t I?” Charles queried, raising an eyebrow. “It has that old British military green. Pleasantly retro.”
“Exactly,” the saleswoman grinned. “Most people that come into our sales floor don’t recognize that. I’d much rather see this beauty with somebody that can appreciate the aesthetics of the bike as well as the performance.”

Even though Charles assumed the salesperson was buttering him up in the hope of a sale, the professor smiled back anyway. Erik, however, was unimpressed and stalking closer.

“Charles, limited editions are just an excuse generate interest and sell unwanted bikes at an inflated price,” Erik began, unconcerned about the saleswoman. “All the manufacturer does is dress them up in new paint and throw on a few premium options.”

“But I like the color,” Charles shrugged, for no other reason than to have a little sport with the taller man.

“The matte khaki is really unique,” the woman nodded. “Only the Steve McQueen T100 has anything like it.”

“I could send the tank out,” Erik replied sternly, “have the color matched and painted.”

Charles couldn’t help but chuckle when he turned to the saleswoman. “I’d like to have my friend test ride a Street Triple, since I don’t have an M-class license.”

Both Erik and the saleswoman looked conflicted. Erik was likely concerned about the limited edition issue. The saleswoman, Charles mused, was probably thinking about the dealership’s liability and Erik’s influence over the buy.

“I need to have your license,” she said to Erik, “and get you to sign several release forms.”

Erik’s face turned hard, but Charles waved him off and withdrew his wallet. Opening the wallet, he slipped out a stack of crisp bills. “You know, it so happens that I had to go to the bank and get new bills, because they wouldn’t fit in my wallet otherwise? Don’t worry, friend, Erik is a professional.”

The woman stared at the cash in interest then led Erik back to her office to sign the appropriate release forms and make a copy of Erik’s ID. In the meantime, Charles went out to his car and retrieved Erik’s helmet and gloves. One of the dealership’s techs was wheeling a dark purple demo bike out as the professor came back in.

It didn’t take long to get Erik on the Street Triple, though on seeing the purple tank he grinned. “I bet the limited edition is green shot over purple.”

It was a wonder Erik didn’t peel out or wheelie off the curb. To Charles’ relief, he was a model rider as he rode off the lot and headed for the highway. It was a lovely morning for it. The morning chill was only just beginning to lose out to the coming desert heat. The sky was partly cloudy, laying out a patchwork of sunlight and shade across the landscape. Charles imagined Erik on the Triple, speeding from cloud shadow to cloud shadow on the highway.

As he waited, the saleswoman came over again to ask what kind of riding experience Erik had. He desperately wanted to tell her, ‘Oh, he’s been stealing motorbikes for the last fifteen years.’ Instead, he settled for a sedate, “He’s been riding and racing for the past fifteen years or more.”

Erik rode up a quarter hour later. He continued to keep the Street Triple docile which was a testament to his will power, were Alex to be believed. He switched the key off and came to a rolling stop. Feet flat on the asphalt, he peeled off his gloves and reached for his helmet’s straps. Without the splint on his left hand, he could unstrap and pull it off quickly. Running a hand through his hair to straighten it from the helmet, he bestowed a feral grin on Charles.
“I think the purple is faster than the khaki,” he stated. “The matte has more drag than a gloss surface.”

“Honestly,” Charles laughed, “I really like the white version. So, what do you think?”

Still seated on the Triple, Erik gave a grudging nod. “For a pretentious bike, it isn’t bad. Feels nimble. The braking is good. It doesn’t excel at any one thing, but seems to do everything well. It’s well-rounded. The wind drag is bad on any street fighter, so expect to be worn out after riding it for any amount of time at highway speeds.”

“That sounds like approval,” the saleswoman enthused. “I was really worried you were going to kill my sale!”

Erik shrugged. “No, he’s got a mind of his own. He’ll bring me in to advise, but he’s going to do what he wants.”

It was nice, Charles thought, almost praise, coming from Erik and it made his heart swell. Turning to the salesperson again, Charles turned up the wattage on his most winning smile and smacked his wallet rhythmically into the palm of his hand. “So, do you take… cash?”

Paying in cash made the process much easier; there were no credit checks or bank loan wrangling. The moment he could get a word in, Erik pushed the dealership to throw in a helmet to the deal and protective gear. While the paperwork was performed, one of the dealership’s lot attendant readied Charles’ white Street Triple by cleaning, detailing, and topping off the gas tank.

It was well past noon by the time everything was in order. Charles was elated. Not only would he be riding a motorcycle again, but Erik had acted as his personal assistant while he selected gear. He taught Charles how a helmet should fit, which was something neither of them had known a decade ago. He showed him how to identify a quality protective jacket by looking at seams and how many pieces of leather were used in construction. When it came to gloves, Erik explained that anything that didn’t cover the wrists wasn’t appropriately protective.

Charles was no slouch. He soaked up all the information Erik gave him, often without needing an explanation. And if they touched more than absolutely necessary during the process, neither of them complained.

When the Triple was ready and keys bestowed, the pair walked out together. Erik dismissed lot attendant and saleswoman with one of his pointed looks.

“Just because you quit smoking,” Charles chastised while the two dealership employees were still in earshot, “doesn’t mean you are permitted to be an ass.”

“It helps.” Erik took the key out of Charles’ hand. “Let’s go to your place and drop off the car. We can two-up back to my place to get the R1 and then go for a ride.”

The suggestion was beautiful, but Charles still gave Erik a stern look. “That sounds lovely; I’ll spring for lunch. But, in the meantime, stop being such an ass to people that don’t deserve it.”

Erik blew a derisive snort, but didn’t choose to argue.

They walked together to the Acura and stowed Charles’ new gear in the back seat. When Charles slid into the driver’s seat and shut the door, Erik was still standing next to the car. Curious, the professor lowered the window and gave Erik an inquisitive look.

“Did you forget something?”
Erik shook his head, his expression cryptic, but hinting at humor. “No, I remembered.”

The tall man fished in his jacket and withdrew the folded paper he had been looking at on the way over to the dealership. He held it out to Charles between his first two fingers. As soon as Charles took it, Erik turned and limped back toward the Street Triple.

Brow furrowed in confused concern, Charles unfolded the paper. Relief rose in him when he saw it was a medical form from a free clinic. The form was in both English and Spanish and cleared one Erik Lehnsherr of any sexually communicable diseases.

Charles never suspected a medical readout could be quite so erotic.

Ahead on the Triple, Erik’s pale eyes were on Charles. The moment the professor looked up, a smirk pulling the corners of his mouth up unevenly, Erik nodded knowingly. The German flipped down his dark visor and toed down from neutral into first gear.

Charles was glad Erik didn’t know where his apartment was; it would force the man to keep close to the Acura. Of course, with the medical report sitting next to him in the passenger seat, Charles wasn’t sure he could maintain an appropriate speed limit, either.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be a bit more exciting, but likely not unexpected.

Update: I forgot to post pictures of bikes mentioned. The Triple is from the Errata: Simple Motorcycle Tutorial chapter, but I really wanted to get Erik on it thanks to these pictures:
As for the BMW S1000RR, I'm using it in my icon right now, but have a better look:
Asphalt Ballet

Chapter Summary

Erik leads the first dance and Charles is set to seize the second.

And, the return of technobabble!

Chapter Notes

I didn't get to the part I prewrote. However, that is definitely in the next chapter. You know, after more porn.

About chapters... I am absolute shit at gauging how long anything takes. My quick and dirty outline called for twelve, but everything is taking far more words than I thought. Sooo, I think there are a minimum of, um, six more chapters to go?

Also, there have been a couple fanworks for Strict. (No one is more shocked than I!)

Check out motleypatches photo set for Strict.
And a WIP study of Erik's R6 from synechdoche.
And it looks like GQ took advantage of Fassbender showing up to his US GQ photoshoot on the R12GS. So, now there's photospam all over of him with his BMW branded helmet, gloves, and keys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"The circumstances put soul in me,
   And there ain't no holding me,
I've got heart made of gold in me..."

A Little Better, Cee-Lo Green

Asphalt Ballet

With the test paper in his pocket, Charles was quick to remind himself that the sex from several days ago had been far from perfect. It didn’t do much to keep him from wanting to try again, though.

When he came back down the outside stairs after dropping off his new gear, his blue-eyed gaze fell on Erik’s bare neck. The man had set the Alpinestars jacket to his side on the stairs. Without the leather barrier the play of Erik’s scapulae was apparent under his grey V-neck.

Erik was no blushing virgin, far from it, but even if the man had made progress in opening up to Charles, sex as a serious topic still hadn’t appeared on the table. Looking at the point between Erik’s scapulae where he had set his promise, Charles’ resolve not to provoke sex until they spoke strengthened. He was willful and stubborn and those qualities helped him resist.

Once they had talked, though, he would wreak sexual devastation on the man.
It was early enough in the afternoon that Charles doubted anyone would need to scale the stairs, so he settled in next to Erik. “What’s the plan?”

Erik wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “We’ll take the Triple up to PV, I’ll set your suspension, then we’ll head to Cave Creek to test your skills. No matter what you think, your turbocharged GPz was a pig. The Triple is half the weight and easy to throw around. It makes far more consistent and smooth power than anything you’ve piloted before. You’ll need to be cautious with it at first.”

The plan was reasonable and worked in Charles’ favor: there was information at Erik’s house he wanted to get for Agent MacTaggert. He hadn’t wanted to get caught snooping in Erik’s room that morning. Not when he suspected Erik had been on the phone with his sponsor or the malevolently named Azazel. Setting the Triple’s suspension was a much better time to do what he needed.

It was nice to sit on the stairs in the relative cool while the desert breeze brought them warmth and the scent of dust. Charles was glad his apartment complex didn’t make the attempt to grow grass like so many other complexes he had seen in Phoenix. Grass in the desert didn’t make sense to the professor. It contributed to humidity, which Phoenix could do without: a dry 110 F was far more bearable than a humid 90 F.

After they were both done eating, Erik rifled through his jacket and withdrew a packet of gum. Charles smiled fondly as he watched the man take two pieces of gum instead of a habitual after-meal cigarette. He then replaced the packet in his leathers.

“Aren’t you going to share?” Charles teased, gesturing in the general direction of the gum.

He received a baleful look for his effort and a flat response. “No.”

Unfazed, Charles chuckled and patted Erik’s left knee. “Fine then, I’ll get my gear on and meet you down at the Triple.”

Erik nodded and handed Charles the wrappings from lunch. Jacket in hand, he headed down the stairs. He used his right hand on the rail to keep some weight off his bad leg.

Charles watched him go. He needed to start talking to people about knee replacement surgery. He didn’t know if he needed to know about the injury that precipitated the osteoarthritis or not. The point would prove moot, though, if there wasn’t enough alcohol or sex in the world to get Erik to talk about it.

Moving resolutely, Charles went back into his apartment to gear up. Though Erik had complained, Charles had selected a Triumph-branded jacket. The leather was perforated for airflow, but Erik had still suggested they take a road trip to LA to a shop that sold RS Taichi mesh jackets. It was a none-too-subtle hint to Charles that he was long overdue for a talk with Raven about the unexpected reunion with Erik. Prospect was no less stressful than before.

Erik was sitting on the Street Triple when Charles came down, helmet in hand. He’d gone with Arai’s DNA graphic. It didn’t remind him of DNA, but the black, red, and white graphic was more sedate than the rest of the helmets worn by Erik’s group and acquaintances. He liked the colorful array of helmets, but he couldn’t get past the notion that a rainbow had vomited most of them. Plus, the white and black blocks of color matched the Triple’s white paint and blacked out engine.

Charles pulled the Arai helmet over his head and fumbled for a few moments with the straps. He had managed to buckle Angel’s helmet faster, but then he’d had enough tequila and scotch to not over think the process. Once the helmet was buckled, he pulled on the Alpinestars gauntlet-style gloves.
Erik had forced him to buy.

The Triple’s riding position looked more upright and comfortable than the GPz, ZX6, or R1. When Charles threw his leg over the seat, though, he found two-up on the one-piece seat only marginally more rider-friendly than the R1’s pillion. There were still no grab bars and each thigh was only inches from the Triple’s double exhaust canisters.

When he was ready, he reached behind to grip the lip of the Triple’s tail, hoping the two exhaust cans wouldn’t make it too hot to hold. Through the leather covering his fingertips, he felt the top of the taillights and endurable heat. It could work if he needed it.

Reaching under Erik’s right arm, Charles snaked his arm around the taller man’s ribs and pressed his palm flat beneath his chest. In response, Erik slapped Charles’ outer thigh a few times to signal their departure.

To Charles’ surprise, Erik continued the model citizen behavior he had exhibited on the way from the dealership. He didn’t challenge traffic lights. He didn’t launch the bike from any stops. He even came to full stops at stop signs.

The onramp to the highway had likely never seen such a well-behaved motorcycle hoodlum. Erik did not flog the Triple at any point, but his effortless matching of gears to RPMs was still a thing of beauty. It was, Charles mused, not unlike asphalt ballet. With Arizona’s 70MPH traffic limits and the police’s blind eye to 80MPH speeds, Charles still achieved a velocity high as Erik navigated the HOV lane. He only pulled out of the lane to pass slower vehicles.

The sweeping curve past Camelback Mountain felt no less exciting for the lower speed limit. However, he felt Erik stiffen at the apex of the curve. His left hand came off the grip and smacked Charles’ thigh hard and then pointed to the southbound lanes. Charles looked to the left and saw a group of three southbound raked-out cruisers.

Abruptly, Erik’s right arm clamped down on Charles’ arm, trapping it against his side. The German man leaned hard to the right, swinging them out of the HOV lane and one more lane over. Erik released the throttle and grabbed the front brake to rapidly drop behind a Ford F250. He then swiftly maneuvered the Triple another lane to the right. He hit the throttle once more to pull the Triple abreast of the truck.

Placing his trust in Erik’s abilities, Charles lifted his head into the turbulent air. It was a strain on his neck the way the wind jostled his head, but he wanted to see what the cruisers looked like. Unfortunately, he couldn’t see much with the truck and concrete divider between them.

Were they the SS Darwin had told him about? It seemed likely. Had they seen Erik? Charles’ heart thudded lurching and sped rapidly in his chest. They knew him by his helmet and motorcycle, he reminded himself, and they were two up on a white Triumph. They were likely in no trouble. But, he couldn’t help wonder; if the Russian Mafia backed Hellfire, did that mean SS also had some kind of crime syndicate backing?

Charles put his head down, his helmet clacked lightly against Erik’s, and held tighter to the other man’s torso. There were far too many ways to die in Erik’s dangerous world.

The rest of the ride to Erik’s house would have been idyllic, but Charles was too shaken to enjoy cutting through the air along the asphalt expanse. In his mind, it was nightfall and the GPz was being run off the road by a man on a Yamaha V-Max. He could almost smell the oily smoke from the man’s face cooking on super-hot metal. To think, that man was likely still alive out on the East Coast.
When they got to the house, a familiar Toyota Corolla was pulled up on the street. The car’s presence took the edge from the worst of Charles’ worries. Erik switched off the Triple’s ignition and let the engine’s continued momentum pulled them to a slow stop in front of the open garage.

Charles spared no time dismounting the Triple. He pulled off his gloves and helmet. Erik stayed seated on the Triple as he did the same. His expression was serious beneath his mussed auburn hair.

“Are you okay?”

“I don’t know,” Charles admitted, looking away for a moment. It was true, he didn’t know and he wasn’t sure what to say. When he looked back, Erik’s mercurial eyes had lost their openness. His expression was shuttered.

“This is stupid,” Erik stated, jaw growing tight. “Even if my sponsor agrees to my proposal, there’s still the SS. They don’t bother the others, but if that changed?”

Charles knew from experience what Max would do, but Erik? That was somehow a more chilling prospect. “You have enough pain and anger without thinking about hypothetical situations.”

Erik looked blankly at his helmet where it sat on the Triple’s tank. His jaw was still tight, his brow furrowed deeply. Charles stepped closer, reaching a hand out to comb Erik’s hair back into place. The furrow was something he could do nothing about.

“What’s this about a proposal?” He asked, still carding his fingers through Erik’s hair.

The man sighed and tilted his head back to look Charles in the face. “My contact’s in town Thursday for an aerobatic competition this weekend. We’re meeting tomorrow to discuss an exit strategy.”

Charles’ heart clenched again, but this time in a combination of elation and dread. He wanted to ask about the strategizing, but the need for information for agent MacTaggert trumped that question. “Oh, your contact flies?”

Erik nodded and glanced toward the garage before continuing. “Not competitively. He has a friend that competes internationally. I might get dragged out to watch on Saturday or Sunday, though I’d rather not.”

“Talk to your contact,” Charles advised, running his fingers through Erik’s hair and down to hold the back of his neck. He took comfort and strength in touching Erik, as if he absorbed it through skin contact. Erik body radiated warmth into Charles’ hand. “Take one challenge at a time.”

Erik folded his hands over the helmet’s contour and closed his eyes. He took a deep breath through his nose and released it slowly. When his eyes opened again, they took back their former intensity. “Let’s set the suspension.”

He dismounted the Triple and gestured for Charles to push it into the garage. As Charles took the grips, Erik stepped into the garage and called into the house for Alex. Charles had no trouble rolling the Triumph inside. His eyes lit upon the R6, leaning on its side stand with its blue plastics back. Fondly, he parked the Triple next to it.

When Alex appeared, Hank wasn’t far behind. Charles chuckled and raised one hand in a jaunty greeting. “Hank, what a surprise! I didn’t know tutoring pre-engineering students was part of your internship.”

Hank made an annoyed face, but his ears pinked all the same. “Professor, you saw my car outside; don’t act surprised now.”
“Geek,” Alex deadpanned, “you better hope the girls of PMS never take an interest in you. You’re the easiest target ever. Consider yourself uninvited to the annual bikini barbecue.”

Even with Alex’s help, it took time to set the Triple’s spring rate to Charles’ weight and preferences. Charles tried not to laugh too much as Erik groused about the Triple’s soft factory suspension. He’d disparaged BMW’s suspension just that morning after all. It seemed a source of endless annoyance to the man.

Hank looked on in fascination. Alex answered the physicist’s questions as they came, never getting impatient. He explained what they were doing even when holding the Triple upright while Charles stood over the saddle with his feet on the bike’s pegs.

When Erik told him to get down, Charles excused himself to hit the bathroom. He left his new boots at the door and headed inside. As nobody had ever directed him to the house’s public bathroom, Charles felt he had an appropriate excuse to go to Erik’s. The door wasn’t locked.

Rather than head for the bathroom, Charles went directly to Erik’s bedside table and pulled the drawer. The pistol was the first thing he saw. He closed his eyes momentarily and made a conscious effort to dismiss his unease. With a deep breath, he looked back in. The condoms were still there as was the lotion, but now there was more appropriate lubrication.

The bottle brought a wicked grin to Charles’ face. “I’ll be seeing you later, my friend.”

He reached past and snagged the small paper bag stuffed with envelopes. He had no intention of opening any of them. Charles scanned the stamps for the most recent postmarks and matched them to changes in the New York post office box. The PO Box and zip code changed every two years and most recent postmark was from ten months prior. The last time the box changed was one year prior. Chances were good that the box would stay the same for another year, which would give the FBI agent time to observe the comings and goings of whoever checked it.

Moving fast, Charles pulled out his phone and took a photo of the New York address. Hopefully it was enough to get Erik a passport. If not, he had information on Erik’s contact, Azazel. Surely the man would go to another aerobatic competition to see his friend compete. The FBI or CIA could tail him from there and eventually, perhaps, the Black King.

He had everything back the way he found it, before he remembered the DVD. That needed to go back in the drawer as soon as humanly possible. He would have to check out what it held and return it while Erik was meeting with his contact.

Charles walked out of Erik’s room and closed the door behind him. Walking down the hallway, he located the communal bathroom and slipped in long enough to simply push the head’s lever. He didn’t know if flushing could be heard in the garage, but it was worth the extra bit of authenticity.

Nobody took notice when Charles walked back into the garage in the cool garage. Hank’s curiosity made a good screen for Charles’ ulterior motives. Erik was still sitting on a rolling stool, going at the stock shock absorber’s adjustment rings with a brass punch and rubber mallet. A fine sheen of sweat was beginning to appear on his forehead. While Charles was out of the room Erik had gone from gum to chewing on a match.

Charles stood in the door, watching and trying to imagine Erik shirtless and barefoot, wearing the old rubber butcher’s apron. The fantasy wasn’t what it used to be. Just watching Erik’s focus on his work, his intense physicality, was enough. With the V-neck’s short sleeves, it was easy to watch the bunch and jump of Erik’s biceps as he delivered consistent, consecutive, blows to the punch.
Charles face began to flush.

When Erik was done hammering at the rings, he had Alex hold the bike upright again while Charles stood on the pegs. Erik measured the sag one more time and nodded. “That’s as good as you’re going to get until you get an Ohlins or something. Prestige manufacturers always have the worst suspension.”

Using the Triple as leverage, Erik stood up and headed for the door into the house. He paused at the two stairs that led up, before bending down to unfasten his boots with dirty fingers. Charles set the Triple’s side stand and tried to gauge how much Erik’s knee was bothering him by the amount of difficulty he had after the technical laces were loosened.

He noted that Alex was covertly doing the same while putting Erik’s tools away. Considering Erik had mentioned making the other help in the past, it was no real surprise. The support Erik had in his club members could never lose its poignancy.

Charles kept the relief off his face when Erik managed to negotiate the removal of his riding boots. He dismounted the Triple and followed only to take even longer to remove his own riding boots. He caught up to Erik as he was going into his room.

“Thank you,” Charles said, following Erik into the bedroom. “You’re spoiling me, you know.”

Erik smirked, crossing his arms over as he gripped the hem of the V-neck. “I know.”

Charles laughed at that, then lowered his eyes to Erik’s hands. “You’re going to get your shirt dirty just holding the edge like that. You can go ahead and take it off; I’ve seen it all before.”

Erik continued to pause. He looked down at his hands for several seconds. “Close the door, Charles.”

Charles reached back, eyes still on Erik, and pushed the door shut. As soon as it clicked, Erik pulled the shirt up, revealing his handsomely proportioned and muscled torso. In the daylight coming through the blinds, however, it was clear why he hesitated. The scars were far more terrible in day than they had been at night.

It was all Charles could do to react to Erik’s body rather than his skin.

“Does this show repeat in the evening?” Charles smiled with as much appreciation as he could project. He could wait for an explanation. After all, Erik had been far more communicative in the last five hours than he had in the last two and a half weeks put together.

Erik tossed his shirt aside, his eyes fastened on Charles’ with the same intensity he had bestowed on the Triple’s shock absorber. His hands dropped to his belt and worked the leather loose. Actions always spoke louder than words when it came to Erik.

“Are you taking a shower?” Charles breathed.

Erik’s head dipped once in a nod, but his eyes stayed fixed on the man before him.

Heat was rising to Charles’ cheeks under the intense gaze. It was terribly erotic being the subject of Erik’s exclusive focus. Along with the rush of blood to his cheeks came the rush of blood to his groin.

In one swift move, Erik pushed his jeans and boxer briefs to the floor and stood up again. He reached up and took the match from his lips and tossed it aside. “What about you?”
The perfect vision of Erik’s nude body was one thing, but the huskiness of his voice was another. Charles’ jeans were getting increasingly tight as his cock responded to a storm of sight and sound. “I’ll… I’ll just watch?”

“Will you?” Erik asked, his head tilting to a questioning angle.

It took a great deal of willpower, but Charles answered as he thought appropriate. “Erik, I’d like to join you, but I want to know a few things before we proceed.” God, he’d just cock-blocked himself!

Erik raised an eyebrow in further curiosity. He stepped forward and pushed the Triumph jacket from Charles shoulders and down his arms. “Then ask.”

The jacket, still stiff with newness, hit the floor. Charles nodded mutely, trying to find the best way to ask even as Erik worked inexorably on undressing him. “Have you been with other men?”

Erik paused to look at Charles speculatively, then went back to unbuttoning his shirt. “No.”

Charles shook his head, seized Erik’s wrists, and brought them up to shoulder height. The single syllable killed and kindled his lust. “That is just like you. Erik, if I had known, things would have gone totally different Thursday night. I would have taken care of you, instead of being so selfish.”

To Charles’ surprise, Erik didn’t fight the hold on his wrists. “I didn’t want to be taken care of or for you to be gentle. I got what I wanted.”

“You wanted a ferocious wank using my limp hand?” Charles snorted and squeezed Erik’s wrists. “I call shenanigans. Don’t take me for a fool, Erik.”

“I never have,” Erik stated evenly. He turned his wrists in Charles’ hands, but he made no move to break free. “You can be stupid, but it has never taken over your life.”

Anger melted from Charles’ spine and made room in his lungs for a deep sigh. He pulled Erik’s wrists down until the man’s long hands opened to hold Charles’ shoulders. Charles dipped his head and leaned forward to rest his forehead against Erik’s stubborn lips. “It is now your turn to stop talking.”

He felt Erik’s lips push forward in what was possibly a kiss, but Charles forged on. “We are going to take that shower now. And you, my friend, you are going to let me take care of you. Unless, you don’t want that, in which case you should say, ‘Charles, I don’t want you to suck my cock.’ Understood?”

He lifted his face up and beheld Erik’s strangled expression. The taller man’s face was flushing in anything but embarrassment or anger.

Giving him a smile, Charles glanced down to see Erik’s cock rising with a declaration of intent. He released Erik’s wrists in a slow unfurling of fingers and took over the unbuttoning of his shirt where the other had left off. “Understood?”

For a few beats, Erik’s hands continued to rest on Charles’ shoulders. He shook his head slowly and slid his right hand up Charles’ neck to his jaw, calluses scratching lightly with the motion. His gaze was determined as ever, but less harsh. “Understood, but that isn’t what we’re going to do right now. We’ll do things your way after Cave Creek. For now, we do things my way.”

Despite himself, Charles leaned into Erik’s rough palm. He could smell brass and exhaust fumes from the Triple on Erik’s hand. His bright blue eyes did not leave the challenging grey gaze across from him. “If you promise me the reins after we’re done at Cave Creek then I’ll let you be in charge.
“You have my word,” Erik agreed, voice husked low.

“Excellent,” Charles breathed, pulling his shirttails out of his jeans in one languid movement. “Let’s get in that shower.”

With Erik already gloriously nude, it took no time at all for Charles to join him in nothing but his own skin. They made it into the shower with a minimum of exposure to cold spray. Charles found himself thankful he had showered there before and knew where everything was and how it all worked.

He let Erik lead, waited for him to negotiate the logistics that would best allow access to the long German body with the minimum strain on the man’s knee. Grip tape across the shower’s floor and a sturdy rail set in the wall made things far easier than Charles had hoped.

For the first few moments, Erik was intent on cleaning his hands and rinsing off sweat. Charles took advantage of his distraction to do a new tactile exploration of the Erik’s muscular back, following the channel of his spine, then running his hands appreciatively over his ass. Water rinsed Charles’ hands of soap faster than he could create lather with Erik’s bar soap.

Then Erik turned, shower spray hitting the back of his lower neck and between his shoulders. Charles squinted to shield his eyes from the momentary aquatic halo as it rebounded off scarred skin. Erik’s lips were parted as he bent his head down to Charles.

Not one to wait, Charles surged up into the intended kiss, bringing the fight, as ever, to Erik. The friction from Erik’s tongue pressing forward just as firmly as Charles’ fed the professor another dose of red-clothed lust. The kiss a heady rush of sensation of tongues that fenced and soothed.

Charles closed his jaw partially, scraping his teeth lightly when Erik disengaged slightly. He slipped his hand to the back of Erik’s head and pulled him close again. He could still taste a trace of mint on the taller man’s mouth. Of the match he could taste nothing.

The shower spray eventually necessitated a break in the kiss for breath. Charles gave ground, licking across Erik’s lower lip as they parted. Eyes narrowed and blinking against the water’s spray, Charles could still see the heat emanating from Erik’s intense gaze, the swell of his lips. He noted Erik’s right hand’s white-knuckled grip on the shower rail and grinned mischievously.

Placing a foot between Erik’s, Charles leaned in, pushing his body against Erik’s. The motion fed him the sensation of other’s stiff cock, a burning line pressed against hip and waist. He felt Erik’s guttural moan through his chest, rather than from his throat.

“Just don’t call me Max,” the taller man growled, seizing Charles’ flank and maneuvering them flush. Their erections pressed together wickedly.

“God, no, I would never…” Charles gasped, lust making him inarticulate. He tried to worm his free hand between them to catch at overheated flesh. “You’re Erik… My Erik.”

He finally caught both their cocks together. Much of Erik’s height was in his torso, but his legs were still longer than Charles’. However, with all his weight centered above his left foot, Erik’s height was reduced slightly by the angle. The logistics were a strategy of bliss. Charles swept his hand down both lengths.

Erik banged his head back against the showerhead.
“Teufel,” he hissed, appreciatively.

“Oh, German,” Charles grinned at the man’s responsiveness, pumping his hand again. “I’m doing something right when I hear German.”

“Make it quick,” Erik rasped, hips jerking. “Save slow for later.” His hand left Charles’ flank. Leaning back, he covered Charles’ hand with his own and helped set the pace and pressure.

Between them, a pace was negotiated, if temporarily struck. Charles only broke the grip once for soap and, though much of the lather washed away, the slipperiness was intoxicating enough to break the shaky unison they had found.

Soon, Charles’ free hand was gripping the shower rail just as hard as Erik. The friction of fucking their conjoined hands had low-grade nonsense spilling from Charles’ lips. Cock slipping against cock sandblasted any remaining sense form his brain. Their joined hands struggled as they thrust out of time into their mutual grasp.

Charles wasn’t aware that Erik was coming until the man’s hand pulled out of his grip and off his cock. He grabbed the back of Charles’ head and crushed the shorter man’s lips against the lower line of his bared teeth in a failed attempt to kiss his way through orgasm. Erik’s shuddering breath was not unpleasant against Charles’ nose.

Erik’s shot covered Charles’ fist and was swiftly washed away from his stomach. The pulse of the man’s cock against Charles’ and the stuttering jerks of hips took him to the edge. But it was the ragged sound of Erik’s animal moan that did him in.

Orgasm came thundering up from Charles’ toes and down from the crown of his head and met in the middle, wrenching his abdomen in heated knots. He bit into Erik’s chin and finished in violent spasms within his own hand. It was like the tight knots of his pleasure were undone, coil by coil, by being pulled violently straight. Again and again and again, until he was slumping forward into Erik’s broad chest.

Then they were sliding, slowly, inexorably down. Erik’s injured leg was out straight, but his left folded, bringing them to the shower floor. His right foot slid across the perimeter of the shower floor where the grip tape did not span.

Charles twisted his body as they descended, trying to redistribute his weight away from Erik’s right side. He ended up half collapsed across Erik’s left, pressed flush against the shower’s glass. The slide of skin on skin and skin on glass was exquisite to sensitized flesh.

Erik raised a hand and blindly reached back to turn the water off. His expression was still a bit slack, but one corner of his mouth was pulling up into a smile. Pressed against the glass and feeling wonderful, Charles started to chuckle.

“That was ridiculous,” he gasped through his humor. “Brilliant and ridiculous.”

Erik managed to commit the rest of the way to the smile, he even snorted in lazy amusement. He lifted a hand to his chin to explore any damage Charles might have left. “Better than losing your virginity in a half bath, surely.”

“Don’t ruin it,” Charles groaned, slapping Erik’s wet thigh, “by making me remember that. I didn’t lose it anyway; I know exactly where it went.”

“Not every drunk teenager does,” Erik shook his head, his skull pivoting back and forth against tile.
“Lucky me.” Slowly, Charles pulled himself up. Placing a hand on Erik’s jaw he looked at his chin and the fading crescent of tooth impressions. “No skin broken. It will be red for a few minutes, probably.”

Erik brought his head away from the wall and seated his chin fully in Charles’ hand. This close his eye color was more clearly blue-green. “Are you relaxed now?”

A lazy smile answered Erik’s question sufficiently, but Charles gave him words, too. “Yes. Can we take a nap?”

“No,” Erik sighed, though he seemed every bit as boneless as Charles. He pushed wet tendrils of hair out of Charles’ eyes. “The key to good riding is relaxing. This is the perfect time to go to Cave Creek.”

His hand dropped from Erik’s chin in order to slap the German’s thigh again. “You planned this! Buy motorcycle, set suspension, induce orgasm, apply post coital bliss to riding lesson!”

Erik grinned with all of his teeth and though it was a smile most people feared, Charles saw it as the brightest point in the past few weeks. It was the most unburdened expression he’d seen Erik make yet and it made Charles’ heart fill with a pleasant conflagration. He clambered up on hands and knees and pressed his lips to Erik’s. The kiss was a chaste movement of lip on lip, but it was like a pressure release valve, feeding Erik the overflow from Charles’ heart.

Then he reared up on his knees and pressed Erik’s face to his solar plexus. “You impossible bastard. What are you doing to me?”

“Ich weiß nicht,” Erik murmured against wet skin. He slipped a hand between their bodies and pushed Charles away. His smile faded, but was not lost to a wave of thoughtfulness. “Come on, dry off and let’s go.”

The mark on Erik’s chin had faded by the time they were both dressed. Erik’s short hair dried quickly, but Charles’ was still damp. Charles sat on Erik’s bed as the taller man slid back the door on his closet. He opened the chest of drawers within the closet and began tossing a set of folded clothes next to the professor.

A fond smile worked onto Charles’ lips; Erik was planning on staying the night elsewhere. Likely in Tempe. In Charles’ bed. Splendid.

“The complex has a pool and hot tub,” Charles said offhand. “Bring trunks.”

Erik nodded and reached up to the closet’s shelf to retrieve the item Charles suggested and a compact backpack. He packed quickly then pulled open the bedside table. The motion threatened the languor drifting pleasantly through Charles’ limbs, but Erik only opened it to take his handgun. He checked the safety and then shoved it roughly in the back of his jeans.

Charles needed no other reminder to replace the DVD as soon as possible.

“Let’s go,” Erik said, zipping up his jacket and grabbing the backpack. “The air circulation in your helmet will dry your hair.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Charles sighed.

Erik shrugged, “Arai has non-fog shields on their helmets. You’ll be fine. If it does fog, just keep the shield open a crack.”
“That’s not what I’m worried about,” Charles replied as they walked down the hall together. “My hair is going to end up dried into permanent helmet hair.”

Erik snorted in amusement and shoved his hand into Charles’ brown locks. He took a handful and tousled. “You and your hair, Xavier.”

Charles smirked and playfully shouldered Erik against the wall. “My hair is my crowning glory. Everyone says it is my eyes, but it is definitely my hair.”

When Erik shoved Charles back, the professor went with the push, purposely allowing the force to bash him into the window flanking him. He was careful not to put pressure on the glass, but grip the framing in one hand. He covertly slapped it with an open palm just to make it seem far worse than it was.

It didn’t work. Erik’s grin didn’t falter at all. Likely he would have laughed outright had the window broken. Breaking things never fazed Erik; his life had always been too full of violence to be perturbed by casual breakage.

“Hey,” Alex shouted angrily from where he and Hank were seated at the kitchen’s granite island. “I’m not putting in anymore glass. That’s Sean’s thing.”

Charles smothered his laughter behind a hand, though he felt vaguely childish for doing so. He felt even more childish for being chastened for rough-housing in the house Erik shared with Alex.

“When you start paying rent,” Erik deadpanned, “you can dictate the rules around here.”

“Hunh,” Alex snorted in suddenly amused disgust, “that’s a direct quote from the foster family book of child-rearing.”

“Good thing you pay rent, then,” Erik returned. “Isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Alex nodded, trying and failing to withhold a grin. He twirled a pencil between his fingers over a spiral notebook and a collection of what were likely Hank’s personal textbooks. “You kids behave yourselves.”

Erik paused, left hand gripping the doorframe out to the garage. “When Angel gets back from instructing Scottsdale trophy wives, you can use the Tacoma. If you need anything in the shop, call me. I’m in the middle of rebuilding Machete’s transmission and I don’t want anything moved.”

“Got it,” Alex halted the pencil’s spin and pointed it emphatically at Erik. “Plastics are back on the R6. Stay off the R1 or the next Deus motion passed will entail plastering you with nicotine patches and selling the video to PMS to cover the property and physical damage incurred in the process.”

Charles was certain that his eyes watering would be the least of the damage were he to withhold the laughter Alex’s pronouncement induced. He succumbed from silent shaking to peals of hilarity. He heard Hank join in hesitantly, followed by Alex’s surprisingly light chuckle. “I would pay to see that, too.”

“I’m sure you would.” Erik looked on, his expression bland. Charles was on his heels when Erik stepped into the garage.

“What kind of lessons does Angel give?” The professor asked. He wiped mirthful tears from his eyes as Erik sat on his work stool and put on his boots.

“Pole dancing.” Erik replied, looking speculatively between the R1 and R6. Nodding to himself, he
retrieved his helmet and limped to the R6. He placed the helmet on the tank and then stepped over to Alex’s yellow R6.

After finishing with his own boots, Charles watched curiously as Erik reached down through the cowling. Even had he been standing near the yellow bike, he wouldn’t have been able to see what Erik was doing. He doubted Erik could see, either. Likely he was doing whatever he was doing strictly by feel.

“What are you doing?” Charles asked quietly, drawing the garage door shut behind him.

“Loosening a connector in its housing,” Erik smirked, pulling his hands out of the wiring harness and cowling. “Shouldn’t take him too long to figure it out.”

“Is it just as easy to steal one?” Charles inquired. It was a question he’d wanted to ask for days. It finally seemed like an appropriate moment.

“All bikes have tricks to them,” Erik replied, as he went back to his blue R6. “Little things you’d never guess at unless you own or work on one. Essentially, the difficulty of theft varies from model to model. All I need with most modern bikes is a clear path to a fuse box and a paperclip to jump the ignition. A decade prior to your GPz, it only took a safety pin. Recent models like BMW’s K1200LT can be stolen with a toothpick, if you’re lucky.”

“What if the handlebars are locked?” Charles asked, genuinely curious and flummoxed by the idea of stealing a BMW with a toothpick. *German engineering, what?* “Or the wheel is chained?”

“Locked handlebars are no match for two people and a truck. Just pick it up and load it.” Erik shrugged, slinging his leg over his motorcycle. “And with enough leverage, there’s no chain a pair of bolt cutters can’t cut. Methods depend on what kind of bike you’re taking, how much time you have, how quiet you need to be, and how easy it is to get parts, if you need to break something to take it.”

Charles mulled the information over and the casual manner it was delivered. A decade had seen Erik go from a thrill-seeking thief to a levelheaded, and possibly reluctant, professional.

All thoughts of thievery and the past were swept away when Erik nonchalantly rolled the R6 backwards out the garage and left him alone with the Street Triple. He was glad it was already facing forward, pointed toward the street. Biting his lower lip, Charles donned his helmet and gloves and swung onto the seat. He brushed his leather-clad hands over the tank’s white paint.

“Hello,” he whispered, under the cover of Erik starting up the R6. “I’m likely going to have a bit of trouble to start with, but once I get back up to speed, so to speak, I’m sure we’ll get on.”

The Street Triple had nothing to add, so Charles slotted his key into the ignition and started it up. With its unusual three-cylinder configuration, the Triple sounded and felt like nothing else. For a moment, Charles shut his eyes and listened to the throaty sound of the engine.

Then he realized he was just sitting there filling the garage with exhaust which would likely back up into the house. Grimacing inside the helmet, Charles toed the Triple down into first gear and slowly let out the clutch.

And killed the engine.

He’d forgotten to twist the throttle even the barest degree. He fished up for neutral’s half click purgatory and restarted the bike. It roared alive again. More carefully, he timed his clutch with the twist of his wrist and eased the Triple out the garage.
Erik was waiting patiently on the street. When he saw Charles, he took off slowly, heading for the highway’s outer road. Charles followed him south when Erik hit the outer road, though he took the turn far wider than he’d intended. Erik was right about the Triple’s light weight and the way it nimbly fell into corners. The ease was disconcerting, but also heady: when he was used to the machine’s grace he would be able to take the most from it.

A smile worked across his face as they sped down the outer road. The Triple had plenty of torque, too. Like the R1, it was happy doing far more miles per hour in first gear than the GPz or ZX6. It accelerated far faster than he ever expected and proved incredibly responsive.

Long before they reached the stop before the highway, Charles experimented carefully with the Triple’s Brembo brakes. He doubted motorcycles would ever have the stopping power of a car, but he’d noticed in the painful stop-and-go traffic Thursday night that the R1 stopped quickly. The Triple’s brakes did not disappoint. In fact, the stopping power was strong enough that he thought he could use it against Erik, should they end up racing around Phoenix. He wished he’d paid more mind to the saleswoman’s memorized speech concerning the Triple’s specs.

He forgot about the specs, too, when they hit the ramp down to the highway and the wind began to buffet his helmet and body with the force of his passage. The Triple’s tiny fly screen made little impact in forging a trail through the air.

The R6 shot out on the northbound highway like it was propelled from a gun. Charles was too careful of the Triple’s torque to grab much throttle and thus loop the it. As a result, Erik ended up far ahead of him. The gap didn’t concern Charles. Max had been patient with Charles’ attempts to learn how to ride the ZX6 and then how to use the GPz’s turbocharged boost. He suspected Erik would be a saint as he waited for Charles to become reacquainted with riding and with learning the Triple.

He wasn’t wrong. While Charles never saw the R6’s brake lights, Erik accelerated or decelerated as needed. Erik led him into Cave Creek without any problems and stayed exactly on the speed limit as they passed through the police-ridden outskirts. A patrol car tailed them all the same, but soon turned back. Erik’s Arrow exhaust was loud, but it didn’t hit Cave Creek’s illegal decibel level. Of course, it helped that Erik kept careful control of the throttle. The Triple’s volume was no cause for concern.

They spent the next hour dancing in Cave Creek’s well-known the hills and turns. Many of the turns were blind and decreased in diameter, necessitating Charles trust Erik by matching his entry speeds and lean angles. The German was patient, but he also pushed Charles to tighten his turns by taking curves faster each time. Faster turns meant lower leans and lower leans were frightening to most people. It was that fear people like Erik thrilled to and, many years ago, Charles had acquired the taste.

Whether it was the sex or the return of long-dormant skills, Charles relaxed into the Triple. He stopped watching and following Erik and simply moved with him. The Triple was an extension that allowed him to skim along the desert roads, like a bird in flight. He leaned into the turns as much as he needed, rarely crossing the yellow lines and matching his gears to RPMs with growing efficiency.

It felt good. It felt beautiful.

He lost track of time, content to move through the dry atmosphere. It came of something of a surprise when Erik led him to a parking lot near a lake and brought the R6 to a stop.

Charles pulled abreast of the R6 and copied Erik when he flicked back his face shield. “That’s enough for today. Why don’t you call for take out and we’ll race it back to your place?”
“Race take out?” Charles laughed, switching off his ignition. “Are you serious? The traffic is going to be hideous.”

“That or we go to El Encanto,” Erik returned, also switching the R6 off. “It isn’t far, but we’ll have to endure being filmed the whole time.”

“PMS?” Charles wondered aloud. He wasn’t sure he wanted that, if it meant Erik would become distant, as he often did, when they were in the presence of others. “I’ll call in an order, but I don’t want to race.”

“Tell them to have it there in forty-five minutes,” Erik suggested, loosening the fingers of his gloves before pulling them off.

Charles pulled off his own gloves and helmet and placed them on the Triple’s white tank. Pulling out his phone he was pleasantly surprised to see a text from Raven.

*I will only forgive you, if you got two helmets. Send a pic!*

“Before I call, could you take a picture?” Charles grinned, opening the phone’s camera app.

Erik pulled his helmet off and set it down. “You could just get video from one of the girls. There’s going to be plenty of them before long.”

Charles shook his head and offered Erik the phone. “I want it now for Raven. You know PMS found my Facebook? I have over twenty friend requests that I have no intention of adding. Not even Mama Chete.”

“Don’t add Machete, but don’t make her angry, either.” Erik advised and took the phone. He dismounted the R6. “Good thing you made it private long before coming out here.”

“Troll,” Charles smiled, though it was somewhat sad. “Do you even have a Facebook?”

Erik shook his head as he moved to take the picture of Charles on the Triple. “I want it now for Raven. You know PMS found my Facebook? I have over twenty friend requests that I have no intention of adding. Not even Mama Chete.”

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Erik took the picture and tossed the phone back to Charles. “As long as I never have to watch them.”

“Not even if I let you do the filming?” Charles’ grin grew wider as he looked at the shot. His helmet and leathers matched the Triple nicely and his hair looked nowhere near as bad as he thought it would.

“I hate seeing myself on camera,” Erik stated and got back on the R6. “I wouldn’t watch it, even if you were using me to train for competitive cock sucking.”

Unfazed by Erik’s attitude, Charles happily sent the picture to Raven. *I can’t get you a helmet until we get you properly fitted.*

“You might change your mind,” Charles laughed, “once you’ve experienced my award-winning performance.”
Chapter End Notes

Charles' Arai helmet (he went with the white one):

Setting suspension/spring rate/sag:

That blue spring is what Erik is adjusting and the two rings with the notches are how you loosen and tighten it up. He’s using a brass punch on the notches. (Brass is soft and used to avoid harming the adjustment rings.)

**Edit:**
The shock pictured is the right shock, but that knob there? That means the shock can be adjusted simply by turning the knob. I can't believe I posted that pic and did not twig to the stupid knob.
Self-adjustment is a great selling point, because actually having suspension set is not something average motorcyclists want to screw with. Plus, dealerships don’t want to offer a service which requires a customer to go into the service area. Self-adjustment is a nice idea, but efficacy is another matter altogether. So, basically, I screwed up. Thankfully this is an AU, right? In this AU Street Triples don’t have self-adjusting shocks! :D (please accept my humble apologies)

Concerning the safety pin comment:

It doesn’t work on anything newer than the nineties (due to a transistor installed for this very reason). Unfortunately, meth addicts don’t really care about that. Took that photo with my crappy cell phone a few years ago.

The BMW K1200LT and toothpicks:

There’s a design flaw in one of the side bags that allows a knowledgeable person to pop open said bag with a toothpick (or something comparable in shape). People have a habit of leaving their wallets in those bags which wouldn’t be quite so bad if they didn’t leave their handy ‘credit card’ key in their wallets. Hence, if you’re lucky, you can steal one with a toothpick.
Slow

Chapter Summary

Adrenaline, sex, character appearances (wanted and not), and reveals.

Chapter Notes

First, if the smut is any good at all, you have storybinding and Tahariel to thank for beta reading it. If it sucks, well, that's all me.

Second, this chapter is the longest chapter I have ever written: 11.5K words. By other author's standards, it isn't that big a deal, but for a slow writer like me, it is quite a bit. Title is a double entendre for how late I am with this upload (blame the porn).

Third, I have another engine/technobabble tutorial for you, thanks to Aaliyah's More Than a Woman video, which features Triumph's Speed Triple, BAMF!Aaliyah, and a sexy tour through a motorcycle engine.

Last: Please keep in mind the warnings I have tagged this fic with. I know you're all good with the sex, but please do not forget the violence.

“I have a secret
A secret that no one can know
I have been waiting
For someone just like you to show
Let's do it slow”
Slow, VAST

The ride back to Charles’ apartment was a pleasant thrill of tomfoolery with Erik. They wove back and forth across lanes in lazy sweeps in excess of 70MPH on their southern route.

Erik challenged him with engine braking. He never knew when Erik would slow down since he seemed to enjoy doing so without triggering his brake lights. It was a bizarre habit, as far as Charles was concerned, but he compensated by applying throttle and soaring past the R6 every time he twiggled to Erik’s decelerations.

At wide open throttle, Erik’s R6 had no trouble catching up. Charles entertained himself by studying Erik’s ass when the other man moved the R6 in sinuous patterns only a few meters in front on the Triple’s nose.

Then he caught the flick of Erik’s right wrist and the R6 was shooting ahead, leaving the Triple far behind. With a twist of his own throttle, the Triple’s engine roared and galloped ahead to close the gap. The next time Erik slowed unexpectedly, Charles shot up abreast of the R6. He turned his head
to look at Erik on his left.

With his tinted visor equipped, he couldn’t see much of the man’s expression, but he was certain there was a smile on his face. Mischievously, Charles brought the Triple closer to the R6 and released the left grip. Fighting the wind’s buffeting, he brought his arm up and lightly smacked the back of Erik’s Suomy.

Tag. Why not?

Erik’s right shoulder came up as he leaned to the left and peeled away from Charles’ advance. This time, he grabbed his front brake lever and dropped immediately back. Simultaneously, Charles seized all the throttle the Triple had available. The Triumph proved every bit as responsive as he hoped. The front wheel came a few inches off the ground as it launched forward in fifth. It was a massive head start.

It wasn’t enough. The Triple was all torque and the R6 was clearly all top-end power. The Triple accelerated faster than the R6, but it also topped out faster.

It finally came clear to Charles, his only hope at beating Erik in a race would be to do so in the hills or on the city streets at night, places where there would be plenty of turns and only short bursts of straight road. In those conditions, he could deny the R6’s speed with the Triple’s power.

Despite his disadvantages, they made it into heavier traffic before Erik could tag Charles back. At that point, they gave up the game and the two swept into the HOV lane.

The rest of the ride was tedious and hot. The sun, spring or not, beat down on them. The asphalt beneath them radiated heat up. The cars in front blew hot exhaust back. The few times they slowed to a miserable 10MPH, the heat off the engine and exhaust heated Charles up.

When they finally got into Tempe, Charles began to sense exhaustion creeping up on him. He got to the apartment complex without worry and pulled into his assigned spot under the carport: the Acura was in the general parking running the length of the apartment buildings. Erik pulled in under the shelter in the same parking space, key already off. Charles turned the Triple’s key and then slumped over the tank.

“I told you the wind was going to be an issue with the Triple,” Erik commented once he had his gloves and helmet off. “You didn’t even sit it to test its ergonomics.”

“Nnng,” said Charles from inside his helmet, which he had let drop onto his crossed arms.

“Do I need to carry you in?” The other man asked, voice amused. He kicked down the R6’s side stand.

“Yes,” the professor sighed. “Please put me to bed. You can eat all the Thai food when it arrives.”

“Two servings of Thom ka kai soup works for me,” Erik commented drily. He dismounted the R6 and set his helmet on the ground, before walking around to Charles.

Charles felt the man’s hand rest on his Arai helmet and jostle it gently. “Erik, remember when you used to sleep on the ZX6?”

The jostling of his helmet stopped abruptly. “I’ve been trying not to.”

“I always thought that was amazing,” Charles sighed, weary in every bone. “So, I’m just going to practice now.”
“Xavier,” Erik sighed. He gripped the helmet and pried up. “This is not the right way to sleep on your motorcycle. Get up or I’m going to take dinner and head back up to Pleasant Valley.”

“Nooo,” Charles whined piteously, head angled back by Erik’s grip on the helmet. “I suppose I can practice sleeping on the Triple later.”

“Good idea,” Erik replied, though his tone clearly implied the opposite, and let go.

While Charles took off his gloves and helmet, Erik pulled the pillion seat off the R6. The pillion hid just enough storage space for a length of chain, padlock, with little to spare. As soon as he had the chain and padlock out of the space, he placed his handgun in.

Moving his right leg awkwardly, Erik crouched down to chain the front wheels of both motorcycles to a carport support beam. Charles frowned at Erik’s crouch and dismounted the Triple. Mentally he reprimanded himself; had he been less lazy, he could have saved Erik the effort.

Once locked, Erik situated his weight to his right leg and stood up without effort. Charles retrieved Erik’s helmet for him and the two walked together to Charles’ apartment. Though exhausted, Charles observed Erik’s limp grow more pronounced as they got to the stairs. Wordlessly, he tucked himself under Erik’s right arm and pulled his arm across the back of his shoulders. With the height disparity between their torsos, it was a good fit.

“What are you doing?”

“Helping you up the stairs,” Charles smiled, despite Erik’s sudden irritability. “You’ve been grinding your bones together all day on my behalf.”

“I’ve been off my feet for most of it,” Erik denied.

“But I haven’t seen you take any hydrocodone,” Charles continued, pulling Erik along. Erik allowed the help, leaning on Charles as they scaled the stairs together.

“I haven’t,” Erik agreed, “but I intend to when the delivery arrives.”

Once inside, Charles set both helmets on the kitchen table. Erik was still able to remove his short boots without help. He set them beside the door and slung his jacket across the back of the apartment’s couch. His backpack he set next to the coffee table situated between the couch and the apartment’s old entertainment center.

Despite weariness, Charles pulled Erik down into the couch with every intention of making out like teenagers. However, Erik merely smiled and pushed the side of Charles’ face into his broad chest. “Take a rest, Charles. I’ll wake you when the food arrives.”

Exhaustion led Charles to nod. He swiftly dropped into a doze, lulled by the beat of Erik’s heart, the steady intake of his breath, and the smell of motorcycles, sweat, and the lingering trace of cigarette smoke.

He woke when Erik sat up and gently began to resituate him on his side. He reached after the other man, disoriented, when he levered himself off the couch and limped to the door. When Erik didn’t return, Charles heaved himself up into a seated position. It all made sense when Erik opened the door and took two plastic bags of Thai food from the restaurant’s delivery driver.

Erik had the driver wait while he pulled all the containers out of the bags and checked that everything was as Charles had ordered. Satisfied, he nodded to the driver and opened Charles’ wallet to pay him.
When the door shut, Erik reached over casually and locked it again. “You want to eat on the couch or at the table?”

Charles was groggy from interrupted slumber. He rubbed at his eyes. “You stole my wallet.”

“It isn’t stealing, if you were going to pay, anyway,” Erik commented, repacking the plastic bags for easier transport. He came back to the couch and pulled the coffee table closer. “Don’t eat the soup.”

The instruction didn’t make any sense, even though the soup smelled horribly spicy. “Why not? I’m working on my tolerance for spicy food. You know tolerance can be developed, but is rarely lost?”

Erik nodded, unpacking the food again, but leaving the soup within the bag. “If you eat it and then fall back asleep, you’ll get heartburn. I have a feeling that will work against the promised award-winning blowjob.”

Charles chuckled despite himself. “I can’t imagine semen makes a good cure for heartburn. Spicy food doesn’t make for very comfortable head, anyway. That’s one of those lessons you don’t want to learn firsthand.”

“No kidding.”

Charles smirked in response and snagged a container of pad thai and a set of chopsticks. Once he started eating, his appetite shocked him. He went through the container in record time. Eating quickly wasn’t his habit; he liked to take time and enjoy what he was eating. He was also used to having leftovers for the next day’s lunch. Snagging the plastic bag, he pulled it over and frowned at the soup Erik had forbade him. If he’d known how hungry he would be, he would have ordered the mango rice.

Glancing askance, Erik snorted and pressed his chicken curry into Charles’ hands. “Just eat the chicken. The rest is probably too hot.”

“I can’t believe how ravenous I am,” Charles stated, shaking his head. “I don’t feel like I should be this tired or hungry.”

“It’s the wind buffeting,” Erik explained. “You only have that little fly screen on the Triple to deflect the wind. You do far more work just sitting there than I do on the R6. If you tuck down more while riding, you’ll save yourself some fatigue.”

Charles took Erik’s curry and without remorse picked through it for all the chicken. Meanwhile, Erik found the television’s remote and started flicking through channels until he found the Speed network. It was the least surprising thing Charles had seen all day, even though he hadn’t known he even had the Speed channel. The apartment came with basic cable, but he rarely watched television; it had a tendency to put him to sleep.

The Speed channel was still on, but showing reality programming, when Charles woke up the second time. He was draped across Erik’s thighs. He could feel Erik’s left hand threaded through his longish locks of hair and see his right hand’s loose hold on the remote. Charles didn’t remember falling asleep again. Tilting his head, he looked to see what kind of light was coming in through the balcony’s glass doors. He saw the diffused glow of the complex’s lighting.

“What time is it?” He asked and turned his head to look up at Erik.

Erik removed his left hand, draping his arm across the back of the couch instead. “Half past ten.”

“I slept four hours?” It was far more than he expected. He felt unaccountably robbed of time he
could have spent with Erik. Though, he supposed, he had been with Erik the whole time. He hadn’t
had any dreams of the man, though. At least none he could recall.

He reached up and touched Erik’s chin and felt the stubble beginning to show there. “You sat here
for four hours?”

Erik shook his head, lips curving and eyes wrinkling at the edges. “No, I’ve been up twice. You
crawled back into my lap both times.”

Charles smirked back, unembarrassed. If he was willing to risk danger to life and limb in order to
pursue his feelings for Erik, embarrassment made no sense. “I don’t recall, but I’m sure I had good
reasons for doing so.”

The television was switched off and Erik folded slightly over Charles. “I like it better when you have
no good reason for doing so.”

The angle was awkward, but Charles reached up and gripped Erik’s t-shirt and hauled him down.
The taller man had to twist and Charles had to move up, but they managed to press their lips
together, albeit haphazardly. Erik’s lips tasted of mint. Of course they did; he had been sitting bored
without cigarettes on the second or third day of quitting.

Charles parted his mouth and traced the contours of Erik’s lips with the tip of his tongue. Then ran it
along the seam until Erik’s tongue met him in the middle. He felt the other man swallow a moment
before their tongues began to fence in the joined space their mouths created.

Charles drew back gently, eyes clouded with amused desire. He licked the stubble-rough skin at
Erik’s chin and flicked his tongue across the man’s lower lip. “Did you just swallow your gum?”

The display of white teeth in a predatory smile was answer enough. “Perhaps.”

“Errrik,” Charles groaned in what was mostly desire, but also exasperation. “That’s unhealthy.”

“Mmhm,” he replied, and brought a new offensive to Charles’ lips. He sucked Charles’ lower lip
lingeringly and nipped it lightly when he let go. “I prefer swallowing to spitting.”

“Oh,” Charles laughed, moving his mouth to bite Erik’s chin. “I will keep sir’s preference in mind
when he’s too incoherent to tell me himself.”

A puff of breath announced Erik’s single snort of laughter. He lifted his upper body from the
awkward position over Charles, then reached down to pull the tail of his button up from his pants.

Charles grabbed Erik’s hand and shook his head. “Nope, we’re home from Cave Creek. That means
I’m in control now.”

Erik’s mouth opened, likely to argue, but there were no loop holes to exploit. His teeth clicked as he
shut his mouth again.

The sound brought a devilish smile to Charles’ face that was all the more diabolical for the paleness
of his eyes. The idea of being in charge of a man like Erik, all furious action and intent, was heady.
His cock had already been stirring, but with the realization it jerked slightly within his boxers.

Sitting up, Charles moved close to Erik’s side and whispered breathily in the man’s ear. “Take your
shirt off. Slowly.”

Frowning, but in interest rather than anger, Erik crossed his arms to grip the hem of his t-shirt. He
slowly lifted it up, revealing scarred skin and muscles centimeters at a time. When the t-shirt was over Erik’s face, Charles moved in sliding his hands slowly over the man’s broad chest, down his solar plexus and back across ribs.

The hard muscle under sleek skin felt amazing under Charles’ palms and fingertips. Conversely, Charles’ hands felt just as good to Erik, who shuddered in response and pulled the shirt over his head and tossed it aside.

Charles lifted his hands to Erik’s shoulders and ran them down his arms, across tightly muscled triceps, biceps, and then down the equally impressive forearms. The contrast of soft skin over hard muscles was heady.

“You’ve no tattoos.” Even though Max had never seemed interested in tattoos, Charles had still equated them with motorcycles and gangs.

It came as no surprise when Erik became nonverbal in his answers. He shook his head slowly, eyes fixed on Charles as if he wanted nothing more than to devour him. The look only fed Charles’ desire. He brought his hands up to undo his button-up as quickly and efficiently as possible.

The concept of being commanded didn’t work well with Erik. He quickly returned to pulling the hem of the shirt out of Charles’ pants. Rolling his eyes, Charles made no second attempt to stop him.

“You don’t follow instructions very well,” Charles commented. He abandoned his shirt’s buttons to Erik and leaned forward to suck at the man’s firm lips. His hands slid into Erik’s hair and pulled lightly.

Slowly, Erik’s eyes closed against Charles’ sensory advances. It felt like a small victory to the professor; he paused his sucking kisses to smile wickedly. Carefully, he nipped lightly at Erik’s lips in parody of his former kiss.

Accepting Charles’ advances did not stop Erik from pushing the professor’s shirt off his arms, though it meant Charles’ hands had to leave his hair. Erik left the shirt crumpled on the couch. His fingers went directly to Charles’ pants next.

Charles did not arrest the Erik’s progress: he wanted to be naked with Erik, after all. Keeping Erik busy with undressing made it easier for him to concentrate on feeding them both sensation. He threaded his fingers back into Erik’s hair and ran his nails against the man’s scalp. He felt the response, a short sigh, against his lips and repeated the motion.

Charles felt Erik’s hand palm the front of his boxers. His cock had already been filling out, but the contact nearly brought it fully erect. “No, Erik, I want the pants off first.”

Breathing a soft snort in response, Erik pulled back. “Stand up, then.”

Charles raised an eyebrow in response, but said nothing.

Erik’s expression was confused for a moment before he ventured: “Please.”

“Very good,” Charles responded in his best professorial tone and stood. Erik was quick to pull down Charles’ pants and boxers, which left his erect penis in the man’s face.

Charles was nearly done in by the sight of his cock so close to Erik’s face. When Erik glanced up, eyes more green than blue and brimming with lust, Charles sucked in a breath in anticipation. Rightly so; Erik opened his mouth and set his tongue firmly to the head of Charles’ cock and licked a solid line along the shaft.
A curse left Charles’ lips. “Get those jeans off right now, Erik. Right now.”

It took little effort to get Erik up and his jeans and boxer briefs down. Charles kept his hands off Erik’s hardening cock and led him to the bedroom. When he saw Erik’s limp, he positioned himself under the taller man’s shoulder again. “Did you take hydrocodone at dinner?”

Erik shook his head. Charles had the distinct feeling the older man was humoring him by allowing him to help. “Not when I realized how tired you were. Why, do you have plans that would make it necessary?”

Charles laughed as he brought Erik into his bedroom. “Not at the moment, but we’ll discuss that later.”

When they hit the bed, Erik fell back with a smile. “You won’t be the first to suck my cock, Charles. I wonder how you’ll compare?”

Shaking his head at the challenge, Charles crawled onto the bed beside Erik. “Here’s the thing about getting head from another man,” he stated leaning down so his breath caressed Erik’s ear. “We’re intimately acquainted with the equipment, which is why lesbians usually kick our asses when it comes to cunnilingus. Lucky you: I happen to excel at the oral arts.”

Charles leaned back to see Erik’s face and to hear his response. The other man shook his head at Charles’ overwhelming arrogance. “Fuck the foreplay, Charles. Just do it.”

“I think not,” the professor grinned back, running a finger from the dip at Erik’s collar and slowly down his chest. “Foreplay is part of a good blowjob.”

“Shooting my wad seconds after you get your mouth on my cock,” Erik replied, “is not going to allow me to enjoy the good blowjob.”

The chuckle Charles gave Erik in response was not comforting for its wickedness. “There are ways of dealing with that.” He tracked his finger further, down the lean stomach, between the narrow hips, and along the middle of Erik’s groin to the base of his cock.

“Less talk,” Erik hissed, pulling Charles to him by the back of the neck, “more action.”

Relenting at last, Charles leaned forward to suck the words off Erik’s tongue. Below, his finger merely brushed up Erik’s warm shaft and circled the head lightly. Charles savored the resulting breath the other man breathed harshly through his nose.

Though Erik tried relentlessly to make war, rather than love, on Charles’ mouth, the professor played things cool. He took his hand away from the Erik’s cock and splayed it at the center of Erik’s chest. Though Erik struggled against the motion, he was not positioned to keep himself from being pushed back down on the bed. Charles thrilled with the victory, but didn’t let it go to his head.

“Shhh,” Charles whispered to Erik as he moved to straddle the man’s hips. He leaned down over him, holding either side of Erik’s face. His thumbs ran gentle mirrored circuits along the edge of his cheekbones and down his hollow cheeks. “Shhh, Erik, just let me… let me give you something slow and sweet.”

Panting slightly with effort and desire, expression serious, Erik looked up and Charles read conflict in the his dilated eyes. He considered stopping to ask what the hang up could possibly be, but then he felt Erik relax by steady increments. “Do it.”

It was reasonable to assume, Charles mused, that Erik wasn’t the type to indulge in slow or sweet.
He would have to change that. Lowering his face to Erik’s he brought their lips together once more.

The kiss was slow and languid. Charles set the pace, dipping his tongue into Erik’s wet mouth. Erik allowed him to lead, his tongue swirling over Charles’ when he began the motion. Unable to keep still, Erik’s hands drifted in long strokes up and down Charles’ back.

The heat of Erik’s mouth, the obscene wetness, and the pleasant friction of exactly the right pressure of tongue-on-tongue added continuously to Charles’ arousal. His balls and groin tightened pleasurably with it. His cock ached for contact. The rub of Erik’s cock against his ass only heightened his senses.

As a tease, he lifted his hips up, transferring more weight to his knees in order to quit the contact that was likely tantalizing the head of Erik’s cock.

A frustrated breath was indication enough from the man beneath him. In response, he changed the character of the kiss. He sucked Erik’s tongue, giving him an example of what was to come. Erik’s hands stilled; his fingers dug into Charles’ back.

When Charles lifted his face from Erik’s, his lips were wetter with the other man’s saliva than his own. He looked down at Erik’s handsome face, at the furrow etched in his brow, the lines around his face, and he saw a curious sort of perfection within them rather than premature age.

He lined Erik’s lips with his tongue again and felt the difference from moments prior. They were softer, wetter of course, and swollen. The liberties Erik allowed him, the effect he had over him; it was heady stuff. He wanted to make it last, to be more addictive than cigarettes.

Moving over Erik on hands and knees, always mindful of his injured right leg, Charles began a lengthy exploration of muscle and skin. He sucked languidly at Erik’s salty skin and was pleased with every impatient sigh he won. Charles pulled only enough color to the surface that would fade by morning. And as he moved up and down Erik’s body, he kept low; the better to rub against the excited, leaking, cock beneath him.

Erik was not still, never still, one hand threaded into Charles’ hair and pulled lingeringly. The other hand grasped Charles’ shoulder; his fingers digging in as he found sensitive regions. Erik’s breath came irregularly as Charles put his book learning and his experience to work to wreak sexual devastation.

By the time he focused on Erik’s cock, it and Charles were smeared with precum. Changing tactics again, he gave the sensitive organ a single rough lick and was rewarded with Erik’s cursing and shudder.

He deposited a few more sucking kisses to Erik’s abdominals before moving the man’s left leg wide. In response, Erik bent his left leg, pulling it up and open to allow Charles better access to his balls and the curving erection above. It also helped him avoid his right knee.

For a moment, Charles paused to drink in the sight. He had Erik open physically and, he dared believe, emotionally. His lips were parted, his breathing harsh, and his eyes were half-lidded with lust. It was nothing like Thursday night’s indiscretion. The lust was mutual and more unguarded than Charles felt he really deserved.

Charles reached for and grasped the base of the Erik’s curving cock. It pulsed in his hand when Charles finally parted his lips around it. Erik swore and jerked as Charles took the head into his mouth and slowly ran his tongue around its circumference.
On his tongue’s second pass around the head, he pressed along the underside, just above the circumcision scar. His tongue proceeded to flick down and then up over the slit. He tasted salty precome; Erik’s had a tang not unlike soap.

Beneath him, Erik’s hips came up, seeking to push his cock further into Charles’ mouth. It wasn’t unexpected. Charles simply lifted off with a sucking pop and looked up into Erik’s burning eyes.

“Stop that,” he said and flicked his tongue over the head again. Erik’s teeth were bared in something that was neither a smile nor a growl. His hands had grasped fistfuls of bedding.

“Quit teasing, Charles,” Erik ground out, his teeth clenched.

Charles shrugged with one shoulder and lowered his head again. That’s what foreplay was: teasing. He had no intention of putting an end to it, not when Erik’s protestations were feeding his mind, and thus his body, pleasure.

He licked up the underside of the shaft, from just above his other hand and all the way to the tip. The sound of Erik’s fingers bunching the sheets worked further magic on Charles’ lust. Keeping his cock off Erik’s athletic body was getting increasingly difficult.

Dipping his head lower, he sucked gently at Erik’s sac, which elicited a hard exhalation from the man. When he went lower and sucked on Erik’s perineum, he felt the concussion of one of Erik’s fists hitting the bed. Then a hand was grasping his hair in helpless tugs.

“Scheiße, Charles,” Erik growled breathily.

Oh, good. German. The reaction made Charles’ cock jump. In response, he added slow strokes to Erik’s cock while sucking away at the patch of flesh beneath his balls. The hand on Charles’ head pulled harder and more German, likely filthy, choked abortively from Erik’s throat.

All the aural stimulation was making Charles’ desperate for friction. From his position, laying on his stomach, propped up by elbows, he managed to begin short haphazard thrusts into the bed.

It didn’t take long for Erik’s body to begin tensing and his balls to start drawing up. Putting the Erik’s pleasure first, Charles took his mouth from Erik’s skin and rose up into a kneeling position. From there he bent over and sucked the man’s cock into his mouth while his right hand settled on Erik’s thigh so his thumb could go back to massaging his perineum.

Both Erik’s hands grasped Charles’ head. His breaths were ragged, his hips pushing up insistently. Between Erik’s powerful grip and his stubborn hips, it was difficult to keep from being choked. Charles took his hand away from the Erik’s perineum long enough to give his left thigh a resounding smack. So much for sweet.

Erik’s hands fell away to savage the sheets, but he seemed to have no control of his hips.

Charles improvised, working with Erik’s helpless thrusts. He sucked hard and then took Erik’s cock deep, careful not to upset his gag reflex. It was still enough to make his eyes water. Erik’s animal groan made it worthwhile.

He deep throated him only a few moments at best, before pulling back. He sucked hard again, his tongue pressing against the man’s shaft as he brought his mouth up and down the length. It only took a little extra suction to put Erik over the edge.

Erik gave a strangled shout, his hips pumped erratically, and his cock pulsed, flooding Charles’ mouth with jet after jet of warm ejaculate. It was difficult to swallow down with the two of them still
working Erik’s cock, quite a bit escaped down the shaft and from the corners of Charles’ mouth.

Charles spread his hands across Erik’s hips, hooking his palms on jutting hipbones, in order to feel the slow fall of orgasmic contractions within Erik’s loins. He watched Erik’s face attentively as the tension in his jaw lessened. He continued to gasp for air through his open mouth, which filled Charles’ heart with fondness and did nothing to diminish his lust.

Erik’s eyes were half-lidded. He looked through his lashes at Charles and lifted a hand from the sheets. He reached toward Charles’ face, a motion Charles facilitated by leaning forward over Erik’s hips. The rough-skinned hand was warm on Charles face as it lingeringly wiped the come from his mouth and chin.

“I’ve never seen anyone look so good with my come on their face.” Erik said, trying to catch his breath.

“I know,” Charles grinned cheekily, and began to pull himself up Erik’s body. His cock and balls were aching for further stimulation. He considered giving himself a hand job, but wanted his penis on the athletic planes of Erik’s body.

“You should wear it more often, then,” Erik snorted, responding as always to Charles’ arrogance. He rubbed his thumb back and forth across Charles’ lips.

Intense pleasure from the friction across his swollen lips was a surprise that shocked another jolt to his cock. Charles’ lips parted in a low moan. Erik took advantage, sliding his thumb past Charles’ teeth. He hooked his thumb behind the lower line of teeth and pulled Charles further forward.

Charles was happy to go. He crawled up Erik’s body until he was straddling his waist, his shoulders looming over Erik’s. He closed his teeth on Erik’s thumb and sucked it lingeringly before releasing it again. Erik’s expression was open with contentment and fascination, his eyes focused on Charles’ mouth.

Slowly, Charles lifted his ass and then lowered his torso over Erik’s. He placed his elbows on either side of Erik’s head. Experimentally, he rubbed his lips against Erik’s. Erik misread the motion and opened his mouth to a kiss that wasn’t forthcoming. Charles shuddered with the erotic sensation of smooth skin and then hard teeth against his swollen lips.

Directly south, he canted his hips and brought his cock in a burning pass up Erik’s abdomen. The unrestricted motion broke his lips from Erik’s in a moan. For a moment he ducked his head, the pleasure too much. Then brought it back, brushing his lips against the stubble at Erik’s chin for further stimulation.

He rolled his hips, the motion pulling his cock back and then forth over Erik’s sparsely haired abdomen. A light sheen of sweat and trails of precum assisted the motion, but he was at the point he could rub out on any reasonable surface. Withholding pleasure while drinking in Erik’s had left him a sensitive mess and Erik’s lean abdomen was better than reasonable. He began to jerk his hips rapidly; it wasn’t going to take long.

He shuddered bodily when Erik’s hands, fingers hooked, scratched down his back, across his flanks, and finally seized his ass. The attention only encouraged Charles’ wild thrusts.

“Fuck... Erik,” Charles began to stutter, breathlessly. He felt feverish, like his skin was scalding. “Fffuck…”

Erik responded by hauling him further up his body, so Charles was fucking furiously across his
stomach. They both looked down to watch his cock oozing precum across the defined muscles of Erik’s stomach. The sight made Charles begin to babble filthy nonsense, but then Erik began to flex his fingers and lift Charles’ ass cheeks up in time with Charles’ hips. The resulting tug of tight skin across his sensitive perineum pulled deliciously at the already tightened skin of his scrotum in turn.

A shiver ran over his flushed skin. His balls seized. His abdominal muscles pulled hard and he was suddenly shooting come across Erik’s chest. A startled cry ripped from Charles’ throat.

Charles was done in. A litany of ‘fuck’ and ‘Erik’ punctuated every gasp as he thrust helplessly, messily, into the semen from his first shot and sent more ejaculate across Erik’s chest, neck, and chin.

Erik lifted a hand off his ass and brought it back in a flat-handed slap. “That’s it, Charles. Do it.”

“Oh, fuck,” Charles moaned brokenly, spasming helplessly, shaking his head frantically as Erik’s smacked his ass again. “Fuck!”

Pleasure was milked from the sudden surprising pain, drawing the orgasm out and intensifying it a little more. And then Charles collapsed, sprawling momentarily across Erik’s upper body and head.

Taking more care than Charles would have expected, Erik muscled him over onto his back. Charles shuddered helplessly, his skin hypersensitive with the intense orgasm. He let Erik lay him out, but drew his knees up the moment Erik’s hands left him. His sides heaved as he sucked in air.

Propped on an elbow, Erik observed him quietly, ejaculate dripping from his chin, and slipping down his neck, collar, and chest. Charles closed his eyes and bit his lower lip against the sight. His cock was far too sensitive to see such things.

“I may like watching you come better than coming myself,” Erik mused, pressing the back of one hand against Charles’ cheek.

Charles opened his bright blue eyes. “If that’s so,” he replied between gasps for air, “let’s focus on me from now on.”

A lazy smile pulled Erik’s lips up. “Never too weary for cheek, are you?”

“Default state,” Charles responded breathlessly. He reached up to the hand against his cheek. Biting his lip again, he fit his palm against Erik’s and laced their fingers together. Odd that the gesture was far more intimate than having a cock down his throat.

Erik’s brow furrowed. His eyes, dark grey in the dim light of Charles’ bedroom, focused on their clasped hands. For several seconds he stared at the interlaced fingers and then he brought his hand off Charles’ face toward his own. He pressed the back of Charles’ hand against his mouth.

Charles’ felt like his spirit would have an orgasm of its own at the sight and touch. He wanted to say how he felt in that moment, but refrained. There was no way that a blowjob, no matter how amazing, was the way to prepare Erik for declarations of love. Words were empty to Erik without actions to back them up.

Gently, Erik slipped his hand from Charles’ and began wiping come off his chin. For a moment his expression seemed distant. His fingers traced absent patterns in the semen spread across his chest.

“What are you thinking about?” Charles ventured.

“Mmm?” Erik’s eyes refocused on Charles’ face. “Just wondering how come’s viscosity compares to various lubricants in my shop.”
“Are you really?!” Charles laughed, delighted with Erik’s one track mind.

The man nodded back, smiling. “It loses its utility as it coagulates, though.”

Charles nodded, “True enough. Give me a few more seconds and I’ll get towels.”

Erik nodded and leaned forward, eyes drifting closed, to press a chaste kiss to Charles’ lips. Charles closed his eyes in turn. This kiss was his favorite. It was the kiss that echoed across the years, beautiful despite the pain and horror that surrounded it the first time it was given to him.

If he lost Erik to a criminal lifestyle, to federal prison, even if he lost his life, he could never lose that kiss.

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Morning light filtered through the bedroom’s long windows and overlaid their skin. With Erik’s scars, his skin looked like a double exposure of two different maps: one of lines and the other of values. Charles woke earlier when Erik had risen to hit the bathroom and since then made no progress on reclaiming somnolence. He didn’t want to sleep, content as he was to lie, propped on one arm, and study the man occupying his bed.

Only in sleep did the furrow at Erik’s brow completely relent. Charles wanted to remember the man in a relaxed state. He wasn’t sure, but suspected Erik would be more on edge the closer time came to the appointment with his contact.

Charles looked at his bedside clock. It was well past 8AM, which he was certain would always feel early, even when he would start teaching summer classes at 7:45AM. Ungodly early, that. Likely not too early for Erik.

Placing his hand on Erik’s chest, he slid it down the man’s body and explored his muscular topography at a more leisurely pace than the night prior. Under his fingers, Erik stirred, his eyes slit open like a sun-warmed cat. He raised his hands over his head and stretched. Charles’ fingers were smart enough to enjoy the ripple of muscle under their touch. Meanwhile, his mouth went stupidly dry at the sight Erik presented.

“Mmm,” Erik murmured, eyes still only slightly cracked. “Morning.”

Charles bent over Erik’s torso to place open-mouth kisses slowly up his rib cage. “You forgot,” he said between sucking kisses, “the ’good’ part of that greeting.”

“The good part was several hours ago,” the man said quietly. He closed his eyes again, but still intercepted Charles’ head as his kisses fell over his scarred chest. Dexterous fingers threaded into Charles’ semi-long locks and pulled lazily. “Perhaps the good part is returning.”

“I told you I like German models,” Charles mumbled into Erik’s skin. “1000ccs, indeed.”

“And I like naked ones,” the German man sighed, pulling firmly, but gently, at Charles’ hair. He let go with one hand in order to massage soothingly at the back of Charles’ neck.

The pulling and pressing felt lovely. Charles sucked languidly at Erik’s chest, just over his heart, pulling color into the man’s impressive chest. Things were progressing nicely toward a long, slow,
sexual interlude. He pondered how Erik would take to languid intercrural sex.

A jarring knock at the apartment’s door startled them both. Erik pulled harder on Charles’ hair. Charles’ teeth closed on the patch of skin he’d sucked into his mouth. Neither were perturbed by the pain so much as the disturbance.

“Don’t answer it,” Erik growled, both hands back to running through Charles’ hair, and pulling gently at the ends.

Charles snorted, “Of course not. Nobody comes over here. Somebody is either out evangelizing or they have the wrong apartment number.”

A longer tug on his hair preceded Erik’s next request. “Come up here; I can’t reach your mouth.”

“I have morning breath,” Charles warned, sucking at Erik’s clavicle. “Will your shirt cover it, if I leave a mark here?”

In the living room, Charles’ phone began to ring. He looked away to the open bedroom doorway. The ring tone was unmistakable. In conjunction with the knock at the door it was alarming. His brow knitted in apprehensive consternation.

The next tug on his hair was not so gentle. “Ignore it. Come up here, Charles. Or turn over and I’ll go down.”

The banging on the door resumed and was followed up with a voice far more familiar than the ringtone. “Charles! I know you’re in there; I can hear your phone!”

Charles didn’t move a muscle, though his heart was pounding like hooves in a horse race. He’d always known there was a possibility, but the timing was horrid. Erik stilled, fingers wound in Charles’ hair. On his face annoyance joined with suspicion as he worked through the few possibilities.

“C’mon Professor! I see the bike out here! Open the door! I’ve got chai and bagels!”

Erik’s expression changed from dark annoyance to a brief flash of boyish enthusiasm. He sat up abruptly. “Is that Raven?”

The sudden move forced Charles off Erik’s chest. He didn’t try to stop his fall, instead he used it to tumble from the bed and scramble madly for his clothes.

Except their clothes had all come off in the living room. He bounded to his closet, babbling instructions as he went.

“Stay in here. No matter what, stay in here,” Charles rushed, seizing a pair of khakis and shoving his legs into them carelessly. He yanked the material up his legs and fastened them hastily. “I’ll take her to get a helmet and you can slip out then.”

“You didn’t tell her,” Erik accused. A low current of anger threaded his words together.

“I will. I promise I will tell her today.” Charles swept a button-up off a hanger and turned to Erik with a sincerely apologetic frown. The other man was sitting up, tense and glowering. Charles frown deepened. “This very morning.”

He didn’t wait for a response. Charles rushed out the bedroom door, shutting it firmly behind him. In the living room, he seized Erik’s clothes, backpack, and Alpinestars jacket and stuffed them beneath
the sofa. He left Erik’s boots by the door; he could claim he had two pair.

Raven had ceased knocking with her hand and had resorted to kicking the base of the front door in constant rapid succession. “Jesus, Charles, wake the fuck up! I’d like my chai hot and the bagels to still be crispy.”

When Charles threw open the door, his posture was good, though his shirt remained unbuttoned. He tried to look nonchalant, despite the rising flush from rushing around the apartment. He hid his discomfort by wrapping Raven up in a hug. “God, what a surprise! I’ve missed you!”

“Oh shit!” she squawked, trying to keep the takeout drink carrier and bagels from being crushed in Charles’ overly enthusiastic greeting. Her arms were held out awkwardly, holding food out and away from her body as she was squeezed. “Whoah! Charles! I’m happy to see you too, but let me put the food down!”

She was grinning as he stepped back to let her inside, her eyes crinkled with laughter. Raven gave him their drinks and hugged him around his ribs with one arm. Holding the bag of toasted bagels to the side, she pushed her blonde head against his face.

“You’re blonde again!” For a moment, Charles completely forgot Erik stranded naked in the bedroom and exulted in the presence of his sister. He kissed her hair and smiled. “I’m sorry. You know I’m not normally a morning person.”

“Hollywood likes blondes.” She snorted. Raven turned her head and kissed him back. “I’m not a morning person, either. I left work at 4AM and drove pretty much straight here. I’ve got a couple days reprieve from the studio so I figured we could spend it getting a helmet and riding around.”

“We can do that,” Charles smiled fondly as she released him and headed to the kitchen table with the bagels.

The kitchen table that had two helmets sitting on it.

Raven paused, her head canting to an inquisitive tilt as she observed both helmets, and then resumed walking to the table. “I thought you only got one helmet?”

Without ceremony, she dropped the brown paper bag on the table and picked Erik’s Suomy up. Charles’ heart was suddenly beating in the vicinity of his larynx. She turned the helmet over and lifted it close to her face. Raven sniffed.

“My neighbor left it last night after drinks,” Charles finally lied, hoping he sounded natural. It was damnably difficult to fool Raven at the best of times. Hopefully it was easier at the worst.

“The neighbor who has your bike chained with his?” Her head turned slowly, until she was casting a positively wicked smile in his direction. Her eyes broadcast mischief. “He smokes, huh? That’s unlike you, Charles.”

“Actually,” Charles replied, trying to keep her gaze, “he recently quit.”

Movements slow and purposeful, Raven replaced the helmet on the table and slowly turned around. “Charles,” she said in a pleasant, conversational voice. “What’s the gene called for bruising easily?”

His brow furrowed instantly. Raven was being tricky. Her trickiness often wore the guise of the utterly random, but there was usually a point behind it. “I don’t have it memorized, but I can easily look it up for you. Why?”
Her eyes lowered to the gap in his unbuttoned shirt. “Oh, just the hickey that peaks out from under your shirt when you move your arms apart.”

He couldn’t help it, his eyes widened slightly as he looked down to the bare skin the button-up parted to reveal. He saw no hickey. His brow furrowed and he glanced back up cautiously. Raven was definitely being tricky. “There is not.”

Raven’s eyes were huge. “Holy fuck, he’s here, isn’t he? Your Olympian. He’s still here. That’s why you fucking reek of fucking!”

Charles would have denied, if he weren’t choking on his own words. Raven wasn’t the type to wait for an explanation, anyway. She surged past him with a gleeful shriek.

“Raven, no!” Charles shouted, grabbing at her. Raven knew his tactics far too well and evaded his grasping hands.

She was at his bedroom door in a flash. He hadn’t locked it, but he hoped Erik had once Raven had discovered the helmets.

He hadn’t. Raven threw the door open and rushed inside. Charles was hot on her heels, trying to catch hold of her. Raven may have seen the bathroom door shut, but Charles was only in time to hear it lock. He dropped his hands as she came to a stop outside the bathroom door.

“Raven!” Charles admonished sharply. “This is childish! I wouldn’t do this sort of thing to one of your friends!”

“He’s more than a friend at this point, don’t you think?” Laughing, she knocked on the door. “Hi there! I’m Raven, Charles’ hot adopted sister! I work at Universal and I have to say what a fine ass you have! I work with a lot of fine asses, but yours is truly exceptional!”

The door shocked under the force of a percussive strike from the opposite side. Charles’ frowned dramatically. Why did Raven live to make his life as embarrassing as humanly possible?

To make matters far worse, Erik now knew Raven had somehow seen his ass. After all, had she seen his face, she would have known exactly who he was. He wished he’d never sent her the picture. Who knows where it was posted now? She was every bit as bad as the women in PMS.

“Hey,” Raven scowled, “don’t break the door.”

“Raven,” Charles groaned, reaching again for her shoulders. “Please stop harassing… my friend.” A deep sense of derealisation was settling over him. Was Erik really hiding, naked, in the bathroom while Raven tried desperately to get him to come out, just because of one stupid photo?

“Stop trying to grab me.” She was slippery as a fish. Rolling one shoulder forward and the other back, she wormed out of his grasp. “What’s your friend’s name? And why is he hiding? Doesn’t he know you took that pic?”

Charles hesitated needlessly before remembering Raven didn’t know Erik’s name. “His name is Erik. He’s shy.”

“He’s one of the bikers you met at the university, right?” she rationalized. “Hey, Erik! You can either come out here now or I can grab a hanger from the closet and open the door that way.”

“Raven! Please, his clothes are in the living room!” Charles admonished, feeling anxious and scandalized. Raven knew how reduce him to helplessness by reducing his choices to nothing but the
sort of options he always abhorred.

“There are towels in there, Charles,” Raven snorted.

He wanted to grab her and haul her out, but he knew from their teen years that would only turn into a wrestling match. They were both strong-willed, but he wouldn’t resort to ridiculousness. She knew that and exploited it. “And just where did you learn to open doors with hangers?”

“I’d say who taught me to open doors with hangers,” she drawled, “but I don’t want to induce a panic attack.”

The declaration rocked Charles back a step in shock and bewilderment. Partially out of a feeling of guilt, but mostly on Erik’s behalf who undoubtedly heard Raven’s barb. Their relationship was tenuous enough as it was without straining it further with injuries that weren’t supposed to exist.

“Oh, Charles.” Evidently misinterpreting his reaction, Raven’s stubbornly set shoulders relaxed. She stood up and took a step toward Charles, her lips parting in what he assumed was the beginning of an apology. He relaxed in turn, reaching out to her with one hand, when the bathroom door banged open.

Erik had one of Charles’ light blue towels knotted at his waist and an expression that was a struggle between multiple iterations of anger. “You should have just told her.”

Eyes shocked wide at Erik’s appearance, Charles snatched Raven’s incoming hand and pulled her close, somehow thinking he could still hide him from her. She stumbled against Charles and he pulled her flush to his chest with his other arm.

“Erik,” Charles tried frantically. “I told you I meant to! I just didn’t know how to begin.”

“You obviously began by sending pictures of me from Machete’s crew,” he spat. “You just didn’t finish the job.”

Charles was not looking forward to telling him the picture had not come from PMS but from Thursday night. The night Charles had so clearly lacked all ability to exercise good judgment.

“That voice.” Raven began struggling in Charles’ arms, her eyes shocked wide. “I know that voice! Let go, Charles! What the fuck is going on?”

Raven struggled wildly in his arms. She brought her hands up to his shoulders and tried to peel herself from his grip. He hugged her tight, trying to prevent what was fast turning into disaster.

“Let her go, Charles,” Erik commanded. His stance was square as his right knee would allow. Charles understood what Erik was doing and his heart clenched painfully: he was setting up for the same violent reception Charles had given him. It wasn’t what he wanted at all.

“Don’t touch him, Raven,” Charles demanded, knowing his orders meant nothing to Raven when she was in a passion. “It isn’t what it was. It never even was what it was.”

All it took was the loosening of his grip and Raven twisted free of his arms. The motion spun her about on the axis of her left foot, so that she stopped facing Erik. Her back was to Charles, her hair in his face. He saw nothing of her expression when she looked up at the man that, as a teen, had showed her how to open doors with hangers.

Raven trembled with what Charles assumed was anger and resurgent grief. He felt the fraction of a second it took for her to gather herself. Charles’ hands shot to her biceps, but did not take hold. In the
end, he didn’t try to stop her. Erik knew what she would do, he had evidently judged on the basis of what Charles had done.

As he had with Charles at the university parking lot, Erik went with Raven’s punch. He let her connect a glancing blow to his cheek just as he had with Charles. This time he snapped his head to the side with the force of the blow in order to lessen the impact.

Unlike Charles, Raven had a follow up. He caught her left wrist before she could land her next punch. When she rushed him he gave ground, letting her push him up against the bathroom door’s frame. Though it looked and sounded worse than it was, Charles winced at the force of Erik’s back hitting the framing.

From there, Raven departed the expected tactics. With her left wrist still in Erik’s right hand, she pushed bodily against him, her forehead connecting solidly with his bare chest. Skin hit skin with a slap, but she was not enacting an unorthodox attack. She didn’t press violently forward. Raven trembled again and sobbed.

“Max, you bastard!” Raven shrieked into Erik’s chest. “You fucking bastard! I hate you so much! I’m glad you aren’t dead, but I fucking hate you!”

Erik’s face remained stoic, his body tense, but he nodded resolutely. Charles wanted badly to catch his eye, to support him and Raven. He chastised himself for not talking to Raven sooner. He’d never really figured out how to do it.

“I don’t know what is going on with you two, but stay away from my brother, Max,” Raven continued, face still pushed into Erik’s chest. “You’ve fucked him up enough.”

Charles could feel his hair, mussed from sleep and struggle, swing with the force of his negative headshake. He wanted to beam the denial straight into Erik’s heart. “I’m not fucked up, Raven. I’m fine. Even better since seeing him again.”

Erik closed his eyes briefly, whether it was against Raven’s accusation or Charles’ denial was impossible to say. His expression was pained. He lifted his left hand and stroked Raven’s hair. “I’m sorry we left you with Marko and Sharon.”

“You left me alone for two months!” Raven accused, but her free hand came up under Erik’s arm and gripped his shoulder from behind. She held onto the shoulder for support. “When Kurt finally brought Charles home, I could hardly see him for the bandages, Max. Broken ribs, broken collar, whiplash.”

“I know. It was my fault and I can’t fix it, Raven,” Erik replied softly, yet firmly. He let go of her wrist and settled his right hand against her back. “I didn’t think I’d ever see either of you again. I never wanted you to.”

“It was a bizarre fluke,” Charles sighed. He moved forward to join them. He placed his hands on her back, the heel of his hands above Erik’s hand, his fingertips grazing her shoulders. “He’s been in Phoenix a long time now.”

It was Charles’ touch that soothed Raven’s trembling. She sighed against Erik’s chest and lifted her head in order to nod. “He’s part of that biker stunt gang, huh?”

“Hellfire was a gang,” Erik corrected, his tone slowly reaching for neutrality. “What I have is a club. We’re not bikers, we’re motorcyclists.”

Raven pushed away from Erik, back into Charles’s arms. “Past tense? Hellfire was a gang?”
Erik frowned and looked past Raven’s shoulder to Charles. “Hellfire doesn’t exist in Phoenix.”

Charles wondered at the look Erik cast his way. What he’d said about Hellfire not existing in Phoenix wasn’t exactly true. It wasn’t exactly false, either. If Erik numbered himself amongst their ranks, did Hellfire not exist in Phoenix? Perhaps he wanted Charles to support him in a lie. He may have with anyone else, but he wouldn’t do that with Raven.

Sniffing, Raven rubbed her face with her hands, trying to wipe at the tears and her running nose. Erik reached back and grabbed one of the bathroom’s light blue hand towels and offered it to her. She took it, looking over the top of the material as she blew her nose.

“You look like you exploded that night,” Raven said, using a corner of the towel to remove tears and snot from his chest. Her eyes darted over all the old scars. “And had a bunch of medieval doctors stitch you back together.”

“What happened to Olympian?” Erik deadpanned, deftly avoiding elaboration on his multitude of scars.

She leaned her head back on Charles’ shoulder to look him in the eyes. “Is he really the Olympian from your pic?”

Charles looked away from both of them.

Raven turned back to Erik. “Show me your ass, Max. You know, so I can verify. Not for any personal pleasure or anything. Because, you know, I never humped my pillow thinking about you when I was in Junior High.”

Erik gave a disbelieving little sigh. “Neither did Charles.”

“That’s what your pillion girls were for,” Charles chimed in. He took hope when Raven’s snark made a comeback. He dared hope she could overcome all the bitterness. After all, she had forgiven him. Perhaps she could forgive Erik, or Max, too.

“Indirect sex,” Raven pronounced wearily. “And now you’ve gotten rid of the proxies. That’s an improvement. Your ass is an improvement, too, Max. Before it was just hinges, now it finally has dimension to it.”

“You haven’t changed,” Erik smiled hollowly. He gestured to the bedroom door. “I’m going to get my clothes and I’m going to leave. I’ll leave the chain on the Triple and the padlock key under the seat.”

“The Triple’s keys are in my helmet,” Charles said unnecessarily, mouth turned down in a frown.

Erik shook his head. “I’ve never needed keys, Charles.”

“Of course you don’t. Call me after the meeting,” Charles made the words sound less like a request, and more like a soft command. “Let’s the three of us get reacquainted. Raven doesn’t know all the good things you’ve done.”

The shrug Erik gave Charles was not encouraging. He made no verbal reply to Charles’ command or suggestion.

Raven shook her head, but held her tongue. Her turn to the laconic was unsurprising only to Charles; she was emotionally drained, just as he had been after running into Erik. She leaned further into Charles as Erik left the room with as little limp as the man could manage.
“You have so much explaining to do, mister.”

“I know,” Charles sighed. “I really did have every intention of telling you, but I wasn’t sure how or when to do it.”

“So, is he why you got the motorcycle?” she asked quietly. “That is an improvement, at least.”

“Yes,” he admitted. “And before you ask: yes, I have it bad.”

“How bad, Charles?” Raven said, turning in his arms. Her expression was terribly earnest. “Because this looks and sounds like something beyond the realm of mere human folly. Even for you.”

“Let me explain once he’s left,” Charles whispered.

They waited quietly in Charles’ room. Even though Charles wanted to see Erik off, he didn’t think it would be a good idea. Erik likely needed to work through his emotions without Charles muddying up already turbulent waters.

At the sound of the door opening and then clicking shut, Charles led Raven out to the living room. She retrieved the bagels and chai and brought them to the couch. They settled in for a long overdue catch up session. Excluding the FBI agent and the Russian Mafia connection, Charles told her everything.

There was a lot to digest. Raven sat quietly, mulling it over while Charles took their bagel wrappings and paper cups to the kitchen to throw away. There was something bothering him, a feeling of forgetfulness. He tapped his lower lip speculatively as he thought. There was something he needed to do while Erik was at his meeting.

He looked at the microwave’s clock, hoping it would jog his memory: 9:45. Erik would probably be back in Paradise Valley, showering in the en suite.

The bedroom was enough to remind him. The DVD. He had to return the DVD. Charles went to his room and dug through the dirty clothes in his hamper for his black cardigan. When he found the cardigan, he felt the DVD still wrapped up inside. He pulled it loose and went back into the living room.

“You’re going to think I’m a creep,” Charles announced as he set up the DVD player. “But I found this in Erik’s room.”

He showed her the handwritten script before slipping it into the player and pushing play.

“You were always a creep,” Raven snorted. “But so am I. I had the best possible example to learn from.”

Charles chuckled and sat on the couch again, grabbing the television remote from where Erik had left it the night before. “I don’t know whether to be pleased or insulted.”

“I hope it’s a sex tape,” Raven grinned, settling closer to Charles on the couch. “He was always hot, but he’s gotten better with age.”

“I doubt it,” Charles replied in disapproval. “If it weren’t for the use of his old name, I’d guess it was a compilation of PMS’ trolling. It must be something older, like movies or something that he liked back then.”

Charles’ condescension only succeeded in making Raven laugh. She quieted down as the picture
coalesced on the screen before the sound did. The picture was fuzzy, showing only a space lit with overly bright fluorescent lighting. The pictured sharpened as someone adjusted the camera. Next, the overhead lighting lost its brightness, but not the harsh shadows it cast.

The room looked vast. The floor was poured concrete and indicated an empty factory or warehouse. There were a few stools and several men and at least one woman assembled. Nobody was seated.

The camera was angled down, hiding the faces of the closest people gathered. Without seeing their faces or hearing any sound it was impossible to tell what the small crowd was talking about, though body language and gestures revealed a tense situation.

“This is weird,” Raven murmured, her eyes roving the screen. “Like extras hanging around a late nineties set. Inexpensive equipment was sort of a trend back then.”

Charles nodded slowly, his brow knit in concentration. There were men in suits, flannel, leather, and at least one police uniform. The woman was wearing a white pantsuit with no visible blouse beneath her blazer. She was standing close to a man in an expensive charcoal suit. The other two men in suits were facing his direction, while the collection of others, including the officer, were angled more or less with deference to the two suited men.

“It must be the nineties,” Charles said in an equally low voice. “But, you know, I think the patch on the leather looks familiar. This is something gang-oriented.”

“We’re going to see Max get all Reservoir Dogs on somebody, aren’t we?” Raven’s hands encircled Charles’ bicep. She pushed even closer to him.

Charles couldn’t say he was sorry for the contact. He moved his arm out of her hands and placed it around her waist. “It does say ‘Max’s Hits’. Maybe it isn’t that bad, though.”

“Did he wear flannel or is he off screen?” Raven asked, her brow beginning to furrow as much as Charles’ as she studied the different figures on the screen. “The woman sure has a nice rack.”

Another light came on screen, reflected on the concrete floor. It then faded. The camera was jostled for a moment as the photographer made an adjustment. The camera angle was unchanged, but suddenly the sound came on.

Footsteps echoed in the audio, confirming the vastness of the space. Two sets were clear and crisp, but after a few moments a third set was audible. One of the approaching people was likely barefoot.

Soon enough, three sets of feet, the middle set barefoot, came on screen. “It isn’t just girls,” Raven quipped. “Gangsters take pictures of their feet, too!”

Charles snickered helplessly at the comment. “I think the camera man has a foot fetish. He’s spending more time on feet than on the White Lady’s tits.”

The picture revealed two policemen bracketing a man in a prisoner’s orange jumpsuit. One of the prisoner’s arms was in a sling.

“Oh, here we go,” came a warm and friendly voice. “My prodigal boy. I do hope his arm is expertly splinted.”

“Nothing less for the Black Bishop,” replied a voice that sounded like it was being issued from between tightly clenched teeth.

Charles’ humor evaporated immediately. The DVD was definitely not a movie and it ceased to be
funny.

“Your manners are always impeccable,” the friendly voice countered with only a hint of sarcasm. “Fetch the boy a chair, I’m sure he’s tired.”

One of the men in flannel backed out of the picture, but returned with a metal stool. It was placed directly beneath the fluorescent light.

“Help him sit,” the Black Bishop said. The policemen led the prisoner forward. One pushed the stool into the back of the man’s legs causing the prisoner to sit automatically.

Both Charles and Raven leaned forward to see the prisoner’s face, but were foiled by the pillowcase over his head. Charles hoped Erik—Max—would make it quick, but was ready to grab the remote if he didn’t.

“Well, son,” the friendly man was saying, his voice conveying what was possibly badly feigned regret. “You fucked shit up rather remarkably with their boys. I’m disappointed, to tell you the truth. You know how hard I worked on this agreement with their management. All this time, I thought you’d finally shaped up. I had hopes for you. You let your club down. You let me down.”

The man in the charcoal suit stepped forward, one beringed hand descending to rest on top of the prisoner’s head. “Things are just about patched up, but I had to make a concession or two. The least of those concessions was to let their club members extract some Old Testament style justice. Eye for an eye and all that. You know all about that, don’t you?”

The man’s hand curled into the pillowcase’s fabric. He pulled it slowly from the prisoner’s head. Charles and Raven both tensed, holding each other tighter.

“Oh God,” Raven choked. “Turn it off, Charles. Turn it off. They’re going to beat up Max.”

Charles took the back of Raven’s head and directed her face gently into his chest. “Don’t look Raven.” He made no move to stop the DVD. He had to see. He had to know.

Max’s face was drawn and tired, but his pale eyes were alive with defiance as he blinked into the bright light. He said nothing, but looked up at the man before him.

The man held the pillowcase toward the white-suited woman. She stepped forward and traded him the fabric with a gun.

“You’re going to want to struggle,” the man was said. He casually thumbed off the safety. He placed his free hand on the side of Max’s face, stroked the young man’s cheekbone with his thumb in the same casual manner he had removed the safety from the gun. “But don’t. We’ve made a deal, son.”

The man ran his hand through Max’s hair, putting it in order. Then he backed away, to the very edge of the camera’s field of vision. “They get you for an hour. They are to do nothing that would endanger your long-term worth to me: no impaired senses, no blows to the hands. Everything else is fair game.”

“No blows to the hands,” Charles echoed. The scars. All those scars and so few were on Erik’s hands.

The man held up the gun meaningfully. “I will stand here the whole time to enforce my agreement. You understand?”

Max looked up to the man and nodded solemnly.
“And after this, we’ll have a talk about relocation.” The man turned to the woman. “Would you mind stepping back, dear? It’s going to get a bit messy.”

As soon she stepped out of the picture, the man turned back, the gun still in his right hand as he gestured fluidly toward Max. “Okay, let’s start this out right boys, shall we?”

Charles didn’t even see the man pull the trigger. Certainly hadn’t expected it. The shot rang out abruptly and both he and Raven startled bodily. On the screen, Max’s right leg jerked back and he fell forward off the stool with a gasp. He caught himself on his good hand before his face could hit the concrete and tried to pull himself up to his knees.

Max’s face was pale with shock, but then it went white with agony. He opened his mouth and roared. It was an ungodly sound fueled by a rush of shock and adrenaline; half bellow and half shriek.

“That’s for your runaway prospect,” the man explained. “Since he’s not here to take it himself.”

“Charles,” Raven pleaded, “turn it off! This is sick! How can you watch a snuff film of your best friend being shot and tortured?”

Sucking in a shaking breath, Charles grabbed the remote and turned the DVD player off as Max screamed in German and slipped in the smears of blood growing on the concrete floor.

Charles was never so happy to see a blue screen. Raven wrapped her arms around him and began sobbing into his chest. Dazed, he encircled her waist with his arms again and pressed a kiss to her gold hair.

Raven cried openly. Charles’ inborn need to protect her initially forbade him from joining her in tears. Instead he folded around her, protecting her. Then, facts began to add up and the story began to develop. Max wasn’t just banished from the East. He wasn't just punished gangland style for the night he’d protected Charles from the people that had ran him off the road. No, he'd been crippled by the kneecapping meant for him.
Fumes

Chapter Summary

Charles watches the rest of the video, discusses the past with Raven, and bad situations, of course, only get worse.

As a reminder: Graphic Violence. Also: Graphic Humiliation.

Chapter Notes

I focus on action/adventure, not emotional consequences so I totally didn't see this chapter coming. In fact, as I admitted elsewhere, the whole reason this fic is twice as long as I expected, is that none of the emotional stuff appears whatsoever in my outline.

And, no, I haven't abandoned this story. There will be a few delays in the future, too, because I'll be going out of town for a couple weeks at the end of July.

Also, the sex scene in the prior chapter was helped along by a photoset motleypatches' compiled when I kept complaining about how long it took to write (more than sixteen hours).

Finally, huge props to mixture (storybinding on Tumblr) who beta-read the last scene in this chapter.

“Road’s end getting nearer
We cover distance but not together
I am the storm and I am the wonder
And the flashlights, nightmares, sudden explosions”
Röyksopp, What Else Is There?

fumes

Charles sat on the couch with the remote held loosely in his fingers. The television was on; the blue screen washed him in cool light.

After stripping and remaking the bed, he had put Raven down for sleep. Between all the emotional outbursts, shocks, and sheer lack of sleep, she had dropped off immediately. It was better for Charles; he needed to think and make decisions.

The first decision was easy: he turned off his phone. He’d received another batch of text messages
from PMS that would have been amusing had his morning gone differently. The most recent was from Angel, asking if he and Erik had had a fight.

He didn’t want to think about why she would text him a question like that, but extrapolated that she was at the house when Erik returned.

His other decisions were myriad and challenging. Watch the rest of the DVD or not? Sneak it back while Erik was at his meeting? Or wait to take it back after the meeting, so he could come clean about prying? He was leaning toward the latter. Best to get it all out in the open.

It was hard; his pride was habitually problematic. He wanted to justify taking the DVD with how Erik had treated him like a one-night stand. Fortunately, in this case, he knew the smell of his own mendacity. He couldn’t justify it, just as he couldn’t justify sending the picture to Raven. He’d been like a hunter showing off pictures of the first lion he had ever subdued.

There hadn’t been enough alcohol in his veins to blame when he’d compromised Erik. It had all been in the name of winning one of the innumerable immature games he and Raven were prone to playing. If she’d known about Erik, it might have been permissible.

His right hand jerked with the sudden urge to pick up his phone and scroll through to the picture Machete had taken of them at Cherry Bomb. Even though Erik had been staring murderously off camera, Charles wanted to see them standing together. Instead, he put the remote on the coffee table and went to the second bedroom that acted as his study.

Erik’s battered copy of *Speed Tribes* was sitting on his desk where he left it. Charles picked it up and took it back to the couch. Frowning profoundly, he turned the book over several times in his hands. He flipped through the pages without reading them. The book was in such bad condition, Charles would have thrown it away and bought a new copy. But Erik hadn’t and Charles hoped he never would.

He fanned the pages helplessly. The resulting breeze smelled so much like Erik, the force of nostalgia made his eyes feel wet. There it was: stale cigarettes, exhaust fumes, tires. He’d hated everything to do with those scents for over a decade and now he wanted nothing more than to sink within them until they closed over his head.

The book hit the carpet. Charles dropped his face into his hands and took a deep breath. His head lifted up and he stared at his hands in confusion: they smelled of Erik and sex. Then he remembered stripping the bed for Raven. For that matter, he had yet to shower, but he knew to save that for after watching the rest of the video.

He left the book on the floor, retrieved headphones from his study, and picked up the remote. He owed it to Erik, to Max, to see the rest and to suffer through. Plugging the headphones in, he pressed play.

The Black Bishop had said an hour, but it took Charles almost twice that to get through. At first, he paused the DVD frequently: he needed to breathe, to cry, and once to throw up. Halfway through, though, Charles was numb and staring.

His brain took over from his heart and began to note, clinically, how the rival gang members became increasingly depraved. It became a competition as they tried to top each other with the pain and humiliation they meted out.

The Bishop paused the action every so often to have a doctor check Max’s vital signs or shock. The doctor moved jerkily, obviously terrified, as he checked Max over, but advised what sort of
punishment could still be delivered. Near the start he had dressed Max’s knee to stop the flow of blood, but had given nothing for the debilitating agony. Sometimes he gave Max something to drink, other times injections.

Over halfway through, while the doctor spread Vaseline over a cut to keep the bleeding down, Max spoke. His words were slurred brokenly, his English thick with German vowels, “Is the doctor yours or theirs, Bishop?”

“He’s mine, son,” came the response from off camera.

Max moved without warning. Throwing an arc of blood with the motion, his unbroken arm shot forward. His red-stained knuckles connected solidly with the doctor’s face. The man was knocked sprawling onto his back.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” asked Black Bishop calmly from off camera. The doctor scooted backwards, clutching at his face and broken glasses.

“The deal,” Max murmured brokenly, “you made the deal... you made it with them. Not the doctor.”

The Bishop began to laugh. It was a sound of pure delight. “That’s true! That’s very true, Max. You do your mother proud with that brain of yours. But, don’t hit the doctor again. We can’t have you passing out before the hour’s up. People have to get their money’s worth.”

Charles could see Max’s logic before the Black Bishop mentioned it. If he passed out because the doctor wouldn’t or couldn’t do his job, the abuse would end. All the same, there were still many times Max’s eyes rolled up and the doctor would bring him back around. As the hour reached fulfillment, those incidents became far more frequent.

In the last few minutes Max had no coherence left. When they set the front of his tattered jumpsuit ablaze he hardly twitched. To put it out, each of the three assailants took a turn saturating Max, and the remnants of his prisoner’s orange jumpsuit, with urine. It was, Charles thought wearily, better than his initial fear when the first man unbuttoned his jeans and drew out his penis.

Max lay on the concrete, eyes slit open, breathing through his mouth since his nose was broken in one of his falls to the floor. His chest and stomach heaved, taking in all the oxygen he could. His eyes did not lose their anger or defiance, despite his clear lack of strength or ability to focus.

“Have your boys clean him up,” came the Bishop’s disgusted voice. “I’m not taking him like that. Cut filming, there’s enough. Nobody’s going to want to see him get cleaned up. Ruins the fantasy.”

One of Max’s assailants volunteered to get a mop and bucket and walked off camera. The picture shook a little and then the blue screen was back.

Charles sat, numbly in the blue glow, working through the beating and the Black Bishop’s words. Raven had called it a snuff film, but he didn’t think she was serious. She probably wasn’t, but that didn’t make her horrified pronouncement less accurate.

In a daze, Charles pulled the DVD from the player and stared at the handwriting. Was this the Black Bishop’s script? How many of these DVDs were there? Surely there was finishing done to edit out the dialogue between the Bishop and Max. Was this a copy of a master? Raven was the film expert, but he had no intention of ever sharing this with her.

He returned the DVD to its case. It was the closest he had ever been to the mysterious Black Bishop. Even knowing what the man was capable of, he felt more anger and outrage than he did fear. In part with himself, but in greater amount, with the man who chose to punish Max. Now he knew what
Erik had meant Friday morning when he’d said that they couldn’t fool a man that created disabling injuries.

In his mind’s eye he replayed the Federal agent, Moira MacTaggert, writing her number down on his pad of sticky notes and dropping it into his desk. Giving her a copy of the DVD was too dangerous for Erik’s safety, but the address in New York was the least he could do. He wanted very much not to stop there.

Charles took the disc to the small dining nook and tucked it under his helmet to give back to Erik. That was no longer a question. He was going to give it back and tell him everything except for the bit about the FBI. He could tell him about her when, and if, they got a passport out of the deal. Before then, it was just too dangerous for both of them.

Determined, yet weary, Charles returned to his bedroom to shower. Afterwards, hair still damp, he collapsed next to Raven in his bed. Before he could pull her close, she reached out to him. They drew themselves together and held each other like they used to in the years before Charles left for Oxford. In the years when his pillow did not smell of Erik.

Charles’ sleep was not dreamless, but he felt fortunate he could not remember any when he woke. He woke with a feeling of anxiety, unease, and a distinct sense of abruptly interrupted motion. Raven was no longer beside him, but he could hear the television in the living room.

He wandered out of the bedroom to find her sitting forward on the couch, not even looking up at the colorful program on the television. She was involved in Max’s old paperback. “Did you read the part about Choco Bonbon? That’s like the best porn star name ever, until you find out he’s named for the color of his ball sac.”

“How now you know why Max wouldn’t let you read it,” Charles laughed, but it sounded weak even to him.

She turned a page. “Right, you say that like we never spent hours perusing Kurt’s Playboy collection while he and Sharon boozed it up in the city.”

“Do you want to talk about the video?” Might as well take a page from Erik’s playbook and just cut to the chase.

At that, Raven closed Erik’s book and set it on the coffee table. Her eyes were determined; a slight crease appeared at her brow. “There’s not much to say, is there? Just that, as much as the reality of this whole she-bang scares the fuck out of me, I want to get him out. I mean, I’ll always be angry with him for getting you involved in his bullshit, but he’s always tried to help you.”

Charles sat down next to Raven so their legs were pressed together. When they weren’t involved in their petty sibling boundary violations, they could be ultimately at ease with one another. A team. “I can’t tell you how good it is to have you on my side.”

She let him take her hand and went a step further, interlacing their fingers. It was strange to think how the same gesture with Erik was fraught with emotional peril.

“I’m always on your side,” Raven smiled. “Even when we disagree. But, you know, we do need to talk a bit more about you and Max.”

“Call him Erik,” Charles corrected. “He doesn’t like being called Max these days.”

“Fine,” she smirked, “we need to talk about you and Erik. You say you told me everything, but I’ve got a few questions for you, young padiwan.”
Charles rolled his eyes. “Have you forgotten that I’m your older brother?”

“Nope,” she pronounced. “I relish it with every grey hair I see on your head.”

“Touché,” Charles sighed. “The defense is ready for your questions, ma’am.”

“So, what the fuck are you doing?” She began, squeezing his hand gently. “Getting into a relationship with Max –Erik? You never give your heart away casually and last time the two of you were together was just as friends. Friends, right? And him pretending to die destroyed you.”

Charles frowned, but squeezed Raven’s hand back as a sign of his understanding. “It did. But he also gave me back the self-respect Kurt took. Erik has always given more than I have. I never knew the extent until now”

“Okay, but you hooked up a week after punching him in the face,” Raven deadpanned. “And sent me a pic of his ass. His very nice ass. Which, on the one hand, I loved, but on the other hand, is likely putting the gigantor of all strains on your whatevership.”

Still holding Raven’s right hand in his left, Charles covered his eyes with the one he still had free. “I know. But the night I was attacked and run off the road, he…” Charles paused. He hadn’t told anyone. Back then, the last thing Raven wanted to hear about was Max.

“He kissed me. I’m not sure if it changed anything, or just put a name to something deeper I hadn’t understood.”

Raven’s eye brows elevated and her mouth opened slightly in surprise. “You never told me that…!”

He gave her a small, but warm, smile in return. “You weren’t comfortable talking about him until right before I left for Oxford. That’s when you finally forgave me for running away without you.”

“I forgave you,” she said softly and leaned her head on his shoulder, “but you never forgive yourself.”

“For weeks, I left you alone,” Charles sighed, “with Kurt and Sharon. The former an emotionally, psychologically, and occasionally physically abusive step-father and the latter an emotionally neglectful mother. I’m entitled to regret that for the rest of my life.”

“You aren’t trying to make up for it by crusading after Max, are you?” She asked quietly.

“Erik,” Charles reminded gently. “No, though I’m sure that fear adds to the intensity of my emotions.”

“Alright, Charles,” Raven replied and lifted her head up. She let go of his hand and embraced him warmly. “I’m on board for this crusade.”

He hugged her back and kissed the side of her hair, as he was wont to do. “Hopefully we don’t need to get involved. He’s seeing somebody today for advice on getting out of Hellfire.”

Raven pulled back so Charles could see her sudden grimace. “I hope I didn’t bruise his face. He’s going to be in a bad mood for that meeting, huh?”

Charles’ expression was comparable in dread. “Probably. I better give him a call. Get ready to go. I need to swing by his place to return the DVD before I take you helmet shopping.”

“Fuck, yes!” She grinned, cares forgotten in an instant of enthusiasm. “I can’t wait to ride!”
They released each other so Charles could retrieve his phone and Raven could get ready. He took the phone into his study and closed the door for privacy. The first thing he wanted to do was not call Erik, but check the New York post office box address. He intended to write it down and delete the photo from his phone.

When the phone was on and loaded he found several alerts. Other than the previous night’s messages from PMS, there were three more from Angel and two back-to-back missed calls from Erik. Brow furrowing, Charles forgot about the address and immediately tapped the screen to dial Erik back. The phone went straight to voicemail. He was likely talking with Azazel. Charles carefully wet his lips and then checked Angel’s messages.

Did you and Erik have a fight? He’s pissed.

Do you know anything about a dvd? You’re the only one that’s been in his room alone, so you are currently suspect #1. He’s fucking furious.

Charles’ stomach dropped at the same time his heart clenched. He reread the message. It didn’t change.

How in God’s name could Erik have discovered the missing DVD so fast? It had been in the back of the bedside drawer and he had the gun in the R6. Had he gone to read his letters from Germany and noticed the absence?

Swallowing thickly, he went to the next few messages. Both were short and simple.

WTF happened with you guys?

Prof. Call me.

Charles hesitated but dialed anyway. Needing to expend nervous energy, he opened the study door again and wandered into the kitchen to pace.

Angel answered on the second ring. Her voice broadcast agitation. “Are you okay, Prof? What the fuck’s going on?”

Charles exhaled and then took a steadying breath. “I screwed up Angel. And, yes, I have the thing he was looking for, but let’s not talk about that right now. What happened?”

There was a pause wherein Charles could hear what sounded suspiciously like nails drumming on a table or bench. “Did you watch it? He said he’d revoke Deus membership, if any of us even have it.”

“I don’t want to talk about that,” Charles repeated, grasping a firm hold of the bridge of his nose. He hit his head softly against the wall. He never fucked up in half measures, did he? “What happened?”

“Now, you listen Prof,” Angel replied, her voice cool and sharp. “We’ve been backing you, Deus and Machete’s crew. We all know Erik’s an insensitive asshole, but you obviously have some failings of your own. That DVD’s important to some meeting he has today. He had to leave without it.”

Charles hit his head a little harder. What would Erik’s contact need with the DVD? “Should we really be talking about this on the phone?”

He heard her sigh as static. “Prof, I like you, okay? But I have really bad taste in people, so it isn’t a point in your favor. Look, I know where you live, but I can’t get down there. I don’t have permission to use the Tacoma and my bike tops out at 50MPH.”
“I’m not sure it would be a good idea for me to be there when he gets home,” Charles sighed. “And my sister is with me.”

“You have a sister?” Angel asked, thoughtfully. “I think Sean said something like that. Huh, well, whatever. You’ve got him smoking in the house. He never smokes inside, Prof. Sean and I had to clean up the ashes.”

Again, Charles hit his head against the wall. Of course Erik was smoking. He quit for him and he could start thanks to him, too.

“What’s that noise, Prof?”

“Just my head hitting the wall,” Charles admitted. “Angel, yes. I have my own failings, but that’s for me to deal with and for me to admit to Erik. You’re a good friend to him. I… I should…” It was pride he was choking on. “I should be more like you.”

“Yeah?” Angel sounded a little incredulous. “Well, I’ve got plenty of costumes for you to try on when you get to that point.”

Charles’ sudden snort of laughter was nothing if not relieved. Angel’s humor gave him hope that he could make some reparations, even if he couldn’t fix all the damage. Charles hated asking for advice, but Erik was too important to allow his pride to get the better of him. “Give me your advice, Angel. Should I go over and wait or let him contact me?”

Her sigh billowed over the receiver. “I don’t really know,” she started. “He took the R1, so he probably planned on being reckless after his meeting. He likes go near Lake Pleasant to ride out his aggression. I’m not sure if it is a good idea, but if you want to catch him, you could ride out there. That is, if you don’t mind waiting in the heat. He usually takes Carefree Highway to the 17 or keeps heading east for Cave Creek on his way out. I don’t think he’ll be in the mood for Cave Creek, though.”

“How about this,” Charles mused. He took his hand from the bridge of his nose and rubbed his brow with the back. “If you have the day off, I’ll bring my sister over to your place and the two of you can enjoy the rest of the day while I wither in the Arizona sun out by Carefree Highway and the 17.”

“I don’t have the day off,” Angel returned carefully, “but I can take your sister to work with me down in Scottsdale. She might have fun.”

Charles’ head hit the wall again. Raven would probably enjoy a free pole-dancing lesson. In fact, Raven would probably do to Charles what PMS loved to do with Erik; bond via rockstar-status trolling.

“I think she might like that,” Charles admitted. “She likes to go dancing.”

“If she’ll fit in my clothes,” Angel said, sounding far happier than she had at any other point in the admittedly somber call, “we won’t have to buy her anything before class. Yeah, Prof, come on over. Don’t forget Erik’s property. We can talk about him for a few minutes when you get here.”

Even though she couldn’t see him, Charles nodded and agreed to get up there as soon as possible, since it was nearly three and Angel had a class in an hour and a half. They would be cutting things close, but Alex would be able to get a few hours extra sleep before work.

“Am I going dancing?” Raven asked brightly when Charles put his phone down next to his Arai.

Smirking over at her, he shook his head. “Dancing lesson with one of the stunt women I told you
about.”

He knew she was doing her best to cheer him up, despite her own feelings. When she clapped her hands enthusiastically, he couldn’t help but feel some of the anxiety billow into warm affection. “Oh, popular or hiphop?”

“Pole.”

Charles took momentary refuge in Raven’s ecstatic laughter.

When they arrived at Erik’s house with Charles leading on the Triple, the garage door was closed. He wasn’t comfortable enough to do a U-turn in the driveway so he turned the Triple off and cranked the handlebars to the left to pull it around. He kicked the sidestand down as soon as the front tire was facing the street again.

The Tacoma was parked on the street, but Raven didn’t recognize it and parked Charles’ Acura next to the Triple. She got out of the car while he took off the helmet. He could see her looking around thoughtfully.

“Nice place,” she nodded. “Bit out of the way.”

With the garage door closed, Charles was obliged to search for the front door. It was the first time Charles ever found himself at the entry. He felt like a stranger as he searched for, and then pressed, the doorbell.

Raven joined him by the time Angel opened the door. “Hey, Prof, sorry about the garage. I didn’t realize Sean shut it on his way out.”

“It’s no trouble.” Charles returned and gestured to Raven who was already smiling. “Raven, this is Angel. She’s the stunt rider I told you about.”

Angel’s dark eyes swept immediately to Raven and crinkled in a brash grin. “You look way more fun than the Prof.”

“Oh, Charles,” Raven chuckled, “Max lives with sassy friends!”

“Erik,” Charles frowned and nudged Raven with his elbow. He saw Angel’s eyes widen for a moment at the name, but she recovered quickly.

“Prof,” Angel grinned, “you have a sassy sister! I don’t really live here, but I come do my laundry and soak up the AC so the power bill isn’t so bad at my apartment. You want out of the heat? We kind of have to hurry.”

“If you two don’t mind,” Charles chuckled, shaking his head, “I need to drop something off and ride out.”

Angel’s humor faded, but she kept up appearances as she let them both enter the cool interior of the house. “Don’t forget to take off your shoes.”

Angel led Raven to the living room couch where a laundry bag was half stuffed and several colorful yoga outfits were folded. As they looked for something to fit Raven, Charles glided down the hallway to Erik’s room. It had never smelled of cigarettes before, but now the scent lingered.

The bedroom door itself was closed, which wasn’t unusual, but it was locked where it hadn’t been before. Frowning, Charles set his helmet on the floor and pulled the DVD from one of the jacket’s
interior pockets. Crouching down, he found the gap between the floor and the door’s bottom edge was wide enough to admit the case. He placed it flat on the floor and flicked it so it would slide away from the door.

Charles came back into the open living room and kitchen area to find Raven peeling a pair of bright blue leggings down her legs. “Yeah, these’ll be perfect.”

“When did you start wearing underwear?” Charles teased as he made for the front door and his riding boots.

“That’s gross, Charles,” Raven shot. “I may be adopted, but I’m still your sister! Just for that, I’m going to show Angel all the photos from your graduation party!”

He snorted lightly to himself as he put his boots on. “You were going to do that anyway, Raven.”

“Hey if you show me those,” Angel joined in, “I’ll show you a great video of Charles checking out Erik’s ass in the most embarrassingly obvious way.”

Charles tried to imagine that he wasn’t fleeing when he made it out the door.

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That was how Charles found himself north of Deer Valley, toward Black Canyon. The northern view up the highway toward Black Canyon was good, though the western view at his back was a little flat and boring. It was a stretch to imagine Erik, if he was already in the park, would be exiting along a straightaway. The heat would have been worse had there not been a veil of cloud cover across the sky. He felt fortunate for that and the wind that sometimes ruffled his hair and cooled the light sweat and sun block on his freckled face.

He sat on the Triple, jacket and helmet on the tank. He occasionally took a pull of the bottled water he’d bought at the AM/PM a few exits back. He spent the time reading new articles on genetic markers and sequencing and lurking Raven’s Facebook, wondering which of the many embarrassing photos she would choose to share with Angel.

Three hours after Charles arrived, and half an hour before he planned to leave, he heard the R1. He didn’t question who it was, how many R1s sounded like Erik’s? The full system Arrow exhaust set it aside, but Erik had probably tinkered with the engine, too. Instinct guided his hand to the Triple’s ignition and habit pulled in the clutch. The Triple came to life at his bidding. The R1 was loud and it was almost on Charles by the time he turned back around.

Lifting his color-blocked helmet, Charles attempted to wave Erik down. He didn’t see evidence of brake lights. He didn’t hear the result of the throttle being cracked, either. The engine maintained steady power; that bespoke Erik more than the sound of the engine or black spade on the helmet’s brow.

The R1 did not slow down. Cursing floridly, Charles took the helmet in both hands and pulled it over his head. Instead of buckling the helmet, he began pulling his jacket on. He could zip his jacket, put on his gloves, and buckle the helmet later, he thought.

He kicked the sidestand up. One hand on the throttle, the other on the clutch, Charles made ready to stomp down into first gear.
The screech of tires on asphalt jolted him out of readiness. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the R1 laying down a streak of black rubber as the motorcycle’s mass fought the wheels’ arrest of its forward motion. The R1 slid through the scent of burnt rubber and came to a stop just forward of the Triple.

Erik knocked the visor up over the spade on its brow. His eyes were cold and piercing. “Buckle the helmet straps and do up the jacket. Don’t bother giving chase; you haven’t a hope in the world to keep up.”

“Erik, let me apologize,” Charles replied, hating the pleading note that he hadn’t planned to enter his voice. “Please, let me apologize and explain. I haven’t told you everything.”

“I don’t want to know everything,” Erik said with cold determination. “Buckle the helmet straps. If you’re going to embarrass yourself with a chase, you’ll need the protection.”

In frustration, Charles pounded his right thigh with a fist. It was far less violent or painful than the constricting organ behind his breastbone. “Erik, give me a chance. Don’t let it all be for nothing.”

If anything, Erik’s eyes grew colder with the statement. Charles felt the first frosty fingers of despair make his heart itch. “Arrogant prick. If I did everything for you, it would be for nothing. I don’t.”

“Bloody hell, Erik!” Anxiety pulled every syllable into agonized symmetry. Charles felt like he was suffocating inside his helmet. He tore it off his head and dropped it to the side of the Triple. It bounced off the dusty ground and rolled to one side as he gasped for air.

Blue eyes squinting against sunset’s orange wash, Charles gave Erik’s stoic visage a wild look. “You don’t have to. You never have to do anything for me ever, but let me do something for you.”

“You have no idea,” Erik returned, voice as cold as the R1’s engine was hot, “just what you’ve done.”

“How could I?” Charles asked incredulously. “You never told me. You never shared the burden with me.”

“I can’t share anything with you that you steal from me!” Erik roared, right hand twisting the throttle so the R1 joined in.

“Shenanigans! You had no intention of ever sharing that!” Charles shouted back.

“We’ll never know the truth, will we?” Erik snarled, fury resounding despite the dampening effect of the helmet. “Unless you lied about being able to read my mind.”

“Of course I know the truth; you let me believe you were dead! If I hadn’t accepted the position here, I would still be mourning you!” Even as the words left his mouth, he had a moment of feeling separate from the moment. This was Max’s way of handling things, too. He always gave in to the rage and fury, wrapping it around him like armor and immolating everything that made him uncomfortable.

“It was better that way!” Erik barked, taking his hand off the throttle. It seemed to Charles that the previous rev had been unintentional.

Taking a deep shaking breath, Charles nodded and steeled himself. He grasped for neutrality, but only attained his former anxiety. “This shouting isn’t getting us anywhere. Just let me ask you one question.”
Erik eyed him suspiciously, his fury still radiating from his tense shoulders to his firmly planted feet. He said nothing for several seconds before giving the barest of nods.

“When you told me you regret nothing about the night we were attacked and that you’d do it all again,” Charles began, hands clenching and unclenching with nervous energy. “Did the ‘all’ in that statement encompass everything from that moment on?”

It was risky to try diverting Erik’s anger with emotions he didn’t understand, but Charles knew he could get nowhere with the wall of rage. He didn’t ask the question because he didn’t know the answer; he asked to remind Erik the answer. Actions spoke louder than words and Max’s actions a decade ago said everything he needed to know.

For several more moments, Erik said nothing, but stared at Charles as he presumably worked through the question, its answers, and the implications. Then his chin lowered, shielding his eyes from view. Erik reached forward and switched the key off. He dropped both hands to his thighs.

Charles listened to the cars on the highway behind him head up the 17 to Black Canyon, Surprise, and further on to Flagstaff or perhaps Sedona. The wind was beginning to pick up as the sun set in the west, the hot air rushing toward the cooling air of the east. It picked up and tousled Charles’ hair and plastered dust against the areas of skin damp with sweat.

Erik’s hands drew up from conforming to the shape of his thighs and formed fists. As tension grew, he brought his fists up slowly, evidence of the growing battle within him. They reached shoulder height and shook violently.

Charles squeezed his hands together tightly. There was no telling which way Erik would go.

The R1’s tank rang with the double impact of Erik’s gloved fists. Charles didn’t startle, still too close to the DVD he’d watched that morning. Erik made a sound that didn’t even vaguely resemble human speech. It was an articulation of confused rage. He hit the tank again with his right fist.

“Damn you,” he hissed. “I can’t think. There’s too much going on.”

Charles nodded, then followed up with a ‘yes’ when he realized Erik couldn’t see it. This was the point he needed Erik to come to, though he knew he didn’t deserve Erik getting there at all. Admitting confusion meant he was open, just the tiniest bit, and Charles seized the chance.

“I took you to task for treating me like a one-night stand, but I’ve treated you just as badly,” he said carefully. “I want to apologize for everything I’ve done, but you need time.”

Erik’s right fist hit the R1’s tank once more, but with little force. Charles had to work to keep himself from dismounting the Triple and going to Erik. As the action played out, he saw how close his fears were coming to reality. Intercepting Erik had likely been a mistake.

“I don’t want to lose you,” Charles finally admitted quietly. “I’ve only just got you back. However, if you could do so much to protect me, surely I can accept whatever decision you make in order to protect you.”

Erik’s head tilted up again and his eyes, shaded within the helmet, closed for a moment. “How much of it did you watch?”

“All of it,” Charles admitted, nearly choking on the memory. “I owe you that. I owe you my life and my mobility. It should have been me.”

Even with the helmet obscuring most of Erik’s features, Charles could easily read the tension around
his eyes as well as see the settling of his shoulders. “He would never have knee-capped you, Charles. You were too high profile.”

“It’s the thought that counts,” Charles quipped despite himself.

“I’m going back to the house,” Erik stated, seemingly independent of everything else said.

“Call me when you’re ready,” Charles replied, beyond shame at the note of supplication in his voice.

“Check your helmet,” Erik said, voice low and nearly swallowed completely by his Suomy.

Charles sighed and nodded. He put the sidestand down and got off the Triple. He zipped his jacket up as he walked to the helmet to pick it up. There was dust sticking to it, there were scratches on the finish, but the visor was only lightly scratched.

He held it up to Erik. “Is it still good?”

Erik twitched a one-shouldered shrug. “Depends who you ask. The ground out here is fairly soft, plus your head wasn’t in it, so I think it should be fine. Throw it away, if you drop it on a hard surface or crash in it.”

Charles nodded soberly, looking down at the light scratches. He wondered if there was a parallel hidden in Erik’s advice. Likely not: Erik was always right to the point with his painful brand of honesty.

When Erik brought the R1 back to life, Charles looked over, his heart constricting painfully. He stood still, gripping the helmet tightly in order to keep himself from reaching out.

He wanted to reiterate Erik calling him as a question, but kept careful control of himself. Without a word, Erik tapped down to first and fed the engine gas. He pulled away slowly and took the on ramp at a sedate pace, but without looking back.

Charles watched him disappear from sight before he got back on the Triple. He smoothed his gloved hands down the Triple’s white tank and thought of the white tank of the BMW S1000RR. It was easy in that moment to wish Erik were not flesh and blood, but a machine.

Erik was much like the machines he rode. Powerful, despite his quirks. Dangerous in the wrong hands. Built and styled for aggression. He was a beautiful work of lethal grace, with a faulty understanding of emotional intricacies.

“I’m a fool,” he told the Triple. “If he doesn’t come back, it will be just we two.” He ran his hands back up the tank. “And really, I’m sorry love, but in matters of the heart, you simply can’t compete with that German model.”
“…in which I had just ended up here
in a kind of drunken universe
that irresponsibly empty and senseless
took hold of me in phases…”

Selbstporträt mit Kater, Einstürzende Neubauten

Charles’ woke up to Raven, an empty bottle of expensive whiskey, and a hangover in his bed. It was the sort of hangover that made him wonder if his intestines had suddenly gained sadistic sentience. He doubled over on his side and hissed in agony before squinting through gritty eyes for his bedside clock.

It was Thursday and it was no longer morning.

He couldn’t remember much of the evening beyond riding the Triple home from the outskirts of Lake Pleasant. He remembered trading texts with Raven, who had gone dancing with Angel. There were a few pictures and maybe a video, but the only sense he had was one of Raven attempting to cheer him up and get him to join her.

Stumbling and gasping as pain refracted and splintered through his head, Charles made it to the bathroom where he promptly downed two glasses of water. He wanted to force down a third, but didn’t fancy his chances of keeping the prior two inside if he did.

Looking in the mirror, he saw pasty skin, purple smudges under his eyes, and dried tracks leading from his eyes. The salt tracks trailed down his face and across his cheeks. Using the back of his hand rubbed the dried tears away in angry disgust. Then he slowly wilted over the vanity to rest his forehead on the cool corion surface and wish for oblivion. If Erik had been present, he would have overlooked the hypocrisy and asked him for hydrocodone.

There was new pain when he found himself biting the inside of his lip. Thinking of Erik added
heartache and anxiety to his head ache and intestinal rebellion. He imagined he was hurting in every way possible. His heart more than his head. A pathetic moan escaped him.

“Charles?” Raven called from the bedroom. He didn’t even remember her coming home. “Are you okay?”

When he couldn’t find his voice to answer, she appeared in the doorway, brow knit in obvious concern. She sighed when she saw him and moved close. “Oh, Charles, I should have known.”

She leaned over and kissed his bare shoulder and went to his medicine cabinet. She opened it and picked through carefully until she found something she likely thought would help. Charles felt a surge of bittersweet love rise and fall within him. His eyes felt wet again.

“I’m going to find the nearest Jamba Juice and get you something with all the wheat grass, spirulina, and green tea you can imagine,” she soothed. She filled his glass again and shook out two aspirin. “All those antioxidants will make you feel a lot better.”

Charles pushed himself up onto his elbows to take the pills with water. “Thank–,” he choked, and paused at how weak and terrible his voice sounded before trying again. “Thank you, Raven.”

She stroked his back carefully. “You don’t need to thank me. You’ve cleaned me up after far worse. Like the time I threw up twice in Westchester after I drank what was left of Sharon’s bourbon.”

“You’d gotten another rejection letter,” Charles sighed. “You were entitled to get drunk and throw up all you liked. It was the lack of eating that was a problem.” He paused to look up from the vanity at her face. Were her cheeks a little hollow? They didn’t look hollow. “You’re eating, right?”

“How did it go with Max? You were totally incoherent when I got home last night.”

“Erik. Can we save this conversation,” Charles rasped and it was not a question, “until I’ve consumed all the green things you mentioned a moment ago.”

Raven sighed. “Of course. Here, let me help you back to bed.”

They walked arm in arm back to the bed where Raven helped him settle down. She left the room and returned a moment later with a bottle of water from the kitchen. She set the bottle on the night stand and assured him she wouldn’t be gone long. He fell asleep again before she made it out the door.

Whether due to the aspirin or water, he felt marginally better by the time Raven made it back. She brought her hangover blend and handed it to Charles as soon as he managed to sit up. Helpfully, she also placed his phone next to him.

She sat beside him as he drank the cold green concoction and watched over his shoulder as he tracked back through the messages.

“There should be spell check on this thing,” he said, cringing. “This is atrocious. Content check, too, once you’ve made a certain number of spelling errors. Is there an app for that? It should monitor spelling mistakes and word choices and then suddenly cut you off the moment you reach a quota.”

“It exists, but I don’t want it,” Raven grinned. “It would think I’m permanently drunk.”

“But that sounds accurate,” he teased.
“I see the aspirin and the green bomb blend are helping,” Raven chuckled. “So, are you going to tell me about Erik or what? I asked Angel while I was out and she says he’s been working on somebody’s transmission and chain smoking all morning.”

“Machete’s transmission, I think.” Charles mulled the chain smoking over, but tried not to think too deeply about it. “He found out I took the DVD. He didn’t take it well.”

Raven made a grimace that was nearly comical in its intensity. “Oh, well, for fuck’s sake.”

“He had that meeting to discuss getting out of Hellfire after he discovered the DVD was gone.” Charles continued, “I tried to talk to him, but he wasn’t really ready or in the mood to talk.”

Raven said nothing, only slipped her arms around him and pulled him close. Charles went willingly. He closed his eyes and went on, “I don’t think I would put up with somebody that did the same: that stupid photo and then the DVD. It’s my fault he needs his knee replaced, that he’s covered in scars, and then I go do that.”

His voice cracked on the final words, but he held desperately to stoicism.

“You have it bad, Charles, you really do,” Raven whispered, and stroked the back of his head. Her touches were warm and comforting in their familiarity. “But think a sec, okay? Getting shot and getting beat up: he never told you about those consequences. You can’t hold that against yourself, if you never knew the stakes. He chose that without you.

“And the photo, that’s all my fault. I should have kept my big mouth shut. I shouldn’t have tried to chase down your mysterious Olympian. So, taking and watching the DVD; that’s really the only thing you are guilty of.”

“A comedy of errors,” Charles tried to smile without voicing his disagreement, “only without any of the comedy.”

“Story of our lives,” she sighed, rubbing between his shoulder blades. “But there’s some hope in all this. No matter what happens, even if he never talks to you again, you got him on the road to getting out of Hellfire. You did that.”

Raven’s words rang true, even though he wanted to wallow in his misery. He deserved no reprieve, as far as he was concerned, but the idea stopped him. The idea that he had done something good, but it was best for the other person that he let go. Perhaps that was how Max had felt when he had been shot and beaten. Perhaps that was what made it possible for Erik to follow him on the internet, to watch his life, but to never be involved in it. The understanding brought him an epiphany.

Max, or Erik, had never been able to articulate his emotions beyond anger, but he didn’t always have to, because, sooner or later, he acted on them. Charles usually knew his own feelings and he had always been talented at reading them in others. So how could he have missed reading Erik? Was he too close to the trees to see the forest?

If there was one thing that could be said for Erik, it was that actions spoke louder than words. To take a bullet, beating, and then let Charles believe in his death, all spoke of one thing: love. Erik had loved him the whole time. From the first chaste kiss as they stood within the stench of burnt flesh to the decision to stay out of their lives: it was all for love. He had been too self-absorbed to see he had what he wanted until it teetered on the brink of a chasm.

Leaning into Raven again, face contorted with grief, Charles wept.
By late afternoon, Charles had pulled himself together and his hangover had receded. He half wanted it to stay, convinced that he should feel as bad physically as he did emotionally. His phone remained silent. There were no calls from Erik, no texts from Angel or anyone in PMS. Raven’s phone, by contrast, was active as she talked to people at work or texted with her many acquaintances. He suspected she still had Angel monitoring the situation with Erik.

Wanting out of the apartment and the shadow Erik had left over it, he invited Raven to buy gear. Not knowing where else to go, he took her to the dealership where he’d bought the Triple. Erik’s shadow, of course, was there as well in the neat display of BMW S1000RRs.

Raven happily tried on everything that caught her eye and performed pin-up poses for endless pictures. Despite his gloom, Charles laughed as she modeled a jacket matched another helmet she’d picked out. He took the picture and sent it to Angel. Angel replied that she could get Raven a job at Cherry Bomb. It seemed the two had hit it off.

As Raven sent pictures to friends and updated her Facebook, Charles wandered over to the BMW section and stared at the S1000RRs. In particular, he fancied the white, red, and blue model. It reminded him the most of Erik’s helmet and, thus, Erik. He couldn’t understand why Erik didn’t buy one. He certainly made enough cash with his prolific engine work. Was it because he knew his limits? That the temptation to ride it fast and ‘menacingly’ would prove too great?

Carefully, he brushed his fingers over the tank, then the instrument cluster, and finally the gill-like vents on the right side plastics. The S1000RR looked a little like a shark. He supposed that image would please Erik, but thought him too warm for the comparison.

“Aren’t you happy with the Street Triple?” said a familiar voice. “Or just trying to see what your friend likes about this one?”

Charles turned to find the saleswoman Erik had been so thoroughly rude to. She was smiling brightly, her fingertips resting lightly on the uncomfortable-looking pillion seat. He gave her a weak smile in return. “I’m not really sure what it is. He could buy one, but he doesn’t.”

She nodded enthusiastically. “Maybe your friend doesn’t trust himself to behave. When you have a good rider, they want to push their limits and grow into their bike. The S1000 is superior to your friend’s skill and he probably knows it. Really, we’ve never sold one of these bikes to anyone that has the chops for it.”

She patted the pillion’s upholstery fondly. “It would take World Superbike and MotoGP class skill to really use this ridiculous thing. Your friend might be okay if he had it on a track, but out on the road? He’d need a really good traffic lawyer and spanking health insurance. I know his type.”

“You think he’d crash it?” Charles asked, incredulously.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” she laughed.

“It isn’t?” Charles was rapidly growing more confused. How was crashing not bad? He’d crashed twice and both times were awful. Max had crashes, too, and Erik still had light marks from the road rash on his skin. He remembered the bottle of hydrogen peroxide and tweezers they used to pick gravel out of Max’s left shoulder, forearm, and thigh. Max had never found both of his shoes from that wreck. After that, he always wore a jacket and boots when he rode the ZX6.

“Well,” she winked, “it is bad, but kind of a natural part of sport riding. I’m guessing that’s where he hurt his leg. And the taped fingers? That’s a typical sport bike injury. Your friend must be a serious rider.”
Charles opened his mouth to correct her on the taped fingers, but stopped. Better to not say too much of anything. “Sport riders crash a lot?”

“On the track, yes,” she nodded. “Crashing is all part of learning. You should get him out to the track for track days. It’s a really safe place for people like him or you. You could learn a lot about your Triple in a safe environment. Maybe you guys might start racing.”

“He’d like that,” Charles said fondly. Though, once he thought about it, there was a good chance Erik’s engine work kept him from competing. If he was part of the competition, perhaps nobody would trust him to give them the best possible engine modifications. It seemed like a violation if interests.

“Think about it,” she encouraged. “We sell track day tickets and I have a lot of literature. Actually, this is all a little self-serving, too, because I do some instructing. But, really, do a bit of research and you’ll see I’m not selling snake oil.”

Charles nodded and thanked her for the information. It felt good to discuss Erik as if he was a concrete part of his life.

Raven was still trying on helmets when he made it back to her. Her hair was getting more disheveled as she went; it brought a grin to his face. Feeling more upbeat, he looked through the helmets with her. The Arai had suffered a fall, and even though Erik had said it would probably be okay, he didn’t want to take chances when it came to his head. It was a decision he thought Erik could respect.

Charles decided on a white helmet with thin, black concentric circles to replace the Arai. It cost half the price and had twice the convenience. It was a modular type: the whole chin was capable of swinging over the top of the visor and to the back of the helmet, thus converting it from a full-face style, to a three quarter style that exposed his face. He wouldn’t be forced to shout through a full-face nor always take off the helmet whenever he wanted to get off his bike to go inside a store.

They left the dealership with plenty of protective gear. With the help of knowledge Charles had gained from Erik and additional advice from the dealership’s staff, Raven had everything she needed.

On the drive home, Raven looked up from her phone. “Angel wants to know if you want to go to a place called Cherry Bomb? She says she’s working there tonight. A lot of her friends will be there.”

The corners of Charles’ mouth pulled down, as he watched the traffic ahead of them. “That’s right. Today’s Thursday, isn’t it? Erik goes there Thursdays and I haven’t heard from him, yet, so I had best not. You should go. Maybe you and Erik can get reacquainted.”

“No,” Raven laughed. “I am not leaving you alone tonight. Not after coming home at 2AM and finding you crying over an empty bottle of whisky. Let’s have ice cream and comedians night. Angel’s friends want me to watch John Leguizamo and I think you need some Eddie Izzard. He’s still your favorite, right? His Latin routine always reminds me of the time you tried to teach Max Latin. And he was like, ‘There’s a reason this language is dead.’”

“I’d forgotten that.” Turning his head long enough to share a smile with Raven, Charles replied, “And then he named his club a Latin name. Your plan sounds perfect. Then, tomorrow morning I’ll take you to Cave Creek. The roads there are good for riding.”

Raven turned out to be a well-behaved passenger. It was clear she remembered all Max’s instructions.
from when she was in middle school; she never tried to sit up while the Triple was leaned over, she
didn’t push on her passenger pegs, and she did a good job of keeping her body as close to his as
possible.

All the same, Charles tried not to make the ride a long one since he’d rarely had opportunities to
carry a passenger. While he felt fine at high speed, he was less confident in low speed situations.
Several times when he cracked the throttle to thrill Raven, he felt the font wheel lift off the asphalt.
Logically, he knew it was her weight on the back of the bike changing their center of gravity, but it
was still shocking.

For her part, Raven laughed, screamed, and enjoyed herself thoroughly. When he brought them back
to his Tempe apartment, she was still laughing and hesitant to remove her helmet. She clearly had no
desire for the outing to end.

“Say,” Charles grinned, flipping the front of his helmet up so he could talk easily. “Would you like
me to teach you? You could get your own bike.”

Raven blinked rapidly, her brow knit, but Charles couldn’t see the rest of her expression for the
black, fuchsia, and green helmet. Then she blurted, “Why did I not think of that?”

The feeling of his grin, the slide of muscles under skin that formed a smile, made Charles feel lighter
than he had even while they’d watched John Leguizamo and Eddie Izzard the night before. “I think
we should give it a try. When do you have to be back at Universal?”

Her answer was delayed by pulling the helmet off her head. “I’m just waiting for them to call, but
I’m kind of worried about dropping your new bike. Let’s wait until Sunday when Angel and your
friends practice at the university.”

Charles’ bright gaze travelled to Raven’s new boots. “Erik usually takes Angel’s bike there in his
truck.”

“He’s not going to be there,” Raven shrugged. “Didn’t Angel tell you? Angel’s friend, Machete, is
having him put an engine in that morning and then he has to go to an airport for something called
dynotuning?”

“That’s funny,” Charles murmured, “I was under the impression he’d be going somewhere else that
day. There’s an air race up in Monument Valley.”

Raven rested her helmet on her hip and cocked her head to the side. “She didn’t say anything about
an air race. I think she would, you know, considering how all Max’s friends are adrenaline junkies.”

“Erik…” Charles corrected absently, as he thought along different lines. Thinking things through, he
took his apartment and car keyring out of an interior pocket and tossed it to Raven. “I just
remembered something I left at the university. You mind going in and making lunch? I’ll be about an
hour.”

The keys rattled in Raven’s hand and then around the keyring when she spun it around her finger.
“Okay, Professor. Think about going to the university on Sunday, too, okay?”

Charles nodded, but he was already sliding his helmet’s face back over his chin. He slotted the key
into the ignition, backed the Triple out, and darted out of the complex’s black asphalt plain.

If the trip to the university from his Tempe apartment was swift by bicycle, it was all but nonexistent
by motorcycle. It was also warm with stop-and-go traffic and noxious with exhaust from the
surrounding cars. He much preferred the highway’s air movement and speed.
Friday found the university parking lot a veritable sea of cars and students. Charles worried that parking would be difficult, but discovered two other motorcycles sharing a patch of shade in a spot near the building. There was just enough room for the Triple, though the bike’s pillion seat stuck out into the bright sunlight. Having ridden pillion before, he was relieved he would not have to set his ass on the black surface when he came back out.

He cranked the handles bars all the way to the left so they would lock when he turned the key off and then the extra click to the left. Reaching up, he pulled off his helmet as he walked toward the building. Once inside, he took the stairs two at a time all the way up to his floor. When he walked into his shared office, two of his future coworkers were present, hard at work on student marking.

His jacket and helmet drew looks, but all he got were the friendly greetings of people that were not well-acquainted. Despite the gravity of his situation, Charles did not withhold a charming smile and greeting in return. Putting people at ease was his natural state.

Placing the helmet on his keyboard, where he knew he shouldn’t, Charles pulled the desk’s central drawer and drew out his pad of sticky notes. It was as he was beginning to pull the top one off that he noticed: there was no writing on it.

For a full five seconds, Charles stood frozen and staring. His stomach dropped. Then he set the pad next to his helmet and rummaged through the drawer more. He was dismayed to find there were no other opened pads of sticky notes in the drawer; the others were still wrapped in cellophane. A cursory exploration of the three drawers on the right side of the desk bore no other paper fruit.

Still leaning over the desk, Charles looked up at his two coworkers. “Has anyone been at my desk lately? I’m missing a note from my pad with a research reference on it.”

Both professors shook their heads. The woman offered, “Have you tried coffee?”

Charles stared at her, smile frozen awkwardly on his face at her strange question. “Frequently?”

She laughed self-consciously and shook her head. “No, I mean, if you wrote heavily on your notepad, there might be an impression left. If you take a drop or two of coffee you can fill the impression and recopy the reference.”

“Oh,” Charles replied, looking back down at the pad. He brought it closer to his face, hoping to see the agent’s scrawl carved into the paper. When he tilted the small pad just right, the impressions filled with shadow. The writing was there.

He bestowed a bright grin on his fellow professor and held the pad up. “You are brilliant, ma’am, and I am forever in your debt. Next time I make coffee, I’ll share my private blend.”

She laughed at him. “I’ll remember that.”

Charles still worried about the missing phone number, but grabbed his helmet and pelted down to the physics department’s coffee maker. The coffee there was long cold and little more than dregs, but Charles didn’t need more than that. He set his helmet on the department’s water dispenser and grabbed the coffee pot. Quickly, he stuck his hand into the coffee pot and wetted his fingers.

Touching the pad lightly, he drew his fingers back and forth, spreading a thin wash off coffee, over the small block. Moira MacTaggert’s handwriting was certainly sharp and heavy; the numbers were filled in immediately.

“Brilliant,” Charles laughed. He took out his phone and took a photo of the number before crumpling up the note and tossing it in the trash.
Swinging by Hank’s desk, Charles took a pen off the TAs desk and jotted down a quick note on the pad. *Did you happen to use any of my sticky notes? ~CFX*

He stuck the note on Hank’s laptop and walked away. It was time to find a pay phone and fill up the Triple’s gas tank.

As an extra layer of caution, Charles rode out to Sky Harbor airport to use one of the pay phones there. It was an expensive call, requiring multiple quarters, which he exchanged for a ten at a kiosk. The phone number’s prefix was not one he recognized and he had placed calls to multiple countries in and beyond the UK and North America.

Once the quarters were in the phone and the number dialed, the phone went through a series of ringing, followed by clicks, then another set of ringing. It all seemed like overkill. It was the FBI, he snorted, not the CIA. When the line finally did pick up he heard only the agent’s recorded voice.

“Leave your phone number.”

The message was repeated in French, Spanish, and Portuguese and then the recording beep sounded. Stumbling slightly, Charles gave his number, paused, and then hung up.

“Anticlimactic,” he murmured and turned on his boot heel to go back to the Triple. He wondered what Raven would be cooking when he got back to the apartment and what Erik was really doing on Sunday.

Saturday morning came quietly. Charles woke up before Raven and began his usual routine by checking messages on his phone. Amongst a few texts from Angel and PMS members, he found one from a number that he knew, but never expected to see. His heart thundered, circulating anxious blood throughout his body.

*My morning is open today.*

Charles stared. Erik didn’t have texting. Did he? Had he lied or did he get it recently? Throwing the questions aside, he checked the time the message was sent. Around six in the morning? Had he been up all night or was that obscene hour Erik’s preferred time to awake? Why was he even wondering when he should be texting back?

He typoed no less than six times and nearly sent the message before he was done, but he managed to make a coherent reply. *Shall I meet you there or do you have somewhere else in mind?*

Charles frowned at the time. It was a quarter past ten: Erik’s message was four hours old and the morning was nearly over. Running to the bathroom, he slipped the phone into the waistband of his boxers and brushed his teeth with vigor. He rinsed and washed his face while listening for the answering ping of a reply.

It finally came as he opened the walk-in closet and began consulting the interior. He wanted something to wear that wasn’t too casual, nor too desperate. He snatched the blue cardigan that brought out his eyes, but then threw it back. It was getting too hot for such things.

Taking up the phone again, he scanned it quickly. *I’m in the shop.*

Pleasant Valley, then, Charles nodded and typed back that he’d be on his way in minutes.
“What’s got you so frantic?” Raven asked blearily from the bed. “Did Erik call?”

Charles nodded, hastily dragging a pair of jeans over his legs. “He texted. As far as I know, he doesn’t have texting, so he might have gotten it just to text me. Don’t tell Angel, please. He’d kill me.”

He heard her move behind him in bed and looked over his shoulder. Raven was sitting up, watching him thoughtfully. “Wear a tight shirt, Charles. You have a nice chest. Something with just a little pale blue, if you have it.”

“When did you end up in wardrobe?” Charles laughed, conveying only a little of his nervousness through snark.

“I have to work with wardrobe pretty closely, you ass,” she smiled back. “Don’t forget the condoms and lube.”

“A text doesn’t mean we’re going to have sex,” Charles snorted, pulling a tight grey shirt over his head. It had a small rearing hippocampus embroidered on the left side of the chest.

“I gave you that shirt!” Raven crowed happily.

Charles grinned back and tapped the embroidered creature. “Did you know it symbolizes metamorphosis when you bought it?”

She shook her head. “No, I just knew it would bring out your eyes without being as obvious as your infamous ‘fuck me’ cardigan.”

“Mock all you like, but that cardigan has served me well.” Charles laughed in response. His expression took a turn for the apologetic as he threaded a belt through the jeans’ loops. “You don’t mind me leaving you for a bit, do you?”

A pair of rolled eyes gave him all the answer he needed. “Please, take all day if you have to. There’s a lot to do in Phoenix; so I’ll be fine. And I might see what Angel’s up to. Maybe take her shopping in Scottsdale. Just give me your extra key before you run off. And shoot a text or call, if you think you’ll be a while.”

He walked over and kissed the top of her blond head. “Thank you, Raven.”

“Good luck,” she said with a smile when he handed her the key. She squeezed his hand as she took it and purposely placed a sloppy kiss on his cheek. “For luck!”

Charles took the Triple and made his way north as swiftly as he dared. The day was already heating up, but the air movement cooled him down considerably. When he got to the house, the garage was shut again and the Tacoma absent. He parked the Triple and walked along the gravel toward the back of the house and Erik’s shop.

By the time he got to the back, he had his helmet off and his gloves stuffed within. He could smell metal and hear the crackle of welding as he walked up. The shop’s door was wide open as were all the windows. An exhaust fan set in one window was humming along, feeding the smell of welding to Charles as he neared.

Charles paused in the doorway. Erik’s face was covered with a welding mask and a worn leather welding apron was cinched around his hips. He carefully laid a line down the seam of what appeared to be an aluminum swing arm. Even with his face obscured, Charles knew Erik. He knew his long torso, his forearms, his broad shoulders, and impossible waist. It was fascinating to watch him work,
to see his intense focus trained on a project. Even without seeing his face, Erik’s body language seemed focused on the task at hand.

As soon as Erik lifted the protective mask to take a closer look at the weld, Charles knocked gently on the door frame. Erik made no move to acknowledge him, but removed his gloves and twisted the gas canisters off. He began putting his torch and tools away.

“Good morning,” Charles ventured into the growing tension. The bruise Raven had left on Erik’s face was already fading to green, limned in a toxic-looking yellow.

“When did you watch it?” Erik replied without preamble. He pulled the mask off his head and hung it up. As Charles struggled with the abrupt question, Erik untied the welding apron and pulled it from over his head. It was looped over the welding mask and hung on the same hook. He was wearing another pair of utility shorts, his bulky brace, and work boots that looked like they had had the comfort beaten into them.

“After you left my apartment,” Charles answered, shaking his head. “I can’t be sorry enough for taking that DVD, but I don’t regret watching it.”

“The DVD isn’t for watching,” Erik said, voice cool and toneless. “Why were you looking through that drawer at all?”

“I was looking for your gun,” Charles replied, “to see if you were still in the house. It wasn’t there, but the DVD was and it had your old name on it. I was curious. It’s no excuse, but had you not left like that, I would never have looked.”

“You’re right,” Erik returned with no hint of warmth or understanding. “It’s no excuse.”

“I had already decided to tell you I took and watched it,” Charles continued, ignoring Erik’s chilly response. “I returned it as quickly as possible.”

“What, Charles,” Erik scoffed dismissively, “do you want a reward for giving back something that was never yours? How colonial of you.”

“Why do you keep it?” Charles ventured, hoping to divert Erik’s anger away from him through questions.

Erik picked up the swing arm and began to scrutinize the weld he’d laid down. “It’s a reminder that my skills don’t make me untouchable.”

“Erik,” Charles sighed, moving further into the ruthlessly organized shop. He stopped by an engine stand holding an inline four. He picked at the rags stuffed into the intakes. “Why did you tell me you’re free this morning? Am I here just so you can shoot me down?”

He placed the swing arm back on one of the shop benches and finally brought his gaze to bear on Charles. Without a word, he wiped his hands and, with none of the teasing Charles would have preferred, stripped his shirt over his head. He tossed it on the bench next to the swing arm and stood, feet planted, eyes locked on Charles’ face.

Erik’s skin was no longer a mysterious expanse of unreadable hieroglyphics, especially in the bright light of a clear Phoenix day. After watching the macabre Rosetta stone, Charles could read it everything there. Each scar had a corresponding moment from within a scant hour’s time.

His throat worked as he met Erik’s challenge; he moved forward. Erik did not give ground as Charles advanced, not even when Charles moved right into his personal space.
Raising his hands, Charles read the scars like they were partially written in Braille. Erik’s skin was always warm, but more so from work and welding. The scars’ texture was as he remembered, but gained deeper dimension with new knowledge. He did not shy from where Erik was cut, burned, or pissed on. His touches were not the light skin of someone afraid to break skin with contact. His fingertips dragged across the scars and Erik did not shudder. Charles’ throat felt dry and thick as he looked and felt the evidence of Erik’s sacrifice.

“Look up,” Erik growled. “Look me in the face.”

Charles only hesitated because he worried the motion would break the surface tension of the tears in his eyes and send them down his cheeks. He tilted his head up. The surface tension broke: salt water went where gravity took it.

“What do you think when you look at all these scars, Charles?” Erik asked, eyes narrowing.

“I think I might like to die, if I can’t kiss them all.”

Despite the sunlight, Erik’s eyes looked dark, his face smudged with carbon. “Why are you here? The fantasy is broken, Charles. Associating with me is a dangerous game.”

“The fantasy is broken,” Charles agreed, hands still reading Erik’s skin. “I’ve seen with my own eyes the risks involved, and I’m not giving up. I’m here to accept the reality. I don’t want to lose you.”

Erik’s expression turned agitated once again. He took Charles’ wrists and lifted his hands off his chest. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“Why should that matter?” Charles scoffed lightly, rather than disagree. “I may have been motivated to help you by a feeling of indebtedness before, but that doesn’t matter. It hasn’t truly mattered since that night in August, when you kissed me. Remember?”

With his eyes on Erik’s face, there was no way to miss the working of his jaw or the minute shake of his head in vain denial. “I couldn’t express myself in English.”

“Sometimes words are meaningless,” Charles replied, letting his wrists rest within the confines of Erik’s hands. “Your actions have always spoken louder than words.”

“Everyone’s do,” Erik snorted. “What do yours say about you? That you have no respect for my privacy. I can accept that from Machete and her crew, but not from you. Not from somebody I want.”

“Somebody you want?” Charles said, startled. He believed Erik loved him, but to hear him say something similar was shocking and heartbreaking. “I want you, too. I’ve always wanted you, I just didn’t know what it was.”

“Damn you,” Erik snarled, his grip tightening on Charles’ wrists hard enough to break capillaries. He pulled his hands back so Charles was forced to lean into him. “I want you, but I can’t trust you.”

“Have you considered how hard it is,” Charles asked quietly, feeling the beat of Erik’s heart where their chests touched, “for me to trust you when you keep so many secrets?”

“My secrets,” Erik shot back, “are for your own good.”

“Your secrets preserve a fantasy,” Charles denied with a carefully measured tone. “I want to see you, not the façade you’ve been feeding me since I was sixteen. You don’t trust me to want you, but the
fantasy you perceive I have of you.”

Erik’s mouth opened to argue the point, but when no words were forthcoming, Charles knew he had the right of it. The cool-colored eyes shifted away. “It doesn’t make what you’ve done any better.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Charles agreed. “And now I know where all these scars are from. I’m not disgusted and I don’t pity you. I want you more than ever.”

Erik snarled something guttural in German, face flushed with anger and confusion. He thrust Charles’ hands low and then back behind, toward the work bench. Charles had nowhere else to go, he was already pressed against Erik.

Then Erik’s tense upper body was curling over him, his hands lifting him up by his arms. When Charles looked up, his mouth was crushed against Erik’s.

Chapter End Notes

Charles’ modular helmet (which is kind of a nod to mixture, because I <3 her). It actually glows, but... yeah. The brand name is Shark. Good modular helmets.

Raven’s helmet:
Objects in Mirror

Chapter Summary

Fear, ratcheting tension of many kinds, and just enough release to make it bearable. (Maybe.)

Chapter Notes

Well, a dramatic four hours before I need to be on the train to the airport, but here it is.

Gigantor-size love and worship to mixture/storybinding for holding my hand through this chapter because I just couldn't. I don't even know how she puts up with my bullshit.

Also, I updated the last chapter with images of Charles' and Raven's helmets.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The man who was mortally wounded in war,
   Kept on fighting
The man who was cut to the quick by love,
   Kept on loving
The man who was mercilessly tortured by thoughts,
   Kept on thinking
The man who was crippled with concern,
   Kept on caring.”

Hair of the Dog, Bauhaus

Objects in Mirror
(are closer than they appear)

Charles’ hands scrabbled from the bench, where Erik had shoved his arms, and reached up Erik’s back. He smoothed his fingers up scarred skin, across flanks, the channel of Erik’s spine, and hooked his fingertips over the flat blades of Erik’s scapulae. Erik’s naked skin was hot, slightly tacky with sweat, but a heady joy to touch, especially under the circumstances. Charles wasn’t sure if Erik was forgiving him or admitting defeat to emotion.

If there was one place Charles wanted to be, it was in Erik’s arms. If there was one thing Charles wanted, it was to have his mouth locked to Erik’s. Erik’s kiss was a battle; a conflict of lips that belied sharp teeth. Though the kiss was unexpected and he was startled, Charles gave in to the beat of Erik’s heart and the advancement of his fury. He opened his mouth and invited Erik to conquer.

There was no hesitation. Erik’s tongue slid over Charles’ lower lip and circled his tongue in parody of a fencer’s circle parry, but did not disengage. The strong flavor of cigarettes was every bit as shocking as Erik’s aggression, but Charles didn’t think to protest. He sucked Erik’s tongue and when
Erik pulled back, just as quickly, Charles inhaled hard and took cigarette-tinged breath into his lungs.

When they broke, Charles thought it was for air, but Erik reached past him and shoved aside the swing arm, his discarded shirt, and several bits and bobs that Charles couldn’t identify. The ring of different types and shapes of metal hitting the floor came soon after.

Then Erik was manhandling him up onto the bench, turning him sideways, pushing him down, using Charles’ ass the pivot point for getting him on his back. It happened quickly, but Charles’ reaction times were better than average. He tried to tell himself otherwise, because, since Max had ‘died’, he didn’t fancy himself a man that could be easily dominated when it mattered. This mattered.

Charles didn’t resist. He told himself he could, but didn’t. He told himself he should, but didn’t. Erik bent over him a second time, hands on the bench left and right of Charles’ head, and took his mouth again. This time Charles grabbed either side of Erik’s head and pulled him to.

Erik’s kisses tasted more of ferocity than of cigarettes. It didn’t take long to forget the taste and transform the aggression into lust. Charles let his head fall back onto Erik’s slightly damp shirt. Erik followed, his mouth never leaving Charles’ and his hands shoving the tight grey shirt up under his arms.

When Erik finally broke the kiss, it was unexpected. Charles’ lips remained parted for a beat, glistening and wet with Erik’s saliva. He had rarely had opportunity to kiss a man or woman with lips so firm and a mouth so wet. It was obscene. Charles panted and reached for Erik’s hair, even though he knew it was too short to use for leverage.

He didn’t have far to reach. Erik’s mouth only traveled to the pale skin of Charles’ chest, just beneath bunched grey fabric where he began to lick. He painted broad strokes of twofold sensation. The first stroke of hot wet tongue, followed by the immediate cooling effect of the breeze the exhaust fan created.

Erik’s tongue applied firm pressure. When he turned to Charles’ flat nipples, the licks progressed from vague titillation to immediate groaning gratification. Feet flat on the bench, knees in the air, it was easy and instinctual for Charles to shove back on his elbows and arch. He shoved his chest up against Erik’s mouth.

Cruel in just the right way, Erik closed teeth on either side of the tan aureole and sucked. He slowly drew back, increasing the pressure of his suction and the scratching of his teeth across flesh as he centered on the slight bead of flesh at the middle. Charles’ eyes went wide. He’d done this to women before, but never to a man. He’d had no idea his nipples could be so sensitive. Neither did his cock, but it approved and filled out with lusty desperation.

Erik pulled off in a sucking pop that left his Charles’ skin sloppy and wet.

Charles gasped nothing coherent; just a garbled sound of confused and ecstatic syllables. He didn’t even feel embarrassed that one nipple was hypersensitive, swollen, and nearly purple when Erik jerked the shirt back down. Charles could feel the fabric, the tight constriction of the grey cotton, as it absorbed dampness and pressed against his newly sensitive flesh.

“I won’t tell you everything,” Erik growled, his lips as wet as Charles imagined they would be. They were dark and beginning to swell with their occupation. “And I don’t want your prying.”

His heart already beating hard with a mélange of lust, love, and hope, it nearly skipped a beat at Erik’s words. Erik was setting ground rules. Rules that would make or break a tenuous relationship.
They were going to have a relationship. Max Eisenhardt and Erik Lehnsherr were going to be an item. For a moment, Charles squeezed his eyes tight, there was too much emotion there and he didn’t want it to scare Erik away. If only Kurt Marko weren’t dead and Erik banned from the East Coast, he could have brought his illegal immigrant Jewish biker boyfriend home for Thanksgiving and given his stepfather a proper heart attack.

“I’ll need you to tell me when I begin to pry,” Charles breathed hard, pulse racing with relief as much as lust. “I need to know your boundaries.”

“I’ll tell you.” Erik’s breath teased Charles’ lips. With his eyes shut, he couldn’t see, but he imagined Erik’s face was so close to his that he could feel body heat just as acutely as his breath.

Charles swallowed thickly; hope was beginning to catch up with relief and lust. However, good sense swooped in and trumped all. Even his outraged cock. “What else do you want, Erik?”

Erik pushed one hand forward while pulling the other back. The movement swiveled Charles’ upper body so his right shoulder was pressed to Erik’s left and his chest was open to the breeze the exhaust fan created. “No pictures. If Machete’s piranhas send them to you, fine, but you won’t take any.”

Joining Angel in the photography ban was disappointing, but Charles nodded his acceptance. If it meant he would have Erik for the year, hopefully more, then he could accept nearly any restriction. “I accept. More?”

“Never take anything of mine,” Erik said quietly, lips brushing Charles ear and sending shudders down his spine. “Unless I specifically say you can.”

“Agreed,” Charles nodded.

Erik moved back and pulled Charles upright in the same motion. “If you had lost that DVD I would have had to find one of the copies. The chances of finding one of the others after ten years aren’t very good.”

Charles opened his eyes in his confusion. His erection flagged and faded. Copy? So it was a snuff film. His lust died and his curiosity came to the fore. He sat up. “Can I ask why your contact needed it? Why you keep it by the bed?”

“I’ll answer because I want you to understand the gravity of the situation,” Erik stated. He settled his hands on Charles’ shoulders and tilted his head down toward him. “That video is not for my contact; it’s for my sponsor. If I can’t find it and if I can’t get any of the copies, we make another. Understand?”

All thoughts of sex, making up, or even the joy of being back in Erik’s presence evaporated. Blood fled Charles’ face and left him pale. He shook his head in denial of the horrific idea. He couldn’t imagine the anxiety Erik must have felt when he found the DVD missing. “That’s monstrous!”

“Of course it is,” Erik snorted dismissively. “Do you think I work for him because I enjoy his leadership?”

“Wait.” The second shock was late in coming, but jolted his heart into beating again, though at a furious pace. “Your sponsor…! You met with your sponsor?”

“I hadn’t expected him, but he wanted to see the race. Thankfully this,” Erik tapped the fading bruise he received from Raven, “could be explained as a shop accident. If I still had the splint on my hand, things would have been bad. My hands are more important to him than I am.”
The answer was answer enough, but Charles barely heard it in his excitement to voice his next, most important, question. “Did you talk to him about leaving?”

Unconsciously, Erik leaned back, setting his stance wide and steady. Charles noted the posture and assumed the news wasn’t good. It took Erik a few moments to answer.

“He’s taking the weekend to think about it,” Erik replied soberly. “It doesn’t take him long to make decisions. He’s just taking his time to fuck with me because he has something I want. He’ll give me the answer and my property tomorrow.”

The mention of property was new. Charles took a moment to ponder what the Black King could possibly have that Erik couldn’t buy, steal, or fabricate.

“Why do you work for him?” Charles asked, though he had the sense it was not a question Erik would answer. “The things he had done to you…”

“I proposed a deal with him back in Germany,” Erik replied, gaze dropping away. “He accepted. That’s all.”

“Then,” Charles ventured, “it really was a snuff film? His voice was edited out and it was sold?”

Erik’s eyes snapped back up. “He was cut out entirely. There was a stand in for the gunshot in all the finished copy. Things like that don’t have much editing, unless they’re being produced for a particular client that will pay for the extra work. There was no client; it was just an efficient way to make profit from an embarrassing situation.”

Charles frowned profoundly. The embarrassment had nothing to do with Max’s punishment; Erik meant the embarrassment the Bishop had felt when Max’s protection of Charles had strained negotiations between rival factions. Whether it was rival Russian factions or Russians against some other syndicate, he had no idea and couldn’t ask.

“Do… Do people ever recognize you?” Charles asked. He didn’t see how anyone could forget Max’s striking face, his eyes, or the divot in the middle of his permanently serious brow.

“If they do, I’m sure the limp confirms it,” Erik replied. “I had some problems the first years I was here. For obvious reasons, I lost my temper if people stared at me. I lost my temper frequently; the pain was unbearable and I couldn’t think.”

Charles mouthed Erik’s jaw, then kissed the hollow beneath his ear. “Why is that?” he whispered. “Because you didn’t have a good brace?”

“It wasn’t just my knee.” Erik shook his head slightly and turned to lean into the bench Charles was still sitting on. “No, I was always sick. I had chronic lead poisoning.”

Charles’ brow furrowed in thought. “Lead poisoning? The water here in Phoenix is disgusting, but lead poisoning? Is this before you got your house?”

“Before the house,” Erik replied, pressing his forearm lightly to Charles’. “The bullet fragments started to dissolve. The lead killed off the cartilage. The other effects were worse. I couldn’t remember anything, chronic stomach cramps, and too nauseous to really eat. It took time to figure it out. Those years are still a blur.”

Charles turned his face toward Erik and pressed his lips to his high cheekbone. It was a more eloquent response than the rage he felt toward the Black King and his disproportionate punishment. “Why does lead dissolve in your body where it doesn’t in others?”
A snort puffed from Erik. He turned to look at Charles. “Lead dissolves in the synovial fluid of all joints, Charles, not just mine. I still have bullet fragments, but they aren’t in any of the joint compartments.”

“Can you feel them?” Charles asked, morbidly curious.

Erik nodded and pulled himself up to sit on the bench next to Charles. He took Charles’ hand and guided his fingers to the gap between the two halves of the brace. On the left side of his right knee, he pressed Charles’ fingers near the patella until he felt a tiny lump.

It was a strange relic. Charles pulled his hand away and folded over to look at the small bump. It was small enough not to be noticeable and too deep to affect the color of Erik’s skin. It was strange to see and to feel a piece of the bullet that was responsible for Erik’s lack of mobility.

Careful not to over balance and pitch off the bench, Charles leaned over Erik’s knee and brushed his lips over the fragment. “If I kiss it enough, will I make you fond of it?”

“Likely not,” Erik admitted, “your kisses are better spent up here.” He illustrated his words by tapping a finger to his lips.

A devilish grin took to Charles’ mouth. He pressed a kiss higher, on the fabric covering Erik’s thigh. “I could take my time to get there.”

Another light snort escaped Erik as he looked down on Charles with an expression that looked very nearly fond. He threaded his fingers through the hair at the base of Charles skull and pulled slightly. “As much as I would like that, I need to get Machete’s rolling chassis in here and mount her engine and transmission.”

Charles rolled his eyes. “Germans and their work ethic. Are you absolutely certain you want to pass up the opportunity for make up sex? It’s good.”

The devilish look migrated to Erik’s face. “Charles, I’ve been holding back all this time. I intend to get some work out of you before I ride you like I stole you.”

Both Charles’ eyebrows shot up. Erik had been on the passive side for most of their sexual exploits. Charles wasn’t sure Erik being on the offensive would be an equal playing field. At least, as long as he was standing; the brace seemed to work wonders for him. “If that’s the case, you better treat me better than the ZX6.”

Cradling the back of Charles’ head with his hand, Erik drew him over and pressed an open-mouthed kiss on his lips. Charles’ eyes fell half-lidded, too heavy with lust to remain open. He slipped his tongue against Erik’s and received the passionate onslaught with pleasure. When his phone began to ring quietly, he ignored it. It was his ringtone for undisclosed numbers, anyway, so he doubted it was anything important.

Unless it was the FBI Agent.

Erik drew back questioningly when Charles froze. For his part, Charles took it as permission to go for his phone; he seized it out of his jeans’ front pocket and answered it automatically. “Can you hold please? Just a moment.”

He cast an apologetic look at Erik and slipped from the bench. “Give me a minute to speak to my colleague.”

Giving Erik no time to respond, Charles walked out the shop’s door and brought the phone back up
to his cheek. “Hello? How can I help you?”

“You have something for me?” Moira MacTaggert’s voice was as business-like as ever. He appreciated her forwardness, but not her timing.

“Yes, give me a moment to look it up, if you don’t mind?” Charles moved the phone away from his face and scrolled through his photos. To be safe, he walked out to the front of the house where he was certain Erik wouldn’t overhear. Once there he read off the P.O. Box address in New York.

“Why is this important?” She asked slowly. “Who does it belong to?”

“The address changes about every two years,” Charles explained, “but I don’t know who picks up the mail there. All I know is that your King receives it at some point. Who ever checks the box is a lead.”

The silence from the other side of the line was frustrating. Charles didn’t know if he had done well or not. “A box. Well, that’s not what I expected. Anything else?”

By now Charles heart was beating hard in its bone cage. He was doing it. He was ratting out an important man in the Russian mafia. This was the sort of thing that ended in much worse situations than what Erik had known in film. He swallowed thickly. “Watch the crowd in the Red Bull Air Race at Monument Valley tomorrow.”

“Ah hah,” she replied. He thought she sounded interested in that. “Nice to have that confirmed. Is that all?”

He thought about Erik’s mention of his contact’s friendship with the air race pilot, but hesitated. It seemed Erik trusted his contact somewhat, if he’d arranged a meeting with him to talk about exit strategies. It was a crashed meeting, but even so it would be unconscionable to sell out somebody that may have aided Erik.

“I’m not sure,” Charles sighed, “I need to confirm something. It might be nothing.”

“I understand,” she said. “If the box leads to something more, I’ll work on the passport. As for relations in Dresden, that’s probably a negative. Only child. Father killed over twenty years ago in what I suspect was a hate crime. Mother succumbed to cancer a month ago. No obit.”

Charles sucked in a hard breath and bowed over in the driveway beside the Triple. “Hate crime? Cancer? Does he know about—?”


“Haven’t I already?” he asked, but she had already hung up and left Charles with a constricted heart and the uneasy feeling that he knew something crucial that Erik did not. The balance of information kept flipping, but he could be damned for keeping or revealing the same secrets, so he resolved once again to wait until he could be open with Erik. If ever there could be such a time.

Agitated and helpless, Charles paced the driveway several times and then leaned on the Triple’s bright white tank to stare at his face in the gloss finish. He was sweating from the deepening heat, nose and cheeks a tad flush, and his brow lined in dismay. It seemed like one thing after another with Erik and his complicated situation. He hoped the post office box would be enough.

Shaking his head at his unproductive gloom, Charles focused instead on what he did have: a second chance with Erik. He tried not to think any more about the possibility he could he blow it completely
if Erik suspected what he was doing. Of course, even if he lost Erik over procuring him a passport, it would be worth it. Even if the Black King released Erik from servitude, there was no guarantee he would give Erik an identity.

No, if Erik could take a bullet for him, then Charles could do the same. It was a fair price. With his resolve coalesced into a hot white diamond, Charles shoved his phone back into his pocket and returned to the back of the house and the shop. His only concern was acting normal, but that wasn’t a problem; when he got back to the shop’s open door, Erik was hefting the inline four engine from the stand and onto blocks on his workbench.

His biceps and forearms bunched and strained under a sheen of sweat as he manhandled the engine onto the blocks in a mechanical parody of how he had laid Charles there only minutes prior. Erik hissed with exertion as he maneuvered the heavy machinery into place. Different sets of muscles and tendons stood up under his skin as they were called into action. Erik was sweaty, filthy, and still shirtless. Charles tapped his head against the doorframe in an attempt to stifle a new surge of lust rippling through his body. He was half hard just looking at Erik shirtless. No, not just shirtless: shirtless, sweating, straining, and vocalizing. Raven was right; he had it bad.

“How do I get the rolling chassis?” He asked and didn’t care that his voice had turned husky. “The garage is shut up.”

“Go in through the kitchen,” Erik replied, catching his breath. He picked up the discarded shirt and wiped his face. “Take off your shoes at the door and carry them to the garage; the floor is a pain to keep clean. If you have trouble with the chassis, let me know.”

Charles nodded, but hesitated. “Erik, are you sure you want me in there alone?”

Erik looked back without doubt or sympathy for the obvious pain in Charles’ voice, “This is the only way I know to rebuild what you destroyed. Go.”

Charles swallowed, his throat feeling dry and miserable, and took a step backwards. He spun around and headed for the sliding glass door. He felt fortunate in the extreme Erik even bothered to engage in trust-building. There was no hesitation whatsoever on his way to the garage. He paused only to take his shoes off and to put them on again in the garage.

Alex’s yellow R6 was not present, though Angel’s stunt bike was; it was like her bike lived there. He wondered why Angel didn’t change out the sprockets between the weekends. Without the bike, she was effectively dependent on everyone else for transportation.

There was only one stripped down frame in the garage and it had no rear wheel. Charles took a deep breath, determined as ever, and nudged the switch to open the automatic door. As it opened, the cool air of the garage shifted and began flowing out and the sun-warmed desert air began to move in to replace it.

Charles seized the chassis subframe in his left hand and the throttle in his right. Experimentally, he squeezed a finger down on the brake and pushed forward. The front brake pads clamped down on the rotor and prevented forward movement. Armed with the knowledge he could stop the chassis’ movement immediately should he need to, Charles heaved up on the subframe and pushed forward.

He rolled it out past the Triple and toward the gravel that wrapped around back. The gravel was an extremely difficult surface to move the chassis across, but he forced it along successfully. By the time he set it down outside the shop, he was beginning to regret the tight shirt. It brought out his eyes and accentuated his physique but it also trapped heat against his skin and soaked up the sweat under his arms and along his back. The former was uncomfortable and the latter unattractive.
“One malevolently-named Mexican woman’s rolling chassis,” Charles panted, “at sir’s behest.”

Erik picked up his discarded shirt and threw it at Charles. “Put this on. You might want to get a pair of my shorts, too.”

Charles caught the shirt, but only gave Erik a sardonic look. “If I’m going to wear the shirt you were just wearing, may I also have the shorts you’re wearing?”

“No,” Erik stated, unmoved by another attempted seduction. He walked to the shop’s bay door and knelt to grab the low handle. As he stood, he used the leverage from the motion to help swing the heavy door up and back overhead.

With no room for argument, Charles pulled off his shirt and set it aside in favor of Erik’s. He slipped the thread bare grey v-neck over his head and inhaled the usual triumvirate of comingled scents; cigarettes won out over sweat and automotive scents.

For the next hour he assisted Erik muscle the engine back into the frame. Erik was far less patient with engine work than riding motorcycles; probably because Charles was far less likely to help smash his fingers and scrape his knuckles while riding. Charles’ colloquial German vocabulary improved exponentially and with little of the usual thrill. However, despite the cursing and impatience, there was something inclusive about working with Erik that he’d never had with Max.

“She should have used the hoist,” Erik commented as he washed his hands in the sink next to his solvent tank and small sonic cleanser. Charles watched, absently, still catching his breath from the exertion and thinking about Max hadn’t wanted his help with mechanical labor.

When he finally broke out of his staring he joined Erik and began washing his hands, too. “I thought you were putting Machete’s engine in tomorrow?”

“Angel tell you that?” Erik asked, eyeing him sidelong.

“Angel told Raven,” Charles corrected. “I wasn’t prying; it was volunteered information.”

Erik shrugged and smirked. He took hold of the shirt Charles was still wearing and, despite protests, dried his hands. “Then she also told you I’m doing dynotuning at the airport tomorrow.”

“Can I see you dynotune a bike?” Charles asked, though he suspected Erik knew what he was really asking and would shut him down for prying.

“Charles, why would you want to see my sponsor?” Erik returned, though he looked more amused than angry. “I’ve spent blood and energy to keep the two of you apart.”

Hands still wet and soapy, Charles copied Erik and dried his hands on his own shirt. He did not say, *Because I want to see the plane’s registration.* Instead, he sighed. “Morbid curiosity.”

“No,” Erik said. He reached down to the damp hem of the shirt and began pulling it up Charles’ pale torso. “To see his face, to be able to identify him, that’s a death wish.”

“I already know his voice,” Charles argued carefully, taking the hem from Erik and pulling the shirt off the rest of the way. Only Erik seized it as it slipped toward his wrists and twisted down and around, so his wrists were crossed and locked together within fabric.

“No, Charles.” Erik shook his head and drew Charles to him by the shirt. Erik loomed over him, his torso damnably long. Charles pulled back on the shirt, but only succeeded in pulling himself closer. His chest hit Erik’s. Erik remained serious. “There’s always a risk of discovery. The Hellfire Club is
well-known by other gangs and American government agencies like the ATF and FBI. If you’re ever discovered and questioned by a government agency and he learns of it? We’re both dead.”

The fear came back twofold. Charles turned his face away lest Erik see the amateur espionage written all over him. Dying for Erik he could do, but not kill him. He hadn’t considered that a possibility. “But I was only a prospect,” he denied. “I was only seventeen.”

“Kneecapping is for runners,” Erik sighed and pressed warm, dry lips to Charles’ sweat-slick brow. “Runners can never be trusted.”

“But I didn’t run,” Charles exclaimed, pushing his head into Erik’s neck. He wasn’t telling him anything he didn’t already know, that he hadn’t already admitted to himself and an FBI agent. “I just didn’t go back. I was only there for you.”

“Ignorance and naïveté don’t clear guilt,” Erik sighed, and placed a hand on his head, sinking his fingers into his brown hair. “I was more a child than you when I sold my soul. I won’t let him have yours, too. That contract isn’t for sale.”

For a moment, Charles considered going to the airport in his Acura. He could spend the whole day watching for Erik and his sponsor’s plane. Instead he bowed his head further until the top of his head was pushed against Erik’s solar plexus. No, he could risk himself, but not Erik. It was not a decision he was ashamed of, but a matter of risk management. Charles wouldn’t gamble on something he didn’t want to lose.

Erik dropped the shirt from Charles’ wrists and tugged gently on his hair instead. In response, Charles surged up past the pulling hand and grabbed either side of Erik’s face. Between the framing of his hands, he brought his lips to Erik’s and spun his fear into desperate passion.

Surprised at first, Erik gave way to the assault, his lips and teeth parted in surprise that Charles did not hesitate to take advantage of.

The kiss was as harsh and clumsy as their first night together. The taste of cigarettes continued to dominate, giving a burnt edge to the bruising force of lips crushed against teeth. Charles’ tongue chased Erik’s for a moment and then Erik’s hands seized his ass and pulled him to. He leaned back, letting Charles’ weight fall into him enough that it was less of a challenge to lift him up.

Thinking nothing of Erik’s knee, Charles brought his legs up and clamped his thighs about Erik’s narrow waist. It took only three steps to bring Charles to the bench again. Digging fingers into the denim covering Charles’ ass, he hefted Charles onto the bench. Charles breathed a harsh gasp into Erik’s mouth the moment his weight transferred to the wooden surface. He did not release his thighs’ grip on Erik’s waist nor did he pull his mouth away.

It was a struggle, but Erik broke the kiss for air and to sweep away the four blocks of wood he’d used to hold the engine upright on the bench. They hit the floor with a clatter. Forcibly, he shoved Charles back against one of his tool boxes. Leaning forward over the bench and Charles’ abdomen, he bit at his pale chest and collarbone.

Charles’ gasps for air weren’t entirely swallowed up by the noise from the exhaust fan nor were the low sounds of desperation coming from his throat as Erik raked his teeth across him. He ran his blunt nails down Erik’s back, inscribing red trails through skin and scars; across shoulder blades, muscle, and ribs. When he hit the waistband of Erik’s shorts, he hooked his thumbs in and yanked down fruitlessly: with his thighs clamped tight to Erik’s waist, they couldn’t go anywhere.

The sloppy wolf-kisses Erik bit into his skin ceased. Erik raised his head and commanded in a low
Swallowing, Charles nodded and parted his thighs from Erik’s waist, but rather than go after his shorts, he pulled Charles’ shoes off and dropped them on the floor. Eyebrows raised and lust continually feeding blood into his cock, Charles watched Erik make short work of his jeans’ fastenings.

“Lift up,” Erik commanded in the same low voice he used before. There was a timbre, a rough edge, to it that made Charles shudder.

He lifted his hips as bade and Erik peeled the jeans from Charles’ thighs. From there they slipped easily from his calves. Like his shoes, Erik simply dropped the garment, along with his socks, to the floor.

Charles looked at Erik and then past to the property beyond. Even though it was a Saturday, he was certain Erik’s closest neighbor wouldn’t be able to see them. The houses on Erik’s street were placed far apart.

His attention came straight back to Erik when one hand began to rub against his boxers directly over his cock. Panting still, Charles went after Erik’s shorts again, but Erik rebuffed him. “Lift your heels onto the bench.”

Not quite certain what Erik intended, and more concerned with the warm friction pressing back and forth over his prick, Charles hesitated. Erik, however, wasn’t in the mood to be patient: he took Charles’ ankles and lifted his feet up on the bench himself. He then pushed back between Charles’ knees, effectively spreading his thighs wide by returning to biting and sucking at Charles’ skin. He continued to tease and rub his cock.

“Erik,” Charles groaned, pushing his feet forward until they were braced on Erik’s hipbones. “God, you’re going to— what are you—? I want the shorts off.”

“That makes two of us.” Erik took his hand off Charles’ cock and hooked his fingers over the waistband of the boxers. He pulled them to Charles’ knees. Charles gasped as the breeze chilled the light sweat lining his cock and balls.

It felt scandalous to be pressed against the tool box, with his boxers around his knees, and his balls touching the motor oil-stained work bench. The scandal only increased when Erik leaned back long enough to no longer impede the progress of unclothing Charles.

“What if one of the kids come home?” Charles huffed, though he was close to not caring. Hell, perhaps Alex and Hank needed a live tutorial.

Erik didn’t bother replying: he hooked Charles’ knees over his shoulders and lowered his head. With no preamble he lifted and sucked Charles cock into his mouth. Charles’ head rocked back and hit the top of the metal box. Obviously Erik had little interest in the inherent dangers of young people running in and out of his home. Charles decided it was a merit rather than a flaw.

If there was any question of how erect his cock was before, there was none when Erik sucked it to further life with skill he attributed to a life of smoking cigarettes. Erik was rough, but kept his teeth off the delicate skin of Charles’ foreskin. Instead, he explored the unfamiliar skin with several swirls of his tongue that had Charles banging his head against the tool box again.

“Fuck!”

Erik took things quickly, driving Charles to a frantic edge far faster than he expected. Even though
Erik wasn’t particularly a stand out giver of head, just knowing it was Erik’s wet mouth coating his prick in saliva, Erik’s tongue exploring his foreskin, Erik’s high cheekbones rubbing against his shivering thighs, made it a truly exceptional blow job. And what Erik lacked in experience he made up for in spades with intense focus and determination to succeed.

New sweat broke out over Charles’ skin as Erik worked his cock with rough enthusiasm. The fan chilled him, but the warmth and weight building in Charles’ groin made the dichotomy delicious. Charles knew he couldn’t last long under Erik’s onslaught. He dropped his hands to Erik’s head for the ride and garbled out incoherent encouragement as Erik continued to suck him.

It came as a horrible surprise when Erik abruptly opened his mouth and let Charles’ straining cock and a mouthful of mixed saliva and precome slip out. Charles’ protest was a combination of whine and growl as the breeze hit his too-warm prick. Erik ignored him in order to straighten and lean forward. He reached up and past Charles’ head.

When his hand descended again, an unmarked plastic bottle was in his grasp. He popped the cap off the bottle’s nozzle and dropped it aside.

“Erik,” Charles asked, his eyes narrowed with frustrated desire, his voice low in his throat. “What is that?”

Erik pointed the nozzle at the cupped fingers of his right hand. “Mineral oil.”

“But, I want your mouth back on my cock,” Charles chuckled breathily, patience beginning to be forced. “Your mouth isn’t nearly wrecked enough to stop now.”

“I’ll see it through,” Erik returned, his own voice no less husky. Charles had never seen Erik’s hands tremble, but as he watched, Erik’s hand was not steady on the bottle.

Charles didn’t try to parse Erik’s plan. He watched him coat his fingers with oil and then smiled indulgently as he bent down again. The coldness of the exhaust fan’s breeze evaporated on Erik’s tongue. Charles didn’t stifle his appreciative moan at the return of the wet heat.

Charles did, however, jerk with surprise when Erik pressed two of his oiled fingers between ass cheeks. “I thought you never—?”

He regretted asking the moment Erik’s mouth came off his cock again to answer. “Not with a man, no.”

Just the idea, the very idea, that he could give Erik a prostate orgasm in the future nearly brought Charles off. Instead it made it easier to relax, to open up, and make the slip of Erik’s index finger easy as he pushed, slowly, past the tight ring of muscle. As best he was able, Charles pushed down on the invading finger.

“Just one,” Charles choked, enjoying the sensation of being penetrated by a slick finger. “That’s all I need for what you’re doing.”

He wanted to applaud Erik: he quickly worked out a punishing rhythm of push and pull between thrusting finger and sucking mouth. Charles was already hot, his skin feeling close to immolation despite the exhaust fan’s breeze to cool. He was swearing, rocking between Erik and the tool box, unconsciously vocalizing.

Then Erik worked out the angle to rub Charles’ prostate. Charles gave a hoarse cry and hit his head on the toolbox with a terrific bang. The pain was nothing; he pressed down, the pleasure of touching his prostate stronger than the wet mouth sucking on his cock.
The first touch wound him impossibly tight. The second thrust against the bundle of nerves was like a pin that burst pleasure throughout his entire body. Charles shouted something incoherent and began to convulse.

Waves of burning heat spread from him in violent pulses and further convulsions. He vaguely knew his heels were stretching across Erik’s back, that his thighs were clamped imperiously on his cheekbones. He could feel the suggestion of a spasm and then struggle from Erik as well, but mostly, Charles was absorbed by the violent pleasure of the orgasm. It was wringing all the energy from his body in lessening waves of white noise.

When his senses started to lift up through the veil of intense sensation, Charles found himself slumped haphazardly against Erik’s tool box. One of the smaller drawers had come open and was supporting his right elbow. His other arm was pressed back against the metal surface of the box’s other drawer faces. His thighs were on either side of Erik’s hips again.

The back of Erik’s right hand was covered with oil from fingering him and come where he’d likely wiped it from his face. He was swiveled to the side, with the fingers of his left hand pressed against the left side of his nose. He took a deep breath through his mouth and exhaled hard out the right side of his nose. Charles was too sex-addled to figure out what on earth he was doing.

“Are you okay,” Charles slurred, impressed with his ability to produce speech after the intensity of his prostate orgasm.

Erik turned back with a rueful smirk. “I didn’t realize how strong your thighs are when you come. I couldn’t breathe.”

“Did I…?” Charles watched as Erik lifted his arm and wiped at his nose with his shoulder.

“It went up my nose.”

Charles filled the shop with reverberating laughter. Despite weakness, he sat up and gripped Erik’s messy right wrist. His upper body pressed against Erik’s arm, shaking the limb with hilarity.

Erik dropped his left hand from his face and shook his head in good humor. “It wasn’t a complete loss.”

“Oh, my friend,” Charles laughed, wiping at his eyes, “no, it was beautiful. You’ve nearly killed me… twice.”

Not losing his smile completely, Erik stepped back from Charles’ thighs and went to the shop’s sink to wash off. He took a clean rag from the shelf overlooking the sink, wet it, and tossed it at Charles. “Do you want degreaser for your ass?”

Another chuckle broke past Charles’ lips. He took the rag and jumped off the bench to clean off. “Not this time, no. By the way, I don’t think that qualifies as riding me like you stole me. Let’s take this inside and I’ll show you how it’s done.”
I won't be able to fix typos until I get to Serbia, so try to overlook them for now. Also, no update for a month since I'll be away for three weeks.
Chapter Summary

The relative calm before the storm.

Chapter Notes

I’m not sure, but I suspect there are only two chapters and an epilogue left to go. Additionally, I wrote some back story pieces on tumblr that I will probably be uploading on AO3 later on after I do some minimal tweaking.

Deep thanks go to mixture for another bout of beta-reading. Thank you so much for putting up with me and my inconsistencies!

Also, thanks to Tahariel, who suggested Charles’ ringtone for Erik when I was stumped.

Capture something read,
Paste it to the edge of your bed.
Someone will be there,
Someone who will know what it says.
Beat and the Pulse, ~Austra

Remove Before Flight

“What do you mean, ‘No’?” Charles asked, even though he was still exhausted from his prostate orgasm. He didn’t think it at all fair to not return a sexual favor, especially when Erik would be the main beneficiary. “You’re obviously under more stress than you’ve been in what I’m guessing is years. Since part of that is my fault, let me help you relax.”

Erik turned off the water and shook his head. “Later. I want to get this brace off; it’s starting to bother me. I’ll take a shower and relax in the pool.”

The prospect of relaxing in the small pool was a nice one, thus Charles let the matter drop. Instead, he tilted his head in a show of confusion. “I thought the brace helped?”

“It helps my knee,” Erik replied, wiping his hands on a towel. “But it doesn’t help my thigh and shin.”

Charles paused in the act of picking up his boxers and looked up at Erik. “You never told me you had problems with your shin.”

“Normally I don’t,” Erik shrugged, seeming to be unconcerned. “The brace transfers weight to my thigh and shin. I’m heavy enough, but so are you and the engine.”
Charles slipped on his boxers and jeans, but left his, and Erik’s, shirt off. He was tempted to go barefoot, but he didn’t think unclad feet would go unpunished in a shop environment. “Let me help you to the shower then?”

“I don’t need help; friction burns hurt less than my knee,” Erik admitted. “You take the first shower while I put things back in order here. You can use my bathroom, but don’t touch anything in my room.”

Frowning, Charles nodded, slipped his socks and shoes on, collected their shirts, and headed for the house again. Even though he knew he didn’t deserve Erik’s trust, it didn’t stop hurting. However, he could accept that. He had already accepted the possibility of being rejected outright, if it meant he helped Erik more than harmed him in the long run.

Charles stepped into Erik’s room, knowing the second to last time he’d been there had seen him snooping through his precious letters from Germany. He wondered if they were from Erik’s mother, but hadn’t the slightest inclination to check. If they were, he wasn’t sure how Erik would take the news of her death if he didn’t know. He’d never seen him experience loss; Max had never had anything to lose. Except him and what lengths he had gone to keep Charles safe had been terrible.

While he was still thinking of the possibilities, Charles pulled out his phone and deleted the photo he’d taken of the New York address. Moira’s strange number he kept, just in case. Then he shot a text off to Raven: I’m not sure if I’m coming back tonight or in the morning. Likely he’d get a snarky comeback, but knew she’d understand.

He made the shower quick and didn’t bother with his hair, since they’d be in the pool anyway. When he got out, he started to look for sun block, but stopped the moment he placed a hand on the medicine cabinet.

He didn’t have permission.

My fault, he reminded himself and tried not to mope. He toweled off and pulled on his boxers. If he was going to swim, it really didn’t make sense to put anything more on, besides, it was getting terribly warm outside.

He found Erik sitting on the bed when he came out, a laptop across his thighs. He was staring intently at the computer’s screen.

“Anything interesting?” Charles ventured.

“Somebody sniped the Whitworth tools I bid on,” Erik snorted. “Do you remember what that is?”

“Please,” Charles huffed indignantly, coming to sit on his right so he could look at the growing bruise under the raw-looking skin of Erik’s shin. His brace was already off and resting on the bed behind him. “I know I oscillate between American and English diction, but I am still a citizen of the Empire. I wonder if America will ever switch to metric, too?”

Erik’s minimal smile was enough to tell him he was teasing. “I have an extra pair of trunks, but they might be tight on your waist.”

There was an understatement if ever Charles had heard one. Charles was in perfectly good physical condition even though he was an academic. Long ago, Erik, or Max, had instilled a love of sporting and physical activity in him. Erik, however, displayed a rare combination of genes that made for ridiculously narrow hips, never mind the long legs, torso, and broad shoulders. Of course, picking up where nature had left off, Erik’s work and enjoyment of physical activity had added wiry muscle to
the deadly package.

“I think your trunks would cut off my circulation,” Charles replied in his driest tone. “And I’m not even broad.”

Erik closed his laptop and shrugged. “Boxers it is. That is, unless you have an urge to look for any of Angel’s bikinis in the laundry room.”

“Pass,” Charles chuckled. “Don’t suppose you have sun block?”

“Also in the laundry room,” Erik replied. “There’s a shelf for that sort of thing. Shouldn’t be hard to find among the water artillery.”

“I’ll find it.” Taking a chance, he leaned the bare distance between them and pressed his lips to the harsh cut of Erik’s cheekbone. “Thank you.”

Erik didn’t return the kiss, but he smiled faintly. He set his laptop aside and limped carefully for the shower. Charles studied Erik’s gait and decided that, yes, he would do something about that.

It was as he was leaving the room he noticed the blemish on the wall. The white patch was on the wall opposite the bathroom: it was large and roughly triangular. Charles stared. He’d never noticed it before and it was large enough that he couldn’t have missed it. On closer inspection, he could see the plaster repair was still drying. It was recent. His first thought was that Erik might have hidden something in the wall, but then he saw the other, larger, patch further along.

Looking suspiciously at the bed’s simple head and foot, he saw deep scuffs on the corners furthest from the wall. Evidently Erik had hurled the bed at the wall in his search for the DVD. He looked around the room again and noted other little changes. The lamp on the bedside table was new as was the clock.

Chagrined, he went for the sun block, which he found, as Erik had said, amongst what amounted to a water gun arsenal. The presence of so many different types and sizes of water guns brought a grin to his face. He could easily imagine Erik, Alex, Angel, Sean, and likely a few of the PMS crew running around the property during a full-scale water war. He felt a little sorry for anyone that didn’t have Erik on their team. Perhaps he was his own team. Maybe they didn’t even have teams?

Charles took the sun block and drifted outside, happy with the friends Erik had found once he had started to care more for the consequences of his actions. Once he had, in all reality, found something to live for.

Coating himself with the sun block, Charles went out and slipped into the small pool. The water was warm from the sun, but it still felt chill the moment it hit his stomach. He quickly submerged and swam a couple laps. It was hardly worth the effort; the pool was obviously more for cooling off than exercise. It probably did Erik’s knee injury a world of good.

Erik came from the house minutes later, still damp from the shower and carrying two towels. “Did you forget a towel or are you taking me too literally about not touching anything?”

“Touched the water guns,” Charles admitted, watching Erik’s limp, “and forgot the towel.” From his much lower vantage, he could see more of the bruising on his upper shin. The burn from the padding’s friction was also more apparent. He decided to wait until Erik was in the water and relaxed before making his proposition concerning knee surgery.

After setting the towels aside, Erik did what Charles considered the stupid thing and dove into the shallow pool. It wasn’t a bad dive; he took it at an angle, his hands ahead of him and guiding him
across the pool’s floor without hitting it. When he came up, he kicked back over to Charles.

For a while, they said nothing. Charles leaned back on the edge of the pool, his arms ranged out on either side of the lip. Erik joined him, leaning back against the edge with his arms crossed comfortable behind his head. Charles thought about offering the sun block, but figured Erik would use it if he felt the need. With his pale skin, Charles had no choice, really.

Eventually, Erik’s eyes closed and his breathing became deep and even, as if he were sleeping. Charles knew better; Erik was simply relaxed. Probably the most relaxed he’d been for several days. He lowered the arm closest to Erik and moved over until his bicep was lightly pressed to Erik’s ribs. His breathing did not deviate from slow, steady intakes of breath. He was like a beast at rest.

“I can get you knee replacement surgery,” Charles said quietly. “No records with your name on them would exist.”

Watching as he was, Charles couldn’t miss the rapid inflation of Erik’s chest as he sucked in a deep breath through his nose. For more than a minute, Erik didn’t reply, but he remained relaxed, likely thinking the option over.

“Let’s talk about this tomorrow night,” Erik replied at length, eyes still closed, breathing less deep, but not unrelaxed. Charles didn’t miss the subtext. Erik was really saying, Let’s talk after I know what Shaw’s decision is.

“That’s not a no,” Charles said softly, daring to smile at the possibility of providing Erik a life free of pain.

“That’s not a no,” Erik agreed.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” Charles ventured. He let go of the wall and moved in front of Erik.

Erik’s mercurial eyes opened a fraction, but he did not dissent. He lowered his arms, but only to reach out and drag an unresisting Charles in. Having set his passivity aside earlier in the day, he pulled Charles close and took his mouth. The kiss was slow, relaxed, but not without passion.

They remained in the pool, kissing without urgency until Erik’s shoulders began to look a little pink. Then they retrieved their towels and took things inside to the living room couch. Erik eventually fell asleep between kisses with Charles laying between his legs, using Erik’s lean stomach for a pillow. It was a firmer pillow than he usually preferred, but Charles was content to doze. He occasionally opened his eyes to look at Erik’s face, far less burdened in sleep. Sleep he obviously needed.

Not quite an hour later, Charles heard the Tacoma outside and the garage door actuate. The wall clock read half past four. He sat up carefully, but Erik was far too deep in sleep to rouse at the movement or the noise. He hardly stirred when Alex came through the garage door, Angel not far behind. Both of them had bulging backpacks across their backs.

Neither of them got far before seeing Charles, who had placed his finger to his lips for them to be quiet. Alex gave Charles a slightly horrified look and began to step back, no doubt due to his state of undress; Alex couldn’t see Charles was wearing a towel or his boxers. Angel looked surprised, but then a grin stretched her lips. Unlike Alex, she edged forward.

Charles rolled his eyes at her, but she came on regardless and peered over the side of the couch. Her brown eyes met Erik’s comatose form, with his slackened jaw, and lit up in glee then dimmed to something deeply warm. She mouthed what Charles guessed to be Oh my God. Then her eyes flicked up to Charles and became serious.
“If you fuck this up, Prof,” she whispered, voice low and weighted with promise, “you’ll wish you never set foot in this desert and we won’t let you rest until every speck of Arizona dirt is chased off your skin.”

Charles found himself surprised at the articulate promise. Surprise turned quickly to warmth rather than indignation. Perhaps Erik questioned Angel’s loyalty, but it was obvious she cared.

Seeing his acceptance of her promise, Angel smiled again. “How are you so charming that he’s giving you a second chance?”

Charles shrugged and carefully disengaged from Erik’s long legs, taking extreme care to avoid jostling the right. He came round the couch and joined Angel as she headed to the kitchen area where Alex was already unloading the contents of his backpack. They’d been grocery shopping.

Alex relaxed visibly when he saw the towel around Charles’ hips. “Jesus, man, I thought we’d walked in on you and Erik.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Charles teased as Alex pushed a carton of yoghurt to the back of a shelf. “I’ve been thinking you and Hank might need lessons.”

“Jesus fuck,” Alex snorted under his breath and focused on his chore while his face turned red. Behind him, Angel was setting out a few fresh items on the kitchen island.

“Good call, Prof,” she laughed quietly, and reached over Alex’s shoulder for a Corona, which she set before Charles with a lime from her half of the groceries. “Alex didn’t sleep here last night.”

Alex’s jaw clenched, but he didn’t respond to either of their teasing. He continued to unload his backpack in silence.

“Take a picture of Erik passed out on the couch for me,” Angel whispered next to the tow-headed young man.

“Fuck you, no,” Alex snarled quietly. “Have the prof do it. I’m not into all this weird fetishising of my club founder, you fucking pervs.”

Angel turned abruptly to Charles with an expectant smile followed by a mouthed, Please?

With a sigh, Charles shook his head. He took up a knife from the kitchen block to cut the lime for his Corona. “I’m sorry Angel, but you and I are now in the same boat.”

She raised one eyebrow dramatically then gave in to a shrug. “Well, you can’t take Erik’s shit without permission and get away with it. You probably deserve worse.”

Charles nodded soberly: he didn’t need anyone to remind him.

Alex shoved the last of the cold groceries into the fridge. “What was on that DVD, anyway? I’ve seen Erik take a sledgehammer to an engine over a racial slur, but never freak over somebody taking something from him. Hell, when St. John stole all the money out of Erik’s wallet, Erik didn’t flip his shit. He just welded St. John’s bike to the mail box post until he worked the money out of him.”

“And then kicked him out,” Angel sighed. “But yeah, he was freakishly calm about the whole thing.”

“The postman must have loved that,” Charles mused. “But I’ve broken Erik’s trust more than enough. I can’t compound the situation by telling you anything else.”
Alex closed the refrigerator door. “Can’t argue with that.”

He turned to look Charles in the eye. There was no forgiveness, but a hint of grudging acceptance. In that look, Charles saw Alex had only asked about the DVD to see how he would respond. “You and Erik have history; I guess that makes things different.”

“Perhaps,” Charles replied, which seemed to be enough for Alex. “So, Angel, what are you making?”

Angel answered as she typed a message on her phone. “Get some clothes on, Prof; you’re going to help me prepare ceviche for tomorrow. Then we’ll fry up some more fish for tacos.”

Alex nodded, “Angel makes the best fish tacos ever. Sean’ll be over in an hour and a half. Maybe Cupcake, too.”

Erik didn’t rouse from his sleep while they prepared the ceviche, nor even when Angel started cooking the fish for the tacos. Charles was surprised he slept on when Sean came by and things started to get a bit louder.

Sean opened his laptop on the kitchen island and the lot of them laughed quietly over more of Cupcake’s digital editing. This time, none of the videos were of Erik. Most of them featured Luchalogna, the Pony of Bologna; an animated pony with dubbed in luchadore dialogue. Sean assured them that the English subtitles were just his made up translations, since he didn’t speak Spanish. Charles’ Latin couldn’t help when faced with so much Mexican slang.

It didn’t make much sense to Charles, but the other three laughed through the clips: Sean and Angel with their hands over their mouths and Alex struggling to keep his lips compressed. Finally, Sean couldn’t contain himself and let a bray-like laugh slip between his fingers.

They froze with their hands over their mouths as Erik finally sat up, groggy from sleep, and looked over the couch’s back. He rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. “Did you break something?”

“No,” Sean blurted, voice cracking on the single syllable.

“Then the guilty faces are for something else,” Erik reasoned, slowly easing himself to his feet. “I don’t need the first aid box incident as an excuse to break your fingers, Sean.”

Sean blanched, but Charles grinned. Sean had known Erik years without figuring out Erik’s very special brand of humor.

“Dinner’s ready, papi!” Angel sang out, trying and succeeding at diverting attention from Sean, if only for a moment. “Fresh fish tacos with lemon basil popsicles for dessert. Plus, Charles helped me make ceviche for tomorrow. It’ll be ready by morning.”

She slung an arm around Charles’ shoulders and pulled him close. “Ceviche is Erik’s favorite. Just, never ever, under any circumstances, make it with shrimp. He won’t eat it.”

“It isn’t kosher,” Charles explained automatically, though he knew it was likely unnecessary. He offered his second Corona to Erik, but he shook his head. “Back in the old days, Erik jumped the counter of a mall pizza place because they slipped half a slice of pepperoni in his pizza. It was terrifying.”

Erik shrugged in reply as he limped over in his swimming trunks. As he neared the kitchen island, he casually reached out with his left hand and grabbed Sean by the back of the neck. Effortlessly, he dragged the resisting redhead into a headlock.
“Erik,” Sean pleaded. “Hey! I’m sorry I woke you up! Come on. It was dinnertime. I’ve never slipped you any cloven-hoofed things that don’t chew a cud!”

Erik ignored Sean, content to drag him along wordlessly as he began to pull plates down for Angel. Sean struggled weakly in his arm, no match for the combination of Erik’s height and strength.

Laughing, Angel put tacos together for everyone while Alex poured drinks. Erik turned down another bottle of Corona in favor of water. He then dragged Sean to the other side of the island, where he sat on the bar stool next Charles’.

Charles looked down at Sean’s face, which was beginning to turn pink. “If you aren’t going to eat your dinner, do you mind if I do?”

Sean’s face scrunched up in exasperation. “Come on, Prof, help a guy out!”

“We’ve talked about freeloading,” Erik commented before Charles could compose a reply. “You’re washing the dishes.”

“Of course,” Sean promised, “I was going to anyway! But can I at least take some fish to Cupcake? She’s studying for her Chemistry exam at the apartment.”

“As long as you don’t steal any of the groceries for when you and Cupcake get baked,” Erik continued grimly, but with a hint of a smile that softened his features.

“Aw, c’mon Erik,” Sean argued, trying to laugh. “That’s why I have a job! So I can get baked and then buy munchies from Circle K. But yeah, I won’t steal food!”

Erik put down his food, clenched his hand into a fist and rubbed his knuckles against the top of Sean’s head vigorously. Sean’s howls only brought hilarity from the others at the table. Alex nearly choked as he swallowed, but Angel chuckled wickedly. Charles couldn’t help himself and laughed along. He hadn’t seen Erik give anyone similar treatment since they’d ranged around the upper East Coast.

The moment he was released, Sean bolted to the opposite side of the corion island and rubbed the top of his head. “Um, I’ll take the fish over to the apartment later then come back.”

“We’re leaving her alone at the apartment,” Angel explained. “Otherwise she’ll never be able to study. We already took the gaming console away, gave her Celia’s phone, and changed the gearing on her bike so she won’t stunt in the parking lot.”

“Wait,” Charles interjected, “if it isn’t such a big deal to change out Cupcake’s gearing, why don’t you change yours?”

Angel snorted, “Because there’s no need.”

“Somebody got her license revoked,” Alex replied, “for assault. With a stolen car. Under the influence.”

Angel smiled sweetly. “Yeah, well, that asshole never hit my mom again, now did he? Too bad mom went and got another just like him.”

Charles frowned. He’d supposed Angel had issues with a father, but nothing quite like that. She gave a brave, unaffected, face, but her actions gave lie to her tone. Charles knew intimately what that looked like; he’d seen it in his own mirror often enough.
“Can’t you get it back?” Charles asked. Raven had nearly gotten her own license revoked during a self-destructive phase in her first year of university.

“I could have if I’d pulled that stunt in Arizona, but it was Oxnard,” she shrugged, licking crema from her fingers in a manner that caught Charles’ attention far more than was appropriate. “The court hearing didn’t go so well. I suppose I had a chance, because my dad’s Mexican and the judge was Republican. But my mom’s black and showed up wearing more alcohol than perfume. Great hat, though. And of course, my girlfriend looked like a cholo with all her tattoos and those stupid slippers.”

To the side Alex interjected, “Machete still looks a gangster.”

“I only served half the time for the offenses, but when I couldn’t get the money together for all my fines, well, I served the full two months for that.” Angel paused and looked down at her plate. “Anyway, I gave up my right to drive in California, because I didn’t want to move back just to go through the stupid traffic school and then deal with a pinche interlock device. Unfortunately, when I went to renew my license here in Phoenix, I couldn’t. California put a hold on it.”

“But you have friends,” Charles encouraged, thinking that Angel was probably ashamed of her dependence on the others. “I’ve never once heard a complaint about driving you. My sister certainly finds you amazing.”

Angel looked up, her brave face firmly in place. She tossed a shrug. “Yeah, I am pretty amazing, you know. They all think of it as a privilege to have my ass warming up their pillions. I’m like the hood ornament on a Jag. Nobody gives a fuck until they see me.”

Both Alex and Sean groaned, wadded up the paper towels they were using as napkins, and threw them at her. All three erupted in laughter, which Charles joined. Erik kept eating, but his eyes were crinkled in a smile. When they went back to eating, Angel’s expression seemed lighter.

After dinner, Sean took up the dishes like he promised, popsicle hanging out his mouth. Alex changed into his work shirt, which consisted of black Dickies and a dark orange shirt that proclaimed U-Haul across the chest. Charles snorted at that; he’d never even asked where Alex worked. Angel headed for the couch to turn on the television as Alex gave his good-byes and went out with his R6’s keys.

Soon Erik and Charles joined Angel to watch the highlights of the 2011 Isle of Mann races. Charles smiled, watching the absent manner in which Erik demolished his popsicle. It was a better show than the races as far as he was concerned.

Erik gradually sat up straighter as the documentary progressed. Halfway through, his back was off the couch and he leaned forward, arms crossed on his thighs, just above the knees. His eyes were locked on the screen, taking in all the minutiae. He chewed the popsicle stick with thoughtless abandon Charles found endearing.

In the midst of the show (that of the TT and Erik’s slow splintering of the popsicle stick), Charles checked his phone. Raven had already texted him back. It was a simple tease: I hear you guys were doing some post coital cuddling on Erik’s couch!

Charles smirked as he replied. It wasn’t post coital and I’d call it napping rather than cuddling. Still don’t know if I’m staying the night.

After the show, Angel stood up. “I’m going to get ready for work. Should take about an hour. Can I take the Tacoma or do you want to drop me off and have Alex pick me up?”
Erik took the frayed stick from his mouth, but didn’t take his eyes from the screen as he flicked through Speed channel’s schedule. “I’ll take you; I need to come back and load your bike on the Tacoma so you can practice tomorrow. Either Sean or Alex can pick you up; I’ll be turning in early.”

Angel winked at Charles. “Are you now? Is Charles going to make you breakfast, then?”

When Erik shook his head Charles tried not to let his disappointment show. “No, Charles’ sister is still in town and I need to finish Machete’s bike and dynotune the 250 now I’ve finished the swing arm.”

“I could drop Angel off,” Charles volunteered. “Cherry Bomb isn’t out of the way for me.”

Erik shook his head again. “No, but we can ride to Tempe together.”

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It was shades of the past: riding at dusk just behind and to the left of Erik, a beautiful woman perched on the R6’s pillion. They looked good together, moved with the ease of comfortable familiarity. Only a few of Max’s pillion girls had a modicum of Angel’s natural poise. She kept her body near Erik’s, keeping their center of gravity balanced. A few times she anticipated his leans, but normally she matched her lean to his.

They were lovely to watch and Charles couldn’t help but wonder if he rode pillion as well as Angel. She made it look easy, like she were wings on Erik’s back. As she had said, Angel owned any pillion she sat.

Though he preferred having the Triple and had no intention of giving it up, he liked the intimacy of dancing the asphalt with Erik in control. He also liked the idea of being like Angel. She made it obvious the pillion was not the lesser position on a bike unless the passenger thought of it as such.

Charles spared a moment to lift his left hand from the clutch to smooth leather-clad fingertips across the Triple’s tank and the myriad colors of the sunset reflected there. He could have both: be both knight and rook, bishop and queen. He could ride pillion and do the piloting. There was no conflict, unless he made it into one.

He took the grip back in hand and flicked the throttle to charge forward. With Erik on the R6 Charles had 75ccs on him, and with no passenger he gained quickly. He surged along the left. Erik instinctually made room for the Triple, allowing Charles the unexpected pass. Charles grinned inside his helmet and whipped his hand off the throttle just as he came abreast of them and tagged an unsuspecting Angel on the ass.

Her head whipped around, eyes wide with a blend of surprise and indignation. She raised her left fist and brandished her middle finger in retaliation. Charles laughed and touched his front brakes. He dropped back quickly, leaving Angel to feel acutely her unprotected back.

When they arrived outside Cherry Bomb, Erik took the R6 up on the sidewalk, to the annoyance of several pedestrians that were out for dinner and early drinks. Angel sat up, one hand firmly on Erik’s shoulder, the other in the air giving her best parade wave as she swiveled her torso left and then right to face some of the people they passed.

Charles slotted the Triple into a space already containing two cruisers and turned the key off. It was a little trouble, but he managed to unlock the chin of the modular helmet and pushed it up. He liked that he didn’t have to take the helmet off or shout with the visor up.

Angel hopped onto the sidewalk, undid her chinstrap and lifted the floral helmet from her head. She
stepped abreast of the R6’s tank and, with her fee hand, hooked her finger into the chin of Erik’s helmet. He allowed her to pull his head around and tilt his face down so she could do as Cupcake and Sean had done more than a week ago. She gave the spade on the helmet’s brow a kiss then smacked the top.

Erik took the playful abuse without reaction; what Charles had thought was Cupcake’s original notion was beginning to look like a custom. Or it was something new that had started that night?

Saying nothing, she turned and waved over at Charles. “Raven’s coming to the university tomorrow. Are you coming, too? We can teach her to ride together.”

Charles nodded; he saw no reason why not. If anything, it would be an excellent distraction from whatever Erik would be doing. “Brilliant idea. We’ll be there, though we might be late. When we’re together, we always end up staying up all night.”

“Yeah,” Angel laughed, “she’s a regular party girl! See you then!”

As she turned to go, Erik pulled the R6 around and took it off the sidewalk down a handicapped parking ramp. He came along side the Triple, turned his key off, and flicked his visor up.

“Where’s your Arai?”

“At my apartment,” Charles answered. “I haven’t felt comfortable with it since I dropped it.”

“Think about giving it to Machete’s piranhas,” Erik suggested. “Most of them are squids with substandard gear.”

Charles nodded, though he had no intention of doing so. It would be the right thing to do, but he was too emotionally attached to the memory of Erik helping him select it. “Will I see you tomorrow night?”

There was a pause as Erik considered the question. He brought his right hand up to his Suomy’s chin strap, paused again, and lowered his hand. “I’ll call you when I’m free.”

“I’d really rather fall asleep on your couch tonight,” Charles sighed, “watching brainless Speed Channel programming.”

Erik shook his helmetsed head. “No. I need to focus. It was hard enough the day you showed up. I had to deliver a bike that night and, as a consequence for injuring my hand, my sponsor played the DVD.”

“I could help you relax, though. You fell asleep this afternoon with me,” Charles pressed, though he was surprised at Erik’s explanation. He’d forgotten Erik’s protestations about needing to think that day. That day… two weeks ago.

“No,” Erik repeated, voice low and muffled by the helmet. “I probably misjudged the hydrocodone. I don’t relax like that normally.”

It sounded like self-deception to Charles, but he allowed it. Who was he not to? It was more likely that Erik had needed the rest desperately after all the stress he had caused. “So, then, I’ll wait for your call.”

Erik nodded and switched the R6’s key back on and hit the ignition. “We’ll take it from there.”

Charles watched him go. It took force of will to back out of the parking spot and head in the opposite
direction, toward his apartment. He wanted to turn around and go after the R6, but he knew better. Erik had to be the one to come to him.

When he walked into his apartment, Raven was folding clothes from the couch. Her duffle was open and being filled with clean laundry from the stacked units in the hall closet. She gave him a wry grin. “I got a call from the studio. I have to go in tomorrow and help set up for new molds. Dehumidifier broke down and the resulting humidity compromised them. They’re filming Monday, so we’re rushing.”

Already disappointed with Erik’s brush off, Charles subsided a little more. He placed his helmet on the dining nook’s table and turned back to Raven’s frowning face.

“Your body language is suggesting suicide,” his sister commented. “I thought things went well with Max? Or are you just sad to see me go?”

“Erik,” Charles corrected with a dramatic sigh. “And, yes, I am sad to see you go. I’m also a little disappointed to be sleeping here tonight, even though it is probably for the best I come home. I’m going to miss you terribly.”

“Why are you here, anyway?” She asked, coming around the couch to meet him as he pulled off his riding jacket.

“He needs some space,” Charles replied, thinking it an accurate statement that didn’t reveal too much. “Says he can’t focus when I’m around.”

“If that’s true, he’s got it bad, too,” Raven smiled fondly, slipping her arm around his elbow. “Charles, it’s Saturday night, the person you love is forgiving you, and your gorgeous sister is in town.”

Charles took a deep breath to release tension and gave her a brisk nod. She was right. He and Erik were back on track; there was no use moping over how Erik chose to deal with stress. Wrapping Raven in a hug, he kissed her gold hair.

“You are absolutely right,” he said brightly. “Scottsdale for drinks, perhaps dancing. You can meet the rest of Erik’s club next time you’re here. I’m certain they’ll all adore you, if Angel is anything to go by.”

“There’s the Charles Xavier I know,” Raven crowed, throwing a fist in the air. “Call a cab! We’re going to get soused!”

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Charles woke sometime after noon with a light hangover, the central air on at full chill, and Raven clinging to his waist. He slipped out of her arms and showered. He brushed his teeth twice: once before the shower and once after when his mouth still felt gross.

He retrieved two bottles of water from the kitchen and a bottle of aspirin from the bathroom and settled carefully down with Raven again. They had made an absolute mess of themselves in Scottsdale and they had done so with a fervency and show of excess that Charles could only manage after several strong drinks and Raven’s influence.

Still, it had been fun and his feet hurt in the way that reminded him of how much dancing he’d done. It was a good release and worth the pain and nausea. For five hours he had exerted himself without thinking overly much of Erik.
Charles downed two aspirin with water, before waking Raven as gently as possible. Setting his water on the night stand, he said her name softly and jostled her shoulder carefully. When that failed to bring her to wakefulness, he tilted her face up and kissed her brow.

“Raven,” he said quietly, “why are you like a writing desk?”

“Gehhh,” she croaked. Her eyes remained closed. “Because my notes are always flat. Oh God, tell me you have aspirin.”

Charles pressed the cold bottle of water to her hand. “And water.”

“I love you,” she said with serious conviction.

It was another hour before Charles felt completely human again. Raven continued to look ill. Even though she needed to leave immediately, they spent thirty minutes on Charles’ couch going through each of their phones’ pictures. Charles was relieved he had the FBI agent’s phone number in a different folder.

The picture of Erik and Charles at Cherry Bomb fascinated Raven the most: she’d never seen a picture of the two of them together before. Max had never allowed his picture to be taken.

“Send me that one,” she suggested. “Angel sent me several, but none of just the two of you. I want to get used to seeing you two together again, even if he looks psycho here.”

Charles was more than happy to comply. “He told me that you could use him to frighten off any annoying prospects you might have. Not that you can’t do it yourself.”

Raven smiled at the photo when she received it and then sighed. “I’m going to be late, but I don’t regret it.”

Charles helped pack her the car. He pressed his aspirin and several bottles of water on her, plus fresh fruit they’d picked up on Friday. She promised she’d be fine and hugged him as hard as she could. Watching her leave was nearly as painful as watching Erik leave the night prior.

Depressed again, he wandered back into the apartment and napped for another few hours. Then he picked up Erik’s copy of Speed Tribes and spent the day rereading it cover to cover and inhaling its familiar scent.

It was after 10PM when Charles heard the chorus start from Rihanna’s Shut Up And Drive; his ring tone for Erik. He took it before Rihanna got from zero to sixty. He heard the sound of traffic and voices in the background before Erik’s voice.

“Can I come over?” His tone gave nothing away. Charles hated that.

“You don’t even need to ask,” Charles replied. “Do you have good news? How long will you be? Are you hungry?”

“I’m fueling up,” Erik answered, even though he hadn’t been asked. “I’ll be there in about ten minutes. Food would be helpful. Nothing heavy.”

“Very good,” Charles grinned, already heading to the kitchen. “I’ll see you soon.”

It didn’t take long to make a simple cucumber and watermelon salad. He tossed in a few sprigs of mint and on further consideration, a handful of blueberries. He was just washing up when a knock sounded on the door.
He came from the small kitchen wiping off his hands and opened the door. Erik stood before him; tall, imposing, and handsome. “It wasn’t locked.”

Erik shrugged and stepped in. He leaned down to unfasten his boots out of force of habit, even though Charles still had his shoes on. Charles let him, practically bursting with impatience, but loathe to show it. Once Erik stepped out of his boots and joined him near the apartment’s small table, Charles let out an exasperated huff.

“Stop drawing it out,” he demanded. “Tell me what kind of news you have.”

Erik sat down, placing his helmet next to Charles’. “I still haven’t figured that out. It has potential to be good, I just don’t trust him.”

Charles seized the bowl of salad he’d made and set it before Erik with a fork. “That sounds like he’s laid down some criteria for exit. Tell me everything. Spare no details.”

Erik snorted, but there was a not inconsiderable amount of humor in the noise. “He wants one last bike. I’m free the moment it’s delivered to him.”

Charles gaped. That was too good to be true. One last theft? “How impossible is it?”

“Stealing is a lot like assassination,” Erik said, taking a bite of salad. After chewing thoughtfully and swallowing, he continued the comparison. “If somebody wants you dead badly enough, nothing will save you. It’s all a matter of intelligence, planning, and will.”

“Which you have,” Charles breathed. A smile was slowly beginning to take shape on his face. “All of which you have in droves! Erik, you’re going to be free!”

And then he was up and crushing Erik’s upper body against him, curling lovingly over his head. It was a moment of pure joy. The feeling of idol worship he’d never lost for Max and which had matured into confidence in Erik rushed through him. He paid special attention to the sharp points of contact where Erik’s angles, his elbows, shoulders, and chin, intersected with the curving of Charles’ welcoming body.

Resistant at first, Erik slowly melted into Charles’ enthusiastic embrace. He took a brief shower of kisses to his forehead. The beginnings of a smile began to filter onto his face. When Charles finally released him and sat down, the smile faded back, though a few vestiges remained in the corner of his mouth.

“This isn’t the sort of thing I normally steal,” he said soberly. “It’s bigger. American.”

“Indian or Harley?” Charles anticipated. Max had never liked Harleys; he could never wrap his head around a manufacturer that had lost its pioneering spirit, attempted to pick it back up in the form of Eric Buell, only to drop it again.

“Harley,” Erik replied and his voice did not dip down into a disdainful register the way it used to. “From the second world war. It’s in perfect running condition, but there’s no way to ride it to the shipping point.”

Charles sat down on Erik’s right at the table, their knees touched, though Charles was careful to avoid applying any kind of pressure. “Why not? You’ve said it before, some of the modern Harleys look like the old ones at a glance.”

Erik brought the opposite end of the fork to his mouth and placed the edge there like he would a cigarette. “No, not these. There are two problems with riding it after I get it out. First, this bike’s top
That did sound like trouble. Charles deflated a little, but then glanced up again. “Have you ever ridden a sidecar rig?”

“Several,” Erik shrugged. “I stole a BMW R71 once and that’s likely the job I’ll model this one after. Especially since this Harley was based off the same bike. They both have parallel twin engines and shaft drive.”

“Then you have experience,” Charles enthused, beaming once again. “I still don’t understand why you don’t have confidence in this theft.”

“Charles, my sponsor doesn’t collect Harleys.” Erik placed the fork down again. “His rival in LA does.”
Ride It Like You Stole It

Chapter Summary

Charles rides it like he stole it, before doing recon on the HD XA.

Chapter Notes

I would have uploaded sooner, but took me two weeks to figure out how to steal the XA.

Special mentions:
Synecdoche has spoiled me with two awesome works!
Empty Mouths Talk About the Passion, which I thought made for nice Strict Machine Canon. It was a trade for motorcycle sex, which I provided in Pressure Wash.
And art! Charles kissing Erik's trademark Suomy helmet!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"mir war
als hieltest du
in den armen mich
und tausend disteln
sag mir was das war"

Wüste, Einstürzende Neubauten

Ride It Like You Stole It

“What does that mean?” Charles asked haltingly. If Shaw was high up in the Russian Mafia, what kind of rivals would he have? Those from within the organization or those from without? Probably both. Which was worse? “Is his rival just another collector or is he in a club?”

“His rival is affiliated with traditional one percenters, like the Angels, Vagos, or Mongols. It could be he wants to use the XA as a peace offering. Perhaps,” Erik continued, thoughtfully, “it is another blow in their little cold war. If it is the former, there’s no real problem, but if it is the latter, it could be trouble.”

Charles subsided immediately. The SS were likely one percenters, or a so-called outlaw motorcycle club. It was a group of affiliated one percenters that had driven Charles off the road on the East Coast after Max’s chronic provocations. The three men that had survived Max’s wrath, without being mutilated, were likely the same that beat, tortured, and humiliated Max in the video. “Erik, please tell me this rival isn’t the same as the one on the East Coast.”

“LA is a long way from New York,” Erik replied derisively. “It doesn’t matter exactly who my sponsor’s rivals are, just that they tend to be people of power with little regard for human life.”
“Just like your sponsor,” Charles replied. “So there’s no real issue unless, by stealing it you bring an avalanche of fury down on your head.”

He wanted to add more, to lure Erik into admitting that Hellfire was more than just a motorcycle gang. On second thought, though, he realized Erik’s statement was meant to be just that: a coded admission. Erik had always known Charles was intelligent, so it stood to reason that he likely knew Charles suspected there was an organized crime link. There always was when it came to gangs that trafficked drugs.

“Exactly,” Erik nodded and continued to make in roads into the salad. “So I need time to research and plan. Two or three months of research and planning then the fewest possible seconds to act.”

Watching Erik eat something he put together brought Charles a smile. He could see why Angel liked to come over to Erik’s house and cook so much. Salads and pasta were Charles’ specialty; he didn’t have the patience for much else, though he could pull just about anything off if he wasn’t distracted.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

Against all expectations, Erik shrugged and gave Charles a speculative look. “When you said Raven could fake a debilitating injury, what did you mean by that?”

Charles’ bright eyes rounded. He leaned back in his seat and jumped forward in the conversation. “How different do you want to look?”

Erik shook his head. “I never said I wanted to look different. My build and limp give me away. I’d prefer to use Alex but he’s too young to inspire confidence for this. I think you’d work better. That is, if you can come down to our level.”

“What level is that?” Charles snorted. “Do you still think I’m too bourgeois for you? I thought we worked that out.”

“Even when you and I were forced to sleep in public bathrooms, you never lost your sense of privilege,” Erik commented without rancor. “That’s not the point. The target is privately owned, but it isn’t in a residence; it’s on display at a dealership. If you want to help, I’ll need you to go in during their business hours. Alex will have a different role.”

The personal statement and Charles’ proposed role needed time to percolate. “So Alex knows you’re a motorcycle thief?” Charles asked, rather than address the heavier notions before he was ready.

The more important thing, his inclusion in the heist, was going to his head. Max had never really included him in anything illegal beyond underage drinking, limited recreational drugs, and reckless driving. Erik might comment on his sense of privilege, but they both knew Max had done everything in his power to preserve it.

“My club knows what I do,” Erik replied. As he had with Sean the night before, Erik reached casually out and gripped the back of Charles’ neck. The gesture was far more intimate between them. “Only Alex is involved; he’s my understudy and logistics tech. He’ll take care of getting a truck to transport the bike to the airport.”

“You’ve been teaching Alex to steal motorcycles?” Charles frowned. “Sean was dealing drugs and Alex is your bike theft apprentice?”

Erik shook his head, “I’ve taught him how to work on motorcycles; that’s a trade. As far as stealing them, that sort of knowledge comes with the territory.”
“What of me?” Charles asked to change the subject. The bright blue of his eyes slowly lost ground to the dilation of his pupils. When Erik pulled him forward, between his knees, he sank down easily to the tiles. “I could always call on my bourgeois riches and buy it.”

“And alert all the wrong people to your existence by pissing them off? No, you’ll be on reconnaissance,” Erik explained, his voice pitched lower though his seriousness remained the same. He held the back of Charles’ neck firmly, but did not pull him any closer. With his free hand, he dipped a hand into the bowl and retrieved a blueberry and placed it gently on Charles’ lower lip.

A thrill ran down Charles’ spine at the press against his lip. He took the berry and made a play for one of Erik’s long fingers, too. Erik was far too quick to get more than a brush of red lips against one fingertip. “As you can see,” he chuckled huskily, “I am capable of coming down to your level after all.”

“I want to fuck you,” Erik replied bluntly. “I want to fuck the class and high society right out of you.”

“Impossible,” Charles moaned in surprise: Erik’s dirty talk effectively drove Charles’ blood from his brain straight to his cock. “But you are more than welcome to try.”

Leaning forward and pulling Charles’ face to him, Erik crushed their mouths together and immediately slipped his tongue past his lips to Charles’. The fresh fruit and mint did little to mitigate Erik’s return to cigarettes, but Charles didn’t protest; he planned to say little about it until the Harley was safely in the Black King’s hands.

They broke apart lingeringly when breath was something they both needed. Charles used the break to rise up and pull Erik out of his chair. “Let’s take it to the bedroom.”

Charles needed very little strength to get Erik upright; he was more than willing to go. Erik shed his jacket and left it on the chair then whipped the green v-neck he wore beneath over his head. “Let’s go.”

Charles knew it would have been a ridiculous sight had anyone been there to see the two of them trading sucking kisses, shedding clothes, and stumbling a bit as they made it back to Charles’ bedroom.

His clothes were easy enough to remove; he wasn’t dressed to go outside or into Phoenix’s growing heat. Erik’s jeans were more of a challenge, but one that Charles was happy to conquer. It was easier to peel them down Erik’s legs while he was upright. Beneath his jeans Charles found Erik wearing a different brace; it conformed closely to his skin. He made no move to take it off and Erik made no mention of it.

As soon as they were both naked, but for Erik’s brace, Erik took Charles’ face between his hands and bowed his head to bring their lips together. He insinuated his tongue in another slick kiss. Charles didn’t notice when he closed his eyes; it came naturally. He stroked back along Erik’s tongue firmly with his own while his hands skimmed over Erik’s heated skin. He still tasted strongly of cigarettes, but Charles was getting used to it.

For an unknown amount of time, they stood kissing. Charles had long been a talented kisser, but kissing someone for so long was unusual for him. The physical feel fed an emotional need to somehow devour Erik, to pull him inside to keep. He wondered if Erik felt the same way.

With their bodies close enough to feel each other’s body heat, it only took an instinctual shallow thrust of his hips for Charles’ cock to rub against Erik’s hip. The friction was delightful. While the
first touch was unintentional, Charles moved his hips purposefully the second time and brought his growing length against Erik’s. Erik bit into the kiss. His teeth sank into Charles’ lip in a nip that was on the painful side of firm.

Aroused as he was, Charles found an erotic edge to the pain. He ground his hips against Erik’s, thereby trapping their cocks together between their abdomens. Bringing his arms up under Erik’s arms and gripping his shoulders from behind for leverage, Charles began to rock up off his heels. He was rutting, ever so slowly and deliciously, against Erik’s abdomen and fast-thickening cock.

Under the assault, Erik pulled his lips from Charles’ and began to bite him gently; on the cheek, the lobe of one ear, his jaw. He leaned down, his cheek rubbing and scratching slightly at Charles’. Erik’s breath puffed over his ear in slow syllables. “Du zerstörst mich…”

The German went to Charles head, even though all he could make out was the ‘you’ and the ‘me’. He pulled Erik down with him to the unmade bed. The descent made it sensible to break apart again and catch breath. The sheets were still in disarray from a night of restless and intermittent sleep.

“Erik,” Charles whispered breathlessly, “you’re still going to accept the knee surgery, yes?”

Erik blinked, his expression clouded with confused desire. “Yes.”

“I’ll find somebody then,” Charles promised, “as soon as possible. I’ll get it scheduled for after this Harley job of yours.”

Erik did not smile, but gave a single nod before pulling Charles closer. “I’d like that.”

“You know what I’d like?” Charles murmured and licked a path up Erik’s neck and across the corner of his jaw. The light stubble there made his tongue tingle.

“A nice Jewish boy,” Erik chuckled huskily. He threaded his fingers through Charles’ hair and tugged lightly. “This is why you’re entitled: you always get what you want.”

“You’re no better,” Charles grinned back. Erik’s grip on his hair didn’t loosen even when Charles changed tactics and bit Erik’s collar bone. “But let’s both have what we want this time.”

Erik pulled Charles’ head back to gain a clear view of his bright eyes. His expression was predatory, yet hotly curious.

“Let go a moment,” Charles murmured, giving Erik a grin that was nothing less than devilish.

When Erik complied, Charles sat up and reached for the shelf above the bed’s headboard where several books and a lamp made their home. He switched on the lamp and pulled down a new bottle of lubricant. “This is a bit better than mineral oil, I think.”

“I’d be lying,” Erik drawled, taking the bottle from Charles’ hand, “if I said I wanted to forego any foreplay and just have you stick your fingers up my ass.”

Charles couldn’t help it, he burst out laughing. “No, no, that wasn’t what I had in mind!”

Erik gave him a lopsided grin that showed his comfort with Charles and his utter lack of embarrassment. He handed the bottle back while Charles caught his breath.

“No,” Charles chuckled breathlessly, tossing the bottle between the two pillows. “Didn’t I tell you I like to ride German models? I may not ride you like I stole you, but I still intend to ride you.”
Erik’s eyes narrowed, but it wasn’t a matter of suspicion; he was likely thinking through the logistics. “You’ve done that?”

Or perhaps, it was jealousy. Charles grinned and ran teasing fingers up his own cock. It wasn’t as good as having Erik’s hands on him, but it was still an effective tease for them both. He bit his swollen lower lip for good measure. “In your shop, you reminded me how good prostate orgasms are.”

Fast as a snake strike, Erik was on him, heedless of his knee, he pushed Charles flat on the rumpled sheets and kneeled above him, expression fierce. “You’ll forget the others: I’ll fuck them out of you.”

Jealousy or possessiveness then; Charles found them both intoxicating. His cock began to ache with the effect. “Says the man that stood outside the bathroom door the first time I got laid. Were you there to protect my privacy or to listen?”

Erik leaned down and nuzzled Charles’ ear. He licked at the lobe before biting indelicately. “That’s the mystery, isn’t it?”

Charles moaned and arched his hips, trying to get some friction against his leaking cock. “I think it was both. That’s good, because I was thinking of you the whole time.”

Erik took Charles’ shoulder and tried to work him onto his stomach. Charles put up a spirited token resistance, knowing that doing so would likely only heighten Erik’s lust.

Once Erik had Charles on his belly, he straddled his thighs, his cock settling naturally in the crease of Charles’ ass. Erik took Charles’ wrists and pinioned them with one hand to the small of his back before leaning over to mouth a bump of spine just between his shoulder blades.

Erik left a damp trail as his open mouth kisses jumped from vertebrae to vertebrae down the highway of Charles’ spine. Beneath him, Charles moaned and shifted his hips to give his cock the barest friction. He could feel a wet spot growing beneath him, a small slick puddle that made his efforts more maddening.

At the last vertebrae, Erik stretched out over Charles again; enough to make it possible to press his cock into the inviting crease of Charles’ ass. Charles bit his lip, rocking his hips as much as he could as Erik used the leverage of one hand on the bed to slowly begin humping Charles’ ass.

Precome made the sound of Erik’s movements as wet as they were beginning to be slick. When Erik shifted his weight to his left leg, the angle of his thrusting changed: the head of his cock rubbed more firmly against the left side of Charles right buttock. Charles heard him groan and smiled.

“Use the slick, you great idiot,” he laughed.

Erik paused his rutting and snorted irreverently into the back of Charles’ neck. “How does it taste?”

“Didn’t check,” Charles admitted. He certainly didn’t look for something that tasted nice; he didn’t need lubrication to suck Erik’s cock, after all. “Why does that matter?”

He felt Erik let go of his wrists and then move down his body again. This time Erik dragged his short fingernails in a long scratch down the length of his back. Charles moaned softly at the light pain and countered it with another slow drag of his hips against the bed. With Erik off him, he could achieve a far greater range of motion.

Then Erik placed a stilling hand on his back, beneath the channel of his spine, over his tailbone. To Charles’ cock’s displeasure, Erik pressed down, stilling his rocking hips. But then, he felt Erik’s
mouth on the curve of his ass.

“This is why it matters,” Erik murmured to the pale skin. He licked firmly up Charles’ left buttock. Then he began to leave sucking kisses across it.

“What on earth are you doing?” Charles huffed.

Erik lifted his mouth and let fly his hand, slapping Charles’ ass hard where his mouth had left it wet.

A shocked cry choked from Charles’ throat at the sudden sharp pain. He lifted up and twisted his shoulders to stare at Erik with incredulity. Erik smirked back and, holding Charles’ gaze with his own, inclined his head to lick one slow painful stripe across the spreading red mark.

“I’m kissing your ass,” he murmured, letting his lips brush the newly sensitive skin, “the only way I’m capable.”

“You are infuriating,” Charles growled, but made no move to buck Erik off. He could escape if he wanted, he thought. He could twist his hips around and present his cock for attention instead, but a frisson of pleasure in the pain stilled him. There was something to Erik’s lips catching on his skin as he spoke.

Annoyance turned to fascination. Charles watched, and felt acutely Erik placing more open-mouthed kisses to the blushing skin. The kiss turned edged when Erik began to suck, drawing more color into the flesh. He did not produce the sort of red that faded in the night, but pulled hard enough to produce purple welts.

When he lifted his mouth, he laved the marks with strokes of his tongue. Though Charles wanted to say how silly or childish it was for Erik to mark him, the eroticism of the act trumped his wit. “God, please. Do the same to my cock when you’re done there.”

Erik’s smile was no less predatory. “With pleasure.” He struck Charles’ opposite buttock with equal force.

The slap hurt less against dry skin, but the surprise and the sharp burst of pain shocked another cry from Charles. Rather than soothe the offended flesh right away, Erik smacked the rounded muscle again. The pain was worse, but this time Charles saw the bounce of his ass in response to the strike and was further aroused.

As color rose to his skin, Erik lowered his head to kiss and tease needling pain from the blush. Charles moaned at the half pain, half-pleasure of it. He closed his eyes and buried his face in the sheets near his face. He tracked the sensations, made all the more intense without his vision, as Erik kissed, sucked lightly, and licked his ass.

His delirious cock, of course, responded by leaking more precome. Charles was not one to deny himself; while Erik continued to worship his ass, Charles began to rock against the sheets again. His cock ached for more, but he knew that would come when Erik grew hungry for it. Also, it was an intense pleasure to have Erik’s teeth, his wolf-like teeth, scraping over abraded skin.

Charles moaned freely into the sheets and began to push up against Erik’s mouth and then down to feed his cock more friction on the wet sheets.

His ass was aching and stinging deliciously when Erik finally slipped his hand under Charles’ hipbone to flip him over. The promise of Erik’s mouth turning to his prick was all the incentive Charles needed. He flipped over onto his back without help and nearly smacked Erik’s chin with his hard on in the bargain.
They both chuckled at the near collision, though Charles’ laugh turned into a hiss as his lovingly abused ass pressed against the wet sheets. Precome turned out to be a less than effective balm.

Clearly amused by Charles’ pain, Erik only smirked and caught Charles’ prick in his callused fingers. The head was slick with precome and protruding almost entirely from the foreskin. Erik pushed Charles’ foreskin down the rest of the way with a firm pass of his tongue. As Charles groaned, Erik slipped the head between his lips and gave it the same treatment he had earlier given Charles’ tongue.

“Nng,” Charles moaned, hips leaving the bed, only to be pushed back down. He hissed again at the contact. “Erik…”

Erik lifted his mouth off Charles’ cock and pulled himself up alongside him. He turned to Charles and reached for his hand. Charles turned to stare into Erik’s desire-laden eyes. He wished, not for the first time, that they had been doing this for the eleven years they had lost.

He let Erik take his hand and press it, predictably, to Erik’s warm and very hard cock. “Humping my ass not enough?”

“I thought you were going to ride me like you stole me,” Erik rumbled. “Or did you decide you aren’t the rider you thought you were?”

“Is your engine warm enough for that?” Charles panted, his fingers curling around Erik’s prick.

“Mmm. If you stole me, I don’t see why that would matter,” Erik replied. “The saying implies a joy ride.”

“True.” Charles stroked Erik lightly, noted the pulse of his cock as he did so. It would definitely be a joy if they did things right. “In that case, you should probably do what I tell you.”

Erik snorted at the suggestion. “I’ll try.”

Charles took his hand off Erik’s heated flesh and reached back for the lubricant: his hand slipped over it twice in his eagerness. He squeezed a generous portion into his cupped palm and capped the bottle one-handed.

Grinning wickedly he licked his unlubricated hand and took hold of Erik’s cock. Erik took a shuddering breath at the grip that pumped his prick up and down for only a few short moments. When Charles withdrew yet again, Erik made a low displeased noise. “Damn it, Xavier…”

“I want to see you stroke yourself,” Charles responded. He brought his hands together and warmed the slick between them. With a teasing grin, he took a hold of his own cock and began stroking himself. “I want to watch you while you watch me.”

Erik swallowed visibly at the command and nodded once in slow acquiescence. He sat up and took his circumcised cock in hand. For Charles, the sight alone was enough to power a thousand hours of sexual fantasies.

Charles released his prick long enough to arrange his pillows against the bed’s headboard. He used his fingertips, since his hands were liberally coated with water-based lubrication. Then he turned and leaned his back against them and brought his heels up and his knees high into the air. It was an unexpected bonus that the position kept his abused ass off the sheets. Slowly, he let his knees fall open so he could get to his cock easier and to display exactly what he had in mind.

Even with the dimness of the room, Erik’s gaze was direct and heated. So much so that it was like a physical touch. Taking a firm grip on his aching cock he gave Erik a soft command, “Match my
hand with yours.”

Shaking his head at the command, Erik stilled his strokes and waited for Charles to move. When Charles resumed with an unhurried pace, Erik watched and followed. The slick felt so good, Charles immediately wanted to pick up his pace, but he kept it slow, torturously slow. All the better to drive Erik mad with need when the time came.

The other hand he dropped down past his balls. He began to circle his fingertips around his asshole. When Erik had breached him Saturday with the aid of the mineral oil, he’d been slick and wild enough with desire that a single finger hadn’t been a problem. However, it had been quite a while since he’d ridden a cock and he wasn’t confident in Erik’s ability, lubricated or not, to loosen his anus gradually enough. Sooner or later, perhaps after Erik had recovered from knee surgery, he hoped to switch the position.

From Erik’s expression, Charles wasn’t sure if the slow circle and teasing push of his fingers was as intoxicating as watching the slow fisting of his cock. His invading middle finger didn’t hurt in the slightest, nor did he find himself resisting it.

*A body knows itself,* he mused, sinking the digit past the second knuckle. He pulled it out slowly brushing his prostate carefully as he went. A shudder ran down his spine, he thrust hard into his hand, and his lip caught between his teeth.

It took control to slow down after that, but he put forth the effort and glanced at Erik to make sure he was still keeping the same rhythm. He was pacing himself, but Erik’s expression had grown more intense, more focused: hungry like a starving man. Charles was encouraged by his visage to add his slick ring finger to his middle and carefully start working the two past the tight muscle.

As before, the pleasure of stroking himself made the penetration relaxed and easier than he suspected. It was still slow going despite the generous lubrication. Working his fingers in carefully, he again brushed his prostate and this time found himself grinding down on his fingers. He moaned quietly at the build of pleasure and imagined how Erik’s cock would feel hitting it relentlessly.

“Erik,” Charles called hoarsely, pistoning his fingers slowly in and out of his ass to the same rhythm of his hand on his cock. “There are condoms in nightstand. Get one on.”

Erik growled in obvious frustration. “I got tested for you and you still want me to wear a condom?”

Charles bit his lip to keep from laughing, though it came out as a lascivious sort of chuckle anyway. “The secret to sanitary anal sex, my friend, is an enema. If you want that, I’m afraid you’ll have to wait a bit. Otherwise, get a condom, because I have no intention of sucking your cock clean after this if we’re going bareback.”

Erik rolled over and fumbled through the nightstand for the condoms. “God damn it, Charles, why are you always so smart?”

“Good genes.” Charles’ laugh was part wince as he stretched his two fingers apart as much as possible. Two wasn’t quite enough, but three was too ambitious. Erik’s cock, however, would do nicely. “Oh, Erik, hurry up.”

It took a bit longer than necessary when Erik accidentally shredded the first condom in his haste by ripping the packet open with his teeth. He had trouble tearing open the second because one hand’s fingers were wet with precome. With the ease of familiarity, he unrolled the condom smoothly down his handsome cock and turned to Charles.
“Give me your hands,” he grated, voice affected more than he would likely have allowed were circumstances less heated.

Charles nodded mutely and wiped his hands on the sheet as Erik maneuvered himself into a seated position at Charles’ feet. Erik offered both hands to Charles, palms out, fingers splayed. Charles’ eclipsed Erik’s callused palms with his own and slotted his fingers into the gaps provided.

Carefully, Charles rolled forward, momentarily forgetting the pain of his bruised and sensitive ass. As he advanced, Erik subsided. They moved together, Charles’ forward motion turned from pushing on Erik’s hands to reliance on them for stability and balance. It struck him there was something to that, but was too taken by the intimacy of their shared grip and the grace with which Erik’s spine unrolled to conform to the mattress.

He kept moving forward, though his knees hit the bed on either side of Erik’s ribs and folded down for another heated kiss. It was hot, passionate, and gentle by turns. Their tongues tangled and stroked. Teeth clacked together and lips were sucked. When Charles lifted up they were both panting.

“Charles,” Erik said, his voice sounding with an entirely new note; barely restrained need. “I don’t know if I can hold back much longer.”

The admission caused a ripple of fire to run down Charles’ spine and join the roiling need already churning in his loins.

“Just a moment more,” Charles whispered. He freed his hands and snatched up the bottle of slick again. He poured a little more of the lubricant into his hand and applied it directly to Erik’s cock. Erik groaned at the touch and lifted his hips, but Charles groaned at the way his prick jerked in his hand.

Wiping the excess on his thigh and capping the bottle against his chest, Charles tossed the lubricant aside and seized one of Erik’s hands. The other hand remained on Erik’s prick, to guide it to the slick ring of muscle.

Keeping his hold tight on Erik’s hand, Charles lowered himself onto Erik’s erect cock. Instinctually, his body resisted the slow invasion, but he managed to relax. The sheer amount of lubricant he’d used, and which was already present on the condom, eased the incremental stretch of his asshole over Erik’s prick.

Charles let go of Erik’s shaft and gripped his open hand as he pushed slowly down. His head rolled back and a shuddering gasp escaped him as he was stretched open. Beneath him Erik was sucking in a long breath between clenched teeth. Charles had the barest presence of mind to note that Erik’s body felt tight and rigid between the brackets of his knees and calves.

It got easier the moment the head of Erik’s cock popped within him, fully encompassed. Charles paused to adjust; he felt stretched ridiculously wide. He had a moment where he questioned his sanity, but took a deep breath and began to lower himself further. His thighs obeyed gravity in a slow journey downward. His ass was on an arc set to coincide with Erik’s groin.

“Oh,” Charles moaned, his skin felt feverish with sensation. “Oh, God. You’re going to ruin me…”

Erik was holding Charles’ hands so tight it was just shy of painful. His chest was heaving as he gasped for air. “Good…”

Increment by increment, Charles lowered himself on Erik’s cock until his ass came into stinging
contact with Erik's groin. He hissed at the pain and clench hard around Erik’s sheathed prick. Erik’s moan in response was strained.

Charles took a shaking breath as he adjusted to the feel of the cock seated deep within his body. It didn’t feel as strange as the first time he’d had one buried in his ass, but it was far more intimate. It was, after all, Erik lying beneath him in his bed.

He looked down. The tendons in Erik’s neck had never been so stark. His jaw, though, he had seen jut with tension before. His arms were steady as they supported Charles’ upper body weight, but there was still a sheen of sweat on his temples and upper lip. The moment he saw the sweat on Erik’s face, Charles became conscious of the sweat on the inside of his knees, where they pressed tight to Erik’s ribs.

“Bring me down,” Charles said softly and slowly lowered his torso to the backs of his hands.

Erik nodded and lowered his elbows to the bed. Charles’ mouth opened in pleasure as the slow movement changed the angle of Erik’s cock inside him.

When his hands reached their destination, backs against the sheets on either side of his head, Erik was either unaware or comfortable with the dominant position Charles had assumed. It was now Charles pressing Erik’s hands to the bed, Charles straddling Erik.

“Have you done this before?” Charles asked, his breath stirring the hair near Erik’s ear.

Erik nodded. Charles pulled back to see his expression; Erik’s face was open, expressive. “With a couple one night stands. Hard to last.”

“You can last,” Charles murmured and clenched around Erik’s cock.

“Then you better get riding,” he growled.

Charles’ only response was to drag himself up Erik’s body, pulling half free of his prick and exacting a rumble of pleasure from Erik in the process. Then he slowly pushed back down and repeated the motion. Charles smiled to himself at the smooth feel of the slow ride. He’d used more lubrication than necessary, but that was fine; he was more concerned with hitting his prostate than having too much friction on the mouth of his ass.

Below him, Erik was beginning to thrust up to meet him. He looked good with his eyes closed tightly and his jaw cracked with strain: handsome and vital. Seeing Erik wrapped up in such ecstasy he could forget that a bullet had stolen part of his mobility, that his scars were a product of torture.

He could forget, but he didn’t.

Keeping his fingers laced tightly with Erik’s, Charles sat up, pulling Erik’s hands up in the process. Using his hands to push down on Erik’s and his strong thighs to rise up, Charles began to ride Erik. The change of angle brought Erik’s cockhead in contact with Charles’ prostate, just as he’d known. He closed his eyes and let his head fall back with the sensation. He moaned long and loud.

Charles increased his pace, rising up on the strength of his thighs only to drop down until his ass slapped against Erik’s thighs. He hit his prostate again. Another moan, louder this time, escaped his lips. He built up momentum slowly, rubbing growing waves of sensation into his prostate as he drove down on Erik’s prick.

Erik was increasingly responsive. At first he tried to keep his gasps and growls quiet, but the tight squeeze of Charles’ asshole stripped the façade from him. His breathing was labored and his left hip
led increasingly powerful drives to crash into Charles’ thighs. His skin was heated and sweaty. His long fingers dug into the backs of Charles’ hands.

The slap of Charles’ ass against Erik’s thighs came faster. Charles didn’t even feel the burn in his thighs, just kept rising up and slamming down. When he felt his legs begin to tingle slightly, he cultivated the growing wave of pleasure that was growing within him. His breathy vocalizations became words as he got closer to the precipice.

“Fuck yes, don’t stop,” he cried. “Oh, Erik. Fuck me. *Fuck me hard.*”

Laboring hard for breath through gritted teeth, Erik growled a response and tore his hands away from Charles’. He reached down and seized a tense handful of each of Charles’ bruised and sensitive ass cheeks and yanked him down hard as he thrust up.

A yowl of pain and pleasure escaped Charles from the further abuse of his ass: Erik’s fingers were digging hard into his flesh. With his newly freed right hand Charles took his cock, with the left he reached back and grabbed Erik’s right wrist for further leverage. “Ah God, *don’t stop!* Fuck me! *Harder!*

Pulling on his cock only made the prostate orgasm that much more potent when it came upon him. Shouting incoherently as it began to crest, Charles sank his blunt fingernails into Erik’s wrist and slammed down repeatedly, erratically, with no mind at all for rhythm or anything else. His vision went dim when it rolled over him. He lost much of his coherence as heavy ecstasy steamrolled and lit him up like a live wire. Charles shouted more than Erik’s name, but most of it was nonsense.

Below him, Erik was driving savagely up into him, snarling and gasping like a beast as his own orgasm came over him. Charles heard his name and smiled serenely as they both lost control.

The last of his convulsions had passed and warm euphoria was settling deep in his limbs when he once again had claim of his body. His ass was aching pleasantly, inside and out, and his thighs were burning from exertion. Overall, though, he felt amazing and overwhelmingly worn out. Catching his breath was his main concern, though he half wanted to just rub his body all over the bed like an animal. His sides heaved as he regained his breath.

The bed shifted as a weight settled next to him. Charles’ eyes snapped open; he hadn’t even noticed Erik get up.

“Awake?” Erik rumbled, amusement clear from the twisting corner of his normally inexpressive mouth.


Erik jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the bathroom. “Tossed the condom and washed up. You could use a wash, too, and we should strip the sheets.”

Charles shook his head and wrapped his arms around Erik’s arm and pulled him down. “No. Post coital bliss first.”

Erik’s shoulder hit the mattress near Charles’ head. He snorted and pressed a kiss, a chaste press of warm lips, to Charles’ temple. “You don’t know what you said, do you?”

Charles frowned and clung all the harder to Erik’s bicep. “Do I want to know?”

“You didn’t say the wrong name this time,” Erik smirked with gentle derision. He bumped his head gently against Charles’ in reprimand.
“I said the wrong name?” Charles looked at Erik, dumbfounded. “God, that first night was nothing but greater and greater idiocies on my part. What did I say this time?”

“You proposed,” Erik snickered.

Charles’ jaw dropped and he stared at Erik wide-eyed before covering his face with his hands. “Are you meeting me at the altar or did you break my heart?”

Erik pulled Charles closer; he could feel Erik’s smile against his temple. It was the only answer he received.

The next morning Charles woke to the smell of sex and the sound of rustling paper. Before opening his eyes, he inhaled deeply to appreciate the mélange. Despite the lingering scent of cigarettes, it was not unpleasant.

“Guten morgen,” he heard from Erik. From the sound of his voice, he was above him. And amused. Eyes still closed, Charles smiled and stretched underneath the sheet that only covered half his ass and wrapped around one leg. He knew Erik would appreciate the sight. Even if his body wasn’t as well-honed, the way Erik had devoted himself to his ass obliterated any doubts.

“Mmm, German…” he sighed, opening his eyes to the diffused light from closed blinds. Erik was still naked, sitting up, his back to the bed’s headboard. He had both legs drawn up casually and his head bowed as he read something. The black brace was still on his knee.

Charles found the sight immediately arousing. Erik reading naked could be his new kink. He already had morning wood, but the fantasy of Erik reading aloud while fucking him brought his hard on an extra rush of blood.

But then he saw what was in Erik’s hand: an unfolded sheet of paper with what appeared to be German writing on both sides. The fantasy slipped away as did all the excess blood in his cock. It was one of Erik’s letters from Germany. It struck him that it was the property the Black King had that Erik could not buy, fabricate, or steal.

Charles wanted to ask who it was from or what it contained, but he was afraid to know the answer. If the letters were from his mother, it meant Erik didn’t know she was dead. He wondered if Shaw knew. The letters never went to Erik’s Phoenix address, so it stood to reason that Erik had never provided it to the writer. Perhaps, then, it was not Erik’s mother, but an associate? Why then letters rather than email? It was also mysterious.

“You know, I can see some of the writing on the other side of the letter,” Charles said cautiously. “I’m not trying to read it, but I want you to know.”

Erik turned his face from the calligraphic-looking script and quirked one corner of his mouth in sarcastic humor. “You expect me to believe you went through my nightstand without looking at my letters?”

“You’ve always made it clear,” Charles replied, a rising anger coming into his voice, “that your letters were your business. I’ve never attempted to read them. Not when I was a boy and not now. Besides, I never learned much German. Your loss made it too painful.”

Erik lowered the letter to his naked thighs. He was quiet and still as he looked Charles’ expression over. It felt like he was searching for a key to unlock his mystery. Evidently, he saw something that agreed with him; he nodded. “After the job, we’ll talk about this.”

Charles forced a smile onto his face. He knew it was weak and that Erik could tell the same, but Erik
wouldn’t know why. No, he didn’t want it to be true, but he’d lied to himself enough lately: the letter was very likely from Erik’s mother. There was nothing he could do, no way to tell him; the only thing was to make sure he was there for Erik when her death came to light.

“Would you like breakfast? I may not have ceviche, but I have an uncanny mastery of omelets,” Charles asked, trying to sound more upbeat.

Erik reached out his left hand and ran his fingers through Charles hair. “I’d like that. I’ve got some cylinder heads coming in today and I want to start researching the job, so I’ll have to leave soon after. You’re welcome to come along.”

Charles turned to press his lips to Erik’s palm. “Later. I have to go by the university first. Before that, though, I want you take Raven’s number; she told me she’d like to have you back in her life.”

Erik sighed heavily, “I’ll get unlimited texting.”

“I’ll buy you a smart phone,” Charles promised, biting at Erik’s artistic fingers.

“No, I’ll just break it,” Erik snorted, taking his hand back. “Smart has never equated unbreakable.”

* 

It was nearly noon by the time Charles took his bicycle off the apartment’s balcony and pedaled to the university. He felt good despite his tender ass. Other than his backside, he ached in all the right ways; a sweet sort of sex hangover from the night before and then showering with Erik after breakfast. There was no pressing business at the university he had to attend to; they were still nowhere near the summer term. He really only wanted to check in with Hank then get back to his apartment to field the eventual call from the FBI agent.

Locking his bike up, Charles made his way straight to the physics department’s TA desk. It was a pleasant surprise to find Darwin taking lunch with Hank. It was also extremely convenient.

“Hello, gentlemen,” Charles grinned, snagging another chair and pulling up to Hank’s shared desk. He did his best to sit in the least painful manner possible. “Lovely to see the two of you.”

Darwin was the first to respond and he did with typical teasing familiarity. “Professor Xavier, I hear you dropped the Q-bomb of charm on the lion after you pulled the thorn from his paw. Decided against the student body, huh?”

Chuckling, Charles dropped a hand on Hank’s shoulder. The young man blushed with guilt. “I do prefer big game hunting, Mr. Muñoz, but I can’t imagine where you would have heard such a thing.”

“It didn’t seem to be a secret,” Hank returned, suddenly taking great interest in the sandwich in his hand.

“It isn’t,” Charles reassured. He squeezed his shoulder and let go. “Did you get my note?”

Hank nodded. “I’m sorry about that. You’re the only person I know in that office, so when I was up there the other day, I got into your desk for sticky notes. I put it back.”

Charles shrugged nonchalantly. Internally he was so relieved he felt a substantial weight lift from his
mind. Knowing the agent’s number was safe was almost better than sex with Erik. “Good, I haven’t the best memory for numbers.”

“And neither of you have any sense,” Darwin drawled, rolling his eyes. “Common sense isn’t so common when it comes to you academic types. Though I suppose Hank’s doing better than you, Professor. Alex doesn’t have anyone trying to kill him.”

The commentary led to Hank sinking his head even lower and flushing all the darker with embarrassment. It was adorable, but Charles opted not to join in on the teasing; he wanted Hank to be comfortable, after all. “I’ve been meaning to ask you, do you know if there’s any footage left of the parking lot altercation? Stryker threatened me with it last week.”

Thoughts of teasing and feelings of embarrassment were largely forgotten as both men focused on Charles in alarm. Darwin was the first to shake his head. “That must be why he stopped bitching about you. He thinks he has something on you. I’ll check, but technically I’m a driver, not security.”

“I deleted the clip I had for the problem set,” Hank added, “but I’ll see if there’s anything else. I might be able to check into Stryker’s files, too. Emphasis on ‘might’.”

“Thank goodness,” Charles smiled, easing back into the chair out of relief and to find a more comfortable position. He was pleased Darwin had come up with his own line of reasoning concerning Stryker backing off; he certainly wasn’t going to correct him. “I wouldn’t want my conduct outside of work hours to reflect badly on me. I doubt the faculty back home would care, but I’d hate to lose out on a year of living near my sister.”

“And running around with a notorious motorcycle thug,” Darwin teased again. “But, I’ll do what I can. I didn’t say anything at the time, but I was impressed with how far you went to get the Civic back when you thought Alex stole it. That took cojones, Professor. Idiocy and cojones. You aren’t what you seem and that’s probably why Stryker doesn’t like you.”

“I know,” Charles winked and placed his arms behind his head. “I look like a romantic comedy darling, am extraordinarily brilliant, and I have a devastating right cross. Plus, I’m filthy rich. What isn’t there for a curmudgeonly security guard to hate?”

“You’re wealthy?” Hank asked. “I didn’t know that.”

“Hank,” Darwin snorted with a roll of his eyes. “The man bought a new Trek mountain bike when he got here, just bought a European street fighter, and he drives an Acura TSX.”

“The Acura is leased,” Charles grinned, kicking his feet up on the desk. “He was relieved to find the transfer of weight to his tailbone freed the ache, if not the sting, from his ass. “If either of you ever want to go out on the town, I will treat you a lovely time.”

“If you get anymore full of yourself,” Darwin said, shaking his head, “I’ll start to worry the whole campus will feel the explosion when somebody pops that ego.”

“Did I mention, Mr. Muñoz,” Charles went on, feeling like a king with his court, “that my gorgeous sister is currently quite single?”

Darwin raised an eyebrow, “Does she come with a trust fund?”

Charles nodded solemnly.

Darwin picked up his coffee with his pinky extended, and nodded back. “I say old chum, shall I clear my schedule for a spot of tea with the young miss?”
They were all still laughing when Charles swung his feet back down and headed back up to his office. He found the sticky note with the FBI agent’s number on it, he was relieved. He also had to laugh again, because Hank had scribbled equations all over it.

It wasn’t until Charles was halfway home, Rachmaninov’s *Moderato Allegro* dictating his speed, that he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He stopped pedaling to check the caller. It was an undeclared number: MacTaggert. He unlocked the screen, accepted the call, and pulled an ear bud out to hang down on his sweat-damp t-shirt.

“Yes?” He greeted, momentarily happy for the classical still playing in his left ear.

“You get that mysterious thing worked out, Professor?” Came the agent’s curt voice.

Charles coasted to a stop. “I’m sorry if the call isn’t clear; I’m on the side of a road. Yes, I do have something for you, but this is it. No more.”

“Are you compromised?” Agent MacTaggert asked patiently. “Do you need help?”

“No, it isn’t like that,” Charles answered. “There’s nothing more I can do without passing an acceptable limit of risk and… and trust.”

“That’s reasonable,” she replied in a matter-of-fact tone. “So let’s hear what you have.”

“Last night, your air race attendee visited either the DeerValley or Glendale airport.” Charles stated in near monotone. “Left around 10PM or so.”

“That might help get an ID on the plane. Anything else?”

“No,” Charles affirmed. “No more. If it were just my safety at stake, I’d do whatever you like and damn the consequences. However, anything that can be traced to Phoenix implicates my friend. Identity means nothing if he’s dead.”

“Then we’re done,” she replied. “You aren’t going into my reports, but I can’t promise you the passport. I won’t make a promise I can’t keep.”

“Are you ransoming his identity after you told me to keep out of trouble?” Charles hissed angrily. “I thought better of you.”

“Understand this,” she returned evenly. “At this point, it could be that you are no use to me whatsoever. Frankly, you’re cutting our communication before I know. Even if your info is good, it may not advance my aims. I’m not risking my neck to get your boyfriend a passport until I know your intel is good and that it is worth the risk.”

Charles’ voice was a strange combination of demanding and pleading. “Try, please,”

“Please stay out of trouble,” the agent replied before the call ended.

Charles stared at the phone, motionless but for the traffic’s movement whipping his clothes and hair about. Then he deleted the photo of her number and his call history. When he got back to his apartment, he burned the sticky note, too.

*
Charles hid from the heat and sun in Erik’s house’s living area for weeks and did very little work. Only a few tweaks on the research paper he was co-authoring with one of his Oxford colleagues. No obsessive revising of his syllabus for the looming summer term. No communication with the TA he’d recently acquired.

Mostly, he sucked up Erik’s AC, watched National Geographic, participated in enthusiastic sex, and considered writing sociology papers on the interaction of Erik’s club and the various members of PMS that came and went. More importantly, he observed Erik conduct business both semi and completely illegal.

The semi-legal business arrived early on weekends or weekday afternoons. People of all kinds, but almost universally tattooed, would bring Erik whole sport bikes, engines, or fork tubes. Erik didn’t like taking in whole bikes, he didn’t have space to spare, so he levied a storage fee of $20 a day to discourage the practice.

The few people Charles spoke with were interesting and from wide fields of work. Most of them were road racers, some were what Erik called squids, but with connections to PMS. Some were from Arizona and California chapters of Ruff Ryders.

The Ruff Ryders usually brought in just their engines. They had enough entrepreneurial spirit amongst them to pull engines, but trusted Erik to work his magic when it came to his main claim to fame: cylinder head porting. Erik’s reputation was such that he could charge exorbitant prices for his work; all payable in cash.

The porting work was noisy once Erik completed welding the original intake and exhaust ports full and began cutting the new ones by hand. The die grinder was high-pitched and loud even when Erik shut his small shop up and ran the exhaust fan. Due to his late night job, Alex slept with earplugs when Erik told him he’d be cutting.

Some nights, Alex didn’t come home from U-Haul at all, which was fine with Charles since it often led to spontaneous sex in the public areas of Erik’s house. Sometimes in the semi-public of the pool. Sometimes in interesting situations, such as a precarious blow job on the R1 when Charles had attempted to wash the bike on the back patio.

Erik’s clearly illegal activity involved surveillance of the Harley’s current residence, researching security systems, and having Alex stop by the dealership that had it on display. Erik had even made a trip to the security agency that covered the dealership, posing as a potential customer.

He planned when and where to take one of Alex’s work trucks for the heist and which of the trucks would work best. Erik wanted a tight fit; it would make the truck look far less conspicuous if it didn’t look it could hold the rig. According to the specs Shaw had provided, there would only be ten centimeters to spare. Erik devised his preferred plan and several contingencies. It was going to be, Erik mused, nothing more than an elaborate smash and grab should things go wrong.

Charles was further pleased when Erik took up a texting relationship with Raven. The communication with Raven culminated in three visits; one expressly to show Erik how different she could make Charles look with things as simple as color contact lenses, bronzer, and facial hair. The second visit turned into a riot when the three of them went drinking together. Raven began sending incriminating photos and video to Angel. Photos and video that breathed new life into the PMS crew’s trolling.

The battery in Charles’ phone had not survived the evening due to all the texts and videos, especially when Raven began uploading the same photos to Facebook and tagged him relentlessly. His peers in Britain began to message him just as doggedly as PMS after that.
Later, he’d untagged himself and demanded Raven delete all the pictures that included Erik. He knew Erik wouldn’t like his face all over the internet. Additionally, he wanted to give Agent MacTaggert time to possibly come through on identification for Erik before he made their relationship public to anyone outside Phoenix.

The third visit found Raven and Charles in Erik’s bathroom, applying make up the Friday morning before the Sunday night ‘job’. They could both hear Erik in his shop grinding away at another cylinder head, despite the central air and Raven’s phone playing her collection of electro-clash on shuffle. “I swear Charles, I should be playing Ministry or something to cover that noise up.”

“You’ve outgrown Ministry,” Charles smirked, just to be annoying. “You get used to the noise after awhile.”

“Oh, shut up you smarmy bastard,” Raven snorted. “I really wish I didn’t have to give you facial hair. People are so often clean-shaven these days. No ironic hipster beards in the insurance business. Alex says their normal guy doesn’t wear it.”

“But I’m not the normal guy,” Charles shrugged. “I’m the trainee. Erik’s called them this week just to verify with them that I might need a little help to find all the VINs. It won’t take them long to figure out I was part of the job when they make an insurance claim on Monday.”

“I know,” she shrugged. “At least you look ridiculously hot with facial hair, you insufferable jerk. Erik’s going to jump you when he sees. Actually, even though you’re my brother, I’d definitely be a fan if you two want to do amateur gay porn. I’ll do the fluffing for Erik. Can I even get my mouth around that thing, Charles?”

“Are you asking for permission or a reproductive curriculum vitae?”

“Nope, this is a genetics question,” Raven grinned. She put down her brush and leaned back to observe her work. “Is a big dick dominant or recessive? What is that even called in Latin or whatever? I want to ask guys that with a straight face, like when you pull that heterochromia thing on girls with hazel eyes.”

“It doesn’t sound as impressive,” Charles smirked, “to ask somebody if they have magnus penis, does it?”

Raven made a distasteful moue as she smoothed a bit of rakish mustache down on his lip. “Nope, not using that. Anyway, how much lube does it take, Charles? Do you need enough lube that you’ll slide uphill?”

“Did the die grinder quit?” Charles asked innocently. “Because if it has, you can just ask Erik.”

Raven’s brow rose in curiosity. She hadn’t noticed the die grinder stop, but she was hardly unflappable.

“Ask me what?” Erik asked as he came down the hallway. He paused in the doorway, shirtless, filthy and sweaty in a manner that had Charles flipping through a mental index of kinky sex. No longer a stranger to Charles’ kinks, Erik gave him a slow knowing grin.

Raven seemed similarly stricken, though she chose to protest in comic style, while peaking through her fingers. “Oh my God, Max, put a shirt on. My virgin eyes!”

Erik’s smile fell away instantly. “Don’t call me that.”

Before she could apologize or snark further, Erik turned away as quickly as he’d come and resumed
his path to his bedroom and, likely, en suite bathroom.

Raven huffed a small sigh. “What’s his problem? I used to call him Max all the time.”

Charles shrugged. “I don’t really know. We both know that name, but he doesn’t like it anymore.”

“Oh, you must be Robert.”

*Except I’m not,* Charles thought to himself. He smiled at the mildly tattooed woman as if the dark brown contacts didn’t obscure the inviting blue of his eyes. “Yes,” he nodded and handed her one of the cards Sean had filched from the insurance agency six weeks prior under the pretence of applying for a job.

Normally, Erik didn’t include anyone beyond Alex in heists, but this one was special. When Erik admitted to his club that he thought it might be the last, everyone wanted a part to play. “Shouldn’t take more than an hour or so, ma’am.”

“No problem,” the older woman nodded, smiling just a little. He knew the look; she was looking at him like he was somebody’s cute little brother. Obviously the facial hair was doing wonders for him in the realm of Harley working culture. “Your manager called to let us know you might take a little longer than usual.”

Charles nodded amiably. “I’ll try to stay out of your way.”

“There’s no pressure,” she shrugged. “Just make sure you ask for help in the storage area, if the bikes are packed too tightly for you.”

Charles flashed her a bright smile despite himself, “If I get into any trouble, I’ll take all the pictures and write the claim in your favor myself.”

The woman snorted and nodded, “As funny as that might be, just ask for help anyway.”

Internally chagrined at his instinctual flirting, Charles nodded mutely and started for the front of the dealership. He didn’t want to be memorable. If anything, he needed to be the exact opposite of memorable. Also, the more he spoke, the better the chances his accent would slip.

Erik and Alex had observed at other dealerships the insurance agents started in the showrooms, so Charles acted no different. Erik had found a used handheld device on ebay and had figured it out fairly quickly. Then he taught Charles how to use it for the sake of authenticity. Learning where to look on Harleys for their VIN numbers was comparatively easy; to deter thievery, modern Harleys had identification numbers stamped on nearly every part.

Charles moved around the dealership, happily invisible, as he entered VIN numbers from each motorcycle into the handheld like a good little insurance field agent. He moved at a brisk pace, absorbed in the deception, and attaining a natural-looking efficiency that would likely make him even more invisible.

It seemed to work; none of the dealership’s employees so much as glanced his way. Potential customers only asked him questions a couple times, and he easily deflected them to the real sales people on the floor. In addition to logging VINs, Charles also made notes concerning the security in place. Alex had done so two weeks prior, but he couldn’t get into the service or storage areas.

When he got near the ‘trophy bikes’ on display, Charles made a natural transition to check out the
old Harley XA first. Photos on the internet really didn’t do the machine justice. It had a strong presence within the dealership surrounded as it was by professional lighting, high gloss paint, and blinding chrome. It certainly looked the part for a desert fighter with the drab paint and vertically mounted rifle holster on the right. There was a rifle in the leather holster that Charles assumed, for insurance and common sense purposes, was unloaded.

As he’d been told, the bike was obviously regularly maintained. There signs of recent maintenance, and the tires had seen wear despite being only a year or two old. Charles checked the fuel gauge and saw it was holding about a quarter tank of gas. Erik had no plans to run the bike, but it was good to know it was maintained.

Charles turned to the other trophy bikes next, trying to spend the same amount of time on each, but was impatient to move to complete the other two parts of his reconnaissance mission: closer looks at the security system and important keys.

Erik had sat him down for an hour to discuss motion detectors, or passive infrared sensors, as he called them. It seemed to Charles that the dealership was full of them. As he noted placement, he became increasingly concerned. There were several of them and they consistently overlapped.

The weakness of some sensors was the inability to sense a moving object coming straight at them. However, with the overlap of sensors, even if Erik moved straight at one, he would necessarily be moving across the vision of another.

When Charles moved into the back, past the service area, and to storage, he saw fewer of the sensors, but they were still professionally placed. He was frustrated just looking at them. That did not deter him from the part of his mission they deemed the most delicate.

Charles walked up to the simple door that led to the storage room. There was a bay door on the outer wall, but a single door to allow easier movement. It eliminated the tedium of opening and shutting the rolling bay doors, if one wasn’t bringing a motorcycle over from storage. It wasn’t locked, but he made a simple show of trying the handle, anyway.

Cultivating a casual air, Charles walked back to the showroom to the sales manager and asked her for the keys to storage. She raised an eyebrow at the request, which set Charles’ heart pounding uncomfortably in his throat.

“Should have been unlocked,” she snorted. Then she reached into her pocket for a set of keys and, to Charles’ utter delight, picked out one. “This is the one. Bring them right back.”

“Okay,” Charles nodded, taking the ring by the storage key.

He walked back to the storage room and pretended to unlock the door and let himself inside. It was much warmer inside storage than the rest of the building; there was no need to cool it much with few people staying within for very long.

Once inside, Charles shut the door behind him and took pictures of both sides of every single key. It was the work of a couple minutes, but when he was finished, he took the keys right back.

Nobody seemed to notice any delay in the return of the keys and he only gave a vague thank you.

As he continued his work logging VINs, Charles noted the less secure bay doors. They didn’t seem to have any security measures beyond industrial-looking padlocks hanging in one of the many square gaps that appeared every twenty centimeters or so along the runners.

They would be impossible to open from the opposite side, so it was little wonder the bay doors had
no security in the face of the padlocks. Erik had expected that would be the case, but it was still disheartening to see it. He supposed Erik could always cut a hole in the doors, but that would likely trigger the infrared sensor, too.

When he was finished with the tight confines of the storage area, Charles stopped by the service writer’s office to ask if there were any dealership bikes in service. Receiving a no, he thanked the man and headed out the way he came in. He only paused in the show room to give the female sales manager a wave and a causal, “See you next time.”

*I better not see her next time,* he thought on his way out the door. Since next time was in a couple days at 2AM.

Charles casually took the rental car to a restaurant’s empty parking lot to change the license plate back to the original. Erik had been insistent that the extra layer of caution cover Charles, since he was the only person that could become a possible suspect to the theft.

In the car, he removed Raven’s handiwork. The contacts first, followed by the rakish beard and mustache, and then the bronzer. He frowned at all the freckles he uncovered. It didn’t matter how many people thought his freckles were attractive; he doubted he could ever agree.

Before heading out to the rental car lot, he shot Raven a text telling her everything was fine. It was her cue to meet him at the rental place.

It came as no surprise to see the Tacoma when he pulled up. He went through the necessary 360 walk around and paperwork before heading back out into the blazing heat that stood between him and the Tacoma’s air conditioning. Rather than move to the tight seat in the Tacoma’s half cab, Raven scooted next to Erik to make room for Charles.

She was grinning fit to rival Lewis Carroll’s famous cat, but waited to show her enthusiasm until Erik put the truck into gear and eased them onto the road. Charles also held back; he enjoyed watching his sister fidget. Erik, of course, was unaffected and kept his eyes on traffic.

“Well?” Raven finally demanded, her grin staying where it was. “How did it go? Any trouble?”

Charles cocked an eyebrow, “Are you implying that I would deliver anything less than a perfect performance?”

Raven pumped her fist and let out a whoop. “Pompous ass brother delivers another stunning performance!”

Charles nudged her with his elbow, which she returned with glee.

“Security in the service and shipping area?” Erik asked, business-like as always. He spared Charles an inquiring glance.

“Yes, well,” Charles sighed, turning back to Erik. “Not so many of the infrared sensors, but still placed in the worst of ways. Well, the best of ways if you’re the dealership. Of course, you’re the expert. The bike itself is in running condition; just as you and Alex said.”

“That might help get it into the box truck, but hardly necessary,” Erik mused, eyes back to looking ahead. “Pushing it in should be faster. Could save time when I make the delivery, though. Regardless, that’s hardly important. When we get back to the house, I’ll have you draw me a diagram of all the sensors and the back area’s floor plan.”

“Easy enough,” Charles shrugged. “I’d like to mention that while my faith in your abilities is
absolute, I don’t see a way to by pass their security measures. Even if I do have images of the keys, keys won’t bypass security codes or sensors.”

Erik snorted softly at Charles’ remarks. “You’re over-thinking it, Charles. I don’t even need the keys; that’s just a matter of professionalism. That’s why people like you should never be in the security business when people like me are the problem.”

Chapter End Notes

The Harley Davidson XA never saw action because the US military preferred the Jeep for desert combat. Also, while I’ve seen some extremely decrepit photos of them with side cars, this is one of the best photos I’ve seen. The extremely rare sidecar models may not have survived.

Photo © Jeff Dean
Chapter Summary

Professor Charles F. Xavier, PhD helps an illegal immigrant and a runaway steal a rare American motorcycle for a ranking member of the Russian Mafia.

Chapter Notes

I’ve taken a lot of liberties with the HD XA. For one, there is no passenger seat mounted in back like there was on the BMW R71 it was modeled after. It had a rack for a ‘light weight’ 40 lb radio instead. I now doubt there was an XA with a sidecar. I also ended up basing it almost completely on the BMW R71 it was modeled after.

*Much love to Eilidh* for kicking my ass when I returned to using epithets and who always helps me with German. (I don't know if it is apparent, but I redlined this chapter three times. All the others only got redlined once.)

Warnings: There's nothing here that I haven't warned for already, so please keep the tags in mind.

“Broken glass is luxury;
Friendly fires are alchemy;
Daylight is the enemy;
Witching hour, soft power

“We’re not sleeping at the wheel.
The wheel is turning the machine
that kills for us.”

*Soft Power*, Ladytron

The Ace of Spades, Thief of Hearts, and Suit of Clubs

Alex was in the back of the Harley dealership with wire cutters. Erik was up a pole, God only knew where, with insulated bolt cutters. Machete, Angel, Sean, Darwin, and Raven were up north at the Happy Valley AMPM waiting to meet them for celebrations after the drop off. Meanwhile, Charles sat a block down from the Harley dealership in a U-Haul box truck waiting for his signal.

He didn’t like waiting and he didn’t like sitting alone while Erik and Alex did their parts. He watched impatiently for his signal, which wouldn’t come until after Alex cut the phone line.

Erik’s plan was brilliant in its simplicity: the best way to defeat the security system was to deprive it of power and communication. The best way to keep the power disruption from being reported by the security system, since that was a possibility, was to cut the phone lines. So Alex had gone in first, the hood drawn up on his sleeveless hoodie and a black bandana over the lower half of his face, to cut the phone line. He would be the only one on camera.
For an added layer of obfuscation, Erik opted not to cut power directly at the isolated Harley dealership, but further up the grid. With the dealership closed on Mondays, there was a good possibility the theft wouldn’t even be discovered until Tuesday morning.

Charles’ reconnaissance mission had been less a matter of sensors and more a matter of service and storage room layout, with a little key duplication. Alex had the ring of keys Erik had cut from the images Charles provided.

The lights went out. There weren’t many lights in the area, as the dealership was on the outer fringe of the city, but the blackness at 2:30AM in the middle of the desert fell thick and velvety lush. That was Charles’ cue. He started up the truck and drove the short distance to the Harley Davidson dealership with a giddy level of apprehension.

*I am an Oxford graduate and professor with a PhD in life sciences. I have numerous works and publications to my name. I am often cited by leading thinkers in my field. And I am about to steal a rare American motorcycle for a ranking member of the Russian Mafia. What is my life?*

When he came around the back, he saw Alex with a penlight in his teeth and surgical gloves over his hands, going through the keys Erik had cut on Saturday. He had the dead bolt unlocked, but was still looking for the key to the door latch. He nodded to Charles as he pulled around and kept going through the ring without pause. He was like a mini Erik in focus.

Charles parked the truck with the back facing the closest bay door to the service entrance. He turned off the headlights, but left the parking lights on to make his job easier. Once he had the emergency brake engaged, he jumped out into the oppressively hot night’s stillness. It hardly cooled down in the evenings now, but the temperature was down from the afternoon’s triple digit heat.

Moving quickly, Charles ran to the back of the truck, threw up the rolling door, and pulled out the built in ramps. While he brought the ramps out on their runners, he heard Alex open the door.

“We’re in, Prof,” Alex commented, excitement an undercurrent in his voice. “You got the lamps?”

“You packed them, didn’t you?” Charles laughed. He pulled two LED camping lanterns from the truck and traded them to Alex for the key ring. He walked back for the other two and Erik’s metal flashlight.

Erik’s flashlight was a D-cell monstrosity big enough and battered enough to suggest its use as a bludgeoning device. He slipped it into the back of his jeans. The warm, rigid metal reminded him of waking up just that morning with Erik’s cock pressed against his ass. His mind was filthy when he was nervous. Any more nervous, though, and he’d be nauseous and uninterested in any amount of sex.

Alex was already inside when Charles came out of the truck again. He chased the receding light of the first lamp into the service entrance just as Alex strode into the showroom. With Alex’s lamp in the showroom, Charles turned both his lanterns on and set them down. Light sufficient to see by, he stepped to the closest bay door. He only needed to get one of the two open and it was the most convenient.

Charles pulled a pair of Erik’s surgical gloves out of his pack pocket, over his hands, and started picking through the keys. The padlock keys were the smallest and marked ‘M’ with an awl for the lock’s brand name, Master, but the members of Deus all said it was Magneto’s M-mark. Charles smiled as he thought of them and sorted through the keys for the M group. He unlocked the first with ease and placed it in the front pocket of his black jeans before going to the next.
Behind him Alex opened the two doors that separated the showroom from the service entrance. The light from the lamp he left in the showroom shown in and joined that of Charles’. “This thing is a bitch to push around. The handlebars keep turning to the right.”

Charles grinned and struggled with the second lock; the M key that fit best didn’t want to turn properly. “I’ve almost got this; I’ll be right over the moment it gives up.”

“Hey,” Alex barked, “don’t forget you’re the guy that decked Magneto and walked away. If you can do that and face down an asshole in a stolen Honda Civic, then you can open a couple locks.”

“Thank you for the reminder, Havok,” Charles called back, both proud and chagrined.

The stubborn padlock opened immediately after. Charles unhooked it and slipped it in his opposite pocket. He still needed to get the door open, but he wasn’t sure how to actuate it. Charles took Erik’s flashlight out of his jeans and searched for the button to open and close the doors. It was something he hadn’t thought to do during his reconnaissance mission. He hadn’t noticed any buttons at all.

Then he stopped. There was no electricity. Turning the flashlight up to the high ceiling, Charles studied the rails. How did they open the doors without electricity? Why hadn’t Erik or Alex covered this with him? Was he missing something painfully obvious?

Rather than waste time on the mystery, Charles spun about and trotted back to help Alex with the XA or, as Alex was calling it, ‘The Monstrosity’.

Alex was making slow progress, pushing with one hand on the sidecar and one hand on the passenger seat. Even in the cold glow of the lamps, Charles could see Alex’s face was flush with exertion. He would push the Harley a few feet before the wheel would turn and then he was forced to run up and turn the handlebars straight again. Push another few feet then repeat the process.

“Hate these things,” Alex huffed, as his feet scrabbled on the floor for purchase. “Stupid Harleys. Stupid Indians. Stupid Triumphs.”

“Leave Triumph out of it,” Charles laughed, earning a derisive grin from Alex in the process.

Alex ran to the left side to push from the handlebars while Charles pushed steadily on the sidecar. “I couldn’t figure out the door. I have the padlocks off, but it needs to be opened. I’m not sure how to do it with the electricity out.”

“You’re unbelievable,” Alex scoffed. “I take it all back; you should write manuals, not actually participate in real life situations. I’ll show you how to open it when we get over there.”

It was far easier to move the bulky motorcycle with the two of them working together. It was the work of seconds to maneuver around the bikes lined up and waiting for service and pull up to the bay door.

“Observe, Prof.” Alex stepped straight to the door and crouched down to grab handles set low to the floor. Using his legs to lift, he launched himself straight, throwing the door up as he went. It easily ran up, the metal wheels clanking along on their rails.

“Manuals it is,” Charles grimaced, embarrassed.

“Yep,” Alex laughed.

The opening door revealed Erik stowing his insulated bolt cutters in the back of the truck. He’d already stripped down to his grey v-neck due to the heat. The U-Haul was open and waiting, ramp
down. Charles laughed at the sight even though he was the one that had prepared it. Things were moving along smoothly; the result of Erik’s weeks of careful planning.

Contrary to expectations, a shadow passed over Erik’s face as he looked from Charles’ smiling face to the XA. His cool-colored eyes narrowed. This was the first time he had seen the XA in person and he didn’t seem to like what he saw.

Alex picked up on the expression and chuckled, “I told you it was a monstrosity. It weighs a ton.”

“Understatements both,” Charles remarked with a wink.

“This isn’t going to work,” Erik replied quietly, his top lip curling a bit in subdued disgust. He made his dissenting pronouncement with no hint of excitement or urgency. It was such an unperturbed statement that neither Charles nor Alex noticed at first and resumed pushing the Harley for the ramps.

Alex caught it before Charles and stopped. He took his hands off the bike and held one out to Charles in a gesture for halt. Charles’ brow knit. The problem that had the two concerned wasn’t readily obvious to him. If anything, perhaps it would be difficult to take up the ramps, but he was sure Erik had planned for that, too.

“No way,” Alex breathed, shock appearing on his face. He walked around to the front of the XA and looked from it to the box truck and back. Slowly, he shook his head in horrified disbelief. “It’s wider than the box. Holy fucking fuck. Did they fuck up when they put the sidecar back on? Did we get the wrong specs?”

Erik only shook his head in return. “We don’t have time to check. It doesn’t matter: short of removing the hack, there’s nothing that’s going to make it fit.”

“There must be a way,” Charles disagreed, echoing Alex’s shock and disbelief. He looked back and forth between the XA and the back of the truck. “Can you remove the sidecar? We can’t come this far to fail.”

Both Alex and Erik shook their heads. Erik said, “There’s no time to separate them.”

Charles felt his chest seize and his stomach drop. A deep-seated feeling of derealisation struck him through at the same time as intense nausea. This was one situation Erik had no contingency for. Charles didn’t want one miscalculation to scuttle Erik’s chance at freedom.

Erik stared at the Harley as he thought. When he looked up again he jerked his thumb at the open bay door. “You two clean up. I’m going to try to start the XA. If it turns over, I’ll ride it to the airport and the two of you will take my R1 in the truck. If it doesn’t start, we put it back and break into the office to make it look like a robbery.”

Like a good soldier, Alex didn’t hesitate to run back inside to start gathering up the lamps: they could use the truck’s headlights to put the XA back in if it came to that. Charles hesitated; he wanted to stay and help Erik, but what help could he possibly provide an experienced motorcycle thief in starting a sixty-year-old bike?

Instead of helping Alex or interfering with Erik, Charles stood helplessly and watched Erik limp to the R1 and retrieve his helmet, thin hoodie, and perforated leather jacket. He slipped the dark grey hoodie on and went back to the Harley to place the other two items in the sidecar before swinging over the military bike’s saddle. Even though Charles doubted Erik had ridden anything like the XA extensively, he didn’t doubt Erik’s confidence or experience.

It struck Charles that Erik’s height made the bike look far more manageable. Its low center of gravity
meant it would be no challenge for anyone to touch the ground while sitting it, but it was still a solid bike.

Erik sat down on the saddle and reached under the seat to turn the kick start out. He twisted the left-handed throttle to prime the cylinder with fuel and then cranked the kick start a few times. Satisfied with his preparations, he drew himself upright by the grips.

Charles held his breath when Erik bore down on the left-sided kick start. He was glad it wasn’t on the right side; Erik hadn’t taken any hydrocodone since that afternoon.

It started in one kick.

Laughing in relief, Charles called over the sound of the engine, “You’re aptly named Magneto!”

There was no answering smile. Erik barely nodded and immediately started familiarizing himself with the various features, such as the blackout lights. He reached down to each side of the engine and fiddled with the carburetors to richen the fuel mixture. “Put the R1 in the truck.”

Erik’s return to laconic seriousness concerned Charles, but he complied. Without Alex to help, he had to ride the R1 up one of the box truck’s ramps. It was nerve-wracking to ride the 1,000 cc bike fast enough to go up the ramp and then slam the brakes to avoid hitting the box’s wall, but he managed. Charles secured the R1 using the tie down straps and stand they brought for the XA.

Alex came in behind him moments later with all the lamps. “Don’t forget the padlocks; leaving things like that is amateur work.”

“Which I’m not?” Charles asked. He started to draw them out, when he heard Erik shift into first gear. Forgetting the locks completely, he ran down a ramp, concerned that Erik was leaving without them. However, Erik was only repositioning the XA away from the truck’s rear. Charles wondered how difficult it would be to get used to the XA’s left-handed throttle and right-handed clutch. Erik didn’t have any issues with the configuration.

Behind him, Alex ran the ramps back into the truck and yanked the door down. “Let’s go, Prof.”

Charles was frozen with indecision for the first few seconds. He glanced between the truck and the Harley. Alex gave him a questioning look and waved for him impatiently. Charles decided. He ran to the service door and locked the deadbolt and latch as Erik started putting on his jacket. Then, swift as a hare, went for the Harley.

“Truck,” Erik snarled, his expression equal arts anger and incredulity. Charles ignored him and swung up behind on the saddle-style passenger seat.

“We don’t have time to argue,” Charles said coolly into Erik’s ear. “I’m seeing this through.”

Erik leaned far to the left and began to reach back, likely to shove Charles off. Then changed his mind, perhaps thinking it was too much of a time-drain. He turned to Alex and shouted. “Keep ahead of me on the way out and follow once we get off the 101 onto the 17. Stay outside the PV airport when we get there.”

“Understood,” Alex called back from the box truck’s cab. He gave Charles a sharp look and shook his head in mild exasperation.

Mindful of the dealership air conditioning’s effect on the engine, Erik opened the throttle gradually, taking speed steadily and surely on the way to the highway. As he did so, he barked instructions at Charles. “Your weight is going to make us slower, but I don’t have time to struggle with you, so
make this worthwhile. Put on my helmet and if we have any trouble, be ready to jump into the sidecar. If you’re over there to counterbalance, I’ll be able to make up time by taking fast left-hand turns.”

Charles patted Erik’s shoulder in acknowledgment then squeezed it once, hoping to give reassurance a simple gesture normally couldn’t deliver. Erik had them on the street as Charles leaned and stretched to grab the iconic helmet from the sidecar. Once he had it, he shouted that Erik should wear it since he was piloting.

Either too angry or too focused, Erik continued his lack of replies. He continued to open the throttle, but was milking second gear for all it is worth to get their speed up as quickly as possible. Charles’ hair was dancing around his head with the wind when he tried again to get Erik to put on the helmet.

“No,” Erik finally shouted back, taking the highway ramp and shifting to third. “Put it on; I don’t want to chance my sponsor seeing your face.”

Stunned by the unexpected revelation Charles had no follow up argument. There had been no mention that Shaw would be present at the drop off point. He took Erik’s gloves out and shoved the helmet on immediately and without further complaint.

The Black King was going to be at the Pleasant Valley airport for pick up. If Charles’ heart rate had been high before, it was now beating against his ribcage in an unsteady and raucous rhythm. It took him several tries to get the chinstrap secure. Once he had his hands back on Erik’s narrow hips, Erik began to shrug out of his leather jacket.

“No,” Charles shouted. “You need that!”

“It looks suspicious for you to wear a helmet and no jacket,” Erik shouted back, “and for me to wear a jacket and no helmet.”

Charles huffed into the helmet, but acquiesced. As soon as he had it over his shoulders, he had to loosen all the straps along the waist to get it to zip up. He made a note to himself to get Erik measured for a custom jacket; he’d noticed all Erik’s leathers fit loose on his long, narrow waist. Though Erik had broken the leather in, the jacket fit Charles better.

When Erik had the bike at its top speed, a surprising 70MPH out of a bike said to only attain 65 at best, Charles passed Erik’s gloves up. These, at least, Erik did not argue over. He slipped them on and fastened them securely one at a time. It wasn’t like Charles could get his wider hands in them anyway.

Alex kept his speed up in front while Erik chased the truck’s bumper. He did his best to use the truck as a visual block against any oncoming traffic, since he couldn’t hide from vehicles behind them. The distinctive sound of the Harley’s BMW-inspired parallel twin engine echoed off the truck and bounced back at them. Charles found he didn’t mind it so much, though he much preferred his Triple’s unusual three-cylinder purr.

It was a remarkable night for a ride. At 2:45AM on a Sunday night, the moon was a waning crescent and there was nearly no traffic at all. Erik had known exactly what he was doing when he’d planned the heist. Still, the XA was an unusual bike and would be strange to be seen at nearly 3AM on a Sunday night. Charles didn’t fancy their chances should a random police officer decide to pull them over.

He began to breathe easier as they neared the 17. They passed few vehicles and no police cars. As they came up onto the ramp, the tension began to leak out of him at a greater rate. On the other side
of Glendale and out into DeerValley, the highway lights were few and very far between. If fuel held out, after HappyValley they would hit the blackness toward LakePleasant and the danger would be over.

On their way up the 17 and out of the city’s light pollution, they made their way through into the night with a full canopy of stars overhead. Charles sucked in a breath at the beauty the night sky offered and the coolness their movement produced. Breath coming to him far more calmly, he relaxed a little more as they passed the ramp for HappyValley: Raven and Erik’s club members were waiting just a roundabout and a block away.

Charles threaded his arms around Erik’s ribs and pressed his helmeted cheek to his spine. Erik lifted his right hand from the grip and patted Charles’ thigh firmly. It was both a reassurance and a reminder that they were not in the clear yet.

And it was well-timed. Due to the wind in his face making his eyes stream, Erik’s vision was severely limited. Charles saw the group of motorcycles on the overpass before him. Carefully, he patted Erik’s side and pointed over his shoulder toward the Jomax Road bridge as they left HappyValley and the AMPM behind them.

Erik ducked his head, wiped at his eyes, and squinted. Charles felt Erik’s muscles stiffen under his hands: he swiftly pointed at the sidecar. Heart rising back up to beat in his throat, Charles nodded. He hoped it was just Erik acting on caution, but as they neared the pass, headlights up top flicked on, brake lights glowed red. The cruiser-style bikes started moving.

It was nerve-wracking, but Charles stood up on the passenger pegs as they sped under the overpass. Using Erik’s shoulders to steady himself, he maneuvered his weight onto one peg and swung his other over to step onto the sidecar’s closest wall. Holding onto Erik’s solidly planted right arm, he backed his other foot out and over the sidecar wall.

Erik aided him by taking his hand off the grip to guide Charles as he stepped out. With Erik’s arm closer to the sidecar it was easier to step fully into it. Even so, he practically fell in under the force of the wind. Once within, and feeling acutely the bumps in the road, Charles turned back to see what was behind.

The cruisers coming down the frontage road were hard to see, blacked out as they were with matte paint. Even their chrome headers and collectors were black with matte paint or black fiberglass heat wraps.

Charles’ heart was incapable of beating more erratically, but his stomach could always clench again. 2:45AM was a strange time for a group of blacked-out cruisers to be heading up to BlackCanyon. Unless, of course, they were the group of one percenters Erik had been antagonizing since he first noticed the twin lightning strikes of the Nazi SS on their tanks. Their timing was remarkably suspect.

Erik reached for the rifle in the Harley’s holster and drew it out. From behind, Alex pulled into the right lane and began to drop back. He threw Erik a salute. Erik shouted at Alex, but there was no way he could be heard. Alex shrugged helplessly and pointed north.

Turning toward the truck, Charles gave Alex a thumbs up. In reply, the young man pointed at his blond head meaningfully and tapped his brow three times. Charles wasn’t sure if he was telling Charles he was smart or something else. He settled for nodding in reply and gave his attention back to Erik.

Erik’s jaw worked angrily: he was grinding his teeth. He flicked the safety off the rifle, pointed it one-handed into the air, and pulled the trigger. Nothing. It was shoved unceremoniously back in the
There was no way off the 17 between Happy Valley and Carefree. They were stuck racing up the straight shot until they got to Carefree Highway and its back road twists and turns. It was a safe bet Erik would go for the twists, because taking the straight path to the airport only played to the strengths of the faster cruisers behind him. Of course, the motorcycle they were riding was every bit a cruiser, too, despite the BMW-style engine.

With Alex behind them Charles couldn’t see the fast-gaining motorcycles entering the highway. He did not miss Alex placing his cell phone to his ear as he continued to drop back. Charles dared hope for reinforcements from Happy Valley. It was a tainted hope, for even as Charles watched Alex make the call, he wondered if somebody in Deus or PMS might have sold Erik out. Or, more likely, if Erik’s sponsor had sabotaged them, because he had no intention of releasing Erik from bondage.

Alex’s encounter with the SS continued a theme of vehicular destruction Charles had witnessed from the start of their relationship. The U-Haul truck wasn’t agile, and it wasn’t particularly bulky, both of which made it a substandard block. Alex did a good job of slowing down and weaving back and forth, to keep the SS back, but slowing down made for longer gaps for the more adventurous of the riders to punch through. Three made it past by gauging the timing or, perhaps, luck.

A fourth rider was less lucky: the U-Haul’s front bumper tagged his rear wheel as he tried to follow the third. Charles turned quickly forward as the bike fishtailed and then reared up on the front axle, fit to go tumbling end over end into the desert. He didn’t want to see what became of the biker. Charles pressed one hand, still covered in a surgical glove, over his mouth and nose. Without a helmet or any other protective gear, a crash at highway speeds was almost always fatal.

Charles squeezed his eyes shut momentarily. The SS were stupid, yes, but he didn’t believe they deserved to die. He looked back again, trying to get a glimpse of Alex; how would Alex handle being involved in a death? Even if he felt he was playing the part of a protector, causing a death was still life-altering.

It stayed on his mind as Erik flicked the Harley’s headlight off and the diffused blackout lights on. Erik squinted against the wind and the darkness assaulting them. Between the squinting and the wreck behind them, Charles figured Erik needed the helmet far more than he: it was crucial to sight and safety.

Alex’s gesture suddenly came clear as his fingers came up to unbuckle Erik’s iconic spade helmet. If there was anything the SS would twig to, it was Erik’s trademark helmet.

Caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, Charles thought to himself. The helmet would protect his head in the event of a crash, but it would be the target in the event of a gun. He left it on.

As he knew Erik must, they took the ramp for Carefree Highway. He didn’t brake further back than he would on the R1 even though the XA’s drum brakes would require extra room. No, he was braking very late for the left-hand turn, which was terrifying considering their weight and inefficient brakes. When Erik finally hit the brakes, the only thing that had slowed them was gravity.

The XA took the turn at a speed that shocked Charles; Erik would never take a corner on the R1 like that. His eyes widened in fear. Erik wore his terrible intensity of focus; he went into the corner hot. He leaned hard to the left, hanging out over the left cylinder head as he started the turn. It was like he intended to take up sidecar air cruising.

Which, in fact, he did. The sidecar lurched up from the asphalt and into the air; it creaked menacingly. Charles leaned hard to the right to keep the hack from going any higher. It rose despite his efforts, but likely kept the bike from rolling outright. It felt like a splintering turn on a brutal old
wooden roller coaster.

Charles had an uncomfortably close view of the concrete wall when the sidecar came back down. He looked back, stunned, and then the sidecar hit the asphalt again and he was jolted and thrown gracelessly against the sidecar’s forward rail. He bit his tongue when his head hit the rail, but wasn’t hurt thanks to the helmet. He’d have to tell Erik about the hit to the helmet’s brow; he’d get Erik a new one.

“Pay attention next time!” Erik shouted at him and hit the throttle. “I need you to counterbalance!”

He forgot about counterbalancing when he saw the cruisers coming up the ramp behind them. One or two of the three Harleys closest to them likely had turbochargers, Charles mused. He gripped the sidecar’s walls as the SS came at the turn. The first biker performed some hard braking, and though he fishtailed a bit, he kept the rubber side down as he made the turn.

The bike behind him didn’t do as well and went wider through the turn than Erik or their first pursuer. He hit the overpass rail with a bang. It was too dark to see what followed, but Charles suspected the rider went over the side. His bike went sparking along the concrete rail without him.

There was still one SS member on their ass and a second further back. The first biker was close enough that his headlight, set to bright, lit the way before them. Erik traded secrecy for better vision and turned the blackout lights back off and headlight on. He reached to the back of his jeans, pulled out his handgun, and held it out to Charles. Charles made no move to take it.

Erik gave him an incredulous look and roared: “Shoot them!”

“They’re just chasing us!” Charles shouted back. His shock at the command to kill turned to anger. “I’m not shooting at somebody that hasn’t shot at us first!”

Between the wind noise and the lack of volume, Erik’s virulent swearing in response was largely lost on Charles. He gestured at the XA’s handgrip. “Then take the grip so I can!”

Charles shook his head and yelled back. “No! I will not help you commit murder! That’s behind you: you are better than this!”

“Damn you! This is self defense!” Erik shouted over the wind, his expression enraged and wild. “They’ll shoot at my helmet, Charles! At least shoot his tire out!”

Erik’s words were made real: Charles heard the popping crack of small arms fire from behind them. He startled at the percussion of metal on metal as a bullet hit the rear of the sidecar. A pop and another crack as a second hole, closer to Charles than the first, appeared in the sidecar’s metal. Charles stared in horror. As feared, the SS member was shooting at him due to Erik’s helmet.

“They’ll kill you, Charles!” Erik snarled in his rising fury. “Das ist kein Spiel!” Charles knew it was fear that made Erik violent, that made his lover over in the image of his fury. It was a sword to kill and to fall on.

Regardless of efficacy, Erik turned and shot several shots behind them, his hair blowing around his face as the wind took it against the grain. Disadvantaged in sight and position, none of the bullets connected with either of their pursuers.

In the face of the SS’ blood thirst, Charles passed over the threshold of terror and found himself strangely calm. He looked back at the two bikers behind them and considered taking Erik’s gun and squeezing off a shot. He had never taken an interest in guns: movies and novels were the extent of his experience. All he really knew was that a handgun was far less accurate at distance and he didn’t
fancy his chances at shooting out a tire without hitting the rider.

Instead, he reached into one of his pockets and pulled out a heavy Master lock from the Harley dealership. Amateur mistake indeed. The biker wasn’t wearing a helmet, which nearly stayed his hand, but he quickly rationalized while he couldn’t shoot someone in cold blood, he also couldn’t be held hostage by another’s stupidity. Charles slung the lock, not really sure what the results would be, but thinking that the speed and weight of probable impact would likely be serious.

He missed. There weren’t any sparks to show him how far off his aim had been. As dark as it was, he hoped he would do better on the second throw. He aimed for the headlight and heaved the second, and last, heavy lock into the distance.

The lock did not hit the headlight. It hit something on the handlebar and bounced out into the darkness. The biker lost control for a moment, his handle bars wavered, but the rake of his bike was too steady to cause him much more damage. He did, however, lose his handgun and his grip on the throttle in his mad grab to steady the bike.

Charles felt more satisfaction than triumph. Then the other SS member surged abreast and past his comrade and that satisfaction faded. Charles turned and half stood to grab at the empty rifle in its leather holster; intending to throw it, too.

And that’s when something hit his right tricep with enough force to spin him violently around.

He was already in an awkward position, off balance and half-standing to take the rifle, but the force that threw him reversed his reach out toward the shoulder of the two-lane highway. Charles knew he was going over; he was falling outside the sidecar. He heard the rush of the wind in Erik’s helmet and Erik’s voice, yelling something unintelligible.

He supposed, as his head and shoulders dove past the sidecar’s edge, that it was a good thing he was wearing Erik’s gear after all. Perhaps he would survive.

Oddly, his forward momentum seemed to slow, his fingers were whipped, surgical gloves tattered, by scrub grass. Then he was yanked backwards by the edge of Erik’s Alpinestar’s jacket, and the sidecar was heading off the road. Erik was directing the XA into the desert. It made sense; the XA was built for desert warfare, even if it had never seen it. The Harleys behind them were not.

There was a tremendous crashing and suddenly he was slammed back into the sidecar; limbs akimbo and confused. His right shoulder hit the side of the car closest to the bike and pain bloomed white through Charles’ vision. Behind them there were several more pops of small arm fire.

It happened suddenly. The sidecar’s tire went out and they jerked hard to the right. Erik did his best to counter steer to the left. Charles leaned toward Erik, hoping to lessen the load on the hack’s wheel rather than let it become an anchor for the Harley to drive around. Then the XA’s rear tire was hit and they fishtailed violently through the dirt. Charles saw Erik try to force the handlebars straight, but there wasn’t enough adrenaline in the world to fuel his desperate measures at their speed.

Charles watched, his instincts prepared only to take cover, as Erik’s expression went from fury to focus. He managed to force the handlebars to the left and hung out and over as if he was racing his R1. His left knee crashed through the desert scrub. The line he forced the XA to take brought the sidecar up and Charles had no time to counterbalance; he doubted Erik even meant him to. They were going to crash and Erik was trying to control it.

The sidecar swung up even as the XA’s left cylinder head plowed into the heat-blasted desert earth at more than 50 MPH. The Harley’s body shrieked and groaned as the engine head dug a line through
the desert floor. Then there was a colossal quake and bang as the XA collided with something. The heavy bike was forced into a violent stop. Then all was spinning, blurring, and ripping metal because the sidecar hadn’t hit.

The sidecar swung around, dragging the axis of its orbit along with it, and plowed into the same huge and solid thing. It wasn’t a rock or metal, but a huge organic object that absorbed some of the force of the impact. Charles’ head hit the rail harder than before; this time the visor cracked. However it was his right arm that lit up his nerve endings with agony. Charles’ scream was every bit an instinctual pain release valve.

Dust and dirt flew all around the XA in the night. Charles found himself in a glowing cloud of orange that encompassed the sidecar and part of a saguaro trunk. The dust, illuminated from the highway by a single headlight, was too thick to see below to the XA itself. The notion ‘below’ itself was an odd thing to consider.

Then the car was falling, sliding at angle in order to complete its arc to the ground. The car’s slat-style suspension bounced once. It rocked Charles and slammed his shoulder again. The pain was great, but he grit his teeth against the flood of agony. It finally sank in that a bullet had pierced his arm.

He didn’t care about his arm or the bullet, though, because he did not see or hear Erik. Erik had managed to keep the sidecar from crashing at speed, but that hadn’t been the case for the Harley. Worse yet, he wasn’t wearing a helmet or any other gear beyond his gauntlet style racing gloves. The possibility of death or critical injuries was already a grim specter that had reared up in the past few minutes.

“Erik?” he asked, voice atremble. He crawled out of the wrecked sidecar and scrabbled over the wadded up metal of the XA. The smell of burning oil and leaking gasoline was saturating the dust cloud.

Searching frantically, though his head spun and his arm grew increasingly wet inside Erik’s leathers, Charles scrabbled on all fours through the slow settle of desert dirt. Behind him, he heard another pop and a bullet ricocheted off the XA, off into the desert night. Charles didn’t know if they were trying to hit him or the tank. He bit his lower lip and tasted blood; he had to find Erik.

“Kike! Hey, Kike!” Came the rough voice of one of the men from the direction of the headlight. “You dead? Say something! You eat so much dirt because it’s free?”

Charles grit his teeth against the desire to yell back and shuffled through the sage and brambles. Erik hadn’t died in the ZX6’s explosion a decade ago and Charles wasn’t going to let him die this time, either. When he found him, he promised himself, he would yell at Erik for always invoking the wrath of other assholes: it was a bad habit.

Visibility with the lit dust cloud was almost nonexistent and worse closer to the ground. Charles had no luck until one hand fell on dusty denim over the warm contour of a calf. Erik’s form was loosely crumpled at the base of the giant saguaro they’d hit.

“Erik,” he gasped and choked on the desert dirt.

More handgun fire lit up the night. Charles’ shuffled up along Erik’s unmoving body. Bullets ricocheted off the Harley, sank into the tires, and slammed into the huge cactus. Charles had no time to check Erik for injuries and the situation was too dire to take care in moving his head. Grunting against the pain in his right arm, he seized Erik’s lax form under the knees and shoulders and stood. He didn’t care that it made him a larger target, only that he could get Erik away from the gunmen.
faster.

Charles made it several steps past the saguaro before a bullet sparked the XA’s fuel vapor. The Harley’s tank exploded and the night sky was illuminated in fiery orange. The blast bowled Charles over. He went down in a tumbled knot of arms and legs, half of which were not his own.

The helmet’s visor collected dirt in the process, making it an efficient blindfold: he slammed it back in frustration. Half snapped off along the crack for his efforts. “Bloody stupid fucking thing!”

The pop of small arms discontinued after the explosion, but Charles untangled himself from Erik and picked him back up again. He made it a fair way from the Harley before he fell, this time tipping forward when he overbalanced Erik’s weight. His flight hadn’t been aimless, though. Charles successfully kept the saguaro’s tall body between them and the SS members. If they continued to shoot from near the road, he and Erik would be relatively safe.

Charles did not get up right away. Fingers clawing in his haste, he managed to unlace the strap from Erik’s helmet and pull it off. The desert wind immediately swept away the heat that built up in the helmet without airflow to drive it away. He dropped the helmet to the side and tried to get a good look at Erik’s face.

The dimness out in the desert not far from Lake Pleasant was almost complete with only a sliver of moon in the sky. Charles could only see that Erik’s face was dark with dirt and muddy with what he hoped was tears from riding without anything to shield his eyes. Erik still hadn’t moved or made any noise since Charles had found him.

“Be okay, Erik,” Charles whispered, stroking a hand through Erik’s sticky hair. He pulled Erik’s upper body up his thighs, to keep his head elevated in the very likely case of a traumatic head injury. Charles folded over Erik’s head momentarily, caressed then kissed his filthy cheek. “I want you by my side. I can’t do this without you. I can’t lose you twice.”

Eyes tingling, Charles uncurled from Erik’s upper body and lowered his hand to Erik’s lips and nose to see if he could feel his breath. It was hard to tell with the remnants of the tattered surgical gloves in the way. Furiously, he ripped the right one off and checked again. He thought he should be panicking, but Charles was oddly calm. He felt for Erik’s neck and the pulse at his jugular. Relief flooded him when his fingers detected the light jump of blood circulation.

Carefully, he felt Erik’s face. Half his face was warm and covered in dry dirt, the other half was covered in sticky, wet mud. Erik’s nose didn’t feel straight, his lips were wet and felt swollen as if from kisses Charles hadn’t given him. His mouth remained open, probably in order to breath if his nose was broken.

Charles continued to pat Erik down, trying to blindly discern the extent of his injuries. Erik’s hooded jacket was gone. His short-sleeve shirt was ripped apart and his chest and left arm were clad in more sticky mud.

Stretching over Erik’s torso, Charles reached lower, across strips of dirty cotton. He only got as far as the belt cinched tight across Erik’s hips. The only consolation Charles could find in his helpless inventory of damages was that Erik had probably been in much worse condition on the DVD. Erik had needed a doctor then and he needed one now.

Charles took his hands off Erik and patted himself down. Where had he put his phone? He needed Alex. He needed Angel. No, Machete was whom he really needed; she was one of the people waiting at the Happy Valley AMPM.
He found the phone in his front jeans pocket. The glass covering the LCD felt laced with cracks, but he prayed it would still work. It didn’t.

Thinking quickly, he wedged a thumbnail between the cracks and pried pieces of glass up and tossed them aside. When he had a section clear, he tried again. Nothing. Desperate, he tried the knuckle of his left hand ring finger, which was still covered with the remnants of his remaining surgical glove. The screen illuminated.

The problem with illumination, though, was that it had the potential to give away their position. He grabbed Erik’s helmet and thrust the phone inside to swallow its blue light. It was unnecessary: a moment later he heard voices and then one Harley engine. The beam of light that did not penetrate the saguaro’s two-armed shadow whirled around and headed slowly away. Its departure did not make Charles less frantic.

It was a nightmare, but Charles managed to get Machete’s number to ring. Unfortunately, the call went straight to voicemail. Still, he was calm.

“Hello, Machete,” he said with grave formality. “Please give me a call as soon as you receive this message. Thank you.”

Then he tried Alex. Alex’s phone also went straight to voicemail. Charles left the same message. Next was Sean. The phone went straight to voicemail. Charles hung up and tried Raven.

It rang once. “Charles! Oh my God, Charles! Are you okay? Where are you?”

Charles nodded habitually. “I’m fine. Erik needs immediate medical attention. Have you spoken with Alex?”

Raven paused before answering. Her voice was shaking. “Charles, your voice. You sound… weird.”

“Have you spoken to Havok?” Charles repeated calmly, reverting to club names, since he felt strange using a given name over the phone in the situation.

“No, we heard from Angel’s ex. Look, she and Banshee are on their way to you,” Raven said. “I’m with Darwin and Angel. Keep talking to me; you might be going into shock. Tell me if you’re hurt.”

“I broke his helmet,” Charles said slowly. He spat into his hand and tried to wipe the mud and dirt from Erik’s face. “I wore it so they’d shoot at me instead of him. It worked. He’s pretty bad. His jacket was ripped right off his body.”

“How are you?” Raven asked, voice becoming slightly shrill. “Look at yourself. How are you?”

“I can’t see myself very well,” Charles glanced down, but the saguaro blocked the XA’s fading firelight and the phone only illuminated his face. He returned to wiping off Erik’s hollow cheek. “I’ve got all my clothes on. I feel a bit odd: a headache is coming on. I think I’m fine other than my shoulder.”

Raven started asking about his arm, but the sounds of a V-twin and an inline four stole Charles’ attention from his sister. Headlights shone from the road then vanished.

“Oh, say, I hear something that isn’t a Harley,” Charles suddenly smiled, relief filling his system. “They must be friendlies. Call me back in five minutes?”

Charles didn’t wait for his sister’s answer. He hung up and slipped the ravaged phone into the Alpinestars jacket’s left hand pocket. Slipping his arms under Erik’s knees and shoulders, he tried to
gather him up and stand. The pain that ripped through his arm was blinding. A guttural cry and traces of spittle burst from his mouth. Relief from hearing the familiar engines had sucked away his ability to carry Erik.

His phone began to ring. Charles panted, eyes watering, and retrieved it. “Hello?”

“Havok here. I don’t see any SS.” Alex sounded like he was walking the razor wire of fury. “We’re right by the XA. Where are you guys? Let me talk to Magneto.”

“We’re behind the saguaro,” Charles replied, calm as before but still gasping in pain. “Come back here, I need help carrying him.”

The phone clicked and then he heard Sean’s voice loud and clear. “Marco!”

Charles blinked rapidly, his mind going back through the years to his late stepfather. Then he understood what Sean was doing. “Polo! Sean, back here!”

He saw the illumination of Sean’s phone as he used it to guide his way, then the brilliant beam of Alex’s LED penlight. Charles waved at them, eyes squinting against the small torch. Both boys kicked up the recently settled dirt in their rush to get to him.

Under the cold glare of the bright penlight, Erik looked horrible. There was blood everywhere; even his hair was sticking up with it. It mixed and congealed on his face with dirt where Charles’ fingers had done nothing but leave bloody streaks. The ripped grey v-neck was black and dark red with blood and dirt. One eye was swelling shut, his lips were broken, and his nose was crooked. There was too much muddy blood to even see where he was bleeding from, though the amount of blood suggested a scalp wound.

“Fuck,” Alex coughed. “Fuck!” Behind him Sean gripped the front of his shirt with his free gloved hand.

Both young men hit the dirt on their knees at Erik’s side. Alex immediately sought Erik’s neck for a pulse, Sean’s hands touched Erik’s chest and then hovered like miserable birds over him. “Is he going to be okay, Prof?”

“He’s a thug. Remember?” Charles replied firmly, willing himself to believe his own claim. “Most of the blood is probably rash from sliding across the ground. He probably looks worse than he is. Alex, give me the torch.”

“Get his legs, Banshee,” Alex grated and thrust his flashlight at Charles. “You guide the way, Prof.”

“Yes,” Charles nodded and moved aside to entrust Erik’s head and shoulders to Alex’s care.

Alex reached under Erik’s shoulders and picked him up, while Charles helped support his head against Alex’s chest. Considering his previous flight and falls, worrying about a spinal injury seemed too little far too late. Sean hooked an elbow under each of Erik’s knees and hefted.

Machete was putting out the last of the fire with the box truck’s extinguisher when they carried Erik out of the brush. Her dark face turned all the more angry as her sharp eyes swept over them. She tossed the fire extinguisher on the ground and ran to open the box truck’s passenger door.

“Pinche Erik,” she snarled, taking his legs from Sean. “You stupid, stupid, cholo; I told you two months ago the SS got affiliated.”

“There’s a tarp behind the seat,” Alex said to Charles. “Set it down so we keep the blood off. I can
Charles nodded and pulled the blue tarp out and unfolded it in the seat while Sean pushed the seatback as far down as he could. Working diligently, they settled him in the seat. Machete stole Alex’s bandana and pressed it over Erik’s hairline above his right eye where the blood appeared to be coming from. Charles grimaced through agony and settled Erik’s legs inside.

By the time they had Erik’s long limp body installed in the truck, they were all covered in muddy blood. Charles went through Erik’s pockets for his phone. He found it in pieces, with fragments imbedded in his thigh.

“He always breaks his phones,” Charles suddenly choked. “He had pagers in the Hellfire Club because he would always break the phones. He knew where all the payphones were everywhere we went.”

Machete grabbed Charles by his chin and forced him to face her. “He’s going to break a lot more phones after tonight. We’re taking him to my sister-in-law; she has a clinic that deals with illegals’ emergencies.”

Charles jerked away. “I can’t go yet. Sean, I need your bike.”

Sean looked at Charles like he was crazy which was largely deserved, Charles thought. “No, you need to ride with Erik to Cupcake’s aunt’s clinic.”

“The Black King is expecting the delivery to be there at any moment,” Charles said with quiet firmness. “Do any of you have his number? Can you call and tell him we won’t be there? I’d rather he didn’t come down on Erik for failure to deliver in a timely fashion.”

Both young men looked away. Machete spat on the ground. “Who is this Black King? Is he Erik’s affiliate?”

Charles shook his head. “That’s his business; take it up with him. Erik’s phone is obliterated and his contact is waiting at the airport for the bike. Somebody has to go there and it might as well be me.”

“Alex will drop me at the Happy Valley AMPM. I’ll be waiting with Angel, Darwin and your sister to take you to the clinic.” Sean muttered, “I’m taking your Triple, if anything happens to my SV.” He took out his key and handed it to Charles. He didn’t bother giving him his gloves; they both knew they were too small.

Charles nodded, thinking he could just buy Alex a new SV should he survive the encounter with Erik’s sponsor. He leaned into the truck’s cab as Sean climbed over Erik and held him securely. Not dissuaded by the fresh blood on Erik’s forehead, Charles’ pressed his lips to his brow. But for the blood trickling down his face and neck, Erik didn’t move.

Charles wiped the red from his lips with the back of his left hand and looked up at Sean. The young man’s eyes were troubled, but determined.

“Take care of him,” he said. “And tell Raven not to worry. I’ll be there as soon as I can. Alex, please don’t get pulled over.”

Machete snorted, “With my crew running interference, Havok won’t have any trouble getting to Lupe’s clinic. Vámonos! Highway patrol might be coming.”

There was just one more thing he needed. “Machete, do you have a gun?”
The harsh woman’s eyes narrowed, but she reached inside her black leather jacket and retrieved a large handgun. Charles noted that it was much warmer than body heat could account for. “Take it for self-defense, mijo. Killing Erik’s affiliate here in Phoenix? That’d be bad, even if it got blamed on the SS’ affiliate.”

Charles nodded, determined to make his own decision about whom he would or would not kill. He checked the safety and shoved the gun into the waistband of his jeans as he ran for Sean’s turquoise SV. Blood smeared across the green helmet from the rivulet coming down his right sleeve when he placed it on his head. It made the throttle slick when he started the engine and took off.

Erik’s blood ran across the back of his left hand and the wind made beads of crimson blood from the stream coming down his right. He left a scattered red trail in his wake, created by carving a path through the desert air.

He had completely different blood on his mind: he was certain Shaw had set them up. It was impossible to believe the SS’ presence could be a coincidence. One way or another, Charles was determined to free Erik from the Hellfire Club. He didn’t fancy himself a murderer. Normally he would let the law take its course with a criminal like the Black King. However, in this case, Charles was sure the law would fail to protect a criminal illegal alien; that was the part he had to take into his own hands.
What Comes of Dealing with a Devil

Chapter Notes

I didn't take a break between chapters, this one really just took hours and hours of labor (I would guess I have more than seventy hours in this one). It also took up Tahariel's time, too, as she edited this installment repeatedly. I was so braindead that one of the paragraphs herein is mostly hers.

Thanks as ever to Eilidh, for helping me with the German.

Another thing; I've been lucky to receive fanworks from several amazing people.

Synekdokee: Charles kissing Erik's Aces helmet

Tehslowone: Photo manip/collage from tehslowone

Clarounette: NSFW image inspired by Strict Machine.

And, believe it or not, there's now a podfic in production! You can find Occasionallyundulyformal's first chapter of her Strict podfic here. I sort of think she's crazy (in a good way) for undertaking a 125K+ word fic.

"I’m waiting in the gaps in between
allegedly unprotected
I’m waiting for the new language
that that will be of use to me

"I’m waiting for the dopamines
that have been internally promised
I’m waiting for the vision
that the film finally begins..."
Ich Warte, Einstürzende Neubauten

What Comes of Dealing with a Devil

The Black King, formerly known to Charles as the Black Bishop, had been a specter throughout his association with Erik. Charles had never seen him or his much remarked-on girlfriend, Emma, personally. He knew the man was considered both brilliant and terrifying, but the closest he’d been to him was his handwriting; namely the sick pun he had written as a title on Erik’s copy of the snuff DVD.

The DVD was his best insight into Erik’s sponsor. On film the Black King was smart, conducted himself legalistically, and appeared to be a sadist with a sick sense of humor. No matter the scale of his ambitions, Charles imagined they were uninhibited by morals. People like Erik were nothing but tools to him, judged on a constant scale of utility.
Charles wove Sean’s Suzuki SV650 along the dark highway’s curves with some difficulty; his right wrist didn’t always move on the throttle the way it should. Rather than dwell on it, Charles wondered whether the Black King would even be waiting at the airport.

If the Black King wasn’t there it would be obvious he’d set them up. After all, even if they hadn’t encountered the SS, there was still the matter of the erroneous XA measurements he’d provided. Part of Charles wanted the Black King not to be there, for fear of the outcome: Charles had a heavy pistol tucked into the waistband of his jeans and enough anger and hatred to use it. If it came to that, he knew he’d have to kill Shaw and anybody with him, Machete’s warning be damned.

Maybe he would have to shoot himself, too. But, then, what about his connection to Erik? How many people in the Russian Mafia still knew about Erik, considering his sole duty seemed to be stealing motorcycles for Shaw? Was it possible that Erik would take the blame? Charles couldn’t stomach the notion. Even if he didn’t kill the Black King, would there be retaliation to come from Shaw’s LA rival?

Second guesses fought with anger in a war waged in Charles head and heart. He continued to struggle with conflicting thoughts as he got closer to the Paradise Valley airport which, despite the name, didn’t reside within the PV city limits at all.

Charles rode into the airport without any problems; Erik’s black jacket hid the bullet hole and blood well in the night. He was similarly uncontested when he neared the personnel entrance to the tarmac. Charles frowned within his helmet: obviously a motorcycle was not unexpected. That made the Black King’s presence far more likely.

Once inside the small airport’s grounds, Charles wondered momentarily how he would find the correct plane. His worries were unfounded. There was only one plane out on the tarmac; a sleek commuter jet with two tall figures talking beside it. Taking things slowly, as to appear as non-threatening as possible, Charles kicked Sean’s SV down into second gear and made his approach.

Both figures turned Charles’ way as rode SV toward them. His heart rate sped up again. Adrenaline began to sweep his blood clear of lethargy: Charles recognized one of the two men.

He was one of Max’s fellows in the Hellfire Club. Charles had always been secretly terrified of the grim man. He was tall, his long black hair was slicked back from his brow; his eyes were a more startling blue than Charles’, placed as they were against swarthy skin. But it was the scar, the deep scar that divided his face vertically from the center point of his right eye socket, that he recognized more than the blue eyes or black hair.

Max had always warned Charles to not attract the man’s attention. Accordingly, Charles had avoided him and never even learned his name. Now he was staring right at him as his mouth moved into an uneven twist of suspicion. The man crossed his arms casually over his chest: Charles did not miss how the move placed one hand inside his unbuttoned jacket.

The other man was older, handsome, his expression unexpectedly mirthful, his brown hair dusted with silver. Laugh lines bracketed his eyes and mouth. Though the lines and expression on his face suggested a man with a healthy sense of humor, it was his calculating gaze that said otherwise. While Max’s frightening friend wore black, this man wore beige linen. Had it been morning, he would match the backdrop of the desert landscape.

Charles killed the SV’s engine and coasted the remaining distance. He came to a halt several meters away and pushed up Sean’s visor. The act left a smear of blood on the visor’s lip. Charles began to worry he would have to try to shoot Machete’s pistol left-handed.
“Well, good morning,” the man, likely Shaw, smiled. “Where’s Max?”

And there it was, the reason Erik hated that name: the Black King was probably the only person who called him Max anymore.

“He’s being taken to a doctor,” Charles replied, trying to sound as American as he possibly could. *Robert. Channel Robert and say as little as possible.*

“And the Harley?” the man asked, showing no apparent concern for Erik’s well being.

“Totaled,” Charles said. He flicked his eyes away from the man toward the thug next to him. Was he the pilot or a dedicated bodyguard? Maybe both? Charles’ confidence in his planned violence eroded further. He would have to reach behind his back to retrieve Machete’s gun, but if the thug had a gun under his hand it would be no contest.

The man, Shaw, caught Charles’ look and smiled slow and wide. It was an easy observation when the helmet covered all of Charles’ facial features except his eyes. “Why don’t you take that helmet off, son? You might want to wipe the blood off; I hear it impedes visibility.”

Charles swallowed. If he took Sean’s green helmet off, the scarred man could recognize him. “I just came to deliver the news since Erik couldn’t.”

The smile remained, but the Black King’s eyes turned cold and ruthless. “You seem to be suffering from an unfortunate misconception: I don’t make requests.”

Moving slowly, Charles lifted his hands to the chin strap. It took work to fumble the strap loose of the D-rings with numb fingers. He considered throwing the helmet at the black-haired thug as soon as he had it off. Maybe it could give him a chance to shoot Shaw.

Once the strap was undone, Charles pushed up on the edges. Taking the helmet off his head proved another fit of agony. The moment the helmet cleared his forehead, a sharp metal point pressed into the hollow behind his jaw and beneath his ear.

The scarred man had closed the distance between them while his eyes were covered in the process of removing Sean’s helmet. Charles wished it were a gun jabbing his skin; knives were infinitely more personal. The knife was sharp, but once the threat was apparent, the thug scaled back his pressure enough that Charles doubted a new point of exit had been made for blood flow. Instead, the tip of the blade etched a promise of pain and death into the vulnerable skin.

“What’s your name, son?” Shaw asked congenially. His cheerfulness was a disturbing counterpoint to sharp point at Charles’ throat.

Charles didn’t look the Black King’s way: he and the thug stared each other in their pale eyes. He had to remember, but would he say something? Charles whispered, “Please don’t.”

The other man’s blue eyes narrowed, though Charles caught a flash of what might have been pity. “Doesn’t matter,” he replied quietly, accent deeply and horribly Russian. “His name is Charles Xavier.”

“You know him, Azazel?” The Black King asked sharply. Shaw obviously didn’t like surprises. On the other hand, Charles did like surprises, but this was a nasty one: Agent MacTaggert had named Erik’s contact Azazel. That meant Charles had known Erik’s contact almost as long as he’d known Erik.

Azazel kept the knife to Charles’ throat when he took Sean’s bloodied helmet. He hung it on the
SV’s right-hand mirror. Had Erik been there he would have snorted in derision at the placement. Had Erik been there, though, everything would be fine and Charles wouldn’t be weighing whether or not he should kill a gangster.

Azazel looked back at Shaw with a raised eyebrow once the helmet was out and away from Charles’ hands.

“No,” the Black King said. He shook his head in subdued astonishment and recognition. A chuckle of slow-rising delight followed. “No, don’t tell me! Is it little Charlie Xavier from New York State? What a surprise! This suddenly makes so much more sense.”

Charles turned his focus from Azazel to Erik’s sponsor. Amused delight was all over Shaw’s face and cruel humor in his eyes. There was nothing to say and nothing to do for Charles but bide his time.

“You’re all grown up, aren’t you?” The Black King laughed, walking closer. He headed for the left side of the bike. “Max didn’t mention you, but then he never really did, did he? So what do you do now, Charles? With a family and connections like yours, you must have made something nice of yourself.”

“I’m here to bargain for Erik’s freedom,” Charles stated firmly. He summoned as much authority into his voice as he could with a knife tip pressed into the hollow behind his jaw. The knife didn’t have to be pressed hard into the flesh to be threatening. The unvarying pressure it exerted on his skin was more effective than active pain.

“Oh, there’s no need for that.” The Black King grinned. He stepped up to Charles and the SV, close enough that Charles could smell the faint scent of Shaw’s expensive aftershave. “Didn’t you say the Harley was totaled?” He gestured to the small plane behind them. “Does that look like it could haul some American-made derelict? No, this is just fine.”

Confusion knocked Charles’ thoughts askew. He looked at the plane; there was less chance of loading the XA in the plane than the U-Haul. As an afterthought, he noted its designation; he no longer had a means to contact MacTaggert, but he couldn’t help the desire to take any advantage he could. “You never wanted it.”

“Astute observation.” The Black King shook his head, “No, I never did want it, but even as a boy Max always had an uncanny talent for pulling off the most surprising and audacious capers. I figured that even with the odds stacked against him, there was a chance he’d manage.”

Charles stared blankly at Shaw for a moment and willed himself to not ask why he’d set Erik up for failure. He desperately wanted to know, but asking why could bring him knowledge that would increase the chances of Azazel’s blade piercing his skull.

With tension and pain winding him up, Charles startled slightly when his phone began vibrating from within Erik’s jacket. The jump meant a self-administered jolt into the knife. The pain brought him new clarity. He didn’t make a move to answer it, though he desperately wanted to see if it was someone with word on Erik’s condition.

“Do you want to know what happened?” Charles asked hesitantly, steadfastly ignoring the phone. It stopped after a few more rounds, but the ache from the knife remained.

“Of course, but first—” the Black King paused and, startlingly fast, seized a handful of Charles’ sweaty hair, “—you should really answer my question, Charles. What do you do?”
Charles’ eyes bolted wide. Thankfully the motion pulled him away from Azazel’s blade. Shaw’s hold was not painful; if anything the firm tug on his roots was not unlike the solid grip Erik often took during foreplay. It was not a comparison Charles was pleased to make. Even less so when the Black King placed his free hand on Charles’ cheek and patted in bizarrely gentle encouragement. Charles tasted bile.

Brain short-circuiting with mounting horror and disgust, Charles backtracked in the conversation. Did Shaw want to know his profession? Of course he would: the Black King wanted to know if he could kill Charles without raising questions. “I’m an Oxford professor of life sciences. I teach, research, and publish my findings. I’m well known in my field.”

A less dangerous expression of surprise; Shaw’s eyebrows drew up. He pulled gently on Charles’ hair and leaned in so close that his breath caused the sweaty skin of Charles’ cheek to prickle with chill. “Was that so hard?”

Unable to find his voice, Charles shook his head slightly. He started to inch his bleeding arm down, hoping he could get his hand closer to Machete’s pistol.

“You’ve done well for yourself, haven’t you?” The Black King released Charles’ hair, but didn’t withdraw the hand on his cheek until he’d delivered another disconcertingly gentle pat. “But you still enjoy slumming with Max. You’ve been a good influence on him, I’ll give you that.”

Charles stopped moving his hand down and said nothing. He stared and tried to think about anything other than the Black King’s invasion of his personal space or the blade that was sharing his body heat. “Not until he took that bullet for you, of course.” The Black King shrugged. “We kneecap runners, Charles. Did Max tell you that?”

“Max never told me anything. Are you going to shoot me?” Charles asked, and was proud that his voice did not waver. He had no interest in talking about Erik’s torture, especially not with the man who had ordered it.

“I don’t get much opportunity to shoot professors. However, while that would be fun, Max wiped your slate clean. Too bad.” Shaw shook his head and reached into his blazer. “In fact, I’ve something for you to give him.”

Charles leaned away in the SV’s saddle until he felt Azazel’s hand on his back; his knife followed Charles’ neck with uncanny accuracy. Shaw withdrew an envelope from within the blazer and held it up in front of Charles’ face. “Take it with your left hand, Charles. Your right is covered in blood. You don’t want to get blood on Max’s things, do you?”

Glancing at Azazel first, Charles reached for the envelope. It was unmarked. He took the envelope in his left hand and awkwardly folded it in half in order to slip it into his back pocket. His hand brushed Machete’s pistol as he did so.

He could do it. He could shoot them both. Even if Azazel slit his throat, he could still do it.

The handgun’s grip remained foreign to Charles’ hand. He made no move to grip it. Had the Black King really said Erik was free and Charles’ slate wiped clean? It didn’t seem real somehow, like it was all too easy. But then, had it ever been easy? The XA was a burnt-out wreck, he’d been shot, and Erik was a mess. The Black King had set Erik up on a mission doomed to fail as a bitter token of his displeasure.

“Tell me how it played out,” Shaw prompted once Charles returned his hand to the air.
“There’s not much to tell,” Charles answered. Both his arms were tired, but his right was a scaffold of agony. “The XA’s specs were incorrect, so it didn’t fit in the truck. Erik decided to ride it up here, which you probably suspected. A gang that hates Erik saw him along the way and attacked. I think we took out two of them, but they shot out the sidecar’s tire and then the XA’s rear after Erik took it into the desert off Carefree.”

“Not surprising.” The Black King snorted. “Old Harleys are even slower than the rest of that American trash. Little wonder they caught up, German copy or not. Max is a talented rider, but he couldn’t go cross-country soon enough. The highway being where it is, he had to wait until he got across.”

Charles paused to consider Shaw’s words. He hadn’t thought about Erik’s strategy at all; he hadn’t had time. “You knew how this would go.”

The glint of the airport’s lights reflected off Shaw’s too-white smile. “Of course I did, Charles. I’m not a gambling man. Other people, well, can’t say the same for them.

“This is the second crash Max has gotten in with you around, isn’t it? This time, though, you didn’t run. Well done. Personal growth agrees with you.” He nodded with natural condescension. “Now, you better get to Max’s doctor, son: you’re looking a little pale.”

Charles felt Azazel’s knife come away from his neck before he saw the intimidating man take a step back. Charles nodded mutely to him, though he wasn’t sure why he bothered.

The weight of Machete’s gun was still at the small of his back, but he was no longer tempted to use it. What good would it do? Even if the Black King had set Erik up as a cruel gesture, Erik was free of the Hellfire Club. He thought back to Erik’s mention of the terms for his freedom. Hadn’t the stipulation been that the XA be delivered? Perhaps he hadn’t meant delivered so much as destroyed.

“Tell Max we’re done.” The Black King chuckled. “Go on now. I’m sure he’ll be happy you survived meeting me once he’s done being angry.”

Moving in slow increments, Charles took Sean’s helmet off the SV’s mirror and pulled it over his head without fastening the straps. The blood on the visor was dry and blurred his view, but he made no move to clear it.

He turned the key in the Suzuki’s ignition but without sensation in his thumb, it took him a few tries to hit the start button correctly. Several agonizing moments later he finally managed to bring the twin engine to life.

An attack of nerves struck Charles once he turned the handlebars and started to pull away. Never had his back felt so broad and exposed. The space between maneuvering the bike away and hitting the throttle was filled with the expectation of Azazel’s knife severing something vital. The short distance from the plane to the personnel gate was an eternity of waiting for a bullet to the back.

When neither came, it was almost worse; he had the feeling that the other shoe had yet to drop. He couldn’t say why; Erik was free, after all. Though, what kind of freedom would it be if he couldn’t get identification? What kind of freedom would it be if he didn’t survive the crash?

In a growing daze, Charles took the more winding route from the airport to Happy Valley. He didn’t want to chance riding by the crash site, for fear police would stop him and notice his injury and all the blood. Erik had sought to avoid leaving fingerprints by having them use his surgical gloves, but that didn’t matter now: his blood was a far more damning calling card. For that reason, he hoped Alex or Machete had picked up Erik’s helmet and the broken piece of visor.
Charles felt sick and heavy by the time he finally hit the first roundabout on the west side of the 17. His arm was still in agony and his fingers were numb. To make matters worse, his wrist continued to give him trouble. Neither issue would have been a concern were it not his throttle hand, where careful modulation would be necessary should Charles meet more of the SS.

On the bridge between the two roundabouts, he looked up north into the stifling desert blackness for emergency vehicle lights. There were none; Sunday mornings, Erik had explained, always saw the least traffic. Of course, there would be even less northbound traffic, since most people would be heading into Phoenix, not out. There were no headlights in either direction.

Past the second roundabout Charles had a good view of the AMPM, but didn’t see Darwin’s Civic in the lot. He slowed down to look around the mostly deserted area. He saw the black Honda on the other side of the street, in the mouth of the road that led to the large Happy Valley shopping center. With the theft devolving into violence and death, there was little doubt why Darwin had moved the car away from the twenty-four hour gas station’s cameras. There was also the not inconsiderable fact that Sean had Erik’s blood all over him. Even hidden behind Darwin’s tinted windows there was a chance he could be seen.

Darwin, Raven, and Sean emerged from the car as he pulled in. Sean got to him first: he held the SV as Charles all but fell from the saddle. Raven seized him, tears streaming down her cheeks. Behind her, Darwin approached with a pack of gauze.

“Charles! You stupid bastard!” Raven said fiercely, holding him close. He smiled inside Sean’s helmet despite the pain she caused. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“I’m fine,” Charles sighed softly. “I’m fine, just a bullet in my arm. Any word on Erik or the police?”

“How bad is it?” Raven finally pulled back, her wet eyes narrowed with anger at the sight of all the blood on Erik’s jacket: there was no telling how much of it was his or Erik’s. She let Darwin move in to help Charles remove the jacket as carefully as possible. “Those fuckers. Alex said he knocked two into the desert and that you and Erik managed to take out two more. They didn’t even go back to help the ones that went down, the assholes.”

“We haven’t seen them come back, anyway. They probably went up to Black Canyon,” Sean said. “We haven’t seen any police, but that’s not surprising; it’s really dark and desolate past Happy Valley. I’m going to call it in after we leave, if I can find a pay phone.”

“And PMS is out making nuisances of themselves to keep most of the police busy so Alex can get to Lupe’s clinic faster,” Darwin continued. “Thankfully he and Erik did something about the U-Haul’s speed limit governor or that truck wouldn’t get over 70 MPH.”

After Darwin had the jacket off, he helped Charles press the gauze against the entry wound while Sean worked to pull his helmet off Charles’ head. It wasn’t a pleasant process; the edge of the helmet’s padding dragged painfully against his ears as Sean pulled. Once free of the helmet, Charles let them pack him into the back of the Civic.

“I think we only took out one,” Charles said after some thought. “The one that hit the rail.”

“But there was a Harley on the side of the road past where you guys crashed. They wouldn’t have left it unless it couldn’t be ridden,” Sean scoffed. “How did things go at the airport? Can you tell us anything that won’t get us in trouble?”

“Let me think a bit before I say anything about the airport.” Charles shifted, trying to get comfortable in the backseat, but it was a challenge to avoid getting blood on the upholstery. “Do you have any
Darwin and Raven got into the Civic while Sean did his best to clean the blood off his helmet and right grip. “You guys should get down to Lupe’s clinic,” Sean suggested. “I’ll catch up!”

Darwin gave Sean a salute and started the Civic. Taking the car at a sedate pace, he pulled out and headed west for the 17. “Erik came to,” he said, easing the car along the roundabouts. “So that’s good, though Angel and Alex were having a hard time with him last we heard. He’s in a lot of pain and was bleeding a lot.”

Relief undermined Charles’ ability to stay upright; he sagged heavily against the Civic’s back seat. Behind closed eyes he silently thanked the universe for whatever quirk of fate that had kept Erik alive. If Erik had come to, his brain was probably not as badly damaged as Charles had feared. Erik in pain was distressing, but consciousness was far better than the alternative. Charles breathed easier as tension born of worry dissipated from his chest. Erik would be okay.

“He sounded pretty energetic when Angel called me,” Raven winced. “But he kept using a lot of German, so we’re not sure what he was saying. Angel says he’s probably concussed, maybe worse.”

“Was it Angel who called me?” Charles asked. “Probably, I think she would probably have tried you first,” Darwin replied. “So, what happened at the airport, Professor? Any good news?”

“Yes and no.” Charles shook his head in bemusement. “I don’t really know. It was strange. Erik’s boss never wanted the Harley; he was pleased to hear it was destroyed. Then he told me he was releasing Erik. It seems too easy, but I guess it hasn’t been easy at all.”

“Charles.” Raven drawled and turned in her seat so she was facing him backwards over the headrest. “What about this was easy? You guys planned this for almost two months. You broke into a Harley dealership, stole an old bike, and then attempted to ride it out to the airport. On the way you were attacked by a bunch of bikers and you guys ended up crashing in the desert. You got shot and Erik is all fucked up.”

“Is he at the hospital yet?” Charles asked, immediately diverted the moment Erik was mentioned. “Give me your phone so I can check with Angel.”

Darwin glanced in the rearview mirror at Charles. “Good thinking. We should let them know you’re okay.”

Raven turned back to find her phone and hit Angel’s number before facing Charles again. He leaned forward so his cheek and her phone would meet in the middle distance. It only rang twice and then Angel’s voice erupted, choking a little with anger. “So help me Raven, I’m going to kill these bitches! They are so shitty! I’m sorry, but I totally told Celia and her sister that we’re dating, but Celia’s still giving me the stink eye and Lupe banished Machete and I to the parking lot!”

Charles reeled back. “Angel, this is Charles. We’re on our way to you. Are you and my sister really dating?”

“What?” Raven squawked. “Angel and I are fine feathered friends! So far, anyway.”

“Charles!” Angel exclaimed, and he momentarily pulled his head back from the phone to protect himself from her volume. “I’m so glad you’re okay! We were really worried! Sean called and said you got shot! I told people here you’re coming, but I don’t know if they’ll take you in right away when you get here. Raven promised to write a huge check to the clinic, so maybe you can get in faster. Alex says you’re loaded.”
Obviously Hank had told Alex about his wealth, not that Charles minded; he didn’t usually think about it. The money sometimes caused problems among his peers; there were those that sensed it as a barrier. He had long ago decided that it was their problem rather than his.

“Tell the people at the clinic the rumors of my financial situation are all true,” he said after consideration. “I’m sure a six-figure donation would do the place good, provided Erik makes a full recovery and you and Machete are treated with the respect you both deserve.”

“Way to throw your money around, Prof! I approve!” Angel laughed. “Hey, my battery is dying and I don’t have my charger. Is there anything else you need?”

“How’s Erik?”

“Word is he’s got a dislocated shoulder, broken clavicle, broken arm, maybe some cracked ribs, and a broken nose. He has a concussion, but the road rash is the first issue they’re dealing with because he’s lost so much blood,” Angel responded quickly. “They’ve put him under to scrub all the dirt out. He’s been pretty wild. Maybe he’s built up a tolerance to painkillers? As far as I know, he’s in no danger of dying, but he could need skin grafts.”

Charles paused, acutely aware of the slick surface of the phone Raven had pressed to his cheek, the smell of blood, and the lack of sensation under his right hand’s fingertips. Even without Erik’s jacket on, it felt hot in his dark short-sleeved shirt. None of the injuries sounded life-threatening but, skin grafts? Skin grafts sounded disfiguring and that made the reality of the crash far more real than the head injury.

Charles had seen, even experienced, road rash before, but he had never seen road rash so serious that skin grafts were required.

And then he remembered the acrid smell of burning flesh, the sound of garbled screams, and Max’s expression of contorted rage as he crushed a man’s face against super-hot metal. Surely skin grafts and reconstructive surgery had been required after that.

Following those images were more recent memories. The day Erik had stripped his shirt off in his shop to display his scars as a warning. Erik dozing in his boxer briefs, scars laid quietly across his skin. Their differing textures under Charles’ lips and tongue. Charles had seen many of Erik’s old road rash scars after they were made, but the extensive ones gained the night he’d crashed the ZX6 were the worst.

Charles closed his mouth. He swallowed past his constricted throat in an attempt to get some moisture back. Erik would be okay, that was all that mattered.

“Tell her we’ll be there in twenty minutes,” Darwin suggested. “Lucky for you, Professor, this clinic is sort of in your neighborhood.”

With some effort, Charles pulled himself from his macabre reverie and passed the timetable on. He nodded to Raven when Angel ended the call.

He wanted to focus on the joy of knowing Erik was free of the Hellfire Club and that his life was in no danger. For a moment, he sat still, trying to find the healthy enthusiasm he thought should be filling him with effervescent joy. In his head though, and under his tongue, the memory of Erik’s scars lingered.

“Charles,” Raven said from where she still perched facing backwards in her seat. Her eyes were dark with knowing concern. “Is everything okay?”
She was always so perceptive; one of the many reasons it was easy to love her. “Erik’s in no danger of dying,” he parroted, “and he’s free of the Hellfire Club. Just… I can’t seem to summon the elation I should be feeling.”

Raven reached a gentle hand back and touched his closest knee. “Charles, how many times do I have to say this? You were in a chase with a bunch of bikers, you got shot, and then you crashed. You also went and confronted a guy that probably even Erik fears. Don’t you think all that insanity could put you in an emotional coma?”

“That’s part of it,” Charles nodded. He wanted to touch the hand on his knee, but he needed to keep pressure on his right arm. “There’s just so much I don’t think I understand. Machete said the SS were affiliated, but I’d like to know by whom. For all we know, they could be affiliated with Hellfire. And with all that to think about, I don’t want to be distracted by the family drama at this clinic.”

Raven and Darwin both laughed at the last. Darwin opted to explain once he was done laughing. “Erik’s no stranger to Lupe’s clinic or that whole mess. From what I understand, Erik met Machete at the clinic while he had some kind of lingering illness. Machete had been after Lupe’s sister for a bit, but Lupe hates Machete, so Celia resisted. Eventually though, Celia gave in—”

“Celia’s jealous of Angel,” Charles nodded impatiently. “I know. Celia feels indebted to Erik because he put distance between Angel and Machete.”

“Basically,” Darwin nodded. “But I also think Erik sort of likes Celia’s mothering.”

Charles stared at Darwin in the rearview mirror, then dropped his gaze. He wanted to reach into his back pocket for the crumpled letter but continued to keep the gauze pressed to his arm instead. Chances were it was something to do with Erik’s contact in Germany and, no matter if it was his mother or not, the letters were none of his business.

The car remained quiet for the rest of the ride to Lupe’s clinic. The small building sat near Tempe’s border with Mesa; the outside of the building was clean and well kept, but Charles noticed little else when they pulled in. His attention was on Angel as soon as he saw her running toward the car. Her features fell into an exaggerated expression of relief as soon as Darwin had the Civic parked. She pulled Charles’ door open and helped him out.

“I am so glad to see you!” she exclaimed. “If I wasn’t worried about you and Erik, I would have called a fucking cab.”

Charles kissed Angel’s cheek since hugging her was out of the question. “Don’t worry, I’ll defend you.”

“Machete left to start bailing people out and Celia’s gone home,” Angel shrugged, “so no. The problem is when Celia knows Machete and I are in the same place.”

“Machete’s bailing people out?” Charles shook his head wearily. “What’s happened now?”

“A few of the girls creating diversions for Alex got caught when they ran,” Angel shrugged. “One of the club rules is that if you have to run from the cops, you have to do it on foot. The bikes always end up impounded, but we usually get away.”

Darwin shook his head in amusement. Both Raven and Charles gave Angel dubious looks, but it was Raven that voiced their mutual doubt. “That sounds like a stupid rule, Angel.”

She followed up a smirk with a helpless shrug. “Honey, when you have a pizza-sized rear sprocket and your bike taps out in top gear between 50 and 60 MPH, running on foot is your best bet.”
“Why don’t the women in PMS just change their gearing?” Charles resumed walking to the clinic’s front doors.

Angel opened the door for him, “We aren’t all mechanically inclined. Can you change your gearing without Erik holding your hand through the process?”

Charles pulled a face and walked through, “Theoretically?”

Charles had to wait more than an hour for treatment despite Raven’s heavily emphasized mentions of a sizable donation and Angel’s familiarity with the staff. It was nearly 5am by the time he was admitted. The doctor took one look at the bullet wound under the gauze and rushed him into the operating room to relieve the pressure build-up on his radial nerve from the damaged tissue.

Even though they anaesthetized his arm for the operation, Charles had look away from the screen separating him from the surgeon. Creating the sort of unpleasant sounds coming from behind the screen during a lab dissection was one thing, but having somebody else produce the same noises from his own flesh was another. He grit his teeth and tried not to imagine what they were doing.

The bullet had passed through the meaty part of Charles’ tricep, but the damage from its turbulent passing had lacerated the outer edge of the radial nerve. Cleaning out the wound without causing further damage to it had been a tricky and time-consuming affair.

The slug was slow-moving enough that it hadn’t done as much damage as the staff had feared. The bullet had stopped just under his skin on the other side of his arm. It only took a small incision for the surgeon to remove it. Once the bullet was out, Charles received cleaning, soluble interior stitches, and normal stitches on the entrance wound and the carefully incised exit wound.

“After the painkillers wear off, you might find you have some numbness along your arm,” the stately surgeon explained as Charles’ arm was bandaged post surgery, “in addition to the loss of feeling in your fingers.”

Charles would have nodded in reply, but his brain was flying high on a chemical cocktail of sedation and painkillers. “I understand. Will feeling return? I like feeling.”

The surgeon ignored Charles’ clipped sentences with cool professionalism. The silver-haired man had carried an air of unrestrained annoyance for most of the surgery.

“It’s possible. The nerve may heal, but to make sure you should visit a specialist who can monitor the injury and prescribe physical therapy. As you know, those are things I can’t do here and another reason why you should have visited a different hospital in the first place.”

“My friend was brought here,” Charles returned. It wasn’t an entirely honest response. He was conflicted about the ordeal, but remained certain that going to a regular hospital would have been a mistake. Wealthy or not, there was no guarantee he could have bribed the staff not to call the police over a gunshot injury. “I promise I won’t come back. For myself, at any rate.”

It was a wonder he’d been able to keep hold of the throttle since he’d been shot: with his arm extended and palm facing down, he couldn’t lift his hand at all. There was a possibility that the cleaning of the wound had made the injury worse, but Charles was happy to lose a little mobility rather than suffer complications from infection.

“See that you don’t,” the surgeon said. “I’ve far more needful patients who won’t go to other hospitals for better reasons.”
Still light-headed, Charles nodded. Ensconced in a chemical calm, he didn’t want to sit through a chastisement, no matter how deserved. Despite his internal conflicts, Charles didn’t need the doctor to tell him he’d done wrong.

When Charles signed out, left-handed, he received a few hydrocodone, which brought him a rueful smile, and a script for one refill. He supposed he would surrender as many as possible to Erik until the knee surgery. Before that, though, he would need his checkbook and a way home. Luckily, Darwin was kind enough to offer to drop Raven back at Charles’ apartment on his way to work. She could drive her car back over and with Charles’ checkbook.

Rather than try to explain the damages at work, Alex decided to call the U-Haul box truck in as stolen. He’d ditched the unlocked truck in a Deer Valley apartment complex known for its population of meth addicts. It wouldn’t be noticed as unusual right away, even if the truck wasn’t stolen immediately by the residents.

Charles tried to talk to Alex about the deaths he’d had a hand in, but Alex threw off his attempt, reasoning in a fierce whisper that the ‘bastards had it coming’. Alex affirmed that while Erik was an asshole and had caused the SS plenty of property damage, he’d never set out to kill any of them.

Charles let Alex go, seeing it was too soon for the gravity of what he’d done to sink in. He simply offered to talk to him about it, if he ever wanted to. Alex had left in a huff to go back to the house in order to call in the bogus stolen vehicle.

By the time Raven got back Erik was in recovery, but he wasn’t allowed any visitors. Exhausted and worn out, Charles and Raven fell asleep leaning against each other on a pair of old, uncomfortable waiting room chairs. If it hadn’t been so hot outside, Charles would have tried to trade Alex for the Tacoma and slept in the back.

“Prof. Hey, Professor X,” came a familiar voice. The owner of the voice was gently shaking his uninjured arm.

Charles opened his eyes to Cupcake. At first he didn’t recognize her: she was wearing none of her thick eyeliner and her pink-tipped mohawk was lying flat and loose, concealing its true shape. Her smile was gentle and earnest.

“Hey,” she said with quiet enthusiasm. “There’s those pretty blue eyes. Hey, so you wanna go see pinche Sharkface? He’s tranquilized or morphined all the way up, but he’s awake.”

Charles was instantly upright if not completely lucid. “What time is it? Shouldn’t you be at school?”

“Almost eleven.” She shrugged. “And, yeah, but I’m a senior and pretty much done. You should come to my graduation party; it’ll be even crazier than the PMS annual bikini barbecue.”

“Wouln’t miss it,” Charles managed despite his weariness. With Cupcake’s help he sat up and redistributed Raven gingerly across his chair’s seat so she didn’t awake. He took to his feet without any aid. “How is he?”

“With all the road rash, he’s going to be in hideous fucking agony if his pain meds lapse,” Cupcake shrugged. “Lupe says he’s really good for a motorcycle accident. He’s resilient and you guys hit dirt, not asphalt. Anyway, he doesn’t say a lot beyond demanding a phone in, like, four different languages. He doesn’t even remember Havok and Angel bringing him in.”

Memory loss, temporary or not, was hardly a surprise with a concussion. Charles nodded. “You know, I’ve only gotten conjecture about his injuries. Do you know anything solid?”
“Well,” Cupcake grimaced, “there are a few broken things. Clavicle, cracked scapula and ribs, two bones in his right forearm are broken, and so is his nose. You know about the concussion; it came with eleven stitches.

“Bad road rash across his upper back and shoulder, also his left leg, less bad on his arms. Lupe thinks he hit the ground in a tumble, upper back first, then rolled and hit a big cactus arms first. There were a couple spines in his arms, but just scratches on his face, so maybe he broke his arm between his face and a cactus. That’d explain the broken nose.”

“She’s right, we hit a saguaro,” Charles confirmed. More than ever he was thankful Erik managed to slow them down as much as he had by dragging one of the cylinder heads through the dirt. He wondered at what point Erik had come off the XA; clearly it had been well before the bike had hit the saguaro.

They went up the stairs to the second floor, which winded Charles where it wouldn’t have a day prior. Machete and Sean were asleep outside Erik’s door. Machete had a folding chair tilted back on two legs, her head lolling to the side. Sean was seated on the floor, arms wrapped around his legs, head resting on his knees. For a moment Charles felt a stab of jealousy that he hadn’t been told he could wait outside Erik’s room, but he let it go. Sleeping against Raven downstairs wasn’t comfortable, but it was out of the staff’s way.

Cupcake ignored the two. She walked up to the door and peered through the window. “He might be asleep again, but you can go in. I won’t tell.”

Charles thanked her quietly and slipped inside. He closed the door and turned around to face the small, bland room. There were two hospital beds crammed in the room, but only one was occupied. It took only a few steps to cross the brief floor space to the bed holding Erik’s long body.

His face was clean, if a little scruffy with more than twenty-four hours of beard growth. Covering his tan skin was a bandage around his forehead and a butterfly bandage across the bridge of his nose. Only his left eye was dark with bruising. His chest was thrust forward somewhat due to a sling that kept both his shoulders back. No doubt it also took pressure off his back’s road rash. His left arm was secured to the sling; an IV protruded from the back of his hand. His right arm was in plaster. His eyes were closed and his breathing deep.

“Hello,” Charles said softly. He laid his left hand against Erik’s rough cheek.

Erik’s eyes flickered open and his brow fell from the temporary fugue of drug-induced sleep into its customary troubled lines. He made a soft noise somewhere between an acknowledgement of Charles’ presence and a question. His right arm twitched up and fell back down; warm flesh gripped by plaster. “Was…”?

“Do you know where you are?” Charles asked, leaning down closer to Erik’s upper body. His use of German was more concerning than sexy.

Erik nodded once, anything more was likely beyond him. “Get me out.”

Typical, Erik was never content to sit still. “I can’t. Probably not for a few days. Only as long as you need. I’m told Celia wants to take you to her place, but I’d rather take you to mine despite the stairs.”

“Celia.” The weight Erik gave her name was heavy with resignation. “No, take me home.”

“I can’t take you all the way to PV, yet,” Charles smiled. “We’re practically in Mesa.”

Eyes dull from painkillers and sedatives, he was slow to focus on Charles’ arm sling. “You’re hurt.”
“Yes,” Charles nodded and leaned in to sit on the very edge of the bed. “It’s just my arm. I would have been hurt worse, but you kept me from falling out of the sidecar. Thank you.”

“Give me your phone,” Erik said. His voice was gravelly and his German accent picking up strength. Charles shook his head. “I’m sorry, it’s broken. Who do you want to call?”

“Sponsor,” Erik said and with the word came some anger and on the heels of anger, came strength and lucidity. “I need to talk to him.”

A genuine smile came to Charles’ face at that: Erik didn’t need to talk to Shaw ever again. “Erik, the Harley was destroyed, but your sponsor didn’t care. It was all a game; probably between him and his LA rival.”

Erik gave him a confused look, so Charles leaned in and kissed his scabbed lips. “He let you go, Erik. You’re free of the Hellfire Club.”

“After almost twenty years?” Disbelief was writ large across Erik’s face. His eyes were dull with a lack of understanding. “How do you know? Did you meet him?”

“Somebody had to.” Charles pressed another kiss to the corner of Erik’s mouth. It sounded like Erik had been in Shaw’s service from childhood. Charles kept his anger in check and kissed the opposite corner of Erik’s mouth. Erik was free; nothing else mattered.

“You are totally free of him,” Charles whispered. “When you’re healed enough, we can start figuring out how to get you legal, too. First, though, we’ll have to celebrate your break from Hellfire.”

“He said I’m free?” Erik’s expression was a troubled blend of anger and confusion. “But I didn’t deliver the bike. It doesn’t make sense; the deal was to deliver the bike.”

“It was a game, Erik,” Charles repeated. “Just a stupid game. It never mattered if you delivered the bike or not. Destroyed or in his hands, it was always the same.”

“No,” Erik denied. He started to shake his head but stopped with a hiss. “That’s not how it works. There’s always a deal and never any exceptions.”

Charles ran his fingers over Erik’s reddish stubble. “You know,” he said gently to distract him, “do you have Irish or maybe Spanish blood in your family? I’ve been wondering where you get this ginger from.”

Charles was about to continue in the same vein, but Erik’s eyes gained sudden, intense, clarity. His face, pale beneath the bandages, lost even more color. “Give me your phone.”

“I told you, it’s broken.”

Erik went from calm and confused to enraged and demanding in a split second. “Gib mir das Telefon!” He snarled, spittle flying, lips splitting open once again. He swung his right arm to grab at Charles, but wound up bludgeoning Charles’ injured arm with the cast instead. Despite the awkward angle, the force of the swing was as shocking as the pain was blinding.

Gasping, Charles’ seized Erik’s cast with his left hand, but Erik was already using his other arm to wrench himself upright. Despite sedation and the IV, Erik managed to pivot wide and swing his legs off the bed.

“Gib mir das verdammte Telefon!” he roared, this time spraying as much blood as saliva.
“Machete! Sean!” Charles yelled. He tried to shove back, to get Erik’s shoulders down on the bed, but Erik’s strength was overwhelming when it should have been nonexistent.

Erik’s left hand shot out and seized Charles’ face. For a moment Charles was keenly aware of how difficult it was to breathe. Then Erik pulled him close to gain leverage and shoved back hard. Charles stumbled backwards from the bed, his head reeling and heart racing.

In the time took for Charles to regain his balance, Erik slid from the bed and sent the IV drip flying with another swing of his cast. The bag hit the limit of the tube’s length and the tube jerked out of the splint in the back of Erik’s hand. Fluid from the tube sprayed crazily about the room on its way to the floor.

Behind Charles, the door opened and Machete and Sean burst in. Sean gave Charles a wildly uncertain look, but there was no time to ask or explain when Erik, naked but for bandages and plaster, charged. They braced for Erik’s impact, but his right leg betrayed him by giving out completely; he crashed to the floor at their feet.

Though far shorter than Erik, Machete was on him in an instant. With little regard for the bandages swathing his back, she straddled his waist and wrenched his broken arm around his back by the cast. Sean quickly joined in, straddling Erik’s thighs and pulling back on his ankles. Erik swore and spat in German, and tried to buck them off, but between his injuries and the weight of the two people on him, he made little progress.

Charles got around the tangle of bodies on the floor and flung the door wide. “We need a sedative in here!”

A commanding woman with her hair in a severe bun was already sweeping down the hall toward him, a syringe and a bottle in her hand. She pushed past Charles to Erik, who was trying to force Machete back despite her agonizing grip on his arm. The morphine in his system was probably compromising the effectiveness of pain as a deterrent.

The woman prepped the syringe carefully and dropped down beside Machete, then reached past Machete’s wiry biceps and tapped the inside of Erik’s arm, since the IV splint was underneath him. She gave a simple terse command and Machete muscled Erik’s arm still by putting ruthless pressure on the back of his elbow. The woman inserted the needle into his arm and depressed the plunger.

“Is this more of the same, Lehnsherr? Or something new?” she asked calmly, but there was no reasoning with him.

Erik’s arms shook in strain in his efforts to free himself, but his shoulders were held easily back by the sling and Machete’s able grip. Charles knelt in front of him. Lifting his free left hand, he touched Erik’s cheek, watched the furious snarls and fight form and fall from his face. Charles knew it was not his presence that began to calm him, but the drug the doctor had administered.

He carefully stroked Erik’s cheek with his fingertips as Erik’s eyelids started to drift down his eyes. Erik’s breathing slowed from ragged and labored gasps to deep, even breaths. Machete didn’t release him when he began to relax, but Charles wouldn’t have relaxed his grip on Erik, either: he could be tricky.

All the same, Charles took the opportunity to lean in and press a kiss to Erik’s gauze-covered temple.

“You can move him,” the doctor finally said. Machete shot her a mutinous look, but carefully changed her grip. Machete took him from under his arms and Sean lifted Erik’s knees as he had earlier in the morning. Between the two of them they carried Erik back to the bed.
The doctor, meanwhile, spoke to the two nurses who had entered the room without Charles’ notice. Charles’ grasp of Latin and French would have helped him understand more of the conversation had he applied himself. He did not.

“I want everyone out,” the doctor said with grim authority. “Go home. I don’t want to see you until Tuesday. And you,” she pointed directly at Charles, “are you family?”

“Something like that. Give me just a moment,” Charles requested, his hand again taking up residence on Erik’s cheek.

“That check I heard about better be fat,” the doctor snorted. She turned to Machete and began speaking in Spanish. Machete watched Charles for a moment, but then left the room with the doctor, who Charles suspected must be Lupe.

Sean patted Charles’ shoulder. “I’ll wait for you downstairs with Raven. Don’t be long.”

Charles sighed and nodded. He took his hand from Erik’s face long enough to grasp Sean’s hand in an overhand grip before the redhead walked out.

Ignoring the nurses in the background, Charles leaned over Erik and pressed his forehead to Erik’s.

“Erik,” Charles whispered. “I don’t know why you’re upset, but I’ll get you out of here as soon as I can. I promise.”

Eyes glazing over with the sedative, Erik murmured a quiet reply, “Ich will dir vertrauen…” His eyes slipped shut before the last syllable left his mouth.

_____________________

With the summer semester looming, Charles threw himself into his work. The majority of his prep work had been completed in the weeks before his reunion with Erik, and his load was still fairly light. Most of his university time was spent familiarizing himself with his TA and the university’s lab environment.

The TA was enthusiastic, which was annoying in the mornings, but she did excellent work. The lab was better than he’d expected, though not as well-appointed or up to date as he was accustomed. When he wasn’t working Charles checked in on Erik.

He visited the clinic once, sometimes twice, a day. Erik was kept heavily sedated the majority of the time due to his violent behavior and the sheer pain of the road rash wounds. Charles came by and stayed with him for hours regardless, often bringing along his laptop or Erik’s battered copy of Speed Tribes. He also brought takeout, which he had shared with Sean and Angel the time he found them already in Erik’s room.

On his second visit Charles delivered a check that stunned the staff. After that, he was given less lip and a wider berth. Lupe even came by Erik’s room to thank Charles, though he assumed it pained her.

Friday, he walked in with Vietnamese takeout and found Erik lying awake, staring at the cast on his arm. A bright spot of painful pleasure jagged through Charles’ chest and stomach at the sight of Erik’s open eyes. He nearly dropped the bag of food in his rush to Erik’s bedside.

Though his focus was hazy, Erik’s lips gave Charles the impression of a smile when his grey-green eyes settled on him. Erik didn’t say anything, but he didn’t resist Charles’ careful one-armed hug, either. It was the most logistically fraught embrace Charles had ever given; not only was he confined to the use of his left arm, but he had to avoid swaths of gauze and the plastic wrap acting as skin over
much of Erik’s back and shoulders. Despite the painkillers, Erik hissed softly.

“I’m so glad to see your eyes open,” Charles said with feeling. He sat back to look at Erik’s healing face. His black eye was still hideous, but the scratches from the cactus were no longer enflamed. The bandage across his forehead was gone and the line of stitches it covered half hidden in his hair line. The butterfly strip across his nose had disappeared the previous day. “How are you feeling?”

“I don’t know,” Erik admitted slowly. “They may have replaced my blood with morphine.”

Knowing his dependence on hydrocodone, Charles assumed Erik knew what he was talking about, but teased him a little anyway. “Did you know morphine changes gene expression? I don’t suppose you’d mind being the focus of my next research subject, would you?”

“If it pays,” Erik replied absently. “Lupe says she’s releasing me on Sunday. I’d like to go back to PV.”

Charles overlooked his disappointment in Erik’s lack of enthusiasm; getting Erik out of the clinic was far more pleasant a notion. “You know I’m more than happy to take you. I’ve got Raven’s car while my arm heals, so it would be easy enough.”

“As long as somebody’s at the house to help get inside,” Erik said. “How’s your arm?”

“Better.” Charles nodded. It was an honest answer. “I’ve got an appointment to have it looked at next week. I’m having trouble with something called wrist drop that I hope will go away. With my palm down and arm extended, my hand flops down.”

“You’ll have to ride pillion until it heals up,” Erik said quietly and sighed. His eyes drift downward to his cast again. “I warned you about being around me.”

“You’re worth the risks, Erik.” Charles asserted. He lifted his bag of take-out in a play to end Erik’s melancholy. “Sick of the hospital food yet?”

A vague smile pulled at Erik’s lips. “I don’t remember much of what I’ve eaten, but I’m sure it was awful. If you’re up to feeding an invalid, I’ll take what I can get.”

With a grin, Charles unpacked the cartons and chopsticks. He happily fed Erik as much of his early dinner as he could. It wasn’t until Erik had fallen back asleep that Charles realized Erik hadn’t asked for a phone.

Sunday was another in a slew of bright summer days with intolerable heat. At the clinic, Charles received a crash course in the extensive and time-consuming activity that was changing Erik’s bandages. Despite the analgesics, Erik gnashed his teeth through the entire process. By the time they were done, both Charles and Erik were exhausted and needed to rest before making any attempts to get Erik dressed.

Alex had given Charles Erik’s oldest and most beaten up t-shirt as it was so threadbare that it seemed lighter than any gauze. Alex also provided a pair of basketball shorts he had found in the bottom of his own closet. They hadn’t found anything better in Erik’s.

Getting Erik dressed was not as fraught with peril as changing bandages was; the shirt was light enough not to cause trouble and the basketball shorts didn’t rub against the outside of Erik’s left knee much. Moving him out to the car, though, was more than the two of them could handle together.

Erik’s left leg was severely rashed around the side of his knee and calf. Moving the joint meant pulling on the scabbing and plastic wrap covering the open wound. Relying on Erik’s right leg, of
course, was an imperfect solution.

Thankfully, they had plenty of help from Lupe and her staff. Lupe herself gave Charles an array of plastic prescription bottles and detailed instructions for keeping Erik medicated.

Finally on the road, the Phoenix summer shone through the car’s untinted windows. The AC was on, but the sun touched their skin with heat; the way north was laidback and easy as Charles sped them through the highway’s Sunday traffic. A comfortable hush lay over them and Charles felt no need to disturb the companionable quiet with music or conversation. It was enough just to share space with Erik.

It was Erik who finally interrupted the stillness. His voice was low and carefully toneless. “I talked to my sponsor,” Erik finally said.

He’d wondered why Erik hadn’t asked for a phone since coming out of sedation. Charles’ heart rate picked up at mention of the Black King; he hoped Erik wouldn’t lose his temper in the car.

“It’s like you said; I’m free.”

With those words, something seemed to click into place and Charles breathed easier. Until then, Charles felt like he was in a sort of purgatory, waiting for the other shoe to drop. He hadn’t realized what he needed to put things right: Erik’s confirmation that the ordeal was over. It was a call that only Erik could make and he did so calmly.

“I have friends that may be able to help get you a legal ID.” Charles didn’t want to think about it, but it was better to get started on the project rather than wait for uncertain charity from the FBI agent.

“He said you have something for me,” Erik continued, as if Charles hadn’t spoken at all. “An envelope. Do you have it?”

The letter had been living on Charles’ person for a week, waiting for the right time to be delivered. Carefully, because using his right arm was often painful, Charles plucked the battered envelope from his button up’s front pocket. He unfolded it and passed it to Erik’s waiting left hand.

Erik’s left arm was no longer tethered to the collarbone sling. He only had another week in the figure eight sling that was keeping the broken halves of his clavicle set. A week after it came off he would go in to a local hospital for grafts on his leg and shoulder. The surgeon at Lupe’s clinic had explained the two-week wait after release was meant to give Erik’s immune system time to recover. Charles planned to pay for the grafts out of his own pocket.

“May I ask who it’s from?” It seemed safer now to ask.

There was another long pause filled with the sound of the AC and outside traffic. “I don’t know who it’s from yet,” Erik murmured. He unfolded the envelope and rapped one narrow edge against the glove box in rapid succession, shifting the contents down to the bottom.

Charles divided his attention between the road ahead and Erik’s use of his teeth to rip one end of the letter open. Once opened, Erik turned the envelope over and shook the contents out. There was only a single sheet of paper inside and it wasn’t a letter at all; it was some kind of form or certificate.

Charles’ heart pounded and leapt into his throat. Could it be a birth certificate? His foot pressed down a little too hard on the gas in his excitement. The engine raced and Raven’s car surged ahead. It was utterly unlikely, but he wanted it to be a usable birth certificate. God, he wanted all good things for Erik. Carefully, he eased back on the car’s speed and spared Erik a glance.
Erik’s response to the not-a-letter was not happy, it wasn’t merely sad, either. Charles slowed the car further and started to head across lanes to the highway’s shoulder. What he saw on Erik’s face, the way his facial muscles went slack and his brow furrowed deeper than usual, was despair.

The flat certificate surrendered printed planes into mountains, valleys, and chasms around Erik’s curling fingers. He jerked backwards, heedless of the way his shoulders hit the seat behind him. The headrest creaked with the force the back of Erik’s head exerted against it.

Tension followed on the heels of slack despair. Erik’s eyes shut tight, his lips drew back from teeth locked together in turmoil.

Charles pulled them onto the shoulder, the car nearly stopped. The moment he was able, he threw the car into park and released his seatbelt. He moved up to his knees on the seat and gingerly took Erik’s face in his hands.

Despite a singular drunken moment a decade ago, Charles never expected to see tears in Erik’s eyes again. Nevertheless, his broad palms compressed wet rivulets on Erik’s skin. New tears limned his hands in warm sorrow.

Charles dragged Erik’s head forward, kissed his brow, and pulled him close. He curled his upper body and arms protectively over Erik’s head. Despite the concussion and stitches, it was the least painful shelter he could give.

The invasive sunlight and the penetrating chill of the AC moved over Charles’ back, but all he could feel was the increasingly violent shake of Erik’s grieving. It was no birth certificate at all; it had to be the exact opposite. Erik had not known. It was a cruel parting shot, to give Erik freedom only after his mother had died. Doubtless she was a motivating factor in his decision to seek breaking ties at all.

Charles continued to hold Erik. His heart broke for Erik’s loss the way it never did for Kurt Marko or Sharon Xavier. His heart broke for the smile on Erik’s face when he had read his mother’s last letter in bed two months ago and the way Max had protected his letters with promises of violent retribution. His heart broke for Erik’s mother, who must have been a loving woman to inspire such loyalty in her son. He suspected Erik had been stolen from her for his talent at theft. Such irony: a stolen thief.

They remained together long enough that Charles’ back began to cramp and his shoulders to ache. Charles maintained his hold; the strength of his love for Erik was far more powerful than his need for rest. At last, Erik’s shaking stopped and Charles subsided, kneeling in his seat, his hands grasping Erik’s within their warm shelter.

Charles suspected his face was blotchy as Erik’s. Looking at Erik’s red eyes and his runny nose, Charles instinctively went for his handkerchief. He didn’t have it. Normally he carried a handkerchief in his cardigan, but Phoenix’s triple digit heat meant his cardigans rarely ventured outside anymore. Charles leaned over Erik’s thighs and opened the glove box in case Raven had tissues within. He found several packs of makeup removing wipes which Charles deemed just as good.

He tore one of the packets open and handed it to Erik. Erik accepted it silently and wiped at his face and nose.

“It isn’t a letter, is it?” The pain of dishonesty tore at Charles. He reasoned that he had to protect Erik from the source of his knowledge by pretending he didn’t know why Erik was crying.

Even if Erik was free from the Russians, Charles didn’t want to imagine what Erik would do if he
learned an FBI agent had visited the university. Or how the security guard even had Erik under observation. It was no simple matter, and though he loathed the secrecy as much as it racked him with guilt, he hated the idea of losing Erik even more.

Erik said nothing, did not fight the return of the relative quiet within the car, but eventually shook his head. “No, it isn’t a letter. I wanted to tell you sooner, but you didn’t give me any reasons to trust you.”

“Granted,” Charles admitted. It still hurt, but the pain had diminished somewhat over the weeks of trust building and sex.

“Even though you were shot, you still risked meeting my sponsor. That was stupid, but I understand. I would have done it, too.” His right hand’s thumb was rubbing firmly against the base of his index and ring fingers in clear agitation. “Secrets seem pointless now.”

“You don’t have to,” Charles replied gently. He hadn’t thought himself brave at all, just angry. He hadn’t shot the Black King, after all, but Erik understood action and Charles had acted. “You don’t have to tell me anything.”

“I was born in Dresden, East Germany,” Erik began, anyway, staring into the foot well without focus as he spoke. “Dresden’s in an area the rest of the GDR called the Valley of the Ignorant.”

Charles sucked in a breath of stale air. He wasn’t sure if it was intentional, but Erik appeared to be trying to return the favor by speaking for once. He nodded for Erik to continue. “That’s an unpleasant nickname.”

“It would be more accurate to call all of the GDR ignorant,” Erik replied. “But Dresden got the name because we didn’t get any of the Western media broadcasts everyone else got. Soviet control was stronger there for it.”

Again, Erik paused, his agitation clear under his skin, evidenced in the ripple of muscles on his left forearm or the jump of his jaw. “Along with Soviet control came their brand of anti-Semitism. It only augmented the anti-Semitism that remained after the war. That’s why, when I was a child, my father was beaten to death when we were accused of jumping a bread queue.”

Charles squeezed Erik’s hand tight; he did not miss the ‘we’ in Erik’s statement. Erik had seen his father murdered before his young eyes. Charles swallowed past a growing lump in his throat and continued to listen quietly. He was afraid that if he were to interrupt, Erik would not continue.

“It was hard for us without my father.” Erik said, breathing tightly controlled. “I was only a boy, but I thought I should be the man of the house and take care of Mama. I couldn’t get work at my age, not legally, so I did things illegally. The Russian Mafia was powerful in the GDR; it made illegal business easy to get into. It turned out I had a talent for theft.”

Erik’s gaze came up from the no man’s land of the foot well to rest on Charles. “My original fence never gave me a fair price for anything I stole. I complained to his boss, but that didn’t get me anywhere. However, his boss was a motorcycle enthusiast. When I couldn’t get in to see him, I stole his Ducati.”

“How old were you?”

“Twelve,” Erik replied. “I got to see a man named Schmidt, who you met last week at the airport. I told him I’d give him his motorcycle back with interest, if he made a deal with me.”

Charles took a breath. He’d asked Erik about his deal with his sponsor the same day he found Moira
MacTaggert sitting at his desk.

“I was an idiot,” Erik said, looking ahead at the car’s dash. He was back to not focusing on anything. “He eventually made a deal with me. As long as I worked for him, he would make sure my mother was provided for.”

The words released slow horror into Charles’ heart. With every beat the poisonous feeling spread throughout his chest. Bile crept past the blockage in his throat. “When did she die, Erik?”

“April.” Erik’s voice was remarkably steady, but his eyes were shining and wet. “The week before I met you. The week before I delivered the last bike. But when I met him before the air race the bastard said she was well. It was all a game to piss off his rival and to punish me in the same stroke. Two birds with one stone.”

Charles covered his mouth with one hand to hold back a cry of anguish. He was relieved Erik was not looking at him, that he could not see him revealed in all his soul-rending guilt. No wonder it never mattered to Shaw if the bike was delivered or not; with Erik’s mother dead, Erik was under no obligation to steal it.

Worse still, the entire XA fiasco had been preventable. Had Erik told him about the deal when he’d asked, Charles thought he would have found a way to tell him about his mother’s death. At least, he wanted to think that; it made the situation less agonizing. Surely he would have said something. Surely.

But, Charles tried to reason, he couldn’t have told Erik about her death without telling him about the Agent’s visit and that wouldn’t have ended well. He had protected Erik by not telling him about the FBI, the way Erik had protected him by not telling him about the Mafia.

No, just as Erik had taken a bullet due to the secrets he kept from Charles, so had Charles taken a bullet in consequence of his own secrets. And Erik had ended up with agonizing injuries to boot.

Unable to exonerate himself of guilt, Charles bowed over, and pressed Erik’s uninjured hand to his face. He shook with sorrow he hoped Erik would not find over the top. His trembling dashed tears from his eyes and bathed Erik’s knuckles with salt water.

Erik leaned to him and pressed the side of his head to the top of Charles’. He turned his hand over to clasp and hold Charles’ hand with bruising strength. “I don’t want to keep secrets anymore, Charles.”

No more secrets, Charles swore to himself. There can’t be anymore ever again. At length, kneeling silently in his seat, Charles decided he would tell Erik about the agent. It would probably mean Erik would leave him, but it was better, he told himself, better to have his love in truth rather than build on secrets and dishonesty.

Just as he had the day he’d waited for Erik at the junction of Carefree and the 17, Charles reaffirmed to himself that he loved Erik enough to let him leave. He promised himself he would wait to reveal the truth only until he’d done everything he could for Erik. After Erik’s recovery, after knee surgery, and once he had a new identity, Charles would tell him everything. Until then, he would live on stolen time and cherish every second of it.

Like a leaf stretched toward a storm, Charles lifted his face and pressed his lips to Erik’s temple. It was not too late to confess at least this much. “I love you.”

Erik nodded and did not draw away. It was the answer Charles wanted; Erik’s actions, once again,
spoke louder than his words.
Chicane

Chapter Notes

This was supposed to be an epilogue, however, it is really a final chapter instead. I'm going to mark this as complete, but come back later to add a 'chapter' of cut scenes. Notably I'll include the reference scene I wrote of Shaw and Erik's interaction where Erik shows up without the DVD.

Huge thanks to Tahariel, Mixture, and Eleni who all showed me the value of beta readers (especially Tahariel who helped me so much through the previous hell-chapter). Also, thanks to Synecdoche who supported this story back when it was still in its writhing (bad fic) infancy at the kink meme.

Much flailing to the generous people that contributed fanworks. Your time and effort blew my mind each and every time.

Finally, if you've commented, you played a part in the completion of this story. Thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“We can pull a map out
detailing the direct route
Young ones grow anxious to proclaim their advances to the fray.
If we don't wake up
and the truth never comes up
You will never have our old lane, you will never have a right of way…”

Lovers Who Uncover, Crystal Castles

Chicane

At the sound of shrieking laughter, Charles quickened his pace down the hospital’s hallway. He clutched his laptop to his chest as he ran, a shield against the orderlies’ reprimands for his reckless strides. Their expressions of disapproval deepened from annoyance at the noise to outright censure when they saw Charles’ flippant grin.

The answering cheer of other voices brought his grin to full glory, freckles and dimples working in unison to pull off a charming expression he hoped would steal one person’s breath away.

He overshot the corner and slid across the white tiles with momentum that nearly took him into a wall. He regretted wearing his nice Italian leather shoes for an instant, but the fleeting emotion was muscled aside when he saw the situation in the hallway.

Angel had one arm around Erik’s neck, the other extended into the air in victory. She kicked her knee-length Chucks back and forth in delight as she sat across Erik’s lap. He had the hospital wheelchair tipped back, balancing on its axis, right hand inching one wheel around as he attempted to put the chair into a spin. Erik’s forearms and biceps worked as he adjusted minutely for Angel’s
wild gestures.

Sean, Alex, and Raven were cheering and Cupcake was filming with her phone. “Oh yeah, Jaws, work that wheelchair!”

Though Erik looked determined, he was smiling. Charles wondered if the open expression was due to the lingering affects of the surgical medication. Or perhaps his good mood could be attributed to an immediate future of walking without pain.

Angel’s burst of surprised laughter brought Charles’ presence in the corridor to the attention of the rowdy youths. Everyone looked up with grins on their faces. Angel waved wildly. “Professor! Your chariot awaits! I’m keeping it warm for you.”

“Careful you don’t make that chariot into a stick shift,” Raven cackled.

Erik turned his head to take Charles in. Charles didn’t miss the dilation of his pupils, nor the way he swallowed; he knew very well Erik liked seeing him in a suit. Erik’s tells were slight, but devastating with every appearance made. Slowly as he could, he lowered the chair to the front casters and moved Angel off.

Charles let his laptop down from his chest; the only shield he needed was one to protect him from the landmines he’d planted himself. He closed the distance between them. “I thought the doctors said you wouldn’t need a wheelchair.”

“They did. I don’t.” Erik admitted, rolling the chair back and forth with ease. There was bit of mischief in his eyes. “But I broke the walker while we were waiting for you.”

Charles’ eyebrows rose in explicit inquiry. “You what?”

“Erik broke the walker while we waited for you,” Sean said very slowly. “It could not withstand the brutal show of force when he tried to balance and then bounce it on one leg.”

“I won twenty bucks on that bet,” Alex added. He held up and waved his winnings like a flag.

“I have video,” Cupcake supplied, staring at her phone’s screen instead of at Charles’ face. “The two left legs bent right away.”

“And we’ve been told it would be great if we left, like, immediately,” Raven chimed in merrily. “Can you imagine?”

“Yes.” Charles snorted incredulously, trying hard not to laugh. “Yes, I can. Erik, can’t you control your club?”

Erik shrugged and put the brakes on the wheel chair. “Why would I want to?”

With speed and grace, he hoisted himself up to his left leg. His right wasn’t supposed to take much weight for a few days. Alex immediately stepped forward and ducked under Erik’s arm as a self-designated crutch. “I still think staying at the Prof’s apartment is stupid, Erik. Our place doesn’t have a flight of stairs.”

“I don’t need two legs for stairs,” Erik scoffed, but leaned on Alex all the same. It was obvious Erik didn’t need the wheelchair when the two started forward toward Charles. He would likely only need a crutch or a cane for a few weeks. They’d all been surprised when they learned how quickly knee surgery patients could get back on their feet. The physical therapy promised to be far less agony than what Charles had endured for his gunshot wound or that Erik had experienced since his skin grafts.
Alex stopped when he got to Charles and nodded respectfully. Charles winked in response. “Thank you for the special delivery.”

“U-Haul all the way,” Alex muttered, fighting down an embarrassed smile. “You guys take it easy.”

Erik rolled his eyes, then took his arm off Alex and threw it across Charles’ shoulders instead.

Charles grinned at Alex. “I intend to keep him on his back for the entire weekend.”

Alex grimaced. “That’s great, Prof, but I hope it wasn’t a pun.”

“It wasn’t.” Charles winked. “It was a double entendre.”

With the wheelchair vacated, Angel flopped back down in it and pointed forward. “C’mon Sean, you be Fargo! Mush!”

“I think you mean Balto.” Cupcake snickered and sat down on Angel’s lap. “Sean! Sean! Wheelchair cam! Mush!”

Sean and Raven each took a handle, and after a false start with the brakes still engaged, ran ahead.

Charles bit his lip, trying to hold his hilarity in and took Erik in the opposite direction, toward the elevator bank.

The moment the elevator doors closed, Charles burst into loud laughter. He placed a hand to one wall for support as he shook.

Leaning against him easily, Erik smiled along. “Just like old times.”

Charles nodded, laughing into his free hand. “Only better. Cupcake makes a nice addition to Deus, and if Raven joins up, you’ll have an even better mix. I don’t think you should let anyone else jump on from the PMS ship, though.”

“I don’t recall you getting a say,” Erik said. “You aren’t a member. You’re more like, what, a den mother?”

“Are the painkillers still working on you?” Charles countered. “Because I’m going to hurt you if you suggest that again and I want it to be effective.”

“You could always conduct an experiment to see.” Erik bent his forearm back in order to run his fingers through Charles’ hair. “Scientific method.”

“You’re too simple an equation to solve,” Charles huffed, though he had a terrible time keeping a smile from conquering his lips.

The clinic was far closer to Erik’s house, but they took Charles’ leased Acura and headed south to Tempe. The sun was still hot, but the weather was cooling down as Phoenix moved into autumn. The triple digit heat broke after the monsoons finished so the rampant humidity no longer made a bad situation horrendous.

Unfortunately for Charles, retrieving Erik from the clinic, no matter how happy the occasion, put him in mind of the last time they were on a similar journey. He didn’t like the reminder or the guilt that came with it. It had been almost three months since the XA tragedy, but it was always fresh in his mind. It took all his willpower not to cling to Erik, and he wasn’t always successful.

Though the knee surgery was finally taken care of, Charles had yet to do more than casually sound
out his friends with access to citizenship records. He was putting off the search for a passport for Erik and he knew it. Charles was fully aware he shouldn’t delay telling Erik about the FBI agent any longer than necessary.

But the very real possibility that Erik would leave him after he admitted the situation made it harder than facing the Black King had ever been.

“You were late today,” Erik said, interrupting Charles’ brooding.

“The videoconference took longer than I expected.” It wasn’t a lie; the conference with his colleagues in England had lasted past the scheduled end, but Charles had signed out fifteen minutes before the official end. Two hours prior. He’d been late due to something else entirely.

“When did my work ethic start rubbing off on you?” Erik asked dryly.

“I have a work ethic!” Charles exclaimed. “Besides, I didn’t mind having a good excuse to sit out filming the bone saw episode of your life. I thought you hated being filmed.”

Erik shook his head. “It’s my leg; if I ask for a joint to be hacked out of it, I want to see. I wouldn’t need to film it, if they’d kept me awake to watch. Better than my other home movie, at any rate.”

“Don’t…” Charles stopped and sighed. “Don’t remind me.”

Erik had kept the DVD on the off chance he could one day use it against Shaw. Charles had suggested sending it to Shaw’s LA rival, but Erik killed the idea on the grounds that he would have to go through the SS to do so.

Mention of the DVD didn’t bother Erik without the threat it used to represent hanging over his head. It was still in his bedside table, but it was at the bottom of the drawer. Charles had pushed it to the back; he didn’t like any of the boxes of condoms or bottles of lubrication making contact with the disc. It had a habit of killing his hard-ons when he touched the damn thing while grabbing for either.

The journey to his apartment complex remained blessedly uneventful. Charles nattered away about the videoconference and the research project his senior seminar students would be collaborating on with his colleagues’ students back in Oxford. Erik listened attentively, obviously interested in how the project would be organized.

Pulling into the parking lot, Charles considered telling Erik to close his eyes. Instead, he opted to monitor Erik’s reaction as they neared Charles’ parking spot. He kept on about the project, but he noticed the moment Erik snorted in disgust and leaned forward in his seat.

“One of your neighbors bought an S1000.” Erik commented without regard for the previous conversation. “Idiot. The S1000 is becoming the new GSXR; only this time it’s going to clean the gene pool of people with more money than sense.”

Charles bit his lip to keep from laughing. “Maybe the owner will let you take it for a ride?”

“No funny.” Erik glowered at the red, blue, and white BMW as if it had personally offended him. The ferocious glower faded the closer they came to the covered parking. When he saw exactly where the motorcycle was parked, Erik sucked in a sudden hissing breath between his teeth. “Gott in Himmel. Charles, what have you done?”

“Brought you back to my place?” Charles grinned and parked the Acura in general parking, since he couldn’t fit the car in his designated spot next to the S1000RR.
Erik had the Acura’s door open before Charles turned off the ignition. Thankfully, the surgery on his right leg made it far more difficult to get out of the car, so Charles had time to get out and catch Erik before he did something regrettable like face plant onto the hot asphalt.

Wordless in his enthusiasm, Erik didn’t complain when Charles tucked himself under his right shoulder and helped him hobble over to the bike. Once in touching distance, he let go of Charles and took hold of the tank and one of the grips.

“This is why you were late.” Erik said with evident shock.

“It seemed like a nice way to thank you for switching the Triple’s throttle to the left,” Charles said, beaming his brightest smile. “Since my wrist will probably never work properly again.”

Erik shook his head slowly. “This is too much, Charles.”

“Hardly,” Charles denied smoothly. “I have plenty of money, so doing something like this costs me very little effort. I’d say buying you an S1000 is less trouble than the work you did to help me buy, adjust, and personalize the Triple.”

The look Erik gave him was doubtful, but his enthusiasm burned through. He held out a hand. “Do you have the key?”

Grin full to bursting, Charles withdrew the key from his trouser pocket and handed it over. “You can ride it in a week or so.”

Erik only shook his head and slotted the key. “I just want to hear it.”

The motorcycle’s instrument cluster came to life under the turn of its key. Various electronics whirred and hummed as the motorcycle underwent its start up diagnostic. Charles hardly noticed, he was so fixated on cataloguing every nuance of Erik’s fascinated expression. He chuckled when Erik leaned down to listen to the electronics.

He straightened again and pulled Charles closer. “Put it in neutral for me.”

“You could just pull in the clutch and start her,” Charles said, just to be difficult.

Erik pulled in the clutch as suggested, but didn’t hit the ignition. “Toe it up to neutral.”

Amused, Charles shook his head and slipped his foot from his shoe. It wouldn’t do to scuff the nice leather on the shift pedal. He made the half pull up from first to neutral and then crouched down to put his shoe back on properly. Erik lost no time firing the S1000 up.

Using the tank to support himself, Erik crouched next to Charles with his right leg out straight. Charles didn’t stand up; the view of Erik’s face as he listened intently to the S1000’s engine was too good.

“What do you think?”

Erik didn’t turn his head. “That this is still too much.”

“Pasta for dinner, then,” Charles deflected, “since that is the minimum of effort?”

Snorting softly in exasperation, Erik shook his head and rose up on his left leg. Ignoring Charles’ sudden protest, Erik pulled in the clutch and used his right foot to kick down into first. The engine died as he turned the key off, leaving the computer to power down quietly, but audibly.
Charles fit himself under Erik’s right arm once again and helped him toward his apartment building.

“What’s going on, Charles?”

Charles looked through the gap between the kitchen and living room to where Erik had the first of two World Superbike races paused on screen. Erik always powered through the commercials and never paused races unless he was trying to puzzle through a racer’s strategy or see exactly what a bike was doing before a crash. He was doing neither. Erik was twisted around to look into the kitchen, his attention fixed on Charles alone.

“What do you mean?” Charles responded. He kept as much eye contact as possible while continuing to monitor the boiling pasta.

“You’ve been acting guilty ever since you got me out of Lupe’s clinic,” Erik stated plainly. “And I’ve told you before you’re not to blame for the XA crashing, if that’s what this is about. Or is it something else?”

“Can we not talk about this?” Charles directed his question to the boiling water, rather than Erik. “You’ve suffered enough,” Erik continued, despite Charles’ protest. “You’ve done nothing but help, and now it’s like you’re trying to buy forgiveness or something with the S1000. Isn’t it enough that you’ll probably never get full function of your wrist back?”

“Erik.” Charles looked up from the saucepan and shook his head with slow exaggeration. “Which part of ‘I don’t want to talk about this’ is eluding you?”

Erik’s eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched. A moment later, he released his gritted teeth. “When can we talk about it?”

“Stubborn.” Charles sighed. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. “Not tonight. Just… not tonight.”

“When?” There was no getting around Erik, but Charles was determined to dodge his inquiries as long as possible.

“Can I just promise you we’ll talk when I’m ready?” Charles tried for stern, but his tone made the question sound more exasperated than he wanted. “It takes me time to work through things like this. You should have seen me after I thought you died: I hated motorcycles for ten years.”

Erik stare didn’t waver even for an instant. “What if you’re never ready?”

The pasta received a thorough and unnecessary stirring in response. Charles cast his gaze back down and pressed at his mouth with the knuckles of his free hand. He had no answer to give. So far he was doing a terrible job of assuaging his guilt by trying to fix up Erik’s life instead of telling him about the FBI agent. He needed to work on the passport. He didn’t want to work on the passport.

Why couldn’t the S1000 take away his guilt? Like the buying of an Indulgence? He sighed and dropped the wooden spoon in order to rub at his face with both hands. Probably for the same reason his mother’s expensive gifts and addiction to alcohol never fixed a loveless and abusive second marriage.

Charles didn’t look back up until he heard the race resume. By the time it did, he discovered the pasta was far softer than either of them liked. Little was said over dinner, nothing during the race, and Charles was the only one to say good-night when they went to bed.
Though a deep sleeper, Charles woke when Erik sat up with a mouthful of angry German expletives tumbling from his mouth.

“Erik,” Charles murmured, placing a reassuring hand on Erik’s heated back. Back when they were on the run together, Max had frequent and terrible nightmares that would wake them both when their intensity would creep from his mind and into his limbs. Erik still had them, but they were less frequent. “Nightmare?”

“No, the squid on the ZX6,” Erik snarled, twisting to move the blinds aside and cast a murderous glare through the glass pane and metal screen between them. “Last time I stayed the night, he left before I could knock some sense into him.”

The answer startled Charles. He hadn’t heard the enthusiastic revver outside the apartment for over four months. As a consequence, he’d assumed the young man no longer came by the complex at ungodly hours.

“It sounds like your old bike, doesn’t it?” Charles asked fondly. He slid his hand up Erik’s back to his still-tender shoulder and pulled. Erik let himself be subdued and pushed flat on his back again.

Another burst of raucous noise wrecked the night’s stillness apart, but it had a fading quality: the revver was leaving. Charles dropped a kiss in the dip between Erik’s shoulder and clavicle. The space was usually where he placed his head to sleep and kisses had come to be, in his mind, the equivalent to fluffing up a pillow.

Erik shrugged the opposite shoulder and reached to thread his fingers through Charles’ sleep-mussed hair. “It isn’t that uncommon an exhaust note for an old in-line four with a Yoshimura exhaust. But you’re right, it sounds like my old ZX6.” He still sounded irritable, but Charles could feel the tension bleeding from his muscles.

“It used to wake me up,” Charles said quietly. He leaned over Erik’s chest and looked into his eyes. “It was terribly upsetting.”

“What changed?” Erik asked, raking his fingers through Charles’ unruly locks of hair.

“I don’t know.” Charles replied. He gave Erik a smile that he hoped expressed his sincerity. “Probably you.”

Erik closed his hand in Charles’ hair and tugged gently. His expression softened greatly; the tension from earlier retreated. “Then, would slow, lazy sex put you at ease?”

Charles hummed in pleasure at the pull of his hair and Erik’s offer. “Can I have the slow, lazy sex even if I’m already at ease?”

Erik released Charles’ hair and laid his hand across the back of his neck instead. His eyes were already dilated due to the dark, but his voice was husky, “You shouldn’t have to ask.”

“Then I won’t.” Charles whispered and pressed an open-mouthed kiss to Erik’s sternum which he followed up with a tender press of his lips to Erik’s.

Charles had made out with Erik before, but as they lay together, facing each other on their sides, he was touched by how gentle Erik had learned to be in his kissing and foreplay. He wasn’t always concerned with conquering Charles’ mouth or body with shows of force or endurance. Instead, he took things easy, as promised.

Erik caressed, kissed, and sucked Charles’ freckled skin until Charles begged quietly for more. There
was no rush to grasp Charles’ aching hard cock, though when he did it was with a kind of gentle firmness that was unique to him as a lover. Eyes half-closed, Charles let himself go when Erik enclosed both their cocks in his hand. He sighed and gasped breathily as Erik struck a slow, languorous rhythm that made his hips strain forward and his toes curl in the sheets.

It wasn’t until much later that Charles fell back asleep, but when he did it was with the soothing rhythm of Erik’s heart under his ear.

The next time Charles woke up, it was to his doorbell ringing and Erik’s elbow in his ribs. “Get the door.”

Cursing incoherently, Charles rolled out of bed and fumbled for his sleep pants. He found Erik’s first and, shrugging, pulled them on. The waistband bit into his hips and the cloth strained over his muscular thighs. Charles wasn’t one to care about his appearance in the morning, but the length in the pant legs necessitated cuffing them. The top shirt from the hamper was actually his, so he made it out of the bedroom door, pulling the garment over his head as he went.

On his way through the living room to the front door, he smoothed the shirt down over his stomach and checked the clock. Nearly half past nine was too early for Raven, but not too early for murder if it was her.

Throwing the lock and latch, Charles opened the door and winced as the morning sun blazed past the unfamiliar woman at his door. “Christ, it’s early. What could you possibly want?”

“Two government-issued forms of picture ID, if you’re Charles F. Xavier so I can release this package to you.” The woman held up a sturdy envelope and a scanner. She did not seem very friendly or appreciative of her welcome, such as it was.

Charles wasn’t expecting a package. He blinked several times, grimaced severely, and looked more closely at the woman. Her uniform was affiliated with a courier service unfamiliar to him: neither UPS, DHS, nor FedEx. Charles felt suddenly uneasy. What if she was there to kill him or Erik?

“Let me just,” he began, looking at her hands and forearms: she certainly seemed fit, with wiry forearms and callused hands. “Let me just get my wallet.”

She nodded and Charles closed the door. For a moment he stood there and looked through the door’s peephole to see if she would pull out a gun. She did no such thing. The courier only looked at the package with clear impatience.

Confused, he walked back to the bedroom to retrieve his wallet. Erik watched sleepily from the bed, where he was propped up on one elbow. “You look troubled.”

“Wasn’t expecting a courier,” Charles shrugged, fishing through discarded clothes for his wallet. He found it and cracked it open. Two government-issued forms of picture ID? He pulled out his driver’s license then headed for his study for his passport.

He was better prepared for the sun when he next opened the door and handed the woman both forms of identification. “I apologize for the wait; I’m not always human in the morning.”

Her demeanor softened a little, but she didn’t smile. She checked each ID against his face and her clipboard before handing them both back. Then she scanned the envelope and handed it to him. “No problem, Mr. Xavier. Have a good day.”

He nodded and closed the door again. He looked down at the envelope, but the plain brown
cardstock was only labeled with his name and address. Reaching back absently, Charles turned the deadbolt, but let the latch hang freely.

Charles took the envelope’s tab and ripped it back along its perforations. Inside the envelope he saw an official document of some kind and a burgundy passport. Both were written in German.

Charles’ own passport and license fell forgotten to the floor. Fingers trembling slightly, he retrieved the passport from the envelope. Numbly, he opened it and turned past its unusual hardcover to the page that held the photo and name of the passport holder.

The name read **Erik Lehnsherr** and the photo was of Erik. Charles recognized Erik’s particular unsmiling expression from the photos Raven had uploaded to her Facebook one drunken night before Charles had infiltrated the Harley dealership. The whole thing had been manipulated to make it a suitable photo. But Charles was sure Raven had removed all the photos of Erik within twelve hours of uploading them. Had McTaggert been monitoring Raven’s Facebook the whole time?

Flipping past Erik’s name and photo, Charles found exit and entry stamps for England and the United States, as well as an American work visa that took up an entire page. The visa was good for three more years. It seemed the FBI agent’s goodwill hadn’t extended to permanent residency. And why would it? Erik had a criminal history of breaking and entering, theft, illegal ownership of a weapon, possession and use of illegally obtained drugs, drug-running, extortion, assault, battery, murder, and, if Kurt Marko had ever been believed, kidnapping.

Unless Erik found legitimate employment, or left for Germany, he would be back to life as an illegal immigrant in a few years. If it came to that, Charles was confident he could find Erik work. If Erik wanted it.

Though he looked through every page of the passport and both sides of what appeared to be a birth certificate, there were no notes, no evidence of whom it was from. They were unnecessary. It was obvious Moira MacTaggert had sent it. Charles didn’t care that it meant his information had helped her with the Black King. Rather, he cared that, unless he lied to Erik, Erik would learn of his involvement with the FBI and, possibly, that he’d known of his mother’s death.

Except, he was supposed to tell Erik all of that, anyway. Hadn’t he sworn there would be no more secrets? Wasn’t the passport the final barrier between his secrets and Erik? And wasn’t that barrier the whole reason he had dawdled in his inquiries for two months?

Charles stared down at the passport and birth certificate and shook his head in defiance of reality.

Could he ever be ready? Charles tipped back until his shoulders hit the door. For a small eternity, Charles stood mutely with Erik’s freedom in his hands. The truth was: he would never be ready. Ready never had been, and never would be, appropriate criteria to base his life’s choices on, let alone another person’s future.

There was no certainty that Erik would leave him once he learned the truth. Logically, he knew that, but his heart was an animal thing that only knew what it most wanted and most feared. His heart could tear him apart if he allowed it: for several months it already had.

Taking a deep breath of air, Charles pushed off from the door. He’d been living on stolen time for too long and the longer he did so, the easier it was obscure his original intent with sophistry and rationalizations. Ready or not, the time had come; to wait longer would clearly be wrong.

Charles placed both forms of identification into the brown envelope and put his first foot forward on the too short path to his bedroom. One way or another, they had both done their time; he would no
longer keep Erik waiting.

Erik was sitting up naked in bed, casually inspecting the incision and stitches that held the edges of his skin together right down the center of his knee. In the indirect light from the window he looked less patchwork than he had when his road rash was in various stages of healing. Even after several months, he still had scabbing on one shoulder where skin had ground down to bones and joint. The scabbing was evidence a skin graft harvested from the opposite shoulder which hadn’t taken completely.

At Charles’ pause in the doorway, Erik looked up. “I think the stitches in my head were better than this.”

“Better than your home jobs, then?” Charles tried and failed to sound jocular. Erik noticed and looked at him in question.

Tasting his heart on the back of his tongue, Charles advanced to the bed and sat down facing the closet. Anxiety was making a noose of his lower intestines, but he twisted to the side and handed the envelope to Erik. “Actually, this is for you.”

Possibly wary due to Charles’ odd behavior, Erik took the heavy cardstock slowly. As if expecting poison, he warily parted the edges of the envelope and looked inside. Charles watched Erik’s face compose caution and curiosity with an equal part of reflexive intensity. He took the passport out first and opened the cover.

Erik’s expression turned blank and then moved on to dumbfounded. “Was…” He set the envelope down and studied the passport for several seconds. Then he flipped through. When he came to the work visa, surprised confusion burst across his face, followed by what looked like his default anger. Without letting go of the passport, Erik reached into the envelope and withdrew the other item: a birth certificate. He stared at it, eyes flicking across the page’s text from item to item. Charles observed, and wished he could just hang himself with his intestines instead of facing what was to come.

Finally Erik looked up. “Charles, what is this? A passport with a three-year work visa? A birth certificate from Dusseldorf? Does this have anything to do with why you’re acting so strange?”

“Yes,” Charles sighed, “and no. I’m afraid the answer is somewhat worse.”

Erik dropped the certificate and passport onto the envelope on his thighs. “Charles, I need to understand. Right now, I don’t know whether I should be happy or mad. Explain this.”

“You asked last night if I would ever be ready to tell you,” Charles began, face turned down. His eyes fastened to the floor as his fingers engaged in a losing battle of smoothing out the gathers of cloth at the bend in each knee. “I’m going to tell you even though I’m not ready.”

There was a moment of silence as Charles grasped for his confession. Erik filled it with a command. “Charles, look at me.”

Charles did not. “Erik, the Sunday after that first night at Cherry Bomb? That morning, right after you and I talked, I found somebody I didn’t know in my office. She was at my desk, with my work computer on.”

Despite himself, Charles glanced at Erik. A shock ran through him at Erik’s expression; he’d forgotten what it was like to be at the mercy of Erik’s intense gaze. Though he had yet to reveal the damning information, he already felt skewered.
“She was looking for information on somebody named Shaw. She was a federal agent.”

Erik’s face lost color, but his expression did not change. “Charles, what have you done?”

“They were watching you, but then I showed up and it seemed suspicious to them, considering our past,” Charles defended weakly. He knew it sounded pathetic, but he was too emotional to care. “She told me you were from Dresden. She hinted at ties to the Russian Mafia. She even told me that somebody named Max Eisenhardt had died in Tel Aviv in a gunfight.”

“Who was watching me?” Erik asked in a soft, yet terribly calm voice. “What federal agent was watching me?”

“The security guard, Stryker, is a retired agent,” Charles said. “He must have looked me up just like he looked you up. Out of bored vindictiveness or something equally stupid. It doesn’t matter. He told the agent, MacTaggert, and she came to investigate.”

“And what did you tell her?” Erik’s voice remained deathly calm, hushed.

“I told her I would try to provide information that would help against Shaw, but I wanted you left out of it. Really, she was only interested in you for your connection to him.”

“What did you give her, Charles?”

“I gave her the New York post office box address from your letters,” Charles said and ran his hand through his hair in agitation. “I told her about the air race and which airports he might have used. In return, I wanted a passport for you.”

Erik lifted the passport and thrust it in Charles’ face. “This is from the FBI? I suppose three years was generous of her. Scheiße, Charles, your fame might protect you, but do you have any idea, any at all, what would happen to me if it came out where I got this passport from? That DVD would look like a kindergarten Christmas recital.”

“But it won’t come out!” Charles insisted, pushing Erik’s hand away. “She told me she would never reveal me, let alone you.”

Erik picked up the envelope and tossed the passport and certificate inside. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and retrieved his boxer briefs. “I could forgive you this entire, naïve episode, Charles. I could.”

Charles watched blankly as Erik pulled the briefs on then went for the loose basketball shorts Alex had bequeathed him. “You could?”

“But you lied.” Erik’s voice was arctic in character; whole blizzards were held in each word. “You never told me. I forgave you for stealing and watching the DVD, because I thought you told me everything. I thought I could trust you. Scheiße, you seemed so fucking sincere.”

Pushing off the bed, Erik lurched unsteadily to his feet. Charles stood instantly, hands instinctively going to steady him. With a hard sweep of his left hand Erik knocked Charles’ hands away and barked with all the heat his voice had previously lacked: “Don’t touch me!”

The force of Erik’s contact against his hands wasn’t as shocking as his raw shout. “Erik…!”

“Shut up, Charles,” Erik snarled, covering his face with one wide-splayed hand in a sort of angry defeat. “Just shut up. I don’t want to hear your voice. I don’t want to see your face.”
Charles flinched a step back and nearly tripped and fell over the bed. His heart hammered in his chest. He paused, torn between pride and humility. Part of him wanted to tuck in and eat his deserved rejection. A smaller, stronger, part given life years ago with Max’s death, wanted to stand up and fight to keep Erik. Both made equal sense to Charles. He stood, frozen in agonized indecision.

Erik hissed in angry pain as he limped forward and snatched his t-shirt from Charles’ hamper and pulled it over his head. He turned and took the phone Charles had bought him from the nightstand and immediately placed a call. While he waited, he pinched the phone between his ear and shoulder and grabbed his keys and began prying at the key ring.

“Pick me up,” Erik said into the phone. He continued after a short pause. “Do I sound like I care? You can either bring him with you or he can leave.”

As he watched Erik talk, Charles made quick internal negotiations with his conflicting emotions. He remembered the confrontation at Carefree highway and reasoned Erik again needed his space if Charles wanted a chance at reconciliation. Though the idea of reconciliation was so unlikely as to appear a desert mirage.

When Erik was done with the call, he turned the phone off and tossed it on the bed. He finished working the key to Charles’ apartment off his key ring and dropped it on the bed, too. The keys to the S1000RR stayed on the table. He did, however, take the envelope when he limped from the bedroom as well as the prescription bottles he’d received after his knee surgery.

Charles followed mutely, hating the way Erik was limping, his body taut with pain and anger. He watched without words from the living room as Erik sat at the kitchen nook to slip on socks and shoes then, using the wall as a support, limped to the door. Going down the stairs would be a feat Erik could manage without help, but Charles followed anyway.

“If you don’t call me in three days,” Charles stated as Erik went outside, “I’ll call you.”

Erik slammed the door shut in reply. The force of the wood hitting the frame sounded like a gunshot; it knocked a clock off the wall.

Charles slumped to the floor and dropped his face into his hands. He tried to imagine ways it could have gone worse, but had little success.

It was hard to concentrate. He was not his normal exuberant self in classes. His TA had asked multiple times if he was feeling sick. In fact he was, but explaining to his TA that he was afflicted with heart sickness did not fit his pride’s criteria of professional behavior. Blubber to friends he would eventually do, but not to an undergrad.

*Prof, srsly, wtf? You wanna meet?*

Charles dropped his phone on the bed and picked Erik’s back up. He scrolled through the messages Erik sent him for the eighth time that night. The height of romance was a message that contained a video Erik had taken of Sean trying to start the Triple after the throttle had been switched. Most of Erik’s messages were utilitarian in nature as were his photos.

Under Erik’s video file, however, Charles found a movie of himself sucking Erik’s cock in the Tacoma after they’d gone trail riding in the desert. It had been Charles’ idea and though Erik had once said he would never film receiving a blowjob, Charles had finally won him over by reminding him Erik’s face wouldn’t appear.
Erik had said he would delete the video; Charles didn’t mind that he hadn’t. It was interesting to see himself at lascivious work. He had enjoyed giving Erik the ridiculously dramatized blowjob. Charles tried to watch it, but hearing Erik’s groans and gasps for air and his own hums of pleasure made him feel simultaneously sick and hard when he only wanted the simplicity of wallowing in misery.

His phone pinged again. He checked it automatically.

What’s going on? Are you okay?

Charles dropped his phone once more and rolled over in bed. It was Monday night but Angel had started texting Saturday. Raven always messaged him, but she’d started asking him if he’d had a fight with Erik around the same night. It was obvious Angel had told her there was a ‘situation’. Unfortunately, where Raven was able to take a hint and wait to talk about something, Angel had no such constraints. At least she only tried a few times each evening.

Erik’s phone buzzed with a message. Charles checked it on reflex.

Asshole, I promise to give you a chance.

Charles sighed and dropped Erik’s phone and picked up his own. Prove it. He then shoved his face into the pillow that still smelled like Erik. He hadn’t even washed the sheets despite the mess they’d made of them Friday night.

A moment later his phone pinged again. Charles sighed a moist breath into the pillowcase and lifted his head up. Angel had sent him a file. Curious, he opened it, expecting anything but what he saw: a picture of Erik.

Sheets fled Charles’ skin as he shot upright with a gasp. Angel had broken her promise to Erik. On the screen Erik was asleep on the couch, one arm over his eyes and a bottle of Ketel 1 held loosely at his side. As he stared another message came through.

Proof enough?

Sighing, Charles shook his head. Angel was obviously more invested than he expected. I want to tell you what happened, but I can’t. I did something on the same scale as the dvd incident in the same time period. But I didn’t tell him until Saturday morning.

Angel’s next text was a long time in coming. Probably because she finally had his attention and he was reduced to staring at his phone in anticipation. After ten minutes of staring, though, he decided it wasn’t coming at all and pushed both phones off the bed and onto the floor.

The next morning he awoke to find she had sent several messages in the night.

It’s hard to be mad at you when I don’t know what you did, you know? I just know I should be.

What you did must be fucked up, but here’s the deal. You and I are still friends and we’re going to hang out. In maybe a couple weeks, I’ll feel Erik out for you, okay?

Charles stared at the message and nodded to himself. He wasn’t going to call Erik like he said he would; he would trust Angel’s judgment. She had, after all, spent far more time with him than Charles had. Rolling his bottom lip across his top teeth, Charles sent a message back.

Angel, you are aptly named. Clubbing in Scottsdale this weekend?
Deus intra Machinam no longer used the university lot for stunting practice; much to Darwin and Hank’s mutual disappointment. Darwin liked to watch and socialize with Deus, and Hank, well, he obviously enjoyed Alex’s presence.

Charles had known his revelation about the crotchety security guard would net their departure from the grounds. Logically he knew it had nothing to do with Erik’s anger with him. Emotionally, it was a different story. The loss of their ruckus made the university far too still and intolerably contemplative on Sundays. Charles stopped going to the school Sundays, too. Charles took to driving to Glendale on the weekends to see Raven instead.

October was a long month, particularly when Hallowe’en came and went without Erik. The things they had talked about doing together, like going to LA for haunted houses, aggrieved Charles more than anything else.

The weekend before Hallowe’en he brought Angel, Sean, and Cupcake with him to visit Raven. They did LA’s haunted tour and hit as many theatrical haunted houses as possible. It was only awkward when Sean accidentally mentioned things couldn’t be too bad with Erik, since he hadn’t taken smoking up again. Even then, it might have been fine had Raven not taken the opportunity to declare smoking didn’t kill some people fast enough.

Weeks later, the craze of the presidential election was over and Phoenix was far less warm. The sun was as bright as Charles’ hope was dim. There were now two unridden motorcycles chained in the same carport space. Alex had brought the Triple back from Erik’s garage where, at one time, it had waited for Charles. He had yet to list either one for sale, though he had started to do so half a dozen times.

After two months with no direct word from Erik, Charles started to look forward to June and his return to Oxford. Angel had not given up trying to talk to Erik about Charles, but she had little luck and no progress. Erik had taken to shutting himself up in his workshop to focus exclusively on engine work or spent days at a time on dyno tuning. Angel suspected Erik was spending nights up by the airport in a motel or possibly, and more likely, the workshop where he kept the dyno.

It wasn’t until a week after Thanksgiving, that Charles received a text from a number he didn’t recognize. It was Saturday and he was doing the unthinkable; cleaning his university-leased apartment. His phone pinged, but thinking it was just an overworked Raven bitching more about a bad batch of alginate, he continued with laundry and clearing out old cartons of take out.

As he waited for the dryer, Charles cracked a beer and settled on the couch to zone out with his laptop. First, though, he checked his phone for messages. There was only one, which he opened as he tipped the bottle against his lips.

5:00 at the place across from the museum.

Charles choked on his beer and ended up with most of the cold liquid soaking into his cardigan and pants and splashing off his closed laptop. In a panic, he jerked his knees up, to slide the laptop onto the couch, set the beer on the coffee table and rushed to the kitchen for paper towels.

He sopped the beer up with shaking hands and an abundance of swearing. The museum referenced in the message was Phoenix’s art museum on McDowell and the place opposite was Thai Hut. Erik was the only person he’d gone to either place with.

Conflicting emotions fought for territory in his chest. He wanted to race for a shower and spend an hour going for a flawlessly casually disheveled look. He also wanted to throw his phone through the drywall. Instead he threw his cardigan and pants into the wash and turned to cleaning the beer
soaked carpet and couch with furious energy.

What was Erik thinking? Why invite him to a place so familiar to the two of them? Perhaps because it wasn’t Mexican; Erik wouldn’t want to take a chance on going somewhere where a PMS member’s extended family might be working. They were like a locals-only paparazzi that way. Charles counted himself lucky the women hadn’t said anything about the break up to him. They kept him involved, but slowly their messages had dwindled until only the student segment of the crew messaged him regularly.

At five on a Saturday the quirky restaurant probably wouldn’t be too busy, though the overwhelming urban quality of the area during the Christmas season could make things congested. Phoenix was already loading up with snowbirds from all over the country, how much worse would that make meeting at their once-favorite Thai spot?

What were they even meeting to discuss? Did Erik want the clothes he’d left? The S1000? His copy of *Speed Tribes*? Charles had almost thrown it away, had thrown the book into a waste bin in a fit of rage only to fish it out the next day.

Concluding that he had no idea at all what Erik could possibly want, he made no special preparations. The beer spill necessitated a shower, but he wore nothing noteworthy. No ‘fuck me’ blue cardigan, no t-shirt from Raven: black cardigan over jeans and a white button up. At 4:30 he walked out to his car with a bag of Erik’s clothes in his left hand. He had the book under his right arm since still couldn’t trust his right hand to hold anything with his arm extended.

The traffic was thick on the highway and without a passenger, he couldn’t use the HOV lane. Most of the slow-moving traffic was headed for Scottsdale or other shopping centers. Fortunately, Charles didn’t have far to go; McDowell was only a few exits away.

Though he arrived fifteen minutes early to secure the advantage of choosing the seating arrangements, Charles saw Erik’s blue R6 was already present in the former diner’s half empty parking lot. More nervous than he wanted to be, he left the bag of clothes and the book in the Acura and went in through the restaurant’s east entrance.

He thought he should be used to his heart beating erratically when it came to a life lived close to dangerous people like Erik, but he wasn’t. It still made him a little dizzy when he walked through the door and saw Erik in all his leather-jacketed glory. He looked as devastatingly handsome as ever.

Erik was not sitting in their usual spot along the counter, but at a booth near the door closest to his motorcycle. Charles wasn’t sure what it meant. Perhaps Erik was feeling paranoid, like he often had in the old days, but he didn’t seem suspicious when he saw Charles heading toward him.

Charles searched Erik’s face as he looked up, but saw only Erik’s usual mysterious demeanor. He felt Erik search him in turn, but Charles made no attempt to show anything but wary curiosity. His eyes, he was pleased to note, were totally dry.

Erik did not gesture to a seat, but Charles had to remind himself not to sit next to him.

“Are we ordering?” Charles asked, pretending that everything was fine, that Erik had not shut him completely out of his life for two months. That he didn’t want to attack Erik or beg him for forgiveness.

Erik shrugged. “I planned on it, but you do what you want.”

Charles turned and motioned one of the waitresses over to take their order. She smiled slightly,
recognizing them.

Once their orders were placed, and glasses of water delivered, Erik cut to the chase. “Do you know what this is about or do I need to explain it?”

“I have no idea,” Charles admitted. His voice was carefully neutral, despite the dread he was feeling. “I have certain hopes concerning forgiveness and reconciliation, but those seem unlikely.”

“I thought you listened to the news everyday.” Erik frowned and looked away from Charles’ face. There was a flicker of something in his eyes, but the emotion quickly vacated.

Charles frowned in confusion. What did the news have to do with anything? “I got out of the habit with the election.” It wasn’t exactly untrue, he’d simply stopped listening to American news sources as the election news saturated every imaginable source.

Erik’s nod seemed unconsciously commiserating. He refocused his gaze on Charles. “Then you haven’t heard about Sebastian Shaw’s indictment.”

Charles stared. A confused burst of emotions fired throughout his mind and heart and rendered his lips totally useless.

“It was only mentioned briefly on the networks two days ago,” Erik continued. “I thought you would have heard that he’s being held without bail, for charges like kidnapping for the purpose of prostitution, money laundering, fraud, murder; the usual. The list is long and, eventually, it will include possession of stolen goods, such as his motorcycle collection. Even if they can’t get him for anything else, they can get him for tangible stolen property.”

“What…” Charles was too stunned to continue his sentence and had to try again once he’d calmed. “What does this mean—?” The second time he stopped purposely, ruthlessly biting off his heart’s intended for us.

Erik picked up his glass of water and took a long drink before answering. “It means Shaw will likely go to prison for thirty to seventy years, because the FBI, if Azazel’s friend, Quested, is to be believed, was able to track Azazel’s movements, and thereby Shaw’s.”

“I’m glad he’s going to go to prison.” Unbidden, one of Charles’ hands advanced across the table toward Erik’s. At the last moment he redirected it to his own glass of water. He hated himself for being hopeful. He fiddled with the plastic tumbler turning it slowly on the table with the tips of his square fingers. “But what I really want to know is what this has to do with you and me?”

“It doesn’t really mean anything for us,” Erik said.

It was as if Charles’ heart was struck by lightning. His hand dragged across the table as he fell back, his spine cracked against his chair. His jaw felt tight and began to tense with frustrated emotion. He needed to tell Erik to fuck off. He needed to tell him that leaving meant never contacting him ever again. A relationship like theirs either had to crash and burn or go strong until the journey had some ultimate end. Hope was more like a cancer, burning him up from the inside.

“But, there’s one thing that does.”

Charles didn’t even recognize the hope the comment offered, so thoroughly did the prior one devastate him.

“Did you continue to inform the agent even after you understood what the DVD was?”
Charles nodded. He answered automatically, hardly thinking about what he was saying. “I stopped after you agreed to give me a second chance. I didn’t mind risking my life if it meant I could free you, but I didn’t want to sneak around behind your back any more. I didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize what we had.”

“Oh then you should know that if my mother hadn’t died, you would have freed me from my sponsor. However,” and Erik paused, focused and intent on Charles, “that was always your intent. I’ve come to think the end justified the means. So tell me one last thing.”

Charles stared, flabbergasted and bewildered. And hopeful, he hated it, but he was hopeful. Anger and frustration built up, causing his left leg to jitter nervously under the table. “What could you possibly want to know? I fucked up and now you’re ripping my heart out of my chest with possibilities I can’t bloody well grasp, Erik! What do you want?”

Erik leaned forward across the table, eyes focused and intent. He opened his recalcitrant mouth and he asked, “Will you take me back?”

The words were galvanizing. Charles stood abruptly, his chair hurtling behind him and hitting the floor with a clatter. Without thought for the scene he was creating or the property damage he was incurring, he knocked the table aside. Bottles of hot sauce, the tumblers and their water, napkins, all flew wide as the table crashed against the floor. Erik’s eyes rounded slightly in what had to be shock. He leaned back as if bracing for a violent attack, but with his back to the wall, he had nowhere to go. So when Charles collided bodily with him, he only remained upright thanks to the wall his back slammed against.

Erik’s tall frame was rigid for only a moment as Charles’ arms slid around his neck, his cardigan sleeves bunching back against Erik’s black leather. Then his body language turned warm and receptive as Charles rested his weight on Erik’s shoulders. Charles went up on his toes and slammed their mouths together. And if Charles broke their lips open with the violence of his kiss, that was okay; it was a reunion he would gladly wear, blood he would happily mingle, and a pain far more tender than a lifetime of joy apart.

Vaguely, Charles felt Erik’s arms answer his embrace, curling tight around his thicker waist and lift him up until his feet left the floor. There was shock and some outrage in the restaurant, but that, of course, was nothing new.

It was Thursday after chess club and Richard LaCroix and Charles Xavier were sitting in Mrs. LaCroix’s Impala outside the local café. He and Charles had the windows up, the AC running, and the last bit of Queen’s ‘We Are the Champions’ dying out over the radio. Earlier they had driven with the windows down, sharing a menthol Virginia Slim from a pack they’d found stashed in the glove box, and talked like gangsters.

Charles was thrilled. Since Kurt wouldn’t, Richard had agreed to teach him how to drive now that Charles had his learner’s permit. They were the same age, but Richard seemed somehow older despite being a grade junior to Charles. Having advanced a grade, Charles was the youngest and last in his class at their private school to drive.

Switching off the radio, the two stepped out of the car and made ready to walk in to the café where Charles had consented to tutor Richard’s study group. As they went for the door they both heard the harsh consonants of a foreign language. Raising an eyebrow, Charles turned to seek out the speaker.

At a pay phone to the left of the café’s entrance was a rangy young man with a cigarette hanging off
his lip. Despite the unusual spring heat, the man was wearing a black leather jacket, steel-toe boots with duct tape wrapped around the instep of the left, and a grease-stained t-shirt. Under his arm hung a battered motorcycle helmet.

As the two high school boys watched, the young man took the half-burned cigarette from his mouth and began to gesture with it, while his tone became steadily more aggressive. There was an intensity to him that drew attention, something present and oh-so-real that Charles found himself totally mesmerized.

Richard moved closer to Charles with a frown. “I took French, what about you?”

“Latin,” Charles said, eyes fixed on the cigarette’s expressive cursive. It stopped abruptly as the stranger slammed the phone back in the payphone’s cradle. Then it glowed brightly as he put the filterless end to his lips and sucked hard.

“Oh!” Charles remarked. He was shocked at the full picture of a biker smoking, growling in German, and slamming public property around. “He looks like a criminal, doesn’t he?”

The young man’s eyebrows raised as if he understood Charles. He released the smoke from his mouth slowly, only to suck it in through his nose again. Both boys stared in awe-inspired fascination at the feat.

The awe ended the instant he flicked his still-glowing cigarette at the two of them, still clad in their school uniforms. “That’s because I am.”

“Oh,” Richard said stupidly, “you know English.”

The foreigner snorted smoke and looked down his nose at them through the cloud.

Charles, however, thrust his hand forward. “Charles Xavier. Nice to meet you, Mr…?”

The self-styled criminal raised an eyebrow at Charles, but then showed a good deal of teeth in what was either a smile or a precursor to biting Charles’ proffered hand. He seized Charles’ hand and, in a dick move, ground Charles’ knuckles together. “Max.”

Charles frowned, and jerked his hand back. “You know, that’s very rude!”

Max shrugged. “Then we are birds of a feather.”

Intrigued by Max’s frankness, Charles paused. He was uncertain what to say to somebody so completely beyond his realm of understanding. “Would you like to join us for a cup of coffee or something?”

Richard turned his head slowly to bestow an incredulous look on him. He clearly thought Charles was cracked. Charles didn’t care.

Max’s eyebrows lifted slightly. He searched Charles’ face intently then shrugged in acquiescence. “Coffee sounds good.”

fin

Chapter End Notes
The ending actually surprised me: it may be the happiest ending I have ever written.

Thank you for reading and supporting me throughout the writing!
Some of the cut scenes were linked to my Tumblr along the way, but I wanted to archive them here for ease of reference. In addition to cut scenes, I'm adding the very rough reference scene for when Erik met Shaw after Raven showed up at Charles' apartment. I'm also adding a few questions I've been asked about the story, plus a few other random things.

If that isn't enough, you can check out prompted back stories in Strict Machine: Prompt Fills. I'm going to add more fills to that over time.

The original, very crappy beginning from January 2012. In my defense, I hadn’t written anything beyond a couple poems for more than five years when I started Strict.

With his eyes shut, Charles couldn't always tell the difference between tuner cars and motorcycles. However, he knew the sound of an older model Kawasaki ZX6R when he heard it. At least, that's what he thought every time he heard a transverse in-line four cylinder engine with a Yoshimura exhaust pipe.

If he'd thought about it, the sound would have promoted a lopsided list of pros and cons concerning his move to Phoenix, Arizona. However, he hadn't given motorcycle engines much thought when he eagerly accepted the research opportunity that swept him from his comfortable, and often motorcycle-free, tenure in Oxford.

And why would he be thinking of motorcycles during a bitter English February, when most two-wheeled aberrations were under tarps, in garages, or locked away in storage facilities? Rather, he had thought of conducting research in lovely, temperate, desert winter. He had also thought of tequila, authentic Mexican food, and sunscreen. Especially the sunscreen.

Charles had not thought about Hell's Angels, he had not thought about Ruff Ryders, and he had certainly not thought about twelve months of mostly perfect motorcycle riding weather. Thoughts of 1997 Kawasaki ZX6Rs and Yoshimura exhausts never entered his head. Nor how every single time he thought he heard one, he would experience a full-body cringe.
A bit of technobabble I wrote for a scene where I wanted Charles to give Hank a lift. Even though I'm not fond of Hank as a character, I wanted to try to include him more.

“You’re a physicist,” Charles barked, “you should know that the spin of the wheels fights the gravity of the motorcycle’s mass when we lean in a corner. That means, of course, you should lean with me, not sit up and push the bike further down or cause more wind drag than absolutely necessary.”

*  

Cut from the second chapter when I realized Charles wouldn’t be paying attention to the whole conversation between Sean and Darwin. I really wanted Darwin in a lot more than he is. If I rewrote Strict, I’d have implied Darwin/Alex rather than Alex/Hank.

Darwin rolled his eyes, but smiled: Sean’s enthusiasm was contagious. Then his expression became guarded. “Wait, does this mean I owe Deus or one of the others?”

“Erik decided Deus owed you one,” Sean shrugged, “because you keep the lot open for us. PMS had the contact for the chop shop that had your car, so we owe them. Angel says they already had it apart. It took awhile to negotiate it free and then to get it reassembled.”

“PMS already call in the debt?” Darwin asked after mulling the information over.

“Yes,” Sean nodded. “Erik’s rebuilding an engine and doing a little welding, too.”

Darwin took in a deep breath and let it out just as slowly. As he did so, he relaxed visibly.

*  

Cut from the second chapter and reorganized and cannibalized for the third for greater impact.

The truck had an orange and white dirt bike strapped down in the back. It was a sensible truck and it looked well-kept. The windows were tinted, but Charles couldn’t make out the driver anyway. The truck looked well-kept, it and the motorcycle in the back were covered in a fine layer of orange dust.

Charles gripped the first aid kit tighter, wondering just what kind of terrifying beast this Erik person was. Sean was terrified of him. He inspired a sort of hero-worship in Alex. Darwin was cautious. A figure had taken shape in Charles mind that took equal parts inspiration from his stepfather and popular media.

What stepped out was worse.

Charles’ grip on the first aid kit was hard and the surface of the box slick. His hands slipped off into
fists and the box was given to gravity. His heart constricted hard enough that one hand spasmed out of a fist and pressed awkwardly to his chest.

The first aid kit clattered to the ground. [He nearly faints when he crouches to pick it up.]

His hair was lighter than Charles recalled, his skin far more tan, but there was the same harsh beauty, the same grey eyes. Max Eisenhardt was not, and never had been, a victim of terminal velocity and unforgiving asphalt.

A corner of Charles mind was having a heart attack. Another portion was wondering why the police had lied about Max’s death. A truly manic part was wondering why Max had showed up for Erik’s R6.

Without a word, Max bypassed everyone, making a direct line to the wrinkled and creased R6. He crouched behind it to take a look at its spine: from tail to triple tree. One corner of his mouth pulled up into what was either a sardonic expression or a snarl. He unfolded from the crouch and looked over the tank, the front forks, and the cowling.

Touching the broken brake lever with his right hand, Max snorted and glanced at Alex. “I’ll need the plastics off to make certain of the frame. It’ll need forks, tank, levers, and new rear sets. New headlight assembly, too. Plus all the plastics.”

Alex was practically as boneless as Sean in his dejection.

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I originally envisioned Moira as more of a hard-ass, but around this time, I got conflicted about Erik or Charles getting killed off. So I went with a more sympathetic, movie-accurate depiction of Moira.

“Let me set you straight, Professor,” MacTaggart stated coolly. “The PD isn’t really interested much in collecting and deporting illegals; there’s no money in it. There’s money for the municipality in traffic violations, which your friends pay into frequently. Arrest somebody, convict them, now that’s a drain on finances. They don’t want that.

“Federal agents, we’re different. It’s still a money game, but we get money based on achievement of different goals. I don’t have to be interested in this little gang. I don’t have to plaster their names all over my reports. I don’t even have to mention their gang name beyond a footnote. I’d much rather write about a guy named Shaw or his contact, Azazel. You think you can help me with that, Professor? Or do I need to spend more time on this Deus intra Machinam?”

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As I got further along with the writing, I had fewer cuts, because the picture was developing nicely in my head. Thus this one came as a bit of a surprise. I cut it because it placed too much emphasis on an original character. I wrote a new one that featured Angel instead.
“Sexy Librarian!” The cry was muffled by Cupcake’s helmet. Short and slender, the helmet made her look as ungainly as a bobble-head toy. It was an extremely colorful Suomy; white with rainbow-colored fish in haphazard knots all over the surface.

She flung her brown arms out and launched herself at Charles. He was just able to avoid her helmet pummeling his chin. Side stepping her, he caught her before she collided with the Tacoma’s tailgate and used her momentum to swing her around once. She shrieked in delighted laughter.

“Orale,” she laughed, brown eyes wide. “You were up there forever! You never reply to my texts! You didn’t tell me if you like the *Billie Jean* gif! It’s my masterpiece!”

She sank down to her kneepads, threw her helmeted head back and howled, “You kill me with your uptight *guerro* indifference! Why are white people so emotionally constipated?”

“No, sorry, Redline,” Sean laughed, grabbing Cupcake’s arm to haul her upright. “She misjudged and drank too much. Don’t make me oppress you in the name of my European ancestors, CC.”

Just as quickly, Cupcake grabbed Sean’s ankle and pulled, nearly sending the boy crashing to the ground. Sean was in the unenviable position of trying to keep his balance while he had hold of her arm and she had hold of his ankle. “Come on, I’m gonna claim this ginger in the name of PMS!”

“Cupcake,” Erik said, voice cool and commanding, there was an undercurrent of authority that everyone felt. “Let go of Sean.”

Sean looked relieved when Cupcake immediately let go of his ankle. “Aw, *pinche* Magneto…”

“If you want to talk to Charles,” Erik continued, switching from commanding to wry, “you’ll have to let him respond.”

“And please take off the helmet,” Charles chuckled. “Volume does not replace clarity.”

“Sexy Librarian, only you,” Cupcake sighed, as she stood, “would say something like that. We’re not in a library, we don’t have to be shushed. So, *Billie Jean*. Speak!”

“Helmet first,” Charles replied, retrieving a tamale with green sauce from the plastic.

Sighing dramatically, Cupcake unbuckled her helmet and pulled it off. Her wide mohawk was in sweaty disarray, pink tips pointing in all directions, her makeup was smudged. “Okay, mama Machete. Oh! I made those!”

“It looks delicious,” Charles nodded, unwrapping the corn husk. “As for your gif, it is a masterwork. The contrast and clean up is excellent. The way each tank lights up as Erik steps from one motorcycle to the other is brilliant in its surprise and simplicity. The slow motion is perfect, since he has a brisk walk despite the limp. If he was walking too fast, the clip would be over too soon and the emphasis of each lit gas tank would be lost.”

Cupcake nodded, eyes locked on Charles and her fingers drumming on her thighs with excess energy. Sean kept glancing at Erik to see if he would react to the description of the gif. But Erik only took another drink of his water and watched Angel coach Alex.
“I think the lighting of the various mirrors and gauges as they are broken or kicked off is much better than your first iteration’s glitter effect. The only way you could improve it, I think, is to add the actual song, but then you’d need to work on the timing.”

“Huh…” the young woman frowned, “I thought I sent you the movie file. Guess not. Easily fixed.”

Then she smiled. “Thank you, Sexy Librarian. Let me know if you ever have any requests. My sisters and I, we have plenty of footage to work with.”

“I’m sure you do,” Charles chuckled. “I like seeing your texts almost as much as my sister’s.”

Cupcake thrust both hands in front of her, thumbs in the up position. “My sisters and I shall keep you updated! Enjoy the tamales; my aunty and I made them together.”

*I cut this because I figured it was too hard to believe, even though I actually based it on a real experience I had with a male model friend of mine.

“What kind of lessons does Angel give?” The professor asked as Erik sat on his work stool to put on his boots.

“Pole dancing,” Erik replied, “for taste-impaired Scottsdale trophy wives. Sooner or later you’ll have to ask her for video of the time Alex picked her up in the Tacoma. He ended up with phone numbers written all over his arm.”

“Have you ever picked her up?” Charles chuckled, imagining Alex trying to ward off the older women’s onslaught. He sat on the garage’s step and put on his own boots.

Erik shook his head, “No, but if I ever do, I’ll park a street over.”

*I

For the DVD blow up scene, I had to write a reference scene so I knew exactly what Erik was going through. Without the scene, I couldn’t keep Erik’s reactions accurate. Actually, I had intended to write this scene into Strict. However, I had to give it up because it would have been jarring to have only one scene or chapter out of so many being in Erik’s POV.

Since it was only a reference scene, I mostly kept it minimal, so what you see is really very sketchy and switches tenses from time to time. It starts after Raven showed up at Charles’ apartment and Erik leaves.

(On the way to the R6, Erik checks his phone and sees he has missed calls from Azazel and Shaw. Annoyed, he calls Azazel first. The phone is answered on the sixth ring.)
“Max,” Shaw says and then continues in German, “since when do other people take priority over your sponsor?”

Erik, already in a bad mood, stops dead in his tracks. It takes him a moment to continue forward to the R6. “When other people call first.”

“You owe me more than other people,” comes the reply, obviously intended to put him in his place. It does.

Erik leans against the R6 and shakes his head. “That’s true.”

“Of course it is.” Shaw replies, laughing. “How does seafood sound to you today?”

Shaw always goes for seafood, usually exotic, always expensive. “Mexican is better in this area.”

“Mexican food is comprised of things only economically disadvantaged people eat, Max. You know me better than that.”

“What time?”

“Two.” And Shaw hangs up.

(Back at his house, Erik is in an even worse temper. He took a longer route home, just to work out some of his aggression, but he’s still furious. He showers for almost an hour. He gets out, shaves, and dries off. Gets dressed in nicer clothes than usual. Goes to the side table to get the DVD. It isn’t there.)

(At first, he’s just confused, then he rifles around. Still nothing. He checks his mother’s letters. They’re all fine. He drops down and searches under the bed, behind the table (where he has another gun; holster is screwed to the wood), behind the drawer. He rips the sheets off the bed, tips the mattress, then the box spring. He finally flings the frame up, where it punches into the wall. He tears the closet apart.)

(Finally, he storms out to the living room where Angel, Sean, and Alex have congregated in concern.)

“Someone’s been in my room,” Erik said, voice absolutely calm and utterly terrible. “That alone is not good. To make matters far more serious, that someone removed something. A DVD.”

“The only person that’s been in your room without you in it is the professor,” Angel said carefully, capping her nail polish. “And that’s your own fault for leaving before he woke up. I know he’s a guy, Erik, but morning after etiquette is morning after etiquette.”

If he’d been more worried about Charles’ feelings and less concerned about losing Shaw’s special DVD, Erik would snarl at Angel.

Sean had the decency to look concerned. “Which DVD, maybe it got out here somehow?”

Erik’s lip curled in disgust and fury. “It has ‘Max’s Hits’ written in permanent marker. If you find it, tell me immediately and absolutely, on pain of being kicked out, do not watch it.”

Stalking back into his room, he seized his phone from the charger and immediately dialed Charles. Charles’ phone went straight to voice mail. He tried again. Nothing.

(He checks the time. There’s not enough time, not even if he speeds, to go to Tempe and make it
back to Scottsdale in time. There’s no guarantee Charles is even there. But if Charles has the DVD, wouldn’t he have watched it? How could Charles act normal if he had? Had he watched the DVD before they fucked?

(Rage. How could he act so normal, knowing what he’d gone through?)

(Goes to McCormick & Schmick in Scottsdale. Shaw has a private room for them. Azazel isn’t present. Emma might be shopping across the street.)

(Shaw has ordered shark and has already ordered something for Erik. He makes small talk, mentions that Erik’s fingers appear to have healed nicely, and then asks for the DVD.)

“I left it at the house,” Erik stated blandly.

Shaw snorted and raised an eyebrow. “That’s a poor way to start a discussion on leaving Hellfire. You know the agreement, Max. You bring the DVD every time we meet as a reminder. If you lose it, you either find another copy, or we make a new one. I think you know which would be easier to do.”

Erik nodded and did not complain. “I’ll bring it next time. It was a foolish mistake.”

“You just watched it the other week thanks to the broken finger,” Shaw shrugged and sipped his wine. “And this is the only time you’ve forgotten in a decade, so I think I can overlook it. But, understand it does throw a damper on the already distressing news that you want out of Hellfire.”

“I understand that,” Erik replied. He questioned his reasoning for even making the exit. Then thought of his mother, sick in Dresden and how he wanted to see her. He thought of Charles next though he didn’t want to.

“I don’t understand why you went to Azazel for advice instead of coming to me first,” Shaw continued. “It implies a certain lack of trust on your part. I didn’t like hearing that you had scheduled a meeting with Azazel without me.”

“I would have scheduled with you,” Erik lied, “if I had known you were coming to see the race, too. I was under the impression Azazel was traveling alone to see Quested compete.”

“So, why do you want to leave me,” Shaw continued, feigning hurt. “I know you enjoy the challenges I send your way.”

Erik nodded, picked up his glass of white, observed the way it moved within the glass, and then replaced it on the tablecloth. “I want to see my mother. I want to take care of her myself now I have money and skills to do so.”

“I can appreciate that,” Shaw nodded, his sympathy a carelessly composed veneer. “That’s what brought you to me in the first place. But do you really think you can provide for her as well as I can?”

Erik nodded. “Even without a passport. All I need is to get back to Dresden.”

Shaw shook his head. “Trafficking people to and from America was much easier before the September 11th attacks, Max. Getting you out isn’t the same thing. Besides, economically speaking, America imports people, not so much exports. There’s no real demand for Americans. I can’t get you out the way we got you in.”

(The seafood is served. Shaw eats as normal, but Erik hardly touches his.)
“Max,” Shaw states between mouthfuls of shark. “Not eating is a poor way to show your gratitude to my overflowing generosity. Is there something else on your mind?”

Erik shook his head and picked up his cutlery.

“I have a letter for you, by the way,” Shaw said casually. “She’s responding very well to the chemotherapy.”

Erik’s hand paused in the act of spearing asparagus. His eyes tracked up to Shaw. He hadn’t had a letter in months.

“But I left it in my briefcase.”

His eyes fell to his plate. (Shaw is just baiting him now, but Erik is like the shark on the man’s plate.) “I can follow you to your hotel to get it.”

“No,” Shaw smiled, “I won’t trouble you like that. Why don’t we meet Sunday? I want time to think about if I can arrange your departure from service. I can’t make any promises, of course.”

Erik knew better. Shaw had already had time to think about it. The wait was just more of Shaw’s pointless sadism. “Sunday it is.”

“We can meet at the air race up in Monument Valley or on my way out at Deerfield airport.”

“I have dynotuning on Sunday,” Erik said. “Glendale is better.”

Shaw sat back with his glass and a wry expression. “You’d pass up a race to do dynotuning? That’s German of you, Max. But, no, Deerfield airport it is. 9PM. Bring the DVD. I can’t very well give you your property unless I know you are taking care of mine.”

Erik nodded, though bitter anger clenched his stomach. He kept eating.

*

Last but not least, I cut the start of the first reconciliation scene. I had Charles getting really mouthy, which I liked but which was inappropriate because Charles was making progress on his entitled attitude. I like Charles’ entitled attitude, I love it when he’s rude or when he digs in his heels. However, this was a bad time for it.

Panting for breath, mouth wet, Erik stepped back. “We need to talk.”

Charles gave Erik an incredulous look and pressed a hand to his crotch illustratively. “Yes, I know, but can it wait until after we’ve fucked?”

Erik shook his head. “No, I want to talk before endorphins fuck up my brain.”

“My brain will be equally flooded with endorphins,” Charles tried. He sat up and took hold of Erik’s belt to pull him closer.

“No.” Erik was adamant. “Even though I want to fuck my name into you, we need to talk. If we’re
going to do this, I need you to understand there are still going to be things I won’t tell you.”

That had Charles’ attention. He suspected Erik had no intention of telling him about the Russian mafia, but what other secrets could there be? “Very well, then I reserve the same right. There will be some things I’m not going to tell you.”

A cross expression passed over Erik’s face but he shrugged. “There are going to be things I tell you, too, Charles. The main thing I need you to be able to do is to respect my privacy. If you can’t swear to that, this isn’t going to work. I’d like to cut my losses before they get worse.”

The prideful part of Charles was tempted to tell Erik that ultimatums were frowned on in Relationship 101. Being sensible, though, he accepted that he deserved a second chance far less than an ultimatum. With grave sincerity he responded, “I agree.”

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Questions from comments and Tumblr:

“[H]ow exactly tough loner Erik started collecting kids?”

The same way he ended up with Charles in the first place, but also because he needed to replace Charles. Note that the kids were mainly all around Charles’ age when the two met. Part of that has to do with the casting of XMFC, but it dovetails nicely with how Erik was ‘stuck’ in the same place/age. He matured, but didn’t grow much. The biggest difference between Max and Erik is due to the motorcycle wreck back on the East Coast. He didn’t start growing from that moment until Charles showed up once more.

“Why doesn’t Erik have tattoos?”

Erik doesn’t go to temple nor believe in God, but he is still observant to a degree for his mother’s sake and as a strong part of his cultural identity, so he never received tattoos. This is kind of unrealistic, because there are plenty of secular and non-secular Jews in the Russian Mafia and they all have the requisite tattoos. Erik may have dodged tattoos on the grounds that he was never truly a member of the mafia.

“[I]f charles had went to the airport, even though I already kind of know that part of the would be story?”

If you mean the time Erik told him not to go: I realized later that Charles would have wound up at the wrong airport!

The second time, when he really did go to the airport when Erik couldn’t? If you mean, what if Charles had pulled Machete’s gun, then Charles would have been killed. He might have been able to take out Azazel or Shaw, but he wouldn’t have survived himself. The story would have ended there, because it was in Charles' POV. This would have been the ending I originally expected.
“What was Strict’s original ending?”

There were two. Originally, I was pretty sure either Erik or Charles was going to die (one protecting the other). The only way to circumvent this was to not kill off Shaw. The ending I had counted on being in the ‘epilogue’ was unresolved. Basically, I had intended for Strict to end with Charles deciding to confess about the FBI. I never intended to show Erik’s reaction or even Charles’ telling Erik what was up, because the whole point of the story was that Charles was able to overcome his entitlement and truly love Erik enough to let him go. I’m happy people like the ending even though I think it could have been better.

“[W]hat are some of the things that you didn’t expect you [would] change/add (but did) when you were planning Strict?”

Heh, other than expecting either Erik or Charles to get killed? I didn’t expect the love story to take over the whole thing. This was my first serious romance and I had no idea how powerful the genre’s tropes/expectations were and how they would overthrow my second planned ending. I mainly wanted to write action, motorcycles, and sex but the love story came in and wrecked my intentions and doubled my word count.

I also didn’t expect to write anal sex. In fact, I didn’t want to, because it isn’t the end all and be all of gay male sex. I don’t really know how anal sex feels/works for a guy (despite research). I only caved in when I realized Charles would go for it, because I made him the kind of guy that has intensely strong prostate orgasms.

And if I could change anything about Strict now it would be to strip out Alex/Hank and add in Darwin/Alex. Unfortunately, Strict grew out of a prompt that I took liberties with at the kink meme and the OP requested Alex/Hank.

“What’s the deal with Sean and Cupcake?”

Nothing. They’re just really good friends.

Chapter End Notes

Miscellaneous items (some trivial and some of note):

Machete and Celia were vetting Erik as a sperm donor. Erik was conflicted about this the entire fic.
Shaw had vague ties to Vladimir Putin as Putin was the head of the KGB in Dresden before the wall fell.
Erik is fickle about motorcycles: the BMW S1000RR will only be his favorite as long as he thinks it is the pinnacle of motorcycle technology. He still prefers the firing pattern of the R1’s cross plane crankshaft. He never bought an S1000RR because he wasn't sure which was better.
Charles has yet to discover that Erik audited a year of Latin at the university.
The female professor in Charles’ shared office is crushing on him. Erik keeps his laptop locked in one of his tool boxes in the garage with his expensive whiskey. The night at Cherry Bomb when Erik and Machete were drinking Don Julio is when Machete told Erik about the SS picking up a sponsor. The thievery and destruction of the XA was not widely reported, even though two of the SS were killed.

End Notes

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