Summary

To his students, Erik Lehnsherr is despotic and terrifying. To his department head, he’s the brilliant young researcher who abandoned his prestigious job overnight, moving across the country to join MIT’s faculty. But to Charles Xavier, he is a contradiction. As Erik and Charles settle into their new roles as colleagues, their professional rivalry starts to spill over into the personal.

Notes

Developed as spicy and aesc were in Chicago, wandering around and talking about mutant professors in true, everlasting hate.

Note: We've chosen not to use archive warnings in this fic, so please heed the tags in the
header as you read along. We'll include additional spoilery warnings and tags in the endnotes for chapters where they apply, and those can be reached by clicking the link to read the notes at the end of the chapter.

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Also, sometimes shit isn't in chronological order. That's because this isn't a novel, it's a collection of snapshots at two people's lives. So don't be thrown off if you finish an example in present day then suddenly find yourself hanging out twenty years earlier in the next one! We're fairly nonlinear here. :)

Example One: Cognitive Dissonance

Kitty’s only been at MIT for a semester, but even so, she knows she really ought to be attending colloquia regularly. They’re scheduled every Friday at 3:30, and it’s her best opportunity to see the faculty present their research and engage conversationally with the students. But somehow she’s always ended up with too much to do by the end of the week, rushing to finish a paper or get a prototype out to Dr Lehnsherr before he starts sending increasingly-curt reminder emails, and so she never ends up making it.

This is the first time she’s ever been.

She sits with a clutch of other grad students, some of them more advanced and quietly (or not-so-quietly) superior, several of them other first-years like her. They’re huddled a few rows safely back for reasons Kitty can’t quite understand, a row of BCS faculty between them and the lectern like a barrier wall.

Dr Lehnsherr paces back and forth across the stage, glaring at the audience--Kitty realizes why the rest of her cohort is sitting so far away--and then at the clock. That glare glances over her before moving on, a flicker of acknowledgment that's not quite dismissive, but given Dr Lehnsherr growling at her about being more collegial, she'd expected Dr. Lehnsherr at least to say something sarcastic.

“Time to begin,” Dr Lehnsherr says the moment the minute hand hits the ‘six’ at the bottom of the clock, and immediately launches into his lecture, flipping through his slides at a pace that, while not breakneck, strains even Kitty’s faculties. She finds a sort of rhythm to it eventually, though, and after a while she forgets the pace altogether, engaged in the familiar research programme and recognizing more and more representations of the work they do in the lab. It’s cool to see the actual data she’s heard so much about, even if it is presented in aggregate after undergoing some incredibly complicated statistical analyses Kitty isn’t sure she totally understands.

"There." Dr Lehnsherr reaches the last slide. The laser pointer bobs in the air, spinning aimlessly. "Any questions?"

Kitty nervously eyes her colleagues, who all stare at their laptops or tablets or into the middle distance. Dr Lehnsherr's silence is ominous, as it always is, suggesting that questions aren't welcome, but not asking a question would be a sign of intellectual disengagement.

"I have a question," Dr Xavier says from the front row.

A ripple runs through the other grad students, quickly stifled. Dr MacTaggert, who's sitting in front of Kitty, sighs.

"What is it," Dr Lehnsherr says flatly.

“Go back to slide … I think it was twenty-three, where you had the figure.”

Dr Lehnsherr flicks back through his presentation without comment, data flitting across the screen too fast for interpretation, a blur of black and white before he finally pauses on the plot modeling the estimated regression lines. He raises an eyebrow at Dr Xavier, and Xavier must nod, because he sets the clicker down.

“Here,” Dr Xavier says, gesturing at somewhere on the screen. “Are you controlling for the effects of intersectional privilege on mutation status, instead of simply subject mutation status as the mediating variable?”
“If you recall from slide nineteen, I used mixed-effects modeling.” Dr Lehnsherr makes mixed-effects modeling sound like the most menacing thing Kitty's ever heard. "Subject is treated as a random factor."

“But not SES, race, marital status, disability …?”

“All of those are accounted for by determining subject as a random factor,” Dr Lehnsherr growls. The clicker begins to levitate, the bright red dot of the diode flashing erratically. "They wash out. But no, they are not controlled for, only because it would be semantically misleading to use the term ‘control’ when they were not entered into stepwise regression.”

“Did you run the model both ways anyway?” Dr Xavier asks. When Dr Lehnsherr glares, he adds, "Just out of curiosity, of course, you know I trust your statistics." Kitty's sitting at an angle to him, so she can see the patient, earnest look on his face, the same one that he wears when he's explaining something in seminar.

“Of course I did,” Dr Lehnsherr snaps. "It made no difference as to the reliability of these results. And my imaging results do rather speak for themselves. Now are you finished?”

“Not quite,” Dr Xavier says with the brilliant smile and unflappable pleasantness that Kitty thinks must be a constant in the universe.

Dr Lehnsherr scowls. It's the kind of scowl that Kitty's grown to dread, and that her older colleagues say, with a kind of desperation that says they're trying to convince themselves, she'll get used to. "What else wasn't sufficiently clear, Dr Xavier?”

They go on like this for the rest of the time available for seminar, Dr Xavier asking for clarification on some point or another and Dr Lehnsherr indulging him, albeit grudgingly and with ever-increasing ire, until at last Dr Xavier says:

“And you really think this means humanity cannot be fundamentally altruistic? That these data support a basic egoistic, or even biased, motivation?”

Kitty frowns, confused; it's related to both their research areas, sure, but Dr Lehnsherr had said nothing about these data supporting his ancillary hypothesis about essential bias. These data -- sure, they do kind of support Dr Lehnsherr's hypothesis, but he was focusing more on the neural phenomena, not really the ...

"What else could they possibly support?” Dr Lehnsherr snarls.

Dr MacTaggert sighs audibly. "Gentlemen…"

"No,” Dr Lehnsherr says. "Please, Dr Xavier, enlighten us.” He gestures at slide twenty-three. Kitty strains to decipher it, to understand how Dr Lehnsherr is deriving all of this -- how they've gone from arguing over the kinds of statistics she's only beginning to understand to altruism versus bias as some immutable, basic characteristic of human nature, for that matter.

"Well,” Dr Xavier says, "your data could suggest motivated suppression of altruistic inclination.”

"If you were completely deluded, then yes, it could,” Dr Lehnsherr says.

Kitty is fairly certain that, if anyone else had spoken to Dr Lehnsherr like this, if anyone had even thought about his data supporting anything other than egoism and bias, he would have extracted all the iron from their blood and left them to die on his office floor. Or possibly done it in front of the entire department, to make an example of them. She holds her breath along with the rest of her
cohort; even the older grad students, who have seen far too much, shift nervously. It's twenty after five, but no one so much as glances at the door.

"Let's assume I'm not deluded," Dr Xavier suggests.

Kitty's right leg tingles and she shifts, or tries to shift, inconspicuously. Up by the lectern, Dr Lehnsherr is settling into a steely and wrathful silence, although the laser pointer creaks ominously, its metal skin splintering.

At last, long after Kitty thought Dr Lehnsherr would speak if he were planning to reply at all, Dr Lehnsherr says, “Your proposed explanation is not parsimonious. Egoism explains far more effects, accounts for all of the variables, and it does it without presuming the presence of some insidious motivating factor that miraculously affects humans, chimpanzees, and rat models. The probability of P is greater than the probability of Not-P plus Q plus suppression variable S. That is basic logic, Dr Xavier, and I would have thought you'd know better.”

Dr Xavier only smiles brilliantly, which seems to goad Dr Lehnsherr into apoplectic silence. When Dr Lehnsherr opens his mouth to press home his victory, or maybe to demand why Dr Xavier's smiling like that, Dr Xavier says calmly, "We've kept everyone here rather late, it looks like, and I think we both have a commitment elsewhere, yes?"

The tension releases like a plucked string. Kitty stays sitting until the other students begin to gather their things, all of them looking nervously at each other and a couple suggesting drinks at the grad student bar in Central Square. The faculty talk softly among themselves as if nothing unusual has happened while Dr Lehnsherr shuts down the tech station and ignores all of them.

"Want to come with us?" Hank asks. He's one of Dr Xavier's students, huge and blue and barely able to fit into the special-accommodation desk at the end of the row.

Dr Lehnsherr's ignoring Kitty as thoroughly as he is the rest of the room, and Kitty figures it's best to escape unnoticed -- and unscathed. And she can ask the others what, exactly, just happened.

“Oh,” Nora says when they're safely outside and walking toward Central, all bundled up in layers and layers of clothes to protect against the freezing January wind, “they're always like that.”

“Every time,” Hank agrees.

"Every goddamn time.”

“But … why?” Kitty prods, feeling a little foolish and a bit like a gossip-monger, but none of the other students have been sparing in their criticism of their respective advisers so far, so she figures it must be okay.

Salim snorts. “Foreplay.”

“What?”

“Foreplay. Because their mutual 'commitment elsewhere’ is Xavier, on his knees, in Lehnsherr’s office. Probably happening as-we-speak.”

Kitty blinks, not sure if this is meant to be a joke, or some … some kind of prank, or --

“Stop it, Salim,” Nora says, fixing him with a disapproving frown. “That’s disrespectful. Not to mention statistically unlikely.”
“Obviously not *that* statistically unlikely, because they’re totally doing it. You can tell. Xiaomeng agrees with me, don’t you -- Xiaomeng, they’re fucking, right?"

Xiaomeng blushes scarlet, but after a moment, she nods her head. “I mean,” she says, “probably not ... probably not *really*, but we do like to joke about it. They’re always at each other like that.”

"Like ... that?" In Kitty’s mind’s eye, Dr Lehnsherr is about to pull Dr Xavier limb from limb. It's *maybe* sexy, if you’re turned on by that sort of thing. Kitty is, kind of, but the thought of Dr Lehnsherr and Dr Xavier together -- *like that* -- is horrifying. It’s also impossible to stop thinking about, now that Salim's pointed it out.

"Every colloquium," Hank says with the weary resignation of a fourth-year who just wants to finish his dissertation and find a job. "They aren't allowed to attend any of the interdisciplinary symposia at the same time because all they do is argue during Q&A."

"And public events shouldn't be X-rated," Salim says. It gets him an indignant *shut up!* from Nora.

"But *why*?" Kitty's not entirely sure she wants to know. Some of it's that Nora's right: it's weird, wondering about her advisor's sex life, and wondering about her advisor and another professor in her department. There's something about Dr Lehnsherr that discourages this kind of talk -- it's not respect, it's more like healthy, animal fear. And maybe some things, Kitty supposes, aren't meant to be known.

“They have a theoretical disagreement,” Nora says, sniffing, like she is trying hard to rise above the tenor of the rest of the conversation. “It’s quite normal in academia, only Xavier and Lehnsherr are a little more fervent about it than most.”

“Fervently fucking,” the usually-quiet Xiaomeng murmurs, and Salim punches the air, says, “That’s my girl!”

The conversation tilts away from that after a while, moving on to other things, but Kitty keeps finding herself drawn back in her mind, turning the idea over despite knowing it’s stupid, that Dr Xavier is a telepath and might catch her at it. God, she thinks, what is she, twelve?

Even so. She does wonder.

She wonders even more later that week, when she has to pass by the two of them in the hall -- they’re standing close together, not close enough to be suspicious but not quite enough space between them to count as professional, either, and she can’t help but catch a snippet of their conversation as she passes by.

“ -- solutely not,” Dr Lehnsherr is saying, his arms folded across his chest and his gaze dark where it’s tilted downward to meet Dr Xavier’s, who is far shorter than he.

"You agreed," Dr Xavier says.

Kitty slows down and steps into the department office. She needs to check her mail; she absolutely does not need to eavesdrop on her advisor.

Dr Lehnsherr makes an aggravated sound. Dr Xavier says, patiently and inexorably, "Come now, Erik, I shouldn't have to remind you..." The words trail off into something softly suggestive, something Kitty would, in another time and place, call *teasing*. The silence stretches on, enough time for Kitty to wonder if they’re talking telepathically -- Dr Xavier can, although never does with students.
At last, Dr Lehnsherr says, "Oh, very well."

"Lovely!" Dr Xavier says, all bright enthusiasm. "Thank you, Erik."

They retreat down the hall -- Kitty sees them walk past the open office door, toward the faculty offices -- and she finally remembers to look perfunctorily at her mailbox. No mail.

Once upon a time Kitty would have insisted Dr Lehnsherr would never let another faculty member push him around like that, and after that display at the colloquium she would have said Dr Xavier least of all. Only now this, and Kitty doesn’t know what to believe anymore.

But she is quite certain of one thing: whatever it is, sex is surely not involved.

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"Now," Charles says, "That wasn’t as bad as you thought it was, was it?"

They’re sitting in Charles’ office after the symposium for undergraduate research, Charles looking quite pleased from behind his desk and Erik in the chair where Charles’ students usually sit, his long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles and his arms folded over his chest, as ever finding himself incredulous people like Charles Xavier can really exist in this fucked up world, are actually living breathing talking human beings one of which is sitting in the same room as Erik right now, that they aren’t all just forced paper archetypes invented for thought experiments.

"It was worse," Erik says. "Two hours. I could have read four papers in as much time."

Charles makes a disappointed sound, although he radiates amusement. "And you would have found as much to complain about in those papers as you did in a collection of undergraduate posters."

"At least those are higher-order mistakes. What on earth are they teaching in those research methods classes?" Some of the methodology and analysis he'd witnessed would have embarrassed him, if Erik were the kind of person to experience embarrassment at the mistakes of others. If he'd made those errors, Shaw would have -- Erik stops himself from imagining what Shaw would have done.

"And yet, you survived," Charles says mildly. Erik needs a moment to realize he's talking about the damned undergraduate symposium, not Shaw. "Thank you again for agreeing to help out."

"I said I would go," Erik corrects him. "Not that I would help judge the damn thing."

He'd agreed to going; that much was true. And then, between the door to the ballroom and the first display with its nervous undergraduate investigator hovering in front of it, Charles had asked -- or rather, ordered under the guise of asking -- "Would you mind helping me judge the entries?"

And it was too late in the game at that point for Erik to properly argue himself out of it, so he’d ended up being swept along with Charles’ will, and so here he is, reaping the benefits: which are, apparently, nothing more than Charles’ personal approval. All there is for Erik to do now is to be appropriately surly about it.

"Think about the contribution you made today, Erik," Charles says. "Maybe due to your helpful feedback, some of the students will revise their work and gain a greater understanding of science. One of your future colleagues could be in there."

"Christ, I hope not."

Charles fixes him with a Look but says nothing else on the subject, just taps the side of his forefinger
against his lower lip, which is very red, like he’s been biting it. “Do you like being here, Erik?” he says, and the question comes out of left field, taking Erik completely by surprise.

“It’s tolerable,” Erik says carefully, suspicious he’s about to step on a landmine.

“Good,” Charles says, “because I hope you will come to make MIT your home in every possible way. I think you will find you can make fruitful inroads here, if you choose, but part of that will mean collaborating with the rest of the community from time to time.”

"I've got graduate students." They're the two Erik's brought with him from Berkeley, plus the pair foisted on him by MacTaggert -- Pryde and one other, whose name Erik has decided to forget. "And I did that colloquium you insisted I do."

"And it was very stimulating," Charles says. He has been biting his lower lip, or he is now; Erik catches the corner of one tooth worrying at the soft, red curve of flesh. Erik presses his thumb hard against the muscle just above his elbow. "But that's not everything. You'll need to take an interest in the undergraduates as well."

"Which I just did," Erik points out. He ignores the soft drift of satisfaction Charles sends him.

"You did," Charles agrees. He leans forward a little, fixing Erik with those sharp blue eyes. "Thank you again."

“You didn’t hire me personally, you know,” Erik decides to remind Charles, just in case he’s forgotten.

“Well, I voted for you after your job talk, which amounts to the same thing. And I want to see you do well here, so I know my vote wasn’t wasted.”

Erik shrugs one shoulder and uncrosses his arms, leaning forward to reach out and pick up the little metal figurine sitting at the end of Charles’ desk, turning it over in his fingers like he’s looking at it for the first time even though probably they both know he feels out every corner and edge of it with his power every time he comes into this room, has memorized it better than the palm of his own hand. Charles knows this about Erik, the same way he knows everything else, everything there is to know.

Erik sets the figurine back down again a moment later, the metal clinking against polished wood. He stays leaned forward, though, setting his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands, the distance between him and Charles reduced, now.

Charles doesn't give ground. It's still surprising, how he doesn't, even when he seems to yield when Erik pushes or presses, or when they're disagreeing in front of colleagues and Charles seems to let him win. Erik isn't used to pushing up against something that doesn't give way. Or someone.

"Do you regret that?” Erik says. "Voting for me?"

The smile Charles gives him is somewhere between sly and gentle. "I don't," he says. He knows, of course, Erik doesn't regret leaving California. He knows Erik had nearly jumped at the chance, even if it meant Boston winters.

Erik eases forward slightly. There's even less space now; it would be awkward, but he could touch Charles' hands where they're folded neatly on his desk. Charles, despite the soft edges of khaki pants and old cardigans, is always contained and precise. It's the soft edges that persuade Erik to do things like agree to look at undergraduate posters; it's the precision that gets Erik to really participate.
"Why vote for me, if you know I’m just going to make your life hell here?" Erik pushes further. He wants to know what Charles will say, if Charles will admit to knowing more than he ought and using that as evidence in his calculus, if he’ll remind Erik that, in some insanely ironic way, Erik got this job through the same old twisted nepotism as always.

"You really are a quite excellent scholar," Charles says and Erik detects something scolding about the corners of his mouth, like he’s berating Erik for even considering what he did. “I voted for you on merit. Honestly, Erik, you aren’t a student, to need such reassurances.”

That stings, a little, but Charles isn’t wrong.

“Well then,” Erik says, “as long as you’re happy.”

Charles beams. "I'm very happy."

Erik pushes aside that strange, unwelcome warmth that starts behind his ribs. He can't tell if it's Charles' approval, if it's his own pleasure, or if it's some hybrid of the two. In an obscure way he wants more of it, but when the desire threatens to coalesce, he reminds himself this isn't Shaw. He's not what he was, twelve years ago, to make the choices he made.

At last, Charles leans back. His satisfaction doesn't dim, although the space between them isn't as charged, as full with his presence, as before. Erik refuses to chase it.

"You'd be happier if I agreed with you on essential altruism," Erik says, instead of the things he can't say.

Charles smiles ruefully. With that expression, it's hard to remember Charles is close to Erik's age, just as senior and well-established. "I'm not sure that's true."

“Hmm,” is all Erik says to that, and then he pushes back his chair and stands, slinging his satchel strap over his shoulder. “I have writing to do. Good-bye, Charles.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Erik,” Charles says, and Erik would correct his presumption if he didn’t think -- well. He’s probably right.

Tomorrow, then.

"And ANA," Charles adds, just as Erik's about to make his escape. "End of the week."

"Yeah," Erik says. He's half-pushed the conference out of his mind. "Maybe."

Charles' mouth twists with amusement. It's not really a smile.

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On the other end of a too-long week, Erik arrives at the Westin and is immediately swallowed up in crowds upon crowds of neuroscientists. He scowls the bellhop into submission and takes his suitcase himself, eeling through the throngs to check-in. By the time he gets his keycard (totally pointless, but humans tend to be shrill when Erik uses his abilities on delicate electronics), his head aches from the tension and noise, and he'd rather not look at anyone until Charles’ session the next morning.

He goes back downstairs anyway, nodding noncommittal hellos at the few people he recognizes. Most of the scientists here are from the East Coast, not many from California, although he recognizes some names from journal articles, others from press releases and listservs.

There’s the opening speech, presented by some luminary far too old to still be luminous. The free
coffee helps, and Erik’s down three cups by the end of it, feeling much more human again for the
dinner with his undergraduate lab, filled now with so many bright new faces. Erik looks at them and
thinks, surely I was never so young. But he was one of them once, in a time that feels like it belongs
to a very different Erik indeed, back when matters of professorship and tenure were distant dreams
and his whole world was consumed by the fear he might not get into his preferred graduate program.

Charles is nowhere to be seen, which doesn't surprise him, although in some indefinable way, still
irritates him. Erik searches the crowd once, twice, three times, and there's still no Charles, no familiar
tousled brown hair or annoyingly sophisticated watch (a steel Bulgari that Erik loves and hates in
equal measure).

So the first day is a Charles-less one, perhaps fortunately. It's also a Shaw-less one, which comes as
more of a surprise. Erik had skimmed the program as soon as it was made available, looking for
Shaw’s name. It’s not something he’s happy to admit. Shaw isn’t presenting this year, so it’s possible
… possible, even if not likely, that he didn’t come at all.

That hope sustains Erik through the first day and only gets stronger on the second, as he attends talk
after talk and doesn’t see his old adviser. By the afternoon he’s almost sure Shaw isn’t here, and by
evening he’s certain of it.

As late night approaches, the scientists begin to thin out, migrating in search of more drinks, little
clumps of them drifting out the door to the city streets or through to the hotel bar.

"Erik!"

It's -- fuck, who is it, Shameer someone, from a half-remembered conference who'd given a paper on
something interesting enough to attract Erik's attention. Cognitive dissonance and anti-mutant
sentiment's effects on visual perception, uses transcranial magnetic stimulation, that was it. Erik, just
about to slide away to his room, finds himself caught between Shameer and one of Erik’s old cohort-
mates from grad school, Marta, and carried between them to a bar across the street that's full of more
colleagues and noise, and alcohol.

Shameer's in the middle of telling Erik about some new collaborative project and the NSF grant he's
putting together (and that he's not-so-subtly asking for Erik's help with) when Marta straightens up
sharply and waves, her gold bracelet flashing in the light. Erik, caught by the motion, looks up.

He had prepared for this moment, had known it might be coming, but that isn’t enough to steel him
against the shock that jolts down his spine when he meets that pale blue gaze. Sebastian Shaw stands
far nearer than Erik would have liked, a mere five feet away and undoubtedly Marta’s target. His
mouth stretches into a grin when he sees Erik, and he steps forward, close enough to hear when
Marta says, “Professor Shaw, please sit with us, let us buy you a drink.”

Erik stays where he is, although fight or flight is electric in his veins, trying to decide how much of a
career-killer it would be to elbow his drink into Shaw’s lap as Shaw pulls out the empty chair next to
Erik and sits down.

But, of course, Erik is nothing if not professional. Shaw greets Marta, Shameer, and when he turns to
Erik with that predator’s smile on his face Erik says, “Dr Shaw. I wasn’t sure you would be able to
make it this year.”

"I wouldn't miss it," Shaw says easily. "Even if it's all the way on the other side of the country."

With a polite smile to a woman trying to edge between them and the table behind them, Shaw shifts
his chair closer in -- closer to Erik. The sleeve of his jacket brushes against Erik's arm. "Although,"
Shaw adds, once he's settled, with a smile for Marta and Shameer, "I'm never sure what possessed ANA to have its annual conference in New York in January. Far too cold."

"Not after Chicago." Shameer flags down a waitress, who takes Shaw's order. Laphroaig 25, two ice cubes, no more; Erik can almost smell the scotch, the acrid burn of it high in his nostrils, and hear Shaw saying, Erik, if you would...? "I see you haven't changed," Marta laughs. Shaw smiles indulgently, paternally. "All those times we went to the Rose and Crown... Erik, you remember."

He does remember, dim lights and heavy wood tables, Shaw presiding over the favored students of the moment -- five or six of them at a time, maybe, all of them soaking up Shaw's knowledge, his predictions and promises for the future. Shaw always drank whatever the most expensive Scotch was on the list; the rest of them drank beer, grad-student swill, or whiskey when Shaw was feeling generous.

"That was a long time ago," Erik says in a way he thinks is noncommittal, but Shaw says, "Oh, not so long, I don't think. Seven years now since the two of you graduated, isn't it? When you get to my age, seven years will seem like nothing at all."

He says it like he has the age and wisdom of an ancient man, but Shaw's only fifty years old this March. Erik covers his irritation with a sip of his martini. Erik used to hate gin. He doesn't remember when he started drinking it. The others are talking about how they've occupied the past seven years, now, recounting their anxious battles on the tenure track and fellowships won and lost. Erik's heard most of it through the grapevine already so he just listens, or pretends to, staring down at his now-empty martini glass and wishing when the waitress brought Shaw's drink that Erik had thought to ask her to leave the bottle.

"You're at MIT now, aren't you Erik?" Shameer says eventually, the sound of his own name startling Erik out of the pulsing fog of his own thoughts.

"Yes."

"How is that? Why the sudden move?"

Erik catches himself turning the stem of his glass round and round between his thumb and forefinger and stops himself, placing his hand palm-down on the table. "It was time," he says.

"Really?" Shaw murmurs. He takes a long, slow swallow of his drink, eyes flickering shut in satisfaction. Erik watches the shift of his throat. "I'd thought you'd only just begun to do great things at Berkeley."

"I'm surprised he lasted as long as he did," Marta says, laughing into her wine. "I always thought the students there would be way too... earnest for you to deal with." Next to her, Shameer grins and asks a question Erik can't make out, and Marta says, "Oh, we're pretty sure that Erik would have eaten the Stanford freshmen, if he could. He had no use for them."

Shaw smiles lazily. "So few things change," he says as he sets his glass down on its coaster. "You've never had the most nurturing approach to student interactions."

Erik bites back what he wants to say, thinks he'll choke on the words if he can't get them out or swallow them. Marta and Shameer both seem amused, hearing only Shaw's confirmation of Erik's longstanding disdain for undergrads. Marta hesitates, her laughter falling off as she catches Erik's expression, and Erik can almost see what he dreads most: speculation, Marta flicking through her
memories of their years together, thinking *Erik stayed close while all the rest of us moved away* -- and, finally, maybe, rationalizing those hypotheticals away to something safe and ordinary.

“MIT though,” Shameer is saying, oblivious. “Kid geniuses.”

Erik’s voice comes out tight, not-his. “They’re satisfactory.”

Marta saves them, then, that somehow reminding her of a story about her research assistants and the ungodly shenanigans they get up to (Erik would have fired them immediately, expelled if possible). Erik so badly wants to be interested, to have his laugh come naturally, but it isn’t up to him. Shaw is here, forcing them to spin ‘round him like electrons, seven years gone from his tutelage but still playing by his rules.

When the waitress comes by Erik orders another drink, deciding he doesn’t have to sit through this sober. He’s nearing the bottom of this glass by the time Shameer excuses himself, spotting another colleague across the bar, and onto his third when Marta leaves them.

Shaw doesn't move, not when he has Erik trapped between a wall on his right side and a crowded table of drunk, happy academics at his back. The shouting and laughter right behind him seems to come from far away, surreal, and it means Shaw has an excuse to lean close to him and crowd up into Erik's space, his knee pushing against Erik’s under the table. Erik can't edge away, with nowhere to go, and he doesn't want to give Shaw the satisfaction.

"You're enjoying Boston, then," Shaw says in that deceptively sleepy voice, the one he'd saved for when Erik was being especially rebellious. He raises a hand to signal the waitress -- for another drink, not the check. She nods and scurries off.

"I am," Erik answers. His own drink is empty, and there's nowhere near enough alcohol in his system. Any more, though, and he's not sure if he'll be able to think clearly enough to deal with Shaw. As if he can ever really think *clearly*.

"It's very different, but I'm sure you're finding ample opportunities for growth." Shaw pauses long enough to look around the still-crowded bar. "You've always been very good at finding ways to *grow*, as a scholar and researcher."

Erik grits his teeth, and it’s only after a long, tipsy moment that he remembers: he can say whatever he wants to Shaw, now. No one can hear what they're saying. Erik’s established at MIT, he has guaranteed tenure; Shaw couldn’t ruin that much if he tried.

“*What do you want, Dr Shaw?*” is what he ends up saying, however. Maybe it’s for the best that instinct still takes precedent over irritation. Erik might have regretted it tomorrow if he gave Shaw reason to put him back in his place.

“*‘Dr Shaw?*” Shaw laughs, like he finds the appellation amusing, as if he thinks Erik is being childish. “Clearly you’ve taken to the East Coast, then. Tell me: is your new position as comfortable as your last?”

Erik holds tight to the coins in his jacket pocket; they're the only things, maybe, keeping him from pulling the building down on Shaw's head, for all the good that will do. "More comfortable,” he says when he can be sure enough of his voice to speak. He waits for the waitress, who's materialized with Shaw's drink and another martini for Erik, to disappear again. "At least, I earned it on my own merit."

That's more bitter than it should be. Shaw clucks sadly at him. "You were always an apt pupil, Erik.
Even after you graduated.

Sometimes, when Erik's drunk enough to chase dangerous lines of thought, he wonders if Shaw actually thinks he helped Erik in some way more crucial than most advisors help their students, if he taught or shaped or molded Erik into something better than Erik otherwise might have been. Those musings nearly always make him sick to his stomach; one time he'd acted on them and, when MIT had come calling, had arranged for an interview without a second thought.

Not quite a year after his campus interview, he's here on the East Coast -- and, with Shaw next to him, right back where he began.

"I graduated," Erik says, as emphatically as he can. The martini, the late hour, and Shaw all cloud his head, and he's angry, Erik realizes distantly, and he's going to do something profoundly stupid. "I've moved on, Dr Shaw."

"Have you now?" Shaw murmurs.

As a question, Erik thinks, it's awfully apropos. He's rather keenly aware, right now, of Shaw’s gold Rolex and the heat of Shaw’s skin against that metal, the clock face burning like a sun in the back of Erik’s mind. He takes a sip of his martini, a mistake. Probably the first of many he’ll make tonight.

“I’m not coming back,” he says.

“Oh, of course not. No. And certainly not on my account. It's just, well,” Shaw smiles, the expression so wrong on his features, Erik’s always thought, "you know I have your best interests at heart, my boy. I want you to live up to your fullest potential.”

He'd said those same words, very nearly, when Erik had been twenty-two and newly arrived at Stanford. Erik's never forgotten them; it's as if his neurons are steel and everything Shaw's said and done has been etched into them. Abruptly, he wonders if there's anyone else Shaw has wanted to live up to their fullest potential. He wonders, as he's always done, why Shaw picked him out of all possible candidates.

He doesn't have those answers; he doesn't want to have them.

"I was hired on an accelerated tenure path," Erik says as calmly as he can. "The T&P committee will meet to award me that tenure at the end of the year." He's got his portfolio ready to go; it's really just going to be a formality. "I've brought in six hundred thousand dollars this past semester alone. NSF." Shaw makes a vaguely approving noise at that. "That's not including the grants I won at Berkeley -- without your help.

"Oh Erik, there's no need to be so…” Shaw hesitates delicately. "Touchy. I of all people would never doubt your capabilities -- I only want to be sure you're pushing them. Stretching them. Testing."

The limits of Erik's endurance are being tested right now. He takes a deep breath. "I'm not your responsibility anymore," he says tightly.

"No, but you are -- " Shaw stops, frowning, before continuing, "Be that as it may, you were my student. It's natural of me to want to keep tabs on you."

Erik thinks he can guess what Shaw was going to say, before he thought better of it. It feels like a minor victory, like rubbing what Shaw’s lost in Shaw’s face. He drinks the rest of his fourth martini, setting the empty glass down on the table too hard. The way Shaw’s seated, he’s backlit by one of the lamps at another table; it casts a warm glow about his head, a golden halo. Saint Sebastian.
Good thing Erik’s Jewish.

“Natural maybe. Not necessary, though.” Erik’s definitely drunk now, thinking with all the blurry half-giddiness of the definitely-drunk. “Marta, do you keep tabs on Marta? She’s at,” where is she at, “Duke.”

"Ah, well, Marta. She's a wonderful researcher, very astute," Shaw says musingly. He holds up his glass, studying the scotch -- appraising it, the way he's appraising Marta, with the clinical detachment of a man discussing something he might want to buy. "But not everyone has your promise, Erik. Your gifts."

"Marta's a mutant too," Erik reminds him. Mutants only, that had been one of the reasons he'd wanted to work with Shaw when he'd been applying to programs. Shaw had had that reputation, taking only mutant graduate students, advocating for them, making space for them.

"Levitation, low level," Shaw says. He sets his glass down and rests his hand on the tabletop, a bare inch from Erik's. His fingers are still long and immaculate, the bones a bare reminder of strength. Erik swallows. "You could move the world, Erik, if you wanted to, and I wanted to help nurture those gifts. I'm the only one who could, and you knew that all along. You still know that, Erik."

The veiled jab strikes hard, and Erik clenches his jaw. Shaw has a point and they both know it. Erik wouldn’t be where he is if it weren’t for Shaw’s influence, and whether he deserves anything he’s bought with his borrowed power is still an open question. He can’t begin to imagine what kind of expression is on his face because Shaw looks pleased, a self-satisfied smile curling at his lips.

“Listen to me very carefully, Erik,” he says, and the sound of his voice rattles down Erik’s spine, an unexpected heat flaring beneath his skin. Erik listens, listens with all the fervor of a student sitting at the master’s feet, those words tugging at something deep and vibrant in the core of his body. Shaw notices; his mouth twitches, slightly, before he continues. “We can still be of mutual value to one another. There is still a lot you need to learn.”

Shaw's right hand is pale against the dark wood of the table, so close. Erik knows magnetism, knows it in his very bones, and what he feels isn't that, but it's as compelling. As he watches, his left hand drifts as if carried on a tide to rest alongside Shaw's, so Shaw can, if he so wishes, stroke the back of Erik's hand with his thumb.

He could sleep with Shaw tonight, Erik thinks hazily. The sharp edge of Shaw's thumbnail scratches along Erik's phalanges, to the fifth metacarpal and back up again. He could sleep with Shaw and it would mean nothing -- or everything, because Erik can sleep with him and choose for it to mean nothing, choose to walk away in the morning and leave Shaw behind, with no consequences. He could sleep with Shaw, if he wanted, and the light in Shaw's eye says Shaw knows it, that Shaw's thinking Erik wants to.

Erik stands, mercifully without his knees giving out or his head swimming from the gin. Shaw stands as well, straightening his cuffs with precise flicks of his fingers -- a gesture Erik remembers well.

"I'm going upstairs," Erik says.

Shaw’s gaze snaps up to his. His eyes are pale and keen in the dim light of the bar, bright where the candles catch them, staring out at Erik from under the shadowy overhang of his brows. His thin mouth curves up in a smile that isn't precisely happy, or if it is, it's happiness at Erik doing precisely what Shaw wants.

Suddenly Erik sees Shaw in a different light entirely. It feels like swallowing ice water, and Erik isn’t
sober but he is very definitely not as bad off as he was five seconds ago when he was seriously considering -- Revulsion tastes bitter at the back of Erik’s throat.

“Good night, Dr. Shaw.”

He keeps looking long enough to see the slight shift in Shaw’s expression when he realizes what is happening and takes a grim sort of satisfaction out of it as he turns and pushes his way out of the crowded bar, ignoring Shaw’s voice calling his name after him, just once, and when Erik bursts out onto the street the air is shockingly and bitingly cold. He left his coat behind, he realizes, but he certainly isn’t going back for it now, skulking back to Shaw with his tail between his legs to retrieve his forgotten things.

He shivers at the crosswalk instead, hands drawn into tight fists to conserve warmth, and he makes it all the way across the street and into the bright welcome-home lights of the hotel lobby before he puts together exactly what he’s thinking comes next. It’s a bad decision, but tonight has been the product of a series of bad decisions, so he might as well keep making them.

Erik pulls his phone out of his pocket and hits the first number on speed dial, holding it up to his ear and thinking pick up, pick up, pick UP damn you.

The phone rings once, twice, a third time, and just as Erik’s ready to crush the thing into a ball of splintered metal and glass, there’s a click and a faintly confused, "Erik?"

"What's your room number?"

"Twelve seventeen." An indistinct clamor of other voices rises behind Charles’, with faint music buzzing obnoxiously. "Can I ask why?"

"I'm coming up," Erik says.

"I won't be there," Charles replies. Half the words blur with feedback.

"Then I'll let myself in," Erik snaps. "Just get back here."

That gets him a sigh, clearly audible despite the connection. "Give me five minutes," Charles says.

Erik hits the button to disconnect and stalks toward the elevators. Five minutes would, in theory, be enough time to realize what a terrible idea this is -- enough time to realize he could change his mind and go back to his own room and salvage something of this wreck of a conference. Or, Erik decides as he watches the numbers climb, leaning back against the elevator's mirrored wall, he could raid Charles’ minibar while he waits for Charles to stagger back. Bad decisions, after all.

Even with the late hour and what, judging from the incoherent hum of telepathy, is plenty of alcohol, Charles is punctual. Five minutes, Erik thinks, glancing at the clock on the bedside table.

"I see you did let yourself in," Charles says when the door swings open without Charles needing to fumble his keycard from his pocket.

Erik hums out a wordless noise and holds up the tiny bottle of whiskey he found in Charles’ minibar. “Mind if I …?"

Charles pauses, apparently still processing that Erik is here, in his bedroom, on his bed and holding his overpriced liquor, before he waves his hand and says, “Sure. Why not.”

Erik unscrews the cap with his power and tips the contents of the bottle into his mouth, swallowing it
without trying to taste it, without much success. He sets the empty plastic down on top of the
nightstand, where it wobbles twice and then settles. “That’s really bad,” Erik comments, and Charles
says, “Well, it’s not like I picked it out.”

He hasn’t asked what Erik is doing in his room. Probably he already knows and is too English to say
anything about it.

"Are you here purely for the purpose of emptying my minibar?" Charles asks. He pulls his wallet
from his pocket and drops it on the bureau, followed by keycard and some loose change. His
movements are steady, cautious, as if he’s afraid of startling Erik, but strangely purposeful too. "I do
have to justify expenditures on my reimbursement request, and I'm not sure the administrator will
accept drunk colleague as a reason."

"That's her problem." Erik waves the administrator and her paltry concerns into insignificance. He
frowns. "I'm not here for your crap alcohol," he says after a moment. The whiskey burns the back of
his throat and makes the logic of what he's about to ask unimpeachable. "I want you to fuck me."

Charles straightens. "Pardon?"

Erik doesn't look away; he's not in the habit of doing that, hasn't ever been. "You heard me," he
says, and adds silently, with all his conviction behind it, I want you to fuck me.

"Are you," Charles coughs, gratifyingly unsteady, his eyes wide, "are you sure? You've had -- how
much have you had to drink?"

"Four martinis and your shitty bottle of whiskey," Erik says. He slides off the bed -- the only way to
do this, it seems, is to get into Charles' personal space, to make him see and understand this isn't Erik
being drunk and begging, this is Erik wanting this one fucking bad decision, only for the night. "I'm
not completely inebriated," one more step and he's so close, "I'm in my right mind," Charles is
looking at him with those ridiculous blue eyes, licking his lips like he doesn't know what that's doing
to Erik right now, "this is me consenting, so fucking come here."

Charles falters a little, like he wants to ask again but thinks better of it. “What if you regret this?” he
asks instead.

“I'm regretting it already. God help me, Charles, come here.”

And at last Charles does, closing that last bit of distance and reaching up to pull Erik down and kiss
him. He isn't uncertain now, not anymore, and he kisses Erik like he actually wants him, Charles’
tongue in Erik’s mouth and his hand twisted in his hair. Erik makes a muffled noise and pulls him
along when he moves back again, toward the bed, untucking Charles’ pressed shirt from his trousers
and then towing him forward by his belt buckle.

Get on the bed, Charles tells him and for once Erik has no desire whatsoever to disagree with him.

Erik lets Charles push him back and down, laying himself out across the hotel bedspread, and
everything after that is a blur with shocks of detail, his clumsy, impatient hands fumbling to get
Charles’ shirt off his shoulders, Charles’ warm weight pushing him down into the mattress, Charles’
fingers sliding under Erik's trousers. Come on, Charles thinks, the last clear thing Erik hears -- it's all
soft murmurs and gasps after that, and blood humming in Erik's head and strange, inarticulate
sounds.

He comes, although he doesn't realize it until Charles has them both rearranged, Erik's head on a
pillow instead of halfway down the bed. Afterglow and alcohol unfocus Erik enough that he watches
Charles rub a cloth across his own belly and then Erik's with an odd, almost anthropological attachment, a ritual he's never seen before. Charles rustles around a moment more, a moment in which Erik ends up under the covers and the light turns off.

A hangover's lying in wait. He should leave now and get back to his room, Erik thinks. He should go to sleep.

To finish off a night of bad decisions, he chooses the latter. Charles' arm wraps around him and Charles' breath is warm on the back of Erik's neck, so he can't entirely regret it.

* 

When he wakes up in Charles’ bed the next morning there is a long moment before he remembers what happened and where he is. And then there’s Charles, snuffing in his sleep with his broad hands on Erik’s bare skin, a furnace against Erik’s back. He wakes up of course when Erik moves, fighting through his pounding headache to pull the duvet aside and swing his legs off the edge of the bed to start getting dressed.

“You don’t have to leave,” Charles murmurs from the bed, his hair mussed and in his face when Erik looks back at him. There are pillow creases on his cheek.

Erik does up the fly of his trousers and says, “Yes I do. This never happened, Charles. Do you understand me?”

Charles pushes himself up, suddenly serious despite the ridiculous hair and sleepy eyes. He regards Erik carefully, a care Erik does not appreciate. When Charles says, “Of course,” Erik can't tell if he's relieved at Charles' agreement or angry that he's being coddled.

"Are you leaving?" Charles asks.

"Yes.” Erik grabs his jacket and wallet, and ignores Charles' bare, freckled skin, the subtle marks decorating his shoulders. He ignores the fact that he's been staring at Charles for much longer than he should have.

He ignores many things as he takes the stairs five flights down to his floor. The taste in his mouth is old alcohol and sex, stale and bitter until he washes it out with Listerine and brushes his teeth twice. A shower gets the scent and feel of Charles off him, replacing it with the indifferent floral bouquet of the hotel body wash. Erik stands under the spray, face tilted up into it, and imagines the shower steaming out the past day and night so maybe when he sees Charles again for the flight back home, neither of them will remember anything.

While the hotel room's tiny coffee pot brews the first of many cups of coffee he will need today, Erik gets dressed. Tailored trousers and shirt, the lines clean and close and trim -- control and camouflage. He ignores the dark smudges under his eyes and the fact he's forgotten to shave.

It’s the last day of the conference. Erik has an early afternoon flight out, which only affords him two hours to eat breakfast and view posters. He wanders through the various poster sessions, not really paying attention to any of them. He’s looking for Shaw. Keeps expecting to turn a corner and see him standing there, talking to someone, someone he would ignore if Erik walked up. Erik wants to look him in the eye and prove to him he doesn’t own him anymore, that he never did.

He doesn’t get that satisfaction. He’s left with nothing but a simmering sort of disappointment when he brings down his luggage and takes a cab to the airport, tense and angry all the way through security. He forgets about his ticket and his seating option, next to Charles, until he gets on board and
finds Charles standing in the aisle putting his bag and jacket into the overhead compartment.

“That’s my seat,” Erik says, dumbly.

“Yes, I know, I picked it out. You can have the aisle if you want.”

Erik shakes his head and determines that will be the last thing he says to Charles for the duration of the trip. Charles looks much better than Erik feels, pink-cheeked and bright-eyed, practically bushy-tailed as well, like he had a late morning and a good night’s sleep. They end up crammed together, seated in coach like this, elbows battling for space on the armrest (Charles eventually concedes).

The commuter plane crams them together, the closeness of the metal muffled by the plastic bulkheads and Charles’ inescapable presence, crowding Erik up against the window despite how Charles is -- now that he’s given up claim to the armrest -- neatly contained in his own seat and ostensibly studying the in-flight magazine. Erik shifts to find any amount of leg room he can, or any amount of breathing space, and can’t really find either.

He sits through an interminable delay as they wait for takeoff, a delay filled with the first officer's apologies and the rising conviction that he should have just taken the damn train. Charles rubs his temple, wincing a little, maybe more hungover than he looks, or picking up on the impatience of the other passengers.

Or picking up on Erik’s thoughts, more than likely. There's no way he could have missed them last night; there's no way Charles misses anything. Erik respects Charles' mutation, but by its very nature it's invasive. There's no way he can't know, Erik's sure. He has to have known since well before last night, since they'd first met when Charles had come for a lecture series at Berkeley two years ago. It's the only reason for him to have slept with Erik last night, the only reason he called him up last fall and said, in that aristocratic voice, *We've an advanced assistant professorship opening up. Are you interested?*

"I know you only hired me because you felt sorry for me," Erik says as the engines open up into a full-throated howl.

Charles goes still while the cabin rattles around them, the scenery racing by outside the window. The plane dips as the wheels lose contact with the ground.

“That’s not true," Charles says, almost too softly to be heard.

They say nothing else for the rest of the flight.

It’s an awkward silence then, but it’s far worse when they land and have to walk together down to the cab queue. At least on the plane they had books, magazines, articles to pretend to be invested in, but now there’s nothing but what never-happened stretching out between them, taut like a rope.

Erik gives Charles the first taxi, watching him roll his suitcase up and hand it to the cabbie, saying something pleasant and nondescript -- Charles and his small talk -- before opening up the back door. He pauses there, hand still grasping the top of the window, looking back at Erik like he wants to say something. But he doesn’t. Their gaze breaks, Charles gets into the taxi, and they go their separate ways.

*
Boston is slow to warm up, the winter holding tightly on, but warm up it does -- even if it's only relatively speaking. Charles has never particularly enjoyed winter for a variety of reasons, and the mental grumbling about the endless cold and snow and endless nights tends to become tiresome more quickly than the temperature or darkness.

On Saturday morning, though, Erik's slow to wake up, exhausted after midterms and a deluge of departmental obligations. It means Charles can enjoy, at least until Erik’s alert and catapulting out of bed, having a warm body against his own, Erik's sleep-soft mind drowsing in close proximity, dreams fuzzy and indistinct as they begin to taper off and Erik shifts towards wakefulness. They're moments that Charles, despite himself and despite the sense that he shouldn't, can bask in.

Predictably, just as Charles is thinking of drifting back to sleep, Erik's thoughts snap into focus and he stiffens in Charles' arms. It's an awkward dance, but Charles knows the steps after a month and a half of sleeping together: Erik sits up, Erik swings his legs over the side of the bed, Erik reaches for his clothes to get dressed.

Erik says, after he's safely clothed again, "We aren't sleeping together."

Charles agrees, as he always does.

He makes himself get out of bed as well, after a moment, going to his dresser to pull out his own clothes for the day, just jeans and a shirt, not like he's planning on going much of anywhere. His general Saturday plan, like always, is to get Erik to stay as long as possible, and after Erik leaves, grade at least 20 papers and then work on revising his current manuscript. It’s a good plan.

“So,” Charles says once they’re both dressed and passing for civilized, “can I convince you to stay for breakfast?”

“You’re a terrible cook,” says Erik, who has agreed to this offer only once before.

That much is a flat-out lie, in Charles’ opinion, especially since he doesn’t think there’s any way to really mess up scrambled eggs and toast, but he predicted this response and has a rebuttal packaged and prepared. “You can cook, then, if it makes you happier. You must be good; I know how discriminating you are.”

“Now you’re just trying to put me to work,” Erik says, cantankerous as ever, but he ends up in Charles’ kitchen all the same, power moving the skillets and mixing bowls around so efficiently that it takes him half the time it would have taken Charles to make two plates piled high with thin, European-style pancakes smothered in berries and cream. Or, one of them is -- the plate that Erik pushes across the table toward Charles before sitting down in front of his own, rather more bare one.

“Are you trying to fatten me up for slaughter?” Charles raises an eyebrow.

"I know you have a sweet tooth," Erik says disdainfully. He sets a demitasse cup by Charles' plate, rich, dark espresso lapping at the brim, before sitting himself across the table. "Well? Eat, before it gets cold."

"Very good, Erik," Charles murmurs, meaning it more for Erik's work than for the food -- although it's delicious, as he knows before he takes his first bite.

Erik responds to the praise as he always does, with silent prickliness, and waits for Charles to begin...
eating before he starts himself. They eat in a silence that isn't precisely companionable but is one that Charles has become used to sharing with Erik at meals, with Erik's tempestuous thoughts growling and pacing in the background and Charles studiously ignoring them.

All too soon, Erik finishes his breakfast. He's left the pans and dishes for Charles to deal with, of course, although Charles wonders idly if he could persuade Erik to do them in exchange for a blowjob or the sexual favor of his choice. The possibility spins out into Erik spending the rest of the day with him, a thread of promise and tantalizing possibilities. Charles quickly cuts it off before it can become even more outlandish.

"Thank you again," he says as Erik stands. Erik nods curtly, his mind blaring a reminder, we aren't talking about this because it didn't happen. "I'll see you Monday, then."

"Yes," Erik says. He takes his coat from the rack by the door and sees himself out as he usually does. Charles has learnt by now not to expect a kiss good-bye.

The rest of his weekend is productive, though, and Charles arrives at Monday feeling relatively satisfied with it overall. The start of the week means the start of a new to-do list, though, and it’s looking more and more like this semester will be busier than Charles is sure he can handle. There’s his new position on the planning committee for next year’s ANA meeting, his undergraduate lab and the graduate level class he’s teaching, the committee for undergraduate studies, not to mention the three grants he’s hoping to apply for before summer.

Charles likes giving back to the department, but in a way he can’t help but envy Erik, who spurns all service activities as if he thinks he’s above them. At least, he envies the extra time Erik will have to devote to research.

On the other hand, Charles admits as he looks again at his semester activities list, Erik ought to be more involved. His tenure might be guaranteed, but there’s something to be said for showing a good face to one’s colleagues -- and not having the tenure committee second-guess the hiring committee’s decision. Charles, for one, could really use the help.

Which is how Charles ends up knocking on the door to Erik’s office at three that afternoon, when he knows Erik will be there, writing; Erik’s always so regimented in his schedule.

“Come,” he hears Erik say, and Charles pushes the door open, letting himself in.

"What is it?" Erik doesn't look away from his monitor. He's got two, one set to a document and the other to BrainVoyager; Charles has to resist the urge to examine the data on the screen, otherwise he'll be here for far longer than he has time -- and, very likely, arguing. Already Erik's impatient, mind bristling against the intrusion -- although he wouldn't have let Charles in if he'd truly wanted to be left alone.

Or so Charles tells himself. (And, being a telepath, he can tell that with some degree of confidence.)

"The undergraduate seminar on graduate school preparation is next week," he says after he's sat himself in the chair across from Erik. Erik has the most uncomfortable chairs in the department. Strategic, of course, a method to make sure no one overstay's their welcome, but Charles can cope.

"And?" Erik scowls at his monitor. "You're chair of undergrad studies, I'm sure you've got it in order."

"And I'm sure you need to demonstrate more engagement with the service aspects of your professorship, if you want to get a raise along with your promotion."
That, at least, gets him a flat and unimpressed look. Erik stops typing. "I'm sure whatever paltry merit raise I'd get wouldn't be worth whatever I'd have to do for your seminar."

Clearly this avenue of argument isn’t working.

“Close the door, Erik,” he says, and to his surprise Erik complies, pushing it shut by the metal knob. Erik’s response had been relatively quick, too, and when Charles dips into his mind he finds Erik’s attention is fully focused on him now, not split between Charles and the computer as it had been before. Interesting, Charles thinks. He can work with that.

“What?” Erik says, when Charles can’t get his nerve up in time to speak first.

“That wasn’t really why I came by your office,” Charles says. He slides his chair back and gets up, crossing around Erik’s desk with his fingertips trailing along its surface and Erik’s gaze following his every move, Erik turning his chair to face Charles properly when Charles finally stops behind Erik’s desk, standing close enough now that there are just a few inches between their shoes. “You really should lock the door, too,” he suggests, and watches the realization dawn on Erik, both of Erik’s eyebrows lifting as he complies.

"Good," Charles says softly. He kneels, pushing Erik's legs apart as he does, delighted with how easily Erik lets his thighs fall open so Charles can ease between them. Erik’s muscles have tensed, though he’s really nothing more than hard, lean muscle anyways. Charles loves stripping Erik's fine suits away, uncovering those uncivilized lines of tendon and sinew woven together. If he can’t undress Erik, he'll take this, feeling Erik's body tremble through fabric as Charles runs his hands up Erik's thighs to his belly, as his fingers settle on the snap of Erik’s trousers.

"Can you undo that for me?" Charles asks, and Erik wordlessly complies, the snap opening with the tiniest flex of Erik's ability. "And your zipper too, lovely." Erik does that as well, his mind surface obstinance and annoyance despite his obedience, with trembling happiness hidden underneath. He's already hard, his cock pushing at the opened zipper and his boxer briefs, and Charles takes a moment to enjoy it, the tension threading through Erik's body as he hesitates and the hiss of breath when Erik loses control enough to say "Charles."

"Hush," Charles murmurs, and runs a thumbnail up the hard ridge of Erik's cock. Erik hisses and his hips jolt up, chasing after more, which Charles grants to him before Erik can get impatient. These moments are delicate.

Delicate himself, he leans in to mouth at Erik's cock, still through his boxers, and Erik outright whimpers before he can stop himself. His mind is melting and delicious, and Charles basks in how easy Erik can be when he's like this, when Charles can tell him do this, let me, and Erik does. Still, though -- delicate, so Charles keeps a light touch on Erik's mind, watching to be sure he's in this moment and nowhere else, and when it seems that Erik's going to drift into belligerence, he peels the waist of Erik's boxers down over his cock, the elastic cupping Erik's balls, and takes Erik in his mouth.

Erik makes a soft sound, and it's that kind of reinforcement that makes Charles want to keep going, to taste the salt of Erik’s skin on his lips and take him in deeper. But not yet -- not yet. Instead he only sucks at the head, tracing the tip of his tongue against the sensitive underside and glancing up from beneath his lashes at Erik, who is watching him with keen interest, knuckles white around the arms of his chair.

He keeps at it like that for a while, until he thinks Erik might snap at him for taking so long, and right when Erik opens his mouth to do just that Charles sucks him down the rest of the way -- or as far as he can, at least, considering Erik’s surprising size. Erik’s hand ends up clenched tight in Charles’
hair, tugging just hard enough to hurt. Charles doesn’t mind. He’s lost in Erik’s perception of this, the wet heat around his cock and the reflection of the way he himself looks down here on his knees sucking it, head bobbing in Erik’s lap.

The best part is when Erik’s finely-tuned control finally starts to slip and Erik tilts his head back, exposing the elegant line of his neck, hips twitching a little as Erik strains not to buck upward into Charles’ mouth, Erik’s free hand flexing and gripping and flexing again like fingers around reins, trying to keep his body from taking the bit and running with it. Charles’ jaw is starting to hurt, a little, but it’s easy enough to keep going when he has Erik like this.

*Give in,* he tells Erik, and a moment later Erik does, spilling into his mouth, warm and saline. Charles swallows it down without complaint, sucking him through it as Erik’s cock pulses between his lips, until when he at last draws back and lifts his head Erik is pink-cheeked and spent, hair tousled from Erik’s own fingers raking through it one too many times.

He gives Erik a few last licks, cleaning off his own saliva and stray drops of come. Erik shudders and stares down him with pleasure-glazed eyes, although he’s not really seeing anything except his own afterglow and, Charles hopes, how pleased Charles is. Before Erik can move, Charles grabs a handful of tissues from the box near the edge of Erik's desk and wipes away the worst of the stickiness -- although Erik will probably be a bit uncomfortable until he can shower properly. A reminder, Charles thinks, sitting back on his heels and trying not to wince at the ache in his knees.

Erik's hand twitches, either involuntary or maybe an aborted attempt to touch Charles' hair. Charles wouldn't mind, but Erik does -- Erik minds many things, as Charles has learned. He minds talking about this, whatever it is that brings Erik to Charles' house on random weeknights or the occasional Friday, what brings Charles to Erik's office or, more rarely, to Erik's empty and echoing condo. Instead of talking, Charles lets the silence ride while Erik collects his breath and collects himself, only watches and tries not to lick his lips too much.

"I'll go to your stupid undergraduate thing," Erik says at last.

Charles only smiles.

*Charles agreed to teach a seminar this semester on Ethics and Professionalism. It’s a service obligation, but Charles volunteered for it despite already having plenty of service already. It’s a subject he finds very important, arguably more important than any of the other things graduate students will learn during their tenure here, even if most of the other professors see the class' instruction as a necessary evil, to be endured but not enjoyed.

It’s the module on informed consent today, three full hours of nothing but IRB regulations and ethical guidelines. Charles has the grad students sit at the table and discuss the subject amongst themselves after he’s given the requisite slideshow and video the NSF makes them show all federally-funded students, himself seated at the table head and jotting down notes on their observations.

For students who likely view this as the most boring class they’ll ever take, they are awfully engaged with the subject matter. Of course, if they were anything less than painfully intellectually curious, they wouldn’t be graduate students in the first place. Charles keeps an idle eye on their thoughts, which rove restlessly back and forth between their own observations in lab and class so far, hypotheticals, what they’d do in their own studies if confronted with the issues they've learned about.

"Devil's advocate, though," Kevin says as he adjusts his glasses authoritatively, with the confidence
of a young man used to being heard whenever he speaks, even if he's wrong. Across the table from
him, Kitty (who's already absorbed some of Erik's personality) rolls her eyes, and even calm Xiaomeng seems annoyed. "Most people aren't going to know how an MRI even works, no matter how many hours we spend explaining it to them. So why bother when they're not going to have a clue about any of what we're actually doing?"

Charles sucks in a breath. In his mind's eye, in the corner of memory he can never quite suppress, he's twelve and frightened, watching Kurt and the hospital administrator pass forms back and forth, Kurt scribbling his signature and initials where he's told, then pushing the pile of paper back across the desk. He thinks Erik might have a point when it comes to treating graduate students like they're dangerous, barely-educated idiots who can only be made slightly less dangerous.

"I don't know," Xiaomeng says sarcastically. "Maybe you could tell that to the people in the Tuskegee experiment."

"I'm not saying that," Kevin protests. "What I'm saying is --"

"What you're saying," Charles cuts in before he can stop himself, "is you haven't thought about the privileged position you occupy as a researcher, and the power you'll have over the people who entrust themselves to your care -- or who entrust their loved ones, if it comes to that." He takes a breath; it's either pause to collect himself or make Kevin extremely sorry he opened his mouth. "And you haven't thought about how important it is to be worthy of that trust, or what it means to have it in the first place."

The room falls silent, all of them sitting there, stunned. Kevin’s neck is a little flushed and his mind is a riot of resentful embarrassment but Charles can’t bring himself to feel sorry for him.

“Like I said,” Kevin tells them eventually, just to have the last word “just playing devil’s advocate.”

Charles lets out the breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding and says, before Xiaomeng can jump in with a retort, “Let’s stick to logically acceptable forms of argumentation and,” with a speaking look at Kevin, "not those that belong to Internet boards, thank you,” and slowly the discussion resumes, awkwardly at first. Charles sits and listens in relative silence, now, his pulse finally starting to slow.

It’s late when the seminar finishes, and Charles returns to his office to find Erik waiting there outside the door, leaning against the wall with his arms folded over his chest and his characteristic scowl fixed on his face.

“Good,” Erik says, “you’re here. Let’s go.”

“Let me get my coat,” Charles says, and Erik unlocks his office door for him. It’s the first time Erik has actually waited for Charles at the end of the day; usually he shows up at Charles’ flat, or texts him at midnight and demands he come over. Charles is surprised Erik didn’t just let himself into Charles’ office like he owned the place.

Charles collects his coat from the back of his chair and a couple of article reviews to stuff in his laptop bag. Erik watches all of this, and then accompanies Charles down the hall, like Charles' silent, ill-tempered shadow. What could have inspired this, Charles has no idea, but he does know better than to ask; Erik doesn't tolerate having his motives questioned, and any query even touching on 'why?' as it relates to Erik's behavior will have Erik stalking back to his own place, hackles raised, and Charles somewhat the worse for wear.

Instead of asking any of the questions lining up in his throat, Charles leads Erik down the hall, down
the stairs, and outside. Boston at the end of winter is still heavily decorated with snow, although it's worn and melted and laced with dirt and trash that's been hidden since the blizzards. It's also warm, too warm for Charles to be comfortable -- or maybe it's the oddness of having Erik stalking along next to him, when they're not going to a lecture or other departmental event.

"I was thinking I'd order in tonight," Charles says idly as they reach his car. Erik's mind prickles with irritation at how Charles drives to work in fucking Boston of all places, although part of him is pleased with the car itself, German and finely-tuned.

Erik shrugs dismissively. "As long as it's not shrimp or pork."

"Is Indian all right?"

"Fine."

Erik doesn’t sound terribly enthused, but then, he never does. He has to push the passenger seat of Charles’ car almost all the way back to fit his long legs into the cab, and even then he looks strange and gangly, all sharp angles, a presence Charles isn't used to. Charles puts the car in reverse and pulls out of the space, turning out of the parking lot and onto the street.

They don’t speak for most of the ride home, Erik fiddling around with something on his iPhone and obviously making a point of ignoring Charles. From the faces he’s making, Charles guesses he’s responding to student emails; Erik doesn't tolerate what he calls ‘egregious ignorance,’ either.

“So,” Charles says after a while, when he can no longer stand the silence. “Productive day?”

“Reasonably,” Erik says, not looking up from his phone. Charles doesn’t expect him to say anything else, so it comes as a surprise when Erik continues, “I finished writing the letter of intent for an R01.”

Charles nods. "That's… impressive," he says. It's also a bit more than only reasonably productive.

"I want you to look at it," Erik continues, still glaring belligerently down at his phone.

"I was hoping to submit it in a couple days," Erik says. "By the end of the week at the latest."

"Work on what you want to say for the undergraduate prep seminar, then," Charles says. Erik's answering silence is hostile, but considering, "Work on that and I'll look at your LOI."

He feels the moment when Erik consents, however begrudgingly, a palpable shift in his mind that accompanies a low hum of satisfaction, one Charles doubts Erik consciously notices. He’s starting to notice a pattern with this, a certain … conditioned response, perhaps. Is it unethical to take advantage of that, considering its etiology?
Charles puts that thought aside for the time being, to examine later on when he isn’t sitting next to the man himself.

Charles lives in a three-story brownstone in Back Bay, a beautiful Victorian townhouse he fell in love with the moment he first saw it. He loves everything about this neighborhood, from the perpetual quiet to the way the sun filters through the tree branches to dapple the cobblestones below and the steep hills he has to climb every time he goes out for an evening run. Erik likes it too, Charles can tell, even though a part of him still resents the obvious displays of wealth in the neighborhood.

“Get out,” Charles says when they’ve parked in his usual space. It’s a test, and he watches as Erik makes a face but obeys all the same, unfolding himself out onto the sidewalk without a grumble of complaint. The complaint Charles does hear, silent and trapped in Erik's head, feels perfunctory.

He leads Erik into the house and then spends the next half-hour trying to follow his weeknight routine with this strange new presence filling his space. His laptop bag goes next to the couch, his jacket on the coatrack by the door, his shoes in a pile on the mat. Erik huffs at that, glaring down at the jumble of winter boots and running shoes, but doesn't say anything. Instead, he puts his own satchel on the other end of the couch and trails Charles into the kitchen.

"Pick what you want," Charles says, pushing the delivery menu over to Erik, who accepts it wordlessly. Charles can't tell if this is Erik obeying because the only other option is to not eat, or if he’s responding to the subtle order in Charles’ tone.

Either way, Erik glances at the menu and says, "Double order of butter chicken and naan."

Charles puts in the order and those are the last words either of them exchange until food arrives. Charles folds himself into his chair in the breakfast nook -- the dining room table is covered with mail and the accumulated debris of half a very busy semester -- and lets Erik hunt down silverware. It's a pleasure, tracking Erik with his own abilities as Erik feels out all the metal in the kitchen and zeroes in on the drawer he needs. There's even an approving thought for the metal fixtures in the kitchen, especially the steel drawer pulls so Erik can tug on them and draw out forks and knives. Running underneath that is a curious kind of pleasure Erik doesn't seem to be quite aware of, having his evening given shape by Charles' quiet instruction and expectation.

“One of your students came to me today,” Erik says eventually, halfway through his meal. He eats so much more food than Charles had expected -- it's as if he's a bottomless pit, and if Charles didn’t know Erik runs marathons he'd wonder where the hell he puts it all. The double order that Charles had assumed was meant to be split into two, maybe even four, meals, Erik puts away in one sitting, and even then his gaze roves to Charles’ food, like he might be interested in having more.

“Oh?” Charles prods when Erik isn’t more forthcoming.

“Hank McCoy. He asked me to be on his dissertation committee.”

Charles lifts a brow. Hank had mentioned this to him a while back, in one of their meetings. Erik was but one of several proposed faculty, the others somewhat more relevant to Hank’s research, in Charles’ opinion. He’d thought they’d settled on Jasanova and Tenenbaum. He tries to conceal his surprise with another bite of naan, chewing and swallowing before he speaks again.

“What did you say?”

Erik makes a rough noise. “I asked him if you knew he was asking me, and I asked him why he thought this was a good idea. He said he felt he could only be certain of his arguments’ strength if they ‘survived’ my questioning.”
"I knew you were one of several possible choices," Charles says, as diplomatically as he can. It's not diplomatic enough -- nothing is, for Erik -- and the look Erik gives him says as much. "I know what you think about him as a scholar, Erik, but Hank is tougher than he looks. And more rigorous than you think."

"Contrary to popular belief, I do think our grad students are marginally capable as intellectuals," Erik says dryly. "I told him I'd consider it if he sent me something worthwhile to look at -- and that I'd talk to you first, before signing on. If I decided to."

"Is that why you came home with me tonight?" It's dangerous, but he has to ask. "I didn't realize Hank McCoy was that high on your list of priorities."

Erik gives him a truculent look, and instead of answering helps himself to a forkful of Charles' saag paneer. Charles permits the silence; it's one thing to press Erik to move where ordered, another to press Erik into talking. Wordlessly, Charles pushes his plate to the middle of the table, thinking for a second that Erik will be contrary and back off; Erik, as always, surprises him, pulling apart a piece of naan to scoop up more spinach and cheese.

"Did you eat today?" Charles laughs.


That's almost… contrite, an admission. "It's a good thing I came to the rescue with Indian, then," Charles says. "Do you want dessert?"

“That depends. What do you have?”

There’s ice cream in the freezer, but Charles finds he doesn’t quite know what to do with Erik here, a strange new variable thrown into his usual after-work agenda. The prospect of sitting down with Erik here at this table or in, eating in silence, Charles trying to get work done in the study while Erik roams around his house and passes judgment on his possessions, doesn’t quite appeal to him.

“‘There’s an ice cream shop a few blocks down,’ Charles says instead. “How does that sound?”

Erik shakes his head, hands clasped on the table as his silverware rearrange themselves on his plate, lining up perfectly parallel. “I have work to do. I don’t have time to go on a date with you.”

Charles leans back, a little startled by the accusation inherent in those words, the sharpness to Erik’s gaze. He should have predicted Erik might take it the wrong way, he thinks, one of his hands gripping the seat of his chair out of Erik’s sight. He’d wonder why Erik was doing all of this, if Erik even found him attractive at all, if he didn’t know the answer to both those questions.

“For Christ’s sake,” he says, and his voice comes out sounding like his mother’s, more aloof than Charles really feels. “We aren’t dating. Remember?”

Erik flinches a bit at the reminder of their non-arrangement. Charles has decided not to try to define whatever it is they have; that's all on Erik, so what they have seems to shift with Erik's moods. The only constants are, hostility and not-dating; the other variables change so often, Charles figures it's best to let them be.

"Come on," he says as he stands and collects his plates. "We're going for ice cream, I promise not to hold your hand, and we'll go there and walk straight back so you can get to work."

Erik's silence is mutinous, silverware trembling. Charles resists the urge to add your choice, because Erik does know this is his choice, as much as anything is. Given what he knows about Erik, what
Erik's allowed to slip out despite his reticence and what Charles has seen in his mind, *choice* is semantically slippery. Instead, he puts away the leftovers (what Erik's refrained from eating anyway) and collects his wallet and keys again, and waits Erik out.

Finally, Erik stands, his mind flexing in that shockingly malleable way it can be as he bows to Charles' desires. He summons his wallet and phone and obediently stalks alongside Charles as they leave the house and Charles leads them down the street to Emack & Bolio's. True to his word, Charles doesn't try to hold his hand -- doesn't even joke about it -- although Erik walks closer to him than is strictly necessary, and Charles doesn't say anything when Erik insists on paying for him.

"You got dinner," Erik says, and when Charles can't decide between peanut-butter oreo and moose tracks, adds, "Now hurry up and make up your mind."

Even though Charles promised they could eat on the way back, Erik ends up sitting down at one of the tables outside all the same, chair tilted so he can stretch his long legs out on the patio, crossed at the ankles and the screen of his phone flicking through his email even as both Erik’s hands are occupied trying to prevent his ice cream from dripping down the cone and onto his expensive trousers.

“There was this place at Stanford that made ice cream sandwiches,” Erik says. “Real ones, with fresh baked cookies as the bread and homemade ice cream in the middle.”

It’s bland, impersonal, but Erik never talks about Stanford at all. It feels intimate, and Charles tries not to let his interest show on his face as he starts eating his ice cream, glancing up at Erik only when he thinks Erik won’t notice. It’s distracting, watching Erik lick at his cone, and Charles wonders what he’d have to offer in exchange to get Erik down on his knees doing that to Charles later tonight. Or maybe it would be the other way around. What Charles would demand of Erik to allow him to suck Charles’ cock.

“Toscanini’s has something like that, near Central Square,” Charles says when it’s clear Erik isn’t going to give further details. “Brioche buns though, not cookies.”

“Mmm. Cookies are better, I expect.”

The silence after that is unexpectedly companionable, even if Charles knows it can’t last. Erik doesn’t trust him, and apparently there isn’t anything Charles can do or say to change that. It won’t be like it was when Charles was visiting Berkeley and Erik was -- well, still himself, but more talkative, clever and insightful with a dry sense of humor. That Erik must still be there, if buried under layers of defensiveness and old scar tissue.

Charles is a telepath, but telepathy wasn't made to deal with this. It will, maybe, save him from severe injury if Erik detonates -- maybe. Charles has come up with many similes for Erik, all of them dangerous, all of them safer than thinking of Erik as he actually is.

At last Erik seems to have had enough of being in one place. He rolls his shoulders, shrugging off the quiet like something uncomfortable and stands, waiting with his usual prickly impatience for Charles to finish. "It's chocolate peanut butter," Charles says, "and it needs to be savored."

"It's a mess," Erik says, disdainfully eyeing the soupy swirl at the bottom of Charles' cup. He, of course, had devoured his ice cream before it could do much more than threaten to drip on his clothes. That, like the ice cream, swirls together with idle thoughts about how Charles' mouth must be sticky, there's a bit of ice cream drying at the corner that Erik yearns to clean up in a way that's both annoyed and lingeringly fond.
They leave just before Erik's restlessness hits critical mass. There's enough room on the sidewalks now to walk side-by-side and so they do, Charles' hands safely in his pockets. He knows Erik would not react well to Charles saying that, when they're talking together or Erik's giving a lecture, he's often distracted by Erik's hands, which are thin but strong and clever and quick. Sometimes, even though Erik's using his abilities to direct the laser pointer or a metal object he's manipulating, Erik's hands will gesture and twitch, a sculptor subtly directing bronze or a conductor leading his orchestra.

Erik's hands are very good at very many things, although he's hesitant with them in bed. Charles sometimes tries to encourage him to take more, to touch him as freely as he touches Erik. Sometimes Erik does, sometimes he doesn't; sometimes he ends up with his fingers tangled in the sheets, or wrapped around the iron headboard.

When they get inside, coats hung in the closet and shoes off, Erik walks past Charles to the living room with his satchel, claiming one of Charles’ leather armchairs as his workspace -- although eventually that space spreads, capturing the coffee table and the end of the sofa as well. Charles reads one of his leisure books in another chair, far enough away to have his own space and possibly try to convince himself he’s still alone here, to evade distractibility by Erik’s presence.

That turns out to be impossible. All the other times Erik’s been here it’s been about nothing but sex. It’s not that Charles minds Erik being around more so much that it is his presence is colored by other … associations. Charles can’t be aware of his continued presence without imagining the hue his mind takes on when he’s aroused, anticipating it. Every time Erik shifts in his seat Charles tenses, expecting him to get up and cross the room and tell Charles it’s time to go upstairs.

Charles is thirty-eight years old, old enough not to have his faculties so thoroughly co-opted by such things. And yet here he is, watching Erik over the edge of his book and thinking how his body looks without those clothes covering it up.

“I’m going to bed,” Charles says at last, when it’s quite clear he’ll get nothing useful done tonight. Erik makes a noncommittal sound and turns the page of the article he’s reading, not even looking up. Charles stands up, taking his time about putting the armchair’s decorative pillow back in place, setting his book down on the lamp stand. Erik is still just frowning down at something he’s reading, reaching after a second for his pen to scribble something in the margin.

“Good night,” Charles says, instead of Are you coming? Erik flaps a hand dismissively in Charles’ direction and Charles takes that as his cue, turning and leaving the room and Erik behind.

Upstairs he changes out of his day clothes and into a pair of flannel pajama bottoms and a plain t-shirt. Pajamas: he hasn’t worn those with Erik over before, either. His telepathy is still looped into Erik’s mind downstairs but all Erik’s thoughts are tied up in his work, not thinking about Charles at all as Charles pulls back the corner of the duvet and gets into bed, setting an alarm on his cell phone.

He drifts off to hazy dreams, his mind partly awake and his, partly wandering with Erik's through the thickets of fMRI data and regression analyses. Erik's mind forges straight ahead, laser-direct and precise, and Charles should really have much better control, but Erik's presence has tested it all evening--nothing to do but give in.

Eventually Charles' sleep is his own, so he misses the moment Erik's mind turns away from work. Looking back on it, he'll recall the vague sense of Erik's presence heading up the stairs and slipping into his room and, comically, surprise when Erik realizes that Charles is actually asleep.

In the moment, though, the first thing he consciously registers is Erik's hand on his shoulder, shaking the sleep out of him and Erik's mind a clamor of confusion and need. Charles rolls over onto his
back. Erik's hovering over him in the dim light, his body tense and trembling, his thoughts washing over Charles, tidal breakers that lap against Charles' cortex and leave him covered in Erik's desire and impatience and anger. That desire is for many things, for sex primarily, and then release, and the strange serenity of sacrificing control to Charles for a while.

"I want you to fuck me," Erik says, prosaic and unromantic.

"That's well and good," Charles says. Earlier this evening, there was... Oh yes, Erik lapping up ice cream, his eyes narrowed with concentration. He pushes down the comforter, already hot. "But I want you to suck my cock."

Erik swallows heavily, his gaze drifting down Charles' body, focusing on his crotch, where Charles is starting to get hard. "Well?" Charles asks softly, daringly. "Can you do that?"

After a long moment Erik nods. Before he can speak, though, Charles says, “Good. Then take off your clothes.”

He watches as Erik obeys, Erik himself too caught up in the current of his own want to be even cursorily annoyed by Charles’ demand. First the shirt, button after button slipping through cotton fabric, exposing the long taut lines of Erik’s chest and abdomen. Charles sits where he is, keeping his hands flat on the mattress instead of reaching to touch Erik’s skin, the color of the candied ginger he knows Erik keeps in his desk and sees as an excuse for dessert. Only when the shirt is off does Charles pull his over his head as well, dropping it down onto the floor next to Erik’s and leaving them both bare-chested, Erik’s nipples pebbling in the cool room.

“Go on,” Charles says, and Erik flips the top button undone with his power, those lovely fingers tugging down the zipper and then hooking in the waistband of his trousers and pulling them down, off. He’s aroused already, his impressive cock stiff and a little bit flushed. Charles’ groin tightens slightly and he leans back, resting the weight of his torso against the headboard as Erik climbs onto the bed after him.

Erik doesn’t pull Charles’ pajamas down immediately. First he settles there, one knee on either side of Charles’ thighs, hand braced past Charles’ shoulder against iron as the other reaches down between them to palm Charles through the flannel, feeling out the size and shape of him. He hasn’t broken Charles’ gaze this whole time, that tension and the pressure of Erik’s hand on his cock intensifying the heat in Charles’ lap. The want.

It's easy to forget that, for all his impatience with delay, Erik is capable of incredible patience and taking his time to get what he wants. What he wants, even with the nagging thought that he should hurry up and get started, is to feel Charles out, to anchor himself against metal and in the moment and make sure this is good. It is good, at least for Charles, and that subconscious part of Erik -- the part Erik doesn't acknowledge openly--enjoys this, leaning over Charles while knowing this position is what Charles wants. It's a contradiction Charles can't untangle, especially not right now with Erik stroking him firmly, drawing his body tighter and tighter.

"Come on, Erik," Charles murmurs, rolling his hips up into Erik's hand.

A bit of rebellion at that, but it doesn't last. Erik lets go of the bedstead and eases himself down, the magnificent line of his body bending like a wave as his head bows, then shoulders, his spine still arching gracefully as he slides back. His fingers run down Charles' chest, Erik's mouth following them so Erik can nuzzle with unexpected gentleness at Charles' ribs and belly and, when Erik tugs Charles' pajama bottoms down, the point of his hip where a few stray freckles have gathered and with which Erik seems oddly pleased.
Charles shifts enough to help Erik with his pants and then Erik’s back between his legs, bending down to take Charles in his mouth. His tongue slides flat against the underside of Charles’ cock, and oh god, Charles thinks hazily, that’s so good, a thousand times better than the quietly fevered and inappropriate thoughts he’d had earlier tonight. He tries to keep his own thoughts locked down, projecting only pleasure with Erik’s skill and obedience, and when he laces his fingers through Erik’s hair to direct him and keep him in position, to push him down to take more of Charles’ cock in his mouth, it’s careful, lazy, a silent so good, please, just like this, it's perfect.

Erik’s satisfaction with that is more than worth it, and instead of doing something different just to upset Charles Erik actually does keep going just-like-this, moving his head up and down along Charles’ cock and hollowing out his cheeks. One of his hands, on Charles’ inner thigh, pushes Charles’ legs just a little further apart and Charles lets out a heavy breath, one that nearly tapers into a moan.

It’s so hard not to just thrust up into Erik’s mouth when he has Erik like this, to find out for himself just how much Erik can take. Probably all of it -- Erik isn’t the type to tolerate any degree of insufficiency on his own part, but it’s rude to find out without asking first, and Charles knows he can’t ask.

Charles tastes Erik’s own arousal in his mind, the tension between Erik’s legs as Erik rubs his hips down against the bed, his pleasure bleeding together with Charles’ own. “Fuck,” Charles whispers, his grip tightening in Erik’s hair. Erik’s free hand slips down under his cock, finger stroking at Charles’ perineum and his palm pressing lightly up against Charles’ balls and Charles comes, just like that, too quickly to warn Erik -- but Erik sucks him through it anyway, ripples of pleasure rolling through Charles’ cock and down his spine, Erik kneeling there and patiently swallowing his come.

So good, Charles says, unable to stop himself with shields shot to hell and Erik surrounded in the fog of Charles’ afterglow, golden and perfect between Charles’ legs, lapping him clean with the same care Charles had shown him earlier today. Erik shudders but doesn’t move, maybe nearly as lost in the moment as Charles is. Erik’s pleased with himself, not only for taking Charles apart so effectively but for being good, his usual unruliness absent as he licks his lips and lets Charles rub a sleepy, clumsy foot along his calf.

Not for long, of course, because this is Erik after all. Charles being pleased with Erik is one thing, affection is entirely another. Before Erik can bridle or back away, Charles collects himself enough to say, his throat as rough as if he’s the one who’s just had a cock down it, "On your side, Erik. Let me take care of you."

"I can do it myself," Erik says. He doesn’t reach for his own cock, although his mind is radiating urgency; he’d been trying hard not to rut against the mattress when he’d been sucking Charles, or get a hand under his body to jerk himself off, but that control is fraying now.

"Let me," Charles repeats and nudges at Erik with one knee.

Erik bends again, stretching himself out as ordered: on his side, his back to Charles. He has a lovely back, and Charles has enough sense to keep that to himself, showing his appreciation with firm but gentle kisses across Erik’s neck and strong shoulders, down the long arc of his back to narrow hips and the tight muscle of his ass. Charles laps idly at the two divots that bracket Erik’s spine and then trails lower, savoring the bright shock of realization when Erik understands what Charles is doing.

Charles bites back a quick smile and nudges Erik’s top leg forward with one hand, exposing his hole -- but Charles doesn’t go there, not yet, just slides his tongue down the soft skin between Erik’s cheeks, kneading one of them with his fingers and feeling the way Erik’s muscle twitches, Erik fighting to bury a full-body shiver.
Charles tilts his head enough to nip at the flesh of one buttock, watching the skin flare red when he draws away, soothing the pain of it with the tip of his tongue. He checks telepathically: Erik’s gripping a handful of the bedsheets hard enough his knuckles have gone white, his eyes clenched shut and his face turned in toward the pillow, hiding the heat in his cheeks. For a second Charles is alarmed, but delving just a bit further shows it’s all pleasure, an unexpected desire for Erik, one that hasn’t been explored before.

Charles hums softly, pleased, and at last he circles his tongue around the muscle of Erik’s hole. If Erik makes a noise it’s buried against the pillow, but Charles knows he likes it, feels the hard pulse of arousal between them. He does it again, then licks over the hole itself, feeling Erik clench under his tongue, reflexively.

*Relax for me,* Charles tells him, but if anything Erik only tenses more, his entire body strained with mounting lust. So Charles pushes the issue, licking again, and reaches an arm around Erik’s hip to take hold of the base of his cock and pull a slow stroke up its length.

Erik's mind nearly collapses with pleasure and there's nothing else for him to do but give way, hips flexing in a shivering thrust into Charles' grip, the tension in his spine loosening as if he's turned to liquid. *Good,* Charles says softly, the word little more than a caress across the web of signals that tell Erik how much he loves this, how good it is. Erik's thoughts flare with a greedy kind of acknowledgment, and with embarrassment at how eager he's being, how quickly he's giving it up to Charles.

*No, it's perfect,* Charles soothes, or tries to. Nervousness creeps in alongside pleasure, vague thoughts of not cleaning himself properly, of not putting a towel down--there'll be a mess. Erik's fingers tighten in the sheets, their own kind of denial, Erik trying to anchor himself in the moment before he's yanked out of it completely.

It's not soothing, but Charles strokes Erik again and licks a long, firm stripe from the hot skin behind Erik's balls back up to his hole again, slow and deliberately filthy, and Erik makes the most beautifully broken sound Charles has ever heard out of him. (Erik has so many of these sounds, each more gorgeous than the last, when he's given himself up and forgets about his dignity.) Charles strokes Erik again, gripping him tight and just on this side of painful, sending Erik fever-vague approval for how big he is, how he's so hard just from sucking Charles off, and a more definite order not to come. *Wait for a bit, enjoy it,* he thinks, smiling ridiculously against the hard muscle of Erik's ass when Erik twitches and moans into his pillow.

Really, he could do this for a while, Charles decides, keeping Erik right here, balanced at the edge, Erik not bothering to fight or push back because he's so busy letting Charles do what he wants. Erik’s mind doesn't stumble out of its steady drumbeat of pleasure when Charles pauses to spit on his own fingers and slide them in, even if his breath goes quick and sharp with surprise at being penetrated. It's a moment only, and Charles holds his own breath, lacing kisses across Erik's lower back, until Erik relaxes again without being told.

Inside Erik is hot, tight, his body rippling around Charles’ fingers and tugging them gently deeper. Charles loves everything about this, the way it feels like he is piece by piece taking Erik apart, unbuilding his walls to see what lies down at his very foundations. Erik squirms a little, now, his pleasure building in his groin, but he must remember Charles’ order because he holds himself back: Charles can feel it in his mind, the way he’s fighting against his own instinct in favor of listening to Charles, how badly Erik wants to give over and let Charles take control.

Charles curls his fingers in Erik’s hole, stroking inside him and wondering if he’ll be lucky enough to find Erik’s prostate or if he’ll have to settle for getting him off the old-fashioned way. He found it
once before, the one time Erik let Charles finger him before this, and if experience means Charles should be marginally more lucky --

Aha. He must remember better than he thought, because his fingertips graze over a slightly spongier area inside Erik’s body and Erik jolts like a shock has run through him, his entire body snapping to attention and all his faculties suddenly and passionately devoted to not coming all over himself and Charles’ bed.

“Good,” Charles murmurs again, and he licks at Erik’s skin where it’s stretched around his own fingers, fucking them slowly in and out of Erik for a few moments before he curves them again, eliciting another, smaller jerk out of Erik’s limbs. Erik’s mind is a dazzled constellation of sensations, bright and lit-up like a galaxy in the darkness of this room. Charles closes his eyes and watches as that pattern shifts and changes, flaring and dimming and flaring again in their private darkness.

He continues stroking Erik's cock, slow and firm the way Erik likes it, enjoying the slick sound of flesh over flesh and just how big he is. Charles has never thought of himself as the kind of guy who gets off on a big cock, but he loves Erik's, thick and long and a satisfying weight in his hand. Erik responds to Charles' hand on him as fervently as he's responded to everything else Charles has done, with shuddering gratitude and keen, cutting pleasure, and Charles is vaguely amazed at how Erik's held on this long without just saying fuck it, disobeying Charles' nominal orders, and coming hard.

Speaking of…. Charles presses a kiss to Erik's spine, right over that thick rope of nerves that races with hectic electric impulses, carrying hormones and heat and passion back and forth between Erik's body and brain. He charts the progress of that kiss, such a minor accent in this cacophony, up from warm, damp skin through to the parts of Erik's brain that recognize kiss and mouth and wet and Charles, that parse them out and combine them again into another delicious surge of desire that has Erik's body tightening around his fingers and his hips stuttering forward into Charles' hand.

Erik's bare inches away from begging outright, and Charles could make him. He could -- Erik's so frantic, held back only by control and whatever unconscious dignity he has, it won't take much to push him over and turn that imperious, elegant voice to incoherence and pleading.

"Come on," Charles murmurs to the hot curve at the base of Erik's spine. "You can come, Erik."

And Erik does, so immediately it's almost surprising, his cock throbbing once in Charles' hand and then spurting. Some of it gets on Charles’ fingers, warm and viscous, making the stroke of Charles’ palm up and down Erik’s shaft slippery and noisy. Erik makes the most perfect noise, something between a gasp and a moan and Charles would come again himself if he hadn't already, letting out a soft breath and tilting his brow forward against Erik’s back.

For several long moments they both just lie there, Charles drifting in the open sea of Erik’s afterglow. He doesn’t wonder how long it will last: he just lets himself appreciate it for now, the warmth and the quiet, his hand soft and still below Erik’s navel and Erik’s breathing slowly becoming regular again.

At last, only when he knows he has to or risks attracting Erik’s irritation, Charles pulls his finger out of Erik’s ass and sits up properly, getting the wet wipes out of the nightstand to clean them both up, wiping his own fingers before handing a few clean ones over to Erik. Even now Erik’s mind is still softer, without some of the rougher edges it’ll reacquire over the next few minutes (and certainly by the next morning).

Erik’s thinking about the wet spot, an old anxiety prickling around the edges of his mind and Charles says, “I’ll wash the sheets tomorrow. I was going to, anyway. Just go to sleep.”

Erik grunts, and lies down -- but that spot does mean he has to curl closer to Charles on the bed to
avoid discomfort, his skin hot next to Charles’, more so when they’re both under the weight of the covers. He’s less argumentative like this, so Charles can get away with settling himself there with a hand on Erik’s chest and his face pressed up against Erik’s arm, breathing against his skin, without Erik pushing him away.

*
Example Three: Occam's Razor

Charles lands, jet-lagged and headache, in the bright light of a California afternoon. The Oakland airport is oppressively busy at the height of the travel day, while Charles' circadian rhythms have him three hours later in Boston, ready to sit down with a book and dinner and peace and quiet. Some of his research suggests that psionics, while demonstrating significantly higher neuroplasticity than baselines or non-psionics, are also very wedded to routine and are reluctant to break out of it, wanting the familiarity of a regular schedule, or even familiar faces, around them as much as possible.

Maybe, Charles thinks as he follows the tide of harried, preoccupied thoughts through the terminal to the baggage check and pick-up areas, telepaths are so aware of change and instability, they want as much regularity as they can manage. He's never liked the first two weeks of new semesters, when his life switches over and needs time to establish a new pattern. Mid-semester lectures and conferences, while enjoyable, are still something of a necessary evil.

He hopes this particular mid-semester lecture will be slightly less evil. It might even be enjoyable, if his first sight of Erik Lehnsherr is any indication.

One clear advantage to telepathy: it makes finding Lehnsherr in a crowded atrium easy, and would even if he weren’t so striking. Lehnsherr is tall and blade-slim, broad shoulders and lithe muscles under tailored clothes that Charles, who's only met Lehnsherr in passing at ANA and one other conference, can finally properly appreciate. When Lehnsherr steps forward to take Charles' hand, his fingers curl around Charles' with a casual strength and his mouth curls in a smile that's both dangerous and easy to answer.

"Dr Lehnsherr," Charles says with a smile of his own.

"Erik," Lehnsherr corrects.

"I'm Charles, then." Charles has never really understood this ritual -- everyone's a doctor or professor until stated otherwise -- but there's something calming in it.


Charles falls into step alongside him, dragging his carry-on behind. He knows Lehnsherr’s a mutant, but doesn’t think precisely what that mutation was. He doesn’t look in Lehnsherr’s mind to find out -- more fun to try and guess. It’s clearly nothing visible or disfiguring, unless it’s concealed under clothing. Admittedly, a lot of things could be: Lehnsherr’s wearing long sleeves with his trousers, despite the weather being on the warmer side today. Charles doubts it, though, so perhaps instead something related to physical ability: super-speed, or flight. Super-strength and mass don’t always go together, but Lehnsherr could be hiding behind slim muscles and sharp edges.

No. No, if anything, Charles would guess it’s something more abstract. It’s just intuitive, a false correlation probably, but Charles can’t imagine Lehnsherr messing up that perfect suit by launching into sudden orbit. Telekinesis, or even better, something psionic like persuasion. Lehnsherr’s certainly charming enough for it. Or at least, he has mastered a veil of charisma; he's draped over his every word and movement, each both casual and practiced at the same time.

“Is this your first time in California?” Lehnsherr asks him when they’re crossing into the garage, the cool shadow dropping over them all at once.
“No,” Charles says. “I’ve been a few times before, for conferences, occasionally for holiday. I can certainly understand why you stayed here after grad school; the weather’s impeccable.”

A light ruffle of unease carries from Lehnsherr’s mind and into Charles’, not enough to be disarming but certainly significant. Maybe he just doesn’t like small talk, and the weather is, admittedly, unbearably cliché. Charles changes the subject.

“Are you going to SPR this year? I couldn’t believe it when I saw they’d booked it for Paris. I don’t know where they think we get the funding.”

"Haven't decided," Lehnsherr says, his voice throbbing with the same discontent that's turned his mind tense and strange. He continues, more calmly, "I'm not presenting this year, it'd only be for networking, and it can be hell convincing the university to fork over the money for that."

When they reach the car, Lehnsherr gestures and both the trunk and the front doors pop open. Telekinesis after all? Charles focuses on the particular texture of Lehnsherr's mind as his ability flexes itself, the places to which he's directed his attention, sees as Lehnsherr remotely starts the car that it's not directed at levers or latches but at the metal itself.

"Electromagnetism, then?" he asks as he puts his carry-on in the trunk. The trunk shuts itself and Charles can't help but grin in delight.

"Yes," Lehnsherr says, visibly pleased with himself and Charles. He looks at Charles over the roof of the car. "And that wasn't a lucky guess."

They've come to it, as they would eventually. Charles gestures vaguely at his temple. "Minor telepathy, though I'm best at sensing mutants and their abilities," he says, and can only hope he's not projecting too loudly when Lehnsherr's reserve melts a little and his grin only widens, broad and full of teeth and happiness.

"We've got a good collection of mutant students in Bioengineering and Psych," Lehnsherr tells him. It would be the rote kind of thing all professors say about their students if it weren't for the palpable pride Lehnsherr has. It's not fondness, not at all -- Lehnsherr doesn't seem like the kind of professor to cultivate friendly relationships with his students -- but there's warmth and pride all the same. He tells Charles about some of their projects ("the ones worth remembering, anyway," Lehnsherr says with a well-rehearsed cantankerousness), and Charles tells him about some of his own students, and idly points out some of the city as they drive through it.

Berkeley's sprawling campus is, as Charles predicted, full of harried student-thoughts and preoccupied professor-thoughts, not much different from MIT in some ways though it diverges in so many others. Dazed and a bit fascinated, Charles winds his way down the sidewalks with Erik, following along as Erik gestures to the buildings and then to the huge new complex that houses Bioengineering and Erik's office, basking in Erik's sense of ownership over this place.

“I’m responsible for you until tomorrow morning,” Erik says when they get to his floor -- they take the stairs, of course, Erik’s body well-built for darting up the steps and Charles keeping up with him only thanks to many long hours of running up Back Bay streets. “Garrett Hall is taking you out for breakfast, as I understand it, and you have a full day from there. But I have you for dinner tonight.”

He grins over his shoulder at Charles, all sharp teeth. Charles feels a thrill of arousal thinking about the possibility of Erik taking him back to his apartment after that dinner, never mind Charles’ reserved hotel -- Charles can lick every inch of him, can edge him so hard Erik will be dying to come by the end of it. He isn’t married; Charles looked at his ring finger, and it’s perfectly bare. Of course, it would stand in violation of any number of moral guidelines, and probably official ethical ones as
well. Better save that for SPR, if Erik decides to go after all.

Erik unlocks his door without a key, letting them into his office. It’s small in the way that assistant professors’ offices are, but it has a large window and a desk that can be adjusted to either sitting or standing height -- it’s at standing, now, and Erik pushes it down to sit in the chair behind it, gesturing for Charles to take one of the uncomfortable-seeming student seats. His desk is much neater than Charles’, all his papers cleanly filed away in clear drawers behind the desk: Charles can see the labels, written in a slanted hand.

“I’d give you the grand tour,” Erik says, “but Cal doesn’t have a proper neuroscience department. We’re all just affiliated faculty. I’m in bioengineering and psychology, Hall is in psychology, Zhang is in electrical engineering, and so on. You’ll be doing most of your events over in the psychology building.”

Charles has already gotten his itinerary from the Bioengineering administrator, and a couple of shyly excited emails from graduate students who are looking forward to his lectures. He appreciates the reminder, though, especially when delivered in that rough, hypnotic voice -- and, he admits with a private, rueful laugh, when it gives him a chance to be still after a day of constant motion. Erik tells him a bit more about neuroscience as an interdisciplinary field at Berkeley, and some more about his own research, until his department head wanders by and, in true full professor fashion, monopolizes the conversation for a while before Erik can chase him away.

"You're probably exhausted and starving," Erik says once they've gotten rid of the department head and he seems to take stock of Charles. "We can go for dinner now, if you'd like, give you time to settle in."

Charles does feel grubby, and exhausted, and not entirely on top of his game. "Dinner would be great," he admits, and finds himself chasing after Erik again; all Erik has to do is summon his keys and doesn't even need to pause to shut and lock the door behind them before he's stalking down the hall, his long strides conceding nothing to Charles's lack of height.

Dinner is Ethiopian, which means Charles gets to watch Erik expertly tearing off strips of spongy injera to scoop up doro wat and gomen kitfo and, with apparent ignorance as to what he's doing to Charles, licking away the sauce that daubs his fingertips. He uses conversation as an excuse to watch, and between bites, presses at Erik a little bit regarding his theory and methodology.

"So you hold that the human condition is one of essential bias and egoism," Charles says as he thoughtfully mops up the last bit of azifa.

Just like that, Erik transforms back into Lehnsherr, prickly and impatient. "In the face of the evidence, yes. It's the best explanation for -- "

Erik tenses, his mind racing fast off the track of his research and into another direction entirely, yanking Charles along so sharply there's mental whiplash. A moment later -- not even a heartbeat -- Erik's cell phone goes off.

There’s an obvious moment of hesitation, Erik very much wanting to ignore the message but at the same time feeling compelled to read it. On the table, one of Erik’s hands has curled into a fist -- but his face is carefully neutral as he says, “I apologize. I need to reply to this very quickly.”

Charles didn’t think Erik was the type to pull out his phone at the dinner table, particularly not in a professional setting, but it’s not unusual these days, especially among Charles and Erik's own generation. So he smiles and waves his hand dismissively, says, “Of course,” pretending to be very interested in his glass of water, taking rather longer swallows than necessary as Erik taps out a reply
under the table.

After just a few seconds, Erik tucks his phone away again, settling back into his seat properly and meeting Charles’ gaze. “As I was saying ….”

He starts back in on his discussion of essential bias, but it’s more restrained now, Erik expecting another interruption -- which they receive, in the form of another text message alert less than a minute later. This one Erik ignores, his mind fiercely defensive of what he has going on right now, his conversation here with Charles, trying to pretend to himself he didn’t even hear it.

Charles plays along. Normally it would be easy; Erik’s worldview is diametrically opposed to Charles’ own, and while perhaps discussions of essential bias and altruism are best left to the philosophers it’s quite clear that both of them have a philosophical bent to the way they choose to interpret their findings even if it isn’t always something they’ll choose to outright publish in papers. But it’s hard not to be distracted when Erik’s only half paying attention himself, anticipation bleeding from his thoughts into his body and making his gestures tense and sharp, even his posture stiff and unnatural.

The phone goes off again, startling them both. Charles hadn’t realized how tense he himself had become, waiting for it, and now the sound catapults through his mind, tearing thoughts off from their origins and leaving them baseless and hanging like cut strings, ideas left unfinished. It’s not the text message alert this time, but a different tone: a call.

Erik’s mind echoes with so many things Charles has to shut himself off before he can parse them all. There’s irritation and outright anger, resentment, all of these things shading deeper into territory that Charles can’t, or doesn’t want to, explore. It's breach of privacy, for one, and especially egregious when he’s told Erik he’s a lower-level telepath instead of what he truly is; and two, this is Erik, who is unexpectedly more a friend than a colleague already. Then there's Charles' own selfishness -- Erik would laugh, if he'd heard Charles confessing to it, his desire to spare himself.

The phone rings and rings, and on the fourth, when Charles expects Erik to let it go through to voicemail or hit the button to ignore, Erik says, "Could you please excuse me? I need to take this."

"Of course," Charles says, and ignores how Erik's already standing up and stepping away. He flags down the waitress for coffee and dessert, thinking Erik might need something to steady him or an excuse for continuing to avoid the person on the other end of the line.

Guiltily, he slides a sidelong look at Erik, who's hovering in an alcove nearby. Charles isn't particularly adept at reading body language, despite several years of having it hammered into him. Erik's shoulders and drawn tight and hunched over as if he's curling around his anger to keep it warm -- it's fairly radiating off him, poisonous and radioactive -- and the hand not holding his phone is clenched at his side. All the metal around him hums, vibrating with Erik's power sunk into it like claws and humming with the resonance of Erik's emotions.

" -- with a colleague. I told you, the lectures," Erik snaps, voice breaking discipline to become audible before Erik can control it. Erik doesn't glance over his shoulder, though he has to know people (maybe even Charles) could have overheard him; he only shifts further into the alcove for the remainder of the conversation, not that there's much of one.

Charles pretends to be busy with the coffee and choosing between fruit and pasti, or both. Erik is radiating fury, destroying the rest of Charles' appetite and replacing it with nausea. Erik’s personal life really isn’t any of Charles’ concern, even if a baser part of Charles might like it to be. He wraps his telepathy up as close as he can and very pointedly doesn’t read Erik’s mind as Erik returns to the table, his phone put away for now.
“Again, I apologize,” Erik says, and this time his voice is remarkably smooth, all of the edges from earlier gone as if melted away. He’s even smiling a little, which doesn’t at all match up with the assumptions Charles had made about that phone call. “Thank you for getting coffee. Are we getting dessert?”

The rest of their dinner conversation is remarkably easy, Erik letting Charles poke a little fun at him for ordering fruit salad and considering that luxuriously sweet, Erik finally consenting to taking a tiny sliver of Charles’ chocolate and popping it into his mouth, then quickly chasing it down with a swallow of coffee and a grimace.

“So,” Erik says as he accepts the checkbook from their server, cursorily examining the total before jotting down a tip and scribbling out his signature, “I was thinking we should go for drinks next. It’s not academia if nobody’s drunk, after all.”

"This is true," Charles agrees. His body is clamoring for sleep, but now that Erik seems to be himself again, and now that he has coffee and his second wind, a drink with Erik (maybe followed by bed with Erik) sounds more attractive than his hotel room.

They're out in the sun long enough for Erik to lead him to a quiet bar, sleek enough not to be inhabited by undergrads and expensive enough to scare most frugal grad students away. When Charles mentions this, Erik's thoughts shade off toward darkness again, but stop before they get too far, as if Erik's forcing himself back into the moment. It might be that the alcohol is just as much for Erik as it is for collegiality.

Either way, Charles is willing to help. Erik negotiates with the hostess and wins them a table near the back, in the close, private shadows. The tea candle sends distracting patterns dancing across Erik's face, shifting chiaroscuro that hides his eyes one moment and emphasizes the gaunt line of his cheekbone the next, then the long golden slide of his throat to the suggestive barrier of his collar. The look Erik gives Charles, when Charles can see his eyes again, seems to say that he knows Charles is looking, that he enjoys it.

Their drinks come, a martini for Erik and another for Charles. The bar has a good scotch selection, but when Charles had noted it, Erik's mind had veered away sharply, an aversion that comes from bad experience. It's fascinating, watching how Erik's thoughts shift back and forth, sudden and strong, passionate in everything and never half-hearted, a buzz that's as potent as alcohol and exhaustion.

“Enough about work,” Erik says after they’re both halfway through their drinks. “Tell me about yourself, Dr Xavier. When did your mutation manifest?”

Charles has been asked this question a thousand times since college, but somehow it never fails to throw him a little, tugging at old bitter strings. He recovers quickly, though, before Erik can notice, and says, “I was twelve. It took me the longest time to realize that’s what it was -- mutation.” Erik looks curious, like he’s going to ask more, so Charles says, “What about you? How old were you?”

“Twelve as well, or as far as I remember. My father told me I used to move coins around when I was a toddler, but I don’t recall being able to do anything with metal until I was in secondary school.”

When talking about mutation, the darker tilt to Erik’s thoughts vanishes entirely, leaving his mind bright and open in a way Charles finds helplessly alluring. It’s so tempting to give into his desires and sink himself into the waters of Erik’s thoughts, drift in the currents of his shifting attention and see what he finds. But he can’t risk losing himself there, not yet at least, so he keeps himself tethered close and simply enjoys what he glimpses from afar.
"There's something to be said for mutant-only mentorship," Erik's saying. A smirk decorates that lovely mouth -- oh, Charles is distressingly three sheets to a vigorous wind right now -- as Erik gestures, drawing some spare change, spilled from someone's pocket, maybe, into orbit around his fingers. The alloys, which Erik refers to dismissively as 'cheap', part, copper drawing away from nickel and nickel drawing away from zinc. "There are some ways my ability is useful that I'm not sure a non-mutant would appreciate."

"Living MRI machine?" Charles asks, catching the line of Erik's thought and a vague image of the lab, Erik's focus bright and intense on a set of numbers on the screen in front of him, the patterned whorls of an MRI scan.

"Of a sort. I can't visualize the data I get from my own abilities and I can't quantify it; it's too subjective. But the nuance helps and my engineering work tries to exploit that." Erik sips his own drink, something he calls a shrub cocktail -- drinking vinegar and vodka. Charles wonders how inappropriate it would be to ask for a sip. "Like your telepathy, I imagine. Is that why you're in neuroscience?"

"I've never liked the idea we have to remain in the field to which our powers call us," Charles says. It's common, though, mutant students pursuing a field they think might help them understand themselves better. His counselor had suggested the opposite, that he find something to do that didn't involve psionics or medicine; she'd thought he wouldn't be able to depersonalize effectively, that he'd always be too close. He considers his next words, since he can't tell Erik the memories crowding his head.

"I want to understand people," he says at last, "not my telepathy. When I first started, I wanted to learn about the logic that lies underneath the chaos." He gestures at his head. "Telepathy tells you that we always experience ourselves subjectively, never objectively. I wanted the full picture. I wanted to understand not why I'm a telepath, but why I'm a telepath and so many other things simultaneously -- bisexual, for example."

He doesn't miss the way Erik’s brow flicks up at that or the slow simmer of satisfaction that shivers through the telepathic line between them. Charles could not be telegraphing his interest any more clearly if he got naked and climbed into Erik’s lap, and Erik knows it. Erik wants him in return, too, a pulse of desire there too strong to ignore even if Charles is being polite and not-looking. It's gratifying -- and promising, for later.

"You’re interested in the human condition, not just Charles’ condition," Erik murmurs, leaning closer to Charles, now, perhaps unintentionally. Perhaps not. Charles’ focus is split between Erik’s hand around his glass and the line of his lips, imagining those long fingers curling around his cock, that mouth doing the same.

"Aren’t you?" Charles asks, his throat gone a little dry.

Erik’s gaze, half-lidded, flicks down to Charles’ lips and back up again. “Yes. I am.”

Interested in Charles, that is.

Charles is suddenly quite aware of his own heart beating within his chest. They’ve both drunk enough, now, to excuse their own culpability, if something were to happen. It could be professional oversight, not professional error.

“That’s part of the human condition, you know,” Charles finds himself saying -- babbling, really, the way he does when he’s on this side of intoxicated and too interested in someone for his own good. "Sexuality. Desire. The fluidity of both. You see bisexuality in lesser mammals as well, of course,
but you can imagine, as the human brain adapted for social interaction and became larger and more interconnected, the drive to mate for reproduction became only one factor of importance. We have a drive to affiliate, generally speaking, whether across sexes or -- or within."

Silence greets that, and Erik's already-glassy eyes widening slightly. "And is this... drive to affiliate indiscriminate?" Erik asks, although it sounds like he's already got his own answers and isn't particularly interested in academic discussion.

"In a sense," Charles says. Despite the swallow of alcohol -- it's Erik's drink, he realizes; he's taken it from Erik's hand, where it's been held, forgotten. The vinegar is tart, obscuring most of the vodka. He imagines that his lips are curved around the same place where Erik's mouth has been, which would be ridiculous except he can see Erik's fingerprints on the bowl and the softer, curved marks of lower lip or tongue on the rim. "Given a choice, most people will affiliate with those demonstrating some similarity, but we do always want to belong -- we want to have someone who can see us." He gestures at his temple again, drunk and clumsy, and likely making no sense, but Erik seems captivated. "Who sees us and understands and accepts."

"Distinct from sexual desire?" Erik asks softly.

"Not always," Charles says. He's leaning forward, drawn into Erik's gravity well. A few more inches and they could kiss, or he could do something equally stupid, like trace the curve of Erik's cheekbone or feel the pulse beating under the delicate skin of his neck. "Emotions and drives are like polar liquids ... they mix together, color each other, affect each other. Sometimes it's like dye; I think I'll get stained by it if any splashes on me."

Erik nods, as if Charles' rambling makes perfect sense. Charles wants to tell him that Erik's lust is coloring him, vibrant shocks of orange and red and the blue that's in the center of a flame. Telepathic contact is all well and good, but Charles wants more, he wants it now, and with Erik feeling the same way he's caught in a feedback loop. Let's go to my room, he wants to say. We can stay there the rest of the week, cancel the damn lectures. Charles is just about to throw caution to the wind, to kiss Erik and worry about the consequences another day, when the feedback loop falters, then snaps. Charles is left dazed and light-headed for a moment, cut off from the dreamlike trance of their clouding desires and fumbling for an anchor as Erik leans back, reaching to draw something out of his pocket.

It's his cell phone, again, the screen lit up with a green text message bubble Charles can't read from here. Erik frowns down at it, his mind sharpening again although not as furious as he was at dinner, all his responses dulled and blurry from alcohol, that same anger present but dampered.

Erik doesn't respond to the text, but he doesn't put his phone away again, either, its face still glowing where it's clapsed in his palm and casting a bluish light onto Erik's features. Charles' stomach sinks and he does his best to fend off the worst of his disappointment; he knows without Erik having to say anything that whatever might have been about to happen a minute ago isn't happening anymore.

"Is everything all right?" he says, carefully.

"I should get you back to your hotel room," Erik says, his words crisp again, and Charles could think he was perfectly sober if he didn't know any better. "You have an early morning tomorrow, as do I."

"Oh," Charles says, wondering how much of his dismay is showing on his face. "Yes. That's probably for the best. I'm still stuck in Boston time, after all." He smiles like it means nothing, which really it should -- Erik's lovely but they barely know each other, and clearly Erik has something else going on, even if Charles hasn't been able to put his finger on what it is.
Erik’s reassertion of his own boundaries reminds Charles of his own. He pulls himself back in, locking his desire away, extracting himself from where he’s managed to entangle himself in Erik’s mind. He’s still colored by Erik, lit up and hot, although the heat cools by the second and as he watches Erik’s expression close off into formality again.

It’s whoever’s on the other end of those text messages, it has to be. He doesn't need to be a telepath, or a genius, or anything except mildly observant to correlate Erik’s reserve and muted anger with the texts and the one phone call -- and in this case, Charles is fairly comfortable assuming that causation is operating here, not correlation. There may be no ring on Erik’s finger, but that doesn't mean there isn’t someone in Erik’s life, doesn't mean Erik comes without strings attached.

Those strings might do more than bind. Erik's gaze straying to the phone even when it's silent, the unhappiness welling up, are responses to a specific stimulus -- those strings being tugged on.

He waits silently, not sure how to recapture at least friendliness without making a horrible mockery of conversation. The waitress at least appears with their bill and Charles, sensing that this much alcohol isn't going to be covered by Erik's research account, wordlessly offers a card for his half.

"I'll take care of it," Erik says. The smile he directs at Charles is only a ghost of that broad, sharkish grin. "I insist."

*I don't want you to get in trouble with whoever it is back home,* Charles thinks about saying. He bites that back and shrugs instead. "I'll owe you, then, if you ever come to Boston."

“I’ll be counting on it.”

Erik hails them a taxi outside the bar, neither of them sober enough to drive. It’s started raining since they went inside, the droplets making a mosaic of the cab windows and transforming the city lights into hazy watercolor. Erik’s preoccupied with his phone, with the person on the other end of it, as they ride through the streets toward Charles’ hotel, picking up Charles’ luggage from Erik’s car on the way. Charles is reluctant to say anything, in a strange way worried of interrupting.

“Here’s my card,” Erik says when the cab stops at Charles’ hotel, a doorman approaching to get the luggage from the trunk. Erik is pewter-colored in the rainlight, the streetlamps casting strange dapples onto his skin. Charles takes the card: simple, nothing but Erik’s name, position, e-mail, and his website. “Email me any time if you need something.”

It’s more than just hospitality, but it isn’t flirtation, either. Something else. Something with a more vengeful edge to it. Erik leans back in his chair, arms crossing over his chest, watching as Charles unbuckles his seatbelt and lets the strap slide back home.

“T’ll see you tomorrow morning.” Charles says. “Thank you again for dinner, and afterward. I had a good time.”

Erik nods, almost curtly, and there’s nothing for Charles to do then but get out of the car and step under the doorman’s wide umbrella, his ankles already cold where the puddling water splashes up and wets the hems of his trouser legs. There's something poetic in that.

His hotel room is warm and quiet, and unexpectedly empty after an evening spent in Erik’s company and how long he’d spent imagining having Erik here with him. No use dwelling on that, he reminds himself as he hangs up his trousers and jacket and sets out his shaving kit. He’ll see Erik tomorrow and he'll have to be professional regardless of what happened, or didn't happen, tonight. And regardless of the hangover he's certain is going to follow him around all day; it's lying in wait, curled deep in his skull, and there'll be no dodging it like he'd used to be able to do in grad school. There's
nothing for it, or for anything else, but to take some painkillers and drink as much water as he can, and make sure there's caffeine for the morning.

Whatever else will come after that, will come.

*

The hangover and jet lag aren't quite as cruel as Charles had been fearing, and after breakfast with Professor Hall, who is politely jovial and interesting in a purely academic way, Charles feels his equilibrium come back. He resists the urge to interrogate Hall about Erik, or read his mind to unearth any details or department gossip; the result is Erik is still as much a puzzle when Charles sees him, distant and politely professional, on his way to speak with the graduate students.

"Don't let them monopolize all your time," Erik says. He falls into step next to Charles, already that magnetism humming between them, drawing Charles along with him. "You've got a half-hour quiet time built in before your lecture, and they should know better than to eat into it."

"I'll be fine," Charles reassures him. He's been entertaining idle fantasies about finding Erik during his prep time and talking, or kissing him, or talking and kissing, but they're really only useful for distracting himself from long walks between buildings or the bureaucratic ramblings of the department chair at lunch. "I'll see you there, I'm sure."

"You will," Erik affirms. He stops by the main door to the building that houses his lab, eyes intense and direct in the bright afternoon. "Until then."

He disappears into the building and Charles has the bizarre urge to follow him. Probably he could get away with it; the grad students would assume Charles, as so evolved and illustrious a creature as a professor, had found something of more pressing importance that demanded his attention. No one would really ask twice, except, of course, for Erik himself, who is giving no signs today that he might entertain Charles’ advances.

So Charles goes along to the next item on his itinerary, meeting with a gaggle of seven grad students who buy him coffee and ask about his research, one of them not-so-subtly mentioning that he's going on the job market next year. The more senior grad students manage to keep the discussion confined to twenty minutes, giving Charles ten left to prepare in the lecture hall, checking through his slides one last time at the lectern as the audience filters in. He notices Erik’s arrival almost immediately, of course, as if his mind were attuned to Erik’s presence like a compass pointing due north, glancing up to meet Erik’s gaze and smile back at him as Erik takes his seat in the third row.

Charles goes through a mental list as other various people-of-merit arrive, fixing names to faces only before seen on websites, TED talks, or in person at various conferences. No one he knows as well as he feels he knows Erik now, which is unsettling to realize, considering he’s only really known Erik the one day. Charles likes to try to keep such thoughts in check: assuming his telepathy affords him magnificent depths of knowledge about a person at first glance is what he’s been told is called ‘magical thinking’, and is not a rational thought. Charles tries to be rational.

He recognizes a few of the professors from lunch -- Hall, of course, Zhang and Diamant. There are plenty of unfamiliar faces as well, possibly people from other departments, and he’s pleasantly surprised to notice Sebastian Shaw in attendance: Shaw’s at Stanford, which is a bit of a commute by Caltrain, but he is a MacArthur ‘Genius’ Fellow and was once widely expected to win the Nobel Prize in Economics for his research on differential decision-making associated with structurally divergent mutant brains.

And, if Charles recalls correctly, he was Erik’s graduate school adviser, though when he turns his
attention back to Erik’s mind all he finds is the dark rumble of displeasure when Erik notices Shaw’s presence, sharp anger cutting into something surprisingly like shame.

Charles turns away from Erik’s mind. That kind of shame isn't meant to be seen; it's worse, somehow, if it doesn't know it's being witnessed. He steadies himself against the podium, hoping he's being inconspicuous, and tries not to watch as Shaw moves through the audience to settle directly behind Erik. Shaw doesn't acknowledge Erik beyond leaning forward to murmur a brief hello; he seems more interested in making himself comfortable and exchanging pleasantries with the social scientist sitting next to him. The lights trained on Charles feel unbearably hot, or maybe that's just Erik's fury and humiliation dripping all over him, or maybe it's Charles being hyperaware that he's standing in front of an audience of nearly a hundred scholars and can only think about two of them.

The department chair gives the introduction and preliminary remarks, and obsequiously thanks the donors -- two of whom are absent, one of whom smiles with the serene superiority of the rich -- who made Charles' trip here possible.

"And now, I'm very pleased to welcome Dr. Charles F. Xavier, Associate Professor of Cognitive Science at MIT, who will be speaking to us on 'Psionic Neuroregeneration and Memory Formation and Retrieval.'"

The clicker is warm and slick under Charles' sweaty hands. He's spoken in front of large audiences before, and in front of scholars every bit as illustrious as these. He's faced down his stepfather. People, at least now, aren't sources of anxiety for him, but he's anxious nonetheless. Focus, he reminds himself, staring down at his lecture notes and taking a moment to rebuild his shields, blocking out the stomach-twisting spillover from Erik and Shaw's quiet, permeating satisfaction. That helps, and Charles feels more himself again. He begins to speak, the words present in his memory with the clarity of fresh ink -- the benefit of having a telepath's heightened recall.

Once he gets past the first few slides he’s on firmer ground, the words flowing easily from one to the next, passage eased and well-oiled from his many practice talks, most recently this morning in front of the bathroom mirror in his hotel room. He falls into an old trick, courtesy of an undergraduate instructor, and focuses on speaking only to Erik -- meeting his gaze every now and then, gauging from the minute shifts in Erik's expression whether to elaborate further on a point or skip onward to avoid condescending his audience.

Charles is a good speaker. It isn’t inhumility to acknowledge that which is simply true -- and he knows from reading his audience’s minds that he’s got a way of making them feel at-ease, like they can grasp the material without needing a doctorate in neuroscience to do so (even though most of them have that already). He’s a bit self-deprecating when he has to be, and mocking at other times, but never quite to the point of offense. Not that he would have risked any of this without telepathy. Charles knows from experience.

When he opens the talk up for questions Erik’s is one of the first hands in the air.

“While I concede that fluid intelligence is not isomorphic with memory retrieval,” Erik says, raising his voice well enough to be heard but otherwise staying exactly where he is, relaxed back into his chair with his legs crossed at the knee -- he’d barely waited for Charles to finish acknowledging him before speaking, even, “I believe the constructs are more strongly associated than you seem willing to admit, here. How did you account for $G(f)$-associated variance in neuroplasticity when considering your psionic sample’s performance on memory retrieval tasks? Particularly since some behavioral studies do show correlations between psionic ability and increased fluid intelligence.”

That question is… quite close to taking off the gloves. Charles has the sense of a gauntlet being thrown, and that his answer is only going to produce more questions. "I'm looking at neuroplasticity..."
and neuroregeneration as broadly construed," he says, unsurprised to see the faint annoyance on Erik's face. "That is, I'm looking at them without limitation -- without reference to, say, whether it is derived from purely psionic ability, the strength of that ability, or \( G(f) \). Moreover, if there's overlap between \( G(f) \)-associated variance and neuroplasticity or neuroregeneration, that only supports my hypothesis."

Erik huffs. "Then how do you account for, say, Randall and Vernor's findings? Or Pearson and Fletcher. The correlation they describe between psionic ability and fluid intelligence isn't insignificant."

"I see we've got a question in the back -- Mr. Chang?" the department chair says timidly.

"If I could," Charles says, "I do want to address Dr Lehnsherr's point." He continues without waiting for the chair's acknowledgment, "Randall and Vernor's study was limited by their choice of inventory; they were more concerned with emotional intelligence -- which is itself hotly debated, and their findings have been criticized. Pearson and Fletcher were also interested primarily in memory formation and fluid intelligence in psionics, but their findings weren't convincing insofar as they suggested a particularly strong relationship between psionic ability and fluid intelligence."

There are other issues that Charles could get into, but Erik's already tugging at the bit, impatient with delay. He wants to say (his mind is practically shouting it) that criticizing other people's research isn't really an affirmative defense of Charles' own, he wants to tell poor Mr. Chang to wait while the adults talk, he wants to argue, fight, something to get the tension out of him.

He sort of wants to indulge Erik, Charles finds.

So he stays silent, just long enough for Erik to burst out, like it's been building up inside him the entire duration of Charles' reply, "Furthermore, I find it striking that you didn't investigate the clearly significant amygdalar response during your memory retrieval task. We know the amygdala is implicated in memory consolidation and conditioning responses, but this pattern was practically a goddamn Christmas tree. You need to record EEG to ascertain whether or not this is due to theta activity, in which case you may be looking at a feedback loop, in which psionic synaptic plasticity enhances memory retention which affects memory retrieval, which in turn enhances associated cortical interactions which improves synaptic plasticity!"

Charles blinks at him, taken aback, by the brightness in Erik's eyes, by the pounding of his own heart, and by the veracity of the next words out of his mouth: "That's a very good point, Dr Lehnsherr. So good, in fact, that we are currently running that study in my lab as we speak."

"And I hope this time you're accounting for psionic-related fluid intelligence," Erik snaps back without hesitation, and Charles feels a unique thrill roll down his spine.

He opens his mouth to respond, enamored with the way he feels right now, with the way Erik is looking at him, but before he can speak another voice cuts in, smooth and cool as silk.

"Erik, my boy, let's not monopolize the discussion," Sebastian Shaw says from his seat behind Erik in his smooth, silken Southern drawl. Shaw is sitting upright, now, bringing him closer to Erik -- and Charles has the perfect angle from which to view the way this makes Erik's neck tense and his jaw clench, a muscle twitching in his cheek. "You're not the only one who would like to ask Dr Xavier a few questions."

The audience's reaction nearly drowns out Erik's fury, and Charles is grateful for the stunned silence because he can't think of what to say either. The grad students are horrified that someone talked to Professor Lehnsherr like that; the faculty are uneasily dismissive, not liking how Shaw's being so
patronizing but recognizing that he's both Erik's former advisor and the preeminent scholar here.

Charles thinks none of these things. He hears the not-so-subtle possessiveness rolling under the my boy, sees Shaw still bent close to Erik, hovering there like an evil genius. He remembers the text messages, Erik's face pale in the light from the screen of his phone.

"I believe it was Mr. Chang who had a question?" Shaw says. He turns around to give the grad student a solicitous smile. "It's easy to get lost in intellectual drama, but I'm sure you remember what you were going to ask."

"Yes," Chang squeaks. He stammers and shuffles his notes before he can manage to articulate a question Charles only half hears.

"Applications? At the moment, only speculative," Charles says. "I don't want to be overly optimistic," a soft drift of amusement from Erik at that; he already thinks of Charles obnoxiously optimistic, "but further work on the mutant genome, in conjunction with my own work, might lead to new therapies for neurodegenerative diseases. There's some work coming out of Caltech, I think, on the possibility of interfacing psionics with non-psionics to stimulate memory retrieval. It's done through cybernetics, to control and target specific interactions, but it's all theoretical at this point."

The Q&A progresses, a couple more graduate students piping up, more faculty chiming in as the initial awkwardness fades. Charles fights not to keep glancing at Erik; now that that anchor's been taken away, he finds himself drifting, trying to find something -- someone -- to latch onto. The only other compelling presence in the room is Shaw, and Charles thinks if he focuses on him, he might throw up. Or go looking to confirm what he fears.

After the discussion is finished Charles lingers at the podium. Has to, to shut down his presentation, and to receive commentary and further questions from audience members as the rest start drifting out, heading toward the reception and the promised free food. Charles can't quit the anxious rattling inside him, the desire to make his excuses and escape away, maybe avoid this entire situation and pretend he hasn't thought about the things he has.

But Charles didn’t get to where he is today by letting his emotions get the better of him. He’s perfectly patient and congenial with everyone who approaches him, and acts appreciative when Dr Hall comes to lead the way down the hall and into the conference room that’s been set up with refreshments for socializing. It’s time for Charles to play the role of the intermediary: between anyone at Berkeley (or Stanford) who wants to reach out and make a connection to anyone at MIT they think they can attract via Charles. He’s here representing his department as much as he is his own laboratory.

It means he can’t expect much in the way of speaking with Erik alone; as soon as he’s filled his plate with veggies and fruit and little cubes of cheese he’s accosted by a group of engineers who want to talk about potential applications of his research to some tech they’ve been working on, and after that it’s a nonstop feed, faculty cycling out to be replaced by other faculty, other students and postdocs, the occasional ambitious undergraduate. Charles tracks Erik’s movements around the room with part of his mind even while he laughs and interacts with the others. It’s easy: he can’t miss the swollen knot of anger, resentment, and humiliation pulsing at the center of Erik’s mind.

“Dr Xavier,” someone says just as Dr Zhang is leaving, hand touching Charles’ elbow -- Charles almost hadn’t realized anyone was standing there, too caught up in Zhang and in Erik, but he recognizes that voice with a sudden lurching sensation in the pit of his stomach. He feels sicker still when he turns around to meet Shaw’s pale gaze, forced to mirror the thin smile on Shaw’s face.

“Dr Shaw,” Charles makes himself say, his voice clear despite the seasick feeling in his head as he
lets Shaw clasp his right hand, polite and professional. “I didn’t expect you to come.”

Shaw’s smile is a knife being slowly unsheathed, lazy and cutting. ”The trek isn't one I'd make every
day,” he allows, ”but to see one of the bright young minds on the East Coast … well, it's worth the
effort. A fine presentation, if I may say so.”

"You may," Charles says with a good humor he doesn't really feel but is excellent at faking. "It's
always gratifying, having a MacArthur Fellow in the audience."

As he suspects, Shaw bends easily when his vanity is pressed, even for an academic. "I'm sure
there's one in your future, Dr Xavier," he says in the tone of a senior scholar praising a fledgling
researcher, one just out of the nest of grad school. Charles is used to people assuming he's much
younger than he is (even thinking he's a grad student himself), but Shaw should know he's tenured
himself and well-established in his own right. Shaw sips his wine, sighing elaborately over the
mediocrity of it. "And I should apologize for Erik's behavior after your lecture, Charles…. I thought
I'd taught him better professional manners."

Across the room, Erik's attention sharpens, focusing in on Charles and Shaw. Charles doesn't dare
look to see if Erik's watching them, but he can sense that Erik is from the confusion and fury that
swells and fills the far corner of the reception room like a shadow. Erik's mind is a clamor of urgency
-- get Charles out of here, get Shaw out of here -- and resignation and helplessness, and that shame
again, that hollows out a pit in Erik's belly.

"Dr Lehnsherr had relevant points," Charles says as calmly as he can when a pit is opening up in his
own stomach, when he's sending out careful tendrils despite himself because he has to know for sure
what this is, how all these strands of Erik last night and Erik today and Shaw all fit together. "And
while I think our philosophical commitments differ, I can't ignore his concerns -- or their intellectual
weight."

Shaw smiles a thin, sickly smile, and says, “Be that as it may, his concerns would have been better-
delivered after your talk, and perhaps with a bit more … class.” Charles tries desperately not to raise
a brow at that. “But he’s young, and impetuous, as I’m sure we all remember being. Perhaps some of
us more recently than most.”

Shaw gives Charles an arched, appraising look, and Charles thinks, What is this?

Charles abandons his better judgment and his caution, pushing those tendrils into Shaw’s mind all at
once. But as it turns out, he doesn’t have to look deep to find his answers -- and he immediately
wishes he hadn’t looked at all.

He snatches his power away, back into the safe confines of his own mind. It's none of my business, a
part of him argues, but it’s little use against the part of him screaming The hell it isn’t!

“Are you well, Charles?” Shaw says. “You’re looking a bit pale.”

Is he? “Just jetlagged, I’m afraid,” Charles says weakly, taking a sip of his own wine. It tastes bland
and watered down, not nearly as fortifying as he’d like. There’s a bitterness at the back of his mouth,
maybe the wine, maybe what he's just learned, sour and metallic like old blood. ”And unfortunately
when you're British and living in Boston, paleness is inescapable."

Shaw laughs. It's one of the most unpleasant sounds Charles has ever heard. "True, true, and you've
had a trying day. So many people competing for your attention and favor, and I understand from Erik
that you were out a bit late last night. I hope you enjoyed yourselves."
"Within the bounds of reason, for the night before a lecture," Charles says. He thinks about taking another sip of wine, then reconsiders. He knows exactly how Shaw understands from Erik that they were out late drinking, for a moment he feels Shaw's hand curled almost crushingly tight around his wrist.

He wonders if he should go on the offensive, insinuate that he knows the truth, but then he thinks of Erik -- and he can't help but send his awareness out across the room to where Erik's standing, to where he's pretending to listen to Hall and one of the grad students. Charles desperately wants to reassure Erik, to smooth the anger and humiliation away -- and he knows if he does that it'll all be over. The only thing that runs deeper than Erik's shame is his pride.

"Still, I hope you don't overdo it tonight," Shaw says, vaguely nettled; he doesn't like Charles any more than Charles likes him, he suspects Charles' interest in Erik but can't do anything to Charles directly. He collects a new glass of wine from a hovering postdoc, who radiates the desire to talk to him and uncertainty as to how to approach and beg the attention of a god. That smile slides over to the young woman, acknowledgment and thanks at once. "Hello, my dear. I didn't hear your name….

Released from Shaw's attention, Charles abandons his terrible wine and distracts himself with assembling more food. He's not hungry (how could he be?), but his brain has its own demands -- it consumes glucose like fire consuming dry wood -- and he has to capitulate to them, even when he has no appetite.

He keeps trying to find a way to get back to Erik, but he is quickly caught up in another conversation with another professor and gets to watch his chance slip away as Shaw drifts over to where Erik is standing alone near the door, touches Erik's elbow and murmurs a few inaudible things -- Erik’s mouth tightens but he doesn’t say anything, just goes, vanishing out the door and down the hall. Charles looks away, but not before he sees the smug expression on Shaw’s face.

Erik doesn’t come to the dinner that evening. An ‘unexpected personal emergency’, as it’s relayed to him by the department chair, but he does show up the next morning at Charles’ hotel, his sleek car pulling into the valet area up front to take Charles to the airport.

“Are you feeling better?” Charles asks when he settles into the passenger seat, his suitcase locked away in the trunk.

“What?”

“Your chair said you were ill at dinner.”

Erik glances sidelong at him, his expression partly obscured by the tinted aviator sunglasses he’s wearing but his lips in an obvious frown. The lower lip is flushed and bruised-looking in one spot, like Erik’s been chewing on it. “I wasn’t ill, Xavier, it was a personal emergency. Everything’s fine now.”

Charles doesn’t believe him, of course, and Erik knows it. Still, he puts the car in drive and they pull out onto the street, the machine around them humming quietly under the guidance of Erik’s power. Charles had decided with some finality last night after dinner that he isn’t going to suggest to Erik he knows the truth. This thing that’s going on between him and Shaw -- well, Charles has his opinions, but Erik is an adult. More than that, Erik doesn’t just need to make his own choice, he wants to. Charles has to believe that means he will, eventually. And he doesn’t need Charles’ help for that.

Active inaction is something Charles has become uneasily comfortable with, as a telepath. He knows things about people that no one else knows. He sees the darkest hearts of everyone he meets, but also
the brightest stars in their eyes. He can’t save every starving, abused puppy on the street. He just can’t.

“You asked good questions at my lecture yesterday,” Charles says as they turn onto the highway, no longer able to keep fiddling with his phone in his lap without feeling childish.

Erik makes a throaty noise, something between amusement and dismissal. “I know.”

“Do you think there’s a potential for collaboration, somewhere down the line?”

Charles watches Erik’s face carefully out the corner of his eyes, or what he can see of it, at least, the momentary part of Erik’s lips before they press back together again, the slight tightening grip of his hands on the steering wheel.

"I don't know," Erik says. "Maybe."

Being a telepath, Charles knows that the relationship between what people feel and think and what they say is complicated. Erik desires things very powerfully, and he wants to work with Charles, wants what they'd had the night before last -- and he knows, with the same kind of conviction, that it won't happen, for a host of reasons that can't be untangled from each other.

"Well, if you think you can work with someone who is not as committed to the correlational links between psionic ability and fluid intelligence, please let me know," Charles says as casually as he can.

Erik makes an equivocal sound. Charles keeps a light finger on the pulse of Erik's thoughts, which are bitter and resigned. They're familiar, thoughts and sensations Erik has a lot, well-worn with frequent use. Charles thinks about that fierce, direct gaze he'd first encountered on Berkeley's faculty webpage, how it's hidden now, Erik withdrawing from him with every second. He imagines Shaw riding behind them, a presence both invisible and felt -- a ghost haunting them, although he's still very much alive.

The moment for whatever they could have had (if having anything was ever possible) has passed. Still, Charles pulls a business card from his wallet and hands it to Erik after Erik's pulled into the drop-off lane at the airport.

"In case you ever change your mind, Dr Lehnsherr," Charles says.

Erik studies the card, his mind spiking with suspicion. He's already wondering how much Charles knows, if his telepathy is strong enough to find the lie behind personal emergency. It's a suspicion he's right to have, and there's no way for Charles to reassure him, not without having Erik explode in his face -- not without making everything worse. Reassurance implies the situation can improve, or can be endured until it ends.

Charles isn't sure either of those things are true.

"Thank you for dinner the other night," he says as sincerely as he can. Which is quite sincere; Charles is good at sincerity.

"You're welcome." Erik's voice holds a thread of warmth. "Have a safe flight back."

"Times when electromagnetism can come in handy," Charles replies. It wins a half-hearted bark of laughter from Erik.

He takes a few steps back and away, reluctant to part but already in that space where he has to think
about finding his gate and dealing with security. He raises a hand, is quietly pleased when Erik waves goodbye -- and then Erik returns his attention to the road, pulling out into traffic and vanishing, when Charles finally lets him go, into the humming tide of the city.

*
Moira MacTaggert smiles at Erik as he comes into her office, gestures for him to take one of the seats in front of her desk and to close the door behind him -- which he does, using his mutation, of course. Erik never misses a chance to show off, and although she suspects Erik sees most non-mutated humans as blind to the merits of mutation, Moira never misses an opportunity to appreciate his.

“So, Erik,” she says once Erik is settled, opening the thick folder on her desk to his personnel page. Even at a school like MIT, Moira likes keeping paper copies of records. She finds she thinks better if she does things by hand before transcribing them into digital files. “The T&P committee will be meeting next month to discuss your application for tenure. Before we begin the formalities, I just wanted to sit down with you and talk about things.”

Erik looks up from the tablet he has resting on his thigh and meets her gaze, one brow lifting. “All right,” he says.

“It’s nothing bad.”

“I didn’t think it would be.”

A moment of uneasy silence, and then Moira says, “Well, your research looks good. Good, even trend of publications, high-impact journals. You presented at ANA in January, which we like to see, and I know you’ve submitted for SPR in the fall. Congratulations on the R01, by the way.”

“Thank you,” Erik says, though his expression is inscrutable.

“And the NSF, as well, yes, I remember that one. Not to mention Kitty just got the GRFP, didn’t she?”

“We’re all very proud,” Erik drawls, but she thinks she detects sincerity there, at least, a glimmer of pleasure and pride in Erik’s face, reflected in the way he tilts his chin up just slightly.

"Rightfully so," Moira says. "It speaks well of your students." Very well; the NSF doesn't just hand out fully-funded graduate fellowships on a whim. "And it speaks well for your potential to serve as a valuable resource to them -- and to the undergraduates."

Erik, ever perceptive, doesn't miss the needle going in. "My potential," he says flatly.

"Service and education outside the classroom are important parts of professorial life," Moira reminds him. Erik rolls his eyes, but to his credit, it's actually somewhat restrained. "Service is relatively low on the scale for assessing a tenure case, and what you have in your dossier isn't going to disqualify you, but I couldn't help but notice your apparent … disengagement with the students here."

"Just because I don't hold their hands doesn't mean I'm disengaged," Erik says, tone just this side of belligerent. He's usually respectful with Moira, or as respectful as a person like Erik is capable of being, so she's set back on her heels a bit -- if only for the moment it takes her to collect herself. She's dealt with more arrogant, confrontational asshole men than Lehnsherr. "I'm their advisor, not their governess."

Moira suppresses a smile. "That's not the point. Your graduate students are turning out high-quality work, as we've seen, but your willingness to work with the undergraduates is … less remarkable. I see you've gone to exactly one undergraduate research day, and I understand that's because Dr Xavier persuaded you to do it."
“As I understand it, MIT is a research university, not a teaching college.”

Moira’s brows lift. “That is true. However, we do have certain expectations for our professors’ interactions with our undergraduate students. I’m not asking you to be their best friend, I’m asking you to put in just a fraction of the effort you do for your graduate students toward ensuring they have a quality education in your classes and lab, and are well-prepared to enter graduate school or industry when they leave here.”

“Teaching evaluations,” Erik says, “are not an accurate metric of a professor’s didactic success. You should wait until next year, when you can quantify the grades my students make in the classes they take following having had their prerequisites with me. I guarantee you I teach them more effectively than half the staff here.”

“That is entirely possible,” Moira says flatly, well aware that ‘half her staff’ is only nominally present on campus at all, and far closer to corpsehood than professorhood at this point. “However, I can’t have students coming to me complaining that they came to you with issues on their p-set and you told them to ‘pull themselves together’ and to ‘figure it out.’”

A look of recognition dawns on Erik’s face, like he’s figured out precisely which student Moira means, and he says, “As stated on my syllabus, I am quite happy to assist any student on any problem, so long as I am convinced they have given it their best shot first. If a student comes to me with questions and cannot demonstrate having given the problem even the barest modicum of thought, I see no reason why I should waste my time with them until they do. It is the same reason why I don’t tolerate questions from students during my lectures. Questions should be researched independently, and asked of me only if independent search has failed.”

Moira wants to roll her eyes even as, at the same time, she has the unique sensation of feeling sympathetic toward Erik’s autocratic rules. God knows she gets plenty sick of students coming time and time again with the same questions, questions they would know the answers to if they’d been paying attention, or if they’d thought to give the textbook a cursory glance, or read the damn syllabus. Admittedly, most MIT students are better than that, but there are some.

Then again, she suspects Erik is referring to questions that would be better answered with a Ph.D. in Cognitive Science rather than a nice good search on Wikipedia.

“That would distract from your research,” Moira says with a calm smile. It’s times like this she can understand why Charles seems to enjoy poking at Erik; the ire glinting in Erik’s eyes is, perversely, enjoyable. "But just … keep in mind these students might be your junior colleagues one day.”

"Charles said the same thing,” Erik says. He leans back a little, tilting his head to study Moira. It's not unlike being studied by something large and predatory. "And I'll tell you what I told him: God forbid.”

Moira shakes her head. "Logically, God can't forbid all undergraduates from becoming
neuroscientists and still have neuroscience continue as a viable field." Erik's mouth twists in something that passes for amusement. "We're not asking you to befriend all your undergrads, or turn into Mary Poppins, just be more accessible."

"Accessible." Erik sighs. "All right. Is that it?"

"Unless you have any other concerns?"

"No." Erik doesn't get up, though; if anything, he seems to settle into his chair more firmly, even as his gaze roves around Moira's office, from the diplomas on her wall to her family photos to the trinkets she keeps by her computer station to make the place seem less bureaucratic and soul-killing. "When will the committee meet?"

It would be cruel to ask about the thread of nervousness in Erik's voice. "End of semester," she tells him. She wants to say more, that it really is a formality to satisfy the university's paper-pushers, but Erik will take that as her trying to placate him. "You'll have our decision that day."

"Thanks." Erik stands, unfolding those preposterous long limbs of his. "Now if you'll let me get back to work?"

"Yes, go," Moira says, and to preserve some tenuous sense of authority waves him out of her office. Erik stalks away, long legs eating up the distance from Moira's corner desk to the door, an absent flicker of power pulling the door open and shut again.

Moira stares at her monitor for a few minutes, half her mind on Erik's tenure file, half on Erik himself. He's settled in somewhat; as far as she can tell, his research hasn't slackened, hasn't even faltered despite the disruption of a move across the country, dismantling and reassembling his lab, and acclimating to a new department. His grad students are thriving and the undergrads will eventually. When they do, Moira supposes she'll have to thank Charles for being the only person in the department capable of persuading Erik to do things Erik doesn't want to do.

Their relationship is so … she wants to say fraught, but that isn’t really the right word, and she’s not even sure why it came to mind. Strange, certainly. The way they claw at each other's metaphorical throats every time they get the public chance is not unheard of in academia, but both of them seem to take a certain delight out of it that usually doesn’t accompany such rivalry. And she's not used to seeing bitter intellectual enemies leave colloquia together, either, or wait for each other so they can sit side-by-side at lectures.

If she had to guess, and she really doesn’t want to guess, she’d say they were sleeping together. Charles is a confirmed bisexual, having been dating a man seriously when he arrived at MIT. They broke up a year later and Charles has brought a few women with him to various social events. Erik, she has no idea. Being thirty-four and single doesn’t mean today what it meant in Moira’s day, after all, and Erik is very dedicated to research.

Not that she should be considering this either way. She isn’t one of her own grad students, to sit around and gossip about her teachers’ sex lives, for Christ’s sake.

Not that she hasn’t heard the rumors, either.

Never mind that, Moira decides, pushing the thoughts forcefully aside. If Erik can open himself up to his students, and if Charles helps him with that -- in whatever way -- then all the better. Moira won’t ask too many questions, that’s all.
Two days after his conversation with Moira -- lecture from Moira, really, although she's good about disguising them -- Erik keeps his office door slightly open, the universal signal for reluctantly-granted office hours. Just past the semester's halfway point, with the weather warming enough (or nearly enough) to want to be outside, undergraduates still avoid coming to see him, which is unexpectedly intelligent of them, although it means Erik will inevitably have to field questions as they become more anxious about their grades and more dependent on his mercy.

Between then and now, though, these are two more hours he can spend writing, and so write he does, translating numbers to meaning and basking in their clarity, the certainty they give him, and basking also in the faint warmth of imagining the look on Charles' face when Erik presents him with the draft and the inescapable, inevitable evidence that Erik's right and altruism be damned.

He's in the middle of a sentence when he senses the hesitant approach of a cell phone and jewelry in unfamiliar configurations. Sighing, he ignores the intrusion for as long as possible, only acknowledging it when a soft rap sounds on his door.

"Professor Lehnsherr?"

The face peeping in at him is young and, oh god, distraught. Erik sighs again and gestures the door open.

"Come in," he says, and she finishes with a quiet "Marie, I'm in your Cognitive Neuroscience class?"

Erik wasn't really wondering about her name, but he supposes knowing it is the first step towards the meaningful engagement Moira wants. He gestures to one of the free chairs across the desk from him and she sits, tucking her satchel by her feet and folding in on herself. She looks around his office, looks at everything except for him.

"Can I help you?" Erik asks.

“Oh,” she says, and already it sounds thick, higher-pitched, like she’s on the verge of crying. “Can I -- I’m going to close the door.” She’s out of her seat before he can tell her to sit back down, and so he lets her close the door herself. She pushes it shut with a firm sound before reclaiming her seat, hands grasping both her knees.

He sits there silently, waiting for her to speak, and when she doesn’t he stays silent even longer. He isn’t in the habit of prodding the unwilling.

“It’s just,” she says, her breaths uneven, “I’m so stressed right now? I’m taking 23 credit hours and I have my research job and my internship and I’m trying to figure out MATLAB so I can do this, this assignment, you gave us, and ….”

“I see.” And Erik does see. He sees exactly what the problem is. Of course, being intrinsically motivated to do well in one’s classes is hardly something he can advise against. He frowns, considering the best plan of action, and the student must interpret that poorly because all of the sudden she makes a choked noise and tips her head downward, covering her nose with her mouth.

“No!” Her head snaps up at that, eyes watery but wide. “No, of course not! I can do it. I wasn’t talking about this Friday, actually I -- I already did that one.” She grabs at her satchel, digging through her binders and loose paper until she finally pulls out a stapled packet that Erik recognizes as a printed-out version of this week’s p-set and pushes it across his desk. “No,” she says again, “I mean the uh, the capstone project? I tried to get started early, but it’s just ….”

“I see.” And Erik does see. He sees exactly what the problem is. Of course, being intrinsically motivated to do well in one’s classes is hardly something he can advise against. He frowns, considering the best plan of action, and the student must interpret that poorly because all of the sudden she makes a choked noise and tips her head downward, covering her nose with her mouth.
She’s *crying*, for Christ’s sake -- crying, in his office, over an assignment she decided to start *early* --!

Calm, Lehnsherr, he tells himself, although he wants to bang his head against his stainless steel desk. He finds the packet of Kleenex he keeps in his drawer and passes it to her wordlessly; she shivers and accepts it, blowing her nose -- twice.

"Thank you," Marie says into her tissue. She wads it up, although she clings to it instead of throwing it away. "I'm -- I'm sorry for just melting down like this," a braceletleted hand indicates her tear-stained and flushed face. "But I just feel so, so … overwhelmed, you know?"

"No, I don't," Erik says, because he doesn't; he's always responded to feeling overwhelmed by working harder. Charles would probably respond with some sympathetic noises and tea -- he has an electric kettle he keeps in his office, along with a stash of loose-leaf -- and advice that would soothe and provide direction. Erik doesn't believe in sympathy, or tea, and he believes in learning one's own way, but right now he wishes he could telepathically summon Charles from his graduate committee meeting.

*You can deal with her yourself,* Charles says, that vast telepathic attention attracted by Erik's perplexity -- or, like the devil, summoned by Erik thinking his name. How exactly Erik can deal with a distraught student, he doesn't say before he vanishes again.

"I know I shouldn't have overscheduled," Marie continues miserably. "But my undergrad advisor said I could take an overload if I thought I could do it, and I *did* think I could. Now it's too late to drop, I can't stop either my research job or my internship or I won't get credit for them, and …" she gestures at her printout. "I'm sorry, Professor Lehnsherr, but I just *can't.*"

"Don't apologize," Erik says. "You're doing well enough in class," he assumes she is, otherwise she wouldn't be here; students' appearances in his office tend to have an inverse relationship to their performance in his classroom. "Here, let me see what you're doing. Perhaps I can help."

"Oh, that would be wonderful," Marie says, leaning forward as if he's offered her the path to salvation instead of some hints on understanding a computer program. "I know you want us to look up things on our own, but I don't know, I couldn't work it out, and I *did* try."

Erik makes an indiscriminate noise and finds his laptop buried under his satchel on the floor, tugging it out with his power and opening it up on his desk, mutation typing in his password and opening up MATLAB and the version of the demo he'd decided not to use in class.

He doesn't walk her through it, not exactly; he asks guiding questions, more like, which has worked well enough in his past experience and is just as effective here. Marie is bright and picks up quickly enough once she stops second-guessing herself, which makes Erik think the problem is much more with her insecurity, stress level, and imposter syndrome than anything else. It's the reason why, once Marie seems comfortable with the demo, he pulls up the website for MIT Mental Health on his desktop and copies down their phone number onto a sticky note, which he presses onto the MATLAB printout he hands back to her.

“I want you to call that number and set up an appointment,” he tells her, shutting his laptop down. She’s gazing into his eyes like he’s the Moshiach himself, come down to usher in a new age. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of, and I think it will help you far more than going through a few demo problems.”

Marie nods, clutching her packet to her chest with both hands. “I will,” she says. “But -- but I can still come and talk to you, right? If … if I need to?”
There’s something almost shy about the way she says it, which is confusing, but as Erik reminds her, “I do have office hours.”

“Right,” she says. “Yes, okay -- okay, I’ll come to those.” She looks significantly happier now, the tears dried from her cheeks as she leans forward in her chair to start putting her things away again. “Thank you so much, Professor Lehnsherr. You’ve been a big help.”

Erik nods his head and turns back to his computer, opening up the document he’d been working on before she’d interrupted. “Carry on, then. And make that appointment.”

"I will," Marie reassures him. She hesitates at the door, even though he's opened it for her, but if she wants to say something she -- mercifully for them both -- refrains. After she leaves, Erik manages to forget about her, and that there are other undergraduates who could conceivably come knocking with existential crises and MATLAB questions, and immerses himself in his work again, barely a flicker of annoyance to spare for having lost forty minutes of writing time.

He works without interruption until the texture of the day changes, the busyness of midday slowing down as the afternoon wanes. The grad students not in seminar are all crowded into the lab, nursing their results along, and the professors without evening classes or commitments are either gone or contemplating being so. Usually Erik would stay until he reaches a natural stopping place -- there's nothing at his condo worth going home for, beyond an absence of people bothering him -- but new possibilities have presented themselves.

He could go home with Charles, or meet Charles at his house. All he needs to do is say this is what I want, and Charles yields (or doesn't, sometimes, or yields only with conditions), and then Erik can share space again, eating dinner at a common table, inhabiting the same room and the same time with another presence. He can share more than that; his blood runs hot with the memory of Charles behind him a few nights ago, his mouth wet and scorching low on Erik's back, his fingers buried deep inside him. Erik sits up and takes a ragged breath, hands falling into his lap from where they'd been resting, unmoving, on the keyboard.

Or, Erik thinks, he should work late and go home by himself tonight. He doesn't know what Charles makes of these requests, beyond welcoming them with or without stipulations attached. The thought of Charles seeing and acknowledging the need Erik carries with him -- he can't bear it. When Erik's cheeks flush this time, it's with humiliation and not arousal.

With a single notable exception, Charles has seen more of Erik than anyone else living. Maybe it should be reassuring, that Charles has already witnessed the worst there is to see of Erik and clearly is unperturbed -- or at least, to Erik’s face. But on the contrary, it makes Erik feel even more exposed, like he’s an animal waiting with its soft belly up, lying defenseless and taunting the predator to attack.

Of course, the cowardice inherent in thinking of himself as prey as good as decides the matter for him. Erik saves his paper to Dropbox and shuts down his computer, packing up his things in his laptop bag and heading out of the office, twisting the lock shut behind him. Charles’ office is one floor down; he’s typing something at his computer when Erik lets himself in, though he does look up just briefly, saying, “I’ll be ready in just one moment.”

Charles must have been aware of Erik’s decision as soon as Erik made it himself. There’s no use pretending to be alarmed by Charles’ gift, especially not when Charles knows perfectly well how Erik feels about his particular powers.

“How long is a moment?” Erik asks.
Charles smiles up at him, hitting the ‘enter’ key rather forcefully, and says, “Right now,” getting up from his chair and reaching for his bag. After a second he adds, “I can’t help noticing you survived your encounter with your student earlier this afternoon.”

“Are you basing that judgment on the absence of visible scarring?” Erik says mildly. “Because I’m not sure that’s an empirical metric.”

Charles laughs and pushes at Erik’s arm, nudging him to precede him out the door and into the hall, waiting while Charles locks up with his mundane key and latch. His hair is disarrayed at his nape, just enough that Erik can see peeking over his collar two freckles placed diagonally to one another. He recognizes them, can trace a mental line down past that collar to where the constellation continues under Charles’ shirt.

With a single notable exception, Erik's seen more of Charles than he's seen of anyone else. He knows exactly what the cardigans, corduroys, and khakis hide, and what that young-looking, gentle face conceals. Back when they’d first really met, when Charles had come for his Berkeley lecture, he’d been tricked by all of that, drawn into that enthusiasm and fiercely joyful intelligence, and now … well, now, here he is, pausing so Charles can precede him down the hall, walking slightly ahead and Erik not quite a half-step behind. Despite Charles' telepathy, Erik can leave; he would leave, if it didn't mean admitting he can't handle this.

Next to him, Charles gives Erik the illusion of privacy and the comfort of silence. That's one thing Erik's come to appreciate about Charles, that he does know the value of quiet, when the Charles everyone else sees loves to talk and fill the space around him with his voice and presence. It's only now, since they've started not-sleeping with each other, that Erik has started to see that the Charles the rest of the department knows and the Charles he's learning to understand are different animals entirely.

He swallows back the shiver of anticipation. Part of the animal Erik knows is the part that can take him and push him down and keep him there. It's dangerous and it knows it's dangerous, and knows that it camouflages itself under its civilized exterior. Erik loves it and hates it.

"You did well with that student, Erik," Charles says softly, once they're in the relative privacy of the parking lot. "It's what she needed to hear."

Erik huffs, but accepts the praise, and accepts the instruction to unlock the car and get in. "She threatened to come back to talk some more. It's like stray dogs when you feed them."

Charles laughs as he slides into the driver's seat, stashing his laptop bag behind them. "I'm sure it won't last long," he says, as if there isn't a line of students waiting to talk to him every Tuesday and Thursday. "Once her work evens out and she's got some perspective -- and some better coping techniques -- she won't see herself as needing to rely on you anymore."

“If you’re wrong about this, I’m just going to send her to you,” Erik says.

“Your student?”

“Since you seem to have all the time in the world for them, yes.”

Charles pulls out into the street, waiting overlong, in Erik’s opinion, for the traffic to clear before he merges. Erik tilts his head toward the window to watch the scenery go by, MIT’s strange architecture, industrial Building 37 juxtaposed with the bizarre surrealism of the Stata Center, a huddle of Asian tourists standing out front snapping pictures. And then the commercial neatness of Kendall Square gives way to the bridge over the Charles River, blue water glistening bright beneath
them and dotted with white sails belonging to students taking advantage of the fine weather, the
towering skyscrapers of the financial district reflected in its surface.

Next to him Charles, the person, is humming along to the indie alternative playing on the radio, some
song about sex and church, his pale thumb beating out a rhythm against the gear shift.

Erik wonders why he’s here, why he’s reiterating this pattern for the hundredth time, sitting in
Charles’ car going home with him as if this were perfectly normal and perfectly natural. Erik would
like to think he knows better than this but his judgment has been suspect for the past twelve -- no, it’s
thirteen years, now. Erik reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out his sunglasses, pushing them
onto his nose and taking advantage of the tinted lenses to look back at Charles again, studying him
where Charles can’t obviously tell he’s looking.

“We’re not ordering in today,” Charles says, eyes still on the road. “It’s starting to get unhealthy.
We’ll make dinner, instead.”

“Watching your figure?” Erik asks snidely, and Charles says, “I am nearly forty, you know.”

Charles wears his age well -- better than well, impossibly well. One of Shaw’s comments drifts up
from where Erik’s suppressed it, like fucking an undergraduate, I’d imagine, said in reference to
Charles’ young face and irrepressible smile, in more specific reference to how much Erik would have
enjoyed screwing Charles if he’d gotten the chance. Or Charles screwing you. Erik focuses on
Charles’ mouth, a much better thing to focus on, which is still red and clever and animated, even
when discussing what to make for dinner, and the hand not on the steering wheel cutting distracting
patterns through the air.

"Out of the car," Charles says once they get back to his house, silently approving when Erik obeys.
The stress of the week so far melts a little, loosening as Erik goes along with more of Charles’ orders:
satchel by his chair in the study, chop vegetables, get the corkscrew for wine -- all while Charles, as
if determined to be useless, assembles a small plate of raw vegetables, crackers, and cheese, and sits
himself on the counter to watch Erik do the actual work.

Erik’s so caught up in slicing lamb and crushing garlic that he needs Charles’ light telepathic tap to
look up and see that Charles is presenting him with a water cracker topped with parmesan and kosher
sopressata, along with an inquiringly amused look.

"It's called kashrus," Erik says, leaning back a little and regarding the cracker warily. "You know,
the whole not mixing dairy and meat thing."

Charles’ eyebrow rises. "Do you want it or not? I'm pretty sure you skipped lunch, except for that
energy bar."

"Give it," Erik snaps, and takes the cracker from Charles’ hand. He catches the edges of salty, warm
skin, tongue lapping the underside of Charles’ thumb and teeth just glancing the pad of his index
finger. Charles smiles gently, pleased, and sets his fingers against Erik’s jaw as Erik chews, against
Erik’s throat when he finally swallows.

"Here," Charles murmurs, picking up the glass of wine. The glass of wine, Erik realizes; there's only
one.

Is it too far? Maybe. But Erik only expresses his annoyance with a short grunt and then lets Charles
tip the glass against his lips, pouring a tiny sip of wine into his mouth. The spiciness from the
sopressata pairs well with the fullness of the Chianti, leaving a mildly sweet taste in Erik’s mouth
after he swallows. Charles touches Erik’s lower lip with one finger and Erik is briefly, strangely,
fascinated by the tiny saccades of Charles’ eyes as he looks at him before Charles smiles and steps away, his words -- “You should finish with the lamb” -- breaking the spell.

Erik’s chest is a dizzy buzz of arousal and irritation as he turns back to the meat, sliding his knife through a particularly thick ribbon of fat. He should probably be past pretending he doesn’t know the etiology of both of those, but sometimes self-deception is survival.

Once the food is in the oven and there is nothing else to be done but wait, Charles pulls Erik over with him into the living room and pushes him down onto the sofa, Charles himself co-opting the ottoman and sitting there tailor-style with the charcuterie plate in his lap, assembling more little towers of meat and cheese on crackers.

“You’re going to ruin your appetite,” Erik says, wondering if Charles plans to feed him more of these, wondering if he wants him to.

"This coming from the bottomless pit." The look Charles gives him invites Erik to laugh along with him; Erik pointedly declines. With a shrug, Charles eats one of his creations himself and swallows a mouthful of wine with a satisfied sound.

"Here," he says when he's done, holding up another cracker. His eyes are bright with expectation -- not challenge, this isn't Charles offering Erik an opportunity, this is Charles giving Erik an order -- and Erik has to answer it, has to lean forward to accept what Charles gives him. Cracker, then wine, then a sip of water, all given to him with a measured pace and in Charles' own time, and all Erik can do (all he wants to do) is wait for what Charles offers.

Good, Charles says, quietly pleased. He holds Erik secure with those eyes of his, an anchor to keep Erik in this time and place -- or a weight to drag him down. Panic and anger threaten, this is not what he should want, not this honeyed, slow evening spent giving himself up to someone else's will.

I want this, he tells himself, and takes another sip of wine when Charles presses the glass to his lips. He swallows and shudders, the alcohol and Charles' approval washing through him, washing away everything that isn't important, everything that isn't this moment and Charles' presence.

When the oven goes off, Charles murmurs for Erik to follow him into the kitchen, to leave the plate and glass where they are, I'll clean up later. He sits Erik in the breakfast nook (Charles still hasn't cleared all the mail and semester detritus off his dining room table; if anything the situation has only gotten worse) and makes up their plates himself.

Two plates, two glasses of wine, two glasses of water. Erik stares down at the lamb and vegetables in dull surprise before snapping back to himself and, when Charles gives permission, beginning to eat.

The food is good, and Erik finds his senses heightened almost, the garlic more garlicky, the lamb tenderer, the pepper spicier on the tip of his tongue. Erik can’t remember the last time he’s cooked for himself; he has Seamless on speed dial and a menu tacked to his refrigerator at home, with the list of what he’ll order for each day of the week planned out, lather rinse repeat. He saves his creativity for his work.

After dinner Charles starts collecting the empty dishes, piling them up in the sink and flicking on the faucet to run warm water over stainless steel; Erik feels it as if it were on his own skin. Charles must catch that thought because he glances over his shoulder at Erik and says, “I’ll take care of this. Why don’t you go upstairs and take a shower?”

Erik looks at Charles over the rim of his wine glass, finishing off the last swallow of Chianti. “And
“And then come back downstairs.”

Erik sets the glass down on the table with a clink of glass on wood and gets to his feet, complying without argument. It’s easier to go along with what Charles says when it’s what Erik wants to do, himself.

In Charles’ bathroom Erik strips down, folding his clothes and setting them on top of the closed laundry hamper. He finds the usual tools and necessities in the cabinet under Charles’ sink, nestled in a copper tub like a bloody gift basket, and avails himself of them while the water heats up in the shower. Charles’ shower has the kind of water pressure that comes only with expensive neighborhoods, beating down on Erik’s scalp and shoulders and scouring away the day and any reservations Erik had before. He treats himself to Charles’ herb-scented shower oils and, after, to one of the fluffy white towels in the linen closet.

The gift basket also came with a few different varieties of lube. Erik uses the simplest, then brings it and a couple of condoms back downstairs with him, the ambient air of Charles’ home cool on his naked skin.

Charles he finds sitting in an armchair near the window, drapes drawn, laptop propped up on his knees and tapping away at the keyboard. He looks up when Erik comes in and pauses for a small second, his lips parting as his gaze dips down Erik’s body, taking him in. For the briefest moment Erik wonders if this wasn’t what Charles meant, but then Charles shuts his laptop and sets it aside on the end table, LED lights still glowing.

Come here. It's not a psionic imperative; Erik knows the difference between that kind of compulsion and the force of Charles’ personality. There is, maybe, not that much of a difference when the effect is the same: Erik walking, bare and exposed, across the soft carpet, inwardly all a-tremble, to stand in front of that assessing gaze.

That gets him an approving nod, Charles turning more fully to face him. The last of the dampness from the shower evaporates slowly, leaving Erik attenuated to the slightest brush of air across his skin, or the slightest brush of Charles’ fingernail glancing across his hip. Idly, Charles shifts him in place, turning him so he can run his hand up the back of Erik's thigh, cup his ass (and hum thoughtfully, Charles' mind vibrating with pleasure as he presses against the firm muscle). Erik's breath catches high in his throat when Charles' fingers slide between his cheeks, pressing up and in, and his mind slides into Erik's, looking for new memories and finding them.

"You got yourself ready for me." Charles thoughtfully strokes him, his fingers sliding through lube and the hot clench of Erik's body. Erik desperately locks his knees, just as Charles pushes a third finger in. "Stretched, slicked up, cleaned…"

"I hope you're planning on doing something about it," Erik says, nowhere near as steady as he'd like. Enemas are never much fun, but few things have been, and they've always been expected. There was a ritual: shower, enema, slick himself up and open himself, get the bed ready with a towel. Only the condoms are different now; Erik can't remember the last time he's used one.

Charles hushes him with a neat bite to the upper curve of Erik's ass. Erik strangles the cry that surges up, feels it trapped and clamoring in his chest. One strong hand steadies Erik's hip, keeping him still so Charles can give him a matching mark -- Erik feels them, sharp pain transmuting into heat and a rolling ache, his cock responding to it embarrassingly quickly -- and so Charles can keep fingering him, slick fingers sliding deep into him, and so Charles can say, without Erik collapsing, You take my fingers so nicely, Erik. Maybe one day you can take my fist. Would you like that?
Erik shudders bodily and Charles chuckles softly.

Yes. I thought you might.

Charles’ breath is hot and damp on his buttock as Charles’ tongue skims over the mark he left, and he does it with an odd delicacy, one that doesn’t seem to match with the way he’s fucking Erik with his fingers and talking about doing more than that.

“Erik,” Charles murmurs, lips moving against his skin, “If you would ….”

And Erik doesn’t need to ask what he means; he can feel the pressure of Charles’ swelling cock pressing up against the fly of his trousers. Erik curls his power into that steel and tugs the zipper down tooth by tooth, then flicks open the button. Good, he hears, then one of Charles’ hands leaves his skin and there’s the rustle of fabric moving. Erik imagines Charles pulling out his thick, hard cock and touching it with Erik standing here in front of him like this, with Charles’ other hand still filling Erik’s ass and idly stroking him from the inside.

After a moment those fingers withdraw and Erik is left feeling empty and discontent and irritable for it, at least until Charles says, Hand me that, and takes the condom and what’s left of the lube from Erik’s grasp.

It’s maddening, not being able to see what Charles is doing, being forced to imagine the images to go with the sound of that foil packet tearing open and then, a few moments later, the slick sound of Charles’ hand moving against something lubricated. Erik wants to look, but equally as much he wants to do as Charles instructs, and Charles hasn’t told him he can.

He wants, and denies himself, and stands quivering and hard and restless while he waits for Charles. Then, finally, Charles’ hands are back on him, getting slick all over him when they close tight around his hips and tug him back. You’re going to fuck yourself on my cock, Charles tells him, far too casual for a man who’s just about to have his dick up Erik's ass. Erik wants to snap back -- something, but defiance escapes him and all he wants is this: Charles guiding him back and down, one hand leaving Erik’s hip so he can grasp his cock to steady himself, and then that wonderful, thick cock pushing into Erik, and Erik’s body taking Charles easily, so stretched and wet already.

Good, Charles says as Erik lowers himself, the position awkward and leaving Erik half-dependent on Charles to help him stay balanced until he's resting fully in Charles' lap, his weight leaning back so Charles can take it and hold Erik up, chest broad and strong and reassuring against Erik's spine. Sat like this, Erik can look down the length of his own body to where his own cock rises, red and obscene, between his thighs, so hard because he's such a fucking greedy, desperate whore for this, for having Charles' cock deep up in him, so deep Erik can feel him everywhere.

Charles hushes him, face buried in Erik’s neck and fingers now splayed across Erik's belly, pressed to shivering muscle and skin as if to search out the feel of himself where he's buried in Erik's body. When he shifts, cock sliding in with a wet, thick noise, one finger presses down hard and Erik groans, helplessly aware of that pressure keeping him in place and the heaviness of Charles’ dick inside him. Charles noses at Erik’s neck and shoulder, lacing kisses and bites wherever he can reach, his approval swamping Erik and wrapping around him, filling the air in Erik's lungs and all the spaces in his bones and his synapses -- everything, everywhere. Erik loves it, fucking loves it, and sobs and hates himself.

No, Charles says, though it's not reassurance or coddling, it's a command for Erik to come back to himself and the moment. Charles shifts again, a reminder, and Erik clenches around him, whining softly. That gets him a pair of pinched, aching nipples, and when he arches up into the pain, wanting more of it, that pushes him down on Charles' cock, and that gets him a good, lovely and more of the
same treatment so he's rocking and writhing helplessly, mounted on Charles' cock, fucking himself on Charles just as Charles had promised him he would.

Charles’ trousers are rough beneath Erik’s bare thighs, his shirt a soft whisper on Erik’s back, both sensations constantly reminding himself of his own nudity, of Charles’ relative civility, and that’s miraculously arousing in its own way, building along the pleasure of Erik’s fullness, of Charles’ cock pushing at him from inside. It feels both too-much and not-enough at once and Erik grinds himself down on Charles, wanting more. He wants to feel Charles everywhere inside him, to have his body shake with it.

One of Charles’ hands curls around the base of Erik’s cock -- only then he does nothing, simply stays with his slick fingers grasping Erik’s shaft, and Erik has to squirm still more, rocking back and forth trying to fuck himself up into that grip and Charles makes a soft noise from behind him, a little sharp.

*Keep going like that,* Charles urges him, and Erik does, he can’t do anything else, his mind stretching out thin and white as he shifts and grinds against Charles’ cock, Charles’ hand. A flare of pain as Charles bites his shoulder -- God, that’ll leave a mark, and Erik wants Charles to do it again, wants bruises like jewels all down his spine.

Charles’ thumb shifts to rub over Erik’s frenulum, eliciting another groan from Erik’s throat and he reaches back with one hand at Charles’ hip, grappling for him through the folds of fabric. Charles isn’t restraining himself quite as well as he was at first; his hips keep tilting up, little abortive snaps as Charles tries to keep from just fucking up into Erik, his lips and his tongue wetting Erik’s nape and that hand on Erik’s waist digging short nails into his skin.

Erik holds on, holds and holds as ecstasy tries to pull him away from his control. Charles hasn't said he has to wait for permission to come, but that order can remain unspoken, a silent expectation, and so Erik clings tight -- even as, the more he thinks he can't come, the harder it becomes to just not give it up and spill all over Charles' fingers, and the more he focuses on the hard, aching pleasure of Charles fucking up into him, how he's spread out in Charles' lap, naked and straining and completely exposed.

With a harsh grunt and a sound that's muffled against Erik's shoulder, Charles comes. The hand he's got around Erik's cock tightens and begins to jerk him in earnest, not the teasing pressure of before, and the noise that wrenches from Erik’s throat would be humiliating if he weren't so far gone. When permission finally comes, it's silent, Charles projecting a vague sense of *now, come now* along with images of Erik's big cock and semen striping Erik's belly.

Erik comes so hard it's nearly a shock, a punch in the gut or the solar plexus that steals his breath and makes the world go fuzzy and empty of everything except itself. Charles strokes him rough and relentless through it, milking every drop from him -- he's already got come halfway up his chest, he can see it through blurry eyes as he looks down at himself -- so the dregs of it land sticky and white on his belly. As Erik shudders brokenly around the cock inside him and whimpers in agonized pleasure as Charles fondles his softening dick and balls, Charles presses a kiss -- gentle, quiet -- to the back of Erik's neck, just where Erik's hair curls damply against his nape.

He's spent enough to permit it, and at least for a while he doesn't trust his legs to support his weight so he can get away. Charles does help Erik off his cock, but all Erik can do after that is slither helplessly to the floor between Charles’ thighs, his cheek pressed to Charles' knee and his hectic breath pushing at the now-rumpled, fine-woven wool of Charles' trousers. Charles’ fingers wend their way into Erik’s hair, holding him securely.

With his eyes closed, all Erik can see are the shifting lights and shadows of the room, changing as the
lamp flickers. The room is almost too quiet now without the sounds of their breaths, their moans and the slap of skin against skin. There’s just Erik’s heartbeat, beginning to slow, and the low throb of pain where Charles has tugged on his hair against his scalp.

After a long while, long after they’ve both come down and the semen is dried on Erik’s stomach and chest, Erik says, “I’ll be needing another shower.”

“Hmm?” Charles says, like coming out of a daze, then, “Oh -- no. Not until the morning, I don’t think.” His free hand skims down over Erik’s shoulder to scrape at Erik’s chest, loosing a few idle flakes of dried come. Erik shivers very lightly, his eyes still only half-lidded as he watches Charles’ palm smooth properly up to his shoulder once again, resting there.

For a long time, he can’t bring himself to move. He sits curled on the floor, bracketed by Charles' legs and leaning against him, and breathes.

*

Erik wakes up the next morning, still sticky and still naked, although in Charles' bed instead of on his living room floor. Next to him, Charles sleeps on, his mind resting somnolently against Erik's and far too unconcerned by the lateness of the hour -- it's almost six-thirty; Charles insists on getting up at seven so he's in the office by half past eight -- for Erik's taste. Energy thrums under Erik's skin, potent and restless, but Erik stays where he is, with Charles' arm a steady weight on his belly.

Not until the morning, Charles had said, and he'd meant it. Erik's skin feels tight where the come hasn't flaked away, or where spit and sweat have dried into patches of tackiness, and it's felt like that since last night, which he'd spent stretched on the couch, drowsily watching Charles pretend to read.,

He'd cleaned Charles up himself, taken off the condom and licked Charles' damp cock clean, fetched Charles a cloth like a goddamn butler -- and then Charles had stopped him when Erik had gone to clean himself, asked softly for Erik to straighten him up instead.

Erik had, and then Charles had nodded at the couch. You need to rest tonight, Erik. We both do. Too exhausted to obey and still too deep in recovery, Erik had curled up on the wide leather sofa, an afghan underneath him, and stayed like that so Charles could look at him from over the top of his book, examine all of Erik's spent and naked flesh, and smile with soft approval.

Approval, Erik snorts to himself, and glares at Charles.

He doesn't move, though, not until the alarm goes off a half-hour later, Charles wakes begrudgingly, and Erik feels the click of the coffeemaker turning on downstairs. Charles peers at Erik hazily, as if vaguely surprised to find Erik still there, still lying next to him, and says “Good morning. Would you like to shower?”

“I hardly need your permission,” Erik scoffs, and it feels like an effort to make up for last night, for having … debased himself so completely. Of course, Erik pushes that thought violently away almost as soon as it presents itself, because if they aren’t sleeping together then Erik did nothing deserving of shame.

Charles’ brows lift and he says, “You can go to work filthy if you want to,” and when Erik doesn’t respond, just mirrors his facial expression back at him, Charles says, “Get in the shower, Erik.”

Erik throws the duvet back and swings his legs off the bed, bare feet hitting the cold floorboards. He’s in the shower, scrubbing his hair with rough efficiency, when Charles pushes the curtain aside and steps in alongside him, knocking Erik’s hands away to take over the task. Erik doesn’t know why he lets him, just like he doesn’t know why he makes the bed when Charles tells him to.
When Charles tells him, that morning as they walk into the building, just before splitting to go their separate ways, “Don’t forget to eat lunch today, Erik -- a proper lunch, not just one of your protein bars,” Erik doesn’t plan on following through.

He doesn’t plan on it, and yet somehow he finds himself standing in line at Flour at twelve-thirty all the same, ordering a chicken salad sandwich and frightening a pair of undergraduates away from the last table available before the lunch rush to sit there with his sandwich and the latest copy of *Nature Neuroscience*, following Charles’ orders.

Erik isn’t so blind as to not recognize a pattern when it’s presented to him, and even he can admit, as he finishes his lunch, that there is a clear pattern in development here. Charles says. Erik does. Like a trained monkey, or a child. The only difference is that monkeys don’t feel this strange heat in their bones when they respond to command.

*
Example Five: Learned Helplessness

Chapter Notes

Heads up! There are some tags/warnings we aren't including in the main tags at the moment, but if you don't mind spoilers and want to be fully warned as to content, we've included those tags in the end-of-chapter notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Erik resettles into the tepid San Francisco winter as best he can. As best he can isn't his best by far for the first week back from Boston after his campus interview; he's too aware of the hours stretching into days, those days inching their way closer to the two-to-three weeks he'd been told to wait, to concentrate on his work. This is something that graduate students do, hover over their phone and email from mid-January on, jumping at every chime or beep. Erik never had to do it, but he's doing it now, hoping for good news.

Hope is not something Erik's familiar with. Hope is too patient, too lacking in agency; it sits, and suffers, and can't do anything except keep existing and being what it's always been. Erik's never believed in sitting and suffering, and he's not about to start now, even if all he can do is sit and suffer, and watch for news.

Or he can run. That next Thursday after seminar he heads out to Claremont Canyon and exhausts himself on the trails, mile after mile up steep, twisting paths and down again, his heart racketing in his ears and his breath whistling painfully until he thinks his lungs might explode. For a few minutes at a time his mind melts into the challenge of keeping pace while struggling up a steep grade, or negotiating down one of the canyon trails without falling headlong, and there's peace of a sort until he comes out the other side and his anxiety waits for him.

He tells himself he's chasing what he wants, that even if he has to sit and wait for a decision, he's still doing something.

When he gets home that night, Shaw eyes him dubiously, covered in dust and sweat as he is, trailing it into the polished tile and marble of the house. Erik ignores him and takes his phone with him when he goes to shower, has to fight back the nightmare scenario of getting a call (if he gets a call, he will get the call) when he's at home and Shaw's right there, listening.

The next day, nearly two weeks into waiting, he heads to work. Every muscle in his body aches, there are bruises on his wrists and one beneath his knee. He shuts his office door behind him when he gets there, places his phone on his desk, turned over so he can't see the face. The file for his Basic Principles in Bioengineering midterm is open, mostly blank; the article he's revising, filled with perplexed comments from the second author, is on the other monitor. Both don't seem to be real. Erik fumes to himself and tries to focus.

He's finally found something approaching a stride, even if it's an awkward, hobbled one, when his phone buzzes.

"Lehnsherr," he growls, power flickering out to capture the phone and accept the call.

"Dr. Lehnsherr? This is Moira MacTaggert with the department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences at
MIT. I’m calling to let you know that we’d be happy to offer you a position as an advanced assistant professor of Neuroscience here in BCS.”

Her voice is light, feminine, and the most beautiful thing Erik thinks he has ever heard.

“That’s good news,” Erik says. His voice doesn’t waver, even as his heart races, his knuckles white where his hands grip the edge of his desk.

“We were very impressed with your application,” MacTaggert tells him, and Erik bites back the urge to ask if he can start now, if he can get on a plane and show up in Boston tomorrow and have his position there, waiting for him. “I think you’d be an excellent fit here at MIT. Please take your time to consider your options. You can let us know any time before --”

“I accept,” Erik says.

“You don’t have to decide that now, Dr Lehnsherr, you can have five weeks to think it over and speak to your family --”

“I don’t need to think it over,” Erik says. He doesn’t say, I have no family, even though that’s also true. “I’ll take the job. Thank you, Dr MacTaggert.”

A brief pause, but MacTaggert recovers quickly, her voice as smooth as before when she says, “Excellent! Well, that’s very good to hear. In that case, I’ll forward you the relevant documents and we can get started on the paperwork for HR. I don’t know what your plans are for transitioning your lab from Berkeley, but we would be able to support you on a summer fellowship here if that’s something you’re interested in. If you need to finish in California, though, we can simply wait until the fall.”

“I’ll come this summer. I’ll be there in May.”

Three months. Three and a half months, technically. He can do three and a half months.

He hovers over his email, waiting for Dr MacTaggert's message. It arrives an hour later, a scanned copy of his letter of offer with professional responsibilities, salary and statement of benefits -- and, most important of all, your appointment will be at the rank of advanced assistant professor with tenure awarded after one year of service. He stares at that sentence, clinging to it like a lifeline that will pull him out of treacherous currents.

Another email from MIT's human resources department follows at the end of the week. Erik's heart leaps into his throat; his cell phone's in his hand almost before he knows it.

"No," he says to the confused HR administrator on the other end of the line, the one who'd likely been hoping to leave the office early -- it's quarter to five on the east coast, darkness falling while it's surreal and bright in California. "I want you to send the paperwork to my work address, not my home address."

"That's very irregular," the administrator says.

"I'm sure you've sent overnight packages to people's workplaces before," Erik snaps. He's already had to create a new email account, divorced from his work and alumni accounts, and he's lived in quiet fear (no, not fear, watchfulness) of anything from MIT showing up in the mailbox at home. Once the university press had sent something, a brochure for summer publications, and he'd gone cold and still until the shock had passed.

At last he wrenches a concession from the HR person. She'll send his formal offer letter and benefits
registration to his Berkeley office.

He still spends that next Monday behind his desk, failing to work, waiting for the familiar, arthritic creak of the mail cart arriving so he can intercept the mail carrier before the student assistant at the front desk can sign for packages. The heavily-taped overnight envelope addressed to him from MIT, its corners dogeared from being crammed through sorters and into delivery bags, is beautiful.

He fills it all out in one sitting, looking up the information he doesn’t know off the top of his head, then locks it away in his desk drawer to send back tomorrow; he won’t risk keeping evidence lying around where it might be encountered by a colleague or student with a better head for gossip than for science. The hard part, he thinks, is going to be finding an efficient way to wrap up his ongoing projects here in the next few months in a way that’s neat, precise, lends itself to easy continuation once he’s in Boston, and most importantly, won’t arouse suspicion. He can’t tell his lab manager or his graduate students, obviously, which means he has to work around them instead of letting them work for him like they’re supposed to. Fine. It’s a minor obstacle, compared to the obstacle that would be staying in California. He’ll manage it.

What he isn’t sure he’ll manage is Shaw, who has such preternatural skill at ferreting out the secret and the dangerous that Erik’s not convinced it isn’t a secondary mutation. Erik doesn’t trust himself not to have it written all over his face, the knowledge that this is it -- that he’s actually leaving, that he’s never coming back. It isn’t theoretical anymore, Erik has tipped the first domino. It’s happening.

It’s that certainty which is dangerous, he thinks. Does Shaw suspect, because Erik pushes harder, now? Because he snaps back and breaks the rules and -- no, no, he must not, only because Erik doesn’t dare break the rules that matter, because he knows which crimes can be forgiven and he knows there’s a difference between the risks of a prisoner facing parole and those of a prisoner facing life. So, some rituals Erik still upholds, because he knows it only has to be ninety-two more times, ninety-one more times, ninety more.

Twenty-seven days left, closing in on twenty-six, and Erik's trapped in his office, racing to finish prep for the studies he'll need to start when he's in Boston. He keeps his schedule in his head, nothing on paper or on his computer; he knows to the day when things need to happen, and he knows in his bones what will happen if he falls behind. He can't pack his lab equipment and prototypes until the last minute; the plans for those are laid out, for one morning when he'll tell Shaw he's getting up early for a run -- when he'll go to the lab and start packing.

He still has to tell his grad students -- it's the one thing he'd negotiated on, insisting on having their moving expenses paid if they wanted to come with him -- and he'll have to tell them so they don't panic when they see their lab dismantled and in boxes. He's not entirely certain their fear of him will overcome their need to talk about an impromptu move across the country, and he hates that he'll have to trust them to keep their mouths shut.

That night he staggers out of the office and back to Shaw's two hours later than he should. It's nearly ten, when he should be home at eight at the absolute latest.

"Busy day?" Shaw says neutrally. He's seated in his armchair, a chrome and lime green creation that offends every cell in Erik's body. His ever-present scotch sits on the table next to him, a newspaper folded by it. Erik's heart skips when he sees the day's mail on the coffee table.

"Deadline," Erik says. It's far too close to the truth, so he adds, trying not to sound too hasty, "The article for Cognitive Neuroscience." Which, shit, is an MIT journal; Shaw's eyes seem to say he knows that, that he knows the code to Erik's brain and can dig the secrets out of it. "My second author is useless."
"Bayat, is it?" Shaw says with an indulgent smile. "Well, I wouldn't go that far, my boy. But I would, if I were you, keep a closer eye on the clock in future."

Erik's done nothing but think of time the past three months. "I will," he says.

And he does, because he can't risk getting on Shaw's bad side this close to his escape. He can't risk what would happen if Shaw got suspicious, knows from painful experience that Shaw doesn't need proof, only doubt, in order to act.

The days pass so slowly sometimes Erik starts to think he'll go mad before he ever gets out of here. They ooze past like hot tar, each one more constrictive and claustrophobic than the last. But they do pass eventually, one by one. The day before his flight to Boston Erik tells his graduate students and lab manager. They aren't happy, but they'll be well looked after at Berkeley if they choose to stay, and if they go to MIT their expenses will be covered and -- because it's a private school -- their stipends will be higher. He knows he's asking a lot, for them to move across the country at such short notice, and he tells them as much, and that they can rely upon him for positive reference letters whatever it is they decide.

He should feel worse about it, he thinks as he goes back to his office to finish putting the last of his books into boxes, hiding those boxes in his closet where they won't be glimpsed by students or other faculty. He'd hate himself for this if he were them, but it's been eleven years, and Erik would rather die than make that twelve.

The last morning comes. Last time he'll ever wake up in this bed. Last time he'll eat breakfast at this table or stand and look out this window at the sun rising over the hills. Last time Shaw's hand will ever touch his shoulder, last time he'll drink his coffee while Shaw chats about something shockingly inane -- ignorant of what today is and what it represents. Not-knowing he'll leave the house and won't ever see Erik like this again. Erik keeps his mouth shut and just lets Shaw talk, certain if he tries to respond he'll just vomit over Shaw's handmade Italian leather shoes and then Shaw will have reason to keep him home and wrap him up in a blanket on the sofa, bring him warm tea as Erik's freedom flits and flies away.

The anxiety is stronger than ever, but Erik only has to contain it a few more hours. And then, finally, finally, he can rest.

He drives ten minutes down the highway toward San Francisco and Berkeley, then turns around and goes right back into Palo Alto, right back home. He can't bring much with him -- can't risk moving all his things to Boston -- so he packs a change of clothes, his mother's chanukiyah, Shabbos candles, and seder plate, the silver kiddush cup that belonged to his great-grandmother, tucking the heirlooms in among the underwear and trousers and saying a silent prayer because this must be blasphemous somehow, like dropping a mezuzah on the floor -- not that Shaw let him install mezuzos in this house, of course.

There's nothing else in this house he wants. None of the furniture is his, only a bare few books and metal fixtures Shaw had bought him with an indulgent smile, like buying toys for a precocious pet. The car he drives isn't his, this life isn't his; he can leave it all behind without a flicker of regret.

He leaves the house without a backward glance, eyes fixed firmly forward even though he feels invisible eyes on him, Shaw tracking him, lying in wait, waiting for Erik to take one last step towards freedom before swooping down on him. Forward, forward; he has last things to do before he catches his flight.

He cancels his cell phone and switches carriers, switches numbers. It takes longer than it should; the last time he'd felt this sick was waiting for his flight back home to Germany, back home to his
mother's funeral. The salesperson at the new company prattles on inanely about finding the best plan and multiple lines, until Erik glares him into silence and compliance with his wishes. Then, in the cab to the airport, he writes his last email to his department chair apologizing for his abrupt departure and thanking him for his collegiality. That the man had been on the committee that had hired him leaves bitterness in the back of his mouth, less gratitude than wondering how much leverage Shaw had to apply to get him to agree to hire Erik.

The minutes crawl by as the traffic does, the late afternoon congestion in full flow. Erik wishes he could fly to the airport -- fly himself to Boston if it came to that. Then again, if he could have, he might have left long ago.

His heart races and his breath comes tight. He can't help but keep glancing at his phone, expecting to see a text or missed call from Shaw, no matter how many times he tells himself Shaw doesn't have this number, can't have this number, and he's blocked Shaw's home, cell, and office already. He hadn't imported any contacts to this phone; he'd saved MIT's numbers and Charles's, and that was it. The cab's meter beeps and Erik nearly crushes the metal frame of the safety screen.

At last then he's at the airport, he's in the airport. He checks in with fingers fumbling for his passport and his ticket. When he goes through security, he thinks surely the security-theater TSA agents must sense his agitation -- it has to be obvious, written all over him. Once he's at his gate, he watches the digital signboard to make sure the flight to Logan remains on time, that it won't change, that Shaw won't materialize with that sad, fond smile and say, Oh Erik, my boy, why did you even try?

When the plane takes off Erik grasps the armrest next to his seat and stares out that tiny oval window, so tense the woman next to him laughs and says, “Don’t worry, darling, they never crash,” as the ground dips away and Erik’s ears pop with the pressure change, this incredible creature of aluminum carrying him up and afar and finally, permanently, out of Shaw’s reach.

* 

January, four months earlier. Shaw thinks he’s in Boston doing a practice run of the marathon course -- Erik Boston qualified last year -- which felt like a flimsy excuse at the time, but Shaw knows next to nothing about running except that it’s a hobby he tolerates in Erik because it keeps him young and fit and attractive. It’s not something Shaw feels the need to more intimately support. Even so, just in case Shaw had an uncharacteristic stroke of fraternity and felt the urge to come along, Erik begged and cajoled the hiring committee to schedule his on-campus interview when Shaw is busy with his department's policy committee -- a week, Shaw had groused, overhauling bylaws and negotiating with the university.

But it does mean Shaw will expect to see certain expenses on Erik’s credit card statement next month. MIT is paying for everything, Erik’s flight and boarding and all his food, so Erik has to purchase a second flight for Shaw’s Erik, a second hotel room that he’ll never use, three extra meals each day he buys for the people standing behind him in line at Dunkin Donuts or the falafel shop, crossing his fingers that Shaw won’t check a map and realize these places are all suspiciously located near MIT’s campus, nowhere near Boston proper. It’s frankly exhausting, but Erik’s willing to go to extraordinary lengths if he has to.

He recognizes Charles Xavier as soon as he steps past security and onto the main public concourse. Xavier’s far from tall, but somehow that doesn’t make him any easier to miss; or maybe Erik is uniquely attuned to his presence, drawn toward him like a lodestone by the magnetism of so many could-have-beens.

“Dr Lehnsherr,” Xavier says, beaming as soon as he spots him and darting forward energetically to shake Erik’s free hand. “It’s magnificent to see you again. Did you have a good flight?”
Erik had spent the flight wondering if he would land to find a message from Shaw on his phone; he shuts that thought aside. Xavier strong enough telepath to catch it.

An odd expression crosses Xavier’s face, darkening those eyes and pulling that red mouth into something close to a frown; Erik realizes he’s been silent far longer than Xavier's question requires.

"It was fine," he says, more curtly than he should; changes it to, "on the long side; crying babies." That, at least, was true; six hours on a plane with them, with Shaw watching over Erik's shoulder, had worn him down to his last nerve. And that gets a sympathetic look from Charles, something arch and dry that invites Erik to shrug off the long flight.

"It's a bit odd -- not really déjà vu… Déjà vu in reverse, maybe? But my greeting you on your arrival to Boston on a winter night when you greeted me on my arrival in Berkeley on a lovely fall afternoon." Charles talks with the easy unself-consciousness of a man used to hearing himself talk; unlike with Shaw, Erik thinks he could listen to Charles forever. More dangerous thoughts; Erik curbs them, reminds him not to get ahead of himself. "My car's just through here… I thought, since you're still in the middle of your afternoon, you might want only a light dinner? Or we could get something more substantial and I'll tell you about the schedule."

Like Charles, Erik's already had his two days scheduled down to the minute. Even given his background, he'd gone through the wringer at his interview for Cal, two days of constant people talking -- the senior undergraduates, the grad students who'd showed him around campus and taken him to lunch, faculty from the department and the college, administrators, the lab managers and program directors. Then his job talk and presentation, and then one last exhausting dinner before they'd let him go home.

He decides to savor this time with Charles, no matter how dangerous it might be. He'll see Charles when he talks to the hiring committee tomorrow, again at his presentation, and one last time at his final dinner -- Erik has the sense Charles is one of those pushing for his candidacy, and he doesn't like that sense, but for now, at least, he can try to recapture those few hours they'd had.

Charles leads him to a ridiculously well-tuned BMW. Erik grins crookedly. "No Aston Martin? No Jaguar?"

That gets him a laugh. "I'm hardly James Bond," Charles says, although his accent is sleek and suave enough; Erik hadn't been oblivious to the Cal students swooning over it. "Although I left the DB5 at home today."

Erik hums wordlessly and strokes his power over the curves and edges of the car, appreciating its simple construction and the way the metal gleams in his sense of it. “I thought you’d be more of a public transportation man, myself.”

“The T? Oh, god, no. I’d never get anywhere on time. Here, get in,” Charles says, and he unlocks the doors with his key fob but it’s Erik’s power that swings them open, to a delighted grin from Charles.

It’s a dizzying tangle of streets to get out of Logan and back to Boston proper, the road tunneling underground and then rising sharply up again into the sunlight, the frozen river whizzing past out Erik’s window and the trees planted along the Esplanade stretching skeleton fingers overhead. It’s nothing like New York, with Manhattan’s sensible grid and practically-engineered skyscrapers, but then again very little is like what Erik once decided was the most perfect city on earth, structurally and otherwise. Then again, if Boston will take him away from the West Coast then Erik doesn’t need it to be anything other than what it is: an escape.
“Coffee first,” Charles tells him as they turn onto the bridge over the river, and it’s only then that Erik realizes he never gave Charles an answer about dinner. “We’re taking you to Voltage in Kendall Square. It has a rather eclectic latte menu. I think you’ll like it. Then we can get you settled in at the hotel and you’ll have plenty of time to prepare before tomorrow.”

“That sounds perfect,” Erik says, and it really does; he doesn’t think he could put food on his stomach right now even if he tried.

A moment’s silence, Charles manipulating the car around a poorly-placed roundabout and merging onto a side-street, before Charles says, “Have you been to Boston before?”

“Once. I interviewed at Harvard out of grad school.” He doesn’t say ‘it didn’t work out’ -- that much goes without saying, even if the why of the matter isn’t nearly so straightforward. “It’s old, as far as American cities go. I like that.”

“Oh yes,” Charles says, “particularly the North End. You’ll have to go there sometime when Polcari’s is open -- amazing coffee, not to mention the kinds of spices you’ll never find anywhere else in this country, not for those prices anyway. Mike’s Cannoli is only a few blocks away, too …”

Charles is still rattling on about tourist things for Erik to do when they park the car at a meter and step up onto the sidewalk, Erik flinching slightly against the unexpectedly icy wind.

"It's probably a bit much after Berkeley," Charles says sympathetically. He shepherds Erik inside the coffee shop, the warm air enfolding them both -- and wearing out its welcome as it quickly becomes stifling. Erik fights his way out of his coat and scarf with as much dignity as he can in front of Charles and the faculty members who are already there.

The drinks menu is interesting even by Berkeley standards. Charles orders a latte infused with Earl Grey and white chocolate ganache -- the Madame X, he says with an impish grin that draws a laugh from Erik and headshakes from the other faculty. "He always does this," Dr Kim says, gesturing Erik forward for his turn.

They idle through conversation over more than one drink. Tension unspools from Erik's spine as they talk, four of them crowded into a booth beneath whimsical lights with art on the wall, warm with the cold Boston streets and silver light on snow outside. Erik falls into the rhythm of familiar debates, laughingly exchanging barbs with Dr Jordan over Stanford's rivalry with Notre Dame, even though Erik knows vanishingly little about football and cares even less. The conversation shifts between grad school reminiscences and current research, the next two days and the hell of balancing research and the thousand other things their departments require.

"I'm on policy this year," Dr Nguyen says with a sigh. Erik tenses; it gets him a quizzical look from Charles. "I complain, Erik," he adds reassuringly, "but our service requirements aren't so bad."

"Please don't scare him off," Charles laughs.

There's no chance of that, Erik thinks.

“Really, though,” Dr Kim says, “I think you’d like it here. Aside from the usual departmental stuff, we have a lot of great opportunities for faculty. There’s a private climbing gym, you can join an ice skating club, sail out on the river, and we have lots of sponsored trips all over the country for camping or skiing if you’re an outdoors person.”

“And there’s the marathon,” Erik adds.

“Oh, do you run?” Charles looks interested, twisting in his seat toward Erik with his second mug of
latte’d tea held between his hands. His lips look redder than usual, like he’s been sucking on them while Erik wasn’t paying attention.

“Every day. Twice a day, when I can get away with it,” Erik says, and someone laughs, thinking it’s a joke.

“Well,” Charles says, “try the Esplanade tomorrow morning. Personally I can never stand running on ice or breathing this air in winter, but there will be plenty of other madmen out there to keep you company.”

It’s an excuse, too, to take a few pictures along the marathon route to have on his phone in case Shaw gets suspicious. That old paranoia is back, rearing its head from beneath the surface of Erik’s thoughts. He’d hoped his anxiety about his interviews would keep it at bay but it’s clear Erik overestimated his own ability to remain distracted. Or, maybe that’s the payoff: he can be anxious about the interviews or he can be anxious about Shaw, but never relaxed, not even for a moment.

The discussion of recreational activities somehow feeds into Dr Nguyen talking about the MIT-owned daycare he sends his kids to, and Dr Jordan says, “I can’t ask if you have kids, of course,” earning her an amused look from Dr Nguyen, a flick of an eyebrow as if this references some inside joke of theirs, “but if you do -- well, Matt brings his daughter in to work some days, and Meiling brought hers last week, so it’s become a bit of a joke around the department, that some of the professors are having children in an attempt to raise up perfect little future research assistants for their labs. You know, free labor.”

Erik smiles as best he can and forces a laugh he hopes is convincing. From the sympathetic set to Charles’s mouth, it isn’t, but the others don’t seem to notice, as the conversation flows into graduate students, the various tracks through the doctoral program and opportunities for research and professional experience. Erik thinks of perfect little future research assistants, and glances around at his colleagues. Only he and Charles don’t have wedding rings.

"You'll probably have a thousand questions to ask and answer tomorrow," Charles says. "But are there any you want to ask now?"

*Can I go to my hotel?* is one question Erik has, but probably not the one that should be asked. He's never much cared for many people at once; one or two at a time he can handle, but any more grates on his nerves and wears them down like gears grinding against each other. Shaw had ignored that, had insisted Erik go to as many symposia and conferences as he could in order to be professionalized. At the end of a long night and a blur of faces -- scientists Shaw had introduced him to, mostly -- Erik had been nearly catatonic.

"What are the student-free neighborhoods around here?" he finally asks.

The question earns him laughter -- as intended -- then a barrage of suggestions, everything from Harvard Square to Beacon Hill to the outlying towns. "I live in Back Bay," Charles says, "a wonderful neighborhood. We scheduled you in for an appointment with a broker, Saturday I think."

Erik imagines driving around the city, looking at places to live. *His* place. He hasn't really had one of his own for over ten years; the precise amount of time, he doesn't want to think of. Could he put down a deposit on a place and not have it turn up in a credit report? Or would he have to wait until he moved?

Mercifully, the conversation dies after Erik asks a couple more questions about local kosher delis and how easy is it to get down to New York City, and gets some teasing from Charles about Boston having too much crumbling brick and not enough steel in return. The other professors slowly trickle
out, gathering coats and scarves and leaving behind their wishes for a restful evening before the big
day tomorrow.

"Speaking of rest," Charles says, not unkindly, "you look like you could do with some peace and
quiet. Would you like me to take you to your hotel? Dinner reservations are for seven-thirty."

“Yes,” Erik says; he doesn’t have to hesitate much at all to know the answer to that question. “I at
least need to shower -- cover the scent of airplane.”

There’s another reason he has to get to the hotel, of course, and why he has to quietly pressure for
dinner to end sooner rather than later. Shaw calls him at ten Eastern, precisely on time for their
prearranged Skype chat, wanting to know about Erik’s flight, about Boston, but still obviously vexed
from the policy committee meeting he’d been in all day. Erik goes through the motions, though he
wonders if it is going through the motions, really, if it can count as just pretend when it’s been what
he’s lived for so many years. At what point does something cross over from make-believe to reality?
How fine is the line between pretending he belongs to someone else, and belonging?

Questions Erik doesn’t want to answer, but if tomorrow goes well, they might be questions he never
has to.

The next day is relentlessly scheduled, each hour occupied with interviews and Erik’s job talk and
social events. He wants to give over to autopilot and let himself run off muscle memory, but that’s
taking a risk, and Erik won’t allow himself error. It means staying ‘on’ all day though, even when
after a while the faces start to blur together, the only recurring constant: Charles.

It’s easier now to forget what Charles knows, how Charles might act on what he knows, when so
much of the game is still in Erik’s hands. Erik has to fight through the interview first, and there’s no
room yet for holding grudges.

While he thinks his job talk goes well, he doesn’t have an objective metric by which to judge. The
questions he received suggested comprehension. One of the faculty pulled him aside after with an
interesting potential future direction, something Erik wants to dare think is meant to be a proposal of
collaboration. Only he doesn’t quite dare, not yet, optimism is dangerous.

He’s grateful, on the last day, to have the morning free before he’s scheduled to catch his flight back
to California. He jogs, as Charles suggested, along the Esplanade, veering south eventually to track
along a section of the Boston Marathon route. He imagines being here several months from now,
going at race pace with his thighs screaming and his lungs pierced with pain but his mind clear -- so
clear -- his thoughts crystal and bright. There’s no one out on the streets this early and so it’s just Erik
and the frigid air, the sound of his crampons biting into the ice and his heavy exhales. He can just
run: it doesn’t have to be from someone or to something. He lets everything singe to white.

He wraps that memory up with all the others, little glimpses where he thought he could imagine what
it might be like living here, working here, and tucks them away somewhere soft and safe in the back
of his mind where they won’t be contaminated by the filth of returning home.

* *

Erik gets conscripted to play chauffeur and host to one of their fall lecturers. He manages to avoid
most non-teaching and non-research responsibilities, except for the obligatory one committee and his
advisorship of the undergraduate mutant science student group (which he does actually enjoy), but
not all evils can be avoided. He’s marginally senior to you, Hall had said when he’d ambushed Erik
in his office, but you have similar research interests, and I know you can be charming when you
want to be Erik had given him a look and Hall had shrugged. Had to try.
He agrees, because it's dinner on the department's dime. Dinner and drinks and -- Shaw.

The evening before Xavier's arrival, Erik sits down on the low chair across from where Shaw's sitting on the couch. Not sitting, that isn't the right word; even in a room inhabited by only two people, Shaw presides, newspaper in one hand, glass held idly in the other, legs crossed at the knee.

"You're looking very expectant tonight," Shaw says eventually. He folds the newspaper over and sets it on his thigh. "What is it?"

"I have a schedule change tomorrow," Erik tells him. He should have told Shaw as soon as he knew, two weeks ago. Hall had asked two weeks ago, and Erik hasn't told Shaw yet.

"Really?" Shaw's grey-blue eyes fix on him, gimlet and considering. "Do tell."

"My department needs me to take a visiting professor to dinner tomorrow night," he says as evenly as he can. "Charles Xavier, MIT, for a lecture on neuroregeneration and memory retention."

"Xavier," is all Shaw says for what seems like an eternity. Erik waits, his hands clasped between his knees. Petitioning, he thinks, hating himself. Shaw continues, as if to himself, "I've met him in passing. A bright young man." That musing, absent tone vanishes. "And you're going to take him to dinner."

"Hall asked me to," Erik says. "I told him yes."

"Then," Shaw says with an indulgent smile, "you must go. You need to be more engaged in your department life, my boy. But," he smiles, sliding the needle in, "I'm going to expect you to answer me when I text and call, and answer me promptly. And you'll be home at a reasonable hour, or I'll have to discuss matters with you. I trust this is clear, Erik."

"It's very clear," Erik says.

"Good boy." Shaw taps the edge of the sofa. Erik rises and paces over to him.

The rest of the evening passes as it usually does.

Charles Xavier, as it turns out, is older than Erik but looks ten years younger, an exotic creature with a quick smile and bright eyes who proves too clever by half. Erik’s not accustomed to finding himself enthralled, not by people, anyway, but it’s the only word he can think to describe the sensation he has listening to Charles go on about his life growing up in England the next night over dinner. Charles waves his hands around when he talks, pale birds flitting through the air above the dinner table; Erik watches them go and barely tastes his food.

"My father was a professor at Oxford, you know," Charles tells him at one point, sucking a stray bit of wat off his forefinger and doing indecent things to Erik’s groin. "Apparently, as a small child I used to be found curled up in his don’s robes all the time -- I liked them better than my bed, I suppose. This was more than once, mind you."

"I slept outside," Erik says, catching himself by surprise; he never volunteers information about his own childhood. Too risky, when everything gets back to Shaw, gossip like water flowing downhill. "My mother would have to go bring me in from the garden."

"Oh, I imagine you would still, if you could get away with it," Charles says with a light grin. "You don’t care much for convention, do you?"

"Not as a general rule, no." Erik sips at his tea, watching Charles over the rim of his cup and quite
sure he’d be happy to never look at anything else. He barely feels like he’s in California anymore, which is a dangerous thought. All these thoughts are dangerous and Erik’s at risk of revealing too much, either about himself or to himself. He hasn’t looked at a man like this since -- well, since college.

“That has its benefits and its drawbacks. But you settled into a conventional enough profession. Why?”

Erik glances down at his plate, occupying himself with tearing off another piece of injera so Charles won’t see the way his lips tighten, his mind too quick to jump back to tainted memories. “I like open questions,” he says. “And I like trying to solve them. Science was an obvious choice, and academia because I’d rather not put a price on knowledge.”

Charles hums in agreement and Erik says, "You were born into it, though. Were you always meant to follow in your father's footsteps?"

He means it as a lighthearted change in subject -- or, really, any change of subject -- so he has to hide his consternation, and endure the awkward silence, when Charles leans back, the warmth of his presence withdrawing subtly. Erik sips his tea as casually as he can, and Charles busies himself with assembling another bit of wat and injera, dextrous fingers tearing off a bit of the spongy bread and using it to sweep up lentils and sauce, until at last he says, "When I was very young, my mother wanted me to go into her family's business, which was mostly the business of being very rich and finding ways to become richer. Then my telepathy manifested, and … well."

Charles has left plain, bold print between the lines, and Erik can read it easily. Mutant rights and inclusion have come a long way since their respective childhoods, and Erik can easily imagine a young boy -- cloistered, probably, in privilege and expectation -- suddenly and dramatically diverging from the future and identity planned for him. Erik forces himself not to find the nearest piece of metal and warp it out of shape; if Charles is angry, he doesn't show it, and his anger isn't Erik's to vent.

"Still," Charles continues more brightly, that smile back on his face as if it's never left, "it all worked out for the best. When I first started, I was in psychology, but I found I liked the biological side of it -- so much less read my mind and tell me about my problems to cope with -- and changed to neuroscience. At the time, I'd thought I was going to find answers, even though I didn't quite know the questions. But as it turns out, possibilities are quite nice, in their own way."

Erik tries not to dwell on possibilities, either in regards to Charles or in general. In the moment, though, Charles's optimism invites him to imagine other things for himself, other futures that aren't governed by Shaw and the choices Erik made years ago as a blindly foolish boy.

"This is wonderful," Charles says, something truly inconsequential now -- even if he's licking his fingers again, not even trying to be decorous about it. "Are the desserts as good?"

"They are," Erik affirms, even if he's not much of a dessert person. "The coffee is better."

"Do I have to give my lecture tomorrow?" Charles asks faux-plaintively. Those blue eyes, though, hold dimensions of appeal, liquid and sorrowful. "I'd much rather sit here in this lovely restaurant and eat wonderful food for the rest of my stay. And," he adds, "not go back to our dismally cold Boston fall."

Erik grins, feels himself relax back in toward Charles, his body settling itself as if it's already decided it will be staying here with Charles for at least the rest of the night. "I'm sure we could find some way to expense out a twenty-four-hour dinner."
The conversation turns back to work, then, not that talking about neuroscience is ever boring. Charles asks him about some of his recent projects, which somehow turns into Erik defending his more philosophical position on the fundamental nature of humanity. He can tell Charles disagrees vehemently with his theory, can see it in the anticipatory gleam in Charles’ gaze, like a predator spoiling for a fight. And Erik’s never been so keen to argue with someone else, is about to open the discussion up for Charles’ rebuttal when he senses it -- a lightning-quick jolt of electricity like a shock to the brain. Basic conditioning, stimulus and learned response, but Erik tastes anger and its edge of fear in his mouth before he even hears his phone go off.

There’s no questioning who it is. All of Erik’s friends are academic, all of them know he’s here with Charles tonight and wouldn’t dream of interrupting.

**Sebastian**

Keep an eye on the time. Remember, he has a big day tomorrow.

As if Shaw cared about Charles’ welfare.

It’s 9:04, late but not egregiously so. He responds, but of course it isn’t enough; it so rarely is. He ignores the text that follows. He discussed this with Shaw before he left. How dare Shaw interfere with this -- here, with Charles, when Erik might finally have a real chance to talk to someone normal for once. And that’s what Shaw hates, of course: he hates Erik being around anyone he hasn’t influenced. Hates that Erik might glimpse out the window of their tiny cell and see that no one in the rest of the world has to live like this.

Erik tells himself quite certainly that he doesn’t care what Shaw thinks. Why should he capitulate to the insane demands of his prison warden? He’s been a mindless slave for ten years. Enough.

Charles watches him like he knows, concern etching small lines on his brow and narrowing his gaze. Damn him. As if he sees into the anxious well at the center of Erik’s body, pooling with quick-swelling venom. Erik picks at his food, which has gone cold, just to have something to do with his hands.

Shaw calls him, predictably, the unique ringtone Erik chose for him shattering the uneasy shield of their conversation, breaking any pretense either of them had that there isn’t a third person sitting here at this table with them, watching and judging with cool eyes. Erik takes the call. Hates himself for taking the call, because it’s better than what happens if he doesn’t.

"Lehnsherr," he says, as if this is any old conversation, when both he and Charles know it so clearly isn’t. He steps away into an alcove, although that, too, is useless. He tries to moderate his tone. "I'm sorry."

"Erik, dear boy," Shaw sighs, redolent with disappointment. "You've been ignoring me."

"I missed your second text," Erik says, and then, bitterly, "I'm with a colleague. I told you, the lectures. I'm sorry I have professional responsibilities."

"You will be," Shaw promises. "I recognize you have responsibilities, but they don't supercede your responsibilities to me, unless we've established otherwise. And we did not establish otherwise. Is Dr Xavier's conversation really so fascinating you forgot to check in with me?"

"No," Erik says. Shaw might not be a telepath, but he knows Erik’s mind well enough to read it even
miles away. He wonders, not entirely irrationally, if Shaw's outside, watching; he can't feel the Mercedes lurking on the curb or Shaw's watch or cufflinks, but that means nothing.

He considers lying, can only apologize again.

"Yes, you are very sorry." Shaw pauses. "You'll be home no later than eleven, Erik. And when you are home, we're going to talk."

"Yes, sir," Erik whispers, swallowing heavily. "I'll be prompt."

"See that you are."

The line goes dead, the phone falls into somnolence again. Erik stares at it, his own sweat smearing the casing, then shoves it in his pocket. Charles is waiting, face neutrally expectant; he's been joined by two small cups and a ceramic jebena, with the two cups full of dark coffee. Erik wishes they could go back to the alcohol and chases that wish away. He'll hoard these moments with Charles, he decides; Shaw can't ruin this part of tonight, even if thoughts of what might come later make Erik flinch away.

"Again, I apologize," Erik says as he slides back into his seat, ignores the don't worry about it gesture Charles makes. "Thank you for getting coffee. Are we getting dessert?"

"I am," Charles says with a grin and hands Erik the menu. "It looks too good to pass up."

Erik finds his thoughts mirroring those exact words by the time they're eating dessert. A part of him is keenly aware of the time, second hand ticking past all the little moments he wants to spend with Charles, but he’s able to relegate it mostly to the periphery of his attention, the rest of his focus ensnared by Charles’ clever ideas and banter, the way his lips look red against the white ceramic when he drinks his coffee.

When Erik decides to ask Charles for drinks after their meal, he realizes he isn’t just deciding what happens now, but making a choice that will affect the rest of their evening and far beyond that. He still feels the ramifications for similar crimes rippling through his life even years later; Shaw has a long memory. It's not carelessness. But if Erik doesn’t do something -- anything -- to prove to himself he is still the agent in charge of his own choices in his life, he’ll lose his mind.

He decides he wants to fuck Charles sometime around his third drink, a strawberry shrub cocktail that’s very nearly too sweet for his taste but looked like something Charles might enjoy. They’re both just fumbling around the subject of their mutual research interests after a while, and so it comes as a relief when they finally slip into discussing mutation instead. Charles seems so fascinated by Erik’s, and Erik can’t help but show off, desperate for the signs of Charles’ pleasure in the tilt of his mouth or the widening of his eyes.

It will be worth it, Erik vows. He’ll make this night worth it. He can tell Charles wants him. Erik isn’t blind to the purposeful angles of Charles’ body, the posture that aims to draw him in, Charles leaning toward him across the table with his fingers slipping through the condensation on the glass of Erik’s drink. The way his voice softens when he says the words, sexual desire.

All good things must come to an end.

Sebastian

Erik stares at the screen. The space and the moment collapse around him, this beautiful thing he's made tumbling to ruins. *Come home, Erik.* He can't look at Charles right now; he has to get himself under control and be, at least until he gets Charles to his hotel room, friendly. *Collegial,* the Shaw-voice in his head corrects. Erik doesn't have friends, only people who share his research interests and his profession. Colleagues.

There's a mask he wears, that can slide between himself and the Erik he thinks of as Shaw's Erik; it can fool even him, when it's busy fooling other people. The mask is cordial and unaffected, capable of calling for the check and suggesting that Charles rest up before his big day tomorrow. It can sit in the same space with Charles and not ache to ask Charles if he can come up to Charles's hotel room so they can spend the night together. It can wish Charles good night in a voice that doesn't shake, and it doesn't think nervously ahead to what waits for him.

He goes home, wishing behind his mask that he had another word for this place. *This place* is big, hidden behind its own gate which in turn is hidden behind the huge front gate of the community itself -- gates Erik detests with everything in him. The first set rattles arthritically as it opens to his keycard (Shaw doesn't permit Erik to use his powers for this); the second opens more smoothly, allowing Erik up the drive. The driveway circles by the courtyard, under avocados and coconuts and oranges, faintly fragrant at this time of year. Erik feels water running through the copper pipes under the fountain in the middle of the courtyard, can hear the splashing; it makes him seasick, along with the drift of sea-salt air from the ocean.

This is *home,* behind gates and huge stone walls. His shoes echo on the cobbles; there's a light on in the study, where Shaw will be waiting on the sofa, empty glass by his elbow and a disappointed look on his face.

"Erik," Shaw says the moment Erik steps into the living room. Erik freezes, half obedient and half startled, wild animal. "I thought I set you a curfew. Can you tell me what it was?"

"Eleven," Erik says.

"And it's after one now." Shaw watches him with those watery, foxlike eyes. "I didn't want to trouble you; I wanted to know you could be trusted to remember a simple request. And you couldn't."

"I'm sorry." Erik doesn't move; he can't.

"You've said that already." Shaw taps his fingers against the arm of the sofa. It's not a summoning gesture; that gaze has Erik right where it wants him. "Actions speak more loudly than words, Erik."

Erik’s stomach cringes, the same way he cringed when he was twenty-two and in graduate school and had made a mistake on a project -- he’d apologized, and Shaw told him this same exact thing. Back then he lived and died by Shaw’s approval. Now? Not much has changed.

He stays silent, now, rather than risk saying something and it not being the right thing. Shaw’s lips purse, considering his reaction and, as usual, finding fault with it.

“Did you enjoy yourself, with Dr Xavier?” Shaw says, and Erik feels as if he’s swallowed ice.

“Nothing happened.” Erik says, but the words sound false even to his own ears. Never mind that he’s telling the truth. That doesn’t matter. It feels like a lie because Shaw believes it’s a lie. What did Erik tell his students last week -- Reality is perception?

He wants to throw up, and his guts contract rhythmically, trying to grant his wish.
“Hmm,” Shaw says. A long silence, the grandfather clock ticking in the foyer and Erik’s pulse a drumbeat in his ears. Shaw uncrosses his legs, a slither of fabric against fabric.

Please, Erik thinks, prays. Just believe me, just let this be the end of it.

But Erik doesn’t believe in God. He knows there’s nothing out there listening. There’s just the gaping chasm of the universe -- and this moment, drawing out into eternity.

At last, long after Erik thought his legs would give out and he’d find himself broken there on the cold marble floor, Shaw says, “You must be exhausted. Go upstairs and get ready for bed.”

"Yes, sir," Erik says woodenly. He turns, his muscles stiff and hard against his bones, the familiar walls and decorations of the hallway -- paintings, a huge Grecian urn, a brocade that blocks the full-length window by the stairway -- passing by. His body remembers even when Erik wants to forget, Shaw's Erik remembers, and it remembers to strip down until he's bare and to fold his clothes away, to put his shoes in their place in the closet. When he goes to the bathroom to brush his teeth, he thinks he might vomit bile and toothpaste into the sink.

In the bathroom mirror, his reflection stares back at him with wide eyes. Erik decides there's contempt in it. Do you see what you did? it asks.

He sees and knows, and knows what's waiting for him. By hand, he starts the shower, turning it up as hot as he dares. While it warms, he collects the enema box and opens it, mixes in the saline powder with water from the sink. His body wash, clear and unscented -- Shaw hates anything chemical or artificial, anything that makes Erik smell like anything other than him -- waits next to the box, along with waterproof lube. Erik climbs into the shower.

Dissociation is one word psychologists might use to describe this, how Erik's body goes through the motions while his mind unmoors from it and drifts away from the nauseated clench in his gut. He doesn't really feel the harsh rub of the loofah spreading body wash across him or, when it's time, the enema going in. When he's cleaned out, he flushes the toilet, wincing, and showers again, the water hotter this time.

Leaning his weight against the bathroom counter, he opens himself up. This is ready for bed, in Shaw’s lexicon, Erik stretched enough that he can take three of his own fingers, not that Shaw can't make this any less pleasant if he wants. Erik stares at his reflection again, at the awkward cant of his body as he reaches back to cram his fingers into his own ass. His cock is half-hard from the pressure (such a slut for it, Shaw says in his head), and from the treacherous, intruding thought of Charles standing behind him, watching with hot, adoring eyes.

No, he can't have Charles here. Charles is for other times and places, not sacrosanct -- so few things are, in Erik’s life -- but not part of this. Erik can't look at him tomorrow and think that he'd imagined Charles when it had been Shaw on top of him.

He’s already on edge, waiting for it, but he still flinches a little when he feels the light switch off downstairs. Shaw’s metal is on the move, cufflinks and wristwatch, the tiny nails in the soles of his Italian leather shoes, wandering around the downstairs as he puts his drink glass somewhere obvious for the maid to pick up and then approaches the stairs.

Erik floats somewhere above his body as the rest of him walks back into the bedroom, bringing a towel with him, and goes to stand next to the huge bed. The bed frame was hand-carved by monks in Besançon, dark and well-oiled mahogany, the mattress draped in cream and burgundy bedclothes. The towel is also cream-colored, but it looks out of place laid atop the sheets with the duvet pulled back, as if prepared for a young child who still wets the bed.
Shaw only spares him a passing glance as he enters the room, walking past Erik as if he were naked only in the sense that a statue is naked, its nudity an artistic display but otherwise nothing noteworthy, an old relic Shaw purchased once and hasn’t noticed since. Only that’s far from a perfect metaphor, because if Shaw didn’t notice him, Erik wouldn’t be here at all.

Erik watches, silent and uncomfortable, as Shaw performs his toiletries and vanishes into the large walk-in closet on the other side of the bathroom. The cufflinks go in their box, the watch is draped atop velvet next to the five others Shaw owns. Once the shoes are off Erik loses track of Shaw. He might be able to sense the iron in his blood if he tried, if Shaw had a particularly bloody meal that evening, but it always gives Erik a migraine and that’s the last thing Erik needs tonight, on top of everything else.

Shaw emerges eventually, nude, and when he flips off the bathroom light all that’s left is the amber glow of the lamp on the bedside table casting its alien patterns on to Shaw’s features, the effect distorting them for a brief moment before Erik blinks and the effect is gone.

“You have an early morning tomorrow, don’t you?” Shaw murmurs as he stands there next to Erik, the backs of his fingers grazing down from Erik’s waist past his hip, skating over the bone. “I’ll try not to keep you up too late.”

Erik wants to shut his eyes. There's no point in that, there's no point in pleading; Shaw will tell him to open his eyes, and tell him to be quiet. Some pleading, Shaw enjoys, but not the useless pleas that well up in Erik's throat despite his determination that they don’t. He doesn't allow himself to hope that Shaw will keep his word and that this will all be over with soon.

"I love you fresh out of the shower," Shaw says. His hands settle, five pressure points on each hip, and Shaw presses down, those inhumanly strong fingers that can make bone creak and shatter leaving their impress on Erik's skin. "As if you've cleaned the day off," Shaw continues, still pressing. Erik bites his lip. "As if you've cleaned everything off. A blank slate."

Shaw propels him to bed, ungentle; Erik manages to catch himself but make it look like a fall, absorbing the impact with shoulder and forearm instead of his chest.

"And you've gotten yourself ready for me, my good boy," Shaw says approvingly once he's got Erik arranged the way he wants, on his belly, hips canted so his ass is in the air. He idly caresses Erik's ribs and the muscled wing of his shoulder blade, his arm, his wrist -- and pauses there, fingers curling cruelly around the bone.

Tighter and tighter and Erik wonders if his breath will snap before the bone will. At last he can't hold it back, not the gasp of pain or the humiliating prickle of tears in the corners of his eyes; he's lying right cheek down on the pillow, his tears will end up soaking it before the night is through.

"I'm sorry," Shaw croons. The pressure eases, leaving behind red skin and a deep, coruscating ache that numbs Erik's fingers. "I'm very sorry, my good boy," he swings one leg over Erik, straddling him, pushing Erik's arms up so they're over his head, curled uncomfortably against the solid wall of the bedstead. The bed is all wood, hand-joined, not a comforting nail or rivet in it to hold it together.

"It's only that I forget my own strength." The words brush against Erik's ear, his cheek. "How intoxicating you are, that you make me forget myself."

Sickness throbs through Erik’s veins and he has to put all his effort into not turning his face away from Shaw’s lips, a shiver starting in his chest that will threaten to overtake his whole body if he isn’t careful. Already his breaths come too quickly, desperate little gulps of air that do nothing to combat the dizziness buzzing in his mind.
Shaw’s hands slip back down his body, leaving light electric trails in their wake as one dips below Erik’s hip to smooth against his quivering belly then gliding fingers lower to cup his soft cock. Shaw makes an admonishing noise, a tap-tap-tap of the tongue and then nips at Erik’s shoulder, the threat of teeth enough to startle.

“I remember being your age,” Shaw tells him, hand squeezing lightly. Erik’s whole body shakes, the tension that grips him trying to claw itself out any way possible, the threat of pain as bad as pain itself. Shaw’s breath is hot at his nape, his lips pressing cold kisses to each of Erik’s vertebrae. “So eager for it, all the time.”

Erik’s cock responds, traitorous, starting to swell a little against Shaw’s palm and Shaw chuckles dryly before he lets go.

For one taut, electric moment there is nothing at all, and Erik tries to dare himself to open his eyes and look but fails, his courage left in a bar in San Francisco. Then Shaw’s fingers twist in Erik’s hair and yank him up viciously enough Erik only-just manages not to yelp, eyes flying open from surprise just in time for Shaw to press a hard and brutal kiss to his mouth, one that demands and takes rather than gives. And Erik’s caught there between the drag at his scalp and the sharp sting at his lower lip from Shaw’s teeth, the taste of copper bright on his tongue when Shaw finally breaks away.

"Good," Shaw murmurs. He licks his lips; in the shadows, Erik sees a smudge of blood cleaned away. Shaw's eyes are small points of light in the shadows under his brows, considering and malevolent. "Stay very still now, Erik, and I'll finish taking care of you."

Erik doesn't even shudder; he can't, not with his entire body locked up, already obeying. Shaw likes it when Erik goes still like this; years ago, he'd enjoyed Erik trying to fight him, trying to match his own insignificant strength against Shaw's mutation. Erik imagines those times the way he pictures a small animal struggling in the grip of a larger one. Now, he doesn't have an image or a word for what he is.

"Imagine if he did this to you." Shaw ruts his hard cock against Erik's ass, sinks his teeth into Erik's neck and holds him still like that as he strokes Erik's side, gentle and phantom-light before thumb and forefinger close tight around one nipple, tight and tight like a clamp, pulling a sob up into Erik's throat. It pushes and pushes, trying to get out with the pain building up behind it.

Shaw lets him go. "Is that what you imagined at dinner tonight?" he asks. "When I touch you," his hand snakes further underneath Erik, squeezing his cock and balls, and Erik can't keep back the broken sound that comes out of his throat like shards of glass, "are you imagining him touching you?"

No, Erik tells himself. He doesn't want to, he doesn't want to drag Charles into this. He wants these two tonights -- the one with Charles and the one with Shaw -- to stay separate, the memory of one untainted by the other.

Only it's too late. He's already imagining Charles here. It's Charles lying atop Erik, not Shaw; his strong chest against Erik's back, not Shaw's; his hand around Erik's cock, not Shaw's; his voice whispering low and hot in Erik's ear, calling that fire up -- not Shaw's. Erik frantically pushes back against it, trying to anchor himself in the moment, as terrible as it is, and not think of all the images that had gone circling through his mind earlier at dinner, or think of his determination the entire time: that he was going to sleep with Charles, and damn Shaw.

He’s half-hard now, traitorous body, a little shiver threading through his nerves when Shaw’s cock drags against his ass again because he can’t stop thinking of Charles, Charles’ cock hard and flushed and wanting Erik, the gorgeous little sounds Erik just knows Charles would make.
“Does he know,” Shaw murmurs, both his hands smoothing against Erik’s skin as they map out the space of Erik’s ribs, “how you like it? Could he ever even guess?”

Shaw’s teeth scrape against Erik’s shoulder blade and then his fingers press in. With human strength, at first, and then not anymore. Erik clenches his jaw, fighting the hiss of pain that still slithers out his lungs, ten burning stars pushing harder, harder, tiny muscle fibers tearing and Erik’s bones bending under the weight -- before at last the pressure is released and Shaw’s hands skim lightly over the bruising flesh, rubbing his thumbs over stung skin as if to soothe it.

“I’m sorry, darling,” Shaw says again, soft as silk as he tips down and Erik feels his lips graze his ribs. “Was that too much?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer, of course, but moves his hands down to grasp Erik’s hips instead. It’s a jarring sight, when Erik lands on his back to see Shaw still leaning over him when his mind had half-convinced itself he would find Charles there instead. But it’s Shaw in the yellow light, his fingertips tracing a line down from Erik’s temple past his neck, over his collarbone and continuing on toward his stomach.

“Look at you,” Shaw whispers, gaze following the finger’s path. It veers off sharply past Erik’s navel, Shaw reaching down to fondle Erik’s cock again, now hard against his stomach. "You want it so badly."

Erik doesn’t want it, but his body jumps eagerly all the same. The mix of arousal and dread turns to sickness, a lurch and surge low in his abdomen. Years ago, he might have begged Shaw to stop; there's really no point to it anymore. He holds deer-in-the-headlights still as Shaw strokes his cheeks, getting lube and precome across his face, his mouth, his nostrils filling with warm, bitter salt scent. As Shaw peers down at him, with the same clinical attention he might give to samples or scans, Erik wonders idly if Shaw will choke him. He's done it before, pinned Erik down by his throat and squeezed until the world had blurred and faded almost away.

"You're thinking about him," Shaw says, smirking as Erik's mouth automatically falls into a denial they both know is useless. He reaches down to stroke his cock, which looks terrifyingly huge when Erik thinks about the painful ache in his ass.

Almost idly, Shaw pushes Erik's legs further open, forcing them up and back so his knees are nearly against his chest. Rocked back up onto his shoulders, Erik's slick, open ass is exposed, nothing holding him up except Shaw's vise-like fingers on his shins and his tight, straining stomach muscles. With a quiet "stay like this," Shaw takes one hand off him and pushes it -- three fingers of it, the fourth finger scratching at Erik's rim before it too slides inside him, stretching and stretching and there's that pain again as he takes Shaw in knuckle by knuckle.

"I should let you be able to walk tomorrow," Shaw says, although he continues to hold Erik open. Erik doesn't let himself be grateful that Shaw's decided not to fist him; he is, though, distantly grateful that he'd prepared himself well -- but not too well. Shaw likes it when Erik hurts, in a different way than Erik's body likes it.

At last, Shaw pulls his fingers out and wipes them almost fastidiously on the towel he'd placed on the side of the bed. Erik shivers; Shaw must have placed it there, because he'd forgotten to. Erik expects Shaw to reach for the condom on the bedside table, the next step in the ritual -- it's not that Shaw's worried about Erik not being clean; it's that Shaw doesn't like messes -- but he doesn't. Instead, he slicks on a skim of lube with a grin that threatens to swallow Erik whole.

"I thought we'd change things up tonight," Shaw says. He leans back so Erik can see the length of his bare cock, glistening with slick and red and hard. "You can think about having my come in you
all day tomorrow."

Those hands are back on him now, pushing his legs into position again where Erik hadn't been able to keep them up, and Shaw's pushing roughly in, his cock filling Erik's sore, stretched ass. The humiliating ache in his cock intensifies, the pain sickly-sweet, as Shaw slides deeper, naked skin inside him, as Shaw's eyes fall half-shut and lidded and lazily pleased.

Erik exhales, slowly, shakily, and moves even though he knows Shaw doesn’t want him to, tilting his ass up toward Shaw’s hips and reaching with both hands to grasp at Shaw’s shoulders, his skin hot to the touch and the air between them thick and humid. It’s very nearly tender, the way Shaw kisses Erik’s temple, would be if it weren’t that Shaw kisses him there to avoid the slick mess he left on Erik’s face. Erik tries not to think about his cock trapped between their bodies, but it’s almost impossible once Shaw starts to move, rocking in and out of Erik and the skin of his stomach dragging along the underside of Erik’s shaft.

The rhythm Shaw sets is slow, at first. Deceptively slow, Erik knows, because it must mean Shaw wants him to feel comfortable, and he only ever wants peace so that he can shatter it. His face is so close to Erik’s, nose brushing against his with each thrust, eyes open and gazing down into Erik’s eyes. Erik has the brief and shocking urge to spit in Shaw’s face. He wishes he’d thought of that before, back when it was still acceptable to claw and scratch and bite.

“Mmm,” Shaw hums out, moving a little faster now, long firm strokes of his cock up Erik’s hole shifting their bodies on the mattress and making the wooden headboard tap against the wall. Erik’s breath catches in his throat on one particularly deep thrust, one he can feel all the way up in his neck, and Shaw chuckles softly and says, “Relax, my boy. I’ll be careful.”

Shaw could probably kill him just like this, if he wanted to. Fuck in hard enough to rip into Erik’s guts, push through his organs and leave him bleeding on the inside. It’s a thought Erik’s had before, but he tries not to have it when Shaw is actually still inside him, still rutting his cock into Erik’s hole.

Erik digs his nails into Shaw’s skin and feels the tiny quiver of Shaw’s flesh that’s Shaw’s body absorbing the kinetic energy, the heat, the force. Shaw must like it because he makes a low noise and fucks in particularly hard, Erik’s body jolting enough that his head hits the wood board with a flare of pain.

"Oh, poor boy," Shaw croons. Erik feels dizzy and hopes he has a concussion; even as the possibility forms, though, the sharp shock of the blow fades into a throbbing ache across the top of his skull. Only surprise, then, Erik realizes distantly. Shaw laughs indulgently. "If you didn’t do these sorts of things to me, Erik, I wouldn't lose control like this." He thrusts in hard again, pushing Erik up the bed, bumping his head again.

"You're such a delicious slut, aren't you? You are." Erik tries to crane his neck so he doesn't hit his head every time Shaw thrusts in; the position he manages isn't much better -- maybe worse, because it tilts his head awkwardly so he can see down the straining curve of his body to where his cock is still traitorously hard and dripping messily down his belly, where Shaw's cock is moving in and out of his ass. Shaw leans down to kiss him, rough and bruising, teeth grazing right over the still-sore cut on Erik’s lip. Erik lets himself be kissed, can't bring himself to kiss back, not that Shaw minds.

"Are you thinking about Dr Xavier?" Shaw asks. He doesn't sound winded in the least; his mutation means he can, and sometimes does, fuck Erik until he’s raw and cringing and it's all Erik can do to crawl out of bed to clean himself up. "I dearly hope, for your sake, you're thinking about how you'll feel me whenever you move tomorrow. I hope your pretty little ass clenches every time you talk to him."
Erik can't help but tighten around Shaw's cock, the width of it suddenly acute and keen, a stretch he feels everywhere. Shaw laughs. "So greedy, so very greedy… Maybe, if I were the sort to share, I'd invite him back here tomorrow night and you can have both of us fuck you at once."

_No_. Erik can't think of Charles now. It means tomorrow, when he sees him, he'll think of Shaw -- think of Shaw fucking him, the marks on his body and the soreness everywhere. He turns his head away from the future, which is cowardly, maybe, but he can't help it. "Just finish," he whispers roughly, trying to sound like the whore Shaw tells him he is. "Please come in me."

“Soon,” Shaw promises, but Erik doesn't trust the sharp curve to his mouth or the way Shaw reaches for him again, tightening his hand around Erik’s cock. Shaw pulls a long stroke up his length, one that’s echoed by a shiver up Erik’s spine. “I’d be a poor lover if I didn’t make sure you finished first, wouldn’t I? After you’ve bottomed so well….”

Erik doesn’t want to come. God -- he’d just as soon shut off his ability to feel, but Shaw tugs at his cock all the same, pulling another stroke up over the head. Heat builds in Erik’s groin, trapped between Shaw’s hand and Shaw’s dick pushing into him. He hates himself for the tight noise he makes when Shaw’s thumb rubs over his frenulum for the nth time and he can’t keep it in anymore.

“If it helps,” Shaw says, “you can think of him.”

Of Charles’ red mouth and his capable hands, Charles kissing him and touching him and fucking him.

_Stop it --_

“No, don’t close your eyes.”

Erik looks at Shaw again, hating him viciously as his body responds, back arching to push himself up toward Shaw’s hand and Shaw’s cock. Shaw smiles a poisonous smile and Erik turns his face away, pressing his brow against Shaw’s wrist where Shaw has himself propped up against the bed. He can tell Shaw is close to coming from the way Shaw’s cock feels bigger in his ass, now -- or maybe that’s just because Erik’s so raw he can’t keep it in anymore.

Fine, then. This is a race Erik knows he can win.

He turns his head to look at Shaw once more, reaching up with one hand to pull him down into a kiss, licking into Shaw’s mouth and clenching his ass around Shaw’s dick, rolling his hips up against him like he wants it, like he’s twenty-two and this is all he’s been hoping for.

Shaw laughs against his mouth and kisses him deep and hard, taking whatever initiative Erik had in the kiss and turning it back against him, pressing forcefully into Erik's mouth. Erik does what's expected, melts back into the pillow and lets Shaw kiss him until he almost smother. When Shaw drives in deep and holds there for a long moment, the tight heat of Erik's body and the friction too much even for him, Erik wants to sob with relief. It'll be over soon.

"You can come for me now," Shaw says, jacking his hips hard one last time, and Erik moans and obeys, spilling hot and messy across his stomach. He comes, he realizes with a flush that's as much dismay and humiliation as exertion, without Shaw touching him; pleasure burns and flashes up his spine, but it doesn't really reach him where it matters, stopping before he can drown in it and forget.

It leaves him clear-headed enough to appreciate the ache of Shaw fucking him through his orgasm, and the vicious triumph on his face, and the lingering wish that Charles were here instead. Recognizing that wish for what it is sparks his anger, enough that he's not drowsy and lax under
Shaw; he has to make himself go limp and breathe deep in the agitated way Shaw likes, and chokes back helplessness and anger, and pushes away the image of Charles watching him.

"You feel so good when you come," Shaw says exultantly. "Even better without -- " he grunts and begins to thrust again, and Erik forces himself to tighten around Shaw's cock even though it hurts, god, *fuck* it hurts, and then Shaw shoves in one last time, those last raw inches dragging a scream from Erik's throat, and Shaw comes inside him. Erik feels, he swears he feels, every pulse of semen filling him, coating and sinking inside him, as Shaw had said he would.

Shaw rests inside him for an interminable time, his weight on Erik's chest and Erik's legs still tucked back so his hips ache. The gentle touches start, Shaw exploring the bruises and marks he's left, laughing when Erik flinches away from the soreness.

"The problem with barebacking," Shaw says after what seems like an age, but that the bedside clock says is only three minutes, "is it leaves one a terrible mess… and the towel is on the floor, where I can't reach it."

Erik sighs and resigns himself to having to move once Shaw gets out of him. Shaw pets him consolingly and says, "I don't think you should have to get up, Erik. Not after your… exertions."

“What, then?”

Shaw shifts, the motion dipping the mattress beneath Erik's body as Shaw’s weight adjusts and Shaw moves to straddle Erik’s hips. Erik feels his brows go up, a little, thrown -- Shaw's cock is still half-hard, though softening, smeared in lube and semen.

Erik frowns. And then, in that second, the pieces snap together.

Erik and Shaw react in the same instant, Erik struggling to push himself upright, to -- to get away, possibly, or maybe just to sit, though it doesn’t matter in the end which it was because Shaw gets there first. He shoves Erik back against the headboard, pinning him there with impossible force, the collision sending little shock waves traveling down Erik’s torso.

“Wait — " Erik manages to get out. The rest of his words are cut off by Shaw’s cock as Shaw crams it into his mouth, free hand twisting in Erik’s hair to hold him still as he jabs his hips forward.

“There,” Shaw says in satisfaction, Erik choking violently as Shaw manages to get the head of it down past his gag reflex. Both his hands grasp at Shaw’s hips, nails scratching and clawing at his skin as if that could do anything against Shaw’s power. In a distant sense Erik notices this, himself, and bitterly loathes himself for being so crude. But in the immediate sense Erik’s throat spasms and convulses trying to reject the cock that’s stuffed it full, even as Shaw says, “Suck it clean, there’s a good boy.”

Erik can’t breathe, he realizes dimly, even as he finally gets his hands under control and grasps more firmly at Shaw’s hips, no longer trying to push him away. He’s forgotten the rest of his body, his legs, his torso, his entire world temporarily restricted down to the taste of saline and the thick pressure of Shaw’s cock against his tongue and the roof of his mouth, the hot tears prickling at the corners of his eyes as he struggles to keep himself calm.

Finally, finally, knowing it’s the only way to end this and -- god, but he *needs* to end this -- Erik hollows out his cheeks and sucks, keeps sucking as Shaw murmurs his praises and draws his cock slowly, slowly, past Erik’s gag reflex and back into his mouth, then out of it. Erik gasps on the first breath of air he gets, his body still instinctively trying to heave and his stomach in knots, but Shaw just wipes the head of his softened cock on Erik’s lips.
Erik kisses Shaw's cockhead. It's only after he does, lips shaped briefly to the swollen, cooling glans to suck away the last traces of come and spit and lube. Shaw shudders, a discontent expression crossing his face -- too much stimulation, that last little bit -- and finally, finally, Erik could sob with relief, Shaw gets off him. Cool air rushes in to replace Shaw's humid, stifling presence, and Erik has it long enough to drag in a breath and to shiver, the sweat slicking his body cooling abruptly. Just as the chill seeps into him, Shaw returns, pushing Erik onto his side and into the damp sheets and situating himself in front of him, close enough that nearly all Erik's field of vision is taken up with Shaw, and all Erik can smell and feel is him.

"Isn't this cozy?" Shaw asks. He leans up to grab the blankets from where they've been kicked to the end of the bed, where Erik kicked them when he'd tried to get away. The soft weight settling over him is claustrophobic; Shaw's arm settling over him, heavy and redolent with unnatural strength, is so much worse. Erik swallows. He hurts all over, a hundred different kinds of aches and pains that clamor to be heard.

"Use your power to turn off the light, dear Erik," Shaw says, idly stroking Erik's flank. Erik fumbles to obey, his power clumsy, but he manages. Shaw hums and presses closer, cock, belly, chest, thigh slung over Erik's, breath, everything.

Shaw remains silent, breathing steadily, and Erik tries to fall asleep. He can't, pinioned like this, his shoulder and arm threatening to go numb. At least Shaw isn't making him lie on his back with his ass as sore as it is.

He's almost asleep when Shaw says consideringly, "You know, Erik, after tonight, I don't think we need condoms any more, do you?"

Erik's heart lurches. Shaw continues, "It was so enjoyable this time, not having anything between us, and you were so obliging about cleanup… And I love the thought of leaving my come in you, having it drip out of your greedy ass to remind you," his hand tightens low on Erik's hip, fingers five points of clarity as they dig into the muscle of Erik's ass, "you belong to me, my dear boy."

He says nothing else for the rest of the night, but long after his voice has been replaced by the sound of Shaw’s soft and even breaths Erik can hear those words echoing in his mind and drilling themselves into his bones, bruises that will last much longer than the ones on his skin.

Erik drifts in and out of an uneasy sleep. Every time he wakes up all he can see is Shaw, the expanse of his chest and the angle of his jawline taking up Erik's entire field of vision. When he tries to detach himself to go to the bathroom Shaw's grip only tightens, crushingly hard until Erik manages to wake him.

The escape doesn't last, of course -- as soon as he's returned he's back under Shaw's wing. Literally.

That morning Shaw lets him shower, but not clean himself out. He even checks when Erik emerges, tugging the towel free from around his waist to insert a probing finger into Erik’s hole, kissing him right where the bruise is welling on Erik’s lower lip. They dress together, they eat breakfast together in the sunroom with Shaw partially hidden behind that morning’s paper, and then -- to Erik’s dismay -- Shaw pauses at the front door, keys in hand, and says, “I think I'll accompany you to that lecture this afternoon, Erik. I’m very interested in hearing what your young man has to say.”

The relief Erik had felt, to be escaping Shaw’s gaze for the workday, vanishes all at once and leaves him with a hollowness inside, one that doesn’t abate as he takes his last sip of coffee and sets the mug down. “Oh?”

“Yes,” Shaw says. “So we might as well ride together. Haven’t you seen those brochures they’ve been putting on our doors about greenhouse gases?”
Shaw’s constant presence, then, inescapable even in Erik’s own office because Shaw takes the liberty of socializing with Erik’s department head right outside his door and driving Erik to higher and higher levels of unspeakable rage, serves to blot out even the otherwise enjoyable aspects of Erik’s morning, such as his brief -- and solitary -- encounter with Charles in the courtyard as Erik returned from getting coffee. He manages to get work done only because, by now, he’s remarkably skilled at doing work while orbiting within the sphere of Shaw’s influence.

As far as Erik is aware, none of the people he works with -- and none of the people he worked with at Stanford -- know that he is with Shaw. It’s entirely possible that he’s deluding himself because he’s happier that way, because he’d rather believe the things he wants to stay secret will remain so, because this is his single greatest mistake. Then again, knowledge and suspicion are two very different things. He isn’t blind to the glances and second glances the department secretary sends his way, nor does he miss the idle, veiled comments people made last year when Shaw and Erik hosted the Stanford department at their home for a holiday dinner. But no one wants to say anything outright, because that would raise questions -- questions of duration. Of beginnings. No one wants those questions answered.

Shaw leaves later in the morning and over lunch, although he hasn't gone far -- as he makes sure Erik knows. *Stay in your office until I come to collect you*, Shaw texts; he's having lunch with one of the senior psychologists and another neuroscientist, both of them old friends from Shaw's Harvard days. (And Shaw says *Harvard days* as if he'd crewed on the Charles and worn cricket jumpers and downed Manhattans with his finals club.) The order is perversely welcome, keeping Erik behind his closed door and away from everyone else, only work and data to fill his head and drown thoughts of Shaw and Charles.

That time goes by all too quickly. Soon enough, the rap at his door -- crisp, unignorable -- announces Shaw's arrival. Erik gestures the door open and Shaw strides in, lazily replete and radiating satisfaction. "You've stayed here working all day, haven't you?" he asks, loud enough for the hallway outside, and Erik's lab assistants, to hear. "You know what they say about work and play, Erik."

Erik bites back a retort that will win him nothing but pain later. "Is it time, then?"

"Yes." Shaw eases closer, leaning against the edge of Erik's desk. Erik hears the tell-tale pause of footsteps in the corridor, faculty and students and staff -- the entire fucking world it seems -- peering in and wondering. Shaw's voice, as if in recognition of this, drops. "By the way, Erik, I was very forgetful and so didn't mention this earlier, but you won't be going to dinner with Dr Xavier and the others tonight."

"What?" Erik sits up sharply, has to remind himself of the delicate electronics around him before he breaks them all. "Why? I was booked for that dinner, you," he pauses, continues more softly, "gave me permission to go."

"And I'm retracting that permission," Shaw says. His voice is silky, the accent and cadence old, refined -- its cruelty has had decades to cultivate. "We could talk about this more, but I'm not sure you're ready for your department to learn what it is you get up to after work." He makes a quietly reproachful noise. "What they would think, Erik, if they knew."

He's not in a position to argue, or to tell Shaw to shut the door. He's not in a position to do anything except nod in mute agreement and choke down his rebellion.

"Yes," he says finally.

"Wonderful," Shaw purrs. "Shall we go, then? It sounds like the house will be rather full; we want
good seats."

Erik wants Shaw in hell, but that's not going to happen. He collects his jacket and heels Shaw down
the stairs to the lecture hall, trying to divorce himself from the self-satisfied miasma of Shaw's
presence and to compose some kind of excuse for Hall and the others who are going to dinner. As
Shaw predicted last night, he can feel Shaw's presence whenever he moves, the ache in his ass with
every step he takes and the way come still leaks out, sometimes, always when Erik least expects it.
Erik tries to think of anything else.

The hall is buzzing with conversation as faculty and students file in, the graduate students all looking
far more excited about a Friday lecture than they usually are, and even a few undergrads in the
audience, maybe drawn by the promise of extra credit for a report on Charles's talk. And Charles --
Erik's gaze is drawn to him, inevitably, even if he tries to keep it away with Shaw so close -- Charles
is there at the front of the room, leaning against the podium as he laughs with Russo and Wiley.

He looks -- young, Erik thinks. It's the first word he comes up with, even if perhaps it's not the best
one, considering Charles is many years his senior. He could pass for one of Erik's own students,
though if he were, Erik would likely find himself resigning his mentorship in short order. But there's
an undeniable sense of freshness about him, as if despite being an academic and chained indoors he
was born to be outside among the green things and the blue air.

Charles catches his eye shortly after Erik finds his seat, the blue brilliant even this far away, and Erik
allows him a smile. What would life be like, he wonders, if he were as independent as Charles
Xavier?

It's a dangerous proposition, but Erik finds himself entertaining the possibility of having met Charles
in graduate school. As soon as he arrived, of course. Charles, with his dark head bent over a
microscope counting cells with his dark lips murmuring silently to himself. Charles would have
asked Erik out, not the other way around.

But Erik would make the first move.

Erik thinks of Shaw, last night: Imagine if he did this to you.

The image in his head is sick now, repulsive, and Erik shunts it quickly away, just as a familiar voice
murmurs in his ear, “I’m right behind you.”

Shaw holds his upper arm, the touch painful even though to an observer it would seem deceptively
light. Deception is the nature of Shaw’s power. Erik doesn’t move, can’t move, not until Shaw
releases him and leans back, the heat of his breath gone from Erik’s nape -- but even then he can’t
lose his sense of Shaw’s watch and cufflinks and tie pin all shifting in his awareness. Erik should
have sat in the back row. No -- because then he’d have to see Shaw no matter where he looked, and
that wouldn’t be any better.

Charles’ talk begins, at last, and Erik tries to ignore Shaw in favor of the words Charles speaks and
the data on his slides -- and then questioning him on all the things potentially wrong with it. It’s a
testament to Shaw’s possessiveness that he manages to interpret even Erik’s genuine academic
criticism of Charles’ work as being representative of something more intimate. Or, Erik thinks
bitterly, he’s just looking for an excuse to humiliate him in public.

Still, there's a kind of low, secret thrill at arguing with Charles, professional or not, a thrill that isn't
entirely academic. It's sparked by Charles's eyes, the sudden and quick passion in his voice as he
responds to Erik's critiques, his hands moving with the same capability that had entranced him last
night. For a minute or two, he even manages to forget about Shaw's presence hovering behind him --
until Shaw says, in that tone that has the rest of the audience turning to look at them in surprise, that
Erik should stop monopolizing the discussion.
He doesn't dare look away from Charles, although he badly wants to. It means he has to see Charles's gaze flit from his face to just over his shoulder, to Shaw and what Erik knows must be the patronizing expression Shaw's wearing. Everyone else is staring too, and Erik doesn't need to be a telepath to know what they're thinking.

Shaw defuses the moment with one of the comments he might have made back in Erik's graduate school days, back then, smoothing over the moment with a laugh and a solicitous comment for the anxious graduate student in the back rows. Erik aches to leave, but he can't.

The Q&A finally winds down as everyone's thoughts turn toward the reception waiting down the hall. Food is the last thing on Erik's mind; escaping before anything else happens is all he can think of, escaping before Charles somehow reads or sees the truth in his head. At least Charles is immediately surrounded by a flock of other faculty with three grad students hovering in orbit around them like nervous satellites, and some other professors come up to talk to Shaw. Erik puts on his most forbidding expression, one that the rest of the department knows to expect, and begins to make his way to the front of the room, where Dr Li, his department chair, is talking to one of her students.

Just as he's about to make his escape, Shaw's hand closes on his arm. That pressure brings him to a halt, abrupt and shocking; he hopes no one sees him, or if they do have to see him, they don't see the tension in his body, or Shaw's fingers pressing painfully into his jacket sleeve.

Shaw tugs him a little closer and bends in. "Wait for me in the hallway."

Erik nods shortly, past hoping that Shaw will be lenient.

He scares the grad student away from Li, who gives him a faintly exasperated look but still says, "What is it, Erik? I hope you're not going to register any academic objections over Dr Xavier's work with me."

"No," Erik says and gives her a rueful look, one she receives with a wry shake of her head and a smile that says he's forgiven. "I wanted to tell you, though, that I won't be able to make it to dinner tonight; I had a minor emergency come up and need to take care of it tonight."

"Oh, no!" Dr Li says. The hand she places on his arm is gentle and light. "I hope it's nothing serious."

"I'm not sure yet, but I need to find out," Erik says. That's a lie; it is quite serious. "My family is in Germany," this is also a lie; he doesn't have family anymore, none that he keeps in meaningful contact with, anyway, "and my aunt is not well. A stroke, maybe. I have to call my uncle and talk to him before it gets too late there."

He stops talking before he can embroider the lie any more. Fortunately, Dr Li seems to take his agitation as a man upset over an ill family member and not a man distressed at lying to his department chair. She pats his arm and gives him a sympathetic look, tells him to tell her if he needs anything, that she hopes his aunt is well.

Erik feels even worse, after that. But it means he can get away.

It makes him apprehensive to have to wait out in the hall like a disobedient student for Shaw to finish socializing -- and Erik's not stupid, he knows it's to stop him from talking to Charles. The sheer monument of this overreaction astounds Erik, when he really takes a moment to think about it (and he has plenty, leaning against the wall and pretending to read his email on his phone). He was late at dinner with Charles. Therefore, Erik should not be allowed to speak to him again, nor should he be allowed to engage in the usual sorts of networking involved in this kind of event, or to better himself.
by asking *apt* and *necessary* questions at the conclusion of a visiting scholar’s presentation.

Unless, he thinks, Shaw is really so deluded as to think Erik actually did fuck Charles. But if he did, surely things would be far worse than this.

He’s pacing up and down the hall by the time Shaw finally comes out from the lecture, catching Erik’s elbow and using it to propel him through the corridor alongside him, the sound of their shoes on the floor echoing off the high ceilings. Shaw is silent until they’re outside and heading toward Shaw’s car, the sunlight dazzlingly bright overhead.

“You really should focus on developing your taste, my boy,” Shaw says derisively, pausing only to flash a thin smile at a passing student, who has waved in recognition. “Xavier looks like an undergraduate.”

“I’m with you,” Erik says before he can stop himself. “That should say something about my taste.”

He regrets it almost immediately, and he can tell from the cold cruelty in Shaw’s smile that Shaw knows it. His grip tightens, though not enough to bruise -- not yet. After a moment Shaw seems to catch himself, to realize they’re actually outdoors and in public now, visible, because he lets go altogether. They’re still close, though; too close, Shaw’s shoulder brushing Erik’s after every other step.

“It does, Erik,” Shaw says at last, long after Erik thought he was going to reply, long after he’d already started to predict the increasingly painful punishments Shaw is likely to inflict upon him later. “A man’s choices in life say a great deal about his character, I think. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Erik says nothing, the hand farthest from Shaw curling into a tight, brief fist before he forces himself to flex his fingers. Shaw draws his keys out of his pocket and uses the fob to unlock his car and start the engine from a distance. They’re almost out of sight, and Erik dreads every step.

“I asked you a question, my boy.”

"Yes," Erik says. It's the only answer Shaw will accept, even if it's a philosophically facile one. Shaw, though, has never permitted any debate, academic, philosophical, or otherwise.

"Then," Shaw says, gesturing for Erik to sit himself in the passenger seat, "as we drive home, I suggest you reflect on what your choices say about you." He slams the door shut, a cell door closing.

Erik does reflect on his choices. They are, above all, *his* choices, made as his own agent -- not forced upon him, contingent, or coerced. However terrible they might have been, they were and are his, and he accepts the consequences for them. The looks Shaw gives him every now and then, sly, insinuating, say he believes otherwise -- that Erik is the foolish, overeager, and over-confident boy he was above ten years ago. And that he believes Erik is a prisoner who deludes himself with thoughts of freedom.

After far too long and not long enough, they’re at the house, on the other side of two heavy gates. Shaw gazes out at the distant golf course, set away from the house and screened by a wall of pines and a water feature, observes that he might go out this weekend and play a round, as if this is any other Friday.

It’s not every other Friday, of course. Shaw shepherds Erik inside, hand on the back of his arm. "Go to the living room," Shaw says, "and stay there."

Erik goes. The living room is high-ceilinged and sterile in a way that is, paradoxically, overdone. Shaw always teases him about loving the chrome and stainless steel that accent the marble. Erik hates
it, the chrome a brittle coating over much cheaper metal, a low-quality nickel whose only redeeming value is that Shaw would be enraged if he knew by how much he'd overpaid. The steel is anonymous, mass-produced with no character in it.

Eventually Shaw emerges from the kitchen, his sleeves rolled up and tie loosened, jacket hung on his arm. He regards Erik steadily, how Erik's positioned himself as wordlessly expected, in the center of the floor, gaze off in the indifferent distance.

"It's amusing," Shaw says, "that you've chosen now to be obedient."

Far behind him, past the large windows and through the trees and beyond their neighbor's house, someone’s lawn sprinkler switches on. They are in silence, temporarily, Shaw considering Erik and Erik considering nothing at all, his mind wiped clean as slate.

After a while Shaw steps forward, dropping his jacket to drape it over the arm of his atrocious armchair. Erik listens to the sounds of his footfalls as he paces behind him, around, then comes up along his right side, all without turning his head to look. He keeps his eyes open, though.

Shaw stops at his side, the only part of him visible in Erik’s peripheral vision the vague impression of his profile and the color of his shirt: blood-burgundy. His fingers trail through Erik’s hair, combing down over his skull and toward his ear, traitorously gentle as Erik’s stomach clenches despite himself. Every time the tips of Shaw’s fingers graze the nape of Erik’s neck Erik nearly jumps, his skin electric. But nothing happens.

“I find myself confused on one matter, Erik,” Shaw says at long last. His hand keeps moving, over and over, petting Erik as if Erik were a large animal -- until it stops, pausing on Erik’s shoulder as Shaw comes to stand just in front of him, putting himself in front of Erik’s gaze so Erik has no choice but to look at him. His eyes are blue, but not in the way Charles’ are blue. They’re pale and watered-down, nearly transparent and inhuman.

His hand shifts at Erik’s shoulder, moving to properly grasp the back of Erik’s neck, the corner of Shaw’s mouth twitching a little when Erik tenses, forgets to breathe.

Shaw doesn’t blink, and so Erik holds his gaze, looking into his eyes until he can’t help but feel there’s some palpable bond stretching out between them like a rope, tethering them together across space and time, ineffable and inevitable. His chest feels tight.

“Do you really want to be with me, Erik?” Shaw asks softly, so slowly that he’s nearly tasting each syllable.

Want is the worst verb in the English language. It describes too much. It describes something that has eaten Erik like acid from the inside, out. Erik makes a noise he detests, something halfway between a gasp and a whine, and Shaw’s fingers tighten very minutely at his neck.

Erik wants to step out of this life like it’s a tired suit at the end of a long day. But that isn’t the problem, and that isn’t what Shaw’s asking.

“Yes,” Erik whispers.

"Then," Shaw says, still perfectly calm, methodical, "you also know what you want to do."

He doesn’t want to, but he has to -- and Erik turns from that, away from the thought that what he does is because of a necessity Shaw forces on him, and reminds himself of why this all began. He’d wanted it then, and wanted it badly enough that he took Shaw’s control as guidance and approval. Wanting had made him stupid, and rather than think himself that, and armed with a young man’s
philosophy, he'd decided his life, what it had become and what it would be for a future that stretches on past the horizon, is the consequence of those decisions, a consequence he's decided to live with.

So he wants to kneel, and he does, settling first to knees and then resting his weight back on his heels. Sometimes Shaw tells him what to do with his hands, behind his back or resting on his thighs, or hanging uncertain at his sides. He says nothing now, only stares down at Erik's downturned head.

"Look at me."

Erik does.

"I learned from Hall that you were taking Dr Xavier to the airport tomorrow," Shaw says. He's all Erik can see, shadowy with the light behind him. "You can understand why I am extremely reluctant to permit you to do this, why my first inclination is to tell you to call Li and tell her your family emergency," his mouth curls around the words; Erik has no family, of course, only Shaw, "means you won't be able to help out tomorrow."

"Yes," Erik says softly. He spares a regretful thought for Charles.

"But, let us consider this a test." Shaw's hand settles on his belt, his fingers spread suggestively across his groin. "Ask me very nicely, Erik, show me how much you want to be with me, and you can go tomorrow."

It's a trick. That’s Erik’s initial reaction, and he has no reason to doubt it. If he does it, it only implies that he is that desperate to see Charles again. If he doesn’t do it, it’s because he doesn’t want Shaw.

There’s no third option.

Erik reaches his hand between Shaw’s legs, reaching back to cup his balls through his pants, pressing them up toward his body. Shaw exhales, even that soft sound self-satisfied, and Erik keeps going, moving his hand to palm Shaw’s cock instead as it starts to grow and push against the front placket of his trousers. Shaw’s hand falls away from his belt, leaving Erik to do all the work of unbuckling him and dragging down the zipper so he’s stroking Shaw through his boxer briefs instead.

“What an obedient boy,” Shaw murmurs, pleased, and Erik ignores the part of him that’s tempted to bite down as he leans in to mouth Shaw through the fabric, the cotton going wet and transparent beneath his tongue and clinging to the shape of Shaw’s cock, now a hard line pressing toward his right thigh. Shaw hasn’t said anything about his hands so Erik pushes them beneath Shaw’s trousers to grasp his hips, keeping him still while he tongues at the head and glances up to check Shaw’s expression -- Shaw’s watching him with his lips parted, and when he catches Erik looking he slides a hand into Erik’s hair, keeping him close.

A long time ago, Erik got off on doing this in Shaw’s office, sucking him off while Shaw sat in his ergonomic chair with the door unlocked, only Erik’s power between them and getting caught by a curious student. Back then, when Shaw forced his head down on his cock, Erik was more flattered than upset. He thought it meant he, Erik, was just that good.

“Hmm,” Shaw says after a minute of that, obviously unwilling to let Erik get away with stalling. “I’m not convinced, my boy.”

"Please," Erik whispers against the hard curve under his mouth. He peels the boxer placket aside, tugging Shaw's hard cock out, vaguely repulsed at the glistening, slick glans sliding out from its wrapping of foreskin as Erik strokes him. He's never minded it before, has always enjoyed the
contrast, but now he has to swallow back his disgust to fit his mouth over Shaw's cockhead and begin to suck, trying to make a show of it, soft moans to show Shaw how much he loves having cock in his mouth, delicate licks across the underside that hint at what it will be like when he's taken Shaw in deep.

That's where this is going, after all. Erik, as if he's stepped outside of himself to watch this tableau, as disinterested in it as in a tedious movie, watches the man on his knees begin to suck in earnest, his mouth sliding down and down the length of cock until his nose presses against the fine fabric of the other man's trousers. It's a scene not unlike many before it, when the man on his knees had been younger and carried away with the thrill of showing off for his mentor, showing how good he was, the hot mouth and throat around that cock a promise: *look at what you can have, if you keep me.*

Shaw sighs, pleased and luxurious. "You have such a lovely mouth," he croons, fingers running through Erik's hair. They begin gently, at Erik's forehead, then tighten as they go on so they finish knotted at the back of Erik's head, keeping him in place so Shaw can fuck him lazily. Erik chokes and Shaw murmurs approvingly. "The entire time you were talking today, I thought how many better uses for your mouth I had."

Erik chokes again, tongue fluttering along Shaw's cock as he fights to swallow. He finally manages it before he can gag on his own saliva. Shaw hums, casual and warning, and Erik tries to cover himself, relaxing his jaw, pushing his mind as best he can into a blank space where his body does what it has to and he can drift, free and clear.

He can't; this isn't Shaw using him, this is him *begging.* He's faintly aware that he's drooling, spit running down his chin and neck and soaking his collar, that he's making obscene, wet, humiliating sounds as he sucks and sucks and tries to get all of Shaw's cock down his throat. *Please,* he thinks past the shame and fury, and the knowledge tears have gathered under his eyelashes. *Please say yes.*

Shaw gasps, his breaths coming heavily now, and Erik doesn't believe in God but he always ends up praying to him to end this right around now, a sick and sordid religion. Erik grips at Shaw’s ass, needing that stability as Shaw keeps fucking his face, driving in deeper and Erik fighting hard to take it. He hates the person he is right now, clinging to Shaw even as he gulps around his cock, moaning and slobbering and pornographic, Shaw’s cock smearing pre-come onto the roof of his mouth with every thrust. His lower lip stings.

Above him, Shaw grunts behind gritted teeth and his grasp tightens at Erik’s neck. From his distant, glassy fever-dream Erik wonders if it will bruise, if that bruise will be visible over his shirt collar, if he’ll end up needing to wear a cravat to hide it. Erik has his face buried in Shaw’s crotch when he finally notices the throb at the base of Shaw’s cock and thinks -- *it's over, it's almost over,* but Shaw uses his grip on Erik’s hair to pull his head back and Shaw’s cock out of Erik’s startled, open mouth. Erik doesn’t have time to react: Shaw pumps his fist down his cock once, twice, and spurts his load onto Erik’s face, Erik grimacing and his eyes fluttering in surprise as warm come splatters his skin, all the way up into his hair, little gobs of it on his tongue and in his eyelashes. His hands have slipped from Shaw’s ass, fallen useless against his thighs and all he can do is wait for Shaw to finish and try to be grateful it’s over, to remember it could have been worse.

Shaw groans one last time, working the dregs from his cock as Erik stares dumbly up at him, come sliding down his skin to pool in the low places, fleshy-tasting on his lips when Erik finally thinks to close his mouth. His cheeks are burning, his humiliation complete, now, as Shaw wipes his softening cock on Erik’s shirt and tucks himself back into his underwear, zipping up the front of his trousers.

He doesn’t leave, though, and Erik realizes with a sinking feeling in his chest that it isn’t over, after all. Erik, apparently, hasn’t groveled enough to win his prize.
He wets his lips -- a mistake, because it means licking come into his mouth and then having to swallow it down, his tongue and throat full of the taste of Shaw’s cock. “Please,” he rasps, blinking come-heavy eyelids and trying to keep Shaw’s face in his line of sight though it’s blurred by his messy lashes. “Please, sir, let me -- let me go tomorrow.”

When Shaw continues to look at him, that face blank of everything except sleepy pleasure, Erik adds, "I'll take him and come straight home, come back to where I belong." He would add on bribes, promises of good behavior for the rest of the weekend, but Shaw expects those anyway; Erik would be giving him nothing more than his due.

"Please," Erik repeats. He hates the sound of his own voice, rough and needy, borderline desperate. He shouldn't sound this way, but he does.

"Very well," Shaw says indulgently. He pats Erik's head, a master's reward for his pet's obedience when it comes to heel. "I can trust you to be good, can't I, Erik?"

"Yes," Erik says. He has no idea if he sounds convincing; mostly he sounds dead. "I'll be very good."

Shaw regards him for a moment more. "You look very nice with my come on your face," he says. "You may wear it for the rest of the night."

Erik stares. "My eyes…” He can feel Shaw's come starting to crust on his eyelashes. It'll gum them shut.

"You may clean your lashes," Shaw says graciously, though the graciousness fades with warning. "No more than that. I'll inspect you tonight before we go to bed."

He's almost too tired for anger; it swells up, though, impotent until it burns itself out or is blown out by Erik's exhaustion. A world away, Charles and the others are going to dinner; in another world entirely, Erik is with them, arguing with Charles over his lecture, trading barbs like flirtation and plotting ways for them to escape from the rest of the group.

In this world, where he is, Erik remains on his knees until Shaw leaves. It's only then that he rises stiffly, wincing as his knees creak and his muscles protest. He's run marathons, has considered running ultras -- maybe, if he runs long enough without stopping, he won't come back here -- and these times are worse than hours of sustained effort, his body locked up with tension and a shame that's more exhausting than hours of running. Shaw heads for the stairs and the bedroom, whistling tunelessly; Erik heads for the kitchen sink to wipe tears and come from his eyes.

The evening passes with Shaw's come drying stiff and flaky on Erik's face, with Shaw in his study or wandering casually through the kitchen to make dinner and his inevitable after-dinner whiskey. Erik wants to go for a run but can't, not with his face like this; he can't do anything except sit in his chair in the living room and pretend to read, and pretend to ignore Shaw when he walks by to pet Erik's head, an absent caress that still makes its point.

Shaw keeps his promise that night, grasping Erik’s chin in their shared bathroom and tilting his face toward the light, running the pads of his fingers along Erik’s skin to feel the rough spots. “Good,” Shaw murmurs, a smile curling his lips. “Now get ready for bed.” And he finally lets Erik shower, the hot water sluicing the evidence from his flesh and carrying it far away. The shower doors are glass, which means Erik can see Shaw’s blurry figure standing at the sink, feels the sharp metal razor as Shaw shaves. How easy it would be, Erik thinks, to have that blade slip in Shaw’s hand. He entertains the thought, but it’s just a thought.
He washes his face three times, until his skin is raw, and even though Shaw’s had him once already tonight he fucks him again before they go to bed, vicious and greedy and laying his claim to Erik’s body every way he can while there’s still a threat on this side of the country, proving over and over where Erik belongs.

As they lie there in the dark Shaw brushes soft kisses to the back of Erik’s neck, kisses that make Erik certain he must have bruised after all, Shaw’s touch so slyly gentle that Erik can almost believe all over again that Shaw loves him in any way that’s different from how Shaw loves all his valuable possessions.

By the morning, Erik has learned his lesson. Charles is beautiful in the car next to him, sunlight glimmering auburn in his hair, but he’s beautiful like a museum artifact -- to be seen through glass, or on the other side of a chain, but not touched. Even so, when he stops to let Charles out and Charles hands him his card, Erik’s thumb skimming over the embossed letters of Charles’ name, there’s a flicker of regret in Erik’s chest and he has the sudden, almost overpowering desire to throw himself out of the car after Charles, to buy a last-minute plane ticket at the counter and fly all the way to Boston with him. It’s so sudden and violent in its desperation that Erik has no choice but to write it off to youthful fancy. He’s just thirty-one himself, old enough to know better in some ways but in others still too young to be trusted with his fleeting desires.

So when Charles vanishes into the terminal Erik makes himself pull away from the curb and turn back onto the road into the city, back to his life here.

It’s a choice, like any other. Another choice, like all his choices, that Erik will have to learn to live with.

How he lives with it, he can’t say sometimes. But live he does, and he pushes Charles and the memories of him into the recesses where he keeps the few good things he has, the place not even Shaw can touch. He’ll bring them out every now and then, handle them for a while before tucking them away again.

At the end of the day, with Charles receding into a hazy distance, Erik returns home. Shaw isn't back yet, so the house is mercifully empty -- even if it, as it always does, has the sense that Shaw is still there, invisible and watching. Erik strips out of his work clothes and climbs into running gear as fast as he can, and escapes into the swift two-count rhythm of a hard run, a one-mile sprint slowing only slightly as it spools out into two, three, five, eight miles. His legs want to stop, muscles protesting their treatment after three days of inaction and the rest of him still sore from Shaw's treatment two nights ago.

(He wonders, when he slows reluctantly at an intersection, if anyone sees the bruises on him, if they wonder what those bruises mean.)

He can't sweat or run Shaw out of his system, but he can come close; he can, at least, run until his mind is blank. Inevitably he returns to the house, shivering and deep into oxygen debt, preferring the thought of aching legs and stiff shoulders from his run to whatever Shaw might feel like giving him next.

Shaw's there when he gets back. He is, at least, profoundly disinterested in Erik when Erik's sweaty and sticky for reasons other than Shaw; he views Erik's running as a curious and inexplicable hobby, something he permits his pet in order to keep it healthy and amused. He watches narrowly as Erik moves around the kitchen to collect milk and water, frowning at the sheen of sweat Erik's running socks leave on the tile.

"The only redeeming value those have," Shaw says, nodding at Erik's compression shorts, "is that
they do such lovely things to your body. I shouldn't let you go out of the house in them."

Erik ignores that in favor of hydration. Shaw makes an amused noise. "I hope," he says, once Erik's done drinking, "you were able to get Dr Xavier to the airport in time."

"Yes," Erik says, because it's clear Shaw expects an answer.

"Such an... interesting man," Shaw says musingly. He leaves the idea there, dangling like bait on a hook, for Erik to circle while he showers and climbs into clean clothes.

"A gifted researcher, and he didn't really need to become one," Shaw continues, only after dinner's eaten and they're in the living room, Erik trying to read and Shaw idly flipping through something on his tablet. He sets the tablet aside; Erik feels his gaze, sharp and hot on the side of his face. "He was born to a very wealthy family, you know."

Erik remembers Charles's reference to his mother's family; it explains some things about Charles. It also might explain Shaw's fascination with him; Shaw has been as keenly interested in money as he is in foolish graduate students. The thought of a wealthy man working when he doesn't have to has to intrigue him.

Erik grunts disinterestedly and feels, more than sees, Shaw's grin. "Of course," Shaw continues when he doesn't get a further reaction, "he might have felt it necessary to go into this line of work, given his mutation."

"Hm," Erik says. "It's not unusual."

"That in and of itself isn't," Shaw allows. He stands, setting his tablet on the coffee table. "But for a telepath of his strength to be so interested in something he could understand simply by taking..." He must see the disbelief in Erik's face, the contrary memory of Charles's claims to low-level telepathy rising up. He grins. "Oh yes, Erik. I spoke with a neurologist who'd worked with Charles when he'd been a student himself. At least Theta-level, and likely stronger ... and that was the first time he'd been in for testing."

Erik sits frozen, his own reading forgotten. Shaw pats his shoulder gently and moves to the liquor cabinet. The whiskey uncorks like a gunshot, the liquid sloshes heavily like the nausea in Erik's stomach.

"So you see," Shaw murmurs, caressing Erik's shoulder again, "it's best that you didn't pursue anything with him. After all, he knows everything about you now, and what use could he have for a person like you? Beyond," he adds, "the obvious."

He sits down, whiskey in hand and tablet taken up again. Erik stares at him, aching to sink his power into all the metal in the house and bring it down around them. It wouldn't do anything, but it would -- no, it wouldn't even make him feel better, not even that. He tries to hold on to some twisted sense of gratitude for Charles's lie, that it gave him a few hours of being able to pretend he had something different than what he does, or that he could have it.

The gratitude melts into anger, though, and anger into inevitable helplessness, and he ferments in it for the rest of the night -- for days, until it burns itself out and then when he looks at Shaw, when he wakes in the morning and Shaw is there watching him, possession written across his face, all he feels is the peace of accepting what has to be.

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**Additional Tags and Warnings:** Sebastian Shaw/Erik Lehnsherr, Consent Issues/dubcon. This chapter also includes explicit descriptions of physical and psychological abuse and manipulation in the context of a relationship.
"You and Erik are certainly getting to be very close," Moira comments one afternoon as she and Charles are sitting in Flour, ostensibly just to drink coffee and socialize -- although now the truth comes out, Charles can't help thinking when he catches the gleam in Moira’s eyes, the way she watches him over the rim of her cup as she sips her macchiato.

Charles lifts an eyebrow and twists off the dark, cakey top of his housemade ‘oreo,’ licking at the frosting left smeared on the underside. “We’re colleagues,” he says once he’s chased after the last sugary remnants. “Erik’s quite intelligent, even more so than what you’d expect for studying what he does. He has a keen eye for detail, which I appreciate.”

A virtue which, of course, Charles values as much in intellectual debate as he does in the bedroom, where he’s sometimes convinced Erik is subtly mapping the erogenous zones on Charles’ body, always predicting just where and how to tease every dreg of pleasure from him -- when, at least, Charles can get Erik to touch him at all. Charles nibbles at the cookie, swallowing it down with a sip of raspberry seltzer, and hopes Moira doesn’t catch the drift of his thoughts.

“Oh,” Moira says, “I’m sure you do appreciate it,” which definitely skirts the line between insinuation and outright stating her suspicions. Better, of course, to continue to feign ignorance. Of all the things Erik tolerates, Charles doubts being the subject of idle coffeeshop gossip is one of them.

He told Charles as much, once. No, in fact -- he told Charles precisely that, two days after he arrived in Boston, them standing close under the gutter to avoid the downpouring rain and Erik’s gaze dark, sharp, his voice rough. *I will not be the subject of idle coffeeshop gossip, Xavier.*

It wasn't as if Charles could send out a memo to that effect, and it doesn't help that academics -- as Moira is currently proving -- are inveterate gossips. Something about Erik forbids gossip anyway, although Charles is aware (very aware) that the mill's started turning ever since he and Erik started spending more time together. He hopes, for their sakes, Erik doesn't find out what the grad students say about them.

Denying it again will only cement her suspicions, *methinks the professor doth protest too much.* Silence, of course, will do much the same thing. Charles sighs. "Moira, you're my chair, and my friend, and I love and respect you, but I'd prefer not to have my friendship with Erik made grist for the department's minor scandal of the week."

"I wasn't going to tell anyone," Moira protests. She feels aggrieved, and rightly so; above all else, Moira is reliable, and Charles has trusted in her professional confidence several times. "And, not as a department chair, but as your friend, I think I'm entitled to a little tawdry gossip."

Charles sighs and takes another bite of cookie. "Then I'm going to have to disappoint you, I'm afraid. Along with whoever else in BCS has decided to place bets on whether or not we're sleeping together."

"I can tell you've been spending far too much time with Lehnsherr," Moira grouses. "You have absolutely no sense of humor anymore."

He resists the urge to defend Erik. Erik does have a sense of humor, quick and cutting more often than not, but also capable of a kind of dryness, a line delivered with a wry twist to his mouth that Charles finds more compelling than should be reasonable. Saying that, though, will only confirm what he's spent the past few minutes trying to deny.
"So your arguments during colloquium aren't foreplay, then," Moira says, sipping her macchiato delicately. "And you didn't share a room at SPR."

Charles scowls. "It was two -- "

The look Moira gives him says she was actually paying attention when she was reviewing conference expense reports. "Single bed room, Charles."

Charles' mouth snaps shut, brain tumbling through a laundry list of excuses and coming up with: "The conference was in Long Beach. In the interest of being economical, Professor Lehnsherr and I mutually decided it was the best use of our limited funds."

"Uh huh," Moira says dubiously.

"Look," Charles tells her at last. "Whatever you or anyone might think about my friendship with Erik, the fact remains that it is neither your nor their business. But, for the record -- " and for Erik, who has made this statement so many times at this point that it's nearly lost all meaning for Charles, "-- we aren't sleeping together."

She still doesn't believe him, of course; he can read that in her mind the same way he can read her disappointment and slight sense of betrayal for Charles not trusting her with this, inasmuch as she still knows he has no obligation to do so. Her gaze lowers as she finishes off her macchiato, placing the empty cup down on its saucer, and eventually she says, "I'd better be getting back into my office. A lot of administrativia to take care of before the end of the fiscal year."

He rises from his chair alongside her, bending his knees to pick up his leather satchel. "I'll see you tomorrow, then," he says, and she nods, vanishing out the door and onto the gray street.

Charles follows more slowly, finishing up his soda and leaving the empty glass behind to be washed. He has no particular desire to go back to campus so soon; in fact, he appreciates the excuse to take a break from working for a while and let his mind recharge. It's a habit he had to learn after college: how to turn things down once in a while, lest he get overstimulated and end up losing his carefully-bought control.

That's a habit he wishes he'd learned earlier, when it could have done him some good -- when he was twelve, for example; it would have saved him six years and more of what he'd lived through. And he could have learned it during college, instead of spending those years bouncing between drunk, asleep, and in pain. Charles turns away from those thoughts, which are tiring all of their own, and idles down the street to the parking garage, trying to think of what he can do with his afternoon that isn't work and smiling with quiet amusement when he realizes he can't think of anything.

Erik's still in his office, naturally, and he'd frown at Charles for slacking off when so much of the day remains. He should text Erik to let him know he won't be back in, in case Erik might want to come over -- or not, Charles decides, his cell phone cradled in his palm. Erik requires a surprising amount of mental energy, energy that Charles is usually glad (very glad) to expend, but this late in the semester, with everyone's thoughts speeding up as they race down the slope to deadlines and finals, Charles wants quiet if only for a handful of hours, and Erik is anything but.

Of course, once he's at home and can let his shields down a little, letting his telepathy unfurl across the blessed silence of his house, he can't quite settle. He roams around, tidying away the detritus of a busy week, putting dishes away, doing laundry -- doing the bedclothes again, really. His scent and Erik's fill his nostrils as he gathers the sheets into his arms, musky, old sex and sweat and accents of detergent, a reminder that, here or not, Erik's worked himself into the fabric of Charles's space, bending it around him.
Like his scent, there are other traces: paperclip sculptures on the side tables, a pen Erik had gotten at some engineering conference in the coffee mug Charles uses for pen storage, a stray sock that Charles tosses into the wash along with the sheets. There's nothing more substantial than those things, although they've slept together often enough, and Erik's spent the night often enough, that Charles should have cleared out a drawer for him in the very least. Charles has toyed with the idea, but like texting Erik to tell him to get the T if he wants to spend the night, landmines wait to go off just under the surface of what seems harmless.

The washing machine hums and throbs as it begins its cycle, white noise to accompany Charles through to his living room. Maybe a nap, he thinks as he folds himself onto the couch and tugs an afghan over himself, determinedly not remembering how Erik looks on this very couch, still buttoned-up and focused as he works, or stretched across it, decorative and only wearing his skin. He presses his face against the pillow, rubs his cheek against the roughly textured fabric, imagining it's Erik's skin instead, the sparse, coarse hair on his chest.

_Dammit._ Charles turns over on his back and stares up at the ceiling, pristine white ringed by crown molding -- original to the house, antique. He wishes his telepathy worked on his own mind, so he can do for himself what he knows now he can do to other people. Think about architecture, think about anything except Erik, except how he's everywhere, sleep.

He must achieve it at some point, because the next thing he knows he opens his eyes and the house is the charcoal-violet of twilight, his phone buzzing on the coffee table. It’s a text from Erik.

**Erik**

Where are you?

Charles sits there for a moment, his legs folded up tailor-style beneath him and the afghan still tangled up in his lap before tapping out a reply. _I went home._ He considers adding some kind of explanation before deciding he doesn’t need to provide excuses to Erik; Erik knows where to find him if he wants him. So he hits ‘send’ instead, watching the message load and then the text pop up beneath it a moment later: Delivered.

Erik replies almost immediately, _I'm coming over,_ and Charles pulls himself up to his feet, flipping on a lamp so he can see to tidy up a bit -- Erik's very particular about organization habits, and Charles has caught him eyeing the clutter on his desk on more than one occasion. He makes the bed, even though he suspects it'll just get unmade again sooner rather than later, and then just potters around uselessly, not able to really invest in any one project when he knows Erik will show up any minute now to interrupt it.

It’s a relief when the knock on his door finally comes. Charles has never been a hermit, he’s always rather enjoyed socializing, particularly when alcohol’s involved, but he always needed that time alone after to let his thoughts spool out in all directions and unwind. Strange now to find himself restless and wishing for someone to come and relieve him of his own company.

He's still in that space between drowsy and wired, restless but not rested, when Erik arrives. Charles is in the kitchen, trying to do dishes, when the lock draws back and the door opens, Erik's presence tumbling through the door like a river through floodgates. Even Erik's thoughts, hardly calming at the best of times, are welcome, giving shape to Charles's own as they fill up the house, a comfortingly impatient background hum that cancels out the white noise Charles's own telepathy generates when no one else is there.

Erik drops his duffel bag by the front door and kicks off his shoes, and right on time stalks into the
kitchen. His attention roves from the stack of mail (three days' worth) on the counter to the dishes to distracted, irritated observations on the state of Charles's saucepans and the unconscionably cheap metal used in them.

"If you want, you can come with me to Crate & Barrel," Charles says, grinning to himself as Erik snorts. "How was your day?"

"Fine," Erik says. He sidles onto one of the chairs at the kitchen island; even with his back turned, Charles knows Erik's watching him, alert and hawklike.

After a moment, Erik says, dissatisfied, "You left early."

"I was tired," Charles says. He slides the last plate into the dishwasher and shuts it, washes his hands free of soap scum and dries them. When he turns around, Erik scrutinizes his face as if trying to catch him in a lie. Concern colors the air, or something like concern, alloyed with Erik's usual annoyance, as if worry is an inconvenience and he doesn't have time for it.

Finally, Erik nods. "Maybe you should take your own advice and rest some more, instead of harping on me about my eating habits."

"I should," Charles agrees. He doesn't say that some of his exhaustion comes from spending his days maneuvering around Erik's many dangers, and nights further addicting himself to Erik's body. "Tonight will probably be early for me."

Erik makes a noncommittal noise. Charles pours two glasses of water and offers Erik one; Erik accepts it, but waits for a nod to drink. When he sets the glass down, half empty, he sits quietly, his energy folded up and in on itself to leave his shoulders relaxed, his hands resting easily on his thighs. In these moments, Erik is touchable and, potentially, biddable, if touched and bidden correctly.

"Have you eaten?" Charles asks him, and Erik makes a dismissive gesture with his hand that Charles knows means he hasn’t, though the way his gaze lingers on Charles’ mouth suggests he wouldn’t mind if neither of them get around to it tonight. "Well," Charles says, "it’s leftover chicken satay for me, though you’re welcome to have some of it."

The hue of Erik’s thoughts deepens slightly and Charles, gathering the general gist, says, "Later, then."

"Frankly, I don’t trust your cooking," Erik says, a bit dryly.

"Probably wise," Charles admits. "But if you’re here, you’re going to be eating something." The problem is, Charles isn’t due to go to the grocery store until tomorrow, and the contents of his pantry are … limited, as Charles can’t quite envision Erik sitting at his kitchen counter eating helix escargots out of a tin.

His gaze lights on the fruit bowl in the breakfast nook, and for lack of a better option Charles crosses to carry it back over to the island, assembling the contents atop his cutting board and reaching for the knife only to find Erik has snatched it from the block already, the blade neatly slicing through a plump golden mango and exposing its juicy inner flesh. He’s quicker than Charles with the steel, so Charles settles into peeling the skin off a small clementine, opening the fruit into its tiny wedges and passing one half over to Erik, who pops it into his mouth all in one go.

"That’s not how those are generally eaten, you know," he informs Erik, but Erik only grins, a sharp smile that shows too many teeth.

"Here." Charles sections off the other half of the clementine and takes one piece from its cradle of
rind, rubbing his thumb against the fine velvet skin that encases the fruit itself. He holds it up, offering it the way he's offered Erik food before.

Erik's eyes narrow, and Charles is suddenly aware of those sharp teeth, and the danger of being bitten. When Erik leans forward, Charles has to hold himself still and not flinch away, hold still, stay steady so Erik can take the clementine from him, those pale eyes not looking away from Charles's as Erik's teeth skim Charles's thumb and index finger. Very good, Charles says as Erik chews and swallows, and brushes a drop of sweet juice from the corner of Erik's mouth.

When he tastes it for himself, he tastes the sweetness and the tartness of the clementine, the faint salt of Erik lying beneath it. Erik swallows, indecision and desire flickering through his head and across his face. Charles lets the moment go and turns back to cutting up clementines and collecting a half-forgotten package of strawberries from the refrigerator. Erik cuts those with swift, ruthless precision, crimson juice staining the blade and cutting board.

"Is this all I get tonight?" Erik asks, after he's plowed through another clementine, half the strawberries, and mango slices.

"You know where the delivery menus are," Charles says. "Or you can brave my pantry to see if there's anything you like."

Erik sniffs disdainfully and says something about not wanting to subsist on truffles and helps himself to the menus. Charles bites back a comment on Erik's dietary habits; as far as he can tell, Erik survives on a steady diet of protein bars, takeout, and hostility -- not precisely healthy, or sustainable, even if it's the stereotypical meal plan for overworked researchers and graduate students. Erik, Charles reflects as they pick their way through the fruit and he waits for his satay to warm up, is like a graduate student in some ways, still: struggling to find a place, masking his insecurities, wondering how much of what he has is due to his own merit, how much to other people.

I know you only hired me because you felt sorry for me. Those words still flirt around the edges of the constellation of memories and images Charles associates with Erik. He can't quite work out the extent to which Erik believes that, even if Charles -- who'd been part of the search and every tedious discussion -- knows it isn't true at all.

After Erik hangs up the phone with the Mexican place, Charles, still sitting on a stool at the counter, lifts a hand toward him and says, “Come here.”

Erik spares him a glance, brief but suspicious, before he actually complies, stalking back across the kitchen and stopping two steps away -- though he closes that distance when he lets Charles trap his hand and tug him nearer.

“What?” he says impatiently when Charles doesn’t immediately give him another task, grey-green eyes flitting between Charles’ gaze, his mouth, the fruit still left on the table, Charles’ fingers curled around his bony wrist.

“You have strawberry juice,” Charles says, “here,” and touches Erik’s lower lip where the berries stained his skin like a bruise.

“Are you going to lick it off?”

“No, it’s stained.” But Charles reaches up to pull him down anyway, Erik bending easily with the guiding hand to let Charles suck at his lip. He almost imagines he can taste the sweetness of the strawberries, still, bright and summery -- he can’t, of course, but it’s a pleasant thought to have while licking at the part of Erik’s mouth and tracing the tips of his fingers down his nape toward his spine.
Erik goes, notably, still when Charles’ touch slips beneath the collar of his shirt, counting one-two-three vertebrae. After a long, taut moment Erik finally moves, hand coming up to clasp the side of Charles’ face and keep him there in return. Charles hums out a soft, pleased noise and opens his eyes, just a fraction, just enough to see that Erik has his closed. There’s evidence of tension there, Erik’s brows drawn in, though it eases when Charles smooths a hand round his waist and draws him another step closer, spreading his knees to fit Erik between them.

“Very nice,” Charles says when he finally does lean back again, Erik’s hand dropping away from Charles’ face like he’s been caught doing something he shouldn’t. Charles keeps him where he is with that grasp on the back of his neck, bent down to Charles’ height with both hands fisted near his hips.

"Still there." The strawberry juice has sunk into Erik's skin, past being kissed or licked clean. He wets the corner of a napkin in his water glass and carefully dabs the juice away, leaving Erik’s lip shiny and unstained, only a little swollen from kissing. "Much better."

"Thank you," Erik says, although not as sarcastically as he’d usually say it. He straightens when Charles leans back but doesn't move away, his body still drawn tight with the restlessness that usually, in Erik, means uncertainty.

"Thank you," Charles tells him, and sends him a soft wave of approval for Erik being so compliant -- and his surprise and enjoyment when Erik had touched him. What he keeps to himself is the regret that Erik rarely does it. Erik watches him narrowly, as if dissecting the impressions Charles has sent him, but doesn't move -- and doesn't offer Charles his trademark annoyance or impatience with what he'd usually see as Charles taking care of him.

Eventually Erik’s food arrives and they sit down to dinner. Erik silently pushes an extra empanada at Charles, mind echoing softly with thoughts of Charles’s hypocrisy (one satay skewer and Charles had only picked at the fruit, making Erik eat most of it) until Charles cuts the empanada in half and moves one half to his own plate.

"One of my undergraduates is taking a year off," Charles says after a while, into a silence that's stretched through dinner and into dessert -- cookies for him, an apple for Erik. "I think it'll be good for her; she wants to do lab work while she decides between med school or the academy."

Erik scoffs. "A year off? She really needs an entire year to decide?"

"She's got other reasons," Charles says. He has to talk around some issues, FERPA being what it is, and his respect for his students' need for confidentiality above all, but he's curious as to what Erik would make of this in light of his own students. "She had a rough time this year, personally, and was having a hard time adjusting."

"And you indulged her existential crisis," Erik says with a headshake. He crunches his way through another apple slice.

"I didn't indulge anything." Charles pushes his plate away, and tries hard not to think of being on the patient’s side of his counselor’s desk, hearing her words and feeling them reframe his life. "She needed the time, so she's taking it. Don’t be an ass."

Erik waves a dismissive hand. “I’m not. If she wants the extra time to build her CV that’s one thing, but because she’s so psychologically fragile she needs to take a break from her life?” He lifts a brow at Charles across the table, derision written on his features. “It hardly bodes well for her ability to succeed in postgraduate work. If she needs such coddling you might suggest she look into a less demanding profession.”
Fragile? Between the two of them, Charles isn’t the one who’s --

He cuts that line of thought off before he finishes it, lips pursing and his heart beating faster in his chest. He resents his own reactiveness, wonders if Erik would consider that a sign of mental frailty as much as he does so many other things. “That’s enough, Erik,” he says.

Lifting a brow, Erik says, “There’s no need to scold me, Charles -- you know perfectly well I’m right. Would she demand an extra year on her tenure clock, too, if she has a hard time ‘adjusting’ then? Perhaps you can go along to graduate school with her, to hold her hand and spoonfeed all the answers -- “

“I said that’s enough.”

Erik falls silent, stunned; the words came out like the crack of a bullwhip, cold and final, Charles himself on the edge of his seat with his cheeks burning. It takes a long moment for Charles to uncurl his fingers from the reflexive fists they’ve made against his thighs, smoothing clammy palms against his trousers and breaking his gaze away from Erik’s, taking advantage of the pause in conversation to reach for his glass of water and swallow down two chilly mouthfuls.

“Charles …” Erik begins, but Charles cuts him off swiftly, setting his glass back onto the table. “If you won’t respect the students, you will at least respect me. We are finished with that conversation.”

Erik sinks back against his chair, eyes still tracking Charles like he expects sudden movement. Charles shuts himself off from having to listen to Erik’s mind play the conversation over, trying to identify the exact point of contention, and instead busies himself with carrying his plate -- and Erik’s, too, after a fashion -- over to the dishwasher, which is full enough now to need running. He pours a tablespoon of detergent into its designated dish and closes the door with his hip, all without looking back at Erik but feeling him watching all the same.

Ignoring Erik is never easy; even in silence, Erik compels his attention, demands some kind of reaction. Charles considers telling him to leave -- the anger has the words ready at the back of his tongue, one wrong thought away from being spoken -- but if he does, Erik might not come back, and the anger, swift to form, dies enough for Charles to keep himself from asking.

He leaves the room instead, quietly and meanly pleased at the slurry of confusion and annoyance that he leaves behind. Erik’s still working over the conversation, and good, let him chew on it, Charles thinks as he settles into his chair and pulls up a book on his tablet. Erik’s still in the kitchen, but he’s standing now, moving around with a frustrated, directionless energy that needs a few minutes to direct itself to a new task.

Erik appears in the doorway, dressed in running shorts and MIT shirt, lithe and wiry and distracting Charles from not paying attention to his book.

"I'm going running," Erik says, glaring at Charles as if expecting a challenge.

"Have fun," Charles says, whereupon Erik, bristling like an affronted cat, turns on his heel and stalks off. The door, wrapped for a moment in the aura of Erik's ability, opens and shuts itself harder than necessary.

Filled with a restlessness of his own, and freed from having to pretend to ignore Erik, Charles abandons his tablet. Erik’s duffel is by the door to the downstairs bathroom; he moves it upstairs to the closet, under the few pairs of trousers and the shirts and ties Erik keeps in one corner. Back downstairs, the laundry buzzes; Charles fetches clean sheets and linens, breathing deep, comforted despite himself and despite knowing Erik's going to want to pick at the wound that's opened up
tonight.

He wonders if he should tell Erik the truth. Not about his student -- he'll take her confidence to the grave -- but about himself. Erik has to know he's struck a nerve that has nothing to do with what he thinks is Charles's overprotectiveness and the fragility of the younger generations, and like any researcher he'll test that nerve, poking it, stimulating it, seeing what gets it to react and why it reacts the way it does. Charles's explosion tonight had very little to do with Maya herself, although he really wishes Erik would learn not to view his students as younger versions of himself, or raw metal that needs to be purged of its imperfections. It has more to do with his own past, and what he's not sure he can admit to Erik yet.

His counselor at Harvard, after studying his CT scans and the neurologist's evaluation with a complete lack of surprise, had given him piles of pamphlets and brochures, advice, the number for the organization for mutant students and written up a list of psychologists who specialized in psionics. He'd left her office stunned almost out of himself, part of his mind remaining to drag his body along like a ship dragging its anchor, most of it spinning out over the city, hearing the voices in it as if for the first time. Back then he'd been a freshman in his fall term, still disoriented from years of medication, and then disoriented by being told something that should have been -- that was -- the completely obvious truth.

Even so, it took him a long time to trust his power -- years until he could control it -- and sometimes even now, forty years old and long since supposed to know better, he catches himself trying to push certain thoughts and voices down and out of sight, furtive and ashamed. He still spends a great deal of time wondering if he’d have been even more powerful if he hadn’t taken the medications, if perhaps he’s quieter and dumber and less creative now than he had the potential to be. He knows he talked himself into a good part of his insanity, little delusions and psychoses that were neither organic nor telepathic, just fantasies spun from pure imagination and confirmation bias. Probably this is one of them, that lingering self-doubt every time he has a particularly good idea, or is especially suspicious, wondering: Is this a delusion of grandeur? Is this paranoia? Can I trust what I myself am thinking right now?

Charles became so perfectly aware of the impact a label can have on generating self-fulfilling prophecies, and never more aware than when losing that label saw those prophecies start to crumble like castles made of sand.

He knows all the ways in which Erik resents him, Erik’s pet grievances lined up like figurines on the windowsill of his mind, easy to see and know the shapes of. That Erik thinks Charles can trust his own desires is one of them, albeit a smaller and less significant item of interest, primarily borne out of envy. If Charles let some of the truth slip, would Erik trust him more? Or less, for having kept it from him so long?

Charles unspools a thread of telepathy, chasing after Erik down Marlborough then up Exeter, along Newbury for a while with all the lavish displays Erik appreciates and hates in equal measure, down toward Erik’s favorite bookshop where Erik darts back over to the Esplanade to run down south and then across the bridge over the river and into Cambridge. He isn’t thinking about their conversation anymore: just the heaviness of his breath in his lungs and the quick cadence of Brooks soles on asphalt, loose swinging arms and the sharpness in the back of his throat when he inhales.

Silently, Charles withdraws, carrying the laundry upstairs to remake the bed and fold the shirts: one pile for Charles and another, smaller one that’s Erik’s. They smell identical straight out the dryer like this, like the vague floral scent of Charles’ fabric softener -- Charles really is insane, he thinks, catching himself with his face pressed into one of Erik’s cotton button-downs. They’ve been not-
together for a year, Charles could go downstairs when Erik returns and smell the thing itself, though admittedly a sour and sweaty version, and Erik would probably let him if Charles were sufficiently subtle about it. He’s not a teenager drawing hearts and his name with Erik’s last in his notebooks. He wasn’t that teenager even when he was a teenager.

He wonders if he might, in some part of him he’s never accessed, be that person. Something beyond mere attraction keeps him opening his door to Erik again and again, keeps him happily tangled in a relationship Erik thinks Charles understands but that Charles knows he doesn’t. It might be selfishness masquerading as a desire to help, or save, and god knows Erik’s ranted about Charles’s savior complex often enough. Every time Charles wants to tell himself it isn't either of those things, that disbelieving voice reassures him that it is, and he should be a better person than he is and end this.

As always, the debate ends unresolved. By the time Erik gets back, breathing hard and climbing out of oxygen debt, Charles has cleaned up a few more things and resettled in the study, the page on his tablet the same as when he’d left. Erik stalks by the door and pauses, peering in, shadowed in the hallway but defined enough for Charles to catch details of muscle and sweaty skin, Erik’s tousled hair.

"How was your run?"

"Fine," Erik says, still restive, eight miles not enough to run out his energy. "I'm going to shower."

Charles sends him a vague *by all means*. Erik huffs and strides upstairs, trailing discontent behind him like a banner.

He'll have to do something before that discontent ferments into anger and into a fight they've so far managed to avoid. Erik doesn't fight him -- Charles can't quite believe that -- and they don't fight about personal things, although they have plenty of disagreements about work and their professional life. Here, in this space, though, it's different. Charles asks and Erik bends; Charles asks and Erik does what Charles wants, and he'd be lying if he said that wasn't a headrush all its own -- but they don't fight, and Erik, in a way that neither of them acknowledge, looks to Charles to give direction.

Charles is directionless now. He'll need to orient himself, with both of them adrift, even if all he wants is to let go and let the current take him.

*When you're done, get dressed and come downstairs.* He sends the thought as quietly as he can, framing it with enough command that Erik can't ignore it. He expects some pushback, Erik resenting Charles trying to pretend that everything is fine when it isn't, but Erik's mind softens in the way that says he's heard, the back of his thoughts grateful and relaxing after the argument and the adrenaline rush of his run.

When Erik reappears, damp-haired and still on edge, yet willing to cooperate, Charles beckons him over. "You moved my duffel," Erik says as he settles himself on the other end of the couch from Charles.

It's somewhere between a complaint and an observation, a warning shot fired across the bow.

"I didn't want you to have to make an extra trip down, if you forgot something in it," Charles says. Erik chews that over silently, reflecting on how Charles had put his duffel upstairs, instead of keeping it by the door -- that he wouldn't have done that if he hadn't wanted Erik to stay. Part of Erik, predictably enough, wants to rebel and say he's leaving.

He stays where he is, waiting -- not patiently, but without fidgeting or pushing at Charles to say
"I'm sorry I snapped earlier," Charles says eventually. He dares to reach out to stroke Erik's bare knee, the rounded jut of bone scaffolded by muscle and covered with shower-soft skin, fine, pale reddish hairs that brush against Charles's fingertips. "I'm not sorry I told you to stop pressing the issue, but I am sorry for shouting."

Erik makes a brief, ambiguous noise, but keeps his leg where it is, where Charles can touch him freely. There's an element of vindication there, victory, albeit dampened by the way the words inevitably draw Erik's attention to what Charles isn’t apologizing for. Charles waits, while Erik decides how he wants to respond -- but Erik’s response, apparently, is silence and his knee tilting toward the outside of Charles’ thigh, giving Charles room to smooth his hand down toward the inside of his thigh, keeping a careful eye on Erik’s gaze in case permissions change.

"Let’s go upstairs," Charles says, and Erik rises with the gentle implicit nudge in Charles’ voice, Charles following after to ascend the stairs and head down the narrow hall to the bedroom. It’s Charles’ bedroom, the house is in Charles’ name and Erik doesn’t legally live here -- but Charles has noticed himself thinking of it as the bedroom, as their bedroom, reflexively, as if anything about this were nearly so official.

Charles usually tries to keep his touch on Erik’s mind limited to the periphery, which means he can’t really tell how Erik feels about it, if Erik considers this ‘home’ or if it’s just another island between the university and Erik’s apartment in Inman Square.

Erik turns to face him when they’re both inside and Charles leaves the door open as he steps close and slips his hands up under the hem of Erik’s plain dark t-shirt. The shape and feel of his body is familiar by now but never loses its sense of novelty -- strange, how this bone and that muscle feel well-traveled, well-memorized, but Charles is still so … fascinated.

"Take off your shirt," Charles murmurs. Erik resists for a moment, mentally, testing that he still can -- before he complies, stripping the fabric up over his head and exposing his bare torso for Charles to tilt his head forward and press a kiss to the center of Erik’s sternum, above the throb of his heartbeat. Erik doesn’t quite know what to do with that, Charles sees, awkward about whether his hands should go on Charles’ shoulders or his waist, or lower, so right now they simply hang limp and twitching at his sides until Charles reaches for one wrist to kiss it as well, then sets Erik’s hand on his hip.

"You should touch me more," Charles says, looking up to meet Erik’s gaze, and Erik’s lips press out into a thin line. "I like it when you touch me," Charles revises before things can spiral out of control, pressing Erik’s palm down more firmly against his side. “Just like you like it when I …” He slips a hand between them to cup Erik through his boxers, feeling Erik’s cock immediately respond to the touch. He quirks a smile at Erik and lifts a brow. “Yes?"

For answer, Erik releases a ragged breath and rolls his hips. The motion reminds Charles that Erik's just gotten back from running, reminds him of that lithe, concentrated power in the muscles of his thighs, housed in the weave of adductor and pectineus and tensor, all of it hidden under smooth, strong skin. He wonders what Erik would say if Charles asked Erik to fuck him -- told Erik to fuck him -- wonders if Erik would still hold back or if he'd willingly use all that power to take Charles apart.

"So good," he whispers instead of asking the question he now wants, urgently, to ask. He plays with Erik, enjoying the soft, shivery sighs and the cock hardening in the cup of his palm, raising an eyebrow in amusement as Erik hardens enough that his cock pushes at the placket of his boxers, an obscene bulge that Erik, his head dropping down on a wordless gasp, almost blushes to see. His
mind coruscates with pleasure and embarrassment and annoyance, heady and potent all on its own even without Erik standing so close, allowing Charles to touch him.

"Are you going to do anything?" Erik asks, trying to be biting but succeeding only in whining softly when Charles slides his fingers inside his shorts to stroke him. "Or are you just -- "

Charles shushes him with another kiss to his sternum, one more higher up in the notch between his collar bones, at the confluence of bone and vein and tendon. Erik's pulse beats a little faster now, and he's thinking of Charles pressing his ear to Erik's chest to hear his heart racing, arousal and fear mixed together as always. As they go on, the fear will bleed away, but there's always the sense in these early moments of Erik resolving not to be afraid and using his anger to forge through it, until there isn't anything left but pleasure.

"Come on," he murmurs, stepping back toward the bed, thrilled when Erik follows him obediently. His eyes are hooded and dark in the dim light of their bedroom, watching Charles closely as Charles eases back onto the bed and tugs Erik down onto him.

"What -- " Erik starts. He's puzzled, and Erik doesn't like being puzzled, so Charles shows him, tugs his own shirt up and places Erik's hand on his bare skin, presses down until Erik registers the bone hidden under layers of flesh.

"More of that," Charles says, and runs his fingers up Erik's sides, which gets a shiver and grunt, and vague unease at Charles being so gentle now when he'd been shouting at Erik earlier. Charles bites back a sigh. "Touch me, Erik. I'd like it, if you did that."

Rebellion sparks at the back of Erik's mind, very nearly instinctive. Charles waits to see if Erik will need a command in truth, if he can't take something gentler, and as Erik stiffens and rocks back on his knees, his body still angled over Charles's like a falcon's, he begins to frame an order -- but then Erik yields, unbuttoning Charles's shirt with quick, deft fingers, workmanlike until he pushes Charles's shirt open like he's unwrapping him, and his fingertips settle just beneath Charles's sternum, hesitating.

But then, coming almost as a surprise even to Charles, Erik presses those hands down more firmly, tracing the lines of Charles' lowest ribs and then the plane of his stomach. Charles takes in a shallow breath as Erik's touch becomes heavier and Erik notices that, his gaze flicking up to Charles' face. Whatever it is he's looking to find, he must find it -- or not find it -- because Erik pushes harder, testing the limits of what Charles will allow, perhaps, smoothing his palms up toward Charles' chest. When one of his thumbs rubs over Charles' nipple Charles shudders visibly and Erik's mind catches, freezing in place like he's been caught doing something wrong.

"It's good," Charles says, his own hands on Erik's body and moving toward his waist, keeping him there. "It feels good," and Erik doesn't repeat it but he does make a brief, harsh noise that may be a huff as he moves his hands back down toward Charles' hips.

"This is what you want?" Erik comments, and it nearly passes for derisive -- would, if it weren't for the fact that Erik's gaze keeps stealing back to Charles' cock, visibly half-hard through his trousers, and his mind, which buzzes with anxiety and anticipation, the two emotions tangled up and hard to differentiate.

"It's not all I want."

Charles pushes himself up enough to strip his arms out of his shirt, pushing the fabric aside, off the edge of the bed. When he settles down again he brings Erik with him, distracting him with a kiss until Erik's body softens and his mind loses the roughness of its edges, Erik's mouth opening for
Charles’ tongue and his breath hot against Charles’ skin. Erik doesn’t flinch, then, when Charles guides his hand down lower, rubbing Erik’s palm against himself through his trousers. Erik makes a muffled noise against Charles’ lips, unidentifiable, but he keeps his other hand where it is on Charles’ waist even if it’s gone still now.

The kiss breaks and Charles thinks -- no, he doesn’t think, he does, twisting two fingers in Erik’s short hair and using that grasp to tug his head down so Erik’s mouth meets the curve of Charles’ neck, his head tilted away to allow it.

Erik draws back as soon as Charles releases him, though, and, exasperation curves quick in Charles’ chest, ready to face the respondent snap of anger from Erik’s mind -- only that anger never comes. Instead Erik kisses him again, just lower down this time, nearer Charles’ collarbone and Charles is left to blink, surprised, at the ceiling as Erik’s hand squeezes him again through his pants.

That surprises him enough that he can't keep himself from thrusting up, chasing after more of that pressure. He manages not to clutch desperately at Erik's shoulders, although he does curl his fingers into the coverlet, holding onto it as if it can keep him from breaking apart. What he can't stop is his mind reaching out for Erik's, an intimacy he rarely allows himself, lacing through it and suffusing it with his appreciation, how good this feels.

That gets him a headshake, as if Erik wants to shake Charles out, and Charles almost withdraws. Erik doesn't really resist him, precisely, and after a pause he uses his abilities to undo the metal snap of Charles' trousers, and his zipper, drawing it down tooth by tooth, the sound of it emphatic in the charged silence.

*Good*, Charles says softly. He cranes his head so he can see down the length of his body, covered by the sinuous ridge of Erik’s spine and the curved wings of his shoulder blades and the lines of muscles thrown into relief by the overhead light and shadow. Erik still has a hand between them and is sliding it into Charles's open trousers to push down his boxers, brushing across his pubic hair until he can wrap his fingers around Charles's cock. The angle is awkward for Erik's wrist but it's excruciatingly good for Charles, who can't help the softly approving moan and shiver.

Erik's watching him now; he senses the shift in attention, Erik drawing himself away from what it's like to touch Charles's cock this way, to have hot flesh underneath him, and refocusing on the sounds Charles is making and the expression on his face. Beneath the clamor of hormones and Erik's own desire are memories, shrouded in a forgetfulness that's almost desperately wishful, of other expressions of pleasure -- lazy and thick, like a slow poison that numbs him to far worse --

Charles shuts down before he can wander deeper and pulls himself back as best he can. Erik's attention rests against his skin like a knife, ready to cut if Charles so much as breathes.

"Please don't stop," Charles says, once he's sure of his voice. He opens his eyes and gives Erik his best imperious look. "Take my trousers off, please, and your boxers too."

With a disgruntled noise, Erik obeys, sliding down Charles's body so he can curl his fingers around the waist of his trousers and pull them down his legs, taking Charles's boxers and socks with them. He strips his boxers off economically -- and hesitates before getting back into bed, shoulders squaring in the kind of defiance that Charles associates with Erik in moments of uncertainty.

"Come on," Charles says, and holds his hands out.

Erik’s chest and belly and shoulders shiver, a spasm that runs through him like an earthquake. He does, though, easing himself back down and onto Charles again, straddling him and holding himself above Charles's body until Charles can press him down with palms in the strong, warm hollow of
Erik’s back, so they're flush together, Erik all rangy and volatile and finely-honed lines to match against Charles, who thinks of himself mostly as pale and freckled with moments of strength.

Charles kisses him again -- and they fuck like that, Charles keeping Erik close, his nails occasionally digging into Erik’s skin when he forgets himself, Erik’s hands on him tentative but there and unignorable. Charles makes sure Erik knows how much he likes every bit of this, his arousal throbbing in the air between them and staining the edges of Erik’s mind where it meets with Erik’s own want.

Afterward they lie there tangled up together on top of the sheets, the light a soft grey-blue now; Charles hadn’t realized the sun set while they were fucking, except to appreciate the golden glimmer of light on Erik’s skin and the red in his hair. Now he’s a study in pewter, eyes shadowed where they’re half-lidded and gazing at Charles as Charles traces small concentric circles on his skin.

Erik isn’t thinking, anymore, about the unspoken third person that stood just outside the door the entire time they were having sex -- not interfering but there, threatening to, closer today than most days. Charles noticed, though, and even if he gave Erik his privacy he could tell this took a lot from Erik. It’s good. It’s another step forward, but one tethered back in turn by the tension from their conversation earlier still knotted overhead.

Charles chooses his words carefully before he speaks them, because Erik has a long memory, and he wants to be sure Erik hears what he means him to hear.

“I took time off, after I graduated college,” Charles says, and watches the shift in Erik’s expression: the catch of surprise followed by careful neutrality, Erik too perfectly still for it to be natural. “Two years, in fact. I took a technician job.”

He leaves the words hanging there long past time Erik should have responded, knowing Erik expects him to say more but waiting for Erik to react first. Charles keeps his gaze on Erik’s, keeps his hand in its steady pattern on Erik’s hip, until Erik finally makes a short, tight noise and says, “I told you, it’s different if you’re using the time to get more publications.”

“That isn’t why I did it.” Charles lets his fingers rest, his whole hand coming to press against Erik’s skin now instead, smoothing up toward Erik’s narrow waist. Erik’s watching him closely, a tiny part of him disbelieving but the majority some clamoring combination of surprise, chagrin, curiosity, and the ever-present irritation.

Charles is about to let his hand fall away, drop to rest on the bed between them -- in fact, it’s already sliding down Erik’s stomach by the time Erik says, “Why, then?”

He has to tell Erik now. Erik might not be a telepath, but he knows Charles well enough to know what the truth looks like on his face and in his voice.

"I was having problems with my telepathy," he says, carefully ignoring the shock that rings in Erik's mind like a bell. "Truth be told," and he's not really telling the truth, but he can't tell Erik everything, not now, when remembering it is like peeling back a bandage to find the wound still raw and bleeding, "I'd been having problems with it for most of my undergrad, but it finally got bad enough that I needed to take the time and get a grip on it."

Erik frowns. "You didn't -- did you consider suppressants?"

"No," Charles says, which is, at least, completely honest. Erik's made his opinions on suppressants very clear. "But I had serious doubts as to whether or not I'd be able to shoulder grad level work and stabilize my abilities at the same time. Either would have been a full-time commitment."
Erik shifts a little. "So you took a mental health year."

"Literally, yes," Charles says. He slides his hand back onto Erik's stomach, has to mask his relief when Erik doesn't move. "I realized I would be more effective as a student, as a researcher, if I didn't have to fight against my abilities constantly."

There's some bristling against that, Erik annoyed with Charles making sense and therefore annoyed with having no way to contest what Charles is saying that isn't insulting, wrong, or petty -- or all three. Erik rolls his shoulders, sighs, and says, "But you didn't think you were some fragile, special snowflake -- "

"My student doesn't think that either," Charles says, with enough bite in his tone that Erik, as if Charles has taken him by the scruff of the neck, gives way. He strokes Erik's belly to soothe the reprimand, not that Erik's inclined to accept any apology, ever. "People stepping back or stepping away isn't a sign of weakness, Erik." He almost wants to say *don't project*, but he's not that angry, or that foolish. "It can be harder to do that, sometimes, than forge ahead."

Erik studies him, face shadowed and inscrutable. Charles keeps his mind away, determined to let Erik's thought process be his own.

"Your school should have provided you with better resources," Erik says at last. "Mutant students are becoming more and more common. You should have been supported throughout, not simply left to fend for yourself after graduation."

Well, that they can both agree on, even if in Charles’ case the criticism doesn’t necessarily apply.

"But," Erik finishes grudgingly, "in the absence of such resources, I'm sure you did as you felt … appropriate."

It's the closest Erik will ever get to eating his words, so Charles smiles and kisses his jaw, lips scraping against the stubble. It's late enough now that neither of them makes excuses for the way they linger on in bed until the darkness sinks in deep and sleep comes for them both.

*
Example Seven: Dependence

It's six months to the day, now, since Charles' entire life changed.

In so many ways, nothing really did change -- it's just the way he thinks about it, and more importantly the way he thinks about himself. Telepathy's not an illness: people don't look at him in disgust when they find out, as if they think he'll be contagious, and they don't look at him with pity. Oh, there are the odd few bigots, there always are, but at least at Harvard it's hidden behind several layers of old money manners and the desire to appear politically correct.

There's a lot of that at Harvard. The old money, yes, but also the need to seem tolerant.

All right, maybe Charles is being a bit harsh; they mean well, and a first step is a first step and is better than nothing, and maybe it's not Charles' place to judge considering he's white and male and able-bodied and so many of the people they're fighting for aren't, but he's also a telepath: which means he sees the motivations of every person attending this meeting of Crimson Warriors for Justice. Usually they aren't conscious, but they're there all the same, obvious when he knows to look for them.

The girl painting the 'FIGHT FOR MUTANT RIGHTS' sign, for example, isn't a mutant at all, she just wants to be, and pretends her high level of emotional intelligence is actually AΩ-tested empathy. Pretends so hard she's very nearly convinced herself, and she hasn't been tested because she doesn't want to know, doesn't want the proof that she's been deceiving herself and all her friends for the past two years. The thin, spotty guy awkwardly trying to flirt with her is a mutant, but that's it -- no other intersecting identities -- and can barely speak to a Black person without tripping over his tongue because he's terrified of coming across as racist. Even Jenna, Charles' best friend, and the reason he's here, has a tiny part of her that always gleefully thinks how good the publicity will be if the rally next month makes the news, wonders if it's poor form to put her activism on her CV when she applies for internships next month.

You shouldn't have to hide who you really are, Jenna told him, the coup de grâce of her argument convincing him to attend his first CWJ meeting and being open about his mutation. And she was right, of course. Even though part of her had turned over how great it would be for her to bring on someone new, she was right, and Charles does need to connect with his community.

Charles has had his identity hidden for him since he turned twelve, kept under lock and key until someone had released it for him. He'd ignored Jenna's twinge of unease when he'd projected his thanks to her, and her whispered advice to him that he might want to tone down his telepathy a little, "at least until people get used to it. We don't have a lot of psionics at the moment -- but it's a really diverse group," she'd added, as if afraid he'd back out.

Now he's here, and already he has a slight headache. His neurologist has given him some painkillers,
extra-strength Tylenol meant specifically for telepaths suffering from psionic overload -- something, Dr. Krishnamurthy had said, Charles would almost certainly experience until his abilities settled -- but Charles has an instinctive aversion to them. *Take this and you'll feel better,* he's heard that a lot, right before being given his little paper cup of pills or, far worse, an injection that would make the world go dull and indifferent. The clamor of minds around him, nearly a hundred students racing back and forth with banners, pamphlets, and righteous indignation, makes him consider risking it, though.

"Everyone!" Jenna calls to the handful of students in earshot, an earshot enhanced by Jenna's abilities to amplify sound. Everyone in a fifty-foot radius pauses, and in the hiatus Jenna climbs up onto the podium. She gestures for Charles to join her, which he does, reluctantly.

"Before we begin," Jenna says, and Charles, with quiet horror, hears the resolution and words forming in her mind, "I want to introduce you to our newest member. This is his first rally as an out-and-proud mutant," this gets scattered applause and a swell of respect, "so please make him feel welcome: Charles Francis Xavier!"

A ripple runs through the crowd. Charles forces a smile onto his face and waves. He reminds himself that, above all, these people are *like him,* most of them mutants, all of them committed to redressing injustice. The reminder is a bit of driftwood to cling to in the storm of thoughts that swamps him, the rich, well-connected kids realizing who he is and adjusting their opinions of him accordingly; other mutants writing him off for being baseline-passing and only coming out as mutant *now,* everyone wondering what someone so rich could even begin to understand about intersectionality, what he could possibly have to say that couldn't be better said by someone else.

Charles doesn't have anything to say, not really. Or, rather, he does have something to say -- rather a lot -- but he doesn't have the words, and already, he's not sure the students here would understand.

"Come on," Jenna says, her voice down to baseline levels now, hand hooking into Charles’ elbow. "I’ll introduce you to some people you’ll like."

He follows as she leads him over to where people are making signs for the next rally, taking a seat at the table and choosing a green marker when someone pushes the bucket over toward him.

"This is Margot,” Jenna says, gesturing at the girl across from him, who extends a rainbow-braceleted hand for him to shake, grinning widely.

"*Francis.* That’s a middle name. My parents gave me Ermagene.”

Charles fakes a wince. "Ouch," he says.

"Yeah, tell me about it. So you’re a first-year?” She props her head up on her hand, studying him with a sharp gaze. Charles gathers from her surface thoughts that she considers herself an expert judge of character, and immediately worries he might not make a good first impression.

“Oh,” Charles says, “yes. I’m in Currier House, with Jenna.” He realizes he’s clutching the marker in his hand and pulls a piece of posterboard toward himself to start coloring in the large blocked-out letters, message unclear and hidden under the crayons and Sharpies scattered across the table.

“What’s your concentration?” Margot asks.

“I don’t know yet. I was thinking maybe Psychology or Biology.” He attempts a smile, switches out the green marker for blue. “Still plenty of time to decide, I suppose.”

“Charles is a genius,” Jenna says, nudging him with her elbow and grinning between him and
Margot. “He’s in Math 55.”

This, at least, garners him a double brow lift and a shiver of interest, accompanied, of course, by jealousy and resentment at its flanks. “Still?”

“Him and seven other people. Apparently it was killer this year, and most people dropped out in the first half of the first semester.”

They’re both looking at him, expecting a comment, and all Charles manages to come up with is an embarrassed, “I like maths.”

"Obviously," Margot says dryly. The interest has faded out as jealousy predominates, amusement at Charles’s awkwardness threaded through it like smog in clouds. "Psych, though? That's so... " she pauses delicately, "problematic."

"Medical hegemony," Jenna says, before Charles can do more than look puzzled. "The entire history of psychology has to do with marginalizing the mentally disabled," as if Charles hasn't had intimate personal experience with that (but then, he hasn't told her), "and pathologizing not just mutants, but anyone who isn't a white male." He wants to ask if their very presence here -- at a rich, Ivy League university, most of them from wealthy families themselves, with all the access that money provides to education and support -- isn't problematic, but keeps quiet. It means the silence is uncomfortable, tinged with Jenna's satisfaction at making her point and Margot's still jealous and resentful. Charles focuses on coloring: MUTANT RIGHTS ARE EQUAL RIGHTS. END BASELINE SUPREMACY.

"So, Jenna says you're a mutant too," Margot says as she pastes CJW stickers on a banner. She looks up at Charles with sharp cat eyes, pale green and slit-pupilled; her ears are drawn to delicate points, pierced in multiple places. "Do you mind sharing what it is?"

The wording pays lip service to dim memories of registration and mutants being forced to disclose what they are; Charles sees, though, that she expects an answer. It's different when it's all mutants together.

"I'm a..." Jenna shoots him a look, frantic and speaking loud enough he doesn't need his powers to decipher it, but he decides to forge ahead anyway, "I'm a telepath."

"Oh." He has the sense of walls going up, high and made of iron, spikes and rejection and stay out stay out stay out. Margot frowns at Jenna, who blushes. "I wish you'd said that earlier."

"Why?" The air in the room is uncomfortably close, stifling.

The odd thing about those walls in Margot's mind is how easily he can see through them to the words giving shape to inchoate beliefs and assumptions. "Because not everyone is comfortable having their minds read," Margot says as she wads up the wax paper backing of the stickers to throw it away. "And because if people knew you were just in their heads, looking around, they might have an anxiety attack. Privacy is very important."

“I know,” Charles says quickly, earnestly. “I don’t really pay attention all that much, honestly. People’s minds usually just aren’t that -- “ -- interesting. “What I mean is, I don’t go looking. But sometimes I can’t help it, and I just … hear things, if people are thinking or feeling loudly.”

It's the wrong thing to say, and he knows it as soon as the words have left his mouth, but he has no way of taking them back. “Things they didn’t consent for you to hear,” Margot points out, and Charles drops his hands under the table, curling his fingers into fists against his thighs, palms sweaty.
“It’s a … thorny ethical issue, I’ll admit,” Charles tries, but Margot says, “You know, it’s a bit ableist of you to reduce your triggering other people’s anxiety to an ethical issue.” There are air quotes.

*Ableist?* Charles very nearly laughs out loud, because it’s just too rich, in this context. Margot isn’t even particularly concerned with the very people she’s talking about; she just wants to win the argument and have the last word, and what’s more, the levels of anxiety she usually experiences seem to be well within two standard deviations of the mean.

“What do you suggest I do, then?” Charles says, his irritation bringing an evenness to his tone that he’s grateful for, mother’s training carrying with it the return of his dignity as if on a silver platter. “Take suppressors?”

Margot’s planned retort goes stale in her mouth, and Charles will admit to getting a small twinge of satisfaction at that, although he feels guilty for it immediately after.

“Not necessarily,” she says, not wanting to cede his point outright. “But you do admit you have mind-reading privilege, don’t you?” And a quote, one dredged up from an online mailing list, tags along on the question’s tail: “Your rights end where ours begin.”

The guilt fades. Charles wonders what she'd do if he told her how many years he'd spent too drugged to read anyone's mind, and how many of those years he'd spent convinced he wasn't a mutant at all. Then again… in Margot's recent memory he sees her striding down Mass Ave, carefully skirting a moving pile of rag and dirt that's actually a human being, a human being holding out a trembling hand to her and trying to warn her about the End Times. The memory is painted with strokes of annoyance and disgust, *why do they even allow these people here* flickering through her mind before Margot can tuck it away, safely unexamined.

"I warned you," Jenna hisses as she slips by him to get more supplies.

"So," he says, hoping Margot will take his refusal to engage as the victory it really isn't, "since I'm new to the group, whose rights are we fighting for, exactly? Jenna gave me some information, but it was all fairly last minute."

"Everyone's," Margot says. She sidles away a bit, as if distance will help. Her own mutation is visible, so those thoughts are uppermost in her mind: mutants with physical mutations, who still suffer from the kind of abuse and neglect society has tended to visit on them, higher rates of mental illness, homelessness, poverty, restricted job opportunities. The anger is quick and visceral, although Margot's mouth only thins and her slender shoulders tense. "We're a majority-mutant group, but some humans help out. We're interested in addressing social inequality faced by all marginalized groups."

"That's why I'm interested in psychology," he tells her. "I think addressing all those issues is one way to reform the discipline, adjust it so it recognizes how mutations should challenge and redefine parameters for what's considered to be illness or disorder."

"Yeah, until you end up drinking the Kool-Aid and pathologizing everything," Margot scoffs.

The room is getting steadily more crowded, physical voices and mental voices rising up in a cacophony. Charles fights the urge to rub at his temple; already it's become a trigger point or a pressure point, activating his telepathy even if he doesn't really want to use it. "So are you planning to go into a nonprofit, then? Mutant advocacy?"

"Law school," Margot says with a flip of her hair. "And yeah."
Charles wonders what the odds are of her ending up at a nonprofit after taking out hundreds of thousands of dollars in law school loans. He doesn't say anything, but she must see some of that disbelief on his face because she goes bright red, her aura flushing with chagrin.

"Just curious," Charles says. "I suppose if someone said they wanted to go to medical school, that would also be problematic, since Western medicine has a history of precisely the same sorts of practices psychology is guilty of -- even if that person wanted to work with mutants, or underserved populations."

"Of course not," Margot growls. She shoves the extra stickers into a folder and, with a muttered comment about having to find someone named Brian to help put up the banner, stalks off.

Jenna reappears a moment later. She examines Margot's empty place and Charles's visible unhappiness. "I take it you didn't make a friend?"

There's more than a hint of I told you so in her tone. Charles sighs, too in pain and too tired to fight. "I don't understand why I'm here, if I can't be who I am," he tells her. "And why what I really am is going to be judged by someone who doesn't even understand." And who doesn't understand what a hypocrite she is, he thinks, but doesn't say.

“Margot’s a bit passionate,” Jenna says, and when she sees the look on his face, adds, “Real passionate. But I mean, can you blame her? Looking like she does, people don’t exactly treat her normal. I’d be sick of the shit, too.”

Charles finishes coloring in his last giant letter and caps his marker, setting it aside. “It felt like she just wanted to fight.”

Jenna shrugs, but at least she doesn’t tell him off for the tone argument. She steals Margot’s gluestick and glitter and starts decorating the edge of Charles’ poster. Charles watches, feeling exhausted, and wonders how much of that exhaustion is from the day and how much is sense-memory from the last time he sat around, a grown man playing with glitter and markers.

After a while, though, that seems better than just sitting here doing nothing, so he collects a sheet of stickers for himself and starts peeling off metallic stars to press onto the board, making a tiny galaxy.

Eventually, long after Charles thought she’d bring it back up, Jenna says, “You have to be patient with people. They’ll come around. Telepathy sounds scary if you don’t know much about it, and none of them know you. Once they do, they’ll be okay.” She smiles at him from across the table, resting her chin on the heel of her hand. “You’re not flashy about it, and you don’t abuse it. But it takes time for people to realize that.”

Charles attempts a weak smile and chooses to let it go. Of all the things he could think about, this seems … less important. But making that decision in the moment doesn’t mean the thoughts don’t creep up on him at night all the same, when he’s lying in bed listening to his roommate snore through the thin wall that divides them, the hum of dream-minds on every side. Is it really a violation, reading someone’s mind? It comes so naturally to him, but just because something comes naturally doesn’t mean it ought to be adopted in civilized society.

He keeps a low profile at the CJW events after that. Contrary to Jenna's predictions, Margot and the others don't seem to warm to him. Occasionally, when they're all listening to a speaker or planning their next event, their thoughts will turn to him, and Charles can see how those thoughts cover the spectrum between unease and hostility, the colors shifting between warning red and a stomach-shifting green.
It doesn't help that, one day, when they're tossing around ideas for something they vaguely refer to as awareness, that he suggests local homelessness. It may or may not be related to that memory of Margot, sidestepping a man and his battered paper cup of coins and rumpled bills.

"It's an obvious, visible problem," Charles says, "and there's got to be better ways of addressing it than simply 'raising awareness.' We're all clearly aware; the next step would be, what can we do about it that would be substantive and useful?"

"We did transience awareness last year, before you joined," Jenna begins, as if there's a schedule and Charles is suggesting moving it up. Before she can continue, Goren, another mutant, says, "Maybe we could, if we focused on mutant homelessness."

"No," Charles says, "just homelessness in general. There are so many other intersectional issues there -- "

"What, like drug addiction?" Goren asks. He shakes his head; the air seems to blur around him, a wave of heat or mirage, and a couple students edge away. "I'm not sure why we should spend time worrying about people who did it to themselves."

"Goren," Jenna says.

"I didn't know we were in the business of deciding who gets rights and who doesn't," Charles says. His headache, more or less a constant companion at these meetings now, starts up, a cruel throb just behind his left temple, where his telepathy seems to live. It's strange to localize it in that way, although he's fairly sure telepathy doesn't actually work like that. But that place behind his eye, beneath the thin plating of the temporal bone, seems to have a life of its own, and right now it's restless, a creature in a cage being poked at and pushing back against the bars.

"Are you lecturing us now?" Deirdre asks. She glances around at the others, who subtly shift towards her.

"I'm not lecturing," Charles protests, although in a way, he is, but he's too angry to be compliant. Anger is strange and fresh and bracing, after so long with emotions blunted or muffled, wrapped up tight and locked away. It's not precisely a breath of fresh air; what floods his lungs is hot and thick, like poison. "It was only an idea, and I'm trying -- "

"Maybe we should move on," Jenna says, and she's thinking just let it go at Charles as hard as she can.

"Listen to me!" Charles snaps, and finally they all do, turning their attention toward him like flowers turning faces toward the sun. Charles takes in another breath, trying to clear the poison out, and it’s only then that he notices the shock and fear underlying all their thoughts, thick and dark and pulsating, like disease, and he realizes --

"That was an accident," he says, voice quavering. He pulls his telepathy back as hard as he can, winding it up like yarn but the damage is done already -- he can see the tracks it leaves behind it, long and deep grooves that mean long-term memory, only right now it isn’t memory, not yet, it’s raw and fresh and bleeding. “I didn’t -- I didn’t know I could ….”

Even Jenna can’t meet his eye.

“I’m sorry,” is all Charles manages to get out, then, and -- “I’m … my head,” he gestures at it and doesn’t care about the confusion he receives in response, almost doesn’t notice because it’s swallowed up again so quickly by anger and resentment and distrust, Deirdre’s freckles vivid against
her bloodless face.

He goes, before he can make it any worse. Stepping outside into the sunlight is like drilling straight into his skull, the pain sudden and severe enough that he flinches bodily and has to grab onto the bricks for balance. His telepathy throbs, hot, beneath his temple, like it’s punishing him, and Charles throws up twice into garbage bins on his way to Health Services where all they’re authorized to offer him is two Excedrin Migraine and Suppressex, which Charles refuses to take on principle.

The doctor does say, “It looks like you have a prescription for Thorazine ... ? If you take one of those it should knock you right out, no trouble,” and laughs, like it’s a joke.

“That’s old,” Charles says, though his headache’s bad enough now it sounds like his voice comes from far away. “That’s an ... I’m not on that.”

“Here,” the doctor says instead, “take two Excedrin now, and two ibuprofen. In four hours, repeat. But don’t take more than four of these Excedrin in a day, and no Tylenol, you’ll destroy your liver.”

Charles staggers back to Currier House with his baggie of pills, takes all of them, and washes it down with half a bottle of vodka.

That pretty much does the trick.

*

For the last months of the school year, Jenna’d been distant, in her head if not in space. They had breakfast or coffee together when they could, she still invited him to CJW -- although those invitations were more for the sake of form than anything, when her thoughts echoed with that last debacle and finding Charles unconscious in his bed later. Charles spent the rest of spring term wishing she would end a friendship she was keeping out of loyalty rather than any belief it could really be saved, and her resolution to overcome what she saw as her own anti-telepathy bias.

Over the break, they drift, friendship fading like fabric in the summer sun even as Jenna makes him promise to call if he needs anything. Charles moves out of Currier House to a sublet in Back Bay, where it's quiet and he can think. The minds of the adults around him, when they aren't puzzled at a nineteen-year-old drifting through the neighborhood, clearly alone and clearly not one-of-them, are soothing and tedious -- and best of all, they don't know about his telepathy. If Charles weren't so tired of worrying about it, he'd spend his days dipping in and out of their minds, scooping up secrets like a raptor snatching up prey, feeling as little remorse as the bird would.

It means, when Opening Days come and Charles has to move himself back over to Currier, he exchanges quick, polite nods with Jenna, hiding behind the excuse of having arms full and too little time to move too much stuff to stop and say hello.

Charles drifts through classes, vaguely aware that he should be getting more out of this. He's at a great university, among the best and brightest, and as he walks down Quincy one day, thinking vaguely of getting tea before going to hole up in his room, all he can think of is how this place, this bustling, throbbing place, seems as illusory as anything he'd dreamed back in one of his old rooms, high and drifting on the Thorazine or the drug du jour.

_Beneath_, Charles decides, as he watches a disinterested girl idly flirt with a very interested boy. That's what's important.

At his neurologist appointment two weeks after term starts, he gets to see Dr. Krishnamurthy worry quietly about his daughter -- who doesn't want to go to medical school, who wants to go to art school
to be with her boyfriend -- while he studies Charles's most recent scans. Charles now knows, thanks to the tedium of cycling through the MRI and CT machines, that the radiologist thinks she'll be much happier if she can just lose those last ten pounds, that she still desperately misses her cat, who died last year. Charles keeps his face carefully blank as Dr. Krishnamurthy's mind tugs itself out of preoccupation as if out of a tar pit and drags itself over to Charles's tests.

"You're gaining strength," he says at last, reading Charles's reports from the ability assessment specialist. "But," he adds as he shifts over to the fMRI, "not necessarily control."

That sounds pretty accurate, Charles thinks. Instead he sits there with his hands tangled up in his lap, invisible beneath the edge of the table they're sitting at, feeling rather like he’s been brought up to the headmaster’s office -- constantly expecting a rap on the wrists and a stern reprimand.

“Have you been doing the exercises your counselor assigned to you?” Dr Krishnamurthy asks, looking up at Charles’ face at last.

“Yes,” Charles says. It’s actually true for once. These exercises have a purpose, beyond futility. He actually thinks they’ll lead to real measurable change. They’re supposed to help him become acquainted with his telepathy’s little quirks and eccentricities, allow him to master them rather than the other way around. Things, obviously, could be going better.

“Every day?”

“Yes.” This time it’s a little bit of a lie, and Dr. Krishnamurthy must know it, because he gives Charles a look and Charles says, “Almost every day.”

“You really do need to do them regularly for them to have an effect,” Dr. Krishnamurthy tells him, setting down his fMRI scan. “That’s how you build habits. And it’s not just behavioral, it’s structural change, too; every time you use your power, you activate a certain neural network in your brain to do it. The more times you activate that network, the stronger it gets. And the stronger it gets, the easier it is to access -- but, on the other hand, the harder it is to access other networks instead.” He taps Charles’ scan, over a part of the brain Charles doesn’t have a name for, because he hasn’t taken neuroscience yet. “So if you make good habits, and you practice the right way, then eventually practice makes perfect. If you practice the wrong way ….” Dr Krishnamurthy shrugs, letting Charles complete the thought for himself.

“And practicing irregularly?”

“The network gains a little strength because you practiced, but you also lost a little strength because you didn’t practice. You stay still. Or you move very slowly, one way or the other.”

Charles laces his fingers together in his lap, then unlaces them, then finally sets both hands atop the table, one palm laid over the other. “I’ve been having headaches,” he says, resisting the urge to reach up and touch his temple demonstratively. “They’re debilitating, and they usually happen when I’m overstimulated or after I use my power.”

“Ah,” the doctor says, leaning back in his chair, looking pleased with himself -- clearly he thinks this is the root cause of Charles’ poor practicing. “Yes, that can sometimes happen. They will get better as you get more control, but for the time being I’ll prescribe you some OxyContin. Try to use it only when you really have to, all right? Inasmuch as you’re trying to get more control over your telepathy, narcotics tend to reduce control. Hopefully we’ll get you to that happy medium where you can do your exercises without pain, and build up those neural networks like we talked about.”

"Right," Charles says. Dr. Krishnamurthy scribbles on his prescription pad, tears off Charles's script,
and gives it to him. Charles accepts it and thinks about chasing his migraine pills and Advil with vodka, what would happen if, the next time a headache rolls around, he did the same with the oxy.

"It's crucial that you work on your control," the doctor says, his tone bordering on preaching, and far too close to the kind of lecturing Charles had gotten from the worst of the psychs, or from Kurt. He plasters an earnest expression on his face and quietly tells Dr. Krishnamurthy that he's paying close attention; he's good at that sort of trustworthiness, enough that the doctor can trust he'll do his exercises as promised. "You've jumped up three levels over the summer, Charles. You'll be very powerful, but that power's going to be detrimental, even dangerous, if you don't know how to work with it."

"Right," Charles says again. Suddenly, the thought of doing those exercises, doing anything with his telepathy, seems like setting foot into a pit of vipers.

"The alternative is, you go back on Thorazine," Dr. Krishnamurthy continues, arching an eyebrow at Charles from behind his thick glasses. Charles goes very still, the reaction that he must have been looking for; he nods and continues, "and that is not feasible long-term, not for telepaths. Or we try you on suppressants. Psyonor or Suppresssex, either might work."

"No!" It's only with an effort that he keeps his telepathy on its leash; it fights against restraint, the fabric of Charles's control fraying with terror. "No -- no. I'll get better about the exercises. Just, no more suppressants."

"Of course," Dr. Krishnamurthy says soothingly. He leans forward, lips set in a gentle, practiced smile -- a smile that he actually feels, remembering when he'd been thirteen years old and bewildered, before he'd learned the truth. "Call me, though, if we need to adjust your current medications. And I would suggest seeing your therapist twice a week, in the short term, until you find it easier to stick to a regimen."

Charles deflates inwardly; Dr. Sawyer is cheerful and indefatigable -- and inexorable, when it comes to making Charles come to grips with his telepathy. She knows his background of course, she knows how long Charles spent believing his telepathy was hallucinations, and then how long he spent ignoring it, and to her, that means that he has to make up for lost time.

"It's a long road, Charles, but you're traveling it." Dr. Krishnamurthy stands, a signal for Charles to stand as well. His hand closes, big and warm, around Charles's cooler one, the pressure bringing with it a flood of memories and vague hunger and worries about his daughter, and genuine wishing-well for the pale boy who's watching him with exhausted eyes. "You'll get there, I promise."

* Charles does get there -- if ‘there’ is the floor of his room one year later, staring at the last Oxy at the bottom of the orange bottle. If he stares too long his vision starts to blur and he has to blink, pulling the little green pill back into focus. The headache’s back, pounding in his temple, pumping like a vestigial organ.

At last, when he doesn't think he can take it any longer, he pours the pill out of its bottle onto his sheet of tinfoil and crushes it to get rid of the time release mechanism, under the paperweight he uses for the purpose. No one comes into his room -- no one needs to question why he has a kettle but no tea, why he has a spoon but no bowl. Once the powder’s dissolved, beautiful and milky-white with its tiny island of cotton-ball fibers, he draws it up through the filter and into his rig. Rig in the hot water mug, belt around the arm -- not too tight, don’t want to bruise -- and then in, a slight prick of pain he barely even notices anymore.
Blood clouds up into his syringe like watercolors and Charles pushes down the plunger slowly … slowly ….

The best part is when it hits, an amber cloud that overtakes Charles’ entire mind and pulls him into its embrace, pain softening, then sinking away.

Charles exhales and releases the tourniquet, needle slipping out of his arm. He sets it down on the table and pushes his hand back across his face, through his hair. The contact feels -- so good. Like being loved.

At some point he slips off his chair and then lays down on his stomach with his cheek pressed against the cold wood floorboards, mesmerized by the contrast between it and his warm body. The empty bottle of bourbon is directly in his line of sight like this, which should be repulsive, but he doesn’t even care enough to close his eyes. While drunk, he does his best to pretend he’s not drunk. While high, he doesn’t care at all.

It takes fifteen minutes for Charles to decide he’s ready to concentrate again, and that’s when Charles finally drags himself up and to his desk to tap out an essay on his typewriter, squinting against the too-bright window -- he can’t hear everyone’s thoughts, like this, which is nice. His telepathy’s still there, he could use it if he wanted, but like a tool: voluntary, not inescapable.

He feels better by the time he finishes, and better still once he’s edited it and typed it back up again without the mistakes. Better enough to make it to class, even. He takes half an hour to get dressed and comb his hair just-so, layer his clothes just-right so any dishevelment is just being artfully tousled -- costuming, really, because at this point he’s not him, he’s just playing the role of Charles Xavier through a haze of pain and holding the fitful tremors at bay with a handle of vodka poured into his Nalgene.

Well, Charles thinks, perfecting a smile at himself in the mirror before he leaves -- he inherited his mother’s blue blood after all. If he didn’t know that his mother wouldn't be caught dead with it in her house, he’d say some of that blue came from curacao.

By the time he makes it to Harvard Hall, it’s back: the headache has pressed itself against his temple; he imagines the bone flexing, the subtle folds and cracks in it widening like fault lines about to rupture. The light surrounding the professor’s lectern and the glaring white of the overhead projector are like staring at the halo of an eclipse; Charles takes his Nalgene and satchel and hides in the the back, in the darkness.

Professor Martel surveys the sea of faces in front of him, his mind a vague buzz of memorized lecture and worry about how much his wife is going to ask for in their impending divorce. Charles lowers the dial on his telepathy -- although, some days, his telepathy goes to eleven, regardless of what he does -- and closes himself off as best he can to the clamor of one hundred freshman and sophomore minds. Most of them are busily diagnosing themselves with everything from bipolar to anxiety to schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder, the lists of symptoms in the DSM marching across their memories. Charles ignores those as well.

Whenever the headache threatens, or the voices get too loud, Charles takes a sip of vodka. Perversely, he’s glad he can afford the good stuff -- all that suffering paid off, in the end, literally -- and doesn’t have to suffer through bottle after bottle of Stoli, though it’s sometimes a near thing, keeping his resident tutor or housemaster from noticing.

"And now," Professor Martel drones serenely, "we need to talk about comorbidity for schizophrenia."
Oh, lovely. Charles sinks lower into his chair. He's fairly certain that Professor Martel isn't going to list "jackass stepfather" as a comorbid or contributing condition. Some of the students are starting to drift, safely away from any uncomfortable talk of drug addiction and alcoholism, the various disorders caused by the antipsychotics themselves, and from pictures of the people on the streets who talk to themselves or the air.

This, he knows, is what people think of when they think of psychosis. Raving lunatics. By which is meant: people too poor to be able to afford the medication to manage their conditions. People who lost their jobs because they got hit with an unavoidable genetic illness in the prime of their twenties, who maybe were once smart and articulate and creative -- but now all they seem is a bit simple. Worse if they're tardive dyskinetics. Might as well be human vegetables, he hears people think, always with that curl of disgust twisting round their thoughts.

No one ever thinks it could happen to them, or to anyone they love. Money, power, intelligence, virtue... those are all protective factors. Right?

“Average life expectancy,” Professor Martel says, “is reduced by twenty-five years ....”

When class ends, Charles is the first one out of his chair.

He meets Alex in Lowell House later on; Charles may or may not have telepathically nudged one of the students rooming there to let him in without a key, and spent the better part of an hour waiting in the in-suite common room with Alex’s roommate for Alex to get out of class and meander, slow as always, across the Yard and up Lowell House’s narrow staircases to slouch right past Charles as if he weren’t even sitting there, disappearing into his bedroom.

“Hey,” Charles calls after him, a little more snappishly than he means to, leaping to his feet.

“Hey what,” Alex says back, monotone as a negative schizophrenic himself; Charles heads after him, giving the roommate a look that says, Oh Alex, you know how he is, he does this all the time to assuage suspicion as he pushes the door shut behind them.

Alex spares Charles a glance, then starts … stripping off his clothes.

“What are you doing?” Charles says.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Alex tosses sweater, shirt, undershirt, onto his bed. “So? What do you want, Xavier?”

The trousers are next, Alex’s hands moving quick at the buckle of his belt, just below the flat plane of his tanned stomach and just above .... Charles swallows, and keeps his gaze steadily on Alex’s face. The last thing he needs is more rumors.

“Oxy, thirty 160s. Do you have it?”

Alex's right eyebrow bounces up. "I might. That's new stuff, high demand."

Charles’s throat is getting tighter by the second, anxiety and need squeezing the air out of him. "If you do, how much?"

The calculations run through Alex's head, the numbers fueled by greed and the picture Alex already has of him: trembly, pale-eyed sophomore, buckling under the pressure and desperate for release. "Forty-six. Hundred."

Charles snorts. Along with the numbers are pictures, of Alex passing a wad of cash off to an
oncology resident and the resident handing him two small paper bags in return, all done in a moment on a crowded bus. He wonders what Alex would do if Charles told him he could turn him, and that resident, into the authorities; somehow, that's not as important as getting the bottle Charles knows Alex has hidden in a lockbox tucked under the frame of his bed.

"Okay, fine," Alex grunts after Charles presses, just-so, on the resistant corner of his mind, the one that wants to jack the price up even higher. "Three thousand."

"Done," Charles says. He'd take the damn pills for free, but he's not that desperate yet. Instead, he hands over his own ball of hundreds, rubber-banded together, when Alex opens the bottle and counts the pills out, one through thirty.

"Nice doing business with you," Alex says. "Hand me my shirt?"

He's staring, Charles realizes, relieved that Alex hadn't asked for any additional form of payment; he's not sure he would have said no, if Alex had asked or demanded. His libido's been at a low ebb, whether it's been because of Thorazine, Suppresex, or the constant pain of his headaches -- or because he knows what kinds of things go crawling through people's hindbrains -- but if Alex had asked, and had made that a condition of the transaction, Charles might not have thought twice.

Wordlessly, he hands Alex his shirt and escapes before he has to watch Alex slip it on, the twisting, absent grace of muscle and skin. Face hot, and fighting the urge to make himself invisible, he leaves Lowell, the bottle tucked safely beneath his jacket, the plastic smooth and soothing in his sweaty palm.

The hit he’s on gets him through the night, though, and he doesn’t need more until the next morning, when he wakes up at five AM with the alcohol out of his bloodstream and electric shock feelings sending jagged little spikes through his mind, jerking his limbs like a spastic patient, the sheets damp with his own sweat. He drinks straight out of the bottle, right then and there, sitting upright with his head in his hands until the tremors still and his brain goes quiet again, until it’s just the noise of other people’s dreams and not the electrical storms of his own body trying to tell him what a fantastically stupid thing he’s doing to it.

When he has the pills, he’s okay. Even though they don’t really effect anymore if he takes them by mouth, though whether he’s more tolerant because he’s a telepath or more tolerant because he’s a fucking junkie, Charles hasn’t decided yet. He just feels … sublimely happy, when he’s high. It makes his telepathy something he can use, it doesn’t use him. And the mild euphoria he carries around might catch people’s attention, but it’s tempered by the vodka-bourbon-whiskey-Scotch-gin.

All in all, the effect is: one perfectly-normal Charles Xavier. He floats just behind that ceramic mask, inside that ceramic body, and no one’s broken it yet.

* 

Until it breaks. All on its own, apparently.

The sequence of events leading up to it is where Charles gets hazy. His counselor said he was doing well, and didn’t need to see her anymore. He walked out her door with ‘in full remission’ on his chart next to ‘major depressive disorder’ and ‘psychosis NOS’ and felt like he was stepping out into a dream. Discharged. Go, be happy, frolic. You are Just Fine. You are Perfectly Normal now.

All better. No more delusions, no more fits of lethargy and self-pity. ‘Telepathy well-controlled,’ the counselor wrote, which is is: strapped down and held in tight by all the chemicals Charles can throw at it.
Only, that didn’t last. Soon the pills weren’t working like they used to. Time to level up, he always thought, as if this were some particularly fucked up video game where instead of shrooms you just graduated to full-on opiates, right before shooting himself full of the shit. They don’t make pills stronger than 160s, so he just does 160s more often. The part that should have been rock bottom was when Alex told him after Charles’ second visit that week it’d be cheaper if he just bought heroin. The part that really should have been rock bottom was briefly and accidentally convincing his professor the professor was the historical figure he was lecturing on (even worse: that figure was George Wallace) and then trying to undo the damage so effectively he woke up the next morning with a face and term paper full of his own vomit.

That’s not rock bottom, though. Through the summer after his junior year he drifts slowly, vaguely, inevitably down. Looking back, he'll see it as a steep descent, the bottom dropping out in such a way that he should have felt it, like going into freefall; in the moment, he can't feel anything except the persistent beat of It will be okay if you can take your pills and the comforting cocoon of the high. The collection of scars and scabs in the crook of his elbow doesn't mean anything; he can ignore it when he pulls on his sweaters (more and more layers these days between his skin and the air and sun, between himself and everyone else). He researches as relentlessly as he can in the slim, productive spaces between pain and blankness, filling up time the only way he can in the absence of anything else. Research is its own high, carrying him forward when the rest of the world threatens to grind to a halt.

"You'll need to start thinking about your plans for next year," his advisor says at the beginning of his senior year. Charles nods; she sees the perfect, attentive student and research assistant, one of her best. She adds, gently, "We should have talked about this last spring, at the workshop on graduate studies, but you were out sick."

"I'm sorry," Charles says. "I'll -- I've got a list of prospective programs I think would be a good fit. Neuroscience."

The good thing about telepathy is that it makes it easier to sell the bullshit, especially when people want to believe it and are willing to buy. Dr. Brabant smiles understandingly. Inside, Charles watches the future open up, real and terrifying and empty.

He goes back to his apartment -- he's out of Currier House, on his own, a place quiet enough he doesn't wake up with other people's dreams in his head, a place isolated from the bustle of the school and the lives the other students have -- and empties his last bottle onto the marble of his kitchen counter. The ritual isn't as comforting as it was; now it's something to speed through clumsily, fingers slipping on tourniquet, syringe, splashing water all over.

How many pills end up in his rig, he's not sure; it might not even be all that's left. The past several months, the high's been gentle and hazy, enough to divorce him from the rest of the world, but now it hits him light a freight train -- like a light seen in the corner of his eye, and when he turns to look, it swallows him whole.

What happens next, he doesn't find out until later.

He finds out on the far side of a haze of cramping like his body is trying to break in half, and vomiting up everything in him until there's nothing left but bile, and when that's gone, blood that splashes the bedpan and the bedclothes. There are hands, he knows, and minds that are implacable no matter how he begs and shivers and finally tries to make them give him what he needs; he claws at them, clumsy, frantic, until one mind-owner, their body a nauseating swirl of flesh and sweat, calls for an injection.

Afterward, after an age he can't recall clearly except as a nightmare, he stares at the ceiling of his
hospital room. It's blank, indifferent white, pale next to the clinical tan and eggshell of the plastic monitors and the metal and LED lights that flash in time with the beeping of his heart monitor. His forehead and temples itch, and there's a delicate pinching at the base of his skull, all familiar. The PsiEEG scratches along, the peaks and valleys shallow, nearly a straight line. No wonder everything seems far away, the voices in the hospital coming to him as if from a great distance instead of just outside his door.

A harried, nervous intern with blue hair and three dexterous fingers on each hand comes in to check his vitals and ask him if he needs water. Charles's mouth tastes like a dry sewer; he's afraid of what it will make the water taste like.

"Orange juice?" the intern, Dinesh, offers instead.

"Sure," Charles says indifferently. His voice is hollowed out, as if he's puked out his very self along with all his organs. "What happened?"

Dinesh winces. "You'll have to ask the attending, or the ER docs who treated you."

Charles thinks he has a pretty good idea, though, and if the way Dinesh looks at him is anything to go by, he’s right on target. Charles struggles to push himself up on arms still shaking from before and Dinesh says, “Here, let me help,” pushing the button at the side of the bed to levy it and him slowly up to a seated position.

The change in posture sends a rush of blood down from Charles’ head, though, and for a moment he lies there -- tense against the mattress, fighting to focus his gaze again -- before the feeling passes. God. He’s never felt so fragile, like his bones are twigs to be crushed beneath the weight of his own flesh. His hands twist sweaty fists in the sheets.

“Okay?” Dinesh says, and Charles nods queasily. “This is just here if you need to vomit,” Dinesh adds, pointing to a pink plastic kidney-shaped dish on the tray table next to Charles' bed.

That Dinesh finds that so very likely doesn’t bode well for Charles’ chances, he thinks, and another wet rush of nausea confirms that suspicion. He battles it down and takes the cup of orange juice Dinesh pours him instead, just holding it between his hands for now, nails picking at the styrofoam. “Thanks,” he croaks. He can’t explain the hot throb of gratitude he feels for the young intern right now; maybe in the absence of a telepathic presence to ground himself Charles has just -- imprinted, on the nearest available thing.

“Just doing my job. The nurse will be in in a minute to check your vitals.” Dinesh lingers at the foot of his bed a moment, like he wants to say something. Normally Charles would check to see what that was, but Dinesh’s mind is just a soft murmur and mostly inaudible. It retreats when Dinesh does, vanishing out the door and into the bright fluorescent hall where it becomes indistinguishable from all the others.

Left to his own devices, Charles tries a tiny sip of the orange juice. His stomach rebels on principle and he gags, swallowing against the bile until he forces it to stay down. The second sip is a mild improvement, but the whole time Charles is fighting the quiver in his gut, an unignorable tremor that threatens to spread and take him over entirely again. It occurs to him that he’s worse than his mother, which is no mean feat. Sharon might be many things, but she’s never put herself in a hospital bed. Well. If there’s one thing Charles is good at, it’s consistently improving on the family vices.

The nurse comes in to take his blood pressure and temperature after a while, but she doesn’t speak to him. He just provides the arm and the measurements she jots down on a scrap of white paper before rolling the machine back out into the hall, off to other patients. Patients here because they’re actually
sick. Patients who didn’t do this to themselves.

Rather than face that thought, Charles counts the steady clicks of the flowmeter until he falls asleep.

When he wakes up, the attending’s checking his pulse and the IV embedded uncomfortably in Charles's arm, busywork to fill the time until Charles comes around. The attending's eyes are pale green and kind, which Charles fears more than annoyance or condemnation.

"How are you feeling?" the attending asks.

Something in that face, lined and uncompromising despite the kindness, compels Charles to answer honestly. "Terrible."

"Narcan will do that to you," the attending says. Charles forces himself to focus on the name stitched into the doctor's lab coat and on the ID card clipped to his lapel. Dr. Carnahan, Internal Medicine. Dr. Carnahan leans against the rails at the foot of Charles's bed. "You gave your entire street a scare."

Charles frowns. He'd been alone in his apartment; it's not like he'd invited people to come and watch.

"Your next-door neighbor started feeling faint," Dr. Carnahan says with terrifying gentleness. "Dizzy, sleepy. She thought it was a gas leak, so she called 911. As it turns out, other people around the block -- a one-block radius -- were experiencing the same symptoms."

The heart rate monitor beeps faster. Charles swallows. "That was -- "

"Firemen went door-to-door to evacuate the neighborhood while they searched for the source of the leak. They found you unconscious in your townhouse." Charles looks away, although Dr. Carnahan's face has no judgment on it. "You were very close."

To dying, Dr. Carnahan adds silently. He only says, "Paramedics saw the rest of your prescriptions -- not just the oxy -- on the sideboard when they were transporting you out and worked out that you were a telepath. You're in the Internal Medicine, Mutant Subspecialty wing at Mass General."

"What about," Charles swallows, "what about everyone else? Are they okay?"

"Vicarious overdose effects were fading by the time the evacuation finished," Dr. Carnahan says. He moves around to Charles's right side; a penlight flashes in Charles's eyes, blinding, but a headache doesn't follow; Charles feels stretched, attenuated, waiting for the pain to strike. Dr. Carnahan's thumb rubs under his eye, his mind filling with dissatisfaction at the dark smudges under them. Vitamin deficiencies, exhaustion. "Everyone's fine, except for you."

Charles’ lips feel very dry, almost chapped; wetting them doesn’t help. He can’t even summon the energy to feel as embarrassed as he knows he should, thinking about people finding him like that, on the floor with a needle stuck in his arm. It should be shameful.

Instead Charles just asks, the selfish question -- “My telepathy …?”

Penlight clicks off. “We had to put you on Suppressex. A temporary measure, just to keep you from sharing your symptoms with the other patients.” He doesn’t bring up Charles’ attempts to influence the staff, even though Charles knows he must know. Dr. Carnahan reaches for a rolling chair and draws it closer to Charles’ bedside, sitting down. He’s a tall man, Charles realizes, his limbs folded up in ungainly fashion just to bring him down to the seat’s level.
“I have to ask you a few questions,” Dr. Carnahan says, though even this is without the pointed edge to it Charles expects. “I need you to answer them honestly so that we can best treat you. Nothing you share will be shared with the police. All right?”

Charles hadn’t even thought about the fact that all this is illegal. Not once, not even when he passed the money over to Alex and received drugs in exchange, did it occur to him that he was the criminal. Not some dark shadowy figure in a Southie alley. Him, Charles Xavier, misdemeanor possession.

“All right,” he says.

“Good. Can you tell me your name?”

“Charles … Charles Xavier.”

“Do you know what year it is?”

“Um. 1997?” Charles reaches for the orange juice again and takes a sip, even though it’s gone warm. At least he can stomach it.

Dr. Carnahan settles his wrists on his knees, long fingers clasped between them. “Now Charles, I need you to tell me, did you do this with the intent of harming yourself?”

Charles wants to laugh, make it sound like a ridiculous question, but he can’t find that in himself. Swallowing is like swallowing against sandpaper. “No. Just,” the pain, only it isn’t just the pain, hasn’t been for a long time. He blinks and there’s a sudden heat stabbing pinpricks at the backs of his eyes, a tightness drawing up quick behind his brow. He turns his gaze away, just long enough to get ahold of himself. “No, that wasn’t it,” he says instead, his voice stronger now.

“All right,” Dr. Carnahan says. He believes him, which is more than Charles had any right to hope for, he knows that much. “I know you’re feeling better now, but we’re going to have to keep you here a while longer regardless, just to make sure you’re stabilized. And Charles … when you came in, your blood alcohol content was at 0.16. You look like you’re in college, so maybe this was just a few drinks after class,” he doesn’t say, in the middle of the day, “but if you drink often, and then you stop drinking suddenly, sometimes you can get some nasty side effects.”

One of the curses of his telepathy -- a secondary mutation, his neuro had said -- is an extremely retentive memory. Alcohol can blur the edges of it, but it can't completely erase how much money Charles has spent on vodka, whiskey, Jaeger, everything from the high-end to the swill in a back-street rathskeller. The line of bottles marches back to his second year.

"What kind of side effects?" he asks.

At least Dr. Carnahan doesn't press for an explicit admission. "To start off, more of what you’ve been experiencing. Nausea, tremors, cold sweat… But then it can progress to hallucinations. Late-stage, seizures and delirium tremens: more hallucinations and nausea, anxiety, fever, racing heart, low blood pressure.” He touches Charles's hand, which has started to tremble. "The symptoms will peak between four and five days. You'll need to stay on Suppressex for the duration; your case files from your neurologist say you're very powerful. Theta-level when you were first tested; you're Sigma now. Have you been having problems controlling your telepathy?"

Charles very seriously considers lying, imagining the look on Dr. Krishnamurthy's face. "Yes."

"it's not unusual with rapid gains in strength," Dr. Carnahan says. "But medicating as a way to achieve control is not a good coping mechanism."
You don't fucking say, Charles thinks with a burst of hostility and heat. At least the Suppresex means that thought stays in his head. He flushes, ashamed -- or is that the fever Dr. Carnahan was talking about? "I couldn't do it on my own," Charles confesses, speaking softly, urgently. Now that he remembers properly, he remembers that alcohol withdrawal can kill him. It's quite likely, given he's already suffered through opiate withdrawal and years before that of too many drugs, too much work, too little care. "I was failing, I couldn't stop it."

"Your telepathy," Dr. Carnahan says.

Charles nods. He bites his lip and tells himself fiercely that he won't cry, even if it's already too late; a tear hovers at the corner of one eye, threatening.

“It’s something that takes time,” Dr. Carnahan says. “Usually children learn to deal with the advent of their telepathy as they’re growing up, but I understand from your neurologist why that was … impossible, for you. But you can’t expect yourself to immediately control your powers flawlessly when you have only had a few years to even try.”

It feels like he’s missing the point, by Charles’ estimation: it’s not that Charles needs to control his powers so quickly. It’s that when he doesn’t -- when he doesn’t, people get hurt. And until he can get himself reined in, that won’t change.

“All right, here’s the plan,” Dr. Carnahan says when Charles doesn’t reply again, reaching for his clipboard -- Charles’ chart -- and setting it on his knees. “I’m going to put you on some fluids and electrolytes. And we’re going to do something called symptom-mediated treatment. If you have three symptoms of alcohol withdrawal, we will start treating you with small doses of benzodiazepines. Withdrawal shouldn’t last more than a few days, and we’ll keep you here until the worst of it is passed. Every symptom you have past those first three, we’ll give you a little push of Ativan.”

“Why?” Charles asks, sniffing, not caring now about the fact the noise betrays how close he’d been to crying. “I’ve never taken those.”

“Benzodiazepine withdrawal and alcohol withdrawal are essentially the same process, since both drugs bind to GABAergic receptors in the brain. Your symptoms will be in response to your brain, which has stopped its production of the GABA neurotransmitter because those receptors have been binding ethanol instead, experiencing a deficit of GABA at those sites. Eventually your body will take over homeostatically and you’ll be back to making your own chemicals. But until then, we can push benzodiazepines which will bind temporarily to those same receptors and decrease your symptoms.”

Any other doctor might have talked down to Charles, shortening his words and description as if speaking to a particularly slow child -- but Dr Carnahan has seen his chart, knows Charles is studying neuroscience. So he expects him to keep up. It’s … gratifying, being seen as an adult for once.

“That said,” Dr. Carnahan lifts a finger in warning, “you have to promise me you won’t go mixing benzos with alcohol at home. They each enhance the CNS-depressing effects of the other and make it that much easier to overdose. And if benzodiazepine and alcohol withdrawal syndromes are the only two life-threatening withdrawal syndromes … you can imagine what it’d be like trying to come off both at the same time.”

"Yeah," Charles says. There's something oddly appealing, though, about trying. The space of time after his overdose is empty, as empty as if he'd stopped existing, perfect and quiet until he'd been yanked out of it and into consciousness again.
"What about," he says, when he sees Dr. Carnahan preparing to stand up, "the telepathy?"

"You'll stay on Suppressex for the duration," Dr. Carnahan says. "Like the rest of you, the opiate addiction has it off-balance. You can't cope with it now." As if, Charles thinks, he ever could. "We'll wean you off that slowly once you've navigated through withdrawal; you might want to talk to your neurologist or psychiatrist about staying on it until you've stabilized."

Charles can't explain why he wants off the Suppressex, when his telepathy has done nothing but cause him problems. *When you've avoided having to manage it,* he thinks caustically. It's the principle of the thing, he supposes, which is a terrible reason to do anything.

"Rethinking your relationship with your abilities is something you'll have to take up after you're discharged and in recovery," Dr. Carnahan says.

There's nothing to say to that, really, so Charles watches as Dr. Carnahan makes a few last notes and gets up to put Charles's chart back at the foot of his bed. He moves quietly; even without his telepathy, Charles can tell he's a quiet person, the sort who moves with no fuss or bother, neatly contained within himself.

"Are you a telepath too?" he asks.

"Empath," Dr. Carnahan says, his thin, lined mouth quirking upward. "Not very strong, but enough that it was a headache -- literally -- growing up. It did get better, although I imagine you're tired of people telling you that."

"People leave me alone," Charles says. He means it to sound belligerent, but it really ends up sounding pathetic and lonely. He adds, "I get that from my psych a lot."

"Anti-psionic bias can make it hard to ask for help." Dr. Carnahan tucks his hands neatly into the pockets of his lab coat. Now that Charles is looking, and can control what little remains of his attenuated telepathy, he can sense the subtle difference that always follows mutants like auras or shadows, the special awareness Dr. Carnahan has of the world. He's never considered that a good or special thing before, but it is now. "I hope you'll ask, next time."

"I'll try," Charles says.

Dr. Carnahan leaves a few minutes later, with a last comforting smile and a promise that Charles will get through this.

When Kurt appears by Charles's bedside that night, a nightmare looming in the half-dark of his room, Charles isn't so sure.

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When Charles leaves the hospital, on the other side of four days of trembling, vomiting, seizures, and the reality-twisting sight of his hallucinations -- mostly visual and mostly Kurt, at that, Kurt and the counselors from camp with their mocking smiles -- Dr. Carnahan hands him the information for the local Narcotics Anonymous and makes him promise he'll go. Charles isn't so sure he'll fit in there with all the others, people who have real reasons to use, who aren't … rich, privileged Harvard students with their lives set out for them. But he says the words anyway and packs the flyers into his satchel with all the rest.

It's uncanny, walking into his townhouse now and knowing what happened the last time he was here, standing in this kitchen -- imagining how they must have found him. Someone's cleaned away the needle and spoon, but his bottle of Oxy is still on the counter with his other pills, cap tightly
screwed on.

Charles goes straight for it, opening it up and pouring the entire contents down the sink, flipping on the faucet and then the garbage disposal just to make sure they’re entirely gone, the disposal grinding angrily around nothing but water. It’s surprisingly easy -- no part of him rebels against it, or against throwing the empty bottle into trash and taking it out to the curb.

He pours out all his alcohol, too: the stuff downstairs in the liquor cabinet, but also what he’s hidden under the bathroom sink, stuffed into a slit in his mattress, in the dryer, behind his bookshelf, and even the little bottle of Patrón he’d secreted away at the bottom of a box of laxatives. The sight of his recycling box full of all those empty bottles is simultaneously vindicating and staggering. To any sane person, Charles thinks, it would look like enough bottles to have refreshed more than one frat party. Possibly more than two.

Once he goes back inside, though, he doesn’t quite know what to do with himself without the drive to clean out all the paraphernalia of his past life. There’s just him. Before, he liked this house for its size: enough room for all his books, and for a dog if he ever decided to adopt one. Now, he just feels like the last dried up raisin rattling around in its box, aimless.

He showers and changes into fresh clothes, then sits down on the sofa and tries to sit through an episode of Friends. He can’t quite get into it, though; the jokes all fall flat, and Charles is left with the distinct sense of peering in through a window into the kind of life he’s never allowed to have for his own.

Everything’s flat. He makes crackers and apple sauce for dinner; the saltines are stale, the apple sauce nothing more than a collection of chemicals that sits wetly on his tongue and slides down his throat in a cold lump. Remembering Dr. Carnahan’s advice, he chokes it all down; disregarding Dr. Carnahan’s advice, he throws it all up barely an hour later, and sits hunched over the toilet with a cold sweat rising on the back of his neck.

Maybe, the thought comes to him like a soft, reassuring voice, he should just take one more dose. He's got to have some pills around here somewhere, three, two, even one would be fine -- something to fill the space and time and let him get through this first night. There's a pleasing symmetry to the possibility of starting fresh tomorrow, a new morning, a new life; taking just one pill won't mean he's failed.

He has to tear apart his bathroom and bedroom until he remembers that he has a baggie of pills stashed behind some books in his wall unit, reserves in case his bottle ran out and he couldn't get to Alex right away. They're tucked away on a shelf devoted to theory of mind and memory, a not-so-subtle joke that still makes him laugh. He's got a spare syringe there as well, and as for the rest, well, the paramedics didn't confiscate all his spoons and they could hardly have taken every heavy object in the house.

So it's easy, muscle-memory easy, to crush the pills, mix them, suck the liquid up into the syringe. He wraps the tourniquet around his arm and waits for the vein to rise, his pulse throbbing against the taut skin as his heart quiets. The prick of the needle sliding in is familiar, a moment of pain and then the heavy fullness of the solution pushing into his bloodstream, the plunger pressing down and down until there's nothing left.

Nothing left is his first thought when he wakes up in the morning with a vicious migraine and his cheek pressed against the floor of his kitchen and more vomit drying in hideous patterns on the tile and under his cheek. Charles manages to roll away from it, tastes old acid in the back of his throat, and wonders if there's any bourbon or vodka he'd missed, something to clean the taste away.
He listens distractedly for pounding on the door, or the pounding of feet coming through the hall, until he remembers that he's still on the Suppressex. Idly, he wonders what would happen if he crushed up some of those and shot up with them. Could he get high? He's never thought about the possibilities of mutation-suppressing drugs before. Maybe his brain would just fold up and stop, maybe whatever mechanism that allows the drug to suppress his telepathy might suppress other things -- other neurosciencey things. He laughs.

*You're thinking about using your Suppressex to get high while you've got puke stuck to your face.*

It’s enough to get him up off the floor, anyway, to rinse off his face and swish his mouth out with water. Cleaning up the vomit off the floor is nearly enough to make him puke all over again, but he manages it, throwing the soggy paper towels into the wastebasket after. He considers taking one of the Oxy orally for his migraine, before remembering there’s no point, he’s too tolerant of the drug for that to be any good at all, and even if he took it now it’s time-release, it’d take forever for him to feel it.

He needs a plan.

First things first -- Charles goes outside, sunglasses firmly on the bridge of his nose to block out the glare of light, and walks up the street and past the Public Gardens with the young families with children and the tourists and the Emerson kids already out studying with books on the lawn in the Common. There’s a liquor shop in Beacon Hill where he stocks up on Johnny Walker and Grey Goose -- why drink if you won’t drink the good stuff? -- and carries it back home in a crumply paper bag.

It strikes him that he should at least make a pretense at breakfast first, so he eats half an apple before he starts drinking. He does it almost in a daze, drinks and then crushes up another two pills and hovers over the kettle while it heats up, vodka clutched in one hand, sweaty fingers slippery on the glass.

He’s run out of room on his arm now, and one of the track marks looks to be infected -- it’s oozing a little blossom of pus, the skin around it looking green, his vein bruised and streaking nearly down to his wrist. So when he fills up his rig he tries the other arm instead. It’s awkward, his left hand clumsy; he misses the vein three times before he gets it right and manages to suck blood up into the syringe before he pushes down the plunger.

Only two pills means he stays mostly lucid this time, or at least until he drowns that lucidity in the contents of his bottle.

He doesn’t remember much about the rest of the day, just a haze of puking in the bathroom again and lying on his couch, dully staring at the television playing Cheers reruns and at one point at least making an effort on his Neurobiology classwork before his attention fractures too severely to focus. He wakes up at six-thirty when his alarm goes off, ringing piercingly loud right in his ear. The sun's already half-set, casting the townhouse into a dim blue light as Charles struggles to push himself upright against the sway of his own intoxication, scrabbling to turn the shrieking alarm off and then for the dayplanner he'd left folded next to it.

*Narcotics Anonymous Meeting, 7:00, 178 Tremont St. 3rd flr*

Shit. He collapses back into the pillows. It's probably terrible form to show up at the tail end of a high and reeking of alcohol. NA meets every week, same location according to the flyer Dr. Carnahan had given him. He can go next week; he'll have to remember to give himself a day to look like he hasn't just finished chasing his pills with vodka, cranberry juice for vitamins and minerals.
Feeling virtuous, he enters the next week's meeting into his calendar and goes back to sleep.

He sleeps through his Neurobiology lecture and wakes up halfway through his Cognitive Neuroscience class. His left arm throbs, warmer than the rest of him, which hovers between hot and cold, flashes of heat or ice coming one after another. Outside, through his mostly-shut blinds, the world is bright and moving into the afternoon, and despite having slept for nearly sixteen hours, Charles's body is wrung dry with exhaustion.

When he finally drags himself into the bathroom to piss and then clean the worst of the night out of his mouth, he sees himself in the mirror.

The infection in his arm is visible, mottled red following the track of his vein down to his wrist, the scab at the injection site cracked and oozing. His own eyes stare back at him, lifeless, dark circles under them and the rest of his face pale. He's gaunt, and he realizes with a sort of detached interest that he's barely eaten at all the past week, and what he has eaten has ended up in the toilet more often than not. Has he even kept anything down other than the liquor?

You're an addict, he thinks at his reflection, or maybe his reflection thinks it at him. Charles fumbles for the mind belonging to the boy in the glass, but can't get a hold of it, needs far too long to remember that he's at least managed to keep taking his Suppressex and the boy in the glass is him -- a boy who doesn't have a mind, who's made up of painkillers and alcohol and nothing else.

Nothing. This is his life, narrowed down to a townhouse and the reality of the routine of crushing pills, mixing them, shooting them up, drinking. Everything else is the hallucination, from eating to the neuroscience student working his way to graduate school and greatness.

That's a delusion. Delusion of grandeur -- he isn’t great, never will be. That’s the illness talking.

“Fuck you,” Charles says out loud, and watches the skin shift over the bones of the face in the mirror, morbid and terrifying. He can tell just by looking in his own eyes there’s nothing in there. They sucked out his soul in the hospital with their needles and EEGs. They’re keeping it in a jar with his telepathy because they think he’s dangerous.

The thought rattles up inside Charles and he turns away from the mirror, sinking down to his knees and then slumping back against the wall. How would he ever know -- if they took it away forever, how would he know? He could be anything, anyone now. His hands shake when he presses their heels against his eyes and breathes in a heavy, choking gulp of air. He can feel that place inside him that used to be his soul, a gaping black pit sucking the rest of him down into its horrible emptiness, and soon it’ll consume him entirely.

They took it. They took it --

He’s vaguely aware of himself stumbling back out into his bedroom and scrabbling for his phone on the bed, dialing the number of the hospital when he finds it in the phone book. The operator answers, “Massachusetts General Hospital, how may I help you?”

“I want it back,” Charles says, fist clenching in the bedclothes. “Tell them I want it back.”

“Uh, tell who you want what?”

“You know what!” His voice sounds high and pitchy even to his own ears and he hunches forward, blocking the spinning room out with his arms bent up at the elbows, caging his head in. “Please, tell them I’m sorry, I won’t do it again, I’m not dangerous, please -- “

“Sir, if you can’t tell me what department you need to be transferred to, I’m not sure how I can help
you.” The woman on the other end of the phone sounds entirely dubious of him, which makes sense, Charles is too.

“The people, the doctors, they took it -- they took my soul, tell them ... tell them I won’t let them get away with this. I know people.”

“Yeah … look, I’m just gonna transfer to Psychiatry, all right, honey? Please hold.”

But Charles slams the phone down before anyone can pick up and sits there horrified with himself, both hands clasped around his cell with his nails digging in against the black plastic. Oh god, he’s … he’s doing it again. He laughs out loud, the noise loud and crazed-seeming. He might as well be crazy. He does a damn good job of acting otherwise. Sometimes he’s not convinced they weren’t right back at the camp, in the institutions. Maybe it’s everyone else who was wrong about it, maybe he’s just … both. Not practiced behavior, not old habits driving him round in the same mental circles -- how many times does he have to give himself his own damn insanities before he just counts as outright insane? Practice perfect enough times and before you know it, you’re not practicing anymore, you’re just perfect.

Heat shivers through him. Is that the hot flashes Dr. Carnahan was warning him about, or is it the infection spreading in his blood? He studies the mottled red tracery across his arm, the vein like a poisoned river.

When he calls the hospital again, he remembers to be perfect and asks the operator for Internal Medicine. The charge nurse answers, a voice Charles remembers vaguely from the minutes he'd spent hovering at the discharge desk waiting for instructions. He asks for Dr. Carnahan, and in a softer, pathetic voice, adds that it's an emergency.

The nurse sighs and breaks into his stammering. "What's your name? Are you a patient?"

"I was," Charles admits. "Um, Charles Xavier." Do you mean you were Charles Xavier?

"Hold, please." Before Charles can say anything, the line switches over to tinny classical music.

Charles sits and sweats and shivers in silence, clinging to the electric squawk of violins and the belief that Dr. Carnahan will eventually pick up. The minds of the people in the houses on either side of them drift like ghosts around the periphery of his awareness, there but intangible, occasional shocks of emotion or clearly-articulated thought that make his heart leap in his chest and his nerves itch with anxiety. His Suppressex is back downstairs along with most of the alcohol and all of the oxy he has left, and Charles doesn't know if he can make it down without killing himself.

"Charles?” Dr. Carnahan's voice is dead, the way everything is dead.

"Why did you do it?" Charles asks. His hand tightens around his phone, cheap plastic and metal that creaks.

"Charles, it sounds like you're having delusions," Dr. Carnahan says. The tone is soothing, but there's no reality to it; Charles remembers that same voice talking to him in the hospital, telling him it would be all right, while Dr. Carnahan methodically stripped everything away from him. "Can you tell me if you've taken any medications other than the ones I gave you?"

"Not until you tell me what you did with my telepathy, you bastard," Charles hisses. He reminds himself this is not perfect, this is definitely unhinged, but he doesn't care. "I want it back, I want myself back."

"And you can have it back," Dr. Carnahan says, still calm. "When you come in to the hospital so I
can check you out, and we can make sure you're well enough so you can have your telepathy again.”

Charles laughs out loud, manic. “I’m not falling for that trick! Do you think I’m stupid? You want to lock me up and gag me and keep me out of sight. That’s what they do to crazy people. Isn’t it? Isn’t it?”

A beat, and then Dr. Carnahan says, “No one thinks you’re stupid, Charles, and no one wants to keep you out of sight. I am concerned, however, that you’re having this reaction. The withdrawal symptoms should be mostly over by this point. I’d like to see you in clinic so we can make sure there isn’t something else going on.”

“You think I’m crazy,” Charles accuses.

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you were thinking it! I’m not. Everybody said so. I’m not anymore.” He curls his hand into a fist of the duvet, watching the fabric wrinkle up around his fingers. “Give me my telepathy back and I’ll prove it to you.”

“How can I give it back if you won’t let me see you?” Dr. Carnahan asks, placid as the surface of a lake.

“I’m not psychotic.”

“Maybe not,” Dr. Carnahan allows. “But I can’t make that kind of determination over the phone, Charles. It’s entirely possible something else is causing this episode. A side effect of one of your medications, or a stress reaction. You have to let me try and help you.”

Charles sobs, pressing the heel of one hand up against his eyes as he screws them both shut, blotting out the world. He hates this. He hates how he always comes back to this, like a dog who only knows one trick. He can’t stand thinking that maybe the old doctors were right the first time. That the past four years of normalcy have been some horrible fluke, or the psychosis was buried under the weight of all that alcohol, all those pills. That he’ll claw his way back up to reality and find that he isn’t a healthy telepath at all, that there’s a sickness that runs through his veins and in his genes, one he can’t escape forever.

"If you let me, I can help you," Dr. Carnahan says. "We can make sure you're not psychotic, and we address whatever is wrong so we can get you off your Suppressex as soon as possible." His tone offers hope, which Charles desperately wants and fears. "That's what some of this might be, Charles, a bad reaction to the drugs suppressing your telepathy."

It's such a reassuring explanation, and Charles wants to believe it with a hunger that's almost shocking in how visceral it is, as if his entire body is leaning into the phone, chasing after Dr. Carnahan's promises. He scrubs the tears and snot from his nose and upper lip. "Do you swear?"

"I promise," Dr. Carnahan says. "I'm going to hang up and call the ambulance for you, Charles, but before I do that, can you tell me what you took last? The paramedics will need to know."

Charles tries to remember. He's tempted to lie, not wanting to disappoint Dr. Carnahan, but he'll find out anyway the second Charles's bloodwork gets back, stuffed full of opiates and alcohol.

When he admits his failure, Dr. Carnahan only says, "Thank you, Charles. When did you last take anything?"

"I don't know," Charles admits. The numbers on the clock mean nothing.
"Okay, I'm going to hang up now, Charles. The paramedics will be there soon, and we'll get this straightened out, all right?"

It's not all right, but Charles says it is.

The next thing he says to Dr. Carnahan is when he's on the gurney, strapped down so he can't claw the IV out of his arm, smelling of Bactine and antiseptic. "You're disappointed in me." He doesn't need his telepathy to see the tiredness of Dr. Carnahan's eyes, to know that Dr. Carnahan is dismayed at seeing Charles arrive in much worse shape than when he left -- dismayed, but not surprised.

“I think it’s very hard to stay clean the first time you try to quit using,” Dr. Carnahan says. “Less than one in five people manage to stay sober after they get out of their first rehab program, and this wasn’t even that.”

It sounds hopeless, to hear him put it like that -- that even if Charles throws everything away, throws grad school away, he still only has a twenty percent chance of making it work in rehab.

Dr. Carnahan must catch some of that from his emotions because he says, corrects, “I think addiction is a terrible disease. But I also know that most people do eventually recover. Three out of four people make it, and the statistics say that if you’re still sober at four years, you’re likely to stay that way forever.” He reaches down and squeezes Charles’ shoulder, says, “It’s the getting there that’s the hard part.”

This time Charles is admitted straight to Psychiatry. There’s nothing medically wrong with him, after all. Whatever it is, is all in his head. “I’m signed on to consult,” Dr. Carnahan reassures him. “You’ll see me every day. I promise you we’ll figure this out together. All right?”

Those words mean little at first -- at least, when Charles is, for what feels like the hundredth time, sitting dazed on an ancient sofa in a too-clean day room, watching the girl across from him pick at her self-injury scabs and an obese black man mumble to himself about going fishing, gotta go fishing. He wishes, so desperately, he could say he doesn’t belong here. And yet.

And yet. He can’t keep living like this, either.

Charles stays, in the end, for five days. On the fourth day he meets with Dr. Carnahan, the attending psychiatrist Dr. Gilbert, and his psychologist Dr. Kingston, who pushes a handful of flyers across the formica tabletop.

“We don’t feel safe discharging you to your home,” Dr. Kingston says. “We’d like you to consider one of these rehabilitation options. There are a lot of very good programs for addiction nowadays.”

“I can do it myself,” Charles argues, although he’s not even sure he believes that.

“You need round the clock care,” Dr. Kingston starts, but Dr. Carnahan interrupts her, his voice as low and familiar as always, “You don’t have to do it yourself, Charles. You don’t have to do this alone.”

Every time someone's tried to help him, Charles has wished he'd been left alone. Better having delusions in peace and quiet than crowded in with other people with the same tenuous grasp on reality. "You're saying that I'm crazy," he says accusingly.

"We're saying you have an addiction," Dr. Kingston says, and Dr. Gilbert adds, a bit more conciliatingly, "The three of us have talked, and we've reviewed Dr. Krishnamurthy's notes, as well as the case notes from your Harvard counselor. We don't think you're psychotic. We think it's
depression with psychotic features, exacerbated by your drug and alcohol use."

"Depression," Charles says flatly. He isn't fucking depressed.

"I think you're very, very good at talking yourself into believing that you're schizophrenic or psychotic," Dr. Carnahan says. He leans forward a little, the way he would when he'd sit with Charles in the ward to keep him company. "It's a catastrophic response, an overreaction, to stress; you can't believe that the old diagnoses were wrong, or were outright lies. And you know just enough about the psychology and neuroscience of psychosis to talk yourself into believing that what you're experiencing is psychosis, and not telepathy that you can't control."

Charles thinks back over the past few years, the insidious path that had taken him from trying to control his telepathy to headaches to preferring to believe that his telepathy was fine but it was his mind that was broken. It's long and twisting, with its own terrible logic that leads it to an inevitable spiral.

"You need to understand," Dr. Gilbert says in that patronizing tone that immediately gets Charles's back up -- he's heard it from too many psychiatrists already. "I don't have to understand anything."

Dr. Gilbert gives him a ruefully apologetic look. "This is not going to be a swift, single-step process. You'll be staying on Suppressex while you're in rehab, and I'm prescribing an antidepressant that's been proven safe and effective with psionics. After you're out of rehab, then we'll work on a schedule to wean you off your Suppressex gradually and make sure you're not going to get too much input, too quickly. And," he adds gently, "to avoid telepathy headaches."

Charles nods uncertainly and collects the flyers from the table top. Reading them seems easier than acknowledging Dr. Gilbert wants to keep Charles away from the path of temptation. "These are all residential," he says. "I have school."

"School was contributing to your stress," Dr. Kingston says. "Not only the workload, but the strain put on your telepathy by being on a busy campus likely exacerbated problems. You need to take a step back and take some time for yourself to heal and regain your strength."

"I need," Charles says carefully, "to do my work."

"How much work have you gotten done in the past few weeks?"

Well, there was -- there was the, essay, and the ... . He didn’t turn that essay in, though, did he? He doesn’t even remember the last time he bothered showing up for class, for his research assistantship. He has dim memories of taking an exam. He doesn’t remember for which subject, or what grade he got.

“I’m graduating end of the semester. Just give me this semester,” he tries.

Only silence meets that comment, and he can see in their minds that they’re all standing firm, no sympathy there -- except for Dr. Carnahan.

“I have a proposal,” Dr. Carnahan suggests, sitting up in his chair and clasping his hands in his lap. “There’s the Center for Addiction Medicine right here at Mass General. Charles finishes out the semester, he gets to graduate. He also comes to daily therapy appointments, weekly drug tests, and biweekly NA meetings. After he graduates, he goes straight into the detox center of his choice.”

Charles’ heart leaps at the idea, almost too good to be true, surely the others will see it’s too good and reject it outright --

“I’m fine with that,” Dr. Gilbert says after a long moment, and eventually Dr. Kingston nods and
says, “All right. Very well. But if you fail a drug test, or if you don’t show up for a meeting, we’ll have to talk about readmitting you.”

Of course, they can’t do anything without Charles’ voluntary consent, Charles thinks privately, wrapping that thought up in gauze and holding it close to his chest like precious treasure. He can still do what he wants, he can … until he goes into treatment. He won’t, of course. But, he could. If he had to.

It’s enough of a semblance of autonomy that Charles can permit it. He nods, slowly, and Dr. Gilbert pats him on the back with one hand. “Good. Excellent. Then, we’ll start the admission process and get you on the waiting list for one of these places -- your pick -- just let us know before four so we can contact them. We’ll see about discharging you tomorrow.”

Charles nods again, pulse thumping erratically in his chest, but no one takes it back. The scene doesn’t fold in on itself and then expand into the waking world. It’s real.

So that afternoon, as he sits alone in his bedroom with the flyers spread out across the floor, he looks. And for the first time in a long time, he starts to plan his future.

* 

Chapter End Notes

cw: addiction, overdose
Example Eight: Fight-Or-Flight

The semester, as semesters seem to do inevitably, hits a wall after spring break, students more tired than rested from service, trips, parties, and week-long intensive classes. Erik, after a break spent writing and with a dim view of his Cognitive Neuroscience students as they straggle listlessly into their first class after the recess, eyes them impatiently.

"I hope," he says once they're all seated, rows of faces gazing down at him, "you all actually finished the midterm project I assigned."

A chorus of nods and mumbled yes, Professor Lehnsherr answers him, and everyone produces their papers, neatly stapled (fortunately for them) and ready to go. In the front row, the one student he does typically remember, Marie, catches him surveying them and mouths a thank you at him.

He doesn't think much of it, more interested in making it clear that, break or not, he isn't slowing down to accommodate people's jet lag or lingering hangovers. He plunges into lecture, flipping through his presentation to the first slide as everyone scrambles for pens and notebooks. When he hits his stride, he finds it almost calming, and while he's not a telepath he does enjoy the faint hum of concentration as the class races to keep up with his analysis of the day's data set. Charles, he thinks dryly, would be pleased, possibly less pleased by the fact that the absence of cell phones is enforced under threat of fused circuits.

Halfway through, he pauses to make sure none of them are too terribly lost -- a suggestion (order) from Charles, who'd sat in on his teaching observation and come away with an obnoxiously long list of areas in which Erik's pedagogy could, if you were Charles, be improved. Scowling up at them, he asks if there are any questions.

Marie raises her hand and Erik nods curtly. "So, I'm in psychophysics? And sometimes our upper asymptote isn't a fixed value? And needs to be estimated?"

"is that one question or three?" Erik snaps. When Marie winces, he sighs, attempts what Charles might think of as a gentle smile, and says, "Logistic growth model or, depending on your hypotheses, logistic decay. Use a three-parameter function with b as the value of x when y is a over one and the equation is y equals a over one plus e to the product of negative c product x minus b."

The class stares at him in bewilderment and Marie's hand creeps up again.

"What?"

"Could you… could you maybe write that down?"

Erik sighs. "All right." As he scribbles $y = \frac{a}{1 + e^{-(c(x-b))}}$ across the whiteboard, he reminds them of the parameter definitions. When he drops the marker into the tray, he looks over his shoulder. "See?"

Marie doesn't entirely seem to be looking at the equation, but she nods and the rest of the class murmurs their agreement.

"Good. Now, if we can continue?"

The rest of the lecture proceeds with no more questions. Everyone escapes after he reminds them of their homework, the class filling with its habitual sounds of trampling feet and zippers opening and closing, soft murmurs as students talk about whatever it is they talk about. Erik turns his attention to
packing up his laptop and notes, shutting down the display, and very pointedly away from the handful of students who've approached the podium.

“Unfortunately,” he says when he finally rounds about to face them, “for you, class is over, which means this time is now dedicated to data analysis. My office hours are on the syllabus.”

Erik has been accused, in the past, of having an excessively rigid schedule. Perhaps this, like so many other things, he owes to Shaw: Shaw made his expectations of his students quite explicit, and if Erik was not in his office, doing as decreed, at the time laid out on his agenda, it never did end well.

“Our tuition pays your salary, you know!” one student complains, red-cheeked and furious. Sadly, not furious with her own ignorance.

“On the contrary,” Erik says, plastering a smile on his face that makes even the staunchest present flinch. “My salary is paid for by the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Health, and as of recently, a very generous grant from the US Army. I believe your tuition, on the other hand, covers the new windows they just installed in the Stata Center and your campus gym membership fee. Excuse me.”

He escapes to his office, which is blessedly quiet and devoid of undergraduates, and where he can pull up BrainVoyager on his own computer to throw himself headlong into the swamp of trying to wade through his most recent MR-PET data. The results seem to be working out, for once, which always feels like success when dealing with the pitifully small sample sizes possible in neuroimaging. Effect sizes pretty large, and when he pulls up R to check the behavioral data, even that falls within reasonable parameters. A couple p’s of just 0.10, but people call that ‘trending’ these days, and Erik’s a bit of a Bayesian at heart anyway. It may well still end up contributing something to his conditional probabilities.

It puts him in a good mood, which might contribute to the fact that an hour later he starts to muse that maybe he was a bit over the line with that one student after class. He’s even considering writing her a personal note inviting her to see him during his office hours so he can elaborate on the material (not to be confused with an apology) when there’s a soft knock at his door.

“Enter,” Erik says, taking his feet down off his desk, presentable.

A face peeks around his door and Erik straightens up more properly, waving a hand so she can see. “Marie. Come sit down.”

She obeys, pushing the door shut behind her and shuffling forward to take one of the chairs on the other side of his desk, bag dropping down to the floor at her ankles. “So,” she says, and then, when she doesn’t elaborate further, Erik squashes his mental sigh and prods, “Did you understand everything in class?”

"Yes," Marie says, pushing a hand through her hair, a nervous gesture that she'll have to learn to control so she wants to get anywhere and have people take her seriously. Erik refrains from saying that, and instead opts for, "So why are you here?"

"I wanted to say thank you," Marie says. She fiddles with her bracelets before seeming to remember herself and folds her fingers together, resting her hands atop her skirted thighs. When Erik stares blankly at her, she adds, "For your advice earlier this year? You know, when I was freaking out about the MATLAB stuff? And my project?"

"Oh. Yes." Erik's managed to forget that. He adds, "I obviously haven't started looking at your
projects yet, so I have no idea if you mastered the material for it or not."

Marie laughs, a laugh that shivers across Erik's ears like silver. "I think I did okay," she says. "I went to talk to, you know, the counselor? And I've had a much easier time coping with all the work and stuff."

"Good." Erik pushes back from his desk a little and glances at his workstation, with one screen still full of data waiting for further work. He hopes that she gets the hint. "Is there anything else?"

"It just, it got me thinking," Marie says with a distressing earnestness. She leans into the space Erik's left vacant, shifting forward in her seat. "I realized that the more time I spend worrying over my insecurities, the worst-case scenarios, the less time I have to concentrate on what's important."

"That's -- good," Erik says.

"And it's thanks to you," Marie adds. Her gaze is fixed firmly on Erik, melting and brown and achingly sincere.

Erik almost doesn’t quite know how to react. He isn’t the one students have this reaction to. He isn’t Charles, patron saint of underdogs and self-established, self-martyring guardian of the weepy and woebegone. It’s kind of … flattering, at the same time as making him feel a little secondhand embarrassed for her; he’s never liked fawning.

“Oh. Well,” Erik struggles for something suitably Charlesian to say, “as long as you’re well, that’s what matters.”

It’s the kind of nondescriptive platitude that belongs in a half-hearted greeting card, but Marie’s smile only widens and she says, “I am. Thank you, again,” and looks back at him over her shoulder as she leaves, lingering there a beat too long before she steps out into the hall and closes the door again.

She starts attending his office hours regularly after that, so predictably that Erik thinks he could set his clock by her. He certainly does start setting his schedule by her -- rearranging his workload so that he comes upon a natural break just at three on Thursdays, when she’s expected to arrive. He’s starting to suspect she’s planning on applying to graduate or medical school and hopes to get a letter of recommendation out of him. It’s the kind of planned persistence, the carefully-chosen questions that are just-obscure enough to make her look like she’s both paying attention and exceptionally insightful, that usually heralds a student showing up at the end of term with puppy-dog eyes and stories of Harvard Med.

It happens often enough that Erik has a pre-drafted speech he usually gives them, one about how he’s happy to write a letter, but that he intends to extol their virtues and areas of weakness in proportion to their existence in reality. That many institutions expect lavish praise in letters rather than an honest assessment of an applicant’s ability, and they should think carefully about whether a letter from him would best suit their individual needs.

It’s usually enough that most students decide to look elsewhere, though there are always those few undeterred. Erik has noticed a strong correlation between the undeterred and those remarkable individuals about whom he has the fewest negative comments to make in the first place. He’s quite pleased to say he’s never signed his name on a recommendation letter that he didn’t stand behind whole-heartedly, and that those students, in turn, tend to do very well come interview season.

He doesn’t think Marie is the type to accept the conditions of that offer, but nonetheless he has it ready in his mind when she comes by his office on the last week of classes, bereft of a school bag for once and instead looking like she dressed for Shabbos: sundress and makeup, a purse dangling from
Well, it's finally warm enough to not dress in layers; Erik's seen students, and some faculty, loafing around in the squares and on the lawns. It's nice to go out for his runs now without having to bury himself in layers.

"You've already turned in your final project," he says once Marie's settled herself, knees folded together and tucked to the side, her purse resting in her lap. "What is it?"

"I just wanted to say thank you for a wonderful semester," Marie says. She smiles at him, lipsticked mouth a gentle curve. There goes the hand again, pushing her brown hair away from her cheek and tucking it behind her shoulder. "I learned so, so much."

Erik gives her an expression that seems to work on her, gently prompting, urging her to get around to the point. When that doesn't work, and she continues to gaze at him expectantly, he says, "You're welcome. Was that all?"

"No." Marie bites her lip, her brown eyes finally skipping away to scan his diplomas and awards, the otherwise bare walls. Erik prepares himself for her to produce a sheet of paper with the names of med schools or grad programs and a list of dates, but she only says, after a hesitation, "I also wanted to say thank you for talking with me all semester. I feel like I've really learned something, you know?"

"I'm glad." He is; as mystifying as Marie's presence in his office every week has been, he can't deny that, whatever her reasons, she's been attentive and quick, as engaged in conversation with him as in lecture.

"And I thought," Marie continues, standing up and setting her purse aside, her face young and resolved and frightened, "we could continue talking. Or... or more than talk."

Before Erik can ask what on earth she means, she settles herself on his desk, in the place where his printouts and scans might have been. She leans over and he can see her clavicles under winter-pale skin, the soft curve of her breasts cupped by the lace of her bra and the bright print of thin cotton.

"What -- " he begins. His breath crowds up in his throat; over her shoulder, he sees that she's shut the door.

"You were the only person who cared about me," Marie says softly. Her breath trembles against his face, the fine old silver of her necklace and rings shiveringly close. "I thought at first I was just grateful for your help, but then I realized it wasn't only that. That it was more. We have a connection."

Erik reaches for something to say, some prepared response that will send them gliding off in opposite directions again like ships passing in the night, but it's as if his mind has short-circuited and all he receives in response is the horrifying blue blankness of a system error. "Miss -- " he starts, then realizes he doesn't even remember her last name, not off the top of his head. "Marie ...."

"You don't call anyone else by their first name," she says, a hesitant smile flitting at the corners of his lips. "Do you know that? It's only me."

She's going to slip off that desk, now -- onto his lap to put her mouth on his, or onto her knees to unzip his trousers and put it around his cock instead. Erik knows, can see the inevitability of all this, time, marching forward from this moment and spiraling out to a future too terrifyingly real. He should have acted by now, if he were going to act, Erik thinks in a blaze of horror and self-loathing,
his hands gripping the arms of his desk chair. He would have put a stop to this long ago, if he didn’t mean for it to end up just how it is, where it is, the sickness of Erik’s desires permeating everything, even this --

“Stop,” he says, and it comes out croaky, strained, not even a recognizable word judging from the look on her face. He takes in a breath and says it again, more forcefully this time: “Stop” -- and he’s distantly incredulous to hear it sounds angry. To realize he is angry, the violent heat of it cutting a quick path through his veins and burning in his bones.

The force of it must be -- Marie looks terrified, clambering back off his desk so quickly she nearly trips onto the floor, her skin gone bloodless and eyes wide and white. Erik’s power has seized onto everything metal in a ten foot radius, gripping hard like he expects to have to use it, and even his better judgment can’t bring him to let go.

He tries to say something, Leave or Get out, but his throat has locked shut, and he thinks if he does open his mouth, he'll vomit. Marie's inching away, mouth working around apologies, her fingers tight around the strap of her satchel, and she needs to leave, Erik needs to use his power to open his office door instead of using it to shake the building apart, he needs to calm down, he needs to --

"Erik!" A fist pounds on the door, echoing faintly in the solid steel bar of the lock. Charles, his panic clawing at Erik's mind, slipping clumsily on the switch of Erik's abilities. “Erik, goddammit, stop, you're going to collapse -- "

Please, Charles's psionic voice says, pleading and shivering as badly as the walls. Marie's crying, her cheeks splotched under her makeup, and she's begging too, when she isn't apologizing. Please, Erik, let her go, you need to do this for her, for me, please let her go, please, she didn't mean --

She might not have meant it, but it matters damn little what she meant. Erik drags in a breath that tastes like copper and bitterness. He can feel his blood everywhere in his body, feel Marie's frantic pulse, feel Charles on the other side of the door.

He gets enough control of himself to unbolt the door, although he can't let go of anything else. Charles bursts through, sees Marie, and drags her out with a sharp "Leave, now," and Erik slams the door behind her tearstained face.

"Erik," Charles whispers, hands up to show he's not a threat. Which is a lie, Charles is a threat -- or he's not a threat any longer because he's gotten in under Erik's defenses, he's danger, fully-realized and engaged with, too late to turn back or retreat. Danger or not, Charles's eyes are wide and, like Marie's, frightened, and he's trembling, his pulse unsteady and swift when Erik focuses on it.

"Please," Charles says softly. "Please, Erik."

Erik inhales, finally, and with that breath he hears the hum of the geomagnetic field surging in his ears like vertigo, Erik dizzy and sick with it. But it’s enough to bring some measure of stark clarity to his mind, too, like shifting abruptly from color to black and white.

With his power, Erik lets go, easing his grip so slowly it hurts. He watches the relief as it washes away the tension in Charles’ face, the tide strong enough Charles’ balance wavers and he grasps at the door frame for support. He isn’t looking at Erik with pity now, that’s for certain. People only respect you when they’re afraid of you.

Speaking is like scraping glass against his throat, the words bloody in his mouth. “Don’t tell me to calm down.”
Charles, still pale, says, “I wasn’t going to.”

Even so, it’s cautious the way Charles picks his way forward across the office, past the fallen chairs but not close enough to reach Erik’s desk, not even if he reached out his arm to touch it. That careful space between them is -- Erik would be lying if he didn’t say it was viciously gratifying, not to have to endure hands stroking his hair, his neck, a coldly amused voice telling him *Erik, my boy, you really are getting to be too old for these sorts of tantrums.*

The distance is better.

“Erik,” Charles says at last, once there have been enough beats of silence to allow it, his voice tentative and without any of the certainty Erik’s come to expect from him, the casual dominance that pervades every aspect of their interactions, that’s both so terrifying and so craved. “Erik, what …?”

“Don’t ask me what,” Erik snaps, and his grip on a metal pen finally snaps it, spilling a tiny explosion of ink across the surface of his desk. Anger rekindled now, it’s easy to embrace the heat that floods beneath his skin and twists into the metal of Charles’ wristwatch, the knob of the door. “Why pretend? Go on. Say what it is you want to say, and then leave -- just don’t fucking pretend to me you don’t know what. It’s insulting, Charles, and I won’t stand for it.”

"I don't want to say anything," Charles says, with the sort of bare honesty that would enrage Erik even more if he had room for more rage inside him. He already feels like he's boiling over, spilling out of himself. "I want you to be okay," that quiet, earnest voice continues, "and you're not; you're frightening me. Please Erik."

Hearing Charles beg twists viciously and perfectly inside him, even as, sliding in alongside it, is Charles's telepathy -- still a carefully separate thing, as if it's reluctant to touch him as well, saying, *Please, Erik, what's wrong, please tell me what happened, tell me what I can do.*

Behind him, something breaks. One of his monitors, the metal components inside it shredding plastic and glass. The screws holding his bookshelves into the wall start to strip, old metal, infirm; it would crumble at a touch. Charles looks much the same, vulnerable, as if he can break as easily as Erik once did.

He could hurt Charles, Erik thinks, hurt Charles the way he never could hurt Shaw. And Charles might sit there and take it, fucking patient pacifist that he is, ready to martyr himself, take the high road like the saint he probably congratulates himself on being, the one who saves those who need saving, who pities those who need pity. Or he could pin Erik down with his body and his telepathy, hold Erik helpless and punish him, hungry to see how far Erik is beneath him, just waiting for a chance to put Erik in his place, and Erik might even go this time.

"I don't know what you think I'm going to say," Charles says, a strange admission from the man who knows everything, including the darkest corners of Erik's mind -- who should see every ugly thing spilling out of him right now. "Erik, please tell me, I can help, I can do nothing, I'll do whatever you want, but please."

There's a knock on the door, or another fist, and Charles shouts, "Go away!" The EM field around them twists in response to Charles's telepathy, and the owner of the fist, and everyone else out in the hall, departs.

"We're alone now," Charles says. "Everyone's going to stay away. Can you please tell me what happened? Tell me anything?"

“She came onto me,” Erik says roughly, brutally, the sentence jerking out of him in fits and starts. “I
don’t know what I did to make -- “ His breath seizes in his chest, heart pounding so hard he wonders if it’s possible for the atria to rip away from the superior vena cava, meat tearing off the aorta, drowning in his own blood. Finally, with a voice so thin and pathetic he wants to reach in and do the job himself, Erik admits: “I’m no better than he is.”

A flicker of comprehension on Charles’ face, at last, although it’s overwhelmed by the concern and confusion still radiating from him like heat waves. “Oh,” Charles says, and Erik feels the strange shift in his mind of Charles pulling back his memories to look at the conversation he had with Marie earlier, viewing the whole thing through Erik’s own eyes and letting Erik know he’s doing it. Charles doesn’t seem disgusted, though, or horrified, which is simultaneously baffling and … reassuring.

“Erik, none of that was your fault, you didn’t say or do anything out of line,” Charles tells him, like he’s judge, jury, and executioner, his voice steadier now that he has some grasp of the situation. At least insofar as what he lets Erik see. But of course, even Charles can’t let the latter half of Erik’s confession go unaddressed. Erik can tell he’s choosing his words carefully, picking through the possibilities like navigating a shipwreck, “Erik, you’re talking about … Dr. Shaw?”

It’s the first time Charles has ever acknowledged it. And for a moment the world hangs in stillness and silence, and Erik could … he could deny it, or he could say nothing, or change the subject entirely. Instead he says, accusingly, “You know exactly who I’m talking about.”

Charles swallows, his Adam’s apple shifting visibly. “He was your graduate school adviser,” Charles says, and for some reason it comes across like a question, like marking new territory on a map, tentative and uncertain. “Did he -- were the two of you … involved, back then?”

Involved -- as if they were two colleagues working the same project, two acquaintances at a party, two accessories to a crime. And for the first time Erik finds himself questioning if Charles ever knew, if he truly has read the book of Erik’s life and brought down judgment, or if he really …. But if he didn’t know, why hire Erik in the first place? Why become ‘involved’ with him? Why else would he know what Erik wants, needs, well enough to give it to him, to see Erik slavishly grovel for it like an addict for the needle?

"Are you serious?" Erik demands incredulously. "Stop fucking acting like you don't know what I'm talking about. You know."

"No, I don't," Charles says, the words edged with impatience. "I only know what you've told me so far. I know that you're angry," that you're having a panic attack, Erik thinks caustically, "that you were -- with Dr. Shaw somehow. That a student came on to you a few minutes ago. That's it."

"Then look." He points to his own temple. The memories are a blister or pocket of infection, ready to burst and flood him with poison, Charles's telepathy capable of lancing it.

"I was fucking him," Erik says, and feels Charles's ability inside him, handling the memories gingerly. They spark and flare like pain accumulated around a bruised bone when it's pressed on, moments of kneeling on Shaw's floor, being held down by a force of nature, the burning anger that rises up at those uncountable images of Shaw's face (always pleased, mocking, patronizing, smiling). "I was fucking him, and I wanted him to fuck me. I wanted it ever since I was a graduate student, and I had it right up until I left California."

Charles is pale now, his telepathic touch withdrawn. Erik searches his face for the pity he knows Charles has to feel, and when he decides he's found it, says, "Don't, Charles. I don't want you to feel sorry for me. There's no reason. I wanted it."
"But he -- " Charles swallows back whatever's about to come out of his pretty red mouth. If he hadn't, Erik might have shoved those words right back down, along with some of Charles's teeth. Then why did you react to your student like this? Charles asks, the words colored with confusion. Anger and worry are understandable, not Erik nearly demolishing half the building.

Erik shakes that off. "She was inappropriate, and she was stupid." It's much safer to be angry at a student's idiocy. "She not only put me in a compromising position, she had no idea what she could have started, what -- " The sentence ends in his own fear, nightmare that fogs his brain leaving him stumbling for words that might not even be there. I wanted this somehow. I wanted her to do this.

"You wouldn't have," Charles says. "And it's something you would never want." He says it with a conviction that Erik might be able to believe in if he didn't know himself so well.

"You wouldn't have," Charles says again. He shakes his head and runs his fingers through his hair, disarranging it even more. "You aren't a monster, Erik. You're not like Shaw."

"Fuck you," Erik says. He's not entirely sure if he means it; the obscenity feels stale, half-hearted. "I know I'm not."

Charles gives him a Look, and says, "You have a Ph.D. in Psychology, Erik. Do you really think the things Shaw did to you were things that you wanted? I'll admit, it's a more palatable narrative than thinking he was abusive."

Charles says it so starkly that Erik almost doesn't trust his ears. He still reacts, though, his expression twisting as some unfamiliar emotion, hot and nauseous, curdles his stomach. "Don't tell me what I did and didn't want," he hisses, finally stalking out from behind his desk to put himself closer to Charles, bringing himself near enough he can use the advantage of his greater height to look down on him, not touching him but dearly wanting to place two fingers at the center of Charles' chest and push him forcefully away. "You know me. You know that I -- "

Erik falters over how to describe it, his throat clenching up again. Charles finishes for him, boldly, "What, that you're submissive? So are a lot of people, Erik, it isn't a dirty word. You still have the right to choose when and how you submit."

It's stunning, hearing Charles talk about it like this. It was always … shameful, in its way, something to be covered up and buried down deep. Only sick people wanted pain, Erik thought. Only weak people needed to be told what to do. I know what you are, Shaw's voice says from across the gulf of years, coldly gleeful, holding that, like so much else, over Erik's head. In Erik's office: What they would think if they knew….

"I'm not," Erik says, has to ignore the creeping, terrible knowledge that he's lying to Charles and himself, and that both of them know it. "I didn't want that -- I mean, I did want it." He lifts his chin, silently daring Charles to contradict him. "And not because I'm sick," even though I am, Shaw was right, fuck him, he was right.

"You're not," Charles agrees. "You're not sick. But that doesn't mean you wanted -- "

"I consented to it." Erik steps closer, further into Charles's space, into whatever invisible, compelling field it is that he has, the one that can trap Erik and keep him in orbit. Charles doesn't back up, not that there's far to go, and he doesn't look away. "Everything he did, I wanted. If I hadn't wanted it, I would have stopped him. He didn't, fuck, he didn't rape me. I'm not a victim, Charles."

"You thought being submissive meant you had to submit all the time, regardless of what you wanted?" Charles does step back a little now, head tilting as if that can somehow help him decipher
Erik's thoughts. "Erik, that isn't how it works."

"Don't patronize me."

"I'm not." Charles's voice breaks with exasperation. "I'm trying to -- I'm trying to make sense of this. I'm trying to figure out how badly I've fucked up." He hesitates. "Can I tell you two things?"

Erik frowns, wrong-footed. Charles asking permission seems wrong, but he grants it anyway, calm enough now to be curious about what Charles wants to say, even if it won't make a difference.

"Right." The left hand skates absently through that thick, soft hair, coppery brown and grey strands vivid. Charles sighs. "The first thing is, I don't think you're weak and I never once thought I was saving you from anything when I called you to ask if you'd be interested in working here."

Charles has said that often enough that Erik finds himself willing to accept it, at least temporarily. He nods, says, "And what's the second thing?"

"I know what it's like, to be told you're sick," he says softly. "And I know what it's like to be told it often enough that you start to believe it."

Erik hadn’t much considered it, that the other face of the coin is wanting people to submit. Getting pleasure out of their pain. Of course, Shaw never framed that as illness. And while Erik has no idea what it’s like being bisexual, if it’s anything like being gay, Charles has probably heard plenty of the same from neighbors and family friends who don’t pretend to want to understand. For a brief moment the light touches Charles differently, and Erik resists the sudden urge to reach out for him and touch him with his hands and with his mouth, everywhere there is to be touched.

Something eases in his chest, like the way it might feel to release the end of a rope that’s already snapped, belated and shell-shocked. Charles gives him a small, tight smile and drags his hand back through his hair a second time, exhaling before he says, "We don’t have to talk about any of this if you don’t want to. But people are going to want to know what happened with your student. You need to have something to tell them."

"Why not the truth?" Erik says, a little irritated at the implication that he has anything to hide -- he wasn’t the one sitting on his professor’s desk. Not this time, anyway.

"There’s nothing wrong with the truth." Charles pauses, a beat, like he’s weighing something in his mind, before he says: “I think it might be better if I speak to Moira myself, first. Give things a little time to settle, and then you can talk to her on Monday.”

Because Erik will be too blunt, he’s probably thinking. Too forceful, too dismissive of the student’s experience, too unrepentant. Erik makes a harsh noise in the back of his throat but says, “Fine. Good. I don’t have time for her this afternoon, anyway.”

Unexpectedly, then, Charles reaches for Erik’s hands, his fingers cool where they close around Erik’s palm and squeeze, once. Hard. “All right. And after that?”

There’s something so pointed about that question, so targeted, even if Erik can’t see the machinery behind it. Erik looks at Charles’ eyes, blue and focused entirely on him, to the exclusion of the rest of the world, Charles’ hand still curled around his and his thumb grazing Erik’s wrist, right above the pulse point. “Let’s go home.”

*  
Charles leaves Erik to straighten his office and pull himself together, and as he walks down the hall to Moira's office (secreted away in a corner and shielded by the department admin's desk and then
her secretary's desk), sends a quick psionic flicker through the hallways to be sure people stay clear. The other faculty and students have conveniently gone for coffee or remembered their labs urgently require their attention; even the student intern has abandoned his position at the front desk. The space around the department is curiously silent.

"I sent Marie home with a friend," Moira says by way of greeting when Charles knocks and lets himself into her office. "Do you mind telling me what happened? Is there anything you can tell me?"

"You've probably guessed most of it." Charles lowers himself into his usual seat. Moira doesn't look or feel frightened; the worst of that has faded, leaving her usual practicality behind. After the tempest of being so close to Erik, she's calm waters, a harbor. "A student made inappropriate suggestions to Erik and he… reacted."

"Yes, I did in fact gather that," Moira says wryly. "At least, after Marie stopped crying long enough to tell me what she did. The rest, I figured out when my office rearranged itself." Now that he's looking, Charles sees that everything is off-kilter, photos and awards askew on the walls, all of Moira's computer equipment silent and staples scattered all over her desk, paper clips twisted out of shape. "I suppose what I really want to know is, aside from making sure the building isn't going to collapse around us, how much damage control will I have to do?"

Charles shrugs. "I don't know yet. It would be a good idea to find some way to counsel Marie on appropriate boundaries between professors and students." Never mind that, when he'd seen her mind in those blind, panicked moments, she'd come on to Erik because he was nice to her, so extraordinary Charles can almost see where she went wrong. "As for Erik… there are reasons he reacted the way he did, but I can't talk about them."

To her credit, Moira doesn't ask if that's because they're sleeping together, although she clearly wants to. "If this is something that will affect Erik's work, I need to know what it is. Whatever he told you isn't legally protected, Charles."

"If we're in court, then that might be an issue," Charles says. He feels her determination press up against him and meets it with his own. "But until then, you'll have to trust me, Moira. Trust me to know that this will be handled, and that it won't affect Erik's work here, or the rest of the department."

It would be a vain argument if Erik weren't tenured, but he is, which affords him and this situation far more flexibility than Charles otherwise might dare to hope for. He can tell Moira still isn't happy by the time he leaves her, and she's certain to do her best to intimidate Erik into confessing whatever secret Charles wouldn't tell her come Monday, although he's equally certain she knows that will be a frustrating and ultimately fruitless endeavor.

Charles retrieves his things from his office, sending out an email canceling a meeting with one of his graduate students that afternoon, and locks up before heading back to where Erik roves the small space of the interior of his office like an overlarge cat, anxious and irritable and raw, still, from before.

"I need to go by my apartment first," Erik tells him once they're out in the heat of the day, sunlight beating down atop their heads and burning away any shadows that might linger. He doesn't notice the cluster of BCS grad students staring at them both from the sidewalk across the street, perhaps fortunately; Charles emits the telepathic equivalent of a static shock and they all jump, immediately trying to pretend they hadn't been looking. "I need parts for a prototype, if I'm to work on it over the weekend."

“All right,” Charles says. They’re in the aftermath, now, a careful period of minutes, maybe hours, in
which he might -- might -- have some chance of getting Erik to open up more, before time calls upon old habits and Erik shuts himself away behind defensive walls and paranoia. It’s uncharted territory, but Charles thinks he’s finally starting to fit the pieces together, and there’s something about this novel, communicative Erik that’s addictive. Erik let him into his mind, into his darkest memories, openly and without prejudice, and that …. Charles hasn’t had that in a long time.

“Do you want to drive my car?” he asks, but Erik shakes his head and says, “No, let’s walk. It isn’t far.”

The trees are flowering overhead as they veer off onto the side streets, into residential neighborhoods, past the flat walls of old boarding houses and repurposed tenements, one block students, the next block, people who couldn’t afford to live anywhere else. The minds around them are myriad and diverse, too unpredictable for Charles, who would never be able to sleep through the night here.

Erik’s walking close to him, close enough that if Charles dared he could reach out and take his hand. Possibly Erik would even let him, right now. He admitted what they are to each other, if only in the heat of the moment, but he let that open up between them along with all its associated possibilities -- and not just in Charles’ bed, or while under Charles’ hands.

Still. Charles is cautious of drawing conclusions about anything at all right now. He drew conclusions about Erik the first time they met, the first time they slept together, and again the first time Charles held him down and saw how much Erik liked it -- the show of control eliciting a crimson burst of arousal and pleasure in Erik’s mind and leading Charles chasing after more. Probably, that was a mistake.

“How long were you together?” Charles asks after a while, when they’re close enough to Erik’s apartment that Erik can use that as an excuse to shut down the conversation when he wants, if he wants. There’s no point trying to make the question sound casual. No dressing it up as anything other than what it is.

"Long enough." Erik's step quickens. Metal debris -- bottletops, loose change, scraps, a tin can abandoned in the gutter -- scatters around them, swept up in the whirlwind of Erik’s agitation. "What difference does it make?"

"I don't know," Charles admits. Erik barks a laugh and the metal disperses, torn apart into shrapnel. Really, the great Charles Xavier doesn't know something? Doesn't know every secret of the human heart?, Erik thinks, and Charles can only shake his head. "That's why they're secrets."

Erik ignores that, and instead turns (nearly cutting Charles off) in through a wrought-iron gate that swings wide to let them through. It moves smoothly on its hinges, and silently, different from the amount of rust and dilapidation Charles has noticed everywhere else. The house is old crumbling brick, black-painted shutters tattered at the edges, a few steps above some of the other houses surrounding it, but those aren't, Charles thinks as he waits on the creaky porch for Erik to check his mail, significant steps.

The hallway Erik leads him through is dimly lit despite its high ceiling. In its former incarnation, the house might once have been a single dwelling and they'd be walking through its atrium; now they walk by locked and bolted doors, the minds behind them preoccupied or harried or sleeping. Charles thinks of his early undergraduate days, spending time in places like this until he'd felt like he was going to suffocate. Erik, though, doesn't seem to mind.

His apartment is on the third floor, in the back, maybe the only quiet corner of the entire building. Erik doesn't acknowledge Charles's presence as he gestures the door open and stalks through into the
most sparsely furnished apartment Charles has ever seen.

Somehow, he manages not to say "You live here?" Erik has, for reasons only Erik knows right now, brought him here, a place that Charles instantly knows no one, not even Erik’s landlord, has seen. His footsteps echo in empty space, loud on bare wood floors. The living room window looks out onto the solid brick wall of the building on the other side of the fence, a sliver of sky visible if Charles tilts his head properly. As Erik moves around his space, pacing down the tiny hallway to the bathroom and what must be the bedroom, Charles thinks of the den of a wild, wary creature, a place of safety if not of comfort.

Charles debates whether or not he ought to just stand there, like a dumb animal staring at the walls and waiting for Erik to grow impatient, flirting with the possibility that Erik will again find pity in Charles’ behavior and use it as an excuse to snap back and retreat again into his shell. The only other option is to assume permission that hasn’t been explicitly granted and follow after Erik down the dark hall.

Wavering, Charles wanders to the doorway between the living room and the kitchen and hovers there instead, looking round at the bare countertops. There’s a solitary mega-sized box of protein bars on the floor. A single bowl is turned down to dry on the rack, next to a spoon. There’s no table or chairs.

Uncomfortable, Charles retreats back into the living room and decides to take his chances with the hall. He finds Erik in the room on the left, which Charles correctly predicted was the bedroom -- if a mattress on the floor and a single desk lamp plugged into the wall socket next to the wifi router makes something a bedroom. No dresser; just a suitcase tilted open under the window, Erik’s clothes neatly folded within, next to a line of shoes.

Erik himself squats down in front of the open closet, rummaging through a cardboard box, presumably for those prototype parts he needs. Erik will sense Charles staring at the back of his neck, more feral cat than human sometimes, so Charles goes to look at the books stacked up on the shelf someone’s nailed into the wall instead. Fiction, surprisingly. Ray Bradbury, Isabel Allende, Donna Tartt, Gabriel García Márquez -- no consistent theme Charles can identify, but they’re all well-thumbed.

“Have you read *A Clockwork Orange*?” Charles asks on impulse, those books for some reason making him think of the other.

Erik snorts from over by the closet, dropping a handful of screws onto the bare floorboards. “Who the hell hasn’t?”

“All right, then,” Charles says, “*Less Than Zero*. Bret Easton Ellis.”

Erik straightens up, holding something small enough in his hand that his palm closes around it entirely, obscuring it from view as he curls his fingers up into a fist, then slips its contents into his pocket. “What are you trying to say, Charles?” He kicks the cardboard box back into the closet, its top flaps waving aimlessly.


Erik rocks back a little, caught somewhere between surprise and offense. "Rich white male angst? Aren't you projecting a little?"

He has to concede the point. "Bolaño, then? 2666."
That gets him an ambiguous noise, and a silent, prickly suggestion that Erik didn't bring Charles up here to talk about fiction, or to talk about anything. Still, Erik says, "I didn't think you were much into contemporary fiction."

"I read a lot of it in college," Charles says. He'd read even more when he'd been in and out of institutions and camps; there's not much else to do, even if the quality had been terrible, dog-eared pulp books cast off from libraries and churches, weeded through by the staff to get rid of anything upsetting. Stepping into a bookstore had been like plunging into fresh, cold water; his first time at the Widener had been like Heaven. "I'll read anything, though, given the chance or a recommendation."

Another ambiguous noise answers that, Erik absorbed in collecting what he needs. There's nothing else to look at in Erik's bedroom except his bed, neatly made, and the suitcase, which seems like prying. Charles settles his gaze into the near distance, feels his telepathy go loose and detached the way it does when he's not paying enough attention to focus it or pull it back behind his shields. Erik, as always, tugs at it like an anchor, a point of attraction that captures him despite the other thoughts and minds that murmur to him.

"Okay," Erik says. He rises, an absent gesture bringing the box along with him. Despite Erik's insistence on coming here, the prototype seems almost an afterthought; what matters is what he has in his pocket, thoughts and ability curled warm and protective around it.

Like a dog on a leash he trails Erik out through the empty apartment and down the hall. The pattern of thoughts has changed subtly, sleeping minds now awake and worried, new minds tired from the day; Charles wonders what Erik makes of this place, if his abilities mean he can endure such close quarters without minding. Then again, Erik doesn't seem to care; the apartment is a place he goes to stay, but he doesn't live there.

Charles thinks of the suitcase, the box of protein bars. He wants to ask Erik if Erik thinks he'll be leaving soon, tenured as he is.

"So," Erik says, "what do you think of my place?"

"It's very minimalist," Charles says. Erik barks a laugh, and that emboldens Charles enough to say, "If you'd needed help with furniture and moving, we could have recommended movers. Or I would have helped."

Erik's mind flickers speculatively over Charles's arms and shoulders, the blunt competence of his hands. It's flattering and disconcerting. The speculation fades, though, as other thoughts take over. "I didn't have anything to move."

Charles considers suggesting a trip to Bed Bath & Beyond -- or even IKEA, for that matter, if he thought Erik would take him up on it. He imagines that same suitcase sitting in that same spot on the floor since the day Erik arrived in Boston -- shifting, maybe, for a trip to a conference, only to return to the same spot as if it never left. There are as many of Erik's clothes at Charles' own place now as Charles saw kept in that suitcase -- and for that matter, far many more of Erik's nights are under Charles' roof as well.

"I shouldn't have been surprised, really," Charles says as they keep walking, turning off onto a main street. Charles pauses at an intersection, willing to let a car pass, but Erik just forges ahead, leaving Charles to catch up and wave his acknowledgment to the driver. When he falls back into step at Erik's side he continues, a little breathless, "but -- a jumbo sized box of granola bars, Erik? Did you also order a jumbo-sized box of Pepto Bismol?"

Erik snorts, and in profile the line of his grin is sharp, feral. "Why bother when I have Chinese take-
out and your dozen little jars of black truffle porcini spread?"

It appears Charles is never going to outlive Erik’s mocking fascination with the contents of his pantry, so he huffs, putting more affront into it than the really feels, letting Erik savor Charles’ reaction and Charles, in turn, savor the glimmer of amusement that lights up his sense of Erik’s mind.

“Is that what you’re eating for dinner, then?” Charles asks, taking his car keys out of his pocket as they approach the car park nearest their building, pushing the button to unlock his BMW and hearing its soft, respondent honk. “Mushroom sauce mixed in with your lemon chicken?”

“Unless you have a better idea.”

It strikes Charles, unexpectedly, as an invitation -- a subtle cue, a permission, but Charles almost doesn’t dare look to see if he’s right. He does anyway, of course; a quiet part of Erik, soft enough Charles wouldn’t otherwise notice, waits in anticipation for Charles to give an order and to be given the opportunity to obey.

"We'll stop at Baccos, then,” Charles says. "And you can cook."

Since I know the incredibly dim view you have of my cooking, Charles adds silently.

Erik's mouth twitches once, twice, then he finally gives in and smiles, broad and true.

He relaxes back into the passenger seat, spine following the curve of the chair vertebra by vertebra. Charles tries to keep most of his attention on the traffic -- late afternoon Cambridge, cars crawling down streets never designed for them, the late spring sun blinding -- but he can't help noticing Erik's hands resting loosely between his thighs, how he's turned his head to the side to look out the window.

The drive to Baccos passes silently, a different silence from that of Erik's apartment or the walk there. Once they're there, Erik takes charge of the cart, saying, "I've suffered through your idea of shopping," and roams up and down the aisles, tossing a bewildering array of ingredients into the cart. He flicks an amused look at Charles when they pass the porcinis, levitating one jar by the metal lid, and Charles can't help but laugh. A few other shoppers startle, caught by a sound that isn't quiet music or conversation; Charles feels like they should look, they should see Erik being happy.

"You'll actually be able to make something out of all of this?” he asks after they've stopped by the bakery for fresh rolls, their crusts glossy with egg washes, two pastries for the next morning.

Erik grabs a bar of chocolate, something dark with peppers and spices. "Something better than lemon chicken and mushroom sauce."

"I have complete faith in you,” Charles says solemnly.

The tenor of Erik's thoughts changes at that, a stutter-step and a halt before they pitch downward from amusement to seriousness. He knows Charles meant that for a joke, but part of him takes it another way, that Charles trusts him in a way Erik can't trust himself. It brings a host of questions welling up from where Erik's carefully pressed them back, none of them fit for asking out loud here and now. He breathes in deep and sharp through his nose, a racing breath, the oxygen clearing away his confusion.

"We'll see how it goes, then,” he says at last, and again there's what the words say and what they say, Erik committing himself to something more than making dinner for them.

"What's on the menu, then?” Charles asks as the cashier, her face fixed in cheerful neutrality, begins
to scan their items. "Or am I not allowed to know?"

"You'll find out," Erik says. He hesitates. "Unless you want to know now."

Charles pulls out his wallet. "I'll wait."

Erik nods, lingering down at the foot of the register while a teenage boy bags the groceries for them and then hoisting them up into his arms, the muscles of his forearms shifting, whipcord-lean and veined as Erik’s fingers spread under the paper bag, supporting its weight and leading the way back out to where Charles has parked the car in parallel out front, his Back Bay parking sticker prominently displayed to keep it from getting towed.

Charles tries to temper his anticipation as they find parking near his brownstone and walk the short block to his front door, Erik handling the latch without Charles needing to reach for his keys. He kicks off his shoes by the mat -- there are two pairs of Erik’s here now, running trainers and an additional set of Oxford shoes to the brogues Erik wore today, one tilted onto its side to display the well-worn sole. Now, without such a great barrier between them -- and Charles still hasn’t been able to bring himself to really think about what he saw in Erik’s mind yet, too wary of Erik’s skill at reading faces and his own reactions to allow it -- it’s impossible to say where they’re going from here. For Charles to even admit if there’s a direction he wants them to go; they’ve been together a year now, but it’s always been so vaguely-defined, as much a casual fling as a serious relationship, that Charles hasn’t bothered considering what the optimal future would be. He assumed, in a way, that Erik would be the one to decide that -- and for Charles’ part, he was certainly enjoying the ride.

But if he looks at his own emotions through an objective lens, has he really escaped investing himself in whatever this is? Is it even possible to divorce himself so completely on the basis of uncertainty that there’s no outcome dependency whatsoever? If he speaks purely as a scientist, the psychological and neuroscientific evidence on the subject would suggest that despite his best intentions and in the bluntest terms, Charles is -- was always going to be -- pretty well fucked.

He settles himself in what’s come to be his usual seat in the kitchen, watching as Erik takes reign over the stove and countertop, arranging the ingredients in some uninterpretable order and setting the cutlery to chopping up vegetables.

“Do you have a meat tenderizer?” Erik asks.

“A -- what?” Charles says, caught off his guard, but Erik must have already looked with his ability because a moment later something gleaming and steal flies into his hand and he says, “Never mind,” setting to unwrapping the beef from its thin paper envelope.

Feeling a bit useless as he watches Erik fly through the cooking process far faster than any human being has a right to, Charles picks at the grain of his chair with his nail and says, “Is there a wine pairing I might consider, at least?”

“Rioja Reserva,” Erik says without hesitation, his fingers a little bloody as he carries the meat over to toss into the pan, the fat sizzling against the griddle. “Or an old Cab, perhaps, something acidic.”

In that, at least, Charles is somewhat competent, thanks to his broad and varied education in alcohol at Harvard -- he finds a good vintage in his wine cooler and pops open the cork, decanting the bottle to let it breathe while they wait, leaning his hip against the counter and watching Erik’s hands navigate vegetables, butter, the handles of multiple pans. It’s a familiar scene, at least: Erik cooking and Charles looking on, although normally by now he’d have taken command of some type of appetizer he could feed Erik, just to watch those lips close around the food so close to Charles’ fingers, feel the thrill low in his stomach as he watched Erik’s throat shift when he swallowed, riding
the high of feeling like -- if only for the night -- he’d captured some wild thing and brought it into his
dwelling, aware of Erik’s many dangers and finding his acquiescence that much sweeter for it.

He lets Erik be tonight, even though he's aware of that soft, yielding space in Erik's mind that says
Erik is (for Erik) biddable and accepting. Instead, he laces his telepathy in through Erik's
electromagnetism so the world flares brightly as a new dimension is added to it, textures of
overlapping magnetic fields, tastes of well-seasoned copper, the shivering pleasure of well-honed
steel. For someone who's a mediocre cook at the best of times (he can eat his own cooking, which
has usually been good enough), he has a well-equipped kitchen, something for Erik to luxuriate in,
Wusthof knives and All-Clad and Mauviel saute pans. Erik also appreciates the metal in the range
and refrigerator doors, easy to tug to open or close, or to adjust temperatures.

"You like this," Charles says as Erik pulls the vegetables -- charred cherry tomatoes, kale, shallots --
off the stove to plate them.

Erik could take that as the world's clumsiest double entendre, but he only smiles. The expression
catches Charles by the heart, yanks him back to their first meeting, Erik grinning and easy, waiting
for him past the arrivals gate. "I used to cook a lot, in college," he says. He doesn't look at Charles,
not really, wrapped up in taking the filets from the broiler, their surfaces richly browned and
steaming. "My mother wanted to be sure I wouldn't starve to death or live off fast food."

It's the first time Erik's ever mentioned his mother that Charles can remember. An image stands just
behind Erik's shoulder, a slender, frail-looking woman with dark eyes, her greying hair pulled back
into a bun. Despite the grey in her hair, her face isn't old, though it's gaunt, the cheeks spare like all
the rest of her. Every line of her, from the gold necklace to the wedding ring and the practical shoes,
is painted with affection and a hundred memories that hurt to recall.

"She taught me the basics and had me figure out the rest." Erik arranges the filets next to the
vegetables, adds a sauce that has Charles salivating and wishing he would hurry.

"That's where your pedagogy comes from then," Charles says, and Erik laughs again.

While he'd been musing, Erik had used his abilities to set the table. It leaves Charles to pour the
wine, now nicely aerated, and glasses of water. Erik carries the plates and Charles carries the glasses,
and soon they're installed in the breakfast nook. Charles is famished.

"This is amazing," he says, inhaling appreciatively, and the quiet glow of pleasure from Erik tastes
even better than wine.

“I hope you like your meat medium-rare,” Erik tells him, cutting into his own with his hand on the
grip of his steak knife, even if just for show, and Charles says, “Is there any other way to have
steak?”

Later, with bellies full and the dishes banished to the sink for now, Charles finds himself looking
across the next several hours alone with Erik before they’re both likely to fall asleep for the night and
having to face the reality of the fact he still hasn’t decided how he’s going to approach this thing with
Erik, what he learned today and still hasn’t quite digested -- certain he has to bring it up but not at all
sure that doing so won’t fracture the balance it seems like they’ve finally attained between them,
Erik’s pleasant ease and Charles basking in the glow of it.

He senses Erik’s anticipation as well, though it’s of a different sort, Erik expecting Charles to say
something, to make a request that isn’t a request and bring them both upstairs and to bed -- or
somewhere else but for the equivalent purpose. He isn’t at all thinking about the prototype that needs
working on, or writing up the revisions for his manuscript under review at Nature. He’s only
thinking about Charles, as if Charles’ presence is so great as to blot out lesser things. Even so, Erik’s mind isn’t so welcoming a landscape as it seems at first glance, even now. Beneath those calm surface waters are the same turbulent memories, and Erik’s only holding thinking of them at bay by sheer stubborn willpower.

“Shall we open another bottle of wine?” Charles asks for starters, quite certain he could use a little alcohol to lubricate this conversation himself. He goes for the cooler before he even receives Erik’s answering nod, finding a slim bottle of port that he pours into fresh glasses and carries over into the living room, Erik trailing after him like a dark cloud, one Charles directs to sit itself down on the sofa. Charles takes the adjacent seat, passing Erik over his glass and setting the bottle down on the coffee table for when Charles inevitably needs to top up.

Erik watches him with eyes shadowed slightly by the way the light hits his brows and draws out the contrasts in his face, high cheekbones and sharp jaw, his nose narrow and long. Charles sips at his wine, the taste of it sweet and full-bodied and affirming -- Charles went to a few AA meetings, once upon a time, but he never quite was able to embrace the idea of recovery being equivalent to utter and uncompromising sobriety. He certainly doesn’t consider himself as an alcoholic now, and he thinks he’s uniquely well-qualified to define the term.

With the taste of port still in his mouth and the warmth enough to pass for courage, he asks it. "Are you happy with the way things are?"

"Why?" Erik asks suspiciously. He sets his own glass on the side table, untouched. "Is this about today?"

Marie, of course, but that's a thicket to pick through next week. "No," Charles says. "It's about us. This."

"Of course I am," Erik says with a growl. He's inches away from standing to pace, the desire to move humming in his nerves, volition on the verge of being realized. "I wouldn't be here if I weren't."

As with so many things, there's what Erik says and then there's what lies beneath, a reality Erik doesn't perceive except through heavy tints and filters. That Erik stays if he's not happy is clear enough, even from the little Charles has seen and the even less that Erik's told him. Long enough, Erik had said about his time with Shaw; Charles thinks that one night would have been far too long, let alone the years that Erik had implied, and anger and possessiveness flood through him, bracing and shocking, hotter than the alcohol.

He keeps that behind his shields, barely, and draws a breath that's tight and uncomfortable. "Our first night together," he says, remembering that Erik hadn't meant for it to be the whole night, "you said it hadn't happened. And we've kept going that way for a year now. I'm fine with it," he adds, seeing those storm clouds well up, the lightning of Erik's agitation flickering dangerously, looking for a place to strike, "but I wanted to make sure you were. If there was anything you wanted, or needed, me to do differently."

There's a furrow in Erik's brow, thought and consternation shearing away the worst of his anger. He can't frame a response to this; he's never been asked this question before, except by his department chair at Berkeley who'd asked how he was settling in, and by Moira, who'd been thinking more about Erik's startup funds and his office chair. "I'm fine," he says at last, bridling a little as he settles on the obvious answer. "What the hell else would I be?"

"What about me, then?" Charles presses. "Are you fine with -- with " He gestures, spins out a few images for Erik, the suggestion of domination and control.
Predictably, Erik flushes. "I said, if I didn't like it and if I didn't want you doing that to me, then I'd leave."

Old shame, partly Erik's own but mostly Shaw's creation, pulses through Erik's thoughts, Erik himself fiercely trying to ignore it. The one thing about being a telepath is, Charles thinks, if Erik ever really didn't want it -- if he were lying right now, or being misleading about how he feels about this, about Charles -- Charles would know it. Charles has never really thought people are even blind to the signs and signals people give with their body language, certain one could tell just from the way someone flinches or turns their face away that they don't want what you're giving, no matter how much some people (mostly men) claim ignorance. But for Charles that's doubly true. He's never liked to rely on it, preferring the clear unambiguity of outright verbal consent, but with Erik, where what Erik wants and what Erik tells himself he wants are so very different, things are more … complex.

“All right,” Charles says, concedes, refusing to let himself be visibly cowed by Erik’s reactions, taking another sip of his port even as Erik sits there and glares at him, waiting for Charles’ next attack, trying to find some way to offensively pre-empt it.

“This is my choice, Charles,” Erik snaps out, a snake biting at heels, violent when afraid. “I’m the one who came to you, remember.”

“I do remember.”

What it took for Erik to get to that point is what Charles doesn’t know. They’d been flirting around the idea of it for a while, always circling closer but neither of them ever outright asking for it, Erik wary and defensive and a part of Charles -- God help him -- drawn to that, every bit as much as he was drawn to the smooth charisma of the Erik he met in Berkeley. Both of them two faces of the same Janian man, of course, and the enigma of it was compelling enough Charles was willing to wait patiently for Erik to come to him, certain that if he did, Erik would. Eventually. And he was right.

“Usually, in these kinds of situations, people have a more explicit discussion of what they will and won’t tolerate, that’s all,” Charles says, as if this had everything in the world to do with conformity to sexual norms and not Erik’s past, painted around his present like red lacquer. “We never have. And we don’t have to,” he says, before Erik can respond with more acid to that, “I just wanted to be sure that wasn’t something you were still expecting from me.”

It’s hardly as if they’re tying each other up in a dungeon somewhere and breaking out the chains and bull whips, but it’s as obvious to Charles as ever, now, that physical submission isn’t the only dangerous kind. Maybe, given the little bit that Erik's told him and what Charles has seen for himself, it's the least dangerous option. Surrendering the body is one thing; giving up what Erik must have is something else entirely.

Erik bristles a little. "If I'd wanted a safeword, I would have asked for one."

Charles isn't sure about that, and while he thinks he keeps most of that doubt in his own skull, some of it must show on his face because Erik rolls his eyes -- and, for a wonder, his thoughts go bright and trembling with embarrassment. In an instant, Charles thinks he can see how it happened: Erik not backing down from a challenge, no matter what it was, constantly trying to prove to himself that he neither asks nor gives any quarter, that he'll push himself to some place farther than the person he's competing against. That got twisted, Charles decides; Shaw had taken that and fashioned it into a weapon, or a trap, to keep Erik where he was. Where Shaw wanted him.

"I mean it," Erik says.
"I know you do." His old therapist, and numerous telepaths in psychology or psychiatry since, have
told him how easy it is to psychoanalyze even casual conversation, dissecting not the words but the
layers of thoughts beneath them. He has no doubt Erik means what he says, but he does doubt that
Erik fully understands where that determination comes from.

*It's easy to think you can show people the truth about themselves, and they'll welcome it,* his first real
psionic therapist had said, when Charles had told her he wanted to major in either psychology or
neuroscience. *If you operate under that belief, you'll end up like Cassandra in the myth: telling
people the truth and having them refuse to believe you.*

"If that ever changes," Charles says, instead of telling Erik he needs to think about why he thinks he
doesn't need a safeword, "you'll let me know, yes?"

Erik’s mouth twists in a smile that’s almost sincere. "Is that an order?"

"If you need it to be."

Erik accepts that, head bowing a little in acknowledgment. It’s still hotter than that simple gesture has
any right to be. Charles has never really considered himself dominant, or considered himself
anything; sex has always been for pleasure, or transactional, however it’s had, and more than a few
of his partners would have objected to Charles holding them down or suggesting they go make
dinner. But this -- he likes this. Not the control, precisely, but watching Erik bend to pressure
carefully applied, watching that soft place in his mind yielding happily when Charles gives an order
or gives him no choice but to take what Charles wants him to.

“Good,” Charles says, and despite his inexpertise the word rolls off his tongue easily -- or perhaps
Charles is too caught up in the way the lamplight reflects in Erik’s eyes, the line of his lips which
only look hard but which Charles knows to be soft, the way Erik’s gaze trains on him to the
exclusion of all else. “Kiss me, then.”

Before, he would have seen hesitation, Erik visibly warring with himself on whether to reject the
order, whether still needing -- wanting -- it made him weak. It’s not clear if he doesn’t worry that
anymore, or if having it out in the open like this, cast under the light of day where Erik can see the
shape of it without the shadows, has just made him bolder. Erik complies, leaning in; Charles closes
his eyes a moment before Erik’s lips catch his and he lifts a hand to curve behind Erik’s head and
keep him there. The wine tastes heavy on Erik’s tongue, sweet and deep.

Charles twists his fingers a little in Erik’s hair, catching a short lock of it between his knuckles; Erik
yields to the pressure, leaning in harder where Charles wants him to and blunting a sound against his
lips. Charles’ body is warm, lit from within as he tugs at Erik’s lower lip with his teeth before he
draws back, just enough that the dim light and their breathing are all he’s aware of when he orders,
“Come upstairs” -- and Erik obeys.
Example Nine: Availability Cascade

Chapter Notes

Check for cw at end of chapter (and glance at additional tags added).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Coming from Princeton, where temperatures in February are still solidly mired in the bone-chillingly cold, Erik can’t entirely adjust to this: twenty-three degrees -- seventy-four, if he tries to be American about it -- with a partly-cloudy sky and the palm trees that line Stanford’s roads duly winterized and green. When paired with the stucco buildings and terracotta roofs, it has an effect of making Erik feel more like he’s stepped off the plane in Madrid than Northern California.

The house which is hosting the welcome dinner belongs to Erik’s POI: his person of interest, his hopefully someday-adviser, who has somehow managed at thirty-something and with a professorship in psychology to afford this massive estate, cloistered away in a gated community and done up in sleek modern style. Erik feels out of place here, fundamentally disoriented, as if someone will look over and realize the German one -- the Jew -- the one standing a foot taller than all the rest who went to college on scholarship -- doesn’t really belong.

It’s a sentiment Erik’s used to, at least. He’s learned to hide it: he had to, or he never would have survived the socials held at his eating club freshman year, where the women wore pearls and the men trailed the scent of old money behind them like cologne. It’s accomplished with a tailored suit, a glass of alcohol held in one hand which always appears to be half-full but from which he never drinks, combined with an accent thicker than reality and the ability to fall back on linguistic incomprehension as an excuse should the first two fail him. It’s not cheating if it works.

And it doesn’t work at all, Erik determines, if he can’t get the attention of his POI. Which is becoming a problem, because the house is extensive enough and the crowd large enough that Erik hasn’t been able to find him yet and he’s been trying for thirty minutes.

He wanders from the crowded living room -- airy yet still stifling with conversation -- through the immense kitchen, where the caterers are buzzing like hummingbirds, darting from oven to refrigerator and back again, their knives a disciplined flurry as they chop vegetables and meat. Erik takes a moment to admire their technique before passing on; no one thinks to question why he’s here because it looks as if he belongs in this place, that he’s permitted to be here.

Beyond the kitchen is a complex of drawing rooms and oak-paneled studies that belong in some medieval university reading room, the shelves carved in Gothic arches and the floors covered with thick carpets -- strange, next to the sleek modernity of the outer rooms. It's quiet here, as if these rooms are seldom used even by the man who owns them.

Annoyed with himself for wasting time in an empty place, and figuring his POI is sensibly avoiding the crush of wide-eyed prospective and bored faculty by hiding upstairs, Erik turns to head back to the rest of the group. Their voices are barely audible from here, long hallways and large rooms between them.

He heads back past one of the studies, bracing himself for more conversation, when the movement of expensive metal catches his attention, and then footsteps on the marble-tiled floor.
"May I help you?" The metal is a watch, Bvlgari by the engineering (after four years at Princeton, Erik's become discerning), and antique cufflinks. They belong to a tall, spare man with a foxlike face and thin mouth, bones as precisely carved and assembled as the watch on his wrist.

There's no point in saying he got lost, so Erik says, "I was looking for you, Dr. Shaw."

"I've been delinquent, yes," Sebastian Shaw says, although he doesn't seem truly regretful; Erik can't blame him. "There were some matters that required my attention. And you are… Erik Lehnsherr, correct?"

Erik ignores the flush of pleasure at Dr. Shaw remembering his name, or even knowing it. "Yes, sir."

Dr. Shaw smiles, a wide smile full of white teeth. "I was under the impression that we would be meeting tomorrow."

In all likelihood, it's intended to make Erik take a step back, fall into line like the rest of the prospects, polite and demurring. But Erik’s never gotten anywhere in life by giving way to sycophantism, so he says, instead, "We are. But if either of us are to be spending five to seven years in each other’s company, the more information points before making such a decision, the better."

It could well backfire -- Erik doesn’t dare try to interpret the bland expression on Dr. Shaw’s face the first moment after he speaks, when the words still hang in the air between them, interpretable, until at last Dr. Shaw inclines his head and says, “One step ahead of the competition already, are you, Mr. Lehnsherr?"

“I believe that’s for you to determine. Sir.”

The audacity pays off, because Dr. Shaw chuckles and takes a half-step closer to Erik, touching just his fingertips between Erik’s shoulder blades to direct him back toward the main rooms, the man himself coming along this time, warmer now that the initial risks are behind them. He smells faintly of old leather and Scotch, like the library at the Ivy Club, where Erik has spent the better part of the past four weeks finishing his thesis. It carries with it the sense-memories of stress and trepidation every bit as much as the soft triumph of a finished chapter, the easy camaraderie of friends reading together in the lamplight.

“So,” Dr. Shaw says as they step out into the broader room of the main parlor, halting in an empty space by the large windows and settling his gaze on Erik once more, looking at him like he can derive something about Erik’s character from the lines of his face or the set of his mouth. “Tell me about your research.”

That, at least, is a question Erik’s well prepared for; he launches into an improvised version of the broader outline he drafted for himself on the plane, tracing the narrative from his initial research in mech E to bioengineering, to his collaborations in the neuroscience and philosophy departments. It might be unusual, an engineering major applying for Ph.D. programs in psychology and neuroscience, but Erik’s confident in the story he weaves around it. He smells faintly of old leather and Scotch, like the library at the Ivy Club, where Erik has spent the better part of the past four weeks finishing his thesis. It carries with it the sense-memories of stress and trepidation every bit as much as the soft triumph of a finished chapter, the easy camaraderie of friends reading together in the lamplight.

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"Very interesting," Shaw says. He sets his drink down on a side table, more preoccupied with the liquid in it, or the light caught in the facets of the glass, than in what Erik's just said. "Philosophy of mind, eh?"

"Morality and motivation," Erik says. He wonders briefly if that was a mistake; he'd hoped that Shaw's own interests in differential decision-making--associated with the divergent structure of
mutant brains, of course--would be close enough to his own work that Shaw would be mostly interested in the neuro side of Erik's spiel.

"Hm." Shaw's pale gaze transfers itself to the window, which looks out onto the courtyard with its splashing fountain and, in the near distance, the high walls with their decorations of climbing plants and palm trees. "As mutants change and advance the human species -- and supplant it -- we'll see revisions in old philosophies."

Erik isn't entirely sure if Shaw's talking to him, or simply musing out loud. Something in Shaw's stance, though, tensed ever-so-slightly, turned toward Erik enough that Erik has to be aware of him, says that Shaw expects an answer.

"It hasn't happened yet," Erik says. When Shaw gives him an appraising look, Erik adds, "We need to know what the baseline is now, don't we, to know how our own philosophies are going to diverge from it?"

"A necessary evil," Shaw agrees. He picks his drink up and gestures for Erik to follow him. "How do your abilities influence how you conduct your research? Electromagnetism must have very… interesting applications, but you don't talk much about them."

"There are IRB issues with using my own ability as an imaging instrument," Erik admits. Shaw makes a dismissive gesture. "I started out hoping to use it to better calibrate MRIs, if not replace them altogether with something more sensitive. That's what got me into neuroscience in the first place; I found the biology of it more interesting than the mechanics."

"What is your AΩ designation?" Shaw asks.

It’s shocking, a little -- not the sort of thing, if Erik recalls correctly, people are supposed to ask: like asking a woman if she plans on having children. Not rude in normal conversation, but certainly something that people talk about as contributing to bias in graduate admissions. In fact, Erik’s pretty sure he read an article on it in the Chronicle of Higher Education just last month.

"Over-sigma," Erik says. Evasive, maybe -- the equivalent of saying I went to school in Boston when one means Harvard -- but people know better than to ask more. Standard AΩ tests don’t go above sigma as ceiling; Erik had to have specialized testing to figure out his exact score once he maxed out.

Dr. Shaw, of course, must interpret that precisely as Erik means it, because he lifts one brow and turns more fully toward Erik, his attention focusing on him now with such exclusivity that Erik feels heat rise in his nape, self-conscious and wondering if it’s too far, if it’s too lacking humility to count as gracious.

"Might I ask," Dr. Shaw says, "if you have a particular objection to utilizing your mutation in your research, or if it is simply the imposed institutional ethics that cause the problem?"

God forbid, Erik thinks, Dr. Shaw should let him get away with a diplomatic answer. “No objection.”

Dr. Shaw smiles, satisfied, and swirls his Scotch round in its glass. “If you were to attend Stanford,” he says evenly, “you would not need to worry about such issues. The IRB and I have an … understanding. I would not have my students’ intellectual development restrained by the petty bigotries of bureaucracy.”

A thrill runs through Erik at the thought of it: it’s not, after all, as if there’s any human risk to applying mutation to the life sciences, but there’s plenty of baseline lobbying in Congress against it to
prevent the federal agencies from ever funding it, with just enough of that fear of the unknown to prevent university ethics boards from wanting to take the risk. As much as Erik tries to play the cool charade in front of Dr. Shaw, the fact of the matter is, he’s idolized Shaw ever since he read his seminal paper on distance processing in the teleportationist mutant mind, the one which earned Shaw the early career award from numerous professional societies and a nomination for the Nobel prize.

The way Shaw’s looking at him right now, Erik almost dares think that this time next year, he could have everything he wants just within his grasp, the whole world unfolding out before him, broad and unmapped.

"Well," Shaw says. He claps Erik on the back, propelling him back toward the rest of the gathering; through the doors, Erik hears some of the faculty wondering where Shaw's gone, with dinner ready to be served. "We'll have a lot to talk about tomorrow, won't we?"

*  

Two months into his first fall term, and Erik rides euphoria and exhaustion through the midterm slump, when the semester begins to tell and the work begins to pile up. His funding package keeps him out of the classroom, so he can watch his colleagues struggling under the weight of undergraduate incompetence while he prepares for seminar or lab -- or, as now, preparing for his first invitation to Shaw's weekly symposium at the Rose and Crown.

*Preparation* in this case is running his fingers through his hair to straighten it, and changing out his wrinkled shirt for a freshly ironed one. In his first weeks here, Shaw had reminded him of the importance of professionalism--"An observation of the niceties," he'd said, straightening his cuffs to military precision. *Method maketh the scientist; clothes maketh the man.* As he pulls himself together, Erik gathers his thoughts as well, not sure what to expect and disliking the uncertainty.

In the middle of the week, the Rose and Crown is relatively quiet; as always, it's expensive enough to deter undergraduates and most of the graduate students, and Erik's here under Shaw's aegis. A few older faculty talk softly in dim corners, glancing up curiously at the young newcomer as Erik walks by.

Shaw and four others are in their corner table already. All of them are mutants and all of them are neuroscientists: Inhye, Margaret, Dante, and Mesut -- pyrokinesis, teleportation, illusionism, super-speed, respectively -- although, unlike Erik, they're all out of their first year. Dante has the faintly confused air of a man who hasn't set foot out of his office for a week, but even he is gazing steadily at Shaw as Shaw talks.

"Ah, Erik!" Shaw's keen eyes seem to cut through the dimness of the bar, gathering all the light to them like steel. He waves again. "Come over."

As if Erik was going to go anywhere else. He slides into the empty seat next to Mesut, and a moment later the server appears. "Order whatever you'd like," Shaw says graciously.

Erik takes Shaw at his word and orders an Aberlour A’bunadh, neat -- this earns an appraising look from Shaw, neither approving nor disapproving, and when it arrives Erik meets Shaw’s gaze over the rim of his glass as he takes his first sip, the single malt burning down the back of his throat like a smoldering silk ribbon.

Erik is the first to look away, down at the lines of the wooden tabletop as he sets his glass down; when he glances up again Shaw’s attention has shifted back to Inhye, who is saying something about her primate work, connecting it to a recent paleontological finding in PNAS: one of those distant theoretical connections Erik envies, that he’s certain he’d only ever identify if he quit his research
and spent all his time reading the literature of completely unrelated fields, choosing interdisciplinary over the disciplinary entirely.

Erik hadn’t brought any of his own research with him. Shaw told him he didn’t need to -- and yet, an hour in, Shaw turns to him and says, “Tell the others what you’ve been working on, Erik,” and Erik is left reeling for a few brief moments, scrambling for the threads of all his half-prepared elevator pitches, all of them slipping from his grasp.

“Actually,” Erik says, lighting at last upon a distant idea, one composed purely of memories of notes scribbled down in his wrinkled moleskine, three yellow post-its by his computer and highlighter ink bleeding over article print-outs, “I was thinking about a new idea --” and he launches into talking about the proposal he’d been thinking about giving Shaw, still only half-developed and creative, an integrative solution to theory of mind and the relationship between the amygdala and empathic regulation of others’ emotional and physical pain, how bilateral amygdalar lesions may end up influencing perceptions of people’s emotional pain while leaving judgments about physical pain untouched, whether or not these ideas could be extended to predict punishments for moral transgressions, whether the whole system would fall apart if you introduced some dehumanization function onto the target and forced people to disengage.

“And this could be modulated consciously,” Shaw asks; he’s leaning forward now, elbows on the surface of the table with his fingertips tilted together –– Erik almost forgot him, caught up in the idea, in his colleagues’ suggestions and his disjointed map drawn out on the back of a cocktail napkin.

“Motivationally,” Erik clarifies, gaze catching on Shaw’s again. “After all, the limits to people’s empathy aren’t essentialized, they’re self-imposed. People don’t want to care about anyone else, and that will moderate the effect.”

Shaw leans back, nodding in approval this time. "Very ambitious for a first-year," he says, "but that's why you were brought on. All of you," he adds, glancing around the table. Erik's read the department bulletins; between the five of them, there's at least ten different internal and external grants represented. Then there's Shaw, whose list of accolades is longer than most would receive in a lifetime. "We'll talk more about this, Erik. I'm… interested to hear more of your thoughts."

The warmth rising in Erik's gut isn't entirely from the whiskey. When Shaw turns his attention to Mesut, Erik can study him with the weight of Shaw's attention focused elsewhere. Mesut talks on about his interest in experience and spatial perception, Shaw nodding encouragingly at various points as Mesut works through the details, and Erik wonders what Mesut thinks of being the focus of that intensity, if he's used to it, if it's possible to get used to it.

Despite his focus, Shaw is never still. He idly strokes his glass, or nods almost in time with the march of Mesut's ideas, the thick, disciplined fall of his hair brushing his temples. He inhabits the space around him -- owns it, really, and Erik senses that while the others are listening to their colleague, most of their attention is reserved for Shaw.

"You see," Shaw says, once Mesut finishes, "what the scientific institution can't recognize is the unique contribution -- the unique perspective -- our mutations bring to our work. Even if we do not incorporate them explicitly, or study them qua mutations, they nonetheless inform how we theorize mind, self, identity -- the basis, in other words, for a revolution in understanding, as mutations themselves will revolutionize, replace, Homo sapiens and its old, outmoded categories."

Erik's heart beats faster. That future he'd seen at his recruitment, opening, unfolding in front of him, has contours now, an undiscovered country he can now begin to see more clearly, as if a fog is lifting to reveal what lies before him. It's the Promised Land, and Shaw is going to bring them there.
Later, when the alcohol fades and he's home in his cramped studio, he feels vaguely foolish. Shaw, for all his brilliance, is hardly an evangelist, and Erik's hardly anyone's disciple. As he stumbles into bed, Shaw's invitation to next week's symposium ringing in his ears and the camaraderie of walking back towards campus with Inhye and the others, Erik still thinks of Shaw's quick, pale eyes and fine face, his hand resting between Erik's shoulder blades.

After that, he can't help but take more notice of Shaw. In seminar, Shaw's words take on a resonance Erik can't ignore; when he talks to Shaw in office hours, it's as if his brain is supercharged, churning out theories and hypotheses and analyses, every shift of Shaw's body heavy with meaning that Erik transmutes into ideas. When Shaw smiles, broad and toothy, behind steepled fingers, and tells Erik he may be on to something, to be sure to keep it in mind for the GRFP application, Erik's half convinced he owns the world.

He takes that elation home with him, and Shaw's approval, and when he lies in bed, his body hums with excitement, and he imagines in fleeting moments having Shaw's approval for other reasons entirely.

*  

What goes up, Erik tells himself, must eventually come down. And yet through spring semester he only seems to continue rising in Shaw’s esteem, handling four projects at once in addition to his coursework -- and when he’s awarded the NSF GRFP come late March Shaw takes him out for celebratory dinner at Baumé, an upscale restaurant in downtown Palo Alto where the lights glow warmly from behind the wall sconces, casting amber pools onto the few tables scattered throughout the dining area and lighting their skin with gold.

Erik spent more money than he really should have, buying something to wear here that wouldn’t be too obviously last season’s Lanvin, bought at the thrift store and tailored with Erik’s own needle and thread. The garçon knows Shaw by name, the two of them exchanging some untranslatable joke in French before the sommelier brings the wine and leaving Erik to smile politely and pretend he hadn't understood.

The amuse bouche arrives and Erik glances down at the Beaufort parmesan marshmallow speckled with spice and pepper upon its cracker, the peeled grape half peering up at him like a blind eye, hesitating only a moment before he collects it and manages to fit it all into his mouth, the way he knows he’s supposed to. Shaw makes it look easy, of course, though if he notices Erik’s unfamiliar with eight-course meals he says nothing.

“This will change everything for you,” Shaw tells him, setting his wine glass down after taking a sip and leaning back in his chair, one elbow hooked over its spine. “You’ll never have to worry about teaching, for one, or working on other people’s projects. The NSF will cover you for three years, and your internal fellowship will buy you another two -- three, if you want to stay an extra year. There are a lot of people envying your position right now, my boy.”

“I don’t intend to let it go to waste,” Erik says, and Shaw hums approvingly, his gaze not deviating from Erik’s as the garçon returns with the appetizer.

“Do you like caviar?” he asks, switching the subject abruptly to the plate in front of them, an elaborate concoction of caviar and carrot purée on a dehydrated carrot, with little cloud-like bursts of lemon air.

“If it’s not oversalted.”

“The chef here is trained in molecular gastronomy,” Shaw says, dipping his small spoon into his
dish. “He’ll find some creative way to offset the salt, I assure you -- try it.”

Obediently, Erik slides the mother-of-pearl spoon into the caviar, the roe like dusky black pearls themselves. They slide across his tongue, bursting under his teeth with a delicate sweetness of the carrot and tang of lemon, the salt a pleasant bite when he does notice it.

"Well?" Shaw says, smiling knowingly.

Erik puts down the spoon and chases the caviar with a sip of wine, a white that's arid and sharp after the roe. "Very good."

They eat in silence, and slowly, stretching the mouthfuls out. At last Shaw sets his spoon down and leans back so the server can clear the plates away and leave the sorbet, two spheres of pale apple and Calvados. The server returns with the wine for the soup course, and at Shaw's bidding, leaves the bottle.

"So, my boy," Shaw says after he's inspected the wine, a glossy red fragrant with cherry and dark earth. "I hope you've made some time for recreation in the midst of all your endeavors. *Mens sana in corpore sano* and all that."

"I run." Realizing that Shaw might be looking for more than that, Erik adds, "I've been training for the San Francisco Marathon; I'd like to qualify for Boston or New York."

He expects Shaw to say something about his dedication and focus, but Shaw only looks at him. "I might have thought you were," Shaw says, and takes a sip of his wine. In the interim, the server reappears with a small dish of reconstructed vichyssoise for each of them. When the server vanishes again, Shaw says, "You take better care of yourself than most graduate students. While I admire dedication, there comes a point where aesthetics suffer."

Was that a compliment? Erik picks up his own small soup spoon to sample the vichyssoise. "I think more students are concerned with their funding and future prospects than aesthetics."

"Aesthetics are substance," Shaw says. "It isn't a matter of mere appearance, of *accidence,*" he stresses the word, lifting one finger to the sky as if he's a prophet speaking holy words, "but being itself."

Erik feels oddly as if he should say "amen," as if Shaw is witnessing to him -- except Shaw's attention, although overwhelming, is wholly welcome, and what he's offering isn't salvation but something far more to be desired. "I'm glad you approve of my aesthetics, then."

"Indeed," Shaw says. His grin is a bright flash of white teeth.

Erik sips at his wine, turning Shaw’s words over in his head and wondering if he ought to say something further, just to reassure Shaw of his ultimate dedication to his studies, but after a moment Shaw continues --

“Aesthetics are fundamental to the intellect. For Plato, beauty is found at the intersection of passion and knowledge, the appreciation of beauty undivorced from appreciation for philosophy’s own symmetries.”

Erik looks up, at him, and finds Shaw’s gaze still watching, dark with the lamplight reflected in his eyes, a contrast not unbeautiful in itself. A beat, and then Shaw sets down his glass and says, “Of course, not everyone appreciates Grecian ideals as I do.”

The implication is so overt Erik nearly suspects himself of imagining it, hiding his expression with
another quick swallow of wine and fighting to balance his surprise with his subtle sense of vindication: *I knew it, I can always tell.* It seems natural, though, with the taste of it still on his tongue, to say, “Not as uncommon nowadays as it was,” and watch the sharp upward curve of Shaw’s lips, a silent confirmation that beats in Erik’s chest louder than his heart.

The part of Erik that’s still so new at this, that only realized he was gay two years ago and has spent every month since struggling to catch up, very dearly wants to blush now and change the subject, stammer over project proposals and grant deadlines. It’s ignored by the part of Erik that decided one Saturday night with whiskey in hand and some dark handsome stranger eyeing him from across the bar that he would never, ever let shame get in the way of going after what he wants. Anything he wants.

Shaw takes the reins of conversation from there, guiding it out of the deep waters, though all else is shaded now by what Erik knows, or thinks he knows, the suggestion in a lifted brow or the promise in a private smile. He wonders if he would even be here, at this table with Shaw, if his suspicions were unfounded. And fuck it, but there’s something so erotic about the idea of it, of him-and-Shaw, Erik the young scholar learning at the feet of his own erastês, illicit and all the more intoxicating for it. A challenge, too, because Erik wouldn’t expect Shaw to go easily -- one thing to make allusions over a dimly lit dinner, another thing entirely the act itself.

After dessert, glasses of d’Yquem in hand, Shaw takes the check. Erik hadn't dared look at the prix-fixe menu to see what eight courses plus their wines cost; his half alone would be his food budget for the next few months, easily. Shaw doesn't look at the amount either, only sliding a credit card into the folder and setting it aside.

"Family," Shaw says musingly, and Erik needs a moment to realize it's a question.

"My mother, back in Germany" Erik tells him. "My father died when I was ten, no siblings." He shrugs.

Shaw doesn't seem to have much to say to that. He's a closed book, his history locked away beneath a Hugo Boss suit and brilliance. Erik knows the basic details of his academic biography, he's seen Shaw's house, but little past that. Unmarried, no children, devoted to his work and his graduate students.

"You must make connections here." With a gracious nod, he accepts the check back from the server and signs it with a flourish. "You are a fiercely independent student, Erik, and you should never lose sight of that -- your independence will make you great -- but all the same, you must make time to nurture… other aspects of your life."

"I'll remember that," Erik says.

They stand to leave, and Shaw guides Erik through the maze of tables, an absent hand on his elbow to direct Erik past him. He catches the edge of Shaw's approval when he uses his abilities to push open the front door, letting them out into the half-light of Palo Alto after sunset. "Let me drive you home," Shaw says, sliding around Erik again; the step turns into a hand at the small of Erik’s back, turning him to the gunmetal-grey Bentley idling at the curb under the watchful eye of the valet.

"Please," Shaw says when Erik demurs, and nods pointedly at the passenger side door. The valet leaps into action, trotting around the front of the hood to open the door for Erik, and Erik, hypnotized by the wine, Shaw, and the throb of the Bentley's engine under its hood, gets in.

The interior of the Bentley is spacious and oppressive at once, rich brushed leather and a console that resembles something from the 1960s’ idea of the future, the powerful hum of fine-tuned machinery
cradling him. He belongs in a space like this, Erik reminds himself even as he wants to be overawed by it and annoyed by it. Shaw drives away after tipping the valet, elbow resting casually on the frame of the door, right hand on the wheel.

"I think," he says, "this will be a very… fruitful relationship, Erik. For both of us."

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If Erik wakes the next morning with the memory of last night glossy and colorful as a fever dream, lines blurry in retrospect, any doubts he had about his interpretation of the events fall away one after the other as the days pass into weeks and Erik accumulates more data points: Shaw asks him to stay late after the others have left the bar and buys him another drink, Shaw’s gaze catching Erik’s across even crowded rooms, light touches and wry remarks, dozens of little things that would only be little if it weren’t for the tapestry that unrolls behind them.

It’s possible Shaw wants nothing more than this, Erik thinks -- veiled flirting, a good-looking twenty-two-year-old willing to laugh at Shaw’s jokes and tolerate idle touches and innuendos, perhaps in exchange for Erik’s holding onto the halo of being Shaw’s golden boy just a little while longer, basking in the light of favoritism while knowing just how easily it can be snuffed out. But Erik doesn’t want that to be the case. The things Erik wants are far less excusable than anything Shaw’s done so far; they’d end with Shaw losing his job if he weren’t tenured, and possibly even then, which is precisely why Shaw seems to have left the decision in Erik’s hands.

So, Erik starts to push. Small liberties, at first. Making sure their fingers brush as Erik passes him a pen to sign his course schedule. Standing too close behind Shaw’s desk as Shaw shows him something on his computer screen, hand resting on the back of Shaw’s chair and occasionally leaning in to look closer, bringing himself down at a height with Shaw’s gaze and pretending not to notice Shaw’s eyes flicking toward his bared throat.

The galling thing is, Shaw never takes advantage. It makes Erik want to push harder, further, but he’s simultaneously too conscious of the fact that he can’t see the boundaries -- that he won’t know until after the fact, if he ever crosses the line.

Erik tries teaching himself patience. Isn’t it enough, he argues with himself as he sits in the seat opposite Shaw’s desk during their weekly meeting, listening to Shaw talk about options for where to submit the paper from Erik’s first year project, that he knows Shaw wants him? He should be flattered and enjoy it while it lasts -- but that kind of virtue falls at odds with Erik’s drive to examine the details as close as he can, to map out the hidden edges and shadows of anything secret, the same drive that made him want to be a scientist in the first place now making it next to impossible to sit quietly and just think about science while he’s at the same time presented with the shape of Shaw’s body beneath his suit: slim and well-toned, uncannily strong, gaze following the gesture of Shaw’s hands and imagining the power hidden there, how it might feel to have those fingers against his skin, whether Shaw could press just-hard-enough to leave a mark.

One night they're at the Rose and Crown again -- still, with the others gone back to lab or to home. The server has taken away old glasses and given them new ones, the Lagavulin 21 glowing with the richness of dark honey; the taste of it on his tongue, the burn of it in his throat, isn't as heady as Shaw watching him when he swallows.

These times, when it's the two of them, Erik tells himself that Shaw relaxes a little. He's still imposing, still conscious of who and what he is, and still very much the teacher who leads Erik through the mysteries, and Erik is a prize initiate who sees not only the mysteries of his craft but behind the mantle of his teacher. The others get professional advice and encouragement along with Shaw's insights into the working of the academy, but Erik learns so much more.
"I like a man who enjoys whiskey," Shaw says now, after Erik's second sip. He takes a drink himself, sighing in appreciation. "I had to teach myself to enjoy it," odd; Erik had somehow imagined Shaw emerging from the womb in tailored Ferragamo with a glencairn in one hand, "but the effort has more than repaid itself."

"I learned a lot of things at Princeton myself," Erik says dryly, which gets a laugh from Shaw.

"Yes, I rather imagine you did." Shaw nods at Erik's glass. "I'm assuming that you acquired some of your tastes there?"

"For whiskey, among many other things," Erik says as directly as he can, meeting Shaw's eyes as he picks up his glass. He chases the words with another small swallow; Lagavulin isn't for rushing, at over five hundred a bottle. "There were… standards to be met, ones I wasn't used to meeting."

Shaw's eyebrow flicks up. "I wouldn't have thought you were the sort to depend on the approval of your peers, Erik, much less seek it out."

Erik flushes. "Not approval," he clarifies. "It's easier to work if they think you're like them. It wasn't approval so much as it was blending in."

"I'm not sure if you could blend in," Shaw murmurs. "You were made to be extraordinary."

Heat unfurls in the pit of Erik's stomach like a ribbon, even as he cautions himself not to trust it too easily -- he still doesn't know what this is. "I didn't mean blend in with regard to my mutation," he says, and Shaw taps his finger against the edge of his glass and says, "Neither did I. Or at least, not entirely."

Shaw sets his drink down, a click of crystal against wood, and reaches over to pinch the cuff of Erik's sleeve between two fingertips, examining the quality of the stitching, perhaps, or the make of the buttons. "You certainly have acquired a good eye for the finer things."

Erik's heart pulses in his throat, racing right up until Shaw releases the fabric and draws his hand away again, Erik's power still latched onto the steel in his watch, feeling the seconds tick by too quickly.

He makes his decision that night, somewhere between that moment and later on when he's lying alone in bed at night with the single malt still warm in his blood and his body taut and lusting for unrealized possibilities. He chooses to wait until the semester is over, partly to give himself time to work up the nerve, but primarily because he'll be staying in California over the summer -- where, without the structure of classes and weekly symposia to hold it together, his life and research can be rather more self-directed. It means, depending on the outcome, he'll just as easily be able to take full advantage of his triumph … or avoid Shaw, tail between his legs, until it all blows over by fall.

Erik takes extra hours getting ready the night of the end-of-year party Shaw's throwing for the faculty and graduate students at his home, which is why he knows, when he arrives and Shaw's gaze lingers on him across the room several moments too long, that if he destroys everything tonight, at least he'll look good while doing it.

The party is a strange revisitation of that day barely more than a year ago, when he'd come here as a prospective. Now he belongs, and if he's still hopeful, he's hopeful for different reasons. He talks to colleagues -- not really friends as such; colleagues -- and the other professors as well as to Shaw, hoping he's not being too obviously standoffish, too obviously a tease.
At last, the other faculty and students drift away to celebrate the end of the semester by sleeping, a quick breather before summer work begins. Erik idly collects glasses and abandoned plates, bringing fistfuls of silverware trailing behind him.

"You shouldn't do that, my boy," Shaw tsks when he sees Erik at work. The caterers themselves are a distant hum in the dining room, cleaning up the buffet. "These good people here," he nods back at the dining room, "are being paid to take care of these things so we don't have to."

Erik shrugs. "They always miss something."

"Not Continental," Shaw says with comfortable assurance. "At least tell me you didn't get any stains on that lovely shirt."

Erik holds up his wrists, brushed with Hugo Boss-tailored cotton. "Pristine."

"Good," Shaw murmurs. "Since this has become something of a tradition for us, why don't you come through to my study with me? We can get out of the caterers' way and enjoy a drink."

"Thank you," Erik says. He should decline; dedication or not, he's exhausted after the last-minute rush through deadlines and a year of hard work and he's had maybe a bit too much wine and too little food after his afternoon run.

He follows Shaw when Shaw beckons, away from the soft buzz and laughter of the workers and into the quiet recesses of the house. It's been over a year since Erik's set foot into Shaw's sanctum; the one other time he'd been here had been at the beginning of the year -- Shaw's "welcome back" party; he seems to love hosting big department functions -- and he had determined not to press his new advisor's boundaries or hospitality. He wonders, if he had, if he would have had what he wanted that much sooner.

Shaw equips them both with whiskey and gestures for Erik to sit on the end of the heavy leather couch, takes a seat himself in the armchair set close, close enough that if Erik were daring he could reach out to touch Shaw's knee, or slide from his seat and crawl between Shaw's thighs. When Erik swallows, the burn has little to do with the whiskey.

"To a very successful first year," Shaw says, raising a glass; Erik nods and raises his glass in turn. "And, of course, to an even more successful second year."

"Under your guidance," Erik says boldly, "I don't doubt it will be."

Shaw laughs and says, "Flattery will get you everywhere, my boy," chasing the words with a swallow of his drink -- Erik drinks as well, but his gaze is caught by the ripple of Shaw’s throat, something visceral and animal inside him unable to look away.

After he’s rested his glass on the arm of his seat, Shaw crosses his legs and looks back to Erik, his pale gaze assessing from across the short distance. "In truth, most students require the first year at least to get their bearings and acclimate to the demands of graduate school. Not you. Why?"

"I worked hard in undergrad, too. Nothing changed in that respect except the location."

"You are very driven," Shaw agrees, saying the words slowly, as if considering each one before he speaks. "I wonder if you can maintain it."

Erik’s brow goes up, a little irritated by the suggestion he might burn himself out. "I get what I want," he states. "I’ll maintain it as long as it keeps working."
Is he mistaken, then, or is there the hint of a smile at the corner of Shaw’s mouth -- does he catch Shaw’s gaze flitting down toward Erik’s body, watching where Erik rests his glass of scotch on his knee. Erik wonders if there’ll be another Erik in just a few short months, some protegé selected from the entering class, who will be sitting here in Erik’s stead a year from now. If chasing after Shaw like this means he’ll secure his position in Shaw’s graces, or ensure he loses it.

At that thought, Erik lifts his glass and finishes off the rest of his drink in one long swallow, too accustomed now to grimace as the alcohol sears its way down his throat and floods heat below the surface of his skin. It’s not just the whiskey, Erik thinks, that makes the light seem warmer here, the focus of Shaw’s attention more acute and inescapable, Erik wondering if Shaw is as attuned to the details of his every move and gesture the way he is to Shaw’s.

"You do have a remarkable aptitude for accomplishment." Shaw says the word as if he's savoring it. Accomplishment. He tips his mostly-empty glass at Erik, an absent toast.

They talk a while longer, long enough for another glass of whiskey to buzz in Erik's head and make him reckless, pushing for that fast mile even though the marathon's barely started. Shaw excuses himself to see to the caterers, whose noise has dwindled; Erik supposes, in a fuzzy, distant sort of way, that they must be finished and Shaw needs to -- to pay them? Let them out? He sets his glass aside and tries to concentrate.

When Shaw returns, his head has cleared enough for him to stand. He's set his glass carefully down on the side table next to Shaw's, both with a few drops of whiskey left at the bottom. His mouth tastes like old, smoky peat and bitterness, and he wants to know if Shaw tastes the same way, more than he wants to call a cab to take him home.

"Perhaps," Shaw begins, stepping toward Erik, a hand outstretched.

Erik takes the chance, and Shaw's hand, and takes that one step to tug Shaw into him, into his space and up against his mouth. He kisses those thin lips, sharp and ungenerous, tasting like whiskey as Erik knew they would, and unbearably exciting -- stern, unyielding, and he'd known they'd be that way too. For a long moment Shaw doesn't respond, but he doesn't freeze, or lean away; there's none of the repulsion Erik's seen when men realize, to their horror, another man desires them. Instead, he merely stands, as if musing, or willing to indulge Erik.

When he leans back, Shaw somehow looks self-possessed and yet thoroughly kissed, his eyes hazy and pleased, his lips red and, maybe, the slightest bit swollen. Erik tries not to search those inscrutable eyes too deeply, afraid of what he might find.

"Perhaps," Shaw says, and he's not moving away; instead, he's moving closer, hand sliding from Erik's to curl around Erik's hip, tight, perfect, the way Erik knew it would be. "Perhaps, instead of asking if I could drive you home, you should stay here with me tonight."

"Yes," Erik says immediately, grinning and giddy with victory.

"Good." Shaw's teeth are a quick flash of white. "You're a very apt pupil, Erik; I think you would take instruction quite well."

Before Erik can wonder what Shaw means, if it even occurs to him to wonder, Shaw kisses him, hard and fierce, licking into Erik's mouth with a greed that's shocking. Erik keeps up, of course, reaching a hand up into Shaw's hair and taking tight grip of it, determined to give every bit as much as he gets. Shaw pushes forward, too forcefully for his mutation not to be involved somehow and Erik takes a half-step back to adjust for it, his ankle hitting the leg of a table and rattling glass against wood. Erik wonders if the caterers hear it -- if they're still here or not, slightly turned on by the
thought that they might be.

Shaw’s teeth bite at Erik’s lower lip, a sharp flare of pain that has him muffling a noise against Shaw’s mouth, betraying his response. Shaw draws back abruptly, though not so far Erik can’t feel the heat of his breath against his skin, drunk as ever on Shaw’s gaze so close to his and his attention entirely Erik’s for as long as Erik can manage to keep it.

“Upstairs,” Shaw says -- orders, really, and Erik only has it in him to obey.

Shaw guides him again, the way he always does, his hand touching Erik between his shoulder blades, and Erik goes dazedly, walking as if underwater down the hall and up the darkened stairs at Shaw’s bidding, the wood creaking beneath their steps and Shaw an unignorable presence right behind him that draws a bow across the strings of Erik’s nerves and leaves him humming with adrenaline.

Shaw says nothing as they walk down these new corridors. Erik’s glad for it. He wouldn’t know what to say, and he can’t surface from this dreamlike haze he’s in, not even to breathe, not really; his chest is as tight feeling as his groin.

"Here," Shaw murmurs when he nudges him through a doorway and into a room, dark; "Get the lights, Erik," Shaw tells him and Erik’s power sparks electric in the lamp at the bedside table, leaving the overhead black and casting only a small pool of light against the edge of a mattress, a headboard, the corners of a pillow.

"Very good." Shaw's hands are on him again, turning Erik so he's facing the bed, filled with the certainty that Shaw is going to have him there, stretched across it -- on hands and knees, on his back, either way, he'll be there -- and so his back is to Shaw, who stands behind him.

"Such a fine suit," Shaw says as he slides Erik's jacket off his shoulders, as solicitous and careful as a valet. Erik holds still, pulled taut with wanting, the slightest brush of Shaw's fingers enough, it seems, to raise sparks. When he focuses his ability on Shaw himself, Shaw's heart is steady, quick and inevitable.

The shirt is next, untucked from Erik's trousers, and Shaw tells Erik to use his abilities to take off his belt. It's complicated, between the alcohol and victory and the haze of lust, but Erik manages it. Shaw hums approvingly as the strip of leather falls to the floor, the buckle clanking softly on the heavy pile of the carpet. Erik's eyes slide shut as Shaw's fingers slide under his waistband, pressed hard into his skin.

"You are all muscle, aren't you?" Shaw croons approvingly. Those exploring fingers turn purposeful, undoing the snap of Erik's trousers, then his zipper. "Take off your shoes," Shaw adds, soft on top and steel underneath, and Erik thoughtlessly toes out of them, where he'd unlace and slide them off if he were at home. His feet resettle into the carpet, thick and deep -- perfect if Shaw wants him on his knees.

"You didn't try to turn around," Shaw says. "Very good. Now, Erik, I want to know: do you know how to suck a cock? Or," a finger runs up his belly, to his chest, up the trembling column of his throat to touch his lower lip, "are you one of those dear creatures who pretends he knows more than he does and needs to be taught?"

"I know," Erik says, flushing a little. He wants to be angry that Shaw would assume he's inexperienced, but he thinks of being taught and shivers with more pleasure than anger.

Shaw hums out something uninterpretable and the rest of his fingers curve to rest against Erik’s
throat -- dangerous, a part of Erik’s mind tries to warn him, but the rest of Erik finds the suggestion of it arousing, knowing how easily Shaw could press down and cut off airflow. Bloodflow. But for now his touch only-just grazes Erik’s skin and Erik exhales, the breath quivering in his chest.

“Good. Show me,” Shaw instructs softly, and his other hand finally nudges Erik to turn and face him, then pushes just enough that when Erik’s knees bend it feels like an inevitability, sinking down onto the carpet at Shaw’s feet. “Oh,” Shaw says before he can reach for his belt, “Erik … do try to make an effort, will you?”

It should be infuriating, but Shaw knows Erik too well; he knows how Erik feels about a challenge. So when he has Shaw’s fly open and Shaw’s cock, thick and erect, hot in his grasp, he applies himself to the task as if Shaw were grading it and using this single performance to determine Erik’s entire career, devoting himself to licking and sucking and gagging on that cock as if he never wanted to do anything else. And god, but it’s intensely gratifying when Erik swallows down so much his face is pressed up against Shaw’s groin, gazing up at him from where he sits and watching closely enough to relish every shift in Shaw’s expression, savoring the soft sounds and the press of Shaw’s fingertips against the back of his skull, forcing Erik to take it again and again, far past the point Erik thinks he even can, until his throat is raw and his jaw aching and still he wouldn’t stop even if the world ended around them.

Instead he grasps onto Shaw’s thighs, his ass, holding on as he sucks and lets Shaw fuck his face and does everything he can to convince Shaw he wants this even more badly than Shaw does, that if Shaw were to pull Erik’s mouth off his cock right now Erik is the one who’d be upset and bereft -- and maybe he would be, Erik thinks as he moans around a particularly deep thrust, his throat convulsing around the head of Shaw’s cock and his mind fighting his body to keep from throwing up. Maybe more than Shaw wants to get off, Erik wants to prove he can do this, not only well but better than anyone Shaw’s ever had before.

Shaw is silent except for the occasional heavy breath, but through tear-blurred eyes, Erik sees him, luxuriating and pleased, pleased with him. Shaw’s mouth curves into an ecstatic o, his fingers twine through Erik's hair, tugging -- not to get Erik off him, but to hold him still, as if Erik wants to move or be anywhere other than here.

"Don't touch yourself," Shaw murmurs when Erik's hand twitches on his thigh. Erik sucks in a breath through his nose and almost chokes, tightens his hold on Shaw’s trousers, wrinkling the fine fabric. He pictures himself, drooling and gagging, this abject creature barenaked and kneeling with a fully-clothed man's cock down his throat, and moans and closes his eyes and gives himself up completely.

Shaw's stamina would be terrifying, if Erik were coherent enough to think about it. Time blurs, opens up into an endless moment that ends, finally, with Shaw burying himself as deep down Erik’s throat as he can, a thick and heartfelt groan as he spills himself in pulses that echo in Erik's body. When Shaw pulls out, Erik's mouth is flooded with the taste of him, salt and musk and come and his throat is raw, sore when Erik can finally get a breath in and swallow.

"Very good, my boy," Shaw says. He caresses Erik's cheek, which is sticky with spit and sweat. "Now, can you lick me clean?"

Erik can, and does, lapping away the saliva and come that's smeared on Shaw's cockhead and down his shaft. Shaw, Erik decides, has a lovely cock, not big compared to what he's seen but satisfying to have in his mouth, to rub against his cheek before he tucks it away and uses his ability to zip and snap Shaw back into tidiness again.

Shaw pets him approvingly. "Stand, Erik."
He does, with a little help, as unsteady on his legs as a colt until the worst of the stiffness fades. "Let me look at you," Shaw says, and of course Erik does, aware that he's being catalogued, a thoroughbred being inspected for purchase as Shaw touches his flanks, his ribs, the run of his spine down to his ass. Shaw hums. "I should have guessed you'd be hiding something like this, under those trousers of yours," he says, and cups Erik's balls, the heel of his palm brushing Erik's cock so Erik hisses.

There's that grin again, sharp-toothed and musing. "Look at yourself, my boy," Shaw says, and Erik does, shuddering at seeing his hard, red cock cradled in Shaw's hand, the flushed tip of it dripping clear fluid on Shaw's wrist. "So hard, and just from sucking me."

There’s that tinge of shame again, but with it a strange pleasure, Erik tilting his chin up and meeting Shaw’s eyes again as Shaw draws one slow, lazy stroke down the length of his shaft, thumb rubbing against Erik’s frenulum. Shaw’s right; it’s ungodly how aroused Erik is, considering he’s done nothing to try and maintain it, his lust building inside him and swelling instead of fizzling out from lack of attention.

“Of course,” Shaw continues on, hand moving again and looking amused when Erik shivers bodily, his cock twitching in Shaw’s grasp, “you have your youth to sustain you…. You really do try your very best, don’t you? You’ll drive yourself into the ground trying to impress me.”

Erik wants to protest it isn’t about impressing Shaw, but instead of words Shaw pulls a tight groan out of Erik’s throat instead. Without lube his hand hurts a little on Erik’s cut cock, palm dry and rasping against the sensitive skin, but even that pain is indistinguishable from the heat of Erik’s want. Erik knows without Shaw saying so that he wants him to remain still -- and so he tries, hard, not to thrust his hips forward against Shaw’s hand, chasing pleasure. He lets Shaw give it to him at Shaw’s on pace, which is torturously slow, Erik aching for it deep down in his marrow as Shaw squeezes around him lightly, free hand still skimming Erik’s skin and mapping out the bones of his body, casual, proprietary.

“Not just yet,” Shaw says warningly when Erik’s cock pulses in his grasp and Erik makes an embarrassing noise, his cheeks flushing as he clenches his eyes shut and fights to bring himself back down from the brink, whole body unbalanced on a quivering wire. Shaw’s hand keeps moving all through it, like he wants to see Erik fail -- but Erik won’t fail. He takes in a shallow, sharp breath and holds himself back, nails cutting into his palms … but he manages it, finding a tentative sort of equilibrium where he can hang, taut, between here and his climax, mind only-just winning out over matter, while Shaw keeps stroking him and watches Erik struggle.

It feels like an eternity before Shaw finally says it, “Now,” and Erik chokes and gives in, his cock pulsing hard as he comes over Shaw’s fingers, mind flaring to white.

When he opens his eyes again he’s shaking, muscles weak like he’s at the end of a race, barely able to hold himself up. Shaw isn’t looking at him though -- his gaze is on his hand, frowning, dissatisfied with the mess that strings between his fingers. Erik’s mess, he realizes dully, and it feels only natural to reach for Shaw’s fingers, mind only-just winning out over matter, while Shaw keeps stroking him and watches Erik struggle.

"A good boy indeed," Shaw says when Erik finishes. He still, ever-fastidious, takes the handkerchief from his breast pocket and wipes his hand, drops the silk cloth on the floor when he's done. "Now, why don't you lie down? You look, if I may say it, rather spent."

Erik feels it, and gratefully submits to Shaw's guiding him into the bed, which is huge and equipped with a mattress that feels like lying on air. He stretches out, wincing as a muscle in his back unclenches and eases into fluidity again, sighs when Shaw rubs him at that precise place. He's still on
display; there's nothing else to do but lie there and be looked at, like an odalisque in a painting.

Despite his determination to remain awake, Erik drowses, hypnotized into somnolence by Shaw's touches and the warmth of the room. Slit-eyed like a cat, he watches Shaw stand and begin to prepare for bed, hanging his suit jacket neatly on a hook with the rest of the clothes for dry-cleaning, then stepping into an alcove from which he eventually emerges, unselfconsciously naked.

"Good night, my dear boy," Shaw says as he climbs into bed next to Erik. They don't touch until Shaw thoughtfully pushes Erik's hair off his forehead.

*Good night,* Erik thinks to say, but doesn't; he closes his eyes instead.

*Listen to me very carefully, Erik,* Shaw says over breakfast the next morning.

Erik sits back from his plate, hands in his lap. He's ravenous, the crepes Shaw had ordered in not enough to sate his appetite after a morning spent with Shaw fucking him, spent held down by that superhuman strength and taking what Shaw wanted to give. And yet, Shaw's tone says he won't abide Erik eating and listening at the same time.

When Shaw sees he has Erik's attention he nods. "Very good. After you're done eating, shower and get dressed." Erik suppresses a twinge of disappointment; he'd hoped to spend the day consolidating his position, showing Shaw that he had so much else yet to learn, but then Shaw says, "I want you to go home -- are you paying attention, Erik? -- I want you to go home and get clothes, shaving kit, whatever you need to spend a week here."

Now that's unexpected enough Erik's certain he doesn't entirely manage to keep his surprise from his face. He meets Shaw's gaze across the table but there's nothing to be read in Shaw's pale eyes or the sharp lines of his face, settled into cool neutrality.

“All right,” Erik says a beat belatedly, trying very hard to seem unaffected.

Erik’s had many lovers, but he’s never moved this fast with any of them. Then again, Erik’s experiences are limited to bright-eyed boys in the early morning at house parties and rubbing each other off in the desperate tight space of a stranger’s bathroom, or the men he finds at bars who look at him like he’s something rare and mythological, a creature so far removed from reality Erik could never maintain the illusion longer than a night. Even now, he isn’t sure he can be this -- whatever this is -- for hour after hour under Shaw’s supervision, so completely devoted to being what Shaw wants him to be. But even that has the breath of a challenge about it and Erik resolves to try even harder for it, to make sure Shaw never wants to let him leave, to bring Shaw so thoroughly under Erik’s own thrall that no one ever doubts what Erik can be when he wants to, when he really puts his back into it.

“I’m writing a chapter for an upcoming book on bottom-up influences on mutant behavior,” Shaw says, his grapefruit spoon in his hand but his attention still entirely fixed on Erik, breakfast forgotten. “If you’re interested, this may prove an edifying -- and valuable -- opportunity for you. It’s important to show a thorough grasp of the literature early in your career, after all, and this volume will be widely-read.”

A small burst of exultation at that, quickly buried; no one else has managed co-authorship with Shaw this early in their graduate career. “Yes,” Erik says, before Shaw can revoke the offer. “Yes, I would … be interested.”
“Good.” Shaw returns to his fruit now, slicing into the ripe pink flesh with the serrated edge of his spoon, acidity tingling at Erik’s sense of the steel. “We’ll work on it this week, then.”

*

Halfway through the summer, Erik’s spent far more time at Shaw’s house than in his own apartment. The only place he spends more time, as always, is campus, determined to prove to Shaw that, whatever their arrangement (and Erik can’t put a name to it, nor does Shaw seem inclined), he’s not so far gone that he’ll neglect his work. If he’s not in Shaw’s bed, or on the floor, or bent over some other surface, he’s on the couch in the living room, reading, or running through Shaw’s neighborhood, finding new routes to run in this cage of privilege.

Listen to me very carefully, Shaw had said, maybe three weeks ago, when Erik had returned with another suitcase stuffed full of the clothes that weren’t already at Shaw’s to begin with. I won’t permit the quality of your work to suffer, my darling boy. I want you to flourish, just as you have been, testing limits -- just, he’d corrected himself, laughing softly, not my limits.

When Shaw holds him too tightly during sex, when Erik’s fingertips go numb or there’s blood from a bite on his shoulder, or Shaw finds him the next day wincing as he sits in his office chair, Erik reminds himself that this is a test -- a test not to test, or to push back against Shaw’s authority. Erik's accepted that authority, and reminds himself of that when he wants to protest those rough moments.

"You're so good for me," Shaw says when Erik doesn't protest. He kisses Erik's bleeding shoulder, lapping up the blood to clean away the unpleasant iron accent that tickles the corner of Erik's awareness. "It's been a very long time since I've felt so young, Erik." He nuzzles the back of Erik's neck. "Look at what you've done to me."

Shaw cleans Erik's shoulder with a warm cloth and dabs antiseptic cream on it. He covers it with a bandage and kisses it while Erik drowses, cosseted and content.

Later that evening -- this had happened in the afternoon, when Erik had come in from the pool and Shaw had stared at him hungrily before dragging him upstairs -- Erik curls up on the couch, whiskey at his elbow and tablet in his lap, Shaw in his armchair, smiling indulgently.

*

The pace of life changes at the end of summer. Faculty away on fellowships or vacation come trickling in, the graduate students close behind. The fall's crop of first-years all arrive, clutching orientation packets and maps, still with the wide eyes they'd had when they'd come for their recruitment. Erik's inbox fills more quickly, beginning-of-term notices from the administrators and his professors, and his calendar fills more quickly too, with classes, symposia, lab time.

And -- he’s not sure if he should bring it up, but the last week before classes begin is grinding away. Shaw, with the indifference of a man disinterested in time, seems not to be aware of it. How will this -- this meaning their present arrangement, this meaning Erik having a very-definitely-forbidden affair with his advisor -- change when the clock turns over and the semester starts?

"I anticipate we'll be even busier," Shaw says absently when Erik finally asks.

They're in bed together, Erik exhausted and slick and open, and grateful that the tormenting rubber cockring (which he hates, hates) is gone and that Shaw had let him come. Not so exhausted or grateful, though, that Shaw hadn't noticed.

"Will I still stay here?" Erik asks, hating how needy he sounds.
Shaw laughs gently and strokes the line furrowing Erik’s brows. "Am I losing my touch? I thought I would have sent you off to sweet dreams by now."

Erik buries his irritation and wonders if he isn’t supposed to be asking this, if it breaks one of the unspoken rules they have between them. In the end he decides -- he’s been so good all summer, obedient even when he wasn’t asked to be -- that Shaw can forgive him this one infraction.

He gives Shaw a half-smile, acknowledging what Shaw said, and then says, “Are we continuing this after classes start back up?”

It’s as blunt as Erik can put it without testing Shaw’s boundaries but, perhaps because Erik phrased it as a question rather than simply giving his own opinion on the subject (Erik’s unsolicited opinions are something he knows Shaw hates), Shaw looks more amused than annoyed, his fingers skating off toward Erik’s temple and over the curve of his ear, as if after all this time he still doesn’t quite have Erik memorized.

“For the time being,” Shaw says eventually, after Erik had started to wonder if he was even planning to answer at all. “You do want to continue, don’t you, my boy?”

Shaw says it like he thinks he already knows the answer, lips still curved upward, satisfied and sure of themselves, even though Erik himself isn’t certain what he wants. He likes feeling the way he feels when Shaw is finished with him, desired and able to use that desire, some half of him relishing feeling like a trophy boy, something pretty to sit around and be looked at. Erik’s not so lacking in insight not to know why -- growing up Jewish in Europe, he was acutely aware of how it felt to be unwanted. But here, he isn’t a stain in Shaw’s beautiful home, he isn’t pitied and classless, he’s valuable. And he proves that value every day, multiple times a day, fiercely refusing to let his effort falter.

He even likes the pain -- in small doses, anyway, soft enough it bleeds into pleasure -- but not the way Shaw gives it sometimes, careless of the boundary between enough and too-much, too unaware of his own strength to see that sometimes it’s too far for even Erik to take, with all Erik’s determination to take anything Shaw can give. And he isn’t sure he can play this role eternally, stretching it out for months and months if he has to do it like this. It would be one thing if he were going home to his own apartment after, or at least had more than a few hours here or there to be alone with his own thoughts, but the pressure of being on all the time is, frankly, exhausting.

“Yes,” Erik says after a few seconds, though, when he’s added up all the variables and the result comes out heavily one-sided. He turns onto his side, now, shifting to face Shaw properly, not quite able to have this conversation while lying on his stomach, naked and languid. “But won’t you get tired of having me here all the time, sooner or later?”

Shaw quirks an eyebrow, his amusement silent but tangible. "Have I given you any indication that I've found your presence here tiresome?"

He hasn't, but Erik's not sure the question answers the question, and he doesn't know how to continue without sounding insecure. As intimate as they've been (and there's not a part of Erik that Shaw doesn't know by now, that doesn't have Shaw stamped on it), he doesn't confess to Shaw; whatever Shaw's uncovered has been drawn out through hands and mouth, in contexts where Erik's far from verbal. They've talked about work extensively, Shaw somehow able to ask Erik about his research while he's got Erik on his knees, but never about this, whatever it is.

"You haven't," Erik says, "but I want -- I would like not to hypothesize."

"I would think you had sufficient data points by now to reach a conclusion," Shaw says. "But… if I
must reassure you," he gives Erik a quietly warning look when Erik opens his mouth to protest that, "then yes, we will continue this, and no, I will not tire of you."

Erik knows enough about Shaw by now to know that he won't take any more pressing on this, so he lets it go. Shaw pats him gently, a master soothing a worried pet, and turns away to get the cloth he's set in its bowl on the bedside table. When he begins to clean Erik up, wiping away the lube and come, making a face when he realizes that, despite their best efforts, some has ended up on the sheets, it's with his usual attention.

Whatever fears Erik's had of their new relationship complicating their working relationship vanish a month into the fall term. They still meet the others for drinks at the Rose and Crown, with a new face joining them -- Grace, who can manipulate plasma -- and Erik still spends the vast majority of his waking hours with his research or in seminar, devouring everything he possibly can. It's only at the end of the day that he returns to Shaw's house, or meets Shaw in the parking lot so they can drive back together.

They fall into a routine of sorts that shouldn’t be comfortable but is, and after a fashion Erik doesn’t even mind that he barely stays at his own apartment anymore -- with his days to himself (excepting meetings with Shaw, and classes with Shaw, Shaw in the long halls and empty rooms), he doesn’t find the charade of being perfect for Shaw as much of an imposition as he’d thought it might be. He doesn’t even think twice about other people -- as appealing as a man might be, that can’t really compete with the allure of what he has with Shaw, the secrecy of it all only serving to make it more erotic when Erik’s kneeling under Shaw’s desk and sucking his cock in the middle of the day, or gratifying when Erik gets away with another lie to his cohort-mates, another ‘late night’ that just means, instead of drinks with his peers, he’s slipping away to Shaw’s house and Shaw’s bed, feeling now like he’s more a part of that world than his own.

Erik coasts along like that until November, when his mother calls him from a hospital in Düsseldorf. Breast cancer, stage three. Neither of them can really afford for Erik to fly home over winter break to see her, not with the cost of living at Stanford -- and Edie swears she isn’t that sick -- but the thought of her lying alone in some pale hospital bed half a world away grabs hold of something inside of Erik and twists it hard, won’t let go.

He tells Shaw in their weekly meeting on Monday, having kept it to himself all weekend -- Shaw didn’t even notice anything different -- until at last it comes spilling out of him as he sits across from Shaw’s desk with his notebook clutched in his lap, knuckles white at the binding.

“I wanted to let you know as soon as I’d decided,” Erik says when he’s explained everything, still speaking only because Shaw is conspicuously silent, his stomach sick. “I’ll keep working from abroad, of course. And it’ll only be for a month. You won’t see any changes in the quality or quantity of my research. The RA’s can handle things in my absence, I’ve already talked to Anna,” the lab manager, who promised she’d make sure things went smoothly and told him he should focus on his mother and not worry about research at all.

He hesitates, but still Shaw doesn’t speak, his face immutable over his fingers which tilt together in a steeple, considering. A slow, nauseous part of Erik starts to worry he’s made assumptions he shouldn’t have. It isn’t the norm, after all, for grad students to take more than a week off, and last year Erik stayed through the winter -- has he set up expectations for himself without realizing it?

“And I’ve finished the sections you assigned me for the NRSA,” he says, trying to derive meaning from that silence, not to give way to the part of him that’s frantic for a new reason now, not at all to do with his mother’s illness. “I can make any revisions while I’m gone. It won’t hold up the grant
"Well," Shaw says, a gusty sigh more than a word. "That certainly is... optimistic."

A cold, heavy weight drops in Erik's gut. Shaw lowers his hands, lacing his fingers together atop his desk. "While of course this is your decision -- and it sounds as if you've already made it -- I do caution you that the likelihood of your being able to complete substantial revisions to your sections of the NRSA while caring for your mother is... not great, as is the likelihood of your continuing to keep up your research apace." While Erik's still mulling over substantial revisions, because Shaw had been complimentary about the drafts he'd sent, Shaw adds, "Perhaps we ought to defer the grant until next year, when you can concentrate on it more fully -- although the break in your research and grant applications will be noticed."

He hadn't thought of that; it's no work at all to imagine a gaping hole in his CV, a drop-off in funding sources sought and won.

"Listen to me very carefully, Erik," Shaw says, fixing Erik with that steady, inexorable gaze. "Graduate school and the academy require sacrifice, my boy. We make these sacrifices willingly, because of our passion for the work; those who love us recognize that, sometimes, they are involved in those sacrifices as well."

"But," Erik starts.

"You would be setting a bad example for the department, for your colleagues and for the younger students who look up to you as a model for professionalism." Shaw shakes his head regretfully. "Taking off in the middle of the year like that? And they won't know the whole story, of course; I know how you are."

Anger tightens Erik's throat, a hot fist closing around him, but Shaw continues, tranquil and cool as always. "You should go in the summer. It sounds as if your mother is stable and in good hands with her oncologist; you'll be able to take a couple of months -- keeping up with your research, of course! -- and be able to devote more time to her."

Erik wants to protest that none of that matters, that all of -- all of this pales in importance to what's waiting for him back in Germany, but he can't come up with a single cogent argument to any of Shaw's points. Erik's only reason for running off like this in the middle of the year is because he just found out, and he wants to act immediately, to throw everything else away and throw himself into caring for his mother every way he knows how. But it won't do either of them any good if Erik's too worried about his work and the impression he's leaving at Stanford to really be there.

"This summer," Erik agrees finally, reluctantly, and turns his inner eye away from the pulse of guilt in the pit of his stomach.

But by summer it's too late.

One day Edie's fine -- they talk on the phone, she even makes a few jokes about Erik's work ethic and whether or not he got it from her side of the family. Then a few days of silence, silence Erik barely notices as he's rigidly focused on churning out new drafts of his grant application for Shaw's perusal, coinciding with his classes as they resume in the spring along with a new rush of research participants in the lab. The silence breaks with a phone call at four in the morning from his mother's oncologist: pneumonia, unexpected, two days in the ICU, 'we made her as comfortable as possible.'

Erik loses track of things, after that. Lying in bed for hours, unmoving -- too dazed with his own emptiness (empty except that kernel of guilt) to appreciate the irony when Shaw urges him to fly out
for her funeral, the way the sun had no right to be so bright as he stood in black clothes at her graveside and tears a jagged rip in his suit jacket over his heart. Shiva is seven days, so that’s seven days he forgets to eat, too full of his own sickness to keep down anything else.

He accepts callers and well-wishers as best he can, but a distant cousin -- who could be anyone, for all Erik knows -- sees he can't look at anyone and takes over, fielding sympathies that, overheard, sit on Erik's guilt like heavy stones to weigh it down and press it into him. The house has the emptiness of recent death in it, a quiet despite the soft voices of relatives and his mother's friends, a blend of German and Yiddish and even French and Polish. Friends who had come here for her, filled with memories of her girlhood or her college days before she'd married and left for the States, friends who had stayed friends, unlike the son who'd abandoned his mother. When he looks around, the traces of his childhood greet him, furniture and knickknacks that have followed his mother, and him, the curio cabinet full of photographs and the few precious things her family and Jakob’s had salvaged in the war. Small things, still important.

The day after shiva ends he eats the first food he can remember, a stale pastry at a coffee shop. It's too sweet; he manages half of it before throwing it away. He trembles as he begins to pack his mother's house away, separating out the things he'll take -- the pictures, the mezuzos in their cases, the small, still important things -- from what will be sold or donated. He watches as the movers take away her furniture, so much of it old but still good, as a man from the local synagogue comes for the dishes for the kitchen there. He gives mementos to those distant cousins and Edie's closest friends, and ignores their pleas for him to come inside and eat, eat, he looks like a ghost himself. He feels like a ghost, hollowed-out and divorced from his own flesh, so it must be fitting.

His last night in Düsseldorf he has to spend in a hotel, with no bed to sleep on. He haunts the empty rooms and hallways, watching balefully from the upper windows as a man from the realtor checks the locks and posts a discreet For Sale sign by the gate. All that's left, besides his guilt, is himself and his suitcase -- and the envelope he'd saved from the curio cabinet before the movers had taken it away earlier in the last parcel of his mother's life.

Idly, he opens the envelope and shakes the ring out into his palm. He's never had much of an affinity for gold, but this ring is one of the first things he remembers sensing, the first thing he'd ever known down to its atoms, feeling it on his skin whenever his mother picked him up or embraced him, or put her hand on his cheek.

He considers wearing it, looped on a chain around his neck perhaps, but right now he isn’t sure he could stand the reminder lying against his heart, unforgettable. So he puts it in his pocket instead, reaching his hand inside to close it around the ring as he stands in line at the airport, or sits, frozen, in his seat in coach on the long intercontinental flight. He wishes metal had a memory of its own, that he could reach his power into the gold and still see her face or hear her voice -- but all there is is the warmth of Erik’s own body heat.

The cliche would say Erik should forget she’s gone, wake up remembering in the middle of the night, lurching and sudden -- but Erik can’t escape the weight of her absence. It follows in his shadow even halfway across the world, dulling California’s lights and colors and heat and leaving everything as listless as Erik himself feels.

Home, he walks past his roommate without saying anything, luggage rolling itself in his wake, and shuts himself up in his room. This bed, this dresser, these windows, all seem like they belong to someone else. Trappings of the Erik whose mother is still alive, the Erik who cut himself out of the last days of her life in favor of sitting at that same desk and scrawling out the twenty-eighth revision of the same fucking paper, who cared more, apparently, about a line on his CV than he did about his
own mother.

He thinks about staying here, in this square, and never going out again. Monday he types a curt email to Shaw and his other professors, informing them without explanation that he will be absent this week and turning off his computer as soon as he hears the noise confirming the email’s delivery. He sits there at his desk and listens to the rest of the world move on outside, students and faculty waking up and beginning their days, imagines the line in his usual coffee shop, his office mate sitting down at his desk chair and pulling up data files from Dropbox, his biostatistics professor starting lecture.

The week passes, most of it spent in his room, venturing out when his roommate's gone to pick at leftovers in the refrigerator. One evening -- Erik isn't sure which one -- Aaron pokes his head into his room and, after stammering and mumbling for a moment, asks if Erik's okay.

"Like, do you need anything?" Aaron asks before Erik can formulate an answer.

There are a lot of things Erik needs. "No."

Aaron retreating, but reappears ten minutes later with a peanut butter sandwich, very nearly the extent of his culinary skills. "You haven't eaten like all week, man. Here."

"Just set it down."

"You look like shit," Aaron says. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Do I look okay?" Erik snaps. His head aches from hunger but he still manages to swing the door more fully open, in case Aaron doesn't get the hint. "Thanks for the sandwich."

His stomach rumbles, the hunger strong enough to overcome Erik's desire to never eat again. (In the bathroom this morning he'd weighed himself, and wondered idly how long it would take before he simply vanished, if such a thing was possible.) The peanut butter sticks in his teeth as he chews, but he devours the sandwich all the same, the hunger sparking bright and sudden. That bit of life is enough to remind him that he has to check his email; he's ignored it all week, too disinterested in work to even bother glancing at messages he wouldn't respond to.

The first several are from his professors and some of his colleagues, condolences and orders to tell them if he needs anything; they'll take care of it, he just has to tell them and it'll be done. Then a torrent of messages from various listservs, notices from the graduate program and university mailing lists, Anna the lab manager asking a question and then retracting it when she remembers Erik's away.

Nothing from Shaw.

Good, Erik thinks viciously. He's sure he'll have to face Shaw's displeasure for skipping out of class and work for nearly three weeks now; he'll take that censure and move on. Shaw has to understand, certainly, what Erik's lost. When Erik can explain it to him, he'll understand that every morning so far Erik's woken up thinking his mother is still alive -- and that she dies all over again when he remembers that she's gone.

When he finally does show up for his usual meeting the following Monday, Shaw’s office door is shut. Erik lurks out in the hall for a few taut moments, uncertain, before finally realizing -- no, he actually doesn't really care what Shaw thinks, and lifts his fist to rap twice on the door frame.

“Enter,” Shaw’s voice says, and so Erik does, stepping out of the fluorescent light of the hall and into the darker space of Shaw’s office, lit only by the afternoon sunlight falling through the window behind Shaw’s desk and casting everything in pewter. Shaw looks up from his notebook when Erik shuts the door behind him, both brows lifting as he sets down his pen.
“Erik, my dear boy,” Shaw says, after a beat has passed, gesturing toward one of the chairs opposite his desk. “I had started to wonder if you’d be returning to us this semester.”

Erik takes the seat, setting his notebook down on the chair next to him; it’s strange to be sitting here without something in his lap to clutch onto, either a notebook or his tablet or some form or another he needs Shaw to sign. It means his hands hang off the edges of the armrests, empty, as Erik says, bluntly, “My mother died.”

“I know,” Shaw says, sympathy creeping into his voice now, soft and sweetly laced between the syllables. “Of course you should take all the time you need …. I can tell it’s been hard on you.” When Erik’s expression remains blank, Shaw elaborates: “You look unwell, Erik. Like you haven’t been taking care of yourself.”

That rankles, slightly, even if it’s true. “I’m back now. I want to get back to work.”

He needs the distraction, something to eat up the hours where he’d otherwise fall into himself, sinking far beneath the liquid surface of his own grief. Shaw makes a soft, uninterpretable noise and shakes his head.

“You shouldn’t rush it, child. Work isn’t everything. I would hate for you to make the same mistake you did last semester -- your research will still be here when you’re ready for it.”

_The same mistake he made last semester_ -- staying here, instead of visiting his mother. Working, instead of telling her that he loved her.

"I want to work," Erik insists. He remembers Shaw telling him he should stay, he should keep working, _it would be your decision_. Part of him wonders how much of it is really his decision, when his advisor's opinion of him hangs in the balance; he pushes that away and focuses on what he can do now. "Please, Dr. Shaw, I want to get back."

Shaw gives him a rueful look. "I know how hard it is to talk you out of doing something you've set your mind on doing," he says at last. "All right. I assume you'll talk to your other professors about making up your work in class?"

"Yes, sir." His cohort-mates, with an eagerness that's almost rankling, have volunteered their notes to help him catch up; he has appointments with two other professors later this week to go over material he's missed. "What about research?"

"Concentrate on your classes for now," Shaw says kindly. He stands and moves around the side of his desk so he can stand beside Erik, squarely in Erik's space. His hand lands on Erik's shoulder, pressing hard enough that Erik has to acknowledge it. "You wouldn't run a marathon after a month away from running, would you?"

Erik cringes away from the sensation that he's suddenly become a ten-year-old, and an unruly one at that. _You shouldn't rush it, child._ "Listen to me very carefully, my boy," Shaw says, leaning in, "You mustn't plunge in straightaway. You're not well, you've been grieving. Take care of yourself -- and better yet, come over tonight and let me take care of you."

Sex is the farthest thing from Erik's mind and body. He says "yes, sir" anyway.

That night, after an awkward seminar in which he'd sat and listened, too sluggish and tired to keep up with the conversation, he goes back to Shaw's. The high gates and richly landscaped lawns, the distant hills haloed in twilight, seem to belong to a foreign country -- a country where another Erik lives, one wrapped up in his work and his life, ignorant of anything that goes on in the outside world.
Shaw kisses him in greeting when he walks in, and hands him a glass of water. "I've ordered in for us tonight, and you will eat, my boy; I swear you've lost even more weight, if that's possible."

The evening passes like that, Shaw nearly suffocating him with affection. Erik eats what he's told, not really tasting the food even though Shaw tells him in excruciating detail what it is and what the ingredients are. "Finished with sumac salt," he tells Erik as he hands him a small tart, its surface flecked with dark pink flakes. "It brings out the chocolate perfectly."

It tastes like sweet ash. Erik chews and swallows and wonders how long Shaw will need to get off tonight. If there's any mercy in the world, Shaw will decide that Erik shouldn't exert himself at all and he can go to sleep.

That doesn’t happen, of course. Shaw doesn’t ask what Erik would prefer -- he assumes he knows what’s best for him, and tonight that entails Shaw opening him up with his own fingers (instead of having Erik do it himself), and then fucking him long and slow in Shaw’s huge bed. At least Erik ends up on his stomach, so he doesn't have to worry about the blankness on his face or the way his eyes shut after a while, letting his body be aroused and reactive to what Shaw does to it even as Erik’s mind drifts away out the window to hover out there in over the gardens, drinking in the warm colors of the setting sun. Shaw doesn’t say anything about Erik’s silence, though he must notice; he kisses Erik’s throat, his fingers pressing against Erik’s lower lip, as if he wants to keep the words inside.

Afterward, as Shaw collects the messy towel and carries it off to the laundry hamper, Erik pulls the thin sheet up over his hips and presses his cheek against the pillow, feeling his too-fast heart beat throughout his entire body, gradually slowing down. He wonders why he doesn’t just tell Shaw to fuck off, he’s not ready. He wonders why Shaw can’t just tell.

Maybe Erik has no right to complain. It’s not as if Shaw’s a mindreader.

He’s nearly made it to sleep when Shaw returns, waking him with his fingers ghosting over Erik’s cheekbone, tucking a stray lock of hair away from his face. “There, my boy,” he murmurs, and Erik’s eyes slit open, looking at him silhouetted against the window, dark shades and edges. “It will heal.”

It’s impossible to say if he means Erik’s heart or Erik’s body. Both feel wrung out and used up.

The next morning Shaw selects clothes from what Erik’s left at his house previously, dressing Erik like a doll and then bringing him down to sit at the table for breakfast, passing him bite-sized pieces of bagel and sliced melon, using his thumb to brush the juice away from Erik’s lower lip. “I’ll drive us in today,” he says, once he’s poured Erik another cup of black coffee and Erik’s sitting there holding the mug up in front of his mouth, like a shield. “Don’t overexert yourself. I’ll finish with the faculty meeting at six and come to collect you then.”

"Okay," Erik says. He wants to fight -- he doesn't need caring for, he doesn't want it, but he can't resist it, not when Shaw wants it and when he's so tired that any emotion scrapes the last raw skin off his nerves. Shaw will stop after a while, he figures, when Erik’s grief has eased enough and life goes back to something like what it was.

Will it go back, though? In scattered moments throughout the semester, Erik finds himself reassessing, reacting in ways he wouldn't have before his mother's death. The way Shaw presses, hard enough to hurt so that Erik gasps or hisses in pain -- and keeps pressing for a moment longer until he backs off and kisses Erik and apologizes, but you make me so crazy, Erik, I forget myself. Shaw picking out his clothes every morning, selecting Erik's food, watching approvingly when Erik walks in after a run before he tells Erik to strip down right there in the front hallway. They're not
what they once were; they're links in a chain winding around Erik's neck.

* 

At the end of the semester, Erik's racing to finish his papers, caught up in the rush like everyone else. With Shaw keeping him back from research -- only a handful of hours in the lab a week, and Shaw had angled for an extension on their book chapter -- he's not as behind as he'd otherwise be, but that doesn't make the final rush any less hectic.

"Of course, from the other side, our rush starts the day after exams and papers come in," Shaw says, as if he's laboring under a 3-3 load instead of his one graduate seminar a year and the rare advanced undergrad class that comes as a stipulation of his endowed professorship. For a man supposedly waiting for an avalanche of papers to descend on him, he's relaxed, sipping his whiskey as always and idly reading a book on the Napoleonic Wars, laughing softly to himself.

"I'll be done by Thursday," Erik says levelly. He'll be done before then, more than likely. "At our meeting next week, we should talk about research."

"Oh, we should?" Shaw shifts a little, his attention turning away from his book and towards Erik. "Well, my boy, I suppose it's time to get back on the horse."

"Yes," Erik says. He has to throttle back the relief; Shaw in these moments is whimsical and dangerous, he's starting to realize. When Shaw grants favors, there's some barb he'll slide in at the last moment. "The NRSA came through," he wants to choke on the bitterness on that, a terrible last gift from a son to his mother, "and I want to make headway on the preliminaries."

"I'm sure you'll make significant progress," Shaw says indulgently. "And, I suppose, since you'll be around for the summer now, we'll have to draw up a detailed schedule for you. Make sure you stay busy."

At last, anger lances through Erik, like the last surge of electricity through a dead man’s body, rising hot and fast in his veins. It’s simultaneously terrible and a relief, because Erik had started to worry he wouldn’t feel anything, ever again.

“I shouldn’t have waited,” he says, tension clenching at his chest, squeezing hard. “I should have gone in December, when I said I would.”

Shaw tsks him, brow lifted, every bit the teacher with disobedient student. “Now, Erik, you can’t blame yourself. How could you have predicted what would happen?”

A drum beats in Erik’s ears, Erik certain he shouldn’t say anything at all, should thrust the words back into the recesses of his gut, but they come out all the same, fervent and relentless -- “I don’t blame myself. I only stayed because you told me to. I should have told you to fuck off, but I didn’t, and now she’s dead.”

His throat tightens on the last word and he barely manages to choke it out, razors scraping the insides of his lungs and heat, unexpected, prickling at his cheeks. Shaw fixes him with a disapproving frown, infuriatingly bland and unmoved where Erik feels like his blood has turned to venom inside him.

“Don’t project, Erik. You made your own decision.” Shaw sets his glass of whiskey down on the arm of his chair, fingers lingering at the rim.

“No. I had made my decision, and then you changed my mind.” That heat’s at the backs of his eyes now, threatening; Erik beats it back, nails digging painful crescents into the palms of his hands. “You
talked me out of it.’”

The disapproval thickens in Shaw’s gaze, his thin lips pursing as his book falls shut in his lap. “Don’t insult yourself, my boy. You aren’t some flaccid marionette acting on my whim. You acted in your own, and your career’s, best interests, and unfortunately that action came at a price. But make no mistake: it was an action. Nothing in life is choiceless for people like us, Erik, people intelligent enough to know the difference between patiency and agency. At least,” a note of snideness there, Erik thinks, if only slight, “I trust you do know the difference.”

"I do know,” Erik grinds out. He’s heard Shaw talk about it often enough, has drunk it up along with whiskey and wine and Shaw's attention.

"Then you know, regardless of how you may have rationalized your choice, and regardless of what you thought was an absolute decision, you changed your mind," Shaw says calmly. "Now you have the option of moving on with your life and your work, or wallowing in guilt. The liberated mind doesn't permit unnecessary emotional entanglements, Erik; castigating yourself for an event you didn't foresee but, perhaps, could have, takes up time better spent on your career."

Erik stares at Shaw, hating the logic, hating the flat dispassion with which it's delivered, hating that Shaw is right -- or that Shaw is wrong but Erik doesn't have the arguments to prove it. He doesn't have the weapons to fight this battle.

"We'll talk Monday, then," he says.

"Is that a choice?" Shaw says mockingly.

"Yes."

"Good." Shaw returns to his book. "Now finish what you can of your paper -- bioinformatics and neuroscience, was it? The sooner that's done, the better. You have more important things to do."

Erik works on until the small hours, the clock ticking over to one o'clock. Shaw, although usually indefatigable, has gone up to bed, leaving the house quiet around him. Hesitantly, Erik stretches his ability through the empty hallways and rooms, feeling out all the metal in the place and quietly glad that he, at least, has this sense of the world and way of understanding it. He wishes he could wrap all that metal around himself, a cocoon to live in, and damn what Shaw would say about patiency and the passivity of the subject. Still, he tidies away his books and laptop, everything in its corner to wait for tomorrow.

Shaw is asleep and still in his bed when Erik enters the bedroom. He undresses, hesitates before stepping into boxers and sliding on a t-shirt -- Shaw prefers him naked, but Shaw's breathing soft and slow, and doesn't stir as Erik pads to the bathroom to brush his teeth. The taste of old whiskey, stale with the passage of a few hours and sour with the memory of argument, is hard to get out no matter how long Erik spends with the mouthwash.

When he can't put it off anymore, Erik flicks off the bathroom light, sensing the room's textures change as he relies on his abilities to map the still metal and resonant magnetic fields of the room. He crawls into bed next to Shaw and watches Shaw's still back, not trusting it, until he turns over onto his other side, and tries to sleep.

He dreams he’s being restrained, boulders pressing down on his back and between his shoulders, the crushing weight of something -- the night maybe, some kind of metaphor for Erik’s guilt -- driving him down toward the earth. Only -- no, he isn’t dreaming at all. It’s his real body being held down, Erik’s real lungs that can’t quite drag in a breath. Erik snaps out of his doze all at once, some part of
him reeling with the abruptness of it as he plunges back into himself as if into cold water. His
reflexes are quicker than his mind; he reacts before he even knows what’s happening, fighting
against the weight against him and his power dragging electromagnetism with it like a blanket,
tangling up the metal in the room and sending something -- a lamp -- crashing to the floor by the bed.

“Don’t do that,” Shaw’s voice murmurs from behind his ear, and that’s when Erik’s mind catches up
to the rest of him and identifies the weight against him as Shaw’s body, that heat on his neck as
Shaw’s breath. If Erik should be reassured -- it’s not an intruder, no stranger in the darkness, just the
man who shares his bed -- he isn’t.

Erik exhales, but the breath is as shaky as the rest of him, his hands curling into fists: one against the
mattress, where Shaw has his wrist pinned down, his thumb pressing in against Erik’s pulse point.
Shaw would never tolerate get off me or what the fuck or any of the other responses that surge up on
impulse, but even knowing that, Erik has to fight to battle them down and remind himself -- it’s fine.
He’s fine.

“What are you doing?” Erik manages to say at last, the question weak and feeble-sounding to his
own ears but the best he can do when every part of him screams threat, screams flight. Shaw’s other
hand smooths down Erik’s side, toward his hip, and Erik says, “It’s -- the middle of the night.”

Shaw’s lips turn against his neck, kissing just behind his jugular as his fingers twist in the hem of
Erik’s t-shirt, tugging it taut against his ribs. “What’s this, Erik?” he says, ignoring Erik’s question
entirely, his weight driving Erik inexorably downward, still, and Erik realizes with a sudden lurch of
sick clarity that Shaw’s hard against his ass, that when he shifts it’s to press that hardness down
against him, rubbing it between the cleft of his cheeks.

"What's this?" Shaw asks again as he plays with Erik's t-shirt and rubs himself against Erik's boxers. The fabric is a terrifyingly thin barrier, but Erik clings to it all the same. "Well, Erik?

"I thought -- " Erik fumbles for some kind of reason, but any explanation slips through his fingers. "I
was tired."

"It's time to wake up, my boy," Shaw murmurs.

He adjusts his grip on the back of Erik's shirt, and in the long, attenuated pause -- a heartbeat only,
but dilated so Erik knows what will happen a flicker before it does, knows and can't do anything to
stop it -- gathers that immense strength and rips Erik's shirt apart. The fabric tears up the center like a
ribcage cracking open. Erik yelps and tries to jerk away, slithering out from under Shaw like a mouse
from a trap, but Shaw's fingers close vise-tight around his wrists, pinning him down, and with
Shaw's body atop his Erik has no leverage.

"Let me go," Erik growls. The room is still dark but tinged with red, fury and terror and blood, and
filled with the rasp of his breath. He struggles, although it of course does no good; the blow he
manages to land, a foot just beneath Shaw's knee, feels like kicking concrete.

"After," Shaw tells him. "Don't move." Erik can't, even when Shaw lets go of one wrist to yank his
boxers down over his ass; the grip Shaw does have on him is like a bear trap, on the verge of
crushing bone.

"I don't know if I should get you ready for me or not," Shaw says to the sweating, trembling curve of
Erik's neck. "If I'd been thinking, I would have made you clean yourself out earlier, but sometimes
spontaneity has its virtues, wouldn't you say?" He kisses Erik behind his ear, nipping the skin,
bringing blood to the surface so it trickles gently down, following the topography of skin and tendon
until it runs under Erik's jawline, the thinnest metallic thread.
Just do it, Erik wants to say. He bites that back, tries to will himself to go loose and accepting so that maybe this will hurt a little less, but his body has a mind of its own, tensing against the threat that lies atop it, waiting for a chance to escape.

"Now, since you seem to have forgotten the rules," Shaw's fingers slide between Erik's cheeks, dry and blunt, and Erik can't help but flinch away, "I'm going to have to remind you, so listen to me very, very carefully, Erik: no coming until you have permission. If you have it."

But Erik's the furthest thing from aroused, his cock soft and trapped between his body and the bed. Not like Shaw's, which grazes the back of Erik's thigh, stiff and wet-tipped. Erik chokes on bile, the reaction immediate and reflexive now. A large part of him thinks this can't be real, convinced that even Shaw wouldn't push things quite this far -- that even Shaw must know there's a very real boundary here, not just those malleable lines Erik draws in the sand but then lets Shaw retrace time and time again.

“Fuck you,” Erik snaps, and then cries out when Shaw pushes him harder into the bed, the hand at Erik’s shoulder blade strong enough Erik swears he can feel the bone creaking beneath its pressure, white-hot pain clouding his vision and blotting out everything but the way it somehow hurts even worse when Shaw releases his grip, the harsh bite of Shaw’s teeth between two vertebrae a belated echo of heat.

“Now, now,” Shaw says, sounding amused if anything, his fingertips deceptively light as they trace over Erik’s throbbing shoulder. “That isn’t how we play.”

Between Erik's legs, Shaw’s fingers tease at the tight rim of Erik’s hole, as if Erik needed to be reminded Shaw could tear him open there just as easily as he tore Erik’s shirt.

“I know you like putting up a fight,” Shaw says, lips grazing the nape of Erik’s neck again as he rocks his hips down against Erik’s ass, rubbing his cock there, refusing to let Erik forget what’s coming. “I'll allow it, to an extent. But even my patience has its limits -- do you understand, Erik?”

When Erik doesn’t answer, Shaw twists a hand in his hair and yanks a fistful of it against Erik’s scalp, pulling his face up off the pillow and leaving Erik gasping, temporarily, for breath before Shaw catches his lips with his, kissing him bruisingly hard, his tongue and teeth marking Erik’s mouth for his own. “Do you?” Shaw asks again, almost lovingly, his breath hot on Erik’s lips and his pale gaze so, so close, inhuman and unyielding.

“Yes,” Erik gets out through gritted teeth, as if saying that would solve anything. Shaw doesn’t need convincing, though -- he knows he has Erik where he wants him and where Erik can’t escape, where fighting back only gives Shaw more power to use against him in turn. The hopelessness of it all pounds into Erik with the force of his own racing heart, walls closing in, inexorable.

"Good boy," Shaw says, and kisses him viciously once more. "Now, I'm going to let go of you, and I don't think I need to tell you what not to do?"

Erik stays still, dead weight, as Shaw reaches over him to grab the lube from the bedside table drawer. A small, hysterical voice in the back of his mind says at least Shaw's going to prepare him; trust Shaw to want to be comfortable even now, when he's -- when he's -- Erik swallows, tasting sourness and snot, hopelessness.

Shaw squeezes lube onto his palm and throws the tube across the room; it lands in distant shadows, a faint blur of white near the door. The sound of his slick palm running over his cock, viscous, heavy, sends shudders marching through Erik's body, a crawling knowledge of what's going to happen.

Then Shaw is back, fingers closing like manacles around Erik's wrist again, the other hand spreading
his cheeks, baring him to Shaw's inspection.

"I've fucked you often enough I feel I shouldn't need to prepare you," Shaw says idly.

Erik involuntarily flinches away from the cockhead he feels pressed against his hole, a frantic cry strangling itself to death in his throat -- he's pressed down so hard, his head at an awkward angle that forces his larynx against the mattress so he's inches from asphyxiating. _Relax_, he tells himself, but his body has other ideas, tensing in denial. His abilities scrabble for anything he can use as a weapon, even knowing the only way to end this (maybe) would be to find something sharp and slash his own wrists open.

In the end he laces his thoughts through the metal of the house and holds on, tight tight tight, bearing down harder as Shaw presses in. He's barely open, hardly stretched at all beyond the cursory fingering Shaw had given him, and _it hurts_ with an irresistible hurt that sinks its claws in and toys with him, watching him twist and writhe in its grip, every movement only driving that pain deeper. Shaw is huge inside him, undeniable, and there's no apology this time, no _you make me so crazy_ or _do you know what you do to me?_, only Shaw taking what he wants.

He swears he can feel Shaw all the way up in his stomach, his throat, when Shaw finally bottoms out. That must be why he gags, body clenching around the dry retch as if to try to keep it in. He can barely think for the pain, like someone sawing into him, past his skin and up into his gut, only dizzily, distantly conscious of Shaw’s hands grasping his hips and pulling him further down onto his dick. The next morning he’ll find bruises there, long and finger-shaped, and not remember getting them. All he’ll remember is the way he shakes beneath him, rattling like dry bone, and Shaw’s voice saying, amused, “You’re like a child….”

“Please,” Erik says, rasps, as Shaw starts thrusting into him -- not even slowly, just moving Erik bodily on his cock as if Erik weighs nothing, is nothing. He doesn’t fight back, but he knows it isn’t supposed to feel like this, either, as if he were being hollowed out and scraped clean on the inside.

Shaw bites the skin over his shoulder, adding another mark to the chain of them he’s leaving across Erik’s back, and he … God, his breath is perfectly even against Erik’s nape, as if he could do this forever, and he very well might: once Erik clocked him at over an hour without coming, terrible and suprahuman.

After this, Erik swears to himself, biting down hard on his inner cheek -- after this, he’ll make another damn choice, for all Shaw loves choices. He’ll walk out the door and he won’t come back.

Such thoughts are little comfort now, though, when every jolt of Shaw’s cock up into his body feels like having something rammed against his heart. Erik hates himself, _hates_ himself, for the wetness on the pillow beneath his cheek and the sound he makes, an agonized sob on a particularly deep thrust and Shaw’s short nails dragging scratches down his spine.

“What is it, my boy?” Shaw says, teeth scraping along Erik’s ear.

Pathetic, every bit the child Shaw accused him of being, Erik says, “I want you to -- I --”

“Hmm?”

“Please stop,” Erik finishes weakly, his hand curling into a fist against the sheets, sweaty and useless against Shaw’s power.

Shaw doesn't say anything, and he doesn't stop. The mattress creaks and the headboard bangs against the wall and Erik sobs, words like _please_ and _stop_ over and over, until they dissolve into incoherence
and then silence. The pain stretches on and on, unending, and soon it becomes part of him, something he'll feel forever even after -- if -- this ends. When Shaw thrusts harder and faster, and part of Erik is convinced he's torn, that the slickness between his thighs is blood and maybe he'll die and this will all be over, when Shaw's breath goes ragged and he moans, these soft, pleased sounds of a man luxuriating in something rare and beautiful, Erik prays Shaw will come.

He's completely soft when Shaw finishes in him, wanting to crawl out of his own skin in disgust. Shaw collapses atop him as if he's exhausted -- he isn't, of course; through blurred vision Erik sees the clock, counts out the digits one by one and realizes that it's been, maybe, half an hour. It's worse than seeing hours have passed; he'd throw up, if he didn't know that Shaw would make him clean it up, and if he weren't already lying with his cheek in a pool of his own tears, snot, and drool.

Dry lips caress his ear, a breath whistling against the shell of it as Shaw kisses him. His cock is still up Erik's ass, and for a panicked moment Erik thinks Shaw hasn't come at all; he feels hard and huge, jammed deep up there and every inch of Erik on fire.

"You're always such a good boy, Erik," Shaw whispers, and kisses Erik's cheek as he cants his hips and pulls out, and it hurts so badly Erik can't even scream.

He doesn't move, and doesn't need the reminder not to move, as Shaw gets up to clean himself off. Hygiene or not, clean bedclothes or not, Erik stays where he is; he knows he won't be allowed to move until morning, and even the thought of moving -- of getting up when Shaw's in the bathroom, grabbing his clothes and running -- sparks the memory of bone-breaking pressure closing around his wrists. Instead of running, he lies still and breathes, and tries to forget.

Typically Erik would have to focus harder than usual, to sense the iron in Shaw’s blood as he moves about the bathroom area naked and without metal on him -- but tonight his sense of it roars in his ears, beating against his awareness like ocean waves over and over in time with the pulse of Shaw’s heart. Fear skitters up fast inside him when he hears it growing louder, Shaw approaching behind him, unseen, and finally peaks in a white rush of anticipation, loud as electromagnetism right before Shaw’s hand touches the small of his back.

A towel follows, rough-feeling as Shaw wipes him down, clearing all of it -- come, blood -- from between Erik’s legs. Erik wants to say he doesn’t flinch, but he does, his whole body arching away from it as Shaw rubs the cloth against his stinging, swollen hole and Shaw laughs darkly, dropping the towel off the edge of the bed.

He closes his eyes immediately, like not being able to see Shaw would hide him, somehow, and Shaw’s thumb rubs a path across his slick cheek, fingers curling back toward the nape of Erik’s neck.

"Let me look at you, dear boy,” Shaw murmurs, and his hand on Erik’s shoulder forces Erik onto his side as if it were easy, exposing Erik’s body -- which feels fragile now, spun-glass -- and his messy face, Erik’s skin burning. He closes his eyes immediately, like not being able to see Shaw would hide him, somehow, and Shaw’s thumb rubs a path across his slick cheek, fingers curling back toward the nape of Erik’s neck.

"Look at me,” Shaw says, and Erik doesn’t want to obey; Erik does obey, blinking the blur from his vision until Shaw’s face slides into focus, gazing at Erik, lips parted slightly, like even now, with the way Erik looks, he’s never seen something so fascinating. “Thank you, Erik -- for choosing to be obedient.”

It curdles in Erik’s stomach; he tries to turn his face away again, down into the pillow, but Shaw’s holding him firmly enough he can’t. All he can do is let Shaw kiss him, and touch him, bring Erik under the immovable aegis of his embrace where Erik remains for the rest of the night.
Waking the next morning brings the previous night crashing down on him, memory embedded in the pain that burns, inextinguishable, under his skin. Shaw's gone already, the mattress cold and empty next to Erik, the expectations of previous mornings left behind to guide him once he drags himself out of bed.

"God," he hisses as the world drops out from under him and the pain comes rushing up to catch him. His inner thighs are still sticky, he's raw, scraped down to exposed nerves, it feels like; he's never been so aware of his body in so terrible a way. The journey to the bathroom takes far longer than he remembers it ever taking before, his skin shockingly aware of the carpet under his bare feet, the shivering cold of the air conditioning turning on.

When he gets to the sink, he braces himself against the counter and breathes deeply three times before making himself look up at his reflection.

He looks -- he looks as if he's gone nine rounds with a boxer, eyes bruised and hazy, face cut. There are the bruises he'd anticipated last night, the individual imprints of Shaw's fingers on his hips, more marks on his shoulders and chest, bite marks on his neck that he doesn't remember, and maybe that's the one small mercy he's been granted. Erik straightens and makes himself meet his own dissociated expression, hating how his eyes try to skip away to the side.

His reflection brings some clarity at least, enough that Erik can see what Shaw did. *What Shaw did.* Surely, he thinks as he turns on the shower and climbs gingerly in -- lifting his legs to clear the raised rim of the shower stall feels precarious -- if he has to accept responsibility for his choices as an agent, Shaw must accept the responsibilities for his. Once he's under the spray and heating the water until it's almost scalding, though nowhere near hot enough to scour Shaw's touch away, Erik thinks that, following from this reasoning, he should report Shaw. Somehow. To someone. So Shaw can understand what consequences are.

Resolve carries him through the unpleasant process of making sure he isn't torn or hurt to the point of having to go to the hospital. Maybe it would be easier if he was; at least there'd be evidence, of a sort. But trust Shaw to push him to the brink; Erik's not so damaged he has to find someone to patch him back together. Erik lets the anger shiver through him at that; he can imagine Shaw suggesting Erik be grateful that Shaw didn't hurt him worse, twisting logic back on him.

Erik grits his teeth and scrubs at his body with the bar of soap and Shaw's ridiculous loofah, scrubs until there's very nearly nothing left.

He'll tell his department chair, he thinks as he gets out of the shower, wrapping a towel around his waist with arms that still shake. He's an older man, but he's always been gregarious with Erik, acknowledges him in the halls and pulled him aside after he won the NSF GRFP, and then the NRSA, to congratulate him personally. Or he could just skip the middleman and go straight to the police. He admits he gets a certain amount of satisfaction from imagining the way Shaw's cool façade would crack if a detective showed up on his doorstep to arrest him.

Erik isn't stupid enough to think Shaw would get fired for this, or that anyone would ever press charges. Nothing would change -- but Shaw would learn Erik won't just take it lying down. That an agent can make choices that go against Shaw's wishes just as well as they go with them. And then Erik will walk out of this house for the last time and he won't come back.

He changes into a set of clothes, not the expensive ones Shaw has bought for him but the items he bought on clearance and tailored himself, Spring 2002 Prada that could nearly pass for this season but doesn't quite. Clothes attached to memories that have nothing to do with this place. Dressed, he kneels on the floor in Shaw's huge walk-in closet and dumps armfuls of his things into a duffel bag.
Not everything, but Erik doesn’t care about everything. He wants this to be a smooth and unbroken process. Get his revenge get his things, get out.

He leaves the bag at the foot of the bed when he goes downstairs, knowing the maid will be here any minute but not caring what she thinks, if she’ll whisper it in Shaw’s ear, Está dejando.

He finds Shaw sitting at the table in the sunroom, dressed in a crisp robin’s egg blue shirt and linen trousers, orange juice — or mimosa — in one hand and a plate of food half-touched, ignored in favor of the newspaper Shaw has opened up and tilted toward the light from the window. Erik hesitates in the doorway, overwhelmed by the sudden pulse of nausea that crashes like a tide through his entire body and threatens to put him off-balance, the back of his throat closing up.

"Ah, Erik." Shaw regards him over the top of his paper and clucks. "You look tired, my dear boy. Come and sit down."

Woodenly, Erik sits down, hands on his thighs. As always, Shaw pours his coffee for him and makes up a plate, eggs Benedict with hollandaise, wilted greens on the side and a thick slice of toast to soak up the yolks. Erik stares at the plate; when Shaw picks up the fork to break the egg open, the yolk bleeds across white porcelain where the whites are severed, the color of an eye draining out. Erik swallows.

"There," Shaw says softly. He rubs Erik's shoulder and pours a glass of orange juice, fresh-squeezed and yellow-gold when the sun shines through the facets of its crystal pitcher. "I had the cook make them for you especially."

Is Shaw trying to apologize? Erik chokes down a bite of toast, the dry bread scraping his throat. Maybe, he thinks as he struggles to swallow and rationalize the nightmare away, this was only Shaw being rougher than he meant, misremembering his own strength…

No. He'd known precisely what he'd been doing, had done it calculatedly, had made absolutely sure Erik knew what was happening to him and that he couldn't stop it.

"Is this your way of apologizing?" he asks anyway.

Shaw huffs behind his newspaper. "Apologizing for what? For waking you up in the middle of the night for sex? If so, I'm sorry."

"You know for what," Erik growls. The silverware on the table rattles, the knives in their block quake menacingly. "You will."

That gets an outright laugh and Shaw setting his paper down, folding it in half and then in half again, setting it by his forgotten plate. "Oh. Yes. My dear Erik, do you really think you have the moral high ground here, or any ground worth defending? After all, you are the one, I must point out, who's fucking his advisor."

“And you’re the one who’s fucking his student,” Erik snaps out, wanting so badly to snip the tether on his anger but not daring, not quite. “I told you to stop.”

Putting it into words like that, it … unsettles something in Erik, knocking some part of him fundamentally off-balance. But it’s true, and so Erik steels himself against the way he wants to turn his face from this, from all of it, and pretend it never happened at all. His cheeks feel flushed and feverish, even worse when Shaw arches one elegant eyebrow at him and takes a sip of his drink, gaze falling briefly shut, utterly unconcerned with Erik’s presence or his fury.

“My darling boy -- I have no idea how you expect me to interpret your little moods and fancies, I
must say. For a year now you’ve never complained once and, frankly, have put up with far rougher treatment, and enjoyed it. How am I to know if you’re being sincere or if this isn’t just another attempt to persuade me to debase you further?” Shaw sets his glass down and it clinks against the wood tabletop, the noise too-loud in Erik’s ears. “Perhaps it’s because I’m old enough to be well past these childish games myself, but I must take my cue from your actions, Erik, and not your words.”

A pause, Shaw’s gaze unflinching from Erik’s, watching him through half-lidded eyes as if relishing what he sees on Erik’s face, the reaction he can tease out of him piece by piece. “You love a great many depraved things, Erik, and so I’m afraid I can’t see how I’m to interpret such complaints in light of your past behavior. In fact … I can’t see how anyone could.”

A stone drops into the pit of Erik’s stomach and sinks there, quickly, dragging Erik down with it. The taste of his toast is stale in his mouth now, alongside something harsh and bitter -- bile, maybe. He stares at Shaw, suddenly light-headed, and a small smile curls around Shaw’s thin mouth as Shaw reaches across the space between them and places a hand over Erik’s wrist.

“Eat, Erik,” he says again.

"I'm not hungry."

"I said, eat.” Shaw nods at Erik's cooling plate. "You have a busy day in lab, and you still managed to exert yourself last night, even if I did all the work."

Erik isn’t sure how he does it, but he swallows his coffee and orange juice, scrapes ineffectually at his eggs with his toast. He doesn’t touch the greens, which look limp and dead and rotten. Shaw makes a disappointed moue at Erik’s mostly-untouched breakfast and says, "Well, you'll be the one to go hungry before lunch, I suppose -- although I do wish you could take better care of yourself without my having to remind you. Shall we go?"

Throughout the day, Erik clings to the thought of his packed duffel in the bedroom. He’ll leave tonight, he decides. Even if he won't report -- which he still could; he just needs to figure out a way to do it -- he can still walk out, still end this. He has that power, and if Shaw won't face consequences in a court of law, he can face the consequence of Erik leaving. The vision of taking his bag and getting in the cab waiting outside sustains him through an excruciating morning lab, which is spent trying to work while his colleagues watch him move stiffly around, when they get a look at his scratched and bruised face, the burning fear that they might know, somehow, what happened. If he’d had any appetite, that silent curiosity would have killed it.

That afternoon, when he’s counting the minutes until he can escape, he has to head to the department office to check his mail, pretending to read a report while he walks so he can avoid the few people bold enough to try to start a conversation with him. Halfway down the hall he senses Shaw’s watch coming closer at a rapid clip, accompanied by another watch, unfamiliar, and a pacemaker, which Erik does recognize: Dr. Connolly, on the verge of retirement but hanging on, refusing to go gentle into that dark night.

"Ah, Erik!” Shaw calls.

Dr. Connolly starts when Erik looks up and he sees Erik's face. "Oh my goodness, Erik!” he exclaims, foggy blue eyes searching out every mark and blemish. "What on earth happened to you?"

"Yes, Erik,” Shaw says, all dripping concern and surprise. "What happened?"

Erik, entirely by accident, meets Shaw’s eyes and can see, then, that Shaw knows Erik could tell -- could say you know what happened or you hurt me (he still can’t think of it in other terms, refuses to)
-- but that he knows, too, Erik won’t. That for all Erik’s fantasies about turning Shaw in and laying out the list of his crimes before judge and jury, Erik knows Shaw was right this morning, that anyone would look at him and see just what he is: an arrogant child who thought it would be fun to seduce his professor, a perverted faggot who likes getting fucked up the ass and being told what to do and tied up and, yes, even smacked around a bit. Who is fucking the man he’d try to claim hurt him. Who, if anyone looked hard enough, has a two year history back at Princeton of getting down on his knees for just about every straight-passing man with a nice cock. Shaw knows it, and now Erik knows it, too, as if Shaw has dragged him in front of a mirror and made him look at himself in precisely the way he’s been trying so hard not to, all this time.

So when Erik does speak, what comes out is, “I was trail-running last night in the mountains. It got dark and I tripped on a rock.” Self-deprecating smile, never mind the way it hurts to twist his mouth like this, tugging taut the cut of his split lower lip. Erik’s nothing if not a good actor. “Lesson learned, I’ll bring a headlamp next time.”

“You boys these days,” Dr. Connolly says, shaking his head and chuckling faintly. “Man wasn’t built to run fifty-odd miles in terrain like that, you know.”

Erik thinks he can detect the satisfaction in Shaw’s expression, written into the edges of his features as he smiles at Erik, too broad to be entirely sympathetic. “One has to do something besides research with one’s time, I suppose,” Shaw drawls, and with his accent it sounds very near to condescending — near, but not quite. “Better this than some pursuits.”

Erik’s feet are frozen to the floor, his blood congealed in his veins as Shaw reaches out and claps Erik once on the shoulder, collegial, paternal; Erik swears he can smell Shaw’s cologne. “Do take care of yourself, my boy,” Shaw says, one last parting shot as he and Dr. Connolly step away down the hall and leave Erik behind.

The next time he sees Shaw is later that afternoon, on the other side of lab and seminar, and having to lie about trail running at least five more times. Shaw greets him as always, with courteous questions about Erik’s day, as if Erik isn’t burning with hate and wishing he could rip the molecules in Shaw’s body apart. That hatred rides between them, a third passenger, though it’s one of which Shaw seems completely unaware, humming softly to himself along with the radio as the Bentley plows through traffic.

When they get back to Shaw’s prison of a house -- and that’s how Erik sees it now, gilded and polished but still a prison -- he slips away upstairs while Shaw flips through his mail. In the privacy of the bedroom he calls for a car service, wincing at the amount they quote him; he’d walk if he had to, but he just wants out, now. He doesn't bother changing; he grabs his bag and trots downstairs, heart hammering unsteadily against his ribcage.

Shaw stands at the bottom of the stairs, squarely between Erik and the front door. He has his hands in his pockets, a disappointed frown on his face, a question on his lips: "What are you doing?"

"Fuck this, and fuck you," Erik says. He tightens his grip on his resolve and the shoulder strap. "I'm done with this."

"Are you?" Shaw asks silkily. "Are you really sure about that, Erik?"

The last time Shaw asked him that, Erik left his mother to die alone. He takes two steps down, dangerously close to Shaw, but he doesn't care. "I'm absolutely sure. Get out of my way."

"I don't think you're done." Shaw eases closer as well, a snake or a crocodile waiting under cover, preparing to strike. "You see, Erik, it would be... very unwise for you to change our arrangement at
You'll be going up for your comprehensive exams this summer, after all, and it would be -- unfortunate if your performance in them were to suffer."

It’s the last straw, and Erik feels something inside him crack, spilling its raw and rotten contents into his veins. He glares at Shaw, and is distantly cognizant of the crashing noise as some of the pots and pans in the kitchen rattle off the counter and onto the floor, of metal losing its shape and crumpling under the force of Erik’s anger.

“Are you seriously fucking suggesting that you would fail my comps if I don’t keep sleeping with you?” Erik spits out. His head buzzes with his sense of magnetism, loud enough it nearly drowns out his racing pulse.

Shaw takes another step toward him, and Erik fights the urge to retreat back up the stairs, going right where he knows Shaw wants him just to put distance between them again.

“Don’t be absurd,” Shaw says, flicking his fingers as if to dismiss Erik’s accusation outright. “I’m not forcing you to stay here. But it’s clear you’re upset, Erik, and I can only imagine that ending a long-term relationship this close to comps will negatively impact your ability to live up to the standard we’ve all come to expect from you.”

The standard they’ve come to expect -- meaning, Erik doing everything Shaw wants, doing more than what he’s told, fighting with everything he has not just to be good but perfect, to outwit and outfuck everyone Shaw’s ever met. He can practically see it now, how he must look to Shaw, working class kid pretending at being above his station with his thrifted designer clothes and taste for whiskey, immature child playing at being an adult and in an adult relationship. Arrogant student, willing to trade sex for co-authorship on the right papers, connections to the right people.

“Listen to me very carefully,” Shaw goes on, ascending another step, an unstoppable force. “This choice is yours, my boy … but whatever choice you make tonight will doubtlessly shape your future for years to come.” Another step, close enough he could reach out and touch Erik now, wrap those fingers around his throat and squeeze. A shadow of a smile hangs around Shaw’s lips. “I’d choose well, if I were you.”

There’s dimensions of space between those lines, easy for Erik to read the text between them. Rebellion rises up, determination to push past Shaw and put Shaw behind him and take his chances - - and then he remembers what he’s given up and what he’s lost, and the slow curling grin Shaw gives him says Shaw knows what's going through his mind. Erik looks down at him, aching for violence.

"You've worked so hard," Shaw says, dripping sympathy. He gently takes the duffel strap off Erik's shoulder. "It would be a shame to throw all of that away in a fit of pique."

The hand on Erik's side, turning him around, threatens to break the crest of Erik's hip. Erik obeys it, fury welling acid in his throat.

Shaw gets them upstairs again and the bedroom door shut behind them. Erik feels the lock click home, heavy and final in his bones.

*

The next week, Shaw sends Erik to work with a delicate golden chain around his wrist. Erik hates every link in it, itches to melt it down to expensive slag, from the instant he senses it in the velvet box Shaw's put on top of the bedside table. Shaw straddles Erik's hips and smiles fondly down at him as he fastens the clasp and kisses the bumps of Erik's knuckles.
"You'll wear that, my good boy," Shaw tells him as Erik trembles and stares at the metal around his wrist. "And don't be shy."

That means Erik has to roll his sleeves up, displaying the chain on the drive to campus so, on occasion, Shaw can glance over and nod approvingly. The chain, conspicuous and unavoidable, seems to shout Erik's secret to the entire department; he can't roll his sleeves down, tucking the chain under his cuff, with Shaw hovering on the edge of his space at unexpected moments.

"Wow," Angie says, New York accent colored with envy. Erik goes still, can't help glancing at the door to the graduate student offices. At least she doesn't touch him, and she does step back when he turns to glare at her. "Who's the boyfriend, and can he give mine some pointers?"

"He's no one," Erik mutters, flushing. "I bought it myself. Does your presence here have a point?"

Angie's known Erik long enough to be relatively undeterred; it's only the first years who still flinch when Erik snaps at them. "Yeah, can you send me the code you used to analyze your data from the JEM project? I have my meeting with Shaw at 3:30 and it'd be nice to have actual data to show for it."

Erik nods curtly but Angie doesn't leave, tilting one hip against the edge of Erik's desk and peering over his shoulder at the manuscript he has pulled up on screen, making revisions in accordance with the fifty million edits Shaw sent him last week. Erik's too aware of his own body now, the awkward twist of his torso and his hand resting next to the mouse, wondering if he should move away or if that would count as flinching.

"Oh my god," she says. "Well, I feel better now. You're the golden boy, so if he sends even you a thousand revisions that means it's not just me."

Erik doesn't reply, keeping his lips pressed into a thin line to hold back -- he isn't sure what, but he doesn't trust himself to speak. The chain burns against his skin.

Angie must take his silence as a cue to change the subject because she says, "By the way, you can't fool me. Everyone knows you're seeing someone, Erik. You never come to happy hour anymore, you always dress like you're going to a date right after lab, your phone never shuts up. And you have a little something -- " she leans in, grinning, and taps a finger against his collarbone, against a bruise Erik only now realizes is there at all " -- there."

This time Erik does flinch, adrenaline surging through him with self-loathing only a beat behind, heat burning in his cheeks and chest as he grinds out, "My personal life is personal. Please leave."

"Okay," Angie says in a tone that indicates she's humoring him. "But you could always bring him to happy hour or something so we know he exists. Unless..." Erik isn't looking at her, but he knows she's frowning thoughtfully, dark eyes narrow as she turns over possibilities. "He's not a professor, is he?"

"No." Erik shreds the old pennies in his pen holder in half, then in quarters, smaller and smaller fragments until they're tiny, sharp-edged, and he melds them together, the small sphere of alloys not enough of a focus for his rage. He can't turn it on Angie, though, and he can't turn it on Shaw or the chain around his wrist. "Are you done?"

"For now," Angie says, and laughs at the look on his face. "Honestly, Lehnsherr, you can't blame us for being curious."

He can and he does. If he thought Shaw would care, he'd tell Shaw about the suspicions among the
graduate students and ask for him to take the chain off. He might as well ask for Shaw to let him go.

The next week Shaw gives him a shirt, safer than the chain -- except for how it nips close to Erik's waist and molds itself to his chest and shoulders, a hairsbreadth from unprofessionalism. Erik stares at his reflection in the mirror as Shaw tucks the tails into the waist of his trousers and buttons the top two buttons, straightens the seams so they run arrow-straight.

"Perfect," Shaw says. "You have an innate sense for aesthetics, as I've said, my boy, but... limited means to realize it. Now, though -- now you do." He sets his hands beneath Erik's ribs, where his flanks narrow down into his hips. "Dolce and Gabbana, my dear boy. Perhaps a bit extreme, but not overly so, and it's white. Very classic."

For a moment, Erik imagines he's in the world's most surreal boutique, being made over by an associate with an eye for commission and a lack of boundaries. It passes when Shaw kisses the back of his neck. Dressed like a doll, Erik thinks as Shaw untucks his shirt again and orders Erik to unbutton it -- carefully, of course.

As much as Erik dislikes the clothes -- first the shirt, then tailored jeans, trousers, a waistcoat tight enough to be a corset, almost -- he hates the metal Shaw gives him. The chain is joined by a heavy Omega watch, steel links that would be poetry against his skin if Shaw hadn't given it to him, rings (one gold to match the chain, one silver, one titanium), another bracelet and even rings for his toes that are hidden by his bespoke oxfords. He can't ignore it, as if his ability is irresistibly attracted to wherever the metal closes around him, pressure he feels most acutely at his pulse points and against every raw, jangling nerve. For a time, he's convinced that a necklace or collar is next, or that Shaw will want him to get piercings, not content with wrapping Erik up in cuffs disguised as jewelry, but that thought doesn't seem to cross Shaw's mind.

One late June day, Shaw collects Erik from his office, smiling in approval when he sees the watch and the gold chain rubbing against each other on Erik's wrist and Erik's shirt barely wrinkled and his trousers still pristine. "I'm sure you're tired," he says once Erik's passed inspection. "Shall I walk you out while we talk over your comprehensives?"

"Yes," Erik says. It's the tone of voice that belongs to another Erik, an Erik-who-isn't-Erik, compliant and tired of fighting. He collects his satchel and notes, sets his face in the politely interested mask it wears while, behind it, his mind churns restlessly.

"The important thing to note," Shaw says as they head out into the hallway, Shaw himself perfectly at ease with his hands tucked into his trouser pockets and his chin level, Erik struggling to maintain the same, "is that you passed."

"Oh. Good."

A different Erik would take this opportunity to tell Shaw he’s leaving again, now that the immediate threat of comps has passed. This Erik, Shaw’s Erik, knows better. Even if Shaw had let him leave back then, Erik only would have come crawling back sooner or later, desperate for someone who could bring him low and make him feel -- that way again, restrained and dominated and controlled in a way Erik loves far more than he hates. Loves it when Shaw holds him down, loves the danger, the terror that bleeds into ecstasy. A different Erik thought he couldn’t handle it. Shaw’s Erik can.

"We should discuss the project proposal you submitted," Shaw continues on, a faint smile visible on his lips now, like he was waiting for Erik to pass his test. He gestures when the elevator arrives at their floor, allowing Erik to step on before him. "It will need substantial revision, of course -- understandable, as you had to complete it without any input from myself or others -- but it’s a workable idea. I’d like to submit it to the NSF by end of summer."

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“All right,” Erik says.

The elevator is small and cramped, Erik forced to stand close to Shaw, close enough for Shaw to lift his hand and rest it on the small of Erik’s back where it burns through the layers of the clothing Shaw bought him and brands his flesh. Erik half expects that hand to drop after a moment but it doesn’t, of course, just smooths lower, over the swell of Erik’s ass.

“You’ll need space to work on it, of course, and now that you’re officially a Ph.D. candidate you should devote more time to your studies.” Erik isn’t sure how he could possibly devote more time -- his every waking moment is dedicated either to work, or to Shaw. Perhaps Shaw intends him to stop sleeping. “To that effect, I’ve acquired an apartment for you a few blocks from here. Don’t worry about breaking your lease with your roommate. The apartment’s in my name, and as such you’ll hardly be needing credit any time soon.”

Shaw smiles over at him and the elevator doors slide open. Angie’s standing on the other side, out there in the hall with her bag slung over one shoulder and her phone in hand, though her eyes meet Erik’s immediately -- there’s no pretending she doesn’t see. For once, Erik forgets about metal; he can’t feel it, can’t feel anything except Shaw’s touch as it skirts up to the small of his back once more and pushes him forward.

"After you," Shaw says out loud and, dazed, Erik steps out of the elevator under Shaw’s guidance. He should look away, he thinks -- but looking away implies he has something to hide. He can’t figure out where to place his gaze or how to hide what seems so unhideable now, as if Angie could tell from the way he carries himself, the way he follows the pressure from Shaw’s hand, the fact he allows Shaw to be so close to begin with.

Angie slides past them into the elevator, past the arm that Shaw has extended to keep the door from closing. Erik forces himself to stop and turn, to make eye contact, tells himself that at least he’ll be able to see what she knows -- even if she sees the guilt on his own face. Angie's staring at them, of course, her phone forgotten in her hand and beeping as the call disconnects.

"Ms. Ferrante," Shaw says, and Angie's attention snaps to him, "I haven't received the draft for your NIH grant. I trust I'll receive it by eight in the morning, sharp?"

Panic of a different sort flickers across Angie's face. "I'll have it finished, Dr. Shaw."

"Yes, you will," Shaw says mildly. "I've already given you two extensions on it, Ms. Ferrante. Any more and I'll have to assume you're not interested in pursuing this funding opportunity -- or in not wasting my time. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Angie stammers. Shaw gives her his razor smile and lets the elevator door close.

"She has potential," Shaw says. The words seem to come from far away, muted by Shaw’s hand back on him, innocent now -- higher up, between Erik’s shoulder blades, guiding him out of the building. "Potential, but no discipline."

Maybe if she were less interested in Erik’s personal life she'd have that damn NIH grant done, Erik thinks. The hot summer sun on the concrete outside isn’t as hot as the shame inside him.

He's so caught up in chasing after thoughts of Angie, of what she knows and who she might tell, that he forgets what Shaw had told him until later that night over dinner. He's choking down carbonara, the freshly-cracked egg a slimy coating over the pasta when he remembers. I've acquired an apartment for you a few blocks from here.
"I don't need a new apartment," he says.

"Of course you don't." Shaw agrees, "as you'll be spending your time here. Or, most of it. There may be times when I need to not be distracted by you," he touches Erik's hand fondly, running his fingers under the loose silver chain around his wrist, "and when, I'm sure, you'll need to devote time exclusively to your work, as much as I'll miss you."

“Then I can keep my old one,” Erik says, irked that he has to leave his hand there, now, for Shaw to touch, even though he wasn’t planning on moving it before Shaw interfered. “There’s no point in breaking the lease and moving halfway across town when I already have somewhere to go for when you want to get rid of me.”

Shaw gives him a slight disapproving look, lips pursing, though he lets that go. “My dear boy,” he says, fingertips brushing over the backs of Erik’s knuckles, light enough it sends a shiver down Erik’s spine. “Surely your roommate has noticed your absence these past several months. I hate to put too fine a point on it, but our encounter with Ms. Ferrante earlier today provides an excellent example: you can’t afford for anyone to suspect your involvement with me. Even mild gossip can be enough to lose you your place in the program.”

Erik hates admitting it, but Shaw’s right. Aaron’s commented more than once on the fact that Erik only rarely spends his nights at their place anymore. And with what Angie saw today, if she were ever to go by his apartment looking for him, if Aaron were to tell her Oh, Erik’s never here, Erik lives with his boyfriend now.....

His silence is all Shaw needs, of course, in terms of acquiescence. Erik can’t touch his dinner anymore; the thought of putting another slippery bite in his mouth is enough to make his throat convulse slightly, half a gag.

After dinner, hours later, while Shaw rocks into him and Erik curls his legs, arms, around Shaw’s body, every bit as if he wanted him here, Erik decides it’s fine -- all of it, fine. He … enjoys this. Shaw’s attractive, he’s good in bed as Erik’s presently hard and leaking cock testifies, and even if sometimes he’s so rough Erik’s certain he’s going to break, other times the pain is just what he needs, searing through his body and mind and tipping him over, making him come harder than he’s ever come in his life, drunk off skin and blood and the hand pressed over his mouth, high off the risk of knowing if they got caught it could ruin everything.

It’s only three more years.

It's three more years of burying himself in work, pushing everything else to the side and telling himself what he has with Shaw is a respite from days and weeks he'd otherwise spend consumed by his research. Shaw makes sure Erik eats and showers and doesn't spend his nights in his office; he prompts Erik to go running on days when Erik thinks he might skip. And when Erik's mind is all pent-up, directionless energy, Shaw pins him in place and fucks him, and Erik tells himself Shaw's giving him exactly what he needs, even if Erik thinks he doesn't want it.

Two more years.

The tide of dissertation fellowships nearly drowns him; Shaw gives him port in the evenings and rubs his shoulders as Erik types up yet another grant. He'll tolerate this, Erik decides, and more than that, he'll invest himself in it long enough to get through the last stretch of work and the looming year of postgraduate applications. He wants this, he reminds himself when Shaw leads him upstairs one night and strips Erik down to nothing. If he didn't want this, he wouldn't be here.

Late summer, position announcements start going out. Erik, along with the rest of the fifth years,
hover in the mailroom, waiting for the department copies of the journals for CNS and Nature Neuroscience to appear with their columns of job listings. Erik photocopies the relevant pages and prints out the few positions listed online and, as he highlights the positions he'd be suited for, he imagines these places as far-away, exotic locales: Chicago, Boston, New York, Austin, Charlottesville, Durham, Rochester, all of them two timezones distant.

"You should really apply to the Berkeley position," Shaw says one day. They're in a job preparation seminar, going over their fine-tuned letters and CVs. Across the conference table, Angie flicks a meaningful glance up at Erik.

"I was planning to," Erik says. It's far down on his list; he'd rather be the only Jew in the middle of nowhere at an R1 with a tenuous claim to the rank than stay anywhere in California. It would look strange not to apply to a place that's close, and to a program that's clearly outstanding.

"Good." Shaw nods benevolently. "Remember, everyone: make the most of every opportunity offered to you. While you can't control what individual search committees decide, you can control how many chances you can take advantage of and the quality of the materials you submit. The more you focus on that, the better off you'll be."

It sounds, and feels, stale, something Shaw's recited for years. Maybe he has; there are times when Shaw's opinion of the world is clearly influenced by money, tenure, and years of job cycles where he hasn't had to worry about being hired. Erik curls his fingers around his pen -- Mont Blanc, heavy, the ink a crisp black -- and reminds himself that he'll take any job offered to him that gets him away from here. How's that for making the most of every opportunity?

To be particularly safe, he submits three different grant applications for post-docs, maintains contact with every Midwest and East Coast researcher he knows and might be able to persuade a position out of. Two of his contacts tell him he has a place in their labs if the funding comes through.

He gets interviews at Chicago, Duke, Harvard, NYU, Berkeley, and Caltech -- that last in bioengineering, which had been more of a hail Mary attempt than anything else, but Erik's as grateful for it as any others. Still California, but hours south. Out of reach.

"Maybe I should come with you," Shaw muses the evening before Erik's flight leaves for Raleigh-Durham, his mouth moving against the back of Erik's neck and his fingers slipped down beneath the waist of Erik's trousers, fondling his flaccid cock. "I know the Dean. And it would be good for you to have someone familiar to return to at night, after such exhausting days."

Erik can't respond, his mouth full of toothpaste and Shaw's other hand at his throat, pressing against his Adam's apple, not choking him but not safe, either. It twitches against Erik's larynx as he leans forward to spit into the sink, pressing harder against his windpipe, hard enough to hurt.

Erik makes sure he gets spit and toothpaste on Shaw's other hand at his throat, pressing against his Adam's apple, not choking him but not safe, either. It twitches against Erik's larynx as he leans forward to spit into the sink, pressing harder against his windpipe, hard enough to hurt.

Erik makes sure he gets spit and toothpaste on Shaw's hand and is rewarded with a tightening grasp around his cock, that bright jolt of pain enough to tear a rough sound out of Erik's mouth, vertigo eating away at his vision even as Shaw's teeth catch the lobe of Erik's ear between them, tugging, his hands keeping Erik in place even as Erik sways off-balance.

"It's not too late to purchase a ticket," Shaw threatens. Erik meets his gaze in the mirror, Shaw's inhuman eyes looking at him just over Erik's own shoulder, Erik's body taller but still somehow subsumed by Shaw's, caught in the cage of his hands.

"Do what you want," Erik says. It's dangerously close to a challenge, with the promise of four days out of Shaw's clutches hanging so tantalizingly close. "Although wouldn't it be... compromising if you went? People might make assumptions."
"Oh, my darling Erik." Shaw laughs, bright and hard-edged. His grip around Erik's cock tightens cruelly. "Are you trying to play games now?"

"No," Erik whispers. Shaw's Erik comes shivering forward, promising himself that he'll comply if it gets him this one brief flash of independence. "I'm sorry."

"Of course you are," Shaw clucks. "Now, to show you're sorry, clean my hand off."

Erik licks the spit and foam from Shaw's fingers, wincing at the salt that spikes the mint of the toothpaste and gagging on the knowledge of what he's doing. Shaw hums with pleasure, and when he's finally done and Shaw's put a few more bitemarks on his shoulders, Shaw says, "Very well, dear boy. You can go on your own. But I will expect regular, punctual updates."

That puts Erik off his game from the minute he touches down in Raleigh and finds the faculty member assigned to pick him up. He loses the thread of the conversation over dinner, waiting for phone calls that don't come, no difference to him if he's muted his phone; he can sense the impulses coming in, and when the phone buzzes to life he wonders what message will be waiting on his voicemail. On occasion, Dr. Kershaw gives him clearly puzzled looks, makes kind comments about jet lag that rub Erik the wrong way.

Two weeks later, he finds out he doesn't get the job. He's willing to see it as first-interview nerves; there's a difference, after all, between interviewing for a graduate position and interviewing for tenure track. He swallows back his disappointment after he scans Dr. Kershaw's email, rolls his eyes at the explanation that, while Erik had interviewed well, the committee had thought he'd move on from Duke in a few years. We want someone who will be a colleague, Dr. Kershaw had written. But we do wish you all the best in your future endeavors.

After that the rejections roll in. He's second choice at NYU and Chicago, maybe a distant third at Caltech. Neither of the postdoc grants come through, and something in Erik dies with each polite letter, rejection paired with praise that rings hollow.

He's in his office, throttling back the urge to shred every piece of metal in it, when his phone rings.

"Is this Dr. Lehnsherr?" says a soft voice, oddly hesitant. For a moment, Erik thinks it's an undergraduate who's somehow dug up his cell number.

"It is," he says. He's finished -- dissertation done, defended, the dedication on the front For my mother a silent indictment of its meaninglessness -- and he can't take any pleasure in his new title. "May I ask who's calling?"

"This is Sally Whitlock of UC Berkeley," the voice says, and suddenly Erik can place it: it belongs to the Cognitive Science chair, a small, outwardly timid woman with a handshake that could strain iron and a straightforward way of talking Erik had appreciated. "How are you?"

"I'm well, thank you." Erik's heart beats thick up in his throat, clogging his breath. "How can I help you?"

Dr. Whitlock laughs. "I was hoping to help you," she says. "I'm calling to offer you the assistant professorship in cognitive science. We were delighted with your interview, and the search committee was unanimous in recommending you as our first choice."

Erik's hand drops the phone, but luckily his power picks up the slack, holding it steady at his ear. Oh. "Oh." Erik's mind is white, clean like a snowstorm. "That's -- very good news," he says, certain he'll trip over the words even as they come out smooth and unbroken, as if spoken by someone else.
“I’m certainly glad to hear you think so,” Dr. Whitlock says. “Your work is most impressive -- everyone here was simply blown away by the quality of scholarship. We’d love to have you here at Cal if you’re interested.”

Erik nearly opens his mouth to say he needs time to consider his options, only, there are no other options. This is the only offer he has. The alternative is dropping academia, trying to find a job in industry or simply giving up on the field altogether, throwing away five years of … this … and embarking on a career he could have had with just his B.S. in mech E.

So instead he says, “I am interested. Cal was my top choice -- it’s hardly even a question.”

“If you need time to discuss it with your loved ones …” Dr. Whitlock starts, but of course, Erik thinks bitterly, he has no loved ones. He has Shaw.

“No,” Erik says smoothly, “I’ll accept the offer. Thank you very much.”

He doesn’t remember the rest of the conversation. Administrative matters. More praise of his CV, his publications, his funding and his recommendations. Erik finds he doesn’t know what to feel, torn between his gratitude and relief for having a job and the slow-building certainty that with this call he’s just watched his world constrict a tiny bit more, shutting the door to what could have been an escape.

No, Erik corrects himself quickly -- he doesn’t need to escape anything. An exit. Another option. That’s all.

He doesn’t wait for Shaw to come and get him; he goes instead to his own apartment, the one Shaw rented for him with its unused bedroom and sterile kitchen. He runs his fingers along the white-painted walls and tries to convince himself this is really home, that any part of himself lives here and not … elsewhere. He turns off his phone so he doesn’t have to hear Shaw calling and lies down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling fan overhead and listening to the dull whisper of traffic on the street outside, practically inaudible this far from downtown.

He doesn’t fall asleep, but neither does he have any sense of how much time has passed before the knock at the front door startles him out of his haze and he realizes it’s nearly dark outside, dusk settling over the city and turning the room to shades of blue. The layout of the apartment trips him up, so small next to the prison-like opulence of Shaw's house, and he doesn't know it well enough yet to find his way in the dark without stumbling.

The only reason he's surprised to see Shaw is that he wouldn't have thought Shaw would knock; if he didn't have the key, he would simply have broken the door down and polished away the manager's protests. As quickly as the surprise comes, it's gone, leaving Erik enervated and empty, and stepping aside in response to the expectant arch of Shaw's eyebrow.

"I heard the good news from Dr. Whitlock," Shaw says. The shadows contort around his frown as he searches for the light switch. Erik winces at the flash of fluorescence, the light glaring on the stainless steel and glossy marble.

Part of him wonders why Dr. Whitlock told Shaw when Erik hasn't even signed the formal contract yet. A half-formed thought about why Dr. Whitlock would have told him flits through Erik's brain before it vanishes. Shaw smiles. "There's no need to be modest, my boy; Berkeley is quite a coup. Unless," that smile turns dangerous, though Shaw's as pleasant and pleased as ever, "it wasn't your first choice if you got multiple offers."

"No other place accepted me," Erik says. The words sound numb and disbelieving, although he's
shared news of each rejection with Shaw. "Not even the postdocs."

Shaw clucks sympathetically. The grip on Erik's arm, steering him toward the unused sofa in the living room, would be supportive and understanding if Erik didn't know it would raise bruises later tonight. "Now, now, Erik; don't mope. I thought you'd be out celebrating your triumph, not sulking. At this level, it doesn't come down to ability so much as politics and the committee's sense of who might fit best into their program."

That Shaw's said this before doesn't make it any easier; in their prep seminars, all Erik's heard is you can console yourself with that, but you're still a failure if you don't get hired. He wonders if Shaw knows his motivations are different from those of the rest of his cohort; from the calculating gleam in Shaw's eye, he has his answer.

"Look on the bright side," Shaw says as he pets Erik's hair. He's got Erik lying down now, a prey animal pinned by strong talons with teeth inches away from its trembling throat. "You won't have to go to all the trouble of moving across country. You can stay here, with me. Where you belong."

Erik’s eyes fall shut. It means he doesn’t have to gaze up at the white ceiling as Shaw’s lips graze his jaw, his mouth.

"Berkeley’s over an hour away," Erik says, and he can nearly convince himself he’s talking to no one, words echoing out into thin air. Would, if it weren’t for the press of Shaw’s body over him, his hand bearing down on Erik’s hip. “I’ll have to move north. Closer."

“Nonsense,” Shaw says, “you’ll move in with me. I’ll buy you a car -- any commute is tolerable in a Porsche, after all.” He laughs, as if it’s a joke, and Erik feels his trousers pull taut against his skin when Shaw hooks a finger through one of the belt loops and tugs.

It is politics, Erik thinks, silent as Shaw’s other hand pushes up the hem of his shirt and presses against his ribs; they creak, pained, Shaw’s mutation coming quick into play these days. Shaw’s -- who he is. He’s a MacArthur Fellow, he’s a Nobel nominee, he has more Nature publications than any forty-something Erik’s ever heard of. He could have gotten Erik into any of those departments if he really wanted to. Possibly he could have even made the grants come through for Erik’s post-docs -- a call here. An email there. Erik doesn’t bother wondering why Shaw wouldn’t put in the effort; it’s obvious in the sound of Shaw’s exhale against his skin as his thumb blots out Erik’s nipple, his fingers digging into old bruises and making Erik cringe.

Erik’s barely been in this apartment, but it’s the closest thing he has to his own space. Now it isn’t even that anymore, Shaw’s presence like the stain of spilled wine, only deepening the longer he stays; it’ll never come out. All the best, maybe, that Shaw’s taking this place away from him. Erik doesn’t need possessions. Even Erik’s body doesn’t feel his anymore.

Shaw kisses him, sucking on Erik’s lower lip and Erik kisses back mindlessly; it doesn’t take much effort anymore to play along. The other options are exhausting ones.

“You do like our little arrangement, don’t you, Erik?” Shaw asks after a time, his hand between their bodies moving at the fly of his trousers; Erik can feel his skin against the metal buttons, flicking them open, tugging down the zipper.

Erik opens his eyes, caught off-guard -- Shaw meets them, his face close and unreadable.

“What?” he says.

“Our arrangement. You do,” a small curve of a smile now, like a threat, “still want this, don’t you,
"Yes," Erik says. He does, he tells himself as Shaw kisses him again. If he didn't want it, he wouldn't kiss back, wouldn't go boneless and compliant when Shaw kneels astride him and orders Erik to take his cock out. If he didn't want it, he wouldn't crane his head up to suck the head of Shaw's cock between his lips. He'd fight Shaw's fingers tangled in his hair, keeping him still so Shaw can fuck his face if he wants, and he wouldn't try to make this as good for Shaw as he can, doing everything he can think of to show Shaw how much he wants to be here, being good.

His mind blurs and fades into the rhythm of sucking and moaning when Shaw lets him get air enough to do it, and soon enough -- not soon enough -- Shaw is coming, pulling out of Erik's mouth so he can come across Erik's face and neck and the collar of his Hugo Boss shirt. Erik stares up at Shaw through thin, sticky ropes of semen, Shaw's face shadowed and indistinct, and can't decide whether, wanting or not, he feels hatred or despair.

At the end of Erik's second year at Berkeley, with the California summer starting slowly, Erik goes running. It's as much to work out post-semester energy as it is a chance to escape from the clamor of the caterers and event staff who have taken over the downstairs and the back lawn. Shaw, preoccupied with moving some of the more valuable antiques out of harm's way, barely acknowledges Erik's departure; he's bemused by Erik's dedication to such a simple, mechanical pastime but permits it, if only because it keeps Erik in trim and he has another way to deck Erik out.

Erik stretches around the corner from the house and, once his blood is flowing, breaks into a slow jog, warming into the pace and letting his mind fall into sync with his pounding feet. He can't find the rhythm easily today, thoughts of tonight looming, and he's aware of the sun bright on his bare shoulders, the summer breeze brushing the exposed length of his thighs and the two women across the street pushing strollers and watching him.

Susannah Yale and Veronica Wilshire, Erik's memory of his black book provides, wives of Harvey Yale and Nathan Wilshire, respectively. Living in Shaw's house for four years of graduate school didn't prevent Shaw from keeping him locked away from neighborly gazes until Erik was more appropriately graduated, at which point bringing Erik around to all the neighborhood parties and cook-outs, wearing designer clothes on Shaw's arm, Shaw saying former student to describe him only elicited amused smiles and knowing looks. Not the disapproval it might have received just a few months earlier.

He lifts his hand to wave at the two women and they pause on the street corner, waiting for Erik to run across. There's no use now in just darting past: everything can be and is the subject of gossip in this place, and there's nothing for it but to begrudgingly press the pause button on his Garmin and let them draw him in, spiders at the center of their rumor-web.

"Where have you been, Erik?" Susannah says as soon as he's in earshot, body turning toward him as if to welcome him into their circle, oblivious that he'd rather just break through it. "It's been weeks. We missed you at Eleanor's garden party."

Garden party -- Erik casts around in his mind, trying to remember. That was in May. Typically the end of semester rush would be no excuse, as Shaw expects Erik to maintain a social circle with the local wives no matter what else he might have going on, but that particular day he had a bruise high on his neck and was able to beg off.

That Erik was so quickly met, appraised, and filed as 'the woman' in his and Shaw's relationship by their entirely-heterosexual neighbors shouldn't at all be surprising. That doesn't mean Erik has to like
“I know,” he says, the note of apology flowing easily with his words, polite charm and old and well- worn rhythm. “I heard I missed quite a show.”

“You wouldn’t believe it even if you’d been there,” Veronica says, leaning over her stroller to fiddle with her baby’s pacifier, trying to fit it in a reluctant mouth. “We’ve all seen Sophie drunk, but not like this.”

Sophie Poynter, likely drunk for a very good reason. Her husband’s an architect, fucking the secretary when he isn’t busy designing buildings that offend Erik down to his very bones. As far as he can tell, Sophie copes with him by mixing drinks and pills, her anger mixing with the alcohol in a terrible alchemy that’s led to pitying gossip and condescension. It’s hard not to be drawn into it, even when trying to keep himself apart; Susannah and Veronica, along with all the other neighborhood wives, have adopted Erik as one of their own, an initiate into the mysteries of upper-class femininity even if he is a novelty, the token gay man who’s supposed to be better at being a woman than they are.

"I hope she got home without any trouble," Erik says neutrally. He can’t imagine Martin Poynter was there; he usually stays away, busy with the secretary.

"Oh yes," Veronica says after a moment, as if she can’t quite recall what happened. "She’s giving a charity ball down at the club, part of the Gold Cup weekend. Will you and Sebastian be coming?"

Erik tries to think of anything he wants to see less than a polo match, anything he wants to do less than wander around in the sun, holding Shaw’s hand in one of his and a flute of champagne in another. Susannah says, smile all whitened teeth and expensive lipstick, "I’m sure you need the break after the end of term. And you should come to coffee with us sometime. Veronica’s redoing her living room."

"You should," Veronica says with the kind of earnestness Erik doesn’t trust. What they want is what they think gay men like talking about, clothes and interior design and What Men Want, bedroom secrets they think more about than Erik does. He wonders what they’d do if he told them what Shaw likes best is to listen to Erik’s bones groan under his fingers while he fucks him raw. Veronica sighs as the baby spits its pacifier out. "Honestly. Be glad you don’t have kids, Erik. Though have you ever thought of adopting? Our church pastor knows a group in Ethiopia and Vietnam -- "

"No," Erik says. The thought of Shaw with a child makes his blood run cold, the tension locking him up again. "I mean, not until after I’ve got tenure and everything’s settled." After he’s dead. "I should get going."

Susannah flaps her hand in his direction. “Yes, yes, go on. Don’t be late for your party tonight.”

Erik forces a smile before he heads off, running over his planned pace until he can get well out of their sight and turn off the street onto one of the walking trails. It’s shaded there, the trees shadowing the asphalt except for where the light shines between the leaves in dappled patches, warm on the back of his neck and getting warmer as he goes on.

This is one of the few real ways Erik can escape Shaw. Not that he needs to … escape, per se. But he needs the fresh air sometimes, being out from under Shaw’s watchful gaze and doing something that’s just for him, that only he understands. It’s easy to lose track of time and pretend he could eat up whole years like this. Years until what, he doesn’t know. There’s no finish line to any of this. Just that vanishing horizon, always perpetually far away: mid-career review, then tenure, and Erik will have a permanent position at Berkeley. Permanently here. Maybe then Shaw will want that kid after
all. Erik’ll have to raise it, and keep it out from under Shaw’s feet. Eventually he’ll get old and Shaw will stay the same, mutation keeping him young. Eventually Shaw might tire of him, when Erik’s decrepit and unattractive, and send him off to a home somewhere.

Sometimes it surprises Erik to remember that other, unmarried couples break up. That without a ring, there’s every opportunity to simply … step aside. Erik wouldn’t even know how to go about making Shaw tire of him or grow frustrated enough to end things. He’d probably sooner kill Erik than see him walk away.

He manages to get in eight miles before the time tells him he needs to get home if he plans to shower and change before the first of their guests arrive. Returning is always the worst part, dread getting heavier in his stomach with every stride forward.

Today’s path takes him uphill, the road curving along the gentler part of the slope. Somewhere not far away, the Pacific rumbles at the bottom of the cliffs; Erik can’t hear it. Closer in, a lawnmower roars and devours the grass under it, more neighbors call his name and wave, friendly and speculating. Erik waves back and runs on.

Arriving home drops the adrenaline out from under him and the unsteadiness in his legs doesn’t have anything to do with oxygen depletion. At least Shaw is off somewhere, tyrannizing the catering staff so Erik can come down in peace and quiet and try to remember that it’s pointless to think about leaving.

Shaw’s left his clothes for the afternoon and evening on the bed, trim-cut and polished as always, the barest shade on the right side of appropriate. A note in Shaw’s crisp handwriting is on the bathroom mirror: Don’t forget to shave, dear boy. Erik frowns at it as he strips, abandoning his sweaty singlet and shorts to the hamper. The constellation of bruises across his body doesn’t particularly bother him beyond him worrying if any of them were visible when his shorts hiked up as he ran.

None of them are visible once he’s dressed, collared shirt tucked in neatly and sleeves rolled up, watch to hide the bruise on his left wrist. I’d get you bespoke if I could bear to have any other man’s hands on you, Shaw had said when he’d given Erik this outfit. Erik feels like a polished, prize show dog or horse sometimes; he reminds himself he likes it. Shaw knows what it takes to look good, how much people value appearances.

Erik shaves obediently, and then spends five minutes with his hair, parting and reparting it until the line is straight and flawless and his hair is combed without a strand out of place. Even he knows he looks good, when he examines himself in the mirror afterward. But it doesn’t give him the pleasure it once did, so Erik turns away after a moment and goes downstairs.

Shaw finds him there, emerging out of the study in a cream-colored jacket, the kind of garment Erik’s rebellious side immediately determines to spill red wine on sometime tonight. Shaw’s gaze darts down Erik’s body, checking to be sure he looks appropriate no doubt, before he reaches to slide a hand round to the small of Erik’s back and draw him close. “They’ll be here any minute now,” Shaw says, anticipation ripe in his tone. He touches Erik’s cheek, as if assessing the quality of his shave, which must be at standard as Shaw says nothing on the subject.

Sure enough, the bell rings a minute later and Shaw lets Erik go with instructions to wait in the drawing room, there’s a good boy; Erik retreats on command and wonders if he ought to reward himself with a truffle from one of the tables, embrace his own conditioning procedure. He listens to the noise of Shaw greeting the newcomers in the foyer, the muffled voices and steps on the marble floors, Shaw having a hired man take hats.

Greg Clark, Erik guesses, standing there with his hands clasped behind his back and his posture
perfect, ready to be displayed. Greg Clark, closely followed by Eileen Patel.

He guesses right. Easy to fall into casual behavior just before they enter the drawing room, pretend to have been collecting cheese and prosciutto on a cracker for himself like another guest rather than co-host -- as far as Erik’s aware Shaw’s never confirmed or denied if they’re together, whether Erik lives here, to any of Erik’s old professors from Stanford, but sometimes Erik has to wonder if it isn’t obvious. Especially now, when his roles as Shaw’s lover and Shaw’s former student fall into direct, and public, conflict.

"Here already!" Eileen laughs. She pats Erik on the forearm and surveys the table. She'd taught Erik's NSP seminar; she'd stayed friendly with him, a distant, maternal sort of figure, for his five years at Stanford. "How is Berkeley treating you?"

"It's done, for the summer," Erik says smoothly. He steps aside so she can reach the asparagus spears.

"It certainly looks like it's treating you well." Eileen smiles near-sighted at him, her glasses thick enough to make it seem as if she's looking somewhere just beyond Erik's left cheekbone. "Tenure track can be an adjustment, but you've always handled those transitions well."

Greg comes in with Mohinder Sharma and a brace of Shaw's Berkeley friends, two professors at the med school whom Erik's only met in passing. They both give him inquisitive looks, trying to fit him into this place before they remember that Erik was Shaw's student not so long ago. *Prize student*, Erik thinks he sees in the expression of one of them, speculative and measuring as she turns to speak with Eileen.

"It's good you have a mentor who wants to be sure you can keep networking," Eileen says once the room is full of bodies and voices. Shaw is speaking with Whitlock and Dr. Papadakis, and only occasionally glancing over at Erik. "It's easy to get too wrapped up in your new responsibilities that you forget there's a life outside committee meetings."

He makes a noncommittal noise, studying his empty plate. "They've been good about restricting my committee assignments," he says. "I've been able to concentrate on my work."

"Still," Eileen says. She pauses and turns towards him slightly, peering up at him with those large, unnerving dark eyes. "If you need any advice, anything at all, you'll ask me. Yes?"

“Of course,” Erik says unhesitantly, although something about the way she says it makes him uncomfortable in a way he can’t pinpoint. He smiles to cover it up and takes a sip of his wine. Perhaps he doesn’t cover it well enough, though, because after a moment she says, “I think I saw some kind of set-up in the backyard when I came in -- am I right?"


“Come on, let’s go for a walk,” she says, and reaches up to tug on the back of his elbow so he has no choice but to let her guide him between the bodies crammed into this room. Shaw catches his eye as Erik approaches the door, but if he wanted Erik to stay in his sight all evening, Erik thinks, he should have said so. And there’s no way of escaping Eileen once he’s committed to following, so he tries to forget about Shaw in favor of trailing after her through the labyrinthine halls of Shaw’s -- their -- house, out onto the back patio.

There are several more tables of food here, a string quartet still setting up at the gazebo and fairy lights strung through the trellises overhead. It’d be beautiful if it weren’t already full of other memories -- bittersweet, now, remembering how self-satisfied and flattered Erik had felt climbing out
of the pool to sun himself on the flat stones, feeling Shaw’s eyes on him and relishing the attention, hoping to keep it. Only six years ago, now, but it feels like it happened to someone else.

Eileen steals herself a glass of champagne from a passing server and hums out an appreciative noise, looking around at the decorations as Erik falls into step at her side. “Sebastian always did have an eye for aesthetics, didn’t he?” she says.

You have no idea, Erik wants to say. Doesn’t say.

Instead, he says, "Aesthetics are part of reality," aware that he still sounds like a fawning graduate student.

"Eh," Eileen says, see-sawing one hand so her wine sloshes precariously. It doesn't spill. "Perhaps my philosophical commitments are less aesthetically oriented than Sebastian's. Or perhaps I find it a little tiresome, to be honest." She gives him a sly, conspiratorial look. "I trust you won't tell him I said that."

Conspiracy is dangerous, but Erik says, "I promise."

Something like confirmation flickers in Eileen's eyes before she turns her attention to the buffet, all of it expensive and all of it unappetizing -- and strangely pedestrian, next to the diet Erik's used to now. Nearby, the band shifts into another song, a lazy, winding sonata meant for the late afternoon and soft conversation.

"I've always found mathematical formulas quite beautiful," Eileen says at last. She's not really looking at Erik, in a way that suggests she's trying not to press her point. "But that beauty is unforced, natural; it doesn't permit artifice. All this," she waves a hand at the pool, the band, the tables of food, "attests to the reality that Sebastian has money and taste, but little beyond that."

Despite his determination otherwise, her words spark something deep in Erik, something that's been asleep for almost seven years.

"Stature," Erik says, before he can think better of it.

"He told me once there’s no point in money without power."

It sounds like a shallow, quippy maxim, but at the time, Shaw had meant it as a threat. Erik looks at the drama playing out all around them: the music, the caterers, the disgusting ostentatiousness of it all, and the bitterness he tastes in the back of his throat is oddly gratifying. He’d forgotten he could even feel this way: that he could look at anything of Shaw’s and feel irritation instead of that dull sludge of resignation he’s so used to.

Beside him, Eileen gives him an appraising look, weak gaze seeking out something indeterminate in Erik’s expression; it’s impossible to know if she finds it. “Yes,” she says after a moment. “I imagine he would think that. They’re very much the same thing.”

Others are filtering out into the yard now; Erik can feel their eyes on them. He wonders how many of them know what he’s starting to think Eileen almost certainly does. If they look at him playing the part and know it’s precisely that -- if they think he’s pathetic, letting himself be taken in and controlled like this. If they don’t need visible bruises to see where Shaw’s hands have been on him, and if they know now, if they knew then, if they knew when Erik was twenty-two and young and still had a chance at stopping this before it went too far, and they did nothing about it.

Reckless -- or maybe not, maybe Erik’s just desperate to feel like he’s done something to struggle against the tide after so many years of complacency -- Erik looks back to Eileen and says, “You
should ask him his opinion about Greek aesthetics sometime. We had that discussion back when I was a student; it was -- most illuminating."

"I'll be sure to," Eileen says, her thin mouth drawn tight. Behind her lenses, her gaze roves uncertainly across the gathering, looking for people she knows. "And remember what I said, Erik: any time you want to talk about neural processing, please let me know."

She has to be senior enough that she'd be safe from Shaw's influence. Although Eileen doesn't have Shaw's list of prizes (Erik wonders, bitterly, if he should be included on that list), she has tenure and near-universal respect among the researchers Erik knows who know that he worked with her. But... Erik watches Shaw talking to two people whose names he doesn't know, all bright, sharp amusement and laughter as one of them says something. He's already underestimated how much power Shaw has and his willingness to wield it; he can't do that again.

Still, possibilities -- strangers, after two years -- flicker around him like moths as he endures the party and the silent scrutiny of the guests. Have they always looked at him this way, that swift dart of eyes up and down his body, assessing the fit of his clothes, the cut, far too good even for a graduate student who'd found his style at thrift shops? Had they read the line of his body as sculpted to attract a specific gaze and, once attracted, keep it? Greg and Mohinder, like Eileen, have to be wondering what Erik was doing here when he'd had a reputation for arriving at functions late or leaving early -- and, come to think of it, were the only times he'd been punctual and stayed through to the end the times when Shaw had hosted?

The little food Erik's managed to eat sours in his stomach along with the wine. Unfortunately, just as Erik's contemplating escaping upstairs to peace and quiet, even if it courts Shaw's displeasure, Shaw-- speak of the devil and he appears -- manifests at Erik's elbow, face drawn in concern and determination both.

"Ah, Erik, you've been hiding," Shaw says reprovingly, as if Erik hasn't been standing in plain daylight for ten minutes. "Come with me; there are some visiting faculty I would very much like you to meet. Maret and... hm, Gerson, I believe. From the Sorbonne." Shaw's accent drips like dead roses, cloying. "You can talk to them en français and impress them with that delightful accent of yours."

It's a command performance, but Erik bristles against the assumption he'll jump through Shaw's hoops.

Still, he goes. And, because his career and reputation are on the line, he's perfect: perfectly polite, perfectly entertaining, even though Erik finds it infuriatingly embarrassing when Shaw does actively urge him to switch to French and then takes great pleasure in pointing out the mistakes Erik makes in pronunciation whenever his native German accent leaks through.

At least Maret and Gerson don't know him. They can't guess at his history, they have no way of knowing how disgusting he is, chasing after his adviser, or how pathetic, for being a grown man now and still unable to make himself leave.

At one point -- a test, perhaps -- someone makes a joke and Shaw laughs and touches Erik’s shoulder, a gesture that looks innocent but is laden with such power that the pain nearly blurs out Erik’s vision entirely, his breath catching in his throat and heat flooding his flesh even when Shaw’s hand withdraws, throbbing in its wake. This, at last -- this is too much, and Erik feels his façade fracture, Shaw’s Erik vanishing with the retreating dark spots in his gaze.

“Excuse me,” Erik says, setting down his wine and giving the two visiting professors a charming smile even if he doesn’t give an excuse as he turns away, pretending not to hear Shaw’s voice calling
out in faux concern to ask if he’s all right, walking quickly past the caterers and their white suits, Mohinder and Greg, Eileen catching his eye over the shoulder of the departmental secretary.

And then he’s inside, his own footsteps ringing off the high ceilings and his heart beating in his throat, hyperaware of his own skin and the shift of his clothing against it as he turns to the stairs and darts up two steps at a time. He doesn’t breathe properly until he’s shut away in the bedroom with the latch melted behind him, shut off from all the voices he can still hear downstairs and outside, where no one can see Erik drag shaking fingers back through his hair, mussing it and sagging against the door.

Of course, he pays for the lock and the ruined door once Shaw knocks it off its hinges after all the guests are gone and Erik's had hours to spend in caged and angry, frightened silence. He tells himself he isn't frightened despite the hitch and race in his heartbeat every time a footstep sounds too loud or too close, or when Shaw's watch strays close to the stairs. When Shaw presses his face hard against the bedroom wall so Erik can taste every damp breath, moldy with stale wine, he fights to hold onto the anger as it tries to slip away.

"You made things awkward downstairs, earlier," Shaw says calmly, straightening his cuffs. Erik pants for breath and imagines the bruises rising on his neck. "I should have thought you would know by now, that the niceties must be preserved at all costs -- even if that cost is our own discomfort."

"It hurt," Erik rasps. He tells himself it's defiance. "You fucking almost broke my -- "

"Hush," Shaw croons. Erik catches the flinch too late; he shrinks away from Shaw's touch, animal certainty that pain is going to follow. It doesn't, but the caress over Erik's cheek is just as terrifying. "You're overwrought, Erik; I barely touched you. Why would I do such a thing in front of our colleagues, after all?"

"You know full well why you would," Erik tells him.

Shaw's fingers close around the end of his nose, squeezing tight. Erik frantically sucks in air through his mouth, hearing the rattle in his trachea. "You're projecting, darling boy," Shaw says calmly while Erik struggles. "I would never disgrace my prize student so publicly."

"But privately’s different," Erik retorts; it comes out snide and nasal like this, and Shaw releases his nose, though the abrupt absence of any sort of pain is nearly as bad as the thing itself, Erik left taut and anxious waiting for the next blow.

"You disgrace yourself," Shaw states, lips turning into a disapproving frown. "I have given everything to you, Erik: a position in my lab, authorship on papers, the job you're in and the clothes on your back. Perhaps that is my obligation as your tutor -- but if so, your obligation in turn is simple. Do -- not -- embarrass me."

At last it comes, those final words punctuated by Shaw’s hand on his side like a loving touch, and his thumb driving in between Erik’s ribs. “Stop,” Erik gasps out, the word tearing from his lungs when he feels his ribs bend beneath the pressure, half-certain they’re going to snap. “This,” Erik says, grasping onto Shaw’s wrist, digging his nails in and not caring Shaw barely feels it, “stop this.”

He regrets it as soon as he’s said it, as soon as he sees the cold smile curve Shaw’s mouth, looking into the staggering emptiness of Shaw’s flat eyes just before Shaw says, “My dear child ... you want me to hurt you, you don’t want me to hurt you -- however am I expected to keep up?”

Shaw pushes harder, until there’s buzzing in Erik’s ears and his knees buckle; he’d fall if not for the way Shaw catches him with a steadying hand on his hip, leaving Erik held gracelessly in his arms
like a broken marionette doll, limbs awkward and unable to hold himself up. Pain chases away the last dregs of anger, Erik’s mind throbbing with it as Shaw turns a dry kiss to his temple and holds him close, petting Erik’s flank.

“There now,” he murmurs, “that’s better.”

It’s not better. The pain's woken something up, shaken it loose inside him. The part of Erik that is his own drifts, detached, and watches Shaw as he shepherds Shaw's-Erik to bed, urging him to lie down with soft words that sink in sweet and turn to poison the longer Erik lies there. Shaw undresses him - there’s no he lets Shaw undress him about it; Shaw will do what he wills -- and Erik stares at the ceiling.

"Don't sulk," Shaw says indulgently. "Miscommunications are bound to happen, Erik."

Then he'll communicate more clearly, Erik decides. He can't leave (no, he won't leave; there's a difference), but he can push against those shifting boundaries Shaw sets for him. He'll see, Erik decides, that Erik does have the ability to make his own choices, to say, unequivocally, you can't control me when I don't want you to.

He goes out the next night with a couple of his old friends from Stanford, one staying for a postdoc the other switching track to med school. Adnan and Kara give him nearly identical mystified looks when they meet at The Refuge -- a place Shaw would never go, too full of students and lacking in expensive whiskey -- and Erik shrugs. "It's been a long time since I've been out."

"Try forever," Adnan says. "We haven't seen you since you finished."

"Since before," Kara says. Which is true; Erik can't remember the last time he's seen any of his friends socially in any place other than Shaw's. "What have you been up to?"

"Work." Erik orders beers for all of them and turns his phone off before Shaw can call to demand to know where he is.

Four beers later, he considers shredding his phone to pieces. Two beers after that, Adnan and Kara tap out, Adnan with concern that no amount of alcohol can disguise.

"Can I call anyone for you?" Adnan asks. He shoots a skeptical look at Erik's phone. "Your boyfriend?"

There's four numbers on Erik's phone: the lab manager, the department admin, his best RA's, and Shaw's.

"No," Erik says. His voice sounds like it doesn’t belong to him -- he hasn’t been this drunk in a long time.

“All right,” Adnan says reluctantly, reaching out to pat Erik on the shoulder; it hits right over the filthy bruise Shaw left last night, and Erik only just refrains from wincing. “I’ll see you around then, man.”

Erik watches them go and stays long enough to finish his beer, setting the glass down too roughly when he’s done and leaving a few ones on the table before he heads back to the bar. It’s the time of night when he starts to notice a trend among the clientele still hanging around, namely that they’re there for a reason and are feeling a little flexible on standards. Erik’s gaydar is only middle of the road, but it works well enough for him to identify a few prospects, and he ends up going home with Jeff, a CS grad student at Stanford with a swimmer’s build and a nice sense of how to dress.
He doesn't try to make himself forget about Shaw. He can’t forget about him -- he’s present in every kiss, in the slide of hands over bare skin and the small choices Erik makes when he takes off his shirt, when he unbuttons a fly, when he gets down on his knees and puts a cock in his mouth. That he keeps expecting it to hurt adds fuel to the anger already burning in his chest, building on old resentment. Erik tries as hard for Jeff as he ever did for Shaw and wishes he could try even harder, that he could give Jeff more simply to say he did more, went further, with this stranger than he ever did with the man who’s supposed to be his partner, only he can’t because he already gave, gives, Shaw everything he has.

He stays as late as he can, watching the clock tick past three, four in the morning, wishing he could convince himself to fall asleep and stay until sunlight drew him back to his feet and back where he belongs. But all the self-righteous anger in the world won’t hold at bay the gnawing anxiety that starts up in Erik’s bones from the moment they’ve both come and are lying sated on Jeff’s bed, an anxiety that builds the longer he stays here and has time to think about what will be waiting for him an hour, two hours in his future, knowing if he turned on his phone he’d see it foreshadowed on the screen, inevitable.

"I need to go," he tells Jeff.

"You don’t have to," Jeff tries. He hitches himself onto on his elbows, peering down at Erik uncertainly. His hair is tousled and sweaty, he’s got freckles on his shoulders and small imperfections, a scar from what Jeff had told him happened when he'd fallen off his bicycle in the fourth grade. His body is lived-in and practical and beautiful, and it can't hurt Erik, which seems to be the most important thing.

"No, I do." Erik levers himself up and twists to get his feet on the floor. He knows Jeff sees the bruises from the soft hiss.

"Jesus," Jeff mutters. "Fuck. What happened to you?"

"Trail accident," Erik says, the lie old and comfortable. He grabs his shirt and yanks it on before Jeff can look anymore. With a tinge of resignation, though it's too numb, almost, to even be that, he thinks that he'll have a few more to add to the collection.

He should be angry at Jeff's obvious skepticism; a one-night stand shouldn't care so much about a guy he's never going to see again. Eileen shouldn't care about a student she'd had for one seminar. Adnan and Kara shouldn't care, no one should. They're all hypothesizing about him, spinning those hypotheses into gossip and pity, and he won't have it, Erik decides. Shaw is bad enough; condescension cuts Erik's wounds open and rubs salt in them.

*I'm choosing this*, he thinks. His head aches fiercely with the alcohol and his mouth tastes of old beer and come and Jeff’s skin. *I'm choosing this because the alternative is worse*. If he chooses this, he decides, no one should pity him; you can't feel sorry for people for the choices they make, only when those people can't make choices. It's a piece of philosophy, Erik decides, that would make Shaw proud.

The bitterness and anger sustain him on the way home, and he's so past caring that when Shaw rises to his feet in the darkness of the living room, a patiently ominous "Erik, where have you been?" sliding like oil through the silence, Erik laughs at him.

If this were a film, Erik thinks as Shaw moves closer, the shadows shifting eerily across his face, Erik would be screaming at his own character for being so damn stupid. But it’s Erik’s life, and Erik is fucking tired of -- everything. He doesn’t want to be *safe*. 
Shaw stops a half-step away, close enough Erik can see the striations in his eyes even in this dim light. His hand twists in Erik’s hair and drags Erik’s head forward for Shaw to inhale near his crown, breathing in the scent of Erik’s sins as Erik stands there and just lets him, wanting Shaw to be angry. **Wanting him** to react.

“You smell like alcohol,” Shaw says. He doesn’t let Erik go, his grip tightening slightly and drawing Erik’s hair taut against his scalp, near-painful. “I won’t ask you a second time, Erik.”

There’s a warning laced through those words, brittle and sharp. Maybe he’s still drunk -- Erik’s head spins, strange and giddy as if he has nothing to lose.

“It doesn’t matter what I say,” Erik tells him. “You’re going to punish me no matter what.” He meets Shaw’s gaze again, grinning belligerently, skating on that high and unable to stop himself now, gone too far and too fast. It’s easy in this darkness, where he can’t tune into the slightest shifts in Shaw’s expression, can’t see the blow before it comes.

Shaw releases his hair, but there’s no chance to dart away before Shaw grasps onto his face instead, his long fingers covering Erik’s features and digging in at his brow, his temples, Erik making a sharp sound of shock as Shaw uses that grip to force him back, tripping over his own feet before his back slams against the wall -- hard enough it knocks a mirror loose and sends frame and glass crashing to the floor, shattered shards scattering underfoot. Erik’s power, reactive, yanks at Shaw’s wristwatch and cufflinks as if to pull him back, but he only ends up ruining the metal against Shaw’s immovable object.

One of Shaw’s fingers pushes into Erik’s mouth, hooking behind his teeth and prising it open, holding him there when Shaw’s tongue licks inside him, Erik gagging at the intrusion and Shaw’s other fingers pressing harder against his skull. “You taste like him,” Shaw murmurs when his tongue withdraws and Erik can’t breathe, choking on Shaw’s claustrophobic closeness, Shaw’s other hand pinning Erik’s wrist up against the wall and crushing it there, Erik’s muscles and tendons and bone straining against the pressure.

"Was he good?" Shaw asks. He shakes Erik like a cat shaking a mouse, until Erik goes cross-eyed. "Well?"

"Yes," Erik says, the answer slurred around Shaw's intruding fingers. He thinks about biting, not that it'll do more than break his teeth, so he grins instead. "I got to come this time."

Shaw’s eyes are reptilian, dark and glossy in the shadows; his smile has fangs. "I hope you enjoyed yourself then."

"Very much," Erik says, and chokes around Shaw's fingers as they press back past his gag reflex. He coughs and drools, and it's a fight to keep himself from vomiting -- and when he thinks he'll black out or vomit anyway, just at the vision-blurring edge of it, Shaw pulls out and wipes his fingers fastidiously on Erik's shirt while Erik wheezes and is held up only by the hand on his wrist.

"We're going to go upstairs now," Shaw says, still imperturbable, that joke of an accent polished flawlessly like a glass jewel. "We're going upstairs," his grip tightens and he yanks Erik away from the wall, sidesteps and twists so Erik's arm is jacked up behind his back, shoulder and arm straining at the point of dislocation, "and we'll see if you'll come again tonight."

The bedroom is quiet, everything perfectly made. Shaw propels Erik into it, letting him go so the momentum carries Erik forward in a graceless stumble he has to break against the edge of the bed. He turns, power at the ready, fully prepared to rip the house apart if he has to -- it's full of metal; he'll destroy everything, down to the ancient iron artifacts in Shaw's display cases, down to the copper
goddamn pipes -- when he catches the sliver of Shaw's grin in the darkness.

"Since you're so angry," Shaw says pleasantly, adjusting his tie so it sits properly beneath his Adam's apple, "I thought perhaps, before we begin, you could... exorcise some of that rage of yours." When Erik stares at him in bewilderment, every atom in his body trembling, Shaw adds, "Come now, Erik, you've clearly been dying to hit me all night. Here's your chance."

He gestures to his face, his body. "Well? You didn't hesitate earlier."

It's a trick -- it's a trick, it's perfectly fucking transparent, from the tilt of Shaw's head to the smirk on his mouth, Erik's own sheer ineffectiveness shuddering through his body and dropping like a heavy stone into the stormy ocean of his own fury. Erik knows exactly how this ends, but he punches Shaw anyway, hitting Shaw in the face with the full force of his body weight behind it. He feels the odd tremor as Shaw absorbs that energy, and stands there, breathless and shaking after, as Shaw turns back to look at him and says, "Feel better, darling?"

Punishment swiftly follows the crime: Shaw reaches out and taps Erik's collarbone. The full strength of Erik's own blow rattles back into his own body, enhanced and magnified by Shaw's mutation, and Erik hears the bone snap even over his own grotesque sob as its agony shoots up his neck and down his arm, white electricity searing deep into his marrow.

He can't react with that pain still thrust through his shoulder, impaling him like a butterfly on velvet - - can't do anything to defend himself when Shaw pushes him back again, forcing him back onto the bed and seeming not to notice the way Erik screams when he falls against the mattress, the impact like shattering his collarbone all over again.

"You brought this on yourself," Shaw tells him, bearing down over him with his arms on either side of Erik's body, blocking him in. He licks the tears from Erik's cheeks, rocking his hips down against Erik's so Erik can feel that he's hard, that this turns him on. Heat pulses out from Erik's shoulder, spreading in quick waves through his entire body, bright and unbearable.

"Remember that you wanted this." Shaw reaches between them to undo his trousers; his tie, secured in its clip, is still proper, the tail of silk brushing Erik's belly. "You're getting exactly what you wanted, my dear, dear boy."

How it can be so quiet when Shaw's talking, when Erik can hear the rush of blood and breath in his head, he doesn't know. His trousers tear (those are eight hundred dollars Erik thinks vaguely) and Shaw kicks his knees apart, a disgusted noise when he rips Erik's damp boxers off and sees the mess of dried spit and come on his thighs and cock. The silence between them is venomous, Shaw still as a predator.

"You won't need to worry about coming tonight," he says tranquilly. Erik's bones and ligaments creak as Shaw shoves his knees up to his chest, ten points of unbearable pressure when Shaw squeezes them. "Do you ever want to run again, Erik? I could hobble you, if I wanted."

"Please," Erik says. The weight on his chest is nearly unbearable; worse is the knowledge that Shaw could kill him.

"So strong, and yet," Shaw sighs regretfully. He flips Erik over, hands cruel on Erik's hips to twist him, and then Shaw's back on him again, between Erik's spread thighs, forearm driven down on his neck. Erik struggles instinctively and manages, as his vision darkens, to land a few blows that are increasingly feeble. Shaw sighs again, the punches and kicks like gnats. "And yet."

*I'm not your fucking student anymore,* Erik wants to say, but he already knows how Shaw would
respond, can hear the slow Southern drawl of his voice say, *But you are mine.* The pressure when Shaw’s cockhead pushes up against his hole hurts, but not as badly as Erik’s collarbone, and not as bad as it would if Erik hadn’t been well and truly fucked already this night. Even so, the first forward thrust is so powerful it jostles Erik several inches up the bed and forces a cry out of him, some part of Erik sickly certain Shaw’s ripped him from the inside out, his legs shaking and his guts gone to water.

Shaw groans, low and throaty, as if to make sure Erik knows just how much he enjoys this, that he can have his cock hard and throbbing in Erik’s ass even as Erik sobs and cringes beneath him, suffocating on the wet duvet pressed against his face as Shaw starts fucking into him. Each forward shove of Shaw’s cock sends another shot of pain lancing through his broken clavicle and Erik wonders if Shaw plans to break anything else before the night is over, if all this is the crescendo before one horrible finale, if Erik will even have time to see it coming before Shaw crushes the life out of him.

“You’re a child, Erik,” Shaw’s voice says against his ear, Shaw’s breath hot and acrid on the back of his neck. “Children should know their place.”

And he makes it clear to Erik precisely where Erik’s place is, one hand braced against the back of his injured shoulder and pressing down whenever Erik goes too silent, chasing another cry out of him and a hum of pleasure from Shaw. Already Erik feels raw inside, like Shaw’s cock is pistoning forward against an open wound.

From where he’s lying, if he has his eyes open -- which he does; it seems to help, at least he’s not trapped in darkness -- he can see a corner of the window that looks out over the back lawns and the distant golf course. Through the window is the faint, persistent glow of the moon and the light pollution drifting up from the city. Every now and then Erik studies the sliver of light and wonders if it's changing, if night is creeping toward day, if Shaw will finish him and leave him here to bleed out.

*Know your place.* His place is here, always here, he knows it with the same knowledge that knows his clavicle is fractured, rocking in its cradle of muscle, with a deep awareness. Knowing doesn’t bring comfort; it rakes through him like claws, weighs on him like Shaw’s body and fills him up.

"My good boy," Shaw says, and kisses the curve of Erik’s ear, teeth threatening to bite. "Always remember, I'm giving you what you wanted."

Erik doesn’t remember Shaw coming, or much more of the night. He's gone numb to everything else except dragging in what breath he can, and the stab of pain when Shaw presses on his fractured collar bone. When one weight vanishes, he needs a moment to realize Shaw’s gotten up, that the cold air on his back is his sweat congealing and that the stickiness between his thighs is blood and old lube. He doesn’t move.

"Listen to me very carefully, Erik," Shaw says. He absently unbuttons his shirt, tossing it in the hamper with a flick of his wrist. "Until I say otherwise, you won’t go anywhere."

Erik doesn’t know if he could go anywhere even if he wanted to. His body feels broken, his weak legs have forgotten how to move. Erik watches out of the corner of cracked eyes as Shaw strips off the rest of his clothes and vanishes into the bathroom to clean Erik’s blood off his cock and brush his teeth, the dull steel taste of his razor as Shaw shaves. Erik thinks about slicing that steel into Shaw’s throat and killing himself. That’s what it would be, after all. It certainly wouldn’t kill Shaw.

He tries to remember being twenty-one and sitting at a table across from Shaw in a candlelit restaurant, talking about Socratic love and edging around the fringes of their own desires. It’s like trying to recall the details of a book he read years ago, hazy and muffled under dust and disuse.
Shaw returns to bed and gets in next to him, drawing the sheets up over Erik’s shivering body. He leaves Erik’s shirt on and reaches a hand to smooth over the curve of Erik’s bare ass instead. Erik closes his eyes so he doesn’t have to see Shaw’s face. He tries to think about nothing, because if he thinks about anything he’ll have to think about this, and the pain in his body, and the sickness in his core. He chooses not to think, he chooses to obey and stay here next to Shaw as the lights shift on the horizon, long past the sun rises over the hills and Shaw departs for work. He doesn’t let Erik up to call in, just makes Erik give him his email password so Shaw can write a letter to Erik’s students telling them he’s ill and class is canceled for the afternoon, signing it with Erik’s own name.

He leaves Erik there, half-naked in bed like an invalid, for three days, coming in to fuck him when he wants and then abandoning Erik again with Shaw’s come drying on his skin and his collarbone starting to heal un-set, a jagged knob pushing up against his skin from the inside. Erik drinks the water Shaw brings him but he doesn’t eat because Shaw doesn’t bring food. He gets up to use the bathroom with Shaw’s permission only to return to how he was, on his stomach, waiting until Shaw has further use of him.

At the dawn of the fourth day, just as time starts to have no meaning, Shaw wakes him up. The waking world has the same unreality as Erik’s dreams, which are jumbles of darkness and exhaustion and looming dread. Shaw’s petting him gently, rubbing at the stiff muscles low on Erik’s back and heedless of dirty, sweat-sticky skin or the bruises and scrapes.

"Now, Erik." Shaw tucks himself against Erik’s side, a thigh over Erik’s to rub against where Erik’s raw and aching. Erik doesn’t bother to flinch away; it’s all the same. "You’ll be a good boy from now on, I’m sure."

He presses a kiss to the back of Erik’s neck. He doesn’t wait for Erik to answer. He doesn’t need to.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

cw: rape/sexual abuse, physical abuse/domestic violence, emotional/psychological abuse, seriously just ... abuse
Example Ten: Attenuation Theory

After the disaster of Friday, Erik's weekend feels like the eye of a hurricane as he waits for Monday, a circle of quiet around him but with storms looming. He spends it at Charles's -- as, he realizes, he's spent quite a few of his weekends -- and works on his prototype and makes arrangements for his summer lab assistants, with Charles quietly in the background. On Saturday afternoon when Erik goes for his run, he comes back to find Charles rattling around the house, idly cleaning, and the look Charles gives him is soft and warm when Erik brushes by him on his way to the kitchen, utterly indecipherable.

Monday finds him walking with Charles from the parking garage to the department. Anxiety chews low in Erik's gut, where it's housed itself since late Sunday and Erik had gotten Moira's email asking to meet with him. He can't remember the last time he was this nervous about anything academy-related, without having the familiar comfort of his anger or determination to fall back on.

"I'll see you after for lunch, if you want," Charles says just before they part ways, Charles to his office and Erik to the main department offices.

"Sure," Erik says as casually as he can. Charles gives him a quietly affirming nod, a brush of something unnameable across the surface of Erik's thoughts, and leaves in his usual unobtrusive way.

Erik wants to hate that, the sense that Charles is treating him with kid gloves, but -- is he? Erik tosses out a few academic press brochures, holds onto his membership renewal for the APA. It's one thing to think he's subject to the care that Charles shows everyone, from trembling freshmen to seasoned grad students; it's another to think that the way Charles looks at him is different from anything Erik remembers experiencing.

"Ah, Erik." Moira, ghosting up beside him; he notices her earrings and bracelet a moment too late. "If you'd like to come in with me?"

He wouldn't, but Erik follows her obediently. He's got his explanations prepared, and his recommendations for himself and Marie, and plans that Moira doesn't know about -- and won't know about -- to talk to Charles and work through Friday on his own.

"How is Marie?" he asks once he's seated and Moira's poured tea for them both.

"She's fine. Chagrined, as you might expect." Moira stirs her tea meditatively. "I can't tell you the substance of our conversation, but I've recommended that she consider taking classes that aren't your seminars. Not," she adds when Erik bristles, "because I believe that you would be inappropriate, or that she would continue to be so, but to spare both of you any awkwardness."

“That seems wise,” Erik says, still tense but forcing himself to lean back in the chair regardless, grasping the armrests and, for now, ignoring the tea Moira pushes across her desk toward him.

“I'm not terribly concerned about how Marie came to conclude she might have a chance with you, sexually,” Moira says, lifting her cup in both hands and holding it up near her face, letting steam waft up from the surface of the brew. “As I understand it, you were perfectly polite and circumspect. I hope this regrettable incident doesn’t scare you off being kind to the undergraduates in future.”

Too late, Erik wants to say, but he keeps his mouth shut in favor of reaching for his own cup just to have something to do with his hands.

“You're concerned about afterward,” Erik predicts and Moira confirms it with a nod, taking a sip of
her tea before she sets it down to look at Erik properly, lacing her fingers together atop her desk.

“I’m well aware mutation can make things more challenging,” she says, “but nonetheless, we expect professors here to regulate their emotions well enough to avoid causing harm to their students -- or the infrastructure.”

Internally Erik winces, knowing already that there’s probably some damage he’ll be expected to cover out of his paycheck, probably pipes -- and that they won’t let him just fix it with his mutation. Paperwork and bureaucracy, of course. Externally, he is unmoved. “My reaction was regrettable,” he says woodenly, holding Moira’s gaze and trying to seem human, apologetic. He is apologetic.

“All of the circumstance, I should not have lost my temper. I am willing to draft a letter of apology to the student if that is required.”

"Not a requirement," Moira says. "There'll be a note in your file -- not disciplinary, but a personnel note with your statement of what happened alongside Marie's. It will be completely confidential and won't be used in future salary or promotion reviews unless another incident happens, in which case it will come into play. I want to support both of you, Erik, but fundamentally even if Marie was inappropriate and initiated, you were the authority figure in this scenario and your response -- regardless of your justification for it -- was excessive."

"Of course," Erik says. He tries to push back the thought that his… his sickness, his wrongness, his perversion as Shaw had said, is going to infect even this and carry forward into the future. He trusts Moira to be circumspect but she won't be chair forever, and Erik knows all too well the insidiousness of gossip, how speculation can run like wildfire in a department.

"If anyone asks you about what happened, tell them it was dealt with," Moira says, as if she's the telepath in the department. She smiles dryly and sips her tea. "Not that I need to tell you how to give unwanted people the brushoff. Just… do it without hitting them over the head with a piece of rebar."

Erik snorts. Despite being baseline, Moira doesn't seem unnerved by mutation or the damage it can cause; she'd been more afraid of the building falling down than Erik and she doesn't seem frightened now.

"That said," Moira says after they've had a moment to drink and Erik starts to wonder if she's dismissing him, "I wanted to be sure if you're all right. Marie has resources in place if she wants to avail herself of them, but we typically don't have those for faculty. I didn't talk to you on Friday because Charles said you needed time to process, but your reaction…” She blows out a breath. "I don't need to be a telepath to know something's up. I won't ask you to talk to me, but I want to be sure you have someone to talk to if you need it."

Erik thinks, instantly, of Charles. "Yes."

“All right, then,” Moira says, and she puts her cup down for the last time, rising out of her chair and cueing Erik to get up as well, straightening the cuffs of his shirt. “I appreciate you taking the time to come and meet with me this morning. Again, please let me know if there’s anything you need.”

There won’t be, but Erik inclines his head toward her all the same, an acknowledgment, before he takes his satchel and leaves her office. Even with the issue handled and set, apparently, behind them, Erik can’t entirely quash the hot sense of shame that keeps trying to well up in his belly, frustrated and embarrassed. It’s the first time Erik’s done anything requiring a note on his record. A small voice in his head wonders if that’s just because, historically, he had Shaw keeping him in line and smoothing over any mishaps with his fingers in all the political pies. If Erik will inevitably fuck up again and get himself fired, or worse.
It’s a useless, anxious line of thought and Erik tries to ignore it as best he can, burying it down deep under the piles of work he has planned for today, experiments and grant-writing and revisions on a manuscript for *Science* all bleeding into one another until finally the rap at his office door pulls him out of the miasma and he realizes -- it’s past noon, and Erik had become so absorbed in keeping himself busy that he forgot all about his lunch plans with Charles.

His joints are stiff and aching as he pushes himself up from his desk and goes to open the door, exposing Charles waiting there with his shirt sleeves rolled up above his elbows and his iPhone loosely held in one hand -- belatedly, guiltily, Erik realizes the buzzing noise at his phone this past fifteen minutes must have been Charles texting him to see if they were still on for lunch.

“Are you hungry?” Charles asks, tilting his head toward the hall. “The Clover food truck’s still here, and I heard they resurrected the panelle sandwich. Unless you’d rather go somewhere we can sit down.”

“Whatever you like,” Erik says, still dazed with his own data, having not entirely task-switched over to social demands.

“Come on then,” Charles says, and he lifts a hand to touch Erik’s upper arm, the gesture casual but startling somehow, unexpected and affectionate. “It’s so warm, it’ll be nice to eat outside.”

*Outside.* Erik follows in Charles's wake, waiting for his brain to adjust to its new trajectory. Charles stays quiet, occasionally nodding to the faculty who've bothered to come in today. A few of them give the two of them curious looks, Erik most of all, but no one tries to say anything. Is that Charles? Erik wonders, oddly grateful if it is.

Charles orders for both of them -- two panelle sandwiches and agua frescas -- and waits while Erik sits on a nearby bench and watches. It's not a particularly thrilling scene, Charles simply standing there under the sun, squinting thoughtfully at the food truck, his hands in his pockets, but it seems significant, important, one of those moments a life finds itself orbiting, an anchor holding it in place.

"I take it your meeting went well," Charles says, offering a sandwich and plastic cup to Erik. the panelle rich and garlicky, with greens and an aioli that has Erik salivating. Hunger crawls up on him all at once and he swallows his answer along with his first mouthful since breakfast.

"It did," he says once he's devoured half his sandwich. "At least, until I find out how much I owe for damages."

Charles winces, but it's playful, inviting Erik to laugh along. He does, and the warmth of Charles's good humor washes over him, sinking into him like the noon sunlight and Erik thinks that, like the sunlight, he could bask in it. It's not approval, it's not benevolence, it's -- Charles, quite unexpectedly, and Erik finds himself dazzled again.

"Although," he adds, before he can sink too far into happiness, "Moira thinks it would be good for me to talk about what happened."

"It would be," Charles says, suddenly serious. He picks at his sandwich, strong fingers uncertain but still delicate as they peel away bits of fried chickpea. "I know there are... there are reasons for that, Erik, but you should -- well, you should at least consider it."

"Not now," Erik says, gratified when Charles dips his head in acknowledgment. "But... tonight, maybe. When we're home."

Charles looks at him, his brows lifting in faint surprise, though at least Charles doesn’t verbalize that.
He just takes another swallow of his drink, the straw gurgling as it sucks up air around the ice, and says, “All right. Whatever you want, Erik.”

He doesn’t comment, either, on Erik’s use of the word home -- not ‘your apartment,’ not even ‘the brownstone.’ Erik isn’t sure himself how long he’s been thinking of it that way, that the place he spends his nights isn’t just where he sleeps but where he lives now, in every way that matters. He doesn’t feel like a guest that evening when they both return to Back Bay, toeing off shoes in the foyer and Erik snagging Charles’ satchel to sling it over his shoulder, carrying it and his own both into the den that’s turned into a functional second office for them both over the past few weeks, strewn with books and paper and pieces of Erik’s metal.

“I’m making tea,” Charles calls from the kitchen; Erik can hear him bustling around in there, the open and shut of cabinets, the warmth of Charles’ skin against the metal pot. “Do you want anything?”

“Just coffee’s fine,” Erik says, setting himself down on the sofa and opening his laptop on his knees, grazing through the new messages in his email inbox without really paying attention to them. It’s hard to pay attention to anything else when he’s so newly fascinated by all of this: how much of the strangeness between him and Charles has eroded away in a matter of months, noticing as if for the first time that Charles feels like an extension of himself in some ways, constantly on the fringes of Erik’s awareness, natural enough that he’s the one person Erik doesn’t feel the need to recluse himself from at times.

Charles emerges in a little while with steaming mugs held in both hands, bending over to set Erik’s coffee -- black, of course -- down on the coaster near his knee before he takes his own spot at the far end of the sofa. Erik notices, too, how Charles gives him those three feet of space even as he doesn’t place himself so far away as to be out of reach. He wonders how he couldn’t have noticed such things before, if Charles has been doing this all along.

They work for a while, Charles making the soft, amused sounds that indicate he's reading his email. Occasionally he tells Erik about them, from an undergrad's last-second plea for a rec letter ("Tell them no," Erik advises; such unprofessionalism shouldn't be encouraged) to bureaucratic incompetence. "APS is at the end of the month," Charles says after a pause.

Erik hums and continues to work, right up until Charles touches his shoulder. "Dinner?" he asks when Erik looks up from the fog of writing. "Dinner and then we should relax tonight. It is summer, after all. We could even go for a walk twice in one day."

"You aren't as amusing as you think," Erik informs him.

"I know," Charles says, indefatigably cheerful. "Come on."

They do go for a walk after dinner (Erik cooks and Charles cleans, another thing Erik's barely noticed). Early summer is peaceful and busy at the same time, families and tourists out enjoying the weather, but the air is tranquil and sleepy with the scent of flowering trees and gardens and grass. Erik idles along next to Charles for a while, studying the tidy ranks of old houses as they file by and, eventually, give way to busy streets and then the crossover to the Esplanade and the river, which is golden and crimson and black, dotted with small boats.

"When Marie came on to me," he says into the silence, "all I could think was that what I'd done with Shaw, I'd do with her."

Charles looks up at him, eyes shut slightly because he's also looking into the sun. "It wouldn't happen."
"All I could think," Erik repeats over Charles’s objections, "was that I was -- " He can't tell Charles what Shaw said to him, not yet, " -- that I had to have done something to encourage her."

"Is that what you think you did with Shaw?" Charles asks, and Erik says, “I know I did. I made the first move. I seduced him. I made a project out of seducing him.” He glances sidelong at Charles, looking for the flit of disgust across Charles’ face, but it isn’t there. Charles looks back at him, silent, and after a moment Erik takes a breath to go on. “Intentionally or not, I must have done something to make her think this behavior was … acceptable.”

Charles hums in acknowledgment, but he says, “You did nothing inappropriate, Erik. Believe me -- when I saw what had happened, I looked. You were kind to her, in a way that -- forgive me -- you usually withhold from students. If she read too much into that, it’s because she’s twenty-two and young and doesn’t know any better.”

That much is certainly true, Erik thinks. He remembers too well the stupid things he got away with when he was twenty-two, decisions he made that echoed throughout the rest of his life. He doesn’t worry, anymore, that he’s just like Shaw. If he were just like Shaw, he would have taken advantage of the opportunity. He wouldn’t have reacted as he did.

“Be that as it may,” Erik says, then says nothing more, letting that part of the conversation taper off into a silence that’s less uncomfortable than it ought to be, Charles’ shoulder brushing Erik’s every few steps and the sunlight already turning the tip of Charles’ nose pink.

“People have to be held accountable for their own actions,” Charles says eventually as they’re walking through a small wild area near the river, tucked out of sight of traffic near the bridge. “That doesn’t apply only to you. It applies to Marie as well. Even Shaw.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Erik says testily.

Charles shrugs. “I think you know it. I’m not sure if you believe it, though.”

Erik shakes his head, trying to shake out what Charles has said, but the words have stuck themselves in deep, barbed, and there’s no getting them out. Charles continues, still quiet and even. "People and their actions aren’t consequences. They don’t follow logically and inexorably, they aren’t mathematical proofs; human behavior isn’t answerable to Newton's third law. There's nothing you did that made Shaw's choices inevitable, or Marie's." With every word his voice strengthens, losing its earnestness and becoming, almost, angry before Charles moderates himself. "You also have a choice in how you respond to her now."

There’s no way to explain to Charles why he's wrong. Yes, people have to be held accountable for their own actions, but that means Erik has to be held accountable for his choice to stay for so long. In the balance of things, he would rather be guilty of consciously making bad decisions than guilty of being victimized; it’s a half-formed thought, but formed enough that he recognizes the misshapen logic of it -- and accepts it anyway.

"You were kind to her," Charles continues after Erik doesn't reply. They turn back towards the brownstone, past crowds of happy, oblivious pedestrians. "That she took it… the way she did doesn’t diminish the fact that you helped her and tried to look after her.” He grins. "Altruistically."

"Shut up," Erik grumbles.

Charles laughs, bright and honest. Erik wonders what would happen if he stopped Charles here, right here on the busy sidewalk, and kissed him, or asked Charles to kiss him. Charles must catch that thought because his laughter fades and he looks up at Erik, intent, but not in the way he looks at Erik
when they're in bed together and Charles is about to take him apart. He's rapt, more than anything, staring at Erik as if seeing him for the first time.

Erik does stop now, daring, and bends his head. Charles's mouth forms one of those delectable o's of surprise, lush and red (so different from Shaw's, thin and pale, and Erik won't think about him now), and finally he leans up and presses that mouth against Erik's, hesitant until Erik opens beneath him. Next to the warm, vibrant pressure of Charles's lips is his telepathy, sifting fingers through Erik's mind, a caress that has Erik relaxing into the kiss, sighing a little until Charles remembers where they are and pulls back.

"That was nice," Charles says softly, almost dazed.

"Only nice?"

Charles returns to himself a little, now; he smiles and says, "Very nice." His cheeks are flushed and his lips a little darker from where Erik's pressed against them, Charles the flustered one for once when Erik lifts a hand and tucks a stray lock of hair behind his ear, feeling Charles shiver a little beneath his touch.

"Come on," Charles says after a beat, and he touches Erik’s wrist then, Charles’ gaze flicking back to Erik’s face as if to check his reaction, Charles darts his hand down lower and laces their fingers together, Charles’ thumb pressing light against the back of Erik’s hand. And Erik, for his part, must be temporarily out of his mind because he allows it, tightening his grasp a little around Charles' palm and letting Charles tug him down the sidewalk again.

Back at the house Charles doesn’t say anything before taking him upstairs, undressing Erik and kissing every inch of skin as it’s revealed, guiding Erik’s hands to his waist so Erik will remember to touch him, to push Charles’ shirt off over his head and feel the heat of flesh against flesh when they go to bed and rock together until climax sweeps over them like a tide.

After, Charles pulls the thin bedsheet up over their hips and leans in against Erik’s chest, spreading one palm against Erik’s sternum so his little finger touches Erik’s nipple and his thumb is over his heart. He’s radiating contentedness, telepathy lax and languid after sex and drawing Erik down into the amber glow of it; Erik can’t be bothered to fight to draw away. He doesn't want to be bothered; he's content in a way that has little to do with Charles's telepathy. Charles's hand on his chest is a weight, but a gentle one.

It's not that he doesn't mind it, it's that he likes it. Erik handles the sensation carefully, studying it as if for the first time. He knows pleasure and enjoyment, he knows with a shudder in his bones what it's like to be touched like this but with inhuman strength. He knows satisfaction, but he doesn't know what it is to want to lie in one place with another body snug but not demanding against his, untainted by Erik wondering what's next, if he was good enough.

The longer he lies here, feeling Charles drift off into a doze, the more he realizes how much he's wrapped up here, nearly all his clothes in the closet, his own workspace downstairs, the routine that has him cook dinner and sit lazily with a glass of wine while Charles cleans -- he's wrapped up and doesn't want to extricate himself.

"Charles." He nudges at Charles's temple, which gets him a sleepy, disoriented grunt and a questioning mental flicker. "Charles."

"I'm awake," Charles mumbles, although he nuzzles somnolently at Erik's chest. "What is it?"

"I've spent exactly six nights at my apartment since the semester began," He hadn't even gone home
when Charles had caught the flu at the end of January, although Charles had told him to stay away. He breathes in deep; he's woolgathering, straying from his purpose. "It's pointless, my spending money on an apartment I never stay in."

Charles's mind sharpens and he looks up, the tension in his body saying he knows what Erik's obliquely proposing.

"I'm going to pay my share of the utilities," Erik informs him. "And you're buying proper cookware."

“If that’s what you want,” Charles says slowly. Too carefully.

"Is it what you want?” Erik probes.

Charles’ mouth tilts up at one corner and he turns his face back in toward Erik’s chest, pressing a kiss just below Erik’s old broken collarbone, the tip of his nose brushing that misshapen knob. “I’d like that very much,” he says, and Erik feels a tension drain out of him at that, his arm around Charles’ shoulders tightening slightly even as he feels his pulse pick up in his chest, beating faster.

“Good,” Erik says, closing his eyes again and breathing in the mixed scent of them, impossible to tell here where Charles’ begins and Erik’s ends. Charles shifts against him again, nudging closer, and Erik drifts off soon after. It’s easy, after all, to fall asleep in one’s own home.

* 

The annual meeting of the Association for Psychological Science is always held in some large, expensive city -- often New York or Los Angeles, and this year it’s Chicago, held at the massive and ostentatious Palmer House hotel near Millennium Park. If the department weren’t paying for them to go Erik would think the massive suite they’re staying in was far too expensive -- but as it is, the department is paying, and their budgets combined resulted in Charles going, perhaps, a little card-happy on the hotel registration page. It’s with their own money that they pay for an additional two nights. Why fly all this way, after all, and not stay the weekend?

“I’m going to text in sick,” Erik says from where he sits at the foot of the magnificent king-sized bed early the first evening, grimacing down at his Google calendar where it’s drawn up on the screen of his phone, the little blue block marked for ‘Stanford dept dinner’ glaring at him from half an hour in the future.

He’s been debating back and forth on the issue since a week before they left -- fifteen minutes ago Erik declared he was going and got dressed, combed his hair, but now that the prospect of seeing Shaw is fifteen minutes closer the nausea is back in the pit of Erik’s stomach, threatening to climb up the back of his throat.

“You don’t have to go,” Charles tells him. He’s perched in one of the armchairs, paging through the conference program with a capped highlighter tucked behind one ear. He looks up when Erik makes a harsh, frustrated sound behind gritted teeth and says, “You could always come to the Oxford thing with me.”

*And give Shaw the satisfaction of not seeing me there?* It sounds ridiculous even in Erik's head, and Charles gives him a look that says he knows Erik knows it's foolish. All the same, Erik tells himself, he's seen Shaw once since he left, he'd survived -- and he's with Charles now. Those are good things. When he thinks about Shaw, his body doesn't respond with that sickening mix of arousal and nausea that still would have him following Shaw back to his bedroom if Shaw crooked his finger.
"I'm going," he decides.

"Call me if you need anything," Charles says, and taps his forehead. "Even a convenient excuse to escape."

Erik snorts. "This isn't a bad first date."

"No," Charles agrees, though he sounds more warm and fond than anything. "But it's probably a fairly good strategy for escaping from an awkward dinner with an awful ex-boyfriend."

"Thanks." Erik pokes at his calendar as Charles gets up and tosses the program and highlighter on the table. Automatically, he tilts his head up for Charles's kiss when Charles bends over him, can't help a smile when Charles tells him For good luck.

He carries that warmth with him out of the hotel and down Michigan to Mercat. It's a half-mile walk, usually unwise when the object is to show up unrumpled after fording Chicago streets in early summer, but Erik uses the walk to think. He has advantages this time, he reminds himself, with Charles a silent, strong support (and he needs a moment to accommodate that, the thought of having help); he knows he's seeing Shaw, he won't be blindsided. When it's over, he'll go back to Palmer House and curl up with Charles and listen to him tell boozy stories about the Oxonians.

Remembering that is enough to buffer the worst of the anticipatory anxiety, which grows stronger the closer Erik gets to the restaurant, at first a distant buzz in his ears but, by the time he steps into the dim foyer and lets his eyes adjust, has become a dull roar. He intends to take a few seconds in the foyer to gather himself, one last breath of free air before he has to face Shaw, but he should have known Shaw would allow no such thing.

"Erik, my boy," that familiar drawl says from just past Erik’s left shoulder, and Erik doesn’t have to look to know exactly who it is, to know the precise expression Shaw must be wearing on his face, but of course he looks anyway. Shaw smiles from two feet away, false amusement twisting his thin lips, his eyes as empty as Erik remembers. “I wasn’t convinced you’d make it.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Erik says, hating the way he has to pretend nothing’s amiss, wear this polite mask, but knowing that if he doesn’t he risks debasing himself and his reputation in front of all his peers and former professors. Even so, he manages to turn his shoulder just as Shaw extends his hand for Erik to shake, behaving as if he hadn’t seen the gesture as he steps past Shaw and into the restaurant proper, scanning over the heads of the other patrons for familiar faces.

“To the right, dear,” Shaw says, and he touches his fingertips to the small of Erik’s back, propelling him forward; Erik can practically taste his amusement when Erik tenses, reactive, worse when Erik has no choice but to go along with Shaw’s physical guidance, pushed past the first few booths to where the staff have fit together three tables to accommodate the group that’s shown up. Erik spots Eileen, Marta, Angie, even Mohinder, but none of them seem to notice Shaw’s hand burning through Erik's shirt and branding itself into his skin as they approach.

“Hey,” Marta says when she finally spots them, lifting a hand to wave them over; Erik’s breath catches in his throat when Shaw steps past him, but it’s only so he can pull out the chair nearest Angie and gesture magnanimously toward Erik, murmuring, “After you.”

Angie hitches over a bit so Erik can sit without climbing on top of her. He hasn't seen her since Stanford aside from in passing at conferences, but there's enough of the younger woman he remembers in the older one that greets him that he can recognize her -- right down to the quick, calculating expression, the one he remembers focusing on him as if he's a puzzling data set.
"Erik," Eileen says as she gets up and moves one chair closer, an apologetic hand on Mohinder's shoulder at leaving the conversation between him and Dante. She leans over the table -- and Angie -- so Erik can kiss her cheek, which he does; in the corner of his eye, hovering over his shoulder, he sees Shaw bristling with annoyance at being ignored.

"Dr. Patel," Erik says formally, and Eileen laughs. She's still nearsighted, still small and dressed in her old loose-fitting clothes, this time purple leopard-print trousers and a billowy cardigan that must offend Shaw's sensibilities.

"You're out of my seminar -- and you're now tenured, I hear," Eileen says. "You can call me Eileen, you know."

"I am tenured," Erik says. He sits, excruciatingly aware that Shaw has, of course, taken the seat next to him, and that Angie's making calculations in her head, and remembering.

"So," she says once Eileen's sat back down, "MIT. That's MacTaggert's department, right?"

"Right." Erik sips his water and suppresses a shiver as Shaw's foot skims his ankle. "It's a better fit for me than Berkeley in a lot of ways; I wish they'd been hiring when I'd gone on the market."

Angie falls silent, sinking into a dissatisfied silence. Eileen, with a quick frown at her, says, "And are you flourishing there?"

Erik thinks of Charles, the new shape of his days and nights. "Yeah. I am."

"I'm glad to hear it," Eileen says kindly, and she nudges the bread basket over toward Erik -- "Eat, you're still far too skinny."

He smiles, still too conscious of Shaw's presence at his side, Shaw's arm brushing his when he reaches for his water, old painful memories making him wonder what Shaw would do if he got him alone. Remembering that he used to be so sure Shaw would kill him if he ever tried to leave again. That won't happen now, Erik tells himself after he's ordered his food and the server returns to slide the plate in front of him: fifty-dollar steak, because Shaw's paying. He won't let himself be alone with Shaw again, for one, and now that Charles is at least somewhat aware of the circumstances of Erik's history with Shaw it would be impossible for Shaw to get away with any of it. That doesn't stop him thinking about the last time they met like this, though. How close Erik came to asking Shaw upstairs.

"You know, Erik," Shaw says eventually, drawing the subject back around to Boston as if they'd never changed it, "I'm glad to hear you've had such a good experience at MIT. I'd love to hear more of your thoughts on the climate in Cambridge. I'm in talks with the people over at Harvard Medical School for their new endowed chair of neuroscience. It's my understanding that the environment between HMS and MIT is quite collaborative."

"Yes," Erik says. He stares down at the steak, half-eaten in a circle of pale pink juices. His mind echoes, empty of everything except the fear clamoring up from his hindbrain. Shaw's looking at him expectantly, asking if he's all right, and all Erik can think to say is -- nothing.

"I've been hearing such good things about how the program's developing at MIT," Shaw says cheerfully, gesturing with his fork and knife. "I'm confident that under the direction of a suitable chair, both HMS and MIT could benefit enormously. And we already know," he pauses to toast Erik, wine rippling in his glass, "that our previous partnership was very fruitful."

While Erik fumbles for something to say, and fumbles not to reach out to Charles, not to pick up a
knife and drive it into Shaw's heart, Eileen's shaking her head, gesturing back at Shaw. "I was under the impression," she says, "that you were using that offer as an excuse to get more leverage with the department. And," she adds archly, "it's hardly professional to bring up talks when you've got current department colleagues at the table with you."

Shaw’s lip curls, an expression that freezes Erik’s guts. The last time he saw that had been moments before Shaw had driven his face into a wall; what would he do to Eileen? Erik risks a look over at her, a headshake that Angie, of course, notices.

"It's all but settled," Shaw says eventually. Erik swallows his dread and the last of his dying appetite. "Really, all that's left is to formalize the offer and then you would be receiving an email from Jason in a matter of weeks."

"We'll see," Eileen says airily. "You might not find Boston as amenable as Palo Alto."

"So," Angie breaks in, having followed the conversation with an increasing annoyance that Erik can't help but notice. Her mouth is much like Shaw’s, thin and malicious when she wants it to be. "Are you seeing anyone?"

She’s asking Erik, Erik realizes a beat belatedly, and he recovers enough to remember who he is, now -- and that he isn’t Shaw’s Erik anymore, that he doesn’t have to be ever again.

“Yes,” he says, and relishes the faint surprise around the table, particularly the way Shaw goes very still at his side. Erik reaches for his wine and takes a small sip, smiling when he lowers the glass again and adds, for good measure: “In fact, it’s quite serious.”

Whatever Angie had been expecting, it wasn’t this -- her eyes are a little wider than before, brows lifted, but she presses on regardless. “Oh yeah? And what’s he like?”

Erik doesn’t look at Shaw, unwilling to see the look on his face, already knowing what he’d find there if he did; he keeps his gaze fixed on Angie instead and pushes boldly onward, determined to drive the salt in deeper. He can tell Shaw’s watching him closely, can see Shaw’s face turned toward him out of his peripheral vision, Erik’s heart beating fast in his throat.

He considers saying nothing, now: Shaw or otherwise, Erik isn’t interested in having his personal life put on display for his professional colleagues’ perusal. He hasn’t even admitted to anyone in Boston that he and Charles are seeing each other. Come to that, beyond the conversation where he and Charles negotiated Erik moving in, Erik doesn’t think he and Charles have talked about it at all. But with Shaw here and adrenaline coursing hot and fast through his veins Erik’s feeling reckless. He wants to see Shaw shocked. He wants to see him thrown off that perpetual calm of his, to see Shaw fall flat-footed for once.

“He’s a mutant, like I am, and he’s involved in academia. In fact, you might have read some of his work -- Charles Xavier.”

"Ah, yes," Shaw says. Under the table, his foot grazes -- more than grazes -- Erik’s ankle, pressing down the way he used to, hard enough to bruise the bone very nearly. Erik shifts away, bares his teeth in a faint smile at Shaw's annoyance. "You met him at his Berkeley lectures, if I recall correctly."

Shaw has to be remembering that week: Erik ignoring his texts when he'd taken Charles out for dinner and drinks, Erik choking on his cock before Shaw came on Erik’s face, Erik begging for permission to take Charles to the airport the day he left. His fingers tighten around his knife, and the silence is far too long for Shaw, who always has that perfect, polished reply waiting to any comment,
but at last Shaw says, "And, as I recall, not too much later you received a very nearly signed-and-sealed offer to move to MIT. Odd, how these things work, isn't it? I'd call it fate."

Erik thinks of those last months, fragmented with terror and determination, the minutes drawing out interminably until he was finally on the plane and safe. He can taste the adrenaline, very nearly, the memories are that sharp, still potent and pounding if he lets himself dwell on them -- which he never does. Behind them comes panic, and the nearly overwhelming urge to stand up and shout, to tell everyone who and what Shaw is.

"It was time to move on," he says when he can talk without his voice shaking. "To better things."

"It's not like Berkeley was a hellhole, I'm sure," Angie says with a giggle that's far too forced.

"The students at MIT are better," Erik tells her, grateful for the distraction, as awkward as it is. "And there's more support for my work there."

"I'm sure there is," Shaw murmurs into his wine glass. "I'm sure you're.... very well supported."

"Sebastian," Eileen interjects abruptly, with enough firm force to her voice that it has all of them turning to face her, "surely you don’t doubt your own student was more than capable of achieving a good job and good funding on his own merit. Or do you suspect you’ve lost your touch?"

Erik stares at her, briefly certain that Shaw will reach across the table and close his hand around her throat and kill her where she sits because no one -- no one -- speaks to Shaw like that, not ever, not without being punished for it. For one tense moment Shaw seems to be considering the same, his expression like cut glass, sharp and brittle, and Erik wonders if Eileen really did understand what he was trying to tell her at Shaw’s end-of-year party all those years ago.

"Of course not," Shaw says eventually, voice smooth and well-oiled. "I have no idea what you’re trying to imply, Eileen: I only just mentioned how unsurprising Erik’s success has been. He was an ambitious student. I expect little has changed."

The tension is thick at the table now, and Erik starts to wish all of them would just let it be; the worse the environment for Shaw back at Stanford, the more likely he is to follow through on his threat and leave for Harvard, where Erik will fall inevitably back into his orbit.

"Personally, I could never stand the Northeast weather," Dante says, interjecting a change of subject that’s awkward but comes nonetheless as a decisive relief, snapping some of that taut discomfort in the air. Angie laughs again and under the table Shaw's hand finds Erik's thigh, squeezing hard.

Erik bites his lip, strangling the scream low in his throat -- but he can't stop the violent flinch away, knocking his water glass almost into Angie's lap; she's quick, though, and catches it before it spills. Shaw's grip is tight enough that it doesn't budge, his fingers sunk into the pad of Erik's quadriceps. Erik's leg goes numb.

"Sebastian," he says, aware he sounds strangled and on the verge of panic, "if you wouldn't mind? I need to stand for a moment."

They're surrounded by colleagues, in public, with other tables of curious neuroscientists looking up from their own conversations and the disturbance. Surely, Erik thinks, surely Shaw wouldn't press the issue here --

Shaw lets him go, fastidiously wiping his fingers on his napkin as if he's cleaning sauce from them instead of just having them digging into Erik's leg. Before he stands, Erik straightens the wrinkles out of his trousers, no point in appearing disheveled -- and no point in appearing as rattled as he is. He
catches Eileen watching him, and Angie's confusion; he gives Eileen a quick nod, hoping she understands; Angie gets nothing. Eileen's lined face is quietly furious, but she lets Erik go, her shoulders set as if she's preparing to do battle.

Erik's halfway to the restroom before he realizes it's the perfect place for Shaw to ambush him, and the thought of Shaw pulling him into a stall, forcing Erik down on his knees, giving him bruises to replace the ones that had only faded weeks after Erik had moved to Boston -- bruises Erik still feels, as if they're embedded in his skin like stains. Charles might paint them over with his kisses and forceful touches, touches that Erik welcomes and finds himself starved for, sometimes, but Erik's not sure they'll ever efface Shaw entirely.

He changes directions and heads for the bar, noisy and crowded with more neuroscientists drinking far too much the morning before a conference. Someone nearby is drinking whiskey, the scent pungent enough to turn Erik's stomach. He breathes in through his mouth and shoulders his way to an empty space, a raised finger to catch the bartender's attention.

The martini steadies him a little, although not enough, and he won't be able to stay gone for long without attracting even more attention. He shouldn't have come, he reminds himself, and finds himself acutely missing Charles, wishing he'd gone with him to his ridiculous Oxford thing, where'd be surrounded by British accents and jokes he doesn't understand -- and by the warm glow of Charles when he's drunk and happy.

The bartender returns with Erik's tab; he reaches to pick up the little black leather folder, but someone else gets there first, swiping it out from under his hand.

"Here," Shaw says, "let me."

He slides his card into the pocket and Erik, incredulous and alarmed, simply stands there, watching as Shaw passes the folder back to the bartender. The way he's standing, he's angled perfectly so that Erik has no way of stepping past him without pushing him aside -- an impossible feat, with Shaw's mutation. The bar itself is out of sight of their table, too; there's no calling for Eileen's backup. Erik's trapped.

Erik opens his mouth, planning to say something he doesn't doubt he'd regret, but they're surrounded by colleagues who surely recognize them both. What comes out instead is: "That's too kind."

Really, it is. Shaw is never kind without strings attached.

"For my best student? Don't be ridiculous, dear boy." Shaw smiles at him, but the expression's callous and doesn't reach his eyes. Erik knows too well this is a threat, wrapped up in the silk of congeniality and professionalism, but a threat nonetheless.

Shaw continues on, even in the face of Erik's stiff posture and thin lips, his hand frozen around the stem of his martini glass. "By the way, Erik, I've received the APS William James lifetime achievement fellowship this year. Dr. Bardini was going to give my introductory speech, but unfortunately he's been called away by personal matters -- I told him you'd be willing to do the honors, as my most successful student to date." That smile widens, showing teeth. "You would be, wouldn't you?"

To Erik's right is Albert Govorun; to his left, Harris Yancey. Whatever he says will be heard by both their ears, and their opinions of him as an early career researcher aren't ones Erik can throw away lightly.

"I won't have time to prepare a suitable speech," Erik makes himself say through gritted teeth, trying to sound even and polite.
“Don’t worry about that, my boy,” Shaw says, waving a hand dismissively. “No one pays attention to such things anymore, do they? You merely need to stand up there and look attractive while you talk; no one will notice your words when they have your face to distract them.”

If Erik were female, this would count as misogyny. And if it were misogyny, Erik would be totally justified in reacting with anger or righteous indignation, reacting in any way except with a taut laugh that Shaw echoes a moment later, reaching out one hand to clasp Erik’s shoulder as if they were old colleagues. That, too, will leave bruises.

“I would be … delighted,” Erik makes himself say instead of fuck you, instead of give your own damn speech. His chest clenches around his heart and lungs, making it hard to breathe. “Congratulations. Dr. Shaw.”

Shaw ducks his head modestly and laughs. "It's quite an honor, yes. It's not quite a Nobel, but it's flattering to have one's contributions to the field appreciated and recognized."

Erik doesn't move; he can't. "Keep the change," Shaw says to the bartender, who's returned with the receipts, and uses his grip on Erik's arm to guide him away from the bar -- and away from the Stanford table, toward a dark corner behind some columns.

His head hits the wall, not hard enough to dent or crack the plaster but enough to daze. The pain flares, collapses in on itself before the ache rolls out like a shockwave across the back of Erik's skull. In the shadows, Shaw is veiled and dangerous, and two years ago Erik would have done anything to placate him -- beg him, drop to his knees, anything, knowing that what would follow it was pain -- but now --

The pain coruscates and throbs and dulls, and as it fades anger comes roaring in. Some part of him, Shaw's Erik, trembles and reminds him of what will happen, just apologize, go with him, do what he wants, but Erik's too himself and too furious to listen. It's like fire, fierce and cleansing, and Erik feels like he could move the world if he wanted to, he could take all the metal in this city and wrap it around Shaw, turn it molten and pour it down his throat and see if he could survive that.

"Listen to me, Erik." Shaw says softly, and it's accelerant, the heat in Erik's heart burning white now, and Shaw doesn't seem to notice, those eyes filled and that mouth twisted with contemptuous amusement. "Erik, really, such histrionics were acceptable -- perhaps -- in a graduate student, but in a professional? Does Charles permit this sort of nonsense?"

Shaw has him pinned there against the wall with five fingers pressed against the center of Erik’s chest; it should signal danger, it does, Erik’s nerves frayed and his heart racing, but there are limits to what Shaw can do here, where damaging Erik will draw unwanted attention. And even Erik’s better judgment crumbles quickly under the force of his own anger.

"Charles is a grown man who can use his words,” Erik says spitefully, not flinching away from Shaw’s gaze. “He doesn’t need to break my collarbone, or starve me for three days, to make his point.”

It clearly affects Shaw more than Erik expected, a tiny flicker of antagonism about the clench of Shaw’s jaw and the gleam in his eyes as he pushes his hand up to press a thumb over that distorted knob near Erik’s shoulder, hard enough Erik feels pain shooting down his left arm as Shaw says, “I’ll break it a second time if that’s what it takes to bring you to heel,” Shaw whispers, and suddenly Erik feels as if he’s looking at this -- at himself, at Shaw -- for the first time. Whatever Shaw might say, Erik didn’t choose to be standing here right now with Shaw bearing down against him. He doesn’t enjoy that agonizing heat in his collarbone.
But Shaw does.

This -- all of it, every step he’s taken with Shaw at his back, has been because Shaw blocked off all other options. Every action Shaw took was because Shaw chose to take it. Not because Erik asked for it. Not because Erik forced him into that position.

It’s sickening, degrading and embarrassing every bit as much as it’s infuriating -- but Erik can’t afford to be self-loathing when Shaw’s face is still an inch from his, like a relic from a bad dream.

“If you do that,” Erik says coolly, evenly, “I’ll go back to that table and tell Eileen everything you’ve ever done to me. She suspects it already, and I doubt there’d be anything you could say in your own defense. She’d ruin you.”

“Hardly, Erik,” Shaw says, laughter chilling the edges of his words. "Ruin me? With what evidence? With evidence that implicates you and calls into question everything you’ve worked for? If she did, somehow, manage to make life… difficult for me, politically, then there's always Harvard."

Shaw might be cold, but the blood in Erik's veins runs hot, anger at Shaw, at himself, at the people of Stanford and Berkeley and the people of Shaw's neighborhood. It's as if his fear of Shaw has turned a corner, or mutated, and become rage, something tactile that Erik can grasp and use. He can't hit Shaw, although every bone in him aches to give back a little of the pain Shaw's given him, but he can draw himself up and look Shaw squarely in the eye (something, he realizes, he'd rarely ever done before) and say, "Don't be so sure of that."

That gets him a pitying look, a headshake redolent with foolish, foolish boy. "I don't know where this bravery came from," Shaw says, pity shading into a smile that's all sharp edges, "but I'd like to… explore it. Come to my room with me."

"No." This time, at least, Erik's prepared for the bolt of arousal; he can ride it out, steering through it, Charles and his anger a pole star to guide him. Erik straightens himself and nods at the bar, still busy and oblivious. "We should return to our table before they notice we're gone."

"Hm, we should," Shaw says idly, as if their conversation hadn't happened. He inclines his head and gestures, as if that same, careless hand hasn't left new bruises on Erik's skin. "After you, my boy."

"After you," Erik corrects.

Shaw looks momentarily displeased -- no doubt he was planning to follow when Erik tried to leave the restaurant, out to the street where he could grasp Erik’s shoulder and use the pain of pinching on nerve endings to force him to walk normally at Shaw’s side all the way back to the hotel, up to Shaw’s suite, where Erik’s ‘no’ would mean nothing. But he turns all the same, Erik keeping an eye on the back of Shaw’s head, the line of Shaw’s slim body, fully prepared for Shaw to turn around and grab at Erik’s arm, his neck. He follows until they’re within sight of the Stanford table, until Eileen looks up and meets his gaze over Shaw’s shoulder and Erik knows she’s seen them both -- he lifts a hand and waves, grateful she shows no sign of acknowledging it on her face, then makes his escape across the foyer.

His heart pounds in his throat, certain with each step across the floor and out into the cool evening air that Shaw will be right behind him. He isn’t, but even when Erik’s in public, even when several minutes later he’s stepping into the gold and marble entrance of the Palmer House, he finds himself looking over his shoulder to check -- just in case.

I'm going back to the room now, Erik thinks, hoping Charles has enough of a tie knotted into his mind that he’ll hear it. He’s not disappointed; a second later he hears Charles’ telepathic voice in his
head, quick and not nearly as intoxicated as Erik expected: *I'll be there in ten minutes*, accompanied by a brief burst of affection and a sense of presence that Erik’s associated purely with Charles now, like a low hum and the feeling of warmth.

Without Charles there, though, even their suite doesn’t feel safe. Erik locks the door, which would mean little to Shaw’s power, but it feels more efficacious than just standing in the bedroom, waiting, and hoping Charles is the one to get here first.

He sends his ability questing out through the building. He recognizes none of the metal except for the pipes and fixtures, the moving bits of it belonging to staff and guests unfamiliar to him. Jacked up like this, he thinks he could suss out Charles's cufflinks and tie tack from across the city, although Charles is perhaps only a few blocks away at Tru. Shaw's watch doesn't appear, although Erik keeps hunting, waiting for it to materialize, wondering if Shaw took it off, knowing Erik would be looking for it. While he waits and hunts, he paces the room -- generous in theory, small in practice, too small to contain his anger and anxiety.

At last, at *last*, Charles's cufflinks appear, two points of bright, antique gold, and a moment later, Charles's telepathic touch again. It's light, deft, the psionic equivalent of the way Charles will sometimes stroke Erik's hair. At the beginning of this, Erik had made himself wait quietly for that gentleness to solidify into cruelty, fingers knotted in his hair to tug or pull or hold down, but it never did.

Barely two minutes later, Erik pulls the door open for Charles, slams it shut behind him and locks it tight, driving the deadbolt into the wood, the chain in its runner although it's laughably fragile. Charles looks as if he's run half the way here, his brown hair tousled and his cheeks flushed although the night air is cool for Chicago. He's searching Erik's face with that keenness that would be terrifying if Erik didn't know him so well.

"Are you okay?" Charles asks, a rueful, silent flicker of *I know you're not, but what can I do?*

Erik draws a breath. He'd been half afraid his anger would die out before Charles got here, but thinking of ten minutes spent waiting, those interminable minutes at Mercat, Shaw stooping over him like a vulture -- if his anger were dying, it's roaring back to life.


Erik watches Charles' face, even the red in his cheeks blanching as Charles processes that, can identify the precise moment Charles remembers Erik insisting he didn’t rape me and I’m not a victim, Charles, even though that’s exactly what Shaw did, what Erik was. Admitting it is its own sickness, like eating something rotten, but at least Erik can see now: that doesn’t make it not true. Charles wets his lower lip, eyes gone a bit wide, and after a moment Charles seems to draw himself together enough to say, “Shaw’s a terrible person.”

He doesn’t say *I know*, even though he must be thinking it, and he must have known -- or at least suspected, from what Erik let him see in his mind before. Erik’s grateful for that small mercy, just as he’s grateful Charles never tried to define this for him, that he left that much under Erik’s control.

After a long, tense moment Charles steps forward, hesitating after he lifts his hand as if to be certain Erik won’t flinch away before he grasps Erik’s elbow, that single point of contact solid and reassuring, grounding Erik and somehow making him more certain that he’s right. It feels good to be angry. It feels like the first sip of cool water after a decade in the desert.

“Here,” Charles murmurs, and he tugs lightly at Erik’s arm before letting go, Erik following him to
sit at the foot of the bed, Charles’ body turned toward him with one knee hitched up onto the mattress and Charles’ hand braced behind them. Sitting brings them down to the same level, where Erik can look Charles evenly in the eye, searching Charles’ expression for pity but finding none. Eventually, without looking away, Charles says, “Do you want to talk about it?”

"Not -- not about that," Erik says. He's certain that, if he does take those memories out now, he'll start talking and will never stop, the words running on and on into an incoherent scream. "But at dinner tonight, he was his usual self -- he sat me where he wanted me to sit, made me perform for my old cohort. God, I was a fucking idiot."

Charles doesn't say anything to contradict that, but his silence isn't agreement; it's acceptance of what Erik is thinking right now, even if it isn't necessarily true. It's a fine distinction, but it keeps Charles from saying you weren't an idiot, something Erik can't go along with right now. He has to hate himself, a little, enough to say, "I let him keep doing it. I let him hurt me again."

Still Charles doesn't say anything; the expression on his face is something Erik can't decipher, not pitying, but -- understanding, maybe. Erik strips out of his jacket, tosses it on the floor, and once his stumbling fingers can get the buttons undone, his shirt joins it. That does get a reaction, Charles hissing softly but not moving to touch when he sees the bruise on Erik's sternum and the marks on his collar bone.

"He did that to me," Erik says, looking down at the fingertip bruises, still new and faint; they'll blossom purple eventually, dark and angry. "Tonight, when he told me he would bring me to heel however he could. He said the same thing when he broke my collar bone."

When Charles had first noticed that out-of-place bump, Erik had told him he'd broken it tripping over a root during a trail race. At the time Charles hadn't said anything, and Erik had assumed Charles was allowing Erik the luxury of thinking his lie had been believed. But the slack, shocked curve of Charles's mouth, the fury that roars up before Charles can harness it and drag it back under control, says otherwise.

"I never went to the hospital for it," Erik says woodenly. "It healed on its own, but I couldn't reach over my head for weeks." He nods down at it. "I thought he was going to break it again tonight."

Charles’ gaze lifts from where it’s been fixed on new and old injuries and meets Erik’s, his eyes narrower than before and brows knitting together. It’s gratifying, to see him angry on Erik’s behalf. It makes Erik feel like he has a right to his own anger. It confirms that Erik isn’t just … overreacting, the way Shaw always insinuated he was whenever Erik tried to fight back.

“What do you want to do?” Charles asks, quiet. Between them, his hand turns palm-up on the mattress – he doesn’t reach for Erik, perhaps worried he’ll startle him, and Erik stares at the lines of his palm and the curve of his nails, just-visible, for a long moment before he lets his hand come down to rest atop Charles’. Charles’ fingers twitch up, half-curling around Erik’s hand, like even his reflexes want to draw him closer. His skin is warm and familiar-feeling.

“There’s nothing to do,” Erik says. “He’s Sebastian Shaw. He’ll do what he likes, because he knows people will let him.” A breath, Erik’s lips twisting around the next, bitter words. “He said he’s in talks with Harvard.”

“What?”

“The medical school. He said he wants to collaborate.”

Erik hadn’t thought Shaw would go this far. He thought Shaw’s possessiveness might end at state
lines, that as twisted as Shaw could be he’d also be just-callous-enough not to put in the effort to go chasing Erik down and bringing him back. Maybe that was short-sighted. Maybe Erik underestimated what a blow it must have been to Shaw’s ego, to lose someone he put twelve years into sculpting, tying him down with knot after knot until Shaw was certain Erik could never disentangle himself.

"Endowed chair," he continues when Charles doesn't say anything. "To do that, they have to have had a donor lined up, a pro forma search. Shaw would fit all their qualifications -- "

Charles blows out a sharp, agitated breath. "We'll have to address that later," he says, then, with a quick look at Erik, "if you want to. But tonight, what do you need?"

What Erik needs is Shaw dead, or Shaw so thoroughly ruined there will be no resurrecting his reputation. What he needs is to go back in time and shake sense into his younger self and head off the disaster and misery of the next twelve years. Someone more philosophical might say that if Erik hadn't endured Shaw he wouldn't be the man he is today, he wouldn't have met Charles, but philosophical as Erik is, he's not prepared to go that far -- even for Charles, who's looking at him without expectation or demand, waiting.

"To not think about Shaw," Erik says.

Shaw will keep haunting the corners of his thoughts, he's sure, with Boston no longer safe and the crawling certainty that now is the time he'll have to stop running and fight. Tonight, at least, Charles is here, letting Erik hold his hand more tightly, his gaze running up and down Erik's body as if it's incalculably precious. There's a certain symmetry between this night and their first together -- it brings a laugh bubbling up, a bit desperate, but Charles answers it with something warmer and, even better, leans forward to kiss Erik carefully.

It silences the part of Erik that had thought Charles perhaps might not be willing to touch him again - - like maybe Charles would think Erik too fragile now to be willing to push him, not even in the ways Erik would like him to. To prove it -- in case Charles was going to change his mind -- Erik presses closer, parting his lips to let Charles lick his tongue into his mouth, Charles muffling a soft sound there when Erik lifts his hand and tangles it in Charles' hair.

If it were Shaw, he’d push Erik away now with orders to get undressed, to get a towel, a condom: keep everything clean and controlled, a profane act without the profanity. There’d be pain, too, whether or not Erik obeyed. Charles, though, is halfway into Erik’s lap, his free hand smoothing over Erik’s bare skin and holding him close.

“Lie back,” is the only order Charles gives, eventually, breathless when the kiss breaks and Erik has already dragged Charles’ sweater off over his head.

These are the orders Erik wants to obey. He keeps his eyes on Charles, slow heat blooming through his body as he pushes further up the bed and lies down, Charles kicking off his shoes to follow soon after. His mouth grazes Erik’s stomach, just below his navel, and Erik swallows a shiver. One of Charles’ hands bears down on his hip, keeping him still while Charles’ tongue traces small circles up Erik’s skin, his eyes shut and his lashes a dark smudge against his cheeks, looking as if he’s concentrating hard on this -- only this -- while he marks the spaces between Erik’s ribs.

It's been two years -- not even -- since he'd left Shaw, and his body remembers what it's like to be touched gently one minute, with pain the next; part of him waits for Charles to take pleasure and twist it around on him, but it never happens. Erik stiffens as Charles kisses his way up his chest and his mouth trails warm and wet across the red blotch on Erik's chest, bracing himself; Charles lingers there and it's only good, even when Charles kisses the faint protrusion of Erik's collar bone. It isn't to
make a point, Charles stamping his claim on top of Shaw's, it isn't to remind Erik that he belongs to Charles know. Erik doesn't know what it is, though, other than something good he can give himself over to.

Charles's telepathy hovers around him, the warm red-gold that makes everything else hazy and insubstantial as if through a misty sunset. Erik basks in it, and if he compares it to Shaw, whose power had always hovered like a vulture waiting to eviscerate him, Charles doesn't falter; he only kisses Erik's neck, the places he knows where Erik's the most sensitive, and finally kisses Erik on the mouth again so Erik can taste himself, salty and organic.

When he gets his eyes open again and focuses, he's looking up at Charles, almost comically close. He's close enough Erik can see the faint freckles on his nose -- a little bolder now that Charles is spending a bit more time outside -- and the intertwining of different shades of blue in his eyes, his red mouth that's even redder after mapping Erik's body. The expression in Charles's eyes isn't vulnerable, precisely, but it's open and affectionate, as if Charles is looking at something impossibly beautiful that he'd never thought he'd have.

And that's the difference, isn't it? Looking back, Erik can see that Shaw knew he could have Erik, because Erik was for the having and because Shaw could have anyone or anything he wanted. But Charles had hoped, and kept that hope to himself, and hadn't made claims on Erik when Erik hadn't wanted him to.

It's enough that Erik can disobey orders and lean up to catch Charles's mouth in a kiss of his own. The angle isn't perfect but he keeps it, long enough to stroke Charles's bare shoulders and feel the natural strength of them, the warm, vulnerable muscle and skin, and feel Charles shiver happily at Erik taking the initiative.

Erik realizes he's aroused only when Charles insinuates a hand down between their bodies to cup his cock between his legs, pressing the heel of his hand against Erik's hardness and leaving Erik to rock his hips up, chasing that pressure. Charles' teeth catch Erik's lower lip, a bright brief pain that hurts in the right way, Erik exhaling sharply against Charles' kiss.

“I want you,” Charles admits, breathless, his fingers curling in Erik's short hair. He doesn't ask what Erik wants. He knows what Erik wants. The tip of Charles' nose is chilly when it brushes Erik's cheek, Charles' fingers slipping on Erik's fly before Erik's power grabs onto the zipper and pulls it down himself.

It's blunt and honest: no hidden shades, no manipulation, no ulterior motive. Charles just wants him, says it, proves it when he rubs his cock down against Erik's stomach.

Erik hesitates, but only for a beat; he turns his power to Charles' fly and undoes that as well, hooking his thumbs under the waistband of Charles' trousers to push them down roughly past Charles' hips. Charles shuffles them the rest of the way off, then pulls Erik's off as well, kicking the pile of clothes off the foot of the bed. He leans over, then, digging around in the front pocket of his suitcase for a condom as Erik pushes himself up onto his elbows and watches, gaze lingering on the strong lines of Charles' torso, the obvious tenting at the front placket of his boxers.

Charles turns back to him, eyes glossy with lust, his cheeks a hectic pink under his freckles. He's almost undone, which Erik's either never seen or has never allowed himself to see; Charles wants him so much he doesn't care that his desire is dripping off him, or that he's untidy and coming apart at the edges. Although it's light years removed from Shaw's precision, Erik still feels stripped bare and almost helpless -- until Charles leans forward to cup his cheek, unsteady fingers stroking the line of Erik's jaw.
"Can you be good for me, Erik?" Charles asks roughly.

Erik nods, shivering at the pressure of Charles's fingers against his cheekbone. Charles sighs, a quiet, broken breath. "I want you to fuck me," Charles tells him, and presses the condom into the unresisting cup of Erik's palm.

"I don't -- " Good or not, this is something Erik hasn't done in years. Not since his undergraduate, on the other side of a wall of Shaw and terrible memories. His partners in college had been more interested in the size of his cock than the quality of the sex; he's pretty sure that, as long as they got off, he (and his cock) passed muster.

"It'll be good," Charles promises him, and then, whispered into Erik's ear, "I'm going to tell you exactly what to do. I know you'll try your best for me."

He will, Erik decides. He obeys Charles, as always, allowing Charles to roll them over so it's Charles on his back this time, spread out flushed and shameless between Erik's thighs. Charles grins up at him, almost laughing, with the same amusement and delight he shows in seminar or any conversation, and Erik, tentatively, finds himself smiling back.

"If you hate this," he says as Charles runs his hand up and down his thigh, pushing Erik's boxers up and humming with pleasure at the hard weave of muscle, "just remember, you asked for it."

"I won't hate it."

Charles leans up and bites at Erik's lip, sharp and playful; a tiny sussuration of pleasure shudders down Erik's spine and he decides just to go with it, rocking his hips down against Charles', legs tightening reflexively around Charles' hips. He can feel Charles' cock pressing up, hard, behind his ballsack, the tip pushing between his asscheeks. He's tempted to grind on that, but doesn't, letting Charles guide Erik's hand to the waist of his boxers instead.

"Take these off," Charles says, releasing Erik's wrist. "Yours, too," he adds after a moment when Erik's already stripped Charles' underwear down past his hips, freeing his erection to bob pink-tipped between them.

Erik complies, watching Charles watch him, Charles' gaze sliding down to look when Erik's finally naked. There's something gratifying to see Charles' lips part when he catches sight of Erik's cock, Charles' hands twitching into loose fists in the bedsheets.

"Kiss me," Charles orders him, and Erik doesn't hesitate to obey. Charles' mouth is wet and easy now, kissing Erik greedily as he hooks one knee up over Erik's waist, like he'd pull Erik down onto and into him without any preparation whatsoever. Charles presses something into Erik's hand and it takes Erik a second to realize it's a little travel-sized packet of lube, maybe an ounce of it encased in plastic. One finger first, Charles says, voice in Erik's mind since his mouth is so otherwise occupied licking into Erik's.

In a different time, Erik would have resisted this -- all of it, resenting Charles for telling him what to do and resenting himself for liking it. Now, though, all it is is heat in the pit of his stomach and the slippery feel of lube on his hand, Charles' body arching to make it easier when Erik reaches down between his legs. Erik's finger slides in easy after a moment of hesitation, and Charles is shockingly tight and hot, his body rippling eagerly around Erik. Good, Charles's mental voice is almost lazy, satisfied already. Now fuck me with it.

Erik obeys, slow and rhythmic, matched to the pace Charles sets for him. Then he adds a second finger, moaning himself when Charles moans and pushes down against him to fuck himself against Erik's hand. "You have such lovely fingers," Charles murmurs to him, nudging the words against Erik's chin and mouth. "So long and slender." He reaches down around the curve of his thigh and
hip, fingers brushing against Erik's wrist, so close to where he's got his fingers buried in Charles's ass. "A third now, there's a good boy."

Feeling Charles around his fingers fills Erik with fever images of what Charles will feel like around his cock, even more sensitive -- *Even bigger than your fingers, unless you give me that third one,* Charles sends, catching the direction of Erik's thoughts -- and so impossibly tight Erik can't help thrusting down against the mattress just to get even a fraction of the pleasure he can't wait to have. Charles steadies him, stroking gentle and firm up Erik's sides, *Calm down, darling; I want to be good and open for you and I want you to fuck me until I let you come.*

"Not helping," Erik whispers, not even hating how desperate he sounds. Charles just laughs and kisses him, which encourages Erik to laugh with him, and the happiness is this terrible, beautiful thing in Erik's chest that wells up and swamps even the anticipation that has him hard and aching.

He adds the third finger though, as requested, and feels Charles' hole convulse around his knuckles, trying to reject it but unable to as Erik starts fucking these into Charles as well, Charles' thigh quivering against Erik's side where his knee is hitched up over Erik's waist, his lips red and bitten, those tiny sounds he's making in time with each forward thrust of Erik's hand rattling Erik down to his bones and making him feel like his marrow has gone hot and molten and slick.

"Condom?" Erik asks when finally Charles has grabbed onto his wrist to pull his hand out, his back arcing up against Erik again, so desperate and needy for it that it's nearly enough to make Erik come without any kind of manual provocation at all.

"We're monogamous," Charles says by way of response, his eyes glittering bright from beneath half-lidded lashes. "Do you really want to keep using them?"

The obvious answer to that is *no,* and so Erik doesn't argue when Charles reaches down and curls his hand around the base of Erik's cock, using that grasp to tug Erik's hips forward as well, lining the thick head of his cock up with Charles' slippery hole. Erik grabs onto a handful of the pillow next to Charles' head, anticipation fluttering in his stomach as Charles says, "Don't lose control now, Erik. You're going to fuck me the way I want you to fuck me, understood?"

"Yes," Erik gasps, shivering between Charles's hands.

"Go slowly," Charles tells him, canting his hips and urging Erik on despite the order.

Erik goes as slow as he can, which is slow enough to burn, a bright flame running up the wick of his spine. He hears his own gasp as if from a great distance when he finally pushes in, Charles's body closing and clenching around his cockhead, Charles's fingers tensing around his hips. Erik knows now what it's like to have Charles in his mind, he can feel Charles in there right now, a throbbing, ecstatic presence, but this is -- Charles is everywhere, and it's all he can do to calm himself down enough to go slow and careful and pay attention to instructions.

Charles is only praising him, though, telling Erik how big he is, how good he feels and how good he's being. "That's it," Charles croons, rocking slowly against him, his cock rubbing Erik's belly and smearing stickiness between them. "So good for me," he says and gazes up at Erik with those hot blue eyes like he means it.

At last Erik's buried deep, their hips flush together and his body held in the sturdy cradle of Charles's arms and thighs. *Now,* Charles says, a thread of command that snaps Erik to attention. *Pull out until I tell you to stop, then push back in. Slowly. I want to savor this.*

Erik obeys, and the pleasure is practically painful in its own way, throbbing in Erik's belly and
heating him up from the inside. Charles twists his fingers into Erik’s hair and uses that grip to guide Erik’s thrusts, desperately slow, made all the more torturous for the way Charles moans and moves underneath him, his free hand between them pulling equally slow strokes up the shaft of his hard cock.

“A little faster now,” Charles says at last, tugging at Erik’s hair, and Erik shudders and wants so badly to give into the pulsing urge to just -- rut against Charles, to work himself into him until the pleasure crests and swallows him whole. But he wants to please Charles far more, and so he moderates his baser instincts even as he starts to move more quickly, his hips moving between Charles’ legs and Charles squirming there like he wants to push himself back down onto Erik’s cock every time Erik pulls back.

With no barrier between them, it’s impossibly good, sensation flooding Erik’s nerves and humming like static as that physical pleasure competes with other senses -- with the sight of Charles’ wet, parted lips when he gasps on a particularly deep thrust, the tense and clench of Charles’ legs at Erik’s sides, his short nails digging into Erik’s scalp.

“Charles,” Erik manages to get out, though he isn’t sure what he wants to say, or ask, his mind seared white with want and arousal.

Charles keeps stroking himself down there between them; Erik can feel his knuckles brushing his own stomach with every motion, the slick tip of his cock leaving trails on his bare skin. Charles is beautiful, caught up in his pleasure and Erik's, and unabashedly showing Erik how much he loves this, everything from having Erik over him to having Erik in him to having Erik so perfectly obedient, all that strength willingly bent to Charles's will. Erik trembles at the thought because he loves it too, and he'd falter if Charles's hand weren't steady in his hair, the tight grip easing to something gentler, soothing for a moment before tightening again.

"Faster," Charles gasps, arching up to meet Erik’s first hard thrust. Soon he’s got strong legs laced around the backs of Erik's thighs, and both hands in Erik's hair to hold on tight. You're going to get me off just like this; I won't need to touch myself, Charles tells him, and lets Erik bury his broken moan in the curve of his neck.

Erik doesn't know how long he goes on like this, the pleasure a long, slow way of dying. When he tries to back off, certain Charles has to be in pain, Charles urges him on, keep going you're perfect so so lovely Erik, his body reaffirming what Charles's mind says to him. He's good for Charles, and this is so good, everything smooth and easy and perfect with his orgasm coiling low in his belly, in abeyance but something delicious to anticipate.

At last Charles's mind trembles against his and Charles leans up for one last sloppy, open-mouthed kiss, fingers painfully tight and perfect. The order to come isn't words so much as it is a lock opening or a sense of permission granted, a nod Erik feels instead of sees, and he buries himself in Charles one last time and comes hard, sobbing and gasping against Charles's throat.

He’s halfway through his own shuddering orgasm when he realizes Charles is coming as well, and then it’s another surge of pleasure on top of pleasure, his climax somehow all the better for it when he can feel Charles’ come hot on his belly and feel Charles’ body clenching around him, working him through it with the last few, abortive thrusts until it’s just them, spent and trembling in each other’s arms, breathing in each other’s breaths.

“-- Good?” Erik asks eventually, once he’s certain his mouth and jaw will work again, and Charles laughs, the sound raw and uneven, and pulls him in to kiss him again -- lazily this time, his fingers slowly relaxing in Erik’s hair to smooth down his spine instead, thumb skimming over his vertebrae, down until his fingers can spread out and span Erik’s ass.
“Good,” Charles says at last. He’s smiling when they part, cheeks pink and pupils glassy and dark. He doesn’t seem to care about the come that gets on the bed when Erik pulls out, his cock already hypersensitive and aching, or the mess between them when Erik rests his weight down atop Charles’ body and lets Charles hug him close.

They stay there like that for several long minutes, seconds weaving in between heartbeats, until both their breathing is steady and Charles finally rolls them over onto their sides, stretching past Erik to flick off the lamp on the nightstand and cast them into darkness.

* 

*Charles*

Charles winces playfully at Erik when they get up the next morning. It's been well and truly ages since he's played catcher, and he's certain no amount of caution or lube can entirely accommodate for a vigorous fucking by Erik and his giant cock. He's never thought of himself as a size queen, or anything approaching it, but, Charles reflects as he stretches against the slow burn and ache, he could possibly get used to it.

"Very good," he says softly, treasuring the flush on Erik's cheeks. Erik's sleep-warm and lazy still, determinedly ignoring the rest of the day, curled up strong and yet soft-edged in the center of their bed. Charles can't resist bending down to kiss him, tugging Erik's head back the slightest bit so Erik yields -- gladly this time, without protest or hesitation.

When he lets Erik up, he strokes Erik's cheek and says, "When we're ready, we'll go down to breakfast?"

Erik hums and Charles laughs. "You'll be hungry and cranky if you don't eat and are stuck looking at posters and slides all day. Up with you now."

Despite the order, Erik stays where he is, so Charles slips away for first shower. He needs it, his inner thighs still sticky with lube and come that they'd missed last night, and his belly not so tidy either. He's in the middle of basking in Erik's morning-after and trying not to get hard, tracing the lazy course of Erik's mind like a river as Erik thinks over waking up, sex last night -- and then the rough burst of adrenaline pitching Charles forward like pitching him into white water.

*Erik?* he asks, ducking quickly under the hot spray to clear shampoo from his hair and eyes. *Erik, what is it?*

*Nothing*, Erik sends back, testy as ever. *I remembered something, is all.*

Charles knows better than to push when Erik’s got that tone. Knows better than to go looking himself, too, because inasmuch as Erik assumed Charles had already seen his life history through his mind back when they first met, they’ve never outright discussed the parameters of what Erik does and doesn’t want Charles to see. All this -- what Charles catches from him, with one finger touching his thoughts -- is one thing. Actively looking may be quite another.

So Charles just sends a thread of acknowledgment and affection across the bond between them and rinses the last of the suds from his hair, shutting off the water and reaching out of the tub to grab one of the fluffy, clean towels from the rod. When he emerges back into the bedroom he finds Erik sitting naked at the foot of the bed, heedless of his nudity and scrolling through the conference app on his tablet.

“What do you have planned for today?” Charles asks as he kneels down at his suitcase to dig
through for a fresh outfit; unlike Erik, he hasn’t unpacked everything to hang neatly in the provided coat closet, or folded crisply in dresser drawers.

“Shaw won the William James Fellowship,” Erik mutters. He doesn’t look up from the tablet. “He managed to get me to agree to introduce him last night, before he took things too far.”

*That* gets Charles’ attention, and his gaze skips up from his suitcase to examine Erik’s face, the lines of it drawn into a scowl as Erik taps at the tablet screen.

"And you're going to do it," Charles says as steadily as he can. It's not very steadily at all; he's certain the incredulity comes through loud and clear.

Erik looks up, grey eyes limpid; Charles might almost say *mild* if he didn't know that word would never apply to Erik in any way, shape, or form. "Of course. He's my old advisor, isn't he? He did so much for me, after all."

Charles stares at Erik. He knows he's staring and he can't stop staring, and Erik stares right back. There are many things Charles could say to Erik's decision, *You know you don't have to simply because he asks* and *Call the organizers and tell them no because your advisor is an abuser and sadist*, but Erik's mind has that cast-iron resolve to it that says he's made his decision, whatever it is.

"Whatever you want to do, you know I'll support you," Charles says when he can trust himself not to say something idiotic. "Including telling Shaw to go fuck himself."

Warmth curls at the corners of Erik's mouth. "I know," he says. "And I appreciate it."

His mind turns away from the conversation after that, toward the practicalities of showering and dressing. As always, it's an emphatic turn that signals the conversation's over and Charles won't be well-served pursuing it. Instead, Erik climbs in the shower, his mind humming steadily ahead through his day while he cleans himself off -- a few flickers of thought spared for last night, a glow of satisfaction at being good for Charles -- and dries, brushes teeth. He foregoes shaving.

Erik doesn't, though, forego straightening Charles's tie for him. Charles looks down, awkward as it is, appreciating the deft weave of Erik's fingers guiding silk through loops and knots, perfectly symmetrical. "You're useless at this," Erik mock-grumbles, setting Charles's tie in place, summoning the tie clip over with an absent wave.

"Maybe I just like it when you do it for me," Charles says.

"The truth comes out," Erik says. "You manipulative bastard." And he lets Charles tug him down into another kiss, this one drawing out longer than the last, Charles chasing after the taste of Erik's toothpaste and the hot slide of his tongue.

They part ways after the first symposium, Charles for the memory talks and Erik for decision-making and morality. While he’s listening to a young assistant professor go on about calcineuron and fear memory, Charles pulls up the APS app on his phone and adds the lifetime achievement award talk to his agenda for the evening, booting out a workshop on fNIRS that he hadn’t really been that keen on attending anyway.

He keeps a sense of Erik’s mind throughout the day, though, meeting up with him in person for lunch -- which devolves after half an hour into another quick trip up to their hotel room, Charles’ belt undone and Erik on his knees enthusiastically sucking his cock, Charles so strung out after that he misses the first half of his next symposium. Charles starts to understand it better, though, when his phone tells him it’s time to go the Salon room appropriated for Shaw’s award. He can appreciate the
way Erik wants to still taste Charles in his mouth when he gets up behind the podium and says what he has to say.

Charles chooses a seat in the front of the room, so he’ll be directly in Erik’s line of sight if Erik needs grounding -- pretending he isn’t here for all-too-personal reasons as he watches Erik flip through the stack of index cards he has on the podium. Whatever this is, and whomever Erik’s here, Charles thinks he looks strong in this moment: tall, and composed -- controlled, despite the stubble on his face and the way he’s abandoned both tie and jacket alike, leaving the first two buttons of his shirt undone and his sleeves rolled up as if he were preparing to teach a graduate course and not give a speech in front of the entire APS.

The room fills slowly, people trickling in after a first round of drinks and reluctant to give up their socializing. Charles idly flips through his program, telling himself he’ll plan his next day a bit more fully while he devotes most of his thoughts to what he and Erik should do tonight, and is so involved in deciding where to go for dinner that he nearly misses the wave of amused malice directed at him. As it is, he catches it sidewise, flinching a little before he registers who it is.

"I hope," Sebastian Shaw murmurs, inclining his head formally, "this seat isn't taken?"

"Of course it isn't," Charles says. He doesn't dare look at Erik, but he does brush quick, careful mental fingers over him, hating how the shock and anger rings through Erik like the echoes of a bell, oscillating with memories of Shaw’s hands on him last night. Charles wonders if he could drop Shaw here, just reach into that mind of his and rip -- he breathes in as calmly as he can, cuts that thought off before it can take root. "Dr. Shaw, a pleasure; it's been a while. Should I offer my congratulations now?"

"If you'd like," Shaw says lazily. He folds himself into the seat next to Charles with an elaborate wince. "You would think that, with what we pay in registration, they would at least have comfortable seats."

Charles makes a noncommittal noise and turns back to his program. It's already marked up, and he hasn't missed any sessions that look especially promising on his first read-through, so he's left idly scanning the advertisements and list of participants, the president's welcome and the panels he's already seen.

Shaw leans back, crossing his legs and fastidiously straightening the creases in his trousers. Charles has enough of his mother's milk in him to know that they're expensive, precisely tailored. "I understand," Shaw drawls, "that my protegé has you to thank, at least in part. Your guidance in his early scholarship contributed to the strong foundation Erik has today. Even," he adds, not quite able to help himself, "after so many years.”

Charles looks up, now, though just meeting Shaw’s pale eyes is repulsive somehow, Charles loathing the fact he even has to acknowledge Shaw’s existence. He doesn’t care nearly as much about Shaw’s privacy as Erik’s, so he dips into Shaw’s mind and reviews his memories from the previous night -- and finds himself simultaneously shocked and pleased that Erik would admit they were together at all. To turn the conversation against Shaw, yes, but there’s nothing in what he sees of Erik’s expression in Shaw’s mind, or how Erik has acted since last night with Charles, to suggest Erik regrets it.

Of course, Charles can’t even appreciate that small pleasure without it being tainted by Shaw’s implications, the same suggestion that colored so much of Erik’s attitude toward Charles when he first came to MIT, resentful and distrusting, wanting but wary.

“On the contrary,” Charles says benignly, “surely he has you to thank, at least in part. Your guidance in his early scholarship contributed to the strong foundation Erik has today. Even,” he adds, not quite able to help himself, “after so many years.”
Shaw isn’t able to hide the brief flicker of irritation that darts across his expression; Charles is too aware of Erik watching them, Erik’s mind poring over every gesture Shaw makes, every line in his face, as if he could divine from that what Shaw is thinking without needing Charles’ power at all.

“I’m sure you’ve put Erik’s … scholarship … to good use,” Shaw says after the briefest pause, each word crisp and enunciated, like Shaw tasted every syllable on the tip of his tongue before spitting it out.

Charles smiles, doing his best to play the dim, oblivious role, knowing it will rile Shaw further and unable to resist the temptation – not after what Erik told him last night. “Quite,” he says, and tries not to think about Shaw’s fingers snapping Erik’s collarbone, Shaw’s hands holding him down, his mouth kissing him, raping him. It isn’t something he wants to consider, feels somehow like it’d be revictimizing Erik all over again, even if Erik has no way of seeing inside Charles’ mind – but with Shaw here, close enough Charles can smell his aftershave and feel the shift of his body in his chair sending reverberations into Charles’ own, his mind dripping like oil into the edges of Charles’ telepathic awareness along with all its associated memories … it’s more difficult than it ought to be.

"I understand you're in talks with HMS," Charles says, and let Shaw pretend it's a triumph that Erik clearly talks about him with his current partner. "What's in Boston that you can't get in Palo Alto?"

Shaw’s mind spikes with irritation, a mental image of him swatting Charles aside like a gadfly that Shaw has to bring swiftly under control. Charles keeps himself still, projecting calm and complete control -- which he, not so deep down, knows is a lie -- and he smiles reassuringly at Erik when Erik looks up at him. At him, Charles hopes Shaw sees; Erik isn't looking to Shaw, not anymore.

"A bit more influence," Shaw says, indicating a cluster of men and women standing near the stage, all recent nominees to Nobels in Medicine. "It seems most of the big advances are happening on the East Coast and I'd like very much to be a part of it."

Influence. Charles wonders if Shaw's found replacements to influence in the two years that Erik's been gone, and hopes like hell it's not a question Erik's ever asked himself. Are there more Eriks out there? Another question. "Well, we've changed institutions for lesser prizes than a Nobel Medal, I suppose," Charles says.

"Or greater," Shaw replies. "Although you never would guess it by his appearance." He waves his program at Erik, who's taken his seat on on the stage next to a severe-looking woman in black and grey. "It's a bit depressing, really, how Erik's chosen to represent MIT here. You'd think he doesn't take his hard-won appointment seriously."

Shaw means Erik’s clothes, Charles realizes belatedly, and his stubble -- he’s vaguely conscious from Erik’s memories, and Shaw’s, that Shaw had very strict opinions about the aesthetics of one’s self-presentation. He feels a rush of something like vindication on Erik’s behalf, that Erik’s clearly chosen to dress like this just to spite Shaw’s taste.

“Oh,” Charles says mildly, looking back at Shaw with a small smile -- “But he isn’t representing MIT tonight, Dr. Shaw, he’s representing you.”

Shaw doesn’t get a chance to reply to that before the President of APS rises from her seat on the stage, approaching the lectern and tapping the microphone, sending a muffled noise echoing out through the room. Charles is too aware of Shaw’s indignity from where he sits to Charles’ left, the anger sparking off Shaw’s mind and only serving to feed Charles’ own simmering hate.

“-ty-third annual meeting of the Association for Psychological Science,” the President continues on from the podium, reading off a clearly prepared speech illuminating them all as to the sheer prestige
of the award Shaw’s won, the dedication it must have taken to achieve all Shaw has by mid-career, naming all the greats Shaw joins in the halls of APS fame -- Loftus and Baumeister and Seligman. How strict, she says, the requirements are to be selected for this award from all the illustrious nominees: how one must demonstrate novel research, impactful results, mentorship ability, and a high standard of ethical practice.

*Ethics.* The irony, Charles thinks, is unbearable.

“Here to introduce his mentor is one of Dr. Shaw’s former students from Stanford, now an Associate Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience at MIT -- Dr. Erik Lehnsherr.”

Applause follows that, Charles clapping along and smiling again when Erik catches his eye in the front row -- he’s too far away to really tell, but he likes to think he sees Erik’s expression soften when he sees him. Or perhaps it’s just Charles’ imagination.

Erik reaches for his bottle of water under the podium, unscrewing the cap as he stands there in silence, making the audience wait as he takes a long swallow of water -- Charles counts the seconds as heartbeats, caught between the contrasting pulses of Erik’s vengeful thoughts and Shaw’s growing irritation. Next to Charles, Shaw uncrosses and then re-crosses his legs, clearly wishing he could tell Erik off without publicly ruining his reputation.

"We are here today to recognize a distinguished scholar and colleague," Erik says in his usual distinct, careful way, his pale gaze sweeping across the audience. "Or as I prefer to think of him, a mentor."

Most of the conference is here, the room simmering with curiosity, envy, and the sort of febrile speculation -- *we all know the rumors, is there any truth to them?* -- that makes Charles vaguely ill. If Erik senses the audience's mood, he doesn't show it, continuing with the implacable calm and inevitability of his lectures.

"Dr. Reichl has already spoken at length about Dr. Shaw's qualifications as a consummate professional, the benchmarks he's set for intellectual rigor in scholarship and teaching," Erik says. His gaze drifts down to his notes, a pause while the audience wonders what's happening. "In some ways, I can add no more to what is, very nearly, the deification of a man considered by many in the field to already be a god."

Shaw’s mouth thins and Charles has to block off the wave of interest and amusement as Erik’s barb sinks in. The whispers don't help, but Erik continues on. "But I believe I can provide a rather… singular perspective as one of Dr. Shaw’s advisees during my doctoral work at Stanford and the years following when I served as assistant professor in psychology and bioengineering at the University of California, Berkeley."

*Singular perspective.* Charles clamps down on the urge to send an urgent thought to Erik, a warning against what he's about to reveal. But, if he wants to, this is his truth to reveal, isn't it? Instead, Charles twines a soft thread of affection and confidence around Erik's cortex, something to bind them both together and to block out the poison that's pouring off Shaw.

"I, more than most," Erik says, mouth quirking slightly -- sardonic, although he does spare a flash of warmth for Charles -- "can attest to the power an advisor has to direct your course of work, from your first classes to your first professional appointment. For some of us well down the road to tenure -- or arrived at tenure already -- we tend to forget how closely an advisor who is truly engaged and involved in the minutiae of their advisees' lives can give direction to a young scholar's career."

There is not a single person in the audience, now, not hooked on Erik’s words, from the faculty
members to the graduate students titillated off the taste of fresh gossip. Erik takes another sip of his water, clearly amused by the reaction he’s getting, if bitterly so. His gaze scans the crowd again, making a point of looking at -- not Charles, but just to his left, at Shaw himself, whose mind is sharp and furious.

“When Dr. Shaw asked me last night to introduce him here today, I nearly refused.” Erik goes on at last. “After all, what introduction is there to give for a man so universally revered and acclaimed in both psychology and neuroscience alike? You all know his name. You’ve all read his work. Of course you have: it’s why he’s being awarded today. But I realized, then, that I was not merely being asked to introduce Dr. Shaw as a scholar, but also as a mentor, and as a man. And on these subjects, I find myself very well-equipped to speak.”

It’s starting to dawn on Shaw, the concern that Erik might not merely be planning to lace his introduction with a few sharp barbs and veiled insults, but that Erik might really be willing to throw his entire professional reputation away just to expose Shaw publicly. Fear, Charles has found, is always such a bright emotion, and in Shaw’s mind it’s brilliant, crystalline, sparkling through his every thought. Charles is afraid, too, though more of what Shaw might do to Erik if he no longer has to worry about dragging his own name through the dirt.

Erik glances down at the lectern, paging through his index cards, or ostensibly doing so: through his eyes, Charles can see that the cards in Erik’s hands are blank.

“When I came to study under Dr. Shaw, I had of course heard all the same rumors as the rest of you. I knew he was a genius. I knew he had one of the best work ethics alive in the field today.” Erik’s gaze flicks back up again, at Charles, and then somewhere over Charles’ head, speaking once more to the room at large. “The William James Lifetime Achievement Fellowship recognizes Dr. Shaw for his mentorship ability, and I can attest that he took incredible interest in my welfare as his student. He took responsibility for my life, and for my career during the earliest stages of its development.”

Behind Charles, the audience's anticipation spikes, enough to make his belly dance with nausea. Next to him, Shaw's grinding his teeth; Charles shores up his shields as best he can while still staying hooked in to Erik.

"Although many of us, particularly Americans, are taught to praise the self-made man, many of us in our more reflective moments know that we owe our professional success to a vast network of people. For myself, there hasn’t been a moment since my first day at Stanford that I haven’t felt Dr. Shaw’s influence and support, guiding my decisions. He was there when I won grants and fellowships, traveled to conferences, applied for positions. Whenever I think back on those evenings at the Rose and Crown, listening to him spin out his theories and dreams for the future of the field, I can’t help but think of what a nurturing time it was, when, as if at a classical symposium, Dr. Shaw oversaw the formation of young minds -- the future of the field itself.”

"What the hell?” a woman whispers to her companion just over Charles's left shoulder. "Gerry, do you think...?"

"No way,” Gerry whispers back, sounding nowhere near convinced. Still, he doesn't need his friend to finish the question, they were really sleeping together?, to give his answer, which says he believes the opposite. Charles sucks in a quiet breath; even if Erik doesn't come right out and say it, everyone will know, or as good as know. Behind Erik, the APS president is fidgeting, clearly wanting to interrupt, but courtesy holds her back.

"Above all,” Erik says, his tone hardening imperceptibly; Charles hears it, although he's sure no one else does, except for Shaw, "I owe him a debt of gratitude. His belief in discipline and rigor -- not only in intellectual life but in practice and daily living -- helped give me direction when my mother
was dying of breast cancer. Time I would have spent uselessly worrying, I spent hard at work. I know, even though I wasn't able to return to Germany before her death, my success brought her pride. I would not have been able to give her that, without Dr. Shaw's guidance."

*That* gets an audible reaction, a murmur rolling through the salon like a wave, a heady rush of everyone's thoughts and emotions crashing against Charles’ mind: confusion, incredulity, anger, disgust, fascination. Charles’ heart beats hard and fast in his chest, an anxiety that he knows is inappropriate when it isn’t his own life, his own career and his own trauma, but he’s so tied up with Erik now, their minds and lives so intertwined, that it nearly feels like the same thing.

Erik glances at Charles, clearly having noticed the response his words got this time. Charles gives him a tiny nod, and out of the corner of his eye sees Shaw's gaze snap toward him, Shaw’s rage battering impotently at the fringes of Charles’ telepathic awareness.

“Dr. Shaw did, admittedly, guide with a very firm hand,” Erik says after a moment’s pause, and Charles feels more than he sees Erik’s knuckles white at the edges of the lectern, “but I don’t doubt it was necessary to keep me on the path he knew was necessary. Doubtless I otherwise would have wandered off too soon, outside the reach of his control.”

Stunned silence greets that, followed by a few awkward, uncomfortable laughs, and Erik smiles tightly out at the audience, grim and determined as he pushes brazenly onward now -- “Therefore, I must thank Dr. Shaw, from the bottom of my heart, for the extreme lengths to which he has gone in his role as mentor. While perhaps these acts will not go down in history, will hold no lasting legacy as his scholarly work and novel contributions to the field undoubtedly shall, I myself will remember them acutely. It is my great pleasure, now, to invite Dr. Sebastian Shaw to the stage to receive the Association for Psychological Science’s highest award: the William James Fellowship for lifetime achievement.”

A pregnant beat stretches out in the wake of Erik’s words, before Erik himself lifts his hands to clap politely and the rest of the room seems to catch on, applause starting up soft and uncertain at first, then swelling up, louder. Next to Charles, Shaw is stiff and simmering with bound-up fury, a moving mental black hole as he unfolds from his seat and goes to join Erik up on the stage, his face a mask as he reaches out to take Erik’s proffered hand and shake it. Only Charles catches the sharp stab of Erik’s pain when Shaw grips far too tight, Erik’s bones bending and only barely not breaking.

Charles hangs on to his telepathy tight as he can, but it's been years since it's been this out of his control, ready to lash out at the slightest provocation without Charles giving it direction. *This is the last time you'll touch him*, he thinks when he's certain that thought will stay safely behind the cage of his skull, and when Shaw's finally let go to accept the plaque and and handshake and kiss from Dr. Reichl. Erik steps back, gesturing to the podium as if Shaw hadn't nearly broken his hand, and Shaw replies to the courtesy with a razor-sharp smile and nod.

"Thank you, Dr. Lehnsherr, for that… gracious introduction," Shaw says. Charles tenses, waiting for him to gloss away what Erik's so obliquely accused him of, years of ugliness hidden under that finely polished exterior and smooth words.

Only, Charles realizes, Shaw *can't*. The accusations are out there with a life of their own, and they're beyond Shaw's ability to control. They've done what Erik wants them to do: break free and exist outside of the universe Shaw's built for himself, a universe that -- even with Erik in Boston -- has always included Erik in orbit around him, bound and obedient.

"A measure of a professor's success isn't always the list of grants and fellowships on his CV, or his publication impact factor, or his ability to increase his department's research profile," Shaw says, "but rather, it's the success of his students. Dr. Lehnsherr is perhaps paradigmatic of the student all of us
senior scholars hope to raise: driven, dedicated, determined -- and anxious to break the apron strings and strike out on his own."

*It won't work,* Charles sends to Erik when Erik's mind spikes and prickles with anger. *Everyone knows already. He can say what he wants; it won't make any difference.*

Part of Erik despairs at that; he's used to Shaw taking moments when Erik *almost* escaped and turned them into opportunities to tie Erik down more tightly. He sees the same thing happening here, so Charles shows him the audience's skepticism, how it's there, Erik's seeds planted and already taking root.

"But Erik, of course, is far from my only student, and I'm proud to say that *their* success is every bit as exceptional and praiseworthy -- a legacy I'm as proud of as I am of my own work as a scientist. To say I am humbled, Dr. Reichl," Shaw bows to Dr. Reichl, who nods back, her thin hands tightly clasped in front of her, "is to understate the matter. I thank you and the APS fellowship committee for this… very, very great honor."

Shaw’s words fall on deaf ears, of course; Charles is aware of a pair of graduate students a few rows back hunched over a cell phone, on their ninth tweet so far about this talk alone. Erik, sitting back in his chair, crosses his legs at the knees and watches Shaw with narrowed eyes, his program and blank index cards held in one hand.

Shaw’s speech is prepared, of course, and he doesn’t deviate from what Charles can tell is his standard. He’s hoping he can play all of this off, take advantage of some people’s lingering doubts, pretend he himself noticed nothing amiss in Erik’s words. The apparent obliviousness bothers Erik nearly as much as it would have had Shaw found some magnificent way of dismissing Erik’s speech in a single play.

When he’s finished, he shakes Dr. Reichl’s hand again, and returns to take her old seat next to Erik on the stage while she assumes the podium to give closing remarks. Charles, however, has very little focus left for that when he can’t stop looking at Shaw, sat so close to Erik, his arm brushing Erik’s arm and his foot placed an inch away from Erik’s foot. He’ll try to draw Erik away as soon as this is over, doubtless to administer due punishment in private. Charles doesn’t intend to let him -- even if it means having to find an excuse to give Shaw his congratulations all over again.

Indeed, the moment Dr. Reichl steps down and the applause starts up again, Charles sees Shaw lean in toward Erik and grasp his upper arm, whispering something in Erik’s ear -- Charles doesn’t hesitate before getting to his feet and heading up to the stage himself, pulling his own phone out of his back pocket as he does so.

“Erik,” he calls from a few feet away, holding up the iPhone. “I think you left your phone behind.”

No one, of course, misses any of this; Shaw and Erik are onstage, the bright lights of the salon full on them, and for once the audience isn’t so eager to get to dinner and drinks that they aren’t willing to wait around to speak to the presenters -- or, in this case, see what further gossip might develop. More than a few eyes are taking note of Shaw’s hand on Erik’s arm, the expression on Erik's face, which flickers from furious to relieved when he catches sight of Charles.

Shaw has to let go of him or risk the rumors turning into truth. Erik detaches himself from Shaw as if Shaw's grip on his arm had only been the barest press of fingers on fabric and heads over to Charles, turning back to give Shaw a nod and farewell so formal in its courtesy Charles can taste the blood in it.

"Thanks," Erik says, too furious and rattled to care that Charles has rescued him. "Let's get out of
You did marvelously, Charles sends, filling the words with as much private warmth and affection as he can. To keep up the charade, he hands Erik his cell phone -- to join Erik's phone, Charles is sure, in his briefcase, and tucks his hands in his trouser pockets.

He leads Erik out of the crush, silently suggesting to the other attendees that they have better things to do than fish for the specifics behind Erik's speech. In the salon behind them, Shaw's beginning to talk to Reichl and a handful of others, sonorous voice spinning webs that Charles imagines will spread across the country, snaring Erik in them and dragging him away from Charles.

So he hopes, very much, that Erik will understand when he spins out a thought of his own, fine as barbed wire, sinks it into Shaw's brain and yanks so it snags deep in his memory and binds himself and Shaw together. *This is the last time you'll hurt him. It's the last time you'll put a hand on him,* he says, and he sends with it his certainty that if Shaw does anything, Charles will make sure Shaw is bound and helpless in ways he could only dream of making Erik.

He turns his attention away again immediately, refusing to witness Shaw’s reaction. He focuses on Erik instead, the familiar twist of Erik’s mind so close to his, the sense-memory of it so caught up with so many different emotions borne out of the past two years and still growing, still developing.

“Are you hungry?” Charles asks, but Erik shakes his head, confirming Charles' interpretation of the unsteady feeling in Erik’s mind.

“I just threw my entire career away, didn’t I?” Erik mutters, ignoring the interested looks given them by the people they pass by, people who had been present during the talk and who doubtless want an excuse to pull Erik aside and ask as many probing questions as they can. They’re all too wary, now, of approaching Shaw -- gratifying in its own way.

“No, I don’t think so,” Charles says. “You were vague enough. And aside from that, your scholarly record will stand on its own.”

Erik hums out a noncommittal noise and turns toward the short staircase that leads down to the elevators, Charles following. Erik strips off his lanyard with its nametag while they stand there waiting for the elevator to arrive, silent in the presence of all the other conference attendees waiting for their own elevators to come dinging down to the second floor. After a moment he reaches into his back pocket and hands Charles’ phone back to him silently for Charles to tuck it away in his jacket, out of sight.

They take the lift up to the fourteenth floor, angled in among all the others, in with the heat pulsing out of their bodies and the buzz of their minds like clouds overhead. Erik steps out first when they reach their floor, leading the way back to their room where he opens the magnetic latch with a touch of his fingers to the keypad.

“He'll still get the Harvard job if he wants it.” Erik says when the door swings shut behind them, toeing off his shoes near the wall and heading in toward the bedroom. “His scholarly record stands on its own, too.”

"It's not going to be the only consideration," Charles tells him, although Shaw's record as a scholar will loom much larger than his record as a terrible individual. *The fish rots from the head,* he thinks with a cynicism that's partly Erik's; Erik can't imagine Harvard turning Shaw down based on rumors and vague not-even accusations by a former student who'd gone on to success of his own.

Charles can't help but continue, though. "People are going to be more careful," he says as he
wanders around their room, stripping off jacket and tie, a bit regretful for ruining Erik's work with the knot. "They'll warn their students about him, technicians, everyone. He won't be able to do this again."

"He'll find a way," Erik says, his mind dark and hopeless, midnight where earlier he'd burned so brightly with defiance. "He always did. He's still finding a way. He made me, Charles, and he won't let me forget it."

"You don't have to forget it," Charles says, hoping against hope he doesn't sound as patronizingly understanding as he sounds. The glare Erik sends him says he's failed. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, I know." Erik sighs explosively. Energy twitches under his skin, the restless energy of a prey animal preparing itself for escape. "I know you're sorry, that you mean it."

_That Shaw never was sorry_, Charles hears, although Erik doesn't say it. "You've beaten him already, Erik," Charles tries, and when Erik laughs bitterly, he says, "you did it when you left him, when you refused to go with him again and again. He's lost his power over you and he's trying to get it back."

"Do you think I don't know that?" Erik snaps. "I don't need you -- " he clenches his teeth, his fist opening and closing; his metal, coins collected at the airport and the razor in a plastic letter-opener, starts to rattle agitatedly on the desk. "You're right. I can't believe it, though."

Charles knows, intimately, what it’s like to have someone clench down hard when they worry they’re going to lose control over you -- to go to any lengths in order to maintain it. And he knows how, even long outside their clutches, that fear and anxiety can linger, a quick shadow darting behind every corner.

"He won’t be able to hurt you again,” Charles says, stepping closer to Erik, who lets him, who doesn’t flinch away. “People will be watching for it now. He can’t hope to keep using old tricks.”

“He’ll invent new ones,” Erik grouses, but as he didn’t flinch, neither does he pull away when Charles rests a hand on his arm. Not the arm Shaw touched.

“He couldn’t stop you from going to MIT. And he couldn’t stop you from saying what you said today. Sooner or later, he’s going to have to stop trying, or he’ll risk his own ego to losing again and again.”

But Erik looks down at him, frowning, and says, “You don’t know Shaw."

“Maybe not.” _But I do know people_, Charles adds, telepathically, which makes his point even without subtlety.

"Telepaths," Erik snorts. Still, he permits Charles to lace their fingers together -- the hand Shaw had abused this time -- and permits Charles to kiss the bruised, aching bones and skin of the back of his hand.

"Let's order room service," Charles suggests, and takes in stride Erik's silent complaint that room service is almost always disappointing. "We'll order in, then. A quiet night, like at home.""You're coddling me," Erik says, bridling a little, although he doesn't try to pull away. He sounds more fond than anything, and cantankerous more for the sake of it than because he actually resents Charles trying to take care.

"It's not every day someone makes APS interesting," Charles says. He grins when Erik barks a laugh. "I think there's a list of places that deliver here in the brochure on the desk. Get what you want
and then once we've gotten rid of the delivery person, we won't have to look at anyone else tonight?"

Erik briefly imagines Shaw breaking down the door to their room -- Shaw, before that, finessing their room number out of a flustered receptionist, all sweet words and venomous thoughts -- but the scenario vanishes when he contemplates what's real: the two of them here, Charles proud of him and looking at him with *that* look, the one Erik can't get enough of and loves and fears in equal measure.

That's not something Erik should fear, Charles thinks; he hopes Erik won't, some day. He knows what it's like to not trust yourself, to see the many mistakes you've made and the failures of perception you've been guilty of, and to go with the explanations that other people hand to you -- and when you realize it, how complicit you've been in methodically destroying your own life, you realize you can't trust other people and you have to, somehow, learn to trust yourself and what you tell yourself is real, even if you know you're unreliable. If Erik's not going to fear this, or him, he'll have to do it because Erik trusts himself as much as he trusts Charles.

In the meantime, Charles can care for him as best he can and in the ways Erik permits. He collects the food when it shows up, laughing when he sees it's pizza and a bottle of severely expensive wine from the Palmer House's cellars. Erik shrugs and curls up on the bed, thinking thoughts of comfort food that Charles can't argue with.

“I wish I'd gone with you back to your hotel room when you came to Cal,” Erik says later, after the pizza is gone and they're lounging back on the pillows in bed, the wine half-empty and Erik swirling his around in his glass, glancing up from it to meet Charles' eyes. “I very nearly did, you know. I'd never met anyone like you.”

Charles swallows down his mouthful of wine before he chokes on it, taken aback by the words out of Erik's mouth, even if he knows they're true -- has known they're true for a long time. He sets his glass aside, then, on the nightstand so he isn't at risk of spilling it all over the white coverlet as he reaches out a hand to trace his fingers against the underside of Erik's wrist, tracing the greenish web of veins there.

“I thought surely you would,” Charles says. “I thought I was irresistible, and yet your better judgment held out after all.”

He gives Erik a tiny smirk and enjoys the sharklike grin Erik responds with, bright and dangerous, full of sharp edges.

“I don’t know if it was my better judgment,” Erik says, though he avoids veering back off toward Shaw territory, his mind determinedly fixed on this, Charles, and their current conversation.

Charles snorts. “Please.” And watches as Erik lifts his glass for another sip of wine, the shift of his long and elegant throat as he swallows and then Erik lifts a brow, fixing Charles with his gaze and saying, “I know a rake when I see one.”

“Do you know a hoe, too?” Charles says, unable to help himself, and it’s worth it when Erik laughs out loud, the expression creasing up his face and crinkling the corners of his eyes, as genuine as most things Erik’s shared with him lately, bursting into Charles’ awareness like the sizzling flare of a lit sparkler, shimmering against a summer night.

He leans over, telegraphing his intent and grinning helplessly when Erik looks up with honest welcome in his eyes, and kisses the wine-rich crease of Erik's lips, licking in when Erik opens for him. This might have happened for the first time years ago, when Charles had gone to Berkeley, but it didn't; it's happening now, and Charles can't help but be tremulously grateful for it. Erik carefully slides his wine glass onto the bedside table and collects Charles's as well so Charles can settle atop
Erik’s strong, beautiful body, covering it and keeping it safe and tangling the two of them together in a kiss that goes nowhere except further into itself. Erik's mind is sweetly molten, hot and melting around Charles's, ready for Charles to take it and shape it into something made entirely of pleasure and contentment.

*Just touch me, darling*, he thinks, smiling when Erik huffs softly in annoyance at having to be told -- although he's getting better, bolder about touching without being asked and finding new ways to make Charles shiver. He complies, though, idle fingers traveling Charles's ribs and back, reacquainting himself, stamping himself into Charles's flesh so he's indelible.

And he doesn't have to bruise Charles to do it. Charles hopes Erik understands that.

They make out lazily for a while, two slightly-older-than-young men masquerading as teenagers. It leaves Erik sleepy and content, mouth kiss-swollen and eyes lidded, pliant enough that he lets Charles undress him for bed and guide him through brushing his teeth and pissing. His mind is buckling under exhaustion, the stress of the day still hidden where Erik doesn't have to cope for it but making its presence felt all the same.

*Sleep well*, he tells Erik once he has him back in bed, Erik curled on his side, an elegant apostrophe Charles will curve into later. For now he's propped up on the pillows next to Erik, half minded to check the program before following Erik into dreams, but wanting to stay awake a little longer to make sure Erik's sleep isn't troubled by Shaw or anything else.

Instead, he ends up with his cell phone in one hand, scrolling through his e-mail and checking his unread messages from graduate students, his lab manager, his new and surprisingly competent post-doc…. There's the usual fodder of spam messages and inquiries from undergraduates as to whether he’ll be taking on new students next year, enough of them that Charles nearly misses the sender’s name on the third email from the bottom.

*Kurt Marko.*
Clicking *delete* is instinctual, a reflex like yanking his hand away from an open flame. Charles tightens down his shields before the worst of the shock can spill out across Erik, toxic sludge to infect dreams that are quiet and simple, flickering images Erik won't remember tomorrow morning. He glances down at Erik, who's still blissfully asleep, soft-edged right now but still strong; Charles lets himself stroke Erik's hair, a moment of comfort so he can turn back to his cell phone without wanting to throw it across the room.

*Best to get it over with.* Kurt rarely communicates with him directly, preferring his or Sharon's attorney -- which is also how Charles prefers it. There's something refreshing in the lawyer's indifferent professionalism after years of Kurt's subtle malice, although it means when Kurt does email him, Charles has to remember to armor himself all over again, to not be twelve years old again, believing every word out of his stepfather's mouth because it was easier than the alternative and adults were to be trusted.

He hits the subject line with his thumb, gets an interminable hiatus before the message loads.

*Charles--*

Charles skips over the inconsequential opening sentences; there's not much, because Kurt always gets right to the point. He skims the rest, a short paragraph that reads like a telegram, snorts when he gets to the end of it.

"Of course," he mutters to himself, flipping back to his inbox. It's nothing that Kurt hasn't sent him before, requests that skirt the edges of demands, an update on his mother, with whom Charles hasn't spoken in years. He wonders why Kurt had sent this email on his own without going through the lawyer, wonders why he's asking himself that question.

He can let it sit. His mother is still dying slowly, he's still in control of his share of the estate. More importantly, *most* importantly, he's still here with Erik, who makes a soft noise in his sleep from the pillow next to Charles and shifts closer to the halo of Charles' body heat.

Deciding to let it go doesn’t make it easier to push it from his mind, though, even after Charles has flipped off the bedside lamp and settled down on his side facing Erik, close enough that Erik’s exhales gust warm against his nose and forehead, the hotel room silent save for the hum of the air conditioner. Even when he thinks of nothing at all he can feel the memory of that email pressing up against the back of his mind, an anxious weight that translates too easily into a quick heartbeat and a lingering sense of exasperation, one that feeds on itself, looping back again and again and blossoming into a slow and sure insomnia.

If it were Erik who couldn’t sleep, Charles would push at his mind with a touch of telepathy and wipe away the worries, dipping him down below the surface of his own thoughts. It doesn’t work against himself, of course. There’s no way to bat aside his distractions and preoccupations, to blot his mind to white. If there were, doubtless Charles wouldn’t have had the issues he did in college, because he wouldn’t have needed narcotics to forget what a fucking mess his life turned out to be.

He lets his telepathy unspool a little, in lieu of sleeping, threading out through the hotel and taking attendance of the minds present, famous and infamous alike, from lowly graduate student to the APS president herself, all leveled and equal like this. He doesn’t pry, not really -- it’s a technique he taught...
himself when he was in grad school himself, feeding off the fringes of other people’s minds while they slept, trying to steal the sense-memory of sleep to lure and trick himself into letting dreams take over.

Eventually, it must work; the next thing Charles knows it’s seven in the morning and Erik wakes him up, wet-haired from the shower and sitting on Charles’ side of the bed with the room service menu propped up against Charles’ shoulder and asking about breakfast.

*Must you?* Charles asks blurrily. His eyes are dry and gritty and he feels hungover, although he’d barely drunk at all last night, too on-edge waiting for Erik to tap in. Last night comes back in vivid fits and starts, ending with that email. No wonder he's exhausted. He rolls over, ignoring Erik’s grunt of annoyance.

"Busy day today," Erik says. His mind clicks swiftly through the menu, straight-ahead and determined as always, like railway tracks. "Sessions for both of us, unless you're going to skive off." His thoughts hesitate as Erik takes notice of him, registering all the minutiae that add up to something not being right. "Are you all right?"

The question is gruff, unpracticed, but with concern lying underneath it. "I got an email from Kurt last night, before I went to bed," Charles says. He pushes himself up on his elbows and tries to rub the worst of the sleep from his eyes. Exhaustion's settled itself in his skull, and if it didn't mean leaving Erik to the mercies of professional gossip, he would skive off and spend the rest of the day asleep.

"Kurt," Erik says flatly as he reaches for the phone on the bedside table. "Your stepfather."

"Yes." Erik only knows the sketch of Charles's life, really, the rough and distorted outlines of it. What Erik's been able to intuit from that, Charles doesn't know and he's not sure he has the energy to find out. He rolls over and sits up, nods his thanks when Erik levitates his watch over to him and hands him the menu. "Belgian waffle, please."

Erik sniffs disdainfully. "You need protein."

Charles hums. "Chicken sausage, then. Does that count?"

"I suppose," Erik says discontentedly. "Do you want tea or coffee? The free coffee downstairs is shit."

“Tea,” Charles says, “Earl Grey,” and Erik clearly has enough information at that point to dial and put in their orders. While they’re waiting, Charles sits where he is and blearily watches as Erik gets dressed, far more smartly than he bothered with for Shaw’s award talk, though Charles is tired enough he can’t even appreciate the way any of it complements the lines of Erik’s body.

Eventually he pushes himself out of bed properly and wakes himself up enough in the shower that he manages to assemble a reasonably put-together outfit for the day, trousers with a belt and a tucked-in oxford collar shirt. The lingering edges of exhaustion are enough to add static to his thoughts, and when he rolls the sleeves up toward his elbows he finds himself staring down at the old, blanched scars on his forearm from abscessed track marks. They’re barely visible now, after nearly twenty years, but Charles notices even if no one else does, not even Erik. He has the geometry of them memorized: here, where they lift a bit, textured and nearly keloidal. There, where he used to use as the starting point when he measured just how far up his vein the black had spread.

The knock at the door of their food arriving startles him enough that he knocks into the bed when he lurches forward, tripping over himself even as he instinctively crosses the room to answer the door
and let the man wheel the trays in and transfer them to the desk, passing over a folded twenty from his wallet as tip.

“Maybe you should have ordered coffee,” Erik says, not unkindly, and lifts the lid off one of the plates to pop a blackberry into his mouth. Charles makes a noise of agreement, although Erik's coffee smells strong enough to wake him up all on its own.

The tea does help, though, and it's the heat as much as the caffeine that clears Charles’ mind enough so that when he sets his cup down on its saucer and says, “We’d better head down,” he can do it without much of a grudging sense of obligation. “Your symposium is at eleven, right?”

“Mmm. Just before lunch, unfortunately,” Erik confirms, pushing back his chair and reaching for his satchel where it's leaned against the suitcase on the floor, heading toward the door and waiting there for Charles to collect his own bag and follow. “At least they put you in a three o’clock.”

“I’d trade if I could,” Charles says, smiling at Erik as Erik opens the door for them with his power, preceding him into the hall.

Erik laughs. "Everyone's already thinking about drinks?"

Charles considers what a rich, rare thing Erik's laugh is; as Erik draws even with him, he flicks a glance sideways to see that broad grin, all white teeth and enjoyment. "Drinks and food, or else trying not to fall asleep in an underventilated room."

"Hmph." Erik's haloed with vaguely annoyed thoughts about unprofessional behavior and lack of focus, although some of the talks he's seen have been mind-numbing in their unoriginality or the lack of precision in their argument. Still, he says, "It's better than everyone wondering what they should have for lunch, I imagine."

"It depends." They've reached the worst of the conference maelstrom now, conversation piled upon conversation, packed as tightly as the bodies of too many academics waiting to get into the conference rooms. "Sometimes it's easier to ignore hunger than combined sleepiness and desire for alcohol."

"Interesting," Erik says.

He's thinking about asking Charles more about his telepathy and how shielding works, a topic they’ve rarely discussed beyond arguments about privacy and agency, but the question vanishes into annoyance when Erik hears the substance of the conversations around them. There's no way to shield him from that, Charles reminds himself; what Erik had done last night, not so much tarnishing Shaw's reputation as laying a patina of speculation over it -- people had started talking while Erik had been talking, and they'd certainly kept on talking after the two of them had made their escape.

Curious gazes follow them, speech muted slightly as they pass by. The line of Erik's jaw tightens, slowly, surely, and it's only long practice at pretending everything is fine that keeps Charles's expression neutral. Charles catches in a few of their minds flashes of memory and consideration that makes it clear Shaw’s been spreading the rumor -- the truth, really -- about Erik and Charles being together, hoping people will infer that Erik’s simply the sort who would sleep with anyone if he thought it would further his career, that if Erik did sleep with his adviser it’s hardly Shaw’s fault because he slept with someone at his new institution as well, long before he got the offer. It doesn’t seem to have worked out as Shaw intended, most people not malicious enough to see it as anything other than an interesting tidbit or something that’s none of their business. Even so, if Erik knew, he wouldn’t like it; Charles knows him well enough for that.
“People are inherently distrustful of the tenure system, even when it works in their favor,” Charles murmurs after a few seconds, quiet enough only Erik can hear. “They’re inclined to believe people in authority will abuse that authority if given the opportunity, especially when there’s little consequence for doing so.”

“Does that extend to Nobel nominees, too?” Erik says, a bit coolly, but that anger isn’t directed at Charles.

A few beats pass, and then Charles says, “Are you going to the social neuroscience talk?” He suspects the answer but wants to be sure, glad the topic is common enough between the two of them that he doesn’t have to worry about Erik thinking Charles is trying to play white knight if he comes along.

Erik hums out agreement, even as he scans the halls with narrowed eyes, sending more than a few undergraduate students scattering off on sight. “Salon 3.”

“Good,” Charles says, “me too. Shall we go and get seats?”

That much is for Erik’s protection, but Erik had been thinking along the same lines -- Charles checked -- and he goes along without complaint, letting Charles follow him into the ballroom and choosing seats together near the back of the room, poised for easy escape.

As it turns out, though, those same seats invite company: they’ve barely been sitting five minutes, Erik leafing through his program and Charles watching people filter into seats at the front row, when an older South Asian woman in a flowy green tunic shirt sits down at Erik’s right, her mind all focused purpose and intentionality.

"Erik," she says pleasantly, one lined hand settling briefly on Erik's knee. Erik doesn't twitch away, although his thoughts are a brief, chaotic tumble of recognition, fear, and gratitude. The woman leans forward around the barrier of Erik's body and she offers Charles a smile. "Dr. Xavier, yes?"

She says it without glancing down at Charles's lanyard. Erik, bemused at being territory caught between two sides, says, "Charles Xavier, Eileen Patel," and watches as they shake hands. Eileen's hand is cool and dry, fragrant with moisturizer and soft except for writer's calluses on her thumb and index finger.

"One of Erik's old professors at Stanford," Eileen says, still with that smile. "Emphasis on old."

Emphasis on Stanford, rather, Charles thinks. Eileen settles into her seat, humming to herself as she takes out her tablet and pushes her briefcase under her chair. She adjusts the tablet on her lap with all the fastidiousness of an artist preparing her canvas, or a cat settling itself in the sun -- with her mind fixed all the while on Erik and what she's come to say while the room's still mostly empty.

"We should talk more over coffee later," she says absently, "since we didn't get much of a chance to catch up at dinner the other night." Shaw hangs as the subtext behind the words, hovering like a malevolent spirit. "But I did want to say that it was brave of you to say what you did last night. Far less than he deserves, but a start."

Erik releases a shaky, aggravated breath. "Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me for the truth." Eileen's thinking of the past, years hazy but punctuated with flashes -- moments of stolen conversation, a younger Erik brimming with anger and confusion, words spoken carefully because Eileen, although a respected scholar in her own right, wasn't sure how much she could risk and still be able to give help if asked for it. "We failed you, Erik." She
frowns out at the slowly-filling salon. "Something should have been done, and we should have been the ones to do it."

There’s nothing else to say, then, at least for the time being, because the row behind them has started to fill up and, as if he's a devil who's been spoken of, Charles feels the sickening, slanted feel of Shaw’s mind sliding into the room as well, surrounded by his usual coterie of sycophants. Erik notices, too, his thoughts tilting darker, and when Eileen follows his gaze her frown deepens.

“Later,” she says, waving a violet-nailed hand at Erik, and they fall into an uneasy silence, Eileen paging through the program and Erik stony-eyed next to Charles, the tension beating off his mind like an arrhythmic drum.

For his own part, Charles finds it equally difficult to pay attention to the lectures when his focus keeps slipping off back toward Kurt and that blasted email.

Kurt has, at least, achieved his goal: he's got Charles so fixated on what he said that he can barely think about his own life, things that ought to be -- that are -- more important than Kurt’s repetitive dramas.

During the Q&A of the final speaker, Charles finds himself pulling open the email and reading it again, even though with his psionic’s memory he’s already got the thing memorized. As much as Charles wishes it were an option, he can't simply ignore this forever. He'll have to draft some kind of a response, the shorter the better, or Kurt will only keep sending message after message until he drowns out everything else in Charles’ inbox. Charles knows from experience.

“What did you think?” he makes himself say once the session is over and they’re gathering up their things, Eileen still quiet and circumspect considering their surroundings.

Erik makes a dismissive gesture and says, “First talk: obvious, simply a more rigorous test of things we already know. Second and third, poorly-designed. Fourth, interesting, but how interesting depends on whether or not they can take care of that data analytic issue which I’m sure didn’t escape your notice.”

"I admit, my attention was flagging by that point," Charles says, and before Erik can give him that too-considering look, adds, "But don't think I won't pay scrupulous attention to your analytics in the next session."

"I'm presenting third; are you sure your attention won't give out by then?" Erik asks, but it's gently mocking -- gently, of course, for Erik. Still, it's welcome, Erik needling him out of his distraction.

"I need to go speak with Dave Gilchrist," Eileen says, with an absentness that Charles is quickly coming to realize isn't absentness at all; under the distant tone, and under those violet nails and violently-patterned outfits, she's calculatedly present. She must be, to survive sharing a department with Shaw. "I'll see you in your session, Erik."

She departs with a squeeze of Erik's hand and a polite nod for Charles, crowds of academics parting for her thin, small body like the sea around the prow of a determined ship. Erik watches her go, his mind a confusion of admiration, gratitude, and anger -- and wanting to talk to Eileen more, wanting to run away from a truth he's only beginning to understand he'll have to admit to himself again and again.

*Come on*, Charles says quietly. He doesn't touch Erik here in public, only too capable of imagining what Shaw had done, marking Erik's body as his own and trusting Erik's self-control to keep him from causing a scene. Still, it helps to give Erik direction, and Erik softens a little for him, summoning his briefcase up from the floor and turning to follow Eileen into the crush. From across the room, Shaw's attention tracks them like a bloodhound, and Charles wants nothing more than to
crush those parts of Shaw’s brain that hold his memories of Erik, the part that even now thinks of Erik as *his*.

When Charles notices Shaw beginning to shift, and the intentionality in his mind -- heading this way, wanting to intercept Erik before Erik’s talk -- Charles finds himself glancing down at his watch face and saying, “How long do you think you’ll need to set up?” hoping Erik will take the bait without reading too much into the intent behind it.

“I need to transfer the presentation onto the computer,” Erik says. “It shouldn’t take long, but I ought to head over now before there’s a line.”

Charles hums noncommittally and lets Erik lead the way through the winding halls, past the lobby and up a flight of stairs to the next room. Shaw doesn’t follow -- can’t, not without drawing unwanted attention, but even so Charles has nothing better to do with his fifteen minutes than trail after Erik and take his seat on one of the folding chairs near the aisle, settling in to answer emails from his phone while the other seats fill up.

Charles was familiar enough with the material Erik is presenting already, having heard about it in bits and pieces over dinner and in frustrated rants during car rides home from lab more often than he can count, but this is the first time he’s seen it all in one piece, knit together and cohesive with a strong narrative running from inspiration all the way to future directions. He sits attentively, hanging on every word … but of course he can feel Shaw doing the same, having slipped into the back row sometime after the first talk. Erik has noticed, as well, that knowledge coloring his thoughts and stirring up old anger and anxiety even as Erik keeps the tone of his presentation calm and consistent thanks to all his extensive practice. In many ways, Erik is controlled to a fault: with so many eyes on him he never falters, never flinches; Shaw knew it, and Shaw relied upon it.

Maybe it's the imp of the perverse, maybe Charles is tired of taking the high road in his own life -- forgiving for the sake of his mental health and for the sake of moving on, even if he can't forget what happened to him. Either way, he itches to sink into Shaw's cortex and find out what he could do to him and what it would take to wipe that pleased, knowing smirk off of Shaw's face. If he could unlace a few connections here and there -- if he could make Shaw cluck like a chicken, or make him forget about Erik completely… Charles looks back up at Erik, one finger held over the pulse of Shaw's thoughts, focuses the rest of himself on Erik's concluding statements and the last few slides.

After Erik finishes, the chair indicates that the floor is open for questions. A moment of silence descends, the audience collecting its thoughts. It isn't silence to Charles, though, as the mental voices rise up to replace the humming echo of listening minds, a roomful of people running over their notes and memories of Erik's presentation, searching for something to ask or striving to frame their question in a way that won't require the chair to urge them to get to the point.

Through it all, Shaw's mind runs like an arrow or a finely-honed knife, sharp and striking home with purpose.

"Dr. Shaw," the chair says, gesturing to him.

"Ah, yes, Dr. Lehnsherr," Shaw says, rising to his feet in a rustle of expensive fabric. "A fascinating discussion, as we've all come to expect, but as you spoke I couldn't help but wonder…" his tone shades down into a sort of inquisitive disappointment, "... if, philosophically, the research agenda you've outlined for us isn't rather facile?"

Irritation flickers through Erik’s mind, hot and bright. “How so?” he states flatly.

“Well,” Shaw says, drawing out the syllable, tasting the consonants on his tongue, “I simply wonder
if this model accounts for all the variability we might observe in the wild, so to speak. We must always be skeptical of grand claims of universal, well, *anything.*”

Faces turn back toward Erik now, waiting for his response; at the podium, Erik has lifted one brow, looking for all the world as if Shaw is Erik’s least favorite undergraduate asking another obtuse question, rather than the preeminent scholar in their field.

“Naturally data examined in aggregate will never identify all the tiny variations between individuals that exist in the real world. Not only do these things wash out with high enough power, but we intend them to. It’s the nature,” a thin smile, “of statistics. Furthermore,” Erik says before Shaw can continue, barreling onward even though Shaw has already opened his mouth, “a model may be philosophically facile, but empirical data never is. Personally, I’ve always been a fan of empirical parsimony, myself. If we cannot inductively prove universality through frequency, we can at least deductively support it through absence of falsification. I’m sure you’re up to date on your introductory methods courses, Professor Shaw.”

A quiet titter runs through the audience at that, many of whom were present for yesterday’s debacle, and even those who weren’t can recognize an insult when they hear it. Erik doesn’t look at Charles, his gaze still fixed coolly on Shaw, waiting, but Charles feels his attention flick toward him if only briefly, curious as to his reaction. Charles supplies it readily enough: a faint amusement, accompanied by agreement and approval, because to Charles it’s perfectly obvious Shaw doesn’t stand by his own argument, which was no more developed a criticism than any that might have been launched by one of Erik’s own undergraduates: it’s there to needle Erik, to get a reaction, nothing more.

He should know better, Charles thinks; for a man who had turned Erik inside-out for twelve years and steadily ground away at Erik’s sense of himself, he doesn’t know the core of Erik -- hasn’t seen it, hasn’t been able to touch it. It's that core that allows Erik to smile calmly and say, "I trust that addresses your concerns, Dr. Shaw?"

Shaw sits down without saying anything. The silence speaks for him, annoyance tamped down and masked with satisfied professional curiosity. Grad students sitting nearby -- the same students from yesterday, Charles realizes, bemused by the eager resonance of their minds -- furiously enter the exchange into their Twitter logs. Up on the stage, the chair eyes the audience suspiciously. "Any further questions for Dr. Lehnsherr?"

Charles raises his hand, to a bolt of irritated amusement from Erik and faint worry from the chair.

"Dr. Xavier?"

"Thank you, Dr. Yang," Charles says. He turns to Erik, who's regarding him narrowly. "I'm afraid, Dr. Lehnsherr, I'll have to ask you to flip back to slide… eighteen?" He remembers perfectly, of course, but the hesitation provokes more annoyance, Erik's hackles going up like an angry cat's as he scrolls back through the presentation to the slide Charles wants. "We've had this discussion before, of course, but I noticed that you included affect, arousal, and intensity of affect as variables instead of examining discrete emotions. Can you explain your reasoning behind this?"

"The evidence supporting biologically fundamental discrete emotions is flimsy: a large body of work suggests they are the emergent property of affect, arousal, and intensity as more basic ingredients of emotion, characterized as these discrete emotions only through cognitive conceptual processes. Furthermore, as this is an imaging study and discrete emotions do not map one-to-one onto specific neural structures, it seemed fruitless to make such connections even on a theoretical level,” Erik says, each word crisp and quick, having said nearly the same thing to Charles at least thrice before now.
Charles hums out a noncommittal sound and says, “But perhaps your results would have been cleaner if you had. Do you think?”

Erik huffs. “I’m not in search of clean data, Dr Xavier, I’m in search of good data. Good data is rarely clean.”

Charles grins a little at that, ceding the point; he really does agree with Erik when it comes to emotion theory, but it’s one of those topics Erik has always been quite opinionated about. It’s easy to poke at the raw flesh and watch Erik react, and feel the spark of passion and conviction in Erik’s mind.

“Are you saying, Dr Lehnsherr, that all the work that has been done on basic emotion theory to date, by such luminaries as Ekman and others, has been totally in vain?” he asks, just to see Erik’s jaw tighten, forced to restrain himself from saying yes and tanking his career in a single word.

“Naturally not,” Erik says at last, visibly trying to sound measured and conciliatory. He isn’t thinking about Shaw anymore, at least, which was the real point of this exercise. Charles crosses his legs and leans back in his chair, listening attentively. “Without such research into the concept of discrete emotions, more recent work would not have been possible. The idea of discrete emotions surely exists in the human psyche: no one debates that. The question is whether or not those emotions are truly fundamental, and that’s what concerns constructionists, appraisal theorists, and so on.”

Charles lets Erik direct the Q&A back to a more even path after that, waving Erik off when he asks if he has further questions. Admittedly, he takes a twisted sort of pleasure, too, in sensing Shaw’s reaction to all of this, Shaw’s realization that he’s already been thrust aside in favor of keener worries and more interesting rivalries.

"Thank you, Dr. Lehnsherr," Yang says the moment Erik's allotted time is up, just as Erik finishes expanding on a question about regression analysis from Thea Kalmar -- whom, Charles knows, Yang had called on instead of Shaw, who'd raised his hand again. Thea murmurs a quick thank-you to Erik, who acknowledges it with a nod before he sits down again.

Charles sits through the final talk, a half-hour of thinking more about Erik and hearing the thoughts about him than about the speaker and their science. He picks up on amusement mostly, the schadenfreude that came with seeing Shaw trying and failing to lord it over Erik and the rest of the room, the mental gymnastics of people deciding they’d always known Shaw was terrible even though they’d sought his favor at every turn. He can't decide whether to be furious at the hypocrisy of it or pleased for Erik -- maybe pleased, he reflects as he turns into Erik’s thoughts and feels the drum-steady beat of them, no agitation at all.

Yang, ever-punctual, releases them on time after a warning look to the last questioner to hurry up. The salon is galvanized into action, hands reaching for bags and programs and minds reaching out into the future, the next set of panels, drinks and dinner slowly approaching but still on the far side of a busy, quick lunch. Yang is talking to Erik, ostensibly absorbing all of Erik's attention; Shaw's watching, mouth tight with disapproval and mind roiling with annoyance at knowing he's in no place to interrupt without looking desperate.

Where had all of this been when Erik had needed it? Charles sucks in a breath through his teeth, sends Erik a quick I'll be over here with a mental gesture to a quiet, empty patch by the door, mostly ignored by the people streaming in and out. Ideally there'd be a quieter place to collect himself, Charles thinks as he leans his head back against the wall and watches the room slowly change, the audience giving way to a brown bag round table, but he'll have to take what he can get.

"An excellent panel," Eileen says, materializing silent as a cat. Charles looks sidelong at her, half
wondering if she's a mutant; everything about her is deceptively quiet, good at blending in.

"In many ways," Charles agrees. Eileen smiles gently and nods, and settles herself in next to Charles. "Does this count as 'later'?"

"If Erik wants it to," Eileen says. "Perhaps you two would join me for lunch? There's a lovely small place at the Art Institute, and I'm fairly sure none of our colleagues will be there."

Charles sends the idea over to Erik telepathically, letting it wait in the wings of Erik's thoughts until Erik's finished what he's saying to Yang, at which point it slides forward into Erik's conscious awareness. Charles feels Erik hesitating, uncertain, before at last his thoughts ping affirmative and Charles tells Eileen, "Of course. Erik should only be another moment."

I can stay back at the hotel if you'd rather, Charles tells Erik once Erik has finally extricated himself from his conversation with Yang, heading across the salon and making a point of avoiding Shaw and his hangers-on.

It's fine, Erik tells him briefly. A further press into Erik's mind reveals Erik preferring Charles' presence, anyway; clinging after the reassurance Charles has to offer, the soft comfort Erik feels when Charles is there -- Charles pulls away before he can read too much, feeling strangely self-conscious.

"I'm told we're doing lunch," Erik says once he rejoins Charles and Eileen, arms folded over his chest. Shaw has left out the other exit, having spotted Erik with the two of them and judged his odds unlikely of extricating Erik from that conversation unscathed. Charles still feels his mind though, hovering like a miasma over his body in the west hall, dark and already plotting revenge.

"We are. I hope you're hungry," Eileen says. "It's my treat."

The art museum is only a block away, the walk too short for proper conversation, especially when the streets are full of listening ears, psychologists and neuroscientists seeking out their own lunches and, maybe, a bit of gossip to spice it up. Charles badly wants to reach over and lace his fingers through Erik's, but Erik doesn't tolerate PDA even on his best days -- this is, Charles is fairly certain, not one of those days, despite his series of victories over Shaw.

So he keeps his hands thrust into his pockets instead, his mind as focused as it can be on talking about the speaker that followed Erik, all three of them highly skeptical of his methods and enjoying themselves a bit for poking fun at them.

It's only after they've been seated at their table, menus in hand and waters arrived, that Eileen turns her attention more fully toward Erik and says, "I just want to say again, Erik, that you have my support. I am sorry you did not have it earlier in your career."

"Thank you," Erik says gruffly -- rudely, if Charles didn't know him so well. Eileen doesn't seem put off; she has to know him well, too. Erik sips his water. "I wouldn't have asked you for that support, earlier, though; you never would have gotten the chance to offer it."

"Still." Eileen's mind sparks with memory: Erik, tall and looking far too perfect, standing lost and despairing in the middle of a room teeming with people. Anger colors Eileen's memories of that moment, overlaying what Eileen had felt at the time -- curiosity, a slowly growing conviction about the truth and disgust for Shaw. Worse, there are the memories of rumors that Eileen had ignored as foolish gossip propagated by grad students who weren't being kept busy enough and faculty more interested in rumors than actual research.

Erik swallows thickly. Under the table, his foot hooks around Charles's ankle and his ability wraps tight around the links of Charles's watch. They're seated in a corner so there's no one to see, but
Erik’s still on edge and torn between wanting reassurance and not wanting to be seen. "Did anyone know?"

"For sure? No," Eileen says bluntly. It’s the only way to answer the question, even if their silverware trembles with Erik's anger. She shoos away the waiter. "But there was speculation of course, when you were always at parties before the rest of us and the only other social events you'd bothered to go to were those he sponsored."

"So they knew." They knew and they didn’t do anything, Charles hears, spoken with fury that rings clear and bitter. He sends Erik all the confidence and calm he knows Erik will accept, which isn't much, but Erik still spares him a nod, a sense that Charles is exempt from his anger -- spared, like a man a tornado has passed by. "It didn't matter they had no proof, they were certain enough that proof wouldn't make a difference."

Charles sips his water, feels it slide cold and bracing down the dry column of his esophagus. At times like this, his telepathy is blessing and curse, allowing him to see what runs under the surface of the conversation, the truth that Eileen and Erik's words only hint at. The disjunction between the two, especially Erik’s ruthless honesty with himself, leaves him vaguely motion sick.

"They would have thought I was there willingly," Erik says at last, once the waiter's been and gone with lunch orders Charles doesn't feel like eating.

The implication rolls through Eileen’s mind palpably and Charles finds himself twisting his own fingers in his napkin even as she does hers, that stab of Eileen’s guilty conscience like a blade between them. Eileen waits for a moment, taut and holding her breath, but Erik doesn’t elaborate. Charles is amazed he’s said this much to begin with, but whatever harm it’s done to Erik’s pride, that’s hidden behind the simmering surface of so much angry satisfaction.

“Probably,” Eileen admits at long last. “Even when I wondered, myself, I … that is what I assumed, Erik. No one likes to think of the alternative.”

“No, I imagine not. It’s not palatable,” Erik says coolly, enough so that even Charles cringes. It's not palatable to think a respected professional is raping and abusing his student.

“I won’t give you excuses. But I will say that we’re certainly paying attention now, and that Sebastian will find quite a chilly reception waiting for him back at Stanford next week.” Eileen’s lips press together, holding back more as the waiter returns with their plates of food, sliding them onto the table one by one. It seems interminable, and Erik is the only one among them who has it in him to pick up his fork and knife and start cutting into his steak. To Charles, the thought of eating right now is stomach-turning.

“It hardly matters,” Erik says after he’s chewed and swallowed his bite of steak, which is remarkably before Eileen manages to find her words again. “He’ll be transferring to Harvard regardless. His scholarship is good enough for that, and Harvard will stand behind scholarship rather than gossip.”

“Doubtless,” Eileen says dryly, “but I expect your own department will stand behind you in equal measure, if you only ask them to.”

She’s right, whether Erik knows it or not, and so Charles says, “Moira knows the term ‘hostile work environment’ without needing HR to define it for her. He won’t be able to affiliate with BCS as long as she’s chair.”

"As long as she's chair," Erik emphasizes. "She won't be chair forever."
Moira will be chair for three more years; it's rare for anyone to want to lead the department longer than that, not when they have their own research they'd like to do. As much as Moira's a genius at keeping a pack of neuroscientists in order, it's not something she'd like to do for the rest of her life. Charles toys with the possibility of putting his own name in as chair, when the time comes, and simply staying there until he can be sure Shaw is gone.

"Three years can change a lot," Charles says. "Moira can work to make BCS a safe place not only for you, but for anyone else -- faculty, graduates, undergraduates. And she'll get the support from the rest of the senior faculty on that. I can promise you that much." He doesn't entirely know if he's making this promise to Erik or to Eileen, who's regarding him steadily. "We might have a good working relationship with Harvard, but they'll be put off by this as well. They'll watch him more closely, Erik, and we will too."

"If they don't rescind his offer altogether," Eileen says placidly. She takes a bite of salad and sets her fork down, the clink of silver against china precise. "It's by no means guaranteed, but Harvard does have some concern for its public image and the medical school… Well, a person of Shaw's -- Shaw's nature, I suppose, on the faculty will raise the school's profile, perhaps in ways they don't anticipate."

Shaw's starting to see he can't control you, Charles adds silently as he picks at his own sandwich. Erik twitches, mouth lengthening in annoyance; he doesn't like the sense that he's being coddled, wrapped in cotton and packed away safe from harm. Charles presses on anyway. He's seen his usual tricks don't work anymore, that you've grown beyond him. There's only so far he's willing to go to prove his point, and it's going to stop at embarrassing himself. Sacrificing appearances.

Erik's thoughts still darken, imagining everything Shaw can do in private, hidden away and safe from scrutiny. That had been more than enough to keep Erik tame, tied down and obedient for twelve long years. Shaw in Boston will have plenty of opportunities to find Erik in private, with that frightening, near-telepathic ability Erik's long attributed to him -- knowing how Erik's mind works and using that knowledge to track him down in Erik's safe spaces, to find him when Erik tries to escape.

Charles dearly wants to tell Erik that won't happen, that Erik has Charles now and Charles will protect him, but he knows how well that would go over. So instead of saying anything he simply shifts his leg where it's still hooked by Erik's foot, rubbing his ankle against him, and tries to make himself eat another bite of sandwich.

"Regardless," Eileen goes on, "you will have support as far as the Stanford department's concerned. Word travels fast; I've had three emails already inquiring about what the hell is going on." She gives Erik a small, angular smile and returns to her salad as well -- though it seems only to serve as fuel to power her next question, this time directed at Charles: "So, Charles, you must tell me how the two of you met."

Charles is a bit taken aback, telepath or no -- and he doesn't need to be a telepath at all to see what's behind this. All the same, he smiles as well as he dabs at his mouth with his napkin, Erik's leg finally retreating from around Charles'.

"We'd met at a few conferences here and there," he says, once he's certain Erik isn't uncomfortable with the notion of Charles disclosing all this. "Really, though, we didn't become properly acquainted until I gave a talk at Berkeley a few years ago. Erik and I found we had … theoretical differences, so the conversation was certainly generative."

"Hmm," Eileen hums out, considering; with what she knows about Erik and Shaw now, it's impossible for her not to see it echoed in every shadow now, expecting history to repeat itself and not wanting to be caught flat-footed a second time. But by the same coin, she remembers Shaw mentioning these lectures himself, and is somewhat loathe to agree with him on any point now.
“Where did you do your Ph.D. again, did you say?”

“Oxford. I worked with Harold Yaudsley, do you know him?”

“I’m familiar with his work.” Eileen takes another bite of salad, following it with a sip of mineral water; next to him, Charles feels Erik is getting a twisted sort of enjoyment out of watching Charles be the target of Eileen’s interrogation, amusedly curious to know whether Eileen will decide him appropriate or not. “Is he still going on about that dual-process model of memory retrieval?”

“Oh, yes,” Charles says, grinning slightly. “Don’t say the word ‘implicit’ anywhere near him; he’ll implode.”

Eileen laughs. It's a warm, dry sound, nearly a chuckle. "Yes, I expect so. Harold's only become more irascible in his old age, if still terribly English."

"He was a good influence on me," Charles says. "We managed to talk for a little bit at the Oxford dinner the other night; I think I haven't infuriated him completely with my heretical ways."

In more senses than academic, Oxford had been good for him. It hadn't been Boston, or the United States, for one; for two, Harold and his other professors had, in their own fashion, kept him more on the straight and narrow than his Harvard professors and therapists had. When he looks at the faint scars on his arms, leftovers of that infection and that nearly-lost two weeks of overdose, when he waits for liver function tests every year, it seems as if he's looking at them from across the wall of six years of stability and discovering a new creature called Charles Francis Xavier.

Of course, buried under those walls are the foundations of his own life. Erik doesn't know them, hasn't seen them. With Eileen regarding Charles steadily, if with more friendliness than before, Charles feels deeply unworthy. He'll have to tell Erik sooner or later, but rich Harvard undergraduate struggling with drug addiction sounds so ignoble; it certainly isn't what Erik needs to hear right now -- even if Charles will have to tell him eventually.

"It's good for the next generation to strike out on its own," Eileen says as she leans back and sighs. The silence sits for a minute as she studies them -- the next generation, Charles supposes. Her mind hums softly, clicking through the present, the past, the future, the Erik she knows and the one she's seeing now, both different if substantially the same. "It takes some doing, to break away from those methodological debts we have, but it's good for us to do it."

Erik huffs, impatient as always with coded talk. "Is this referring to my graduate school days or my presentation earlier?"

"Your presentation was lovely," Eileen says with an affection Charles thinks Erik wouldn't accept from anyone else. "Very cogent, I thought. Promising."

“Good,” Erik says, still disgruntled but mostly mollified for the time being. He stays that way through the rest of lunch, surprisingly at-ease considering the nature of the confession he’s made to Eileen -- to everyone.

When they get back to the hotel, though, Erik tells Charles he’s skipping the next two talks to take a shower, but that he’ll be back for Charles’ -- and then disappears upstairs. The implication is obvious: Erik wants to be alone while he processes all this. Charles is happy to oblige him, even if without Erik’s presence it’s harder, somehow, to concentrate on the symposia. He finds his thoughts flitting back to distraction: the issue with Erik and Shaw. The email he received from Kurt Marko in the middle of the night. Whether or not he really knows what he’s doing with Erik, considering how well complex emotional situations have worked out for him in the past.
The email also stands as stark reminder of just how much Charles is getting away with, keeping such secrets. Sooner or later it'll out itself. How much worse will it be for Erik to find things out on his own and then confront Charles about them, perhaps scorned because he was never told?

Half his abilities with people, Charles thinks, aren’t due to telepathy at all. He can predict even the most irrational thought processes not because he can read minds but because he’s had them himself, in excruciating floridity.

Erik, himself, keeps to his word: when Charles is setting up for his own symposium he sees Erik filter in through the door along with the rest of the audience, taking up a seat in the center of the center row: where he always likes to be, when he can get away with it. Their gazes meet, briefly, and Charles tilts just the corner of his lips up: a private smile, for Erik only. In return he receives a gruff sort of affectionate acknowledgment, rough around the edges and only a little bitter; Charles is happy to get it.

The symposium's other participants drift through the periphery of his telepathy, their thoughts a chorus preoccupied hums as they prepare their own presentations. Slowly the room fills, the audience's thoughts an odd mix of focused interest and the predicted post-lunch sleepiness. Charles does his best to push all of that to the side and pay attention to his own work, an exercise that's much easier now than it had been when he'd been in a crowded lecture hall and surrounded by other undergraduates -- but still work when he has to filter through all that static to hone in on Erik in the growing crowd. It's harder when he can't look directly at Erik, with bodies between them, but once he has the sense of Erik -- vague impatience with how slowly time's going, that bitterness overlaid with the warm glow of recognition when he allows himself to feel Charles's watch and tie clip -- he doesn't lose it.

Shaw enters with a few minutes to spare, an oil slick wending its way through the currents of Salon 4. Charles isn't particularly afraid of what Shaw might do to him -- he's survived questions from men just as self-satisfied and preening as Shaw, with just as many accomplishments to boost those egos -- but he is afraid for what he'll do to Erik. He sends a warning to Erik, who catches it, and who realizes what Shaw's doing: making his way to where an acquaintance has saved a seat for him, directly behind Erik.

Back at Berkeley, Charles hadn't seen the dynamic then. He hadn't known. He remembers, with a bitter smile for himself, what Eileen had said, that the people at Stanford and Berkeley hadn't wanted to see what was right in front of their faces -- and that day, confronted with Shaw's poison, confronted with Erik's confusion, desire, and pain, he'd carefully turned aside, not wanting to look too close. Out of respect, he'd thought at the time; out of fear seems more honest.

Now he gets to see it play out, Shaw exchanging pleasantries with his seatmates before leaning forward to murmur greetings, dipped in venom, to Erik. The words ring in Erik's ears: Dr. Lehnsherr, a fine performance this morning. One of many, I'm sure.

Erik doesn’t reply, but Charles still feels the prickle of anger and fear, each indistinguishable from the next, which crawls beneath the surface of Erik’s skin, feels the heat of Shaw’s breath against his neck, the perfectly-light touch of Shaw’s hand on his upper arm. Shaw’s touch doesn’t have to hurt: Erik still wants to burn the skin where his hand has been so there’s no part of him Shaw can lay claim to.

Erik’s gaze meets Charles’ now, and a beat later Shaw’s does too, his thin lips curving up in a taunting smile. It’s too easy to imagine this is how it would be if Shaw got the Harvard job: turning up at every MIT talk, every brown bag and colloquium to let his poison seep into the veins of the campus and stain it irrevocably. Or maybe that’s Erik’s thought, rattling through his mind and into
Charles’ and becoming indistinguishable from his own.

Shaw leans back in his chair, self-satisfied, and the symposium rocks to an uneasy start. This time, when it’s done, Charles is the one left stuck on stage while Shaw rises in the audience along with everyone else and presses one hand between Erik’s shoulder blades, perfectly paternal if Charles didn’t know better. It doesn’t matter that he can hear what Shaw says through Erik’s ears, knows it isn’t a threat: rage seethes up in his belly and stings like bile at the back of his throat.

Shaw is gone before Charles gets to Erik, disappearing into the crowd and swallowed up by his own school of sycophants.

“I don’t care,” Erik says crisply when Charles looks to him, opening his mouth to speak. “He’s desperate. I don’t care. Let’s go back to the room.”

"All right." Charles catches Eileen's worried look and nods, sends her a quick it's okay. She doesn't react outwardly aside from turning away to speak to one of her graduate students, though her mind continues to crackle with anger. If Erik notices her reaction, or the curiosity of the other people around them, he gives no sign of it either.

There's a mountain of customs, ethics, and expectations surrounding telepathy, and buried in there somewhere is look but don't touch. Read minds or overhear them if you must, said one of the brochures Charles's old therapist had given him, but don't interfere. As they move through the shoals and schools of scientists that crowd the Palmer House lobby, Charles doesn't feel much compunction when he redirects the attention of the more curious bystanders, turning their thoughts from Erik, Charles, and Shaw to dinner and drinks or calling family members. The bodies in their way shift aside subtly, a step here and there, so their way to the elevators and the silence of the upper floors is clear.

Anger waits for him until they get to their room and Erik shuts and locks the door behind them. His abilities worry at the bolt and the mechanism buried in the door, as if wanting to dig into their atoms and make the steel thicker, stronger. Watching that, feeling the echo of anxiety just under Erik's fury and disgust, Charles can almost taste acid.

"I know you heard what he said," Erik says. He's drawn himself up straight, every muscle in his body tight, his aura like spines, sharp and threatening.

"I did," Charles acknowledges. He drops his laptop bag by their bed. "And you know it isn't true."

"Yes." Erik rolls his shoulders as if trying to shrug off the clinging belief that Shaw is right.

That's what you whore yourself to these days? I can only imagine the blowjob you gave him to get his vote in your hiring. Was it as good as the ones you gave me?

Charles sits down on the foot of the bed, and after a long moment Erik comes to join him, toeing off his shoes and leaning back, propped up by his elbows against the mattress. His body looks long and elegant, and it’s not hard to imagine him as a young grad student and know what Shaw sees in him -- the very thought, of course, is repulsive, but no matter how Shaw would put it the fact remains that Charles does want Erik. That might be the only thing he and Shaw have in common, but it’s still something, and it’s still true.

If Charles were anyone else, maybe he’d be frustrated by this, by how impossible it seems it is for Erik to just let Shaw go. But instead it feels familiar, like old well-worn patterns Charles knows too well. It’s been over twenty years and he still can’t let go of Kurt, or what happened in … therapy. It’s gotten better, old wound scabbed over and finally scarred, but Charles still knows they’re there.
Next to him, Erik has closed his eyes, head tilted up toward the ceiling, and after a second Charles gives up and just lies down on his back beside him, staring up at the still ceiling fan overhead.

“I understand,” he says at last, trying not to think about the way his heart beats a little faster, like hummingbird wings battering against the cage of his ribs. But he made this decision a while ago, didn’t he, last night when he read the email, again this morning when they saw Shaw. It’s -- right, and good, and balanced, and it’s what Charles should do every bit as much as it might be what Erik needs.

Erik tilts his head, his eyes slitting open to regard him skeptically. "Having telepathy isn't the same as understanding."

"It doesn't have anything to do with telepathy," Charles says, although it does -- if not in the way that Erik thinks. He releases a breath and with it the last of whatever it is that's kept him silent, pride and fear and isolation.

"Do you remember when I told you about how I took two years off after undergrad?"

Erik’s looking at him more fully now, his regard precise and focused. For a man often accused of lacking in social skills, he's remarkably perceptive; Charles aches to think of how he earned that perception, learning to read Shaw in order to survive.

"You said you were learning to manage your telepathy," Erik says, the words colored with curiosity. He's wondered about it, why Charles had been having difficulties with his telepathy when most mutants have grown into their abilities before their twenties.

"Because I'd only found out I was a psionic in my freshman year." He makes himself meet Erik's gaze, not looking away from it. "For years before that, ever since I was twelve, I'd thought -- I'd thought something different. But between one thing and another, I couldn't manage my abilities at all, and I fell apart. I refused to take suppressants, but the alternatives were…"

He reaches across his own body and undoes the cuff of his left shirt sleeve, rolls it up -- shoves it up, really -- to above the crook of his elbow, the fabric uncomfortably tight where it presses against the muscle. Erik leans up a little, craning his head to see better, and Charles tilts his arm up to the light.

Erik’s seen the scar before, of course. The needle marks are all faded or lost in Charles's freckles, but that long-ago infection has left a blemish in the skin, a roughness barely visible but that Erik knows along with the rest of Charles's body, nestled in the hollow of his elbow. Charles and the Stanford people aren't the only people who have made assumptions; Erik had assumed a childhood illness, an accident that ended in the hospital.

"I overdosed on oxy prescribed for telepathy migraines," Charles tells him. "Twice in a week, near the end of my senior year. After I graduated, I went to rehab."

He still shivers at the thought of stepping in those doors, turning himself over to the control of other people (and still more than half believing they were going to steal his telepathy away). That time, he hadn't been sure they'd let him out; Kurt would watch him from the other side of a viewing window and laugh.

Erik’s fingertips graze the scar, feeling its raised edges, his eyes turned down to watch the path of his fingers over Charles’ skin -- Charles both wants to know what he’s thinking and doesn’t, and he keeps himself out of Erik’s mind, his telepathy carefully bottled away as his skin shivers beneath the brush of Erik’s touch.
“What did you think you were,” Erik says at last, long after Charles had thought he wouldn’t say anything, “if not a psionic?”

Trust Erik not to miss that, Charles thinks, though not nearly as grudgingly as he could have done. Erik’s fingers slip off his arm -- or down, rather, to curl around his wrist instead, as if to keep Charles from pulling away to evade the question, though Charles knows that’s not what Erik would mean by it. He tugs his shirt sleeve down awkwardly with his free hand, hiding the invisible scar from view.

This is the part he still almost doesn’t want to admit. Putting it into words makes it feel like it might be true, even now -- Charles tries so hard not to think about it all. It’s so easy for him to fall into old habits, chasing down irrational trains of thought, to catch himself in a dream or delusion only after it’s too late.

“My family didn’t believe in mutation,” he says. “They sent me to a camp that claimed it could get rid of mutant abilities through therapy and conditioning procedures and a hearty helping of Jesus Christ our lord and savior. So when the therapy didn’t work, and I was still telepathic after three months, they brought in a psychologist who diagnosed me with schizophrenia instead. I got put on medication, and that’s what I believed ever since. The medication was effective, so no one had any reason to think it was anything else, not for years.”

Erik is still, but his anger rises up around him, metallic and turbulent, a storm to sweep Charles and the world away. Charles doesn’t examine the contradiction too closely, that Erik has for so long steadfastly refused anyone's anger (or pity, or empathy) on his behalf for what Shaw had done to him, but in this moment he allows himself to feel the pure, unalloyed anger only Erik's capable of feeling. And for Charles, who admits he could have used some of that anger back when he'd been fourteen and nearly catatonic with Haldol -- the first of a list of drugs he can't entirely remember.

"So, there you have it," he says, a bit too flip -- and dangerous -- with Erik on edge. Erik's fingers are wrapped around that one wrist, rough fingers gentle still against the bones, and Charles covers Erik's fingers with his other hand, grasping Erik grasping him, and holds him in turn.

"And you still went into neuroscience," Erik says.

That startles a laugh out of Charles. "I suppose I was doomed to it."

It had been an inevitable progression, he supposes. He'd been well enough to apply to colleges -- his mother's fear of mutation was second only to having a son known for being in a psychiatric institute without a college degree -- and when he'd sat down to look at the majors, choosing psychology had been as much out of sick self-fascination as it had been out of wanting to send a not-so-subtle fuck you to Kurt, Sharon, and their dreams of a normal son with a business or law degree.

Erik's studying Charles with the thoughtfulness Charles usually equates with psionics -- not Erik's usual laser focus, but something gentler, if still considering. "What they did to you… You were a child."

"Yes," Charles agrees.

"And you didn't tell me because you thought I'd… I'd see you as…" Erik's mouth twists around the words he'd usually have no problem saying. Weak, helpless.

There’s no good way to say yes, precisely so, even though they must both know it’s the truth. Only perhaps it’s not. Now that Charles knows Erik as well as he does … he can’t see Erik perceiving this sort of thing as weakness, even if he didn’t care for Charles as he does. Not, at least, when it comes to mutation, and how Charles’ was stolen from him. Perhaps he could have said something, earlier,
and Erik would have reacted exactly as so, but Charles…. All of this was so long ago now, for him, and Erik was dealing with enough on his own without having to shoulder Charles’ problems, too.

“It was a long time ago,” is what Charles ends up saying, though he stops short of mentioning Shaw, certain here at least that the reference would be unwelcome. “Maybe I could have told you earlier, but it didn’t seem like the right time.”

Erik doesn’t look as if he believes him, his lips thinning out further, but at least he doesn’t argue the point. Instead his mind just pulses again with an impotent frustration, and Charles thinks he knows exactly how Erik feels, had felt just that way for years after he finally found out the truth, frustration and a lingering fear that maybe those doctors had been right, after all. That Kurt had been right.

“Your mind is -- “ Erik starts, then falters, his anger getting in the way of his own words. “You’re intelligent, and rational, and they must have been blind not to see you for what you were.”

Charles shrugs one shoulder, says, “Plenty of people with schizophrenia are intelligent and rational, and with a great many other positive qualities as well. People just saw what was easy to see, because it was on my chart, and had an insurance code. That’s all.”

"That isn't all," Erik snaps. "They were willfully blind, Charles. You said it yourself -- "

"I know." Charles wants to move, but Erik's still holding on tight. Instead of standing and pacing, he lifts their joined hands to his lips, presses a kiss to the back of Erik's hand. Don't make excuses for them, Erik's mind seethes, and all Charles can say is, again, "I know."

"And you aren't angry?" Erik says incredulously, so incredulously Charles wants to laugh. Of course Erik couldn't imagine reacting any other way; of course he'd be mystified with (and infuriated by) Charles's acceptance. In the tempest of Erik's fury, Charles sees vague ideas taking shape: Erik finding Charles's still-faceless parents, making them see what a dire mistake they'd made -- a vengeance he'll take for Charles that he can't take for himself.

"I'm tired." That stops Erik cold, and he stares at Charles silently. Charles sighs. "I could be angry. Maybe I should be. But I spent nearly ten years of my life not feeling anything, then three years feeling high or in pain. When I want to feel something now, I'd rather have it be happiness. Pleasure." He grins crookedly. "Love. Peace."

Erik rolls his eyes, but isn't as annoyed as he seems. "Love, you say."

"I do say."

“You’re a terrible hippie,” Erik says, but there’s that thoughtfulness to his gaze again, Erik turning the idea over in his head as he rubs the pad of his thumb against the underside of Charles’ wrist, right over the pulse point. Charles thinks about saying it: it shouldn’t be so difficult, not after they’ve been together for over a year and a half now, especially when he considers that Erik must already know. Erik’s far too perceptive not to know, and yet….

“Oh, I don’t know.” Charles says instead, but he opens up his mind to Erik a beat later -- feels the shift of Erik’s thoughts around his before they focus in on what he’s trying to show him, to say.

It’s what he felt about Erik when he first met him, curiosity and intrigue and attraction, the quiver in his stomach when Erik smiled that razor smile with his eyes hidden behind dark glasses, the curve of his fingers around a martini glass. It’s how easy that conversation went over dinner, and how Charles kept thinking about Erik even after he went back to Boston, Erik around every corner, Erik there in his more sordid dreams.
He doesn’t look at Erik’s face, not in the real world -- he isn’t sure he could stand to see it if Erik were uncomfortable, or irritated, so he looks at his memory of Erik instead: everything he’s felt over this past year, the frustration and admiration and appreciation for the tiniest things Erik says and does, each of them glittering like a gem in his recollection. It’s the way his world has both condensed down to Erik and yet expanded since he met him, wide with possibility.

He makes sure Erik sees the frustration and irritation; there’s no way his portrait of Erik would be complete without it, much less accurate. Although he isn’t looking, and although he's sunk in memory, he hears Erik's faint, huffing laugh, the one that says he's amused in spite of himself -- happiness startled out of him -- and he's fairly certain Erik's grinning.

"You are…” Erik's hand slides out from under his, fingers brushing Charles's thigh, settling carefully between them. The cutting edge of Erik's anger has softened, blunted with surprise and pleasure and uncertainty. Part of Erik wants to back away from a conversation that's rapidly gotten out of his depth. It's a conversation he'd accepted he would never have, or if he had it, would have barbs hidden under soft words waiting to catch him -- but he knows, even as he considers the possibility, there's nothing waiting here.

You don't have to say it, Charles thinks about saying. I'm the terrible hippie here, but Erik says gruffly, "You frustrate me too. I don't -- I don't know what I would do without you here."

"Destroy the Palmer House?" Charles asks. It wins another snort of laughter from Erik.

"You know what I mean."

He does, now. Erik's always assumed that Charles knew everything about him, the secret shameful appetites and his weakness, every pathetic truth he'd hidden from the world. Maybe Erik's started to see that those things aren't in him, what Charles sees is something worth knowing and loving.

"God, you're impossible," Erik growls, but the words don't have the bite they usually do, not when Erik's head is bowed, his neck an inviting curve for Charles to kiss and nuzzle into, and his mind resonating with everything Erik doesn't say.

Charles does kiss him there, his mouth seeking out the warm pulse of Erik’s carotid, and Erik tilts his head to make it easier -- he doesn’t flinch away. He hasn’t flinched from this in a long time. It makes it simple for Charles to take over, quietly ordering Erik to strip off his clothes before he bears him down onto the bed, and over the next hour Erik lets Charles take him apart piece by piece until they’re both flushed and sated, lying tangled up in the hotel bedsheets with Charles’ ankle hooked around Erik’s calf and their breaths shallow and arrhythmic in the humid air.

There’s still a part of Erik, Charles observes from where he watches at the edge of Erik’s mind Erik’s thoughts flit and form like colored clouds, that half-expects Charles to push out of bed and make Erik clean himself up, to make some poisonous comment to break the moment, but that expectation is bound up and controlled now -- slid away into the corner where Erik can mostly disregard it. Charles knows better than to think twelve years’ conditioning are so easily erased just because he’s here now; perhaps Erik won’t ever overcome these mental reflexes.

At any rate, it isn’t what Erik is focusing on now: Charles is surprised, faintly, to find him considering the whole of their relationship. Wondering if maybe he had the wrong idea of things, before, if maybe Charles doesn’t behave the way he does (such a perfect foil to Erik, their wants fitting together like puzzle pieces; dominant) because he knows it’s what Erik needs, craves, requires in the most shameful core of himself. If maybe Charles would have been like this anyway. If this is what Charles needs, too: some measure of control after a lifetime of having that taken away from him again and again.
His hand is lying palm-up on Charles’ stomach, and Charles lets his fingers come to wrap around Erik’s, tying them up together and squeezing once, lightly.

"I don't know," he says quietly. Erik looks up inquisitively, head riding comfortably in the cradle of Charles’s shoulder. *I've never really thought of dominance -- my preferences -- that way. Maybe.*

"It'd be reductive," Erik agrees, mind spinning with annoyed thoughts of Freud and vague memories of realizing, not long after realizing he was gay, that he enjoyed submission -- that he still does, on the far side of Shaw.

Charles wonders if this means Erik will be kinder to himself now; he hopes so, although self-kindness, too, has to be learned. Rather than say that, he nuzzles Erik's damp and tousled hair, considers and discards the possibility of getting up. Erik's thoughts swirl nervously around anticipating orders to fetch a cloth to clean himself and Charles -- perhaps an order to lick Charles clean of the sweat and come on him -- but the images are inchoate and fade as quickly as they rise up, thinning into fog and then into nothing.

It means they wake up sticky the next morning -- sticky and late enough that Charles wakes to the sounds of a rapidly emptying hotel and thoughts of planes, trains, hangovers that need to be appeased before going anywhere. The conference is over, he remembers; it seems curiously unimportant, next to everything else.

Erik's already up, of course, still splendidly naked and disheveled, scrutinizing his tablet. "Good morning."

"A very good morning," Charles murmurs, which provokes that lovely, dry grin and encourages Erik to lean down to kiss him. "We're not one of the benighted masses spending hours in transit, after all. Any thoughts on how you'd like to spend our next couple of days?"

“Well,” Erik says, “it was meant to be a surprise, but since you asked -- I got us both tickets to one of the *Lion King* shows. The seats aren’t terribly good, but beggars can’t be choosers.”

For a brief moment Charles thinks he’s being sarcastic, but a quick dip into Erik’s mind shows he isn’t -- Charles’ brows lift and he pushes himself up properly in bed, leaning over to look as Erik pulls up the confirmation email on his tablet to show him.

“Erik,” Charles starts, surprised, but Erik cuts in: “We don’t have to go if you aren’t interested.”

“Of course I’m interested. Thank you,” Charles says, leaning in to press another kiss to Erik’s mouth, earning himself a quiet throb of satisfaction from Erik’s mental landscape.

They have the next two days here to themselves: no Shaw lurking around corners with cold eyes and venomous words, no presentations to give or attend, no demands on their time beyond the ones they give themselves. Charles knows perfectly well Erik isn’t accustomed to taking vacation; even when Shaw used to bring him along to Tahiti, or the Virgin Islands, he was expected to keep up with his work every bit as much as he was to be displayed for Shaw’s enjoyment. As much as Charles himself wouldn’t mind seeing Erik laid out in a bathing suit, ocean-wet and tanning in the tropical sunlight, he thinks this is better, and far more in line with each of their true interests and personalities.

“That’s tomorrow night,” Erik says, shutting off his tablet at last and tossing it toward the foot of the bed, out of reach.

“And tonight?” Charles asks, but he already knows the answer before Erik says it -- carefully, like he’s navigating a minefield, the suggestion coming out even on Erik’s voice although Charles can
see the apprehension drawn taut behind it, an olive branch of voluntary submission: “I thought I’d leave that up to you.”

"I can probably come up with something," Charles says, not precisely neutral, but not teasing, either. "As long as you don't mind being lazy for a bit. Conferences are always wearing."

"This one more than others."

He'd be lying to say otherwise, but Charles doesn't feel like giving Shaw any more space in their time together. "Mostly it's all the graduate students desperately concentrating, the older scholars falling asleep, and everyone else thinking about dinner or how uncomfortable the chairs are. There's only so much shielding you can do when you've got hundreds of neuroscientists packed into one hotel."

"I can be lazy," Erik says dubiously.

"Not for long," Charles reassures him. "Why don't you call for breakfast while I sleep a bit?"

"Not for long," Erik repeats, an order this time, and levitates the phone over to call down for room service.

Charles keeps his promise; two hours later sees them fed, clothed, and out on the streets. It's far too fine a day to spend inside, warm but with a breeze off the lake that has Erik tilting his head back in appreciation. Daring more than he maybe should as they idle through the statue galleries in Grant Park, Charles reaches for Erik's hand, feels the faint flicker of surprise and uncertainty, then the steel of resolution and the hell with what other people think before Erik reciprocates, fingers sliding into Charles's, warm and strong.

They idle up and down Michigan Avenue and the smaller side streets, Erik surprisingly content as his mind weaves in and out of the metal of the city, from the tracks and framing of the El to massive beams sunk into marble and concrete, the skeletons of new skyscrapers and old, industrial-age buildings alike. He imagines Erik on an architecture tour, more interested in what the tour guides leave out than in their discussion of stonework and decoration.

There's one last thing to see, although Charles wants to wait. He drags out the time by taking Erik down to the Art Institute so he can admire the lions, huge and tranquil at their posts outside the museum. "They're beautiful," Erik says as he runs his fingers over oxidizing bronze.

"We'll go see something even better," Charles promises, and grins at the inquisitive, expectant look on Erik's face. "After dinner, when it's quieter and we've gotten rid of the tourists."

Until then, they explore the Art Institute itself, and then the Field Museum, Charles so fascinated by the evolution exhibits that Erik practically has to drag him away after an hour or so, vowing they can come back tomorrow if Charles really insists. For his part, Erik seems fascinated by the ancient metals on display in some of the historical exhibits: old swords and sarcophagi, sculptures made by artists long turned to dust. Charles catches Erik imagining he can feel the history of these pieces in their atoms, men who have touched them before, the places and people they've seen, and it's reassuring, in its way, when Erik doesn’t immediately dismiss his own thoughts as shallow and irrational.

They have hot dogs for dinner. Erik insists, because the ones in Chicago are made from beef rather than pork, and while he doesn’t keep strict kosher he can’t quite resist the still-forbidden lure of sitting down with Charles and eating a hot dog piled high with relish and onions and chili. It’s impossible to eat properly, of course; even Charles keeps spilling chili onto the paper bag that came
with his, making the kind of scene that would likely have Sharon disown him from embarrassment if she were still well enough to do so.

“It’s a crime we don’t have these in Boston,” Erik says, though Charles isn’t terribly sure he agrees; he’s already got a mustard stain on his collar and he’s never been one for hot dogs besides, not even in middle school when they were everyone else’s favorite lunchmeat.

The mustard stain’s the reason Charles makes them go back to the hotel once dinner’s over, changing into a fresh shirt, though Erik takes it as an excuse to put on his running clothes -- “I haven’t had a chance in three days,” he tells Charles, as if that explains everything; “You can come with me if you like.”

But Charles is happier to wait for him in the park; he’s never been able to keep up with Erik physically, but like this it’s easy for his mind to tag along, feeling the quick throb of Erik’s pulse and the heavy gusts of his breathing as he hits mile eight, the air cool off the lake and the sky sprawling scarlet overhead.

There’s always focus and sharp discipline when Erik runs, his heartbeat, breath, and thoughts steady and inexorable, trained to a precision that feels, very nearly, engineered -- calculated, pared down, made elegant, a Golden Ratio given shape and movement. Newer, as Erik darts through the thinning crowds on the path at 47th Street, nearly to Hyde Park, is an absence of escape; Erik’s fully in the moment but without the lingering ghost of Shaw waiting for him in the back of his mind. What quickens his steps as he circles back north again, is the thought of returning to Charles, curiosity over what Charles has planned.

Charles is soaking up the last of the summer sun -- mostly gone behind the city now -- and Erik’s post-run adrenaline high when Erik jogs up, narrow flanks surging in and out as he breathes, an inviting strip of thigh for Charles to trace, discreetly, as Erik halts next to him.

"What you have planned for tonight," Erik says as he surveys the lake stretched out in front of them, a wide blue plain marked by a line of waves crashing at the breakwater, "do I need to get changed?"

"No," Charles says, grinning up at him. "Come on, we can go right there."

Erik raises an eyebrow, curious and amused at the thought of doing something touristy in his running clothes. "Are you hauling me up to the top of Sears Tower?"

"No." Charles holds his hands out for Erik to help him up, which Erik does with a wry grin and more force than strictly necessary. "It’s just a quick walk. Come on."

Bemused, Erik falls into step at Charles’ side, and this time there’s no hesitation as he lets Charles twine their hands together and keep him close. Charles could live like this, he thinks -- the two of them, with all of Erik’s sharp edges, balanced in this strange and perfect equilibrium. He wants a thousand more walks like this, Erik’s profile stark against the dusk sky and his mind letting Charles’ in easily, his palm cool against Charles’ own.

“Oh,” Erik says, his gaze catching the Crown Fountain: a towering display of many tiny panels which make up a screen depicting the face of some recent passerby, blinking in slow motion, a slow smile settled about her lips and her gaze fixed at a second face just opposite, this one of a young boy. Erik pauses, reaching out to touch the wet panels, heedless of the water that splashes up against his shins, standing at just the right angle so the faces disappear and all either of them can see is black mirror.

Charles lets him stay there a few moments, enraptured, his power tinkering with the mechanics
inside, before he says: “This isn’t it.”

Erik glances down at him a beat later, half his thoughts still tangled up with the sculptures. “What is, then?”

“Just a little bit further.”

He tugs Erik back into step, across the plaza and up the concrete steps, through a copse of trees, the shade and the night dark under their leaves. Erik feels it before Charles sees it -- Charles, latched inside his mind, can tell the precise moment when Erik’s power slips along curved metal and then delves into it, the catch to Erik’s breath and the sudden, sharpening focus of his thoughts.

“Up here,” Charles says, smiling now, and Erik chases him up the steps two at a time until they’re stepping out into the square where the huge, magnificent metal sculpture swells up before them, a solid structure of 168 welded steel plates polished to seamlessness, its obtuse sides reflecting their own selves in distorted shape. The Bean was inspired by liquid mercury, Charles heard once, and every time he sees it he thinks he can imagine how. Erik steps forward without him, his power humming around the metal and within, and when he lifts a hand to touch its cool façade Charles feels the buzz of magnetism drawing Erik close a fraction too quickly, searing itself into his skin.

Erik jumps and shivers but his concentration doesn't break and neither does the contact between metal and flesh, Erik's hand flattening out, that broad palm and those long, graceful fingers shaping themselves to the impeccable curve of steel. Erik's mind settles into those contours, too, following the infinite surface as it arcs and twists, traveling into the center and looping back out again, into the center, back out.

"I felt it when I was going to dinner the other night," Erik murmurs. His other hand cups the air, fingers twitching as if conducting an orchestra -- conducting, Charles thinks, the magnetic field around the sculpture. "I was distracted, though; I didn't really think about it."

"It wasn't going anywhere," Charles says. He steps under the sculpture, into the empty space in the center where Cloud Gate arches up, folding in on itself -- the omphalos, the center of the world. Craning his head, he looks up at his crazily distorted reflection -- reflections, really, himself from every possible angle, only himself when, by chance, some part of him isn't twisted out of shape.

"If they made a sculpture of what telepathy is like, this would be it," he muses, mostly to himself, threading the thought in among the cascade of sensory input Erik's taking in. So many perspectives, so many possibilities, distorted and fluid until consciousness takes hold of them and wrenches them into shape.

Erik hums distractedly, still sunk deep in metal, hand moving slowly along the surface as he walks around the sculpture's side to join Charles in the darkness under it. He isn't looking at his reflection, or Charles's, or the reflection of the park and the rest of the city; he must be the only person in the world more interested in the material fact of the thing than its appearance.

"How do you like it?" Charles asks.

He gets a wide, laughing shark-grin for an answer. "It's perfect," Erik says, opening his eyes. He still has one hand raised, settled gently against Cloud Gate's underbelly. "Thank you."

Warmth blossoms in Charles’ stomach and for a moment it’s hard to look away from Erik’s eyes, gray-green and alive in the evening lights.

“Do you have any idea how difficult it must have been for them to construct this so it would stay in
this shape, balanced in this way?” Erik asks, and when Charles shakes his head Erik just exhaled and says, appreciatively, “A masterwork of physics,” his fingertips trailing down the curve of the sculpture. Charles sees his touch pause just over the reflection of his own cheek, lingering there. Oddly, Charles feels his face flush.

“This is what I wish they had in Boston,” Charles says. “Not those terrible hot dogs.”

Erik smiles and turns his face back to the sculpture, gazing up toward its center of gravity. “Yes,” he says, “Yes, perhaps.”

“We can always come back here next year,” Charles says, watching Erik’s face reflected in the steel. When Erik doesn’t speak, he adds, “And the next.”

At last Erik’s hand drops from the surface of the sculpture and he comes to face Charles entirely -- and Charles is frozen into place with surprise when Erik tilts in to press a brief kiss to Charles’ brow, his hands resting on Charles’ shoulders, steady and real. There’s no one around to see -- Charles can tell that much with his power, and perhaps that’s why Erik did it, but even so it rattles him down to his bones. He feels the heat of that kiss sink into his skin, into his core, burying itself there.

“I’d like that,” Erik says, and the simplicity of it, the acknowledgment of what Charles has said, is stunning.

The only words he can think to say are I’d like that too, and they aren’t sufficient to hold everything that’s become so real to him over the past couple of years, from that first meeting to Erik, combative and standoffish by turns, stalking into the tranquillity of the department one midsummer, then fighting with Erik, arguing, being colleagues, being friends -- being many things, and finally, this. Charles wonders if there can be a word for something so multi-faceted, a thing so complex all he can do is accept that it exists and be grateful for it.

He leans up and presses a kiss of his own to Erik's neck, directly beneath the hinge of his jaw, a thrill working through him when Erik tilts his head, that soft, fluttering sensation of near-submission and the pleasure that eclipses worry over anyone looking. Here, under the shelter of the sculpture, Erik is peaceful, surrounded in metal and with Charles pressed close against him. Along with that peace is the sense that Erik wants this forever, too -- for one year and then another, and another past that, stretching out past a hazily distant horizon.

You realize you're signing on for life with a terrible hippie, he tells Erik as seriously as he can, although not even his psionic voice can mask his amusement.

"I can live with that," Erik replies, fingers tightening on Charles's shoulders. The pressure is more possessive than Erik has ever allowed himself to be, ten points of bright pressure along the ridge of Charles's shoulders and the nape of his neck. Erik's hands slide down Charles's arms and around his sides, those slim, strong arms tightening around him to pull him up as Erik bows his head.

As always, kissing Erik is easy and thrilling, licking into Erik's mouth to taste him and the leftover sweat from his run, Erik giving way so gracefully when Charles asks him to. Charles turns them so he can press Erik closer to the metal skin of Cloud Gate, at a place in the curve where Erik's shoulders almost brush it. That gets him an ecstatic shiver, and Charles imagines what else they could do with metal, wonders why they haven't done it, what kind of pleasure he could pull from Erik with well-made steel.

That's for home, he decides, twining his fingers through Erik's hair, relishing the soft perfection of it. For now, he loses himself in the throb of Erik's mind, which is caught between Charles and the sculpture and the distant metallic network of the city. Charles sends part of his own telepathy
spinning out as he basks in Erik so close to him, out through the hum and pulse of so many minds as they slowed down with the coming night, and into the vast quiet of the lake.

*
Chapter Notes

cw at end of chapter

(But also yayyyy we are back!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Down the hall, the reinforced steel door bangs shut. They've hidden the steel under dignified oak, like they've hidden the concrete walls under pretty wallpaper, and the tile is marble, but the heavy echoes resonate through him all the same. He likes it, so precise, every opening and closing exactly like the last, a crisp period to end the run-on sentences that swirl in his head, and oh they do run on and on and on.

After doorclosing, the stepping feet trail out like ellipses. They change, depending who they belong to. Sharp click-clicks mean -- mean click-clicks, high heels, not the nurses or the doctors who wear things soft and sensible. Click-clicks mean Business, mean another and stranger voice joining the chorus, strangely rational, directed; the voice goes in a straight line, not around and around and around in circles, chasing its own tail giddy-foolish or spiraling down or turning into a snake with its tail in its mouth, Ouroboros devouring itself. This voice talks about money and keeping parents happy, insurance billing numbers and figures. It sounds like a calculator or a clock on high speed, not that he watches the clocks anymore.

He turns onto his side to face the wall. The pretty pastel wallpaper has gouges in it, ragged crescents to match remains of fingernails. One voice had suggested doing that instead of worrying at his own skin, dog-with-a-bone-like. He'd already chewed his fingernails down to the bleeding quick, so the next sensible thing had been to start in on his wrists, and he had his teeth, but the wall had offered itself as a substitute.

The door opens a moment later, a murmur of dismay and annoyance slipping in sidewise to stroke his hair.

"Charles," the real-voice, the fleshandblood voice, says. It belongs to Dr. Brandt. "Charles, your mother's come to see you."

No, Charles thinks, then remembers to move his mouth. “No.”

“She’s just down the hall in the family room,” Dr. Brandt tells him, but Charles is distracted counting syllables as she speaks, hoping she stays on an even number. “Why don’t you get up and come visit with her for a while?”

Twenty-four. He’s safe.

When he doesn’t move, Dr Brandt sighs and her hand goes still at his temple, get him out of bed, need to finish paperwork before five. “You’re going home soon, Charles, remember? Don’t you think maybe you should go see your mother and show her how well you’re doing?”

Charles doesn’t want to, but his tongue is heavy and sticky in his mouth, transformed into a piece of
old toffee. When he doesn’t say anything Dr. Brandt decides this means okay and sends the orderly in to roll Charles out of bed and into a wheelchair. When he gets out of here, Charles determines, he’s going to call up all the tabloids in the world, going to call the White House and the Queen and tell them -- tell them -- because they poison people here, because he was able to walk before but then they gave him medicine that stole his legs and replaced them with ghostlegs and he can't walk now, can’t do anything. He’s not the only one, either. Everyone in here is like this.

“All right, Charlie,” the orderly says, and Charles does his best to glare with his heavy eyelids, because he hates that name. “Are you going to be good today? No screaming, right?”

"Go,” Charles says, and so they do, the rubber wheels spinning and pushing him out of this box room and into the hall where the wallpaper is a different shade of pastel, a dizzying floral pattern spinning on the walls that makes him feel nauseated. They roll past the community room where Jim and Kelly perch in real-leather armchairs and stare at the television screen. He waves at them, his hand flopping limply around at the end of his wrist; neither of them notice.

The TV is more not-real voices, but it's a conduit to Outside all the same. Charles isn't sure if he trusts it; it repeats itself, faces recycling over and over, saying the same words over and over, no reality to the faces or the words they drool all over. He should warn Jim and Kelly about that, he's tried to awhile back, but Jim and Kelly had just shrugged and gone back to staring while their voices murmur in the background like static.

Now the steel door opens for him when Dr. Brandt presses the keypad. Five-zero-nine-eight-five, five digits, her oldest daughter's birthday. Charles isn't supposed to know that, like he isn't supposed to know this place is a den full of thieves who steal things -- legs, thoughts, anything they can get their hands on -- and so he keeps that knowledge behind firmly-zipped lips.

The family room is soothing dusky blue and comfy furniture, all calm next to the violent cheerfulness of the ward. The only not-soothing thing in it is the slim, spare-fleshed woman sitting by the bay window in a flood of sunlight, her hands tight around her purse and her lips tight with disapproval. The hand she places on Charles's, limp and lotion-soft, is gone almost before he can register it and the why does he keep doing this, why why why, such utter nonsense that flickers in the air like a devil over her shoulder.

"Say hello to your mother, Charles," Dr. Brandt says with a cold sort of kindness. "You can't make me do anything," Charles tells her. His neck rolls like elastic as he cranes his head to glare at her. "You can take and take but you can't make." "Charles," the woman called his mother says. "Don't make a scene."

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He eyes her crossly. "I'm related to royalty," he tells her. "I'm two-hundred-and-nineteenth in line for the succession." He recalls large leather books, ageworn, Burke's Peerage. "I can make a scene if I want, and I should. If you were my mother, you'd care that they stole my legs." He grasps his knee and shakes it, giggles when his foot slides off the footrest and drags on the fine carpet. "You'd care that they took my legs and they keep putting voices in my head."

The mother-figure makes a tired sound and presses two fingers to her temple. She’s looking at Dr. Brandt, not Charles, when she says, “Do you know he got a perfect 1600 on his SATs? Just last term he was top of his class, and now this. I suppose once school let out for the summer he realized he had to find some other way of getting attention.”

“The Thorazine can cause serious lethargy and fatigue,” Dr. Brandt says. “That’s why he’s having such difficulty with his legs; it’s always a trade-off, deciding how much of a reduction in acute
symptomology is worth the side effects with these kinds of drugs.” The mother-figure makes an indifferent noise.

“Drugs,” Charles says loudly, boorishly, or so he thinks; it comes out whisper-thin and slurried, like he’s a drunk. “See, she admits it. They drug you here.”

“For Christ’s sake, Charles --”

Charles’ eyelids are barely staying up as it is; he lets them slide shut so he doesn’t have to look at the mother-figure anymore. Dr. Brandt murmurs something indistinct -- Charles is trying not to listen to the voices -- and then the door shuts and she’s gone. Not gonenot be a disgrace.”

"Too late," he mutters. The words are abruptly, indescribably funny. He laughs; the mother-figure's annoyance colors the black air behind his eyelids, like an oil slick at midnight. "Am I related to the Hanoverians? Did you know the Privy Council never allowed King Lear to be performed when George III was crazy?"

"I said," the woman's voice is mother-of-pearl over steel, "you will come home to Westchester, Charles, and you will stop behaving in this -- this ridiculous, undignified manner."

It's not the ridiculous that catches his attention (and really, it doesn't catch his attention so much as smack into it, a windshield against the flitting, erratic bug of his thoughts). It's, through the ringing irritation and the overlay of must be from Brian's side; the Carters would never behave this way, the home-to-Westchester part. It rouses him sufficiently for him to open his eyes despite the best efforts of Dr. Brandt's thought-stealing drugs.

"They've already got all my thoughts," he says hoarsely. "I haven't got any left."

"Yes, well," the mother-figure says, fingers tightening on her purse again, "you'll have to dredge some up for college." The smile she offers him is less sincere than the orderly's. "You'll have a couple of months to pull yourself together, and I expect, Charles, this time we won't have any repetition of this nonsense."

"You were the one who put me in here." Charles slouches in his wheelchair, watches his heels scuff across the carpet. "You and the -- " A shadow looms, rushing up out of his memory with giant claw-hands to grab him, although Charles does his best to keep that place in his brain sealed up tight.

"Kurt has your best interests at heart," the mother-figure snaps. She tucks one ankle behind the other and straightens. "I don't know why you refuse to understand that."

Jealous, one of Charles's dark genies whispers to him in his mother's voice. You didn't like me remarrying and now you've decided to punish me for it.

“Now,” she continues, “if you are going to act like this, I won’t linger to serve as audience. I brought you these -- " she opens her purse and sets a stack of booklets on the table; Charles sees the words Duke and Princeton "-- and I expect you to be prepared with a list of ten schools by the time you’re discharged. From this selection, please; I won’t have any child of mine attending a … a state university.”

She rises from her chair, draping the handles of her purse over one wrist. She’s wearing her best pearl necklace, though Charles doesn’t know for whom; certainly not for him.

“I thought I might do community college,” Charles drawls, one last parting shot, just to see the reflexive way his mother recoils as if he’d said a nasty word, cunt or pussy or cock. He can see the paler flesh on the inside of her lips as they draw back from her teeth, disgusted, the flesh the lipstick
didn’t paint over.

She doesn’t reply, but sails out of the room in a cloud of Chanel No. 22, leaving the orderly to shuffle back in to fill the vacuum and take Charles back to his box, packing him away again until someone else has need of him.

Six days later, he’s discharged.

* 

Earlier. The Highcrest Centre's main building sits elegantly on the long skirts of its lawn and private park, hidden behind old oaks and at the end of a long, snaking necklace of gravel drive. Charles stares narrowly out the tinted windows of the Bentley as the trees march past in their endless patterns and distressed voices weave through them like a poisonous breeze.

"I don't know why you're doing this." His mother's voice is solid, solid as pearls with disapproval and the elegance of her accent. Next to her, Kurt drives in dangerous silence; no point in letting the chauffeur in on all the family drama. "How many places is this now, Kurt?"

"Ten?" Kurt says in a tone that indicates he isn't guessing.

Around Kurt's head, hallucinations and delusions drift, words and images that shift like light on the water's skin. Or, Charles thinks with a snicker, like light on the glossy carapace of Kurt's hair, which has been oiled into submission. Kurt knows all the places Charles has been to, all of them with attractive names to make them sound like resorts and not like the prisons they are. Kurt wants Charles to go someplace more permanent, places of cold concrete and oblivion, and as Charles stares at the air over Kurt's temple, he watches a short movie of Kurt marching Charles in through Highcrest's doors and Charles never coming out again.

"I don't want to go," Charles says. Ahead of them, the Georgian pile of brick looms, scurrying ants of orderlies and administrators coming out to greet them.

"Perhaps you should have thought of that earlier, before your … histrionics," his mother snaps. "Highcrest comes very highly recommended."

"Only the best," Kurt says. The words are hollow; Charles can hear the insincerity rattling around in them.

Charles sinks down further into his seat and wishes it would open up like a mouth and swallow him. If he were being slowly digested by a car, he wouldn’t have to go to the hospital. Now he finds himself thinking about the probability of that actually happening -- knows it’s probably never happened before. Or has it? If it did, no one would be around to tell about it. People might think so-and-so died in a car accident. But even if it hasn’t happened before, this could be the very first time. The accomplishments of modern engineering.

But sadly, whether cars have eaten people historically or not, this car doesn’t eat Charles, not today. Instead it pulls to a smooth stop on the gravel drive and someone opens up the back door, spilling sunlight onto the leather cushions.

“You must be Charles,” a new voice says, sweet and kind. Surprisingly, his mental voice is sweet and kind too, no resentfulness, at least not yet.

Charles looks up at someone’s brown eyes and sweater vest and says, “I must be.”

“Go on, get out of the car, Charles,” Kurt says gruffly, his shovel-like hand slapping the top of the Bentley twice. The force of it isn’t nearly as violent as Charles is expecting or knows from long and
intimate experience, but then, in public, it never is.

Charles obeys, stepping onto the pebbled lane and letting the doctor push the car door shut behind him. He can’t decide if he’s relieved to be leaving Sharon and Kurt behind, or anxious about this new place. How pathetic would it be, he thinks, if being locked up in this cell masquerading as a clinic is superior to living in his own childhood home?

The nametag on the vest gives a name that is sweet and bland as its owner is. William. It should sound formal, too formal, like how Sharon never refers to someone by a nickname or diminutive if she can help it, but their proper given name. It doesn't, though. Charles turns the name over in his head, enjoying the soft, liquid roll of the *l* as they ease into the vowels, a slight rise at the *m* as if he's rocking up and down on waves. He could rock up and down on them forever, and ride the current out of this place.

"Why don't we get you settled in," William says, gently shepherding Charles away from the car and Sharon and Kurt, "and your mom and dad can talk to Dr. Tayford?"

"He's not my father." The answer falls off his tongue before he can even think about it. Wicked stepfather, really. Why aren't they in the stories more, evil stepfathers who want to carve out their stepchildren's hearts and eat them, or consign them to sleep in the ashes after working all day?

William doesn’t say anything to that, though the soft, calm voice that rides on his shoulder murmurs with agitation. Images slide around him, odd, refracted views of Charles adjusting themselves, taking on different angles, different hues, new depths. "Well," he says after a minute of silent walking that takes them past the reception desk and into a large, marble-clad lobby, sunlit and warm, "in the meantime, he'll be a visitor you don't have to see if you don't want to."

Charles reminds himself not to think of William as an ally yet. "Kurt won't visit," he says, chasing hallucinations up into the vaulted arches of the atrium. Highcrest is beautiful, but these patterns are jarring, ugly, slugs twined around each other, heavy with drugs. "My mother will visit a couple times. Just for appearances."

"Sounds like you know the routine," William says sympathetically.

"The whole song and dance," Charles affirms. He raps his hands on his thighs, *shave-and-a-haircut-two-bits*. "I bet you've seen it all too."

"And then some," William agrees. He leads Charles through a door marked, ominously, INTAKE and sits him down in the chair farthest from the door. It's a medical room, with sharps boxes sealed up tight and cabinets latched shut. Charles's skin itches. William smiles gently; all of him is gentle. "I'm going to draw some blood, Charles. Is that all right?"

"I guess." Charles pushes his sleeve up. "Shouldn't I -- like, be restrained? Like Hannibal Lecter?"

"Don't think you're going to eat me," William says with the serenity of a man who's stared being devoured in the face. The needle goes in and out, just like that, sucking a bit of Charles's life-force along with it, platelets and plasma and iron. "There are good people here, Charles. Being," William makes a self-deprecating 'cuckoo' sign by one ear, "doesn't make you bad."

"Are you Dr. Tayford?" Charles tilts his head. William's thoughts don't belong to a psychiatrist, just to someone doing a job and determined to do it well. "Dr. Tayford isn't good; the voices say he's just in it for the money. Do you know how much my mother and Kurt are paying him?"

"I’m not Dr. Tayford, no," William says evenly. The William-voice in Charles’ head wonders,
mildly, if Charles’ other voices might be right, but it also doesn’t like to speculate. The William-out-loud voice says, “All of us here just want you to feel safe. If you ever don’t feel safe, I’d like you to tell me. Can you do that?”

“Sure,” Charles says. From someone else those same words might seem condescending, but William doesn’t condescend. Charles can tell. So he lets it go. “I know the voices aren’t real,” he adds, as William snaps off his gloves and throws them in the trash. William glances back over his shoulder at him and Charles pushes on, “I’m not stupid. I know I’m crazy. But sometimes they’re still right, so it doesn’t hurt to listen.”

William gestures for him to stand on the scale, and Charles hops off the exam table to comply, watching William’s pale fingers move around the slider, counting out pounds and pounds.

“I’m a hundred and thirty-one pounds,” Charles tells him, trying to be helpful, but William keeps moving the slider regardless. “BMI 21.0. I’m extremely healthy. Like a horse.” He considers neighing, but decides that’s something crazy people do, and while Charles is indeed crazy, he wants William to like him.

“Hundred and thirty-one,” William echoes after a moment, when he’s stopped moving the slider. He looks back at Charles as Charles steps off the scale, feeling pleased with himself for having been right, although of course he was right. He got weighed at the last place, too. “Very healthy.”

"Told you," Charles says, and wins a wry grin from William.

"So will my blood show you why I'm crazy?" he asks as William takes his blood pressure and listens to his heart and his breathing. All of that's okay, too; he doesn't need silent-William to tell him he's perfectly fine. Healthy as a horse. Healthy as a horse that's gone mad with being locked in its stall.

"It'll show us if you've got any of your meds left in your system." William jots down more facts and figures, tiny, anatomized bits of Charles for someone else's records.

"Oh, no way," Charles tells him. When William looks up, he elaborates: "It's kind of a paradox, because I'm crazy, and my mother won't allow any crazy people in her house. So when I got home from the last place, she took me off my meds and said I'd be fine without them. Which, I was for a while, and I thought that maybe she was right and I was fixed… only," he sighs gustily, for the theatrics and for the scrape of air through his throat, "only she was wrong. Or I was, too. And now I'm here. If the definition of insanity is repeating the same action over and over, hoping for a different result, do I qualify?"

"You're not the one making the calls on whether you're here or not," William says. He tucks Charles's file under his arm. "C'mon, now, let's go get you settled into your room. It's nice."

Charles has been told that before. At these kinds of places, there's an attempt at niceness, but it's all just veneer -- like the ones his mother has on her teeth to hide years of wine stains and nicotine. It's like looking at someone's face and seeing flesh writhing under neat and tidy skin; he can see nuthouse written in the absence of sharp edges and anything he might use to make a weapon, the windows in every door made of reinforced glass.

In fact, when William lets him into his new room -- just like he’d expected, it’s institutional; meant to appear comfortable, but only succeeding in looking like a hotel room -- he doesn’t wait to be asked. He just turns around and toes off his shoes with the laces, pushing them toward William with his foot, then follows them with his belt. “You don’t have to worry about me,” Charles says as William bends to collect them, smiling at him, his heart thump-thumping in his chest. “I only ever tried to off myself the once.”
“Well, you certainly know the drill,” William says dryly, setting the shoes and belt aside atop the dresser for now.

Charles doesn’t know who kills themselves with shoelaces, anyway. It seems so … barbaric. Besides, it was hardly his fault if the nurse just handed over the phenobarbital, without Charles even having to ask for it. Hmm. It never had occurred to him to wonder what happened to her after that. Was it still attempted murder, if he took the pills himself?

“Yep,” Charles says, shaking away that thought and refocusing on William, like his eyes are camera lenses, or … no, that isn’t the metaphor he wants. What is the metaphor he wants? Like … putting on new glasses? No, that’s not it either. Ugh, how frustrating. Charles frowns, dissatisfied, and watches William step past him to draw open the drapes at the window, letting in sunlight. “Oh, don’t bother,” Charles says. “I don’t want to look out there. Why torture myself seeing the green grass and the distant hills and the road on the other side of that wall when I’m not going to get to be at any of them?”

“You can go on the grounds any time you like,” William says, his eyebrows lifting a bit.

“Please, that doesn’t count,” Charles says, and William shrugs, drawing the drapes shut again and casting the room back into the dimness of before, saying, “As you wish.”

"Soooooo…” Charles makes his way down the list of pleasantries appropriate for being locked up in yet another nuthouse. It's a short list, and all the scripts are like Shakespeare plays -- more Lear ranting at hurricanes than Beatrice and Benedick. He flops down on his bed and watches hazily as William makes his rounds, quiet and tidy and unobtrusive. Even his silent voice isn't as bothersome as so many others can be. A friendly ghost. Charles snickers quietly. "How long'm I in for?"

"You'll have to talk to Dr. Tayford." A curtain -- lead, iron, flat -- falls over William's features. Even the William Charles isn't supposed to hear goes quiet.

"So, never." Charles inspects the bandaid on his arm, holding the little bit of cotton in place over the needle site. Charles adds, "I know what schizophrenia is. I know you're not supposed to get better. I know my mother and Kurt have a lot of money."

Sympathy stirs the flesh-curtain. "It's a matter of learning to control your symptoms," William tells him, not unkindly. Charles thinks that William's face won't ever look anything but kind, even if he must do cruel things. "Once you've got that figured out -- and Dr. Tayford can talk to your mother about managing your condition -- you'll leave."

A shriek echoes from down the hall, high and agitated. Charles swallows. It feels like iron in the back of his skull, iron scraping down slate --- nails scrabbling for purchase on a cliff. Footsteps, swift squeak of rubber on tiles, go running like mad little gnats in response.

"People just want to feel alive," Charles says softly. His arm aches, right in the crook of it, as if he's gashed himself with a razor. It's all memory, though, or maybe a dream, or maybe the suggestion of the dark, twisting demon six rooms over, chanting let it out, let it out until his victim picks up the bit of broken CD she's stashed and tries to find a vein.

“I need to go and deal with this,” William says, gesturing toward the hall and the demon. He takes Charles’ shoes and belt under his arm but lingers there in the doorway a moment longer, like he wants to say something more. Charles fumbles to listen in on his other voice, but he can’t hear it over the rising roar of voices from the other room.

“Okay,” Charles says.
William goes, the sound of his shoes on the floor retreating down the hall at a rapid clip, and Charles lies back on his bed again, face turned up toward the ceiling. His arm keeps throbbing until he smacks it, hard, with his other hand, the sting of flesh on flesh chasing away that phantom pain. Later, he knows, there will be individual therapy, and group, and a meeting with the ominous Dr Tayford who will prescribe the new drugs they'll present to him that evening in tiny plastic cups. But for now he's alone again, surrounded by an ocean of unfamiliar voices, a swelling tide that surges into his mind. Charles drowns.

* 

"All of us were born sinful." Ty's voice is strangled with grief and he's got a death-grip on the book in his hands. He peers around at Charles, Alex, Bobby, Marcus, with tear-filled eyes -- eyes that are filled with tears for them. He hunches slightly, even though he's maybe twenty-five or twenty-six, the weight of the world already heavy -- the burden of other people's sins.

"When God created the world," Ty continues, "he created Adam and Eve, man and woman. He did not create mutants; humanity was the pinnacle of his creation and it was for them that he sent his son, Christ Jesus, to die on the cross. Anyone who says mutations are an improvement on humanity commits blasphemy; they're as deluded as those who say they suffer from telepathy, or telekinesis, or shape-changing. They wallow in sin, they rejoice in it!

"We were born sinful," Ty repeats. He paces in the center of their half-circle, his body all a-throb with passion. Charles, oppressed by the weight of it, tries to shift inconspicuously back. "Sinful, yes, but not unredeemable! You were cursed with this Affliction," the way Ty pronounces it is with the capital, "but God can lift that curse from you if you let him! If you say the word in here," a fist over the heart, "and expel the demon of your delusion so that he may enter."

After a beat, he instructs them to bow their heads. Charles does, though he doesn't close his eyes. It doesn't make a difference, and he prefers to see the real world, not the fever-swirls of Ty's ecstasy or the nausea-inducing terror churning around Marcus.

"Pray with me," Ty says, quietly now. Obediently, Charles clasps his hands. "Dear Lord, again I bring to you these four young men who still struggle to make themselves worthy of you. Shed your grace into their hearts and remove the curse that besets them, that they may walk in the light of your grace -- in this life and the next."

Marcus sniffles wetly, a sob he can't manage to stifle. He's green and smooth-skinned, amphibian, desperate to be cured so this illness will vanish. That's what Ty says it is, not a mutation, just some weird, unexplained skin condition. Lepers were the accursed in the Bible. This is your leprosy, Marcus, but you have a divine Physician who wants to heal you.

"I want to be cured," Marcus says after an attenuated moment. Charles winces at the wet sound of Marcus sucking snot back up his nose. "Please, God, I want you to save me!"

"That's good," Ty encourages. He starts to pace again, footsteps heavy one-two-three, one-two-three back and forth in the cage of the five chairs drawn into their circle. He pauses by Marcus, a hand on Marcus's shoulder, safely covered by a heavy sweatshirt. "Ask him, Marcus; confess your sins to him and feel his healing descend upon you!"

"How is this supposed to help us, exactly?" Charles asks into the pounding, heavy silence. Next to him, Alex titters.

Ty stops short. His Purifier Ministries polo shirt has two unattractive stains under his armpits and his hair, curling from sweat at the back of his neck, stands on end.
“Christ Jesus will help you, son," Ty says after a beat, though Charles can already tell he’s annoyed, can hear his annoyance in his mind. “‘I can do all things, through Christ who strengthens me.’ You know the Word, don’t you?”

Charles lifts his head, meeting Ty’s beady little eyes. He’s been here four months already, long enough for Ty and all the rest of the counselors to get well sick of him, for all the Bible says patience is a virtue. He’s missed his entire summer and the first month of eighth grade to boot. And yet they still haven’t figured out Charles isn’t fixable, that the angels aren’t about to start sweeping down from heaven to cure him now if they weren’t willing to make the effort back when this first started.

“Of course I do, you recite that same line to us at least forty times a day. But when’s the last time you saw God turn someone’s skin back from green, or make someone’s tail shrink back into their spine? Or -- God works in mysterious ways, and I assume those ways sometimes include bleach and plastic surgery.”

Ty’s already-ruddy cheeks flush further. A vein sticks out at his temple, thick and turgid, reminding Charles too keenly of the way Kurt gets when he’s angry. “Don’t you blaspheme now. You don’t want to go back to solitary, do you?”

“Did you know,” Charles says, well aware that his voice has started to take on that broad, drawling tone the counselors here hate so much, the one that implies he’s better than them and he knows it, that he’s the one descended through a dynasty of very rich Xaviers, “that the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture considers solitary confinement of any duration for children under the age of eighteen to be a violation of human rights? It’d be a shame if anyone were to find out you were utilizing such methods here, in a place dedicated to serving the will of the Lord and protecting his ‘treasured children.’”

The other campers -- patients, really -- have gone silent, staring at Charles. Or staring at Ty, maybe, who is swelling up rather like a venomous lizard, chest puffing out as he inhales heavily. Charles can practically taste Alex’s fascination and satisfaction, mired in deep with trepidation: he’s worried about what comes next.

"Do you want us to contact your stepfather?" Ty asks.

"Not really," Charles says. Oddly, between the "counselors" and "spiritual guides" at Purifiers and Kurt, he'd take their irrational, superstitious, directionless fear over Kurt's malice any day.

Ty smirks; he's called Charles's bluff, and it's that knowing expression, when Ty knows nothing that has Charles opening his big mouth again: "While I know you read and censor any outgoing mail, do you think a place like this can ever keep its quackery hushed up for very long? I wonder how many journalists would love to find out more about what your backers in the state legislature keep hushed up."

"Did a demon tell you that?" Ty asks. His face and voice are kind, syrupy kind, sweet concern spilled all over them to make Charles sick. Underneath he's all venom, and Charles can see it in his eyes -- behind them -- hot and corrosive. He believes what he's saying, Charles thinks; he honestly believes Charles is possessed, but more importantly, he's thinking need to tell Stryker; need to shut him up.

When Charles smiles, the kind of smile that would usually provoke Kurt to violence, Ty settles down into steely resolve. "All right. Boys, please wait while I bring in another counselor to lead you in prayers and reflection. Charles, come with me. Now."

Bobby and the others watch in mute awe and fear as Ty, his hand now locked around Charles's
biceps, marches him out of the room. Charles tosses them his best winsome grin, because what do you have here if not bravado -- God knows, none of them have anything else, everything else down to their clothes confiscated and hidden away. The hallway outside their meeting room is a long gullet of beige, constricting around him, Ty's bulky frame crowding Charles up against the wall. Every few swift steps they pass an open door and a surprised face.

"I think," Ty's saying into his walkie-talkie (why doesn't he just pray? Charles wonders, if he wants to talk to someone far away?) "Xavier needs to spend some time in private reflection. Can you please prepare Room 10 for me?"

The voice on the other end, a woman with an unangelic accent, says, "Again? All right."

"I think I've reflected more than enough," Charles tells him. Ty frog-marches him outside and down the gravel walkway to the large concrete building at the end of the lane. It looks like a bunker, or the kind of building Kurt favors, square and soulless. "In fact, my reflections have informed me that you should really just let me go."

He concentrates as hard as he can on reinforcing this. Ty wavers, hand loosening and tightening spasmodically, but then says, "Your demons have no power over me, Xavier. I'm strong in my faith; stronger than you are in your wickedness."

I doubt that, Charles thinks, but he has no way of proving it, as hard as he tries. His power feels like a weak muscle, atrophied from disuse. It's infuriating, the way he knows how strong he could be, if he could practice, if he could really work at it -- strong enough to overcome anyone's will, Ty's, Kurt's … and instead he's hobbled here.

Not for long, though. Soon he'll be out of this place, and he'll do a better job of keeping it secret than he did before. In a few years he'll go to college, too, and he'll never have to come home, not ever again, not if he doesn't want to. And he won't want to.

Room 10 is at the end of the hall. The rooms in the middle are better -- sometimes, if you're lucky, there will be someone on either side of you, and you can hear their noises, a comfort in the oppressive aloneness of solitary confinement. Sorry, "private reflection." Room 10, though, is desolate even in a hall that's narrow and lifeless.

"I'll have a Bible brought to you," Ty says magnanimously as he shows Charles inside, standing there in the doorway, his bulky frame nearly blocking the light. Charles' stomach clenches reflexively.

"That won't be necessary," Charles says, but he regrets it as soon as the words have left his lips; at least with a Bible, he'd have something to do.

*Something to do* is, usually, reading the dirty passages from the Song of Songs and wondering how people as violently chaste as the Purifiers -- who emphasize sexual abstinence (and abstinence from anything fun, really) outside of wedlock -- could cope with verses about a man praising his girlfriend's breasts. It's hard to feel anything approaching sexual interest here, but Charles is a teenaged boy, and he's hardly deaf to the heated, subterranean murmurings of other people's libidos, or his own.

Ty leaves him, the door thumping heavily shut and, on its heels, the thick steel bar sliding home.

"You could at least say goodbye!" Charles yells out of the tiny, barred window of Room 10.

Ty doesn't respond; all Charles hears is the odd, echoing aloneness of his own voice reflected back at
him. Once that dies out, he busies himself with kicking his shoes off and stuffing his socks into them, sacking out on the bed and preparing himself for boredom.

"Hey," says a tiny voice, so faint and fragile, Charles thinks he's hallucinating already.

"Hey," the voice says again. "Look between the bed and the wall."

It's not a demon voice, or a telepathy voice. It's a real one. Intrigued, Charles rolls out of bed and, with a furtive glance at the door, carefully inches the bed away from the wall. He needs a minute but he sees it: a tiny hole bored into the painted cinderblock, just where he'd rest his head on his pillow.

Faced with conversation when he hadn't been expecting it, Charles feels momentarily at a loss. Then, figuring introductions are as good as anything, says, "I'm Charles."

"Raven," the voice says.

"Hi," Charles says, delighted, and even though no one is here to see it he can't hide his grin. "How long have you been here?"

"Just a few days this time," Raven says. The voice is female, Charles thinks, though the age some of his fellow campers are, it's hard to know for sure. "You shouldn't come too close. I have leprosy."

"Leprosy?" Charles says dubiously.

"I know," Raven says, a little wry. "I don't believe them either. It's just a mutation, right? But it never hurts to be safe."

Charles rolls onto his back, facing up toward the ceiling and closes his eyes. He constructs a mental image of Raven in his head, even though he's never seen her. For some reason, he imagines her as blue. "All right," he says. "What is your mutation, anyway?"

There's silence for a moment, a moment that stretches on, long enough Charles wonders if Raven's even going to answer him, and then she says, "I can change how I look. I can look like anything. Anyone."

"Anyone?" Charles asks. His mind seizes on possibilities. "Like Einstein? Hedy Lamarr? The President?"

"I don't know who Hedy Lamarr is," Raven tells him, "but if I did, yeah." She pauses, and in the hiatus Charles fills in a few more details of his mental portrait: yellow eyes like a cat, red hair, skin smooth the way a snake's skin is smooth, the faintest texture of scales. "What about you?"

"They say I'm possessed," Charles tells her. That wins a snort, and a sensation of Raven hastily muffling herself. "But before that, I guess I was supposed to be telepathic. As soon as my mother found out -- well, and my stepfather -- they stuffed me in here. Having a mutant son isn't seemedly."

"My mother got rid of me." Tension ripples through Raven's voice, soft as it is. "I guess because I was marked by the devil," mockery; her mood, Charles thinks, is as changeable as her skin, "and finally the state decided to dump me in here. But I'm going to get out."

Charles doesn't ask how. All of the campers -- prisoners -- he's talked to have said the same thing. Inevitably, Charles has seen them brought back in restraints, immediately shuffled off to solitary or put on display for what the counselors call Judgement at the Gate but Charles thinks of as public shaming: a listing of sins, humiliating punishment, the offender left standing on a pedestal so the rest of the prisoners can see the price of failure.
If he had any kind of power worth talking of, Charles would have mind-controlled himself out of here long ago.

“Well, take me with you when you do go,” Charles says. His voice comes out sounding strained and strange. Not like him.

“Are you okay?” Raven says.

Charles opens his eyes. The ceiling above him looks just the same as it did before he shut them, blank and empty, intentionally uninteresting. He’s supposed to be thinking about God, after all, not admiring the decor. “I’m fine,” he says. “It’s just been a long day. I’m sure you understand.”

Raven hums wordlessly, and Charles imagines her leaning against the wall by the hole, facing away from where he lies, perhaps looking up at her own ceiling. It’s refreshing, talking like this. The other campers -- some of them, anyway -- might share Charles’ opinions about this place, but they can’t talk about it. They’ll be overheard, and end up where Charles is right now. Most of them aren’t willing to face solitary again, not after having gone through it once.

“Where are you from?” Charles says.

"New York, I guess," Raven says after a heartbeat. "Where're you from? Windsor Castle?"

"My mum wanted to send me to Eton," Charles offers, his accent as posh as he can make it. "I'm from New York too, though. My father was American."

"Was?" Raven's voice is touched with sympathy; it's odd, Charles thinks, how he knows her voice so well already.

"He died." If Charles concentrates, the ache of that loss stirs a little, a dull sort of throb just under his breastbone. He never really knew his father; Brian Xavier is mostly a painting in one of the studies, and a few photographs and snatches of memory. He wonders if he would have loved his father, if he'd be in this place if Brian were still around.

Raven doesn't say sorry, but then, she doesn't need to. The prisoners here tend not to waste pity on each other, not when they're more afraid of the counselors -- and when the counselors encourage them to report on their fellow inmates for infractions ranging from cursing to "indulging in sinfulness" -- trying to use their forbidden, satanic abilities. The godly must keep watch over the ungodly, Ty says, droning on in that nasal twang. The more vigilant you are against the sins of your fellows, the more vigilant you are against the sins in yourself.

They don't speak after that; Charles figures it's okay. Carefully, he tucks a corner of the blanket over the hole so that anyone looking in can't see it. Their secret, he decides, his and Raven’s, something to cling to until they let him see daylight again, whenever that will be.

The last time Charles was here, they let him rot for over a week. This time, it only lasts a day; someone comes for him that next morning, not long after a breakfast of oatmeal and a grainy, bitter apple. While Charles studies the congealing bowl he'll have to finish before he gets anything else, the heavy steel bar slides through its socket and Charles’ door swings open.

“Come on now, Charles,” Ty says, clapping Charles on the shoulder with his shovel-like paw, though his touch is gentle where Kurt’s wouldn’t have been. “Up and at 'em,” as if Charles hadn’t sensed him coming from all the way down the hall, as if he weren’t waiting at the foot of his bed by the time Ty stepped into the little room, shoes on.

Already? Charles almost says -- would, if he didn’t worry it might remind Ty he hasn’t been here
very long and encourage him to extend Charles’ sentence. He looks through the door of Room 8 as they walk past, craning his neck to see, and feeling a shock roll through him when his eyes meet a gold, cat-like gaze. Raven -- and she really is blue! She watches him go past and mouths something at him, though with her lips half-obscured by the door, it’s impossible to tell what. Ty tugs on his arm and Charles stumbles forward, Raven sliding out of sight.

“Where are we going?” Charles says as they step outside into the sunlight. It gleams down through the tree leaves, dappling the ground beneath their feet and making everything appear too bright, like the world has been re-envisioned in technicolor. They’ve turned left out the front door of this building, heading toward the administrative suites, not the dorms or the so-called community center.

“Where are you taking me?”

"To Dr. Hill's office," Ty says. Charles squints against the sun and up at Ty, who doesn't look terribly pleased. "'Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,' Charles; I'm sorry to say that you haven't learned this lesson."

The world lapses to beige again as they step inside the administration building, mauve chairs and light blue carpets, pictures of Jesus curing the ill hung on the walls. The secretary at her desk gives Charles a silent, heavy look from behind the thick lenses of her glasses; it's a look Charles has gotten used to, the same look Ty has, the cafeteria workers, the counselors, everyone. Ty marches him past the secretary with a brief, "Dr. Hill's expecting him, Arlene."

Dr. Hill is a bluff, pale man, eyes small and self-satisfied on the cushions of his cheeks. He's also not a medical doctor, or a doctor of philosophy, or a doctor of anything that would remotely qualify him to treat any kind of illness; the cross pin on his lapel and the diploma over his shoulder say he's a Doctor of Theology -- "Qualified to treat the ills of the spirit, which are a thousand times more deadly than any disease of the flesh," as Dr. Hill had told him on Charles's first day here. His presence looms large over the camp, manifested in the weekly sermons he preaches and, what is supposed to be a privilege, his occasional visits to therapy or group activities. Whenever Charles looks at him, he has the sense of fire and brimstone, judgment hovering over Dr. Hill's shoulder like an avenging angel.

That's nothing compared to the man sitting across from Dr. Hill's desk.

"Kurt?" It's only looking around Kurt's mountainous, oppressive bulk that Charles sees her: thin and blonde, a ghost. "Mother?"

"Don't act so surprised, Charles," his mother says. She clutches her purse, drawing in on herself as if recoiling from disease. "After your display yesterday, of course the camp contacted us. I must say," she says severely to Dr. Hill, "for the amount of money we paid, your therapy does not seem to have corrected his… his problems."

“That's what I wanted to discuss with you all,” Dr. Hill says. His voice is low and gravely, like he's been eating rocks for breakfast. “It’s becoming quite clear to us all, I think, that the kind of treatment we provide here at Purifiers is not the kind of treatment Charles needs.”

Finally, Charles thinks, so fervently he’s surprised he doesn’t say it out loud. It takes everything he has not to look at Kurt or his mother, not to look too satisfied with himself, though he’s not sure how well he manages to keep it from his expression. He bites the inside of his cheek, hard enough it actually hurts, but it’s enough that he doesn’t smile.

“What do you mean, exactly?” Kurt demands. He’s leaning forward in his chair, grasping the armrests in a white-knuckled grip, almost like he thinks he could launch himself out of it and punch Dr. Hill in the face, like that might make Dr. Hill agree to keep Charles here indefinitely.
"I mean," Dr. Hill says, with an uncanny patience, "I believe Charles’ problems are not of the spiritual sort. We can cure any mutation here, Mr. Marko, Mrs. Xavier. But I’m afraid Charles is not suffering from mutation.” His pale eyes meet Charles’ across his desk, and for the first time Charles thinks he detects something almost like sympathy in that gaze. He fumbles forward with his power, trying to peel past the layers of Dr. Hill’s mind, to understand just what he means, but Dr. Hill speaks first. “I think Charles would benefit from seeing a psychiatrist.”

"A psychiatrist!” Kurt and Charles's mother say at the same time. It would be almost comedic, if Charles were capable of any laughter that isn't despairing.

"Fixed delusions," Dr. Hill says, over Charles's mother's gasps. "I'm truly sorry, ma'am, Mrs. Xavier. But after talking over Charles's case with our therapists and counselors, we've concluded that -- at least in this instance -- mainstream medicine may be of more use to your son."

"First he's a mutant, now he's insane," Charles's mother says bitterly. She levels a disapproving look at Charles -- although, now that Charles thinks about it, has she ever looked at him any other way? She draws herself up. "But you are convinced, Dr. Hill, that he isn't a -- a -- "

"Quite convinced," Dr. Hill says soothingly. "While the line between psychiatric illness and possession due to immorality can be quite blurry, we believe Charles suffers from the former. He claims to hear voices and even speaks with them. These voices tell him that the counselors in the camp are in league against him and his friends, and seek to do him harm or deprive him of liberty. He accuses us of the most shocking behavior, allegations that have no basis other than what these voices tell him. When he was in private reflection, our staff observed him having conversations with an imaginary girl -- Raven, he called her."

Charles straightens sharply and jerks against the hand Ty's placed on his shoulder. "She's not a delusion!" he says, aware he sounds every bit as crazy as Dr. Hill thinks he is. "She's real! She was in that solitary room next to me, there's a hole in the wall, we talked -- and then I saw her! She was blue!"

"Whoever heard of a blue girl?" Dr. Hill asks sadly, shaking his head. "When your son was observed actively hallucinating, Mrs. Xavier, our staff acted promptly in reaching out to you. We will continue to pray for Charles, and for you, that the Lord will guide you through your trials."

“That’s not true!” Charles exclaims, the words bursting from him like water from a broken dam. “He’s lying -- he’s making that up because he knows he can’t make me stop being a telepath, but if he admits that then he’s failed, so he has to make you believe I’m crazy so he can keep his success rate! I bet he’s half-convinced himself, too, because otherwise it means God isn’t as strong as he thinks he is, or isn’t real at all.”

And Charles knows that’s true, knows it with the conviction of someone who’s been able to see the inside of Dr. Hill’s mind, all his fears and weaknesses painted there like some beautiful fresco. The moment he says it, though, he sees the way it looks: a desperate grasp for reprieve by a sick boy, and what applies to Dr. Hill applies just as much -- more, perhaps -- to his mother and stepfather. They don’t want a mutant child. They don’t want a crazy one, either, but at least crazy is treatable.

The realization is like ice water, pouring into Charles’ veins. Responding like this is perhaps the worst thing he could have done in this moment, for all that it’s true. Maybe because it’s true. He watches his mother’s cheeks flush and Kurt’s face set like stone, hardening in his resolve.

“You see,” Dr. Hill says on a sigh, his regret practically palpable. “I feared he might react like this. For what comfort it’s worth, it’s my understanding psychiatry has made great advances as a field these past few decades; this sort of thing is very treatable now, with proper medications. You’re
lucky you’ve caught it so early.”

Charles’s mother sighs and touches Kurt's arm. "Well, Kurt? We very well can't keep him here if Dr. Hill refuses."

"Of course we can't," Kurt growls. The expression he levels on Charles is more of the same, an intent, inexorable malice. "But we can damn well get him taken care of."

Charles glances at Dr. Hill for some kind of help, anything, at least a demand for Kurt to watch his mouth. Silent sympathy, though, seems to be the extent of what Dr. Hill can offer, especially when he's mulling tactful ways to remind his now-former clients that their deposit is non-refundable. And of course he can't see any of what Kurt is thinking, and even though it's a terrible idea, Charles is thirteen and desperate, and he can see the possibilities taking terrible shape around Kurt, an aura that is Charles's future: locked away, tight and secure, soundproof, thoughtproof rooms, people who are even more extreme than the Purifiers --

"He wants to -- to put me down like I've got rabies," Charles tells Dr. Hill. His voice is high and no amount of effort can bring it back down to rationality again. "Please, Dr. Hill, I'm not possessed and I'm not crazy, I've got telepathy, I'm a mutant, and all he wants is me out of the way so he gets my father's money -- "

"Honestly, Charles," his mother breaks in. She stands, tugging her wrap around her shoulders. Like a lady from the fifties, she wears gloves, flawless, unstained, and white. For the first time in months, her gaze is unclouded by the gin when she frowns at him. "Get yourself under control. I won't have you carrying on in front of Dr. Hill and I most certainly will not have you accusing Mr. Marko of engaging in some kind of… of insane plot to steal your father's estate." Her mouth twists. "It hardly does any credit to your argument for your sanity. Now behave yourself. We're going."

"No, Dr. Hill." Charles shakes his head vigorously, has to laugh in despair when Dr. Hill gives him a resigned look, Pilate washing his hands of everything. "I'm not crazy!"

"We'll have a psychiatrist determine that," Kurt says darkly. He stands too, mountainous, a storm looming and ready to sweep Charles away. His hand descends on Charles's shoulder like a thunderbolt; the pressure against bone brings Charles, briefly, back to his senses. "Come on; we're leaving."

That's how Charles finds himself sitting in an office with a psychiatrist two weeks later -- that was the soonest his mother could get him in, even with all her money -- doing his best to explain in plain terms that he was telepathic. That what he could hear, what he knew, wasn't delusions but real. He even read the doctor's mind for her, reporting back her thoughts, but just as soon as he did he could tell it had backfired. Her thoughts weren't things she wanted known. She didn’t like the idea of someone being able to pluck them from her head with such ease, therefore it was better to believe he couldn’t. That she hadn’t been thinking that, or at least not precisely that, and if Charles couldn’t read her mind, well then.

“With this sort of thing, it’s best to be thorough,” Dr. Jessup explained later on, when she had Kurt and Sharon in the room with Charles, though by that point Charles already knew what she was going to say -- knew it in his bones, and in the sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. He wants to scream, he wants to cry, he wants to throw things across the room, but instead he sits there on her white sofa with his hands clasped in his lap, still and perfect, watching her speak and Kurt and Sharon lap it all, gratefully, up. “But I do suspect Charles’ struggles are psychiatric in origin.”

“That’s what the other doctor said, too,” Kurt said, satisfaction permeating his every word.
“It’s too early to make a diagnosis,” Dr. Jessup warns, her clipboard held between her hands, the one with all its careful cursive notes on it, all the evidence of Charles’ insanity. “But a good way to be sure would be to try him on an anti-psychotic and see if that eliminates his symptoms. If not, that would suggest it really is telepathy, as Charles claims. But if the voices go away, they were likely a product of psychosis.”

Kurt frowns, thinking of the debacle at Purifiers. "How long will it take to find out for sure?"

"Thorazine is quite slow-acting," Dr. Jessup says. Her gaze flits around the ceiling of her office as if searching for words that dart just out of her grasp. "I recommend that you agree to admit him to our inpatient ward until we can determine if what we're dealing with is psychosis or telepathy."

"I thought you said it was schizophrenia," Kurt says belligerently.

"Mostly sure," Dr. Jessup says. "But before committing to a long-term course of anti-psychotics, it's best to be sure what we're dealing with. I would like to admit Charles so we can be sure he's tolerating the Thorazine, and so we can run occasional tests to evaluate his mental state."

"And so you can bill our insurance for that much more," Charles adds. The weight of Kurt's determination presses on him; his mother's utter indifference only adds to the weight. Dr. Jessup's mouth goes thin, because of course she was thinking precisely this.

Charles looks over at Sharon, who's staring grimly ahead, through the wall behind Dr. Jessup, back to Westchester where a gin and tonic, and peace and quiet, wait. She's in a red dress, garish against the studied neutrality of Dr. Jessup's office, Chanel No 5 fragrant where the rest of the hospital is astringent and chemical. Please, he thinks at her, praying that she'll hear, feeling himself trying to reach across the gulf between them. Please. "Mum, please. Please, don't let them do this. Don't -- "

“Be quiet Charles, you’re giving me a headache,” Sharon says on a sigh, long-suffering, as she presses two fingers to her temple and massages there. “We’ll discuss this later.” She means not at all.

“We need to do what the doctor says, Charles,” Kurt says, not entirely able to disguise his triumph, his vindication at being right -- there’s something wrong with Charles, there’s always been something wrong with Charles, and now Kurt can prove it. Or he will. Soon. “If you really are one of those mutants,” he says it like it’s a dirty word, “then we’ll be able to figure that out, won’t we?”

Charles can’t be schizophrenic. If he were, he wouldn’t be able to feel all of Kurt’s disdain for him, the reek of it poisoning the air around him. He wouldn’t be able to know what people were planning to say a moment before they said it. Right?

They’ll know the truth soon enough, he thinks viciously, glaring at Dr. Jessup as she tells Sharon and Kurt all about their inpatient program, the medication she’ll be prescribing and its potential side effects. They’ll put him on this stupid medicine and he’ll still be telepathic, and then they’ll all know.

He comforts himself with that while he tries to assimilate the amount of havoc their drugs will wreak on him. The comfort is bleak, cold when Sharon says, "Oh yes, it sounds as if he ought to stay here, if he's going to be having… effects."

"What, drooling? Twitching?" Charles asks sarcastically. It gets him a weary, "Don't make a scene, Charles. This is in your best interests," and another rub of Sharon's temples.

In the part of Dr. Jessup that isn't harboring resentment of Charles's telepathy (not really telepathy, she tells herself, just a very astute young man, a pity he's ill), she's thinking that a mother should at least be willing to hear what the drugs she wants are going to do to her son. Thorazine isn't beautiful;
it's merely less awful than the alternative, an unmanageable patient or one in constant terror. With a practiced sort of pragmatism, she pushes all of that to the side and says, "We'll reevaluate our selection of Thorazine based on his symptomatology. And of course, if the side effects are too onerous, we'll look for an alternative treatment."

"It won't work," Charles reminds her. "I'm telepathic."

_Famous last words_, he thinks hazily, two weeks later.

The Thorazine has worked precisely as promised. While Charles _can_ get out of bed, it's always an ordeal: to push back the blankets, swing one leg and then the next off the mattress. He doesn't bother putting on real clothes anymore; he just shuffles in his pajamas to breakfast, then group, then individual therapy, the edges of each blurring into the next.

He doesn't hear the voices anymore. He wants to be surprised, but he isn't. He can't muster the energy for that. But at least his mother and Kurt never visit, so he doesn't have to muster the energy for them either. He can just drift, and try to be grateful -- as the doctors say -- they caught it so early.

*

The first time Charles heard a voice, he was twelve.

At first, he thought it was a dream. He was lying in bed at night, on his left side with the pillow flipped so it was cool against his cheek, trying very hard to think of nothing at all. Not Sharon in her drunken slumber, nor his new stepfather Kurt and his burly offspring, nor the servants whispering to each other in their quarters as they prepared for bed.

He had been staring at the clock on his bedside table, its neon blue numbers glowing the hour and the minutes as they ticked by, and had been staring so long he'd thought he'd hypnotized himself into falling asleep, or into one of those dreams where you can't really tell if you're awake or not. He doesn't see anything except his dark room and the glow of the numbers and the faint light from the stars beyond his window, and the shadows, but he hears, very distinctly, a quiet voice saying _I worry about her constantly. It's not just the diabetes, cancer runs in our family, but will she listen to me? Part of me wants to stand over her grave and gloat when they bury her. What kind of daughter does that make me?_ The anger and worry jolt him out of his maybe-sleep. He's not himself, not Charles, for a moment -- or rather, he's himself-but-also-someone-else, someone who's wincing at how rough her hands are from the chemicals, who's trying to distract herself from worrying by focusing on rubbing a soothing cream onto each finger, onto her palms, _slow, firm circles, there, doesn't that feel nice?_

The next morning, Charles wakes up to a headache that pounds as viciously as his mother's hangovers seem to. He wonders if this is what being drunk is like and, if so, why anyone would ever want to come anywhere near a gin and tonic. His mother ignores his silent winces at breakfast, and Kurt, after a silent, malevolent glare, ignores him as well.

"Oh," Sharon says after her third cup of coffee. "I completely forgot. Kurt, Rebecca will be taking her day off early this week. Her mother is going to the hospital for some test… something for cancer, I think, I'm not really sure. It does mean, though, that she'll be seeing to your dry-cleaning after she gets back unless you would like her to take it before."

What Kurt says in response to that, Charles has no idea. He’s too busy thinking about what his mother just said, and about what he heard -- thought he heard -- last night. The voice, and the …. It must be the pipes, he figures. He heard someone talking to themselves over in the servants'
quarters. Only he dismisses that thought a second later, because he’s never heard anything through the pipes before. Could he have imagined it? He must have, though it’s a strange coincidence, imagining a servant thinking about their mother having cancer and then it turns out there’s a servant in their home whose mother does, indeed, have cancer.

“Charles is dripping on the tablecloth!” Cain’s voice shatters through Charles’ thoughts, loud and accusing, Cain even now pointing one thick, accusing finger at Charles from across the table.

“Were you raised in a barn, boy?” Kurt says, glaring at him, which is when Charles realizes he’d been holding his fork midway between plate and mouth for at least ten seconds now and there’s a puddle of hollandaise on the table to prove it. Horrified, Charles puts the fork down and dabs at the stain with his napkin, murmuring apologies which -- as usual -- fall on deaf ears.

After breakfast he goes straight to the library, instead of the nursery where Cain might find him, barricading himself in with the books and the chair that still smells like his father, all leather and cigar smoke. It's winter vacation, so his mother's disinterest in him, and her nearly religious avoidance of her dead husband's study, means Charles can go without anyone bothering him for hours at a time.

Still, he quietly chants *stay away, stay away, stay very far away* to himself as he collects a few favorite books and tucks himself into the high-backed chair by the window. Charles isn't given to magical thinking, but it seems to work; the hallway outside the study remains silent, not even the quiet patter of the servants disturbing it. No one calls him for lunch; it's only his stomach growling, and the advent of another headache, that tells Charles he needs to find food.

It means leaving his fortress, but Charles figures he can be quick and quiet, and avoid Kurt and Cain long enough to scrounge a sandwich and some chips, and maybe the cookies his mother forbids but keeps around for late hours when she's awake and too sloshed to care what she eats. The hallways, once he ventures out into them, are strangely empty, when at least two of the army of servants would be around at this time of day. Then again, it means no Kurt -- or Cain, which is just as important.

He's in the kitchen, assembling a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, when he hears it: an animal bellow of pain, a shocking spike of heat -- flesh on flesh, a fist meeting the tender softness beneath a sternum, the impact spreading out in tendrils along muscle and bone. Hunger floods out of him; the knife, covered in raspberry jam, clatters to the tile.

Someone's dying, he thinks. Someone's dying, or it's another dream. Someone's being murdered here in his house, *he's going to die, but he'll die standing, see how tough I am, Dad, I'm not going to cry*.

Charles races out into the hall, following the sound -- even though it’s not a sound, not really. Or not one he can hear with his ears. It’s more like intuition pushing him to turn left on the first floor, then take the stairs up, chasing after something he isn’t sure even exists. But the urgency is real. And it’s that urgency, that sense of *now* and *panic* that brings Charles bursting into the second floor smoking room before he’s even thought through who he’s intervening for and why.

What he finds is this: Cain, huddled down on the floor, hunched over like he’s hiding something -- that something, Charles realizes a beat later, is his own body, the vulnerability of an exposed belly to the predator that stands over him with fist raised.

“What are you doing?”

The words tumble out of Charles’ mouth before he can think better of them, and Kurt turns his ruddy head toward him, eyes dark and angry. On the floor at his feet, Cain is a still and unmoving object, frozen in place.
"What the fuck are you doing?" Kurt wheels around, immense, shoulders and chest and towering height devouring the air and space of the room.

"I heard -- " Charles starts, hearing his own voice tremble. Kurt's fists are red, mottled, with the blood rising to the surface underneath them. "There was shouting, someone asking for help, I thought -- "

"You thought," Kurt says flatly. He unclenches his fists but he's no less menacing, thick fingers flexing unconsciously.

He wants to strike something, he's furious Xavier's will only left part of the estate to Sharon, he's furious his son is nothing but a thick-skulled, wide-shouldered retard who can't have basic intelligence beaten into him, much less drilled by the expensive schools Kurt sends him to -- he says all of this to Charles, clear as day, only that angry slash of a mouth never moves.

"You heard someone shouting for help," Kurt echoes. His voice tumbles down like a rockfall, heavy, mortal. Behind him, Cain stirs weakly, pushing himself up on his knees.

Charles nods. Kurt smiles, a bloody gash across his face with teeth glittering in the wound -- and also real blood, from a bitten lower lip.

"Charles," he says, advancing, "We're going to have to make sure you don't go hearing things again."

Chapter End Notes

cw: ableism, medical abuse, psychological abuse of a child
Example Thirteen: Dual-Process Theories

The hotel -- and Chicago -- is more peaceful for the absence of five thousand psychologists and neuroscientists. Certainly it's more peaceful for the absence of Shaw, and it's a peace Erik only notices when he wakes up in the morning, trapped under Charles's warm and somnolent weight, with last night's memories rolling quietly in the back of his mind: a run through the city, dinner, his shoulders pressed against the perfect curve of Cloud Gate's side while Charles kissed him. He wonders if Charles would mind going back.

"Throwing me over already," Charles murmurs lazily in his ear. His naked body shifts against Erik's as he leans up to nuzzle his earlobe, chasing the words with a nip. "I knew it."

"We're more compatible." Erik cracks one eye open. The bedroom is still dim, the drapes drawn, fragments of the lakeshore sunrise filtering through in stripes that gild unexpected surfaces. Lazily, he feels out the gears and hands in the antique clock in the living room of their suite; almost nine. Nine in the morning and he doesn't particularly want to move.

"Hmmm," Charles hums. The nip turns to a series of slow kisses pressed to Erik's neck, to the knob of his spine between his shoulder blades. "I'll have to win you back, then."

Erik grins where Charles can't see it, leaning back against the heat of Charles' body, and says, "I can’t wait to see you try."

Charles reaches for his waist, tugging Erik over to lie on his other side, facing him. His freckles are invisible in this light but his eyes somehow seem just as blue. He kisses Erik, on the mouth, his mind seeping into Erik’s mind like watercolor paints blending together, until Erik can't tell where one ended and the next began.

How many mornings like this can they have, Erik wonders. Once he would have thought them a limited resource, to be saved up and spent sparingly. Now, the possibilities spin out like a spool of thread before him, vanishing over the far horizon.

They stay there for another half hour at least, languid and warm in the halo of one another’s body heat, until Charles looks at him and says, “I was thinking we could go for breakfast,” and Erik nods, because wherever Charles wants to go, that’s where he’ll be.

*

The first of their meetings after APS, after Kitty has taken her long flight home and spent half of it scouring the #LehnshawShowdown hashtag on Twitter and thanking G-d for living in an age where internet is everywhere, she finds herself sitting in the chair opposite Dr. Lehnsherr's desk and realizing she has absolutely nothing to say. Usually she prepares for these things, detailed agendas that she annotates on her iPad while Lehnsherr listens and makes suggestions, but this time, she forgot. Dr. Lehnsherr sits on the other side of that desk with his legs crossed and brow raised, watching in expectant silence as Kitty struggles for something -- anything -- to say.

"I hope," Dr. Lehnsherr says, "this is a sign your preparation for your qualifying exams is going well."

"Um. Yes." At least it's true; Dr. Lehnsherr might be terrifying in seminar and lab, but he's been almost… solicitous ever since Kitty first sat down with him to collect her reading lists and talk with him about expectations for her grant proposal. She also feels, at times, that she might have a grasp of
the impossible amount of material to synthesize before she gets to stand up in front of her committee and defend her work. "I think my schedule is working out."

Dr. Lehnsherr nods. "Good." He doesn't sound as brusque as usual, although not anything Kitty would call nice, either. "What are your plans for the summer?"

This sounds dangerously close to small-talk, the kind Kitty's more used to exchanging with Dr. MacTaggert or Dr. Xavier. Then again, this could be Dr. Lehnsherr probing for signs of weakness or laziness. "Uh, well, lab of course, and I've got two weeks free, so I was going to go home to see my parents, but with exams and everything, I might stay here -- "

"You should go home," Dr. Lehnsherr says firmly. He gives her an uncompromising look. "Take something with you to work on, but you should go home."

There's nothing to say to that except "Yes, Dr. Lehnsherr," and Dr. Lehnsherr nods with satisfaction. "I suppose," he adds after another silent minute, in which Kitty's torn between wondering if this is pod-person Dr. Lehnsherr and thinking about that hashtag, if something else happened that wasn't in front of an audience. As if he's the telepath in their department, Dr. Lehnsherr says sardonically, "I suppose, the only thing you got out of APS was academic drama and not anything useful."

Kitty winces. "Well -- I mean, I tried not to pay attention. I'm sure it's all gossip."

Dr. Lehnsherr gives her a wry look. "Academia runs on gossip, Ms. Pryde. And sometimes what you dismiss as gossip is -- well." He huffs softly, taps his fingers distractedly on his desk.

And that's when Kitty sees it, a plain, bright silver band around the ring finger of Dr. Lehnsherr's right hand. It shocks her off the trail of Dr. Lehnsherr's thought: sometimes what you dismiss as gossip is the truth.

"Oh my god," she says -- out loud -- before she can stop herself.

Lehnsherr looks at her then, with preternatural acumen, down at his hand -- and the ring. But apparently no further information is forthcoming, Lehnsherr's lips as shut-tight as ever, pressing out into a thin line as he stares her down across the desk between them.

"Are you married?" Kitty says anyway, plunging boldly onward, because why take an inch when you can take a mile. Apparently.

"Has APS really inspired such fascination with my personal life?" Dr. Lehnsherr says dryly, and he draws that hand off the surface of his desk, obscuring it in his lap instead. "You should go, Miss Pryde. I'm sure you have more pressing concerns with which to occupy your time. The revisions on that paper for Cognition, perhaps."

Kitty’s cheeks burn hot. “Right. Of course. I’m sorry. I mean, thank you, sir.”

She makes herself get out of her chair, and then out of Dr. Lehnsherr’s office, though she doesn’t make it far before pulling out her phone to text everyone else in her cohort.

**Kitty**

ERIK IS WEARING A RING

**Kitty**

A WEDDING RING
She doesn't have to wait long before the replies come flooding in. Salim is first, accusing Kitty of outright lying, then Xiaomeng saying she won't accept anything without proof.

**Nora**
So who is it do we think?

**Salim**
Erik prob ate them already

**Xiaomeng**
Maybe he's just wearing a ring? Metal and all...

Snorting to herself, Kitty texts one final command for them to meet her at Flourish in an hour. As she does, she's acutely aware she's fueling the gossip mill Dr. Lehnsherr says the academy runs on, but -- well, *it's a wedding ring*, and if that isn't worthy of gossip, Kitty doesn't know what is. She hasn't been dragged to the weddings of countless older cousins and friends of the family for nothing; she knows what a damn wedding ring looks like. Sure, Lehnsherr might like metal, but he's never worn jewelry before, not that Kitty's seen (which brings up an entirely new crop of possibilities that she will not entertain), and yeah, ring finger of the right hand is definite wedding ring territory. At least in Germany, and Lehnsherr's German, so *Q.E.D.*

Before she can meet with her friends to convince them of the truth, though, she's got one more meeting, this one with Dr. Xavier. He's the graduate director and oversees, in the kindly and unintrusive way he has, all the grad students as they transition through the program, like an enthusiastic and tireless sheepdog. He's also, Kitty knows from experience, consoled both graduates and undergraduates alike after meetings with Dr. Lehnsherr; you can usually tell if it's been a bad finals period by the number of tea mugs Dr. Xavier ferries between his office and the department kitchen during his office hour days.

He's happy to see Kitty today, though, waving her in cheerfully as he minimizes the windows on his screen. "Ms. Pryde, what can I do for you?"

*Tell me if you know who Dr. Lehnsherr married*, she thinks, but wisely keeps that inside her head. "I needed to check in with you on my quals progress," she says instead. "And I just got back from APS."

"Ah, yes," Dr. Xavier says with a wry twist of his mouth. "A bit dramatic, this one. More than most, and that's saying something."

"Yes," Kitty agrees, though it makes her flush a little again to admit it -- perhaps because Dr. Lehnsherr has so cleanly caught her speculating it about it once already. Although what else is she, or anyone, supposed to do, when a tribute speech isn't a tribute so much as a series of veiled accusations? "A bit."

"I know the graduate student rumor mill will grind on, but if I might make a suggestion," Dr. Xavier says, a bit pointedly. "Keep such excogitations somewhere that Dr. Lehnsherr won't overhear them."

"Of course." G-d. He knows, of course he knows, Pryde, he’s a telepath. Stupid. Stupid stupid stupid. Maybe one of these days Kitty will learn to mind her own business.

...But not this day, clearly, because that’s when Dr. Xavier reaches for his mouse to check an email alert that’s just dinged on his computer, and Kitty sees that he’s got a ring too -- silver, a perfect match for Lehnsherr’s, on the ring finger of his left hand.
"Oh my god," she mutters. "Oh my god."

Dr. Xavier turns to look at her, one of those ever-expressive eyebrows arching in curiosity. "Pardon?"

"You," Kitty says. She's gaping, she knows it, and she's powerless to stop. From her first day here, Dr. Lehnsherr, Dr. MacTaggert, Dr. Xavier, everyone has impressed on her their expectation that she conduct herself professionally, and this sort of behavior is light-years from professional, staring at her graduate director's wedding ring and choking out monosyllables and trying not to phase through her chair.

"Yes?" Dr. Xavier says, though it's clear from the amusement on his face he knows.

"You and Dr. Lehnsherr," she says. "You're --"

"Married." Dr. Xavier holds up his hand, displaying the ring more clearly. "Indeed we are. I'm sorry we didn't invite anyone or plan a reception, but it was rather spur of the moment. Maybe we'll do something at the end of summer, if Erik agrees."

"I. But you can't stand each other!" She must sound like a disapproving parent in an Austen novel, but she can't help that, either. And she also can't help thinking of Salim, Nora, and Xiaomeng, all unanimous in their agreement that Dr. Xavier and Dr. Lehnsherr were fucking.

"Well, I wouldn't say that," Dr. Xavier says gently. "Now you know, Ms. Pryde. And I would also ask, before we proceed to discussing matters relevant to your progress, that you -- " he blows out a breath. "Dr. Lehnsherr has been the object of a significant amount of conversation this past week. Be kind, when you and your colleagues dissect this recent development."

Right. Kitty isn’t totally ignorant of what Dr. Xavier means, either -- after Dr. Lehnsherr’s introduction for Dr. Shaw, it was the topic of most of the conversations over gin and tonics at the bar that night. Kitty had spent a solid hour half-drunk and hanging onto the every word of a fifth-year Stanford graduate student who claimed that her post-doc told her that their adviser told him that one of the tenured professors there was widely known to have fucked his grad student. And that this professor was actually brazen enough to have the student living in his home all five years of his doctorate. And that some people -- the Stanford student had, at this point, leaned in conspiratorially -- said it might not have been entirely consensual. All that, and the professor in question never got fired. Tenure is that good.

Everyone knew it was Shaw, the Stanford student said. A foregone conclusion. He was just, like, the type, and he could have gotten away with murder.

At the time Kitty had been entirely devoted to this notion, buying it wholesale and letting it spin out in a thousand directions in her intoxicated mind, convinced it explained Dr. Lehnsherr’s behavior perfectly. Why he always kept the door open in his meetings, even with the male grad students. Why he was so cold, sometimes. Why he freaked out at that undergrad girl when she tried to come onto him last year.

But in the cold light of day, it’s so difficult to imagine Erik -- Dr. Lehnsherr -- letting anyone do anything to him without his permission. Dr. Lehnsherr would kill anyone who tried. Surely he had to have gone along with it, had to have consented. Kitty can't imagine it happening any other way, not with the Dr. Lehnsherr she knows.

Dr. Xavier's watching her alertly and watching, she's sure, much of what's cycling through her head. She can't stop herself, though, try as she might; it's like not thinking of pink elephants, trying to make
herself not think of any circumstance in which Dr. Lehnsherr would permit someone to do anything to him against his will. That there might be such a circumstance, might have been, once, makes her vaguely ill.

"You'll understand," Dr. Xavier says after giving her a minute to stew in her own thoughts, "that I can't tell you anything more about what Dr. Lehnsherr said at the conference. Anything further that you learn should be his story to tell. Not mine."

"Yes, sir," Kitty squirms a bit, thinking of her past self, drunk and trying to work out how to pump the Stanford student for more information, reveling in being part of the gossip rather than on the outside looking in.

"And," Dr. Xavier adds, "you'll also understand that whatever Dr. Lehnsherr's past, whatever his experiences, that you ought not to reduce his personality and his work to being merely the sum of those experiences." When Kitty looks at him in bewilderment, he says, "Dr. Lehnsherr is a brilliant scientist in his own right. We're more than the events and the people that try to define our lives."

Kitty nods. She can't stop herself, though, from the fleeting thought He'd never let that happen. But then -- what would she think of him if he did?

It leaves her unable to concentrate on anything remotely having to do with her qualifying exams, her grant proposals, the Cognition paper, or anything else Dr. Xavier's supposed to know about. It leaves her twisting her fingers through the strap of her laptop bag, studying the chaos of books and papers and coffee mugs in Dr. Xavier's office, the art on the wall, Dr. Xavier's patient and open face. His hands, folded neatly on his desktop, the silver of his ring shining brightly.

"Dr. Xavier?"

"Yes?"

Kitty draws a breath. "Will Dr. Lehnsherr be okay? I don't just mean the gossip from the conference, but… everything behind it, I suppose. The speech he gave for Dr. Shaw."

That wins her one of Dr. Xavier's famous smiles, though this is gentler than usual. "I think so," he tells her. "Although, for your sake, I won't tell him that one of his graduate students expressed concern for his welfare."

Kitty manages to crack a grin of her own. "I don't want to lose my dissertation director before I get there."

"I don't think you will," Dr. Xavier says with that calm, unflappable optimism. Kitty isn't entirely sure -- she only knows Shaw by reputation, and that's more than enough -- but is willing to let Dr. Xavier soothe her. "And now, Miss Pryde, I don't think we'll get much in the way of substantive discussion done. If you would, let's reschedule our meeting for after all of this blows over? Or at least," he adds wryly, "for after you and your colleagues have finished speculating on my marriage."

Blushing, Kitty nods, and gratefully excuses herself, darting out the door as quickly as she can manage while retaining at least a little dignity. It’s only once she’s halfway back to her office that she realizes -- right, she was supposed to meet the others at Flourish for coffee and gossip. The prospect is less appealing now that she’s just had to face Dr. Xavier and talk about the same thing she’s meant to talk to them about, but it’s too late to text and beg off. They’ll be waiting.

And so they are, the three of them huddled around a table near the window, all bright and expectant faces.
“Tell us everything,” Nora says the second Kitty’s bag hits the floor next to the empty seat.

She’s on the edge of her chair, all of them are, her elbows on the tabletop and her brows raised. Kitty sits, reaching for the coffee one of them’s bought her and taking a small sip. “Well,” she says, and tries to push the rest of it out of her mind, to focus on the news at hand and not all the other information she’s gathered in the past half-hour, has been turning over and over in her mind like a strange stone. “It’s confirmed. Erik’s married.”

She waits, holding the rest of the sentence curled up close to her chest, as they all demand to know to whom, and when, then gives them all a crooked grin and says:

“To Charles.”

Salim laughs. "Wait, I could have sworn you just said Charles. Like -- "

"Xavier, yes."

She more than half expects Salim to accuse her of lying again -- and, for that matter, the other two. Xiaomeng is studying her thoughtfully, though, her mouth twisting a bit at the corner the way it does when she’s thinking hard. Kitty's more used to seeing that expression directed at Xiaomeng’s computer screen, not herself. Nora's staring off into the distance, absently rapping the heel of her shoe (stilettos, yellow, and Kitty doesn't know how she hasn't broken an ankle walking through Cambridge in those) against the tile.

"You're not lying," Xiaomeng says at last, and then, in a very un-Xiaomeng tone, "Erik and Charles?"

"I was right," Salim says, bouncing in his seat with satisfaction. Nora rolls her eyes. "They are fucking."

"They're married," Nora says primly, though none of them are at all fooled. "I suppose the question now is… why?"

Their table falls into silence at that. Kitty thinks she might know, but it's all supposition, a hypothesis pieced together from selective interpretations of what Dr. Xavier's told her. They must have gotten married after APS. This is new, this isn't something they've been hiding. What Dr. Lehnsherr said at the conference must have done it -- must have had something to do with it, in the very least.

And now that she sees it, tentative as it is, she finds herself drawing back a little, phasing her fingers in and out of the coffee cup in her hand. The others chatter on, occasionally taking breaks to pump her for more information. Some of it she gives -- revealing how she'd found out, and how Dr. Xavier had confirmed her suspicions for her -- but most of it she keeps back. If the other three suspect any connection between Dr. Lehnsherr's speech at APS and his impromptu marriage, they don't voice it, and Kitty's not going to encourage their suspicions.

It's not her story to tell.

* 

Erik brings the last of his things over to Charles’ house that weekend, what few boxes there are of it - - he still has that same suitcase he traveled with from California, two repurposed Fed-Ex packages that hold heirlooms and print-outs of papers Erik’s written and books containing chapters he’s authored, his solitary set of dishes that he already knows Charles will ‘accidentally’ throw out in the next couple of days. Charles certainly eyes them dubiously enough when Erik passes them over to be carried downstairs.
This has been Erik’s room for a while, now -- Erik’s and Charles’ -- but some part of Erik had always thought of it as more Charles’ than his. Because Charles bought it, maybe, because Charles furnished it and had lived in it for years, because it had been Charles’ before he ever met Erik. He feels differently, now. There’s an ours, there, when he looks around at the calm blue wallpaper and white bedspread and the golden light cast onto the floorboards by the open window. His. The same way Charles is his.

He had placed his mother’s chanukiyah and Shabbos candles on display downstairs, in the living room. Here, now, he lifts a mezuzah from the box, checking to make sure the scroll is still inside, the Shema still facing the shin on the front case, then nails it to the frame of their doorway with his power and mutters a bracha under his breath. When his hand slips away, he smiles despite himself, looking at it looking back at him.

His clothes are mostly here already, so now he turns to the last box, full of old papers, heavier than the rest. Charles has a filing cabinet in the study, so Erik hitches the box up onto his hip and carries it down the hall, dumping it down on Charles’ rolling office chair for easy reach as he pulls open one of the drawers, rifling through the folders until he finds room for his own.

The papers aren't in order; he'd packed them away at the eleventh hour back at Berkeley, more concerned with getting the last of his office into boxes and shipped off to bother with tidiness. They're stuffed into the box along with hanging files and extra folders and he frowns at the disarray, even knowing the reason for it -- that last bit of disorder in a world that has, finally, regained its patterns and propriety. Briefly, Erik considers stuffing the files into the drawer and going to find Charles -- or, rather, following the faint, warm sense of Charles's wedding ring down to the kitchen, where Charles is doubtless mangling dinner -- but order is order, and Erik still refers to those papers now and then.

After a minute, he realizes they're, mostly, in reverse chronological order, some printouts of articles he'd forgotten he has, and some offprints from his own publications. They begin with his last publication at Berkeley, a stapled offprint with the editor’s thanks scribbled on the back. Then they proceed back and back, through dogeared drafts and forgotten scraps of notepaper, He doesn't pay much attention beyond a cursory glance at the file tabs, absorbed in filing the past away into its proper place.

He's almost at the end of the box when -- forgetful, maybe, absent-minded, distracted -- he knocks it off its perch on Charles's office chair and sends the last few papers flying, fluttering white wings shussshing to the floor.

"Shit," Erik mutters, shifting on his knees to gather them together. Apologetically, he glances up at the doorway; having the mezuzah there isn't unlike having his mother watching over him, ever vigilant, blessing and guardian.

One paper's fallen further away than the rest, and he has to lean awkwardly over to fetch both it and its folder. Rocking back on his heels, he flips the paper over to see where it belongs.

"A neural-computational model of moral decision-making under uncertainty in individuals with psionic mutations."

Erik M. Lehnsherr and Sebastian Shaw
Stanford University
Department of Psychology, Neurosciences Program

The journal and year are printed above: Frontiers in Neuroscience (2007).
Erik stares at the names, the words of the title, the year.

He had taken the lead on the research for this paper, had written the manuscript, had seen it through rounds of revisions. He remembers that work vaguely, hours spent running Matlab, analyzing data, working out the implications -- with Shaw, Erik makes himself think, looking up at the second author again. He remembers Shaw looking at him over folded hands and saying, "You'll be lead author on this project, Erik. I'll be here for support and advice, but otherwise..."

2007; he would have worked on this paper throughout 2006. That year his mother had been dying as Erik had worked to give this thing some kind of life. That year he'd gone to her funeral with this paper not even born, a terrible last gift from a son to his mother. And then -- Erik swallows harshly, staring down at the article until his name and Shaw's name blur and swim together.

Then Shaw raped me.

Saying to himself now, without the heat of anger behind it, seems to bring the reality up from where it's hidden in his bones. Most of the time it lies there, quiescent, waiting to surprise him at odd moments; now, when he thinks it, it's like calling up a spirit from inside a protective circle. The knowledge sits there, and waits, but can't touch him. It is what it is, as neutral as the ink on the pages Erik holds. It might change, later, poisoning Erik's blood and making him sick -- it does, on occasion, still -- but for now, it's a neutral condition, controlled, another datum alongside all the others presented in the paper.

When people read this paper, they'll read it for facts and content, for the data, the conclusions, the method. They won't read, or be able to see (even if they might imagine) what lies underneath the words -- the memories Erik has now of lying pinned under Shaw's immovable weight, waking to numbness hedged around by pain then going into the lab and staring at the numbers scrolling by on his screen. It's strange, that something so dispassionate could come into being at a time marked by grief, rage, resignation. Rape.

Erik stuffs the paper back into its folder and slides it into its appointed place in the drawer. Filed away, he thinks, where it belongs.

When he goes downstairs, Charles is sitting on the sofa with his laptop perched on his knees, as still as if he's been there for days, years, rather than since after making dinner. He sets it aside when he spots Erik, though, unfolding his legs to place his feet firmly on the floor. Erik knows him well enough, now, to recognize the look in Charles' eyes for what it is. Guardedness. Trepidation.

“What?” Erik says, pausing there on the landing to look at him with brows arched.

Charles’ mouth twists, like he’s considering swallowing whatever words are on the tip of his tongue -- Erik can see the cogs turning in Charles’ brain, or imagines he can at least. Charles, forming the words It’s nothing or Never mind.

“Tell me,” Erik says again, half a demand even though that’s usually Charles’ métier.

At last, Charles just shakes his head and says, “Mail came for you. It’s on the kitchen table.”

Erik walks past him, feels Charles’ eyes tracking his progress across the living room and into the kitchen; a second later hears him following, too, feels the metal of Charles’ wristwatch hovering behind him like a ghost. The mail in question is haphazardly piled next to the decorative fruit bowl Charles likes to keep on the table, most of it junk and credit card offers. Erik picks up the stack of envelopes and flips through them, discontent stirring in the pit of his stomach, a foreboding sort of premonition.
He finds it, dull silver envelope with an Atherton postmark, his name and new address written in a precise and familiar hand.

Did Shaw know, already, that Erik lived here -- that he and Charles were married -- or did he only guess? It's too easy to imagine Shaw sitting at that opulent desk, its contents precisely arranged (one stack for cards, one stack for envelopes, Tibaldi fountain pen set to the side as he thinks -- as he plans, as he considers. It would only be after reaching some conclusion that he would pick up that pen to write.

*I thought about pitching it*, Charles says ruefully. He circles around Erik's side to lean against the counter, close but not too close. *But it's yours. If you want to set it on fire, I've a lighter around somewhere.*

Despite himself, Erik grins. It's creaky and unsteady, a gallows grin, but one all the same. If there's no humor in it, at least it's a way to spend the tension that's built up inside him, that crowds his chest and makes his nerves ache. He could burn the letter, whatever it is; isn't that what he should do? Cut off all contact, don't acknowledge any apologies or threats or offers of reconciliation -- not that he'd ever expect any of those from Shaw.

Anyways, he's never been good at doing what should be done. He slides one finger under the flap of the envelope and twists, tearing the paper open.

The paper inside is thick cardstock, heavy like old parchment. Erik tugs it out and a smaller, folded envelope and card fall out, tissue paper wisping away onto the floor.

"It's an invitation," he says to Charles. Shaw had always believed in doing things the proper way; that meant a stamped return envelope and RSVP card, no phoning in, no emails.

Charles's mind sparks with surprise like static abruptly raised. "What?"

Erik opens the invitation; Shaw had folded it along crisp, clean lines, possibly made with the help of a ruler. The paper slides smooth and expensive beneath his fingertips, highlighting how rough and coarse Erik's skin is in comparison -- that, Erik thinks, was intentional. He skims the printed calligraphy, generic and impersonal. Charles reads over his shoulder, his thoughts darkening palpably, his telepathy a live thing sizzling through the ambient air.

"He really did it," Charles says, angry and incredulous all at once. "He’s coming to Harvard after all."

Shaw had included a handwritten note in the blank space at the bottom of the invitation. His script is slanted and elegant, smooth and studied and refined. Erik remembers reading comments in that hand in the margins of his papers, anything from short, positive notes -- *Good*, and *Nice phrase* -- to longer argumentation -- to the simple, serpentine terror: *See me.*

*My dear Erik,* it reads.

*I hope you will take this invitation as the olive branch it is intended to be. While our last interaction was somewhat lacking in comity, there is no reason we can't rebuild the bridges of civility. I hope you will be gracious enough to attend my leaving party at Stanford, but if you find yourself incapable, I am certain we will find some way of rekindling our collaboration in Cambridge. Once you have a chance to reflect on what we accomplished together, and how much we may yet accomplish, I have no doubt that the logic and pragmatism I've always admired in you will overcome any misapprehensions you may be cherishing.*
Never forget that I know you, my boy, better than anyone has or will.

Sebastian.

Erik sets the invitation down, palm covering the note.

"It's his leaving party," he says, although Charles has been reading over his shoulder and through his eyes. "He wants me to come."

"Do you want to go?" Charles doesn't say of course you're not going, although surely he must think it, the maelstrom of his telepathy churning with disbelief and indignation.

"I -- " Erik stares down at the table, the RSVP and its envelope and the rest of the mail scattered across it. It's a mess; he'll need to straighten it, and suggest to Charles that they find a place for the mail that isn't the kitchen table. "I don't know."

What is there to not know? Charles doesn't say that either. His mouth is pressed thin, the kind of anger Erik's never associated with him kept in behind it. He's rarely seen Charles indulge in much more other than frustration; the only times he's seen genuine anger, Erik thinks, is when Charles feels it on his behalf.

"You don't have to decide right away," Charles reminds him. He picks up the RSVP card and studies it, an ultimatum written in copperplate. "And if you don't want to go, you don't have to respond."

"I don't want to give him the satisfaction of thinking I've run away." That's against all the advice he knows, all the advice he should have had and should have taken. "And I won't be able to do that once he's here. It would be -- unprofessional." Charles makes a disbelieving noise, as if being unprofessional is what you need to worry about in this situation? "Unprofessional and unseemly. It would attract notice."

"So, what then?" Charles says. "You're going to go down there and confront him? Can't you see that's what he wants -- you there, in his territory again, where he controls the game?"

"No." Erik takes the RSVP card from Charles, resisting the urge to crumple it up in his hand. "No, he doesn't expect me to come at all. He's trying to get under my skin from all the way across the country, but he only expects me to sit here, afraid, waiting for him to come to Boston and find me." Of that much, Erik is certain. He knows it because Shaw’s right, Shaw knows Erik better than anyone else -- or a version of Erik, at least. Shaw’s Erik. And Shaw’s Erik would have done exactly as Erik said.

Charles has his arms crossed over his chest, his whole posture tight and defensive and his eyes over-bright. "I'm not going to tell you not to go," he says, "but I don't want you to go. I think you'd be making a very dangerous mistake, Erik. You told me -- you told me, once, that he would have killed you if he'd known you were planning to leave him. What makes you think he's changed his mind on that front?"

Erik presses his thumb and forefinger together, the RSVP card caught between them; the effort barely dents the paper. He thinks about sending nothing back, about showing up on Shaw’s front step with this card still in his hand, imagines the look on Shaw’s face when he opens the door and finds Erik there.

No, he thinks. In some other world, Shaw's face would be painted with shock, unable to conceal anything. In this world, the surprise would register as little more than a ripple -- a sigh of a breeze
across still water -- and then fade into calculated pleasure and delight. *Erik, my dear boy, I'm so glad to see you; do come in,* then that powerful hand closing around Erik's, grinding bone against bone, drawing him inside, drawing him inexorably back.

"If I meet him at his house, with others there," Erik says at last, "he won't try anything. They'll know, if something happens to me." Charles sits forward a bit, preparing to contest that, and Erik glares him silent. "Shaw prefers to leave those who displease him alive; that way, they'll have learned their lesson."

Instead of saying anything, Charles compresses his mouth into a thin, disapproving line. His silence speaks for him, though, or the agitated fluctuations of his telepathy, maelstroms in the electromagnetic field around them. "If he does -- if he hurts me, I can use that too."

"I can't believe you're seriously considering this." Charles laughs incredulously; then, after a sigh says, "I should believe it, though; it's you. Do you want me to come?"

It should be an easy question. It isn’t, though. Erik imagines walking into that house with Charles at his side, so much safer, Charles an omnipotent, telepathic buffer of protection between him and Shaw, and it feels -- insufficient, somehow. But as terrible to leave Charles here in Boston, on the other side of the country, where he’d just worry about Erik. There’s a practical angle to it, too; Shaw might not do anything to Erik at his home, but he likely isn’t above following Erik back to a hotel.

Erik taps the clean edge of the card against the tabletop. “To California, yes,” he says at last. “But this … Shaw, I think I need to do alone.”

Even though he, Erik, doesn’t think he’s capable of explaining why. Not even to himself.

Charles still looks displeased, his mouth even thinner than before, if that is indeed possible. “Shaw will expect you to come. He’ll have something planned -- Erik, this is a terrible idea, you know that.”

Erik does know that, has known that, did know that. Erik’s whole life -- whole adult life, anyway -- had been a series of terrible choices, one after the other, laid out like dominos for Shaw to tip over. Well. At least this time it’d be Erik doing the tipping.

"Of course I'll come," Charles says, not sounding so much resigned as quietly determined, when Erik's silence says he won't waver. "And I'll be a thought away, if you need me."

Erik does need Charles, but he also needs to do this on his own. Whatever comes of it, he wants to finish what he started at the podium in Chicago, no more indirection. No more running.

"You haven't been running," Charles says fiercely. "There's no cowardice you need to atone for, Erik! There's no cosmic balance you need to put back in order, no -- no requirement that you do something to show him you're not the student he tricked and manipulated and fucking abused." He flushes, looking away guiltily, for all his anger; it's the first time, Erik realizes, that he's come right out and said Shaw had abused Erik -- it's something only Erik's been allowed to say. "I'm sorry."

"It's a good thing, then," Erik says, "that I'm not doing this for the universe, or for anyone else. I'm doing this because I want to, Charles." *But you don't need to* is trembling on Charles's lips; Erik can see it. "In this case, wanting and needing are the same thing. I'm not going to leave business unfinished before he comes here."

Erik reaches for one of the pens scattered across the countertop. It's the minutest flick of power that pops it open, Erik's ability flexing against the tiny spring and lever inside the barrel. Carefully, he checks the box next to *attending* and leaves the *plus one* blank.
It’s only later, when he’s alone and buying the tickets -- round trip, Boston to San Francisco -- that his hands shake.

*
Example Fourteen: Paradoxical Intention

Chapter Notes

cw at end of chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It’s a long drive from the airport to Palo Alto, where Erik and Charles’ hotel was located -- which means it’s a much shorter drive from that hotel to Shaw’s home (palace) in Atherton. It’s this drive that Erik wishes were interminable. As it is, he knows intimately every street, every intersection, can estimate with near precision exactly how much longer it will be before he arrives at Shaw’s estate. For once, he won’t be the first one there.

The driver, at least, seems to have given up on making conversation after one too many monosyllabic responses from Erik on the topic of Boston’s comparative weather -- a mixed blessing, because it means Erik has that much more mental space to spare for thinking about the hot, venomous anxiety seething in the pit of his stomach.

*If you’re thinking about your anxiety, you’re not focusing on what's important.* The words of a long-gone soccer coach drift back to him: Erik maybe eleven or twelve, nervously shifting from foot to foot as he waits with his teammates to go out onto the pitch. He can’t remember if they won that game or not, but it’s not important; what remains is that old lesson. Focus.

Shaw has his own failings, he reminds himself. He's not omniscient, not omnipotent, for all that Shaw’s Erik had believed otherwise for so long.

*You got away from him,* Charles had said last night in their hotel, the two of them twined together and Erik trying to warm and melt the ice of fear that had formed around his heart. *He never saw it coming; he thought he could have you for as long as he wanted you, and you proved him wrong.* He’d had Erik’s hand in his, forefinger rubbing the band of Erik’s wedding ring, a calming pressure of skin against already-familiar metal. *I have faith you can do it again.*

It doesn't make him weaker, relying on Charles. It's a strange thought, still, even though he's acclimated quickly to the silver band around his ring finger (and to the one around Charles's); strange, knowing he could pick up his phone, or *wish,* and Charles would find a way to join him and not think any less of him. Of course, right now Charles is back in their hotel room, probably working himself up with his own anxiety; he hadn’t been very happy about being told to stay out of Erik’s head for this. But this is something Erik needs to face alone.

This is Shaw’s street. *Their* street, once -- though long ago now. Erik used to run down the sidewalk, there, before turning right at the stop sign to head east. That house belongs to the Wilshires, that one the Hammonds. What did Shaw tell them, when Erik left? What excuse to explain his absence?

Nausea rolls in the pit of Erik’s stomach and he says, “Drop me off here,” passing the driver a few bills between the seats and getting out into the fresh warm air.

It’s too hot to be rejuvenating, even at this hour. A warm summer, just like the summer when Erik first came here, long days spent lying out by Shaw’s pool and letting himself be looked at, long nights inside teaching his body to do other things.
The closer he draws to Shaw’s mansion, the more he thinks about turning back. Not to leave, just to pace down to the corner and back again, maybe circle the block -- he could use the time to think. But that would mean hesitating, and Erik refuses to hesitate. Not now, not ever again.

Eileen will be there, he tells himself to steel his nerves. She knows. She will -- he can stay by her, until it’s time, he doesn’t have to let himself be drawn away into dark corners or darker secrets.

The cars of grad students, faculty, friends, are all herded into a cluster of metal in a corner of Shaw’s estate, where they won’t mar the approach -- the long, arrow-straight drive leading between the lemon trees (fragrant, this late in the season, a smell he’d once enjoyed but now makes his stomach twist) up to the fountain in its courtyard. He passes through the gate -- once forbidden for him to touch, and because of that he could have no more pulled that gate off its hinges than a human could - - and up the drive, breathing in deep lungfuls of lemon-scented, California evening air, race of salt from the sea and the electricity running through his own nerves.

Closer, closer; he can hear the voices now, faint through the huge glass-paneled walls, accompanied by the music of the hired string quartet. Always a string quartet. Anything more, Shaw had said at one such event, would be ostentatious and intrusive, unartistic. You can't hear conversation, you can't appreciate the space if noise is taking up most of it. Staring up at the mansion, all precisely calculated lines and polished to immaculate smoothness, all Erik can see is ostentation.

The fountain, an abstract edifice of marble surrounded by its disciplined ranks of shrubs and irises, splashes tranquilly as he walks by. The pattern of its endless slosh and flow hasn't changed either, as immutable as the tides -- and realizing that, realizing his chest is clogged and breathless, that old knot of fear and anger in him, he wonders if Boston, MIT, Charles, all of it is some fantastic dream he's only now waking from. If, when he steps into the house, he'll step back into Shaw's arms as if he'd never left them, as if the past few years had never been.

It’s a strange sort of split, feeling simultaneously like himself, in his mid-thirties now, tenured, vengeful -- but also like someone else, a different him, younger and so carefully controlled, every aspect of himself practiced and rote, knowing the danger that would come with trying to be anything else. It’s a dizzying sensation, which doesn’t bode well for tonight. If he’s doing this -- no, he is doing it -- he needs to have a clear head.

Still, it’s a long moment that he needs to ascend the steps to the front door, white noise buzzing between his ears, the seconds dragging out like salt taffy as he lifts his fist and knocks. Waiting is the worst part. He imagines Shaw opening the door and finding there’s no party after all, that it was a clever ruse to draw Erik here and trap him in Shaw’s elegant prison. His heart pounds so hard he can feel it in every inch of his body; he struggles to keep his fingers lax and loose at his side instead of curling them tight.

Footsteps, then the door swings open, and Erik can’t breathe, can’t think --

“Amelie.” The word tugs out of him on an exhale, relief spiking sharp through his veins. Though it’s too soon for that, still.

Amelie stares at him right back, all wide dark eyes. She’s looking at him the same way she did when Erik was twenty-two and she caught him there in Shaw’s study, wrist twisted behind his back and a lamp broken on the floor, that same shock and the faintest stain of fear only just beginning to bleed through.

"Mr. Lehnsherr," she says reflexively. She looks him up and down, glances over her shoulder at the party beyond. "Why -- "
"I was invited." After that night, he'd done his best not to be alone with her and, he's fairly certain, she'd done her best not to be alone with him. They'd been co-conspirators, implicated in a mutual silence. "And it's Erik, now."

"Erik," Amelie says uncertainly. She doesn't move from her station in the doorway; Erik senses her hand tight on the polished copper of the doorknob. "You disappeared and I thought..." Another glance over her shoulder; she, too, knows Shaw knows everything that passes on these grounds. "I thought the worst, but I'd hoped you had left."

"I left," Erik tells her. "What did Shaw tell you?"

For a wonder, Amelie's mouth crooks in a smile. It flickers and dies almost immediately, and is bitter more than anything else, but it's a smile nonetheless. "He told me to mind my own business or being fired would be the least painful thing that would happen to me. But one day I went to a library and looked you up, and saw your page at MIT."

It's a little surprising, actually, and Erik's brows lift up before he can stop them. Generally Shaw was more subtle than that -- if he had actually said that to Amelie, then he must have been ... G-d, he must have been incandescent with rage. A part of Erik, far removed now from Shaw’s thrall, thinks he rather would have liked to witness that, if perhaps only from a distance. He almost doesn’t believe it, even though he believes her.

“I’m sorry,” he says, knowing it’s useless even as he says it, and Amelie shakes her head.

“Please don’t. I’m just ... I don’t want to say I’m happy you’re back. But I am glad to see you.”

Erik nods, and wishes -- Shaw had never hurt any of the servants, at least so far as Erik knew, or at least not in the more-than-decade Erik lived with him, but he still wishes he could pluck her out of this house the same way he’d removed himself. He gestures past her, toward the rest of the house, and says, “May I come in?”

“Oh.” Amelie steps aside, making room for him to move past her, into the spacious foyer with its glittering overhead chandelier and smooth hardwood floor underfoot. “The guests are in the courtyard and drawing room,” she tells him. And then, a quiet favor: “Mr. Shaw is outside, I think.”

"Thank you." As if he's the telepath, he sees himself through Amelie's anxious dark eyes: not a young man anymore but dressed as she must have seen him a hundred times: gray Burberry suit immaculately cut, jacket open to expose the precise drape of his tie and the low ride of the trousers on his hips. The shade of blue, paler than pale, of the shirt is one Shaw has always been fond of, one he says accentuates the copper in Erik's hair (and the blood on his lip and the bruise on his neck, barely covered by the collar, radiating from the epicenter of Shaw’s fingerprints), matching the swatch of pocket square on Erik's left breast.

He eases around her and more fully into the house, the air temperate against the hectic rush of blood under his skin. It tastes the same as it did, faintest expensive scent -- Cuban cigars, not enough to be intrusive -- touching the back of Erik’s mouth with its richness when he drags in a breath. Once he'd come back late from a run, training for the LA Marathon, had tracked sweat and dust through this same pristine space with dryness and fear dusting his throat, and Shaw had been waiting here -- Erik hesitates, thinks he's seeing Shaw there, on the Fendi loveseat, legs crossed, expression appraising -- and had said, *You're twenty minutes after the time we'd agreed you'd be home.*

In the early days of Boston, Erik had spent weeks (months, if he's honest) expecting to see Shaw around every corner, in every colloquium audience, in every grocery store, on every train, waiting to take Erik back where he'd belonged. Once, he'd woken up with all the metal in his apartment
barricading the door, as if that could stop Shaw from breaking in. During his runs on the Esplanade, he'd pushed himself through mile paces, faster, faster, running seven, then six minutes, five, running right up to the brink of exhaustion, not sure if he was chasing Shaw or running away from him.

Now he's run right back, Erik thinks caustically. Shaw's Erik has been waiting for him in this room, ready to seep into him and take over, as if the past few years with freedom, with Charles, had never been.

“Erik,” someone says; Erik turns, apprehension rising like acid in the back of his throat -- it’s Harry Gilbert, one of the Stanford professors; he’d been on Erik’s comprehensive exam committee, and later his dissertation committee. He’d always been friendly. Was that because he liked Erik? Or had he, too, guessed at Erik’s secrets? Had he known it was important to like Erik, given who his advisor was?

Gilbert approaches, lowering his glass of whiskey and reaching out his hand to clasp Erik’s instead; Erik responds on rote, a thin smile pressing itself onto his lips. He shouldn’t be here. He shouldn’t be here at all -- never mind making small conversation with ghosts while somewhere in this great house Shaw waited for him. As Gilbert smiles back at him, Erik imagines Shaw stepping up behind him, Shaw’s breath on the nape of his neck, Shaw watching him unseen.

“What a pleasant surprise, seeing you here,” Gilbert goes on; Erik just stands there, as if dazed, wondering how quickly he can make his excuses. His heart beats hard in his chest, a drumbeat that pounds all the way down to the soles of his feet. There are others, a cluster of them gathered in the drawing room, just like Amelie had said, eating hors d’oeuvres and drinking champagne. Erik feels like they are all staring at him, even if rationally he knows most haven't even noticed he's there.

Where is Shaw?

"I was invited,” Erik responds, his gaze sliding between faces, seeking out -- something. Maybe Shaw. Maybe just an ally.

"Hm!” Gilbert says. It's a habit Erik remembers, Gilbert's usual response to something that confuses him but still seems to demand an answer. After a heartbeat, and a covering sip of whiskey, he regains himself. "We'd thought you'd see Sebastian in Boston -- " then, wincing, he adds, "the weather might not be Bay weather, but I'm sure that won't stop Sebastian from having some kind of welcome party for himself."

"I'm sure it won't." Something very much like prophecy roars up from Erik's hindbrain: another huge house, another string quartet, another army of servants and servers and cooks -- and another young man, dressed like a doll and to an inch past his life, waiting in another foyer to greet another legion of guests, fingers digging into his palm and a polite, studied smile on his face.

Gilbert rattles on aimlessly about his wife and kids, how Stanford's done since Erik left, his own research. His words rise and fall, trying to fill the empty air and failing. The academic chatter behind them laps at Erik's nerves.

"Erik!"

An ally, Eileen, wispy as ever in her most outrageous pink-and-gold leopard print tunic and opal necklace, the gold bracelets on her wrists clattering noisily. She leans up to kiss him on the cheek and pat his hand -- and, not coincidentally, inspect his wedding ring.

"Hello, Erik," she murmurs, once she's nodded in satisfaction and adjusted the bun (secured with a bright pink ribbon) at the back of her head. "I suppose you're as surprised to see me as I am to see
you; of course, Sebastian could hardly not invite his associate chair. Harry, could you be a dear and
get your associate chair an iced tea?"

Effectively dismissed, Harry leaves for the bar, and leaves Erik and Eileen alone -- or as alone as
they can be, given everyone else has noticed who's here, and those who don't know him are quickly
finding out who he is. The flock of whispers, like agitated birds, can't possibly be anything else but
people being told That's Erik Lehnsherr -- you know, APS -- the one who -- yeah, that's him.

"I know why you're here," Eileen tells him, once she's glared the others into staying away. "And I
expect nothing I say will convince you not to do whatever you want to do, so I'll say: if you need
help, now, during, or after, you have it."

"Thank you," Erik says sincerely, and on impulse he reaches for her arm, squeezing just above the
elbow. It's so much like what she said when he was twenty-two, the fall after his comprehensive
exams, after that fateful summer. She'd called him into her office, with his lips still red and throat still
raw from having Shaw's cock forced down it not thirty seconds previously -- Erik remembers
scrabbling at Shaw's knees and Shaw's hand twisted in his hair, keeping Erik there, trapped in the
claustrophobic space under his desk. He'd never decided if she knew, in that moment, what had
happened, or if she only knew something was wrong.

An anxious little bird flutters in his chest, beating its wings against his ribcage. A part of him wants
to stay here, put it off as long as he can. But that runs the risk of having Shaw find him instead of the
other way around -- and by now it's only a matter of time, if someone slips between this room and
the next, out into the courtyard, finds Shaw and tells him, I think you should come into the drawing
room....

"Where is he?" Erik asks Eileen.

Her mouth twists into a moue -- unhappiness, or perhaps just disgust -- and she says, "Last I saw, he
was outside, cultivating the sympathies of those of our colleagues who still value power over
integrity." She hesitates; he knows she's thinking of telling him this is a bad idea, never mind what
she said earlier, but the words stay trapped in her throat.

"How many are there?" he asks. It's not stalling, it's knowing what he's up against.

"More than you'd like," Eileen says, then lists off a handful of names -- Ruggiero, Cox, Handley,
Wollenberg -- Erik either vaguely remembers or doesn't know. "But less than you would think," she
says after a thoughtful pause. "Some of them are graduate students, some are junior faculty; they
don't know what they can risk, yet. And some," her mouth twists again, "don't really see what Shaw
did as wrong, or if wrong, not worth a public shaming."

"It's only shaming if the person is ashamed," Erik says curtly. Spectacle is what Shaw's always called
such things, the masses baying for blood as if they were back at the Colosseum or around the gibbet
in the public square. "I don't want to shame him; I want to make him pay."

Eileen gives him a sad, sympathetic look. The odds of that happening, they both know, are
vanishingly small. "Then I want, at least, people looking at him and seeing something that isn't this."
He nods at the impeccable, immaculate room around them, the picture-perfect summer evening
beyond the huge glass walls. "I don't want anyone to be able to hide from what he's done."

"Then," Eileen says softly, "I suppose I should wish you good luck."

She lets him go with a last pat on his arm, a warm, gentle touch -- one of the few Erik can remember
in this house. She doesn't turn away, but neither does she follow him, firmly redirecting Gilbert to her
-- he's returned with her tea -- and chivvying the others back to their conversations, away from Erik.

Their eyes follow him, though, all the way across the parquet floor and out of the room, to where his footfalls are softened by the Persian carpet that runs the length of the hallway. Erik hates how seen he feels, how well he can imagine what they’re thinking. When they look at him now, they don’t see his accomplishments, his scholarly work, his professionalism. They see Shaw’s hands on him. They think about Erik in Shaw’s bed, about Shaw fucking Erik -- consensually, or not. It prickles down Erik’s spine, nauseating him, because that’s all Erik can think about, too. He tucks his wedding ring into his jacket pocket, for safe-keeping.

The courtyard is warm and buzzing with the hum of alcohol-fueled conversation; the decorators have strung fairy lights overhead and they glimmer in the periphery of Erik’s vision like distant, dizzying stars. Shaw’s Erik wanders beneath those lights, too, like a fractured reflection of this Erik -- so far, at least, that Erik is far enough away their paths don’t intersect.

He scans the faces here, pulse racing, fully expecting his gaze to land on Shaw’s at any moment -- but he isn’t here. Erik looks again, certain he’s made a mistake. If not here, then where .... But it’s all strange faces, curious gazes turning toward him, sizing him up. At last, real fear ignites in Erik’s veins, because if Shaw isn’t here, if Erik can’t see him, then that means he’s --

Erik senses the metal first: the elegant gold clockwork, a Rolex, accompanied by gold cufflinks and the telltale nails driven through the soles of handmade Italian shoes. His breath turns to ice in his lungs, half a heartbeat before Shaw says:

“Erik, my boy; I’m so glad you could make it.”

He turns; Shaw steps out from behind the screen of boxtrees, eyes glittering from under their shadowing brows. He has his right hand tucked in his trouser pocket, nonchalant; he takes it out and extends it for Erik to shake.

The pressure is fierce and bone-grinding, as it always has been, just shy of fracturing. Erik focuses on his wedding ring, tucked safe on the inside pocket of his jacket, a circlet of silver resting against Erik’s thundering heart. As he did back in Chicago, Erik offers Shaw nothing but a smile, tight and controlled, nothing of pain in it even if both he and Shaw know it’s there.

"Sebastian," he says, once Shaw's let him go. "Thank you for the invitation."

"Indeed," Shaw murmurs. He beckons a server over, plucks a glass of champagne from the tray along with a napkin and offers them to Erik. The champagne in the flute bubbles like poison. "I did receive your reply, but doubted you would make the trek out here when we'll see each other so very soon in Cambridge."

The words are an unnerving echo of Harry Gilbert's; Erik can imagine Gilbert, in his usual awkward way, stammering out news of Erik's presence to Shaw while waiting at the bar. With the benefit of a few years away from Shaw, Erik sees Gilbert now for what he was, nervously and distinctly junior, maybe capitulating to Shaw's demands when they'd been on Erik's exam committee, more interested in keeping Shaw happy -- and keeping his tenure recommendation -- than in Erik himself.

"Not soon enough," Erik says. "You spoke of amity in your note to me; I'm here to be amicable."

Shaw’s smile is thin and languorous, predatory. “After your display at APS, I didn’t realize you still valued professionalism so highly.” Before Erik can respond, Shaw is pressing the champagne flute into his hand, Shaw’s fingers trailing down the backs of Erik’s knuckles as he draws away. “But, of course, I stand by what I said in my invitation. I’m glad you’ve come to see the value in maintaining
bonds like these. I do hate burnt bridges.”

Instead of saying all the things he could say -- a thousand angry rejoinders clambering in Erik’s throat -- he swallows them down with a sip of champagne. It fizzes in his gut, uncomfortable. He sets the glass down on a nearby table and says, instead, “How long has it been, now, since I left you?”

He says it lightly, as if he means nothing by it, though the line of Shaw’s spine goes a little straighter -- it’s affected him, then, being reminded of that. That Erik did leave him, despite everything Shaw had expected from him.

“Two years.”

Shaw is looking at him evenly, unblinkingly, and Erik wonders what he’s thinking -- if he knows, as Erik does -- if he’s looked it up, that the statute of limitations on rape in California is ten years. But no, of course not, because as far as Shaw is concerned, Erik would never expose himself in that way. He’s too well-trained.

"And two years on," Erik continues neutrally, "it's entirely logical that I should leave the past in the past, let bygones be bygones."

Shaw tilts his head. "Indeed," he says. "Although I'm at a loss to understand what, precisely, you believe should be left behind. If all this has been an attempt to prove to me that you could stand and walk on your own, my boy, rest assured, we are all quite aware of your abilities, no petulance necessary. And," Shaw’s voice drops, "despite my desire for amity, I do want to say how disappointed I was, that you spoke of our relationship in the terms you did. I thought you above tawdriness, Erik."

"I didn't think the audience would care to hear in detail about the first time you raped me," Erik says. To say the word to Charles or Eileen is one thing; to say it, the thing itself, to Shaw, is another entirely. The word burns his mouth, his lungs, his ears once he's said it. He pushes through, persists, "Or the second, or the third."

"Don't be dramatic, Erik," Shaw says. One glance strays across the pool to the nearest clutch of scientists and neighbors. "If you must indulge, however, come through to my study. If you please."

For a moment, Erik hesitates. This is precisely the moment, he thinks, that the audience in a horror movie would be screaming at the screen for him to run away. Erik’s nerves scream the same thing, but they’re dampened by the knowledge that they’re still in public, for all this is Shaw’s private residence. Shaw wouldn’t dare do anything to him where he might be seen, or overheard. This is, in the end, why Erik came.

So he takes the first step back toward the house, pausing then to glance back over his shoulder at Shaw with his brow raised -- Shaw hadn’t immediately followed, perhaps thinking Erik was walking away. But now he steps up to Erik’s side, the very tips of his fingers brushing the small of Erik’s back as he guides him back inside. Erik swears he can feel Shaw’s body heat through the layers of his jacket and shirt, for all that Shaw is barely touching him, no force behind the contact at all.

Erik knows how it might look to an observer, Shaw shepherding him along, touching Erik so intimately and Erik seeming to let him -- it was calculated, Erik realizes, designed to build certain assumptions in people’s minds. Shaw touching him like this is inconsistent with Erik’s accusations, as is the two of them disappearing off to be alone together so quickly. Erik thinks about walking faster to put distance between them, but that would mean running from Shaw -- and Erik won’t do that, not ever again.
Those touches, of course, had shaped Erik's own assumptions -- that, in agreeing to them, he was agreeing to so much more, to years of secrets and of mistrusting himself. No one else understands us, those touches said, haunting him when he'd stood in Eileen's office and told her he was fine, with the taste of Shaw still thick in his mouth, when he'd slept with other men and gone home to Shaw's quiet anger, when he'd laid in bed for three days, a mass of emptiness laced with pain. No one can understand what we have together.

The path from the back yard to Shaw's study is a familiar and well-traveled one. The hallway runs parallel to the drawing room -- Erik catches the metal accents of jewelry and surgical screws, an odd metallic murmur alongside muted voices -- and leads only to two places: to the foyer and to the study itself, shrouded in darkness and silence. It had been like this the first time he'd met Shaw, a stupid boy in a thrifted suit he'd altered by hand, offering himself and his future with no idea of the terms.

"Now," Shaw says as he paces across the room, turning on a few lights, gilding old metal and wood, like a gentleman's club from a hundred years ago. "Are you prepared to be civil and rational, Erik? Or, at the very least, professional ... though I think you owe me more than that."

* * *

It's been at least five minutes since she watched Erik disappear down the hall leading to the courtyard. Eileen does her best to occupy the guests gathered in the drawing room, for no reason if not to stop them all rubbernecking at Erik like a bunch of geese around breadcrumbs in a park pond. Her thoughts, however, keep drifting back to circle round the possibilities of what might be happening right now, not so very far away. The possibility that by letting Erik go alone, she is doing the same thing she'd done all those years ago: turning a blind eye, believing someone when they said everything was fine.

"I mean, what do you think, Eileen?" Harry Gilbert says to her, nervously swishing the half-melted ice around in the bottom of his whiskey glass. "Do you think there's anything to these … these rumors? I mean, it's a bit, ha, a bit far-fetched, don't you think? People are reading too much into what happened at APS -- I mean, even Erik didn't say …. " He trails off, as if he's just decided saying that word, rape, might be considered uncouth.

"I think no one should be speculating until Erik does say," Eileen says, looking over Gilbert's shoulder at some of her colleagues, murmuring together in a cluster by the hearth.

Harry shrugs and swirls his drink once more, then downs the rest of it. "It's too late for that."

"Speculating simply because others are doing it doesn't diminish how unsavory it is," Eileen retorts. She wants to add that perhaps Harry -- and herself, and so many others -- could have speculated years ago and nipped all of this in the bud. "And perhaps you could devote some of that energy to examining your own behavior, Harry."

That gets her an indignant, uncomfortable silence, but silence nonetheless. Muttering an excuse into his empty glass, Harry departs for the bar, and then likely for a group of colleagues with more congenial conversation. It leaves Eileen by herself once again, studying the door that leads through to the foyer and the hall that, from Eileen's memory, takes one to the more private areas of the house -- Sebastian's study, the stairs leading to the bedrooms. She'd seen those places once, and only once, when Sebastian had hosted her own welcome party, and then only because (she suspects) Sebastian had wanted her to be fully impressed by his money, the power he has through it and his reputation.

She's on the verge of saying the hell with it and striding into those hidden spaces when she catches the eye of someone else who seems to be having the same thought: Angie Ferrante, who's gripping her handbag like a weapon -- or a comfort -- and glancing back and forth between the crowded
Eileen makes her decision in an instant, abandoning her glass of wine on a convenient end table and striding across the room to Ms Ferrante’s side. Angie was one of Sebastian’s grad students, too, Eileen recalls -- a year behind Erik, though she was several years older than most of her cohort. She’d done her post-doc in Cox’s lab, then got a job as a Google UX researcher. Now she teaches the occasional class at Stanford -- Eileen sees her in the halls, sometimes, though it’s a nodding acquaintance more than true friendship.

“Having an enjoyable evening, Angie?” Eileen says, perhaps a bit dryly, but she expects Angie will forgive her that much -- especially once Angie meets her gaze and Eileen sees the brief, reflexive flash of guilt that flits across her face.

“Hi, Eileen,” Angie says, managing a tight smile. Her gaze slides back off toward the study a beat later, though, and Eileen can practically see the cogs turning in her head, trying to figure out the easiest way to detach herself so she can … what? Get a drink? Find Sebastian and congratulate him? Something in Eileen doubts it, though right now it’s just a little niggling intuition.

Well. Nothing wrong with poking around a few sore spots, Eileen decides.

“You’re not the only one of Sebastian’s students in attendance tonight,” Eileen says. “I believe Marta Keurig and Erik Lehnsherr are here as well.”

Angie nods tensely. "I know. I talked to Marta for a bit, but not Erik -- not that. Well."

"You were a year behind Erik, weren't you?" Erik had been a hard act to follow for several years' worth of cohorts, possibly harder for those who'd known him and worked with him -- for more reasons, Eileen's come to realize, than Erik's own brilliant and difficult personality.

"Yes," Angie says. She fiddles with her purse, tucking it under her arm, then holding it in both hands like a girl running away from home. "We were officemates for a couple of years, so I got the -- the whole experience. And we worked together in Sebastian's lab, of course."

"Of course."

Eileen hums softly, then moves for another sore spot. "Did you know?"

Angie goes very still. She has, Eileen thinks, so many of the hallmarks of Sebastian's students: perfect aesthetics (Eileen doesn't keep up with such things, but she suspects the dress and heels, plain grey as they are, are designer), a dislike of unseemly theatrics, and above all control -- although that last doesn't seem to have stuck with Angie.

"I did," Angie says at last. "I found out -- well, I worked it out -- when I was in my second year. I think Erik had just been through his exams."

It’s difficult not to feel a reflexive twist of contempt, at that -- if Angie had known, especially if she’d known just what that relationship must have been like, for Erik -- then she more than most should have done everything in her power to make sure Erik knew she was on his side. But of course, by the same token, Eileen had a responsibility to report her suspicions to the Title IX coordinators, and she did not. Angie, as a student, and as Sebastian’s student in particular, would have had a thousand more reasons to stay silent. Perhaps that was the reason Angie had left for industry work, rather than staying in the academy, or some of it.

So Eileen just sighs, and wishes she had brought her wine with her after all. After a beat, she reaches over and pats Angie on the shoulder, a pitiful consolation, but all she can offer.
“Erik intends to confront him, of course,” Eileen says, glancing briefly at the maid, unsure what might get reported back to Sebastian -- the girl is staring straight ahead, pretending they aren’t there. “He’s with Sebastian now.”

“Is that,” Angie swallows, uncertain. “Is that a good idea? Letting him do that?”

“If it’s what Erik wants to do, then I think he has the right to do it,” Eileen says with a sigh, and wishes she didn’t believe that as much as she does.

"Yes, but that doesn't mean it's a good idea," Angie persists. She looks out into the silent, shadowed foyer again; she's another woman, Eileen thinks, who's aware of past wrongs that must be addressed, for all Eileen's thought of her as practical and unsentimental. "Should we -- ?"

With Angie at her back, Eileen is sorely tempted. She wants Erik safe more than she wants to respect his privacy, even if she recognizes that much of this desire is atonement -- wanting to rectify the wrongs she's done to him. Still, objectively, Sebastian is dangerous; surely he must have planned on Erik insisting on talking in private, in a place where Sebastian could do whatever he wished, away from witnesses. As much as Erik's changed in two years, the core of him remains the same, and Sebastian must know precisely how to lure him to a place far away from anyone who could help him.

"Yes," Eileen says. “We should.”

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"I owe you," Erik says, speaking slowly -- afraid the words will crack and break if he tries to speak them too quickly, or will pour out of him like a poisoned torrent -- "the truth."

"Truth?" Shaw asks with a patient smile. "I'm sure I will enjoy these epiphanies you're offering. Very well; if it will help you, vent your spleen, and once you've got it out of your system we can talk rationally."

"The truth is that you made me what I am." Erik sinks his power into the long-familiar metal of the study, all of it ancient, expertly crafted -- all of it useless against Shaw, for all Erik's imagined melting down every scrap of gold, silver, and pewter and forcing it down Shaw's throat, I might not be able to make you bleed, but let's see if you can suffocate like the rest of us. "Everything I said at APS was true. You made me."

That smile curves just a little further around Shaw’s lips. He paces the length of the study, not directly approaching Erik, though Erik isn’t blind to how it brings Shaw closer all the same. Shaw settles his hand atop the skull of a carved stone nymph, the tips of his long fingers grazing the sculpted ears. “You flatter me, dear boy. But you could have said that much in public.”

Erik stays where he is, although a large part of him wants to turn around and leave. Shaw isn’t within arm’s reach, but he’s near enough, and Shaw, for all his seeming indolence, is swift to strike.

In that moment, Erik realizes he is exactly where Shaw wants him to be. For all that Shaw had let him believe it was Erik’s choice -- again, again, Erik had made the choice Shaw calculated him to make. He’d walked right into Shaw’s game and played the first move, all unknowing. It ought to be terrifying. Instead, it’s infuriating, a tight heat gripping the pit of Erik’s stomach and twisting there.

Erik needs to stop playing the game, then. But what does Shaw expect from him? How can anything Erik does ever come as a surprise? Shaw does know him, down to the marrow of Erik’s bones. That has always been the problem.
“I’ve told you the truth,” Erik says. “Now all I want from you is the same.” The back of his throat is bone-dry, almost painful, but he makes himself keep speaking. “I want you to admit you raped me. I want you to admit you raped me, and beat me, and coerced me into staying with you.”

Shaw laughs, the low, warm laugh Erik’s heard a hundred times upon a hundred -- that same laugh over whiskey, over grant applications, over Erik’s prone, hurting body. "Whyever would I do that, my boy?"

"Because," the anger heats him like a furnace, "that’s what happened."

"Come now," Shaw says, the laughter vanishing in irritation. "We had an understanding, Erik, that only I could understand and cater to your particular -- desires. That everything I did in the course of our time together was to fulfill what you wanted."

"Stop lying, Sebastian."

Shaw recoils as if Erik’s struck him. Which is ridiculous, of course; Shaw has never stepped back from any kind of physical confrontation in Erik’s memory. No force Erik could bring to bear against him would provoke so much as a flinch or a blink. But draw back Shaw does, a predator surprised by its prey lashing out at it.

"Erik," Shaw says after a moment of deadly silence, "asking me to say I did these terrible things to you would be to violate the truth. Even if I said them to make you feel better now, would you then expect me to lie in front of -- who, precisely? The school? The police? The lawyers?" He laughs, no warmth this time. "The press?"

Erik hadn’t thought so far ahead in his own mind, but that Shaw had -- well, shouldn’t that be telling, in itself? Shaw knows what he did is illegal.

Even so, it’s difficult not to fall back on old habits when Shaw is right here in front of him, the man himself and not just a figment of Erik’s memories and nightmares, in dangerous flesh and blood. Erik never wanted to be this person: the hapless victim, lying prone at Shaw’s feet, taken advantage of and abused. And so he’d tried so hard to believe he was anything else. Shaw’s words speak to that part of him, pulling at old marionette strings, and Erik hates himself for --

No. No, it’s no use hating himself. Shaw’s the one who did this.

“You really think I wanted it?” Erik says softly. “You really think that was part of our agreement -- that I wanted you to break my collarbone? That I wanted to be dressed up and paraded in front of our neighbors like your perfect, mindless sex doll? When I told you stop, did you think I was lying?”

“You liked it,” Shaw says, and there’s acid in his tone now -- Erik’s getting to him, no matter how well he pretends at coldness. “You loved every bit of it, or you wouldn’t have kept crawling back for more. Have you forgotten so quickly? You were the one who kissed me, darling child, you were the one rubbing yourself up against me, screaming for me to give it to you harder.”

*He’s right,* Shaw’s Erik says from the back of Erik’s mind. *I loved it. I wanted it badly enough not to care about the rest. I loved that more than I hated the things I didn’t want him to do to me. I chose this, I chose to let him.*

“I remember you telling me I chose this,” Erik tells him. "I remember you telling me I must want what you did to me. That choices have consequences, and I had made a choice. I didn't realize that this philosophy only held true for me -- for everyone who isn't you."

"And so you've come back to see that I face the consequences for my actions," Shaw says with a
razor smile. "Though I'm still at a loss to see what, exactly, I'm facing consequences for."

"I told you." Erik clings to the words as tightly as he can, to the hard-won truth of them. "For raping me, beating me, and coercing me into staying with you when I wanted to leave."

"Yes, yes," Shaw says impatiently. He steps closer. "And I'm sure I would apologize if I had ever done any of those things."

"So you didn't break my collarbone and force me to spend three days in bed." Erik points to the long-healed bone, to the lump he can feel sometimes if he presses down. "So you didn't force me to give up my apartment, or get credit cards you monitored, or answer the phone every time you called - - or punish me when I failed to answer."

"You're talking about Dr. Xavier." Shaw's glance flicks down to Erik's ringless hands. "Yes, you were awfully quick to fasten yourself to him. Does he have to worry about his reputation now? Will you cry rape at APS when you've decided you're done with him, too?"

Shaw wants him to lose his temper, here -- and Erik very nearly does. The words are practically on the tip of his tongue,

"How dare you say Charles' name?"

before he swallows them down, his hands clenching reflexively into fists. Shaw’s eyes, watching him, glitter in the lamplight.

"I won’t have to," Erik manages to get out past gritted teeth. "He’s never raped me."

Shaw moves another step closer, and this time Erik can’t help but move back. Shaw notices, and

smiles.

"Does Dr. Xavier know how you like it?" Shaw asks softly, almost lovingly, relishing every word as he speaks it. "Does he know how far he must degrade you for you to be truly satisfied? Is he even capable of going to such lengths? Or is it a pity marriage, perhaps, because you told dear Charles your sad, sad story and he just knew that only he could fix you --"

"Shut up," Erik hisses, nails digging into the palms of his hands, his mind flaring white. "You don’t get to talk about him."

"Is that why MIT hired you?" Shaw goes on, taking another step; Erik has nowhere to go, his shoulders brushing the wall. "Did Charles tell everyone how badly you needed that job, do you think, or did he just cross his fingers and hope your vita would do the heavy lifting? ...Does he know why you really came here tonight, Erik?"

"He knows why," Erik says. "He knows I came to finish what I started in Chicago."

"For a man who's so concerned about truth, you have an excellent facility for lying." Shaw is at the very edge of Erik's space, his cologne and his presence filling the rapidly-vanishing air between them. "Lying to yourself, to your poor husband, to me. But I've always been able to see through your lies, haven't I? I've been able to see the truth of you, my dear, dear boy, I always have, ever since that first day we met -- and I'm the only one who ever will."

"You don't know anything." Rage contorts Shaw's face for a bare moment only, but rage it is. He could kill Erik, Erik thinks -- but then, he could have killed Erik so many times already, and he'd settled for pain instead. It's strangely liberating, and he laughs with the freedom, breathless. "You don't even know that you raped me because -- " he rides over Shaw's interruption " -- you couldn't control yourself. Your urges."

"Excuse me?" Shaw says venomously.
"You raped me," Erik repeats, "because you couldn't stop yourself and didn't want to. How long do you think people are going to look at you and see only your aesthetics, after this? By the time I'm done, they'll see every crude, greedy animal impulse that rules you, they'll know you were so lacking in self-control that you coerced a graduate student into sleeping with you, and then blackmailed and beat him into staying."

Erik knew it was coming, but his heart still leaps in his chest the instant Shaw grasps for his throat and pushes him back so roughly his head bounces off the wall with a painful crack. Heat bleeds out from the point of contact, sliding like liquid along his skull and down the nape of his neck -- only, no, that’s blood, Erik can feel the iron in it against his skin. Dizziness crashes over him in waves, Erik struggling to stay afloat, a roaring sound in his ears so loud he forgets it’s his own heartbeat. It’s only when he remembers to breathe that he realizes he can’t -- Shaw is still pressing down on his windpipe, crushing the air out of him as Erik’s hands scramble desperately at Shaw’s grip.

Shaw waits just long enough for the pain to dull -- perhaps on purpose, perhaps to show Erik just how patient and controlled he can be, even in this -- before he leans in close, dry lips brushing the curve of Erik’s ear, and murmurs, “Once upon a time, I could have owned you. I could buy and pay for you and that would make you my property. A man can do what he wants with his property. ...Things aren’t so very different now.”

Black eats at the edges of Erik’s vision, and a panicked voice rises in the back of his head, wondering if he was wrong about Shaw -- if Shaw might kill him after all, swat him like a buzzing fly and have done with it. But Shaw doesn’t. His free hand smooths down Erik’s side, past his waist and over his hip, feeling out the contours of him with a painful slowness.

Shaw kisses Erik’s neck, gently, right above the pulse point, almost like a lover. “I created you, as you said. I sculpted you from raw clay into something worth having, and that makes you mine.”

He kisses Erik again, lower down, in the subdued v of Erik’s collar. His fingers, inevitably, find the familiar hollows of Erik’s pelvis, where muscle is woven against bone, and press -- and press, and press, and two years away from this is nothing compared to the terrible familiarity of it, the taste of the anger and despair rising up like acid in Erik’s throat with the pain chasing up behind it in a moan.

"Like clay," Shaw murmurs, Erik held still in his grasp like a frightened bird. "So biddable, pliable, if you know how to manage it."

"You raped me," Erik says hoarsely, pushing the words past the strangling tightness of Shaw’s fingers, repeating the same line like a mantra so he couldn’t forget. "You coerced me and, when that didn't work, you beat me because you couldn't control yourself, let alone another -- "

Shaw's thumb on his hip threatens to break his ilium in pieces; Erik imagines that the muscle is all that's holding it together. He might suffocate before that happens; still he speaks, he wants the last thing he hears to be his voice telling Shaw the truth. " -- Everyone will know it, Sebastian. They’ll see you for the empty, posturing aesthete, the rapist you are -- "

In the thickening blackness haloing his vision, he sees nothing but Shaw and the splotchy afterimages of the light as it fades. He sees Shaw's expression contorted with fury and disbelief, the world narrowing down to that ugliness, and laughs, breathless and choking and loud, laughs in Shaw's face, laughs as Shaw shifts his grip on his neck, fingers sliding down under Erik's larynx as if to crush it -- palm pressing down, inexorable, on Erik's collarbone, right over the knob where the bone healed unset so many years ago.

The familiarity of the pain doesn’t lessen its intensity. It’s white-hot, like a firecracker popping in his bone, the audible snap of his clavicle beneath the force of Shaw’s mutation. There’s an echoing
sound, strange and strangled -- Erik realizes it’s him, a sob of pain pushed past the grip of Shaw’s long fingers around his throat. And then that grasp relaxes, smoothing down to brush fingertips over the throbbing knot of agony on Erik’s collarbone, feeling the topography of the damage they’ve done.

Erik half expects to find he’s lying face-down on Shaw’s bed again, tears and snot sticky on his cheeks, for Shaw to hold them there and fuck him raw, but that was years ago now. Now, tonight, Shaw just holds him up where Erik sags uselessly against him, his whole left arm numb -- nerve damage, something in the back of Erik’s mind worries -- and the right hand grasping a fistful of Shaw’s elegant shirt.

Shaw’s breath is heavy in his ear, labored, the way it might be if he really were fucking Erik right now. He is -- he is out of control, the dazed part of Erik’s mind wonders at it, the surreality of this moment glaring even through the fog of pain.

“I should kill you,’ Shaw whispers. “You’re starting to become more trouble than you’re worth.’ Then his hands push Erik back, Shaw stepping away and lifting his hands to straighten the knot of his tie. After a beat, Shaw exhales, some of that tight rage slipping back under the mask of civility as he says, ‘But I won’t. That said, we have more to discuss, Erik, and I think you’ll be capable of speaking more rationally once I return, yes? Stay here.’

Erik stays; he’s not certain if he can stay upright without support, much less move. Pain blurs the room, blurs Shaw frowning down at the wrinkles in his shirt before he covers it with his jacket, deft fingers sliding buttons into place, covering up evidence. Erik’s heart beats raucously in his ears, keeping perfect time with the pulsing pain in his collarbone -- he wonders, the thought itself a haze, if Shaw has managed to push the bone out of place, if muscle is torn as well.

"As I said,’ Shaw says once he’s put himself back together, "we will speak more shortly, as soon as I've seen to my guests. You might take this time to reflect on your behavior tonight, Erik, and," he surveys Erik, mouth twisted, "put yourself back in order, if you can.”

He's got his bad arm cradled close against his body, the muscles drawing in on themselves. The rest of him feels about to come apart at the seams; he's not sure how he's holding together.

After one last, weighty look, Shaw turns his back to Erik and strides across the room, measured as always -- strides across the room and, very nearly, into Eileen and Angie, who have materialized in the doorway.

"Sebastian.” Erik almost doesn't hear Eileen's voice through the terror blaring in his head, the Eileen, get out of here competing with nausea to be first out of his mouth.

"Sebastian,” Eileen says again, "we've been looking for you forever. Timothy has to leave soon, but we haven't had your cake or the speeches yet. It would be nice for your department chair to send you off with proper decorum, wouldn't it? If you've finished catching up with Erik," not a flicker of knowing in that light, steady voice, "I'll tell Timothy we'll start in a few minutes."

Shaw must know they’ve seen -- or heard, at the very least. Or if they don’t know, that they suspect; Eileen knows, Shaw knows she knows, and what will he do to punish her for that knowledge? Fear beats against the walls of Erik’s mind, rancid and infectious. But Shaw just affords Eileen and Angie a small, tight smile and says, “Please do.”

He hesitates, just a second, perhaps considering waiting for them to precede him out of the study -- only he can’t, of course, he’s already started leaving, so he’s forced to step past them, sparing Erik one last glance over his shoulder as he goes. Erik wishes he could read more in that gaze than just the
promise of pain, but that promise is all he sees.

“Angela,” Eileen says with calm authority, “go and tell Timothy that Dr. Shaw is on his way.”

Angie hovers in the doorway, hands twisting around the handles of her purse -- it’s perfectly clear she wants to go, but that’s at war with the fact she both feels she should stay and doesn’t want to follow Shaw out to wherever Shaw goes.

A beat later, Eileen says, more gently, “It’s all right, Angie,” and at last Angie leaves, her heels clicking off the wood floor as she heads back to the drawing room.

Erik’s knees finally rebel and he has to slump against the wall. Shock, he thinks numbly; now that the moment is past and Shaw is gone, his body is reasserting itself. Eileen, without regard for the precise geometry of Shaw’s study, hauls a chair over and pushes Erik gently down into it. Her hands on Erik’s wrist, checking his pulse, tremble.

"I won't tell you you were incredibly foolish, or incredibly brave," Eileen says after a moment, "but that's only because I haven't yet decided which one it is. Can I do anything for you?"

"He said he should kill me." Shaw’s Erik had always sensed that as a possibility but had accepted it as simply another consequence of his choices, as inevitable and inexorable as natural law.

Eileen nods shortly; it's only now that she's standing close that Erik catches the ashy tone of her skin underneath her makeup. "We heard that. We saw -- well." She touches her own collarbone. "You'll need a hospital for that."

"I'll live," Erik snaps. Anger -- yes, anger is better than shock. At least, it helps push back the faintness, the cold that builds in violent shivers up and down his spine. The muscles in his arm have locked up tight, along with most of the rest of him, but he's not going to stay here, not when Shaw’s expecting him to remain. "I need to go out -- I need -- help me up."

Eileen looks like she wants to argue, but in the end she just leans down and curves her arm around the small of his back, letting him put weight on her to haul himself back up to his feet. The change in posture from sitting to standing sends all the blood rushing from his head, dizziness crashing over him in a wave -- but he blinks, fights it, and it fades.

He tries to move away from Eileen, to stand on his own, but the lightheadedness makes him sway on his feet and he’s forced to let her act as a crutch, the two of them making slow progress across Shaw’s study and toward the door. It’s fine, though, Erik tells himself -- better this way, perhaps, because now it’s unmistakable what Shaw has done to him. Everything in him rails against what he’s about to do. Shaw’s Erik cringes in the back corner of his skull … but that’s precisely why Erik’s doing it.

Each step they take sends another bolt of pain lancing from his collarbone down his arm, burning in his fingertips. He hears the clink of a knife against glass, someone demanding a speech from Shaw, though their words are muffled from here. A murmur of laughter, some scattered applause -- Erik imagines Shaw demurring, however briefly, before he consents to step up before his audience of willing sycophants.

“Left,” Erik growls at Eileen once they’re in the foyer, and she hesitates, then, her grasp tightening on his hip. It isn’t the one Shaw bruised.

“Are you sure?” she murmurs. “We could leave, now. I have my car. I can take you straight from here to the hospital.”
“I’m sure.”

Wordlessly, Eileen turns, maneuvering Erik awkwardly so they head out through the drawing room, past Amelie's shocked face. She must know what he's doing; her hand raises once, to stop or help, but then instead she darts around them, through the airy and echoing and empty room, to open the door out onto the porch. Erik gives her a tight nod; she looks away.

Out on the patio, the evening has drawn down already, the western edge of the sky chased with blood-red and orange and the rest of it dark, hidden by the even darker shadows of cedars and oaks. The fairy lights and the citronella torches hold the darkness at bay, a dome of soft yellow light that encompasses the hundred or so people gathered around to listen to Shaw bid them farewell.

"Oh my god." It's Angie, hovering on the very edge of the crowd, who sees him first. The words fall like a leaf on the still water of the pool nearby: light, but creating ripples that run through the quiet, ripples manifested in heads turning and looking, murmurs running through them, intersecting concentric rings.

The pain has stabilized enough that Erik can focus on more than pushing it back. He can focus not on the faces staring at him in shock and speculation, but on Shaw, elevated on the stage with the string quartet (now gone silent), shock written on that inscrutable, omniscient face, loud as a scream.

Erik gazes back at him, wanting to etch this moment into his permanent memory: the night he killed Shaw’s Erik and climbed over his corpse to stand here, with Shaw looking at him like he thinks he must be imagining things, like he can’t quite believe little Erik Lehnsherr would ever dare to defy him so publicly.

Erik can’t quite believe it, either, but here he is.

He tries not to think about the eyes watching them, or the whispers brushing through the crowd, his name on their lips a beat way from Shaw’s. This has to be worth it. This has to be about more than them.

“Dr. Lehnsherr,” someone says at last, breaking away from the others -- it’s Timothy Ehrlich, the department chair, his face pale and horrified. He reaches for Erik with one hand, then appears to think better of it, clenching it into a fist down at his side instead. Erik can practically see the questions he wants to ask, a breath away from being spoken, but Ehrlich just says, “Dr. Lehnsherr -- are you … are you all right?”

Eileen squeezes Erik’s hand, but she doesn’t speak for him. Erik watches Shaw, up on that stage, struggling for something to say to smooth this all away, wrap it up in pretty gauze and blur out the meaning of it, until everyone decides to forgets what they saw and believe what Shaw tells them, instead.

Shaw is struggling. The elation and fury brewing inside Erik is a terrible alchemy, lifting him up and out of himself, past the limits of caring that a pack of his colleagues are staring at him, taking in his rumpled suit and guarded posture and, when he tugs his tie and collar loose, the darkening spots of Shaw's fingers on his neck. Ehrlich gasps, and so does Angie.

"Dr. Ehrlich," Erik says into the silence, "I'm informing you that I will be filing a Title IX complaint." He leans on the will, satisfied when Ehrlich flushes and nods. "This should tell you," he says, now to the audience at large -- all of whom have turned away from the stage, all of whom are watching him -- "about the man you're celebrating tonight."

This is his body, his disheveled suit, his bruises, his broken bone and his pain. He thinks, bitterly, of
all the times he's stood in front of a similar group, tie-tacked and cufflinked and flawless, Shaw's prize on display, and these people -- trained observers, thinkers, critics -- had never once thought to look and see what was right in front of them.

Now, though, now they have no choice.

He looks straight at Shaw and memorizes the look on his face, the hatred and the shock, all of Shaw’s impotent rage. Once, Erik would have looked at an expression like that and felt ice drop into his veins. Now, it represents everything he is walking away from, when he turns and lets Eileen help him back into the house, past Amelie who darts around them to the front door, past the glass walls and chrome furniture, all the trappings that once boxed him in. Behind him he hears the voices of the crowd, the disbelief and simmering, righteous fury, all of it directed at Shaw.

The pain in his shoulder is like liquid heat pouring through his marrow, but Erik smiles anyway when he steps out the front door of the house -- out onto the stone path beneath the lemon trees -- and doesn’t look back.

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Chapter End Notes

cw: domestic abuse, references to past rape and violence
Erik calls Charles from Eileen’s car, sitting in the front seat with the phone floating up by his ear. Now that he’s out of Shaw’s reach, without the sear of adrenaline to sustain him, the pain in Erik’s shoulder is worse than ever -- coupled now with the ache in his throat and the low throb at his hip, little gifts from Shaw that he suspects will haunt him for several weeks at least.

Charles picks up on the second ring.

"Erik? Erik -- are you okay? What happened?"

Erik has rarely heard Charles so panicked; usually, he supposes, Charles has the benefit of being able to sit inside someone’s head while they’re doing something risky, controlling all the variables. But since Erik had asked him for privacy in this, Charles must have been pacing a hole in the hotel room carpet all evening, wondering what Erik was doing, what Shaw was doing.

"I'm -- " Erik stumbles on the thought, the admission, "I'm not okay. Can you meet me at -- " he glances at Eileen, "Stanford University Medical Center?" Charles hisses, and Erik swears he can feel the spike of telepathic panic. "I'll be fine, it's just -- " he laughs, " -- it's nothing I haven't experienced before."

"Erik," Charles says, the tremor making Erik's name tense and beautiful. "I'll be there, I'll -- do you need anything?"

"Painkillers." The pain has half of him ratcheted up tight; right behind that, though, is relief, or maybe shock, making his muscles shaky. "And a brace for my left collarbone."

"Fool," Charles tells him, not unkindly. He sounds, suspiciously, like he’s crying. For once, Erik doesn’t want to mock him; part of him wants to cry, himself. "I'll see you soon. Can I…?"

"Yeah," Erik says, and like that, the subtle warmth of Charles’s presence floods across the back of his mind, something Erik had never noticed until it was gone. On the other end of the line, Charles sighs. You’re in pain, Erik. I hate that.

"Hence the need for painkillers," Erik says as dryly as he can. It's not very dry at all; if it is, it's because his throat is parched, nothing but sand and shock. "You'd better be there by the time I arrive."

Charles makes a strange noise, something that sounds like both a laugh and a sob at the same time. “Yeah. All right,” he says, and while he hangs up the phone Erik still feels him in his mind, as organic as if he were a part of Erik all along.

It feels strange to be going to the hospital for something like this, Erik thinks as they pull up in valet parking, Eileen hurrying round to the passenger side door to help him out. Before, Erik would have just taken the illicit Vicodin Shaw procured for him and pretended everything was fine, bitten the inside of his lip until it bled just to keep from making a sound. He’d always told himself he wouldn’t go to the doctor even if he had a choice about it, that he hated the idea of some stranger in a white coat prodding and cataloguing and photographing like he was a specimen under a microscope.

True to form, Charles is waiting when they get inside, pale and wan, hunched in on his anxiety but immediately launching himself out of the waiting room chair as soon as he lays eyes on them. It’s only been a couple of hours, but Charles looks as if he hasn’t slept in a week, ashen and glassy-eyed as he comes up to take over for Eileen, his familiar warm arm slipping around Erik’s waist.
"Erik," Charles murmurs, his telepathy trembling against Erik like an anxious bird before Charles can get it under control. "Oh god. What did -- " he cuts himself off. "Are you okay?"

"Same answer as before," Erik says, but then, once he's got Charles's hand tight in his good one -- Charles staying away from Erik's left side, bless him -- he says, more softly, "Better, though, now you're here."

That gets him a wavery smile, for a moment only before Charles maneuvers Erik over to the admissions desk and flags down one of the triage nurses. "Broken collarbone," Charles says tersely once he has her attention, and onto the end of that, Erik adds, "I was assaulted."

The nurse hesitates, taking in his suit and tie, clearly trying to work out the backstory. Erik scowls. "Do you want us to call the police?" she asks.

"Yeah." There's no point in delaying, not when he's decided to see this through -- even if it means more questions, more poking, more scrutiny, even the chance of failure. He's certain Shaw's back in his house, the guests evicted, on the phone with his lawyer.

"Don't think about him," Charles says fiercely. Erik laughs; too late for that, really -- there'll be no not thinking of him for a long time, Shaw haunting him no matter what Erik's done to cut himself free. Charles's telepathy tries to soothe some of that despairing rage, invisible fingers running in slow, careful strokes across Erik's cortex, and for once Erik lets himself be soothed, or maybe he's too exhausted to fight it.

"My wedding ring," he murmurs, once they've got him in a bed and the two of them are safely curtained off from the rest of the chaos of the ER. If he's going to have to think about Shaw, he wants something to help him think of Charles too.

"You don't have it on," Charles says, rubbing Erik's bare ring finger. "Didn't want Shaw to do anything to it. He'd had vivid dreams -- so vivid they'd seemed real, like prophecy -- of Shaw grinding his ring to dust, crushing it to atoms. "It's in my jacket pocket. Get it for me?"

Charles reaches gingerly into the inner pocket of Erik’s jacket, his fingers fumbling for a moment before Erik feels their warmth against the metal of his ring. Charles slides the ring back onto Erik’s finger, and it feels the same way it felt when Charles did that the first time, the most loving gesture anyone could ever make. Charles clasps Erik’s hand with his, then, covering the ring with the press of his palm.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Charles asks after a moment, almost tentatively, like he thinks Erik will snap at him for it. Once, Erik would have.

This time, though, he just lifts Charles’ hand up to his mouth, brushing a small kiss against Charles’ knuckles. He feels his heart beating through his entire body, pounding all the way down to the tips of his fingers, still too-fast.

“You can look, if you want,” Erik offers eventually, and closes his eyes and leans back against the thin excuse for a hospital pillow.

Charles hesitates just a moment before Erik feels his mind slipping deeper into Erik’s memories, delicately searching through the thicket of them until he finds what he’s looking for. Erik just lies there and breathes, and thinks about how badly it hurts every time his chest rises and falls, the distant
noise of the emergency department humming all around them, about Shaw, who isn’t here but is still far too close for comfort.

When Charles's hands tighten around his own, he's found it: Erik's fear transmuting to fury, to recklessness; his words goading Shaw on, pushing him up to and past the edge of what Erik wants -- then the flare of pain and organic grinding of bone under unbearable pressure, sharper than the dull pain in his hip and neck -- and Shaw’s face and the darkness swallowing up the world. Everything before and even so much after is a blur, the lines between moments faded first by anticipation and then by shock. A few moments stand out, odd details like Timothy Ehrlich's face, Eileen appearing as if in answer to a prayer Erik hadn't known he'd spoken, the silence Erik left behind him as he walked out. Seeing Charles in the uncomfortable waiting room chair, worrying his own wedding ring in circles.

"You're mad," Charles mutters, leaning in to kiss Erik's temple. "You're mad and I love you." He rests his forehead against Erik's, the contact shockingly intimate, strange -- only two layers of bone and skin separating him from where Charles's telepathy lives. He can feel it, Erik thinks, with his own ability. It's beautiful. It's beautiful, and Charles is crying, one tear running down his cheek to splash on the pillow between them. "I'm so glad you're safe."

Erik clenches his eyes tighter shut, and holds on to Charles, and wonders at how he ever got to be so lucky.

* *

They have to cut off Erik’s fine Burberry shirt and jacket with large, industrial-looking scissors to get to his collarbone -- and then, in the end, they strip everything from him to photograph the bruises at his hip and throat as well, measuring the breadth of Shaw’s handprint at his neck from heel to fingertip with a length of white tape.

Charles’s fury quivers in the air between them as he takes in the marks on Erik's body, the careful way the officers go about talking to Erik and measuring him. The police ask him questions: who did it, when, why, any witnesses, has it happened before -- and then, after nine total hours, Erik is discharged home to Charles with a brace for his shoulder, a sling for his arm, and a Percocet prescription.

In the hotel that night, Charles asleep with his hand on Erik’s stomach, Erik imagines Shaw being arrested. Shaw, in his Hugo Boss suit, sitting on a concrete jail bench waiting to post bond. It’s supremely gratifying, but in the end it’s just fantasy, and it can’t keep him from slipping into nightmare when he finally does fall asleep.

When he wakes up, the sky still dark, the lights of the city flooding in and his skin drenched in sweat, Charles is there, tucked even closer, his hand laced carefully in Erik's, his thoughts a gentle litany of it's all right, Erik; I'm here, I'm here. Erik's too exhausted to protest the coddling, hangs on to Charles hanging on to him, reminds himself that the closeness of this body is a good closeness, a support to lean against.

He files the Title IX-Clery Act case first thing Tuesday morning, after a Monday spent hungover on Percocet and exhaustion. It's surreal, walking through the halls of the Stanford psychology department to bring Dr. Ehrlich his copy of the filing, feeling people’s gazes sticking to him as he goes past their open office doors. Shaw’s door is shut, the light off inside -- he must not have been able to show his face here. That, or he's still in jail.

Charles comes with him this time, striding silently along beside him. He gives Shaw's door a long, nearly dangerous look, as if he's imagining the man himself in there, hunched like a spider in his web. Having him here, in a place that's always been the center of Shaw's power, the center of Erik's world for five years, is more necessary than Erik had thought; he's glad, he thinks as he waits for the
administrator to fetch Dr. Ehrlich, he'd asked Charles to come.

Dr. Ehrlich is pale and unsurprised when he stands to greet them, shaking first Erik's hand and then Charles’s, then taking the envelope Erik wordlessly offers him.

"Eileen took you to the hospital?" he half-asks, after inspecting Erik's arm in its sling and brace. Then, to fill Erik's silence, says, "I -- I can't say anything, if there's litigation pending. But all the same, I wanted to -- to express -- " His mouth, usually bland and forgettable, twists in frustration. "I wanted to reassure you, Dr. Lehnsherr, that we will cooperate fully with the investigators. And we're taking steps -- "

"Don't." He has anger, and to spare. Ehrlich had been a new-minted associate professor when Erik had been a student; Erik's fairly certain his rise in the department has been enabled, in no small part, by keeping Shaw happy. "I don't want your reassurances, Dr. Ehrlich. I want the truth. Did you know?"

Ehrlich licks his lips, his gaze darting to Charles -- no help there -- before flying away to light on a painting on the wall behind Erik's shoulder, to the door, to the file cabinet, then returning, trapped, to Erik.

"I suspected," he says at last, shoulders slumping. The rest of him follows a moment after, Ehrlich collapsing in his seat. "It was all circumstantial evidence, but taken together… I suspected."

Erik thinks about adding, And you allowed it to continue -- but he doesn’t have to say that out loud for it to be perfectly clear. Shaw had been on the tenure and promotion committee, the policy committee; he’d had his fingers in every pie it was worth sticking your hand in. Even Eileen admitted to suspecting. But at least she did something about it. Speaking to Erik … offering him her support, however diplomatically, was not nothing.

“And now you know,” Erik says instead, pronouncing each syllable as well as he can, wanting to make sure he can't be misunderstood.

He wonders if Ehrlich had thought less of him, because of it. If he thought Erik had been fucking Shaw to get authorship on papers and support for grants. And while quite literally living in Shaw’s home did make it easier for them to collaborate (constantly, every minute of Erik’s free time taken up by work, Shaw’s pointed comments on those occasions he caught Erik doing anything else), Erik is quite sure he lost out on just as many opportunities, the carrot snatched out of reach every time Erik failed to obey and replaced with a stick.

“I’m sorry,” Ehrlich says, and he looks far older than his years, his face draped in lines and shadows. “I’m so sorry, Erik. I wish we would have behaved differently.”

"I wish you had, too." Charles's mind is brushing carefully against his, not intruding, but a reminder nonetheless, like a touch on the wrist. Erik’s never suspected the true depth of his anger, the pit of it hidden by resignation and isolation; now he’s discovering it, a cave to plunge into and drown himself. He takes a ragged breath, for steadiness. "Goodbye, Timothy."

He has months more of this, maybe years; he's sure Shaw will find ways to drag this out and drag Erik through the mud. Charles had asked him about it Monday morning in the lawyer's office, not dissuading, but offering caution: You know what he'll argue, that the relationship was consensual, that there's no firm evidence for coercion -- that you wanted it. Do you want to face that?

I survived Shaw saying those words to my face. I can survive the lawyers he and Stanford hire to fight this.
Charles had nodded and squeezed Erik's hand, and let it go. Now, striding back down the halls, past familiar doors with unfamiliar posters -- new colloquia, new conferences, new competitions -- Erik has the sense of a future now, this new fight with Charles by his side.

*

Shirin Akbari is petite and firm, slightly impatient, as if the rest of the world moves too slowly for her. It's reassuring to put a human face to the official letter Amelie had received the week before at her sister's apartment -- her sister's apartment because, after Dr. Shaw had returned from a meeting with his lawyers, he'd informed them he wouldn't be keeping this house after all. To have a letter delivered in the chaos of settling into her sister's guest room, surrounded by the noise and disorder of a house with four children after the quiet sterility of Dr. Shaw's house, had seemed ominous, as if Dr. Shaw was still waiting and watching.

"Would you like anything to drink?" Ms. Akbari says, although there's a pitcher of water and cups already on the table. Amelie shakes her head and sits in one of the empty chairs, crossing her legs and grasping the seat beneath her.

Ms. Akbari takes the chair at the head of the table and asks permission before she turns on the tape recorder, then states her name, Amelie’s, the date, and the name of the case: State of California v. Sebastian Shaw.

"What was your position in Dr. Shaw’s household?" Ms. Akbari asks. She has a file open in front of her that must have all this information in it already, but she’s asking anyway, for the sake of the record.

"Housecleaner," Amelie says, though Dr. Shaw had always used the term maid. "I worked there for fifteen years."

"Since what year?"

"2001."

Ms. Akbari nods and makes a note of it. Amelie’s heart is racing, even though there’s no reason for it to -- as if at any second the door might open and Dr. Shaw would step inside in a perfect dove grey suit, adjusting his cuffs and smiling a silent reminder at her. She swallows and, on second thought, reaches to pour herself a glass of that water.

"Were you acquainted with a Mr. Erik Lehnsherr during that time?" Ms. Akbari goes on, watching her with careful dark eyes.

"Yes," Amelie says, crossing her legs and tucking them back under her chair. Why is her throat still so dry? "Dr. Lehnsherr moved in a few years after I got there. 2004," she clarifies when Ms. Akbari asks.

"Where did you live during this time?"

"I lived in the quarters on Dr. Shaw's property." When Ms. Akbari asks if she lived in the house or on the grounds, she says, "In the servants' building, separate from the house. But I was in the house every morning, at about six."

"Until when?"

"It would depend on the day," Amelie tells her. "Dr. Shaw preferred that everything be -- precise." His word, drilled into her from the first day of her life with him. "I would finish my last inspection in
the early evening and leave after I'd met with the cook. Dr. Shaw wanted his evenings private."

Even with the recorder going, Ms. Akbari makes notes. Amelie tries not to lean forward to see what she's writing. She takes another sip of water instead, although it does nothing to ease her throat.

"During this time," Ms. Akbari says slowly, "what was your impression of the relationship between Dr. Shaw and Dr. Lehnsherr?"

Amelie wishes she could tighten her fingers around her cup; it's paper, though, and fragile. "That it was romantic. Dr. Shaw was very obvious about that. I thought it was… doting at first, until I realized that Dr. Lehnsherr -- Mr. Lehnsherr at the time -- was much, much younger, and that he was Dr. Shaw's student."

"Had Dr. Shaw done this before, to your knowledge?"

"Not when I had begun working for him," Amelie says, and then silently, *But that doesn't mean it didn't happen.*

Ms. Akbari must catch the look on her face, but she only says, "When you realized Mr. Lehnsherr was Dr. Shaw's student, how did this change your opinion of their relationship?"

"I thought it was -- " Amelie searches for the word. "Creepy. Unusual. But you hear of these things, students and professors together, and I felt it wasn't my place to judge. Until…"

"Until?" Ms. Akbari leans forward, hands folded around her pen.

Until.

*  

After another Wednesday of seeing Dr. Shaw's sheets through the wash, Amelie feels worn out herself, and -- an increasingly common feeling -- as if she can't wash herself clean. She isn't prudish, not by any stretch of the imagination, and Dr. Shaw has enough money to insulate him from any judgment; it's a different sort of uncleanness, she thinks as she looks over the living room one last time. As if she's agreed to be complicit in some plot, or in a secret.

She reaches to straighten -- carefully, oh, so carefully -- one of the small Tomma Abst paintings that has come askew. It's original; everything here is. There are paintings and sculptures she doesn't touch, that are to be touched only by the conservators who come to coo over them or the art reporters who come to admire on Dr. Shaw's 'exhibition' days. So much here that is not to be touched, and Dr. Shaw has no need to name the consequences, but it's strange that this painting should be knocked crooked, when the rest of the room is so precisely in place.

A heavy thud echoes behind the wall and Amelie freezes.

Then, into the ringing silence, Dr. Shaw's voice: "Listen to me very carefully, Erik."

Those words twist in Amelie’s stomach like a fist taking hold of her entrails. She wants to stop listening, would close her ears if she could, the same way she might close her eyes. Her heart beats in her throat, pulse suddenly deafening and very, very fast.

She thinks about staying here, feet growing roots into the floor, until the danger passes. Or about flitting upstairs to occupy herself cleaning the bathroom, scrubbing invisible
dirt from the stone floor.

“You do not speak to me in that fashion,” Dr. Shaw’s voice goes on. It’s terribly low, and even, a horrible calm that sinks cold fingers into Amelie’s bones. “You know better.”

“Let go of me,” Erik’s voice says in response. His voice is tighter, like violin strings drawn too taut, enough to bend the neck. There’s more pain than bravado there.

Amelie’s feet move without input from her brain, even though every part of her knows better, every reasonable thought in her mind says to stay where she is. They take her on silent steps out into the hall and down one door, her blood roaring in her ears. The moment she steps into the doorway and looks, she regrets it.

Dr. Shaw has Erik pinned against the wall, one arm twisted unnaturally behind his back with the wrist stretched toward his spine, held there with Dr. Shaw’s uncanny strength -- hard enough she can see the white of Erik’s bone pressing up against the underside of his skin, blood-blanced. Not broken -- not yet.

"I heard -- " she starts, and Dr. Shaw turns around, his eyes dark and venomous, and Amelie sees that he knows she knows, she can see how close that hideous strength is to being turned on her. Erik is staring at her too, in pain and disbelief and shame.

"What did you hear, my dear?" Dr. Shaw asks. He straightens, his grip easing on Erik's wrist. Color floods back into it, red erasing the white; Erik's face, though, is bloodless. As if he's Amelie straightening the Abst painting, Dr. Shaw carefully adjusts his tie. "Well?"

Amelie tries to answer, but the words jam up in her throat, caught on dryness and terror. "I -- " she coughs, trying to clear the fear away, but more of it crowds up. "I -- "

"What," Dr. Shaw says calmly, "did you hear?"

"Please," Erik says, aching and pleading, "don't -- "

Dr. Shaw doesn't look at him. His head tilts, predatory, like a hawk; Amelie steps back, even knowing running is useless. "Well, my dear? I'm waiting."

"Nothing," Amelie stammers, praying that it's true, that if she says it it will somehow become true. "My apologies, Dr. Shaw. I thought one of the others -- Clark, Maria -- was in here without permission."

“As you can see, my dear, it’s only us here,” Dr. Shaw says with that paralyzing serenity. He smiles. The expression is cold and reptilian, as if it belongs better on the mouth of a snake. “The others have gone to bed.”

It’s the three of them alone downstairs, is what he’s saying. Dr. Shaw steps forward, and behind him Erik rocks on his heels, eyes wide. Amelie has little attention for him now -- not when Dr. Shaw advances on her, smoothly and inevitably, the soles of his fine Italian leather shoes clicking off the hardwood floor. There’s nowhere to run -- behind her is the vast expanse of Dr. Shaw’s mansion, all its labyrinthine halls he still knows better than she does, and beyond all that there’s the grounds, the neighborhood with its shuttered windows like so many closed eyes. Even if she ran, she wouldn’t get very far.

“Sebastian --” Erik says, implores, but Dr. Shaw doesn’t spare him a thought, not until
Erik’s power catches metal. It sends a lamp crashing off one of the study tables, taking Dr. Shaw’s scotch with it and smashing crystal and ceramic across the floor. It also catches Dr. Shaw’s wristwatch, tugging his hand minutely back, in Erik’s direction -- but stopping short as Shaw’s own strength catches against the tug of the steel on his wrist. The metal gives, not flesh; it contorts against the bones of Shaw’s wrist before Erik’s power lets go.

Amelie, frozen in place, hadn’t even had the nerve to yelp when the lamp broke. Dr. Shaw, though, turns very slowly to look back over his shoulder at Erik. She knows the moment their gazes meet because she sees the way Erik swallows, his throat convulsing around dry air. Shaw doesn’t say a single word. He doesn’t have to.

When he looks back at Amelie, it’s with the same tranquil expression as always, though that look is belied by the anger in his eyes. He lifts his hand -- the one whose wrist bears the ruined watch -- and when the backs of his fingers brush her cheek Amelie nearly rattles out of her skin, hating the thin, anxious sound that touch pulls from her lips.

The fury in Dr. Shaw’s eyes evaporates, and the smile he gives her is sweet, teasing, the smile he gives her when asking questions about her boyfriend and if he's proposed yet. Amelie swallows thickly, feeling her bones evaporate from the absence of tension.

"Oh, my dear," he says kindly. "You've worked for me long enough that you know I won't be angry over such an insignificant -- well, it's not even a transgression, is it? A misunderstanding, as you can see."

It’s true; she's worked with him for years. In all that time, she's never known him to have any relationship long enough for his partner to move in, never known him to indulge in any romantic proclivities at all. Of course, she hardly knows the entirety of his life, what he does outside Amelie's purview, but nothing she knows of him would suggest what she was, only a few seconds ago, considering. *He wouldn't hurt me.*

"I'm so sorry, sir," she murmurs. Her voice comes out shaking with relief. Dr. Shaw smiles benignantly.

"There, there, my girl," he reassures her. His hand descends on her shoulder -- hard, tight, crushingly tight for a heartbeat, gentle before she can do much more than think it's shock magnifying everything. Carefully, he turns her around. "Look at the time! You've been up since the sun, haven't you, and here it is, after nine! You must be exhausted."

She is, though it has nothing to do with a day of work. Still, she stammers, "I -- I am a little tired, sir."

"Go and rest yourself," he advises. His arm is behind her shoulders now, propelling her along through the door and out into the echoing, silent hallway. "In the morning, all will be forgotten."

* Amelie tells that story to Ms. Akbari piece by broken piece, handing it over in fragments. She doesn’t have to worry about detail -- that night is engraved indelibly upon her memory. Ms. Akbari manages to listen with relative dispassion, though Amelie notes the occasional flicker of emotion across her gaze or twist to her mouth. Amelie wonders if Ms. Akbari is sitting there, disgusted with Amelie for saying nothing, for knowing exactly what was happening and keeping her mouth shut about it. Amelie hates herself, too, a little.
“Why didn’t you go to the police?” Ms. Akbari asks at last, and even though her pulse spikes part of Amelie is relieved to have finally been asked, just so she can stop waiting for it.

“I should have,” Amelie says. “I know that. But … I needed this job. My mother isn’t well, and my sister has four children. The last time Dr. Shaw fired someone, they had such a hard time getting a new job with his reference that they had to go on benefits. And -- I know it might sound foolish, but I was afraid of Dr. Shaw. He was so strong, and I couldn’t stop thinking about what he’d do if he thought I was going to tell anyone, because if he’d hurt Mr. Lehnsherr then what would stop him from doing the same, or worse, to me? I was nobody.”

Ms. Akbari is silent, and Amelie feels that silence filling with condemnation and disappointment. Rather than listen to it, she says, "I lived with this for years. When I thought about telling someone, I would think -- I would think of my family, of what would happen to me. When he touched me that night," she points to her cheek, shuddering as if Shaw's fingers are there again, ghosting across skin, "I thought no one would see me alive again."

"I see," Ms. Akbari says. "Do you need a moment?" She nods at the pitcher of water and the box of tissues.

She doesn't; now that she's begun to talk, the words want to become a torrent, kept in check only by Ms. Akbari's questions. She takes a tissue anyway, for something to hold onto that isn't the cup she's reduced to a damp and crumpled wreck.

"Did you witness any other incidents like this one?"

"Never the incidents themselves," Amelie says. "I suppose he became more careful after that. But I knew he would not stop at the one time, and I could see how he would dress Mr. Lehnsherr -- even after he became a doctor -- and order him about. Sometimes I would see bruises, if Dr. Lehnsherr didn't have them covered. Blood."

"Where?"

Amelie shuts her eyes. "The bedsheets, dirty towels. I was responsible for seeing to the laundry. Before, I would gather the towels and linens on Wednesdays," and dry cleaning twice a week, the schedule is embedded in Amelie's brain, "but then it became three times a week." Ms. Akbari's eyebrow bounces up and Amelie wants to laugh. "It wasn't often, but on occasion there would be drops of blood. I -- I didn't want to speculate; even if I was right, who would believe me against Dr. Shaw, even with evidence?"

She remembers the slow-growing terror she felt, one week, when Dr. Shaw came downstairs and said, *Dr. Lehnsherr has taken ill and is convalescing upstairs; please don’t disturb him for the foreseeable future*. Amelie had been so afraid something awful had happened to Dr. Lehnsherr, that perhaps Shaw had killed him and was biding his time to get rid of the body. But then Dr. Lehnsherr had emerged again three days later, so pale she would have believed he’d really been ill if it weren’t for the sling he wore on his arm. Not unlike the sling she imagines he's wearing now.

“Did you ever hear stories from other employees? While that sort of evidence isn’t admissible in court, it may help us identify other potential witnesses.”

Amelie has one of the tissues balled up in her fist, the paper damp-feeling from her own sweat. “Um. Yes. Some. None of us liked to talk about it, much. What if Dr. Shaw or Dr. Lehnsherr overheard? But there were rumors. You might talk to Carlos Oquendo or Jean Amis, the chef.”

Ms. Akbari notes down the names. “Anyone else?”
“I don’t know. Maybe.” Amelie makes herself throw away the tissue and pull another one out of the box instead, dabbing at the wet corners of her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she says, even though she isn’t sure what she’s apologizing for.

"Don't apologize," Ms. Akbari says briskly. The smile she gives Amelie, though, is kind. "Have you spoken to Dr. Lehnsherr since he left?"

"I was relieved when I found out he'd gone to Boston," Amelie confesses. "But I never contacted him there. I thought -- he got out; he would not want a fellow prisoner writing to him, when he was free. I only spoke to him briefly when he arrived at Dr. Shaw's house the night of the party, and again when he left, to make sure he was being taken care of. He said he was."

"Dr. Lehnsherr never intimated that he would be going to Boston?"

"Not once," Amelie says firmly. "He left everything behind -- his clothes, his books. The morning he left was like any other morning. I didn't realize he had gone until the next morning, when Dr. Shaw was -- Dr. Shaw was very angry. I heard him trying to call Dr. Lehnsherr's cell phone; the number had been disconnected."

She can't help the note of pride in her voice. At the time she'd been terrified, more than convinced Dr. Lehnsherr was dead or that he soon would be. That fear, despite Dr. Shaw's threats when she'd asked what had happened, had driven her to the public library on her day off, her heart knocking in her chest as she sat down at a terminal and prepared herself for the worst.

Then she'd seen it in the search results: *Dr. Erik Lehnsherr joins BCS faculty*, and a link to a news page on MIT's website.

"To reiterate, you haven't spoken to Dr. Lehnsherr, or anyone connected with him, since the night of the party?"

"No," Amelie says. She stares straight back at Ms. Akbari, refusing to be cowed. "I've sworn already but I'll swear again if I must. No one contacted me and I spoke with no one after Dr. Lehnsherr left."

"All right." Ms. Akbari leans back. "Thank you, Ms. Lacasse, for your -- bluntness. You were present at the party, but did not witness anything yourself?"

"The assault? No." Amelie's fairly certain it played out much like the one she had witnessed. "One of the other professors -- Dr. Patel, I think, went back to Dr. Shaw's study, with someone else. I don't know her name, but she was one of Dr. Shaw's students, years ago. I saw Dr. Lehnsherr after they came out, and it was clear Dr. Shaw had hurt him."

"Mmm." Ms. Akbari makes another note in her indecipherable handwriting. "Yes, I believe this other student is one of our witnesses, Miss -- Dr. Ferrante. Now, Ms. Lacasse … ."

Ms. Akbari goes through the rest of Amelie’s memories of her time in Shaw’s employ with a fine toothed comb, having her repeat dates two, three times, list witnesses, asking for everything imaginable, down to the chore schedule. By the time she’s dismissed Amelie is exhausted, but she can’t help but feel a sort of quiet, righteous vindication burn in the pit of her stomach, as well. It feels good.

* 

Ever since the events of Shaw’s leaving party, the Department of Psychology has been existing in a state of suspended animation. No one seems willing to talk about it, perhaps because of the ongoing Title IX investigation, or at least not talk about it where they might be overheard -- Angie certainly
knows of grad students and post-docs who have heard a veritable earful from their PIs. Mostly, she’s told, to the tune of Don’t you ever get yourself trapped alone with Sebastian Shaw or you will regret it and I hope you know you can tell me, if you are ever made to feel unsafe by any of the faculty here.

It would be a whole lot more impressive, Angie thinks, if only they’d thought to say all of this twelve years earlier.

Of course, she isn’t exempt from that. She saw things, noticed things -- inferred things. And she decided they were none of her damn business. She’ll have to live with that, but she damn well won’t go around pretending any differently.

She spends time, at the start of her lessons the week after the investigation starts, speaking to her undergraduate students -- all of whom have heard of what’s happening, of course; how couldn’t they? The university was required under the Clery Act to send out an email to the entire student body informing them there had been an alleged sexual assault between a student and professor. From there, it was only a matter of time before everyone figured out exactly who the professor in question was. It was in the papers, after all. While Angie hadn’t been able to confirm it herself, as she stood in the lecture hall in front of her class’ pale faces, listening to them all use Shaw’s name as if she’d done just that, she thought … good. He deserves it.

They're a month into classes, and usually she's found her routine by now, but as she walks under the warm early fall sun, past buildings she'd first seen as a first-year grad student, she can't shake the unsettled anxiety crawling up her spine. It's the school's investigations, of course, it's the interview with the district attorney, Ms. Akbari, for the separate assault case, looming in a couple of weeks. It's sensing the subtext in every interaction and seeing the case -- seeing Erik, seeing Shaw -- dissected and picked over and the very bones of the thing laid bare. It's looking at herself, her complicity; she might have decided not to pretend this is all a huge shock and totally unexpected, but that doesn't mean it's easy.

At least the place remains the same, she tells herself as she walks by Memorial Church. She might not be properly Catholic anymore, but the arches, the ethereal gold and the soft colors of the mosaics, soothe her; she can believe, as she passes through the courtyard, that everything will be well, eventually.

It's one thing to believe it, though, and another for it to be true. Better luck next time, Ferrante, she thinks as Sebastian Shaw catches her eye from near the center of Main Quad, distinctive as always -- slender, immaculate, casually immovable among the flurry of students.

She can't avoid him, not when he's squarely in her path and when there's no clear reason to change course.

"Angela," Shaw says as she approaches, his voice that low and intimate murmur, touched with that accent Angie can never place. "An unexpected pleasure. I didn't know you were teaching for us this term."

Teaching, a reminder that she'd left academic research, never mind that the money was better with Google and Angie had watched her undergraduate loans fester into an obscene mass during her doctorate.

"I am," she says, barely on the edge of civil. "Can I help you, Sebastian?"

Shaw arches one brow, and the part of Angie that had been so well conditioned to respond to the slightest shift in Shaw’s expression, the minutest change in posture, wants to cringe. She holds his gaze, chin lifted.
“Can’t an adviser take an interest in the welfare of his former student?” Shaw says, smooth as butterscotch, and Angie wants to throw up. She dearly hopes that sentiment comes across in her tone as she says, “You mean like you took an interest in Erik?”

Shaw tsks, just this side of withering; he gestures and she falls into step alongside him before she can think better of it, trailing along at the elbow of the greats -- or not-so-greats, as it happened. “You know better than to see things in such stark black and white, Angela,” he says, every bit the disappointed mentor. “I thought I’d taught you better than that.”

There aren’t many shades of grey to a broken collarbone, Angie thinks. She knows what gaslighting is, has read about it in books as much as she’s experienced it firsthand, but no one does it quite as well as Sebastian Shaw. A part of her thinks, surely Erik wouldn’t have fallen for this, before she quashes it -- it’s quite obvious now that she has no idea what Erik would or wouldn’t have done. She made plenty of assumptions early on, about what Erik wanted and what Erik’s motivations were for putting up with things he didn’t want, and she likes to think she’d well learned her lesson by now.

"Complication is not inevitably a signature of sophistication,” she replies as coolly as she can. "You also taught us that the most parsimonious explanation for a given set of phenomena is the most aesthetically, ergo rationally, pleasing."

Shaw inclines his head, as if to concede the point, though with a certain amusement, the amusement of a parent indulging a precocious child. "I didn't approach you to start a quarrel, Angela. I was simply passing through, saw you, and wanted to extend my best wishes -- though, from the reports I hear from Google, you hardly need them."

"Thank you," she says through the panicked tightness in her throat. Who had he talked to there? She fights the urge to run to a quiet corner and text her colleagues, forces herself to focus on the moment; Shaw has always required all her concentration. "I would have thought you'd be in Boston by now, settling into Harvard and your new life there."

Something around Shaw's eyes tightens. "Ah, well, matters must be attended to here, first, and they can be attended to more expeditiously if I'm not dividing my time between Cambridge and Palo Alto. I have every confidence they'll be settled shortly, as does Timothy, and we can put all this… unpleasantness behind us."

"Oh?" Angie can't help but glance up toward the building that houses the Psychology department.

"Indeed," Shaw murmurs. He offers her one of those proprietary smiles, the kind she'd taken pride in as a student, the one that said she belonged in this circle of brilliance, under the guidance of this brilliant man. "It's in the community's best interests, after all, to resolve this as quickly as may be."

“In your best interests, you mean,” Angie says.

"The community's," Shaw says with quiet, deliberate firmness. "It's distracting for the students and a burden for the faculty, having to devote energy to speculations and investigations and such."

"It's not a distraction when it needs to be addressed." Angie hopes she says it diplomatically; Shaw's shifting from one foot to another, that coolly appraising expression turning on her, says she's failed. She reminds herself she has her own career now, a reputation she's built herself; Shaw's always looked down on industry work as mercenary, though how he could have made the fortune he has on a professor's salary, she has no idea.

Shaw clucks softly. "Needs is such a relative term."
"In some cases, an absolute."

"Vanishingly few cases." Shaw tilts his head, studying her; she remembers that from years ago, when she'd first met him at her interviews. He'd been impressed by her work, more impressed by her mutation -- she's fairly sure that her mutation had given her one of those coveted positions as his student. It was gratifying at the time, having a professor more interested in her abilities than her tits. Now, she's far less certain of that interest. "What needs are you serving, Dr. Ferrante? Whose?"

"My conscience's, mostly." Angie lifts her chin. She knows better than to try to push past Shaw, and now she's angry enough to want to see this conversation through.

"Conscience," Shaw says. "Tch. How very -- Disney of you. Those make dangerous guides on occasion, Angela; you'll do well to remember that."

“I’m sure you would know,” Angie says, more sharply than she ordinarily would have dared. It earns her a disapproving look, and there’s ice behind Shaw’s pale eyes now, cold enough to burn.

Shaw must decide, at that point, that he isn’t likely to win Angie over, because he’s frowning now as he says, “Be careful, my dear. I think you’ll find that conscience, like memory, is a fickle thing, and so easily betrays us.” He brushes the backs of his fingers against her shoulder -- Angie only just manages not to shiver, the gesture even more chilling when she reads it as a threat. When she remembers how little effort it would take for Shaw to put his incredible strength behind that gesture and shatter bone.

She doesn’t dare breathe while he’s touching her, and her lungs are aching with it by the time he steps away, smiling again, though it doesn’t thaw his eyes.

“I’ll be seeing you, I’m sure,” he says, and inclines his head toward her before stepping away, humming softly to himself as he walks back toward the Psychology building.

Not for the first time since Shaw's party, Angie finds herself wishing for Eileen. They haven't spoken since that night, and they've never been close -- at least, not until Eileen had walked with her down those dark, silent halls, looking for Erik. Two women together, Angie thinks, two women who should have done something long ago and didn't. If Eileen were here now, she might have been a much-needed witness, better than the oblivious undergrads and faculty trooping by.

Of course, Shaw would never let that happen. It's only now, on the other side of that night -- on the other side of Chicago, if Angie's honest -- that she can really understand how crafted her advisor is, how everything is shaped and placed precisely, including Erik. Including herself.

*  

Angie's wrestling with R late one Monday afternoon, aware of Dr. Shaw's looming deadlines and his expectations -- which also loom, almost impossibly high, shadowing every step of this project. He's already said she'll have first author on this paper, her first time, and she can't afford to fuck this up, not when Shaw had looked at her and said I'm trusting you, Ms. Ferrante, to do the work that will merit my entrusting you with the reputation of this lab. That means having her data flawless, her conclusions parsimonious -- her conclusions aesthetic, above all, and having all of them on time.

While her data runs, she passes the time by doodling in her notebook. Her private notebook, a battered old Moleskine that never sees the light of day except when she's killing time or trying out new thoughts. She's fairly certain Shaw would never approve of it. At least, she never sees Erik doodling, sketching, or doing anything that might be
deemed frivolous or intellectually useless, and Erik is the pattern Angie must cut herself to follow. The rest of her cohort is tasked with the same challenge, but as one of Shaw's advisees, Angie feels the weight of that challenge nearly every day.

She's so wrapped up in thinking of Erik, getting the line of her impromptu, abstract design in her notebook margin precise, in keeping an eye on the program's runtime, that she almost misses the soft, unobtrusive rustling at the door, looks up just in time to hear Dr. Shaw's amused "You're very absorbed in your work, Angela."

"Dr. Shaw!" Angie carefully closes her notebook as her advisor enters the office. This is the grad student office she shares with Erik and a pair of other students, a cramped and cluttered sanctum the faculty rarely invade. Most of the clutter is from Ming and Jeremy; Erik and Angie both keep their desks as clear as possible. Angie struggles for something to say that isn't a promise she'll have her material to Dr. Shaw on time. "Are you -- Are you looking for Erik?"

"No, my dear, I'm not." Shaw offers her a gentle smile. Usually she'd find the endearment grating, and patronizing, and sexist; from Shaw, it's a reminder of her valued station. "But I do need to find a book I lent him; I found myself in need of a citation earlier, and as I would like to get this review off sooner rather than later, thought I would fetch the book myself."

"Of course," Angie stammers. As students, they have nominal privacy; it's not like their professors can just go rummaging around their stuff at will, and faculty are hardly their parents, to go snooping through drawers. She figures Erik must have given Shaw permission -- and, well, this is Dr. Shaw, after all. "If it's not on his desk, we have our bookcase over there; he usually keeps his books on it." *You know, where most people keep their books.*

"Thank you, my dear," Dr. Shaw says breezily, and then proceeds to ignore Angie's subtle direction to the bookcase and opens Erik's desk drawers, one by one.

She sits there in faintly stunned silence, watching him, wondering if she ought to say something, already knowing in her gut she won't. It just seems so -- people just don't do that, she thinks, of course she must be missing some part of the story. Maybe Erik told Dr. Shaw the book was in his desk, or something. She fiddles with the cap of her pen, clicking it against her thumbnail and wondering if she ought to feign interest in her data, at least, as Dr. Shaw glances through Erik’s filing cabinet as well, pushing folders out of the way like he expects to find the book hidden amidst the paperwork.

Whatever he’s looking for -- and it's clearly not the book -- evidently it's not there, though Shaw seems incongruously satisfied as he straightens up. Rather than leaving immediately, he lingers there looking at Erik’s desk, fingertips resting lightly on the edge of it, grey eyes skimming Erik’s darkened computer monitor.

After a long moment, he reaches out and adjusts the steel paperweight atop Erik’s inbox, putting it at a perfect right angle to his keyboard, then at last steps away. When he notices Angie still watching, he smiles and gives a perfunctory glance over toward the shared bookshelf, then says, “Back to the grindstone, Ms. Ferrante,” and sweeps out of the office as graciously as he’d entered it.

*What the hell was that?* Angie thinks only after Shaw’s been gone at least a minute, after the ping of her computer telling her the code has finished compiling snaps her back to reality. She looks back at the paperweight, with its new and more precise position on
Erik’s desk, and wonders … she has no idea what she wonders. It’s just bizarre.

Angie has a master’s degree in Computer Science, she worked for the past five years as a lab assistant at Duke, she’s been in the world and worked in it, and she’s never in her life seen this kind of behavior from a supervisor. Of course, academia exists in its own little universe entirely separate from ordinary norms and mores, and those who wish to succeed in academia -- or so Dr. Shaw had said -- are even less beholden to such regulations, but still.

*Back to the grindstone, Ms. Ferrante.* She can't indulge her curiosity or her confusion, however much she wants to, not with the program waiting and Shaw waiting, too. At least she also has experience staying on-task (or mostly on-task, she thinks as she studies the doodle that's spread across her notebook page) despite distractions, and with an effort, she sinks herself into her work again.

She doesn't surface until Erik appears a couple hours later. It's the end of the day, or the halfway point if you're a graduate student, but he's still immaculate as ever, the lines of his trousers and shirt geometrical and polished. He spares a quick nod for Angie, who nods back, a more careful scrutiny for his desk; he must notice the realigned paperweight, from the way he goes still for a moment before setting his satchel down at the foot of his chair.

"Did Dr. Shaw get the book he needed?" Angie asks, as obliviously as she can.

"Yeah," Erik says roughly. He clears his throat. "I'd put it in his mailbox; he must have forgotten I'd told him."

Not likely, Angie thinks. Should she ask him what the hell Shaw thought he was doing, going through Erik's things like the goddamn secret police? The part of her that doesn't have time for Shaw's bullshit very much wants to; the growing part of her that understands she has to make time for it keeps her silent. Does Shaw go through her things too? Angie hopes he's not offended by her tampon and painkiller stash, or the few Snickers bars she keeps for late nights; probably he's amused by them, stereotypical *ladies' things* anyone would expect to find in a woman's desk, am I right? Shaw has enough of the hallmarks of the older male professor, and a misogynist gay man, to summarily judge the contents of Angie's desk by her chromosomes.

She decides to let the question slide; she might not have (too much of) a problem asking, but Erik doesn't tolerate anything like inquiries into his personal or professional life. *Personal,* Angie thinks; bizarrely, Dr. Shaw's behavior doesn't read like that of a professor being unprofessional, but -- well, like a jealous, territorial boyfriend. God knows, Angie's seen enough of that before.

The conviction sets itself more firmly, its shape more defined, when she watches Erik bend over his keyboard. His shirt, tucked in as it is, tugs down his collar as he stretches that long, slender neck, and in the harsh fluorescents of their overhead lights the bruise just beneath his collar is cruelly illuminated -- reddish and new, but unmistakable.

“What’s that?” Angie says before she can stop herself.

Erik goes momentarily still, tense, and he must know exactly what she means -- Angie can practically feel the way his dynamic shifts, one hand gripping the edge of his seat white-knuckled like he’s trying not to reach up and touch the mark. “What?”
“On your neck. You have a bruise.”

Erik twists around in his chair to look at her, and when people say Erik’s like a younger version of Shaw himself, she thinks, they kind of have a point -- the icy look on his face is a perfect reflection of Shavian disapproval, bladed with an edge of contempt. “None of your business, Ferrante,” he says, and holds her gaze until Angie’s forced to be the first to look away.

When he turns back to his computer, this time, he doesn’t bother tugging his collar up to conceal the mark -- he leaves it as it is, letting her stare at the angry flush beneath his skin, red deepening to purple at its center. From where it’s placed, it couldn’t possibly have been achieved by accident, even an accident like the time Erik had come back from that trail run with his face a mess of bruises and cuts. But the back of the neck isn’t exactly prime real estate for love bites, either, and this … this bruise isn’t the leftover of affection.

A part of Angie is helpless to avoid imagining Dr. Shaw’s hand there, his thumb pressing against Erik’s spine, holding him in place with the kind of effortless strength only mutation can give. Of course, that’s absurd -- Shaw might have been out of line today, coming up here and going through Erik’s things, but it’s something else entirely to suspect him of sleeping with his students. Of … anything else, with his students.

But -- Angie circles back to that day when Erik had walked into their office to gasps from Jeremy, Ming, and herself, one eye bruised nearly shut, the rest of his face a patchwork of purple and blue and red, his lip swollen from a cut where he must have bitten himself. At the time she'd bought Erik's explanation: running too close to the edge of a ridge, taking one step too far when two runners abreast had come up on him. The bruise on the back of his neck shouts its contradiction in no uncertain terms.

Okay, Angie thinks, but why Shaw? Out of all the people she knows, Erik Lehnsherr must be near the bottom of the list of those she'd think would start an affair with their advisor. Then again, stranger things happen at sea and in the ivory tower, and even though she's only starting her second year into her degree here, Angie's been in the academy long enough to know the sexual politics of it don't take into account woulds and shoulds.

She chews on that, and the slowly growing suspicion that ferments in the back of her head, over the next few weeks. Erik is as unapproachable as ever; he doesn't mention the bruise, but doesn't go out of his way to cover it up, either. Shaw is pleased with the material she gives him for their article, enough to forego his usual observations on her ability to focus. If Erik's told him about their not-really-conversation, he doesn't say anything.

Then, one day, she's waiting for the elevator to go to her office, absently dialing her boyfriend’s number and thinking ahead to dinner and a night of work, when the suspicion becomes certainty: the elevator doors slide open and the elevator chimes its arrival, and when Angie looks up she sees Erik and Shaw standing close in an otherwise empty car, not so close that Angie can’t see Shaw's arm draped, low and proprietary and indecent, low -- so low -- on Erik's back.

Shaw’s hand skips up half a foot, to the small of Erik’s back, and Angie is repulsed by the slow, sickening smile that spreads across his thin lips as he says, “After you,” and nudges a stunned Erik out into the hall.
Angie feels like her feet have grown roots, locking her in place, half-certain she’s imagining things -- though she isn’t imagining the look on Erik’s face, or Shaw’s, when she forces herself to step past him and the arm he’s using to hold the elevator doors open. His pale gaze follows her, too shrewd, the same look he wears when he’s criticizing her during their weekly meetings -- like he’s picking her apart from the outside, in.

And Erik ... Erik’s just standing there, now, watching both of them, wide-eyed; Angie’s so accustomed to the Erik that never flinches, never breaks, existing in some cold sphere far north of everyone else’s, smarter and suaver and superior. That Erik isn’t here anymore.

“Ms Ferrante,” Shaw says, and Angie nearly jumps out of her skin. He’s still holding the door open, his narrow gaze fixed on hers, assessing. She grips her phone tighter in a sweaty palm. "I haven't received the draft for your NIH grant. I trust I'll receive it by eight in the morning, sharp?"

Shit. Fuck. “I'll have it finished, Dr. Shaw.”

Shaw doesn’t smile. “Yes, you will. I've already given you two extensions on it, Ms. Ferrante. Any more and I'll have to assume you're not interested in pursuing this funding opportunity -- or,” he slides the needle in, “in not wasting my time. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Shaw moves his hand and the elevator door begins to close, cutting them both out of sight. “See that you do.”

The elevator opens on her office’s floor. Angie exits automatically, her muscles -- and all the rest of her, for that matter, wooden. She knows what she’s seen, she can’t discount it, she can’t write it off as an accident or a misperception or misunderstanding of something perfectly innocent. She’s seen too many men touching their girlfriends that way, casually possessive, this is mine telegraphed through a strategically placed hand. Hell, she's been that girl, back when she was too shy to push back, before she started caring what it meant.

If Erik had been a girl in a bar and had looked at her that way, she would have gone over immediately, pretended to be a long-lost friend in town for the week. But he’s not, he’s Erik, and they weren't at a bar, they were with their advisor. Angie swallows against the cold twist of fear; going up against an overprivileged, anonymous jerk is one thing, her advisor is entirely another.

She spends the night trying to work through her distraction, combing the internet when she can't focus on her grant, forcing herself to write and proofread in twenty-minute stretches. The ice with Shaw is always perilously thin; nearly every conversation she has with him, she has the sense of it cracking underneath her as she tests its patience. For the past two years she’s had to remember her place as a student; whenever Shaw compares her to Erik or chastises her in that paternal way of his, the remembrance chafes.

At the end of a long night, she has a draft ready for Dr. Shaw's perusal. She waits until seven to send it in; it's a point of pride, somehow, to wait those few hours, to not send it in at two as if she’s some frantic undergraduate.

If you could, Angela, come see me later today to discuss this, is Shaw's reply email, sent
at five minutes after eight, precisely. Nothing to say whether he's looked at her proposal or not, much less what he thinks of it. Angie swallows heavily and sets her laptop back down on the floor, curls up against her boyfriend's oblivious back and tries to doze until his alarm goes off.

She feels sick the entire morning, the whole time she’s getting dressed, washing her face and putting on makeup. She can’t stomach the waffles Ben’s made her, even piled high with bacon the way she usually likes them -- because she hasn’t slept, is what she tells Ben, but she can tell even he doesn’t believe her.

Later today. That could mean anything. That could mean, as soon as you arrive, or it could mean after lunch. Her legs feel weak the entire bike ride into campus; she makes herself take the stairs instead of the elevator, even though it’s five flights up, thighs quivering by the time she’s at the top. And when she lets herself into her office, Erik’s there.

He's at his desk, BrainVoyager open on one half of his screen and a Word document on the other half. Erik’s typing pauses only briefly, just half a second, before he keeps going, like he hasn’t heard her come in. He doesn’t look around and, today, his shirt collar is too high to tell any secrets.

Somehow -- somehow, she’d expected him to stay home today, though maybe that was foolish of her. Staying home would have been a tacit admission that something was wrong, and she knows Erik too well for that. The back of her throat is dry as she goes to her chair, setting her satchel down on the floor and pulling out her laptop. Spare coins roll around on the surface of Erik’s desk, nickels and quarters spinning anxious circles next to the keyboard, smaller and smaller and faster and faster.

They collapse into a pile then meld together, an ungainly alloy of copper and nickel, then separate out again into six small spheres that spin together like worry beads. Angie wishes she could take some comfort in her own ability, but she's never thought of her powers that way -- and besides, she's not sure Erik would thank her for raising and lowering the lights around them. Instead, she snaps her fingers once and calls up a small, crystalline ball of light, then another, then a third, thinking of her grandmother's old fingers working across the beads of her rosary.

It doesn't help, not really, not when she and her anxiety have to share space with Erik and his own. There's no use putting it off, either; Shaw will be in by now (will be in, if he came in with Erik, she thinks), and he won't thank her for procrastinating. Not when he thinks you're doing it already, she tells herself wryly.

She leaves behind Erik and his mutilated coins, goes down two floors, and finds Shaw’s office, tucked away in a corner with the rest of the senior professors. Only Dr. Patel's office is next to his and she's either out or busy, the heavy wooden door to her office shut. Shaw's office door is shut as well, and Angie has the sense of being locked out like a penitent, waiting for judgment and mercy from on high.

Still, she knocks. A moment of silence follows, one her heartbeat fills with anxious knocks on her chest wall, adrenaline buzzing in her head. Then: Shaw’s quiet footsteps, the rustling of tailored fabric, the door opening.

"Ms. Ferrante," Shaw says with that familiar, warm smile that now means nothing at all. "I see you received my email."
"Yes, Dr. Shaw," Angie says. She doesn't even bother trying to smile. "Is this a good time? I can come back later."

"Now is fine." Shaw steps aside, allowing her entrance.

His office is as pristine as he is, not a speck of dust to be found, the books on his shelf neatly alphabetized and his desk bare of anything that could be considered extraneous -- everything in its place, papers neatly stacked in the inbox, fountain pens in their stands, as strictly organized as Erik’s is upstairs. Shaw gestures for her to take one of the seats in front of his desk; for himself, he settles in the ergonomic leather chair behind the desk without waiting for her to sit, leaning back and clasping his hands across his stomach. He doesn’t look like a man facing the witness to his potential felony, only an adviser waiting for his student to explain herself.

And it would be a felony, Angie realized. A felony, and if you don’t count the terrified young man upstairs, she’s the only one who can say it ever happened. Of course Shaw isn’t afraid. He doesn’t have to be.

It ought to belong in some dramatic tragedy, like a plot twist from an angsty soap opera, but Angie is becoming dangerously incapable of putting anything past Shaw anymore.

"I took a look at your draft," he says, though Angie has no idea where he found the time -- either he would have read it in the hour between when she sent it and he emailed her, or in the hour between then and now, and he had to eat breakfast, drive into work, and of course, find the time somewhere in there to frighten Erik into silence. Bitterness creeps up the back of her throat alongside bile.

Shaw is silent then, letting the seconds tick past, drawing out like taffy between them. He’s waiting for her to speak. To accuse him? And she should, really, she should … say something, because no one else can, Erik clearly won’t, and what is the point of all those Safe Zone trainings, those posts she writes and quotes, if she won’t act when it really matters?

"It needs some polishing, of course," Shaw says after a minute spent letting her twist in the wind. "But the method is solid, and not even Erik could find much to quibble about with your statistics." He offers her a dry smile, an invitation to a shared joke; the smile she offers in return feels anemic. "I hope you realize that, if you had turned in anything less… acceptable than this," he taps the printout of her draft significantly, "I would be -- disappointed, Angela."

"Yes, sir." She can't say anything else other than that.

"Two extensions," Shaw says musingly. He stares at her with those pale eyes, from the height of his professorship, his MacArthur Grant, his Nobel nomination. "I'm glad you put them to good use, but you must understand that I am not in the habit of catering to procrastination, Angela. It's unprofessional and suggests an inability to manage your own time. These are problems I would expect with an undergraduate, or a first-year doctoral student, not one with lab experience and a year of work under her belt."

"My apologies, sir," Angie says. She tries to meet Shaw's regard, has the sense that failing to do so will only confirm the worst for him. "You have my guarantee that it won't happen again."

"It's for a significant grant, of course," Shaw smiles at her indulgently, "but you're too
advanced now for impostor syndrome and other such nonsense. The more you let
applications intimidate you, the more difficult they will be to do."

Angie nods. "I'll remember that, Dr. Shaw."

"Of course you will." The indulgent smile lengthens to something more knowing. "I
selected you for a reason, Angela, and that reason is, you show great promise as a
researcher and a scholar. So far you haven't given me cause to regret that decision -- see
to it, going forward, that you keep to practices that will ensure your continued success."

And there it is, then. Shaw’s words sink, heavy like stones, into Angie’s mind,
anchoring themselves deep in the sea of her thoughts. She can imagine Shaw saying
something very similar to Erik, knows how he reacted, and -- perhaps it’s habit, perhaps
she’s grown too used to copying everything Erik does, like following the footsteps of a
survivor through a live minefield. All her accusations are dead in her mouth, crumbling
unspoken.

She thinks about going next door to Dr. Patel, telling Dr. Patel everything she saw and
everything she knows. Imagines Dr. Patel’s disbelieving frown, Shaw’s rebuttal, long
hours of committee meetings followed, perhaps, by disciplinary action for slander and
the recommendation that she leave the program. Erik, cold and perfect, denying
everything.

Twenty-seven isn’t too old to start knowing yourself. Angie just wishes she wasn’t
realizing that, at her core, she's a coward.

“Thank you, sir,” she says at last, when it’s too late to say anything else.

Shaw waves a hand, a silent dismissal, though he waits until she is up and already at the
doors before he says, “Oh, and Angela….” She turns around, looking, her heart in her
throat and her breath frozen in her lungs. Shaw smiles, like he knows the effect he’s
having on her, his long fingers perched along his jaw and his gaze even. “Send Erik
down, will you?”

"Yes, Dr. Shaw." She scrabbles for anything to say, anything to suggest that he's reliant
on her for her silence. There's nothing. Nothing to say, nothing to do but leave, to send
Erik down to Shaw, who's waiting for him.

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Angie writes all this down in her notebook -- a different one now, but every bit as battered and
dogeared as its predecessors. Ben, who's been with her through thick and thin, knows better than to
touch it, or to look at it while she's writing in it. She can scribble in peace, the words chasing her
thoughts across the page, while Ben reads next to her.

"Do you ever think about what you'd do," she starts. She has her notebook propped on her knees,
close to her chest. Ben looks up from his tablet. "If you knew someone had done something seriously
wrong, but they had power over you -- what would you do?"

"Is this about the Stanford thing?" Probably the happiest day of Ben's life had been her graduation --
either that, or the day she'd accepted Google's offer to work for them instead of flogging herself on
the academic job market. It's definitely up there on the list for her, but for Ben, it had meant an
escape from the ghost of Shaw haunting their lives. "You've barely told me what it was about, just
that something happened with an old grad school colleague."
"And our advisor." Absently, she spins together a small sphere of light, turning it through her fingertips. Ben, bless him, doesn't flinch; he's human (and Angie wonders what Shaw would make of that), has never been anything but enthralled by her abilities. "What I haven't told you is what, exactly, happened. And," she blows out a breath, "what I knew about it."

She's told the Title IX investigator everything she knows, she's told the police and the detective who's been tasked with figuring out what happened at Shaw's leaving party. She's told, within the limits of what she's allowed to tell, her students. Telling Ben, who's known her for years, who's always had a very definite picture of Angela Ferrante, is something else again. It's a confession that she isn't quite who he thinks she is, and she hopes he can forgive her.

Ben’s sitting there, waiting, patient and oblivious with his hands grasping the edge of his tablet, still loving her -- at least for the next little while. It took Angie a long time, after Erik graduated, to stop hating herself. Sometimes she still does.

There’s something heavy hanging in her throat; she swallows against it, and makes herself go on. “I … you remember Erik Lehnsherr?”

Ben nods slowly. Of course, Angie thinks, how could he forget? They’ve met multiple times, and Angie’s certain she complained often enough about Shaw comparing the two of them. “The one that looked like a fashion model, right? Didn’t you kind of hate him?”

“‘I didn’t hate him,’” Angie corrects, so quickly she nearly stumbles over the words in her haste to get them out. “I mean, he was … he could be difficult, sometimes, but we were all stressed, and I --”

Does she really need to go into this? How flattering a picture will it paint, really, to explain to Ben how brilliant Erik had been, that she’d been jealous, that he got the NSF GRFP and then the NRSA and she didn’t, that she’d wanted so badly for him to like her and be her friend and then resented him for his indifference?

Angie shakes her head, chasing all that away -- that doesn’t matter, hasn’t mattered for years, and certainly not now. “Maybe a little, at first,” she concedes, tightening her hands in her lap. “But not after that summer before my second year. That’s when I ….” She sighs, and wishes she could vanish out of this moment and reappear sometime next week, with all this behind her. “I’m sorry, I’m not making sense.”

“You’re fine,” Ben says. He’s frowning, like he’s concerned -- Angie would be too, probably, in his place. She’s certainly not doing anything to set him at ease. “Keep going.”

"It was the summer of his comprehensive exams, I was just submitting my first NIH grant, and he came in one day all -- " she gestures at her face " -- just messed up. He said he’d fallen down a ravine or something when he was trail running, which was weird, but we didn't think anything of it. I didn't. Until one day our advisor, Dr. Shaw, came in…"

She stumbles through the story as best she can, torn between realizing how obvious it all seems in retrospect and how irresponsible she was for not doing something and how insane the entire story sounds, like the fevered imaginings of a jealous young woman out to ruin the reputations of two brilliant scholars. She can't bring herself to look directly at Ben to see which conclusion he's drawing; either one would be humiliating.

"So," she says at last, brushing a finger across her eye to rid herself of tears, "I shut up about it. I let Dr. Shaw dismiss me that day and I went up to our office and told Erik he wanted to see him. And I didn't say a word about it to anyone ever since, even after I graduated, and I knew the entire time what was happening was wrong. Not only because the handbook said so, it was ethically wrong.
"Criminal, what he was doing to Erik."

"And you couldn't prove any of it," Ben says softly.

"It doesn't matter," she half-shouts. The light-sphere vanishes, dissipating in a tiny flash. "I still should have done something. Otherwise, what the hell good am I?"

"You couldn't have done anything, it sounds like." Ben hitches himself up and a little closer; his sympathy is, somehow, worse than anger, as if she's failed at communicating her own essential shortcomings, or as if he's making excuses. "Do you think Erik would have backed you up if you'd made an accusation? He doesn't sound like the kind of guy who would."

“No,” Angie admits, “he wouldn’t have. He’d have thrown me under the bus before I could get a word in edgewise -- he would have protected Shaw. But that’s not an excuse. I knew it wasn’t an excuse at the time, too.”

“Maybe not, but it is a reason,” Ben says, painfully practical as always. “You can’t help someone who won’t help themselves. There’s a reason people stay in abusive relationships, Ang. It’s not that they don’t realize it’s wrong -- they’re afraid. And you were afraid. You can’t blame yourself for giving into that fear any more than you can blame Erik for it.”

Angie shrugs, and clings to her self-loathing with both hands, unwilling to let go just yet. It feels like -- she deserves this, she deserves to feel bad, because even if Ben’s right … that’s years and years she let it go on, and once she’d graduated, she …. She went to Shaw’s stupid parties, she knew Erik was still there, that Erik was living with him while he was at Berkeley, and once she had her postdoc she could have said something. Or, if not then, at Google. And she didn’t. Time had eroded her courage just as well as fear had.

“He’s pressing charges,” she says. Her voice sounds hollow to her own ears. “Dr. Shaw assaulted him at his leaving party and broke his collarbone. I saw it happen.” A beat. “Erik -- he says Dr. Shaw raped him.”

Ben wraps an arm around her. "Ang."

"It couldn't have happened only once," Angie says. The words feel muffled by the tightness in her throat, as if they shouldn't be spoken. "I could have talked to him, I could have made him see -- "

"You couldn't have made him do anything," Ben says quietly. "That's not making excuses, that's telling you the truth. He wouldn't have let you help him, and yeah, he might have known someone was there for him, but he would have just been humiliated. And angry."

He's right, of course, but it's still justification -- rationalizing away her inaction. She smiles shakily. "Can you please let me be angry with myself for a while?"

"Okay," Ben says with a sigh. "But only if you're angry at Shaw, too. He's the actual criminal here."

"Oh, believe me, I am." Sometimes she's wondered if Shaw agreed to write industry letters for her because it would be so much easier to get rid of her -- to have her not in the academy -- than to have her in the profession. Trying to run her out of the field when she'd done so well -- the GRFP notwithstanding, she'd raked in plenty of her own awards and recognitions -- would have been petty and obvious, and Shaw was very much interested in appearing to be neither of those things.

"I'm glad you've finally gotten a chance to talk about it," Ben ventures after a minute. "Is Erik okay now?"
"He is, I think," Angie says. "He's married to someone else in the field; I don't know him well, but he seems like a good guy. I didn't keep up with Erik much after I finished -- I didn't want to know. It was easier not knowing."

"I'm sorry, Ang." Ben kisses her cheek, which is hot and flushed and sticky with tears. "But thanks for telling me."

She leans in against him, and lets him comfort her, even though she still doesn’t think she deserves it -- and after a while, long after they’ve both gone to bed and Ben’s breathing is a slow susurration from the other pillow, she thinks … this is right. If nothing else, now, finally, she can make it right.

*  

The first news Eileen receives, other than a text message from Charles reassuring her that Erik is all right (for a given value of "all right") and thanking her profusely for her help, is a call from her own attorney: Shaw spent Sunday night in jail and got out on bail first thing Monday morning. It's late Monday afternoon and Eileen's spent most of the day itching to call Erik herself and ask how he is -- she likes Charles quite a bit, and is fairly certain she respects him, but she wants to hear it from Erik's mouth.

"I'm fine," Erik says when she finally gives in and calls him up. He must hear her silent disbelief because he adds, "I'm exhausted and my shoulder's killing me," and Eileen hears a muffled That's more like it that must come from Charles. She hopes some of that exhaustion is the sort left over after adrenaline and shock, that the worst of it will be gone in a couple of days; there's so much more left for him to do.

"If you won't take care of yourself," Eileen tells him, "see to it that you let Charles do it for you. I'm quite serious."

"Yes," Erik says, more quietly than he usually does. "Thank you."

She lets him go after that, hopefully to sleep. It leaves her with some time to spend contemplating her computer screen and the future, the past as well.

Her phone chimes, usually an unwelcome intrusion, but now she leans forward to pick it up and peer at the notification screen.

"Lin?" she asks when she picks up the phone, although it's clearly him; she'd been expecting the police, or Stephen the attorney, or Timothy, who'd promised to call and apparently hasn't worked up the courage -- or hasn't talked to the school's lawyers yet. "What time is it there?"

"It's not even eight in Boston," Lin says chidingly. "Three time zones, Eileen. I'm not in London anymore."

"Yes, yes," Eileen says grumpily. Then, sighing, "I suppose you've heard the news."

“Nasty business,” Lin agrees. She hears the tapping of a keyboard from his side of the line, just a few clicks and then silence again. “Is this something I need to be concerned about, Eileen, or is it just gossip? I figured if anyone would know, you would.”

Finally, Eileen thinks, something she can actually do to make a damn difference in all this. “It’s true,” she says firmly -- no equivocation, no room for any doubt to creep into Lin’s mind. “I saw Dr. Shaw break Dr. Lehnsherr’s collarbone myself. Furthermore, I heard him threatening Erik's life.”

And that isn’t the type of man you want on your faculty goes unspoken.
Lin makes a soft noise, part surprise and part disgust. "I see. That’s … very unfortunate. I’ve met Dr. Lehnsherr a few times -- Boston’s a small town, you know -- and he’s always struck me as the kind of person who wouldn’t put up with anyone’s bullshit."

Eileen raises an eyebrow at her blank computer screen. "He is, but as I’m sure you’re aware, that makes little difference. There’s evidence to suggest this sort of violence was happening even when Dr. Lehnsherr was still Dr. Shaw’s graduate student -- evidence besides Dr. Lehnsherr’s word."

"Really," Lin says heavily. "Are you able to speak to any of this?"

"At the moment? No." Eileen takes a moment to curse the law. Everything related to the Title IX investigation -- meaning everything she knows and suspects about Erik’s relationship with Sebastian at Stanford -- has to be kept to herself, spoken of only with Erik, the university investigators, and the policy committee (that is no doubt in a walter over how to handle a catastrophe it should have addressed years ago). "But I can tell you what I observed at APS, and of course you were there for Erik's speech -- and everything after that that will be, I'm sure, public record."

She hates leaving out the backstory, but left out it must be; she can't afford to damage whatever case Erik might have against Sebastian, and she's not going to give either Sebastian's lawyers or the school's any chance to sweep this under the rug. Lin can infer what he likes; he's already done plenty of that, she's sure, since Chicago.

"Dr. Lehnsherr's APS speech was … eye-opening," Lin admits. "I didn't know the history behind it; I think I have a better understanding now. But the assault… You saw that happen, and I can't dismiss that."

"You shouldn't," Eileen says as sternly as she can. "Lin, Sebastian Shaw would be working with graduate students there; he would have access to the communities at Harvard and MIT." To say nothing of having access to Erik. "I'm rather more worried about those young people than Harvard's reputation, hiring a man who's been accused of assault and who has a history of alleged, " she leans scornfully on the word, "violent, controlling behavior with young men. But if the medical school doesn't care about its students, perhaps it will care about having its name and its integrity called into question by the rest of the profession."

“I’ll certainly pass your concerns on to the hiring committee,” Lin says. “I … certainly have reservations, myself, but I’m not the only decision-maker in this.”

“Of course,” Eileen says, trying to sound understanding but certain she falls short -- she’s never been very good at playing along. “You’ll do what you can, I’m sure.”

“Well. It’s not for me to say, but personally … I would push to rescind Dr. Shaw's offer, given current events alone.”

_Good_, Eileen thinks forcefully, and bites the inside of her cheek to keep from saying it out loud. “I as well,” she says instead. “I hope the committee is meeting soon to address this?”

"I can't talk about that." Lin pauses. "And I can't guarantee the rest of the committee will share my views. I hope they will." He's always been cautious, Lin; Eileen has the sense that he's trying to keep her from being too optimistic.

Still, by the time she hangs up, she’s viciously, grimly sure of it -- Shaw will be receiving a very cool letter from Harvard in the near future. It means he’ll be knocking on Stanford’s door again, hoping to keep his place, but Eileen will make sure nothing comes of that. She’s been here long enough, has published well enough, that people have to listen to her, whether they like what she has to say or not.
It gives her some measure of satisfaction, knowing that Shaw’s future is contingent on her now --
thinking about what Shaw must think of that, of his reputation in the hands of a baseline female, and
of his former graduate student.

* 

The one thing they never warn you about, Eileen thinks wryly as she surveys her
cluttered desk, is the committee work. The pile she has for tenure and promotion has
spilled over into the pile she keeps for graduate committee, and that in turn has begun to
take over the piles of applications for Stanford's internal postdoctoral competitions. All
of that already, and the term feels as if it's barely started.

She sets about straightening things as best she can, although it'll be for nothing soon
enough. At least today is the day she's set aside for her own work -- even if it's
increasingly relegated to playing catch up -- but she'll need to find that pile of articles
first.

In the midst of her search, she hears it, a low, choked grunt, like someone trying and
failing to clear their throat. She looks up from a stack of old tenure folders, arrested by
the quality of the sound -- low, broken, animal, so far outside the murmur of voices she
hears on a daily basis. Her first impulse is to wonder about the pipes or the ventilation,
but no, she can hear the distress behind it, something being pushed to its breaking point
before it cuts off in an abrupt silence.

She sits there, perfectly still, straining her ears to hear more -- but nothing comes. Just
that same sound, reverberating around in Eileen’s skull, replaying itself over and over
like …. All the analogies Eileen can come up with are grotesque and inappropriate.
Perhaps, she thinks -- perhaps she ought to go next door and see if Sebastian is all right,
imagine the horror if she found out tomorrow morning he’d choked to death on
something in his office and she’d sat here doing nothing -- if he’d had a heart attack,
perhaps, he is well over forty now….

As much as Eileen dislikes the man, she doesn’t want him dead. She frowns down at the
paperwork on her desk, rolling her pen beneath her fingers and imagining, just as
floridly, barging in there only to have Sebastian meet her gaze with a disapproving
frown, nothing at all the matter.

Then, as if to reassure her -- horribly, sickeningly, she hear's Sebastian, faint through the
walls but unmistakable: "Slowly, now. You know I don't like it when you hurry,"
followed by a thick moan that is entirely pleasure.

She freezes and stays frozen until she hears the creak of Sebastian’s door opening, then
footsteps in the hall. Her attention snaps up from her desk, catching on a figure as it
walks past her doorway with the quick strides and ducked head of a guilty man.

“Erik,” she says, loudly enough to be heard, half-out of her chair already, palms braced
against the surface of her desk.

Erik's head jerks up. He's been -- there's no other word for it, crying; the skin under his
eyes is puffy and flushed, his cheeks look feverish, a confirmation of what she'd heard.
She hoists herself to her feet, cursing her body's slowness, and grateful that, at least, her
mind makes up for it.

She says his name again, and when she's certain she has his attention, says, "Erik, do
come in. I have some questions for you about an imaging study I'd like to do, and I think you could be of some help. Do you have a minute?"

Of course he does; when a professor asks if you have time, you make it. Still, Eileen shepherds him inside and watches narrowly until he sits down at her desk. He doesn't look as polished as he usually does, his trousers rumpled and his shirt limp, as if it's absorbed sweat enough to counteract the crispness of starch and dry cleaning. Wordlessly, she hands Erik her box of tissues and he accepts it just as wordlessly, staring down at it cradled in his hands.

Eileen settles herself behind her desk, acutely worried now; Erik has never been talkative, or anything close to it, but this silence isn't his usual taciturnity. It's the silence of someone drawn in on himself, hoping not to be seen.

Too late for that, Eileen thinks. She probes carefully, asking after Erik's health and finding out -- to her utter lack of surprise -- it's a cold that accounts for his watery, tired eyes, even if it can't account for what she heard. Were this anyone else, she would gently accuse them of lying; were Erik's advisor someone other than Sebastian, she would have suggested they talk to iron out the problem. Neither of these things are true, though: Erik is Erik, and Sebastian is... well, Eileen wouldn't wish him on her worst enemy, for all his students seem to flourish under his charge. There's what the students see, after all, and then there's what the faculty sees, and Eileen suspects that she's seeing something no one else has seen before.

With an apologetic smile, she pretends to look for the papers related to her imaginary imaging study. Erik examines her desk with a detached sort of interest; her office must be a foreign country, after the immaculate space of Sebastian's, with its minimalist desk and ergonomic everything and the Rothko painting on the wall.

"Are you sure you're all right?" she asks as she finds what she needs.

"A cold," Erik says again, stiffly.

"Then," she hands him not the study protocols but the package of information she keeps for graduate students: mental health and counseling services, how to report sexual or physical abuse, who to talk to for Title IX and sexual harassment complaints, "I shouldn't trouble you with my study today. Perhaps when you're feeling better -- but you must know, you're welcome to come and talk to me at any time."

Erik nods. When he pushes himself up to his feet, clutching the strap of his satchel in one hand and the printouts in the other, she looks at the tension in his spine and the flush in his cheeks, the uncharacteristic tousle to his hair, and wishes -- well. If Erik won’t speak to her, then there’s nothing she can do.

“Look at those papers,” Eileen tells him before he can escape out her door. She holds his gaze, hoping that will drive her words in somehow, engrave them on Erik’s soul. “Only when you can. Understand?”

“Right,” Erik says, and darts out into the hall before she can try to keep him here.

Of course. She could have predicted Erik would do this -- would back out, would run -- but it doesn't make the reality any less frustrating.

You need to keep your nose out of it, Patel, she thinks. All her life she's been too curious
and hasn't known her place. It's not her place to question another student on his relationship with his advisor -- university rules or not, they're both adults, and both consenting. When academics concern themselves with impropriety, Eileen thinks with a snort, it's mostly for purposes of gossip.

But is it consensual? That's the question Eileen kept circling back to, like a vulture over dying prey. She's well aware that some people enjoy pushing the boundaries of things which might seem over the line for most, who like pain as much as pleasure, but … she just can't get it out of her head, either, that sound she'd heard Erik make through the thin wall that separated them. That hadn't been pleasure, not even pleasure mixed with pain. If she had to describe it, she might have said it was … desperate. A little afraid.

And then there's the matter of the way Erik had looked in her office, lashes wet with tears and eyes red-rimmed, the way he'd curled in on himself like a wilted flower.

That's an awful lot of speculation, she chides herself inwardly, but still. It bothers her, like an itch she can't reach to scratch.

She frowns at her computer screen, even as she strained her ears to hear if Sebastian was still in his office adjacent -- she couldn't hear typing, but then again, she might not. What would he do if she confronted him? If she pretended she knew the answer to all of these questions already.

...But no. To do that would be to betray Erik's trust, what little of it she felt she'd earned these past years. Erik has the printouts. He knows she's here. The most she can do is hope that he'd internalize that knowledge, and perhaps take advantage of it one day, if he needed to.

Even so, Eileen finds herself pushing back up to her feet a moment later, making her way around the end of her desk and out of her office, taking the three steps down the hall to rap on the frame of Sebastian's door.

"Come in," Sebastian says in his usual languid tone. She wonders if it's more languid than usual and represses a shudder at the reasons why that might be so.

"Sebastian," she replies, stepping in. "How are you?"

"Quite well, as you can see," he says. "And yourself?"

The smile he wears always seems too wide, manufactured, as polished as his outfits or the sleek, immaculate office he keeps. She's never cared for him, for all his brilliance; Sebastian has never been one to be humble about his accomplishments. Eileen herself has never been particularly humble either, but there's a difference, she thinks, between not apologizing for your intelligence and flaunting it as one would an expensive watch, or car -- or handsome younger boyfriend.

"I'm well," she says as she eases more fully into Sebastian's office. His lip curls in annoyance, but he says nothing. "I won't take up much of your time; I only need to know that you'll have recommendations and statements of support for our prospective graduate students by the committee deadline."

Sebastian laughs, pushing slightly away from his desk. Eileen, without seeming to look, tries to take it all in. No sign of what she suspects, but then, why would there be? "I hope I'm not misunderstanding the calendar, but the committee meets next week for
decisions."

"And I have, in my years as graduate chair, seen how often professors forget these things."

"Fair, fair," Sebastian says easily. Those pale eyes of his still watch her, though, a hawk tracking a mouse. "I promise, Dr. Patel, I'll have my materials to in advance of your meeting. Is there anything else?"

“Yes,” Eileen says before she can think better of it. After all -- if she’s wrong in her suspicions about Erik and Sebastian, then there’s still the matter of Erik’s affect and behavior of late, which have been concerning all in themselves. “I just saw your student, Erik.” She watches Sebastian’s expression carefully after she says Erik’s name, but there’s nothing damning there -- just the faint lift of Sebastian’s brows, inquiring.

“What about him?”

“I’ve noticed he seems … distracted, lately,” Eileen says, as carefully as she knows how. She holds Sebastian’s gaze, though she knows he’s trying to outlast her, to make her be the first to look away. “I’m concerned that he might be depressed. His mother did die fairly recently, after all. It would be a shame if he were to leave our program without us first doing everything in our power to support him here.”

Sebastian leans back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest. “Hmm,” he says, and for several seconds doesn’t say anything else -- long enough that Eileen starts to wonder if he knows what she’s really asking, if he’s already planning how to undermine her credibility. But then he says, “Perhaps. He has been distractible as of late -- but depressed?” A small, dry laugh. “I doubt that. Graduate school is stressful, Dr. Patel, as I’m sure you recall. We can’t be accused of coddling our graduate students. After all, the tenure track will hardly be so gentle on them when they leave our hands.”

"True," Eileen agrees. At this point in her career, she likes to think she's mastered the art of internally rolling her eyes. Sebastian's affect in meetings and nominally casual conversations provokes this response frequently. "On the other hand, it would also be beneficial for our retention numbers --and our placement numbers -- to have students not drop out before they win their first assistant professorship."

That gets her a sardonic curl of the lip. "I'm sure the administration wants to keep those numbers up," Sebastian says. "On the other hand, we won't have students succeeding in the real world if they need their hands held every step of the way. Your maternal instincts are commendable, of course, but Erik does need to learn to stand on his own."

"Your attempts to reduce my role as graduate chair to that of an overly concerned mother are less than commendable, of course," Eileen says mildly. "I don't think, Sebastian, that I need to remind you of the dangers of the ad feminam argument? Or, for that matter, the reductio ad absurdum? Making sure your student can perform the work expected of him is hardly the same as nursemiaiding him every step of the way."

This, at least, garners more of a reaction from Sebastian -- a contemptuous smile and slightly-narrowed eyes, though Sebastian of course can’t do any more than that. After a second that expression eases, though, smoothing out into cool and distant politeness, as if Sebastian had never intended it to show so obviously in the first place.

“Of course,” he said silkily, his voice like polished bronze. “My apologies, Dr. Patel. I
was raised to believe such a thing was a compliment, you understand. I regret that you took such offense to it.”

Eileen considers calling him on this, too -- Sebastian’s lived outside South Carolina long enough to have learned better, for one, and his apology is no apology at all. But it would be asking for trouble, and if Eileen is right about him and Erik, pushing her luck with him may end up having unintended consequences for Erik.

“Was there anything else?” Sebastian says when Eileen doesn’t speak again. “If not, I’m afraid I must get back to work. It’s nearly three, after all…”

“No,” Eileen says, and takes her leave, though even once she’s back in her office her mind is still a crucible of simmering frustration and confusion. She resolves to keep an eye on the matter -- and, if necessary, to bring Erik into her office again.

*

Of course, Erik had never returned to her office other than to discuss his progress to his degree and a few other matters here and there. She had kept an eye on him as best she could, but Erik had remained as inscrutable as ever, as focused, driven, dedicated, as if the shaken young man who'd stepped into her office that day had been a figment of Eileen’s imagination. If anything, he'd become more of what he was, even more precise and exacting, pulling in more awards and accolades -- the jewel of the department, Eileen thinks now, sourly, Shaw's crowning achievement.

She'd held that crowning achievement as he'd stood, swaying, in front of his old colleagues and professors, as he'd made them see what they -- and she -- had refused to see for all those years. At the time, she'd thought he would break under his own pain and the weight of all those eyes watching him, but now, she thinks, maybe it kept him together long enough to do what he had to do.

*

Erik stares out the window at the ocean in the distance, breathing in the heavy scent of salt and petrichor from the earlier rain. The city is a background humming of metal, far away; he's not so distracted that he doesn't know Charles had dragged him out here for a few days of peace and quiet before returning to Boston.

"Erik," Moira's voice says over the speakerphone, "Our leave policy covers circumstances like this. You can take sabbatical -- you've got it coming. We can get coverage for your classes."

"I'm not wasting sabbatical time on this," Erik growls. From across the room, Charles gives him a look; Erik rolls his eyes and strives, mostly successfully, to moderate his tone. "Thank you, Moira, but I'm not going to sit at home fretting when I could be productive. And I'm certainly not going to sit at home and let my lab descend into chaos."

Moira makes an exasperated noise, like a sharp puff of exhaled breath that transforms into static across the radio waves. “I should have known you’d be stubborn,” she says, and Erik gives the phone a bared-teeth grin, more grimace than smile, and says, “I’ll see you Monday, Moira,” and hangs up the phone with a sharp tap of electricity against the screen.

“Come here,” Charles says softly, holding out his hand, and Erik obediently goes.

Charles’ palm is warm when it smooths up the bare underside of Erik’s wrist, along the vein-webbed curve of his forearm -- the uninjured one.

“You aren’t going to tell me to take time off, are you?” Erik says.
Charles shakes his head. “Of course not. It’s your decision, Erik -- if you think going back to work is the best thing for you, then that’s what you should do.” His fingers trace small circles on Erik’s skin, and Erik leans down and kisses him. Charles’ hand tightens, minutely, on Erik’s elbow.

The shiver is almost instant, that barest bit of pressure electric. It's still strange, if Erik allows himself to think about it, that Charles's hand on him in such a vulnerable spot can call up only pleasure now, not fear or resentment or pain. After a moment, Charles lets him go, with one last stroke down the back of Erik's arm, trace of index finger across the heel of his palm, the delicate cup of it, Erik's own fingers.

When Erik can focus on Charles again, Charles is looking up at him with that quietly, fiercely happy expression Erik no longer resents, the one that's becoming, increasingly, reserved only for him.

"What?" he mock-growls, shifting back a little, though not far.

"Nothing," Charles says, grinning. He leans up for a kiss of his own. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." He is, or mostly. His collarbone still aches, and he hates the damn sling and brace they've strapped him into; the bruises are strange anomalies, familiar and unwanted friends who have returned after long away. The investigations -- Title IX and the assault -- will happen, obstacles Erik's identified and that he'll overcome one way or another. Charles is here, which is, all unexpectedly, the most important thing. "Ready to go home."

“Tomorrow,” Charles promises. Erik’s power coils around Charles’ wedding ring, his own, tracing the silver and warming it slightly against their skin. Charles is beautiful with the sunlight gilding his hair from behind him, rays cast through the open window, his soft blue eyes. If Erik weren’t injured he’d draw Charles back toward the hotel bed, happy to let the hours slip past as they wrapped themselves up in each other. At least this, Erik thinks, is the last time Shaw will steal anything from him.

* 

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