Summary

"Did I hear the doorbell earlier?"

"Yeah, but I'd steer clear if I were you. It seemed a little tense. I don't know what's going on, but there's a kid out there who looks freakily like the prof."

Nearly six months after Cuba, Charles' life is turned upside down for the second time. Though he's slowly learning to adapt to the first, he's not sure he can handle the second. Luckily for him, there are a few people out there more than willing to help.
Sean was caught off guard by two things when he opened the large oak door in the grand foyer: 1) the stern looking woman with pointy glasses on the other side and 2) the little boy with bright blue eyes clutching onto her thin fingers.

Ignoring a distant crash that echoed down the hall, he cleared his throat and leaned lazily on the doorframe. "Can I help you?"

The woman spared a glance for the child barely reaching mid-thigh in height before focusing back on the teen in front of her. "I'm looking for Charles Xavier."

Sean quirked an eyebrow, but turned and began to yell for his mentor anyway. "Profess - !"

"That won't be necessary, Sean," Charles interrupted as he wheeled into the foyer, his eyes immediately focusing on the little boy hiding behind the woman's legs.

Sean noted that the Professor seemed to pale a few shades as he eyed the boy for a moment, before focusing on the woman with the clipboard. Weird.

"Sean, I'm afraid I've made a bit of a mess in the kitchen. Would you mind cleaning it up for me?" Charles' voice was quieter than usual, lacking the jovial flair he usually put on for new people.

"Sure thing, Prof," he said, throwing a final look back at the woman watching him as he went.

Knowing it would be fruitless to eavesdrop around the corner (an idea that had come to bite him in the ass time and again), Sean continued on his way to the kitchen where he found shattered porcelain and white milk marring the cold stone floor.

"I'm Charles Xavier," he said good-naturedly, though those that knew him better would have heard the slight tremor in his voice.

"I -" The woman's gaze flicked from Charles, to her clipboard, and finally to the child whose hand she held. "There must be some mistake," she said, her careful avoidance of his wheelchair just as obvious as if she had stared outright.

"I assure you, you have the right one," he answered in a clipped tone. Charles could feel waves of fear rolling off the little boy who cautiously began to peek out from behind the woman's legs, curiously eyeing the new man in the shiny chair. He couldn't have been more than two and Charles offered him a smile, which drew the boy out further.

He knew what this woman was here to tell him before she had even raised her hand to ring the bell, though truth be told, he was having trouble wrapping his not inconsiderable mind around the thought. "He's mine?"

The woman's eyebrows hit her hairline and she fumbled at his unexpected, but factual comment. "Um, yes. Yes, he is. His mother was - "

\textit{Julia Barnard.}

"Julia Barnard. He was born – "

\textit{Prologues}
March 12, 1961

"March 12, 1961."

Just under two years old.

The boy, whose eyes were so much like his own, let go of the woman's hand and toddled over, ever so precariously, before latching onto the side of the chair.

"Hello, Daniel," Charles whispered.

The woman's jaw dropped and she mentally went through their conversation, trying to remember if she had ever mentioned the little boy's name, but Charles ignored her.

"How did she pass?"

"Car accident. In December. We tried to find you sooner..."

"I was recovering," he murmured, eyes fixed on the boy.

"I see," the woman replied, and Charles finally felt her gaze settle on the chair. "He has no grandparents."

Charles remembered that. A conversation in a quiet field, a bottle of champagne resting between them. A summer celebration before the chaos of their final year began. The boy would have been conceived sometime around there. Charles closed his eyes and remembered how that night had ended - in discarded clothes, itchy grass, and hitched breaths.

He glanced up, realizing the woman had said something and was patiently waiting for his response. It wasn't like Charles to get so distracted.

"Sorry?"

"You're all he has left," the woman repeated. "If you don't want him, he will be placed in care of the state."

"I want him," Charles blurted out, more forcefully than he intended. The little boy jumped at his words and stared wide-eyed into the face of the man whose features he had inherited.

Charles placed a hand delicately on his head, brushing his wavy brown hair off of his forehead.

"I want him."

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"What the hell happened in here?" Alex blurted, bypassing a wayward handle that had snapped off its pitcher as Sean scrubbed the floor.

"I think the Professor dropped the milk."

"That's not like him." Alex frowned as he continued over to the refrigerator and pulled out a soda. Sean glared. "A little help?"

"You look like you've got it covered." Alex smirked before stepping over the redhead. "Did I hear the doorbell earlier?"
"Yeah, but I'd steer clear if I were you." At Alex's questioning glance, he elaborated. "It seemed a little tense. I don't know what's going on, but there's a kid out there who looks freakily like the prof."

Charles waited in the foyer while the woman, a Ms. Olivia Friedman, went back to the car for Daniel's effects. The little boy seemed utterly fascinated with the way the light reflected off Charles' chair and he traced his finger over the shiny metal.

Metal.

Charles closed his eyes, avoiding the temptation of allowing his mind to drift into dangerous waters, and focused his concern on the boy and the very real possibility that he could pinch his tiny fingers in the wheel.

"This is it," Ms. Friedman said, holding up a tiny suitcase and a stuffed rabbit. "Shall we move somewhere else to go over the paperwork?"

A little dazed, Charles nodded and led the way to the study.

Less than an hour later, with a signature and a handshake, he was a father.
In which Charles realizes that being a telepath does not make changing diapers any easier.

"Wait. What?"
"Holy shit."
"Remarkable."

... were the three responses Charles received when he could no longer stand the worried thoughts and downright outlandish possibilities the boys were projecting from outside the study door. He beckoned them in with a resigned, We might as well get this over with, and all three managed to make it two steps into the study before stopping dead and nearly toppling over each other.

"Who's that?" Sean asked, pointing at the little boy perched in Charles' lap, though Charles could sense that Sean had a sneaking suspicion already.

He braced himself for the mental onslaught of emotion as he replied, "My son."

Hence the:
"Wait. What?"
"Holy shit."
"Remarkable."

Charles couldn't help but smile as he kept a watchful eye on the little boy currently squirming in his lap.

"How?" The word was out of Alex's mouth before he could bite it back.

Charles arched an eyebrow. "Really, Alex? Of my three boys, now four, I was pretty sure you were the last one to need the birds and bees talk."

Alex flushed as Sean guffawed, but Charles could still sense the throb of warmth, happiness, and dare he say, love, as the phrase "my three boys" echoed in the minds of the young men in front of him.

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Sean sat back and watched as the Professor took all of the questions they threw at him in stride.

"Have you ever taken care of a baby before?"

"No. Not really."
"How old is he?" Hank asked from where he sat on the ground. The little boy eyed him with all the awe and excitement that only a giant stuffed animal can cause.

"Almost two."

Sean crossed his arms and leaned against the paneled oak, wondering briefly how this would affect their newfound family dynamic. As Alex and Hank fired more questions: "Who was his mother?"
"A friend from Oxford," the ginger-haired boy attempted to find a way to join the conversation, but he had a nagging suspicion that the innocent-looking baby reaching out for Hank's fur was about to change all of their lives. Not just his newly appointed father's.

He finally met Charles' eyes and was disconcerted to find the professor staring at him. Though he hadn't felt the familiar and comforting presence of his mentor in his mind, the look on Charles' face told him he knew exactly what Sean was thinking without needing to put finger to temple.

"Something on your mind, Sean?"

Shit.

Sean frantically struggled for a question that hadn't been asked yet and finally settled on, "Well, does he do anything?"

The professor gave a soft glare and Sean sheepishly shrugged. Wrong choice.

"What's his name?" he tried again, a little more thoughtfully. Charles' face seemed to soften as he glanced down at the boy.

"Daniel. Daniel Xavier."

As the boys finally left their professor to bond with his new son, Hank wondered if they had only just served to destroy what little confidence the man had in raising this child. None of them, the Professor included, had absolutely any idea what they were doing where a two-year-old was concerned. The once-lanky teen ran a hand through his blue fur and attempted to ignore the ramblings of the two next to him.

"Can you believe it?"

"I didn't know he had it in him."

Hank rolled his eyes and shook his head, wondering if there were any books on childrearing he could find in the library. But from what little he had heard of Charles' past, he knew his chances were slim.

He suddenly and fervently wished Raven were here. Mystique. The name still tasted foreign on his tongue. But she would know what to do, know how to help Charles.

Inevitably, his thoughts drifted from Raven to Erik, the prodigal son and daughter of their little family that had yet to find their way home. Hank refused to call Erik anything other than his birth name and he wondered what the metal-bender would make of this whole situation.

Charles put up a good front, but Hank saw through his jovial façade. His voice modulated with thoughts of students and renovations and training. But in those rare moments when Charles' smile slipped and his voice cracked, Hank felt his frustration and heard his anger. It was in the brush of betrayal on the edge of his psyche and in the crash of a book as Charles hurled it across the room.
When Charles left the study for dinner, calm and collected once more, Hank crept in and picked up the book, the name slipping out in a whispered rush… Of course, Erik's favorite.

Though they'd never admit it, the occasional break in composure frightened Alex and Sean. But who was Hank to tell Charles he couldn't throw a book?

After all, Erik, who probably knew more than anyone about the devastation a bullet could cause, still wasn't aware the extent to which his had.

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Alex considered himself pretty decent when it came to handling babies. He had a baby brother after all, but he still found it odd to all of a sudden find his role as student reversed as he taught his professor how to properly change a diaper.

Daniel's suitcase had all the basic necessities, but only enough for a day or two. Sean had been dispatched to the store to stock up as Alex and Charles each armed themselves with a diaper and an object to put it on: Alex had Daniel, Charles had a football.

The teen tried not to chuckle as the Professor shot him a withering look. Everyone had to start somewhere.

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Charles leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his unfeeling knees, as Daniel played with some plastic blocks Hank had found in the lab. Who was he kidding? He had no idea how to raise a child. Raising Raven was one thing – she was 8 when she came to him.

Raven.

The name caused a pain somewhere deep in his chest that reverberated out until it reached that which he could no longer feel.

Daniel crawled over and placed his hands on Charles' shoes, tugging himself up into a standing position and staring at him with eyes so much like his own.

"Well, hello there."

It was an odd thing, looking at a miniature version of himself. Though Charles could pick out the features his son had not inherited from him, the resemblance was still striking. Daniel had his mother's nose and ears, but his father's everything else. And as the boy scrunched up his face in an effort to climb the wheelchair, Charles chuckled. Somewhere in a box in the attic was a picture of him at three years old making the exact same face.

As Daniel placed one wobbly hand on the armrest, his grip slipped and he fell back on his bum. A shocked look graced his features briefly before he let out a wail. Charles quickly reached forward and scooped his son up, cradling him against his chest.

"It's okay," he murmured over and over. "You're okay." The boy's cries quieted and Charles placed his first kiss against his son's temple. "Frustrating, isn't it? Not being able to do what you want."

His mind went to the struggle he had that very morning just trying to get out of bed and he sighed.

"I know the feeling."
And boy, did he.

The first week was rough: Sean ended up returning with three different kinds of diapers and fifty different kinds of baby food. Alex hammered together a crib as Charles tried all sorts of tricks to calm the child without resorting to telepathy. Daniel was with strange people in a strange place, and it seemed that the longer he stayed, the more he realized he wasn't going back to Ms. Friedman and her pointy glasses.

"I think it's all set," Alex declared, as he stepped back and admired his handiwork. Charles rolled forward and reached out to place Daniel in it, but Hank's firm hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"Let's test it first."

And when Sean dropped a bookend in the middle of the mattress and the whole thing collapsed on itself, Charles was very glad they did.

"Professor?"

Charles glanced up as Alex stood in the doorway.

"Are you all right?"

The Professor had been sitting at his desk, head in his hands, elbows resting on the worn wood.

"Fine, Alex. What can I do for you?"

"I just… You looked tired. And I wanted to make sure you were okay."

Alex had never been shy around Charles before – he'd never really been shy ever – but as he stood there and watched the man who had come to mean more to him than any other, he felt suddenly hesitant.

"Daniel's been here for five days and I'm pretty sure he's been awake for four of them." Charles gave him a soft grin and rubbed his eyes. "To be perfectly honest, I'm not sure exactly what I've gotten myself into."

Alex edged further into the room and plopped down in the seat across from Charles' desk, picking up a paperweight and tossing it back and forth.

"You're doing fine. You're going to be a great dad."

Charles scoffed.

"I'm serious." Alex's tone caused Charles to look up sharply. "You've already become a father to us, you know? Hank had no family, I was in jail. You took us in, fed us, clothed us, disciplined us, listened to us. That's what being a father is all about… right?"

Alex had been rambling and it wasn't until he chanced a glance up that he realized Charles was looking at him in a way that made Alex's ears burn. Because never had anyone looked at him with such pride before.

"Thank you, Alex. That means a lot."
Alex nodded and stood, placing the paperweight back on the desk.

"And let's face it, Sean's like a toddler anyway, so look at that as extra practice."

Charles awoke not entirely sure of his surroundings – always an auspicious start – and sat up to realize he was on the green leather couch in his study, a place he most certainly had not been when he had nodded off.

Furthermore, Daniel was missing. Charles definitely remembered the boy tearing the pages out of a coloring book on the floor when his eyelids gave up their struggle to stay open. He maneuvered himself into his chair and wheeled into the hall, following the distant voices into the rec room. But what he saw when he got there froze him in the doorway.

Sean was holding a fussy Daniel, rocking him back and forth as the toddler clutched tightly onto a chunk of Hank's fur.

"Maybe he needs to be changed?"

"I just changed him!" Sean moaned, bouncing the baby up and down.

"Shh, the Professor's finally asleep," Hank chastised. "Is he hungry? Maybe a nap?"

Daniel had quieted, but as soon as Hank stopped speaking, he started whimpering again.

"Do that again," Sean whispered.

"Do what again?"

"That! Talk. Keep talking."

"Talk?"

Sean gestured with his head to the calm baby and, with a heavy sigh, Hank lifted his textbook and began to read.

"Spin-polarized density functional theory energies, harmonic vibrational frequencies, and moments of inertia are used to construct modified Arrhenius rate expressions for elementary steps in chain-propagation and chain-branching pathways for dimethyl ether combustion."

Charles bit back a laugh as Sean stared at Hank blankly.

"Dude. English, please. Didn't you ever learn Goodnight Moon?"

Charles was tired – so very, very tired. And that didn't bode well for anyone in his vicinity because the more sleep deprived he became, the more sluggish his control over his power was. Only yesterday he learned he had accidentally projected his dream of losing Daniel into Hank's mind.

Hank was kind enough to not ask Charles about it, but Charles could still feel the sense of relief Hank felt when he laid eyes on a perfectly healthy, not-lost Daniel at the breakfast table the following morning.

Charles sighed and lowered the crib gate for what seemed like the millionth time that week, reaching
his arms out just in time to catch Daniel as he leapt into them. Toddlers were supposed to sleep through the night, right? It wasn't like Daniel was a newborn.

Charles rubbed his hand absentmindedly up and down the fleece pajamas his son wore, placing gentle kisses on his damp hair.

"It's okay," he murmured. "I've got you. I won't let anything happen to you." He maneuvered the chair out of the nursery and back into his bedroom, ignoring the hands on the clock that broadcasted just how early it was. He placed Daniel on the bed, before pulling himself onto the comforter.

It took a concerted effort to get himself places now; even places as mundane, but as necessary as the shower or the kitchen. So not only was he relearning the basics for himself, but he was also expected to teach his son the same.

How could he do that when he couldn't even run to his child's aide should he need him?

Daniel placed his head on Charles' chest, his wet eyelashes brushing his cheek as he stared at the unfinished chess game standing on the other side of the room. Charles followed his gaze and inhaled sharply.

He never reached out to Erik at night, when the helmet was off and his defenses were down. He had made that mistake once and was roughly and thoroughly rebuked.

But as he lay there with his child's tears soaking his shirt and the occasional hiccups muffled against his chest, he heard it – as clear as if the man himself was sitting across the chessboard.

*For God's sake, Charles. Calm your mind. I haven't slept in ages.*
Chapter Summary

In which Hank takes matters into his own paws...

Erik? A hint of astonishment in his voice.

Yes, Charles. Who else would it be? A slight smile. God how he had missed that man, but a sudden spike of fear across the connection had Erik's voice floating over in a burst of reassurance. You weren't projecting your thoughts. Just your presence. Relax.

And relax Charles did.

Why Charles would have to fear him was beyond the metal-bender, then again (he noted with sickening clarity), he did put a bullet in his back.

They had stayed in the area just long enough to confirm that the wound was not fatal, before he and Raven grabbed hold of the teleporter once more and put the past behind them.

Erik tossed on the bed, straining to feel something, anything, from the man hundreds of miles away from him. But still nothing came. And why should it, when the last time Charles had reached out, Erik had made it perfectly clear that in no uncertain terms was Charles to contact him. The fear persisted in the telepath's mind and worry settled in Erik's gut.

Are you ill?

No. Perfectly fine. Why do you ask?

Because only when you're ill do you let your powers run away from you. A vague memory of a cold, tissues, and a melodramatic telepath.

Not ill. Just tired. There was truth in that. Even Charles' mental voice sounded exhausted.

And what has you so tired? A touch of curiosity.

Goodnight, Erik. Rejection.

The presence withdrew and Erik was left with silence.

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"He should be talking by now," Charles muttered as he flipped through the parenting book he had picked up in town.

"Maybe he's shy?" Sean suggested.

"Maybe the sight of your face shocked him into silence," Alex laughed.

"Boys," came the gentle admonishment.
"Well, it's gotta be hard, right?" Alex reasoned. "I mean, the kid was dumped in a place he doesn't know with people he's never met. I'm sure he'll come around."

"Magneto wasn't the most talkative person when he showed up either."

At the offhand comment, Sean received an elbow in the ribs from Alex.

"Don't call him that." Charles's voice lost its amusement and a stony countenance replaced his prior grin. "Not in this house."

xxxxx

There were things that Raven liked and things that Raven did not like.

She liked nice hotels and hot showers and buttered lobster, a recent discovery in their current city of Portland, Maine. She did not like beaches, blue eyes, or being caught completely off-guard. The latter of which hadn't happened since Magneto started working with her on her reflexes. Erik. *Magneto*. Raven shook her head and walked down the hotel's nicely lit hallway, whistling a low tune as she checked her blonde hair in a passing mirror. But as she opened the door to the room paid for with stolen money, her reflexes deserted her as the key in her hand fell swiftly to the floor.

"What are you doing?"

Erik didn't respond as he continued to stare out the window at the docks below and Raven's gaze landed on his helmet sitting on the nightstand. It was the first time it had been off his head during daylight hours in months.

"Erik - "

"Leave it alone," he growled.

She rolled her eyes and changed back into her blue form. She was used to his mood swings by now, but what gnawed at her mind was the fact that he wore his helmet for one reason and one reason only: to keep his thoughts to himself. Raven knew of only two telepaths in the world, but Emma couldn't be bothered and Charles... Well. Charles was a whole different story.

"Did something happen?"

"Why would you think that?" he responded wryly as he turned, though his stance remained taut with tension.

It was her turn to arch an eyebrow and say nothing.

"I just..." he shook his head, looking a bit lost, and Raven again felt that unfamiliar feeling of being slightly off-balance. Magneto never looked lost. But then again, this was the first time she seemed to be staring into *Erik's* eyes, instead of the world's most wanted mutant terrorist.

"I just need to be sure," he finished.

"Of what?" she asked, picking up the discarded headgear and feeling its weight.

"That Charles is okay."

The helmet fell to the floor.

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Charles eased himself down to the floor from his chair to watch over Daniel as he splashed in the bathtub. Alex had come running into the study not ten minutes earlier with a white-covered baby in his arms.

"Professor! Danny got into the flour again!"

"How many times have I told you to keep the flour out of his reach?"

"It was!"

Charles shook his head as Daniel held up a sponge and watched it drop back into the water with wide-eyed fascination.

"Troublemaker," he chuckled, and then more quietly, "How alike you two are."

He thought of the voice which had been echoing in his head since before dawn. Reinforcing his mental shields against Erik took an energy he wasn't sure he could afford and caused a pain he didn't think he could bear.

He missed him. Utterly and completely.

Charles ran his fingers over the terrycloth bathmat that his bare feet couldn't feel. Rarely did he let his thoughts drift to Erik - to the friend he loved and lost. He could still feel him on the periphery of his mind; the helmet had not been replaced. Interesting.

And as tempting as that complicated man was, Charles had other things to attend to. Like the child currently getting more water out of the bathtub than in.

"Sweetheart, no no no..." And just as Charles began to admonish Daniel, he got a faceful of soapy water. Grinning, he wiped the suds from his eyes. "Was that really unnecessary?"

He received a gap-toothed grin in return.

xxxxxx

Hank McCoy was a man on a mission.

Ever since Cuba, Charles had been in a funk. He rarely left his room before midday and Hank was sure he hadn't seen him eat a full proper meal in weeks. There were no more training sessions, no more pep talks. Sure, Alex and Sean had target practice but that was more a case of one-upsmanship instead of actual progress.

Hank might be obtuse when it came to some emotional matters, but he knew depression when he saw it. Charles' new physical condition prevented him from going down to the bunker with Alex and the roof with Sean. The only room of any vital importance except the kitchen on the first floor was the lab and he avoided that like the plague. The yellow and blue suits from that day still hung on the wall, as Hank attempted to find new ways to improve them. All of the suits save three – two went with their owners and one was cut off on an operating table.

Charles was depressed and Hank didn't have to be a medical doctor to diagnose it. But with Alex and Sean finding new ways to destroy things and with a toddler now in the picture, Charles would have to be the man they all knew he was. Before fatherhood, before Cuba... before his best friend put a bullet in his back.

And perhaps knowing who was on the failing side of every one of their successes made the
Professor's resolve all the weaker.

Turning the final corner, Hank put a blue paw up against the door and slammed it back against the wall. Charles jumped from his place over the chessboard whose pieces hadn't moved in almost 200 days.

"Dr. McCoy, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"We need to talk." Hank shut the door with more force than necessary.

"O-okay." Charles frowned and watched as Beast paced in front of him.

Hank had practiced this moment, but now in the study, it was as if Charles had home field advantage.

"Is Daniel sleeping?"

"Yes." Charles gave a slight grin. "But I have a sneaking suspicion that's not what you came here to talk about."

"You need to stop."

"Stop what?"

"Mourning!"

Charles scoffed, "I'm not - "

"Yes. Yes you are. You're mourning loss of Raven, you're mourning the loss of Erik, you're mourning the loss of your legs." Once he started, the words poured out of him like water. "You won't walk again. They aren't coming back. You have to accept that."

Charles looked as though Hank had slapped him across the face.

"Daniel needs you," Hank continued more quietly.

"Daniel has me."

"We need you!" The declaration tore itself from his throat. "You weren't the only one who was left that day. They abandoned us, too. Our sister and our father."

Charles tried to smile but Hank could see him swallow hard in an effort to keep his emotions in check. "Don't tell me that makes me your mother."

Hank ignored him. "We need you. And if you can't pull it together, I swear to God, I will find someone who can pull it together for you."

He turned and strode out of the room, fervently hoping that Erik's new telepath checked in frequently on the residents of Westchester.

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"Is it him?" The small spoon Raven had been using to stir her cappuccino clattered against the ceramic saucer.

Erik nodded, just once, and closed his eyes. It was unlike Charles to be so scattered with his
telepathy – he was always the picture of control, helping her when her eyes slipped back to gold or her skin turned the faintest shade of blue. **Calm your mind**, he would say. And she’d reply with some smartass remark, but he’d just smile and hold up a mirror, showing her that, despite her sarcasm, she had achieved the transformation she wanted.

"Do you ever regret the decision you made?"

Raven jumped, unaware that Erik had opened his eyes and was watching her carefully.

"Do you?" she countered.

Erik said nothing and Raven sat forward.

"If you miss him so badly, why don't you just go back. Not to stay, just to see."

"I don't want to see."

"Why not?"

"Because then I'll stay."

Raven felt an ache that she hadn't felt since she placed a kiss on her brother's forehead and her hand in Erik's palm.

**Magneto, Mystique.** Emma's voice was grating in her mind – nothing at all like Charles' lilt - and the ache deepened. **You have a visitor.**

When Erik and Raven returned to the hotel to find Hank seated in the middle of the suite, Raven launched herself at him, despite their chosen alliances. But the four words that tumbled out of his mouth wiped the smile clean from her face.

"I need your help."

xxxxxxxx

Charles spent the rest of the day watching Sean and Alex closely. Hank's words haunting his every step. They seemed fine – laughing, joking – but something was missing. They no longer had that drive, that spark that Charles saw when Alex destroyed the mannequin (without killing Hank or himself) or when Sean flew for the very first time.

Charles closed his eyes at the memory. **What? You know you were thinking the same.** It seemed that Hank's words were not the only thing haunting him.

He retreated back to his study and his gaze landed on the chess game in the middle of the desk. It migrated with Charles around the house: from the nightstand to the coffee table to the study, its pieces never moving. It used to be a source of comfort, a reminder of things past. But now it seemed to mock him, taunting him with the image of the man he used to be and the man he used to study across the checkered board.

In a fit of anger, he scattered the pieces with a sweep of his arm as a voice echoed from the shadow of the doorway.

"Now, now, Charles. That's no way to greet an old friend. I was winning that game."
"Erik, how… What are you doing here?" The look on Charles' face would have been comical if tears weren't clouding his eyes.

Erik flinched at the use of his given name, but made no correction. "The Beast came calling. Apparently the fur ball was worried about you." He tried to clamp down on He wasn't the only one, but he was sure the thought escaped anyway.

Charles remained silent, staring at the now-empty chessboard in front of him. Erik moved further into the room, the weight of the helmet strange after a few days without it.

"You look like hell. Don't they feed you?"

Charles' eyes flicked to the metal on his head. "I see you're still wearing that silly thing."

"It matches my cape."

Charles snorted and Erik hoped he couldn't hear the underlying worry behind the nonchalance. This was not the Charles Xavier he knew. Slowly, he mentally recapped all he had seen that night: Hank waiting for them in the garden, the puff of red smoke as Azazel disappeared, the wooden ramp covering the front steps – He froze.

"Charles," Erik swallowed hard, "won't you stand and greet me?"

Charles remained silent and seated, but Erik didn't need to be a telepath to see the look of anguish cross his face. Something wasn't right.

"Charles…" Erik's heart thudded against his chest. "Stand."

Charles bowed his head and gave it a gentle shake, causing a tear to splash on the wood in front of him.

"Charles, stand up!"

"I can't!" he slammed his hand down on the desk. "Is that was you wanted to hear? I can't!"

And with that he pushed away from the desk, and rolled back into the bookcase – and finally the piece of metal that had been humming against Erik's senses made its presence known.

Bile rose in his throat as he stumbled from the room.

Hank waited, listening to the rise and fall of voices, until the door banged open and Erik tumbled out, face pale, eyes haunted. He threw the metal helmet off as if it suffocated him and leaned against the wall, panting, until his gaze landed on the beast standing by the stairs.
"Why didn’t you tell me?" he choked out.

"You needed to see for yourself."

xxxxx

Charles' hands shook as he cradled his head in his palms. Of all the ways he had envisioned their reunion, that was definitely not one of them.

A wall of emotion hit him and stole the breath from his lungs. Guilt. Pain. Rage. A distant clatter meant the helmet had come off and skittered across the hardwood floor.

Charles clutched at his chest for the hurt felt too real. Erik's emotions were crashing over him like a wave; drowning him to the point where he no longer knew whose pain was whose.

xxxxx

Alex came strolling around the corner tossing an apple in the air, blissfully unaware of the two worlds that had just been rocked. But at the sight of Erik gripping his hair in his hands, he froze and let the apple fall to the ground. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Hank immediately straighten and take a step towards him, though what good the Beast could do if a laser-wielder and metal-bender came to blows was beyond the teen.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Erik inhaled sharply, as if someone had just landed a harsh kick to his solar plexus.

"I said, 'What the hell are you doing here?'" he enunciated slowly.

The anger that swelled up surprised him. Though sometimes Erik intimidated him, Alex had always admired him. After Cuba, he had clung to memories of squeezing their heads out of a window to watch Sean fall to what was sure to be certain death, and Erik levitating metal plates for Alex to shoot out of the sky. But those memories had long since been replaced by the cold, hollow feeling of betrayal. And every smile his professor had to fake and every room his professor couldn't enter because of a simple thing like steps caused Alex to clench his fists.

"Alex." Hank's tone was cautious and… a little sympathetic?

Alex frowned. "Explain, McCoy."

"We need him."

"No we don't. We've gotten along just fine without him."

Erik slid down the wall to the floor, seemingly oblivious to the teens in front of him. For the first time, Alex actually looked at him, really took him in. His legs were tucked up against his chest, his helmet laying forgotten a few feet away, as he gently rocked back and forth. It was such a stark contrast to the man who commanded missiles with nothing but an outstretched palm.

"Where's Charles?"

At the name, Erik let out a strangled noise against his knees. Hank gestured to the study with his head.

Ignoring the warning Hank started to give, Alex brushed past Erik, not sparing him a second glance, and pushed open the door.
Charles remained at his desk with his head in his hands. He could still feel the wave of grief emanating from the hallway, proving Erik had not strayed far.

At the sound of the door, he swiftly looked up, hating the flash of hope that flared in his chest. But it was only Alex, standing in the doorway and shuffling his feet, looking equal parts lost little boy and pacing prize-fighter.

"Are you all right, Professor?"

Charles gave him an emotionally exhausted smile. "Peachy."

"I could kick him out," Alex offered. "If you'd like."

"That won't be necessary. Not yet, anyway," he added as an afterthought.

The boy nodded and Charles felt him note the scattered chess pieces and the overturned chair Erik had toppled in his hurry to leave the room. The protective feelings that throbbed within the boy made Charles' heart swell.

"Can I do anything for you?"

Charles reached out with his mind, locating the other two members of his family. "Sean's playing with Daniel upstairs. Please make sure they stay there."

"Sure thing," he replied, already on his way to the door.

"Alex?"

"Yeah?"

"Under no circumstances are they to come down."

Alex stood up to his full height, his voice as even as steel. "Yes, sir."

Hank watched from the kitchen window as Erik strode out into the night, disappearing under a cover of darkness.

"He'll be back," said a voice over his shoulder and he jumped and turned, almost smacking right into Raven.

"I know he will." Hank leaned against the counter and took in the girl in front of him. Her golden eyes almost glowed in the dim light of the kitchen and he noted with a hint of pride that she seemed to have settled into her natural form. "You've been missed."

Raven shrugged. "You all seem to be getting along well enough."

"If we were, I wouldn't have had to come get you, now would I?"

The words came out harsher than he intended and he felt the slightest twinge of guilt as Raven's eyes filled with tears, but he thought of how easy the decision to leave them was for her and his guilt ebbed away.
It wasn't easy for her, Hank, Charles' voice echoed in his head.

It was a credit to his new animal instincts that his face remained impassive. Sorry, professor.

Don't apologize. You're allowed to be hurt.

Hank could tell just how worked up Charles was when some of his pain floated along their mental connection. It took all of his willpower not to flinch when it hit him.

Send her in, please... When you're done.

Hank focused on Raven once again as Charles' voice left his mind. A tear tracked a path down her blue cheek and her voice shook.

"You have no idea how much I have missed you all. How much I have missed him. And now..." she trailed off and Hank knew she was thinking of a wayward bullet and the chair it spawned. "Don't presume. Just don't."

Hank was silent for a moment, giving her time to gather herself. She grabbed a papertowel from the counter and wiped furiously at her eyes before chuckling at the pile of dishes in the sink.

"I love what you've done with the place."

"Charles would like to see you."

The chuckle died on her lips and she looked at him questioningly. He tapped the side of his head and her eyes dimmed.

"He couldn't tell me that himself, huh?" When Hank offered no reply, she nodded and gestured one final time to the garden shrouded in night. "Erik likes to be in control. He doesn't take surprises very well."

Hank's thoughts drifted to the baby with his father's eyes.

"Terrific."

xxxxxxxx

Sean smiled as Daniel rummaged so far into the toy box that he almost fell in. In the eight days since he had been there, the boy had certainly racked up a fair amount of playthings. To say he was spoiled was an understatement. Sean was proud of the fact that Daniel seemed content enough to play with him, which he of course attributed to his charm and expert peek-a-boo skills.

Without warning, Alex burst through the door and slammed it shut behind him, causing both Daniel and Sean to jump.

"There's been a lot of that tonight," Sean remarked, gesturing to the closed door.

"You have to stay here. You cannot leave." Alex huffed, as if he ran here, his gaze frantic until it landed on the little boy in the corner. Immediately, Sean's defensive instincts perked up and the smile slid from his face.

"What's going on?"

"He's back."
"Who's back?"

"Magneto."

"Don't call him that," Sean whispered, Charles' rebuke from the other day still fresh in his mind.

"The Professor doesn't want him to know about Danny. We have to stay here."

They both turned to see Daniel staring at them. As he picked up on the tension in the room, the toy train lay forgotten in his hands.

Sean nodded and stood. "Lock the door."

It felt good to say the words, even if he knew it would do nothing to keep Erik out should he want to enter.

xxxxxx

Growing up here, the house had always seemed dark and little foreboding, save for their little nook of paradise in the east wing. But now, the worn carpets and beaten floorboards no longer signaled neglect but life. The soft lamps glowed against the dark walls and voices echoed off the high ceilings. Raven no longer noticed the shadows and it was a credit to Charles for the home he had built.

Stopping just outside of the study door, she held her breath and raised her arm to knock, but something stayed her hand. She had never been afraid of him – not once in her entire life – even knowing all he could do. But now, in her childhood home, a fear of seeing him ate at her because she had deserted him on a beach as he potentially lay dying.

*I won't bite.*

Raven could hear the smile in his voice and, with a final deep breath, she opened the door to the dark study.

"Reading my mind again?"

He shook his head and took her in. "Just noting your hesitation. You never hesitate. Especially not with me."

Despite her best efforts, her breath hitched as Charles wheeled himself across the room, and the tears she had worked so hard to overcome in the kitchen fell unbidden down her face.

"Charles…"

He wordlessly opened his arms and she fell to her knees in front of him, clutching desperately to his torso as she pressed against legs she knew he couldn't feel.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," she repeated over and over again like a mantra.

"It's okay," he whispered, placing a kiss to her head.

*Calm*, she felt press against her mind and, despite her roiling emotions, her tears dried and her sobs quieted.

"I've missed you," she murmured against his chest.
"I've missed you, too." He placed another kiss against her red hair. "You look well. I see he's taken care of you. I'm grateful for that."

She pulled away and ran her hands over the steel armrests, taking in his face: his creased brow, his haunted eyes. The chair was all hard planes and sharp edges, nothing at all like its owner: steely, but soft. Wise, but foolish. Stern, but loving.

Following her gaze to the chair, he whispered, "It's okay, Raven."

She gave him a mirthless grin.

"Charles, you forget I know you well enough to know when you're lying."

xxxxxx

There was something to be said for a night sky. Having spent the past few weeks getting lost in major city after major city, Erik had all but forgotten about the stars.

He sat on the edge of a dry fountain somewhere deep in the garden, needing to get away but unable to stray too far. The mansion loomed against a sky as blue as Raven's skin, its lit windows creating a patchwork puzzle. From afar, he watched Alex pace in an upstairs window and Hank hunch over something in the kitchen. His eyes darted around the remaining windows, but he knew his search would be fruitless – the study was on the other side of the building.

He tried to think back to the moment before he had made his presence known; when Charles sat at his desk looking over a chessboard. If Erik closed his eyes, he could almost hear Charles railing on in his unfailing optimism, almost taste the scotch as he raised the tumbler to his lips, almost feel Charles' struggle to not read the chess moves he was loudly broadcasting across the board.

That mind was powerful and comforting and, now because of Erik, irreparably broken. But despite the pain he had caused, it still tugged at him as if tethered.

And for the first time in six months, he felt home.
Revelations

Chapter Summary

In which Erik has a flashback and reveals a different side...

"How long are we going to leave him out there?" Hank asked, as the three boys stared out into the garden from the upstairs window.

"Until he rusts," Alex replied, gently bouncing Daniel on his hip.

Sean couldn't help but smile at the juxtaposition. Of the three, Hank was the one with the mildest temperament despite his exterior, and Alex no doubt was the one with the roughest edges, but here he was, standing next to the gentle giant with a baby in his arms. The thought made Sean chuckle.

"What?" Alex cocked an eyebrow.

"Nothing. Where's Raven?"

"With the professor," Hank sighed.

Sean wasn't always the most observant but he remembered vividly the day Charles and Erik brought him home. He remembered the fatherly way Charles placed his arm around this complete stranger's shoulder and the pride in his voice as he introduced his sister, Raven. They were close, Sean remembered thinking. She called him on his bullshit and he called her on hers. And when they moved from the CIA base to the mansion, Sean passed by the open door of the study and glimpsed Raven dozing against the Professor's shoulder as he read quietly on the couch. It was an image of such quiet domesticity that Sean found himself clinging to it after everything fell apart.

"Danny, no."

Sean was snapped out of his musings by Alex's voice as he chased the toddler to the door. Daniel stood up on tiptoes to try and grasp at the handle before Alex scooped him up again. Daniel let out a whine and reached over Alex's shoulder for the door once more, but in the battle between toddler and juvenile delinquent, Sean had a feeling it would be the ex-con by a nose. The baby still wasn't talking, though they figured he was perfectly capable of it. He would in his own time, but for now, they were getting pretty good at interpreting his silent demands, the most recent of which was grabbing Alex's nose with one hand and pointing at the door with the other.

And as the blond struggled with the squirming child in his arms, Sean recognized the look of longing on the baby's face.

"He wants Charles."

xxxxxx

Erik never once considered himself a coward. He doubted anyone else would call him one either. But as he walked in no particular direction around the garden, he knew that entering that house once more and facing the man he loved again…
Well, "coward" was an apt name for how he felt.

"He said Hank was worried," Charles said, looking down on Raven where she remained on the floor.

The name of the "he" in question went unspoken.

Raven nodded, picking at the worn rug. "Apparently, he reached out to Emma, told her he wanted to see Mag – Erik - and Azazel transported him to where we were staying."

"And why is Miss Frost close enough to pick up on Hank's mental telegraphs?" Charles arched an eyebrow.

Raven had the decency to look sheepish. "She checks up on things – per Erik's instructions."

"All without my knowledge," Charles whispered with a slight shake of his head. "How distracted I've been."

"Well, you have every right to be."

Her gaze swept over the chair and in that moment, Charles was very happy she wasn't the mind reader of the family for his thoughts were not on his sudden paralysis at all, but on the baby upstairs whose presence he already missed.

"Charles, why is Hank worried about you?"

"I have no idea. I haven't given him cause."

She fixed him with the look that used to drive him up the wall – that usually preceded some clever retort that carried with it the flippant tone only a younger sibling could perfect.

Charles acquiesced. "I haven't been myself."

"You've been moping."

"I don't mope."

That look again.

"I may have been weighing my options."

"Moping."

He let out an exasperated sigh, tempered by a slight smile.

By God, how he had missed her.

The hall was quiet as the carpet softened Erik's heavy footfalls. There was no point in remaining outside with the metal gardening tools in the distant shed humming against his senses. The desire to strangle a dilapidated statue with a rake was becoming harder and harder to ignore.

In the distance, he could see the helmet he had thrown down, and the emotions as he saw Charles in
the chair for the first time took hold of his heart once more. He had broken the body of a man he didn't think could break. Charles' humor, his optimism, and his unfailing faith were ironclad. But Erik was a metal-bender and "ironclad" didn't seem to hold much sway with him.

Without warning, he found himself standing outside the study, Charles and Raven's voices filtering through the partially opened door. She was laughing at something and Erik's heart ached. It had been such a long time since he had heard her laugh – heard anyone laugh, really – and the noise was like bells in his ears.

He peered through the crack to see Charles sitting in his chair, staring at Raven like a starving man gazing on food. He seemed completely and utterly content to hear her rattle on about something idiotic Riptide had done. Even Erik had to admit that, no matter how dapper Riptide might be, common sense was not his forte.

If the telepath knew Erik was there, he wasn't giving any sign, but the longer the metal-bender stared at the wheelchair, the more the hinges in the door began to creak.

Charles glanced up, the look of contentment sliding from his face, and Raven quieted, her gaze bouncing from one to the other. She quickly rose, but Charles' voice rang out in a calm but sharp command.

"Stay."

Raven hovered in a crouch for a moment before returning to the floor.

With no further need for stealth, Erik pushed the door open and huddled in the corner of the room. He was never one to hover but the devastating force of Charles' gaze held him hostage.

Silence hung thick in the air as the two men stared at each other, and Raven seemed to want to be anywhere but.

"Charles, I'm so -"

"Don't. Don't say it." The crack in his voice betrayed the steadiness of his gaze.

Erik fell silent, the apology stuck in his throat. He needed to say the words, needed to hear them in his own voice. Because if he kept it inside, it would eat at him until there was nothing left save for a heavy conscience and a hollow heart.

"I'm sorry, Charles. I can't…" begin to tell you...

Charles said nothing, but the slight tremble of his lower lip told Erik the words had at least been heard.

"Why are you here?"

Erik swallowed hard. "I don't know anymore."

Silence again. Charles seemed to fixate on the scattered chess pieces, particularly the toppled queen near his foot. Erik would give anything in that moment to have his telepathic abilities.

"Let me know if you plan on staying. I'm afraid neither of your rooms has been attended to since you left." He said it as matter-of-factly as the morning weather report.

Erik froze, not sure if he had heard Charles correctly, for surely the man into whose back he put a
bullet wouldn't suggest what Erik thought he was suggesting.

"You want me to stay?" he blurted out.

"No way!" Alex's voice echoed off the oak paneling. "He is not staying under this roof."

Erik narrowed his eyes at the doorway where Sean and the blond teen stood. "I'm not really sure that's your decision to make, Havok."

xxxxxx

"It's Alex." His teeth hurt from clenching his jaw so tightly, his gaze straying ever so slightly to Raven on the floor before settling on Charles. The professor seemed to tense.

Where's Danny? echoed in his head.

With Hank, Alex thought back.

"Banshee," Erik greeted.

"Erik," Sean replied.

"You're not staying," Alex ground out. Please, professor. He made his choice.

Charles sighed, his gaze flitting over the headstrong teen in front of him. He was once a part of this family, Alex. I can't turn him away if he's come back to help.

Erik smirked. "Well, Charles, I see our boys have reached the rebellious stage."

"We're not yours," Alex spit out.

"You used to be," Charles murmured and all fell silent.

Some distant memory of a firm hand against his chest, holding him in place as a jet barrel-rolled, made Alex's stomach lurch.

"Despite what you may think, I did care." Erik corrected, "I do care, Alex."

The use of his proper name jogged his thoughts back to the present, as Sean gave a sarcastic snort.

"When did you ever care about us?"

Alex narrowed his eyes again. "We were nothing more than a pit-stop on your way to Shaw."

Had Alex not been battling his barely suppressed anger, he would have seen Charles place two fingers to his temple and close his eyes. Had he been paying attention, maybe he wouldn't have let out such an undignified yelp as the study melted away and the cold interior of a cargo plane took its place.

"What the hell?" His voice seemed to echo.

"Watch," came the gentle command of the professor, as Alex became a spectator to the action happening in front of him, like a movie in his head.

Erik and a pre-paralysis Charles stood in the middle of the plane, Moira at their side and an unknown agent in front of them.
"What?" Charles paled and automatically reached out for Erik's arm.

"There was an attack on the CIA base – "

"The kids. Are they all right?" Charles interrupted.

"Almost all of the agents are dead."

"What of the children!" Erik yelled.

"One missing and one fatality."

Charles steadied his hand against the wall, his fear for everyone, particularly Raven, radiating out in ripples.

"Who was it?" Erik growled, watching Charles out of the corner of his eye.

"I'm sorry, we don't have names."

In a flash, Erik's hands were around the agent's throat.

"Who. Was. It."

"Erik," Charles warned.

"One of the children is dead, Charles. I need to know who."

Charles placed two fingers to his temple and closed his eyes, a tear slipping out when he opened them again.

"It was Darwin, Erik. Darwin's dead."

Erik stared at Charles, releasing his hold on the agent and slumping against the wall.

"Darwin."

"Angel left of her own volition," Charles continued.

Erik ran his fingers through his hair and slid down the wall to the floor, before slamming a fist against the slid of the plane.

"Goddammit!"

Charles knelt in front of him, but what was said was muffled. Through the telepath, the intruders on this memory felt not only the metal-bender's despair at having lost one of their own, but also his relief as each of their faces flashed in his mind.

"The rest are okay?"

Charles swallowed hard and nodded, placing a hand comfortingly on Erik's shoulder.

"The rest are okay."

Slowly, the cargo plane faded away, leaving the occupants of the room a little dazed. Alex glanced at Erik as he got his bearings, mouth open to say something, but a distant cry echoing down the corridor broke the haze of memory, freezing everyone in the room.
Alex's eyes darted from the door to Charles and back again. Sean cleared his throat in an attempt to recreate the noise, but no one in the room could mistake Sean's vocals with a baby's cries.

"Charles… " Erik breathed heavily. "What was that?"
"Charles… What was that?" Erik's voice shook as he repeated his question.

Out of the corner of his eye, Charles could see Sean and Alex watching him with bated breath, waiting for instruction on what to do.

With a heavy sigh, he closed his eyes. He was not ready for this – not so soon after Erik's return.

_Hank?_

_Professor?_

_Please come downstairs… And bring Daniel with you._

… _Are you sure?_

_No. But do it anyway._

.Yes, sir._

"Charles – "

"For God's sake, Erik, this isn't going to be easy for anyone, so just give me a moment," he snapped.

It was the first crack in his calm façade since he slammed his hand on a desk and showed Erik that which he had tried so hard to keep from him. And for once, Erik did as he was told, as if he knew the importance of the moment.

Charles leaned his elbows on the armrest and dropped his head into his hands, feeling the presence of his son move closer and closer. A hand pressed against the back of his neck and he leaned into Raven's touch. Without words, she comforted him, but as the door creaked open, even she couldn't suppress the gasp that left her lips.

He didn't need to raise his eyes, or even reach out telepathically. He just waited until two little hands pressed firmly but unfeelingly on his knees and he couldn't help the smile that spread across his face as Daniel climbed up and pressed his nose to his.

"Hello, my boy," Charles whispered, pressing a kiss to his son's head.

He could feel the gaze of everyone in the room – it weighed him down, crushing the breath from his lungs and the blood through his veins – but he couldn't look up. Not yet.

Raven had taken a step back, but now her voice rang out in the still, suffocating room.

"He's yours." It wasn't a question.
"Yes," came the simple reply.

He took comfort in the way his son settled on his lap, pressing two tiny palms against his cheeks and forcing Charles' mouth into a pucker he couldn't help but chuckle through.

"How?" Erik's voice was rough and Charles flinched against the seemingly innocent question.

Finally allowing his eyes to drift up, he met the confused/lost/astonished/angry/hopeful/confused gaze that stared at the child in his arms. Erik's lips parted, ready to throw another one of the hundred questions bouncing around in his head at the telepath if he didn't answer the first.

"Charles…" his name left Raven's mouth in a breath of air, as she bent down next to the chair, staring at the baby in wonderment.

"Daniel, meet your Aunt Raven."

Raven's golden eyes filled with tears. "Daniel," she tasted the name on her tongue. "He's not scared of me."

"Well… Hank has been babysitting for the past few days. He's used to blue."

Hank sheepishly smiled from the doorway.

"But…" Erik stuttered, effectively breaking the small moment. "I don't understand. Did you know? All this time?"

Charles met Erik's steely gaze. No. I did not.

When did you find out?

"I found out last week," Charles answered aloud.

"Wow, so you're brand new to this?" Raven chuckled as Daniel clung tight to Charles' shirt collar.

"About as new as you can get without actually being in the delivery room." His gaze flicked to Erik once more but his face was as impassive as a stone.

Charles honored his promise and did not look into Erik's thoughts, tempting though the notion might have been. But as the metal shivered against his arms and back, he knew he didn't need to be a telepath to know what Erik was thinking. Daniel's arms tightened around his neck and Charles placed a soothing hand on his back.

"Erik, you're frightening him," he murmured.

"What?" Erik seemed to emerge from a daze. "Oh, sorry."

The chair stopped vibrating and Daniel once again relaxed against Charles' chest, his eyes heavy despite the attention focused on him.

"It's past his bedtime," Charles offered. "I should…" He made a noncommittal gesture towards the door and Raven backed up again, giving him room to maneuver around the coffee table.

"Professor, he left his rabbit upstairs. Let me run and get it. You know he won't sleep without it."

"Thank you, Sean."
Actually, Daniel didn't have much trouble sleeping anywhere anymore, but Charles figured Sean's suggestion was really just a veiled attempt to prevent him from walking out of the room alone.

And as Erik's gaze bore a hole in his tweed-covered back, he was glad for the company.

Silence hung heavy in the room after Charles departed and Alex could only stare at Erik, as much as he wanted, no, needed to look away. To give the man a moment. The older man looked so lost, so raw, against the backdrop of books, his gaze locked on the empty entryway. He had entered the mansion the epitome of confidence, but the man in the wheelchair slowly stripped it from him, inch by inch, with every secret he revealed.

Hank cleared his throat, breaking the spell that Charles seemed to have cast over the room.

"I'm sure you remember where your rooms are."

And with that, they were dismissed.

Raven tiptoed past the nursery on her way to the stairs, stopping ever so briefly to listen to Charles quietly speak through the bars on the crib. She couldn't make out what he said in the darkened room, but memories flooded her of late nights curled into his side as he read her a story nicked from the library.

It began as a necessity: the house was foreign and big, and nightmares seem to lurk in its multitude of shadows. She would climb into bed with him because she was cold and he was warm, and he would chase the shadows away with the lullaby of his voice.

She recognized a few of the toys dotting the floor of the nursery. Many she had inherited from Charles, from the childhood long forgotten, and he had passed them on to his son. The thought warmed Raven's heart.

She watched for a final quiet moment as Charles gently brushed the hair from the baby's sleeping forehead, before continuing on her way.

Charles is a father. Charles has a son.

The thoughts circled around him and doubled back again, playing on an endless loop that brought him to his bedroom door without really remembering how he got there.

The door was locked, odd, but with a casual flick of his wrist, the deadbolt turned and the door swung open, immediately hitting him with the smell of musty linens and the prick of dust in his eyes.

Coughing slightly, he stepped into the room, his foot tracking a print on the carpet. It was as if he had just stepped back in time as he stared around at the room. His pajama bottoms still hung on the post of the unmade bed. He had figured that he'd make it when he came home that day, never knowing that a return trip wasn't in the cards.

He slowly made his way around, looking at the discarded watch on the bureau and the sweatshirt sticking clumsily out of the drawer. For a brief moment, he allowed himself to wonder if Charles ever came in here, but the thin sheen of dust on the floor was proof enough that he hadn't.
He didn't know whether to let his mind be happy that Charles was saving the room for his possible return or heartbroken that he had locked it all away in an effort for self-preservation.

Hank paced the floor with a predatory air he was just getting used to as Sean sat cross-legged on the bed and tossed a ball in the air.

"Someone should stay up... just in case Magneto tries anything funny." Alex leaned against door, keeping an ear out for movement in the hallway.

"I don't think he will," Hank reasoned.

"Yeah, did you see the look on his face when Hank brought Danny into the room?" Sean tossed the ball up again.

"And neither of you saw him after he found out the Professor was paralyzed. It was..." Hank shook his head, trailing off, remembering the devastation that haunted Erik's features.

"Serves him right."

Clearly, Alex wasn't exactly the 'forgive and forget' type.

Erik leaned an arm on the crib and stared at the baby, his chest steadily rising and falling with every breath into his tiny body. He looked just like his father, brow slightly furrowed and lips pouted in sleep.

Erik tried to block out the memories but they poured unbidden back into his mind: Charles, on one of their many recruiting missions, sprawled out on the tiny hotel bed, limbs everywhere, sheets kicked to the floor. His hair was mussed as his face pressed into the pillow, the white undershirt tight across his back.

He was endearing this way, unaware of the world around him, safe in the confines of his dreams. Erik would sometimes have great fun waking him up, slamming a door or playing the radio too loudly. Sometimes just his thoughts were enough to rouse him and he'd open his eyes already answering a question that was lingering in Erik's mind.

Those moments were a little disconcerting...

_Do I want eggs or pancakes?_

"Pancakes." A yawn. "Definitely pancakes."

"Stop doing that."

A sheepish grin. "Sorry."

Eventually, he tore himself away from the crib and crashed into bed, the events of the day exhausting him emotionally and physically. Only later would he realize it would have been safer if he'd just stayed awake...

_The waves crashed against the shore and the breeze swayed the leaves of the palm trees. What should have been a beautiful day was marred by the fact that he knew something was inherently wrong about this supposed tranquility._
Fear made his heart raced and a distant echo of pain throbbed in his mind as he watched himself command the missiles across the water. The suit was rough against his skin and the helmet should have been heavy on his head, but somewhere deep inside, he realized this was not his dream and these were not his feelings.

Pain in his shoulder as he tackled himself to the ground.

"I don't want to hurt you."

Disorientation as he landed a punch against his own cheek. Sand between his fingers, breath on his face, love in his heart.

Gunshots, screams, pain.


Goodbye. Pain.

Heartbreak. Pain.

With a gasp, he shot up in bed, panting, only to see Alex go running by his open doorway as Raven's voice echoed down the hall.

"We have to wake him up!"

Erik stumbled from the bed, his limbs wobbly as he shook off the vestiges of the nightmare.

"What's going on?" he croaked.

"Charles is projecting," Raven threw over her shoulder as she sprinted down the stairs, Hank hot on her heels.

"He hasn't projected this badly in months," the Beast growled.

"Not hard to figure out why," Alex murmured, but it was loud enough to reach Erik's ears.

His stomach twisted.

Through the pounding of his heart and the roar of his panic, he distantly registered the sound of a baby crying.

xxxxxx

Hank beat Raven to Charles' bedroom door and burst through it. The noise alone should have been loud enough to wake him, but he remained caught in the confines of Cuba, head tossing on the pillow, hair matted to his brow.

"Charles! Wake up!" Raven hopped on the bed and shook him. When that didn't work, she settled for a punch to the shoulder.

Hank growled, thinking of how that would most likely bruise, but if anyone knew how to rouse Charles, certainly his younger sister would. Sean and Alex hovered at the foot of the bed, flinching with every hit that Raven landed on the Professor's skin.

"Dammit, Charles," she huffed as she met Hank's eyes over Charles' sleeping form. "Watch out," she warned…

"It's okay, Charles. You're home. You're safe."

*Raven.*

"I'm here."

He panted, but her small hand on his chest helped him get his breathing under control.

"You're okay."

He nodded, his dazed eyes landing on Hank where he perched on the other side of the bed. Charles' rapid heart rate was making his head swim, but one thing registered quite clearly in the sea of concerned gazes and worried thoughts:

Erik stood in the doorway, hugging Daniel to his shirtless chest, fear broadcasting loudly from his mind. He seemed to shrink under Charles' sudden attention, his hand coming up to rub circles on Daniel's back.

"He was crying..." he offered feebly, unsure where to settled his gaze. Or his thoughts.

Charles could feel them bouncing from concern to anger to fear to regret to guilt to finally something else altogether as he focused on the baby snuggled against his chest. Charles reached out with his mind to his son, and found Daniel radiating nothing but safety and comfort in the metal-bender's arms.

Charles wordlessly held out his arms and Erik shuffled forward, winding his way through the kids to the side of the bed. Daniel immediately reached out for Charles and settled into his lap.

"I'm sorry I woke you all up," he offered, his nose pressed against Daniel's hair, inhaling the sent of soap and powder.

The kids murmured general consolations ("No problem," "Sleep well," "I didn't like the vase I accidentally broke with my sonic scream anyway," ) before filing out, leaving Raven on the bed and Erik standing awkwardly next to it.

Daniel latched on to Charles' t-shirt collar, a comfort that was quickly becoming habit, as Raven ran a hand down the baby's back and pressed a kiss to Charles' forehead.

"No more of that," she whispered.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied.

"I leave you in good hands," she said, as she stood and headed for the door.

Neither Charles nor Erik looked particularly comforted by that.
Chapter Summary

In which Daniel gets sick and Erik gets protective. Shocker.

It was an odd feeling to watch a man he thought he knew navigate uncharted territory with a finesse he didn't think he possessed.

The innate ease that Charles handled Daniel was a marvel to watch. Sure, Erik knew Charles had paternal leanings – how else would those boys have excelled as well as they had – but still, to see a child curled into Charles was a moment too tender for the emotional havoc going on in Erik's body.

He shuffled awkwardly at the foot of the bed, staring longingly at the door Raven had just exited through.

"You need to eat more."

"Excuse me?" Erik's head whipped back to Charles.

The professor gestured to the visible ribs on the metal-bender's torso.

"Oh." Erik crossed his arms across his chest, a defensive mannerism rarely seen. "Unfortunately, I ran out of money in my budget for room service."

Silence descended again, broken only by the occasional contented noise from Daniel. It had never been this hard to talk to him, to find a topic with the man who could read his mind, but Erik inexplicably kept finding his eyes drawn to the child resting against Charles, all thought becoming hazy.

"How'd you come up with 'Daniel'?

"I didn't. His mother named him."

_His mother._ The thought made Erik's chest hurt, yet he wasn't entirely sure why.

"Is she - "

"Car accident."

"Stop that."

"I wasn't." Charles' expression was dark. "Your face is easy to read."

Erik didn't quite know what to do with that. There was a question he wanted to ask him, the answer to which he needed to know. But as Charles sighed and gently set a now sleeping Daniel down next to him on the bed, he realized quite quickly that he missed his opportunity.

"You should head to bed. It's late."

And just like that, he was dismissed.
Raven stifled a yawn as she padded back down the hall towards the stairs. The grandfather clock in the foyer told her it was just past four in the morning, but as she placed a foot on the first step, voices diverted her to the family room instead.

She found the three boys hunched around the coffee table, whispering in hushed tones. It would have been easy to just back away and continue on to the warm bed she knew awaited her upstairs, but as if the house was conspiring against her, a floorboard creaked and three heads snapped her way, all of them falling immediately silent.

"I thought you guys were going back to bed," she said, stepping into the room.

"You might feel comfortable leaving Erik alone with the professor, but we're not." Alex fixed her with a glare as Sean rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

Indignation flared in her chest. "You called us, remember? It's not like we just showed up on your doorstep."

"Correction: he called you," Sean said, pointing at Hank.

Raven sighed and slumped into the empty spot next to Sean on the couch. "How bad is it?"

The frown on Alex's face softened. "Bad."

"How often does he project like that? I haven't seen him do it since we were kids."

"It's been awhile. It was bad the first two months or so after the beach, but now…" Hank trailed off and shrugged, but Raven knew they were all thinking the same thing.

Erik. Erik had shown up, lugging all of that emotional baggage with him.

"He's actually been better since Danny showed up, but he's still not the same." Alex shrugged. "I think if we got him more involved again, made him feel like the leader of the team, he might come back around."

"But we need renovations," Hank growled. "This house wasn't built to cater to the wheelchair-bound."

Raven thought of the multitude of stairs and the narrow doorways. If an elevator was built, Charles could at least go to the bunker with Alex or the roof with Sean, or even his old bedroom. They wouldn't be able to give him proper legs, but it was a start.

"I'll call a contractor. We'll begin tomorrow."

"But Raven, renovations that extensive would take months to complete! How are we going to keep humans in a house with us – "

"With him – " Sean jokingly interjected, pointing at Hank.

"With us," Alex glared and continued, "without your brother having to mind-wipe them every five minutes?"

Raven rose and gave them a devilish grin. "Don't worry about it. I know a guy."
Some people wouldn't call Sean the brightest crayon in the box, but he got by well enough.

However, surviving on two hours of sleep was not his forte and, as he ran into his second wall of the morning, he decided that he might have to ask Erik to borrow his helmet if he planned on staying much longer. It was hard enough to rest without a telepath hijacking his dreams, what with Hank using him as a test dummy and Alex betting him to jump off higher and higher things.

He stumbled down the last three steps, catching himself on the railing, before finding his footing and heading down the hall. The Professor's door was cracked but Sean could tell that the curtains were still drawn by the gray light that filtered through the door.

*Weird.* Throwing the curtains back was the usually the first thing the Professor did and he was usually the first awake, though lately, he had been the last to emerge.

With a gentle push, the door swung silently back, letting a little of the hallway light cast patterns on the floor. Sean tiptoed into the room to find the Professor, thankfully, sound asleep on the bed with Daniel curled tightly into his side, Charles' t-shirt clutched firmly in his tiny hand.

Sean smiled, but only as he turned to leave did he catch the movement in the far corner. He continued on his way, though, not acknowledging the person sitting silently in the chair next to the bed.

And he couldn't help but grin as he left Erik to watch over the telepath from the safety of the shadows.

xxxxxx

"You want me to what?"

Alex was having entirely too much fun this morning, forgetting his now-soggy cereal as Raven and Erik bantered back and forth.

"Renovate the house. It's not that big a deal."

"Yes it is. Renovations take months – "

"Told you," Hank interrupted.

" – And I for one, did not plan on staying here for months."

"Well, this isn't exactly a household that's used to things going according to plan," Alex murmured, his words hitting home when the rest of the kitchen fell silent.

Erik's eyes narrowed. "If you'll recall, I'm not a member of this household."

"Yeah, you made sure of that."

"Boys!" Raven reprimanded.

Alex shrugged, but relished the feeling of knowing his comment had at least some impact on the metal-wielder. Erik froze where he stood, a jug of juice hovering over an empty glass.

The pitcher shook ever so slightly in his hand before he lowered it slowly back to the counter and walked swiftly out of the room.

Raven sighed as she leveled her gaze at Alex. "Why do you do that? Why do you goad him?"
"Because it's easy." He dumped his bowl in the sink and turned to face her. "And because someone shouldn't let him forget what he did."

xxxxxx

It had been easy enough to find a contractor on short notice – Xavier Manor looked good on a resume – but no one really seemed to know how to inform Charles of their little plan, and Charles himself was too preoccupied taking care of a suddenly feverish Danny to notice.

Hank peered out of the upstairs window, carefully hidden from view, as a white truck pulled up the long stone drive.

If he learned one thing about Raven in their few short months together, it was that she was stubborn. Erik still hadn't agreed to help and Charles, the man supposedly footing the bill, still had no idea, yet she called the contracting company anyway.

Hank couldn't help but chuckle.

Of course she did.

xxxxxx

Charles bounced a fussy Daniel his chair as the baby whimpered against his shirt.

"I know. I know it hurts," he murmured every time Danny let out a particularly painful sounding cough.

Sean, would you come here please?

Charles could feel the presence of someone new approaching the front door, but strangers tended to make Daniel nervous and he didn't want to subject him to that, especially in his sickened state.

Sure thing, Professor. How's Danny?

Worse, I'm afraid. Charles couldn't keep the note of worry from his mind.

Is there any cough medicine in the house?

If there is, I'm sure it expired sometime around 1937.

Oh.

Charles continued to rub Daniel's back in soothing circles until Sean arrived and Charles carefully passed the baby off to him.

Daniel had a habit of grabbing at Sean's shaggy hair and, God love him, Sean indulged the baby even if it meant having a sore scalp for a few days.

As Charles rolled himself towards the foyer, he could already hear Raven's voice echoing off the cavernous vestibule. Odd. He didn't hear the doorbell ring. It was almost as if his sister was expecting this visitor, this Mr. Robert Willis, who had come to… fix something?

Charles wheeled around the corner to find Raven chattering happily on to a stout, balding man as Alex stood off to the side and Erik leaned casually, almost begrudgingly, against the wall.

"Just a bit of remodeling," Raven elaborated, "to make it, you know, a little more accessible."
The stranger's gaze landed on Charles, taking in the wheelchair.

"Oh, I see."

Charles tried not to flinch under the contractor's scrutiny, but the pity leveled on him was something he was not yet used to. Erik followed the stranger's focus to Charles and straightened up, tensing immediately.

"What do you mean, you see?" Erik's voice was sharp but smooth, like a good scotch that goes down easily but still bites. Charles couldn't help the swell of affection he felt for Erik in that moment.

The contractor swallowed hard under Erik's gaze. "I, uh… I mean…"

As much as Charles was enjoying watching the man squirm, he saved him from further indignity.

"Elevators, Mr. Willis. We need elevators. And wider doors. Please tell my… " his voice faltered, "my friend here… what we'll need."

Erik stepped forward. "Just give me the schematics and the parts, I don't need tools."

"Don't need…" The contractor trailed off, slightly flabbergasted.

"Tools, that's right," Erik supplied, grinning in a humorless manner Charles had not seen since an October day in Cuba. "I'm somewhat of a contractor myself."

Three hours later, Erik was in the lab, levitating metal parts into the order in which he'd need them. Stabilizing beams first, panels second, and so on.

The interaction with Charles he'd had in the foyer was the warmest they'd shared since he'd arrived. Erik however, being more cynic than optimist, decided not to read too much forgiveness in the small exchange.

Because even if Charles offered it, Erik wasn't entirely sure he'd accept. He owed entirely too much penance to be rewarded that quickly.

A noise behind him caught his attention and he spun around to find Daniel standing there, clutching one of Charles' old shirts.

"Daniel Xavier, what are you doing here?" Erik set the metal panel down and crouched down in front of the child. "It's too dangerous for you, young man."

Daniel's lower lip wobbled and a tear fell onto his too-pale cheek.

"Hey, now. None of that," Erik said as he scooped the child in his arms, pressing a cheek to the baby's forehead. "You're quite warm, there." He pressed his lips against the skin again. "Too warm, in fact."

At that moment, Daniel let out a cough that seemed to tear itself from his chest, causing tears to spring in his eyes and his tiny lungs to rattle as he attempted to draw breath.

"Not good," Erik murmured as he took off with Daniel down the hall.
"Danny!" Charles' voice bounced off the dark walls.

"What's wrong?" Alex appeared at the top of the steps.

"I can't find Danny. Sean turned his back for a second and he disappeared."

"I swear it was only a second!" Sean moaned.

"Sure it was, ginger."

Charles vaguely heard Alex and Sean continue to bicker, but it faded against the ringing in his ears and the worry in his heart. What if Erik took him? What if that was his whole reason for coming? If the man ever wanted a way to hurt Charles, more than he already had, Daniel would certainly be the fulcrum of that plan.

"Come on, I hear water," Alex said, hurrying down the hall to the bathroom off of the lab, Sean hot on his heels.

They didn't get too far though, before slamming to a stop in the bathroom doorway. Charles finally caught up, his heart in his throat, as the boys parted to reveal Erik, sitting fully clothed on the floor of the shower, Daniel in his lap, as steam rose around them.

"What are you doing?" Charles attempted to ignore the way the shirt clung to Erik's skin.

"Moisture helps open up the lungs." Erik gently pushed the wet hair off of Daniel's foreheard. "He was having trouble breathing."

"Is he all right now?" Sean leaned against the doorframe and Charles could feel the relief rolling off of him at knowing Daniel's whereabouts.

"Seems to be." Erik lowered his ear to Daniel's cheek and listened to him breathe.

"Crisis averted," Alex chuckled before dragging Sean from the room. Their attempt to gracefully leave the two men alone proved that subtlety was not their forte.

Charles rolled as far into the bathroom as the chair would allow and carefully watched Daniel's face for any sign of discomfort. He seemed utterly at peace.

"How did you know? How did you know this would work?"

Erik's eyes dimmed, before he tore his focus off of Charles and back onto the child in his arms.

"Erik?"

"Because it did for my daughter."

Just four simple words and Charles' ears were ringing again.
Chapter Summary

In which Daniel learns a new word and Erik has a minor freak-out.

"Your what?" Charles' voice was quiet but Erik flinched as if he had shouted.

He had not spoken of her, or even really thought of her – of them – in so long, Erik was caught off guard by the overwhelming pain that weaved its way through his chest.

"Not now, Charles," his tone was sharper than he had intended and at Charles' wounded look he added a quiet, "Please."

He half expected Charles to roll away, to leave him soaking wet on the floor of the bathroom, just as he had left him bleeding on a beach. But when Charles placed a firm hand on his shoulder, Erik couldn't help the gasp that escaped his lips.

They knew each other better than anyone else, yet they still kept secrets. Charles' son, Erik's daughter, paralysis, his past, Charles' past. Erik closed his eyes – how much of this man remained a mystery to him?

An offhand comment about Charles' charmed childhood.

A swift and vicious rebuke by Raven that all was not as it seemed.

If this, whatever this newfound understanding was, was going to work, secrets would have to be the first thing to go.

With a strengthening resolve, Erik reached up and turned the water off, grabbing the large towel he had left by the tub and wrapping it around the toddler's wet body.

"Put your son to bed and we'll talk."

xxxxxx

Charles smoothed the hair back from Daniel's feverish forehead one last time before exiting the nursery and wheeling himself down the hall, his thoughts reeling.

Erik had a daughter. Just when he thought they'd made progress, Erik would bring out one last surprise, turning what little familiarity Charles had into an enigma once more.

"He's asleep," Charles said as he entered his room. "Whatever you did worked. Thank you."

Erik nodded and the telepath frowned. He stood in the middle of the room, right where Charles had left him, staring at the floor as his wet clothes created a puddle on the hearth rug. It was as if his most recent admission had taken more from him than he could give, leaving him with nothing but a mild case of hypothermia and a vacant expression.

Charles pulled a long sleeve shirt from a drawer and tossed it at him. "You should change. You're
freezing."

When Erik refused to move, Charles reached out with a hand and Erik recoiled as if burned.

"Don't."

"Erik, I saw you with your shirt off not 24 hours ago. Please don't tell me you're bashful."

Erik glared, but remained quiet as he clutched the shirt in his white-knuckled grip. Though Charles kept his distance, he could still feel the flicker of Erik's thoughts against his psyche like butterfly wings. He seemed to be debating something rather rapidly and finally with a heavy sigh, he pulled the shirt over his head.

Try as he might, Charles couldn't help the gasp that escaped his lips as that which he couldn't see in the early morning hours became apparent. The scars that marred Erik's skin were made even more pronounced thanks to the water, the purple contrasting sharply with the pale skin.

"Erik..."

"I don't need your pity, Charles," he growled.

"You don't have it," Charles replied, turning his back and rolling away as Erik changed behind him, a bitter feeling of frustration and annoyance coursing through him.

Without a word, or a glance backwards, Charles held out a pair of dry pants which Erik removed from his grip. He could hear the heavy of drop of wet pants hitting the carpet, some shuffling, and an awkward throat clearing. Though the metal-bender escaped Charles' scrutiny as he changed, the news of his daughter hung over them like a fog.

"You can turn around now." Erik stood in Charles' shirt and a pair of trousers that were slightly too short for him, but at least he had stopped shivering.

Both men stared at each other, a silent standoff to see who would draw first.

"Your daughter..." Charles started, trying to ignore the way Erik flinched again, "Is she - ?"

"Dead."

Charles sucked in a breath. "How?"

Without a word, Erik lifted the hem of his shirt, showing off a scar that singed his side.

"Fire."

Charles' voice was quiet, the emotion that simmered just below the surface breaking through for a moment. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Erik's fists clenched at his sides. "I don't think about it often. But seeing you with Daniel..." Erik turned his back on Charles and faced the window, the set of his shoulders tense. "You're a good father, you know that?" A heavy breath. "I was not."

"Erik." Charles' tone was sharp. "How can you say that?"

"She's not here, is she?"

Silence.
"I don't have the slightest idea of what I'm doing," Charles quietly admitted.

Erik turned away from the window. "No one does."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Charles tried again.

"I keep things from everyone."

"Not from me."

Charles immediately clamped his mouth shut, afraid that he had already revealed too much. Despite all that Erik had done, he still cared deeply about him and that was not something he wanted the other to know.

"I don't need your help," Erik murmured.

"And I don't need yours," Charles snapped, gesturing around him. "Yet here you are."

Erik opened his mouth to say something, staring at Charles with an emotion he couldn't quite pinpoint, before closing it and brushing past him.

Charles closed his eyes as the door slammed shut.

Sean whistled as he strolled down the hall, still flying high from his relief at not having lost Danny. He chafed a bit that Erik was the one to find him, but still, Lord knew what Charles would have done to him had he lost his son.

He pondered the possibilities as a bag came flying out of a doorway in front of him, the tune he was whistling abruptly dying on his lips.

"What the..."

Another bag was tossed into the hall to join the first, Erik following closely behind.

"What are you doing?"

Erik ignored him, picking up the bags and slinging them over his shoulder.

"Hey!" Sean jogged to keep up with Erik's long strides. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Piss off."

"You can't leave him! Not again!" Sean's voice echoed down the hallway and Erik stopped. Sean swallowed hard, squelching the urge to run in the other direction.

"I don't know what you all are making such a fuss about. He seems fine to me."

"Bullshit." Sean's mutation left him with a pretty good ability to interpret other's vocals and he could hear the note of uncertainty in Erik's. "You can't leave him. Not after everything you did."

"I know what I did!" Erik rounded on the teen and it was to Sean's credit that he only took two steps back.

"You don't have the slightest idea," Sean snapped. "He's a telepath, Erik."
"Tell me something I don't know."

Sean shook his head. "You don't know the half of it." His hands shook at his sides, but he knew that if he didn't say what he was about to, Erik would walk out that door and not come back. And despite their denials, Charles and Erik needed each other. Sean knew that, so he continued. "He felt **everything** that day. You know what I mean?" Erik narrowed his eyes. "Every crushed bone. Every torn nerve. Do you know what metal feels like going through brain matter?"

Erik blanched as Sean's meaning hit home.

"I didn't think so."

Erik took deep, shuddering breaths and Sean turned, taking pleasure in the noise of the bag hitting the floor.

"And you thought just the bullet was bad..."

It was a cheap shot, but at that point, Sean was beyond caring.

xxxxxx

"He doesn't look too good."

"Alex."

"What? He doesn't!"

"Shh."

Alex and Hank leaned over Daniel's crib and watched as the toddler tiredly rubbed a hand across his eyes.

"Have either of you seen Charles?" Raven asked as she cracked the door open.

Alex and Hank shared a look. "He's locked in his room."

"Why?"

Hank shrugged his big, blue shoulders. "I don't know, but I heard some raised voices earlier so… you put two and two together."

Raven rolled her eyes. "When will those two learn to play nice?"

"When they stop almost killing each other." The words were out of Alex's mouth before he could stop them, but Raven just gave him a look and continued on to the crib.

"How's my little man?"

"His fever's spiking again." Hank's voice was laced with worry. "103.2."

Alex's heart hammered against his chest at Hank's prognosis. A fever of 103.2 was high for an adult, but for a child, it could be fatal. He vaguely remembered his foster sister being taken to the hospital for a fever of 102.

Raven picked Daniel up and cradled him to her chest. "I have to say I'm impressed."
Hank arched an eyebrow. "With what?"

"That a house run by a depressed professor filled with a bunch of teenagers managed to put together a nursery."

Alex's earned burned, the memory of the collapsed crib still fresh in his mind. "It took a few tries."

"Daddy."

It was an odd thing that such a tiny, unsure statement could halt every sound, voice, and thought in the room.

"What did he just say?" Alex asked, slackjawed.

"Shh," Raven snapped.

Daniel sniffed and buried his face in Raven's neck. "Daddy."

The silence seemed oppressive as the three teens stared at the baby and then each other.

Hank poked a sharp finger at no one in particular. "I told you he'd talk when he was ready."

Raven was already halfway to the door when she turned to Alex, "I hope your aim's gotten better, because I might need you to blast open a door in a minute."

A grin broke out across his face. "Yes, ma'am."

xxxxxx

"Charles!"

His name echoed down the hallway, but as it didn't sound remotely panicked (in fact, if he thought about it, Raven actually sounded happy), he settled further into his chair and sulked as he stared out the window.

"Charles! Bang, bang, bang. "Charles, open the door. It's important."

Important. It was always important. For once, he'd just like to be allowed to wallow without someone coming up and pointing out the silver lining. He didn't want silver lining and he didn't want to deal with "important." He wanted to wallow in the knowledge that the man who supposedly wanted him at his side had walked out on him yet again.

"Charles, Alex will blast through this door."

"Yes, sir. I will."

Charles smiled. It would have helped Alex's case if his voice hadn't wavered.

"Your son needs you."

And that had Charles to the door in a heartbeat.

"What's wrong?" The question was out of his mouth before the the door was even fully open and the reply he got stole the breath from his lungs.

"Daddy." A grin spread on Daniel's flushed face as he practically dove from Raven's arms to
Charles' lap.

"Da…" Charles started to mouth the word, looking up in wonder at the four people in front of him.

"He's talking?" Sean had clearly been late to the party and he received a slight nudge in the ribs from a teary-eyed Raven.

"How…?" Words seem to fail Charles and he buried his nose in Daniel's hair.

"He just said it. Just like that, like he had been saying it all along." Alex shrugged. "Clearly he wanted you."

Charles swallowed hard, as Hank stepped forward, clearly upset at having to ruin the moment.

"Professor, we need to get him to the lab. I have to do a blood sample and try to get his fever down. It's just too high."

Charles nodded, still completely lost in the feel of his son in his arms. He always wondered if Daniel knew that he was his father or if he just thought that Charles was another stop in his seemingly neverending cycle of homes.

But to actually hear the word…

Charles subtly wiped a tear from his cheek.

xxxxx

It was a testament to how distracted Charles was that they actually got him in the lab. He hadn't set foot in it since the day of the mission and, to be honest, Hank didn't blame him.

Three blue and yellow suits hung on the wall: two in relatively decent condition and one with a giant whole in the front from where Alex's sensor was blasted off. Hank had been testing the fibers for improvements with little to no such luck.

Charles no longer had his – it was discarded in a Miami hospital, cut from his back as he lay face down on an operating table – but even if he did, Hank was pretty sure he would have destroyed it by now. It was just one more reminder that Charles didn't need.

Hank got out the iodine and the syringes. Though not a medical doctor, he knew what to look for in a blood sample. Charles and Daniel had yet to let go of each other, Raven aiding as she pushed his chair to the table in the center of the room.

"He's not going to like this," Hank murmured.

"Hell, I don't even like this." Alex eyed the needle with trepidation. Hank smirked.

"Daddy," Daniel moaned, reaching out for Charles again as a crash near the door made all of them jump.

Erik stood there, a broken microscope at his feet. All eyes were on him, but his eyes were on Daniel.

"Daddy?" His voice was quiet. Even but curious.

Hank's eyes flicked from Erik to Charles. They stared at each other as if having a silent conversation, but Hank would bet money that Charles had no desire to look in Erik's mind.
The smell of antiseptic was strong – it burned his nose and made his eyes water, but he was a scientist, so the smell was not foreign to him.

He should have realized something was wrong when the metal started vibrating.

Charles' heart drummed against his ribcage as Erik paled, eyes focused but unseeing on the syringe in Hank's hand. The metal continued to vibrate and the table levitated a few inches off the ground as his breath got shallower and shallower.

"Everyone out." Charles handed Daniel to Raven, his voice even and his order unmistakable.

"But –"

"Now!"

Raven hugged Daniel to her chest and Hank ushered Alex and Sean from the room as Charles rolled forward, stopping in front of Erik.

"Come back." Charles grabbed Erik's arm, but he seemed frozen, unable to break free from the nightmare in his mind. "Erik, come back to me." Calm. Calm, I'm here. You're safe… Come back, Erik.

Erik gasped and held onto Charles' arm to keep from falling over, as the table crashed back to the floor and the assorted metal instruments stopped spinning overhead.

Charles watched realization settle into Erik's features and his hand was abruptly dropped. It wasn't often that Charles saw the vulnerable side of Erik – it wasn't often that anyone did – but as he roughly rubbed a shaky hand across his face, Charles realized that no matter their differences and no matter the pain they had caused each other, no one should have to bear that alone.

"What happened to you, my friend?" he whispered. My friend. It was the first time he had addressed him as such since his head lay in his lap, his palm cradling his neck.

"What do you care?"

More than you'll ever know.

Erik seemed to freeze for a moment, considering the man in front of him.

"What will it take, Charles? What will it take to drive you away, huh? I shoot you and yet still, here you are."

"You didn't pull the trigger."

"You made no such distinction on the beach." His voice cracked, belying the pain beneath the stoicism.

"Forgive me, I had just been shot!" Charles closed his eyes and reigned in his anger. "Why are you here, Erik?"

Silence.

"I don't need your help." Erik was bitterness and petulance all rolled into one.
"Of course you don't." A smile played at his lips, an acknowledgement that he knew the man in front of him sometimes better than he knew himself.

"You can't fix me."

Charles swallowed hard and gave him a sad smile, gesturing to the chair upon which he sat. "You can't fix me either."

Erik's breath hitched and he studied him for a moment more, before taking a deep breath and kneeling in front of him.

"Erik, what are you doing?"

"Do it. Read it."

"What?"

"Do it, Charles," Erik urged, grabbing Charles' hands and placing his fingers at his temples. "Read me."

So he did…


Anger.


Charles gasped, as if breaking through the surface of a deep, dark lake. "Erik…" His voice cracked as he opened his eyes, but Erik roughly let go of his wrists and stood on uncertain limbs.

"Now you know."

And then he was gone.

xxxxxx

Their's had been a careful dance: one step forward, ten steps back; a waltz with devastating consequences and neither knew how to lead.
Charles sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose in an attempt to chase the headache away.

Daniel was currently sleeping peacefully in the nursery two doors down, his temperature finally down to a reasonable level. Charles had survived a missile crisis, a gunshot, and a broken heart, yet he was convinced fatherhood would be the death of him.

Raven had secured Charles a little alone time by bribing Sean, Alex, and Hank with mint chocolate chip ice cream and alone time was what Charles received since Erik had all but disappeared after the incident in the lab. The fact that his helmet still rested on the side table in the study was the only proof that he hadn't gone far.

The uneasy respite was not destined to last long, however. A knock on the door made him jump, and he uttered a lazy, "Come in," but no one did.

With a heavy sigh, he rolled over and peered out, cocking his head in confusion at the sight before him.

The chess board was set up in the configuration it had been in before Charles swept the pieces across the floor in a fit of self-pity.

His heart skipped as he recognized it for what it was: an apology, a promise… a peace offering.

A folded piece of paper lay across the players, and as Charles opened it up, Erik's familiar scrawl met his gaze.

"Your move."
"What, did you buy out the whole store?"

Sean glared at Raven as he dumped the heavy bag he was carrying on the kitchen table.

"Have you seen the children's aisle at the pharmacy? It's terrifying."

Raven snorted and sorted through the various boxes and bottles that Sean had acquired as he leaned against the counter and crossed his arms.

"Have you seen him?"

Raven looked up. "Since the lab? No."

"Pretty intense. What do you think the Professor did?"

"Talked him down from the ledge, I'd assume." She smiled. "He's good at that."

Three hours had passed since they were ordered from the lab as metal hummed around them. They caught a glimpse of Erik stalking down the hall and taking the stairs two at a time before they ventured back into the room to find Charles sitting exactly where Erik had been standing, staring at nothing in particular.

Raven had seen her brother rattled before, but never had she seen him look so lost. So alone.

As if Sean was reading her thoughts he suggested, "Maybe we should just lock them in a room together."

Raven laughed. "I think you picked the two worst people to attempt to lock in a room. Erik could turn the deadbolt with the flick of his wrist and Charles could order one of us to open it from the outside."

Sean blanched, as if he forgot just how powerful the two men in the house were. "Good point."

It wasn't an entirely preposterous idea, though. Charles and Erik needed to sit down and actually talk, but when one had habit of reading your thoughts and the other a penchant for storming out, the options were few and far between to say the least. She was wondering just how far their stubborn selves would take things when one of the men in question appeared at the door.

"Raven, be a love and help me, will you?"

Raven's head whipped around to Charles where he sat with a chessboard in his lap.

"Where are you going with that?"
"To the west wing, where I believe we'll find Mr. Lehnsherr destroying a good portion of it."

The look shared between Raven and Sean did not unnoticed by him, but he kept out of their minds.

"Can I carry that for you?" she asked, gesturing to the game.

"Please."

Alex and Hank appeared in the doorway a moment later, freezing when they got there. The blonde looked around in confusion.

"Where's dinner?"

"Where's Danny?" Charles retorted.

"Sleeping. It was Sean's turn."

Sean snorted. "To what?"

"To cook."

"Was not!" he cried, his voice muffled from the cookie was stuffing in his mouth.

"Enough." Charles' tone was stern, but laced with humor. "I believe there are some take out menus in one of the drawers, yes?"

"Yes," the boys chorused.

"Good. Then I leave it to you to fight over where we order from."

With a chuckle he spun, Raven at his side, as arguments broke out behind him.

"I hope you're not hungry," Raven said as they headed down the hall. "That'll keep them occupied for at least the next 45 minutes."

"I'd rather be hungry than endure Sean's cooking."

Raven quirked the side of her mouth up, as if conceding the point. "Why is Erik destroying the west wing?"

"Because that's where he decided to put the elevator." Charles stopped rolling when he realized Raven was no longer next to him. She looked incredulous.

"He just… decided to put the elevator there?"

"Well, I didn't have a preference." Charles grinned and kept on going, his spirits oddly buoyant that Erik had at least stayed on the property when he stormed out of the lab, regardless of the fact that he was now decimating a good portion of the foundation.

Raven eyed him. "What are you up to?"

"Just a game of chess."

"I can see that," she said, lifting the board in her hands.

He had missed this, this banter, this humor. More than he could put into words. He had smiled more in the last five minutes than he had in the last five months. His hands slowed the wheels of his chair
as he looked at his sister standing next to him.

"What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "I want you to know that this will always be your home. No matter where you are. You can stay as long as you want. If it were up to me, I'd have you stay forever."

"You could." She smiled. "But you won't."

"But I won't."

He noted the wobble in her voice and the tears in her eyes as she bent down and placed a kiss on his forehead.

"You're a good man, Charles Francis Xavier."

He sighed and raised her hand to his lips. "I have my moments."

The gesture was becoming almost lazy now, as he flicked the shovel further into the earth. Removing the wood paneling proved a little difficult, but with the blueprints and the materials at his disposal, he made short work of it as he lorded over the steel beams that placed themselves into the foundation.

It had been three hours since he laid his mind bare to Charles. Three hours since he relived all that he had worked so hard to suppress… Magda… Anya.

There was a child down the hall that reminded him only too well of the child he had lost. Anya had his mother's blue eyes just as Daniel had his father's.

Charles.

He had a habit of bringing out both the best and worst in him, the best being humanity and humility, and the worst being a strident urge to run in the other direction.

Erik was many things, but a runner wasn't one of them.

"Your presence is requested in the library."

He ignored the quip and dug the beams further into the ground. She sighed heavily behind him and placed a palm on his back.

"I'm sorry about what happened in the lab… whatever it was."

His muscles tensed under her hand but he remained silent.

"And your presence really is requested in the library."

He nodded as her palm dropped, and he steadied the structure before turning to find her gone.

He hadn't spent much time in the library – he and Charles usually settled for the study off of the room
which Charles now used as his own. Erik didn't like the library – Shaw had a library – and he suspected this aversion was why Charles suggested the study that first night in the mansion. Charles had a habit of reading him without going into his mind. It was both unnerving and comforting.

The door creaked as he pushed it open to find the man himself sitting at a table in the middle of the room, the chessboard splayed out in front of him.

"I play chess for the company, so if you wouldn't mind, I'd much rather do this in person than on paper."

"I see you got my note," Erik said as he crossed the room.

Charles cocked an eyebrow in that annoyingly boyish way he had. "Clearly." He gestured for Erik to take the seat across from him and, after a moment's hesitation, he did. "I have a few ground rules, though."

Now it was Erik's turn to look at him skeptically.

"1) No storming out in a huff. It's a very infuriating habit you have." Erik opened his mouth to argue, but Charles plowed on, cutting him off. "2) No broadcasting your moves so loudly that you give me no choice but to cheat. And 3)…" Charles paused, as the mirth that had been on his face seconds before vanished, "No apologies."

At this, Erik sharply looked up.

"It was an accident," Charles whispered, his voice cracking on the final word. "Nothing more."

Erik opened his mouth, unsure as to what exactly he wanted to come out of it, but Charles silenced him again.

"Don't." And in a move that caused both of them to inhale sharply, he reached across the board and placed his hand on Erik's. "It was an accident."

Erik's heart hammered in his chest as the forgiveness he had sought for so long covered him like a warm blanket.

"Your move, yes?" Charles prompted, removing his hand, as if he had not just thrown Erik's emotional state into upheaval.

*Your move.* The words he had written not three hours ago were thrown back at him, meaning more now than he had ever intended. Charles had laid the issue bare, without fuss and without question.

Erik swallowed hard as he moved his knight across the board. It was a foolish move, but then again, his head wasn't quite in the game yet. Charles seemed to sense this and made a move just as foolhardy as if to balance the field.

The sentiment made Erik smile. Minutes passed in amiable silence before Charles cleared his throat and glanced just a little accusingly across the board.

"So if your telepath is making continual sweeps, why did she not tell you about me?" He gestured to his unfeeling legs.

"She's not my telepath," he snapped, before looking slightly sheepish.

The unspoken, *You are*, floated ever so briefly across their connection before Erik clamped down on
Just not fast enough. Charles caught the two tiny words, his eyes widening a fraction before he diverted his gaze back to the board, unsure what to make of them.

"She's not there to spy, if that's what you think," Erik muttered.

"It's not. Though I wonder why she chose to leave out this rather large detail." He patted the chair amiably.

"She knows what my weaknesses are and she likes to take advantage." The words were blunt, but his focus remained on the players at hand.

Silence fell again. That's how they worked – how they mended. Taking comfort in the silence before wading into necessary, but still bruising territory. Charles waited fifteen minutes before he spoke again.

"I must ask though, after everything we had been through, did you really not trust me?"

"What?"

"The helmet. You must not have trusted me to put it on after Shaw died."

"Would you have stopped me?"

Charles contemplated his answer. He wouldn't have stopped him right away. He would have used words first, but then he remembered how ineffectual his words were on the beach that day and he eventually responded with a, "Yes."

Erik shrugged, as if to say See?

"You didn't say goodbye."

Erik's gaze flicked to his before shamefully looking away.

I wanted to.

"Then why didn't you?"

"I didn't think it was necessary. I knew I'd never be able to stay away from you for long."

Now that was an answer Charles was most definitely not expecting and silence fell again. Twenty minutes later, it was Erik who broached the next topic.

"Sean told me about the coin."

Charles’ gaze lifted from the board, burning a whole into Erik. He could sense the apology on Erik's tongue and he silenced him before he uttered a sound.

"Rule #3."

"Charles - "

"You didn't know."
"I should have. I should have put two and two together. You were in his mind! How could I not know?"

"I'm sure that fulfilling one's lifelong revenge quest has a nasty habit of limiting one's ability to put two and two together." Charles smiled, but Erik's expression remained pained. "It wasn't pleasant, I'll grant you that, but it's done. It's in the past."

"I don't want to hurt you." Charles floated Erik's own words back at him in his own voice, words he had uttered just after he put a coin through his head and just before he put a bullet in his back.

"I know you meant what you said," Charles whispered. "You didn't want to hurt me."

Erik's chin dropped to his chest and he inhaled shaky breaths. "But I did."

"We usually hurt the ones we love. We don't mean to, but we do."

Charles had said that once to Raven after a childhood fight. She had come sobbing into his room, apologizing for all that she had said, but he simply wrapped his arms around her and whispered that nothing had changed. That he still loved her and he knew that she still loved him.

Erik neither confirmed nor denied Charles' theory, and the telepath was happy to leave it at that.

And so the game progressed and finished and started again. Not much was said, other than an acknowledgement that there was freshly delivered pizza in the kitchen. Neither was hungry and so they played on.

At half past eleven, Charles closed his eyes, feeling distress down the hall. "I need your help."

Erik quirked an eyebrow and glanced at the board. "With what?"

"Daniel's crying and he only calms down when someone paces with him… I can't do that."

Erik's brow furrowed as a flash of emotion crossed his face and Charles was quick to siphon off the guilt that swelled in his mind.

"No, no, no. I didn't mean – I didn't say that to hurt you, my friend." Erik relaxed and Charles continued, "I simply want to know if you would mind… getting my son and pacing with him."

For once, Erik's face wasn't easy to read. Green eyes were a storm and with a curt nod, he stood and walked out the door.

Charles watched him go, feeling both pride and envy. He had felt a flash of something not entirely unpleasant as he watched Erik holding Daniel that morning. It was almost hard to believe that he and Raven had returned just over 24 hours ago.

But as Erik returned with a sniffing Daniel, Charles couldn't help but think, despite his better judgment, how natural the metal-bender looked in his study with his child in his arms.
In which Alex gets a lesson in self defense and Charles takes a bath.

It was odd to hold something so fragile. Though metal was malleable in his hand, it was nearly indestructible to others. But now, he held something significantly more precious and the thought had him more nervous than he'd care to admit.

"You aren't going to break him. He's quite durable," Charles smirked and Erik glared. "I wasn't in your head. You're broadcasting your fear like a radio tower."

Erik returned his focus to the baby in his arms. He had quieted since Erik picked him up from his crib and walked with him back to the library, but tears still stained his cheeks, which he rubbed against Erik's shirt.

"Tell me you weren't scared out of your wits the first time you held him." Erik's tone was slightly teasing.

"Oh, my friend, scared doesn't even begin to describe it."

As the baby was now calm, Erik reclaimed his seat across from Charles, bracing Danny with one arm as he moved his pawn with the other.

"Did you ever think you'd have kids?" He was surprised as the question left his lips, as if it was too personal for the easy banter they had settled into over the past few hours.

Charles was quiet for a moment, considering the little boy in Erik's arms. "I had hoped, but wasn't entirely sure it was in the cards for me. Now..." he gestured to the chair.

Erik immediately regretted asking the question - he wasn't even sure if Charles was capable of having children anymore. Silence descended again until a distant bang and an "Alex!" echoed from upstairs.

"I guess you already had three, if you think about it," Erik said in what he hoped came off as an amusing tone. "Four, if you count Raven."

Charles chuckled. "Sean did get his head stuck in the railings the other day."

The laughter that bubbled up in Erik's throat at the image took him by surprise. The sound was actually somewhat jarring. He couldn't remember the last time he had smiled, let alone laughed. Charles seemed to revel in the sound, a Cheshire cat grin lighting up his face as he rolled up his sleeves and surveyed the chessboard once more.

"How did you get that?" Erik asked, pointing to the large bruise on Charles' forearm.

"What? Oh..." he started, looking down at the injury. "When you lose the ability to walk, simple things like taking a shower become slightly more difficult."
"You should let someone help you."

"I'm fine."

Erik shifted Daniel further up and leveled his gaze at the telepath. "Charles Xavier: so quick to help yet so unwilling to accept it in return." Erik's features softened and his heart beat a little quicker. "I could help. If you'd let me."

Charles let out a bitter chuckle. "You can't change your shirt in front of me yet you expect me to let you see me like that? I appreciate the sentiment, but no thank you, my friend. Besides, you won't be around here forever, so I might as well get used to doing things on my own."

Charles would never know how those words sliced through Erik's heart. He allowed a few more minutes to pass before he gave voice to the thought dancing on the end of his tongue.

"Why did you keep holding onto Shaw despite the agony you were in?"

Charles looked at him as if the answer was obvious. "Because if I had let go, he most surely would have killed you, and I don't want to live in a world where you do not exist."

Six in the morning was a quiet time in the Xavier household. Alex missed the days when the manor was filled with the sounds of Erik banging around the weight room or the smells wafting from the kitchen as Charles hummed over the stove.

Now, it had become too difficult for the professor to even flip pancakes and ever since Erik left, the weight room had been collecting dust. But Alex had a little excess steam to let off and he coughed as he pulled the curtains back, letting the light bounce off the dumbbells and mirrors.

Pushups, jumping jacks, hand weights, pull-ups, sprints, and crunches. An hour later and Alex was dripping with sweat, his t-shirt sticking to his skin as he panted and gulped down some water from the bottle. Since he was trying to spare the garden – the professor did enjoy the shrubbery – Alex took his wrath out on the punching bag next. He hit and hit until his knuckles hurt and then he hit some more.

He thought of Darwin, of Charles, of Hank, of Sean, of Angel who had left, and Erik and Raven who had returned. As he was about to land a particularly brutal punch, he ran into resistance from the bag that jarred his wrist. Blinking, he looked up to realize Erik was now holding the other side, his gaze coldly calculating.

"Again," he instructed.

Alex stood straight and winced in an effort to force air into his struggling lungs. Erik raised an eyebrow as if challenging and Alex lifted his fists again, landing a punch on the bag.

"Harder."

Alex grunted as he placed another hit and the bag bumped Erik in the jaw.

"Harder."

Alex glared at Erik's stony expression. If he wanted harder, he could give him harder. He landed another punch, causing Erik to take a step back as the bag knocked against his chest.
"Better." The older man let go and rummaged around in a bin before pulling out two pairs of gloves and tossing one at Alex. "Let's see how you fair at sparring."

Though he schooled his features into something resembling indifference, Alex's insides jumped. He might not like the older man, but he certainly had a healthy respect for his abilities. And his height.

Erik moved to the center of the room, pushing a weight bench out of the way as he strapped the gloves on and punched his fists together. Alex swallowed as they began circling each other.

"Come on, I won't bite."

Alex snorted. "It's not your teeth I'm worried about. There's a lot of metal in this room."

Erik grinned. "I'll play nice."

Alex punched out and Erik easily blocked with his left before swinging around with his right and connecting with Alex's temple. The boy staggered back and shook his head. The punch had landed before he had even registered it was coming. Alex added quick reflexes to the list of things that Erik excelled at, along with killing people and holding a grudge.

"Protect your face, kid."

Alex swung out, Erik blocked, and Alex staggered back.

"You're dropping your left when you swing." Erik easily landed another hit. "Don't do that."

Anger began to boil within Alex's chest and he swung out again.

"You get sloppy when you're pissed," Erik taunted, capping it off with a tap to Alex's unprotected ribs.

It was an effort to control the rapidly rising energy in his body but Alex ground his teeth together and circled once again. Erik landed another hit on his ribs and Alex winced.

"Drop your elbow when I do that."

Alex dropped his elbow and Erik hit his face.

"But don't leave your cheek exposed."

"How the hell am I supposed to do that?" Alex gritted out.

"Practice."

They continued on with Erik answering every one of Alex's failed attempts to reach him. Finally, he saw an opening, a gap that left the metal-bender's chin exposed every time he jabbed. And as Erik reached out, Alex took advantage and nailed the older man with a swift uppercut that lifted him on his toes before sending him tumbling to the floor.

Erik lay spread eagle on the ground and, for a brief moment, Alex feared he had knocked him out – and then he groaned. The groan turned into a chuckle, before slowly escalating into full on laughter as Erik pushed himself into a sitting position and surveyed the boy before him.

"Not bad, kid."

Alex held out his hand and helped haul the man to his feet. There was blood in the corner of Erik's
mouth, but he didn't seem to care, as he fixed Alex with a look that he couldn't quite place.

"Not too bad at all."

Thinking back on it, though, Alex could've sworn it looked something like pride.

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"Daddy."

Charles watched with a smile on his face as Daniel built a stack of blocks and then knocked them over with a squeal of glee. "Daddy" was still the only word in his vocabulary, but his ability to string together a bunch of nonsensical noises and make them sound like coherent thought was amusing to say the least. Though Daniel's mind was still too immature to actually read, Charles could still sense feeling from him: hunger, fear, exhaustion. It gave him a leg up on this parenting thing, even if Sean did teasingly accuse him of cheating.

"Clearly, he's inherited Erik's more destructive tendencies."

Charles looked up sharply to find Raven standing in the doorway.

"It was a joke, Charles, don't look so scandalized."

The telepath closed the mouth he belatedly realized had dropped and immediately flushed as Raven's words hit home. She narrowed her eyes in an infuriatingly knowing manner before plopping down next to him on the floor and building a tower for Daniel to knock down. He was slowly getting used to her naked form – the urge to run and throw a blanket over her was beginning to ebb away – but he couldn't help like feeling he had held her back in some capacity.

"You never held me back," she said, placing a hand on his pajama-clad leg. At Charles' startled look, she explained, "You're projecting again."

He inhaled deeply. He really had to get a hold of his telepathy.

"How are you sleeping?"

"I think you already know the answer to that," Charles answered dryly.

"Has it always been this out of control?"

Charles shook his head, knowing what she was getting at without having to look at her thoughts. He could hear Raven sigh next to him as he reached out and stroked Daniel's cheek.

"Maybe we should leave."

Charles looked up so quickly, he cricked his neck. "What? Why?"

"Charles, the timing isn't lost on me. Maybe our being here isn't what you need right now."

"Maybe it's exactly what I need right now." He made his voice take on some semblance of calm, but frankly, the thought of them leaving made panic seize his chest. He couldn't say goodbye again. Not when he had just gotten them back.

"He reminds me of you, you know. When you were younger." Raven's attention had turned back to Daniel.
Charles smiled. "You didn't know me when I was that age."

"Still, you have the same crease of concentration on your forehead right..." she pointed, "here."

Charles examined Daniel as he built another tower and, sure enough, his nose scrunched and his forehead frowned, his little pink tongue peeking out in quiet contemplation.

"That was what you looked like the entire time you were writing your thesis."

Charles looked at her in mock indignation. "Surely not the entire time."

"With the exception of your drunken escapades down at the pub, yes the entire time."

The familiar sound of metal bending to his will comforted Erik as he oversaw the structure that was slowly but surely molding itself into an elevator shaft.

He did not know what to make of Charles' words the night before: "Because if I had let go, he most surely would have killed you, and I don't want to live in a world where you do not exist."

How was he supposed to take that? After a life lived in almost complete solitude, to have someone notice, let alone care if he was no longer there was a momentous thing indeed.

"Wow..."

Erik turned to find Raven impressively inspecting the renovations.

"I must say... it's some of your finest work. Then again, I was always partial to your ability to become a human seatbelt." She winked.

Erik frowned. She winked. What was that?

"What do you want, Raven?"

"I think our presence is causing his subconscious some distress."

Internally, Erik flinched but he kept his face indifferent.

"But then again, you know that," Raven continued, "seeing as you've spent the past two nights in the chair next to his bed."

"If I'm the cause of his distress, I'd like to be the solution if possible."

Raven said nothing – she could offer no consolation, they both knew that. No one could mend the frayed edges of their friendship anymore than they could heal the shattered pieces of Charles' vertebrae. The warm feeling of hope Erik had felt over their chess game the other night was eclipsed by the increasingly overwhelming feeling of sadness. They would not be able be to get back to what they were before and the realization hit Erik like a bucket of cold water.

And so hours passed. Erik sat on the floor across from the rapidly forming elevator shaft, mindlessly lifting panels and turning screws. It was his penance; his act of contrition. Prayers fell on deaf ears and his only friendship was most likely irreparably broken, so he built. He hammered and molded until tears clouded his eyes and pain pounded in his head, using every ounce of guilt and heartbreak within him as mortar for the structure.
Eventually Raven left him alone. Sean came around the corner sometime later and attempted to engage him in conversation, but Erik remained focused solely on the task at hand, ignoring the teen but not driving him away. Of all the occupants of the house, Sean seemed to be the least adverse to him – other than Daniel of course – and Erik was oddly comforted by that.

Sean sat next to him, far enough away not to bother but close enough for Erik to take notice, and just watched as the metal-bender worked. Erik couldn't be sure how long Sean stayed there – his mind wasn't really in tune with anything outside of the metal which he warped – but the next time he looked over, Sean was gone and a sandwich sat in his place.

Funny. Erik hadn't even registered the teen leaving and coming back. His stomach gave a traitorous growl and he allowed himself a break and a bite, because if there was one good thing to come from Sean's recreational drug use, it was that his severe cases of the munchies taught him to make a mean sandwich.

Alex was the next to visit him and Erik could both hear and feel the scrape of a metal spoon against a bowl. Without preamble, Alex plopped down in Sean's vacated spot and quietly watch Erik work, a pile of mint chocolate chip ice cream in his lap. He held the spoon out, wordlessly offering some to Erik as the metal continued to work itself. Erik's eyes flicked from Alex to the spoon and back again, briefly wondering if the kid had poisoned the contents and that's why he was feeling particularly generous tonight.

"I won't bite," Alex said, throwing Erik's words from that morning back at him.

Erik narrowed his eyes and levitated the spoon from Alex's hand and into his own, before slurping the ice cream into his mouth.

"Good?"

Erik nodded and returned the spoon. 'Good' didn't even begin to describe it. It was divine, the sweetness exploding on his tongue like a dozen fireworks.

"I've never had ice cream before," he murmured. In his peripheral vision, he could see Alex's eyes widen, but it was to the teen's credit that he didn't comment.

"We'll stock up then." His eyes returned to the construction in front of him, but the telltale clearing of his throat told Erik he wasn't done speaking. "When are you leaving?"

"I don't know." The answer was hasty. Defensive. But curiosity got the better of him and he continued. "What if I don't?"

Alex shrugged and stared at his spoon. "I guess that'd be cool."

Erik swallowed hard. It was the closest thing to a blessing he'd ever get.

Nothing else was said between the two men, and eventually Alex left. Still, Erik waited, hoping against hope that the one person he really wanted to sit beside him would come rolling down the hallway. But his luck hadn't been much of anything to begin with, and the next set of heavy footsteps signaled Hank's approach.

"You missed dinner."

"I wasn't particularly hungry." Erik's eyes drooped and his back hurt from sitting on the floor for the majority of the evening.
"Alex informs me you've discovered a new love of mint chocolate chip ice cream."

"Traitor," Erik muttered.

Hank chuckled, but it came out more like a growl. "Your secret's safe with me."

Erik inhaled and the cynic in him wondered why the kids, who had been none too welcoming upon his arrival, were all of a sudden parading in, one right after the other, just to check on him.

"Did Charles put you all up to this?"

The chuckle died on Hank's lips and his yellow eyes narrowed in Erik's direction. "Put us up to what?"

"This." Erik gestured around him. "You've all been coming up in a steady stream and…"

"And what?" Hank prompted.

"Acting like nothing's wrong! Like I belong here!" For the first time of the evening, Erik's stoicism broke and emotion flashed across his face, constricting his chest just as the break in concentration strangled the metal beam he had in his grasp. In an uncharacteristic move, Hank crouched down eye-level with him.

"I don't say this to hurt you, Erik – frankly, I think we've all been hurt enough – but clearly you underestimate the damage that was done to the professor."

The damage you've done. Erik didn't need to be a telepath to hear the underlying meaning.

"Before, he might have urged us to console you; hell, he probably would have done it himself. But now…" Hank sighed. "I don't even think he has the energy. So no… he didn't put us up to it."

"Where is he?" Erik's voice was raw.

"I saw him about ten minutes ago on his way back to his room. He said he was about to take a shower."

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Hank wasn't entirely sure what he had said, but whatever it was made Erik disappear down the hall faster than he'd ever seen.

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Charles attempted to tug the shirt over his head, but a thread had caught on his chair which meant his head was stuck somewhere between the arm and neck of the material.

"Bloody hell."

Before he could utter a string of profanities that only sheer frustration could bring out of him, the shirt was gently unhooked from the chair and even more carefully lifted over his head. His hair flopped into his eyes but he carded a hand through it to reveal Erik meticulously folding the sweater and placing it beside the sink.

"What are you – "

Erik held up his hand, silencing him, as if metal had just clamped down around his mouth. Charles
could feel the other man's gaze bouncing from bruise to bruise on his body. Maneuvering in his new condition was not always easy and more often than not his body took the brunt of his frustrations and his failings.

Erik reached out, his hand hovering as if to cup Charles' cheek, before dropping back to his side. Charles could feel his face and chest flush with shame.

"I don't need help."

Erik gestured to the bruises. "Your body says otherwise… Let me do this."

It was the raw pleading of Erik's voice that snapped Charles' gaze to his. He looked just as broken as Charles felt, as his eyes rested on the chair and all that it represented. It became the physical embodiment of all his guilt and all his hate, and Charles could feel the metal hum beneath him as Erik's emotions threatened to overwhelm him.

"Come back, Erik." Those three words snapped Erik out of whatever had a hold of him.

"Please, Charles."

It was the 'please' that did Charles in. With a resigned nod and a thumping heart, he allowed Erik to turn the water on before bending down in front of him.

First was the shoes, then the socks. Charles could tell Erik was being overly gentle, cradling his ankle in his palm, despite the fact that Charles could feel no pain. When the shoes were perfectly lined up in a row, Erik cleared his throat and gestured to Charles' pants.

Charles felt the blush bloom across his pale skin, but still he reached down and unbuttoned his trousers, bracing his hands on the arms of the chair to lift himself up as Erik slowly pulled the pants off of his legs.

As the tub filled, steam hovered in the bathroom, yet Charles still shivered as he sat in the chair in nothing but his boxers.

"I fear we are about to cross a line that we cannot undo." Charles tried to chuckle but it got stuck in his throat. Erik ignored his failed attempt at humor. "All right, then."

With a heavy sigh, Charles slid the boxers off, and let them drop, looking everywhere but at the man in front of him. He could feel Erik hovering over him and he gasped as the other man placed one hand on his back and the other under his knees.

"On three," Erik whispered. "One, two, three."

With a soft grunt, Erik stood with Charles in his arms as if he weighed nothing. The chair rolled out of the way to the other side of the bathroom as Erik stepped forward and gently lowered Charles into the tub. Despite the hot water now engulfing him, Charles could still feel the press of Erik's palms against his skin long after he had let go.

"All right?"

He tried to reply with "yes" but that too died on his lips so he settled for a nod. He thought Erik would leave, would leave him to his shame and misery, but the metal-bender continued to surprise him – in good ways and bad – as he pulled a chair up to the end of the tub and sat down behind Charles.
"Lean back."

"What?"

"Lean back, I said." With a flick of his wrist, he summoned a metal cup to his hand and leaned down, filling it with water.

"This is ridiculous, I'm not four."

"Then stop acting like it," he replied as he dumped the warm water over the telepath's head.

Charles spluttered and coughed, but all he could come up with in return was a quiet, "Touche." He could practically feel Erik's smirk behind him.

Eventually, the blush faded from his cheeks and he leaned back as instructed, letting the porcelain of the tub cool his aching muscles. Neither said anything as Erik rubbed shampoo into his hair cautiously and meticulously, taking more care than Charles thought him capable of. He worked the soap into a lather before dipping the metal cup back into the water and shielding Charles' eyes with his palm and he washed the shampoo away.

Charles could feel the waves of guilt, of hurt, of penance, rolling off of Erik and he left him to his ritual, as if his sin washed away with every drop of warm water running down Charles' head.

He wasn't entirely sure how long they stayed like that, saying nothing as Erik shielded his eyes and poured water over his head, as if baptizing him, which was ironic in itself. It was long enough for the water to cool and his hair to be the cleanest he's pretty sure it's ever been. Charles waited until Erik was ready, until the cup was placed back on the counter and a towel pulled from the hook on the back of the door.

"How exactly do you do this?" Erik stood and looked between Charles and the towel.

Charles smiled at the lost look on his face. "Put the towel on the chair."

Erik nodded and covered the chair with the towel before turning back to Charles and rolling up his sleeves. They had come too far for Charles to be ashamed now and as Erik slipped his hands into the water, Charles held tight to his neck as he was lifted from the tub and placed in the chair. Surely, Erik must hear his heart beating – to Charles, the sound was absolutely deafening.

Ignoring the disappointment as Erik's grip left his, he wrapped the downy towel around his torso and yelped as another towel was draped over his head, blocking out the light.

"Erik!" His voice was muffled and he could hear Erik chuckling behind him as he rubbed the towel over his wet hair.

"This is a good look for you." Erik stepped aside, revealing Charles' reflection in the mirror. His hair stuck up at odd angles.

"Was that necessary?"

Erik merely grinned in return and pushed Charles back into the bedroom despite the fact that Charles was perfectly capable of wheeling himself around.

He watched in quiet astonishment as Erik moved around the room, pulling a pair of pajamas from the drawer where kept them, as if he knew where Charles kept all of his things.
And perhaps he did. It was a thought that was both unsettling and uplifting.

"Lean forward," Erik quietly instructed, the amusement gone from his voice. Charles did as he was told and looped one arm through the shirt which Erik held out for him.

"I can do that," Charles said, more sharply than he intended, as he glance at the pants in Erik's hands. For the first time that night, Erik conceded and turned his back as Charles maneuvered into the striped pajamas. It was a struggle, Charles could admit, and he knew it would have been made easier if he had let Erik help, but that was one task he wasn't sure he was quite prepared for yet.

"You can turn back now."

Erik turned but kept his eyes on the ground. It was as if the veil of trust that had existed in the bathroom had fallen and now both men, who had been through so much together, were all of a sudden shy of the other.

"Thank you, my friend."

Erik nodded and let his eyes drift up as Charles rolled over to the bed.

"May I?"

Charles knew what Erik was referring to and with a nod of his head he consented. Erik stepped forward and scooped Charles out of the chair again, placing him carefully – almost reverently – on the bed, before settling into the chair beside it.

"You plan on staying there all night?" He had been joking but what Erik said next wiped the smile from his face.

"If I told you I've spent the past two nights here without your knowledge, would you believe me?"

Charles swallowed hard, but said nothing.

"You have nightmares," Erik stated plainly, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees. "Share them with me. Let me take some of the burden."

Charles must have broadcasted the hesitancy he felt, because Erik responded with:

"What don't you want me to see?"

The telepath let out a bitter chuckle. "Nothing you haven't seen before."

He conjured images of a beach and a gutted plane and the whoosh of air that left Erik's lips told Charles he had gotten the message. It was as if he had just punched him in the gut.

"I forgive you, my friend," Charles started quietly. "It's time for you to forgive yourself."

Erik bowed his head, giving it a gentle shake. "Let me stay."

Charles knew he was asking a lot, especially of a man who had a tendency to harbor strong feelings for long periods of time. But this was different. If Erik didn't let it go, it would consume him whole. And Charles knew he would follow him into that void in a heartbeat.

It was this thought that nodded his head and pulled the "yes" from his lips. At night, in dreams, he was in his own hell, his own void. And all Erik asked of him was to let him follow.
So he did.

He scooted over, patting the space beside him, and the relief that spread across Erik's face nearly knocked him backward. The metal-bender was quick to kick off his shoes and gingerly crawl onto the bed, waiting until Charles had settled before relaxing himself. Erik's heartbeat quickened under Charles' ear as he rested his head on his chest.

"The connection is stronger if there's contact," he murmured by way of explanation. He could feel Erik's chin nod against his head. Even if he hadn't given excuse for the gesture, Charles was pretty sure Erik wouldn't have objected. They were in for a rough night and Charles was glad for the company.

It was an odd thing to be sharing a bed with a man whom he couldn't look in the eye not 72 hours ago.

No, they would not be able be to get back to what they were before. But maybe they could be something better.
Chapter Summary

In which Daniel learns another new word and Erik panics just a bit.

Hot. He is so very, very hot. The kind of hot that creeps up your neck as the first twinge of panic slowly grabs hold of your heart. He knows he's okay. He knows he's probably dreaming - but as the panic elevates his heart rate and dread moves his blood, he can't differentiate between fact and fiction. He needs to run, but his legs are dead weight. He needs to scream, but his voice gets stuck in his throat. He needs, he needs, he needs, but all he wants is taken away before he can even reach his arm out. It's too much, and he knows the panic will surely kill him... will steal the love in his heart and the feeling from his limbs.

But just as quickly as it came, it went, and Erik shot up in a tangled mess of sheets, panting heavily, shirt stuck to his chest, reaching out for something to ground him.

"Erik, Erik, it's okay."

It had felt so real, as if the fear was closing around his throat like a vise. His wrists were grabbed and he distantly registered someone calling his name, but the dream was too hard to shake, its shackles still holding tight to his mind.

"Erik!"

He blinked and focused his dazed gaze on the man next to him. Oh right. The man next to him.

"Charles?"

"I'm sorry, my friend," Charles panted and Erik finally remembered just why they were in the same room, the same bed. Let me take some of the burden, he had said.

He looked down to see Charles' grip still tight on his wrists and it was only then that he realized his nightmare was Charles' reality.

"This was a bad idea." Charles released him and rubbed a hand on his face. "This was a very bad idea; I shouldn't have let you talk me into it."

"I'm fine," Erik croaked, but his voice sounded anything but. It had seemed so real, so all encompassing.

"Erik."

"I'm fine," Charles. Go back to sleep." He punched the pillow into some semblance of fluffiness and lay back down, as if that would end the conversation, but a distant cry echoed down the hall and both men let out matching sighs.

"I'll get him," Erik murmured, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and pushing himself into a seated position. The hardwood floor was cold beneath his toes and he padded quickly but stiffly down the hall to Daniel's room.
The door creaked as he pushed it opened, drawing the toddler's eyes to him instantly.

"Hey there," Erik whispered. "Did your daddy wake you up too?"

Daniel looked up at him with watery eyes and held up his arms as Erik deftly lifted him from the crib.

"You're okay." Erik whispered against his temple as he grabbed the rabbit from the mess of blankets. "You're okay."

The hall was quiet save for Daniel's occasional snuffle as Erik made his way back to Charles' room. The telepath looked up as soon as they entered, his gaze softening as he focused on his son. Erik could practically feel the guilt radiating off of the other man.

"He's fine," Erik said in an effort to comfort both father and son. Charles held out his arms and Erik placed Daniel in them.

"I'm sorry, my boy," Charles whispered, running his hands through Daniel's damp hair and pressing a kiss to his temple.

"I don't think you woke anyone else up," Erik said, as he climbed back into bed and pounded the pillow once more.

"I didn't." Charles rubbed his temple and sighed into his palm.

"At least you're reining in your range." Erik offered a smile over his shoulder as Charles settled against the pillows and shifted Daniel in between them.

"You don't have to stay."

"Goodnight, Charles."

xxxxxx

Heavy lids and a scratchy throat were what Charles woke to that morning. That, and a tiny foot pressing into his side and a large arm draped across his stomach.

He squinted an eye open and couldn't help the smile that spread across his face. Daniel had shifted sideways during the night, burrowing his face into Erik's chest and his toes into Charles' side. Erik, meanwhile, had flipped to his stomach and was snoring softly into the pillow with his arm lazily draped over Charles.

It was all very domestic.

Charles let his eyes close against the sunlight streaming through the window, reveling in the early morning tranquility. It wouldn't be long before Daniel was up and running around the house; before an air of awkwardness settled over the two men.

So Charles decided to enjoy the moment while he could, chuckling a little as his son kicked in his sleep.

xxxxxx

"Where's the syrup?" Sean's voice bounced off the tiled counter.

"Did you check the cabinet?" Raven looked at him archly over her bowl of granola and Sean glared
"Of course I looked in the cabinet."

"The right one?"

Sean scoffed and said, "Yes the right one," but that didn't stop him from double-checking.

"That's not where we keep it," Raven sing-songed.

"It is now," Sean retorted, his tone a little more biting than needed.

Raven looked as though he had slapped her. Much had changed since she left and not just the placement of the breakfast condiments.

"Sorry," Sean muttered. It must be hard for someone to feel like a guest in their own home and Sean wasn't making it any easier on her. "We moved it when we realized the professor couldn't reach up there," he explained, gesturing to the tall cabinet where Raven thought the syrup had been hiding.

"Makes sense," she replied, returning to her granola and pushing it around the bowl. "When did you start cooking breakfast?" she asked after a moment.

"When Alex almost burnt the mansion down."

She snorted and her eyes glowed, but the chuckle died on her lips as the smile slowly slid from her face. "Will you let us stay?" Her voice was meek, such a stark contrast to the girl sitting naked in the kitchen, bold as brass.

The spatula in Sean's hand stilled and he gave a small shrug. "Not my decision to make."

"Sure it is," she replied. "It's your home now."

"It can still be yours too, you know," he replied. "No one asked you to leave."

xxxxxx

She looked at him thoughtfully, as if seeing him for the first time. Gone was the boy who shattered a window in a nondescript CIA facility. Sure, he still had that spark of mischief, but the naivety in his eyes had hardened into something Raven was sorry to see take up residence.

"Son of a bitch!" Alex's voice broke the moment as Raven watched him hop on one foot and glare menacingly at a toy fire truck Daniel had left haphazardly on the floor.

The glint of mischief in Sean's eyes returned for a moment, leaving Raven to wonder if the toddler really was the one who conveniently left the toy right inside the kitchen doorway.

xxxxxx

"Do you think he'll be like you?" Erik asked, sitting on the floor watching as Daniel scribbled senselessly in a coloring book.

"What do you mean?" Charles murmured, eyes glued to a heavy volume in his lap.

"I mean like us. " The emphasis on the plural brought Charles' gaze to his and Erik snapped his fingers, letting a metal bookend float from the shelf, much to Daniel's delight.
"Do I think he'll be a mutant?"

Erik nodded.

"I don't see why not. He is my son." His eyes returned to the book.

"You sure about that?" Erik teased.

Charles gave him a weary look. "He has my smile, my frown, my eyes, and my name on a birth certificate. Yes, I'm pretty sure."

"How come he doesn't talk much? I remember Anya…” He trailed off and Charles lowered the book to his lap, watching him carefully. Erik cleared his throat and picked nonexistent lint from the carpet. "Anyway… I remember she was talking by now."

Charles shrugged, but continued to watch the other man. "He'll talk when he's ready."

Erik wasn't sure why he was still there in the study. Charles was engrossed in a book and Daniel… well Daniel's attention had been held captive by a box of Crayola crayons for the better part of an hour. Yet, Erik still couldn't leave.

"Alex said I could stay," he blurted out.

"Hm? Stay where?"

"Here."

Charles' attention was finally diverted from the tome in his hands. "Alex said that?" His tone was skeptical.

"Well, he didn't exactly roll out the red carpet, but he didn't threaten to blast me over the breakfast table either."

Charles raised an eyebrow. "Progress."

"Would you mind…” Erik picked at the carpet again and cursed his weak delivery, "if I stayed?"

"This house has always been open to you."

"I'm not asking the house, I'm asking you."

The book closed. "Of course you can stay."

The argument forming in his chest, the one that demanded Charles not be so damn forgiving, that begged him to yell just a little bit, that pleaded for some emotion other than acceptance, melted away on a whisper as Daniel crawled into Erik's lap and shoved a colorful mess of paper in his face.

Erik smiled at the boy as his internal turmoil quelled. "Perfection."

xxxxxx


The force of it was almost enough to knock him backward, but as quickly as it came, it went as Erik's attention was claimed by the boy crawling in his lap.
The warmth that spread through him when he watched Erik and Daniel was getting more and more
difficult to manage. At first, he chalked it up to relief at seeing the boy interact with others. But then
he realized that he felt no such warmth, at least not to that degree, when his son played with Alex, or
Hank, or Sean.

It was only Erik that made the supernova explode in his chest, only Erik that caused his stomach to
somersault, only Erik that made Daniel's eyes light up the same way they did when he looked at
Charles.

"Daddy!"

Charles snapped his gaze to his son and smiled as Danny held aloft a paper full of green and blue
swirls.

"Beautiful."

Daniel scrambled out of Erik's lap and the older man let out a groan as the toddler kneed him in a
rather sensitive area. Charles winced on Erik's behalf.

"Sorry about that."

Erik shrugged as if to say, "It happens."

They sat in silence for while, occasionally helping Daniel climb up the couch and then fall back
down again, as Charles' eyes, but not his focus returned to the book in his lap.

"What's on your mind?"

Charles jumped as Erik's voice sliced through the silence.

"What?"

"I don't have to be a telepath to see something has your complete and undivided attention. Come on,
out with it."

"If Magda just left, does that mean you're technically still married?"

Erik was silent for a long moment, examining his hands. "Well that was a topic of conversation I
wasn't expecting. Yes, I guess it would." His eyes met Charles'. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"Why would I have a problem with that?"

The answer was a little too quick and Charles knew it.

The smirk on Erik's face told him he knew it too.

xxxxxx

"If you're going to be in here, please stop touching things."

Alex immediately dropped the strange, high tech pen-looking instrument he had been bouncing with
his fingers.

"Sorry."

"I know you're not here for my company, so what's wrong?" Everything Hank said seemed to come
out as a growl these days and Alex immediately straightened in case the need to run for the door presented itself.

"Do you think we were too soft on him?"

"Him?"

"Erik."

"Oh." Hank moved about the lab, but didn't immediately answer. "I think that's up to the professor to decide."

Alex grumbled at the answer, so Hank calmly placed the test tube back in the rack and turned to face him, crossing his furry arms over his chest.

"Then answer me this, Havok. Do you honestly think that Erik would purposefully hurt the professor?"

Alex stared at the table in front of him. He knew the answer, of course he did. But that still didn't make it any easier to voice.

"No."

"Then keep in mind that any anger you feel, any guilt, any pain… is one tenth of what Erik feels. And no matter how many times the professor forgives him, he will carry that with him forever."

Alex's fingers moved towards the instrument again, but he quickly recoiled when Hank shot him a look. "When did you become the voice of reason?"

Hank returned to the test tube. "I have absolutely no idea."

xxxxxx

Charles rolled to the head of the dinner table as everyone else settled in around him.

"Where am I?" Sean asked, blindly looking for the closest chair he could reach.

"Here," Raven answered, pulling out the seat next to her and offering it to him.

"But that's Alex's seat," Sean argued.

"Well, Alex can sit somewhere else tonight." Charles struggled to squash the frustration brewing. Why it was so hard to seat one toddler, four teenagers, and two adults was beyond him. It didn't help that three of those four teenagers were none too keen on sitting next to one of the adults, but that was beside the point.

Charles had been hoping that he could go back to pretending, but the tension slowly seeping in to the table proved otherwise. The past few days doled out emotional highs and lows to the Xavier Manor residents, before they all finally seemed to settle into an uneasy truce. A truce that was continually threatened like battlements in a war.

It was the first time the entire house sat down to a meal together and more than one set of eyebrows raised when Erik walked in carrying Daniel and placed him in the high chair next to Charles.

"What?" he snapped at them and all attention was quickly diverted back to their respective plates.
Daniel reached a slobbery hand out and grabbed Erik's nose, effectively wiping the frown from his face. Charles could have sworn he heard Alex mutter "Traitor" under his breath.

Hank entered the dining room next carry a large platter of steak, vegetables and potatoes.

Sean twirled his fork in his hand. "If I find blue hair in my food again, I'm complaining to the manager."

Alex snorted. "You can complain when you stop burning my pancakes."

"Says the pyromaniac," the redhead shot back.

"Children." Charles' voice was firm but warm and the three boys were properly chastened, yet smiles remained on their faces. He scooted Daniel's chair closer to him and spooned a tiny bite of mashed potatoes into his mouth as his son's wide eyes looked up at him.

"You're lucky I'm starting with the potatoes and not the vegetables," Charles murmured. Daniel smiled and Charles felt the weight of Erik's gaze on him. The rest of the children were busy doling out portions as Hank sliced the meat, but Erik was fixated on the spoon in Charles' hand.

"When do you eat?" Erik asked.

"When he's done," Charles replied, his eyes not leaving his son's. Daniel had a way of latching onto Charles when he was feeding him, blue eyes boring holes into his soul. It was a moment Charles was loath to break, a connection meant only for father and son.

Hank handed Erik his plate with a slice of meat and Erik chuckled.

"Liking things a little on the rare side these days, are we, Beast?"

Hank growled and Charles mentally nudged Erik, causing him to flinch. An apology was on the edge of the metal-bender's mind but never voiced and silence fell on the table again, seeping into the very pores of the wood.

Up and down the emotions rolled, like a boat tossed on the sea, the tension ebbing and flowing with every forced joke and inadvertent snub.

Finally, Daniel finished eating and Charles released him from the highchair, letting him crawl up on his lap, where he usually remained for the rest of the meal. He would place his tiny hands on the back of Charles' and watch carefully as Charles cut his meal with fork and knife.

"I heard on the news that they're thinking of getting rid of the giant satellite dish," Hank reported when conversation lulled. Erik's eyebrows raised in curiosity but Sean blanched and shot a quick look to the metal-bender.

"Relax, kid, I won't toss you off one more time for old time's sake."

The tension eased from Sean's shoulders, but his eyes continually darted over to the other man, as if he would strike at any moment.

"It was an eye sore anyway," Charles commented, but Erik's sharp look told him the other man thought otherwise.

"What did you just do to me?"

"I accessed the brightest corner of your memory system. It's a very beautiful memory, Erik. Thank
Charles could feel the memory of that moment roll off of Erik and practically slam into his chest. He gasped involuntarily causing all eyes to focus on him, but he waved them off and faked a cough.

"Down the wrong pipe."

Only Erik seemed to know what was truly going through his mind. Their eyes met over the table and locked. Erik's were a midnight pool of regret, fear, and something else that Charles was too timid to identify, yet he couldn't look away.

Only Daniel's squirming broke his gaze and he let his son slide from his lap to the floor, where he toddled over to Erik and grabbed onto his knees, holding his arms above his head as he stared up into his face.

"Well, hello," Erik offered.

"Vati! Vati!"

Charles blanched and Erik paled, as silverware clattered to porcelain plates.

"What did he say?" Raven.

"How does he know German?" Hank.

"What does that even mean?" Alex.

"I'm confused." Sean.

The only two in the room who had remained silent looked at one another.

"Well... I'm - I'm not entirely sure what it means." Charles looked to Erik for guidance but his eyes remained on the floor.

"Erik?" Raven leaned towards him, but he stood up so quickly, his chair toppled backwards, causing Daniel to jump and run back to Charles.

"We should leave," he said abruptly.

"What, the dining room?" Raven looked at him confused.

"No. Leave. The house. Tonight."

A moment of silence settled over the group before everyone exploded at once:

"No. I'm not leaving."

"You're leaving?"

"But... I thought..."

"You said you wouldn't."

"Erik." Charles' voice cut through them all and everyone froze. "A word, please?"

The taller man's jaw tensed as he stared at the floor and nodded, while at the same time avoiding all eye contact with Charles and the little boy clinging to his leg.
"Alex, if you would..." Charles gestured to Daniel and Alex leaned over and scooped him up.

"Come 'ere, Squirt."

Sparing a quick glance to Erik, Charles rolled out of the dining room knowing the metal-bender followed and tried to shake off the weight of five pairs of eyes.

The study door closed behind them and Charles spun on the other man.

"What just happened?" He watched as Erik paced before him like a caged panther.

"I have to leave. Raven can come if she wants, or she can stay. But I have to go."

"Why?"

"Just read my mind."

"I'd rather you told me."

Erik stopped pacing and his jaw tensed even further. "Your son just called me 'vati."

"What does that even mean?"

Erik merely stared and nodded, an invitation which Charles finally took as he closed his eyes and entered the cool comfort of Erik's mind.

"Oh." Charles blinked his eyes open and cleared his throat, heart pounding. "Well, yes that is a new development."
Chapter Summary

In which Alex and Sean make a bet.

"He called him what?"
"Vati."
Pause.
"And that means…?"

The mood in the kitchen could accurately be described as perplexed. One minute they were joking about pushing Sean off a satellite dish and the next, Erik was toppling over a chair and being ushered out of the room.

"It means 'Daddy,'" Hank explained. "In German."

Every mouth around the table dropped into a perfect "o."

Sean let out a low whistle. "No wonder he stood up so quickly. I'd be halfway to Manhattan by now."

"That's because you're an idiot," Raven shot back.

Hank studied Daniel from across the table. "He did take quite a liking to Erik."

"God knows why," Sean muttered.

"Um…" Alex held up his hand. "I know he's the genius' kid and all, but since when are babies born with German dictionaries in their heads?... Or am I only one who noticed that?"

xxxxxx

"Say something."

"What would you like me to say?" Charles' calm exterior was becoming more infuriating by the moment.

Erik continued his pacing and kicked a chair for good measure.

"Please don't damage the upholstery."

Erik glared and tried not to limp on his now-aching foot. "Why are you not more upset about this?"

"Why would I be upset? So my son called you 'Daddy.' It makes sense if you think about it… though why he knew the German word is most peculiar."

"It makes no sense, Charles! None whatsoever."
The only noise in the room was Erik's harsh panting and he hated the knowing look on the other man's face more and more with every passing moment.

Finally Charles shrugged, a gesture ill-befitting the man with a doctorate from Oxford. "He's become somewhat attached to you."

Erik shook his head. "I can't..." he struggled with the words as pain bloomed in his chest. "I can't form attachments."

Charles' eyes dimmed. "Forgive me for thinking you were somewhat attached to me."

"I was – am. That's not the point!" He raked a hand through his hair. "Look what happened to you! Look what happened to my mother! My wife! My daughter! Are you sensing a pattern here? Because I am."

"I'm fine."

Erik reached a hand out and the wheelchair vibrated. "Sure. You're just peachy."

"Erik, don't be petulant."

He released the wheelchair from his grip and slumped onto the couch, the fight leaving him like air from a balloon.

"I shouldn't be here. Danny shouldn't... he shouldn't..."

Charles rolled closer. "He shouldn't what?"

Erik raised his face from his hands and gave a mirthless chuckle. "I'm not exactly the best role model."

The telepath arched an eyebrow. "And that's why you think you should leave? You do realize that just last week I had to stop Sean from duct taping pillows to Danny and using him as a human bowling ball."

Erik squashed the urge the laugh. Now was not the time. "It's not the only reason." His heart constricted as hope flared in Charles' eyes before the calm façade was set in place again. "This is..." he gestured between them. "Messy."

"Messy. Of all the words to choose, he went with "messy." Then again, thinking of the carnage their relationship seemed to leave in its wake, "messy" was rather apt.

"And what exactly is..." Charles mimicked Erik and gestured between them, "...this."

Talk about a loaded question. Erik had so many answers, he didn't know which to pick. Love? Hate? Friends? Enemies? Brothers? Lovers? He shook his head as the last thought passed through his mind. He hadn't allowed himself to think of Charles like that since an October night when the chessboard was a metaphor for what their lives would become and the patterns of a fireplace danced across their faces.

Erik gave a helpless shrug. "I don't know, Charles. What do you want us to be?"

Charles rolled over and stopped in front of the other man, never uttering a sound. Erik didn't blame him. Had the question been reversed, he probably wouldn't have answered either. He closed his eyes and leaned forward, resting his head on Charles' knees.
"I shouldn't have come back," he murmured.

"Why not?" Charles' voice was hesitant. Cautious.

He leaned into the warm hand placed on his shoulder. "Because it'll make it that much harder when I go again."

The telepath pulled back abruptly. "Go again?"

Erik glanced up and nearly flinched at the look in the other man's eyes. "I can't stay here forever, Charles, as much as I'd like to. Surely, you must know that."

Charles let out a gentle scoff and pushed himself away from the metal-bender. "Surely."

Erik could practically taste the bitterness on his own tongue.

"You're right, Erik. You're right. If you're going to leave, then you should do it now, before Danny gets more attached to you. I don't want you to break his heart, too."

_Break his heart, too._ The words echoed in Erik's mind, causing pain with every repetition. Tears clouded his eyes and he opened his mouth but even his voice was in mourning.

"But if you're going to stay…" Charles continued, throat working against his own emotions. "Then stay for good. You don't get to do this to me again." With that, he turned and left the room.

It took all of Erik's will power not to call him back.

xxxxxx

Charles blindly wheeled himself down the hall, passing empty room after empty room as thoughts buzzed in his head. They had been making such progress but it was apparently all for naught.

A giggle from the kitchen drew his attention and he paused in the open doorway, watching silently as Alex stood across from where Danny was perched on the counter, his hand never leaving the toddler lest he decide to nosedive.

"A-lex. Come on, you can do it. A-lex."

Daniel giggled and Alex sighed.

"Really, Danny, it's not that hard. Two syllables. And it's in English," he grumbled.

Danny silently reached out for Alex's other hand, which the teen gladly gave.

"A-lex?"

Danny smiled, but said nothing.

"How come he gets the second word? I understand your dad, but _him?_ Really?"

Daniel grabbed Alex's finger and put it in his mouth.

"I give up," the teen muttered. "And that's gross."

Charles chuckled and wheeled into the room. "Alex, might I borrow my boy?"

The teen immediately straightened and wiped his hand on his jeans. "Of course, Professor."
Charles wheeled forward and allowed Alex to place Daniel in his lap. "I'm sorry if he used your hand as a chew toy."

The boy shrugged. "I've had worse."

Charles turned to go, subtly leaning down and inhaling the smell of baby shampoo from Danny's hair, before Alex's voice stopped him.

"Hey Professor? Is everything... you know, all right?"

Charles sighed and turned back. "It will be." His confident grin was tight and contrived.

"Is he leaving?"

Ah, there it was. The question Charles was waiting for, yet that still didn't prepare him for the fear that froze the blood in his veins.

"I guess we'll know in the morning."

xxxxxx

"Professor!"

With his long strides, Hank was at Charles' side in a moment and barely breaking a sweat, despite having run from the lab, up to his room, and back down again.

"Dr. McCoy."

"I know it's late, and I know you're probably exhausted, and I know it's almost Danny's bedtime -- "

"You want to run some tests."

Hank gaped. "Did you read my mind?"

"By the time we got through all the things you know, it would have been morning." Charles smiled. "And yes, I believe we're thinking along the same lines."

Hank handed Charles the papers in his hand and glanced at the little boy in the professor's lap as he tried in vain to reach out for Hank's fur. The hairy teen lowered his arm, obliging the baby, even if it made him nothing more than a glorified, talking teddy bear.

Then again, if he was completely honest with himself, he sort of relished the role.

"Danny, don't tug," Charles murmured absentmindedly as his eyes scanned the papers. "You can do this?"

Hank nodded. "It's all set up."

"Then lead the way, Dr. McCoy."

xxxxxx

Raven had forgotten how cold the lab got. Of course, she had been wearing clothes (at least two layers) the last time she was in here. Now her stark naked bum was sitting on a rather frosty metal stool.
The door opened and she whipped around, her eyes meeting his, yellow on yellow.

"Hank, must you keep it so frigid in here?"

"You try working in a layer of fur." Hank moved to the left and she finally saw Charles wheeling in behind him.

"Dear brother, are your dinners always so eventful?" She hopped down from her perch and promptly took Daniel from his lap.

"Wouldn't you love to know," he cheekily replied.

"I didn't even get to finish my vegetables."

"You never finish your vegetables."

She smiled at him over Daniel's head. God, how she had missed their easy banter. It was like a cool salve over a vicious burn.

Daniel gurgled something and Raven turned her attention to him. She loved the feeling of the baby in her arms, loved the way he traced patterns with his tiny fingers on her scaly skin, loved that he looked at her in wonderment instead of fear.

"We're gonna run some tests, yes we are," she cooed. "Some tests to figure out why on earth you know German, yes we are."

"Raven?"

She glanced up at the withering look Hank was shooting her.

"Sorry."

Charles chuckled as Hank helped him move from the chair to the table in the middle of the room.

"Run it by me again, Hank?"

Beast looked like Christmas came early. "Well, see, we're going to hook these electrodes up to your head and to Danny's – he won't feel a thing," Hank assured at Charles' semi-alarmed look. "In fact, neither of you will have any idea what's going on since you'll be in a medically-induced sleep."

"How comforting."

"Since he responds most to you, we'll leave you both here through the night and monitor the brain patterns in the morning. If my hunch is correct, I think we'll have our answer then."

Raven had stilled the more Hank elaborated and by the time he had finished, she was as stiff as a marble statue. So much so that Daniel had to poke her to get her to bounce him again.

"Sorry, baby," she whispered, still eyeing the sensors Hank was untangling to hook up to her brother.

"You're sure this will work?"

"Positive," Hank replied, even as he frowned at the machine in front of him.

"Raven, be a doll and get me some more comfortable clothes and then get Danny ready for bed?"
"You're seriously going to spend the night here? On a cold metal table?"

"Not if you get me a pillow and blanket." He smiled sweetly.

"You're crazy."

"So you've said before."

He was an infuriating man with a penchant for biting off more than he could chew and seeing the best in others even when it didn't exist.

Still, as she huffed and hiked Daniel further on her hip, she left the lab knowing she would return with a pillow and a blanket, after successfully wrestling Danny into his footie pajamas.

xxxxxx

"I swear this won't hurt Danny," Hank assured and Charles gave him a warm smile, despite the cold sensors being placed on his temples.

"I know you'd never put him in harm's way."

Hank couldn't blush anymore, but Charles could tell when something was bothering the boy by the way his ears twitched or the way he shuffled his feet.

"Spit it out, Hank."

"We tolerate him for you, you know that, right?"

Charles’ gaze snapped to Hank’s and his heartbeat raged in his ears. "What?"

"You mean more to us than anyone and, what Erik did hurt, but our loyalties lie with you and if – if he hurts Danny… Frankly, sir, I don't think any of us can be held accountable for our actions."

Charles would have laughed if he hadn't felt like crying. They had shown him such loyalty since he picked them up piecemeal from different parts of the globe and made them into this patchwork family. And here was the gentle one, ready to defend his honor and protect his son at a moment's notice. They were next to his bed when he woke in the hospital and they hadn't stopped hovering since.

He wouldn't have it any other way.

"Thank you, Hank," he cleared his throat, "but I'm not sure that will be entirely necessary. I wouldn't be surprised if Erik was already at the bus station."

He tried to adopt a light tone, but the words tasted like bile in his mouth.

xxxxxx

Sean placed the ten-dollar bill on the table and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Ten says he's gone."

Alex arched an eyebrow and threw down a ten and a five. "Fifteen says he stays."

"Stays?" Sean cocked his head and studied the kid before him. "I thought you wanted him outta here."
Alex gave a sheepish shrug. "Despite everything, I think he makes the professor happy. And against all better judgment, Danny seems to like him. So… yeah. If he's going to hurt the professor and Danny by leaving, I'd rather he stayed. Simple as that."

"Nah. I know people like that." Sean shook his head. "They never stay."

"Whatever."

The boys left the winnings on the table, ready and waiting for the victor to come collect in the morning, before they parted ways at the stairs, Alex heading right and Sean heading left. Despite his aversion to all things scholarly, he was inexplicably drawn to the lab, finding fascination among the test tubes and microscopes.

He whistled an old tune leftover from his childhood, one whispered lowly and mournfully over a kitchen stove, but the sound died on his lips as he spied the man sitting on the floor just outside the lab, his elbows on his knees and his face buried in his arms.

"Well I'll be damned. I thought you were leaving," Sean accused. He could handle Erik walking out once, but a second time he would not forgive, even if it did cost him ten bucks.

Erik muttered something into his knees but Sean couldn't make out what it was. It sounded something like, "Watching over… lab rat."

But that made no sense at all and, valuing his life, Sean thought it better not to ask him to repeat it.

xxxxxx

Erik couldn't be sure how long he waited out there in the hallway, but his joints were stiff and his back ached so he could hazard a guess. They never noticed him as they walked out of the lab conversing quietly among themselves. Four went in, but only two emerged.

Erik didn't like that at all.

Hank assured Raven he'd check back early in the morning before they went their separate ways and as they ascended the staircase, Erik rose, slipping quietly into the shadows of the lab.

But it wasn't the hum of metal beneath his palms or the puff of breath against the sharp drop in temperature that caught his attention. It was the steady drone of two heartbeats puncturing the silent air and the bodies lying as still as cadavers on the tables in the center of the room.

He didn't register the rising panic until it brought him to his knees, didn't notice the shallow breaths he took until black spots dotted the edge of his vision.

Charles is fine. Charles is fine. The Beast wouldn't hurt him. Charles is fine. He repeated this over and over until he was calm enough to take a breath and strong enough to get back on his feet.

The image of them lying on a slab of metal hit a little too close to home, but upon closer inspection, Erik realized the two scenarios could not be farther apart.

For starters, there were no restraints. No leather straps biting into soft, pale skin, no chains begging to be broken.

No, the tables in the lab had been pushed together, bringing father and son next to each other, and even in sleep, Daniel's tiny hand rested in Charles'. Erik couldn't help but reach out and brush a wayward lock of hair from the telepath's forehead. His eyes swept the IV drip next to the table and
followed the tube down until it disappeared into Charles' hand. No, he would not be waking tonight, no matter how many nightmares he had. But Erik figured that there so many drugs in his system, even his subconscious would give him a reprieve.

The same held true for the child, a tiny IV dripping into his even tinier vein. He was curled up in a ball, nestled as close to Charles' side as the length of the tube would allow.

Tiny sensors dotted their temples as wires committed whatever Hank was searching for to paper on a far table.

How alike they looked, especially in sleep.

*Vati.* German – proof of Erik's existence imprinted on the child's mind.

His heart panged as his palm hovered over the baby's head. He couldn't stay. Not for Daniel and especially not for Charles. He had hurt him too much already. He would only disappoint.

With a final look, he walked out before his heart could halt his feet, the door clicking shut behind him with all the finality of judge's gavel.

xxxxxx

When morning came, all $25 was still on the table.
**Prognoses**

Chapter Summary

In which Hank runs a test and Charles gets an answer.

The first things to register were the distant beep of a heart rate monitor and the bitter taste of copper in his mouth. Charles blinked his eyes open to reveal four blurry forms standing over him, peering down.

"Are you all right?"

"Can you hear me?"

"Dude, he looks baked."

He blinked again, bringing them into focus. "Mr. Cassidy, I am most definitely not 'baked."

Raven punched Sean in the shoulder and bent down to brush the hair from her brother's forehead. "How're you feeling?"

"Surprisingly refreshed," he yawned and stretched, immediately letting out an "oof" as Daniel climbed on top of him.

"He's been waiting for you to wake up," Hank said, as he helped Charles into a seated position.

"What time is it?" Charles swiped a hand across his mouth to find dried blood caked in the corner. Well, that explained the copper taste. He must have bit his tongue sometime in the night.

"Almost noon," Alex said from his perch on the counter.

"What?" Charles looked around for a clock, as if Alex's watch must surely be defective, for as much as he enjoyed his sleep he had never in his life slept past 10, even when hungover.

"Maybe we should drug you up more often," Raven muttered.

Charles' limbs felt sluggish as he wrapped them around Daniel, who proceeded to bury his face in Charles' chest, rubbing away the last vestiges of sleep.

"So...?" he looked up hopefully. "Anything?"

A grin spread on Hank's blue face. "Like you wouldn't believe." He held up the ream of paper in his hands. "Just give me some time to look through it."

Charles's grin faltered, but he caught it before the others noticed.

That hadn't actually been the news he was looking for.

xxxxxx

Erik picked up the bag he had attempted to leave with three days prior and stared, wondering how
his plan had veered so mightily off course. Show up, knock some sense into Charles, leave. Fairly simple, but damn that telepath and his ability to completely commandeer a situation without even meaning to.

With a heavy sigh, he let the bag drop to his feet and looked around, looking for anything in the sparse, yet crowded room he could want. He briefly wondered if Charles would fit in said bag. Daniel too, for that matter.

A pair of sweatpants he remembered being oddly comfortable still hung out of a drawer and he stuffed them hastily into the duffle. He hadn't slept at all last night after forcing himself out of the lab. The image of Charles and Daniel hooked up to sensors and wires was enough to rattle the normally unshakeable man, however, the strange pull Charles seemed to have on him kept in the mansion.

But as the sun rose, the spell broke and he realized that if he meant to leave, he'd better do it now, before the rest of the house stirred.

"You missed something," said a voice from the doorway.

Damn. With a heavy sigh, he turned to find Alex leaning against the door frame, arms folded across his chest.

"Excuse me?"

The teen pointed to the chess set that had somehow made its way to Erik's room. "You missed something. You might as well take it. He won't play with anyone but you."

Erik was silent, though his chest constricted and his grip on the bag tightened.

"If you leave it, I'll just throw it out," Alex continued, stepping into the room. "He doesn't need anymore reminders of you."

"I'm doing this for him!" he snapped, his eyes flashing and his heart pounding.

"No, you're doing this for you." Alex remained frustratingly calm, his voice even as if merely stating a fact.

Erik grabbed a random item and stuffed it into the bag, just to have something to do. Who did this kid think he was, analyzing him like a statistic? He had no idea what Erik was thinking or why he was doing what he was doing. And what he was doing at the moment was packing the majority of the room filled with stuff he didn't even want.

His hands stilled on a final object, a picture frame, featuring two smiling faces - clearly a recent addition to the room since the days of the elder Xaviers. Charles, no older than 13, was covered in mud from head to toe, save for his blue eyes, with an equally dirty, blonde-haired Raven next to him. Both were beaming at the camera in a way that could only be described as euphoric. And Erik had taken her away from him.

Why it took this long for him to notice the photo was proof enough of how absorbed he had been in his quest for Shaw. Alex cleared his throat and Erik jumped, forgetting that the boy was in the room.

"You can't leave now," he said, the slightest note of pleading entering his tone. "I know I said you could stay, but now I'm asking. As nicely as I possibly can. Do not break him again."

"I don't answer to you, kid." He tried to make his voice hold all of the weight and authority that it usually did, but the teen's words hit him like a punch to the gut.
Alex's face hardened and he took a step back towards the door. "You're right. You don't. My mistake, I thought I was appealing to the human side of you."

Erik closed his eyes as Alex turned, throwing over his shoulder, "And you lost me $15 bucks. I won't really miss the money but, man, I thought better of you."

With that, he left the room, slamming the door behind him.

"Ow!" Charles yelped as Raven yanked a sensor from his chest. "That hurt."

"Man up."

"I think you took off some skin with that," he said as he rubbed the red area, Daniel giggling next to him. "Yes, that's just hilarious, isn't it."

Raven eyed him as she coiled up the wires and folded the blankets. "Go on, I know you're dying to ask me."

Charles cursed how transparent he was. "Did he leave?"

She sighed and plopped down next to him on the table, her legs brushing his as they dangled over the side. Charles knew the answer before she even opened her mouth. "I haven't seen him, but - "

He hung his head.

"But that doesn't mean he left!" she continued, placing a finger under his chin and lifting his gaze to hers. "He's probably brooding in the rafters, like one of those gargoyles I was convinced lived up there."

He chuckled despite himself. "I did give him an ultimatum. I think we both know how well he handles ultimatums."

"It was something he needed to hear," she reasoned as she let Daniel climb from Charles' lap to hers. "You didn't go," he whispered softly.

"No," she agreed, nuzzling Daniel's hair. "And I don't plan to. My family's here."

Charles felt his throat constrict and he reached blindly for her hand as tears clouded his vision.

Sean walked down the hall, a bounce in his step, as he headed for the kitchen, fully prepared to find Alex rooting through the pantry for a mid-afternoon snack. Sure enough, the blond was halfway through a roll of Oreos when Sean hopped on the counter and threw two $10's and a $5 down.

Alex paused mid-chew. "What's this for?"

"He's in the study." Sean grinned as he slipped off the counter. "I don't know what you did, but it worked," he threw over his shoulder.

Never had losing $10 felt so good.
Raven was staying. That thought alone was enough to buoy his spirits for the next few months, turning his bleak outlook into Technicolor. But then he remembered the other half of their party of two and his mood sank faster than the Titanic.

The halls were quiet at 4:00pm – Sean and Alex would no doubt be raiding the kitchen before finding other inanimate objects to destroy and then hide from him. Raven was helping Hank decipher page upon page of jibberish and Erik… well Erik was probably halfway across the country, or the ocean, or some other large, natural formation.

Which was exactly why Charles was so shocked to find him sitting on his desk as he wheeled into the study.

"Hello, Charles."

Hello, Charles. So simple a greeting yet it positively floored the younger man.

"You should – you're not… why are you here?" The wheels of his chair began to move unbidden into the room, bringing him closer to the man with the guilty expression and outstretched palm perched on the edge of his desk.

Erik let out a heavy sigh, dropping his hand when Charles was near enough to hear his quiet confession. "Because I'm in love with you."

For a telepath, his mind went remarkably blank. "I'm sorry, what?"

Erik hopped off the desk and moved towards the window, standing as rigid as a steel rod. "I thought I was doing what was best for you, but I realized I was only doing what was easy for me."

Charles let the pronouncement hang in the air, not daring to move forward nor retreat. As much as he wanted to cling to the words, to bathe in the warm declaration of Erik's love, he could only hear the rushing of his own blood and the steady pounding of his own heart.

"This won't work," he forced out and Erik's face paled. "As much as I would like to keep you here, you know you'll want to go. You'll want to be out there and then you'll resent me, resent Daniel, for making you stay."

Erik took a step closer. "You're not making me stay. You could," he smiled sadly. "But you won't."

"Erik, your ideals will get you killed, and frankly I hope I'm dead by then because I can't be around to see that happen."

"Don't say that, Charles." Erik's voice was sharp as he kneeled in front of the smaller man and gripped the armrests of his chair. "Don't – " he swallowed hard. "Don't ever say that. I can't do this without you."

"Do what? Instigate a war? Slaughter millions of people?" Charles' tone was bitter and petulant as he poured all of the hurt and uncertainty of the last 24 hours into those three questions.

"Live. I can't… live without you." Erik stood and ran his hands through his hair. "When I'm out there, sometimes you're the only thing that holds me back. That keeps me from losing that final shred of humanity in me. If I lose you, I lose that. And then where would we be?"

Charles' jaw clenched and he inhaled sharply. "Do not ask this of me. Do not ask me to sit back and watch you kill yourself."
"No!" Erik kneeled again and took Charles' face in his palms, forcing him to look at him. "I'm not going anywhere. We want the same thing." He held up his hand as the telepath opened his mouth to protest. "We do! If this goes the way I think it will, you'll need protecting. Let me protect your children, Charles."

Charles closed his eyes as Erik leaned forward and placed a kiss to his forehead.

"All of them."

xxxxxx

Alex was feeling very smug as he watched Erik walk through the doors of the lab behind Charles. He received a nudge in the ribs from Sean, who had received one from Raven, continuing down the line until Alex nudged Hank, and the genius turned from his work to gape at the man in the doorway.

"I thought you left," he said bluntly.

Alex rolled his eyes. Tactful.

"Not yet," the older man coolly replied. Alex watched as Erik glanced at the professor and the teen knew there would be no "yet" in the equation.

"Daddy!" Daniel cried from Raven's arms, bringing all focus onto him. Unable to hold him any longer with his squirming, Raven put him down on the ground where he rushed to Charles' side.

The kids had, whether consciously or not, kept Daniel away from Erik, so it was with bated breath that they watched the child leave Charles, run over and cling to the metal-bender's legs.

"Vati," he gushed, the word tumbling out on the swell of a smile.

Had the stakes been a little lower and the tension a little less overwhelming, the lost look on Erik's face and the way his hands hovered unsure over the child's shoulders would have been endearing. As it was, every mind in the room seemed to be waiting for Erik to run in the other direction, but when he offered a small smile and ran his hand carefully through the child's hair, everyone let out a collective breath without meaning to.

xxxxxx

"So Hank," Charles cleared his throat, breaking the domestic moment, even though it caused butterflies to erupt somewhere in the put of his stomach. "What's the diagnosis?"

The blue teen inhaled deeply as if preparing to blow out a cake full of candles, before releasing an onslaught of words.

"It's fascinating. Danny's mind is running faster than he can give voice to his thoughts. Hence his lack of speech. Charles, that's why you couldn't latch onto anything more than feeling from him. A toddler's mind is not as disciplined, not as streamlined. The only thing, or in this case people, that he's been able to name are the constants in his life."

Only the blind would be ignorant of the way Erik uncomfortably shifted, but Hank plowed on, undeterred.

"We haven't had a chance to study mental mutations on a subject this young, since mutations normally don't manifest until puberty. But Danny, being your son, seems to be ahead of the pack."
Charles remained quiet, his gaze never leaving the child's.

"So he's a telepath?" Sean asked.

"He will be. And a very powerful one at that, if he's showing signs this early. We'll have to protect his mind for the time being, shield him until he's ready to handle the power he wields. Charles - "

Charles snapped to attention at his name.

"I'll need your help with that."

"Of course," he murmured quietly.

Raven inched forward. "Have you ever put mental shields on someone?"

"Of course I have." And more, he thought as an image of Moira flashed painfully in his mind.

"I guess the apple didn't fall far from the tree," Alex joked, but the chuckle died on his lips at Charles’ stricken face. "Professor? Aren't you happy?"

"Why would I be happy?"

"Danny's a telepath! Just like you." Oh Sean, gleefully pointing out the obvious.

"Being a telepath is not as glamorous as you all think it is. Trust me, if I could un-know some things, I would." His gaze flicked to Erik for the briefest moments, but only someone watching for it could've caught it. "It's not a life I'd wish on anyone. Least of all, my son."

Sean scoffed, "Come on, it must be awesome to read people's thoughts! I could make Alex bring me peanut butter and jelly sandwiches all the time!"

Charles narrowed his eyes at the teens in front of him, before closing them completely and opening the floodgates.


He could distantly hear them gasp around him as their own emotions over the weeks, months, years were reflected back at them.

It was only a moment; he only gave them a taste. But as he slowly opened his eyes, he could hear how they panted and see the sweat beading at their temples.

"Not on anyone."
Raven hummed softly from her perch on the counter as she watched her brother work. She had been standing sentinel ever since Charles ordered them all out of the lab so he could begin what needed to be done. It had taken everyone a moment, still disoriented as they were from the taste Charles had given them, but eventually they shuffled out, leaving just Raven with silent refusal in her eyes.

The humming faltered and she shivered, remembering the onslaught of emotion that felt like eternity truncated into a matter of seconds. She had never known... Charles had never told her what it was like...

"Can he work with you warbling like that?"

Erik's voice broke her out of her musings and she glanced up at him, the quiet song dying on her lips. Her gaze returned to her brother, where he sat at the head of the table upon which Daniel lay, hunched over so far his nose brushed the soft fringe on the baby's forehead, two fingers pressed to either side of the toddler's temples.

"He's in there deep enough by now. He has no idea what's going on in this room."

Erik gave a noncommittal grunt in reply, crossed his arms and leaned against the counter next to her. He clearly wasn't moving anytime soon and Raven didn't blame him. He had been none too pleased when Charles forced him from the room.

"So what exactly is he doing?"

Raven shrugged. "Subduing the more intense aspects of Danny's telepathy. It's a shame no one was around to do that for Charles when he was little."

Erik glanced sideways at her. "Is it always like that?" he asked, referring to the display of emotional power that nearly brought him to his knees. The quiet question betrayed the air of nonchalance he tried to project.

Her throat got tight and she swallowed hard. "I wouldn't know. He's never let me in like that." All of the times she woke from a nightmare to find him sitting on the edge of her bed – the times he appeared at her side the moment after she fell and scraped her knee – the times he took her pain and made it his own. Always protecting, always shielding.

Erik's surly demeanor reappeared as he focused on the telepath once more. "He's stubborn, your brother."

"You're one to talk." The tension eased from her shoulders, glad to have company in her vigil, and she let her hand slide along the counter and rest on his forearm. "I'm glad you stayed."

He glanced briefly at her palm, but didn't brush her off. Small victories. "Me too."
Silence reigned for a few moments as they stared contemplatively at the man and the boy in the room. Time and proximity had made her slightly better at figuring out what was going on in the metal-bender's head, but this new twist in the story, this decision to put himself above the cause and Charles above himself, threw all of her theories out the window.

"If you hurt them, I'll kill you."

"I know."

A pretty woman with soft brown eyes and long auburn hair. Julia. Pointy glasses and a firm demeanor. The social worker. Himself, looking equal parts shocked and wondrous as he stares at his son for the first time.

Images flickered past like a film as he gently catalogued his son's mind, keeping the memories of Sean sneaking him cookies and Alex tossing him over his head, while quelling the power he could already feel surging on the periphery. He couldn't suppress the gasp that escaped as balance was restored and he properly felt his son's mind for the first time. Happiness and contentment seemed to surround him like a warm blanket, the toddler's mind calm and quiet in sleep.

He slowly began to withdraw and the farther he receded, the more his own body came back to him. Exhaustion set in heavy and thick, clouding his thoughts and pulling his limbs down... down...

"Easy, easy," a voice said, far away.

He felt like he was falling, but the firm press of the cool table against his cheek was enough to tell him that he was indeed stationary. When had he slumped forward? A firm hand pressed on his chest and another cradled the back of his neck as his head was lifted from the steel and gently rested against soft cotton.

"I'll take Danny..." a different voice said.

"Raven?"

"I think you may have overdone it this time, Charles."

He could hear the smile in her voice, but his lids were too heavy to see it reflected on her face.

"Nah," he mumbled. "Easy peasy."

The snort that followed definitely did not belong to Raven.

"Erik?"

"Stop talking."

"Mkay." Charles' head lolled against the cotton as an arm braced his back and another slid under his knees. With a soft grunt, he was hoisted in the air and his eyes slipped open long enough to view Raven walking ahead of him, a sleeping Daniel in her arms, and the wheelchair trailing behind, the force of Erik's errant thought enough to bid it follow.

"I'm not a damsel in distress."

Erik's chuckle rumbled in his chest and he shifted Charles in his arms, causing the smaller man to groan. "Could've fooled me. God you weigh a lot."
"Where're we going?"

"You're going to bed," came Raven's voice ahead of them.

"I'm fine."

"Of course you are."

Erik’s teasing baritone was the last thing he heard before darkness overtook him.

xxxxxx

"How come he calls me 'Vati' but he doesn't call you 'Mama?' You're around him just as much as I am," Erik whispered as they made their way down the hall.

Raven smiled smugly as she nestled Daniel further into her chest. "I don't think that's how it works."

Erik glared and tried to decipher Raven's meaning, but as he hiked Charles further into his arms, he thought it best not to ask.

Charles' room was dark and quiet, the bed made at perfect angles. He had spent more nights in here than in his own and, in that time, he had memorized the details: the pile of books on the nightstand that had yet to find their way back to the library; the dust collecting on the bureau because Charles couldn't reach it; the photograph of them taken days before the CIA massacre, hunched over a game of Monopoly the kids had begged them to play. A photograph that had since been placed facedown on the dresser. Erik would never admit it, but that stung.

"We'll wake them up in a few hours for dinner," Raven whispered, stepping back and giving Erik room to place the telepath on the bed.

Once he was situated in what Erik hoped was a comfortable position, Raven carefully set Daniel down next to Charles and watched with a smile as the little boy immediately curled into his father's side, seeking his warmth.

The sight caused a not-entirely-unpleasant ache in Erik's chest. "He's a lot more powerful than he lets on, isn't he."

It was a thought that had been brewing for some time, ever since he watched a Russian officer stare directly at him and see nothing but empty space.

Raven glanced sideways, all humor gone. "You have no idea."

xxxxxx

"But does that mean he's here for good?" Sean asked as he shoved a potato chip into his mouth. "What about, you know, his bid for world domination?"

Hank and Alex shared a look but offered no theories. Hank wasn't even entirely sure what to make of the situation. Sure, he was open to Magneto, no - Erik - returning, but what that meant for the world at large was a whole other matter. No doubt the Brotherhood would not take too kindly to this new change of allegiance.

"Not to mention the fact that there's an empty elevator shaft in the west wing that I would very much like to not fall down," Sean muttered.

Alex snorted as Raven waltzed into the kitchen, drawing all eyes to her.
"What?"

Sean blushed and stared at the counter as Alex cleared his throat and mumbled something incoherent.

"They're still not used to the fact that you're naked," Hank said, a ghost of a smile on his lips.

"Oh for God's sake." She rolled her eyes and plopped down on the stool. "Grow up."

"Easier said than done," Alex whispered.

"Did it work? The shielding, did Charles succeed?" Hank had been waiting on word for the better part of three hours.

"I think so." Raven stole a chip from Sean's plate drawing a "Hey!" from the redhead. "But both father and son are currently passed out so it's difficult to say for sure."

"And Erik?"

"Watching over them."

The words themselves were harmless, but Hank could read the undertone. The fact that Erik was in love with the professor was no secret – anyone with half a brain could see that and vice versa. Though how that love could survive all that fate had thrown – and would continue to throw – was a different matter entirely. Yes, they were in for a rough road and the look Raven gave him proved that she knew it too.

Sean stuffed yet another chip in his mouth and mumbled, "Don't you think it's weird that Erik spends so much time with the Professor?"

Alex leveled a look at him. "You're an idiot."

The heavy curtains warded off the afternoon sun, throwing the room into darkness and allowing Erik some solace in the shadows.

It was odd to consider this place home now, though if he was honest with himself, the mansion had always borne the moniker. When compared to the shacks, hostels, cars, and hotels he had frequented, it was the closest thing to a home he had stayed in ever since he was literally ripped from his by four men wearing uniforms and swastikas.

He glanced back to the bed to find two large blue eyes staring at him.

"Well good afternoon, Bärchen," Erik whispered, drawing a smile from Danny. "Let's not wake your father." He held out his arms as Daniel gently scooted out from under Charles' and crawled across the bed into Erik's. The older man stayed still, allowing the toddler to squirm for a bit before finally settling in his lap. "Feel better?" Erik tapped the boy's head and Daniel nodded.

"Better."

Erik's eyebrows shot up in surprise, but the swell of pride he felt caught him off guard – pride in Daniel for learning a new word, pride in Charles for being powerful, yet careful enough with his son's mind to bring those words to the surface. It was odd taking pleasure in such things. Mere weeks ago, his focus consisted of schematics, infiltration plans, and possible bloodshed. How his priorities had changed.
Erik buried his nose in Daniel's hair and inhaled the scent of baby shampoo and something distinctly Charles. A fear had been nagging at the back of his mind ever since Emma had let slip a flippant, "You're just like him, you know."

And ever since then, Erik had spent every waking moment trying to prove her wrong.

_I am not Shaw. I am not Shaw. I am not Shaw._

"No one said you were, my friend," came the now-awake telepath's quiet reply.

Erik jumped, causing Daniel to let out a yelp of surprise. "Sorry, Bärchen."

"Why are you calling my son, 'little bear'?" Charles' expression held both confusion and amusement.

"Because he burrows like one," Erik chuckled as Daniel stuck his face into his shirt once more.

"Granted," Charles groaned as he pushed himself up and stretched. "I think he likes the texture of the fabric. He's taken to dragging one of my old Oxford shirts around the house like a teddy bear. How long was I out?"

"About three hours."

Charles rubbed his temples and shook his head. "Separating a mind as manic as a 18-month-old's is not as easy as it looks."

"It didn't look easy from where I was sitting." Erik's tone held more worry than he would have liked and Charles looked at him knowingly.

"I'm fine."

Silence fell, only broken by Daniel's occasional giggle as Erik lifted a metal clock from the nightstand and floated it above his head.

"How'd you know it meant 'little bear'?"

Charles looked sheepish. "I might have graced the surface of your mind for a bit. Do forgive me." But the grin on his face proved to Erik that, forgiveness or not, he had fun doing it. "I had no idea that diaper changing frightened you so."

"Charles." Erik's voice came out as a growl and the telepath chuckled at his friend's warning.

"It's really not as hard as it looks."

Erik wanted to politely, but firmly inform the telepath that he had in fact changed diapers before, but the words died on his lips as their eyes met over the toddler's head. His mouth felt like it was full of dry cotton and he swallowed a few times, but still the words would not come. Yesterday's admission hung heavy in the air and, though he was happy to finally have the declaration out in the open, the fact that Charles had not reciprocated weighed mightily on his mind.

"Charles, about what I said other day…"

A cloud passed over the telepath's face, forming a mask worthy of a poker game. "We'll talk about it later."

"When?"
"When I figure out what I want to say in reply."

"I could offer some suggestions." Erik managed a smile, but knowing that Charles was being cautious in showing his hand hurt the metal-bender. He had laid himself bare in those six little words, "Because I'm in love with you," but he supposed it was only just retribution that the telepath not be so quick to return the sentiment.

"You have to go to them," Charles murmured, changing the subject. "They'll be wondering where you are."

Erik closed his eyes and leaned his cheek against Daniel's head, trying not to think of the inevitable confrontation with his Brotherhood. "I know."

"I could come – "

"Absolutely not." The command was as quick as a gunshot and as sharp as a blade. "I can't… do what I need to do if I have one eye on you the whole time."

"I'm not entirely helpless in a fight, you know."

"Please, Charles." The note of pleading in his voice wiped the smile from the telepath's face. "I need to know that you're safe."

Charles regarded him for a moment before acquiescing. "And then you'll come back?"

Erik placed a kiss in Daniel's hair. "And then I'll come back."

Raven smiled as she leaned against the bedroom door, loitering until the conversation reached less tense territory so she could interrupt and tell them dinner was ready.

No need to interrupt. We'll be down in a moment.

Raven chuckled and rolled her eyes. Having a telepath brother was annoying, yet somewhat convenient.

Convenient enough to tell you that Sean's burning the pasta.

"Shit." She left the door and sprinted down the stairs, cursing all the way. "Sean! Step away from the stove!"

Alex stood precariously on a chair with a magazine in his hand, desperately trying to sweep the smoke away from the hall and more towards the window, with failing results.

"Dude, turn the knob the other way."

Sean scrambled to lower the fire under the pot as Hank growled in the corner.

"Haven't you learned by now to not let him in the kitchen when things are being cooked?" Raven yelled as she blew through the door, simultaneously knocking Sean out of the way and turning the stove off.

Alex chafed a little at that; they had survived six months without her and the mansion had remained
intact, for the most part. But now she was back and, as happy as Alex was to have her, he took offense that she presumed they couldn't survive without them.

"We had it under control," he muttered to deaf ears as Sean and Raven attempted to scrape the burnt pasta from where it had congealed at the bottom of the pot.

Charles rolled into the kitchen with a smile on his face and Daniel perched in his lap. "I sense another culinary feat by our very own Mr. Cassidy."

Sean grinned. "I was just gettin' started."

Alex rolled his eyes. Leave it to the professor to diffuse the tension.

"Where's Erik?" he asked when Charles' shadow had yet to appear in the doorway.

"Mr. Lehnsherr will not be joining us for dinner. He has some business to attend to."

Raven froze at the stove and the way Hank immediately straightened told Alex he was not the only one to notice.

"He'll be back before 9," the professor assured, but the smile on his face was a little too forced. A little too strained.

"Profess – " he started, but one look from Charles silenced him.

Later, echoed in his ear and he gave the briefest of nods before turning and helping in the search for something edible.

The clock struck 11:00 and Erik still hadn't come home.

xxxxxx

He was not naïve enough to think this would go smoothly, but he was hopeful to a fault that they would display a little more trust than what they were currently exhibiting.

"You're leaving," Angel repeated flatly.

"Yes."

"To live with them? With him?" Riptide spat. The "him" in question needed no name.

"This changes nothing. I will just be taking more of a passive role," Erik explained as he gathered what necessities he had left, all while never leaving his back open. They might be a team but that didn't mean that he trusted them.

"This changes everything," Emma argued, almost bored. But the way her eyes flashed told Erik she was anything but. In fact, she was seething. "That man will warp your mind and the offspring will grow to be a threat to us all."

"The kids were always going to be a threat to you. You attacked them on more than one occasion," Erik pointed out.
Emma's face remained impassive, but a smug smile played at her lips. Before Erik could question it, before he could even react, a pop sounded behind him and a blow to the ribs knocked the wind from his lungs.

The last thing he registered was pain blinding his vision and sulfur burning his nose.

xxxxxx

Charles was trying to temper his anxiety but it was becoming more and more difficult with every passing moment.

_Erik? Erik, come back. Erik, you promised. Erik, be safe. Be safe. Be safe. Be safe._ The words had left his mind unbidden, floating on the air but never reaching their destination. Charles had been the one to hand Erik the metal helmet. Had been the one to tell him he'd need it if things went south. And the fact that it was now after midnight told him that south is exactly where they went.

"Son of a bitch." The exclamation echoed in the hall and Charles' heart leapt.

_Erik, you came back. Erik, you kept your promise. Erik, you're safe. You're safe. You're safe._

The metal-bender stumbled through the door a moment later, clutching his side and tossing the helmet to the floor with a groan.

"It went well, then?"

A lamp clicked on in the far corner, illuminating the young man and his worried brow.

"Swimmingly," Erik muttered, picking up the picture frame he had knocked over and groaning as his wounds protested against the movement.

"Jesus, Erik," Charles gasped as the light threw Erik's injuries into sharp relief. His eye was black, his shirt was torn, and the way he clutched his side told the telepath he had more than one broken rib.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Erik offered.

"Don't lie to a telepath." Charles ignored the glare tossed his way as he wheeled forward and gestured for the injured man to take a seat on the couch.

"I've had worse," he moaned as he lowered himself down, joints protesting and face grimacing.

"What happened?" Charles asked, as he pulled out the first aid kit he had taken to keeping in the desk ever since Sean started flying.

"Not entirely sure. They knocked me out. I woke up here in the garden."

Charles' eyebrows raised but he said nothing. The fact that they kept him alive at all was startling, but to leave him outside the front door? Charles shook his head. It made no sense.

"Lean forward," he quietly commanded and Erik did as he was told, hissing slightly as Charles pressed a cold compress to his swollen face. "You're safe."

Erik scoffed. "For now."

The two words were meant to be a dig at Charles' unfailing optimism, but they struck a chord that the professor had been trying to ignore for some time. No, they would not always be able to hide. They
would not always be safe. The illusion that their little oasis had created would not always be so and acknowledging that was like pressing thumb to bruise.

"For now," Charles agreed.

Erik's eyebrows rose. "What's this? Is Charles Xavier finally admitting that not all humans are as accepting as he would like them to be?"

Charles sighed and dropped the washcloth he had been using to wipe the blood from the other man's face.

"Erik, what does it matter? Human, mutant. The Brotherhood, the CIA. They know they cannot have me so they'll go for the next best thing." At Erik's questioning glance, Charles continued. "It's only a matter of time before they find out about Danny. And they will come for him, Erik." Charles gestured to the ceiling where, through wood and mortar and plaster, a little boy slept safely wrapped in the comfort of his dreams next to Raven.

"One day, they will come for my son. I guarantee it."

xxxxxx

Erik had been about to argue – to say that Daniel wouldn't be the only one targeted, that any of them would a prize for the CIA to take – before the words that had been plaguing him for being not quite right came back to haunt him:

"The offspring," Frost had said. Their meaning hit Erik like a freight train and he blanched.

"Oh God, Charles, it isn't a matter of time. They already know." He grabbed Charles' wrist and inhaled a shaky breath. "They know about Danny."
Contingencies

Chapter Summary

In which Charles and Erik have a much needed conversation and Daniel draws a picture.

White noise.

White noise and an overwhelming sense of worry. That was all Charles could register as the washcloth lay limp in his hands, Erik's blood staining his fingers.

"What?" His voice was quiet, distant, as if any answer Erik could give would shatter him to pieces that couldn't be put back together again.

"Frost knows." His grip on Charles' wrist had yet to loosen. "She knows – she – said something about 'offspring' and at the time, I thought nothing of it, but God, Charles… She… It has to mean Danny. I'm - I'm so sorry."

The apology seemed to have wakened something in the telepath and he shook his head as Erik released his wrist. "You have nothing to apologize for. You didn't tell them."

"But –"

"Erik. It was bound to happen sooner or later. Had you found out about Danny before all of this," he gestured vaguely around the room, "would you have said anything?"

The metal-bender was quiet for a moment before answering with conviction, "No."

"Then stop looking at me like I'm about to banish you from the premises. You'd never use my child as leverage; it's not your fault that your associates would. Now arms up."

The crease on Erik's forehead eased and he groaned as Charles lifted the shirt over his head.

"Christ," escaped telepath's mouth as he saw the other man's wounds properly for the first time. A deep gash ran from mid-abdomen, following the line of his ribs, to just under his shoulder blade, as purple bruises blossomed around the cut like a sickly flower. "They did a number on you, my friend," he murmured as he gently traced the gash with the pad of his finger.

"Azazel has a wicked tail, unfortunately," Erik gritted out as Charles felt his ribs.

"At least two are broken, possibly more. I'd need an x-ray to be sure. And you're going to need stitches."

Erik cursed under his breath.

"Did you honestly think it would go well?" Charles leaned back and wiped his hands on the washcloth. "That they'd be completely okay with you coming here?

"Home" had been so close to leaving his lips instead.
"I had hoped," Erik replied wryly.

"Hope can be such a pointless endeavor," Charles whispered as he thought of countless nights spent praying to any god listening that Erik would come back. And every fruitless morning that followed.

"Don't say that, Charles." Erik's sharp reprimand brought him out of his musings. "Don't say that."

"Why not?"

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Because if you lose hope, then what's left for the rest of us?"

Charles swallowed hard, finding it difficult to meet Erik's eye. "Let's get you stitched up, then, shall we?"

Erik levitated the needle from the first aid kit. "I'm not sure how I feel about you sewing me back together."

Something tightened in the telepath's chest. "I've put you back together more times than I care to count."

Erik gave him a sad smile. "Yes. Yes you have." In more ways than one.

The thought whispered against the edge of his mind before dying into nothingness.

xxxxxx

Something wasn't right. Something didn't feel right.

Alex rubbed his eyes and swung his legs over the side of the bed, looking through a foggy window into a misty morning. Erik had gone out last night for "business" and had not been back by the time the teen had gone to bed. It's not like he was worried, per se. In fact, he didn't care what happened at all to Erik. He was a big boy – he could take care of himself. Still… something didn't feel right.

But Alex would be damned if he admitted that Erik's wellbeing factored into any part of that equation.

"Alex!" The door burst open and Daniel ran through, still in his pajamas, trailing one of Charles' shirts behind him. "Alex!" His consonants needed a little work so it sounded more like "Ow-ec" but it warmed the teen's heart all the same.

"Hey, little man." Alex scooped him up and sat him on his knee, trying and failing to get his bedhead into some semblance of order. "You just have words coming out left and right, don't you?"

"He's all yours," an extremely sleepy-looking Raven muttered from the doorway.

"Nice night?"

"I hate you."

"Did we forget to mention that he's a restless sleeper?"

Raven waited until Daniel wasn't looking to make a rude hand gesture at Alex before slinking off. The blond chuckled. The professor would never admit it, but his anxiety the night before had radiated so far throughout the house that Raven had come to collect Daniel and bring him to bed with her. Little did she know that he was all knees and elbows, as Alex learned Daniel's first week in the
mansion when they napped on the couch together. Well, Daniel napped. Alex got an elbow to the eye every time he drifted off.

"Waffles?"

Daniel nodded enthusiastically and cackled as Alex threw him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, nearly tripping over Hank as they exited the bedroom.

"Waffles!" Daniel cried, giggling as he struggled to view Beast from his upside down position.

"Again?" Hank arched a blue eyebrow.

"I won't let Sean get the syrup stuck in your fur this time."

Hank growled but followed them down the stairs, past the professor's closed door and into the kitchen. Alex sat Daniel in his highchair and went to work pulling out batter, eggs and milk.

"Something's not right," Hank muttered and a rock felt like it settled in the pit of Alex's stomach. He lowered the milk carton slowly to the counter, his back rigid with tension.

"What did you just say?"

Hank sniffed the air and frowned. "Something's not right." But just as quickly as it came, the frown went, and Hank folded his still surprisingly lithe frame into a chair. "Do we know if Erik returned?"

Alex spared a glance at Daniel and discreetly shook his head. He had noticed that the boy, though still young, was getting increasingly better at picking up tension – no doubt a byproduct of his telepathy. If they started discussing Erik, Daniel would know something was wrong with his Vati.

"Sweet! Waffles!" Sean slumped into the chair next to Daniel's and held up his hand for a high five, which the toddler returned with gusto.

"Set the table," Alex instructed, as he pulled a spatula out and checked to see how golden the bottom of the waffle was in the iron.


Hank merely raised an eyebrow and flipped a page of the newspaper.

"Fine."

Alex smiled smugly as he heard Sean pulling silverware from the drawer.

"Hey, do we know – "

"Not yet," Alex cut him off, throwing a significant glance in Daniel's direction.

Sean nodded and remained silent as Raven padded into the kitchen, tying a robe around her waist to stave off the morning chill.

"I thought you were going back to bed."

"How could I with you lot banging around in here?" She threw a nasty look in Sean's direction as he placed six plates down on the table none-too-gently.

"What?"
She groaned and began distributing waffles as Alex flipped them off the griddle, settling into something that was slowly becoming routine. It was odd, Alex thought as he glanced around the table, that four people so different yet so alike could come together for something as mundane as breakfast.

He thought of Hank and Sean, who he'd gladly take a bullet for as much as they drove each other up the wall. Of Raven, who he'd give his right arm to protect, even though she could do a decent enough job of it herself. Of Charles, his father in every sense of the word. Of Erik… and that feeling of unease settled into the pit of his stomach again.

With good reason.

"What the hell happened to you?" Sean's eyebrows hit his hairline as Erik limped into the kitchen, shirtless, with a large white bandaged wrapped around his torso.

"Holy shit," Alex exclaimed.

"Language," Erik reprimanded, groaning as he bent down and placed a kiss on Daniel's head. "Just a parting gift from some old friends," he murmured, gingerly touching his blackened eye.

"They did that to you?" Sean's fork lay forgotten halfway between his plate and his mouth, a piece of waffle wobbling precariously.

"Vati." The word was quiet yet it drew every person's attention to the small boy in the highchair. His eyes had grown comically wide, but the tears that began to pool erased any trace of humor.

Erik crouched down eye level with the boy, despite his aching body, and ran a hand softly through his hair. "It's okay. I'm okay."

Charles rolled in, freezing in the doorway as he surveyed the scene in front of him. Alex's gaze darted between the Professor and Erik, catching the resigned look the two shared.

"What's going on, Professor?" Panic was beginning to creep up as his breakfast lay forgotten in front of him.

"Charles?" Raven slid out of her chair and stood, frame rigid.


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He had been prepared for it the night before, knowing it was going to leave Erik's lips the second before it did. It was, after all, a scenario that played itself out over and over in his mind ever since Daniel appeared in his life – so it was with grim acceptance that he faced the reality of his nightmare.

But to have to revisit it, to explain it to the rest of his household, brought with it a panic no precogniscience could quell. The fear from the others seeping into his mind was not helping matters either.

Charles sat facing the four teens lined up on the couch as he lifted Daniel into his lap. A distant hiss over his shoulder told him Erik had leaned up against the bookcase in a manner his ribs did not appreciate.

Silence reigned supreme as he received four blank stares in return.
"But…" Raven stuttered, "But they won't come for him now, right? I mean, his mutation isn't even fully developed."

"Which is exactly why they'll come for him now," Erik said lowly. "They'll want to develop it themselves, get Danny young enough before he can be influenced by those around him." His gaze fell on Charles. "Groom him to do their bidding."

Charles felt sick and his grip automatically tightened around his child.

"No way." Alex stood. "They'll have to get through all of us before they get to him. And we won't let them."

Charles' heart swelled as he glanced at the determined faces staring back at him. He had learned it early in life, but as Sean, Hank and Raven stood beside Alex, he truly realized that when it came to family, blood was not a determining factor.

A day passed and no one came. A week and nothing.

Provisions had been put in place – Alex moved the crib into Charles' room, and even if the boy napped, someone was to be with him at all times.

Charles took the brunt of this responsibility but occasionally, Erik would wander into the study to find Sean or Alex curled up on the couch, Daniel next to him, and *Winnie the Pooh* laying open on his chest.

Charles made regular mental sweeps every hour, on the hour, and the children upped their training, without Erik or Charles having to ask. He was beginning to recognize that odd feeling in his chest as pride as he watched Alex blast discs out of the air or Sean take flight without having to drop from high altitudes. In fact, the rapidity with which Raven changed her form while watching tv was so impressive it was nauseating, as she flickered like a playing card stuck in a bicycle spoke.

All of the preparations, all of the training, revolved around one thing. Daniel had become the eye of the storm and it terrified Erik just how attached he was to the child playing at his feet. The thought of anything happening to him, to Charles, to the rest of them, raised his heartrate more than he'd care to admit.

The wind howled, rattling the glass in the window frames, drawing Erik's attention to the serene garden outside. He narrowed his eyes – always wary of the calm before the proverbial storm.

"Vati, lookit." Daniel tugged on his pant-leg and held up a drawing consisting of red squiggles. "Poof."

"Poof?" Erik inquired.

Daniel nodded and resumed working, his pink tongue peeking out as he dug the red crayon further and further into the paper.

"Does it bother you that he calls you 'vati?'" Charles' voice drew Erik's gaze to the door.

"Does it bother you?"

Charles's smile was wistful as he wheeled into the room, stopping next to Daniel, and running his fingers through his hair.
"We've already addressed that."

Daniel held up his picture to Charles and smiled. "Poof."

"Poof?" Charless looked to Erik for clarification but he merely shrugged.

"Poof."

"Okay, then."

Erik hissed as he shifted, cursing his ribs for not healing fast enough. The bruise around his eye had faded from violent purple to sickly yellow and he could still feel the hum of the stitches in his side. As much as he hated to admit it, Charles had done a decent job. There would be minimal scarring, though even if there were, it would really just be one more to add to the collection.

"You never answered my question," Charles said, gazing pointedly at his son.

"And you never answered mine," Erik retorted, bringing Charles' own words to the forefront of his mind: "When I figure out what I want to say in reply."

Charles flinched, telling Erik the message was received. "My friend, how can I summarize my feelings for you when I'm not even quite sure what they are?"

"So you do have feelings for me," Erik grinned.

Charles glared. "Don't be dense. It doesn't become you."

Of course I do, brushed the edge of Erik's mind, but Charles' eyes remained on Daniel, giving no indication that he had let the thought slip.

Erik cleared his throat and stood, biting back a groan as his body protested. "Drink?" He levitated the scotch by its metal cap and Charles nodded.

A drink would soothe the frayed edges of his nerves. He had been alert to the point of paranoia ever since he had gleaned the underlying meaning of Emma Frost's words. The next time he saw her, he would gladly wrap a wire around her neck and squeeze until she shattered.

"Erik."

The older man blinked at the sound of Charles' voice and glanced up to realize he had warped the doorknob and light fixtures.

"Sorry," Erik muttered, pouring scotch for each of them, while doing his best to reform the metal.

Charles took the proffered glass, eyeing the other man. "What troubles you, my friend?"

"Other than the obvious?" Erik gestured to Daniel, who had discarded his drawing and was currently crawling into Charles' lap.

"I guess your lot aren't the most loyal bunch," Charles muttered, placing a kiss in Daniel's hair.

"They're not my lot. Not anymore." Erik sighed as he lowered himself to couch once again. "Though I didn't expect their allegiances to change quite so easily."

"No easier than yours did." Charles raised an eyebrow, as if daring him to argue.
"My loyalty to you never wavered," Erik calmly replied. "They knew that. Which was why you were always off limits."

Charles opened his mouth as if to say something, but seemed to flounder when nothing came out. Erik hid a smile behind his tumbler, always happy to catch the telepath off guard.

Daniel reached up and gripped Charles' collar, leaning back and closing his eyes against his father's chest. Erik sighed at the sight, taking a long sip of his scotch, wincing at the burn. It would be almost too easy to lock up the doors and shut out the world. Charles certainly had enough money to fund retirement and, as Erik watched Charles whisper something only for his son to hear, the notion was more than a little tempting.

But neither man could live with that, despite the fact that it was the nearest thing to utopia either of them would find. No, Charles' idealism and Erik's restlessness would prevent any sort settling down.

Someday, maybe… But not today.

"You've disappeared again on me, my friend."

Erik jumped and Charles chuckled.

"Apologies. I did not mean to startle."

Erik would have responded but his gaze was transfixed on Daniel as he wiggled out of Charles' lap and picked up a crayon once more.

"I never meant to drag your family into this," he blurted out.

Charles cocked his head and frowned. "I know," he said, as if it was the simplest thing in the world.

Erik's heart hammered against his chest and he took another gulp of amber courage. When did he become so afraid of Charles? When did the man start setting him so far on edge that the slightest provocation had him second guessing every move he's ever made?

_They're your family too, you know_, whispered against his mind and Erik, to his dismay, found a lump lodged in this throat because he hadn't had a family in ohsolong and here was this man, offering his free of charge.

"Charles – "

But before he could express any sort of gratitude, Charles had leaned forward and stolen the words from his lips. It was a chaste kiss, hesitant – so unlike the complicated and sometimes volatile relationship they had. Charles' lips left his and it took Erik a moment to open his eyes, not entirely sure that the last few seconds weren't an incredibly vivid daydream.

The clock in the room had stopped ticking and he could venture a guess that all the metal in the house was frozen in place. His mind had gone alarmingly blank – unable to form coherent thought or sound – and as the silence trickled on, he could see the anxiety pool in Charles' eyes.

"I'm sorry, I – "

But whatever Charles was about to say, Erik didn't get to hear as he pressed his lips to his again.

"Of course I don't have a problem with Danny calling me 'Vati," he gasped as he pulled away for air.

"Of course I'm in love with you, you imbecile," Charles replied, crushing their lips together again.
As he fisted his fingers in Charles' hair, he allowed himself this moment – this one moment to let his guard down, to bask in the warmth Charles flooded into his mind, to revel in the feeling of being utterly and completely home.

But a poof of red smoke and the smell of sulfur changed all that.

Charles and Erik broke abruptly apart and, before either could react, Daniel grinned at Azazel and clapped his hands, holding up his drawing and waving it around.

"Poof!"
Domesticities

Chapter Summary

In which the mansion gains a few new members and hide and seek is played.

The sound of his name being distantly yelled in Charles’ voice was only a vague blip against the blind rage that was his mind.

He didn’t even remember getting up, yet somehow, here he was, pressing his forearm against Azazel's throat, the taste of Charles' lips still haunting his own.

"Erik. Erik!" Charles' hand was warm and placating on the small of his back, the only part of him that he could reach.

Erik blinked and shook his head, realizing for the first time since he heard that telltale "Poof" (Oh, Daniel…) that the man whose torso he was currently crushing against the oak paneling was not fighting back. In fact, he wasn't doing much of anything. Charles had frozen him, frozen everything. Everything but Daniel. Because if Erik knew Charles (and he liked to think he did), he knew that the telepath would never, ever do that to his son if he could help it.

"Erik…” the hand rubbed comforting circles against his shirt and Erik stumbled back a step, the rage slowly seeping out of his body. "He means us no harm."

"What?" His voice was sharp and he flinched at the way Daniel jumped. The poor boy was sitting on the carpet, lower lip wobbling as he stared at the man standing in front of him. As if he was staring at him for the first time, Erik noted with sickening clarity, eyes wide with fear.

"Daniel, I didn’t –"

The boy flinched away from his touch and Erik felt like vomiting.

Come back. Come back to me.

Erik blinked again as Charles’ gentle pleading faded away, finally connecting with the azure eyes that radiated understanding.

"He means us no harm," Charles repeated.

"I have a few broken ribs that would beg to differ."

"Ah yes," Charles sat back and held out his hands to Daniel, welcoming his son as he hurried into his arms and placing a comforting kiss on his head. "I think it will comfort you to know that our friend Azazel here was not acting of his own accord." At Erik's confused expression, he elaborated. "I think you forget that, with that helmet, you are the only one immune to Miss Frost's charms."

And immediately, comprehension dawned.

"He came to apologize – to pledge his allegiance, and that of Janos and Angel, to you."
"Me?"

"Us, actually." Charles' mouth quirked up in a grin. "It seems Miss Frost is willing to sell herself to the highest bidder and the rest of your team would prefer not to be treated," he paused, covering Daniel's ears, "like two-bit whores."

Daniel squirmed, pulling Charles' hands away from his head, still eyeing Erik warily. It was a look he'd wish never to see on the boy's face again and, before Charles released Azazel, before he even drew in his next breath, he needed to remedy the situation.

"Daniel..." he started, crouching down next to the boy in Charles' lap, closing his eyes against the way he buried his face in Charles' shirt, as if frightened. "I am sorry." He held up his hands in what he hoped was a placating manner, and it was calming enough to earn a peek from the folds of his father's cardigan. "I will never, ever, hurt you." Erik slowly reached out and brushed the brown, wavy hair away from the child's forehead, smiling faintly as Charles' breath warmed his hand. "My Bärchen," he chuckled fondly, "hibernating away."

Though Daniel had no idea what Erik was saying, he smiled all the same and the painful constricting in Erik's chest eased in blissful relief.

xxxxxx

Daniel was entranced by the hypnotic way Azazel's tail grazed the floor back and forth. His big blue eyes followed it like a cat about to pounce on his prey.

Charles knew this and therefore kept one eye on his son, the other on Erik, and his mind on Azazel in case all parties in question decided to make a move: Erik for Azazel, Azazel for the door, and Daniel for the tail.

"Drink?" Charles held up the scotch bottle good-naturedly, but the red-faced mutant gave a firm shake of his head.

"Nyet. Thank you."

"We do have vodka, if that's more to your liking..."

Azazel's eyebrow raised in temptation. "Perhaps a bit."

"Who's she working for?"

Charles rolled his eyes – leave it to Erik to skip all pleasantries and cut right to the chase.

"Government," Azazel grunted. "Not sure whose at the moment."

Erik glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. Is he telling the truth? Charles gave a barely perceptible nod. He doesn't know. He sucked in a breath and tried to push the thought of how large a government backed strike would be out of his mind. It was a troubling thought that could wait until morning. Until the buzz of both the scotch and Erik's lips stopped fogging up his mind.

"We've got rooms, if you care to stay," he offered, slightly impressed as Azazel downed the vodka in one. Vodka and Charles had never been good bedfellows.

"Nyet, thank you. Ve prefer to stay in our own accommodations. Except the girl."
Charles tensed. Angel.

"She would like to stay here… if welcome," Azazel concluded, throwing Charles a knowing look that the telepath seemed to wither under.

It would not be easy welcoming Angel back. The boys wouldn't take too kindly to it – not at all, but they'd have to take it one day at a time, as they had with all things. Charles sighed and rubbed his temples, feeling a migraine coming on.

"Ve vill check in daily and I vill bring girl by tomorrow," Azazel said, more to Erik than Charles, sparing a humorous glance for the boy at his feet making a feeble attempt to catch his tail as he walked past. "Congratulation by the vay." This one directed at Charles, with a vague gesture to the child on the floor. "You vill make good parents."

Charles frowned, not entirely sure the red man was joking.

It was an odd relationship that Erik had with Azazel. One minute he was inches away from snapping his neck and the next he was smiling in a way that was genuine, but a little too off. Then again, that's how Erik smiled at Sean shortly before Charles had all but shoved him out of a third story window, so maybe it was a combination of both genuine pride and manic glee. Either way, it was disconcerting.

Azazel turned at the door, fixing Erik with a grin. "Sorry about the ribs," he said, smirking in a way that proved just how not sorry he was.

Good-natured teasing or not, it was to Erik's credit that he didn't impale the teleporter on the flagpole.

xxxxxx

When Alex stumbled through the doorway, blindly reaching out for the biggest bowl Xavier Manor had to offer that would hold at least half a box of cereal, he didn't expect to be scared out of his wits by the sound of a throat clearing in what he thought had been an empty kitchen.

"Morning," Erik greeted wryly, chuckling at the now-scattered Cheerios littering the counter.

Alex blinked stupidly at the clock, knowing full well that it read 5:45am, before focusing back on the tiny kitchen table.

It wasn't the presence of the other man that had made Alex do a double take, or even the way he seemed completely at ease sitting at the table in nothing but pajama bottoms, his childhood on full display in the carvings of his skin. No, it was the way Daniel sat perfectly tranquil on his lap, casually alternating between sucking on Erik's hand and babbling animatedly at the paper when something caught his eye.

And Erik sat there like he didn't mind that Daniel was slobbering all over his palm or crunching up his newspaper in his tiny fist. It was an exercise in patience that Alex didn't even know Erik possessed.

"What's the Squirt doing up?"

"He had a nightmare," Erik replied distractedly, biting into a piece of toast and flipping a page, much to Daniel's wide-eyed delight.

Alex gave a noncommittal grunt to at least let the man know that he had heard him. After scooping up the wayward Cheerios and depositing them back in the bowl, he poured himself into a chair at the
"What are you doing up?" Erik asked without looking up.

Alex shrugged and poured more milk than he really needed. "Thought I'd get a head start on the day."

"And you look so bright-eyed and bushy-tailed about it."

The phrase sounded so foreign coming out of Erik's lips that Alex snorted into his cereal, scattering Cheerios once again across the table.

"Something funny?"

"Charles is rubbing off on you," he muttered, reaching forward and handing Daniel the Cheerio he was reaching for.

"What?"

"Only he can say, 'bright-eyed and bushy-tailed' and actually pull it off."

Erik arched an eyebrow. "Are you saying I can't?"

Alex swallowed, his throat suddenly thick. It didn't matter that he was half asleep and that this was a completely ridiculous topic of conversation. When Erik fixed him with that look, he still felt like a five-year-old about to be sent to the corner.

Alex reached for the pitcher of orange juice and began pouring. "Are you ever going to finish that elevator?" Good. Change of topic.

"It's done."

Wait, what? Alex was so shocked, he didn't even notice that his orange juice glass was full five seconds ago.

Erik shrugged and returned to the sports section.

"He couldn't sleep and I got bored."

The sun was just beginning to peek over the distant trees, throwing the hall into that perfect ethereal blue, as Erik gently pushed the door to Charles' bedroom open and padded across the floor.

It would take practice, this whole getting-into-bed-with-a-sleeping-child-without-waking-said-child-or-sleeping-telepath thing. Erik paused in his effort to pull back the covers, wincing as Daniel shifted slightly in his arms.

"You're getting better," came the mumble from the pillow next to him.

"Go back to sleep, Charles."

"What time is it?"

"Early."
"Mkay." Gentle snoring filled the air a minute later and Erik envied his ability to drop off absolutely anywhere.

Erik subdued the chuckle rumbling in his chest, lest it wake the child sleeping in his arms. Charles’ child. *His* child? The jolt he felt in both his chest and his stomach was certainly enough to make his heart race. Daniel called him Daddy and Charles didn't mind. Was it too much for Erik to call him "son" in return?

"Of course I'm in love with you, you imbecile."

The words floated over him and through him, cocooning him in the kind of warmth that no down blanket could bring.

But before he allowed any semblance of weakness to settle anywhere in the vicinity of his knees, he reminded himself who he was and who Charles was and that any partnership, relationship, whatever-ship, they attempted would not be an easy path to trod.

Still… Charles loved him.

And Erik smiled, weak knees be damned.

xxxxxx


It wasn't that Sean had a problem with being gay; he just didn't want to see his professor/father canoodling with… well, he wasn't really sure what to call Erik. Teacher? Too formal. Brother? Too weird. Badass? Yes, but not pertinent to the conversation.

He had always suspected that they were… you know, but he liked to play the stoner card to maintain some semblance of blissful ignorance, futile though it was. Even without looking, he saw it in simple glances and phantom touches. In what they said to each other and what they pointedly did not. It was in the tone Charles reserved only for Erik's name and how, in the months after the beach, 'Erik' just disappeared from the Professor's vocabulary.

Even without the don't-want-to-see-can't-look-away image that very morning of Erik emerging from the Professor's bedroom in nothing but his pajama pants, Sean knew. He said he didn't but he did. And he was tolerant. More than tolerant – he was happy, because, even though he didn't swing that way, he hoped one day that someone would look at him the same way Erik looked at the Professor.

What Sean was *not* tolerant of, was coming face to face with the girl who shot him out of the sky without a single look back.

"Angel."

xxxxxx

Shouting. Lots and lots of shouting. Too much to discern any individual thread, but *anger, pain, betrayal, guilt, and… amusement?*

Azazel.

Charles groaned as he shoved himself into a seated position and poked Erik none-too-gently in the back. It was a credit to just how comfortable the metal-bender had gotten in the mansion that he
didn't immediately bolt upright and grab Charles by the throat.

Instead, all Charles received was a bleary, "Whassamatter?"

"I believe Angel has arrived."

Erik lifted his head and blinked, a particularly high-pitched shriek from Sean pulling a muffled, "Shit" from his mouth.

"Language," Charles auto-corrected.

Erik gestured to the sleeping baby between them. "I don't hear him complaining."

Raven wasn't entirely sure how she had ended up in that position, with one arm outstretched towards Alex and another reaching out for Riptide, a calm blue sky in the middle of wind and fire.

"Enough!" Charles' voice echoed around the kitchen and ohthankgod because one more second of pleading with Alex's rising anger and Raven would have been diving under the counter.

He rolled further into the room, Erik trailing just behind. She tried to ignore the way they both had matching cases of bed-head, but for the first time since she had arrived, her brother actually looked like he had had a decent night's sleep. She suspected she owed that to Erik, but she didn't want to get ahead of herself.

"Miss Salvadore," Charles nodded in her direction.

Angel returned with a timid smile. "Professor."

"He's not your Professor," Alex spit out, his eyes once again glowing dangerously red.

"Alex." It wasn't sharp and it wasn't mean, but it silenced the laser-wielder as if he had just bellowed across the room.

Raven's eyes darted around faster than she thought possible – from Alex who was seething, to Angel who was cowering. To Azazel who was examining his tail, to Erik who was examining Charles. To Hank who was unsure who to keep tabs on first, to Sean who looked like he just wanted some coffee. And finally to Charles, the glue holding all the jagged pieces together.

Azazel raised a red eyebrow. "Are all your mornings this entertaining, Lehnsherr?"

"You don't get to talk to him! Not after you beat the shit out of him last week," Alex fumed.

Charles looked too shocked to reprimand the boy and even Erik's eyebrows raised at the sudden defense.

"Alex, Azazel's attack on Erik was not his choice. You'll find we telepaths can be very persuasive when need be."

"You mean the diamond bitch?"

"Your language this morning is atrocious, Mr. Summers."

Alex shamefully ducked his head. "Sorry, Professor."
Charles’ gaze seemed to bore a hole into her heart as he focused his attention on each of them in turn.

"Everyone deserves a second chance. Even Miss Salvadore." He held up his hand as Alex opened his mouth indignantly. "Should I have left you in solitary confinement? Not once have I asked you how you wound up there. And no, I did not read it from your mind. It is not my business." Alex closed his mouth, all fight gone, as Charles turned to Sean. "Or you, Mr. Cassidy, should I have let you wander the streets of Boston with no family wondering where you had gotten to?" Sean's eyes softened but Charles had already moved on. "And you, Hank. Should I have let you run away from here after your transformation, as I know you wanted to do too many times to count? Did you ever think for one second that even if you did, we wouldn't welcome you back with open arms?"

Finally, she found his gaze on hers and all of the breath left her lungs.

"And Raven…” his voice cracked. He had given her so many second chances. More than she deserved. She left him lying on a beach, bleeding, possibly dying, yet this was home and he made sure she knew that. "Oh, Raven…”

He didn't need to say anything. Everyone in the kitchen already seemed to know.

"And me," Erik murmured. Again, another redemption story that needed no explanation.

"Believe me," Charles continued, "I am not without my own faults. You all have saved me, and together we will save each other."

Raven swallowed hard. No, he was not without his faults – what Raven knew probably only scratched the surface and Raven knew a lot – but still…

She was pretty sure that Charles Xavier was the best man she would ever come across.

xxxxxx

It took three days and countless broken windows, vases, and almost-limbs before the team (family?) was able to sit down for dinner at the same table.

"Angel, could you please pass the potatoes?" Hank's request was overly polite, as if trying to keep the natural growl from his voice, lest it be interpreted the wrong way.

"Cassidy," Erik barked, "be careful with the windows you break. I don't want Daniel stepping on glass."

Sean let out a loud laugh. "Says the man who tossed me off a satellite dish."

Alex pointed his fork at the redhead across the table. "Says the kid who got so stoned he thought it would be a great idea to go bowling with a toddler."

"You were stoned?" Charles heard himself exclaim, vividly remembering finding his son with pillows duct-taped to his person, but his question was drowned out by the laughter that erupted around the table.

"Oh please, like you didn't break into the Professor's liquor cabinet and get tanked on the 12-year-old scotch." Hank clapped a hand over his mouth, as if surprised that the retort actually escaped.

"That was you?" Erik, this time. "I liked that scotch!"

"Alex, please wait a year before you go getting ridiculously intoxicated," Charles pleaded in a weary
"I don't want to have to explain to the police why I have a drunk minor and a hole in my roof when they come to take you away."

"Aw, come on, Prof. Lighten up."

Charles bristled at the accusation. "Someone has to be the responsible one."

Raven snorted in a most undignified manner and Charles knew he was in trouble before the words even left her mouth. "Says the man who got called to the Dean's office for shagging his way through the doctorate candidates."

The din around the table abruptly cut off and if Sean's jaw dropped any farther, Charles was convinced he'd damage the joint.

"No. Way."

Charles cleared his throat, already feeling the familiar blush creep up his neck and burn his cheeks. "Raven, that was entirely inappro – " But it was too late.

Sean was yelling "No! Way!" in increasingly higher pitches, Alex was high-fiving Hank and even Angel was giggling behind her napkin, while Raven merely shrugged, looking smugly pleased with herself. Only Erik's face remained impassive, the slight quirk of his eyebrow the only indication that he had heard that tidbit of information.

That and the now-mangled cutlery sitting in Charles' palm.

"Erik, was that really necessary?"

xxxxxx

Despite the laughter that erupted from his lips, Erik couldn't help but feel on edge as he glanced at the red, smiling faces around the table. He was happy and that thought alone was enough to throw him into a panic. Erik didn't like it.

Things were good, and things were hardly ever good. He recognized this scenario: the serene dinner sitting across from his mother the night before officers broke down his door; the soft lullaby sung to his daughter before she was taken in flame and hate; the chess game in front of a hearth before his heart was broken by metal and shame.

The calm before the storm.

No, Erik didn't like it one bit.

xxxxxx

It was a knock on the door two days later that broke their domesticated tranquility.

"Who are you?" Erik gruffly asked, earning a smack from a now blond-haired Raven, as she appeared at his side.

"Can I help you?"

Erik wanted to sneer at her saccharine tone as he sized up the two men in suits on the threshold of his home.

"This is the Xavier residence, is it not?"
"Who's asking?"

"Erik, go wait in the kitchen," Raven muttered in his ear.

He plastered a tight smile on his face and was about to reply with "When hell freezes over" but the feeling of two tiny arms wrapping his leg dashed the words from his lips.

"Found!" Daniel yelled, reminding Erik that their game of hide-and-seek was still technically going on and Erik had apparently just lost.

The man on the left removed his sunglasses and gazed at Daniel in a way that made their non-descript black sedan vibrate against Erik's palm. "Whose son is this?"

Raven's elbow to his ribcage was the only thing that kept the "Mine" from leaving Erik's lips.

"His father is not at home," Raven answered.

"Pity." The man slid his sunglasses back on. "We'll come back later then."

Erik practically growled as Raven shut the door in their faces, but a tug on his pant-leg reminded him there were more important matters at hand.

"One, two, three…" he put his hand over his eyes with a sigh, as Daniel squealed and took off down the hall, Raven following close behind.

"Come on, Munchkin."

"Dude, he's so cheating," he heard Sean yell as he passed by the foyer in search of a hiding place in the east wing.

Erik grinned, mentally calculating the distinct feel of Sean's watch and following it up the stairs, down the hall, and through the second door on the right, settling near the window. Behind the curtain, if memory served him right.

The most pressing thing on his mind in that moment was not the odd house call they had just received, but whether or not he should put on a show of actually looking for Sean, or just pounce on him right away.

He should have paid more attention.

xxxxxx

A week later, they came.
Sacrifices

Chapter Summary

In which Erik watches his worst nightmare play out in front of him.

It shouldn't have surprised him just how prepared they were. With their camouflage face paint and semi-automatic weapons; their combat boots that didn't make a sound and their inside knowledge that the third step from the top creaks if you step on it just so.

It shouldn't have surprised him that they had detailed schematics on all of the entrances and a headcount for every soul residing there; shields strong enough to withstand lasers and earplugs sturdy enough to block out sonic pitches.

Erik knew how these people worked. Knew just how far they were willing to go to get what they wanted. It was the kind of desperation you could taste, that intoxicating mixture of copper and ash, fueling irrational decisions that justified themselves in your mind. It caused blood to be spilled without a look back because, after all, it was done in the name of the cause.

No, it shouldn't have surprised him.

Unfortunately, it did.

xxxxxx

"Don't be an ass, get down."

"I'm totally fine!"

"You said that last time and then you broke your arm."

"A minor technical mishap."

Alex shrugged and sat back down at the table on the lawn. If Sean was going to insist on killing himself, he might as well get a good seat and enjoy the show. They had decided to have a picnic in honor of the first decent day of spring and it was one of those shining examples of utter domesticity that made Erik stand to the side and shuffle his feet, a little unsure as to how this whole 'being at peace' thing worked.

And Sean, having probably smuggled just a few too many of Azazel's Bloody Mary's, was currently climbing the tallest tree the vast gardens had to offer, much to Alex's chagrin/delight.

"Down, Sean," Charles called.

"Aw come on, Prof. I'm getting so much better."

"Yes, well, I haven't had my eggs yet and if they go cold while I'm taking you to hospital, I will be most displeased."

Alex snorted. That was polite Charles-speak for, "Get the fuck down. Now."
Erik glanced between Sean and Charles, the latter of whom had yet to look up from the morning paper. Alex waited for it because, obviously, it was coming – and the look he shared with Raven told him she knew it too. Erik was about to crack and when Erik cracked, brunch got a whole lot more interesting.

And sure enough, two seconds later Sean let out a distant yelp as his belt roughly levitated him by the buckle from the topmost branch of the tree. Raven let out a peal of laughter as the strain on the belt started pulling Sean's pants down, exposing his polka dotted boxer briefs.

"Dude, not funny! Put me down!" Sean flailed midair, letting out an "oof" as Erik roughly dropped him on the lawn.

"Thank you, dear," Charles simply said, again not looking up from the paper, but the way Erik's ears burned made Alex feel like he had just been privy to something private. One of those shining examples of utter domesticity.

Hmm. Maybe Erik was getting the hang of it.

The tension in Erik's jaw was so great, he was convinced that if he clenched down any harder, he would grind his teeth into dust.

"Don't move."

"I'm trying," he bit out, as Charles peered at him over glasses that made him look entirely too appealing and entirely unconvinced that Erik was, in fact, trying.

The tweezers in Charles' hand were steady, despite the fact that Erik flinched with every stitch that was removed. The smell of rubbing alcohol was invading his senses and fogging his mind, while images from a distant but ever-present past taunted the edge of his psyche.

"Stay with me, my friend," Charles murmured, giving him another knowing glance over the edge of the glasses.

It should have annoyed Erik that Charles could see through him so clearly, but instead he found it comforting. The fact that the telepath could ground him so completely with one simple phrase was a talent indeed – one that only Charles excelled at. Raven had tried on multiple occasions, only to be rebuffed with a quick glare and a snappy retort. But Erik didn't blame her.

It wasn't her fault she wasn't her brother.

"There," Charles said as he pulled away, admiring his handiwork. "All set. And not too bad if I do say so myself."

Erik groaned, his ribs still protesting against any minor movement. "Thank you."

"Scarring should be minimal."

Erik shrugged. "What's one more?"

Charles never knew how to respond to those offhand comments: 'I'm sorry that happened to you?' 'I'd take them away if I could?' Any would earn him nothing more than a glare and a gruff 'Not your
fault' in return.

Still, he wished he could ease Erik's burden.

"Charles…"

He didn't need to be a telepath to see the conflicted look on Erik's face. "Yes?"

"What exactly… what are…” We?

"We? As in 'us'?

Erik raised an eyebrow and Charles busied himself with packing up the first aid kit to keep from having to meet other man's gaze. Because, truth be told, he didn't have an answer.

"Let's talk about it tomorrow."

Erik rolled his eyes. "You always say that."

"Well we always have tomorrow."

"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow."

"Now you're sounding like Shakespeare."

"And you're sounding like a broken record."

Charles sighed and leaned back against the chair. "I'll make you a deal. If you can go 24 hours without any strenuous activity and let that wound heal, we'll have this discussion."

"Twenty four hours?"

"Twenty four hours."

"I think you underestimate me."

"No, I just know your tendency to attract trouble."

Erik smiled and took a sip of his scotch, wincing slightly as pain shot up his side.

"I was thinking," Erik began, changing the subject and ignoring the knowing look Charles threw his way, "what with the new elevator completed, we could start moving your things back into your old room upstairs."

The feelings that swelled in his chest took him entirely off-guard, and he swallowed hard in an attempt to clear the lump from his throat. It wasn't as if he was particularly attached to his old room – sure, it still had most of the creature comforts he had gathered over the years – but it represented a time in his life that Charles thought lost to him. When he still had the ability to stand on his own two feet, when his biggest fear was the way the local boys leered at Raven, and when his most pressing matter was remembering to pay his bar tab.

And here was Erik, giving it all back to him.

"I'd like that," Charles murmured. "Thank you, my – "

Fear. The sudden spike of emotion that was not his own halted the words on his tongue. It flared in
his mind like a firework, flashing bright before dying midair. It was so real, so consuming, that
without even realizing it, he had the armrests in a white-knuckled grip as he desperately tried to reach
out for that mind again.

"Charles?"
The telepath blinked, bringing Erik's concerned face back into focus.

"Something's wrong with Angel."

xxxxxx

Erik jogged down the hall, an uneasy feeling settling into the pit of his stomach. Charles had gone so
pale, had looked so convinced that something was amiss… And who was Erik to argue with a
telepath?

He burst into Alex's room, not even bothering to knock, only to find the teen sitting crossed-legged
on the floor across from Sean, a game of Monopoly between them.

"Everything all right in here?"

Alex blinked up at him. "Yeah, why?"

"Charles thinks something's wrong with Angel. Have you seen her?"

Alex shook his head, already getting to his feet. "No, but we'll help you look."

With a curt nod, he headed back into the hall, nearly running smack into Raven as she attempted to
get into the room.

"I hope you didn't take the Scotty dog. I totally called that one."

"Game's over, Raven," Sean said, pulling his shoes on.

"What? Why?" Her gaze settled on Erik. She had gotten pretty good at reading him over their
months together and the tense set of his shoulders immediately put her on her guard.

"Prof thinks something's wrong with Angel."

"Raven, go down to your brother. He's with Danny. Just…" Erik couldn't help the terror that seized
his chest at the thought of something happening to them. "… stay with them."

Without a word, Raven turned on her heel and sprinted down the hallway.

"Dude, it must be serious," he heard Sean mutter behind him.

Erik hoped to God it wasn't.

xxxxxx

"Charles!" Raven shouted as she took the stairs two at a time, hoping against hope that her reflexes
would prevent her from spraining an ankle.

She burst through the study door and froze, watching as Charles rocked a sleepy Daniel in his arms,
humming softly in his ear in an effort to keep the boy calm.
"Has Erik located Angel yet?"

She would have to credit him for giving his voice the cadence it had when reading a bedtime story, but a subtle shake of her head hardened his features.

"Can't you…?" she tapped her temple.

Charles shook his head. "Something's blocking her."

That thought was perhaps the most unsettling of all.

xxxxxx

I don't like this. I don't like this.

The four words had been on a loop ever since Erik had burst into the room and Sean's anxiety levels were climbing with every empty room they came upon.

"She's gotta be here somewhere, right? I mean, she wouldn't just run off. I know I haven't exactly been the most welcoming, but dude, she shot me with one of her flaming lugies!"

"Sean?"

"Yeah?"

"Stop talking."

"Okay."

Sean got control of his word vomit as Alex left his side and jogged up next to Erik, who was more mission than man, banging every door open and flicking on the lights. Sean had been about to suggest that they split up when he tripped over something and landed flat on his face, inhaling the carpet.

"You all right?" Alex called back, already following Erik to the third floor.

"Fine! Just tripped on the…" Oh God. Sean swallowed hard, fighting off the violent urge to be sick. Oh God. Oh God. Oh God. What he thought had been a doorstop was actually an arm, reaching out from a darkened alcove in the hall upon which a rather ugly bust sat upon an equally gaudy pedestal. With his heartbeat hammering in his ears, Sean looked around the back of the statue and swallowed down the sudden urge to vomit.

Angel had a single bullet wound in the middle of her forehead, a lone drop of blood tracking down her temple like a red pearl-drop earring.

"Erik!"

Sean reached a shaking hand towards her, but recoiled just before it made contact.

"Mein Gott," Erik breathed out next to him, paling and dropping to his knees next to the girl.

Sean rocked back and forth. She didn't crawl here all by herself; someone had obviously dumped her there.

Which meant they were already in the building.
The sudden explosion of panic in his mind sent him reeling. Erik's voice was so loud, Charles jumped in his chair, effectively waking Daniel and startling Raven.

She's gone. She's dead. They're here. They're in the house.

He hadn't realized he had started hyperventilating until Raven took hold of his shoulders and shook.

"They're in the house," he croaked, unable to fully express the grief he felt over Angel's loss due to the rising tide of fear in his chest.

"Who is?"

"I don't know. But I can't feel them, which means they've got something blocking me." Charles didn't think it was possible for Raven to pale but she did. "Take Danny. Get out of here."

"I can – I can help. You need me here."

"I need to know my son is safe. They are here for him." Charles pressed a hard kiss to Daniel's head and held him out for Raven. "For God's sake, Raven, please." His voice broke as Daniel circled his little arms around Charles' neck, clinging onto something familiar in the sea of suffocating tension.

"I can't protect him. You need to give him to someone who can."

Charles stretched his power out as far as it could go and located Sean, Alex and Erik hurtling down the hallway toward him, but beyond them, it was nothingness.

Hank, get out of the lab. We're under attack. He received a growl in response.

"Azazel?" Raven asked hopefully.

"Won't check in until tomorrow and he's out of my range." Charles attempted to even out his voice, but Raven knew him too well.

The sound of distant glass shattering punctuated the arrival of Sean and Alex in the study, skidding to a halt and panting.

"Where's Erik?"

"When they came through the window, he went back and told us to keep going until we got to you."

"Damn him," Charles muttered, attempting to hand Daniel to Raven once more.

"I'll take him," Alex stepped forward, allowing Charles a moment to hold his boy before handing him off.

"You get him out of here, Alex."

"Yes, sir."

"Daddy…" Daniel squirmed in Alex's arms, reaching out for Charles.

"I love you, my boy," Charles whispered, blinking through cloudy eyes and clearing his throat. "Go,
Alex."

With a nod, the blond ducked out of the study door, taking Charles' heart with him.

More glass shattered, shots were fired, and an animalistic roar signaled Hank's arrival into the fray. Charles closed his eyes and reminded himself to breathe. They had found them – how had they found them? His son was safe, but Angel was dead, and his other three children were fighting a war when they should be in their beds.

And Erik… Oh God, Erik.

I'm here, Charles

Stay with me.

Always.

xxxxxx

A lamp flew across the room with enough force to impale the man pointing his gun at Hank.

They were wearing modified helmets – it was hard to tell from this distance, but if Erik was a betting man, he'd guess that their metal makeup matched the one currently gathering dust on Charles' desk… No wonder Charles couldn't feel them.

An uneasy feeling settled into Erik's stomach. What other preemptive measures had they taken?

Hank growled and swiped at a man bearing down on him, the man's blood mixing with the green and black face paint he wore. Erik gasped as he took a hit to his side, the broken ribs throbbing and the wound opening up again.

"Get to Charles!" he managed to yell to Hank over the grunts of pain and the sounds of warping metal.

They came in through the windows and the front doors, swarming like ants on a discarded apple in summer. Charles couldn't use his telepathy. Charles was vulnerable. Get to Charles was the rhythm to which his heart beat.

They had to be outnumbered at least six to one.

If Erik was a betting man, he wouldn't take those odds.

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"Hold your ears, Prof," Sean called as he let a scream rip down the hall, shattering the vases and windows that lined it and sending five men to the floor. Raven followed after, knocking out any that were still conscious.

Her movements were fluid, to point where she cleared her mind and allowed instinct to take over. Erik had been working with her on her reflexes and by the time she took notice of her surroundings once more, there were bodies scattered all around her.

She blinked and glanced up where Charles sat gaping.

"You're a wonder to behold, Raven."
It was one of the greatest compliments he had ever given her.

"Shh, shh, shhhh. It's okay," Alex whispered as Daniel whimpered in his arms.

This was not where he wanted to be. As soon as he had dashed into the hallway, men broke down the front door, causing him to seek refuge with Daniel in the formal living room off of the foyer. The silk furniture was still covered with dusty sheets and the need to sneeze was almost overwhelming, but the constant pounding of footsteps in the hall just outside and on the floor above was enough incentive to hold his nose.

He would get out of this house if it was the last thing he did. The professor trusted him with his child and he owed it to the man to do everything in his power to get his son to safety.

Hank roared in the distance and Sean screamed again. Alex cupped his hands over Daniel's ears to protect his tiny eardrums and held his breath as footsteps came and went.

They would get through this. Everyone would be okay.

But that was a lie, because everyone was not okay. Angel was dead and any one of them could have joined her by now. He thought of what it would be like without Hank, without Raven, without Sean or Erik or the professor and his heart ached.

He needed them.

Silence fell in the hall and Alex stood from his crouched position behind one of the couches, Daniel clinging to his shirt.

"Almost there, Squirt," he murmured. "Just a little while longer."

But a little while longer turned out to be a lot sooner than expected as the door burst open, throwing harsh lights on the white sheets.

Alex had no weapon except himself, but with Danny in such close proximity, it was absolutely out of the question. He instinctively lowered the boy to the floor and stood in front of him, holding his arms out to prove he was unarmed.

"Hands up! Don't move!" the man on the right yelled, before radioing the position to the rest of the house. "Got him. First floor."

Daniel whimpered and held onto Alex's leg, pressing his tiny face into the back of his jeans. Alex reached a hand back and stroked the top of his head.

"Hands up."

"They're up," Alex growled in returned. It wasn't the first time he had had a gun pointed at him, but it was the first time he had a baby in his care while staring down the barrel. His ears were ringing, but he could still make out the sounds of a scuffle in the hall. They were putting up a good fight and Alex was proud.

The man with the gun took a step forward, eyes fixed on the baby cowering behind him.

"Hand over the boy."

"Go fuck yourself."
The gun rose, giving Alex just enough time to think how lucky he'd been to have finally found a home at last.

*Thank you, Professor.*

Charles gasped, slamming his hands down on the armrests as the gunshot echoed down corridor.

"Alex!" He yelled until his voice was hoarse, until tears streamed down his cheeks, and his throat burned.

Raven came running up behind him and they watched as Erik jumped the last few stairs and ran in the direction of the gunshot.

*He's in the parlor.*

Charles reached out further with his mind and immediately recoiled. *Pain. Pain. Nothing but pain.* Alex was injured, possibly dying and Charles would be damned if he sat there and watched it happen.

"Stay here."

"Absolutely not."

"Raven!" He gripped her hand and pulled her down, cupping her face in his palms. "If anything happens to you, I will never forgive myself. Stay here or I will make you."

She swallowed and nodded, moving away to help Sean limp to his feet.

"Is Alex…?" Despite his mutation, his voice was small and terrified.

Charles kept his eyes trained on Erik, who had frozen outside the open door to the parlor and now held his hands above his head. Charles rolled himself down the hall, eyes never leaving the stiff stature of the man in front of him. Past the bodies of the men who had broken into his home, past Hank who sat on the stairs nursing a head wound, past the front door hanging off its hinges, deceiving all under the stars with the trappings of what should have been a peaceful night.

*Charles…*

*Is he dead?*

*Not yet.*

*And Daniel?*

Erik didn't respond immediately and whatever hope Charles felt in his chest vanished.

*Prepare yourself.*

After what felt like a lifetime, he pulled up next to Erik, inhaling sharply at seeing that for which there was no preparation.

A man, flanked on either side by two guards, held Danny to his chest and pressed a knife against the boy's throat, as Alex lay bleeding out at his feet.
"Well, well, well. The infamous Charles Xavier."

Hate boiled his blood and the act of keeping his face passive was an evolutionary anomaly in and of itself. Beside him, Erik simmered with barely suppressed rage.

"Do come closer, we don't bite," he said, even as he dug the knife closer to his son's throat. Daniel heaved out a sob and Charles' heart broke.

He tore his eyes away to focus on Alex. The boy blinked sluggishly in an effort to remain awake as his head lolled to the side and he focused his hazy gaze on Charles.

*Professor?*

*It's okay, Alex. We're going to get you out of here. Get you some help.*

*I'm sorry – I'm sorry about Danny. I should have… tried harder.*

*No. You did so well. I'm so proud of you.*

Alex's eyes slipped closed.

*Stay with me, Alex!* Charles' heart hammered against his sternum. The man holding Danny followed his gaze to Alex and he chuckled.

"How did it feel, Dr. Xavier? To watch your children die around you and you, powerless to stop it."

He tapped the metal on his head. "Nifty little inventions, these. Not exactly fashion-forward, but we can adapt." His smile was wide but hollow, as he pressed his cheek against Daniel's. "And you would know all about adaptation. Wouldn't you, *Dr. Xavier.*"

The metal in the room hummed and Charles resisted the urge to reach out and take Erik's clenched fist in his own.

"Ah, ah, ah," the man in black tutted. "I wouldn't do that if I were you, Mr. Lehnsherr." To prove his point, he pressed the knife harder against Daniel's neck.

"Erik." *The knife.*

Erik's face screwed up in concentration before his eyes widened in horror. "It's titanium. I cannot – "Oh God… "Charles…"

Charles closed his eyes. Titanium had no magnetic properties. Erik could not manipulate it.

The boy sobbed and reached out for Charles and Erik as the man held a firm hand over the boy's throat. "Daddy! Vati!" The names were repeated over and over in a constant litany of pain and terror.

If Charles had not subdued his son's power, he might have been able to defend himself, but as it were, Daniel was just a boy – nothing more – reaching out for his fathers.

Blood rushed in Charles' ears as he watched the knife press hard enough to draw blood from his son's pale throat. He was drowning in a sea of helplessness and the fear radiating off of Erik proved he was feeling much of the same. Even if he could freeze them, wipe their minds, *something,* they'd come back. There would always be more. More seeking, more hunting. An endless barrage.

They wouldn't stop until they got what they wanted, so Charles made the easiest decision he had ever had to make.
I'm sorry, Erik.

Don't you dare, Charles.

"Take me instead."
Aftermaths

Chapter Summary

In which Erik doesn't really know what to do with himself.

The voice that called his name was small and distant, calling it over and over like his mother had when it was time to come in for dinner. Or maybe it was more delicate, like when Charles used his telepathy to whisper a calming word as he thrashed, trapped in the confines of his nightmares. Charles' voice was always soothing. Charles' presence was always calming. Charles was always the serenity to his rage. Charles was always… Charles was… Charles… Charles!

Erik shot awake, coming back to his body and registering all the pain that came with it. He groaned and willed his eyes to focus on something, anything other than the deep ache that hurt from the marrow out.

"Erik!" The voice from his dream was Raven's and she was kneeling on the floor, next to something. "Thank God, are you okay? I need help!"

"Charles," he choked out, stumbling to his feet as Raven shook her head. And if that small move wasn't confirmation enough, Charles' wheelchair sat empty and toppled in the middle of the room.

He felt rage like he had never known as every lamp and every filament rattled, giving voice to his agony. He wanted to run, not stopping until he found those men and took them apart piece by piece, but there were people here who needed him now and if Erik left, Charles would never forgive him.

"Erik. Help me." Raven's voice cut through the fog that was his mind and he finally registered just what she was leaning over.

Alex was as pale as wax paper, the whole of his blood seeping into the Persian carpet. Raven held his head, yelling at him anytime his eyes slipped close as Hank worked to stop the bleeding from the right side of his chest.

"He needs a transfusion. He's lost too much."

More sights and sounds drifted into his conscious: the smell of burning wood, the thump of the shutter as the wind blew it against the broken window, the sound of a baby crying…

"Danny." Erik ignored the pain that shot down his side as he made his way over to where Sean stood with Daniel. Both looked none the worse for wear – a little shaken, a lot upset, but physically fine.

Erik took the baby out of Sean's arms and clutched him to his chest, inhaling the notquitegone scent of Charles on Daniel's clothes. Sean looked slightly shocked as Erik cupped his cheek next, gently touching the bruise beginning to bloom around the teen's eye.

"Are you okay?"

Sean nodded and swallowed, holding out his arms as Erik placed Daniel in them once more.

"You're gonna be fine, Alex. You're gonna be just fine."
Erik wasn't sure whom Raven was trying to convince: Alex or herself. He dropped down next to her and placed his palm on Alex's head, brushing blond hair off his clammy skin.

"Alex, what's your blood type?"

Alex closed his eyes and his forehead creased, as if trying to remember what he wore on his first day of second grade, instead of something as basic as his social security number.

"A – A positive."

Erik's gaze met Hank's. "Set it up. I'll bring him down."

Beast nodded and took off down the hall.

"All right, Alex, listen to me. Can you hear me?" Erik cupped the boy's face in his hands, forcing their eyes to meet. "I'm going to pick you up and take you to the lab. It's going to hurt like hell, but I'll be as gentle as possible."

Alex snorted. "Since when... are you... gentle?"

Erik smiled. "At least your sense of humor is intact. Eyes open, Alex!" he yelled as they slipped close for a moment before snapping open again. "Good boy," Erik murmured. His head still felt fuzzy, but there was no pain. Odd. "What did they knock me out with?"

Raven's sharply glanced up at him. "They didn't. Charles did."

"What?"

"He didn't want you to do anything stupid."

Erik closed his eyes. Damn that man. "Okay, Alex, on three. One, two, three." He grunted as he hoisted the teen in arms, Raven rising with him to steady Alex's head.

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Alex looked smaller than she remembered, but that was probably because she'd never seen him being carried with such care in an effort not to jostle him.

Erik murmured the occasional "Eyes open, Alex," as she hurried along beside them, cradling his neck in her palm and trying not to trip over the bodies that littered the hallway.

She felt sick. This was her home and they had desecrated it, taking away the one man...

But she couldn't think about Charles. Not yet. Because if she thought about him, she'd lose the thin thread of composure she was currently clinging to, and the tears already staining her cheeks informed her just how close she already was to that precipice.

The lab was cold and unforgiving, but compared to the carnage in the hallway, it was the closest thing to home she could find. Hank had managed to string up a bag of blood and was currently sterilizing the needle he would plunge into Alex's arm.

She cast a sideways glance at Erik to see how he was handling things, remembering all too well his last encounter in the lab, but he was solely focused on the task at hand, gently laying Alex down on the table and shifting his arms into a more comfortable position.

"I've stopped the majority of the bleeding, but I'll need to wait to get the bullet out until he's a little
more stable."

Erik frowned. "We have no morphine."

Hank rubbed the back of his neck in a way that so Hank, Raven could almost see the gangly teen once more.

"Yeah, it's not going to be pleasant."

She felt sick again. "He needs to be in a hospital."

"And how are we going to explain a gunshot wound to the chest?" Erik snapped. "That's if he makes it there at all. He needs blood now."

"I can do it," Hank said, his voice containing the kind of confidence you couldn't get from a serum. "Trust me, Raven. I can do it."

Since she couldn't think about where Charles was, or how Angel was dead, or what the odds were that Alex would live, Raven did the only thing she could do.

She trusted him.

xxxxxx

"What do we do now?" Sean asked, causing three heads to whip in his direction, as if they had completely forgotten he was there.

"We wait," Hank replied, inserting the tube into Alex's arm and watching as the blood flowed from the bag.

Sean was all too familiar with the anger that stemmed from uselessness. Remembered all too well the vicious shout of "Stay back!" before being hurled through the air like a rag doll as the teacher whom they so dearly loved lay bleeding, possibly dying, in his aggressor's lap.

Said aggressor was now approaching him once more, gently removing the child in his arms and cradling him to his chest with a paternal care Sean didn't think the man possessed.

Erik was a terrifying man, but the towering figure in his mind's eyes had softened a bit around the edges. Sure, he could still make Sean shit his pants with a mere glance, but if the way he had saved Hank from a wayward bullet was any indication, Erik had grown somewhat fond of them. Sean assumed they had Charles to thank for that.

Charles. His chest constricted and his eyes burned, but he wasn't crying because he hadn't cried since he was 10 and that would just be stupid.

He automatically reached for the spot on his cheek where Erik had delicately touched him, asking if he was okay.

The pads of his fingers came back wet but no, he was definitely not crying.

xxxxxx

Erik closed his eyes and settled on the small stool as Hank attached EKG sensors to Alex's chest. Daniel had gone eerily quiet since Charles was taken – his cheek rested against Erik's shirt, eyes wide and glassy, staring at nothing in particular. Erik didn't know if it was possible for babies to go into shock. He'd have to ask Hank later, when he wasn't busy attempting to save Alex's life.
I can't do this. I'm not meant to lead. This is your job, dammit! Come back and do it!

Don't leave me, Charles.

Answer me, Charles.

Charles!

"You're bleeding."

"What?" Erik shook his head and focused on Hank as he gestured to Erik's side.

"You're bleeding."

"Oh." Sure enough, the green t-shirt he had been wearing was stained brown from the two-week-old wound that had opened up again. "It's nothing."

"Let me look at it."

"I'm fine."

"Erik."

Heaving out a sigh, he shifted Daniel and allowed Hank to lift the hem of his shirt from where it clung to his skin.

"Charles – uh," he cleared his throat, "had just removed the stitches."

"I'll have to stitch it up again."

"Alex first."

Hank nodded and checked on Alex's blood bag before shining a light into his eyes and monitoring his pupil dilation. Erik ran a hand down his face and watched as the teen blearily blinked around the room. His color was improving but his awareness was still sluggish.

Charles was so much better at this.

"Can I close my eyes now?" came the quiet question.

Erik smiled. "Yeah, kid. You can close your eyes now."

xxxxxx

"He's ready," Hank announced sometime later – none of them had really been keeping track. Night had long since fallen and the warm air from the nice day had cooled to something a bit more biting, as the breeze filtered through shattered glass and broken doors, ruffling the debris in the hallway.

"He'll need something to bite down on," Erik started, but Raven preempted his suggestion by holding up a wooden spoon.

Hank was not looking forward to this, to cutting his friend open while he was conscious. He worked better with test tubes and microscopes, not blood and bullets.

"I'm going to need you to hold him down," Hank heard himself say as he went through the motions of putting on the sterilized chainmail gloves Charles had purchased him for his birthday, since rubber
ones were out of the question. "Sean, get his legs. Erik, his shoulders."

"And me?" Raven appeared at his side, looking like she might lose it if she wasn't given something to do in the next ten seconds.

"I'm going to need you to hand me stuff. Do you know what all of this is?" He gestured to the metal instruments in front of him, and she gave a small shake of her head.

"I can do it," Erik offered.

"You need to hold his shoulders."

Erik levitated the scalpel from the tray. "And I will. Someone needs to hold Daniel anyway," he said, passing the boy off to Raven.

Hank took a deep breath and cracked his neck, once to the left, then to the right, before nodding to Sean and Erik to take their positions. Sean placed his hands on Alex's thighs as Erik stood behind Alex at the head of the table, crouching down, and wrapping an arm across his chest. Their heads were next to each other and Alex reached up and gripped the other man's forearm.

"I'm not gonna like this, am I?"

"No, you're not," Erik murmured.

Alex's anxious gaze floated over to Hank and the boy nodded. "Do your worst, Bozo."

Hank couldn't help but smile at the long-forgotten nickname. "Shut up, Alex," he replied, placing the wooden spoon in his mouth.

Raven stepped away from the table and pressed Daniel's face into her neck, doing her best to shield him from what was about to go down. Hank's heart hammered against his ribcage and his enhanced senses were working overtime. The alcohol swab in his hand burned his nose and the tangy scent of blood in the air made his stomach turnover.

Alex winced and groaned as Hank swabbed the area down with iodine. The wound was small and gracious enough to avoid his lungs and major arteries. He just had to go in and get it out. Just go in and get it out.

With a steady breath, he lowered the scalpel to the skin and pressed.

"Oh God!" Alex choked out around the handle of the spoon. Erik's grip tightened on his shoulders and Sean leaned on his tense legs.

"In and out. In and out. Hank tried to ignore the grunts of pain coming from his friend, to block out the sniffles coming from Raven across the room.

Blood poured from the open wound and he dabbed at it with gauze. "Suction."

Erik levitated what looked like a large turkey baster and Hank sucked the excess blood into the tube.

"Forceps." The new instrument was in his hand in seconds and he gently probed through flesh, muscle, and organ to find what he was looking for.

"Hank…" Sean's voice floated up, wary and frightened, as Alex strained against his holds, his face red and veins bulging.
"Just keep him steady."

"I'm trying," Sean gritted out, practically sitting on Alex's lower half to keep him immobile. "Get it out!"

"I can't!" The bullet was too small, the body was too bloody.

"Do something!" Raven yelled as Daniel cried and Alex screamed.

"Knock him out!" Hank roared.

"I'm sorry, Alex," Erik murmured, before winding up and punching him across the face.

xxxxxx

Heavy panting was all that could be heard in the lab as Alex lay unconscious on the table in front of them.

"I can take it from here," Hank whispered.

Sean lifted shaking hands from Alex's still legs, looking every bit as pale as Alex had before they pumped him full of blood. Raven dissolved into sobs in the corner and Hank stood motionless, the forceps still halfway in Alex's wound.

*Charles, how do we do this without you?*

Erik took a moment longer to fully release Alex from his grip. He mopped the boy's sweaty forehead with a towel and nodded to Hank.

"He's all yours."

Hank nodded and got back to work as Erik made his way over to Raven, gathering both her and Daniel into his arms without a word. It was coming naturally, if slowly, this 'taking care of people' thing. Erik gently rocked her back and forth, her tears soaking his shirt until her sobs quieted to hiccups, before stopping altogether.

He glanced over Raven's head, watching Sean watch Hank, never moving from his place at the end of Alex's table.

"Vati," Daniel mumbled against his chest, the first word he had spoken since Charles was taken away. Erik pulled him from Raven's arms and placed a kiss on each of the eyelids that had already seen too much.

"I'm here, my boy. I've got you."

*Your son needs you, Charles. Our son needs you.*

He knew his thoughts fell on deaf ears, but it comforted him in a way no empty words could.

"Sean, get some rest. Hank will be a while."

Sean nodded but didn't move. Erik knew the boy was stubborn, but the way he stood there with his arms clutching around his torso as if holding himself together, was not something Erik was used to seeing.

"Sean?"
"Angel's still upstairs," the boy whispered and Erik closed his eyes.

Of course. He nodded and placed a hesitant hand on the boy’s shoulder.

"I'll get her," he said as he deposited Daniel back in Raven's arms.

Life finally seemed to stir in Sean and he blurted out, "What about Charles?"

The air left the room as if sucked through a vacuum and Erik froze on his way out the door.

"Tonight, we sleep." The words came out even though every fiber of his being was screaming the alternative: Find him now. Need him now. "Tomorrow, we start."

"But we don't even know who took him! Or where he is!"

Every fact that Sean spewed was a dagger to Erik's heart.

"We will find him. And we will bring him home."

Raven stepped forward, features hurt but face hopeful. "How do you know?"

Erik's face hardened. "Because the alternative isn't an option."

xxxxxx

By the time Raven got Sean to leave the lab, the bodies in the hallway had been cleared, though what was done with them, Raven wasn't entirely sure she wanted to know.

"Grab the crib," she instructed as they passed Charles' room. The door had been blown off and bullet holes riddled the usually pristine oak paneling.

Sean disappeared and returned a moment later, rolling the crib into the hall. "Where are we going?"

"Charles' room."

"But that was…"

"His real room," she clarified as she punched the button for the elevator. The doors opened and Sean wheeled the crib inside.

"He's okay, right? I mean, he's the professor… right?"

Raven cursed the false confidence in Sean’s voice and the false hope she felt in her heart; cursed the men who had taken her brother and the bullet that pierced Alex's chest cavity; cursed the questions Sean asked and the lies she would have to tell.

"Of course he's okay," she replied. "He's my brother."

Sean's shoulders relaxed and Raven felt relieved, even if her own anxiety settled in the pit of her stomach like lead.

The doors opened and both cautiously stepped out. Sean peered down the hall and let out the breath he had been holding.

"She's gone. He must have already come and gotten her."

Raven knew the 'she' in question was Angel and the 'he' in question was Erik. She peered out the
window and could barely make out a shovel digging its way deeper into the ground. Light from an open door spilled out across the lawn, and Raven watched as Erik made his way towards the grave with Angel carefully cocooned in his arms.

Sean sidled up next to her, his breath fogging up the window. "What are you looking at?"

Something in Raven broke.

"A funeral."

xxxxxx

Erik wandered the silent halls, picking up wayward debris and tossing it in the trash bag trailing behind him. He had told the kids that tonight was for sleep, but he knew he would find no rest.

A quick look in the lab showed Alex asleep on the table, his heartbeat strong and steady on the EKG, and Hank, slumped over next to him.

You'd be so proud of Hank, Charles. They're okay. They're going to be okay.

The second floor brought more mess and a puddle of blood no amount of scrubbing would remove. The sight took whatever fight was left in his body: his shoulders slumped and the bag dropped to the floor as he trudged to Charles' old room, the only open door in the hall.

Erik found Sean sprawled out on the chaise lounge next to the crib that had been brought in and Raven curled up in a ball on the bed, clutching one of Charles' pillows to her chest. The sight literally made him ache and he inhaled a shaky breath as he moved further into the room.

Daniel stood up in his crib, reaching out for him automatically. Erik obliged, pulling the boy to his chest before draping a blanket over Sean and crawling into the bed next to Raven.

He could still smell Charles on the pillows and he closed his eyes against the familiar sting of tears. No, there would be no sleep for him tonight. But tomorrow was another day. There had been bodies to heal and bodies to bury. Hearts to mend and break again.

Tomorrow. They would start to look for him tomorrow.

"We always have tomorrow," Charles had said when Erik had asked just what exactly they were. It seemed so stupid in retrospect. Of course he knew what they were. They were rage and serenity, fire and ice, storm and sun.

Two halves of a whole.

Yes, Erik had tomorrow, but he didn't have Charles, so really, what was the point?
Strategies

Chapter Summary

In which Charles fights and Sean has an epiphany.


"He's waking up. Inject him again."

No. Don't. I can't – I need –

"Goodnight, Professor."

Erik.

xxxxxx

"Charles!"

Raven shot up in bed, her brother's name on her lips. Faster than she thought possible, a hand shot out and gripped her forearm, anchoring her to reality.

"Charles," she whispered, trying to shake off the pain that seemed so real, the fear that seemed so palpable. Just a dream.

She glanced down at the hand still gripping her arm and blinked, focusing on Erik where he lay next to her, Daniel curled into his side.

"Breathe, Raven," he murmured, releasing her arm only when she inhaled deeply in reply.

Just a dream, but not. Charles was still gone. Alex was still injured. They still had no idea where to begin.

"Did I wake him?"

Erik glanced down at the baby breathing deeply into his shirt and shook his head.

"Did you sleep?"

He quirked an eyebrow at her.

"Didn't think so," she replied, cracking her neck and envying Sean's ability to sleep absolutely anywhere. "Alex?"

"I checked on him about an hour ago. Still stable," Erik whispered as he pushed himself into a seated position, running a hand over Daniel's hair as the baby shifted closer to his warmth. Across the room, Sean rolled off the chaise and onto the floor, promptly waking himself up.

Raven didn't even have the energy to laugh. She couldn't stomach it. It was an emotion she had
depleted as she held Alex's head in her hands, pressed Daniel's face into her neck, watched through a foggy window as Erik prepared a funeral no one would get to attend.

She started as she felt Erik's hand on her forearm again.

"We'll get him back, Raven."

She felt herself nodding, but she couldn't get behind the movement. She knew that if anyone were to get Charles back, Erik would be the man to do it. He had the kind of singularly-focused drive she was envious of. Charles had it, as he plowed through college, grad school, and his doctorate. As he protected her every moment of every day from society's narrow-mindedness and yes, even under the Markos' brutal reign.

"Get in the closet and stay there."

"But Charles – "

"Raven, now." A kiss to the forehead and a gentle shove. "And whatever happens, whatever you hear... do not come out."

Charles had taken beatings meant for her, had shielded her from so many a horrible thing. And yet she let him go, let him say, "Take me instead," and watched him disappear into the night without a word.

Without a "No," or a "Don't" or even an "I love you."

Yes, Charles had that drive, but she did not. She would have to hope that the man sitting next to her had enough drive for the both of them.

And as he stared brokenly at the child in his arms that looked so much like his father, she had a strong feeling she wouldn't be disappointed.

xxxxxx

Sean rubbed his head as he stared at the ceiling above him.

"Where am I?"

"The floor," Raven's voice said somewhere to his left.

"Oh." He had hoped it was all a dream, but the crib he had helped bring up was sitting next to him and somewhere down the hall and around the corner, a Monopoly game lay forgotten on the rug.

Raven had called the Scotty dog. Both Alex and Sean had wanted the top hat. What a stupid argument that seemed in retrospect.

He groaned and sat up, blearily blinking at Erik and Raven on the bed. It would have been weird to see them like that, but Sean knew whose bed Erik spent most nights in.

The full weight of the evening's events came back to him in a fog of fear, and pain, and holyshit and a whispered, "Fuck," escaped on the breath between his lips.

He waited for the reprimand, as if trained like Pavlov's dogs, but there was no professor there to remind him, "Language, Sean," or to thank him for the pancakes even though they were practically inedible. There was no dramatic reading of the headlines in the posh-est, most Masterpiece Theatre-esque voice Charles could manage. There was no gentle pat on the shoulder when the others weren't
looking, because the professor knew that Sean lived for those moments of youaresafe, youareloved, but didn't need the others to know.

There was none of that. And in the quiet of the morning, he finally felt the result of all that fear and pain and holyshit.

It was a loss like he had never experienced.

And it fucking hurt.

xxxxxx

Erik had only ever known this particular cocktail of pain and love once before.

"What did you just do to me?"

"I accessed the brightest corner of your memory system."

Daniel's eyes were so like his father's – cerulean blue, shocking against pale, flawless skin – it was like looking into a younger face of the man he needed like a drowning man needs air. A constant reminder. An imprinted memory. The brightest corner... with the sharpest edges.

"Erik?"

He looked up into Raven's concerned gaze and pushed the images away.

"You need to eat," she urged.

"We need to find Charles."

"We need to eat and then find Charles."

"Can't we do both at the same time?" Sean's voice called from the floor.

Erik picked the sleepy Daniel up from the bed and stepped over Sean – and if his knee grazed the boy's head, it was definitely not on purpose.

This was all very new to him – this 'having other people depend on him' thing. He was used to the hunt, the brutal, solitary hunt, where he ate when he remembered to and slept when he could no longer stand upright. That method of living was no longer an option. His world might be falling apart, but his son still had to eat.

Erik froze halfway down the stairs. His son. His son.

"Erik, what's wrong?"

Raven's hand was warm on his back and the boy was light in his arms, but his head swam at the conclusion that he would lay down his life for any soul in the manor at that moment, particularly the child in his arms. Charles' child. Their child.

With a subtle shake, he continued on his way, making a beeline for the kitchen and setting about making Daniel breakfast before making his way to the lab.

"Keep an eye on him, will you?"

It scared him how unwilling he was to leave the boy for the ten minutes it would take him to get
down to the lab and back. Raven nodded, elbowing Sean until he nodded along too.

"Vati," Daniel said around a mouthful of Cheerios, reaching out to him with two chubby arms.

"I'll be right back, Bärchen," he murmured, placing a kiss on his head and disappearing out the door.

The everyday tasks of feeding, diaper changing, and bathing throbbed in his mind, but beneath it beat an undercurrent of dosomething, doanything, findhimnow.

And just as the helplessness reached a pitch, just as he thought he'd never find Charles without losing the small bit of humanity that same man had restored, a pop and a flash of sulfur clouded his senses.

And the red Erik saw was so much more than just the color of the other man's skin.

xxxxxx

Hank had been in the process of getting Alex to drink some water when the doors to the lab blew off their hinges. Alex jumped, wincing as he jostled his battered body. Hank just stood there, mouth agape as Erik threw Riptide to the floor by his cufflinks and slammed Azazel into the opposite wall.

"Where. The hell. Were you?" he grunted as he pulled the scarlet mutant away just to shove him back again.

Though Erik was powerful, he could not hold a teleporter and Hank thought it was a healthy balance of fear/respect that kept Azazel in the here and now.

"He's gone! He is gone! Where the hell were you?" Erik's voice vibrated around the stark walls of the sterile lab like a metal rod struck to determine pitch. Azazel held out his hands, palms up, as Erik fumed in his face.

"Ve did not know. Ve checked in yesterday as scheduled and again today," his eyes darted to the clock on the wall reading 8:01am, "as scheduled."

Hank could hear Erik's heavy breathing all the way on the other side of the room and Alex attempted to lift himself onto his elbows to get a better look, but Hank's firm hand on his shoulder kept him where he was.

"You didn't know..." Erik seemed to be piecing the logistics together now that his rage had subsided a bit.

"How could ve? Ve no longer have a telepath at our disposal."

"And neither do we," Alex spit out.

Azazel finally seemed to notice the other two in the room, his eyes falling appraisingly on Alex. Hank stepped closer out of reflex.

"Vat happened to you?"

"He got shot, because your telepath," the word tasted dirty on his tongue when referring to her, "sold Charles out to... to someone," he finished lamely.

A blood red eyebrow rose and his eyes rested on the metal-bender once more. "I see."

He and Erik seemed to be having some silent war of words until finally Erik blurted out, "Angel's dead."
Azazel's face was impassive. "I am sorry to hear that." Riptide blanched where he sat on the floor and Hank felt something akin to sympathy. He might not have liked the girl very much, but he had been warming up to her once more. But these two, they had spent the last six months living, breathing, and fighting beside her.

What if it had been Raven? Or Sean? Or Alex, who had come so close already…?

Yes, Hank could definitely sympathize.

"Vell, where do you intend to start looking?"

xxxxxx

Erik blinked stupidly at him in return, because no one offered Erik help. No one save for a stupid man who had jumped off a stupid boat, and sunk his stupid voice into Erik's stupid head.

"Frost left behind papers. I vill get vhat ve have." And with that, Azazel disappeared with a pop as Sean and Raven appeared in the doorway with Daniel.

"Dude, you're alive!" Sean clapped a hand on Alex's shoulder as Raven shifted Daniel around so the baby could see that Alex was okay.

"How do you feel?" she asked, placing a much gentler hand than Sean's on Alex's arm.

He snorted. "Like I've been shot."

Erik paced by the door, the thrum of *dosomething, doanything, findhimnow*, beating ever harder at the prospect of new information. Hell, *any* information. Daniel reached his arms out toward him and immediately the thrum quieted to dull, but ever-present ache.

"Vati, up."

Erik obliged, wiping stray remnants of breakfast off of the child's face, noting out of the corner of his eye the tilt of Riptide's head as he studied them.

"Vati? But surely that child belongs to Charles Xavier."

"He does," Erik responded, curt and impolite.

"The child has two fathers?" Riptide's eyebrow quirked with the hint of a disbelieving smile.

"Yeah, what about it?" Alex growled, as he shoved himself up onto his elbows again. Despite his pale, waxy complexion, he could glare with the best of them.

Hank stood up as well, a towering figure, and crossed his arms over his chest. "Do you have a problem with that?"

Riptide hastily shook his head and Alex collapsed back on the table, a tired but firm, "Good," leaving his lips.

And a long broken piece of Erik mended itself at their words.

xxxxxx

Azazel appeared a moment later and Sean jumped – he didn't think he'd *ever* get used to the way the dude was just not there one moment and there the next. Unless he was stoned out of his mind, in
which case, he probably wouldn't notice the comings and goings of a stop-sign-red demon-man.

"It's not much. She probably thought it wouldn't be any use and didn't think to take it. It's almost jibberish."

Erik and Azazel hunched over the pile of papers in the red mutant's hands as Raven peered over Erik's shoulder to get a closer look. She seemed to be the only one willing to get that close to him, to actually touch him. Sure, he, Alex and Hank had warmed up to the guy, but he wasn't exactly Mr. Let's-bond-over-scotch-and-talk-about-our-feelings.

Only with Charles. Only the professor brought out that side of him.

"They all refer to Tigger. What the hell is Tigger?" Erik growled, tossing the papers across the room, where they floated down like snowflakes.

"That's Moira," Sean blurted out, as if his tongue had no desire to do his mind's bidding. Seven heads whipped in his direction.

"What?" Erik's voice was deathly calm and that scared Sean more than any outright threat. He cleared his throat under their scrutiny.

"Tigger? That's Moira. She loved Winnie the Pooh growing up, so much so that she brought the collected works with her to Langley and the secretary pool started calling her Tigger, because she was happy… or something. And it stuck. It was her call sign." He shrugged and received nothing but blank stares in return. Come on people, this was old information.

"And how do you know all of this?" That damn calm voice again, laced with homicidal undertones.

"What? We talked!" Sean defended.

"When?"

"Dude, haven't you ever watched Saturday morning cartoons stoned? It's awesome!"

It was Raven who finally broke the stunned silence.

"Sean, I swear I could kiss you."

Erik smiled and Sean shivered. Even when happy, the guy looked like a psychopath.

xxxxxx

"Again."

No. No more.


"We got something that time."


"We'll try again tomorrow."

No. No more. Please no more.
"What's your name?"

Silence.

"I said, 'What's your name?"

Stubborn silence.


Stubborn silence, yet satisfaction.

Don't break. For the love of God, don't break.
Memories

Chapter Summary

In which a visit is paid to an old friend.

This was getting ridiculous.

Erik stood in the foyer, a duffle bag at his feet and Daniel on his hip, as he stared at the outraged/amused/persistent/impatient people in front of him.

"I'm not staying here just because I'm a girl!" Raven fumed with feminist indignation.

Erik pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fine. Sean, you stay."

"Dude, you really want to leave me alone with your kid?"

"Fair point." The frustration was rising within him like a poison. The longer they stood here and argued the more Charles was at the mercy of his captors. "Look, here's the deal. I'm leaving here in ten minutes. My son is staying behind and someone is staying behind with him. Got it?"

"Um, hi. Did you all forget about me?" Alex called from the couch in the study. "I don't think I'm going anywhere anytime soon."

Erik was about to remind the invalid that he had recently had a piece of metal shot through his chest and was therefore in no condition to take care of a not-yet-two-year-old, but before he could decide if he wanted to be snappy or sarcastic in his response, a pain like never before nearly incapacitated him.

Confusion, fear, and a healthy bit of panic were the first to register, underlined by the constant throb of pain, pain, ohgod, pain. Erik groaned as those around him screamed, proving that this was not his body's own making, but rather an invasion… a sign… a call for help.

Raven's knees began to buckle and, despite his own fear, despite his own panic, his arms found their way around her waist, supporting her weight as she slumped over his forearm.

"Oh God," she choked out as Hank clutched his head.

"What the hell was that!"

Erik panted as the pain subsided, his voice just as broken, just as rattled, as the girl in his arms. Holding her up became the hardest thing he had ever done, because all he wanted to do was run, to run and run and kill someone, anyone.

Everyone.

"That was Charles."

Exhaustion.
"You're being quite stubborn, Mr. Xavier," the voice said. A different voice. "Or is it Dr.? I can't seem to keep track these days." A slight chuckle. "Is that right? Professor of Genetics, Oxford University, 1962?" A pause. "Here, we'll start off easier. Where were you born?"

Silence.

A heavy sigh. "It seems you need further convincing... Shall we bring in Dr. McCoy? Or Mr. Cassidy?"

No.

"It would quite easy. It's my understanding that Mr. Summers is recuperating. Surely he couldn't have traveled far from your humble abode in his condition. Perhaps Ms. Darkholme is watching over him."

He's alive. Thank God, he's alive.

"Come now, Dr. Xavier, you must have a pressure point somewhere... Your little stunt back there granted your son temporary immunity." A pause. A sickly smile. "But not Mr. Lehnsherr."

Fear. Rage. "You sonofabitch."

"Ah yes." A chuckle. "Now we're making progress."

xxxxxx

Sean blinked and put his head between his knees in an attempt to stave off the wave of nausea that passed over him as the sulfur faded from the air.

"Dude, how do you do that all the time?"

Azazel smirked at him and sauntered off down the tree-lined street. Sean glared at his back, but his frustration faded as he took in the brick townhouses, illuminated by the dome of the Capitol in the distance.

"Where are we?"

"Georgetown," Raven whispered.

"Damn," he whistled lowly, risking a sideways glance at Erik, who hadn't spoken a single word since Raven managed to stand on her own two feet once more.

In a move that had both impressed and petrified Sean, Azazel seemed to take charge as Erik withdrew further and further into himself.

"Havok and Beast, stay with the child. We leave in five minutes," he had barked, scooping an arm under Raven's elbow and helping her to her feet, before steadying Erik as the metal-bender swayed.

Sean had never seen Erik look so... lost – and that perhaps frightened him most of all because Erik was a badass. And badasses seemed to always know what to do and how best to do it.

"Oof," he exclaimed as he collided with Riptide's back. Badasses also paid attention to their surroundings at all times.

"We're here," Azazel murmured as he stared up at the dark brownstone.
"Moira lives here?"

"Shut up, Sean," Raven hissed.

Again, without words or gestures, Erik stalked up the stoop and opened the door with a flick of the wrist, letting it swing silently back to reveal a narrow hallway.

"Wait," Raven placed a hand on his arm as he moved to step into the entryway. "The last time you saw her, you choked her with her dog tags."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Just remember that she might not take too kindly to you marching into her house in the dead of night."

"Wait..." Sean frowned. "You don't know?"

Four heads turned in his direction, 'what the hell are you talking about' expressions on every single face.

"Jesus Christ, you really don't!" He liked being in the know for once.

Erik's gaze never wavered but Sean felt himself being lifted off the ground by whatever metal he had on his person. It was like being high, but not the fun kind.

"All right! All right! Charles wiped her mind!" His feet hit the ground once more and he breathed a sigh of relief.

"He what?" Erik's voice was hoarse from lack of use, but its steel could not be mistaken. Sean dug the toe of his sneaker in the ground, suddenly wishing he could go back to being part of the scenery.

"He... he wiped Moira's mind. She doesn't remember the mansion... or the beach. Or anything, really, after the attack on headquarters."

Riptide snorted in disbelief. "Why would he do that? He loves the humans."

Sean glared.

"He loves us more."

xxxxxx

The hardwood floor was cold under Raven's bare feet, the imprint of Charles' pain still echoing in her mind.

She tried to follow Erik's lead and take in her surroundings – the beige trench coat hanging by the door, the keys in the bowl on the side table – but her mind kept screaming CHARLES ERASED HER MEMORY, CHARLES ERASED HER MEMORY, and all other insignificant details fell by the wayside.

In all the years that she had known him, Charles had never used his power for something like that. Sure there were harmless abuses in the name of flirtation, but to be reminded just what Charles was capable of in such a brutal fashion was jarring to say the least. It was a testament to how much he valued their safety that his conscience allowed the action, especially to a friend.

A noise up ahead brought her out of her musings, and her eyes focused in the darkness just in time to
catch Sean fumbling with a picture frame. A collective breath was held as the intruders listened to see if there was any movement upstairs. When all remained silent, they exhaled in a *whoosh* of air.

Apparently, however, they forgot that they were breaking into the house of a CIA agent who was trained in methods of stealth and espionage so, when the lights flicked on and Moira stood at the top of the stairs with a baseball bat in her hand, they all appropriately looked like deer in oncoming traffic.

"Erik?" Moira's voice held a balanced mix of astonishment and confusion as she lowered the bat and cocked her head. "What the hell are you doing in my house?"

Raven watched as the metal-bender, who still hadn't spoken more than two words, stepped forward towards the bottom of the stairs and visibly swallowed his pride.

"I need your help."

The words tasted like bile and hope in his mouth, making for a very interesting combination that made his stomach knot.

"My help?" It was a credit to her training that she didn't realize or care that she was standing in front of a group of people, four of them men, in nothing but a silk slip.

"Your help," he repeated, breath protesting against his lungs that seemed to not want to expand.

"I'm afraid you've got the wrong agent," she snorted derisively and held up the bat. "I'm not even allowed a weapon anymore."

His heart leapt into his throat as she turned.

"They've taken Charles, Moira. Help me, please."

If she knew anything about this man – and granted, she didn't really – but if she had to make an educated guess, she was pretty sure that that was closest anyone would ever get to hearing Erik Lehnsherr beg.

*Charles.*

Moira hated how her heart rate increased, hated how her pulse betrayed her. He was attractive, polite, humorous – everything her mother told her to look for and everything her father told her to avoid.

She had been frustrated, but intrigued as she watched him chug a yard of ale and hopelessly smitten by the time they boarded the Coast Guard boat.

But she could see his eyes, those perfect blue eyes, were meant for someone else, because God, how could she not? The two of them huddled under a blanket in the breezy Miami night; arguing over who got to drive as she handed them the keys to the car; nodding off next to each other on a flight from DC to Moscow. And then nothing.

Because, after all, she was disposable.

She constantly had to remind herself that his actions were not forgivable. He had violated her.
Vanished weeks and weeks of her life, because she was a mere inconvenience.

"He took something from me," she stated steadily, eyes narrowing at Erik in particular. The 'he' could just as easily have implied Erik, and the 'something' Charles. The sentence would have had much the same meaning.

"He didn't want to," came the voice from the boy in the back, hovering by the door. He seemed to flinch when Erik turned his gaze on him, but he plowed on as he stepped forward.

Sean – the name came to her in a brief flash accompanied by the image of red hair poking out from under Charles' jacket in the backseat of the car, as Erik stood and stretched, muttering how awful Boston traffic was, yet quiet enough to not wake the sleeping kid.

"He didn't want to." The boy stood next to Erik now, gazing up at her. "If you only knew how much he beat himself up over that."

Moira couldn't help the scoff that escaped her mouth and Erik closed his eyes, as if her disbelief caused him physical pain.

"It's my fault," Sean continued. "Well, our fault. Mine, Hank's and Alex's. You see, Charles – he, he sort of thinks of us as his kids. And he's very protective of his kids. So I get what you're feeling… sorta. But he was just trying to be a good Dad. Which not many of us have had. So what I'm trying to say is… Don't blame him. Blame me, instead."

Moira had to look away from the pleading look on Sean's face, choosing instead to focus on Erik who seemed to be eyeing the boy with a sentiment she couldn't quite place. Fondness?

No. If she remembered correctly, Erik wasn't fond of anybody.

"He means a lot to us too," Sean added quietly, taking her silence for stubbornness. "He's hurting, Moira. He's in pain, we can feel it and it fucking hurts. Please, please help us. We need our father back."

Moira sighed and attempted to swallow past the unexpected lump that lodged in her throat. Charles seemed to have that loveme effect on everybody. People just couldn't not like him and it was infuriating.

"Okay," Moira found herself saying, her head nodding along, providing backup for her words. "Who has him?"

"We don't know," Raven murmured.

"How long ago was he taken?"

"Twenty-two hours," Erik said, paling at his own words.

Big head start, Moira thought. "Why'd you come to me? You must have known that Charles' little trick would do me no favors in the Agency."

"Tigger," Sean replied, cutting off Raven's exclamation of, "We didn't know."

"Excuse me?"

"Tigger. I know that was your call sign. You're mentioned in… these." He pulled the crumpled papers from his pocket and jogged up the stairs to meet her.
Her eyes widened as she took it. "Jesus, Philadelphia."

"What's in Philadelphia?" It was Erik's voice she heard, sounding more hopeful than she could ever remember, but her eyes remained glued to the paper in her hands, her trained gaze skimming over the words and filing away the most important.

"We need to get to Langley," she muttered.

"Why?" Sean asked, taking a step back as if the very thought of CIA headquarters caused his bowels to shrink.

Her gaze settled on Raven, recalling a perfect replica of one of her least favorite men.

"How's that for a magic trick?"

"You need to get me reinstated."

xxxxxx

Since the infiltration of Langley would require more stealth than force, and since neither Riptide nor Azazel particularly excelled at being covert, it was decided that they would wait on the perimeter for further instructions.

"It'll be easy," Moira explained, huffing slightly as she tossed a final bag in the trunk and slammed it shut. "I'm on probation. Just go in as McCone, sign the forms, and that's it."

"That's it?" Raven was sure she looked as dubious as she felt, sliding into the backseat next to Sean as Erik sat in front. "You do know that McCone is the Director of the CIA, right?"

"Don't remind me," Sean groaned next to her.

Raven ignored him and watched as Moira slid into the driver's seat. She was slowly warming to the CIA agent, well, again. She had been kind to her in the beginning – both girls in a man's world. Raven even gave her credit for not freaking out upon seeing her blue skin and yellow eyes.

Sure, the Moira of the past had seen Raven plenty of times in her natural form, but this Moira – the one who was lucky enough to not remember that day – only had a glimpse to go on. Moira might want her memories, but Raven would have been happy to lock the beach up and never look back.

"Is there anything else I should know?" Moira asked as she revved the engine to life and pulled away from the curb.

"Oh yeah," Raven grinned, kicking the seat in front of her. "Charles and Erik are daddies."

Moira quirked an eyebrow at Erik, but his eyes remained on the road ahead, his voice as quiet as night but as sharp as glass.

"And he's paralyzed."

xxxxxx

Charles' eyes snapped open and immediately he squinted under the harsh light, blinking. The movement, which should have been as easy and light as butterfly wings, took a conscious effort.

He remembered how it worked: brainwaves and nerve endings and signals to limbs that traveled
down and up in no time at all. But not today.

*Move your arm.* Fingers twitched, the feeling of leather biting into sore wrists.

Out of reflex, or perhaps punishment, the next thought left his mind without warning.

*Move your leg.*

Charles gasped and blinked (*Open. Close.*) as his toes responded.
In which Erik makes some phone calls and Moira utilizes her sources.

Hank has blue fur. Alex has blonde hair. Sean has freckles and an affinity for illegal substances. Raven is beautiful. Daniel is mine. Erik is… Erik.

Do not break. Remember who you are. Do not break. Remember them. Save them. Protect them. Lock them up. Put them away. Come back to them. Remember them.

Do not break do not break do not break.

xxxxxx

"Lemme see," Sean said, grabbing the binoculars from Raven and looking through the scope. "Dude…"

Raven blinked sideways at Moira, who looked significantly less convinced of her plan's success now that Langley loomed ahead.

"Banshee and I can't be seen," Erik muttered as he leaned against the car door and stared into the distance. "While you might not remember what happened, they do." He nodded in the direction of the base.

"Hey, I didn't send fifty rockets hurtling at those ships," Sean defended before withering under Erik's scorching gaze.

It was an unspoken rule in the Brotherhood: you didn't mention that day. Raven was sure the Manor had a similar understood agreement, but as Moira blinked confusedly, Raven was again jealous of the other woman's blissful ignorance. There were no gunshots; no screams. No image seared into her corneas of Charles arching and falling, stretched into a beautiful bow of agony.

Raven cleared her throat and forced the memories into a part of her mind she couldn't hide from. "You never said what was in Philadelphia."

"You never told me how he was paralyzed," Moira retorted. The other three froze and Sean and Raven's eyes immediately found Erik, as if looking for guidance on how one should break the news that the bullet in Charles' back matched the rest in Moira's gun.

"That's a story for another time," the metal-bender answered quietly. The exhaustion, physical and emotional, clear in his tone.

"The people who have Charles are in Philadelphia," Moira stated simply, going back to applying eyeliner using the compact mirror in her hand.

Erik abruptly pushed away from the car door. "Then why the hell are we in Virginia?"

"Because you're going to need an activated CIA agent on your side." Moira fished in her bag for
lipstick. "The group we're dealing with has many backchannels. We're going to need a few of our own."

Erik seemed to vibrate with tension, like a violin string wound too tightly. Raven watched him carefully, as a mother would whose child was one step away from falling off the jungle gym.

"How did they get him anyway?" Moira asked as she tossed her bag into the backseat and affixed her ID badge on her sweater.

The tension left Erik and he slumped like a marionette whose strings had just been cut. "He offered himself for our – uh… for his son."

Moira froze and glanced at Raven. "I thought you were joking."

Raven shook her head. "He has an 18-month-old named Daniel…” she trailed off and blinked through the sudden wetness pricking her eyes. "Looks just like him."

"Where is he?"

"Back home with Alex and Hank. Alex was shot," Raven stated flatly.

Moira paled. "Alex was shot? But… he's just a kid."

Sean snorted. "Aren't we all."

Erik stared at Moira as if daring her to comment, to defend the world that they, children all, had been thrust into. Raven had been wary of the metal-bender the first time she met him – not thrilled that her brother had adopted yet another wayward mutant and she'd have to share. But Erik grew on her, not taking her place in her brother's heart, but merely occupying another. At the thought, the hollow ache in her chest throbbed.

"When McCone figures out that we duped the CIA into reinstating you, you'll be even worse off than you are now… You know that right?"

Moira leveled a gaze at her. "Of course I do."

xxxxxx

Hank sighed as he stood behind the couch Alex rested upon, eyeing the baby sitting in the middle of the floor with scientific befuddlement.

"He's depressed."

"Babies get depressed? Ow," Alex groaned as he attempted to turn and look back at Hank. "Stop standing behind me, you know I can't turn around."

"Sorry," Hank muttered, walking around the couch and sitting on the floor next to Daniel. "It's three in the morning, he should be asleep."

"Shouldn't we all," Alex managed through a yawn.

The bunker had no windows and, while Hank didn't considered himself to be a claustrophobic person, the monotony was beginning to wear on him and it had only been twelve hours since they had moved down there.

"They know where the mansion is. You can't stay," Erik had said.
"Well, Alex can't exactly go anywhere. And I don't think Charles would appreciate you dragging his son on your exploits too." Hank had tartly retorted.

In retrospect, it was not one of his smartest moves, bringing Daniel into play. He should have learned from the first night when Erik appeared in Charles' room clutching the baby to his bare chest that the metal-bender would do anything for that child.

Before tempers could escalate, Raven stepped in the middle and suggested the bunker before Erik threw the chandelier at Hank and Hank clawed his eyes out. Worry and exhaustion had frayed everyone's nerves and it wouldn't be long before somebody cracked.

Still, Raven's suggestion was a good one – the bunker could only be locked from the inside and it was strong enough to withstand Alex. It would do for the time being.

Which brought them back to this moment: 3am and a child who wouldn't eat or sleep or even say a word except for the occasionally mumbled "Daddy" or "Vati."

Hank was about to suggest reading a story when the red phone on the wall began to shrilly ring, startling all.

"Who the hell is that?" Alex asked, wincing again as he shifted positions.

"I'll give you three guesses but you'll only need one," Hank replied, stalking over and lifting the receiver. "Hello?"

"How's Daniel?" Erik's voice was terse and tense, proving that they were no closer to Charles without Hank having to ask.

"He won't sleep. Or eat." And with great difficulty, he admitted, "I don't know what to do."

"Put him on."

"All right, one moment." Hank let the receiver hang as he walked over to Daniel and scooped him up in his arms. The baby rested his head against Hank's warm chest, burrowing in a bit and blinking slowly, but never saying a word. "Listen, Danny," Hank urged as he pressed the receiver to Daniel's ear.

"Danny?" Hank heard Erik say.

"Vati?"

"Hello, my Bärchen."

Daniel's eyes welled up and Hank rocked him back and forth as Erik's voice echoed over the telephone. He caught bits and pieces, the occasional "past your bed time," "be good," and "I'll bring Daddy home soon."

Alex watched the scene silently from the couch as Hank tried not to listen in to what was said. Still, he had to admit that Erik's voice was calming, the little of it that he caught: "How about a story?"

And as Erik launched into what Hank presumed to be the Runaway Bunny, the teen had a comical image of the man standing in a phone booth with a stack of coins next to him as he recited the entirety of Daniel's book collection. How Erik had managed to memorize the tome was behind him, but he leaned against the wall and allowed his eyes to close, listening to the gentle cadence of the man on the other end of the line.
"If you run after me,' said the bunny, 'I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim from you.' 'If you become a fish in a trout stream,' said his mother, 'I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you.' 'If you become a fisherman,' said the little bunny, 'I will be a bird and fly away from you.' 'If you become a bird and fly away from me,' said his mother, 'I will be a tree that you come home to."

Erik's voice trailed off and the pause roused Hank as he glanced down at the child in his arms, taking the receiver away from the boy's ear.

"He's asleep," Hank whispered into the phone, glancing over at Alex who suddenly looked years younger.

Erik was silent on the other end.

"Where are you?"

"Virginia, waiting for daylight." His voice was rough, as if the story had taken the last of his energy. And perhaps it had. "You have everything you need? Enough food? Blankets?"

Hank couldn't help the chuckle that escaped. "I think you stocked us with enough to survive a nuclear winter."

The soft burst of air that rustled across the line proved to Hank that he had at least gotten a smile out of the other man.

"Be careful," the teen murmured, cradling the boy closer to his warmth.

There was a brief pause and then a gruff, "You too."

A click sounded and the line went dead.

xxxxxx

Erik pressed the receiver to his forehead and muttered a string of German words/prayers/pleas under his breath, before placing it back on the pay-phone hook and slumping against the glass wall.

"You need to sleep," Raven said behind him, but he didn't even have the energy for an acknowledgement.

"I'll sleep when we get Charles back."

"That could be days."

Erik closed his eyes and pressed his forehead harder against the glass. Days…

"Moira and I are leaving in a moment. You and Sean should stay here," she said, gesturing to the rest stop behind them. "We'll come pick you up in an hour."

"When did you start giving out orders?" He stumbled out of the phone booth and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"When you realized that a dead you is no good to anyone, especially Charles," she replied, nudging him towards the diner and the scent of fresh coffee.

"And if something goes wrong?"
"I'm a big girl."

"You're also still Charles' little sister and if something happens to you..." he trailed off, but Raven gave another nudge, mindful of his still-broken ribs.

"I'll be fine."

He rubbed his eyes, spying Moira and Sean in a booth through the window. "Where's the real McCone?"

"Sleeping at home. Azazel's keeping an eye on him and will teleport to us if he makes a move." She quirked an eyebrow at him and he frowned.

"What?"

"The Runaway Bunny?" she asked, slightly teasing.

He felt his ears burn, but he managed a shrug. "It was the last book my mother ever read me. It was given to her by the woman whose clothes she laundered. She wanted me to learn English from it, even though I was too old for it."

"Charles used to read it to me, too..." Raven smiled almost wistfully. "Even though I was too old for it."

Other than a love for Charles and a hatred of beaches, it was just one more thread that they had in common.

xxxxxx

"This coffee tastes like brown water," Sean muttered as Erik slid into the booth across from him, staring at the taillights of Moira's car as it drove out of the parking lot. Sean followed his gaze

"Thanks for what you said... you know, back at Moira's place."

Sean frowned and paused in pouring a mountain of sugar in his mug. "About Charles?"

Erik nodded and the teen shrugged.

"It was the truth."

Erik's own cup of coffee arrived and Sean watched as he took a great gulp and winced. "Brown water indeed."

"Told ya."

Erik continued to drink the drivel black and Sean was preparing himself for another awkward silence before Erik murmured, "Sometimes I think you know him better than I do. I never thought he would have done that. Especially to Moira."

Sean shrugged, but ohgod Erik was attempting to have a heart to heart and Sean was absolutely not prepared for that. He had avoided being left alone with the man – and not because he tossed him off a satellite dish. He just never knew what to say. Erik was so tense, so driven, so serious. And Sean was, well... not. He just didn't think there was any topic of conversation they could both actively participate in.

"What happened while I was gone?"
"You mean after Cuba?"

Erik nodded. "Tell me a story. About Charles."

Sean immediately went from having nothing to say to everything to say, with Charles as their common ground. He started off talking about the welcome home party they threw for the professor, about the cake that Alex burned and the decorations that fell apart. About the time they tried to make s'mores in the fireplace only to end up having a flaming marshmallow fight. About the arm Sean broke while climbing a tree and the ankle Alex twisted while chasing Hank for finding his stash of porn.

About the time a woman appeared on the doorstep with a little boy attached to her leg.

"… And then Alex says, 'It's all done,' and he's so smug about it too, but Hank knows better and tosses a bookend in the middle of it only to have the whole thing collapse on itself," Sean laughed as Erik snorted into his coffee.

"Charles let Alex build the crib?"

"Yeah. Not one of his finer moments."

Sean wasn't sure how much time had passed, but all of a sudden a shadow loomed over the table and both he and Erik looked up to find Raven and Moira standing over them, smug smiles adorning their faces.

"Let's go, boys. It's a long drive to Philadelphia."

xxxxxx

Moira smiled softly as she glanced in the rearview mirror for the tenth time in as many minutes.

Raven and Sean had slumped in the middle, heads resting against each other as Sean drooled on his shirt and Raven snored softly.

Next to her in the passenger seat, Erik dozed with his head pressed against the half-open window, the wind ruffling the hair off his forehead.

They had been in the car barely a minute before Erik demanded a play-by-play of the CIA infiltration. It had been shockingly easy – at 5am, not many people had reported to work yet and getting Raven-as-McCone through the necessary procedures was simple.

But Moira knew it would only be a matter of time before the real McCone reported in and someone made a mention of his being there once already that day. Yes, it was only a matter of time before the paper trail made its way back to her, but she had gotten them a head start. An hour, a day. Who knew? But it was good enough.

Route 301 flew by in a blur of green fields and yellow corn as they made their way north. Moira answered their questions about the group presumably holding Charles, an extremist sect comprised of mostly wealthy men and powerful political heads that wanted to prevent a mutant uprising by suppressing the threat – snuffing it out before it gained ground.

"Collecting them," Erik had sneered.

"Grooming them," Moira had responded.
"And they have Charles?" Raven's voice was quiet in the back, and Moira could only nod in return as they drove closer and closer to Philadelphia.

She was glad they were sleeping now while they could. They'd be arriving in downtown within the hour and, if her sources were correct, breaking into headquarters would take subtlety and tact, neither of which she was sure Erik was capable of, especially where Charles was concerned.

xxxxxx

Raven blinked her eyes open and stared at the large brown building across the street.

"Where are we?"

"Center City," Moira replied as she parked the car and nudged Erik awake. "We're here."

He grunted in response and immediately straightened, all senses humming. Raven affectionately called it his 'hunting mode.'

"So where's this secret club?" Sean asked through a yawn, rubbing his eyes and slumping against Raven once more.

Moira nodded to the large brown building Raven had seen upon first waking. "Right there."

Sean yelped and dove across the seat, causing all in the car to look at him incredulously. "Get down! They'll see us!"

Moira smiled and responded, "We want them to," as Raven muttered, "Get up, you moron," and shoved Sean off of her.

"Why?"

"Because we're staying there."

Raven paled as Sean whimpered. Only Erik seemed to keep his composure, but the radio dial abruptly turned, giving him away.

"We're staying there?" Raven whispered, staring at the intimidating building once more.

Moira nodded and looked them all over. "We'll have to change before we go in. It's a members only club, very fancy. Used to be a Union headquarters during the Civil War."

"And if it's members only, how exactly do you propose we get in?" Erik's voice was unnervingly even.

Moira paused in combing her hair and fixed him with a look. "Didn't I mention?" she pulled an ID out of her wallet with an eagle emblem blazoned on the front. "We're members."

Raven felt her jaw drop. Just when she thought she had the agent pegged, Moira MacTaggert continued to surprise her.

xxxxxx

Three days had passed since they started their stakeout. Three days of watching the comings and goings of well-dressed men and scantily dressed women. Three days of building an appropriate wardrobe with government sanctioned money, three days of pretending to come from old money, though technically Raven did, and three days of wondering when the other shoe would drop,
bringing the CIA banging down the door. Three days of wondering if Charles was still alive and three nights of taking turns sleeping on plush beds beneath gilded picture frames.

And every night, Erik would call the house and every night, Hank would put Daniel on the phone for his nightly story. Goodnight Moon, Paddington Bear, Winnie the Pooh – characters Erik remembered and stories he would make up. Propping himself up against the headboard with Raven curled up by his side and Sean sitting at their feet, Erik would recite from memory and Moira would drift off to the adventures of a bear name Pooh and his good friend Christopher Robin.

It was almost easy to become complacent. Every day, they would walk down the hall, listening for any tidbit of information, remembering to lift their chins and look down their noses, as if common conversation was beneath them. It was an act that was wearing thin on everyone, particularly Erik who had to work the hardest to hide the look of utter disdain at the extravagance around him.

It was growing tiresome, this waiting – so it was incredibly startling when Sean stumbled through the door, babbling so quickly, he was nearly incoherent and causing Moira to drop the binoculars she was using to look out the window.

"He's here I heard them mention a telepath they're throwing a party tomorrow night and they have him we have to go they have Charles."

There was no bedtime story that night.

xxxxxx

"You expect me to wear this?" Erik eyed the tuxedo with disdain.

"Yes," Moira replied without looking up from the garment bag in her hand.

It was easy before – keeping to their rooms and offering only a slight nod of the head or a comment on the weather when they walked down the hall or through the lobby. But now, they were expected to interact with these people, to come up with a cover… a story.

He was startled as Moira grabbed his hand and placed a wedding ring on his palm. "Put it on."

"Not exactly how I imagined my proposal going," he quipped, but his voice shook as he slipped the piece of gold on his fourth finger. It felt odd, like a weight that shouldn't be there.

Charles is in the building. Charles is in the building. It was a mantra that reminded him of the fragility of the situation when all he wanted to do was tear the place apart.

"Where'd you get this?" Raven marveled, gently fingering the green satin that Moira pulled out of the garment bag.

"Sources."

The agent had a habit of doing that that Erik found absolutely infuriating. "Tell me where the door is again," he directed at Raven, needing something to distract himself as he disappeared into the bathroom and began putting on the suffocating tuxedo.

"In the main ballroom, there's a door on the far wall. Go through it, and you'll find a library. Find Thomas Paine's Common Sense, pull it, and a door will open into another hallway. It'll dead end into another door, which will need both a key card and a code. The code for it is 070476. But for the key card, you're on your own."
He poked his head around the door as he buttoned up his starched shirt, thoroughly impressed. "How
the hell did you manage that?"

Raven smiled and winked. "Sources."

Erik rolled his eyes and disappeared back into the bathroom to slick his hair back.

"I'm not sure what's beyond there," Raven continued. "I didn't get any farther before someone came
into the library and I had to book it. No pun intended."

Erik emerged fully dressed, letting Moira slip past him to change into her gown.

"I guess we'll find out soon enough." He glanced at himself in the mirror and smoothed his freshly
shaved cheeks. "This is insane," he muttered.

"No shit," Sean replied.

Getting into the party would be easy enough, seeing as all members were invited and a silver
embossed invitation was slipped under their door sometime in the middle of the night. The plan was
for Erik and Moira to pose as a married couple and Raven and Sean to stay out of the way unless
needed. Raven had done her part in scoping out the possible areas they could be holding Charles and
if, God forbid, everything fell apart, Sean was fully prepared to scream and bring the whole place
down.

"You ready for this?" Erik asked Sean, closing his eyes briefly as another "You ready for
this?" echoed in his head. But they were not on the Blackbird and Charles was not standing in front
of him. Still, he half expected Sean to say "Let's find out," so the kid's confident "Of course I am,"
was even more jarring than the fact that Sean was, for once, completely ready for the task at hand.

Moira emerged a moment later, looking regal in the silk gown with her hair piled high on her head.
Erik noted she wore a matching wedding ring on her left hand and again, he felt that heavy weight in
his stomach. Before he could focus too much on what exactly that was, Raven enveloped him in a
hug and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

"Be careful."

"Always," he replied, before shaking hands with Sean. "Remember, if you don't see us by 9:00, you
grab Raven and get out."

"And then blow it all to hell," Sean supplied.

"Precisely," Erik replied, turning and offering his elbow for Moira to take.

She inhaled deeply and opened the door. "Let's go get Charles."

"Yes. Let's."

xxxxxx

The party was just as awful as she expected it to be: old men and political figureheads, toasting the
greatness of the other with disgustingly expensive champagne. She tensed and her eyes scanned the
periphery, immediately finding the door on the far side of the ballroom that led to the library.

Erik seemed so incredibly tense next to her that one simple touch would shatter him to pieces. She
shot him a sideways glance as he slipped an arm around her waist.
"Don't worry," he assured. "You're not my type."

She chuckled. "Don't I know it."

He arched an eyebrow and she smiled, placing a hand over his where it rested on her hip. "Don't worry, we'll find him."

Erik's face went slack, but Moira squeezed his hand in reassurance. A gentle blush flushed his cheeks and Moira had the sudden urge to kiss it away, to assure him that she knew, had known all along. And didn't think any less of him, of them, for it.

Before she could say anything, though, a waiter appeared balancing a forest of champagne flutes on his tiny tray. Erik grabbed two and thanked the man, handing one to Moira and taking a large gulp of his own.

"How long should we keep up appearances, husband?"

"Five more minutes, wife," he responded before taking her elbow and gently leading her in the direction of the library door.

xxxxx

Slipping into the library was easy. Finding Thomas Paine, however, was not.

"Isn't there usually an order to this?" Erik muttered as his eyes scanned the spines.

"You mean the Dewey Decimal System?" Moira supplied.

Erik was about to reply with some smartass remark when voices just on the other side of the door froze him to the spot. Before he could even plan a mode of attack, he grunted as Moira slammed him up against the wall, pressing her lips to his.

"What the hell – " his muffled question was cut off as Moira nipped at his bottom lip.

"Shut up," she breathed against his mouth, digging her nails into his chest as he attempted to argue once more.

But the argument died in his throat as the door opened, silhouetting two men against the light from the ballroom.

"Well, what have we here?" one said as the other let out a low whistle.

Erik was about to send them both flying by their cufflinks when Moira muttered, "Now!" against his lips before turning and elbowing the nearest in the nose.

Erik marveled at her handiwork for a moment before landing a kick to the other man's solar plexus.

Panting, Moira bent down and pulled the key card from the first man's pocket as Erik levitated them by the metal on their body, shoving them in the bathroom off the library.

"Do you always make out with your partners to maintain the element of surprise?"

"Only the attractive ones," she smirked, pulling a gun out of the garter around her thigh.

Erik's eyebrows hit his hairline. "Impressive, Agent MacTaggert."
She smiled, reached behind him, and tugged gently on a worn spine that faintly read, *Common Sense*.

"I know."

xxxxxx

A small panel, just wide enough for a single man, swung back, illuminating the dark library in an eerie blue glow from a security panel. Moira typed in the code, slipped in the card and the door opened, revealing a narrow spiral staircase. She stepped forward and was about to descend when a hand on her shoulder halted her.

"I'll go first."

"Oh now you get chivalrous."

Instead of responding, he held out his palm and Moira felt the earrings leave her ears and watched as they hovered in front of her, melting into tiny balls the size of bullets.

"I liked those," she whispered harshly.

"Tough," he replied.

The temperature dropped as they went down the stairs, and Moira wished she was doing this in something other than a silk ball gown. Her earrings, such as they now were, orbited Erik like moons, and she couldn't help but be impressed by his ability.

They reached the bottom where a hallway lined by doors stretched out in front of them. The orbiting bullets vibrated and Moira subconsciously placed a hand on Erik's back.

"Cells," he spit out.

They moved forward, wary of what they might see, but most of the rooms they passed were empty, though their purpose was unmistakable. A small cot was placed in each along with a toilet and a sink. Metal doors with tiny windows sealed them all away and Moira felt bile rise in her throat.

But where was Charles?

A noise up ahead caused her to raise her gun once more as she followed Erik down the hall. There was movement to her left but before she could even bring her gun around, Erik had sent one of the warped earrings through the guard's head and he slumped silently to the ground.

"Check him," Erik murmured and Moira bent down emptying out his pockets. A piece of gum and pack of cigarettes. Hardly anything to go by.

"Nothing."

Erik nodded to the door at the end of the hall and they proceeded cautiously. Moira's watch read 8:32. She was about to warn Erik that they had twenty-eight minutes before Sean took things into his own hands, when voices on the other side of the door silenced the warning on her lips.

"Inject him again," Moira heard one say.

"Sir, he can't take much more."

"Again."
The metal hummed around her as Erik's anger rose. Before she could even offer a pointless "Stay calm," the iron door was blasted off its hinges and two of the eight men in the room beyond were dead before she had time to blink her eyes.

Men in white lab coats stood in front of an observation window and beyond seemed to be a room lined with metal paneling. In the middle was an operating table and on the operating table was Charles.

All this, she observed in the two seconds before she fired two shots at the men in white lab coats, watching as they slumped to the floor.

The yells behind her proved that Erik was holding his own just fine. Glass shattered and concrete cracked and Moira ducted under the table, narrowly avoiding the large shards that impaled themselves in the train of her gown.

Silence fell and Moira blinked, emerging just in time to see a tear track down Erik's cheek as he stared through smoke and dust at the man on the other side of the wall.

"Mein Gott," Erik whispered as he watched Charles stand (stand) in the center of the room and push away from the operating table, taking two steps before stumbling once again.

Erik leapt over the desk and jumped through the shattered glass window, sprinting the final few steps before catching the man that would be his undoing.

"Charles, look at me," he pleaded as he grabbed his too-pale face in his hands, feeling the man's weight slump against him. "You're okay. I'm here. I've got you. Stay with me."

The telepath panted as he gripped the wrists holding his head and stared into green eyes awash with fearlovehoperelief.

But the three words that left his lips caused Erik's blood to run cold.

"Who are you?"
Denials

Chapter Summary

In which the residents of the Xavier Estate refuse to believe the evidence in front of their eyes.

Oh god no. No no no. "Charles, it's me. It's Erik."

Erik's heart hammered with the weight of an anvil as Charles looked blankly at him in return.

"Where am I?"

"Philadelphia, where they've been holding you for almost a week." Erik's hands found their way to Charles' shoulder and he shook him gently. "Don't you remember?" Please remember.

Charles said nothing – merely panted and glanced around the shattered room. The walls had been lined with metal paneling, looking frighteningly like the center of Shaw's submarine.

"Charles, who am I?" Erik asked softly, already knowing the answer he was about to receive.

"I don't… I don't know."

His eyes closed in confirmation and Moira's hand on his back became the only familiar thing in the room.

"Erik. Erik, we have to go." She tugged gently on his forearm, and he nodded as he shifted the telepath in his arms.

The telepath. Why hadn't Charles read his mind to find out who he was? In fact, Erik didn't feel the familiar presence of Charles in his mind at all. Not even a flicker or a brush. His eyes tracked the IV's where two distinct bottles and their tubes disappeared into Charles, one into his hand and the other into his back.

"I'm so tired…" he whispered, his head lolling onto his shoulder.

"Stay awake, Charles. I think one of these is a mutant suppressant," Erik murmured to Moira as he calculated how best to release the other man.

"I thought you said he was paralyzed," Moira whispered as she eyed the shaky legs Charles was standing on.

"He was," Erik grunted as he hoisted the compliant man into his arms and placed him on the table. He gently removed the IV from his hand before going around and eyeing the one in his back. It disappeared into the round scar with jagged edges just at the base of his spine and Erik felt all the air leave the room.

It was the first time he had seen properly seen the scar he had a hand in creating – sure, they had slept in the same bed but they had never actually slept together and the most disrobed Erik had ever seen the other man was in a bathtub as he washed his hair.
"Moira, brace his shoulders."

She did as she was told, standing in front of Charles and placing a hand on either side of him, letting him slump forward chin to chest. Erik ran a hand down the back of the telepath's head without thinking – an unconscious habit.

"Charles, I'm going to pull the IV out in three, two, one." He pulled as gently as he could, but Charles still arched in pain as a needle the size of a pencil was removed from his spine. "You still with me, Charles?"

The other man merely groaned in response, his forehead resting against Moira's shoulder as he panted into her skin. Erik rolled up the IV tube and stuffed the bag into his jacket pocket.

"What are you doing?" Moira asked.

"Hank's gonna want to see that," Erik muttered as he eyed the cotton pants Charles was wearing – the only piece of clothing on the man's body. Erik slipped off his tuxedo jacket and draped it over the telepath's shoulders. "Charles, slide your arms through here."

"Why should I listen to you? How do I know you're not just like them?" he mumbled, making no effort to push away from Moira's shoulder. Erik came around and gently lifted Charles' chin, ensuring their eyes met.

"You're just going to have to trust me."

Charles, it's me. It's me. Please remember me.

It was a miracle his voice didn't break.

xxxxxx

Moira rested her cheek against Charles' head as he slumped against her shoulder. Other than a black eye and a foggy mind, he seemed to be physically okay (the sudden ability to walk notwithstanding).

She helped him hook his arms into Erik's tuxedo jacket and straightened his hair into something resembling order. His eyes rolled back into his head and it was only Erik's arms around his waist that kept him from toppling backwards off the table.

"I've got you, Charles," the metal-bender murmured into his hair. "I've got you."

Moira blinked and looked away, feeling guilty for witnessing the intimate moment and even guiltier for watching Erik's eyes fill with tears.

"Can you stand?" he croaked out, letting Moira take one arm as he took the other and helped Charles off the table.

"Why are you doing this?" Charles mumbled.

"We're taking you home," Moira whispered as she buttoned up the tuxedo jacket over his pale torso.

"Oxford?"

"No." Erik's gaze met Moira's over the telepath's head. "Westchester."

Charles snorted derisively. "That's not home."
Moira didn't remember Westchester, but Erik's face paled several shades.

"Nothing but bricks and bad memories," the telepath muttered.

Moira looked to Erik for guidance, for advice on how to proceed, but his jaw clenched and he stared at a spot on the wall just over her right shoulder, humming with what she was sure was a cocktail of frustration, anger, and denial.

Finally, with a deep breath, she watched in fascination as he schooled his features into some semblance of calm and looped Charles' arm across his shoulders.

"I think you'll find a lot more there than bricks and bad memories, Charles."

xxxxxx

The tuxedo jacket was scratchy against his sensitized skin and the energy it took just to keep his eyes open had him wanting to find a nice patch of carpet and lay down for a nap.

"There's glass all over the floor," the man's voice said in his ear. "I'm going to pick you up and carry you over it, okay?"

He heard himself mumble an assent as an arm hooked beneath his knees and he was lifted from the ground. It felt nice – not having to stand anymore. He wasn't entirely sure why his legs felt like jelly and his muscles were screaming in protest, but he wanted the feeling to go away.

He groaned as he was shifted again in the man's arms and the sound of crunching glass echoed around the concrete room.

"Why was I here?"

"We're not sure, Charles, but we're going to get you out," the woman said, carding her fingers gently through his hair. It felt nice and he closed his eyes, resting his head against the man's dress shirt.

"There are dead people on the floor," he mumbled.

"Don't concern yourself with that," the man replied.

"Did you do that?"

"Charles, you might not realize this now, but I'd do just about anything for you."

There were many things he wanted to say and many questions he had to ask, but for some reason, that was a claim that Charles had no desire to argue.

xxxxxx

Erik gently placed Charles down on the ground when they got to the foot of the spiral staircase, his hands never leaving the other man's waist in case his newly functioning legs decided to give out on him.

"Charles, this staircase leads to a library, and the library leads to a ballroom. No offense, but you're looking a little worse for wear, so we'll need to get out as quickly as possible." He was heartened when the telepath smiled.

"None taken. I'm afraid I've left my Sunday best at home."
Moira chuckled next to him and Erik could only roll his eyes. Of course Charles would be cracking jokes while barely able to stand, and having no idea where he was, who he was with, or why he was there.

"Can you make it up the stairs? They're too narrow for me to carry you."

"I'll be fine," Charles said, even as he stumbled into Moira's back as she made her way up.

"Easy there. Erik grabbed Charles' waist again and didn't let go until they both reached the top of the staircase. He couldn't believe that after a week of waiting, of hoping, of praying, the man was finally in his arms.

But it wasn't his man. It was, but it wasn't. What do you do when the person you love has no recollection of the time you spent together? No idea that you spent every night for six months wondering what book he was reading, or what cardigan he was wearing, or what side of the bed he was sleeping on now that you were no longer there to share it.

Music filtered in from the ballroom and Erik shook his head. Those thoughts would do him no favors now.

"They're playing a waltz," Charles muttered, using both a bookcase and Moira's shoulder to keep himself upright.

"It looks like they're about to do a toast," Moira reported as she peeked through the crack in the door. "We can sneak out the back in a minute."

"Raven's waiting outside in the car."

"Who's Raven?"

Erik froze. It was one thing to forget him – to forget the last few months or years. But to not remember Raven…

"Erik…" Moira started helplessly, staring at Charles wide-eyed.

"Not now," he growled, turning to Charles and trying to suppress the fear that echoed in his mind. "Stay behind me."

Charles pushed himself off the bookcase and held onto the back of Erik's shirt. Erik closed his eyes and tried not to think about the familiar brush of fingers, the simple warmth that scorched his very soul.

With a nod at Moira, they made their way through the door and into the blinding light. He felt Charles stumble behind him, but he shot a hand out and quickly caught the other man's wrist.

The majority of people in the crowd were turned toward the bandstand, flutes raised in response to whatever was being said through the microphone and, after two minutes of held breath, he, Moira and Charles met the cool air of the lobby before stumbling through the front door.

"Raven, don't!" Erik cried but he was too late. Before he could offer a warning, Raven was launching herself into her brother's arms – a brother who had no idea who she was or why she was wrapping her arms around his neck.

xxxxxx
"Stop pacing, you're giving me a headache."

Sean froze and slumped against Moira's car. "Sorry."

Raven lifted her wrist to looked at her watch but Azazel's voice interrupted the action. "It hasn't changed since the last time you checked it twenty seconds ago."

She glared at the teleporter sitting in the front seat (Riptide too in the back, for good measure) and picked up where Sean left off in the pacing.

"They should be back by now." She didn't want to acknowledge the growing feeling of dread that settled in the pit of her stomach. But before she could ask Sean to *please stop tapping his fingers on the roof of the car*, a flash of green out of the corner of her eye snapped her attention to the door where Moira was discreetly sliding her gun into her holster, turning around, and helping Erik with –


"Raven, don't!"

She vaguely heard Erik's warning echo across the street, but nothing could stop her legs as they carried her away from the car and over the pavement.

"Charles!" She wrapped her arms around his thin frame and felt him stiffen beneath her. She waited patiently for him to hug her in return – he was probably in shock after all – but the hand that eventually grazed her back did not belong to her brother and she pulled away in confusion as Charles gazed blankly at her in return.

"Raven, he doesn't…" Erik trailed off, but his hand never left. If anything, it pressed harder. That in itself should have set off warning bells. Erik was never one to initiate physical contact, let alone hold it.

"Charles?" Her eyes searched his pale and battered face, finding no warmth, no recognition in those pools of cerulean.

*No.*

"He doesn't know who I am." She heard her voice say that which her mind was still attempting to process.

"We have to get him home," Moira said.

No confirmation, but no denial either.

Raven's arms dropped back down to her sides as Charles slumped sideways into Erik once more. This wasn't possible, it just couldn't be happening. But as her feet carried her backwards, she collided with Sean and the broad chest of Azazel.

"Fascinating," Charles mumbled as he stared up at the teleporter, head lolling against Erik's shoulder once more. "Does he always look like that?"

"Riptide will drive the car to the house."

Erik glanced at Moira and the agent nodded her consent. With another nod in Azazel's direction, the teleporter stepped forward and took hold of Erik's forearm.

And for the first time, the perpetual smirk residing on his face was nowhere to be seen.
"Dude! Open up! It's me!"

Hank paused in the middle of redressing Alex's wound and stared at the metal door that Sean was currently pounding down. He made it there in two strides and yanked it open to find the boy, panting and clutching his chest, his freckles standing out even more brightly against his pale skin.

"You gotta come quick. The prof has no idea who any of us are."

"Go, I'll be fine," Alex called from the couch that Erik had levitated down for them as Hank gave a curt nod and took off down the hall after Sean. Alex glanced over at Daniel, who was watching from the floor with a most peculiar look on his face. "Looks like it's just you and me, kid."

But that changed when a poof signaled the arrival of Azazel and Daniel clapped his hands happily.

"Poof!"

Azazel let his tail hang low enough for the baby to grab by way of greeting.

"What's wrong with the professor?"

"Can't remember."

Alex tried to sit up higher but hissed against the pain. "Anything?"

"Anyone," the teleporter clarified, before picking up Daniel and holding out his hand to Alex. "This won't be pleasant for you."

"Why does that not surprise me," the teen mumbled as he gripped Azazel's hand. He felt the briefest sensation of weightlessness before he landed on the hardwood with a thud.

"Oh, Jesus," he groaned and blinked past the stars in his eyes.

"Are you all right?" A cool palm placed itself on Alex's shoulder and he slumped back down to the floor.

"Agent MacTaggert? What the hell are you doing here?"

She grinned and cupped his face as he subconsciously leaned into her touch. "It's good to see you too, Summers."

Sean helped him into a sitting position so he could better get a lay of the land. Raven was curled up in a ball in the corner, her arms wrapped around her knees, gently rocking back and forth. Sean went back to picking up the debris that still littered the hallway, but the vacant look on his face proved it was more a means of distraction instead of any actual desire to clean. Azazel sat perched on the windowsill, picking his teeth with his tail while Erik…well…

Erik sat like a man awaiting death row. And Alex knew exactly what that looked like. It was in the hollow eyes and the sunken cheeks. The stare that didn't break as it looked unblinkingly at a distant spot on a wall. The hands that seemed to latch onto the nearest thing and not let go. For most guys, it was a letter from home or a state-issued bible. For Erik, it was a little boy who seemed to hold onto him just as tightly in return.
What a pair they made.

xxxxxx

One hour, fourteen minutes, and eleven seconds passed before the door to the lab opened once again. Erik knew because he could feel every moment, every tick of the hands on the clock.

He caught a brief glimpse of Charles sleeping soundly before Hank shut the door once again, holding up his hand against the barrage of questions creating a cacophony in the hallway.

"I have a theory," Hank said five minutes later, as they all sat gathered around the small kitchen table.

"Enlighten me," Erik grunted, holding Daniel closer than was strictly necessary.

"What Charles did to Moira... he did to himself."

Silence reigned as if they had all been frozen telepathically. But that wasn't possible, because the only telepath was thoroughly incapacitated, having absolutely no idea who any of them were—who he was. Erik breathed deeply as the silverware vibrated in the drawer.

"He mind-wiped himself?" Sean asked as Alex responded with, "Why?"

Hank shifted uncomfortably. "He probably didn't want them exploiting his... well, us. So he locked us away."

"All of us?" The timidity of Raven's voice sounded foreign coming from her mouth. Erik found himself staring at her face, wondering if she felt just as broken as he did.

"All of us," Hank confirmed. "As far as he knows, he was raised in this house — spent his undergrad at Harvard and his Masters and PhD in Oxford. By himself," he added as Raven jumped to interject. "You don't exist in his mind, Raven. He never found you in this kitchen all those years ago. You're gone."

"I'm gone," she mouthed silently, as if afraid that speaking them aloud would make them ring true.

"But," Erik's voice was hoarse and he tried to swallow, but his mouth had gone dry. "He can fix it, right? I mean..." he looked helplessly at Hank. "He can undo it, right?"

Hank looked unsure, shooting an uneasy glance at Moira. "Charles is very good at what he does."

Erik followed Hank's gaze and took a step toward the CIA agent. "You don't remember anything, do you." It wasn't a question.

Moira shook her head. "No. Nothing."

Those two simple words hit him like a bullet and, in a rare show of weakness, he let his elbows fall to the table and dropped his face into his hands.

"He must have left himself a trigger, something to trip it..." Hank continued, sounding horribly optimistic. "We just have to figure out what it is."

"What would it be?" Sean leaned forward, face painfully open and honest and innocent.

"Something only we — or one of us —" Hank's eyes flicked to Erik, "would know."
"Oh good, that narrows down the options then," Alex bit out.

"How can he walk?" Moira, this time.

Hank held up the IV that Erik had stuffed in his jacket pocket. "It's a serum, most likely from a regenerating mutant. I'm working on the enzymes now, but just a few days of this and, from what I can tell with a rudimentary examination, Charles' spine has been healed and the muscle deterioration nearly gone."

As momentous as that information was – and the quiet "Holy fuck" that escaped Alex's lips proved it to be – Erik just couldn't bring himself to think past the fact that Charles was lying in a bed with absolutely no idea who he was. Who his sister was. Who his son was.

He buried his nose in Daniel's hair and inhaled, as the boy gripped his collar in his tiny hand. He let the familiarity wash over him – the smell of baby shampoo, the weight of the boy in his arms, the feel of his lips as he pressed a sloppy not-quite-kiss to Erik's chin.

His world might be falling apart, but those moments, those feelings, were definitely worth living for.

xxxxxx

Moira opened the door to the patio, pulling the sweater tighter around her nightgown as she stepped out into the brisk night air.

The place had felt familiar but foreign – like a childhood dream whose paint had vanished but whose skeleton remained – all hazy shapes and familiar feelings. Her senses were humming and the creaking in the rafters was doing nothing to settle her already overwrought nerves.

A little fresh air was all she wanted but when her bare foot connected with a bottle, she jumped as the glass went skittering across the stone hearth.

"Watch out," a rough voice called from one of the wooden lounge chairs facing out over the lawns. "I'm afraid I made a bit of a mess."

'A bit of a mess' was an understatement. It looked as if the entire liquor cabinet had been emptied and its contents drained, leaving a perfect path from the door to the chair where Erik now resided.

Moira tiptoed around, mindful of the glass, and took in his appearance: bloodshot eyes, disheveled hair, slack face.

"It's three in the morning. What are you doing?" she whispered, despite the fact that they were the only two crazy enough to be outside in the dead of night.

"He doesn't remember me," he answered flatly.

She sighed and pulled a chair up next to his. "He will."

"You don't know that." Even while drunk, his countenance was forbidding, marred only by the slight slurring of his speech.

"You never truly forget the people you love. No matter how many times you try to lock them away."

"What if he doesn't love me enough to remember me?"

"Oh you stupid man," she chuckled fondly.
"I'm not a man."

"Forgive me," she said dryly, swearing she had just seen a pout cross the man's face. "Oh you stupid mutant."

He cracked a smile and she stood, considering her venture a success, as she placed a chaste kiss on his forehead, smoothing the hair away from his brow.

"Go to bed. You're a father now. It wouldn't do to have you hungover tomorrow morning."

"I'm not his father."

"Of course you are."

She had to admit that seeing the boy was a shock – he looked just like Charles and knowing the man himself was lying motionless and mentally adrift in just the next room made the likeness all the more jarring. Still, the image of Erik sitting there with Daniel cradled to his chest as he muttered German lullabies into his ear was not something she was likely to forget anytime soon.

"Go to bed," she murmured, running her hand over his head one final time.

"Okay," he replied.

"Promise me?"

"I promise."

"Goodnight, Erik."

"Goodnight, Moira."

And that's how she left him: sitting on the patio, staring out into the unforgiving night sky, the ghost of a lullaby haunting his chapped lips.
Inquisitions

Chapter Summary

In which Charles asks some questions and Erik dodges some answers.

It was some time after four in the morning when Erik poured himself back into bed, and it was only the distant but urgent thought of Daniel that had him collecting the various empty bottles from the ground before doing so.

He closed his eyes, expecting the nightmares, expecting the anguish. Expecting to wake again, despite the fog of alcohol, with the sharp fear that would bring him out of his (Charles') bed and to the crib just next to it.

But Daniel would be sleeping. Fitfully, but sleeping all the same, and so Erik would plod back to bed and close his eyes, expecting the nightmares and expecting the anguish.

What he didn't expect was to hear the door open at just after five and feel the warm press of Raven against his side or the heat from the muffled sob she pressed into his shirt. He didn't expect to wrap his arms around her and tuck her head under his chin. Didn't expect to take comfort in someone other than the man lying peacefully under a white sheet two floors below, but he allowed his heartbeat to fall in step with Raven's; allowed the rise of his chest to be followed by the fall of hers.

He closed his eyes a final time, expecting the nightmares and expecting the anguish, but with Raven's face pressed into his shoulder, nothing came and he slept soundly.

"Dude, what happened to all the whiskey?" Sean asked as he passed by the empty liquor cabinet.

Moira merely raised her eyebrows and tapped the side of her nose as Erik came stumbling into the kitchen, squinting in the morning light.

"Nevermind," Sean muttered.

"Where is everyone?" Erik asked, voice gruff with sleep and, well, hangover.

"Hank's in with Charles, who's still sleeping. Alex is on the couch in the rec room, and Raven is… right there," Moira replied as Raven entered with Daniel on her hip.

Sean didn't like to delve too deeply into the emotional goings-on where the women were concerned – too scary – but even he could tell that Raven had been crying. Her eyes were bloodshot and puffy, her cheeks splotchy as if she had wiped roughly at them. Both she and Erik looked like they had gotten approximately an hour of sleep which, Sean thought guiltily, was four hours less than he did.

It wasn't that he wasn't concerned about the professor – the fact that the only father figure in his life didn't remember him was cause for great alarm. So much alarm, in fact, that Sean went the self-preservation route and tried not to think about it, because it was so much easier to just pretend to let everything roll off his back.
That's who he was. The image he had spent weeks and months building. "Where's Sean?"
"Probably getting high out back." "Has anyone seen Sean?" "Oh, he probably got lost in the library
again."

If he made himself out to be immature and scatterbrained, then no one would depend on him. And if
no one depended on him, then it wouldn't be his fault if anyone got hurt, or upset.

Or taken.

But that didn't stop the stone of need from dropping into the pit of his stomach whenever he thought
of Charles or the plea of pleasegodgoodnews that passed through his mind as Hank entered the
kitchen, looking twenty years older than the twenty he already possessed.

"Charles is awake. Someone should go talk to him."

Every eye in the kitchen found Erik and Sean shrunk back, fading into the counter.

It was just so much easier this way.

xxxxxx

Erik rested his forehead against the wood and inhaled.

It was just a door. He had opened plenty before. Wooden ones, iron ones, concrete ones, plastic
ones. Padlocked ones, deadbolted ones, latched ones, and alarmed ones.

Oddly, it was the unlocked ones he seemed to have the most trouble with.

He closed his eyes and held his breath justdoit as the door swung back and the distinct "lab" smell
filtered through his nostrils.

"That's quite an ensemble you have on," the voice (that voice) said from the bed in the center of the
room. The bed that Alex had occupied barely a week ago.

Erik opened his eyes and glanced down at himself, not even realizing he had fallen asleep in his
tuxedo trousers and undershirt. When his gaze finally snapped back to Charles, the telepath's eyes
lingered not on his rumpled outfit, but on the metal helmet that weighed heavily on his head.

Erik tapped gently against it. "Can't hear me with it on, can you."

Charles' eyes darkened. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Surely you haven't forgotten you're a telepath." Erik tried to chuckle but it was a fear he hadn't even
considered until that point. Just how much did Charles suppress?

"So it's to keep me out?" Of course Charles looked more intrigued that affronted.

Erik levitated a spoon from the counter and stuck it into the bowl of fruit he had forgotten he was
carrying. "We all have our little tricks."

"Fascinating," Charles breathed, eyeing the spoon and then Erik with something akin to awe. Erik
swallowed past lump in his throat.

"I can move a lot more than that… thanks to you."

Charles' eyebrows shot up. "Me?"
Erik inhaled and finally stepped further into the room, allowing the door to swing shut behind him.

"I'm wearing this not because I don't trust you – you're probably the one person in this world I'd trust with my life – " his eyes immediately widened as he took stock of what just left his mouth. "What I mean – what I meant to say is… This," he tapped the helmet again, "is for your sake, not mine." He took the stool next to Charles' bed and, with great restraint, didn't take hold of the other man's hand no matter how badly he just wanted to crawl up next to him and hang on for dear life. "I'm going to take it off in a minute," he continued as if his entire being, with the exception of his voice, wasn't screaming for him to take hold of Charles and shake the memories out of him. "But I want you to promise me that you won't read my mind. You made that promise once to me. I know you don't remember, but I'd appreciate the same courtesy."

Charles cocked his head, studying him, yet nodded and took the bowl of fruit Erik offered him.

"I have nothing to hide from you, which is probably why it's for the best if you stay out of here until… well… this," he gestured between them and around them, "gets resolved."

"I understand," he replied, and of course he did, Erik thought bitterly. Of course Charles could take the fact that the world he thinks he knows is not the world at all in stride. But he pushed the unfairness of it all down somewhere deep where he could brood over it later and lifted the helmet off his head, fully expecting to feel the familiar presence of Charles in his mind, despite his promise, but nothing came.

"I promised you I wouldn't."

Erik raised an eyebrow. "And you just broke said promise."

"You were broadcasting. I couldn't help it." Charles smirked. "Since I am to be relegated to mere human methods of interrogation, am I allowed a few questions?"

"Those I can answer, I will." God, how he missed this man.

"Fine," he began, swallowing around a piece of cantaloupe. "Who are you?"

"My name is Erik Lehnsherr." It felt odd introducing himself to a man who had, at once, known his name, his birthday, and everything else there was to know without even having to draw breath. "We were – are… um, friends."

"Friends," Charles repeated, and Erik nodded, not trusting his voice to confirm such an inadequate description of their relationship. "Okay then, and why are you here, in my childhood home?"

"You brought us here."

"Us."

"The rest of the people in the house."

"I see." Charles took another bite of melon and waved the spoon in a small arc. "And are you all…"

"Mutants? Yes."

"Extraordinary."

"What…” and damn him, the lump in his throat was back, "did you think you were alone?" And quite accidentally, "You're not alone. Erik, you're not alone," floated across the room.
Charles froze and his eyes widened for a moment, a beautiful fraction of a moment when Erik thought that perhaps he'd found the trigger, but just as quickly as it came, it went, and confusion clouded the telepath's face once more.

"Why don't I remember you?"

Erik cursed his naivety and sighed through his disappointment. "You locked part of your memory away."

"And why would I do that?"

"That's not for me to answer."

"Fair enough. I suppose if it was my own decision, then how on earth could you know my reasoning?" He stuffed another piece of watermelon in his mouth. "This is fabulous fruit by the way."

And the comment took Erik so off guard, he couldn't help the chuckle that slipped through his otherwise stoic façade. "I'm glad."

As if heartened by the laughter he managed to draw, Charles leaned forward and narrowed his eyes. "Why are my legs so sore?"

"I can't answer that yet."

"What did I get my doctorate in?"

"Genetics, Oxford, 1962." The specificity clearly startled Charles, but he was quick to continue the rapid-fire questions.

"What side do I play in chess?"

"White."

"Favorite scotch?"

"Glenlivet, but never less than 17-years-old."

"What am I most afraid of?"

"Small spaces."

"Why?"

"You refused to tell me."

Charles leaned back, impressed. "That's because I haven't told anyone." Something ghosted across his face in that moment, a loneliness that Erik knew all too well from years of looking in the mirror and seeing it etched on his own.

This Charles was his Charles, but a little less naïve, a little more aware of the brutality in the world.

"A hardship softened by me," Raven had said.

But now there was no Raven. Only hardship.
"And now a question of my own." At Charles' nod, Erik continued. "Why are you so trusting of me?" The telepath shrugged. "Just a gut feeling." He chuckled, almost abashed. "I don't think I could put it into words, my friend."

My friend.

This Charles was his Charles.

He just needed a reminder.

xxxxxx

"How long's it been?"

"An hour," Hank responded to Alex's question.

"Well, they're either making out or they're both dead. Hey!" Sean exclaimed as he ducked from the pillow Raven threw at his head.

"You're an ass," she replied.

It was odd to be in this place, with these people, who seemed to know so much more than she did. Moira would only catch glimpses of it – in the way Raven couldn't meet her eye as she passed her the sugar across the table, the way Alex physically jolted when she casually mentioned Darwin and Angel, the way Hank studied her as if she was a time bomb just waiting to go off.

"Holy shit," Alex muttered as Erik entered the room, followed by Charles, dressed in a pair of khakis and a sweater.

"Told you he could walk," Sean said in a whisper only Moira picked up on.

Erik cleared his throat, but all sound in the room had long since died down. "I think we have some ground rules to establish until things return – "

"Daddy!"

But before those ground rules could be established or even begin to take Daniel into account, the boy was up and across the floor much faster than his little toddler legs should have been able to carry him, hurtling himself at Charles' knees and wrapping his tiny arms around legs that, for the first time in his short life, could hold weight.

The telepath chuckled and awkwardly patted the boy's head. "Well hello there."

The air seemed to have left the room as the rest of the occupants stared at one another, trying to figure out what exactly came next. Because what does one say to a little boy who cannot understand why his father does not know him? Cannot comprehend why the most familiar, comforting person in the world is looking at him with such detached curiosity?

"Is he yours?" Charles asked, and it took Moira a moment to realize that his gaze was floating between her and Erik. Her eyes widened at the implication.

"No! He's not… I'm not… We're… No," she finished lamely as she looked over at Erik, who seemed to have been glued to the spot upon which he stood.

She waited to see how he would handle the situation. After all, just blurtling out, "You're a father.
Congratulations," didn't exactly have the kind of delicacy that seemed to be required.

Erik's stare had not yet wavered from the knot of wood scarring the otherwise beautifully paneled floor. Finally, after what felt like ages compacted into seconds, Erik cleared his throat and met Charles' curious gaze.

"Actually, he's yours."
Erik watched as Charles paled several shades, the polite smile sliding from his face.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"He's yours."

Charles gaped as his eyes rested on the little boy clinging to his leg once more. It was unnerving to see the telepath look so lost. He always seemed to know what to say and when to say it, but now, he struggled for words like a fish on a dock struggling for air.

"Mine?"

Such a tiny word to split a hole straight through Erik's soul. "Yes, yours."

No one quite knew what to do and Erik could feel the tension pressing in around him like a vise. He hadn't even realized he had held his breath until tiny black dots began to pop in his vision.

"Mine," Charles whispered, slowly lowering himself down to eyelevel with Daniel who immediately reached out and wrapped his arms around Charles' neck.

The wondrous look on the telepath's face would have made Erik smile if his heart wasn't already breaking. Charles had been so protective of his son when Erik first arrived that to see him looking at the boy as if for the first time was more unnerving that most things he had witnessed – and he had witnessed a lot.

"Who's his mother?"

Oh god, what was her name?

"Julia," Hank piped up from the back. "Julia Barnard. You two were – "

"Friends, yes. At Oxford," Charles supplied, his gaze ever studious as it raked over Daniel's hair, nose, and toes. "He has my eyes."

"And your hair and your chin," Raven chuckled, before the reality of the situation hit her and she stopped abruptly, her eyes immediately filling with tears.

Erik reached a hand out and she slid along the wall and pressed into his side. Charles watched the whole exchange with an unreadable expression.

"I, uh, believe you had some ground rules for me," he murmured, nodding in Erik's direction.

"For them, actually," Erik replied, gesturing to the boys in the room and cursing the wobble in his voice. "Downright hooligans, one and all."
Charles cracked a smile and stood, but his hand never left Daniel's head. "I'm Charles. But then I guess you already knew that."

The three boys shared a look before, one by one, they began to introduce themselves.

xxxxxx

"Alex," he said, feeling slightly ridiculous as he waved from the couch and more than slightly depressed as he introduced himself to the man who had essentially saved him from a lifetime of solitude.

"Alex," Charles repeated. "And what happened to you?" He gestured to the bandages looping across his chest and shoulder and Alex immediately panicked.

Erik gave the briefest of nods in his direction, though, and the boy found the words bubbling up because, despite his initial misgivings, Alex was slowly realizing that he would follow Erik anywhere.

"I was shot."

"Good God, why?" Charles' voice had risen in genuine concern and he took a step forward before checking himself.

Something sharp twisted in Alex's chest at the familiar frown that graced the professor's face – at the palm that seemed to reach out of its own volition in some semblance of a comforting gesture.

_Charles is real. Charles cares. Charles asked you a question. Oh God, what was the question?_

But the words would not come now. Alex, who had perfected the art of carefully glossed over fiction, floundered for something to say, for an explanation as to how he ended up with a bullet in his chest because, _"I got shot while trying to protect your son" seemed a little heavy-handed for 9:00 in the morning._

"There was an attack," Erik intervened and Alex audibly exhaled in relief.

"An attack?" Charles' eyes flicked to the doorway, most likely remembering the debris that still littered the hallway. "Here?"

"Yes." Erik's gaze remained on the professor as he turned back to the couch.

"And that's how you got shot?"

Alex nodded. "You can read my mind if you want."

"Alex." Erik's tone was sharp and all in the room immediately stiffened. "Charles has agreed to stay out of our minds until we fix this."

"Fix me, you mean." The professor smirked, but it didn't reach his eyes the way it usually did. Alex wasn't sure when he started noticing that.

"No, it's okay. I want him to." He shifted himself up onto his elbows and nodded in Charles' direction. "He should see."

Erik narrowed his eyes and it was to Alex's credit that he didn't completely shrink back into the couch cushions.
"Fine."

Charles raised his eyebrows at Alex and the boy nodded as the professor made that ohsofamiliar gesture of pressing two fingers to temple. Alex couldn't help the gasp that escaped his lips as the familiar presence washed over him.

Daniel whimpered and held onto Alex's leg, pressing his tiny face into the back of his jeans. Alex reached a hand back and stroked the top of his head.

"Hands up."

"They're up." Alex growled in returned. It wasn't the first time he had had a gun pointed at him, but it was the first time he had a baby in his care while staring down the barrel. His ears were ringing, but he could still make out the sounds of a scuffle in the hall. They were putting up a good fight and Alex was proud.

The man with the gun took a step forward, eyes fixed on the baby cowering behind him.

"Hand over the boy."

"Go fuck yourself."

The gun rose, giving Alex just enough time to think how lucky he'd been to have finally found a home at last.

'Thank you, Professor.'

Charles gasped and stumbled backwards, as if he had thrown himself out of Alex's head, and various exclamations of "Are you all right?" created a cacophony of concern in the room.

All of that was background noise, though, as Alex quickly and roughly wiped at his eyes. He tried to tell himself that it was the phantom pain of being shot, the ghost of the bullet as it ripped its way through flesh, muscle, and nerve, but he knew that was just another one of those glossed over fictions.

And the look Charles leveled at him filled with confusion, pain, guilt, and ohgod love, told him the professor knew it too.

xxxxxx

"Charles?" Erik had placed a steadying hand on the other man's back and tried not to get lost in the rapid rise and fall of his inhalations.

"I'm fine," the telepath muttered, his eyes never leaving Alex.

Erik noted the emotion on the boy's face and carefully averted his gaze. No point in making Alex feel more vulnerable than he already was.

Erik didn't know the details, but he knew that Alex had Daniel in his care when he took the bullet, so he had a pretty good idea of what Charles had just witnessed. And Erik couldn't blame the man for the convoluted feelings rolling off of him.

Alex had saved his son, but seeing as Charles had only been a father for the past five minutes, the conflicted emotions that flickered across his face were completely warranted.

Erik cleared his throat. "Let's continue, shall we?" Playing the role of mediator was a new and
foreign concept to him. But at Charles' nod, Erik moved on. "I'm not sure if you remember Sean from last night…"

"Vaguely," Charles replied, schooling his features into a small smile. "Apologies. I was not in top form."

The redhead stuffed his hands into his pockets, only offering a small nod in return. Usually the most loquacious of the bunch, Erik frowned as Sean seemed to fold in on himself in an attempt to blend in with the carpet. He made a mental note to keep an eye on the boy.

"And by now you know Hank."

"Ah yes, Dr. McCoy," Charles stepped forward and shook Hank's hand, thoroughly at ease with the way his disappeared in Hank's palm. "Thank you very much for attending to me last night."

"No problem," Hank gruffly replied, twitching nervously. Erik couldn't help but smile. Old habits die hard.

Charles' eyes were still bright with gratitude for the doctor when they landed on Raven, huddled against Erik's side and staring at the floor. Erik gave her a gentle nudge and she visibly started.

"Um, Raven," she whispered. In her distress, she hadn't yet changed back to her natural blue form since Philadelphia and her pale cheeks flushed as Charles gazed at her.

"It's very nice to meet you, Raven."

Erik could only hope that the strangled noise the girl made didn't reach Charles' ears. But before they could move beyond the niceties, Daniel's voice rang out in the room like a bell signaling sun after a storm.

"Daddy, lookit!" Daniel grabbed Charles' hand and dragged him over to a pile of paper and crayons. Erik was impressed that Charles managed to keep his clearly surprised features in check.

Daniel reached down and picked up the nearest drawing. Erik couldn't be sure what it was from this distance, even though he had been getting surprisingly good at interpreting Daniel's more "modern" art pieces. But the breath seized in his chest as the toddler thrust the paper out in the telepath's direction.

"Is this for me?" Charles quietly asked.

Daniel nodded vigorously.

"Thank you," he whispered, let out a little gasp as Daniel wrapped his arms around his legs once more. Erik found his own gasp escaping his lips, feeling every bit a voyeur as Charles navigated fatherhood for what he thought to be the first time.

"He's little," Erik found himself saying in response to Charles' lost look. "He doesn't understand what's going on."

Charles didn't say anything – just bent down and scooped Daniel up without a word, placing a gentle kiss on his temple. Erik reached out and held onto Raven's shoulder to steady himself against the sudden wave of love and pain that washed over him.

"I'm his father and that's that in his eyes," Charles finally replied, glancing up at Erik. "Didn't you have some ground rules to establish?"
Erik shook his head in an attempt to clear the emotional fog that had swept in. "Right. Ground rules. Um, until we figure out how we can trigger… what he lost, Charles and I have decided it's probably best to keep the memory sharing to a minimum."

"You're not going to read our minds?" Sean seemed to awaken from whatever stupor he had fallen into.

"Not if I can help it," Charles replied. "I have a feeling it would only confuse me further and frankly," he added, shifting the little boy in his arms, "I have enough confusion in my life."

Erik sighed as Raven dug her nails into his arm.

He knew the feeling.

xxxxxx

"Where are you going?"

Moira jumped at Erik's voice and dropped the car keys Janos (Was that his name?) had left by the door for her.

"Home," she replied, a little surprised as a note of panic crept onto Erik's face.

"Why?"

She held up the ream of paper in her hand by way of response. After the awkward introductions had been made, she had excused herself from the room and crept into the study, spending the next five hours hunched over a typewriter as she hammered out the events of the past 24 hours.

"If I don't want the full-force of the CIA coming down on me and, potentially, you, I have to get this report to them as soon as humanly possible."

Erik arched an eyebrow. "What about as soon as mutantly possible?" He grinned. "Azazel's around here somewhere. He tends to lurk."

As strong as her desire was to never travel via teleporter again, the need to explain herself to McCone was beginning to outweigh her fear. Erik nodded to the paper.

"Are we in there?"

"Not by name. You're just an anonymous source who tipped me off to the location."

"And Charles?"

"The facility was empty when I got there, but it's purpose unmistakable."

Erik seemed to relax at her response, his shoulders sagging under the emotional weight of the past few days as he leaned against the banister. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He nodded to the paper again. "Do you know who they are? The people who had him?"

She bit her lip, debating. She remembered his temper, his distrust – his ability to wield an anchor like a jump rope. The answer would no doubt set him off and she mentally calculated how many steps it would take to get out of the door should her answer ignite a small, but lethal tantrum.
"It's an extremist anti-mutant sect, who are attempting to round mutants up, break them, and the use them against their own to further the cause."

There a brief moment of utter stillness as her words died in the air before Erik immediately straightened, senses humming. She held up her hands pleadingly.

"My call sign was mentioned in that brief you found because I intercepted some communications between the sect and the CIA. I wasn't a part of the original operation because I was on probation, but it failed anyway." She jumped as the doorknob behind her vibrated. "It was called Liberty Bell, but when the team got to Philadelphia, they could never find the headquarters."

His nostrils flared as he attempted to control himself. "But we found it easily enough."

"We had Raven," Moira replied, before continuing more cautiously. "And we think some members may have already infiltrated the CIA. They might have tampered with the information."

"And you're just going to waltz back in there and hand that over?" He gestured harshly at the report in her hand and she took a step back. He must have sensed her fear, because he closed his eyes and regrouped.

"I'm handing it directly to McCone. I know he's not your favorite person, but – "

"What CIA operative is?" He interrupted tartly.

"I'll try not to be offended by that."

He looked chagrined and she smiled wryly, stepped forward, and placed a hand on his arm.

"I know you don't trust easily, but I swear… I am on your side. McCone is a good man."

His muscles tensed under her palm and she squeezed in an effort to draw the anxiety out of him.

"I will do everything in my power to make this right," she whispered. "Let me deal with this. You focus on Charles."

Erik closed his eyes and nodded, leaning back against the banister once more.

"Speaking of Charles, where is he?" she asked.

A small smile ghosted across his face. "I think Danny roped him into building a fortress."

Moira chuckled. "He seems to be getting along well with the baby."

"Yeah, well, the baby's the only one who doesn't treat him like he's about to break."

"And Raven?"

Erik's face darkened. "Hiding somewhere. She doesn't trust herself around him yet."

Moira wanted to comfort him, to reach out again and wipe the frown from his forehead, but she knew there was nothing she could do or say to fill the Charles-shaped hole in Erik's chest. She was about to utter some completely empty words about how the telepath would eventually find his way back to them, when Sean's voice from the top of the stairs saved her.

"You're leaving?"
"I'll be back," she replied, stepping away from Erik and picking her bag up once more.

"So," Erik cleared his throat and crossed his arms over his chest in what Moira perceived to be an attempt to erase the vulnerability of the last few moments. "Are you traveling as fast as humanly possible or mutantly possible?"

With a groan, she replied, "Mutantly."

Erik grinned with far more glee than she considered him capable of and called loudly for Azazel.

"If I'm not back by tomorrow evening, it means I've been detained."

"I thought McCone was a good man…" Erik goaded.

"He is. It's Stryker I don't trust."

Sean slid down the banister and landed at her feet. "You want us to spring you?"

"I appreciate the thought, Sean, but no that won't be necessary."

Azazel appeared a moment later, drawing a small yelp from Moira as she dropped her bag once again.

"Take her back to her apartment, and then to Langley," Erik instructed. "If anything happens, you come get me immediately."

"Yes, sir."

Moira couldn't help the warmth that spread throughout her chest at Erik's words. He stepped forward and, for an awkward beat, looked like he didn't know whether to shake her hand, hug her, or just wave, so she made the decision for him, wrapping her arms around his neck and squeezing tightly.

"Take care of them."

"Take care of yourself," he murmured in reply.

"I will." She pulled away and took Azazel's proffered hand. "If I puke on you, I'm sorry."

Azazel sighed. "It wouldn't be the first time."

With a smile and a nod, Erik disappeared from view in a swirl of red smoke.

xxxxxx

The house smelled different.

No longer did the musty stench of neglected linens or the acidic burn of spilled whiskey pervade the senses; now it was all syrup and baby powder and the distant scent of smoke wafting from the lab, which should have been somewhat alarming, but Charles found comfort in the chaos.

Sure, the carpets were dirtier but the house was warmer – warmer than it had ever been growing up. He had been wandering the halls for the better part of an hour after helping the baby to bed, relearning things he had forgotten in all his years away, and discovering new patterns branded into the mortar by this next wave of occupants.

He had been about to retire for the night, which had him briefly wondering if his old room was still
technically "his," before a noise up ahead stopped his meandering. It sounded like a hiss, followed closely by a groan. Charles' feet led him over to what had been the sitting room (not to be confused with the formal sitting room), but which he overheard Sean now refer to as the 'rec' room.

There he found Alex lying on the couch, attempting to grab a first aid kit resting on the coffee table just out of his reach.

"Here, here, let me," Charles said, hurrying into the room and trying to ignore the way the boy seemed to freeze mid-movement at his appearance.

Alex leaned back against the cushions as Charles sat next to him and pulled the first aid kit into his lap.

"Are you trying to change the dressings?"

The boy nodded. "Hank's been doing it, but he has better things to do with his time than play nursemaid to me."

Charles nodded, but remained silent, opening the kit and pulling out fresh bandages. He reached toward Alex's chest, where the pin was holding the old bandage together, but the boy shrank back and promptly groaned again.

"Sorry," he panted against the pain. "It's not you. It's just…"

"Precisely that: not me," Charles finished quietly. "At least not the me you remember."

Alex finally met his gaze, the apology clear in his eyes. And in that moment, Charles didn't see the tough young man who stood in front of the barrel of a gun and say, "Go fuck yourself." No, in that moment, he looked more like a little boy desperately looking for his father's praise, but Charles wasn't sure how that pertained to him or how he could ease the crease from the boy's forehead.

Instead, he cleared his throat and quietly instructed Alex to lean forward, as he reached out for the pin and gently undid the fastenings. He kept his eyes on his hands as they worked, but he could feel Alex's gaze boring holes into his face. The bandages slowly unraveled from the boy's torso until they finally fell free and Charles couldn't help the sharp inhale that cut through the room like a knife.

"That bad, huh?" Alex tried to chuckle.

"Forgive me," Charles murmured. "I've never seen a gunshot wound before."

"You and me both."

Charles finally met the boy's gaze and an understanding seemed to pass between them. He wasn't entirely sure what the terms were, only that the crease on Alex's forehead eased ever so slightly and the tension in his muscles gave way to exhaustion. The cushions welcomed him as he finally leaned back and allowed Charles to work.

"You're taking this much better than I expected you to."

Charles exhaled deeply and his shoulders slumped. "To be honest, I'm not entirely sure why. And that's no reflection on you, you're lovely."

Alex barked out a laugh and winced, but it brought the first smile to Charles' lips that night.

"It's just…" Charles continued, "It's like I know not to doubt you. All of you. Which is an entirely
frightful and infuriating thing, because I don't know why."

"That's a lot of faith you're placing in us," he murmured. "I hope we don't let you down."

"I'm not entirely sure that's possible."

Their eyes met again and that understanding deepened, and Alex leaned forward once more without Charles having to ask.

Twenty minutes later, both Charles and Alex glanced up as a knock sounded on the door. Erik stood there with an odd look on his face as he surveyed the scene before him.

"Have either of you seen Raven? She disappeared hours ago and..." he trailed off, and Charles couldn't help but hear the *I'm worried* that completed that sentence.

"I'll help you look," he replied as he fastened the last of the bandages. "Good as new. Well, sort of."

He grinned as he placed a gentle hand on Alex's shoulder and stood, packing up the rest of the first aid kit.

Erik stood patiently by the door, but Charles could feel the concern rolling off of him in waves.

*Raven.* The one member of the house he had had the least interaction with. In fact, he hadn't seen her since that morning in the rec room. She had been clinging to Erik like a starfish, uttering her name in the tiniest of voices only after Erik prompted her.

With a final smile at Alex, Charles followed Erik out of the room and down the hall.

"I've checked the kitchen, the lab, her room, the bathrooms, the grounds. All the usual places."

"I guess we best find some unusual places. Shall we split up?"

Erik stopped abruptly, causing Charles to almost bump into him. "Will you be all right?"

Charles felt a small flare of annoyance, his first towards the other man. "I did live here at one point, Erik."

"Of course," Erik nodded, looking both pained and reprimanded. "Meet back here in thirty minutes?"

Charles nodded and watched as Erik turned and stalked down the hall, harshly running his fingers through his hair.

But it didn't take Charles thirty minutes to find Raven. In fact, it didn't even take him ten. He began with the spot he used to go to when he didn't want to be found – of course, that meant someone would actually have had to take the care to look, which no one ever did.

And there she was, curled up on the same patch of carpet behind the curtain in the library where he so often found himself as a child. He almost didn't realize it was her – gone was the pale skin and blond hair and in its place, skin the color of midnight and hair as bright as the setting sun.

"Fascinating," he breathed, scooping an arm under her back and another under her knees and hoisting her into the air.

He froze as she groaned and shifted, pressing her face into his neck. Only when she was entirely
settled did he exhale once again.

*Erik, I've got her,* he mentally called, nearly running into the man himself as he exited the library.

"I checked here," he whispered.

"Not behind the curtain," Charles replied.

"How did you know?"

"It was my favorite spot to hide when I didn't want to be found. Interesting that Raven chose the same."

Erik's expression went from relieved to anguished in a matter of moments and it took all of Charles' willpower not to dive into that mind.

"Are you all right with her?" Erik's voice was rough, as he gestured to the girl in his arms.

"Fine."

They proceeded up the stairs in silence, but Charles caught Erik's sideways glance every few paces. He wasn't sure if his anxiety was for the girl and whether Charles would drop her or for Charles himself. It was a distinction the telepath didn't really want to dwell on.

He paused at the top of the stairs and Erik looked at him questioningly.

"I, uh, I actually don't know which one is her room."

Another pained look passed across his features before being carefully hidden. "Down here."

He followed Erik's lead and entered a bedroom just down the hall from his old room. It was warm and cared for and lived in. As if she had been there far longer than he initially anticipated.

He placed her on the bed and managed to pull the covers up around her, tucking her in as one would a child. He stood and gazed at her, acknowledging somewhere in the back of his mind that Erik had not followed him into the bedroom.

Sometime during the time that his thoughts dwelled on Erik, Raven had blinked her eyes open and gasped, immediately switching back to her pale features.

Charles cocked his head and frowned. "Why did you do that? You're beautiful."

Something shifted in Raven's face – the terror in her eyes faded, her grip on the covers eased and, as a tear fell from her eye, her natural form washed over her like water from a pitcher.

Charles smiled and turned to leave but Raven's grip on his wrist stayed his exit.

"Wait."

She looked so lost, so hurt that Charles felt the ache deep in his chest, even without having to read her mind. He turned his wrist in her grip so he could hold onto hers in return. Her lower lip wobbled and he found himself rubbing gentle circles on her skin.

"Can you just… stay for a few minutes?" Her gaze darted back to the bedding, as if she expected outright refusal in return. The thought made Charles' heart break and he sat on the edge of the bed without Raven having to ask.
"Of course."

Erik rested his head against the wooden doorjamb, attempting to swallow past the lump in his throat as he listened to the exchange.

Charles emerged a few minutes later and Erik ran his hand over his face, trying (and failing) to look like he hadn't just completely welled up.

"I could use a drink," he muttered, leading the way to the study before Charles had a chance to reply.

The scotch burned as he took a larger gulp than normal. It didn't help that Charles was sitting opposite him over a chessboard, like so many nights, looking entirely too delicious for his own good, also like so many nights.

They were three glasses in and the world was starting to look a little hazy.

"So I brought them here to train them?"

Erik nodded, and it took his eyes slightly longer to catch up with the movement of his head. "In a nutshell."

Charles made a non-committal sound and downed the rest of his glass.

Erik's eyebrows rose. "Where'd you learn to drink like that?"

"My mother taught me," the other replied, barely missing a beat.

Again, that brief flicker of childhood, one far darker than the one Erik had imagined. How had Charles emerged so good, so pure, after everything that must have happened to him. Here was a man who could read minds. He had seen the worst of men, yet still thought the best of them. That was a power in and of itself – one Erik found himself wishing he possessed.

"You're too good for this world," he heard himself murmur and, as his brain caught up with his voice, he sat there slightly horrified as Charles let out an undignified snort.

"Never been accused of that before."

Something warm and comforting spread through his chest, down his arms and legs, through his fingers and toes, buzzing in his already fuzzy mind.

Falling for this Charles felt like cheating on the old one.

And that was one dilemma Erik didn't have the emotional energy for.
In which Charles and Sean bond, for better or worse.

One of the benefits of being a telepath was having the ability to sober himself rather quickly, which was a talent Charles utilized when he came across Sean surrounded by empty beer bottles with the distinct smell of cannabis hovering in the air.

"Hey prof," Sean greeted with a sleepy smile. "I thought you were gettin' hammered with Erik."

Charles raised an eyebrow. "I prefer the term 'soused.'"

"Whatever floats your boat."

Charles noted the surprised look on the boy's face as he stepped into the room and moved to sit on the couch opposite.

"What are you doing?"

Charles paused halfway down, hovering just above the cushion. "Sitting, if that's all right with you."

Sean made a non-committal noise and Charles lowered himself the rest of the way. The smoky remains of a nearly spent joint wafted from the ashtray on the table and a newly opened whiskey bottle rested in Sean's lap.

The boy eyed Charles for a moment, as if waiting for the other shoe to drop, before hesitantly offering the bottle. Charles raised his eyebrows and stared at the metaphorical gauntlet Sean was now throwing down, before accepting with a grin and raising it to his lips.

"So the rumors are true. Raven always said you were a lush."

Charles lowered the bottle and swallowed, the alcohol having no effect on his suddenly racing heart. "Did she now. And how would Raven know about my drinking habits?"

"Oh shit." It should have been an exclamation but in Sean's current state, it came out more like a heavy drawl. "You're not supposed to know. I mean, you don't know and I'm not supposed to tell you. That's it," he replied, proud of himself for stringing the words together.

Charles took another pull from the bottle and winced as the alcohol burned his throat. How much could he possibly manipulate the situation without completely taking advantage? Sean giggled at nothing in particular and Charles decided to press his luck.

"Why don't I know?"

"Because you went all badass and wiped your own memories, Prof," he said, eyes going wide. "I didn't know you had it in you! I mean, you were cool and all but that was just… badass."

The confirmation that he wasn't in fact just living out some Twilight Zone fever dream should have
been more unnerving than it was but, truth be told, Charles felt relieved. He wanted to know that these people belonged in his life. He wanted to know that there was a reality in which they did.

"And how do I get my memories back?" He had already been through this with Erik and, while he figured broaching the subject with Sean might not lead him anywhere, it would certainly be amusing. He took another gulp of amber courage and slowly let his mind sink back into the comforting haze that sudden sobriety had deprived him of.

Sean gave a lazy shrug and smiled. "Dunno. Tricky business, that. See, we're not supposed to tell you anything, but what if what we tell you is the trigger? Then boom! You've got your memories back!"

"Boom?"

"Boom!" Sean gestured wildly with his arms, knocking a few stray beer cans off the table. He gave them a moment's consideration, before turning his foggily excited gaze on Charles once more.

"Then tell me a few," Charles replied softly, knowing he was wading into dangerous waters, but not really caring all that much. He was ravenous for knowledge, desperate for any information on how he had ingratiated himself into these people's lives. Sure, Erik had told him he brought them there to train, but what else? What else had them staying, despite the fact that he couldn't remember a single thing about them?

"Hmm…" Sean bit his lip and tapped his forehead in an exaggerated attempt to bring a memory to surface. "Ooh got it! You came and picked me up at an aquarium. In Boston."

Charles could have sworn he heard the boy mutter, "fucking fish," but by the time the whisper ghosted into his ears, Sean was already off on another tangent about how Raven convinced them all to hide from Charles and Erik their first afternoon in the mansion.

" Took you hours to find us, man. Hours! Erik wasn't too happy, but you were just mad we didn't invite you to play along."

Charles' mouth quirked up in a grin. It sounded like something he would do. It sounded like something Erik would do as well.

*Erik.*

The man was an enigma, wrapped up in a mystery, surrounded by a Rubik's cube. But Charles had figured out his Rubik's cube when he was six-years-old and unwrapping Erik was a task he was definitely willing to put time and concentration into.

Still… Erik tended to look at him like he was heaven and hell wrapped up into one and that was an entirely terrifying notion to dwell on.

"… And then you came flying into the kitchen and we had gotten flour everywhere. And I mean everywhere. Even in places I didn't think I could get flour."

Charles snapped back to attention and realized Sean was in the middle of regaling him with a kitchen disaster involving cookies, Alex, and exploding ovens.

"You decided to put a fire extinguisher in every room after that. Even the bathroom," Sean giggled and turned a heartbreakingly hopeful eye on him.

Charles tried to smile, but the knowledge that none of this, none of the stories, none of the anecdotes,
was ringing any familiar bells for him weighed heavy on his mind.

"Nothing?" Sean's smile fell.

Charles slowly shook his head. "I'm sorry, Sean."

The excitement left him with all the suddenness of a drunken, emotional 180 and Sean slumped back against the chair, taking the bottle from Charles and tipping it back with a gulp. Charles wanted to reach out and offer him some sort of comfort, some sort of hope that all would be well, but he wasn't feeling particularly hopeful and his energy to fake it seemed to have been sapped for the night.

"I thought you were gonna kick us out when Danny came." Sean's bleary gaze found him with a surprising amount of focus. "But you didn't." He smiled, despite the fact that his bloodshot eyes were glassy. "That was awfully nice of you."

And Charles didn't quite know what to say to that, but Sean didn't seem to need an answer.

"Like even now. For all you know, we're squatting in your digs, and you're completely cool with it."

Charles could feel the gratitude rolling off Sean in waves, like a warm sea lapping at a beach.

A beach.

Before Charles even could attempt to grasp at the image that flashed briefly before his eyes, Sean's quiet voice brought him back to the surface.

"You never left us." His gaze became surprisingly steady for the amount of substances coursing through his system. "That's Erik's thing. Erik leaves. You don't leave. That's not what you do."

Again, something stirred in the back of Charles' mind, something that was entirely foreign, yet familiar. Comforting, yet costly.

Sean's eyes had slipped close and he slumped further down in the chair, murmuring, "You stayed."

"Come on, onto the couch." Charles stood and pulled Sean up with him, taking most of his weight as he maneuvered the younger boy down onto the cushions. He'd have a nasty hangover in the morning and Charles put the trashcan by his head in case it was needed.

His eyes raked over the tousled, red hair and the freckles, the steady breath and the serene expression. It was odd to feel such concern for a relative stranger and, though Charles tried not to admit he cared as deeply as he did, he still straightened out Sean's knee because it looked vaguely uncomfortable.

And just as he was about to leave, a string of mumbled words stayed his departure.

"Loveyou. G'night."

Charles froze and his gaze snapped back to the boy, who turned and pressed his face into the pillow.

Loveyou. G'night.

Perhaps Charles had underestimated his placed in their lives and the sheer magnitude of all he didn't know, of all he couldn't remember, hit him like a blunt instrument. His throat worked and his eyes welled as warring factions of frustration and love rose up unbidden in his chest.

Willing himself into remembering was an impossible task, yet it was one that still proved much easier
than facing those hopeful, heartbroken faces everyday.

Charles flicked the light out and closed the door, freezing at the sight of Erik leaning against the hall wall, head bowed and hands shoved into his pockets. He didn't look up when Charles exited, but there was no doubt that he knew the man was there.

Charles cleared his throat and wiped surreptitiously at his eyes, attempting some measure of nonchalance. "Tell me, is it common practice for the children to get stoned?"

"No," Erik replied softly, finally looking up and pretending not to see the tears. "Just Sean."


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Erik blinked his eyes open, not entirely sure when he had finally dropped off into sleep, but judging by the sluggishness of his limbs and the bleariness of his gaze, it was a ridiculously late hour.

Which was why he was surprised to find Raven once again curled into his side, her face pressed into his shoulder and his t-shirt tight in her grip. Surprised, yet not, because Raven was beginning to make a habit out of crawling into his bed and it was a comfort he would not deny her.

Erik extricated himself from her clutches and padded across the room to the crib, mental alarm bells immediately going off when Daniel was nowhere to be found.

He didn't remember leaving the bedroom and bolting down the hall. Didn't remember throwing open every door, his panic rising with every empty room he crossed. No, his mind was an utter blank as he arrived in the doorway of the kitchen, watching Charles in blue pajama pants and a white t-shirt rock Daniel back and forth as he mashed up fruit for him, humming some nameless tune in his tiny ear.

"Charles?"

The other man started and turned, smiling bashfully as Daniel reached out for the piece of fruit in his hand. The panic slowly began to ebb as Erik realized both were, in fact, safe and sound.

"Sorry, we didn't mean to worry you. I could feel his hunger and you seemed like you needed the rest, so… I probably should have woken you, I apologize."

"He's your son," Erik forced out. "No need for apologies." His heart briefly clenched at the thought of Charles seeing him and Raven in bed together, It wasn't what it looked like, blaring loudly in his mind.

Daniel chose that moment to reach out for Erik, a large grin lighting up his face. "Vati!"

Oh god. There was a blissful moment of ignorance on Charles' face before Erik watched the meaning of that word, which the telepath no doubt gleaned from his surface thoughts, wash over.

"Vati?" Charles questioned, his voice entirely too quiet, entirely too small, to be heard over the thundering in Erik's ears. "Interesting choice."

"He just started it one day," Erik tried, by way of excuse. "And you… you didn't correct him."

Charles, whom Erik could usually read like the Sunday Times, remained completely closed off to him. The ten seconds it took him to answer felt like an eternity.

"I'm sure I had my reasons. No doubt you mean a great deal to him." Charles gave him a tight smile and turned back to the counter, continuing to mash fruit in the bowl for Daniel to chew on.
Had Erik been the telepath, he would have heard the near non-existent tremor in Charles' voice, would have felt the way Charles almost physically reeled from that tiny, two syllable word, would have noticed that the people in the house, (two people in particular), were methodically chipping away at the shields Charles had built around his mind. But Erik wasn't a telepath.

And he would never know.

"You're getting fur in my cereal."

"Then stop trying to hit me with your spoon."

Hank scooted his seat further away from Sean, glaring in his general direction. It was odd to grow up an only child and be shipped off to Harvard before he even had time to acclimate to boarding school. The sudden presence of three siblings in his life was a change he was still adjusting to.

Alex winced as he attempted to reach across the table and grab the sugar and Hank nudged it closer to him without thinking. Alex gave him a grateful smirk and Hank nodded in reply.

Adjusting. Slowly but surely.

The phone rang and Sean ambled over, picking up the receiver, and promptly announcing:

"Chuck's Pizzeria, how can I help you?.... Oh hey, Moira! Nah, I was just kidding. Hold on, I'll get him." He placed his hand over the mouthpiece and yelled, "Erik! Phone!"

Though he wasn't screeching, his voice still made the windows vibrate and Erik entered the kitchen a minute later, carrying a soaking wet Daniel in nothing but a towel.

"Not necessary, Banshee," he growled before pressing the receiver to his ear, "So whose pizzeria was it this time?" He glared at Sean and silently mouthed, "Chuck's?" before returning his concentration to the phone. "Uh huh. And what did McCon say?"

Hank watched Erik's facial expressions in an effort to glean any sort of information, though he found himself more and more distracted by the picture presented before him. If you had told Hank five months ago that, one day, he'd find Erik Lehnsherr in the kitchen once again with a baby on his hip – a baby he had clearly been giving a bath – Hank would have thought you were certifiably insane. Yet here he was with a baby on his hip whose towel was soaking his shirt and whose rubber ducky was sitting in his palm.

"... They didn't find anything?" Erik closed his eyes at Moira's answer and leaned his forehead against the wall. "Okay... Yeah, we're, we're fine... Charles is fine... No, not yet..."

Hank didn't have to be a telepath to figure out what Moira had just asked. Speaking of telepaths...

"Where's Charles?" he leaned over and whispered to Alex.

"Dunno. Haven't seen him since Erik left to give the squirt a bath."

Erik inhaled sharply and spared a glance for the people sitting at the table. Silence hung heavy in the room and even Sean had stopped flicking cornflakes into Raven's hair.

"We'll do what we can from here... No, that's not an option... Not yet, anyway."
Hank didn't really want to know what wasn't an option. Leaving? Surely whoever came to take Daniel would try again. He didn't know much about tactical advantage, but staying didn't seem like the bright thing to do. At least it sounded like Moira wasn't thrown in detention. Small victories.

"Yes, we will... Okay... Tell Azazel to bring you back when you're ready. And be careful. They're still working with Frost... Right... Bye."

Erik hung up the phone and sighed deeply.

"Moira's okay?"

Erik nodded at Sean's question. "She's fine. Her report earned her just a slap on the wrist instead of permanent probation. She and McCone are working together. They went to Philadelphia last night but didn't find anything." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I need to talk to..." His eyes finally scanned the kitchen and he frowned. "Where's Charles?"

The four kids at the table glanced at one another before Raven piped up, in a voice smaller than Hank had ever heard.

"I know where he is."

xxxxxxxx

Raven hated the attic. It terrified her as a child and continued to send a chill down her spine whenever she passed the tiny door that lead to its stairs. It was an unfounded fear, really. Her first night in the house had been full of phantom creaks and unfamiliar sounds but, as she curled up in a stranger's sheets, she felt a soothing breath of calm steal across her mind.

She woke the next morning to find Charles sound asleep on the floor next to her bed.

The midmorning light cast the floating dust in an ethereal glow as she slowly ascended, putting a hand over her mouth to stifle a cough while using the other to brush away cobwebs. She could hear someone rustling around up ahead, confirming her suspicions, but making her feet falter on the steps.

You can do this. You can do this.

"Raven?"

Shit.

Charles' head peeked out from behind a pile of boxes. "I thought that was you."

"You read my mind."

"You were practically yelling." He smiled and disappeared once again, leaving her no choice but to follow. She rounded the corner to find a circle of debris scattered outward with Charles in the center, the eye of the storm.

"Erik wants you."

"Erik knows where to find me."

"No he doesn't."

Charles closed his eyes and pressed a finger to his temple. "He does now." He plopped back down and proceeded to rummage through one of the many boxes labeled CHARLES.
"What are you doing?"

"Hoping to speed this whole process up," he replied and promptly sneezed as a cloud of dust billowed up.

"What whole process?"

He paused and fixed her with a penetrating glance. "I see the way you look at me."

"What way is that?"

"Like I've taken away something dear to you." He went back to his boxes in time to miss her unimpressed expression completely crack.

He always knew her better than she knew herself – even this version of him.

She listened to him dig around for a while, standing awkwardly in the dust, before finally stepping into the bare center and taking a seat next to him. "Do you need help?"

"I'd love help." He beamed before pulling an entirely-too-creepy jack-in-the-box out. "Oh please don't tell me they subject children to these."

Raven couldn't help snorting. "I think they do."

"No wonder I'm unhinged."

She raised an eyebrow. "That's a bit harsh."

"But fair." He returned to the box and pulled out a ratty teddy bear. "You've been here longer than the rest." It wasn't a question.

She nodded and busied her hands in a box to hide their trembling from him.

"Longer than I originally thought," he whispered as he stared at a picture frame he had just pulled out. She leaned over and gasped, gently taking it from his hands.

She had begged him for two weeks straight to take her trick-or-treating and he had finally relented, even offering to be the Frankenstein to her Bride. And here they were, captured in time, her face white, his presumably green in the black and white photo, both smiling like fools as they held up their Halloween loot.

"I was ten," she managed, when her voice finally found the words to say. "It was my first Halloween." She handed the picture back and realized she wasn't the only one shaking.

"I'm sorry I don't remember," he whispered.

"It's not your fault."

He scoffed. "It kind of is. Word on the street is that I did this to myself."

"For us. You did it for us. And you haven't taken something dear away from me." She surprised them both by placing a blue hand over his. "You are dear to me."

He managed a smile and she chose not to acknowledge the slight wobble of his lower lip.

"You're a good sister."
For a brief second, she thought he remembered but the slight shake of his head and squeeze of her hand told her he didn't. At her questioning glance, he shrugged slightly and gave her a sad smile.

"Some things you just feel in your bones."

And that meant more to her than any photo ever could.

xxxxx

"Be careful, you'll pinch your fingers," Charles gently chastised as he strapped Daniel into his high chair.

He was relieved to find that the new wave of tenants had taken to eating at the little breakfast nook in the kitchen instead of in the grandiose dining room, with its tasteless tapestries and overbearing portraits. It was odd to feel more at home in a house full of strangers than he had in the whole of his childhood.

"Daddy!" Charles glanced down at Daniel, unable to stop his stomach from flipping at the term. The boy giggled as he tossed his plastic spoon on the ground.

"No, my Bärchen," Erik called. "We don't throw."

Charles frowned. Little bear.

"Dinner smells good!" Alex said as he hobbled into the kitchen, clapping Erik on the back and prompting the older man to groan. "Oh shit. Ribs. Sorry."

_Little bear._ "Ribs?" Charles questioned as he straightened back up, a crease still worrying his forehead. _Little bear._

"Erik broke his ribs a couple weeks ago. He and Azazel got into a bit of a lover's quarrel, ow!" Sean exclaimed, rubbing the back of his head where Erik had smacked him.

Alex snorted. "Not as bad as getting shot in the back, though."

"And that wasn't even the worst thing that happened to me that day," Charles replied without missing a beat.

It took the room a full thirty seconds to comprehend what exactly had just been said and Charles himself seemed to be gazing around as if the words had left a mouth other than his own.

Oh God, he swayed.

"Charles?" Erik's voice, concerned and distant, as he turned to glare at Sean. "What did you just do to him?"

But his own, clear as day. _I accessed the brightest corner of your memory system. It was a beautiful memory, Erik. Thank you._

"I didn't do anything!"

_Peace was never an option._

_You ready for this?_

_Let's find out._
It's not that I don't trust you, Charles.

Erik, be the better man.

I don't want to hurt you.

He's mine?

For God's sake, Charles. Calm your mind. I haven't slept in ages.

Charles, won't you stand and greet me?

Because I'm in love with you.

I'm sorry, Erik.

Don't you dare, Charles.

… "Charles? Charles!" Erik's face came into focus and he felt palms clutching his cheeks.

At some point in the last minute, he had fallen to his knees, and he held Erik's wrists in a white-knuckled grip.

"Little bear," he panted. "Oh god, Erik, I remember."

Erik's eyes widened and his grip on Charles' face tightened.

"I remember it all."

In which Charles and Erik take a moment.

The ringing in his ears was surpassed only by the harsh panting of the man in front of him.

At some point, Erik had joined Charles on the floor, though his hands still clutched either side of the other man's face. His blue eyes were wild and glassy, acutely aware of all that had just slammed back into his consciousness and his gaze darted back and forth between Erik's eyes, as if searching for some truth.

"I remember," he chanted over and over, but for Erik, it would take at least a hundred more repetitions before the words actually sunk in.

He distantly heard Sean go running from the kitchen screaming for Raven, and noted Hank's presence next to him, his body radiating heat as the blood drained from Erik's extremities, leaving him numb.

"Professor, can you hear me? Alex, toss me the flashlight."

Erik still had yet to let go of Charles and he couldn't stop of flare of annoyance that flashed within him as Hank placed a paw on his arm.

"Erik, I need to examine him."

Though his gaze never left its lock on Charles, he nodded and dropped his palms from Charles' cheeks. The telepath whimpered at the loss and sagged further forward, causing Hank to reflexively reach out and catch him by the shoulders.

"Professor? Charles?" Hank cupped his chin and forced his eyes up. "Follow the light."

Erik's knees were practically knocking the telepath's and he was close enough to watch the other man's pupils dilate as the flashlight waved back and forth.

"I'm fine, Hank," Charles finally managed to mutter.

"You don't look fine."

"Well frankly, I feel like I've been sucker-punched, but all things considered..." he reached a shaky hand up and rubbed his face. "Had I known it would feel like this, I might have gone with plan B."

Erik finally found his voice. "And what was plan B?"

"No trigger at all."

And just like that, his voice left him once again. He wanted to cry, scream and rage at Charles for ever letting the thought pass his brilliantly brilliant mind. Wanted to grab his lapels and shake him, just to make him feel as torn up and disoriented as Erik felt when the thought of Charles not
remembering them, him, all of them, darkened his mind.

But then something wondrous happened. Charles froze, the smile dying on his lips, as his eyes widened and his hand shot out to grip Erik's shoulder. Hard.

"I – I can…" The other hand wandered down to his thigh. "Oh God, I can feel."

Raven rolled her eyes as Sean called her name for the tenth time. She had told them she'd be down in a minute.

"Raven!"

"Christ, what is it?" she yelled as she yanked the door back, promptly letting out a yelp as Sean appeared panting on the other side.

"It's Charles."

Her stomach plummeted.

"He's back." Harsh gasp. "He remembers, ow." Sean clutched at his chest, wheezing. "I need to stop smoking."

But Raven was no longer in the doorway to hear him complain.

"Aw man, Raven! Wait up!"

The hall portraits flew by in a blur as she raced to the stairs and took them two at a time, not really caring that one wrong step could lead to a very nasty sprain.

"Charles remembers. Charles remembers. Charles remembers. It was the beat that her feet pounded the carpet to and it carried her from her bedroom to the kitchen doorway in all of ten seconds.

But what she saw when she got there knocked out whatever air she had remaining in her lungs.

Charles stood in the middle of the kitchen, face buried in Erik's chest as the taller man gently rubbed a hand up and down his back.

"I'm standing," distantly escaped her brother's mouth on the edge of a sob. "I'm standing."

"Yes, you are," Erik murmured into his hair, rocking him back and forth as she had seen him do with Daniel countless times.

Her face flushed but not out of shame for her brother's tears. She had seen him cry before. She flushed because it was a moment that had five witnesses for which there should only have been two. And for as much as she wanted to wrap Charles up in her arms, the desire to give him and Erik the peace they so richly deserved was so far outstripping the competition.

"Charles." She hadn't meant to say it. It was almost a reflex in response to seeing him. But he pulled away from Erik, all splotchy cheeks and puffy eyes and gazed on her like she was water in the desert.

"Raven." She noticed he only let go of Erik at the last possible moment, his fingers nearly taking the other man's shirt with him, as he took a step forward and held out his arms. "You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."
And before she even realized what was happening, she was letting out her own sob as she crashed into his chest, burying her nose in the familiar scent of him as his arms wrapped around her back, securing her to his person.

"I didn't think I'd ever see you again." His voice broke and she squeezed harder, hoping to convey all she couldn't voice in that one simple gesture.

She didn't know how long they stayed like that, brother and sister arm and arm against the world, but she finally pulled away when her curiosity began to seep into her tranquility.

"What was it? What was the trigger?"

Erik looked as intrigued as she was and Charles chuckled fondly, his gaze finding the metal-bender once more.

"Bärchen."

Erik's eyebrows shot up. "Bärchen? Really?"

Raven smiled, feeling a warm glow sweep through her chest that something so simple, so domestic, would be the key to unlocking Charles' memories.

"Speaking of which…" Charles' eyes scanned the room and immediately landed on the highchair. "Oh, my boy."

Daniel's grin could have powered the western hemisphere upon seeing his father. Charles crossed in two quick strides, made quick work of the buckle, and pulled the baby into his arms like a drowning man hanging onto a life preserver.

Try as she might, Raven couldn't stop the tears from flowing again.

xxxxxx

Alex watched with giddy apprehension as Charles, their Charles, hugged Danny to his chest.

It didn't take long for the professor's gaze to find him, to hone in on the bandage that wrapped around his torso, the bandage he had helped change. The haunted look that settled into his gaze was unnerving and Alex felt the need to assure him that all was well, he was okay, that the kid who had been lying on the floor bleeding out was in fact that same one standing before him now.

"Alex." Charles reached a shaky hand out and gently touched the gauze padding the wound. "I didn't know if… I wasn't sure…"

"I'm alive," he offered needlessly.

"I'm so glad," Charles whispered, reaching out and cupping Alex's cheek, before pulling the boy into a one armed hug.

Alex allowed himself this moment to drop the tough guy façade, to bury his face in the professor's neck and inhale the scent that was becoming just as comforting as his own mother's had been.

Daniel reached out and took hold of his ear, tugging slightly to bring attention back to him.

"Easy there, squirt," Alex chuckled, running a hand over the baby's soft brown hair. "Relax, I'm not gonna take him away."
Charles shot him a smile and placed a kiss on Daniel's head. "Some of my boys have yet to learn how to share."

Some of my boys.

There was so much he wanted to say. So much he needed to say. But Charles was never a man who needed to hear and the voice in Alex's head was as soothing as a lullaby:

I missed you too, Alex.

xxxxxx

Oh God. OhGodOhGodOhGod.

Sean's heart was pounding like a bass drum as Charles gave Alex's shoulder one final squeeze before turning and facing him.

OhGodOhGodOhGod.

He couldn't blend into the background now; not when Charles' gaze was pulling him in like fishing tackle. His fight or flight instinct was kicking in though now it was more laugh or sob.

He didn't want to admit how scared shitless he had been as he stood there that night and watched them take Charles away. Watched as Erik slumped in a heap, his consciousness taken in an effort to save him. He didn't want to admit that having Charles gaze at him just as a well-placed punch was leveled across his face hurt Sean almost as much as it hurt the professor.

Even now, he was scared to see him in case he left. Elated to see him because he never wanted him to leave again. All of it came together in a whirlwind of emotion that sealed him to the stone floor.

What if he had let him down? What if he could have done more?

Oh God, don't go. Don'tgoDon'tgoDon'tgo.

But Charles silenced that nagging voice as he wrapped an arm around Sean's neck and placed a subtle kiss to the side of his head.

"One illegal substance at a time, okay, my boy?"

Sean had frozen, a slightly stunned expression gracing his features at the words, but his hands eventually came up and gripped the back of the Charles' shirt tightly as he huffed out a shaky breath into the professor's shoulder.

"Deal."

You have never let me down, Charles thought. You've done more than enough. You hear me?

The sob that had been bubbling up finally escaped and he nodded against the older man's neck. He couldn't let go. Not yet, because Ohgodhe'shere and best of all, he knew who he was. Sean couldn't adequately describe what it felt like to have no recognition flicker in Charles' eyes when he looked at him, but he likened it to getting a whole punched through his chest and then filled with cement.

But not now. Not it was firm hugs and teasing reprimands. Fatherly (Manly, Sean thought) kisses, and gentle pats to the back of the head.

There would be time later for fear, for complacency, for blending into the background. But not now,
because Charles was looking at him, really looking at him for the first time in over a week, and Sean
wanted to stand out as bright as the sun.

xxxxxx

There was something different about the professor. It was in the way he stood and in the set of his
shoulders, weight distributed evenly on each foot and head held high.

Hank narrowed his eyes and studied him further as he leaned down to whisper something in Sean's
ear that brought a strangled sob from the boy's throat.

Yes, there was something different about Charles. Almost as if the naivety had been drilled out of
him…

… Beaten out of him, floated across his mind and he shut his eyes against the thought. Charles still
had traces of his incarceration written into his skin. A faint bruise over his cheekbone. Ribs that
protruded more than they should. Legs that could function and feel.

Erik stood beside him and the air seemed to crackle with electricity. Hank watched him watch
Charles, his eyes following every movement, his power tracking every moment by way of Charles'
wristwatch.

They needed to give the two of them some time. A moment. A moment to collect themselves, to take
stock of all that had happened and figure out how to move forward.

Charles pulled away from Sean and Hank cleared his throat, drawing all eyes to him.

"Perhaps you two would like to take dinner in the study. We'll bring it in to you."

Alex whistled and Erik's hand was swift to clap him upside the head. Charles chuckled and placed
the hand that wasn't holding Daniel on Hank's shoulder.

"That would be lovely, thank you."

The tension still hadn't left Erik as he followed the telepath out of the room and Hank suspected it
wouldn't until the study door shut behind them.

xxxxxx

Charles had just enough time to place Daniel on the floor before strong hands were spinning him
around and crushing him against warm cotton.

"Don't you ever… ever… do that to me again." Erik pressed a hard kiss to the top of Charles' head
as his breath hitched. "Ever."

"I'll do my best," Charles replied, twisting Erik's shirt in his hands and burying his nose in the fabric.
With the act of having to appear calm and collected and fine in front of the children over, Charles'
legs gave out and he sagged against Erik, the exhaustion of the evening finally taking its toll.

"I've got you," Erik murmured, like an afterthought, as he guided Charles to the couch and sat down,
pulling the telepath down next to him.

And then silence.

Their chests rose in tandem as they matched each other breath for breath, fingers intertwined and
eyes closed. Just bathing in the act of being.
"I missed you."

Charles smiled and leaned up to place a kiss on the bottom of Erik's chin. "I wish I could say the same."

Erik chuckled and placed a kiss on Charles' nose. There would be time later for passionate embraces. Even if they weren't in the presence of a child, Charles was content to hold and be held.

"You did so well with them." Erik raised an eyebrow in question and Charles nodded to Daniel. "With all of them."

Erik shrugged and Charles could hear the denial on the edge of his mind.

"Yes, you did. You saved Alex, you comforted Raven. You were there for them when I could not be." He reached up and cupped Erik's cheek, running his thumb along the sharp contour of his face. "I'm so proud of you."

The blush was subtle but there all the same. Erik swallowed hard and blinked rapidly, finally giving up and looking away as a tear spilled from his eye.

"It wasn't easy. I didn't think you'd ever come back. And then when you did, you didn't. It was like the world's worst practical joke, dangling you in front of me."

"I'm sorry," Charles whispered. He had never truly comprehended what it would be like if he was returned to them. He had only been thinking of their safety at the time, fully expecting to never leave that God-awful place. To never lay eyes on his son, on Erik. On his family. He had their best interests at heart but then he was saved and his best interests didn't seem to be enough anymore.

"Charles?"

"Hm?"

"I said, 'Don't apologize.' You have nothing to be sorry for."

It was Charles' turn to feel the familiar prick of tears in the corner of his eyes. "I caused you so much pain – "

"That I would endure a thousand times over to have you here again." Erik cupped his face in his hands. "Like Sisyphus with that damn rock rolling it up the hill. I'd do it over and over again if it meant meeting you at the top."

And just as Charles thought he couldn't love that man any more, Daniel toddled over and placed his palms on Erik's knees, raising his arms above his head.

"Vati, up."

"So demanding," Erik chuckled as he hoisted the baby onto his lap, dashing Charles' previous assumption. Now he couldn't love him any more.

"What was the worst thing?"

Charles shook his head of his saccharine thoughts. "What?"

"Earlier in the kitchen, your reply was, 'And that wasn't even the worst thing that happened to me"
that day,' after Alex, idiot that he is, said, 'Not as bad as getting shot in the back." Erik leaned forward and turned, his knees knocking Charles' as he faced him on the couch. "So what was the worst thing?"

Charles cocked his head sideways. "Do you really not know?"

Erik closed his eyes and bowed his head.

Of course he knew.

When he next spoke, his voice was wrecked. "I promise never to leave you if you promise never to erase me."

It was the easiest promise Charles had ever had to make.
Apologies

Chapter Summary

In which Moira returns and Charles rights a wrong.

Hank shifted his legs when he could no longer feel them, having a newfound appreciation for the pins and needles that erupted up his calves ever since that October day so many months ago.

Charles had spent the last twenty minutes answering questions in rapid-fire succession, his gaze flicking from one interrogator to the other with the patience of a parent.

They had given Charles and Erik roughly five minutes of alone time in the study before the teens tumbled through the doorway with Raven leading the charge. She had thrown herself down on the couch on the side of Charles that Erik wasn't occupying and buried her face in his shoulder.

"Please let us stay."

Her voice sounded so broken that even Erik, never one for sharing (especially Charles), relented.

And so they gathered around, their little patchwork family: Alex spread out on the chair, Erik and Charles on the couch, Daniel in Charles' lap, Raven at his feet, and Sean and Hank on the floor.

They sat picking at the sad excuse for a meal Sean had pieced together from the leftovers in the kitchen, but truth be told, no one was hungry. Not when Charles had their complete and undivided attention as he answered their semi-sensitive, but mostly blunt questions with utter charm and calm.

"Are you okay?" Raven.

"Why'd you go with them?" Sean.

"Why'd you erase us?" Alex.

Finally Hank spoke up. "What exactly happened?"

Charles huffed out a sharp breath, which he managed to turn into a chuckle at the last moment. For his sake or theirs, though, Hank wasn't sure.

"Where does one begin?"

"The beginning," Hank softly replied. A small smile ghosted across Charles' lips as he gazed at Hank, a lovely combination of gratitude and pride gracing his face.

He wrapped his arms around Daniel, holding him snug against his chest as if he was about to open the most recent acquisition to the toddler's growing library, Where the Wild Things Are, and begin reading aloud.

"I don't remember much. They knocked me out and I woke up in… that place."

"Yes," Charles replied.

"What did they do to you?" Raven looked like she both needed to know yet preferred to stay in the dark.

"I'm not entirely sure. I was drugged most of the time." He said it as if repeating the day's headlines, completely unfazed by the way everyone flinched at his words.

Hank frowned as he thought of the suppressant sitting in a petri dish back in the lab. He still couldn't trace its origin and the uncertainty of it all prodded him like an itch needing to be scratched.

"They kept asking me to repeat my name. Tell them where I was from. I think they were trying to break me. Brainwash me, for lack of a better word."

The air stilled like the sky before a lightning strike.

"Brainwash you," Alex repeated.

"To do what?" Sean sounded much younger than his sixteen years, and a fierce protectiveness Hank hadn't felt before rose within him.

The question went unanswered.

"And then you lot came and saved me. Simple as that, really."

But no, no it wasn't. He was gone. Charles had been gone. And he expected them to survive without him, to know what to do in the face of his absence. His death, for all they knew. They were expected to move on, but how do you move on from something you can't live without?

Charles managed a smile and Hank didn't miss the way his hand found Erik's on the cushion of the couch. "Anything else?"

"Why Bärchen?" It was the first time Erik had spoken since they joined them in the study.

"Why not?" Charles said simply. "It's a word that exists between you and Daniel. And between you and Daniel was where I wanted to find myself again."

Hank swallowed past the unexpected lump in his throat.

The questions stopped after that.

xxxxxx

"What is this?" Raven speared her fork into what looked like a lump of brown charcoal. Hank squinted closer, pushing his glasses up on his furry nose.

"Last week's meatloaf, I believe."

"Oh gross." She let the fork fall against the plate with a clatter.

"Meatloaf?" Charles asked. "And just who, pray tell, has been cooking?"

Raven took great delight in the four forks that pointed themselves in Erik's direction. He glared at them mutinously in return. Charles' eyebrows shot up in surprise and only Raven caught the wary look as he glanced at his own food.
"Just full of surprises, aren't you, my friend."

Before any of them could comment further on Erik's culinary prowess, however, a pop sounded in the hall, followed by a faint, "Hello?"

"In here, Moira!" Sean called, but Raven kept her gaze studiously trained on her brother and the way he immediately blanched.

It would take someone who knew him well enough to notice; someone who had years of watching his movements under her belt, noting the habits and cataloging the departures in character. Which was why she knew in that moment that Charles was more than a little apprehensive as Moira drew closer to the door.

And why not? The last time he saw her (in his right mind), he took weeks from her life – not exactly a justifiable act. Maybe to Sean or Alex, whom Charles was trying to protect, but certainly not to the brunette who stopped cold in the study doorway, eyeing their makeshift picnic with confusion and not a little amusement.

"Have I come at a bad time?"

Daniel clapped and gushed, "Mor!"

"More?"

"That means Moira," Alex clarified and the agent chuckled.

"Mor," she repeated. "I'll take it."

Still, Raven's gaze remained on her brother, watching as he (consciously or not) moved a little closer to Erik, as if playing a game of chess and weighing his first move.

Finally, after what looked like a brief telepathic conversation with the man next to him, Charles stood and cleared his throat.

"Hello, Moira."

The agent smiled sweetly. "Hello, Charles. How are you feeling?"

"Better. But I'm afraid I owe you an apology."

"An apology..." she trailed off and glanced at Erik, but his eyes remained resolutely on his shoes. Charles merely tapped his temple in reply and Moira sucked in her breath.

"You remember."

"Yes. A courtesy which I did not extend to you and for that, I am sorry."

The air in the room changed as the penny dropped.

xxxxxx

_In and out. Breathe, in and out._

_We can do this this way if you'd prefer._
Moira slammed her eyes closed and Charles immediately backed out of her head.

"Sorry," he said aloud.

She shook her head in an attempt to drown him out, focusing only on the roar of blood in her ears and the rapid beat her heart tapped against her sternum. She hadn't blamed the Charles they had pulled from the abyss of that hell, but now… Well, to be frank, she hadn't thought that far ahead. She thought finding his trigger would take longer. She thought she'd have more time.

But as the silent seconds ticked on by, six gazes bore deeper into her soul, leaving her with a feeling that, even though the key to her memories stood mere steps away from her, it was a door she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to unlock. It was there in the way Alex's gaze kept finding the gun on her hip and the way Erik's looked everywhere but.

"I believe I took something from you." Charles looked so pained, so guilty, and Sean's words came back, ringing as clear as a wind chime:

"He didn't want to. If you only knew how much he beat himself up over that."

"Are you here to give it back?"

"Yes."

Moira inhaled deeply and closed her eyes, nodding slightly as she felt the familiar warmth of Charles on the edge of her mind. And then it wasn't familiar anymore.

Images slammed back into her conscious and she grabbed her head as weeks of experiences, weeks of feelings and emotions clutched at her heart, demanding attention.

*A mansion looming against the blue sky, the smell of grass freshly cut by phantoms lingering in the air.*

*A tour led by a bubbly blond, full of high ceilings and overbearing portraits, ending in a bedroom larger than the whole first floor of her townhouse.*

*Rigorous training schedules: Sean on the lawn, a large window propped up in front of him. Alex in the bunker, a place not even she dares go. Raven in the weight room, hiding behind pale skin and grey sweatpants. Erik lurking around, almost as phantom as the non-existent but ever-present gardeners.*

*A presidential address delivered in a clipped, New England tone. A ripple of fear and apprehension at what the following day would bring.*

*A gray jumpsuit and too-tight headset, setting her further apart from the rest decked out in navy and yellow. Further apart than she already felt.*

*A rocket that comes a little too close. A barrel roll that flips her stomach. A show of power that has her staring in awe as a submarine floats by her window. Another show of power that has them crashing to the ground.*

*To the beach.*

And everything slowed down, as if Charles wanted to be gentle in revealing this particular memory.

*Burning fuel and smoking fire. Blood rushing to her head as she hangs upside down. Charles*
releasing her and gently guiding her upright.

Erik running as if the devil was hot on his heels. Charles begging her to be quiet as he watches desperately from a cracked window.

Fear igniting in her chest as Charles screams a scream that seems to last a lifetime. Erik levitating Shaw like a sick mockery of Christ on the cross.

"Go ahead, Charles. Tell me I'm wrong."

A confirmation that has her running to the radio. Silent static that swallows her resolve.

The sharp sting of betrayal as rockets wail through the air. The breath she holds as they shudder to a stop above her head.

"Erik, be the better man."

The weight of the gun on her hip as "Never again" registers in her mind. The urgent need to do something as the rockets turn back toward their deliverers.

An oddly blank mind as she operates on autopilot, on an instinct honed through years of training.


The echo of the last bullet stays in her ears, even as Charles arches beautifully and horrifically before falling to the ground.

A steady thrum of ohgodno, as Erik cradles the man into his arms.

"You. You did this."

The look of hate that stops her heart. Even as her dog tags close her windpipe.

"Please. She didn't do this, Erik. You did."

The release of pressure that brings her to her knees. The weight of Charles' head in her lap, pain etching his usually soft features.

"Help me out. Help me out. I'm going to get you to a hospital." Words that sound hollow to her own ears, even now.

A gasp and grunt of pain that stabs at her heart, knowing she is every bit as guilty as the man who had just abandoned them.

"Wait, don't. Charles. Charles, don't move."

"I won't. I ca… Actually, I… I… I can't feel my legs. I can't feel my legs. I can't feel my legs."

Repetition that does nothing to help ease the blow.

She paid no attention to what came after that, only vaguely registering a return to the mansion and an ironically metal wheelchair.

The warmth at the edge of her mind gently ebbed away, like a goodbye that nobody wants to say. Moira blinked back to reality, taking note of the wetness on her cheeks and the deafening silence of the room. She wasn't sure how much time had passed, but the kids sat hunched in on themselves in a
way that suggested her emotional awakening had perhaps been felt second-hand.

Charles remained standing in the exact same position, hand lowering from his temple, his gaze locked onto hers, filled with a gentle reassurance she wanted to hold tight to.

She remembered the way Erik had refused to tell her how Charles had been paralyzed, though whether that omission was for her sake or his own, she couldn't be sure.

Erik. Finally her gaze found his and he closed his eyes and lifted his chin, as if knowing what she was about to do before she even knew it herself.

And in two distinct strides, she walked up and slapped him hard across the face.

xxxxxx

"Holy shit," Alex muttered, watching Moira's retreating form. "She's got an arm."

"She's a CIA agent, idiot."

Alex glared at Raven, choosing to ignore her remark. Erik rubbed wearily at his cheek, attempting to smile for Charles' sake, but the professor looked as though Moira had taken the last of his energy with her when she walked out the door.

"It could have been worse, right?" Sean, ever the optimist.

Alex rolled his eyes. "Seeing as Erik almost killed her and all he got was a slap in return, I'd say yes, yes it could have gone worse."

"Alex." The professor's reprimand was soft but non-negotiable.

"Sorry." Alex glanced at the man in question and couldn't help raising his eyebrows. Erik looked small and contrite – two words he thought he'd never, ever use when describing the metal-bender.

Alex didn't think anyone could slap Erik and get away with it. Except maybe Charles. It seemed to be a testament to how much guilt Erik was carrying around that Moira was allowed to deck him and leave without so much as a word.

He picked at his now-cold dinner, bummed that their mini-reunion had been soured. He couldn't blame Moira for that, though. The woman deserved to have her memories for all she had done and all she continued to do, despite the fact that the man she was rescuing was the man responsible for the rather large gap in her mind.

"Well," Charles cleared his throat and bent down to scoop Daniel up again. "Perhaps we should continue this tomorrow."

Everyone murmured their assent but no one made a move to leave. Like Charles would disappear again if let out of their sight. Which was probably why Charles had a slightly larger audience when reading Daniel his bedtime story that night.

They had trooped up the stairs, all save Erik, following Charles like little ducklings (Alex internally rolled his eyes. Never in his life had he used the word "ducklings" and he blamed this break in masculinity completely on the child who had everyone, Alex included, wrapped around his little finger).

Still, it was nice to sit on the floor and lean against the wall, watching as Charles sat Daniel in his lap
with Raven pressed to his side and opened a tattered copy of fairytales. From the way Raven’s lips moved silently with the words, Alex could guess it had been a favorite in the Xavier household.

He closed his eyes and listened to the gentle lilt of Charles’ voice, transporting him to far off kingdoms with dashing princes and formidable foes. It was a world without guns, without prejudice, where everything nicely wrapped up like a beautiful bow in the end.

When silence jarred him from the colorful picture he had created in his mind, he blinked his eyes open to find Charles gently closing the book and glancing around at the sleeping bodies around him: Sean gently snoring in the chair, Raven curled up on the bed, Daniel drooling snug against his shoulder and Hank, a furry ball across the room from Alex. Charles’ eyes met his and the teen was overwhelmed by the warmth and love there.

He nodded to the book. "Works every time."

Alex smiled and stretched his neck. "Want help waking them?"

Charles shook his head and carried Daniel to the crib in the corner. "Let them sleep."

Alex knew Charles had no problem with them taking over his room, since he probably wouldn't be spending the night there anyway. Not when Erik was still unaccounted for.

The thought made him blush ever so slightly, but hey, you can't help who you love.

With Daniel tucked safely in his crib and everyone sprawled in various states of unconsciousness, Charles held out his hand to Alex, whispering a quiet, "Goodnight."

But a handshake wasn't good enough and Alex stepped forward, gathering the slightly smaller man in a hug, muttering a quiet "Goodnight" in return. He stepped back and cleared his throat, beating a hasty retreat to the hall. He never was one for emotions and the reliefcomfort roiling around in his chest was wreaking havoc with his desire to be stoic at all times.

Still… Charles wasn't one to judge, as evidenced by both Erik and Moira's presence in his life.

Moira. Alex had no desire to trade places with her, shuddering slightly at the thought of all she must be feeling. Her door was locked and all was quiet inside, but her car was still in the driveway and that had to count for something.

xxxxxx

The ground was cold beneath his palms and for the second time in the past ten minutes, Erik cursed his lack of forethought in finding a coat before he stalked out into the night.

Had Moira not been his only hope after Charles was taken, he would have had no problem whatsoever never letting her into his life again. Not because he didn't like her. Sure, she was human and therefore inferior, but she was a good agent and, though he was loathed to admit it, he had warmed to her over the past week. But she was still Moira. Still his accomplice in one of the two biggest regrets of his life.

He had allowed himself to look beyond that, to let her own ignorance seep into his mind and let him believe that knowing her and liking her was okay.

But not now.

She had fired a bullet and he had put it into his lover's back.
There was nothing okay about that and she was just one more tether anchoring him to a truth he would rather forget.

Mind if I join you?
Erik smiled softly. Never.

The distant rustle of grass announced Charles’ arrival and Erik’s heart surged at the sight of his leather jacket clutched in the other man’s hands.

"Thought you might be cold," he murmured, draping it over Erik's shoulders.

"Thank you." Erik's voice was rough and he leaned back, pressing against Charles' chest as the telepath wrapped his arms around him from behind and placed a kiss on his head.

"Did you do this?" Charles asked quietly, gazing over Erik's shoulder at the makeshift grave he had been inexplicably drawn to. Erik nodded and Charles inhaled sharply. "It's beautiful."

There was a wobble of emotion in his voice. Charles had not known Angel long, but he had a habit of forming attachments to even the slightest of acquaintances. It was one of the things Erik loved most about him. He leaned back further into Charles' embrace, taking great delight in just being held.

"Please don't do this to me again." The plea was quiet and had escaped his lips before he could bite it back.

Charles nuzzled the back of his neck and Erik felt the rise and fall of his chest. "I promise."

"I can't handle not knowing if you're…" he couldn't say the word.

"I know." Again, so simple. So understanding. "I love you."

Erik breathed out sharply, half a sob, finally crumbling under the weight of the night. "God help you."

Charles smiled again and pressed a kiss to the shell of Erik's ear. "God help me, indeed."

Silence stretched as they sat comfortably in the cold grass, not needing to say aloud all that passed between them. It was in the hitch of their breath as Charles ghosted his lips down the back of Erik's neck and the grip Erik pressed against Charles' thigh as the telepath hit a particularly sensitive spot under his jaw.

"Is our son asleep?" He felt Charles smile against the back of his neck and squeeze him tighter.

"Yes, our son is asleep."

Our. Amazing what a little three-letter word can do to one's heart.

"Good," Erik stuttered as Charles splayed his hand across his lower abdomen, staking claim. He pressed back further in between Charles' legs, drawing a quiet moan from the other man.

"Take me to bed," Charles whispered.

"Yes," Erik breathed.

The leather jacket lay forgotten on the grass because wherever Charles led, Erik was sure to follow.
Chapter Summary

In which Erik and Moira hash things out and Charles proves a point.

Despite the cool breeze filtering through the windows, the sheets stuck to Erik's body, clinging to his calves and holding his thighs hostage. If his nerves weren't still hypersensitive from the first round of tender, slow lovemaking followed by the rather destructive second round, he might not have felt the fringe of hair against his forehead as a gentle kiss was placed against his temple.

"Charles?"

"Go back to sleep, love."

"Mmf," Erik groaned into the pillow as he lifted his head. "Where're you goin'?"

"Running."

"Why?"

"Because I can." Charles chuckled at the picture Erik made and he must have been a sight: sheet falling and catching on the curve of his hip, hair sticking up at odd angles, an oddly content, well-fucked grin gracing his not-quite-awake face.

He flopped back down onto the pillow in a most undignified manner and blindly reached an arm out for Charles, flailing it around until he connected with the other man's torso. Charles laughed again and took hold of his hand.

"Something else you needed?"

"Just you," he mumbled. "Don't be long."

Another kiss against his head. "I won't. Not when I have this waiting for me in my bed."

"My bed. Our children are in yours."

"My bed. Your bed. Same difference."

Erik gave a sleepy grunt in response and by the time he opened his eyes for the second time that morning, Charles was back, freshly showered, and propped up against the headboard as he read the morning paper.

"Honestly, Erik. I didn't realize I had worn you out so much. We must work on your stamina."

If Erik could wake everyday to that cheeky grin, it would be a good life indeed.

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Moira inhaled as her lips closed around the rim of the mug, savoring the comforting smell of strong coffee and the light breeze that ruffled the cardigan she was wearing over a pair of pajamas Raven
had lent her. In a house full of men and almost-men, she probably should have dressed before coming down, but frankly, after the night she'd had, propriety was not exactly at the top of her list of concerns.

While happy to have those missing few weeks accounted for, she was beginning to miss the ignorant bliss that hid the truth, and it was only her training that kept her from flushing the bullets down the toilet last night.

Accident. Cruel twist of fate. Casualty of war. Call it what you want, but she had fired a gun and it was her bullet that put Charles Xavier in a wheelchair. If she hadn't... If she didn't...

If.

She unconsciously touched the front of her neck, as if rubbing away the phantom dig of a metal chain. Perhaps she had deserved what Erik had done – not death of course, but just a little pain. A little reminder that what she was feeling paled in comparison to the agony that had carved deep lines on Charles' face.

The patio door behind her slid open and she tensed, ears straining to see if she could pick out the sound of Erik's gait from the rest. Luckily it was Hank that plopped down on the lounge chair next to her, offering a toasted bagel with cream cheese on a plate.

"For me?"

Hank shrugged. "The professor would call it bad manners if we didn't feed you."

She smiled and took the plate, placing her mug of coffee on the side table, but when she turned back around to offer a, "Thank you," she realized that Hank had left and Charles had taken his place.

"Good morning."

"Oh. Hi. Good morning." She found herself glancing back at the door, almost willing someone to come out and join them so she wouldn't have to have the conversation that was surely about to happen.

"We don't have to talk if you don't want to."

"Reading my mind?"

Charles smiled. "Just noting the intense anxiety on your face."

"My mother always said I was bad at hiding my emotions," she said with a rueful roll of the eyes. "Did your mother ever tell you that?"

"My mother didn't really have time for the emotions I expressed aloud, let alone the ones written on my face." His smile was tight and he gave a non-committal shrug.

A sudden sadness washed over her and she wanted more than anything in that moment to wrap her arms around him. Instead, she tightened the cardigan around her body and reached for her coffee cup again. His gaze focused on her clothes and she fidgeted under his scrutiny.

"I probably should have dressed."

He gave a lazy wave of the hand. "We don't stand on ceremony here. You have met my sister, right? The naked one?"
Moira barked out a laugh and eased further into the chair. It had always been easy to talk to him, whether he was drunkenly hitting on her or passionately lecturing on the genetic mutations alive in their culture today, there was an ease, an approachability to Charles Xavier.

"I was merely noticing that that cardigan looked familiar and then I realized it looked familiar because Raven has a habit of plundering my closet. As least she did when she still wore clothes."

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry." Moira sat forward, fully prepared to take it off, but Charles stayed her movements with a hand on her arm.

"No, please. Keep it. Lord knows I have enough."

She sat back, eyebrow arched as if to say "Are you sure" but he merely smiled so she settled into the fabric once more. "It's quite comfortable."

"Just one of the many amenities of the Xavier Hotel."

A comfortable silence settled over them and he leaned back against the lounge chair, closing his eyes as the morning sun drew patterns on his face. She watched him out of the corner of her eye, wondering how someone who had had so much happen to him could be so damn charming.

"I don't know what to say to you anymore," she whispered. At his questioning glance, she continued. "I'm sorry' seems so inadequate."

His eyes softened and he sat up, leaning his elbows on his knees and fixing her with a gaze that, try as she might, she could not break.

"You owe me nothing."

"Charles, I shot you!"

"And I erased your memory. What you did was an accident. What I did was on purpose. We'll call it square."

She wanted to argue further, but she knew it would be fruitless. It felt like a cheat to be offered forgiveness on a silver platter. She had been so angry at what he had done, her bitterness growing with every condescending look that her colleagues shot her, but now… the fight seeped out of her like a leaky faucet. Perhaps they could "call it square," so to speak.

A loud crack sounded and Moira jumped.

"Jesus," she muttered, almost sloshing coffee down her front. "Does he always do that?" She nodded to Azazel who sauntered towards the house, a little too pleased with himself.

Charles offered her a grim smile. "Pretty much."

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Erik glared out the window, Daniel on his hip, as his eyes watched the interplay between the man he loved and the woman who had hurt him.

He could still feel the distant sting from her slap, the accusatory glare in her eyes as she marched up and brought her hand across his cheek. He deserved it for so many things. Too many to dwell on so early in the morning, but that didn't stop the images from haunting his every thought.

"Uh, Erik?"
"What?" he snapped.

Raven raised an eyebrow and nodded to the mug of coffee he was stirring so viciously that half of the substance was already on the counter.

"Oh." Erik flushed a little and grabbed the nearest towel to mop up the mess. She followed his gaze to the patio.

"I thought you and Moira had formed some sort of truce."

"That was before she remembered I tried to kill her."

"I hate it when that happens." She grinned at him mockingly and he tossed the towel in her face. "Seriously, though," she began, taking Daniel from Erik's arms and strapping him into his high chair. "How is this going to work? There's still a very real threat out there and you and Charles still have very different opinions on the world. Throw a human CIA agent in on top of all that and you've got yourself a party."

Erik sighed and leaned against the counter, eyeing the scene on the patio once more.

"I guess we'll have to have a talk."

Raven snorted. "All three of you?"

Erik gave a curt nod in reply.

"Let me know when you plan on doing that so I can gather everyone and whatever valuables we have into the bunker."

Erik swallowed as he watched Moira and Charles stand. He had a sinking feeling that Raven would have to duck and cover sooner than expected.

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The study wasn't as comforting as he usually found it with its mahogany furnishings and plush carpeting. It resembled more of a makeshift boxing ring with each fighter staking out his and her corner.

Charles did a quick mental scan and suppressed a sigh as he sent a gentle nudge to the two boys lurking just outside the door.

Aw, come on, Prof. Sean whined. We wanna see the fireworks.

I'll buy you some for the Fourth of July.

… Deal.

Charles spared a brief thought for what exactly he had just agreed to (pyrotechnics in the hands of Alex and Sean was surely not a particularly sane idea), before turning to the two adults in front of him who pointedly were not looking at the other.

"Is this where we share our feelings and hug it out?"

Charles narrowed his gaze at Erik. "You've been spending too much time around Alex."

I won't argue with that.
"Just a little higher," Raven groaned, standing on her tiptoes as her tongue peeked out between her lips. "Beast, come here, I need your height."

"I'm taking no part in this," he replied as he handed Daniel another Lego.

"You're no fun," she pouted, immediately perking up when Sean and Alex entered the rec room. "Ooh, come'ere."

"What are you doing?" Sean cocked his head as Alex stepped forward, bracing the chair Raven wobbled on.

"Spying. If Erik and Moira are gonna duke it out, I want to see."

Sean immediately blanched. "You can't do that. The professor will catch you."

"I have a feeling he'll have more to worry about in a few moments than whether or not I'm listening in. Now come here. There's a grate above the shelf that peers into the study."

Alex stood on the chair next to Raven, both holding onto the shelves, as Sean stepped forward and grudgingly braced their unsteady perch.

"Alex, if you reopen your wound, I refuse to sew you up again," Hank warned.

"My money's on Erik," Alex whispered, thoroughly ignoring Hank as he climbed up another foot. "No way. Moira, definitely."

"Are you kidding me? The CIA agent versus the homicidal maniac?"

"I've got fireworks riding on this," Sean grumbled, "and if you get us caught, I'll never forgive you."

"Yeah, yeah."

The sudden rise of voices from the room on the other side of the wall hastened Raven's climb, until she was holding onto the top shelf side by side with Alex, their heads pressed together as they peered through the metal grate overlooking the study.

Moira stood on one side, Erik on the other, and Charles in between, a hand outstretched in either direction.

"How could you shoot him?"

"How could you leave him?"

"Sit down!"

The way both Erik and Moira immediately dropped to the couch would have been comical had it not been Charles that had just yelled. Charles didn't yell.

"You are acting like children," he spat. "Stop arguing about me. I am no longer on the table for
I don't care what she did or what you did!" Charles interrupted. "What I care about is that there is a very real threat out there that we should be worrying about. Not whether or not you two can stand to be in the same room as each other without devolving into tantrums."

"Ouch," Raven whispered.

"No kidding," Alex replied.

They watched as Charles paced, rubbing his forehead. Moira and Erik resolutely remained seated as far on opposite sides of the couch as they could get without falling onto the floor.

"Erik, I understand your aversion to – "

"Humans?"

"Governments." Charles glared and the prick on the edge of their minds signaled the telepath's rising frustration. "You know, Erik, what has Moira done to you? I don't remember you getting shot. Stop placing all of your burdens solely on her shoulders."

Erik stood and Raven held her breath. "Charles, I have always made my opinion on that matter clear."

"Yes, you have, but I'm afraid it's not as cut and dry as you'd like it to be."

Charles' voice had gotten dangerously low and Raven's heart hammered against her ribcage. And as her brother delivered his next words, she realized there was new player in the game that neither she nor Alex had taken into account.

"What if Daniel was human, hm? Would you love him any less?"

"You know I wouldn't."

"Sometimes I wonder. I truly do, Erik. What about me? If I was human, would you have deliberately put a bullet in my back seeing as you'd consider me so disposable?"

Raven clamped a hand over her mouth to silence her gasp, but a whispered "Shit" still huffed out from between Alex's lips.

Charles had a point, but it was a brutal way to make it and the stony silence that hovered in the study proved that she wasn't the only one to think so. Moira sat wide-eyed, her gaze darting between the two men, as horror washed over Charles' face.

"Erik…"

Raven watched the muscle in the metal-bender's jaw jump as he turned on his heel and stormed from the room.

"I guess it's Charles for the win," Alex mumbled.

Raven stepped off the chair and leaned against the bookcase, flinching as the distant door slam signaled Erik's retreat.
She had seen enough.

Fuck.

Even she could hear Charles' mental curse and she stood from her perch on the couch, muscles protesting against the tension that had seized them.

"Charles…"

He shook his head and rubbed his face, mumbling, "I'm sorry you had to see that," through the cracks in his fingers.

"I should probably leave," she murmured, feeling more an intruder than invited guest.

"No!" He dropped his hands and reached out for her arm. "We need you. And… though I did what I did, I always considered you a dear friend. It would pain me to think I had lost that forever."

Now knowing what she had lost, she did realize that she missed him and she smiled as she replied, "You haven't."

Some of the tension eased from his shoulders and he slumped into the nearest armchair.

"So what did the CIA think about all of this?" he waved his hand carelessly at his legs, hoping to convey some indication to his incarceration.

Moira bit her lip, but it was no use lying to a telepath. "They're concerned, but it's not exactly at the top of their radar. It pains me to admit it, but if it was a more… human problem, they'd be all over it."

"That's what I thought," Charles replied, resignation clear in his voice. It was no use pretending that the so-called 'mutant problem' was little more than a fly in the CIA's champagne. "I guess we're on our own, then."

She praised his ability to muster up a sense of optimism when she was sure neither was feeling very much up to the task.

"We have the Agency's tools at our disposal, but if something is going to be done about it now, we are very much on our own. And by 'we,' I mean 'I.' McCone knows nothing of your involvement at the moment."

Charles nodded and bridged his fingers. "That's probably for the best. We didn't exactly part on the best of terms."

Moira smirked. That was putting it lightly.

"You do realize that, had this not ended as well as it had – "

"You mean, had I died," Charles offered.

"– had we not recovered you," she glared at his bluntness, "Erik would have torn both heaven and hell apart to make sure everyone suffered his pain."

"I know," he responded quietly.

"So I suggest, Professor," she continued, placing a comforting hand on his head, much like she had
done to Erik that first night back in the mansion. "That unless you want to take the world with you
when you go to your grave, that you avoid it for a very long time."

"I'll do my best."

"Go to him." She let her palm drop from the back of his head and offered him a hand, hauling him to
his feet.

"How does one say, 'I was right, but I'm still sorry'?"

She snorted. "When you find out, let me know."

Charles closed his eyes and shuffled to the door like a prisoner making his final march to the firing
squad.

xxxxxx

It didn't take long for Erik to feel the familiar warmth of Charles on the edge of his psyche, even as
he hammered a nail into a block of wood.

Get out.

No.

Charles, you do not want to talk to me right now, telepathically or otherwise.

I always want to talk to you.

Erik narrowed his eyes as the door to the garage opened and he paused, hammer raised above his
head as Charles leaned against the doorframe.

"Remodeling?" A fraction of a smile.

"I needed something to hit."

The smile slipped and Charles shoved his hands into his pockets, taking a step further into the room. The smell of gasoline and leather polish hovered in the air and the amount of cars present ensured that each member of the household could have a backup in case their primary mode of transportation broke down.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said what I said."

"But you were right, weren't you."

Charles said nothing and Erik brought the hammer down again on the head of an unsuspecting nail.

"I love you," Charles blurted out. The hammer faltered and Erik swallowed past the sudden lump in
his throat. "I love you so much, it scares me. It scares me to think what I would do if you left again. If something happened to you and I had to face this unforgiving world alone."

Charles took another step forward, wrapping a warm palm over Erik's on the handle of the tool. The metal-bender's heart beat a vicious pace as he finally let green eyes meet blue.

"To see you hurting, to see you carrying so much resentment, so much hate… it physically pains me
because I cannot help you bear the burden."
The hammer fell to the ground as Erik cupped Charles' cheek, bringing their foreheads together.

"You do help bear the burden. You do." He felt Charles' fingers ghost up the curve of his back, carefully noting every vertebrae, every muscle, as if memorizing the contours.

Silence fell, save for the steady inhale and exhale of their collective breaths.

"You know I would love Daniel no matter what."

"I know," Charles pulled away and shook his head. "It was a stupid thing to say."

"But it proved your point." Erik ran the pad of his thumb down the line of Charles' cheekbone. "You should have been a lawyer in another life."

Charles threw his head back as he laughed. "God help us all."

Erik delighted in the mirth lighting Charles' face, but the telepath sobered entirely too quickly.

"When I say what I'm about to say, I want you to know with every fiber of my being that I say it not to hurt you. Only to make you see. Okay?"

Erik nodded as if to say, "Go on."

"Your mother was human."

Erik inhaled sharply, but Charles would not be deterred.

"And from what I've heard and what I've seen in here," he touched his temple, "she was one of the most amazing women… humans… ever."

Erik swallowed hard, not trusting his voice to even concur with Charles' remarks.

"You cannot sit there and tell me that all humans are bad. I know there is evil in the world – I've witnessed it first hand. But I refuse to punish and blame the species for the idiocy of the few." With his thumb, he smoothed over Erik's creased brow. "I know you have it in you to see beyond the brushstroke you've painted them all with."

Erik closed his eyes and inhaled the scent of scotch, wool, and something distinctly Charles. "Teach me, Professor."

Charles smiled. "Only if you do me the same courtesy. Make a realist out of this idealist."

"Gladly."

They stayed like that for a moment more, each basking in the presence of the other before Charles brought them back to reality.

"Moira has intel on where the group has moved."

Erik tensed in his arms and Charles immediately began kneading the tight muscles of his neck.

"And what are you going to do when you find them?"

Erik shivered as Charles' breath ghosted across his ear.

"Punish them."
"Are we in trouble?"

Erik arched an eyebrow. "Should you be?"

Sean's eyes widened. "No."

"Good," Erik curtly replied and Charles tried to hide his smirk as everyone gathered in the rec room.

He felt a brief wave of panic from Raven as her eyes found the chair they had left propped up against the bookshelf, and Charles was quick to call her out, leveling her with a glare.

"Really, Raven?" His gaze flicked up to the grate, which they had no doubt spied through.

"Busted," Alex muttered.

We will have chat about that later, he sent to all of their minds, And yes, Sean, you still get your fireworks.

"Sweet!" Sean exclaimed, causing Erik to look at him strangely.

Moira cleared her throat once everyone had settled: Sean, Alex, Hank and Raven on the couch, Erik standing behind it and Charles perched on the arm, Daniel in his lap. Azazel lounged on the window seat, as Janos looked bored in the corner, pretending to read a book.

"We think they've moved from Philadelphia to Manhattan. There's evidence they have a secondary headquarters there, again under the guise of a private club. Azazel will transport us there – "

"I am not a taxi cab," Azazel muttered as Raven bounced in her seat.

"So we get to break in again?"

Alex sat up straighter. "Do I get to come this time?"

"Neither of you do," Charles murmured. "Moira and I will be going in alone, pretending to be a married couple – "

"Why Moira?" Erik interrupted, not bothering or not wanting to hear the rest of the plan.

"Well it's either Moira or Raven," Sean reasoned. "And ew." He scrunched up his nose.

"Ew,' indeed," Charles replied, throwing an apologetic look in his sister's direction. "No offense, darling, you're lovely. But I made it this long without therapy. I'd prefer to make it a few more years."

Raven waved her hand. "None taken."

"Then why you?"

Charles saw Erik's harsh tone for what it was – worry – and his gaze softened at he stared at the other man.

"Because I might recognize something. Or someone."

"And what if someone recognizes you?"
Don't worry about me.

You know that's a futile request to make.

"We'll just have to be sure that no one does," Charles put his arm around Moira and gave her a squeeze. "Won't we, love? You know, I could have a lot of fun with this."

Moira rolled her eyes and smacked his arm, paling slightly under Erik's steely gaze.

Now, now, darling. Play nice.

Pretend all you want with her. Just remember whom you come home to at the end of the day.

Charles sent Erik an image from the night before that caused him to gasp and hang onto the back of the couch for support. Charles' laughter echoed in his mind.

How could I ever forget?
The mansion had an eerie, early morning calm that Erik was still acclimating to. Perhaps it was the multitude of locked doors and shadowed corners – far reaches that his penetrating gaze couldn't monitor at all times. Still, he had seen too many corporeal horrors to concern himself with what went bump in the night.

The sweatpants were baggy and cool against his legs and he shoved up his sleeves as he breathed deeply, letting a slow smile creep across his face – relishing what was about to be one of his favorite moments of the day.

"Everybody up! Get up! Rise and shine!"

He extended his palm, causing the doorknobs of every bedroom in the hallway to vibrate.

"Up! Up! Up! Up! Let's gooo!"

Raven's door was the first to fly open, as she stumbled forth looking nothing short of mutinous.

"I hate you."

Erik smirked at her in return. "Get dressed."

"No."

"Fine. Naked works. Though I'd watch out for chafing when we get to the rope climb."

With a final glare, she pushed past him and headed down towards the kitchen. Hank was next, growling in a manner Erik hadn't heard since the night Charles left behind nothing but broken hearts and a toppled wheelchair.

A few more doorknobs rattled and a few more doorways opened. Alex, looking every bit the rumpled teenager, hair sticking up in a million directions and eyes that opened not quite halfway.

"On you go," Erik said in an entirely too happy manner, clapping the teen on the shoulder and gently shoving him in the direction of the stairs. "And don't forget your sweatpants!"

Then Sean, practically gliding down the hall with his eyes still closed, relying on nothing but his memory and the smell of bacon to get him to the kitchen safely. It thoroughly convinced Erik of the boy's ability to sleepwalk, which would explain their midnight run-in that saw the boy mumbling something about goldfish.

And finally Charles. Charles opened the door and promptly tripped into the hall. His pajama pants were slung low and he held an equally bedraggled Daniel against his white t-shirt.

"My love, is this really necessary?"
Erik paused, letting that slow grin slide across his face once more. The sight of Charles standing there in such a sleepily delicious manner almost convinced him that training could wait another day. Almost.

xxxxxx

"He's a monster," Sean panted from where he lay sprawled out spread eagle on the grass.

"I think I'm dead," Alex moaned.

"Oh don't even," Raven began. "You got off easy because you're injured."

"I got shot!"

"Lucky."

Alex snorted and promptly groaned, reaching blindly for the water bottle he had dropped in an effort to get himself horizontal as quickly as possible. Hank breezed by on what must have been his 67th lap around the mansion, a smirk hidden somewhere in that blue fur.

"Get up, slackers!"

"Fuck off, Bozo!"

"Language, Alex."

"Sorry, Professor."

Raven cackled and promptly began coughing. She knew Erik was tough, but Jesus Christ, this was just plain sadistic. She moaned as she pushed herself to her feet and stumbled over to where Charles was sitting on a blanket, Daniel between his legs, helping the little boy draw what she was pretty sure was Hank in all his gloating glory.

"Ray!" Daniel giggled as she plopped down next to him on the blanket.

"Ray? He's getting better."

"Second syllables seem to be a work in progress."

She chuckled and followed her brother's gaze to where Alex and Sean still lay completely immobile, something fond and fierce clouding his eyes.

Raven's smile faltered ever so slightly and she reached a hand out to trace a finger down Daniel's cheek. "This will be worse than Cuba, won't it."

"Yes. Yes, it will be."

No mincing words now. She missed that about him, the way he stumbled as he tried to find to easiest, kindest way to deliver the worst kind of news ("Okay, so here's the deal… the thing is… What I meant… Well… We can't actually go to the zoo for your birthday…). But he didn't trip over his words now. Only when drunk or only with Erik, and those two things usually went hand in hand.

Raven leaned back on the blanket and closed her eyes, cracking them just a little so she could watch Charles run his fingers through Daniel's hair. Watch him lean down and whisper encouragement into that tiny ear, secret words that had Daniel holding up a blue crayon and babbling things only Charles
"Yes, I see. That's wonderful," he responded, as if what had just left Daniel's mouth resembled something that made complete sense.

"You're a great father, you know that?"

Charles snorted, but his eyes were soft. "Thank you. Just stumbling along really."

"No," she whispered. "Not anymore."

He smiled at her and silence fell, until the drill sergeant they had all been hiding from made his presence known. Erik stood there with his hands on his hips and a scowl on his face as he surveyed his lazy charges.

"Raven! Here! Now!"

"Sonofabitch."

Charles laughed at her as she hauled herself up onto her own two feet once more.

"How come you just get to sit here?"

"I'm recovering."

"Liar."

"Well..." And there it was, that cheeky grin she had so dearly missed. "Having carnal knowledge of the drill sergeant tends to work in one's favor when bargaining."

"Oh ew."

She clapped her hands over her ears and ran away as fast as her tired muscles could carry her, Charles' beautiful laughter still ringing in her ears.

xxxxxx

It was a frightening thing, money. It could build societies or break them. Spawn the best kind of men and the worst. And having had a taste of this organization's past extravagances, Moira knew they were up against deep pockets indeed.

"Sean! You call that a pushup?" Erik's bellowing voice filtered through the window and Moira chuckled. Poor Sean.

She glanced up from the papers in her hand to see Alex's jog slow to trot before stopping all together. He placed shaky hands on his knees and she couldn't help but think about all that Charles and Erik had done for these kids (despite the fact that Alex looked like he could vomit at any moment). They were no longer hanging from ceilings and dancing to Hippy Hippy Shake. Sure, they messed around as kids are wont to do, but there was an underlying current, a seriousness that even the CIA couldn't beat into them. It had to be taught, comforted, cajoled into existence by a man and his infinite patience.

"Raven! Move!" Erik was not that man.

Still, he complemented Charles nicely and Moira supposed that was the beauty of them. Their inextricable balancing act.

She knocked on the window and Alex visibly jumped. "He's on the prowl, you might want to break
Alex smiled, gave her a mock salute and picked up his pace.

She should have been worried about him – the boy had just been shot – but she knew that Charles would come along soon enough and smooth over Erik's rough edges.

Alex had just assumed that the Professor was superhuman. And not in the way that Magneto or Banshee or Mystique was superhuman. Just in the way that he was perpetually good. Always calm and collected, patient and kind. He saw the better side of you before you were even aware of it yourself. The Professor didn't seem to have a single weakness, with the exception of Daniel – or Erik – but that was too sappy a thought for too rough a morning.

Alex didn't know.

How could he have known?

His first clue should have been the rapid way the blood drained from Raven's face when he told her they'd jokingly locked Charles in the shed for not having to run. It definitely should have been the first.

"You what?"

Sean's laughter died as Raven's sharp tone cut through the air. That should have been the second.

"It was just a joke, Raven," the redhead muttered, but Raven was already sprinting across the grass with speed she seemed to lack only moments before, towards the tiny garden shed at the edge of the lawn.

"Where do you think you're going?" Erik called, but when Raven screamed Charles' name, Erik stopped asking and just followed.

The shed was small, only large enough to hold a few rakes and maybe a bucket. It had seemed the perfect place to exact what they thought would be harmless revenge. Ask Charles to get something for them (because of course he would) and then lock the door behind him. It was so easy.

No, Alex didn't know.

"Charles?" Raven banged on the weathered door. "Charles, answer me. Talk to me."

Nothing.

She looked pleadingly at Erik as he jogged to a halt and, with a flick of his wrist, the hinges popped off and the door fell flat at their feet.

"What's going on?" Hank walked up, Daniel holding tight to his fur, but Alex's heart was slamming and all he could think was ohgodwhatdidwedodo?

"Charles?" Raven coughed, already crouching down in the darkened shed. "Charles, look at me."

The dust settled and Alex heard Sean gasp next to him. Had he any air left in his lungs, he might have gasped as well, but all he could do was stand and stare, jaw slack and heart hurting.

Charles sat on the floor of the shed, knees pulled up to his chest, and face buried in his arms. The
rake rattled next to him as he shook, gently rocking himself back and forth.

"Breathe, Charles. Look at me. Open your eyes, Charles." Raven had grabbed his chin, letting her thumbs rub circles on his cheekbones. Blue eyes blinked open and Raven commanded again, "Breathe."

A deep, rattling inhalation ripped through Charles' chest and he gripped Raven's forearm as his lungs tried to expand around the panic. Alex could only stare as their joke tore their mentor to pieces.

"Good. With me, in and out," Raven murmured, placing Charles' hand on her chest and urging his to rise and fall with hers.

"Raven." Erik's voice was clipped but broken, and Alex had almost forgotten he was there. His silence was unnerving, but his face – unwatchable.

"He's fine," she whispered as she placed a kiss against the Professor's head. "He'll be fine."

"Hank, take Daniel inside. Now." Erik's voice was hollow. Lost.

Hank spun on his heel without a word, Daniel peering longingly over his shoulder at the scene he didn't understand.

With his gaze locked on Raven, Charles had managed to get his breathing under control and color back into his cheeks. He closed his eyes and thunked his head back against the wood, but Raven's swift yet soft command of, "Eyes open, Charles," snapped open those two haunted pools of blue.

Erik finally took a step forward while Alex remained completely frozen to the grass beneath his sneakers. He watched helplessly as Raven stroked the matted hair off Charles' forehead and murmured things only meant for a brother's ear.

Charles had survived a bullet, a kidnapping, and a broken heart.

But it was Alex, Sean, and a stupid shed that finally brought him to his knees.

xxxxxxx

A litany of this wasn't how this was supposed to go and oh god Erik's going to kill me if Raven doesn't do it first swirled in Sean's head, making him heavy with guilt and not a little bit ill.

They backed away as Raven helped Charles up, her sharp "Don't" keeping all of them, even Erik, at bay. The road back to the house was quiet and pained, and even Sean's usual desire to diffuse an awkward silence with a joke abandoned him.

Jokes had done him no favors today.

They kept their distance, Sean and Alex identical in the slump of their shoulders and the bow of their heads. Erik walked next to them rigid with tension, fury, and something not seen very much – fear.

Fear on Erik didn't look right. It was like smart on Alex or mischievous on Hank. Hate on Charles. Some things just didn't mix.

Without really knowing how he had gotten there, Sean found himself in the library, leaning against a shelf somewhere in between The Hobbit and Tom Sawyer. Alex sat on the couch with his head in his hands, as Erik paced a beaten path into the floorboards.

His silence was unnerving. Anger would almost be preferable.
And then Raven banged through the door, fury lighting her amber eyes.

"He doesn't like small spaces, you complete asshole!" Raven crossed the room in four strides and shoved Sean hard against the chest. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"How was I supposed to know!"

But the words only fueled her fire.

"And you!" She rounded on Alex and the teen visibly flinched. "I expect this from him but not you!"

"Hey!" Sean's miffed retort went ignored.

"Raven, I'm so sorry, we didn't know."

Her nostrils flared as she panted, trying to ignore the fact that the blond did look incredibly contrite, but his apologies would only soften her anger and right now she needed to vent.

"Haven't you ever noticed, Sean, that no matter how many times you beg him to go into the crawl space to get his grandfather's swords, he won't? A 'no' from the man who would give you the shirt off his back if you asked."

Sean nodded.

"That's because he can't!" Her voice echoed off the vaulted ceilings, its vibrations mimicked in the clenched hands at Erik's sides. "He can't do small spaces!"

"Why not?"

Raven closed her eyes. She had promised not to tell but the time for such pacts had come and gone. She exhaled slowly, feeling the fight leave her limbs. What she was about to say would require a strength she wasn't entirely sure she had.

"Charles didn't – he... he didn't exactly have the most charmed childhood."

"What do you mean?" Erik's voice was low and dangerous, a tone that usually sent most men running in the other direction. Raven, however, made it as far as the couch before she sank down next to Alex and pinched the bridge of her nose – a habit she had inherited from the infuriating older brother curled up in bed two floors above.

"Charles' father died when he was young. His mother wasn't exactly the maternal type and let's just say she saw a little too much of Brian Xavier in Charles' face and found comfort at the bottom of a Smirnoff White Whisky bottle." Raven's breath grew shaky and she cursed the single tear that threatened to fall. "She remarried a man named Kurt Marko, who came as part of a package deal, complete with son Cain." She gave a bitter laugh. "Let's just say he lived up to his name."

The darkened expression that shadowed Erik's face proved he understood.

"Cain tortured Charles and Charles took it, because he knew if he didn't, Cain would find his amusement elsewhere. Most likely with me."

She took a moment and they let her have it. Hardly anyone breathed, as if anything above stony silence would disrespect the hard truth they were learning.
"He still has scars. He's good at hiding them."

A frown crossed Erik's face and she could tell he was thinking back to the nights they spent together. To the perfectly pale skin he had traced.

"Cain buried him alive," she said flatly. Like ripping off a band-aid.

A collective gasp spread through the room and three jaws hit the floor.

"Some joke, huh?" Raven swallowed past the bile in her throat and the tears finally fell.

"But… How?" Alex croaked.

She shrugged. "Cain knocked him out, stole a wooden box from some car parts that had come, and buried him in the garden. By the time I got to him, he had screamed himself hoarse and had bloodied his knuckles pounding on the box. He's hated small spaces ever since."

As she spoke, Erik turned away and braced his hands against the window frame, inhaling shaky breaths that tensed the strained muscles of his back.

"What happened to them?" Sean continued to stare at her wide-eyed, far too innocent for such a conversation.

"Kurt and Cain? Dead. Well, Kurt definitely. Cain, might as well be." At the questioning glances, she elaborated. "When I was 12, Cain came after me. Charles used his telepathy and wasn't exactly… neat. Last I heard, Cain was in an island institution off the coast of Boston."

Alex sat with his hands loose in his lap, staring at some non-descript point on the coffee table, while Sean had slid down the shelf and now sat huddled on the floor, fingers digging into his cotton-clad knees. It was Erik, though, that worried her most. He still stood with his hands on the window-frame, head bowed between sharp shoulder blades. But when he spoke, every ounce of fear, pain, and guilt rippled out like a stone dropped in a pond.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"It wasn't my place."

He finally turned and the look on his face floored her. "You had me thinking… I thought…" he gestured helplessly to the extravagance around them and she narrowed her eyes in return.

"You drew those conclusions yourself. You above all should know that appearances can be deceiving."

Feeling as though a high cost had been paid to ease a great burden, Raven stood and strode across the room, trusting Alex and Sean to fill in Hank and Moira, and Erik to find the one man he'd follow anywhere.

xxxxxx

"Nothing but bricks and bad memories."

"Where you'd learn to drink like that?"

"My mother taught me." …

"What am I most afraid of?"
"Small spaces."

"Why?"

"You refused to tell me."

"That's because I haven't told anyone."

These words haunted him – dogged every step that took him up the large staircase and down the hall, bringing him to this one spot from which he could go no further. Charles was on the other side of that door.

Charles, who had been beaten, bloodied, and buried. Charles, whom he had shown his scars without offering the same consideration. Charles, whom he could not live without yet didn't seem to know at all. Charles, who had seen his horrors and not shared his own. Charles, whom he had found in an ocean and lost on a beach.

Erik opened the door and stepped into the darkened room, eyes adjusting to barely make out the lump under the comforter.

First came the shoes. Then the socks and shirt. He padded over to the bed and gingerly lifted the blanket, sliding in behind the smaller man.

In a move as practiced as if they'd been doing it for years, Erik's arm found its way around the other man's waist as Charles scooted back and pressed against Erik's front, fitting perfectly like a puzzle.

Erik buried his nose in the back of Charles' neck and closed his eyes because, no he would not cry. Not now. Charles' didn't need his tears. Didn't need his pity. Charles needed his strength.

"I love you," came the quiet murmur that finally broke the dam.

The tears fell and the sobs came but it was okay, Erik thought as he laced their fingers together.

Charles didn't need his strength.

Maybe Charles just needed him.
Chapter Summary

In which the plan is put in motion.

They laid side-by-side, foreheads nearly touching and knees bent, forming an awkwardly shaped heart if glanced at from above. The curtains were drawn and the room was cool – the only movement the soft caress of their breaths inhaling and exhaling in tandem.

"Ask me."

Charles.

"If we're going to have this conversation, I'd prefer to do it aloud. Now ask me."

Erik closed his tired eyes and sighed into the pillow. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I didn't want you to look at me like that," he responded, referring to the crease of pity and red-rimmed eyes that marred Erik's face. "Trust me, my friend, I've seen that look far too many times in the mirror. I do not need it from you of all people."

Erik traced the pad of his finger across Charles' brow, down the side of his face and around his jaw, as if memorizing its distinct curve. "Whether you want the look or not, you tell me these things. That's how this works."

The side of Charles' mouth tugged up in a soft smile. "Is it?"

"Yes. I love you. And I might not be able to express that love outside of the security of these walls, but what we have is just as real and just as important as any other… relationship. You tell me these things." He cupped Charles's cheek and wiped the tear that had slipped down. "Do you hear me?"

Charles nodded but couldn't speak past the lump in his throat. He had known that allowing himself to fall for this man would be the end of him. Would present a whole new set of problems and obstacles to overcome. What they were doing was illegal. What they had was against the law – as if some person had the right to point to them and say, "No, this is wrong." But how could something so right be wrong? Yes, Charles knew that Erik would be the end of him.

What he didn't realize was how much he just wouldn't care.

He cleared his throat and laced his fingers through Erik's once more. "My childhood might not have been as pampered as you originally thought, but in the grand scheme of things, it's really not that bad."

"The grand scheme of things?"

"Well..." Charles worried his lip between his teeth, "between the two of us, I'm pretty sure I got the better deal."

The speed with which Erik sat up made Charles jump. "This is not a competition. Do not compare
my horrors to yours. What was done to you was…” he trailed off, but the metal fixtures began to vibrate and Charles cupped Erik's cheek, bringing the other man back from the brink. "You do not get to bear this burden alone," he whispered.

Again, Charles could only nod, his voice effectively stolen along with his heart by the man in front of him.

"Now," Erik cleared his throat, composure restored. "I say we go downstairs – because there are at least two very sorry young men waiting for you, two very worried young women, and a little boy who has no idea what's going on."

Charles chuckled and closed his eyes as Erik began running his fingers through his hair.

"Or we could always stay here."

"As tempting as that is, my love, I have no desire to let Cain win this round. Or any, for that matter." His expression darkened. "He's won enough."

And in a move as practiced as breathing, he reached his mind out to the other occupants of the house.

*I am fine and I appreciate your concern, but I swear if one of you so much as glances at me with a look of pity, you will all spend the rest of the week thinking you're thirteen-year-old girls.*

- Holy shit.

- Can he do that?

- I happened to like my pre-teen phase.

Charles chuckled. "Okay, now we can go."

xxxxxx

But Sean and Alex weren't downstairs. In fact, they were sitting on the floor at the end of the hall – far enough away to not intrude, but close enough to know the moment Charles decided to make his presence known.

It took a full three seconds after Erik opened the door for a blur of red to go barreling by and the "oof!" that escaped behind him proved Sean had found his target.

"I know you didn't want pity and I really don't want to be a 13-year-old girl, but I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

The words poured out almost too quickly to comprehend and they were muffled against Charles' shirt, but their meaning was clear.

"It's all right," Charles murmured into Sean's hair, running his hand up and down the boy's back.

Alex followed at a more leisurely pace, hands stuffed into his pockets and eyes downcast as he waited his turn. Erik couldn't be mad at them. Not when they had been just as ignorant as he was.

Erik wasn't the comfort-giver of the house – the kids all knew to go to Charles for that – but Alex looked so pained and Erik knew he couldn't just let him stand there. So after an awkward pause, he reached out and placed his hand on the boy's shoulder, giving it a small squeeze.

Alex relaxed under his touch and shot him a grateful look as Charles smiled over Sean's shoulder.
You're getting better at that.

Erik rolled his eyes, but fought off a grin. Charles would be the end of him.

The feeling's mutual, my friend.

Days passed and tensions eased. The incident with the shed was not mentioned again, though its consequences were felt. Raven noticed it in the way the boys seemed to give Charles a slightly wider berth, as if their mere proximity was cause for claustrophobia.

"Go over it again."

Moira sighed, bristling slightly at Erik's tone. "The plan has hardly changed since the last time you heard it five minutes ago."

"Again."

"Fine." Moira jabbed her finger at the map labeled 'Manhattan' spread out in front of them. "The club is on Central Park South between 6th and 7th Avenues. Charles and I will check in tomorrow evening just to scope the place out. We'll stay two days and – "

"What if you find something?" Alex interrupted.

"Regardless of whether or not we do, we will come back after two days, regroup and formulate a plan going forward," Charles reasoned. "No sense in being rash."

"Right," Moira continued. "We'll be staying in the club – "

"We' meaning you and Charles." Raven smirked and glanced at Erik, attempting to get a rise out of him, and judging by the way he seemed to be plotting her death in his head, she had succeeded.

Moira finally got out what she needed to say, with only a few more minor interruptions. ("What? We don't get to come to the cool club?"). It was decided that Erik, Sean, and Raven would stay at the hotel down the street ("It's the Plaza, Sean. Stop complaining"), while Hank and Alex stayed home again with Daniel.

Raven was fine with that plan. Erik, a little less so.

"And how do you plan on getting in to your little club? Or did the CIA take care of that as well." Erik's voice was low and Raven didn't miss his disdainful glance at the box of provisions McCone had sent ahead in his stead.

"Actually that won't be necessary," Charles said. "My family are members. Have been since my great-grandfather."

Erik's eyes narrowed and Raven held her breath. Here we go.

"And whose name do you plan on giving when you check in?"

"Mine, of course."

"That's quite a risk to take so casually."

"Easier to find me."
"I don't appreciate you gambling with your life."

Raven's gaze flipped back and forth with all the speed of a tennis match, but when the dizziness got to be too much she snapped.

"Oh for God's sake, get a room."

xxxxxx

Knock, knock.

Moira glanced up and couldn't hide the look of surprise on her face at finding Erik with his hand raised. They hadn't been alone since their argument in the library and that was probably because every room one of them entered, the other beat a hasty retreat.

Yet here he was, hovering in her doorway and Moira had nowhere to run.

"Can I help you?"

"I'd like to talk… if that's all right." Erik took a step forward and began to close to door. He must have caught the way her eyes widened because he quickly followed up with, "Just talk. I promise."

She nodded and but refused to take a seat, in case she did have to find an alternative means of exit. But something deep down told her that wouldn't be an issue, as Erik shuffled into the room and looked everywhere but at her.

"He seems adamant about doing this."

She placed the shirt she had been folding into the open suitcase in front of her. "He does."

"And since nothing I say on the matter will sway him, I was wondering if you would do me a favor."

She cocked an eyebrow, making no guarantees, but what Erik said next shattered whatever defenses she had put up.

"Take care of him. Just… watch out for him. Please." His voice broke on the final word.

There was no denying that, no matter what this man had done in the past or how many people he had hurt, he loved Charles Xavier more than life itself and it was a humbling realization to come to.

Moira stepped forward and placed a hesitant hand on Erik's arm.

"Of course I will."

Erik nodded and finally met her eye.

"Thank you."

xxxxxx

Charles knelt down and pressed his nose against Daniel's, loving the way his son's tiny hands immediately came up and pressed against his cheek.

"I'll be home soon."

Daniel pouted and pushed a thin tome into Charles' chest. "Book."
"Book?" Charles picked up Paddington Bear where it had fallen and smiled softly. "Alex will read to you, won't you, Alex?"

"Sure thing."

They really had to go, but Daniel continued to pout, tugging Charles back down to his knees.

"What's wrong, my love?" Charles gently brushed the hair of Daniel's face,

"He doesn't do the voices," Sean whispered and Alex glared. "At least not as well as I do."

Charles chuckled and pressed a kiss to Daniel's forehead. "I'm sure Alex and Hank will do a splendid job reading to you while Vati and I are gone."

The little boy looked unconvinced, but at the mention of Vati, he hurled himself at Erik's knees, nearly knocking the older man over.

"Easy there, Bärchen," he murmured. "We'll be home before you know it."

Charles remained kneeling on the floor, watching the scene with a heavy, full heart. He hated leaving Daniel – had never spent even a night away from him until his capture. To leave him willingly, though, was proving to be difficult indeed. And if the way Erik was doing nothing to release the boy's hold on his legs gave any indication, the other man was faring no better.

"Guys," Moira gently began.

Charles cleared his throat. "Right, we'd best be off."

Erik bent down and swooped Daniel into his arms, causing the boy to shriek. He blew a raspberry on his cheek, before pressing a tender kiss to the red mark.

We're both coming home to this, do you understand me?

Erik's voice in his head was jarring and Charles had been so lost in the moment, it took him a second to comprehend what had just been said. When he did, his heart hurt. To imply that one of them would not return was a possibility Charles was not willing to face. He couldn't bear the thought that this could be the last time he held his son in his arms, or inhaled the familiar scent of the house, or marveled at the way three lost boys had become men right before his eyes.

In a few days time, we will both be holed up in bed, Daniel between us, reading Winnie the Pooh.

Erik shot him a soft smile over Daniel's head. I'm holding you to that.

I hope so.

Charles stood up and reached for Alex first, giving him a firm hug once Raven had released her stranglehold on him. Hank came next, his big arms nearly engulfing the smaller man. His fur tickled Charles' nose and quickly turned away to sneeze.

"Sorry 'bout that."

Hank gave a weary chuckle. "Happens all the time."

And here it was: the goodbye he had been dreading. Charles walked slowly up to Erik and the little boy still in his arms. It was quite a sight – the metal-bender was swaying, gently rocking back and forth and easing the pout from Daniel's face as it became clear that both of his fathers were leaving.
"Be good," he whispered, placing a kiss on the boy's forehead. Big blue eyes glanced back and forth between the two men looking down on him, and Daniel reached out to grab each of them by the nose.

Something twisted in Charles' chest and he ran his hand through the boy's hair once more. *If we don't do it now, I'm afraid we'll never leave this house.*

"Right." Erik cleared his throat once more, placing Daniel in Hank's waiting arms.

Charles didn't look back when he walked out the door with a bag in each arm or when he reached the car and dumped said bags in the trunk. He didn't look back when he slid in the front seat or when Erik started the engine with a flick of a wrist.

No, he waited until they were halfway down the drive when the people waving from the top step were nothing but a blur, just so the sight of his son's face wouldn't have him sprinting back to the front door and locking it firmly behind them.

xxxxxx

*HolyshitNewYork.*

Sean had been there twice before: his father had taken him to a Red Sox/Yankees game when he was six and he, Charles, and Erik had made a pit stop in midtown on their way from Boston to Virginia. It was an amusing trip: Charles had purchased him a cola while Erik stood on guard as if Russians were going to jump out of the bushes.

"We're here," Erik muttered, pulling up a block away from the Plaza.

"Fuck a duck," Sean announced, causing Raven to snort beside him.

The plan was to get out at the hotel and let Moira and Charles drive up and use the valet at the club. Sean had never stayed at a place that even warranted a valet, so to see the Plaza Hotel in all its glory was like laying eyes on the Taj Mahal for the first time.

Raven grabbed her bag from the trunk and shoved Sean's into his chest. He groaned, but kept his eyes on the skyline, admiring the way Central Park stretched out between the skyscrapers, an oasis in the middle of a concrete desert. It was a hand on his shoulder that finally tore his eyes away and he found himself looking up into the amused expression of the professor.

"Be careful, okay?"

Sean nodded and allowed himself to be pulled into a hug. "You too. Give 'em hell, Prof."

"It's a reconnaissance mission only, Sean." He smiled. "But I do appreciate the sentiment."

Sean waved to Moira as she slid into the passenger seat, but he clapped his hands together and hopped on the balls of his feet as he thought of something.

"Ooh, ooh, don't forget the wedding rings," he called, happy to have remembered a small, yet vital detail that no one else seemed to.

"Oh. Right," Charles muttered, reaching through the window as Moira placed the same golden ring Erik had worn in his palm. The professor seemed to study it for a moment, something sad and hopeful lingering in his gaze.
But before Charles could come to any decision about whatever was rolling around his brilliant mind, Erik took the ring from his hand and slid it on the professor's finger so gently that Sean had to turn away, letting the men say their tight, restrained goodbyes. He wasn't a fool – he knew there was only so much the two could show in public. It sucked, but it's how things were. He kicked a pebble and watched it fly into the nearby fountain.

"Right, we'll be in touch," Charles said, signaling it was okay to look back again. The professor got behind the wheel and smiled at them, before revving the engine and driving away. Sean didn't think it would be a big deal, but he somehow felt a little empty inside.

"Come on, ginger," Raven muttered, following behind Erik's long strides.

"No need for name calling, blondie."

Raven smiled and nuded his shoulder, before leaning in to whisper conspiratorially. "We're in the Plaza!"

Sean flashed a grin, happy to have someone else share in his enthusiasm for this clearly momentous occasion. Erik certainly didn't, as evidenced by the gruff way he gave their names to the front desk and retrieved their keys. They'd all be staying in one room again, despite having the financial means to get another. It was just easier that way. Safer, too, he supposed.

But for the life of him, he couldn't stop staring at the gilded surfaces and ornamental embellishments, safety be damned. And the room itself was no less distracting.

"Dude! Chocolates on the pillows!"

It was gonna be a good trip.

xxxxxx

The scotch burned, but the bar was dark and he felt more at home under the low lights and oak paneling than in the marble lobby under the garish crystal chandeliers.

Erik was two blocks away from Charles. Two blocks filled with horse drawn carriages, spring tourists, and families on their way to the park.

Just 900 feet and it might as well have been no man's land.

He thought of what he had whispered in Charles' ear not an hour before, as he placed a band of gold on the fourth finger of his left hand. A band that meant nothing but signified everything.

*I'm going to put one of these on your finger one day. Not today or tomorrow. Or even a decade from now. But one day, I will. I promise you that.*

He was two blocks away from Charles and it felt like an eternity.
Pretenses

Chapter Summary

In which Charles and Moira play pretend and Erik finds a new appreciation for the toothpaste aisle.

Moira's breath hitched in her chest as she watched their only mode of transportation disappear around the corner.

"Come on," Charles whispered in her ear, giving her a kiss on the cheek. Though whether he did it to keep up pretenses or ease the evident panic on her face, Moira wasn't entirely sure. She didn't entirely care, either.

The building was imposing from the outside and even more so on the inside. It didn't have the regal, yet warm and cozy feeling of the Plaza. This was more militaristic – all hard lines and sharply cut stone.

Still, Charles led her through the door and strode right up to the desk, rattling off his name and a nine digit number with all the charm and charisma that made her fall for him the first time around. Of course, that was before she knew. Knew that someone else would swim into Charles Xavier's life and there was no way she could compete.

It didn't bother her so much now. Not even as he slid an arm around her waist and chuckled at something the man behind the counter said.

"Thank you very much," Charles replied as he took their key, giving Moira a slight tug toward the elevators, before he leaned in and whispered, "You know, for a CIA agent, you're awfully spacy at the moment."

She flushed and elbowed him in the stomach. "Don't think this is an excuse for you to get handsy. You cop a feel and I'll break your wrist."

"My dear, I wouldn't dream of it." A sly smile. "Not even a little one?"

Her laughter echoed off the marble ceiling. "You're a terrible, terrible man."

He sighed heavily. "I keep telling them that, but they never listen."

It was a beautiful, tiny moment. A reprieve from the chaos they were about to walk into.

The elevator dinged open and Charles extended his arm to let her enter first. "Shall we?"

All mirth was gone from his face, the seriousness of the situation reflected in the blue eyes that seemed to ask her one final time, 'Are you sure about this?'

She nodded and slid her hand into his, holding tight.

"We shall."
"Getting drunk already?" Raven arched an eyebrow as she slid onto the stool next to Erik at the bar.

"I wish," Erik replied, signaling the barman for another.

The area off the main ballroom was dark and aptly named The Oak Room. Pictures of Marilyn Monroe and Frank Sinatra hung on the wall and Raven suddenly felt very underdressed, tugging slightly on the short black dress that fell a good six inches above the top of her leather boots.

"Where's Sean?" He would never own up to it, but Raven could have sworn she heard a note of panic in his voice.

"In the lobby. Counting the amount of crystals in the chandelier and trying to see if he can steal more chocolate from the cleaning lady's cart."

"At least that'll keep him busy."

Raven smiled as Erik dove into the scotch in front of him. It must have been difficult for him – sitting here, waiting. He was always more of an 'act now, think later' type of man and letting someone else do the acting while he sat there with nothing but his thoughts must have been killing him.

"Something for you, miss?"

Raven blinked up at the bartender and realized he was talking to her. "Oh. Right."

One cola, please. Charles' voice echoed in her ears and she smiled. Charles wasn't here now.

"Gin and tonic."

Erik arched an eyebrow, but she glared, daring him to say something.

"One gin and tonic coming right up." The barman winked and Raven flushed.

"Don't get any ideas," Erik muttered. "Charles isn't here so consider me your temporary big brother."

Raven scooted her stool closer to him and laid her head mockingly on his shoulder. "Come on, Lehnsherr. Let a girl have some fun."

He grunted in response and she chuckled, taking an experimental sip of the drink the very handsome barman placed in front of her. Hmm. Gin was interesting and she couldn't tell if the bite she tasted was the alcohol or the tonic. She took a larger gulp and turned slightly to look out the windows at the park beyond.

"Is this your first time to New York?"

"No. I was here briefly with Charles and Sean, and one time before that."

"During the Great Shaw-hunt of 1961?" She caught Erik's look and winced. "Sorry. That was rude."

"Yet surprisingly appropriate," He took a long draw of his drink while Raven did the same. "The Great Shaw-hunt of 1961… I like it. Though it started a lot earlier than that, I'm afraid."

"Well I couldn't exactly say the Great Shaw-hunt of 1946 to 1962. It doesn't exactly have the same ring to it." She giggled and the look Erik shot her had her wondering if the gin hadn't already gone to her head. As she thought of her brother and Moira just down the street, though, an uneasy feeling
settled in the pit of her stomach and wiped the smile from her face.

"They'll be all right, right?"

Erik said nothing. Just stared into the bottom of his tumbler as if it held all the answers to life's impossible questions. Of course, if she wanted a sugarcoated response, Erik was definitely not the person to go to. He wasn't exactly known for his optimism.

"They'll be fine," he finally muttered.

"Are you lying to me?"

"God I hope not." Erik closed his eyes, as if those four tiny words caused him physical pain, and Raven placed what she hoped was a comforting hand on his shoulder. She wanted to tell him that things would be fine, that Charles had a habit of slipping out of trouble. It was an ability tightly honed over the years, ever since he talked his way out of detention for getting caught making out with Sally whatshername in the all-boys dormitories.

She wanted to tell him these things, but she couldn't. Because she didn't quite believe it herself.

But leave it to Sean to diffuse the tension. He plopped down on the seat next to Raven and dumped a handful of chocolates on the bar.

"Four hundred and ninety two crystals."

He might have been an idiot, but he brought chocolate and that made him all right in Raven's book.

xxxxxx

Charles opened the door and let it swing back into the suite, revealing the small lounge and large, plush bed.

He followed her gaze to it and smirked. "I promise to behave myself."

She merely rolled her eyes in return and walked to the foot of the bed, where their bags already waited for them. They hadn't run into anyone on the way up, an eerie occurrence, for Charles couldn't even take two steps in the ridiculously large mansion without literally running into someone running away from something they had broken.

He wasn't sure what they expected to find when they didn't even know what they were looking for. Sadly, most secret societies didn't have placards on the wall that read, "Torture Chamber Just Up Ahead."

He sighed and twirled the ring around his finger as he glanced out the window onto the busy street below. Yellow taxis crawled by like bugs in the midday traffic and he had a brief, horrific, what the hell was I thinking moment as he thought of the risk he was so casually taking. He was a father now. He had responsibilities. He couldn't chance things because his ego said it was the right thing to do. The right thing to do would be reading a book at home in bed, Daniel in his lap and Erik by his side.

"Something wrong?" Moira's voice startled him and he turned away from the window, clearing his throat.

"The ring is a little big." He chuckled as he lifted his left hand.

"That's because it was made for Erik."
For a brief moment, his mind went blank before he managed an, "Excuse me?"

Moira stopped hanging her clothes in the closet and turned to face him. "No one ever told you the details of how you were rescued, did they."

"No. No, they did not." His heart hammered in his chest and he sat down on the edge of the bed as Moira leaned against the armoire. It hadn't occurred to him to ask – perhaps it was his subconscious telling him he was better off not knowing – but it was too important a detail to shove under the bed now.

"It was a club similar to this," Moira started as she walked over and sat down next to him. "Some of the members used it as a cover for their backdoor dealings. It was hard because you didn't know who was just a member of the club and who was a member of the society within the club."

"I suspect we face the same problem here," Charles murmured, none too thrilled at the daunting prospect.

"Well, I happen to know a telepath that might be able to help us out." She nudged his shoulder before continuing on. "Anyway, the CIA got us in and Erik and I pretended to be married. We went to a party, found you, and the rest is history, as they say."

"I see. So I'm the second husband." He tried to make his face look as wounded as possible and Moira laughed.

"Erik and I had to pretend to be married for two hours. You and I have to pretend for two days. Big difference. Though I do have a confession to make." She bit her lip and avoided his gaze. "I kissed him."

Charles felt his eyebrows shoot up and what Moira said next came out in such a jumbled rush, he had to simultaneously glean the thoughts from her head just for some sense of understanding. "It meant nothing. It was purely for strategic purposes and I didn't enjoy it one bit, but I feel as though I should come clean."

"Come clean?" he chuckled.

"Well of course. You and Erik are… well, you know…" she made a random gesture with her hands that he supposed was meant to signify 'together,' but she huffed out a breath and let her palms drop to her lap. "You're Charles and Erik," she finished softly, for lack of a better word.

Charles and Erik.

He smiled and wrapped an arm around her shoulder, placing a gentle kiss on her cheek. "I won't hold it against you."

Moira patted his knee and stood from the bed, unzipping the garment bag hanging on the door. "We're expected at dinner tonight at 6:00," she reminded as she ran a finger down the blue silk gown she brought. "Have you thought of what you'll do if you are recognized?"

Charles shook his head and closed his eyes. "I shouldn't have come," he moaned, burying his face in his hands. "Erik was right. It was incredibly naïve of me to think I could just waltz in here, give my own name, and think everything would work out fine. I don't even know what we're doing."

"We…" she bent down and placed her hands on his shoulders, "are going to find out who's behind this so you and Erik can go to bed at night knowing your son is safe. Knowing that the children in
your care will never be chained up and tested like animals." She cupped his cheek and he leaned into her touch. "That is what we are doing."

He nodded and she placed her hands on her hips. "Good. Now get up. The point of a reconnaissance mission is to, you know, do recon."

"Yes, ma'am."

"How long's he been in there?" Alex asked, as he stood next to Hank in the doorway of Charles' – well, Charles and Erik's – room.

"Since they left," Hank replied softly.

Alex shook his head as he watched Daniel curl up among the pillows, thinking sardonically that Erik's nickname was rather apt. The kid really did know how to burrow.

"So, what... Do we just wait in case they need us?" Sean laid back on the bed, leaving his legs dangling over the edge.

"That's the idea," Raven drawled, flipping another page in the magazine the concierge had given her. Erik stood at the window, alternating between keeping an ear on the evening news and watching the exit below.

"But I'm bored," Sean whined.

"Go steal some more chocolates." Raven flipped another page with increasing ferocity. She'd rip one soon if she wasn't careful.

"That was fun the first four times. It's not fun anymore."

Erik could feel his frustration rising. He had agreed that staying in one room was a good idea for safety's sake. Hell, they had done it before in Philadelphia. But now, they didn't have the stunned silence that Charles' abduction had left in its wake, and the inherent restlessness every teen carries was making its presence known.

"I'm going for a walk," Erik abruptly announced, grabbing his leather jacket off a chair and swinging it over his shoulders. "Stay here."

"But – " Raven began before she was cut off.

"It's not up for discussion."

Erik yanked the door open, patting his pocket for the hotel key and giving Sean a chance to yell, "Get toothpaste!" before the door slammed shut, leaving Erik in the blissful silence of the hallway.

He had tried to keep his mind occupied by focusing on the day's current events and the odd, homeless person barking at pigeons in the small park across from the hotel. By now, as he jabbed the button to call the elevator, he allowed his focus to drift those two short blocks and wonder just what Charles was up to.

The afternoon was waning into evening so he would most likely be dressing for dinner. The image
of Charles in a tuxedo brought an entirely inappropriate grin to Erik’s face, which he covered up before the elevator doors opened to reveal a woman, who might have thought him just as strange as the man barking at birds.

The air was chilly for May with the wind whipping in between the buildings, and Erik flipped his collar up as he made his way past the bellman and towards the pharmacy on the corner of 5th Avenue.

The desire to walk in the other direction was almost too much, but Erik kept his feet walking one in front of the other until the fluorescent lights of the pharmacy welcomed him with open arms.

"Can I help you, sir?"

He glanced up to find a kid no older than Sean behind the counter. "Toothpaste?"

"Aisle three."

"Thanks."

Dental care soon stretched out in front of him and he spared a brief moment to wonder what flavor Sean liked before deciding he frankly didn't care. Ready to pick the nearest one off the shelf, Erik stopped dead at the sight of Charles, not ten feet away, clearly weighing his options as he held two different brands in his hands.

Erik allowed himself a moment to just observe the way the other man furrowed his brow and bit his lip, debating the pros and cons of something that Erik couldn't even begin to tell the difference between. Suppressing a chuckle, he made his way slowly down the aisle and stopped so he was back to back with Charles.

"Forgetting toothpaste seems to be an affliction in the Xavier household."

The sharp inhale behind him proved Charles was well aware of his presence now.

"Yes, my… wife and I both managed not to pack it." Charles tripped over the word and, despite the fact that he knew it was a cover, Erik couldn't help the tightening in chest. "Who are you buying for?"

Erik cleared his throat and turned, though Charles remained facing the other shelf. "My son."

"Ah. I see."

"I'm glad." Sparing a brief glance down the aisle to make sure they were alone, he closed his eyes and allowed his nose to brush against Charles' ear, biting back a moan as the smaller man leaned back ever so slightly, pressing his body against Erik's.

"Go with this one," Erik whispered hoarsely, picking one of the boxes out of Charles' hand.

"I appreciate the recommendation, my friend," Charles replied as Erik stepped away. "Give your children my best." I miss them.

"The same to your wife." They miss you too.

"I will."

Be careful.
I love you.

Erik stood in the aisle long after the bell over the door signaled Charles' exit.

xxxxxx

Moira fastened the back on her pearl earrings and gently wiped away some wayward eyeliner. Her heart hammered against her sternum and she braced her palms on the vanity, closing her eyes and inhaling deeply in an effort to calm her nerves for the night ahead.

"Charles, are you almost ready?" She poked her head through the open bathroom door to see him combing his hair back in the mirror.

"Just about." He tossed the comb on the counter and turned to face her. She flushed as his eyebrows shot up and he let out a low whistle. "You look phenomenal."

"Thank you. Will you zip me up?" She turned and pulled her hair over her shoulder.

"Gladly." His fingers ghosted across her bare shoulder to steady her as he took hold of the zipper. "All set. Now where's my jacket..." he asked as he clipped his cufflinks.

"Back of the chair," she responded, admiring him as he moved about the room. He looked good in a tuxedo. He wore it with a natural ease, as if he had been wearing one his whole life. It was a lot different than the way Erik inhabited formal wear, as if it suffocated him, cutting off all circulation.

Moira leaned over and applied her final swipe of lipstick, watching Charles fight with his bow tie in the mirror with amusement.

"Stop, stop." She batted his hands away and deftly took the fabric in her fingers, weaving it around until it resembled a perfect knot.

"Where'd you learn how to do that?"

"My father taught me." She smirked and patted him on the chest, before turning and looking for her clutch.

*It's just dinner,* she told herself. *Just dinner.*

*We'll be fine,* came Charles' reply and Moira practically jumped. "Sorry. I keep forgetting you're not as used to that as the other members of my household."

She shot him a wry smile. "I'm sure I'll get used to it one day."

Going over their checklist one final time (rings, keys, and the garter gun that had Charles looking equal parts scandalized and aroused), they made their way downstairs to the main dining room, where they were seated with two other couples and a pair of single gentlemen.

Moira wasn't sure what she had been expecting, but it wasn't this. It was actually almost *pleasant.* Small talk introduced them to Mr. and Mrs. Howard Reed of Maryland and Dr. and Mrs. Michael Hardwick of Martha's Vineyard. The two gentlemen in town on business were Mr. Robert Lindsay of California and Mr. Peter Hayden of Washington D.C.

The sound of "Mrs. Xavier" registered somewhere in the back of her mind, but only when Charles whispered, "That's you, darling," in her ear did she realize she was meant to respond.

"I beg your pardon, I'm so sorry."
Mrs. Reed chuckled good-naturedly. "Not a problem, dear. I merely asked how you two met."

Panic came on sharp and swift. They hadn't rehearsed this part, but Charles' palm firmly and reassuringly gripped her knee, letting her know that he would handle things from there.

"School. We met in school. Oxford, actually," he replied, smiling broadly as Mrs. Reed "aww-ed."

"Was it love at first sight?"

"No actually, she couldn't stand me," Charles chuckled.

"That's true," Moira accidentally blurted out, before clapping her hand over her mouth. Charles' thumb brushed her kneecap and she put her glass of wine down lest she have any more verbal slipups.

It was a sight to see, really: Charles spinning a tale at the drop of a hat. If she didn't already know his mutation, she'd assume it was being a good liar. Then again, telepathy surely helped in that regard. He detailed the tavern where he first hit on her (not exactly a lie) and the bookstore café he eventually stalked her at until she agreed to a date. It was infectious, this dishonesty, and when Mrs. Hardwick asked what she studied, she replied "Art History," without missing a beat.

A waltz started up as the last of the dinner plates were cleared and Charles stood, offering his hand and winking when Moira looked at him incredulously.

"I can't dance."

"Of course you can. You did it at our wedding splendidly."

She narrowed her eyes to a glare and placed her palm in his, allowing herself to be tugged up flush against his chest as he led her out onto the floor.

"Charles – " she began to admonish before he cut her off.

"No time for that, love. Peter Hayden is here to meet with an Elliot McKittrick regarding admittance into the Society. He doesn't know about me, but if I was a betting man – and let's face it, I am – I would say that this McKittrick person does."

"Why didn't you tell me at the table?" She asked, glancing back as Peter Hayden engaged Dr. Hardwick in conversation.

"I have a habit of startling you when I'm in your head. I didn't need you knocking over the wine."

She hated to admit it, but he was right. Her trained eyes scanned the room and she let out a gasp, which caused Charles' hand to tighten on her lower back.

"Him. I recognize him from Philadelphia. He was in the ballroom the night we came to get you."

Charles gracefully spun her around and caught a glimpse of the man she was referring to before he disappeared out the door.

"That's him. Elliot McKittrick."

"How do you know?"

"Telepath, darling."
"Right."

The band wound down and Charles led her to the bar instead of their table, signaling for a scotch and a champagne, though her head already felt like it was swimming on the bubbles.

"Xavier!" Lindsay and Hardwick flanked them and clapped two large hands on Charles' shoulders. "How about a game of poker? Your wife won't mind if we steal you for a bit, will she?"

Charles raised an eyebrow and she immediately heard his smooth voice in her head. *It'll give me a chance to talk to Lindsay. See what he knows. You can explore.*

Moira smiled. "By all means, steal away."

Charles winked and she watched as he disappeared around the corner, but even after he was gone, his voice remained.

*If you need me at all, you call me. You'll be in here the entire time.*

*Play nice, husband.*

*Spy well, wife.*

An hour later and all Moira learned was that the members of this club had an unnatural ability to drink and a disturbing affinity for dead animals on the walls.

She sat to the side in one of the lounges as Charles played poker, sucking down what must have been her twentieth glass (at least that's what it felt like) of champagne.

"Full house, aces high," the dealer announced, causing all the men at the table save Charles to groan.

Moira stood unsteadily and walked up behind her him, resting her chin on his shoulder and giving the men across the table a distracting view down her dress.

*Are you cheating?* She subtly tapped his temple and he looked scandalized.

*Darling, I am a gentleman. I never cheat at cards. Or chess. Maybe Monopoly, but never ever cards or chess.*

"Well then." Moira took Charles' face in her hands and pressed a slow, sensual kiss to his lips. "For luck," she whispered as she pulled away and gently closed Charles' mouth by pressing her finger to the bottom of his chin. As she turned away from the table, she smugly noticed that Charles' hadn't been the only jaw on the floor.

Needless to say, he won that round.

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Charles noticed two things when he awoke the following morning: a fuzzy feeling in his mouth and a warm body on his chest.

He remembered scotch. Lots and lots of scotch. And poker. And Moira's strategic kiss, which prevented the men at the table from convincingly bluffing their way to victory.

Which was why Charles stumbled back into the room almost $500 richer than when he left. Speaking of Moira…
Charles squinted one eye open to see her sprawled out across his stomach, snoring softly into his
dress shirt. Neither of them had made it out of their formal wear, which did nothing to explain why
he was only wearing one shoe and Moira was wearing his bowtie.

He tried to move, but every muscle in his body ached, with the pounding in his head leading the
charge.

"Moira, love, wake up."

"Go away," she groaned, shifting to her other cheek. "Good pillows are quiet."

He chuckled and ran a hand through her hair. "Yes, but I'm afraid I'm not a pillow. I am your fake
husband for at least the next 24 hours and right now, we need to get up."

"That was a lot of words for so early in the morning."

"It's not early, it's 10:03."

Moira's head shot up and a rapid, "Oh shit," left her mouth, followed closely by a groan as the pain
caught up with her body.

"Oh shit is right," Charles replied, forcing his body into a sitting position and pulling his winnings
from his pocket. He couldn't help but chuckle as he got a good look at her for the first time. Mascara
smudged around her eyes, making her look like one of those raccoons mounted on the wall, her hair
stuck up at all angles, and his shirt had left crease marks on one side of her face.

"I blame you for everything," she muttered.

"What did I do?"

"I don't know, which is why it's your fault." She held her head and closed her eyes, as if willing the
room to stop spinning.

"Come on," he said, placing a kiss to her pounding temple. "What kind of husband would I be if I
didn't get you the two miracle hangover cures: a bloody mary and bacon."

"Yes to the first, no to the second, throw in come coffee and you've got yourself a deal."

xxxxxx

"Oh this is too good," Sean announced as he entered the diner to find Moira sitting across from
Charles in sunglasses, looking decidedly the worse for wear.

Erik gave him a subtle, yet sharp elbow to the ribs to remind the teen that they weren't actually
supposed to know who Charles and Moira were.

"Sorry," the boy muttered. "Forgot."

"Forgot?" Raven hissed. "We told you two minutes ago."

"Dude, give me a break."

"Knock it off, both of you," Erik's reprimand drew Charles' eyes to his.

*Good morning,* Charles' mental voice croaked.
Erik raised an eyebrow and subtly nodded in Moira's direction, where she slurped down a bloody mary. *Doesn't look like it.*

*It would be a long story if I could remember the second half.*

Erik arched an eyebrow but said nothing, leading Raven and Sean to the booth behind Moira and Charles’ putting the two men back to back. A waitress came over and promptly asked, "What'll it be?"

Moira groaned, "Too loud," and this time, not even Raven could hide her snicker behind her hands. Erik gave them a not-too-gentle kick under the table, causing Sean to yelp.

"Three coffees and three pancakes, please," Erik ordered.

"But I wanted waffles," Sean exclaimed.

"Tough."

*Really, Erik. Denying the boy waffles?*

Erik kept his mind stubbornly silent.

*Fine, be that way, Charles replied. I guess I'll have to wait until you're in a more talkative mood to tell you about the information we discovered.*

It was tempting indeed – almost as tempting as jumping over the booth that separated them and kissing Charles senseless, but before Erik could even enjoy the warm feeling that image caused, the waitress was back disappointingly sans coffee and pancakes.

"Excuse me, Dr. Xavier?"

Charles frowned. "Yes?"

"This was just dropped off for you." The waitress placed a sealed piece of paper in his hand, which he waited to unfold until the girl stepped back behind the counter.

*What is it?*

"Fuck," Charles breathed out.

"Prof, you totally have to put a dollar in the swear jar when we get back. Shit! Sorry! Forgot again."

"Doesn't matter, Sean," Charles replied, surprisingly all as he turned in his seat and wordlessly passed the note to Erik.

"Charles…"

"Just read it."

Erik's eyes flew across the paper twice before the words finally sunk in.

*Dr. Xavier,*

*Be so kind as to meet me at two o'clock this afternoon in the Rockefeller Room.*

*And bring your little metal-bender friend.*
Cordially,

E. McKittrick
In which Sean gets a phone call and Charles reveals his inner BAMF.

The note was relatively unassuming: handwritten on embossed, heavy stationery with a simple greeting and a finite end. It was just a piece of paper, yet it sat apart on the nightstand as if tattooed with poisoned ink.

"What do we do?" Raven's gaze darted between the two men sitting opposite each other on twin beds, holding identical poses. Each hunched over, elbows on their knees, gaze never breaking. "Out loud, please."

Erik glared at her and Charles sighed heavily. "Erik and I were just discussing how best to get you home."

"You can't be serious." Sean stared incredulously. "You're actually considering going?"

"We're not considering. We are."

At Charles' words, Erik stood swiftly and strode over to the window, but Raven could not tear her eyes away from her brother. Her heart hammered in her chest because ohgodno this was just supposed to be recon. They were all supposed to go home and play Pictionary because Raven thought 'game night' would be a great way to bond. They were all supposed to go home together – not leave the lynchpins of their family behind.

"Charles, you can't," she croaked. "They will kill you." She turned to plead her case to Erik, for surely he wouldn't let Charles risk his life – not again – yet the taller man resolutely avoided her gaze. "Please."

"Raven, I don't believe my attendance at today's meeting will have any effect whatsoever on their designs on my life."

She let out a whimper and sank down into Erik's vacant seat, staring at her brother's forlorn yet resolute look.

After a solid minute of silence, Charles cleared his throat and blinked.

"Moira, would you mind making sure they make it home?"

"I'm not leaving," Raven gritted out, not even giving the agent a chance to reply.

"Me either," Sean piped up.

"This isn't up for discussion," Charles replied warily. He looked as if he had aged ten years in the last ten minutes and Raven found herself wishing she could rewind back to that diner, eating hot pancakes and drinking weak coffee. Or even to the night before, as Erik humored Sean's desire to practice cannonballs in the hotel pool. Anything would be better than where they were now: sitting around a suffocating suite, eyeing a simple piece of paper as if it was laced with dynamite.
"Please, please don't do this. What about Daniel? You can't –"

But her words had finally lit a fire in Erik and he surged forward at the mention of the little boy.

"Do not bring Daniel into this. We are doing this for him."

"How is you two getting yourselves captured or killed doing something for him?" Rage and desperation fought within her and, try as she might to keep a stoic façade, her lower wobbled and hot tears spilled onto her cheeks. "We've already lost you once," she cried, addressing Charles. "You can't… Please…"

"Hey, hey, shh.” And just like that Charles' arms were wrapped around her in the most painfully familiar manner as she sobbed into his shirt. "It's okay," he murmured in her ear as he gently swayed back and forth. It was a practiced movement, done countless times as children when he found her cowering in a corner after Cain went on a rampage. His nose would be bloody and his eye would be swollen, but he comforted her all the same.

This familiarity was interrupted, however, by a strange hand on her back – one not belonging to her brother. She pulled away and blinked, finding herself face to face with Erik as he rubbed tiny circles over the shirt she was forced to wear. Without warning and without really thinking, she let go of Charles and pounced on Erik, throwing her arms around his neck with such force that he grunted and took several steps back.

"That goes for you, too," she whispered. She felt him smile at her cheek.

"I know."

And a feeling of calm washed over her that had absolutely nothing to do with her brother's telepathy. They would be okay because, frankly, she wasn't going to give them any other option.

xxxxxx

"I still think that when some psychotic asshole invites you to tea, you politely, but firmly decline."

Sean was glad he managed to draw a chuckle from the Professor, who was throwing things haphazardly into Erik's bag and creating the kind of chaos Sean didn't really associate with Windsor knots and tweed cardigans.

The teen sat on top of the bureau, letting his heels thump against the drawers, carefully lifting his legs whenever Charles had to open them to throw even more things into the open suitcase.

"That was my way of saying I don't think you should go."

Charles lifted an eyebrow. "Noted."

Once Raven had let go of Erik, she had disappeared into the hall followed closely by Moira to collect herself. It was weird to see her lose it – Alex had his temper, Sean his humor, and Hank his uncertainty, so often leaving Raven the only one to hold it together.

He hid behind his nonchalance, his casual spouting of, 'That was my way of saying I don't think you should go,' but really all he wanted to do was grab the professor by the shoulders and plead in a most uncool manner for him to stay. Because when Sean closed his eyes, he saw Daniel's tears and Alex's blood and Charles' vacant gaze – memories he wished he could forget. And he had absolutely no desire to live through that again.
And he was about to tell him as such, but the hotel phone rang shrilly in the silence, causing Sean to jump and bang his head against the wall.

"Sean, what did I tell you about ordering room service?" came Erik's stern voice from the bathroom.

"I swear I didn't!" he called back, grabbing the receiver and barking a much curter than normal, "Hello?"

"Say nothing," came the voice on the other end.

"What?"

"If you would like to see the men you consider fathers again after today, you will say nothing of what I am about to say, do I make myself clear? Say, 'No, this is room 853,' if you do."

The drum of his heart was the only thing that informed him he was still conscious – the rest of his body had gone numb.

"No… this is room 853," he whispered and no amount of bullshitting could patch the brokenness of his voice.

"Good boy."

He couldn't be sure what was said after that – just a good deal of threats and some very unpleasant words regarding everyone he loved. He had difficulty even hearing over the roaring in his own ears and it was only when the harsh buzz of the dial tone echoed through the receiver that he managed to blink and put it down.

"Sean, who was that?" Charles' voice was soft as he placed a warm hand on Sean's shoulder.

The teen swallowed and blinked tears out of his eyes.

"Wrong number."

But clearly the man on the other end of the line had forgotten that one of Sean's fathers had the ability to read minds.

And if the way Charles let out a very un-professorial, "That son of a bitch," was any indication, he'd remember soon enough.

xxxxxx

Erik stood wide-eyed in the bathroom doorway as Charles picked up the bedside clock and threw it across the room.

"You're paying for that, you know." Erik smirked, but frowned when Charles began pacing like a tiger.

"He just called Sean."

"What? Who did?" Erik felt the smile slide from his face as the towel he was holding dropped to the floor.

"McKittrick, I'm assuming. Or someone who works for him."

For the first time, Erik's eyes landed on the boy who had not moved one inch throughout Charles'
tirade. He looked shaken and upset, two things rarely seen on Sean Cassidy's face. Charles slumped as if the fight had gone out of him and threw an arm around Sean's shoulders, patting the boy on the back of the head.

"We won't let that happen, Sean. I promise you that."

The boy nodded and Erik took a step closer. "Won't let what happen? What did they say?"

Charles sighed and projected an image into Erik's mind of their own lifeless bodies on the floor with Sean kneeling next to them. Erik gasped as the image faded away, panting slightly through the sudden fear that gripped his chest at seeing his worst nightmare laid out in front of him.

Erik had his fair share of inner demons – ghosts that haunted his every footstep and unforgivable deeds that he would spend the rest of his life atoning for – but nothing frightened him more than thinking of what he would do if anything happened to Charles, or Daniel, or any other member of this patchwork family.

There would be no atonement for that.

"What's going on?" Raven stood in the doorway, Moira closely behind her, surveying the scene.

"Nothing," Erik muttered as the metal sconces vibrated on the wall. "Get your bag, you're going home."

"Like hell I am."

"Raven." Charles' voice cracked like a gunshot, silencing whatever retort had been about to leave the girl's lips.

"Sean, get your bag," Erik continued more quietly, extending an arm out for the still silent boy hugging himself, while at the same time ushering Raven toward the suitcase she hadn't bothered unpacking.

Moira remained rooted to the spot, watching the proceedings with a determination that hinted to Erik she would not be among those that left when Charles finally got them out the door.

And sure enough, three minutes later, Moira took Raven's hand and placed the valet ticket in her palm. "You can drive, right?" The agent's eyes flicked in his direction, as if asking permission, but all Erik could do was offer a stiff nod.

To be perfectly honest, though, he wasn't entirely sure how he felt about the whole thing – while having a human among them was just one more thing to worry about, he couldn't help the warm feeling that buzzed in his chest at the thought of her staying. She stayed to help them, and Erik so rarely had help. Not until the day when a crazy man jumped off a boat and turned his world upside down.

Ignoring Raven's indignation that Moira be allowed to stay, Erik bluntly reminded her that Moira was a trained CIA agent and she was just a girl. He knew it was harsh, but he needed her to go, because the thought of her in danger was not something he could stomach at the moment.

"For God's sake, don't do anything stupid," she muttered as she threw her arms around her brother. "I love you."

"I love you, too," Charles whispered, placing a kiss into her hair. "And if I come home to find a speeding ticket, you'll never drive again."
She smiled, but it faltered. "Promise?"

"Promise."

And Erik knew she demanded so much more than a reprimand. She wanted a homecoming. His eyes eventually snapped to Sean, standing awkwardly in front of him and shuffling his weight from foot to foot.

"Be careful, you know?"

"You too."

The boy took the tiniest of steps, as if reaching for a hug and then aborting, so Erik saved him the trouble and met him halfway, wrapping his long arms around the teen's still shaking form as Sean buried his face into his shoulder.

"Make sure Raven doesn't crash the car."

"Yes, sir," came the muffled reply.

Erik met Charles' eyes over Sean's shoulder and they traded, Raven colliding with Erik's chest and Charles wrapping Sean in his comforting embrace. It took another five minutes to get them out the door, so reluctant were they to leave, but as soon as the latch clicked shut behind them, all three remaining adults slumped, the strong façade fading.

"What time is it?" Moira asked.

Erik looked for the clock, only to remember that Charles had smashed it against the wall.

"1:29," Charles replied, looking a little sheepish as he glanced at his watch. "Moira, would you mind giving us a minute?"

Those oh so blue eyes found his and Erik knew that, no matter today's outcome, he was done for ages ago.

"There's a phone call we have to make."

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"Danny, no!"

The toddler let out a shriek as he tore across the foyer, Hank hot on his heels.

"Alex, help me!"

"I'm trying," came the teen's frustrated growl as he attempted to turn the corner from the bathroom to the hall only to slip on the soapsuds Daniel trailed in his wake. "Grab him, Bozo!"

"He's slippery!" Hank made another swipe for Daniel, but his hand connected with the table as a very naked baby sought refuge under it.

"Dude, I am so not cut out for children," Alex huffed, finally making it to the kitchen.

They were a sight, the pair of them – soaked and covered in suds – and Hank thought it was ridiculous that one insanely smart teenager and one perfectly adequate teenager could not handle bathing a child younger than two years of age. There was no scientific formula to get a baby to stay
in the tub – no tricks of the trade that could be learned from a semester away at Harvard. Though he was loath to admit it, Hank was utterly and completely lost where Daniel was concerned.

"If Magneto can do it, so can we. Danny, come'ere." Alex dove under the table and Daniel let out another shriek, taking entirely too much delight in evading bath time. His bare little bum came tearing out into the hall once more and Hank muttered a curse under his breath as the phone rang.

"I'll get the kid, Alex, you get the phone."

The blond snorted. "Fine by me."

It took a trap of epic proportions involving a door, a plunger, and a rubber duck before Hank was able to corner Daniel in the bathroom and scoop him up in a towel. He carried the giggling child into the kitchen to find Alex standing pale and still, the receiver clutched in a white-knuckled grip.

"It's the Professor and Erik," Alex murmured, holding out the phone. "They want to talk to Danny."

Hank shuffled over, trying to read the subtext behind Alex's haunted gaze, but the blond gave up nothing.

"Charles? Erik? I've got Danny here," he said, before holding the phone to the baby's ear.

"Bärchen?"

"Vati!" The child squirmed in Hank's arms as if attempting to reach through the phone and wrap his arms around the voice on the other end.

"Hello, my boy," Charles replied.

"Daddy!"

Hank held on tighter as the boy struggled in his arms, hope and love and hurt and fear all waging war in those eyes so like his father's. Alex leaned in close, his head nearly bumping Hank's as they listened in to the professor's distant voice.

"Danny, Vati and I want you to be good for Hank and Alex… And Aunt Raven and Sean, no matter what happens, okay?"

Hank saw his own confusion reflected in Alex's frown as the teen silently mouthed, 'What?'

"Brush your teeth, eat your vegetables, go to bed on time."

"Erik, he doesn't understand that," Charles said with a hint of humor.

"I don't care, I need him to hear it."

And in that moment, something akin to dread dropped heavily in Hank's stomach. "Charles, what's going on?"

"Take care of Danny for us."

"Read him stories," Erik interjected.

Alex looked panicked as he gripped the phone over Hank's hand. "No, no, no, what is this? Erik?"

"We love all of you."
"Charles!"
"Goodbye."

A click sounded and the line went dead.

xxxxxx

The phone hung limply in his hand as he stared at the carpet under their feet.

"I have every intention of coming back…" Charles trailed off, unable to complete the thought.

"But…?"

"I needed to talk to him. To them. Just in case," he quietly replied, as if that one tiny admission took what little strength he had left. Admitting the danger gave it power. Potency. And if there was one thing Charles hated, it was being powerless.

He cleared his throat and gave the smallest of shrugs before gesturing to the hall, where Moira waited. "Let's go get her – oof."

The words were cut off as Erik slammed him up against the wall and stole the breath from his lips, mouth pressing lovingly yet insistently against his own until he yielded.

"What was that for?" he panted, slightly dazed as Erik pulled away.

The responding whisper ghosted across Charles' ear.

"Just in case."

xxxxxx

The patterns on the carpet were beginning to blur the longer Moira stared at them. But what could she do, knowing that when Charles said he had to make a call, his oh so young son would be on the receiving end?

It wasn't fair.

But before she could brood further, the door opened and out walked Charles and Erik – eyes a little red-rimmed, cheeks a little flushed, but otherwise none the worse for wear.

"Shall we?" Charles' ability to plough on astounded her. Perhaps it was that whole keep calm and carry on thing or perhaps it was just him. Him and his unfailing optimism.

The gun was heavy on her hip, hidden under her coat. Once an agent, always an agent, even while hungover and severely craving complex carbohydrates.

There was no plan or expectation as they walked the two blocks from The Plaza to the club. Charles slipped his hand in hers as the bronze doors revealed the marble lobby, even though she knew hers wasn't the hand he wanted to be holding.

The charade seemed so trivial now. Who cared if they were married or they weren't? Who was a mutant and who wasn't? Who a man took to bed at night and woke up with in the morning?

But as the oak panels of the Rockefeller Room swung back, questions of moral highground flew right out of Moira's head, because the smirk on Elliot McKittrick's face made her blood boil as he
gestured to their linked hands.

"Please, you aren't fooling anyone. Tea?" he snapped his fingers and a waiter wheeled over a cart full of pastries and a teapot. "No need to look so gloomy. We're just here for a little chat. Isn't that right, Mr. Lehnsherr?" McKittrick's cold gaze landed on Erik just as the metal radiator in the corner began to groan. "Now, now, play nice, Erik." His sickening grin widened. "May I call you Erik?

And without warning, Erik dropped to the ground and clutched his head, screaming in pain as Moira watched on with growing horror.

"FROST!" Charles' voice echoed around the cavernous room, jolting Moira into action.

She dropped down to her knees, vaguely registering the appearance of another in addition to McKittrick and the waiter. The light reflected off the newcomer's diamond form, but Moira paid her no mind as the onslaught on Erik's mind seemed to cease and he slumped sideways into her waiting lap.

"You want a fight, Miss Frost, you stick with me," Charles stated and the air around him seemed to hum. Moira ran her fingers through Erik's hair once, twice, before helping him stand on shaky legs.

Charles and Emma squared off as if the rest of the room had faded away.

"I told you, you can't touch me while I'm like this, sugar."

"Fascinating, isn't she?" McKittrick replied. "Seems her allegiance can be bought for a price and when you're rounding up mutants, having a telepath on your side is a luxury not many people have. But you'd know all about that, wouldn't you, Dr. Xavier? Or do you prefer, 'Professor'?

Charles narrowed his gaze and Erik seemed to unconsciously take a step towards him, grazing his fingers across Charles' back. Moira felt for her gun, but the look Emma shot her stalled her hand as McKittrick continued.

"That is what your children call you, isn't it? Professor Xavier?"

"What do you want?"

And Moira held her breath because she knew that, whatever the answer, no one was going to like it.

xxxxxx

"You. And you, Mr. Lehnsherr."

Two things caught Erik by surprise: 1) the audacity (or was it idiocy?) of the demand and 2) the slight chuckle that left Charles' lips upon hearing it.

"Clearly you don't know us very well."

"Oh but I do. See..." And McKittrick leaned forward and steepled his fingers, causing Erik to want nothing more than to tear the smirk right off his face, "If you join us, Charles, we won't have to come for Daniel. And, Erik, if you join us... we won't have to come for the rest of them."

Silence. Absolute, deafening silence.

Nothing registered in Erik's mind other than the fact that the people he loved had just been threatened, but before Erik could even decide which piece of metal he wanted to impale the man before him with, Charles' voice slipped into his mind like silk.
No, Erik.

But before he could reply, pain likely nothing he had felt flooded his senses and he dropped to the ground once more, writhing in agony. Somewhere in the back of his mind, in the area no one could reach save Charles, he recognized Moira's voice screaming alongside his own.

You speak to him again and they'll get worse, came Emma's drawl.

The pain stopped and Erik panted into the Persian run, ignoring the tears flowing freely down his face. Images of his childhood, of a life without Charles and Daniel, had come at him like ghosts in the night, and he could only reach out and brush Charles' ankle, as if to assure himself that the man in fact was real.

Charles stared at Emma as if trying to burn a hole through her and only the occasional wince belied the mental tug of war going on within those two minds. But before Erik could even determine his next move, Emma's diamond form abruptly disappeared and Charles wasted no time rendering her unconscious.

Erik couldn't help the way his jaw dropped as he stared at Charles in wonder.

It was clearly the first blight on McKittrick's otherwise impressive intimidation tactic. The man blanched and smoothed down the front of his three-piece suit, glancing at Emma as if he had just ingested something sour.

"Well, so much for Charles Xavier, the telepathic pacifist."

Erik spared a glance for Emma's prone form before running a careful hand down Moira's slack face.

I knocked her out. It was easier that way.

Charles –

Erik, no matter what happens, promise me you will do nothing.

Erik was about to ask how Charles could expect him to just sit back and watch, but before words could form around his indignation, the man – the infuriating, lovely, beautiful man – was speaking again.

"Mr. McKittrick, let me make one thing perfectly clear. People have free will because I allow it." He bent down and picked up the gun that had fallen from Moira's hip. "In fact, I could shoot you in the head and convince everyone in this building it was a suicide before your body even hit the ground."

Erik felt his eyebrows hit his hairline as McKittrick tried to erect an impassive face, but the tension pulling him taut like a violin string gave him away. Erik's gaze darted between the two as Charles raised the gun and the man huffed out a laugh.

"Square between the eyes is it?" Despite his bravado, Erik watched McKittrick's Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. Charles cocked the gun and steadied his hand.

"Actually, I prefer the kneecap – just before I dislocate your brain stem – but whichever works for you," he replied flatly as the other man blanched. "Between the eyes would certainly be more pleasant… for you… but I must admit, my aim is a little shaky."

For the first time that night, McKittrick actually looked scared and his fear seemed to light a fire somewhere deep in the dark recesses of Charles' mind. Its heat bathed Erik in a fast and furious
"You threatened my children," Charles continued, his voice as cold as stone.

"Only a little."

"You tortured me –"

"I cured you!"

"I wasn't sick!" His voice cut through the air and Erik flinched as it echoed off the cavernous ceiling.

Erik was no longer crouched in a defensive position, ready to strike at a moment's notice. Instead he was watching Charles with a slightly slack expression, as if seeing the man for the very first time, bathed in beautiful fury.

McKittrick's eyes flicked to Erik and Charles' anger lashed out. "You do not get to look at him! After all you've done, you do not deserve to lay eyes on him."

And in that moment, Erik wanted nothing more than to stretch his heart out and wrap it around Charles, for only that would convey all the love me kiss me never leave me that was running through his head.

McKittrick's desperation was mounting as he backed up, knocking over a chair. "This society is not just one man. There are others. More will come."

"I'm counting on it," was Charles' quiet reply.

"Xavier, you don't want to do this. You are not a killer."

"Am I not? Shall we call up Sebastian Shaw and ask?"

Erik remembered a chess game and a ballet of words in front of a flickering fire.

"Do you have it in you to allow that?"

"The truth is, you're right, Mr. McKittrick. I'm not a killer."

McKittrick seemed to relax for a moment – as if Charles might relent – but Erik recognized the fierce look in his eye and he knew Charles was nowhere near finished.

"But, unfortunately, you hurt my family."

With a lift of his arm, McKittrick seized.

And with a twist of his fingers, he slumped lifeless to the ground.

"Never again."
Realizations

Chapter Summary

In which the kids realize just how powerful Charles is, and in response, Charles gets drunk.

Uproar.

That was really the only way to accurately describe the house. Fifty-two minutes had passed since Alex found himself screaming hoarsely into a dead phone line, which mocked him with its dial tone.

Seventeen minutes had passed since the lazy grin on Azazel's face went slack and he disappeared in a cloud of sulfurous smoke.

Three minutes later, a car screeched to a halt in the driveway and Raven and Sean came tearing into the house, yelling words that Alex only caught sporadically, as each fought to be heard over the other.

"Asshole…"

"Hurt…"

"Help…"

"Need…"

But before Alex could even attempt to decode their ramblings, another puff of smoke signaled Azazel's return and a distant scream signaled he wasn't alone.

It wasn't the speed with which Raven wrapped her arms around her brother's neck that had Alex raising his eyebrows – it was the way Charles hesitated to return the hug, his gaze a little vacant, his limbs a little heavy, as he eventually brought his hand up and gently patted Raven's back.

Something wasn't right.

Erik grunted as he shifted Moira's unconscious form in his arms and Alex finally snapped to attention, approaching the older man and hoping his flailing arms made some indication that he wanted to help.

"Just open the door to the study. I'm going to put her on the couch."

"Is she all right?"

"Unconscious."

"How?"

"Charles," Erik stated, as if that was all the explanation Alex would need.

But why would Charles knock Moira out? Could he even do that? Sure, he knew Charles was
powerful – but the biggest thing Alex had seen the telepath do was manipulate a Russian officer into firing a missile. Which, yeah, now that he thought about it was a pretty big fucking deal, but still… he had no idea what the flirty nerd in the grandpa getup was capable of.

But if you asked him in an hour about the full extent of Charles' abilities, boy, would he have an answer.

Hank watched with a somewhat warm disquiet as Charles let go of Raven and immediately sought out his son, taking him from Hank's arms and burying his face in his tiny neck.

"Charles, what happened?" But before the last syllable left his mouth, Erik's hand was firm on his shoulder in a way that said, not now, maybe not ever, and Hank shrank back from the question.

He had honestly spent the past fifty-nine minutes preparing himself to never see Charles and Erik again (after that phone call, what choice did he have?) and the mental and emotional musings had exhausted him. How does one start a school without its founder? How does one raise a child without his parents? Those were the thoughts – the terrifying, daunting thoughts – that had been swirling in Hank's mind. He was a genius, but even he didn't have solutions to a life without Charles and Erik. Harvard didn't teach a course on that.

Raven still looked like the slightest wind would blow her over, so Hank wrapped a strong arm around her shoulders and hugged her sideways to him.

"They're fine."

But Raven shook her head. "No, they're not. Look at them."

So Hank did and what he saw unnerved him. Charles hadn't lifted his head from the crook of Daniel's neck, breathing in the smell of what could only be Johnson's baby shampoo and peanut butter, while Erik stood next to him with one arm wrapped around Charles' back and the other cupping the back of Daniel's head.

What should have been a joyous occasion was marred by the fact that Charles was subtly shaking and the troubled look Erik arrived with hadn't quite relinquished its hold on his features.

"Raven, what happened?"

She shook her head again, her eyes never straying from the hand that traced gentle patterns on the back of Daniel's shirt.

"They were ready for us."

"I love you."

Three simple words, whispered hotly and secretly against the shell of his ear in the middle of a crowded hallway. Three simple words and Charles held onto them like the precious things they were.

He could feel Erik's breath ghosting across the back of his neck, Daniel's tiny fingers tugging on his shirt collar, and the weight of five gazes scorching holes into his soul. The walls seemed to be pressing in and Charles closed his eyes in an effort to keep the panic at bay.
I need to get out of here. An admission.

Okay. An acceptance.

Erik cleared his throat and guided Charles into the study with a hand on his back. "I know you have a lot of questions, and we'll try to answer them to the best of our ability in a bit."

"But what about – ?"

"Raven, in a bit," Erik replied sternly, before shutting the door in her face.

"That was rude," Charles murmured when Erik turned to face him.

"Right now, I really have no patience for pleasantries." In three quick strides, he stood in front of Charles and cupped his face in his hands. Strong fingers and rough callouses held him in the gentlest of ways, tilting his head slightly to the left, then to right, as if searching for a truth in his eyes to the questions he couldn't voice.

Charles tried to swallow past the unexpected lump in his throat as Erik gazed at him without judgment – merely curiosity – as the things he wanted to ask flickered across the surface of his mind.

How did you do that why didn't you tell me have you always been able to do that can I kiss you why didn't you let me help can I take care of you?

Instead, he settled for, "Are you all right?"

Charles nodded and pressed a cheek to the top of Daniel's head. "I am now."

He closed his eyes and allowed himself to sink into the sensations of Erik's fingers running through his hair. They were skating around the issue, the rather large elephant in the room that had Charles needing to excuse himself from the curiousexpectantworried glances of his charges for a moment.

You killed a man.

"As much as I'd love to keep you here with me for the rest of our lives," Erik murmured, "we have to go back out there eventually."

"I know," Charles mumbled as Daniel clapped a hand over his lips. He placed a kiss on the baby's palm.

You killed a man.

"How much longer do you think she'll be out?" Erik asked, gesturing to Moira's sleeping form on the couch.

"At least another hour or two. I was a little heavy handed," he replied sheepishly. He could feel the young minds buzzing on the other side of the door and he knew that, no matter how much he didn't want to face what he had done, he couldn't hide away forever. "How much do we tell them?"

You killed a man.

"Only what they need to know."

"Erik," he breathed through the words that nearly choked him. "I killed a man."

And Erik, that wonderful, wonderful man, merely cocked his head and ran the pad of his thumb
across Charles' lips.

"I know you did."

Apparently, the definition of 'need to know' varied greatly when four teenagers found his description of events wanting. According to Raven, "We showed up, took care of things, and left" was not a sufficient summary, though Erik found it perfectly adequate.

"But what happened?" Alex asked, leaning so far forward, Erik had a brief moment of worry that he'd topple right off the couch. But then Erik remembered that he wasn't supposed to care if Alex fell over and he hardened his features.

"That's all you need to know."

"Bullshit," Sean laughed. "You mean that you just waltzed in there, pointed something metal at the McKittrick dude and he said, 'Oh sorry, my bad?"

"Not exactly," Charles muttered under his breath.

With a frustrated groan, Erik stood and paced the length of the Persian carpet, sparing a glance for the bullet holes that still marred the oak paneling from that night a lifetime ago.

"We went back to the club, McKittrick was waiting there with Emma Frost – "

"Wait, Emma Frost?" Raven piped up. "Where is she now?"

"CIA custody. And stop interrupting."

Alex look affronted. "Being in CIA custody didn't stop her last time."

"That's because I broke her out," Erik coolly replied, arching an eyebrow to drive the point home. "Which, I can assure you, I don't plan on doing again."

Hank cleared his throat. "What happened to McKittrick?"

"He's dead," Erik answered in a clipped tone. The conversation was getting away from him and he didn't like it.

"How?"

But before he could make up some story about some projectile that impaled itself in McKittrick's body, Charles' voice rang out like a bell.

"I killed him."

Silence.

Charles, that was not the plan.

They deserve to know.

Hank looked confused. "You mean Erik did."

"No. I did," Charles clarified.
Erik didn't want this. It was so much easier to allow the children to believe that he did the dirty work – that he could snuff a life like a candle in a breeze. Then he wouldn't have to see the look of disbelief cross Alex's face or the look of heartbreak cross Raven's. It was so much easier to be the bad cop to Charles' perpetual good, and he gladly would have taken the fall if Charles weren't so damn noble.

Was it so much to ask for Daniel to grow up with at least one parent that wasn't a murderer?

But as the baby buried his face in Charles' shirt, mumbling a tired "Daddy" through his tiny pink lips, Erik knew that no matter the sins they committed, the little boy would love them all the same.

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Sean was used to getting odd cravings: 9am egg rolls, 3pm bacon, and lately, 2am ice cream. The occupants of the house liked to blame it on his recreational drug use, but sometimes, man, he just wanted some fish sticks.

So it was with bleary eyes that he padded into the kitchen, misjudging the size of the door and ricocheting off the frame with a mumbled, "ow."

The house was quiet, but he knew he couldn't be the only one awake. There was an uneasiness to the mansion, as if their world had just been thrown off-kilter. The light in Raven's room had been on as had the hi-fi in Alex's, playing some mopey tune. But only Sean wandered the halls in search of sweets, which had absolutely nothing to do with the half a joint he smoked not an hour ago. Really. Nothing to do with it. Whatssoever.

"Sonofabitch," he muttered, squinting into the too bright light of the freezer to find barely a spoonful of rocky road left in the carton. "Dammit, Alex."

"Shall I add it to the grocery list tomorrow?" came a voice in the dark, causing Sean to jump and smack his head on the top of the appliance, as he muttered a string of German curses that Charles could only raise an eyebrow at. "I'll have to talk to Erik about his contributions to your education."

"Jesus Christ, prof," he said as he rubbed the lump on his head. "You scared the shit outta me."

"I see that," Charles grinned teasingly and raised the tumbler of whiskey to his lips once more. He sat at the tiny kitchen table in pajama pants and a t-shirt with "Oxford" emblazoned across the chest, looking remarkably out of place. With his bed-head and slightly mischievous gaze, he looked like he belonged in a college dorm instead of a stately manor home.

Still bitter about the lack of ice cream, Sean grudgingly pulled the milk out of the refrigerator and the chocolate sauce from the cabinet and began making himself his own cocktail.

"Never took you for a midnight boozer."

Charles chuckled. "Clearly you don't know me very well."

"I'm finding that out more and more today." And as soon as the words left his mouth, Sean knew he was in deep shit. Something in the professor's face darkened and whatever color Sean had in his already pale face fled. "That sounded a lot different in my head."

"Don't worry about it."

"But it's not what I meant."
"Sean, I said, 'don't worry about it.'

Chagrined, Sean dumped more chocolate sauce than was necessary in the glass and banged the spoon around the side as the white milk turned brown. He really hadn't meant to say it. He didn't mean it in a bad way, per se. Just that he hadn't expected it. Like he hadn't expected the Prof to mind-wipe Moira. Or himself, for that matter. But then again, the common thread of all these things was that Charles was willing to do pretty much anything to protect his family. And that made the knowledge that the Prof was capable of killing any of them by winking so much easier to bear.

"Something you want to talk about, Sean?"

"Do you regret it?" came spilling out of his mouth.

"No." The answer was immediate, as if he had anticipated the question. And perhaps he had. "But if that causes you to view me differently, then that I do regret."

"I don't view you differently. Well," he snorted, "maybe now, seeing as you're wearing plaid pajama pants and you've downed half of what I can only imagine used to be a full bottle of scotch. If I'm feeling anything, it's pride."

Charles barked out a laugh and tipped the bottle into the light. "Yes, I suppose it did used to be full."

Sean studied the man before him as steadily as he could with a mind that still felt a little detached from his body.

"Hey, Prof, you aren't down here drinking yourself into oblivion alone because of us, are you? Because of what you told us today?"

And for the first time in the year that Sean had known him, Charles looked utterly and completely lost.

"Yes, I suppose I am."

But that wasn't right. What he did, he did for them. How could he even think that they would… how could he imagine…

But trying to trace the pattern of Charles Xavier's thought process proved too complex for the hour, the lack of ice cream, and the pot still coursing through Sean's system.

"Read my mind."

"What? No, Sean."

"Come on, Prof. Read my mind. I want you to because you need to know that there is no reason why you should be down here with me instead of up there with… you know," Sean blushed. "With him."

Charles stared at him for a moment before chuckling softly. "Fine."

The warmth on the edge of his mind deepened and Sean decided in that moment that having Charles in his head was almost better than getting high.

Almost.

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He had kept himself from touching their minds earlier – the looks on their faces seemed evidence enough. Even now, he expected to find disgust when he grazed Sean's conscious, but instead of hatred or fear, he was met with awe, love, and a decent amount of holyshit.

He pulled out quickly, as if burned, and blinked his eyes open to find the teen grinning at him stupidly across the table.

"You think because you killed one man, we'll love you any less? Dude, do you know how many men Erik has killed? We still love him…. Well. Sometimes."

Alex closed his eyes and counted to five in his head, giving himself a mental pep talk as he raised his hand to the door.

Knock, knock.

"Come in," came the quiet reply on the other side, and for a brief second Alex was afraid he had misjudged the light under the door and woken someone up. But before he could even second-guess himself, the knob turned of its own accord and the door swung back into the room. "Don't just stand there, Summers. And stop gaping like a fish."

Alex closed his mouth and tried not to stare outright at the image of Erik leaning against Charles' headboard, Daniel asleep on his chest, and an open book in his lap.

"I was, uh, I was looking for Charles," he murmured, careful not to wake the sleeping child, as he dug his sock-covered toe into the carpet and kept his eyes on the bedspread.

"He's downstairs getting drunk," Erik deadpanned, returning his eyes to the book.

The teen frowned. "Isn't that something you two usually do together?"

Erik raised an eyebrow and Alex visibly swallowed. "Not tonight."

"Oh." And as the awkwardness started to rise, Alex backed away towards the door. "I'll talk to him tomorrow, then." He turned and began to hurry out when Erik's voice stopped him cold.

"Are you afraid of him?"

"Of Charles?" Erik gave a curt nod and Alex shrugged. "I realize now he's a lot more powerful than he lets on, but otherwise, no. He still wears too much tweed to be considered truly badass."

If Alex didn't know any better, he could have sworn he saw a smile ghost across the older man's features.

"I might be afraid of his abilities. But never of him. Kinda like you," he said, almost as an afterthought. "Night, Erik."

And he turned so quickly, he never saw the soft gaze that followed him out the door.

At 4am, the bed dipped and Charles pressed his face into Erik's chest (mindful of Daniel), inhaling deeply.

"You smell like whiskey," Erik murmured, pulling him tighter. "And chocolate?"
"Sean's fault."

"Mm." Erik's breath evened out and Charles almost followed, but a soft kiss was placed in his hair and Erik shifted Daniel in between them. "Alex came looking for you."

"What for?"

"I'm not sure exactly, but if I had to guess, it would be something along the lines of, 'You have no reason to be getting drunk by yourself. Stop wallowing in self-pity. Everyone still loves you. Now why are you not in bed when you have this gorgeous man waiting for you?"

Charles snorted and was promptly shushed by Erik. "Alex said all that, did he?"

"Those exact words," Erik mumbled into his hair, before pulling away and cupping Charles' face in his hands, his tone going from sleepy to serious. "Nothing's changed. You're still you. I'm still me. And I still love you as fiercely as I did sixteen hours ago. Do you hear me?"

Charles nodded and blinked way the tears that had pooled in his eyes. "I hear you."

"Good." Erik guided his head back to his chest and idly ran his fingers through his hair.

"What do we do now?" Charles whispered, because surely, they couldn't just pretend that nothing had happened. Erik might say that nothing had changed, but really, everything had.

"Well," Erik began, his eyes bright. "We get up and go about our routine. You make breakfast and I dress Danny. You yell at Sean for whatever law he broke during the night and I tell Alex what a girl he's being in the weight room. You tell Hank to stop gawking at your sister's body and I tell Hank to stop pining and do something about it already," he broke off chuckling as Charles swatted him. "We go upstairs under the guise of getting ready, but I ravish you before we even make it to the shower. Mmm, maybe in the shower. Now there's an idea."

Charles chuckled and fought the urge to smack him again, but he felt the heat that image caused creep up the back of his neck.

"We finally get ready, because really you couldn't keep your hands off me, and we take Moira and go to the CIA to explain why a diamond telepath was dropped off randomly in their custody. We don't tell them who we are – "

They'll remember.

But Erik continued, ignoring Charles' thought. "We don't tell them where we live."

They'll find us.

"And we track the rest of this society down, one by one if we have to, if only to ensure a lifetime of this," he said softly, gesturing to Daniel between them. "All I want is a lifetime of this."

And Charles wished more people saw this side of Erik; saw how good of a man he was, despite the gruff façade he hid behind.

Then again, they all had their secret sides. Charles hoped to never have to show his again, but Erik's… He grabbed the man's cheek and sealed his lips in a chocolate whiskey kiss.

Erik's he wanted to broadcast to the world.
Unveilings

Chapter Summary

In which they take a trip to Langley and Charles calls in a favor.

Moira enjoyed mornings.

She enjoyed hazelnut coffee and the arts section of *The Washington Post*. She enjoyed the quiet of the still-sleeping city and the tranquil break it provided for her already chaotic life. Mornings were her moment of peace, her grounding, her calm before the veritable storm.

This was not one of those mornings.

"CHARLES!"

A distant thud echoed on the ceiling above her, which she could only hope was his body hitting the floor after falling out of bed.

"Please tell me McCone was lying when he said he came in to find an unconscious telepath on Langley's doorstep," she shouted as she stomped up the stairs. "And please tell me that you had nothing to do with the lovely note written in cursive pinned to her dress."

"Hey, now that was all Azazel!" Charles tripped out of the bedroom, looking like he had indeed just tumbled out of bed.

Moira stood her ground with her hands on her hips. "I deal with you knocking me out. Hell, I even dealt with you taking weeks of my life — "

"I gave them back!"

"But what I can't deal with," she continued, ignoring his interruption, "is you endangering hundreds of people by leaving a highly volatile telepath in the middle of CIA headquarters!"

"There were detailed instructions."

She narrowed her eyes. "I thought you said you didn't write the letter."

"I might have been lying," he sheepishly replied.

She pinched the bridge of her nose as Erik joined them in the hallway, Daniel on his hip. "If you don't want the CIA interfering in your lives, then you can't interfere in theirs. I have a lot of smoothing over to do today and I could use your help seeing as I was unconscious for the majority of yesterday's excitement."

"It was for your protection," Erik grunted.

"I don't need your protection," she snapped back, perhaps a little unfairly. "And for your information," She pointed an angry finger at Daniel, "he should be sleeping in his own bed by now."

And with that, she turned on her heel and stomped back down the stairs.
"Dude, she's right. You're totally doing it wrong," Sean murmured, as he flipped through Dr. Spock's *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*.

Raven kept one eye on the knife in her hand and the other on Erik, who was so desperately trying to look like he *wasn't* reading over Sean's shoulder, it was kind of amusing. She bit back a giggle and nearly lost one of her fingers as the blade slipped.

"If babies learn to fall asleep while being held by Mommy or Daddy, this can become the *only* way for them to nod off," Sean read. "See? You and the Prof are gonna give him separation anxiety or something."

Raven snorted. "Sure, the kid's had a murder attempt, one abducted father, and another with homicidal tendencies, but it's the *bed-sharing* that's going to give him anxiety."

Erik stared at her for a beat before snatching the book from Sean's hands and furiously flipping through it. She spared him a grin and returned her focus to the half-sliced apple in front of her.

Erik and Charles were trying their best, Raven knew that. And credit where credit was due, they did save the boy's life. They loved him unconditionally, so who cared if they weren't exactly following the practices of self-soothing.

She slapped Sean's hand as he tried to steal a slice. "Get your own."

"Tyrant," he replied.

Raven took pity on him and tossed him a piece as she wiped her hands on a dishtowel and carefully watched Erik out of the corner of her eye. She heard what Moira had said that morning – the agent wasn't exactly quiet about it. And if the way Erik was suddenly flipping through Dr. Spock and Charles was furiously checking every single electrical outlet in the mansion was any indication, Raven knew those words struck a chord in both men. They weren't exactly living out a Norman Rockwell painting.

"Who *is* this man?" Erik muttered as he flipped another page.

"Which man?" Alex asked as he took a seat at the table.

"The baby doctor with the wizard-like knowledge," Sean replied.

Alex raised an eyebrow at Raven, but she just shook her head in return.

"Erik, usually prospective parents have a good nine months to read every book known to man. You and Charles did not have that luxury." She could only see from the top of his nose up, but the frown creasing his forehead eased, as it did whenever someone alluded to their little family unit. Still he looked troubled. "What's wrong?"

"It keeps mentioning the mother," Erik murmured. "Daniel doesn't have a mother."

Sean smirked. "Well, Charles is practically – "

"Sean, if you finish that sentence, you will spend the rest of the week believing you are a three-toed sloth," Charles stated, as he strode into the kitchen with Daniel on his hip and stole the cup of coffee out of Erik's hand.
"Aw, come on, Prof, you have to admit – "

"Or a donkey. Take your pick." Charles took a slow sip from the mug and Sean fell silent as Alex snickered into his cornflakes. Daniel reached for the coffee, but Charles moved it away from his tiny hand. "No, no, my love. We've already botched your sleeping habits, let's not destroy your diet as well."

Raven flashed Charles a sympathetic glance as she took Daniel from his arms and strapped him into his highchair, placing the plate of cut up apples in front of him.

"When do you leave for Langley?"

"When Moira decides to stop fuming in her bedroom." Charles looked sheepish as he stole another sip from Erik's coffee mug. "Perhaps we didn't put enough forethought into the decision to leave Emma Frost there…"

"Oh God, toilet training," Erik exclaimed, not paying any attention at all to the conversation at hand.

"Darling, put that down," Charles soothed as he placed a kiss on Erik’s head. "It's going to give you a complex."

xxxxxx

Moira closed her eyes as she threw another item of clothing into her relatively small suitcase. McCone's incensed voice still rattled around her mind as he dropped words like "irresponsible," "insane," and "get Charles Xavier here now" over the phone that morning. She was sick of running around, picking up the mess that Charles and Erik seemed to perpetually leave in their wake. She wanted to dwell on cathartic thoughts of throwing things at their heads, but the sound of a throat clearing behind startled her from her daydreams.

"What do you want?" she snapped, seeing Erik in the doorway.

"Good morning to you, too."

"Yes, I love waking up to my superior screaming at me for something I took no part in." She slammed the suitcase shut and sat on it to close it.

Erik had the decency to look the slightest bit apologetic. "Sorry about that."

"Was that your grand plan or his?"

Erik scoffed. "You think I'd willingly return to a place I vowed never to enter again, just to drop off a person I'd take more pleasure in killing?"

Moira’s eyebrows shot up, but though he was blunt, she knew he spoke the truth. "I guess you're right. Delivering Frost into captivity – with instructions on how to detain her – has Charles' fingerprints all over it." She glared at Erik in what she hoped was a no, you're not off the hook manner. "And you were just his unwitting accomplice."

"Precisely." Erik grinned and Moira rolled her eyes. "Look, I don't want to go back to Langley and face McCone anymore than you do."

"But you'd follow Charles anywhere," she quietly replied.

"I would," Erik murmured.
Moira examined him for a moment as he stood hesitantly in the doorway. He had changed so much since she first laid eyes on him on the deck of a Coast Guard boat on a cool Miami evening. He no longer seemed to hum with tension, leaving everyone in his vicinity worried that he was a breath away from violence. She knew they had Charles to thank for that – for forging the metal-bender using compassion instead of fire.

"You're not here to talk about McCone, are you." It wasn't a question, yet still Erik shook his head.

"What happens when they use you to get to us?"

It wasn't a new question. Ever since Charles had given her memories back, it had weighed on her mind. What *would* happen? She was loyal to Charles and Erik, yet she had sworn an oath to her country. To *serve* for the greater good. But what happened when her country's intentions and the greater good's didn't line up?

Ironically, she found the words leaving her mouth before her brain could fully process them.

"I'd let Charles wipe my mind again, if need be."

Erik's gaze leveled her – a mixture of respect and something soft enough to look out of place on his usually hard features.

"I don't want it to come to that," he whispered.

"But?" She prodded.

"But the offer means more than you know."

Moira sighed. She tried so hard to stay mad at them. Really, she did.

xxxxxx

The phone was cradled in between his ear and his shoulder as he jotted something down quickly with a messy fountain pen. Charles held the cap between his teeth and glanced up at the knock on the study door. Beckoning the four teenagers in, he capped the pen (trying very hard not to get ink all over his lips) and wrapped up the conversation with the man on the other end.

"Yes, all right. You'll send the forms over?... Excellent… Yes, thank you very much… You as well. Goodbye."

"Forms?" Raven asked, entirely too inquisitive for her own good, as Sean and Alex plopped down in the chairs on the other side of the desk.

"Administrative matters," Charles replied. "Nothing to worry about. Now," he glanced at all of them in turn. "What is this about?"

"You're going back to Langley today," Hank began, but Alex cut him off.

"Do we have your permission to break you out if you and Erik get detained?"

Try as he might, Charles couldn't help the chuckle that escaped his lips.

"We're being serious!" Raven cried, flush with indignation.
"I know. I know you are." Charles tried to school his features and wipe the smile from his face. "It means a great deal that you would be ready to stage a coup if need be."

Raven rolled her eyes and Alex leaned forward. "We're not kids."

"Then why ask my permission?" Charles countered.

He seemed to get them there as they all sat in silence, trying hard not to look at each other for the answer to his question. Charles sighed and leaned his elbows on the desk.

"I know you're not kids. And no, you do not have my permission." He held up his hand silencing the retort Sean had been about to voice. "For starters, it won't come to that. Erik and I will not be detained."

"Says who?" Sean asked, the hint of a pout on his face.

"Says me," Charles replied softly, yet commandingly enough to make his meaning clear. Just yesterday, he had given them the tiniest insight into the strength of his powers and now, they knew that when he said they would not be detained, he meant it.

"Fine," Raven finally acquiesced. "Just don't be late for dinner." And Charles knew that was her way of saying, 'I'm still worried about you, but I'm going to pretend everything is fine.'

Hank nodded next, pulling Sean up with him, as they headed for the door, but Alex remained, biting his lower lip – a habit that made him look far younger than his seventeen years. Charles grazed his mind against the teen's and felt a heady cocktail of anxiety and warmth.

"Something you wanted to talk about, Alex?"

The blond shook his head. "Just be careful," he said as he finally stood. "I know I'm almost legally an adult and it would be pointless to adopt me, but I'm just letting you know that you're my family. And if something happens to you, or Erik, I'm coming after you. Permission be damned."

It was not often that Charles was rendered speechless, but in that moment, his voice (and his mind) were blissfully silent.

The visitor passes were relatively innocuous. Erik wasn't sure what he was expecting, but something along the lines of "Yes, this is the man that sent hundreds of missiles heading towards your Navy" came to mind.

He tugged at his tie once more, earning a gentle slap on the hand from Charles.

*Stop fussing.*

Can't help it.

*If you behave, I'll make it worth your while.* The tone of Charles' mind was teasing, and the image he sent of alternative uses for the tie had Erik nearly running smack into Moira.

"Pay attention," she muttered under her breath as she opened the door to a conference room, putting Erik immediately on the defense.

McCone sat at the head of the table, a stack of files next to him and nothing else. Erik found that odd, and apparently he wasn't the only one to think so.
"Where's Stryker?" Moira asked.

"You requested this be a private meeting, Agent MacTaggert." McCones spread out his arms. "So here we are."

*He's telling the truth, Charles thought. Not a single bug or camera.*

The tension in Moira seemed to ease, but Erik still stood ramrod straight as Moira and Charles took seats at the table.

"Mr. Lehnsherr, I've heard so much about you," McCones said wryly as he stood and held out his hand. "Big fan of your work."

Erik considered it for a moment and, not wanting to offend Charles with his bad manners, took hold and squeezed hard.

"Likewise," he replied, before finally taking a seat next to Charles.

"I suppose we have you to thank for Ms. Frost, Dr. Xavier," McCones began. "She is safely contained now, though proving difficult to question. The first room we kept her in could not adequately suppress her powers and any agent we sent in ultimately came out squawking like a chicken. Her idea of a joke, I suppose."

"Yes, we telepaths have an odd sense of humor," Charles replied and Erik felt a rush of affection for him.

Moira leaned forward and clasped her hands on the table. "Sir, about this society…"

McCones rolled his eyes. "By all means, MacTaggert, dive right in."

"Sir," Moira continued, ignoring McCones remark. "I know you don't consider this a high priority – "

"It's not," McCones replied and Erik couldn't help the rush of anger that had the metal on the Director's chair vibrating.

"Erik, that's rude."

The metal-bender glared sideways at him, but released the hold on McCones chair.

"Forgive my friend here. He's allergic to government." Charles offered a serene smile, which belied the fierce strength hiding in his eyes. "It's nothing personal," he said in a tone that implied it most certainly was.

"Look, Dr. Xavier – "

"Charles, please. Why stand on formality?"

And finally the first crack in McCones stoic facade seemed to show. "Xavier, it's not that I don't consider it a priority. I do! But the CIA…" he glanced around, though no one else was in the room, "The CIA cannot take a stand on it, because I believe the society has infiltrated the upper ranks of this Agency."

Silence reigned as McCones words took a minute to sink in. Erik inhaled sharply.

"You mean…" Moira trailed off.
"Yes, MacTaggert, it pains me to admit that I believe the concerns you brought up to me months ago are warranted. And I…" he swallowed hard, "apologize for not taking you seriously."

"Apology accepted, Sir," Moira replied, barely able to hide her smile. Erik would have found it endearing if he hadn't just been told that a society hell-bent on rounding up mutants had severe influence in the Central Intelligence Agency.

"What's in the files?" Charles asked and only at the sound of his voice did Erik realize the telepath had been unusually quiet throughout the whole exchange.

*What do you know?* Erik thought hard at him, but received only silence in return. Immediately, his heart began to hammer in his chest as McCone reached for the stack of files, sliding one across to Charles and the other to Erik.

And what Erik saw when he opened the manila folder stole the breath from his lungs.

**NAME:** Erik Lehnsherr alias Magneto alias Max Eisenhardt  
**DOB:** Unknown  
**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:** Poland  
**POWER:** Metallokinesis  
**FAMILY:** Parents – Jakob and Edie Lehnsherr (deceased)  
Wife – Magda Lehnsherr nee Maximoff (whereabouts unknown)  
Daughter – Anya Lehnsherr (deceased)  
**NOTES:** Known terrorist and suspect involvement in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Detainee at Auschwitz.

Erik’s ears rang as he thumbed through the pages and pages of notes that followed: details of his mother’s death, results from Shaw’s tests, a photo of Magda, eyewitness accounts of the fire that claimed Anya, and photos of every Nazi he had ever killed, staring back at him with unseeing eyes.

He felt sick and violated, as the details of his life were plainly stated without fuss or fanfare on plain white paper. His greatest sacrifices and harshest pains reduced to nothing but bullet-points.

His gaze swept the first page a final time, finally catching on the last checkbox. Four words that hit him like a punch to the gut.

**SUPPRESSANT SERUM DEVELOPED:** Yes

Erik set the file down carefully and watched as Charles did the same, his hands shaking ever so slightly.

McCone looked deadly serious and every bit the face of the Central Intelligence Agency as he addressed them once more in a calm and clipped tone.

"They call themselves the Human Supremacy Society. And they have a file on every one of you. Ms. Darkholme. Mr. Summers. Dr. McCoy. Mr. Cassidy. Even the young Mr. Xavier."

The metal began vibrating again, but this time McCone paid it no heed and Charles made no attempt
to calm him.

"Officially, the CIA has no interest in pursing the HSS."

"Unofficially?" Charles prompted.

McCone slid another folder across the table at them, this one unmarked.

"Unofficially, Elliott McKittrick died of a brain aneurysm."

How exactly does one use an emery board as a weapon?

That was the question plaguing Emma's mind as she examined her chipped nails for the tenth time in as many minutes. It was cardboard, nothing more. She begged for an explanation as to why they continued to insist upon this torture. It was inhuman.

Letting out an over-exaggerated sigh that she knew accentuated her bosom for the men on the other side of the two-way mirror, she leaned an elbow on the table and let her cheek rest in her palm.

Forget the nail file. At this point, all she wanted was a deck of cards. Or perhaps a good book. Hell, she'd even take a bad book. Anything to get her mind off of the monotony.

Her reflection was distorted as she glanced at the wall – even in death, Sebastian continued to haunt her. It was his telepathy-suppressing design that built the mirrored walls that now contained her. She let out a bitter chuckle. How amused he would be to see her now.

The door opened with a groan and she immediately straightened. After all, it was too early for lunch and she so rarely had visitors. But what she did not expect – and she hated that she could not foresee this – was for Charles Xavier to walk through the door, hands shoved into his pockets and a calmly calculating (and secretly smug) look on his face.

She leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs, affecting an air of nonchalance as she tapped the side of her head. "We'll have to do this the old-fashioned way, honey. You don't work in here."

Charles inclined his head and gave her a half-smile that held no humor. "Ms. Frost."

"Dr. Xavier." She accentuated the doctor, her drawl caressing the v and r of his name. She had to admit he was cute, as he took the seat opposite her and brushed the hair off of his forehead. Too bad Lehnsherr saw him first. Speaking of… "Where's your little magnetic friend?"

Charles nodded to the mirror through which they could not see.

"Never far behind you, is he?" She bit out as she gave a small wave. "Like a dog."

If the words affected Xavier, he didn't let it show. Damn him and his British levelheadedness.

"So, what brings you to my cell?" She drummed her chipped nails on the table and cocked her head. "It can't be for the company. Surely you haven't gotten bored in your house of orphans."

Something flashed ever so briefly in Xavier's eye and Emma knew she found his weak spot. Then again, it really wasn't hard to guess. He always had been a bleeding heart.

"Why'd you do it?"
"Oh sugar, you know all about survival of the fittest." She gave him a sickly sweet smile and he rolled his eyes. Perhaps he was spending too much time with those teens of his.

Xavier glanced at the walls around them. "And how's that working out for you?"

She tampered down the swell of anger and pasted a smile on her face. "Swimmingly."

Xavier chuckled and shook his head. "You really are remarkable."

"I know," she replied as she winked. But the smile slid from his face and he leaned forward in his chair.

"They have files, you know. On all of us. You. Me. Azazel. Raven."

"Mystique," Emma corrected. Xavier ignored her.

"You think that because you sold yourself for the highest price, you won't be right back on their list when you're no longer of use to them?"

She knew he spoke the truth, but she couldn't muster the strength to give him the satisfaction.

"You have information," he continued. "I want it."

Emma raised an eyebrow. So much for the pleasantries.

"McKittrick was not the first, nor the last," she murmured. "They will come for you. And then you'll wish you were in here with me. If only to save yourself the pain of watching everyone you love die."

It was a low blow, but frankly, she was getting irritated. Had she made that threat to Magneto, the metal legs of her chair would be wrapped around her neck, but Xavier merely considered her for a moment, before standing and shoving his hands back into his pockets. It was such a boyish gesture that she was momentarily caught off guard when he leaned in close and brushed his breath across her ear.

"Ms. Frost, if anyone comes for my children, I will kill every last one of them. Just like I did your friend McKittrick. And then I'll come for you."

He pulled away and gave her a disturbingly pleasant smile.

"Luckily, I know where to find you."

xxxxxx

Hank tried to be the responsible one – he really did.

He cooked dinner, bathed Daniel, yelled at Sean for smoking near the priceless books, and sincerely tried not to stare at Raven because she was Charles' naked sister.

But being the responsible one also meant being the boring one – a fact that Alex and Raven decided to exploit when they deemed it necessary to take advantage of the fact that the "parents" were gone for the day.

Which was exactly why Charles and Erik opened the front door to find a pile of pillows at the bottom of the steps and Sean screaming his way down a rudimentary ski-slope in a laundry basket.

"Dude! Best. Idea. Ever!" he coughed out when he landed and tipped over, drawing a squeal from
Daniel where he sat in his own laundry basket out of harm's way.

"Again!" the toddler cried, clapping his hands together.

Charles loudly cleared his throat as Erik pointed at Alex.

"Explanation. Now."

"Uh…” Alex helplessly looked at Sean, who shrugged and stood on wobbly legs. And of course Hank had to choose that moment to come barreling into the foyer, laundry basket raised high above his head.

"My turn!" he yelled.

Yes. Of course he did.

Hank stopped so suddenly, he nearly fell on his ass as the plastic basket tumbled to the ground. Daniel's giggling was the only noise in the foyer as Charles and Erik stood there looking relatively dumbstruck.

"Hank?" Charles questioned, as if wondering if he wasn't viewing Raven in disguise.

The furry teen shuffled his feet before pointing an accusing finger at Alex and Sean.

"They said I was the boring one."

Silence reigned for a moment before a completely undignified snort left Erik. The noise seemed to set off a chain reaction as the metal-bender doubled over in laughter, followed closely by Charles and then Alex and Sean, when they realized they weren't about to be grounded.

"Well," Erik recovered, standing up and leaning slightly against Charles. "you kind of are."

Alex and Sean erupted into laughter again, and Hank finally managed a smile as Charles stepped over the mountain of pillows and lifted Daniel out of the laundry basket.

Raven entered from the kitchen carrying a bowl of popcorn and surveyed the scene.

"Oh damn, did I miss the fireworks?" she asked, glancing back and forth from Erik to Sean, as if assessing damages that might have happened in her absence.

"No fireworks," Alex laughed. "I think we can thank Bozo for that."

Raven arched an eyebrow at Hank and Hank flushed.

"Charles, you should so have more children. I think it's mellowed you out."

"I'm not sure if you've noticed, Raven, but some of us are missing some important child-bearing equipment."

Raven shrugged. "Just go knock someone else up." Erik choked on nothing in particular and Raven clapped him hard on the back as she passed by. "Easy, Magneto."

Yes, Hank was the responsible one and she was the ballsy one.

And that was probably why Hank was just a little bit in love with her.
Erik rolled over in that perfectly balanced place between awake and asleep and blindly reached for the warm body that he fit snugly behind. When he hit nothing but bedding, however, the balance tipped and his eyes snapped open, landing on the empty space beside him.

"Charles?"

He could feel concern teasing the edge of his foggy mind, but he made his way downstairs, knowing that Charles would have a perfectly rational explanation for leaving Erik entirely too alone in an entirely too large bed. A draft made him regret not putting a shirt on, but the sooner he found Charles, the sooner he could drag the telepath back to the inviting warmth of their sheets.

The study was dark, save for the crackling fire and the lone desk lamp illuminating the curve of Charles' cheek where he sat hunched over a piece of paper.

"It's late," Erik croaked, his voice hoarse from sleep.

Charles started and let the pen fall to the desk, but a soft smile graced his face as he took in Erik's sleepily befuddled look. "I didn't realize. I'll be up in a minute."

Erik padded further into the room and crossed his arms over his chest. "Did you hear from Moira?"

Charles nodded. "She called. She got home safe."

Erik nodded and slumped into the chair across from the desk. "What are you working on?"

"Nothing that can't wait until morning." Charles smiled and stretched his neck, but Erik frowned as he caught sight of the piece of paper with Last Will and Testament emblazoned across the top.

"Charles…" his heart thumped against his ribcage and, try as he might, he could not keep the shake from his voice, "is there something you're not telling me?"

"Hm?" Charles tracked his gaze to the paper in front of him and immediately blanched. "Oh. Oh God, no. Nothing like that. I'm fine."

Erik still sat taut with tension, but Charles quickly stood and made his way around the desk, crouching in front of him and gently cupping his cheek.

"I'm fine. I swear. I just… it needed to be updated."

"Updated," Erik flatly repeated.

Charles ran his hands up and down Erik's thighs, a sudden feeling of nervousness seeping into Erik's psyche.

"You're projecting," he murmured.

Charles cleared his throat, but his grip on Erik's knees didn't ease. "Sorry."

"What's wrong?"

Charles took a deep breath, but what eventually tumbled out of his mouth was definitely not what Erik had been bracing himself to hear.

"If anything were to happen to me, you would have no legal rights to Daniel. I'm updating my will
so that, if God forbid something *did* happen and I died, he would be placed in your care. You would be his legal guardian."

Erik sat there thunderstruck. He had prepared himself for heartbreak. For some terminal illness and some terrible long goodbye. He had not prepared for a document that would have stolen the strength from his legs had he been standing in the first place.

Charles’ eyes eventually made their way from the pattern they had been examining on the carpet to the other man's face and he swallowed hard.

"Say something."

But Erik shook his head, causing a tear to splash onto his cheek.

"Is it okay?"

Erik nodded, but again said nothing. Simple words had become so inadequate.

"It's the closest to adoption we can get," Charles whispered, not commenting on the tears that tracked down Erik's face or the way his body seemed to shake with barely contained emotion.

In that moment, Erik wondered if it truly was possible to feel so much that the body just shut down. Or burst. Or said things completely unplanned yet not remotely unwelcomed.

For that was the only way to explain how Erik joined Charles on his knees, cupped his face in his hands, and breathed, "Marry me" across his lips.
Charles smiled into his tea as the ring on his fourth finger caught the glare of the morning light.

He had never put much stock into jewelry. Or marriage for that matter. Sure, he appreciated a good set of cufflinks and a fine watch, but he never thought he'd be wearing a ring (which he's pretty sure Erik molded on the fly from a spare paperweight) on a very particular finger. Mostly because Raven informed him time and again that he wasn't the marrying type.

His father had told him to marry for love. His mother had told him to marry well. Neither succeeded in presenting him with a very positive picture, however, so Charles made it his life goal to hop from bed to bed just to spite them. Though, nature seemed to do a pretty decent job of it as well, when one day he woke up and realized he liked boys just as much as girls.

Weddings just weren't on his radar. Though he was, for all intents and purposes, off the market. And had been since that summer night when jumping off the third deck of a Coast Guard cutter seemed like a brilliant idea.

No. He was not the marrying type.

And then Erik came along.

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They couldn't get married. He knew that. Charles knew that. The world at large knew that.

It wasn't that he was officially, technically already married. That was a mere speed bump on the greater highway of life where Erik was concerned. No, he was more worried about the disgustthatfear surrounding the whole affair.

But he would bide his time. He had spent years hunting Sebastian Shaw – patience was something he excelled at.

Because he had made a promise to wait years. Decades, if need be. And he’d be damned if he let a little thing like impatience derail those plans. And as these thoughts swirled in his head, he found himself wishing, hoping, and praying for something he deemed impossible: acceptance.

Perhaps Charles was onto something after all.

"Aw, come on. The kitchen? Really?"

Erik lifted his nose from the crook of Charles' neck and gave a far too toothy grin in Alex's direction.

"Problem, Summers?"

Alex gave a pointed look at where Erik's arms wrapped around Charles' waist from behind. "I eat
here, that's all I want to say. But no, sir, there's no problem."

"That's what I thought." He felt Charles' gentle smack to his shoulder and grinned against his skin.

"Alex, what Erik meant to say was, 'Good morning, how did you sleep?'"

It was to the teen's credit that he snorted as he poured milk into his mug. "Other than the new aches I acquired while sledding down the stairs, I slept fine."

Erik reluctantly let go of Charles, but his gaze wavered on the piece of metal wrapped around Charles' finger, and its pair wrapped around his own. They were crude – definitely not his best work – and yet his heart leapt every time he glanced at them or felt their weight against his skin. He closed his eyes at the memory, the sight of Charles' shocked face followed closely by the firm press of lips against his own.

"Is that a 'yes'?"

"Of course that's a 'yes,' you idiot."

Yes, he would bide his time.

But if he had to wait decades, he thought, as he glanced at the piece of metal once more, then at least he had something binding while biding.

Secret though it may be.

xxxxxx

There was something off about the Professor and Erik. Something more… lovey, dovey, for lack of a better word.

Not that he had any doubts as to just what the Professor and Erik were. Alex knew, and he didn't care. It wasn't his cup of tea, but who was he to judge? He and Sean knew "chess" was a code word for something else. In fact, it was a hunch that had lost Hank ten bucks when Erik came strolling out of Charles' bedroom one morning many months ago, with the chessboard tucked under one arm.

Still, no matter what they were, they were never this open about it. Probably because an unconscious kiss out in public would be just as bad as him letting slip one of his lasers. People hated what they didn't understand. Alex snuck a glance sideways from his cereal bowl and caught Erik pressing a kiss to the side of Charles' head as he stood for more orange juice.

Sure, there had been times in life and death situations when their awareness of propriety was so far down on their list of concerns that they didn't think twice about a kiss here or a hand-hold there. But as Erik began whistling (whistling) an upbeat tune, Alex finally realized what was so odd about the whole situation.

Erik's shoulders weren't tense. Charles' brow wasn't creased in concentration. They both looked so happy, so carefree, so giddy that Alex felt his eyebrows hit his hairline as his spoon clattered into the bowl.

"Something the matter, Alex?"

Alex shook his head but still stared incredulously.

"Are you sure?" Charles was looking more concerned and Alex hated having put that worry there.
"I'm fine. Are you all right?"

Charles and Erik might have assured him they were quite well, but he didn't miss the not-so-sly look the two shared.

Alex decided it was time to wake Sean up. Something was going on and they had work to do.

xxxxxx

Moira sighed heavily and placed her hands on her hips as she glanced around her living room once more.

"What am I forgetting?"

"Vodka," Azazel replied from his perch on the arm of her chair.

She glared in his direction. "I don't drink vodka."

"For me. Not you."

Moira had quickly learned the pitfalls of arguing with the teleporter. He was quite persistent. With a final glare in his direction, she headed back up the stairs to check her bedroom one final time and leapt back as she turned the corner to find Azazel sitting on her bed.

"I am much faster than the stairs."

"Get. Out."

With a pout, he disappeared in a pop of smoke and she shook her head as she checked the bathroom for all of her necessities. Why she had let Charles talk her into temporarily moving into the mansion, she would never know. "It'll make the investigation easier," he had said. Frankly, she preferred her townhouse and her freedom and the personal space away from Erik's constant judgmental gaze.

Their little rogue unit had McCon's blessing, but had to operate under the radar if anything was going to be done about the Human Supremacy Society. Moira paused in zipping up her makeup bag. How would she feel if a society was created for the sole purpose of extinguishing her life and the lives of those like her? Was she really so different from them? She examined her reflection in the mirror and tilted her chin back and forth. She could probably pass for the sister of either Charles or Erik. Hell, Charles already mistook her for Daniel's mother. They really were not so different, humans and mutants.

Sure, Sean could shatter windows with a hiccup and Raven could impersonate the president, but anyone was capable of harm if in the right mindset.

It just wasn't right.

"For God's sake, are you ready yet?" Azazel called up from the foot of the stairs.

With a final groan, she tossed her toiletry bag in the suitcase and hauled the strap onto her shoulder.

"I'm coming! Don't get your tail in a twist!"

xxxxxx

"Daddydaddydaddy!"
"Danny, Danny, Danny!" Charles replied as he caught the child that hurled himself at his knees and lifted him high in the air. "Hello, my boy," he whispered, placing Daniel on his hip and brushing away the hair that had flopped on his forehead.

"Oh," Raven huffed as she turned the corner, "there you are."

"Looking for me?"

"No. Your son. He bolted the second I put him down on the ground. I swear he's faster than Azazel."

Charles chuckled and tickled Daniel's stomach. "Did you run away from Aunt Raven?"

Daniel giggled and nodded as Raven walked up and ruffled his hair. "He's looking more and more like you every day."

"Poor chap. Ow." Charles rubbed his arm where Raven punched him. "Self-deprecation!"

Raven eyed him in that utterly unnerving way she had been doing since they were kids – as if she were Superman, leveling him with her x-ray vision.

She cocked her head and frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Alex asked me the same thing! Why does everyone think something's wrong?" He turned under the guise of going into the study, but in truth, it was because he could no longer keep up his poker face. A grin was threatening to split his cheeks and he buried his nose in Daniel's hair to hide his low chuckle.

Unfortunately, Raven followed him.

"Everyone thinks something's wrong because you're glowing so much, you practically have moonbeams shooting out of your arse."

"Raven." Charles clapped his one free hand over Daniel's ear.

"What? He doesn't know what it means."

"Arse!" Daniel yelled and Charles glared.

"Thank you for that." He meant to scold her further, but her gaze brushed by his hand and she blanched.

Charles had a feeling the conversation was about to make an abrupt turn.

xxxxxx

She wanted to feel guiltier for adding some color to Daniel's slim verbal repertoire but oh my god there was a ring on a very important finger and, try as she might, Raven could not tear her eyes away from it.

"Holy shit," she breathed.

"Shit!" Daniel promptly replied, but neither Raven nor Charles could be bothered to reprimand.

"Is that what I think it is?" Her heart hammered in her chest as Charles slowly lowered Daniel to the ground, carefully avoiding her probing gaze.
"I don't know what you think it is. I promised not to read your mind."

"Charles!" She crossed the room in three strides and took hold of his hand, running her finger over that which her eyes couldn't quite yet believe. "Erik made this."

It had his fingerprints all over it – it wasn't perfect, but it had a sort of traumatic beauty. Like it had survived the worst the world had thrown and come out the better for it. It was rough, not smooth. Steel, not gold.

It was Erik.

And Raven found that when she finally lifted her eyes to her brother's, tears spilled down her cheeks.

"It's beautiful," she whispered.

He smiled and turned his wrist in her grip so he could hold tight to her hand. "It is, isn't it."

There was so much she wanted to say, so much she needed to say, but the words stuck in her throat because her brother was getting married. Maybe not today or tomorrow or anytime soon, but he had found that person, the person he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, and that thought had Raven feeling very much alone.

"Hey." His voice was quiet and when she looked up, she realized the joy from a moment before had slid from his face. "It's still you and me against the world. You know that, right?"

They were the words she didn't even know she needed to hear and she allowed herself to be folded into his embrace as he held her tightly to him.

"If mutants and homosexuals are accepted tomorrow, and Erik and I get married the day after that; if we have fifty more kids and grow old and grumpy together, you are still my sister. And no one, no one can take that away from us."

"Uh huh."

"Ahem."

They glanced up to find Erik looking equal parts worried at their behavior and guilty for having to interrupt.

"Moira's here," he murmured, his gaze darting back and forth between the two as he shoved his hands in his pockets.

Before he did, though, she caught a glimpse of the matching ring on his finger and she felt as though her heart could burst. She had spent six months in his company – six months watching him brood and ignore his pain. Pretending that she didn't see the way his stoic façade cracked whenever the "other" telepath was mentioned in passing.

"I'll be there – " Charles began, but the inevitable "in a minute," which was sure to follow, was lost as Raven hurled herself at Erik and gripped her wrists tightly behind his neck. He stumbled back a few steps but kept himself upright, stiffening in her arms at her unexpected display.

"Congratulations," she whispered in his ear.

He relaxed under her and held her a little tighter. "Thank you."
"If you hurt him, I'll kill you."

He chuckled. "I'd expect nothing less."

She let go and he lowered her to the ground, as Daniel's voice rang out through the room.

"Vati! Arse!"

Raven turned to find the baby gleefully tugging on a chagrined Charles' pant leg, and she allowed herself a moment of ohshit as Erik's eyes widened, before the hilarity of the situation hit her and she burst out laughing.

"Charles, please tell me our son did not just say 'arse."

"Raven's doing," he pointed and the laughter died in her throat.

"Traitor," she muttered.

So much for them against the world.

xxxxxx

Moira hated the mansion.

Sure, she could appreciate the architecture, the history, and the effort Charles had put into turning it from a mausoleum into a home, but no amount of paint coats, new rugs, or clean windows could shake the eerie feeling that settled in the pit of her stomach and crept up the back of her neck whenever she set foot inside the Xavier Estate. No doubt there were more than a few ghosts lurking beneath the floorboards.

"Moira!" Charles called as he entered the rec room, Erik trailing behind with Daniel slung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. "How was the trip?"

She glared sideways at Azazel where he perched on the sideboard. "Just fine, thanks."

"Did you bring the files?" Erik asked, never one to beat around the bush.

"Hello to you, too."

He looked unperturbed at her sass. "The files?"

"Jesus, yes, Erik, the files," she replied, pointing to a box on the floor. "That's everything McCone had, but nowhere near all. We still don't know the extent of their cataloging."

She watched Charles and Erik shared a grim look and she left them to their telepathic musings for what she believed to be a polite enough time, before she cleared her throat to remind them that, yes, she was in fact still there.

"Sorry, love," Charles grinned as he moved forward and lifted the lid off the filing box.

"It's not much, but there's some background on the HSS as well as some profiles on known members. So... it's a start," she replied, hoping she came off more confident than she felt. "There was something else McCone wanted to say, but he thought it best to do so over the phone. He should be calling in about," she checked her watch, "five minutes."

Charles nodded absentmindedly as his eyes scanned the papers in his hands.
"Christ, they really do have a file on Danny."

That seemed to spur Erik into action and he swiftly took a seat beside Charles and gazed over his shoulder.

"There are files on every one of you. I checked. Even on me."

Erik glanced up. "Why you? You're not a mutant."

"Well spotted," Charles wryly replied.

"Known sympathizer,' is the term I believe they used," Moira shrugged. Being targeted and filed was not something new in her line of work.

They worked in tandem scanning the files as Moira stood sentinel near the phone. It was a wonder to behold, watching them together. Charles finished reading neither before nor after Erik and, as the telepath turned one page over, Erik readied the next. They were like two hands of a clock, moving separately, yet together. Overlapping, yet never obstructing. Moira joked once that she wouldn't be surprised if she opened them up to find their hearts beating the same rhythm.

Now she wondered just how off she was.

xxxxxx

The harsh ring of the phone made everyone in the room jump, but it was only Sean's distant yell of, "I GOT IT!" that spurred anyone into action.

"Sean, don't you dare answer that phone!" Charles called, standing up and quickly picking the receiver up before the teen announced to the Director of the CIA, "Mabel's Pizzeria, how can I help you?" He was slowly making his way through the alphabet and Erik was pretty sure he was onto M, already.

"Xavier residence… Speaking… Yes, Mr. McCone, how are you?"

Erik stood and took his place next to Charles, leaning his head close and trying not to let the smell of Charles' shampoo highjack his concentration.

"… weren't entirely truthful yesterday."

Wonderful. Just the words Erik wanted to hear. He caught Moira's gaze, but she shrugged, looking just as confused as he did.

"Not entirely truthful about what, director?" Charles was using that clipped tone that gave off the air of polite aristocrat, but Erik knew to mean, 'I'm going to put you at ease whilst I prepare to utterly kneecap you.'

"Some new information has come to light. Details about some further abductions came in the day before yesterday, but we had to confirm a few things before we brought it to your attention."

"I'm assuming those details have been confirmed, director, or else why would you be calling?"

There was a moment of silence, before McCone cleared his throat. "Is Erik Lehnsherr there?"

Erik felt his eyebrows hit his hairline as Charles wordlessly passed the phone to him. "Can you read him?" he asked as he covered the receiver.
Charles shook his head. "He's just out of my range."

With a sigh, he lifted the phone to his ear and barked, "Lehnsherr."

"Mr. Lehnsherr, I'd like to have some words with you about your... past relationships."

Erik felt anger bubble within him, despite Charles' calming hand on his back.

"Sure, what's a few more words?" he bit out.

"Everything, Lehnsherr. They may be everything," McCone replied in a tone that was almost... anguished. Erik felt his stomach drop. "They have..."

The phone line crackled and Erik frowned as Charles blanched, having no doubt gleaned whatever it was that the director said.

He pressed the receiver harder to his ear, panic rising within him. "Say again?"

Mc Cone's voice was distant but clear as he repeated the five words that had Erik warping the phone's rotary dial.

"Lehnsherr, they have your children."
"Lehnsherr, they have your children."

The words echoed in his head and Erik glanced around, almost expecting to see Daniel no longer playing on the floor, but there he was: making airplane noises as he crashed his Legos together.

"My children?" he let out a forced chuckle. "I think you're mistaken."

"I'm sorry, Lehnsherr, but..." The phone crackled one last time and the connection went dead, but Erik couldn't even summon a "hello?" in return.

The rotary dial was all but a pile of molten metal on the floor and the receiver hung limp in his hand. It was only Charles' sharp tone as he pointed to Azazel that even allowed Erik to consider the whole situation a remote possibility, and not just some cruel joke.

"Get him here now."

Azazel nodded once and disappeared in a cloud of sulfur.

"Moira, do me a favor and take Daniel into another room."

The agent whispered an "Of course," and bent to scoop the baby from the floor. Erik vaguely registered the sympathetic glance she threw his way, but as soon as she was out of his field of vision, he gave her no more thought. He was solely focused on the split piece of wood in the windowsill, a cacophony of words on loop in his head.

They have your children. They have your children. Children. Children. Children.

He knew Charles had placed a hand on his shoulder but he could no longer feel. The numbness crept down his spine and seized his limbs, immobilizing him for a truth he wasn't sure he could take.

"Erik, look at me." Charles came around, placing himself in Erik's line of vision and cupped his face in his hands. "Stay with me, my love."

Erik took hold of his wrists and opened his mouth to say words that would not come. He wanted to collapse, to curl up into a ball, and hide away from the world, for surely the world could not be this cruel, but another crack of sulfur signaled the arrival of Azazel and he finally tore his gaze away from those ohsoblue eyes to find McConé looking dazed as he stood in the middle of the room.

As much as he may dislike the man, Erik had to give McConé credit for merely nodding at Azazel and replying with, "Convenient, if a little nauseating."

Charles let go of Erik's face and he nearly whimpered at the loss. "Director, I apologize for the crude means of transportation – no offense, Azazel – but clearly this is a conversation best had in person."
Finally, McCone's eyes found his own and the hardened gray softened ever so slightly as he held a dossier up in his hand and cleared his throat.

"We weren't even sure if you were aware of their existence, nor were we entirely sure of their, uh, condition, which is why they were omitted from yesterday's briefing," McCone stated as he handed Erik the document. "This is the actual file the HSS has on you."

If McCone said anything else, Erik didn't hear, as he stared at the lone piece of paper in his unsteady hand.

**NAME**: Erik Lehnsherr alias Magneto alias Max Eisenhardt  
**DOB**: Unknown  
**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN**: Poland  
**POWER**: Metallokinesis  
**FAMILY**: Parents – Jakob and Edie Lehnsherr (deceased)  
Wife – Magda Lehnsherr nee Maximoff (whereabouts unknown)  
Daughter – Anya Lehnsherr (deceased)  
Son – Pietro Maximoff (contained)  
Daughter – Wanda Maximoff (contained)  

His eyes caught on the final two lines and went no further.

"Judging by the look on your face, we were right in our assumption," McCone finished quietly.

"I don't – " he stopped and started, "But she – " He seemed incapable of getting more than two words out at a time, but Charles was at his side without him having to ask, his voice enveloping his mind like a soothing caress.

_Breathe._

"They're twins," McCone continued. His voice was quiet but it thundered in Erik's ears. "We're not entirely sure of their age, but given your history and the fact that you had no knowledge of their existence, we have to assume somewhere around seven or eight."

_Mein Gott. Twins._ Erik felt himself be guided to the couch and somewhat gracefully pushed down into it. He welcomed the cushion's gentle embrace as the panic began to steal the vision from his eyes.

"How did they get them and how long have they had them?"

Erik almost cried with relief as Charles asked the questions whose answers he needed more than air at the moment.

"We're still working that part out." McCone took a seat on the couch opposite as Charles sat next to Erik, close enough for them to be touching from shoulder to knee. "We only received confirmation that they were alive yesterday."

Erik flinched and Charles' slid his arm discreetly behind him, rubbing tiny circles on the small of his
"How?"

"We have wiretaps on some phone lines. They were mentioned." McCone seemed hesitant to divulge more, but he sat forward and placed his elbows on his knees. "Erik," and it was the use of his first name that had the metal-bender finally meeting his gaze. "It seems your children have exhibited mutant abilities. We think your wife – "

"She's not my wife."

McCone sighed. "Regardless, we think she left them at an orphanage in Prague, which is where the HSS picked them up. We think they've been in their custody months. If not years."

Pain gripped him somewhere deep in his chest and he lowered his head to his hands. His children. He had children. Plural.

And in that moment, something fierce rose within him. Something he recognized as lovecherishprotect he felt whenever he thought of Charles, or Daniel, or any other member of his family.

His family.

He lifted his head and gazed at McCone with a steely resolve that had the director sitting up a little straighter.

"Where are they?"

xxxxxx

"Dude, come on! It's not everyday you have the director of the CIA in your living room."

Sean already had the chair pressed up against the wall as he eyed the grate above the bookshelf that would look into the rec room if arranged just so. Raven rolled her eyes from where she perched on the edge of Charles' desk, but Alex couldn't be bothered with Sean's idiotic ideas at the moment.

Not when Moira was distractedly bouncing Daniel and eyeing the study door every ten seconds, as if she expected someone to burst through at any moment. She had been acting strangely ever since she entered the kitchen and told them to stay away from the rec room. Which of course meant everyone made a beeline for the adjacent study to listen in.

They eventually got her to admit that the director of the CIA was present and that what they were discussing had something to do with Erik, but she was mum beyond that. Still. She kept staring at the door in an unnerving way that had Alex pacing the length of the carpet.

"But why's he here again?" Sean gave up trying to stand on the chair and slumped down into it.

"I'm sure Charles and Erik will tell you," she replied as she released a lock of her hair from Daniel's grip.

"Why can't you tell us?" Raven crossed her arms.

"It's not my place." A firm glare and an arched eyebrow ended the probe, but Alex continued to pace. And with good reason.

A loud boom echoed through the wall from the other room, followed closely by the sound of metal
scraping metal. It was like that car wreck Alex had witnessed when he was twelve and it was a sound he wasn't likely to forget any time soon.

"Holy shit." Raven hopped off the desk as Moira hugged a frightened Daniel to her chest.

"What the fuck was that?" Sean lowered his hands from his ears and glanced dazedly at the rest of them.

It would have been comical to someone with an outsider's perspective – all of them seemingly frozen in place before deciding at the same time to make a move for the door. Like something out of a *Three Stooges* episode.

Yes, it would have been comical had the Professor's voice not boomed "Don't!" in their minds in a tone that brooked no argument.

xxxxxx

"Erik, come back." Charles kept a hold on Erik's wrist, even as the lampshade imploded into a ball of scrap beside him. "Erik. Focus. Look at me." He could feel McCone's fear radiating out behind him. "Director, I think it would be wise for you to go and see what Moira and the children are up to."

McCone beat a hasty retreat, clearly not needing to be told twice.

"Erik, my love, come back." Charles let go of his wrist and cupped his cheeks, forcing Erik's gaze upon him. "Look at me. Come back."

"Oh God, Charles," he breathed through a sob, looking more broken than Charles had ever seen him. "I have children."

He couldn't help the gentle smile that spread across his lips. "Yes. You do."

*I didn't know.* "How could she not tell me? How could she leave them? Why – " The volume of questions swirling around Erik's mind made Charles wince.

He had always known Erik would make a good father – he was too protective of those he loved to be anything but wonderful. It was why he had felt such a sting upon Daniel's first arrival. Erik should have been there. Charles *needed* him there. But arrive Erik did and Charles would be damned if he didn't return the favor now. He would follow Erik's lead, until Erik could go no further. And then he would guide the way, Erik's hand in his.

Charles gently manhandled the distraught man back into the chair and kneeled on the floor in front of him.

"Erik, listen to me. We will find your children." He hooked his hands behind Erik's calves and rubbed soothing patterns on his trousers. "We will get them back. And we will raise them here and they will know you and you will love them."

Erik chuckled humorlessly. "But will they love *me*? They're, what? Seven? Eight? They can't be any younger than that – the mental picture of Magda running away from me in fright is not something I'm likely to forget anytime soon." The bitterness in his tone made Charles grip his legs harder.

"When they know you like I do, like Danny does – like Raven, Hank, Alex, and yes, even Sean – they will laugh that they ever once looked upon you with fear."

Charles leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Erik's head as the metal-bender wrapped his arms
around the other man's waist.

"I will not have my children raised as I was."

"Nor will they be," Charles murmured. "We will get them back."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

xxxxxx

McCone knew Xavier was rich, but as he stumbled from the room and met the sight of an actual Caravaggio hanging on the wall, he realized just how clearly he had underestimated the younger man's worth.

It was only through dumb luck that he happened to turn left instead of right, passing the open door to what appeared to be a study, and finding Agent MacTaggert standing in the doorframe, rocking a baby in her arms.

"MacTaggert?"

"Oh, sir!" She stepped back and allowed him to enter, bringing him face to face with the rest of the Xavier household.

The girl he remembered (how could he forget?), but the rest were new. But was that…? His steps faltered and he froze. Yes, that was an animal – wearing glasses, trousers, and a lab coat – standing by the window. The blue-girl seemed to notice his gaze and stepped closer to the man/beast, taking his hand in hers.

"Sir. What happened?"

He blinked back at his agent, his eyes flitting over the child in her arms. Ah. Xavier's son. Clearly. With those eyes, there was no mistake. But then… he raised an eyebrow and gestured between MacTaggert and the baby.

"Been busy? I had my suspicions about you two, but…”

MacTaggert's eyes widened to the size of dinner plates and the redheaded teen guffawed so loudly that the baby jumped, but a swift elbow from the blond silenced him.

"No, sir. He's not mine," MacTaggert muttered, as if that was a phrase she had to say more times than she appreciated.

"Where are Charles and Erik?" The blond stepped forward and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Collecting themselves," he replied, hopefully sounding more like the Director of the CIA and less like a chastised little boy. It was odd feeling this inferior. This helpless.

He just informed a man that two children he didn't know he had were in captivity. Probably being tested and trained and God knows what else. And there wasn't anything he could do about it because there was a distinct possibility that men in his own agency were involved.

McCone felt sick.

"What do you mean, 'collecting themselves?'" The girl erected a stance of fierce protectiveness as she
narrowed her golden eyes at him.

He couldn't tell them. It wasn't his place.

"Raven," Xavier softly called from the doorway.

Raven. Yes, that was her name.

"Director, Moira, if you would both please join us in the other room."

"Charles – " Raven began to protest, but Xavier held up his hand.

"A few more minutes, Raven. Please."

And McCone couldn't help but envy the complete loyalty this young man had garnered from his charges. Raven backed down and stood next to the beast at the window as the blond began to pace the carpet. No argument. No rebuttal. Just blind trust.

If he could lead like that, the Agency would be a well-oiled machine and not a breeding ground for corruption and back-alley deals.

"Director?" Xavier's voice echoed in his mind and McCone glanced up to realize that Moira had already handed the baby back to his father and left the room.

"Right."

His feet guided him from the study and he heard the steady tread of Xavier's steps behind him. In the time that he had been gone, the diminutive telepath had somehow managed to wrestle the volatile man into a chair, where Erik now sat hunched in on himself, head resting in his hands.

"We were there," he muttered. "We were there. We were in the club and we didn't..."

"Erik, we didn't know," Moira soothed. "No one could have known."

Xavier stood behind the chair Lehnsherr sat in and placed the hand that wasn't holding his son on the other man's shoulder. "We'll go back."

McCone cleared his throat, feeling a little out of place as MacTaggert and Xavier offered comfort he himself could not. "Whatever you need, I'll make sure you get it." It was minimal, but he could see the gratitude in Lehnsherr's eyes.

What followed over the next half hour was a series of speculations, hypotheses, and educated guesses as to where exactly Lehnsherr's children could be contained. The wiretap made it clear they were in Manhattan, which led all to assume they were in the Union Club on the park. But really, it was anyone's guess.

Manhattan was a very big place with many dark corners.

Perfect for hiding two tiny seven-year-olds who thought that all hope had been lost.

xxxxxx

"You've got to be kidding me."

Sean gaped as he stared at Erik, absolutely convinced that the Prof was playing some elaborate and very late April Fools joke.
The CIA director, who looked like he had a pool cue shoved up his ass, had left not ten minutes ago, reluctantly taking hold of Azazel's hand as he disappeared in a cloud of stinky smoke. Sean didn't blame him – he hated travelling via teleporter. But that left just the seven of them, seven and a half counting Danny, sitting around looking equal parts shocked (Raven), confused (Alex), and positively pissed off (Erik).

"So they have your kids? Kids you didn't know you had?" Alex sat next to Sean with a look of disbelief on his face that Sean was sure mirrored his own.

Erik gave a stiff nod and Sean's eyes widened (if that was even possible). "Dude."

"Moira, Erik, and I are leaving tonight," Charles began, before a general cry of hell no – or something to that effect – rose up from the rest in the living room.

"You are not leaving us here this time." Raven.

"I always get left behind." Alex.

"At least you're not blue!" Hank. Duh.

"So wait." And, God help him, Sean just didn't know when to shut his mouth. "How many illegitimate children do you two have?" he asked, glancing between Erik and Charles.

It was Hank of all people who reached over and hit him first – and the hardest – followed by Raven, and then Alex, just because any excuse to punch Sean was reason enough in Alex's book.

"They aren't illegitimate," Erik quietly replied.

Hank looked confused and confusion looked weird on him. "Excuse me?"

"They aren't illegitimate," Erik sighed and rubbed his hands over his face. "I'm married to their mother."

Silence.

"You're married?" Raven asked in a tone so quiet and hurt, it was as if she was feeling betrayal on Charles' behalf.

"Yes, I'm married." Erik replied in the weariest tone Sean had ever heard, as he let his hand drop so Danny could grab the finger he was reaching up for.

"Did you know about this?" Raven asked, looking at Charles.

He nodded. "I did."

"Dude," Sean muttered again.

Shit just got real.

xxxxxx

As Erik threw a shirt into a duffle bag far more harshly than was strictly necessary, his ring caught the bedside-lamp light and he paused as he reached for another item of clothing to violently pack away in a bag two sizes too small.

"Marry me."
It had seemed like a lifetime ago. Like he was viewing another man’s dreams through clouded windows.

"Of course that’s a ‘yes,’ you idiot."

He could sense Charles before he heard him. Could feel his gaze on the back of his neck as if he’d fall to pieces at a moment’s notice. And if he was honest with himself, the worries weren’t unfounded. Erik felt as though he was being held together by the flimsiest string, and any thought of Magda, or Anya, or mein Gott, Wanda and Pietro – would snip that thread like the sharpest of scissors.

Charles placed a hand on his now-still arm and wrapped his fingers around his wrist. "I can do this."

"I can pack my own clothes, Charles."

"I’m well aware of your packing prowess, darling; I’m merely offering to give you a moment."

"I don’t need a moment."

And really, he didn’t. He didn’t think he could handle a moment to stop, to think, to be alone with the thoughtspleasrage his body could barely contain.

"Erik.” The grip on his wrist tightened, but he didn’t have the heart to wrench it away. "Erik, stay with me."

Don’t make me talk. Don’t make me think. Don’t make me feel. Oh God, why did she do this?

"Charles,” he finally gasped out, the air suddenly gone from his lungs. "I’m not sure I can handle this.” How could he be so calm? How could he be so confident, while Erik shook like a leaf in the breeze?

"Erik,” Charles began, as he removed the duffle bag from the bed and slowly guided him into its place. "How many times do I have to tell you? You are not alone. There is no ‘I.’ There is ‘we.’ We will do this together."

And it was as if the heavens had opened and created Charles just for him – to say the words he needed to hear and push him back onto the plush pillows for a simple moment. To bathe in the warmth of Charles’ chest as he wrapped his arms around Erik and pulled his back flush against him. The roles had reversed – Erik was usually the one spooning Charles, but for once, Erik allowed himself to be held, firm and steadfast in the strength of his lover’s arms.

His lover. His partner. His fiancé.

"Don’t leave me,” he choked, a hot secret divulged in the quiet moment he had tried so carefully to avoid.

"I’m not sure if you noticed,” Charles replied, as he held up his left hand and threaded his fingers through Erik’s so their rings kissed in the fading light, "but I’ve been playing for keeps since you walked into my study with that ridiculous helmet on your head."

And Erik wondered how many more times he could break – how many more times he could be dropped and glued back together. He knew one more time might very well be it, breaking him irreparably.

But he also knew that no matter how many pieces he shattered into, Charles would track them down
to the ends of the earth and carefully, painstakingly, put him back together.
Relativities

Chapter Summary

In which a return trip to New York is made.

In the end, Sean decided to stay home with Hank to help care for Daniel. Despite the fact that Hank couldn't really go anywhere anyway, the excuse of more time in the lab was flimsy at best. Alex was convinced Bozo actually enjoyed babysitting the squirt.

He was pumped to be included, despite the less than ideal circumstances. He had never been to New York and as he sat on the edge of the fountain in front of The Plaza, he closed his eyes and listened to the sounds — the constant buzz that was the beating heart of the city. Taxi cabs, hot dog vendors, barking dogs. They came together to create a din almost loud enough to drown out the thumping of his anxious heart.

Anything, Alex?

Nothing, Prof.

He had been standing guard for the better part of an hour, watching the comings and goings of the hotel as he pretended to peruse a map of Manhattan. The Plaza wasn't the target — the Union Club two blocks away was — but Erik felt safer knowing every entrance and exit (or at least the main one) was being watched upon their arrival.

Still, as seriously as he took this mission and as grateful as he was to be trusted with helping get Erik's kids back, Alex couldn't help being swept up in the magnetic quality that was New York City. The ornate window displays of Bergdorf's kept drawing his eye, as did every horse and buggy that made its way slowly into the maze of Central Park.

The sweet smell of candied almonds being roasted in a cart on the corner mingled crudely with the stench of horse droppings where a few buggies had pulled over for a break.

They had meant to arrive much earlier — the middle of the night, if Erik had had his way — but he's pretty sure the Prof worked some of his voodoo, lovey-dovey magic because when Raven knocked on the door to ask if they were ready, she found them both passed out on the bed, their half-packed bags forgotten on the floor.

Which was exactly how Alex ended up standing sentinel on the corner of 59th and 5th at the much more respectable hour of 11:43am as Raven and Moira settled in upstairs and Charles attempted to keep Erik from demolishing half of the hotel.

Alex, I very much doubt the HSS are going leap out of the hot dog carts. Come back inside.

The teen couldn't help a slight chuckle.

Sure thing, Prof.

xxxxxxx
Raven’s worry for Erik and her desire to remain mad at him for omitting his marriage was creating quite the crisis of conscience.

They had splurged on two rooms this time with an adjoining door and she eyed Erik discreetly as he paced the length of their room while Charles watched calmly from his perch on the bed.

"Darling, wearing a hole in the carpet will do no one any favors. Least of all, the maid."

Erik glared and Raven tried to hide her smile as she glanced out the window and found Alex making his way back into the hotel. They hadn't been there long – long enough for Erik to frighten off room service who came to deliver much-needed coffee and long enough for Moira to procure schematics of the Union Club with her magical CIA ways. Raven didn't ask questions when the front desk announced there was a package for Moira Xavier in room 913. It was a testament to just how out of it Erik was that he made no comment on the cover name.

"Raven."

"Hm?" she glanced up from where her gaze had been locked on the F.A.O. Schwartz sign just across the way.

"Keep an eye on him, will you?" Charles murmured, nodding back to Erik in the other room. "I have to make a phone call."

"There's a phone in here," she replied, frowning slightly.

"It's not that kind of call…" he trailed off and glanced surreptitiously behind him, where Erik could still be seen pacing back and forth through the door. "As much as we might not want to think about it, I still have to plan for the fact that this might not end as well as we'd like it to."

"I don't understand – " she began, before the mental picture of two coffins and a hearse stole the rest of the sentence from her tongue. "Charles."

"I don't like it any more than you do," he defended quietly, "but you cannot deny that it's a distinct possibility."

"What happened to having faith?"

Charles frowned and pinched the bridge of his nose, finally letting the strong façade crack just a bit. "I need him to have faith," he said, gesturing back to Erik. "I'll worry about practicalities."

And with that, he turned and strode out of the room, nearly bumping into Alex on his way into the hall.

"What's up with the Prof?" he asked as he made his way over to Raven.

"You don't want to know," she muttered darkly. "Help Moira read the blueprints."

Alex gave a mock salute and plopped down on the couch next to the agent as Raven made her way into the adjoining room, knocking hesitantly on the doorjamb.

Erik glanced up and just as quickly glanced away, which Raven took as an invitation to proceed further. At least he didn't bite her head off.

She took Charles' place on the foot of the bed and watched quietly as Erik paced back and forth in front of her. There was nothing she could say, nothing that would relieve the harsh pang of panic or
the sharp sting of betrayal that he was no doubt feeling. There would be no "It's okay" or "It'll be all right," because that was an outcome no one could guarantee. The words were hollow and mocking and cruel so Raven chose to go with silence.

"Tell me it's not years."

"What?" she asked after the moment it took her to realize Erik had spoken.

"McCone said they could have had them months. Or years. Please, God, tell me it's not years," he whispered brokenly as he propped his hands on the window frame and let his head hang low.

"I think McCone was going for worst case scenario," she quietly replied, as she thought of Charles and the phone call he was making in the lobby. And because she just couldn't help herself, she blurted out, "I didn't know you were married."

Erik peered over his shoulder, not removing his hands from the sill, and raised an eyebrow at her even as he let out a heavy breath. "To be quite honest, I forgot."

She couldn't help the scoff that escaped because, really, how does one just forget one's spouse?

"The brain is a remarkable thing, Raven." He turned back to the window, leaving her with just the sight of his sharp shoulder blades. "You'd be amazed by what you can compartmentalize when you want to forget enough."

And in that moment, she knew that there were some hurts you just couldn't recover from. Some pains that continued to haunt, well after the initial injury.

"I was a father by the time I was your age." His tone was quiet, as if his mind was miles away from the hotel room they sat in, and she frowned, utterly confused.

"But I thought you didn't know about the twins."

"I didn't," he replied and left it at that.

xxxxxx

Moira sighed at the befuddled look on Alex's face and tried, for the third time, to explain why she thought Erik's children were in the room very clearly marked KITCHEN on the blueprints.

"But it's the kitchen."

"No, they want us to think it's the kitchen," she replied as she unrolled yet another long building layout. "These are the schematics from Philadelphia. We found Charles here." She pointed at a room off of the library marked STORAGE. "It definitely wasn't storage."

Something dark must have shown in her face because Alex's eyes widened and his jaw clenched. The children had never asked her and Erik what exactly had happened in the bowels of the club in Philadelphia. They didn't need to hear about the rows of dank cells and clear bottles of suppressant serum, images that haunted her sleep in the time since Charles had returned. Speaking of...

The hotel door banged open and Charles walked through looking far worse than he had when he left fifteen minutes prior. His eyes brightened considerably, however, when they met Moira's before nodding to the blueprints.

"Making any headway?"
He listened to her theories and agreed with her suspicions. And not a moment too soon, because Erik stormed in a minute later and harshly declared he could not spend a second more in that hotel room. Frankly, Moira was surprised he had managed to stay sane that long.

It was a fascinating thing to watch, the dynamic between Charles and Erik. The metal-bender had been a brimming pot of rage until one touch from Charles bled the heat from his gaze and quelled the fire simmering just beneath the surface.

"As much as I'm all for going in guns blazing, shouldn't we have, you know, some sort of game plan?" Alex asked.

"Quite right," Charles replied. "Though we'll be brief because I fear the longer we wait, well…" he spared a glance for Erik. "We'll be brief."

Judging by the look of murder in Erik's eye, brevity was in everyone's best interest.

Nine floors to the lobby. Two blocks to the club.

Two guards at the door. One man behind the front desk.

Four guests in line to check in. Three bellboys waiting with their carts.

Adrenaline made Erik think in the simplest of terms. He saw targets and body counts. Exits and potential weapons. The fastest route to the surest means of success.

Of course, it helped that he didn't have to really worry about any of those people, seeing as they were all frozen before Charles even opened the door. Charles.

The man at his side was calm and calculating – closing his eyes and lifting his fingers to his temple as Alex unconsciously stepped slightly closer to his professor, as if wanting to protect him while he was in his own mind. The thought warmed something inside Erik.

"The blueprints indicated a doorway down here," Moira murmured, gun drawn and pointing to the other side of the grand hall.

"You're right. This way," Charles nodded, and Erik was grateful for the air of quiet surrounding him, for the steady thrum of calm patiencelove that lapped at his bruised mind. As if sensing the turn of his thoughts, Charles glanced at him sideways and gave him a half smile, placing a hand on the small of Erik's back as the metal-bender moved into the room Moira had indicated.

Another library, then. These people certainly liked their books. He levitated a letter opener from the desk in the corner as Raven shape shifted into the bellhop she saw in the lobby.

"I'll stay here and keep watch," she whispered in a timbre much deeper than her own.

Two doors. Five tables. Four lamps. Two metal. One porcelain. One crystal.

"I can feel them," Charles stated as he slammed to a stop and Erik's heart bottomed out. "They were not here last time. I did a mind sweep of the whole building."

"Where," he heard himself stutter out. "Where are they? Are they okay?"

"They're frightened," Charles said distractedly as he scanned the rows of dusty tomes in front of him. "Of course," he muttered. "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of goddamn happiness."
And with a swift elbow to a copy of the United States *Constitution*, the entire bookshelf lurched back, revealing a dank hallway with a spiral set of metal stairs at the end.

"For a society obsessed with the Revolutionary War era, they sure have a warped sense of freedom," Moira spat out, as Charles stepped back and allowed Erik to enter first.

The metal of the staircase hummed in his veins, singing to him a lullaby only he could hear. It was the soft melody set against the base beat of his heart, with Charles – constant Charles – beside him to keep tempo.

*Twenty-three stairs. No windows. One exit.*

"If I let out a blast in here, I'll bring the whole place down on us," Alex whispered.

"I don't think there will be any need for that," Charles replied, before the reassuring smile slipped from his face and his fingers dug into his temple.

"Charles, what is it?"

Erik let Moira doing the asking, because he wasn't sure he trusted his own voice at the moment.

"I've lost them. They've – they're gone. They must be in some kind of telepathy-protected room, but how – " The words died in his throat and Erik followed his gaze to the camera perched in the corner of the narrow corridor.

"Scheiße."

"They know we're here. Split up. Alex with me, Moira with Erik."

And if Erik had any extra room in his mind to think, he would have marveled at how commanding Charles managed to be in such a high-pressure situation. Surely by now he himself would have devolved into useless grunts and magnetic hand movements.

Charles had been the glue holding him together and now they were leaving. *Alex with me. Moira with Erik.* It was for the best, some voice of reason in the back of his head said. He and Alex were the hotheads. Moira and Charles the coolly collected. It made sense. But he watched with detached fascination as the man he loved pointed a path for Moira as his feet guided him down the stairs.

"I felt the boy down there. We'll go for the girl. If you need anything just think loudly."


And the answer to his mental recitation: a firm grip and a hot whisper.

"Don't you dare do anything stupid." Blue eyes boring holes into his very soul.

"Likewise." A croaked command.

"I'll see you soon?"

"I'll see you soon."

And then he was gone and the silence was deafening.

xxxxxx
A steady hand. That was what five years of CIA training left her with. She had no family, no real friends. An empty home and goldfish that tended to die. But she had a steady hand and that was all that mattered at the moment.

She kept one eye on the dark path ahead – a labyrinthine maze that seemed to stretch the length of the entire city block – and the other on Erik, who stalked forward without a care for the noise his footsteps made or the letter opener that revolved around his head and came uncomfortably close to grazing her cheek several times.

"Erik –"

"Don't."

She respected his need for quiet, for privacy. He hadn't said more than two words to her since he found out about his children and those two words had been "yes," when she asked if he wanted coffee, and "no," when she asked if he needed to talk. Clearly, he was not the loquacious type.

Footsteps up ahead broke her from her musings and both she and Erik stilled, like a fox about to run the race of his life.

She felt the boom before she heard it – a great rumble of the earth that unsettled her footing and unsteadied her hand.

And before she could even question what it was, Erik's warm body was pressing her up against the stone wall, shielding her from the storm.

xxxxxx

It was too quiet. Alex could hear the crunch of the gravel beneath his sneakers and feel the damp air settle on his clammy skin.

"I don't like this, Prof."

"We'll be just…" he trailed off as they turned a corner and Alex started as he came face to face with three completely immobile guards. "Fine."

"It's still creepy when you do that."

Charles merely gave him a cheeky grin in return. "This way."

It got cooler, the further they ventured, and Alex could only hope that the Prof was somehow tracking their steps. He had no desire to be lost down here in a place that looked like it belonged on a studio backlot for a horror film.

They passed two more guards completely immobile and Alex stifled a shiver at their vacant, unseeing expressions. The sheer magnitude of the professor's power was an astonishing thing to see, and it made Alex all the more grateful that he wasn't on the receiving end of it.

"Ah, here we are," Charles whispered, as they came upon a sealed metal door. "A shame we don't have Erik here for this. Right," he said, after a moment's consideration. "I'm going to need you to blast down that door."

Alex couldn't quite be sure he heard him correctly. "Prof, this isn't exactly the bunker," he replied, gesturing at their meager surroundings.
"I realize that and I have complete faith in you." Charles placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Erik's daughter is in that room and I can't get to her or the men in there until we remove that door and shatter that wall." The hand on his shoulder squeezed. "And only you can do that."

"Professor – " Fear rose within him, clawing its way out of his chest. "Charles…" The teen nearly choked when the older man stood behind him – not down the tunnel, not around the corner, not down the block, but behind him.

"I trust you, Alex."

*Trust.* What had been such a foreign word to him before now formed the foundation of his new life.

With a deep breath and an *ohdeargodpleasedon'tkilltheprof*, he closed his eyes and let loose.

xxxxxx

Erik shook his head as a cloud of dust floated into the air around him and Moira's small frame pressed into his front.

"Are you – " he coughed, "Are you all right?"

She managed a shaky nod as she did a rudimentary physical inventory on both of them – all limbs and organs seemed to be intact.

*Charles?* He thought as loudly as he could, but it was as if his mental call had hit a wall and bounced back. Not that he was any telepath, but he knew when Charles was listening in. He could *feel* the gentle touch at the back of his mind like Charles' breath against his neck in the morning.

A moment too late, he realized he was still crushing Moira between his chest and the wall and he backed away and tried to gently brush the debris from her hair and shoulders.

"He said to think loudly, right?" She looked so hopeful.

"He's not answering me either." The words physically hurt him. To say them made them real. And the fact that Charles wasn't answering was not an issue Erik had the emotional energy to address.

The letter opener hovered at his side once more and Moira raised her gun. He could feel the bullets in the cartridge, as well as the extra mag on her hip. They turned the corner and Moira nearly yelped as she came face to face with an immobile guard.

"Charles' handiwork," Erik muttered, but his heart swelled with both pride and gratitude.

Their steps were quiet – the explosion and ensuing mental silence prompting more caution from them both. The frozen guards became more and more common the further they travelled which Erik had to believe meant they were close. Eventually they came upon a metal door and he wanted to laugh as he felt the hinges creak with a twitch of his fingers.

"This is it."

"Erik, I know you don't want to hear this," Moira began as she stared at the door with her gun raised, "but I promised Charles I would try and keep you out of trouble. Please don't make a liar out of me."

"Deal." He glanced over, met her eye, and raised a brow as if to say *You ready for this?* Her answering smile was almost as good as *Let's find out.* "On three, two, one."

The door blew off the hinges and Erik immediately reached out, senses humming, but he felt only
two pieces of metal in the room. Confusion clouded his senses and he heard a gunshot. A guard fell to his feet as Moira unloaded another string of bullets into another across way. They carried guns but he felt no metal. He sent the letter opener into the final guard as something sharp pierced his right side. It felt like a pinprick as adrenaline coursed through his system, and as the dust cleared, the realization of what the two pieces of metal he could feel were, made the air leave his lungs as swiftly as if someone had punched him in the chest.

"Oh God."

Moira's hand reached out to steady him, but the sight before him brought Erik to his knees. He had tried to prepare for this. He thought he was prepared. But the sight of the little boy cowering in the corner, shielding his face from the dim light of the hallway, broke what little resolve Erik had used to carry him thus far.

"Pietro," left his mouth on the edge of a sob and he crawled over the ground and immediately released the manacles binding the boy's feet to the floor. He was filthy – his eyes two white orbs in a sea of black, his lips chapped and his ankles chafed.

Erik reached out and immediately the boy shrank back. Erik held up his hands as if to show he meant no harm and swallowed the large lump that wasn't sure would ever leave his throat.

"Moira…"

Her hand on his shoulder was soft as she knelt down next to him in the grime and smiled gently at the boy in front of her.

"Sweetheart, we're coming to take you out of here. Can you understand me?"

Pietro gave the tiniest of nods.

"I'm Moira and this is… this is…”

Erik gave an imperceptible shake of his head. The "your father" missing from the end of her sentence was definitely a discussion for another time.

"This is Erik. Can you come with us?"

She squeezed his shoulder once more so Erik held out his hand. Pietro reached out an entirely too-skinny arm and fit his tiny hand in his. The touch was electric – like someone handed him his newborn son seven years too late. Erik wanted to laugh and cry and rage and cry some more, but before he could even begin to figure out in which direction to let his emotions roll, he remembered where exactly they were, which brought reality harshly and unfairly to the present.

"We have to go. Moira, unhook the IV."

And only then did she seem to notice the needle in the little boy's hand.

"Like Charles?" she whispered.

"Like Charles," he replied as his clenched his jaw.

Pietro seemed so out of it that he didn't even wince when the IV was removed, and Erik scooped the boy up in his arms – God he was light – and let Moira lead the way out of the room he was sure would haunt his nightmares for years to come.
Tiny fingers brushed the back of his neck and no matter how dire the situation, Erik couldn’t help the string of thisisyourson thisisyourson that seemed to play on loop in his mind.

He would have reveled in the way Pietro seemed to sink into his embrace; would have thanked whatever God there was for the steady breath that puffed against his neck, and the thin legs that wrapped around his waist.

Yes he would have done all of things if Charles’ voice had not screamed his name in his mind a moment later.

Had he been in this position not a year ago, he would have been utterly lost.

As it were, he was perfectly in his element sitting on the floor of grimy cell, rocking the little girl in his lap as he hummed a nameless lullaby in her ear. Well perhaps not in his element. He would have preferred a nursery.

He heard Erik before he saw him, stumbling into the room, a little boy just as dirty as the girl in his arms clutching tightly to his shoulders. The sight warmed something deep in the recesses of Charles' chest.

Erik audibly inhaled at the sight before him.

"Wanda," he breathed.

"It's all right, darling," Charles murmured in her ear, but his eyes remained on Erik. "We're going home now."

With a grunt, he stood and carried her over to her father so he could get a better look at her. Erik reached a shaky hand up and gently brushed the matted hair off her forehead. She made sign of recognition – no smile, no frown. She barely even blinked.

*She's in shock,* Charles supplied and Erik nodded, pained though his expression was.

"Where's Alex?"

"Here," he huffed, jogging down the tunnel with a large box in each arm. "That's the last of them. We found an office just around the corner with files and stuff. There wasn't much, but it's something."

Charles was about to suggest he call for Azazel – for as convenient as The Plaza was and as confident as he was in his abilities to mask their arrival there safely, Charles knew that these children needed a home; not a hotel – but some change in Erik's expression held the words in his throat.

"Erik?"

"I need you to take him." He seemed quite insistent so Charles handed Wanda to Moira and held out his arms for Pietro.

"Christ, Erik, he's covered in blood."

"It's not his."

"What?"
Erik had barely enough time to hand the child to Charles as his knees buckled from under him.

"It's not his," he repeated.

And only then did Charles notice the wound on Erik's lower right side – the hole in his shirt, no larger than a penny, that was staining the material as crimson as a southern red tide.
In which Erik is stubborn, Charles is hysterical, and an appreciation for Dr. Seuss is shared.

All else faded away and his entire being, his entire world, came down to the man collapsing in front of him.

"Erik!"

Charles hiked the boy farther up on his hip with his right arm so he could reach out to Erik with his left. The man pitched forward, ghastly white, and held onto the wrist Charles was putting on offer.

"Don't you do this to me. You do not get to pay me back for getting kidnapped. This is not a tit-for-tat situation." His voice was tinged with hysteria and he grabbed Erik's chin, forcing his eyes to meet his own as his heart thrummed a rhythm he wasn't sure the rest of his body could keep up with.

"I'm fine," he groaned into Charles' stomach where his head had fallen forward. "Just a little woozy."

Charles' incredulous reply of "A little woozy?" was drowned out by Alex's exclamation of "How did they shoot you? You fucking control metal."

"Language, Alex," slipped out, as if reflex.

He didn't know what to do. It was the one moment in his life where all seemed to come to a standstill. When he faced the barrel of the gun, he was calm. When his son was threatened, he offered himself up instead. Now, now there was no bargaining, there was no calm. All that existed was Erik Erik ohgod Erik along with the steady weight of the child in his arms. Much bigger than Daniel, but still too light. Charles wanted to take him home and wrap him up, cocooning him from the rest of the world. But first…

"Erik, look at me."

"I am." A hitched breath. "You have lovely eyes."

"Erik, now is not the time."

"I'm fine," he mumbled, attempting to stand again, before stumbling sideways into Moira, which seemed to be all the urging she needed to take the situation into her own hands.

"Alex, run up the stairs and get Raven. She can take the boxes and then you can help Erik. Charles and I will carry the children."

The teen nodded once and took off in the direction of the metal staircase.

"Can you stand on your own for a moment, sweetheart?" she whispered to Wanda.

The girl made no sign that she had heard Moira, but her green eyes flicked over to Charles ever so
briefly, so Moira gently placed her on the ground, where she promptly wobbled over to Pietro and held his hand. Charles instinctively wrapped an arm around her tiny waist.

Moira knelt down on the ground, offering Erik a sympathetic wince when he hissed as she lifted up his shirt. The cotton stuck to his skin, reluctant to peel away as she moved to examine the wound.

From his vantage point, Charles could just make out the small hole in Erik's skin and he was in enough control of his faculties to turn both Wanda and Pietro into his chest, shielding them from horrors they had had enough of.

"Watch it, MacTaggert," Erik growled.

"Stop moving, Lehnsherr," Moira snapped. Keeping a hand on his chest to steady him, she lifted his shirt in the back and hummed something that sounded like approval.

Charles prayed to any god listening it was approval.

"Clean in and out. You'll live, assuming you don't pass out before we get you out of here."

"The chances are multiplying by the moment," Erik wryly replied, his eyes rolling slightly as he leaned heavily against Moira.

*You'll live. You'll live.* The diagnosis played on repeat in Charles' mind and he couldn't help the audible exhale that seemed to carry the entirety of his fears on its back.

Erik met his eye and managed a soft smile. *Really, Charles. I'm fine.*

*You don't look it from this angle.*

*My right side was never my best.*

Charles snorted, startling the children pressed into his side and he ran his hands up and down their backs to soothe them.

"What the hell happened? I leave you alone for ten minutes…" Raven came jogging to a halt beside Alex, the bellhop charade long gone.

"I'm fine," Erik murmured.

Raven raised her eyebrows. "It's not you I'm worried about. Still with us, Charles? You're as pale as Erik."

Charles shook the fog from his head and managed a nod for his sister as she smirked. Apparently, everyone found the situation to be not as dire as he did. Moira and Alex helped Erik to his feet before the agent turned around and scooped Wanda back into her arms. Charles did the same with Pietro, who clung to him tighter than a monkey, before Raven picked up the boxes and they all trooped back upstairs.

"What about the guards?" Alex grunted under Erik's weight.

"I'll take care of them." Charles left the threat implied and no one bothered to question further.

Getting Erik up the metal staircase was no easy feat, but they eventually emerged in the library to find five men knocked out on the floor. But before Charles could even question just what his sister had gotten up to, Erik's voice floated up from where his face was buried in Alex's shoulder.
"Did you do that?" he murmured as he was half-carried through the door. Raven shrugged and he smirked. "Perfection."

Leave it to Erik to be bleeding out and yet still able to admire the effects of a good roundhouse kick.

xxxxxx

Hank really was okay with always being the one left behind. He reveled in the oh-so-rare quiet of the mansion and the extra time in the lab without Charles or Raven coming in and reminding him to eat.

And, yes, he'd admit under duress that watching Daniel was not exactly a burden – save for bath time, naptime, and the occasional macaroni-fight.

Still. Daniel was a pleasant distraction from the siren call of science or the riots on the news. **Raven** was the real puzzle. But before he could even begin to contemplate that beautiful enigma (or wonder what Sean was getting up to), a *pop* in the foyer signaled the arrival of Azazel and Daniel's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree.

"Poof!" he yelled, clapping his hands together.

"Yeah, yeah. 'Poof," Hank grumbled. Azazel had a habit of goading him just to see how loud he could roar. Hank found it annoying. Sean and Daniel found it hilarious. "Come on." Hank scooped Daniel out of his highchair and held him close to his chest with one paw as the baby immediately buried his face in his fur, a habit which he would never admit to finding endearing.

But something seemed off and the distant sound of Sean's expletive confirmed it.

"Hank! Get in here!"

**Hank.** Sean never called him Hank. It was "Beast" or "Dude." Never, ever Hank. He quickened his pace, jostling the baby slightly as he jogged from the kitchen into the foyer to meet utter chaos.

Two children clung to Charles and Moira as Alex supported a frighteningly pale Erik, whose shirt and jeans were stained red all down the right side.

"He was shot," Alex gritted out, trying not to sag under the metal-bender's weight.

"How?"

"Plastic," Erik groaned. "They were plastic."

Charles pointed swiftly at Daniel. "Get him out of here."

Only then did Hank realize that the boy in his arms had fallen eerily silent and was staring at his fathers with something akin to horror.

Thankfully, Raven was the first to spring into action, dropping the boxes she was carrying and taking Daniel from Hank's momentarily stunned arms.

"Come on, little man," she murmured against his temple as he attempted to reach over her shoulder, yelling "Vati" the whole way into the rec room.

Erik looked wrecked, as he tried to put up a strong façade for his departing son, while sagging under the disorientation his blood loss no doubt brought on.

"Get them into the lab."
"Them?" Moira questioned and Hank gestured to the frightened, malnourished children in her and Charles' arms.

"All of them."

And so down the hall they filed, Alex practically dragging Erik and Charles forever hovering within a three-foot radius of the injured man, the little boy clinging to him, arms around his neck.

It was easy to set them up on three different tables and figure out whose situation was the most pressing. Of course, it didn't help that the most serious case was also the most stubborn. Erik wouldn't let Hank touch him until he tended to the children, but what Erik didn't seem to grasp was that if Hank didn't get some blood into him, Erik wouldn't be long for this world.

"Erik, they are right here. They aren't going anywhere," Charles tried to reason.

If anyone was going to talk sense into him, it was the professor, and Erik did seem to take comfort in his words, even though his gaze never left the children on the table next to him.

The girl – Wanda, Hank remembered – climbed off her own table and settled in next to her brother. Her little arms wrapped around his neck as they both stared at Erik, who was trying oh so hard to remain conscious. Charles seemed to be fighting the urge to rush to Erik's side, but he stayed with the children – a hand on each of their shoulders – as Moira hooked up an IV drip to help ease the dehydration.

"Erik, what's your blood type?"

"O-negative," was the last thing he managed, before his head clunked back to the table and the hand reaching out to Charles and the children fell limply to his side.

Hank sighed.

Stubbornness and medicine rarely mixed.

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A steady beep slowly started to seep into his conscious, getting louder and louder as Erik got closer and closer to the surface of his fuzzy thoughts.

He blinked his eyes open and quickly shut them once again to block out the harsh fluorescent lights. A groan escaped the deep recesses of his chest and he turned his head, locking eyes with Hank's appraising gaze.

"Where are the children?" His voice sounded broken and he did a mental inventory of the rest of his body. Shirt missing, torso bandaged, IV and blood bag attached.

"With Charles. Getting cleaned up." Hank stood from his perch on the stool next to the microscope and looked at something on the monitor recording Erik's heartbeat.

"He was hesitant to take them away from you, but I told him you'd be out of it for a while."

Erik groaned as he pushed himself into a seated position, helped by the strong paw on his forearm. "How long has it been?"

"Four hours." Hank seemed to hesitate for a moment before handing Erik a clipboard. "Physically, they're okay. Underweight and a little bruised, but okay."
Erik nodded as his eyes scanned the contents of the page: weight, blood pressure, noticeable marks and lesions. Pietro had chafed ankles and bruised ribs, while Wanda had a series of burn marks up and down her arms.

"Your son has superhuman speed."

Erik’s eyebrows hit his hairline. "Superhuman speed?"

"You could ground him and he'd be halfway to California before you finished your sentence." Hank grinned. "It should make for some interesting teenage years."

*Teenage years.* That was if his children didn’t run screaming from him when they found out that he was their father. Erik felt slightly sick.

"And my daughter?"

At the mentioned of Wanda, Hank's features darkened. "Won't say. She's in shock, but going by the marks on her arms, I have a suspicion that her power is very unwieldy, and any slip up was cause for punishment."

The spike of anger that drove through Erik's chest had the metal instruments vibrating. Hank spared them a glance but didn't try to calm the metal-bender down. No doubt he knew his efforts would be fruitless.

"She refuses to leave her brother's side and she hasn't said a word yet. Charles tried to read her mind, but all he got were images of red sparks."


"Would you like *your* diagnosis?"

"I have a feeling I'll live," Erik wryly replied.

"You will, thank God. I'm not sure Charles was giving me any other option."

Erik softly smiled and placed the clipboard with his children's vitals next to him on the table. Sharp pain shot up his side and he silently thanked Hank for not shooting him up with morphine. He needed his head and heart as clear as possible, but he gladly accepted Hank's hand as he helped him off the table.

"Where are they?"

Hank's gaze drifted up. "Moira mentioned something about a bath. I keep expecting water to start pouring through the ceiling."

Erik smirked and took the clean shirt Hank offered him. Getting it over his head was no easy feat, but with a couple of mumbled expletives, he eventually fit his arms through the sleeves and made his way towards the hall.

"They look like you, you know."

Erik stopped at the door and turned. "What?"

"The twins. They look like you."

And Erik didn't really know what to say to that, but a warm feeling made his heart flip as he gave
Hank a small smile and made his way towards the stairs. He climbed gingerly, the pain in his side multiplying with every step he took, but as he reached the top, he heard a sound that made something in his chest tighten.

Giggling.

With his heart in his throat, Erik made his way towards the noise, towards the large bathroom with the clawed-foot tub that was in the last room on the right. The door was ajar and through the opening he could see Charles sitting on the floor, with Wanda in his lap – hair wet and wrapped in a fluffy robe that practically engulfed her tiny body. In his hands was a bright yellow copy of *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* and the giggling was coming from Pietro, who still sat in the tub, hair molded into a peak as shampoo suds slowly made their way down his face.

The image was so bright, so powerful, that Erik couldn't help the gasp that escaped his lips as he slid down the wall and took a seat just outside the door.

Wanda stared intently at the pictures as Charles' gentle lilt echoed off the bathroom tiles. Truth be told, the book was too young for them, but they both seemed so enraptured, that Erik didn't give it a second thought.

"Black fish, Blue fish, Old fish, New fish. This one has a little star. This one has a little car. Say! What a lot of fish there are. Yes. Some are red. And some are blue. Some are old. And some are new. Some are sad. And some are glad. And some are very, very bad. Why are they sad and glad and bad? I do not know. Go – " Charles faltered and cleared his throat. "Go ask your dad," he quietly finished.

Erik thunked his head against the wall and closed his eyes. What was he doing? This wasn't like Daniel, who seemed to accept him without question or judgment, no matter whose flesh and blood he was. This was something new. Something different. Something he wasn't sure he'd be able to get through on his own. The idea of rejection had only frightened him once before – as he stood in a library and offered his heart to Charles on a platter – but now… Now the thought of rejection by his own children shook him to his very core.

"Some have two feet, and some have four. Some have six feet, and some have more. Where do they come from? I can't say. But I bet they have come a long, long way. We see them come. We see them go. Some are fast. And some are slow."

Charles' laughter drew Erik out of his thoughts and he peeked in again to see that Daniel had come up and jumped on Charles' back.

"Look at my hands," Pietro said, and it was the most beautiful thing Erik had heard.

"You stay in there much longer, you'll turn into a prune," Charles replied as he inspected the wrinkles on Pietro's fingers, Wanda still silent in his lap.

"What's a prune?"

"Something my nanny used to make me eat."

"Are you going to make us eat it?" Pietro quietly asked.

"Not if you don't want to."

And the look on Pietro's face broke Erik's heart. So full of wonder was it – as if the idea of not doing something because he didn't want to was an option never before considered or presented to him.
"Can you stand up for me, sweetheart?" he asked Wanda and she gingerly got off his lap, the fluffy robe nearly making her trip if not for the firm hand Charles had on her waist. After making sure she was situated, he grabbed a cup from the floor next to the tub and filled it with water.

"Tilt your head back, love."

Pietro pouted. "But I like my peak." And to prove the point, he twirled his hair into another spike.

Charles chuckled. "I'm sure there's some pomade lurking about the house and you can give yourself as many peaks as you'd like."

"What's pomade?"

But before Charles could begin to describe the waxy substance that was nearly impossibly to remove, Daniel's voice echoed around the tiny room.

"Vati!"

Erik jumped as Daniel practically dove into his lap. He had been so distracted by Charles washing Pietro's hair that he hadn't even realized he had been discovered and he groaned as Daniel hugged him, trying not to let on that he was in pain.

"No, no, my love…" Charles' soapy hands were scooping Daniel out of Erik's lap within moments. "Remember? Vati has a boo-boo."

"Boo-boo," the baby quietly repeated and looked at Erik with wide eyes.

"I'm okay, Bärchen." With a grunt, he got to his feet, but stumbled back when Charles crashed his face into his shirt.

"Don't do that again," Charles whispered fiercely against his chest.

"I'll try," Erik quietly replied, placing a discreet kiss on the telepath's head. "How are they?"

Charles pulled away and adjusted Daniel on his hip as he glanced back into the bathroom to find Wanda and Pietro staring at them both intently.

"Clean. And tired. And wondering if you're all right."

Erik nodded and stepped into the bathroom, smiling slightly as Wanda and Pietro watched him with wide eyes. But as he saw himself in their faces, took in Pietro's nose and Wanda's eyes, their chins, and their ears, his voice failed.

And on the cusp of the hardest conversation he would ever have to face, it was not a time for his words to desert him.

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Charles absent-mindedly stroked Daniel's back as he watched Erik slowly get down on his knees and hold a towel out for Pietro to step into.

"Hello."

Erik nodded. "Hank patched me up."

"I like Hank," the little boy said as he stood and allowed Erik to wrap the towel around him. "He's blue."

Charles smiled softly as Erik quietly replied, "He is."

Erik was handling Pietro as if he were made of glass and Charles found himself thanking the fates for bringing Daniel into his life as early as he did. He didn't have to have a conversation explaining who he was or why he was only making his appearance now.

_Charles…_ The fear in Erik's mental tone made Charles' chest ache.

_We'll bring them to the nursery. You can tell them there. I'll make sure no one disturbs you._

_Don't leave me._

Charles placed a hand on Erik's shoulder and squeezed. _Never._

Pietro's head emerged from the towel and he smiled as his hair stuck up every which way. Charles could have sworn he saw the ghost of a smile pass Wanda's features, but it was gone before he could be sure.

He had expected their English to be broken at best, but apparently their captors wanted them able to converse. Bile rose in Charles' throat as he caught sight of the angry red marks around Pietro's ankles.

When Pietro was dry and wrapped in his own robe, Erik brush his thumb against the boy's cheek and did the same to Wanda.

"Where are we going?" the boy asked as Erik stood and began to lead them from the bathroom.

"Nowhere. You're home now."

And Charles and Erik were greeted by two matching sets of wide, green eyes.

"Home," Pietro repeated.

"Home," Erik confirmed.

The boy shared a look with his sister and reached out, taking her hand in his. Erik's lower lip trembled as he turned, pausing just long enough for Charles to brush his thumb across his knuckles, before leading the way out of the bathroom and into the nursery.

Pietro giggled as he tripped over the hem of his too-long robe and nearly pulled his sister down in a heap as they stumbled their way to the couch. Charles lowered Daniel down to the ground and the little boy immediately toddled over to Wanda and reached his arms up to be lifted onto the couch next to her.

She looked lost for a moment, blinking slowly at the little boy, before reaching down and helping him onto the cushion. Erik stood watching the scene, looking slightly lost now that he had gotten them there, but Charles took the lead, plopping down on the floor across from the twins and offering them a large, reassuring smile. Erik followed shortly after him, his eyes continuously drifting back to Wanda and Daniel.
"So are we going to stay here now?" Pietro let his legs swing freely while Wanda curled hers under her like a cat.

"If you'd like," Charles replied. "We'd certainly like you to."

Pietro nodded, a small frown creasing his forehead. "How come you came to get us?"

Erik stiffened next to him and Charles let his palm graze the other man's back.

"Pietro, what do you and Wanda know of your family?"

The twins shared another look before Pietro glanced back at Charles. "We don't have any family."

"And what would you say if I told you that wasn't true?"

Wanda, who had looked perpetually startled since her arrival, narrowed her eyes and whispered, "What?"

Charles tightened his grip on Erik's back, a subtle way of letting him know that they had reached that point. The man next to him cleared his throat and shifted subtly.

"Your mother never told your father about you. If he had known…" Erik blinked rapidly and reached behind his back to link his fingers with Charles', "he would have come to get you immediately."

Pietro sat up straight and his legs stopped swinging. "You know our father? Where is he?"

Erik inhaled deeply.

"Right here."
In which Moira makes an observation and Sean receives a letter.

Ironically, Wanda was the first to launch herself at him.

The more taciturn of his children paused for the slightest of moments, her jaw dropping and recognition dawning, before throwing her arms around his neck, causing him to topple backwards on the threadbare rug.

She still said nothing, her simple, quiet declaration of "What?" seemed to have filled up her vocal quota of the day. Her arms linked tightly behind his back, expressing all she hoped to voice as she pressed her face into his neck.

And all Erik could do was stare at the ceiling, his eyes watering and his throat working as his daughter (his daughter) hugged him for the first time. He finally managed to get an elbow under him as he pushed himself back into a seated position and shifted Wanda in his lap. She had yet to let go of him and he could feel tiny drops of little tears making their way down his neck. He rubbed what he hoped was a soothing hand up and down her back, muttering what he could remember of German lullabies in her ear.

"You're our father?"

Erik's focus snapped back to Pietro who had yet to move from his position on the couch.

He nodded and swallowed hard. "I am."

Pietro's gaze leveled him like a laser, neither confirming nor condemning as he stared at him with an intensity that should never be seen in a child's eyes.

Erik knew it was coming before it happened. Could see it brewing in the green pools that narrowed, weighing him and finding him wanting.

Which was why when Pietro stood from the couch and ran from the room, Erik could only close his eyes and hold onto his daughter just a little bit tighter.

"Pietro!" Charles stood from his perch on the floor and scooped Daniel up in his arms, pausing just long enough to place a firm hand on Erik's shaking shoulder before following the little boy from the room.

He reached out with his mind and found him cowering in a room at the end of the hall. Charles slowed his gait just enough to give the boy a few minutes of time alone before he stood outside the door and rapped his knuckles lightly on the wood.

"May I come in?"
He heard a warbled, "Uh huh," in reply.

Charles nudged the door open and the light that spilled in from the hall illuminated the small boy dwarfed by the fluffy robe, curled up in the corner.

"Oh, Pietro…" Charles let Daniel slide to the ground where he promptly ran over to the other little boy and plopped down on his right side. Charles followed at a slower pace and sat down gingerly on the left, wrapping his arms around his knees.

He remained quiet, allowing the boy to speak first, if at all, but if the way he was biting his lip and tugging at the tie on the robe was any indication, Charles had a feeling the words would be spilling out soon. In the meantime, he busied himself with staring around at Sean's room and wondering how it was possible for one teenager to make such a mess.

"Is he telling the truth?"

Charles' heart broke. "Of course he's telling the truth. And if you need further proof, you only need look in a mirror. You have his nose. And his eyes."

Pietro looked up at him in wonder and Charles couldn't help but be transported back to cool Miami waters.

You are not alone. Erik, you are not alone.

"He only found out you existed yesterday. And he came to get you right away." Charles sighed and wrapped an arm around Pietro's thin shoulders. "I know you just met him, but he loves you very much. Very much, indeed."

A tear fell down Pietro's face and he harshly wiped it on the terrycloth. "I had always hoped our father would come to get us in the orphanage. He never did. And then when someone did come…” he trailed off and shivered. Charles held him tighter.

"They took you somewhere not very nice."

Pietro shook his head. "Not very nice at all. And they didn't even tell us why."

Charles reached into his mind and nearly cried with relief to find they hadn't actually been in the clutches of the HSS for as long as either he or Erik thought. They had been bounced from orphanage to orphanage before being picked up in Prague just a few weeks prior. Roughly around the same time that men with guns stormed his house.

He bent his head and placed a small kiss on the boy's hair. "You're safe now. Your father and I won't let anything happen to you or your sister."

Pietro nodded and fell silent again as Daniel climbed to his feet and toddled over to Charles, placing his hands on his knees.

"He's yours?" Pietro asked as Daniel picked up one of Sean's wayward shoes and threw it at the trashcan, clapping and giggling as it knocked the basket over.

Charles chuckled. "He is."

"Where's his mother?"

"She passed away."
"Oh. My mother passed away, too."

And Charles wondered how much of that was truth and how much was the Czech orphanage trying to cast their mother in the nicest light possible.

"I'm sorry."

Pietro shrugged, a gesture ill-befitting a boy of his age. "He really didn't know about us until yesterday?"

"I swear on my life, he didn't."

"He came so quickly," he whispered.

And the broken part of Charles' heart, the part that ached to take away all of the hurt and shame that the twins had felt, mended itself just a tiny bit.

"Of course he did. That's what fathers do."

And of course, Sean chose that moment to come back to his room and promptly say, "Oh. Hey, Prof. Is this like one of those room searches? I swear the pot isn't mine."

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"What's pot?"
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The little kid that looked like Erik's miniature, except with slightly lighter hair and a slightly less murderous countenance, blinked confusedly up at the Professor, who looked very much like he wanted to ground Sean for a week.

"Something that Sean should not have. This is not a room search, but don't tempt me," he threatened.

The Prof was pretty good about ignoring Sean's extracurricular activities. He knew he smoked. Hell, Sean had been trying for months to get the Professor to toke up with him, but no such luck. Yet.

"So you're Magneto's progeny."

"What's a Magneto?"

"Sean, stop talking." The Professor seemed to not know whether to be impressed that Sean knew the word 'progeny' or petrified that Sean was about to destroy whatever progress he had made with the kid.

"You weren't in the bad place." The kid, (Pietro, Sean vaguely recalled), asked as he stood and tripped over his robe.

"The bad place…?" Sean began to ask but one look from the Prof silenced his question. Oh. The bad place.

"No I was here. Watching the squirt," he said, gesturing to Daniel who was in the process of tearing apart his already mangled room. "Where's your sister?"

"With Er – With our Papa."

Sean arched an eyebrow and, if the look of emotional shock on the Prof's face was anything to go by, Sean was pretty sure he had just witnessed a large step forward. Papa. It wasn't 'Vati' but it
would do.

"You look like you could use something to wear. Here." Sean dug in a drawer and pulled out an old t-shirt. "I swear it's clean."

Pietro took the shirt and eyed it with wonder. "Who's Captain America?"

"Dude," Sean began as he draped an arm around Pietro's shoulders. "You and I have so much ground to cover."

Erik may not exactly be the father from *Leave It to Beaver* but he was still 'Papa.' Or 'Dad,' as Sean sometimes liked to call him under his breath.

Not that he'd ever tell Erik that.

xxxxxx

Erik looked up as Charles, Pietro, and Daniel entered the nursery once more and, had his heart not been hammering an impossible beat against his sternum, he might have laughed at the too-large shirt and shorts that looked a second away from falling off his son's body.

Charles' face was impassive (for once in his life) and Erik tried to reach out with his mind, but he was met with silence.

*Dammit, Charles.*

The telepath winked and Erik felt something like hope flare up in his chest. Wanda lifted her head from his shoulder and stared at her brother as he walked around the two still on the floor and took his old seat on the couch.

"All right, Wanda?"

She nodded and eyed him from Erik's arms. Erik placed a kiss on her head and glanced between his son and Charles. Well. His other son. Daniel sat by Charles' feet and tugged on the drawstring hanging from Pietro's shorts.

"Pietro, I – " he began, but the boy cut him off.

"When did you find out about us?"

"Yesterday."

Pietro's eyes darted over to Charles and the older man fixed him with a look that almost seemed to say, "Told you." Erik wondered what that was all about.

"You found out about us yesterday and you came to get us today."

Erik frowned in confusion. "Yes."

Pietro locked eyes with Wanda once again and seemed to communicate something that was meant only for brother and sister. She shifted in his lap and pressed herself harder into his chest, as if making a stand that she was not moving anytime soon.

"Okay," the boy murmured quietly after a few silent moments. "We'll stay."

Which was exactly how Erik ended up standing at the foot of a large bed in one of Charles' many
rooms, watching the steady inhale and exhale of the children before him.

Wanda had put on one of Erik's t-shirts, which fit more like a nightgown than anything else, and crawled into bed next to Pietro in Sean's Captain American getup. Their foreheads and knees were nearly touching and both were out within minutes despite the early hour.

"They'll be fine," Charles murmured into the cotton of his shirt before placing a kiss on his shoulder. "They'll be in here the entire night." He tapped the side of his head and Erik nodded, still reluctant to leave their sight.

Wanda had seemed to accept him more readily, but Pietro kept eyeing him, as if expecting him to disappear at a moment's notice. The thought filled Erik's heart with cement, but Charles' hand splayed on his lower back was doing wonders at easing the tension in his shoulders.

They stood watching the children sleep and Erik kept having to fight the urge to bundle them up in a blanket and hide them from the world. He was about to leave, he really was, but Charles's voice murmured softly in his ear four words that took his breath away.

"Look what you made."

He swallowed once. Then twice. His throat working to overcome the rather large lump that had settled somewhere between his mouth and his lungs.

Look what you made.

No one could take his blood from their veins or their place in his heart.

They were his and he was theirs.

It really didn't get much simpler than that.

xxxxxx

Raven didn't classify herself as a snoop, but when it came to the people she loved… Well. She couldn't help but admit to some acts of espionage.

Normally, Charles and Erik's room (because it hadn't been just Charles' for a while now) was completely out of bounds for two reasons. 1) Ew and 2) violating someone's privacy was just not how she got her kicks.

And yet, here she was, huddled on the floor just outside their door with her knees pulled up to her chest and her cheek resting on her forearms, listening to the hushed voices on the other side of the open door.

She had been there since she came up to see how Erik and the twins were doing, only to find Charles leaning against the headboard, running his fingers through Erik's hair as other man's head lay in his lap.

The scene was so peaceful, so quiet, that she couldn't bear to interrupt. Not even to ask after everyone's wellbeing.

"I never thought of 'after," she heard Erik say.

"What?"

"I had always assumed the fight with Shaw would kill me. I never gave any thought to what would
happen after."

Charles inhaled sharply. "Oh, my love…"

He said nothing else and Raven closed her eyes, picturing Charles leaning down and placing a kiss on Erik's head. It was certainly not how she had pictured her brother finding domestic bliss. If she was perfectly honest, she wasn't sure he'd ever find it. For who else could keep up with his boundless energy, his glass half full outlook on life, his ability to bed a woman (or man) at the drop of a mutation?

Sure, he tried to keep the less socially accepted dalliances from her, but like most little sisters, she knew. She knew and didn't love him any less.

But when Erik crashed quite literally into their lives, never once did she suspect that this would be the man to sweep her brother off his feet. To calm his boundless energy and make him see the emptiness in that half-full glass. To occupy his bed for the rest of their lives.

It was enough to make something visceral ache deep within her – the kind of pain that brought both happiness and hurt, laughter and tears.

"What are you doing?"

She jumped as she looked up to find Hank looming over her.

"Spying."

He raised his considerable eyebrows. "Kinky."

She rolled her eyes and placed a well-aimed punch to his shin in an attempt to bury the memory of an aborted kiss within the oh-so-romantic setting of an airplane hangar. "I'm learning."

"Learning what?" he asked as he rubbed his shin and gingerly sat down next to her.

After a beat of listening to Erik chuckle softly in response to something Charles had said, Raven rested her head on Hank's shoulder and closed her eyes.

"How to be."

"Fair enough," he returned quietly.

And the hand that came up to gently press her face closer to his neck brought with it that visceral ache, yet enough soothing balm to make her perpetually empty glass seem half-full and then some.

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He was expecting it, he really was, but that still didn't stop him from bolting upright as the jolt of fear entered his psyche. He kept an ear on most of the occupants of the house, but the twins in particular tonight, which was why the slightest spike in any emotion had him fighting a losing battle with the sheets as he attempted to untangle himself.

"Charles?" Erik mumbled next to him, lifting his head off the pillow and squinting an eye open.

"Wanda's awake," Charles murmured and that had Erik jolting right up next to him. The two of them attempting to free themselves from their cotton confines was almost comical if not for the *gettoher gettoher gettoher* that thrummed in Erik's mind.
"Nightmare?"

"Likely," Charles replied, already halfway to the door, Erik hot on his heels. "She also just doesn't know the house."

It took them roughly two minutes to pad down the hall to the nursery and bump the door open and it took Wanda roughly two seconds to slam into Erik's torso and wrap her tiny arms around his waist.

"Easy, mein schatz," Erik murmured, wincing slightly at the pressure on his wound as he stroked her red hair. Charles left him to his moment and moved further into the room to check that Pietro was still sleeping. A soft smile graced his face as he saw the boy clutching the hem of his superhero shirt in his hand. In the adjacent room, Daniel slept soundly, his stuffed rabbit clutched tightly to his chest.

"Sleep well, my love," Charles whispered, placing a light kiss on the boy's forehead.

It was a large nursery and Charles felt dwarfed by it when he had occupied the vast rooms in his childhood. He grew up never thinking he'd be able to fill it, yet here he was, with three children sleeping soundly within its walls. Well. Almost sleeping soundly.

He exited Daniel's room and found Erik crouched in front of Wanda, wiping her tears with his thumbs.

"Yeah?"

She nodded in response to whatever he had asked.

"Come then." And with a gentleness that never failed to take Charles' breath away, he scooped Wanda in his arms with a small pained grunt and waited for Charles to join him before heading out of the room.

"I should probably…" Charles made a non-committal indication towards Erik's old room at the end of the hall. "She doesn't know about…" again words failed him and he could only gesture to the space between them. "She won't understand."

Erik's face had gone from baffled to amused to almost angry when he realized Charles was serious.

"Don't you dare."

"But she – " Charles didn't get very far in his argument before Erik was taking hold of his elbow with his free hand.

"She is my family and so are you. If this is about getting to know each other, she will know whom I wake up with every morning. Whom I love and am…" he trailed off and glanced down at the ring on his hand. "She will know," he finished firmly.

"Yes," Charles whispered. "Yes, all right."

Wanda seemed to be watching the exchange with confused apprehension and Erik hiked her slightly higher on his hip, placing a kiss on her temple.

"Charles is a very good snuggler," Erik said. "You need a good snuggle, yes?"

Charles held his breath in the moment it took her to reply, but she eventually nodded and reach her hand out for his.

With an arched eyebrow, Erik issued his challenged as he stepped back for Charles to lead the way
into the bedroom.

Charles took the tiny hand in his and smiled. Yes, he was a good snuggler.

xxxxxx

Alex tried not to draw attention to the bedroom activities of the older men in the house - that was usually Sean's department – but his mind was truly nowhere near the gutter when Charles and Erik stumbled into the kitchen the next morning, prompting him to announce:

"You two look wrecked."

And of course it took him a solid three seconds after the words left his mouth to realize what they might have implied and of course, Sean let out a completely inappropriate laugh, which Erik promptly took care of by smacking the ginger upside the head.

"Ow, why do you always hit me?"

"Why do you always ask stupid questions?" Erik snapped back, before stalking over to Moira and practically ripping the coffee pot out of her hands.

"Wanda didn't sleep well," The Professor offered by way of explanation for Erik's surlier than normal demeanor.

Alex was halfway through asking how the twins were when Daniel sent his juice cup flying and Charles barely managed to catch it one handed before it hit the side of the his head.

At least his reflexes were still intact.

xxxxxx

Moira watched the exchange with a smile on her face as she blew on the mug of coffee in her hand. She hadn't even realized she was standing in front of the coffee maker until she found Erik staring at her, growling at her to move.

"Good to see that being shot hasn't affected your disposition," she drawled and if glares could kill, Moira would be halfway to purgatory.

Charles snorted as he returned Daniel's juice to him. "Wrestling coffee from you is more difficult than wrestling state secrets."

"Then it would be wise not to try either," she teased, yet moved to the side anyway, lest she lose a limb so early in the morning.

Charles gave her a suggestive smile. "My dear, I would wrestle you any day of the week and twice on Sunday."

She barked out a laugh and rolled her eyes. "Do your lines ever work?"

"It's not the lines, it's the delivery."

Cheeky bastard.

"I heard that."

"Well, I thought it loud enough," she retorted.
Charles smiled and bent to place a kiss on Daniel's head, before moving to rest his chin on Erik's shoulder as the taller man poured milk into his coffee.

Moira just sat back and watched as the scowl eased from Erik's face and he placed his free hand over Charles' which were clasped across his stomach. Watched as Charles turned his head and pressed his cheek against Erik's t-shirt. Watched as Erik picked up his coffee and turned in his arms, placing a small kiss on Charles' nose before picking a Cheerio out of Daniel's hair.

How could anyone think that this was wrong? Moira had always been a bit of a forward thinker, but still. It made her sick to realize that the majority of people out there would gladly put Charles and Erik in jail or worse for that little display and not because they were "dangerous" or "mutant," but simply because they were "different." They loved differently.

But that made no sense because to love was to love was to love. There was no way to love wrongly. Or differently. Just unconditionally.

"The twins still asleep?" Alex asked and Erik nodded.

Moira shook her head out of her musings and tied her robe tighter around her. "I'll start going through those files today. Hopefully we'll find something useful."

Charles looked as if he was about to offer his help, but before the words could even form on the tip of his tongue, Sean stood in the doorway looking entirely too pale as he held a letter out in his unsteady hand.

"Um, guys? This was tucked into the newspaper."

"What is it?" Charles asked as he reached for it and Sean gladly handed it over.

"I was just looking for the score of the Sox game."

Charles frowned. "It's all right, Sean."

"No. No it's not."

And Moira recognized that feeling in the pit of her stomach. It had settled there like a leaden weight as soon as Sean stood in the doorway, his freckles entirely too bright against his ashy skin.

It got heavier as she watched Charles' features harden and heavier still as he wordlessly handed the letter to Erik.

Reading over his shoulder, she understood why.

"It's not chance that your children were so simply found, Mr. Lehnsherr. It's chess. I can assure you, they won't all be that easy."

Yours,

W. M. S.
Decisions

Chapter Summary

In which Erik lets off a little steam and Alex has an epiphany.

It would have been easy to use his powers. To lift the gun with barely a flick of his finger, to levitate it into the air, letting it hover for the briefest of moments, before pulling the trigger without even touching the metal.

But using his powers didn't give him the emotional outlet he needed in that moment. In that moment, he needed to feel the weight of it in his hands. To revel in the kick of it against his palm and the sound of the clip as he loaded yet another into place.

And as he sent another barrage of bullets into the defenseless target hanging at the other end of the bunker, he felt something he hadn't contended with since he was a child, standing in front of a desk with arms outstretched and "alles ist gut" echoing in his ears.


*I can assure you, they won't all be that easy.*

Charles was usually the bleeding heart, but the thought of more mutants out there – locked up, drugged up, beat up – it made him sick. So he did the only thing he could think of in that moment – and when Charles sharply informed him that, no, he could not warp every metal instrument in the kitchen, he was relegated to the bunker, where he had been for the past hour, loading mag after mag into the stuffed dummy twenty-five yards away.

At some point, Sean and Alex had joined him and they sat quietly (for once) off to the side on a table pushed up against the wall.

"How many is that?" Alex asked as the now-familiar click of an empty cartridge met their ears.

"I lost count," Erik replied, already reaching into the box at his feet for another.

Sean fidgeted a bit – seeming to weigh his options before he asked whatever it was he was about to ask. "Aren't you going to do something about it?"

"About what?"

"W.M.S. stole your kids and then mocked you for it." Sean fidgeted some more. "And you're down here in the basement, firing a gun at wall. It's just… not really your style."

Erik sighed as he snapped another clip into place, trying to quell the resentment and minor-disbelief that Sean of all people had a point. "I would love to, but Charles informs me that going in guns blazing is the best way to get myself killed. And, frankly, he'd prefer me alive."

Sean snorted. "Dude, you are so whipped."

Erik raised an eyebrow and aimed the gun at the dummy once more. "Sean, I know you're not the
brightest crayon in the box, but calling me 'whipped' whilst I hold a semi-automatic weapon is not one of your smarter moves."

Erik could hear Alex mutter, "Seriously" under his breath and he elbowed Sean in the ribs. "Do you have a death wish?"

The boys fell silent once more and Erik allowed himself to be lulled by the rhythmic sound of the bullet leaving the chamber – a truly disturbing notion that ensured any therapist would kill to get him on their couch.

He thought of the twins, still sound asleep upstairs as they caught up on weeks worth of insomnia. He thought of Charles – good, honest Charles who continued to talk him down from the ledge in the hope that they could, together, hang on to that last shred of good buried deep within Erik's warped sense of self.

"Are you sure you're not cheating? Are you doing it the regular way?"

Erik blinked up at Sean. "You mean, 'the human way'?"

"Whatever."

"Of course I am." And as if to prove his point, he unleashed another round into the center of the dummy and turned to find both Alex and Sean staring at him slack-jawed.

"Do it again."

"No. It's a waste of ammunition."

"Aw, come on!" There was more than a hint of a whine in Alex's voice. "You've wasted hundreds of bullets already. What's a few more?"

Though tempted to comply just to shut them up, Erik's stubbornness refused to give in to the demands of adolescent boys. He was saved, however, when the bunker door groaned open and Charles stepped through, followed closely by Raven and Hank.

"Where's Daniel?"

"Asleep."

Erik glanced at his watch. "Already?" Though he was loathe to admit it, he knew Daniel's schedule like the back of his hand. And Charles knew he knew it as he gave him an annoyingly endearing grin.

"The excitement of yesterday had him up early. They're fine." He tapped the side of his head. "I'm the world's best baby monitor."

Outwardly, he merely nodded, but inwardly Erik was relieved. Charles stepped closer and gently took the gun out of his hands.

"You know I don't like firearms in the house."

"I am a firearm," Alex muttered, and even Erik couldn't help but chuckle.

"What about you, Prof? You any good with those things?" Sean asked and Raven laughed.

"What, pacifistic Charles Xavier? He wouldn't know a 9mm if it shot him in the ass. Isn't that right,
Erik had to bite his tongue to keep from saying, "But he might know it if it shot him in the back." It was a self-flagellation thing he wasn't sure he'd ever get rid of.

But Raven's smile slid from her face as something stony settled into Charles' features. And, without word or fanfare, he lifted the gun and fired an entire clip into the dummy – four through the center of the chest, five through the center of the head – before calmly placing the gun on the table, stepping back, and putting his hands in his pockets.

Silence. Stunned, shocked, stupefied silence.

"Ho-ly shit," Sean managed as his eyes drifted from the dummy to Charles and back again. "Holy shit!"

Charles walked up and placed a kiss on Raven's baffled cheek. "Let's not judge a book by its cover, darling. You above all people should know that."

He looked smug, but humbly so. Erik knew Charles didn't like guns (before Cuba and most definitely after). So the fact that he could so ably handle a weapon had Erik both confused and aroused.

Charles' gaze snapped to his and Erik flushed, knowing he'd been caught. He shrugged.

_Can you blame me?_

Charles bit on his lower lip, gave him a completely debauched once-over, and strolled out of the bunker, whistling a low tune.

"Did you know he could do that?" Alex asked, and it took Erik a moment to realize the question was directed at him. He shook his head as Alex laughed. "He's better than me."

Hank rolled his eyes. _Everyone's_ better than you. Moira could probably shoot a fly off your ear."

The blond looked scandalized for a moment, before conceding the point. "Where _is_ Moira? I haven't seen her since this morning."

Erik smirked as he set his gun down. Finally a topic that interested him.

"Let's just say I wouldn't want to be McCone at the moment."

xxxxxxx

She spared one glance for the once-beautiful manicure on her nails as her hand pressed against the door next to McCone's "Director" nameplate and slammed it open.

"Where is he?"

McCone jumped up from his desk, eyes wide and papers scattered. "MacTaggert, what the hell – "

"Where the _hell_ is he?"

McCone looked utterly baffled as he asked, "Who?"

Moira allowed herself a moment to take a breath – which she's pretty sure she hadn't done since Azazel dropped her off outside – before she tossed the letter that had been burning a hole in her hand
"Stryker. William Montgomery Stryker. Where is he?"

McCone's eyes scanned the contents of the letter, his eyebrows rising with every word he passed.

"W.M.S. That doesn't – "

"Don't you dare tell me it doesn't mean it's him. Who else could it be? Who else has access to the kind of power and resources the HSS wields. You said so yourself that you thought the CIA had been infiltrated!"

"Then it would be in our best interests if you lowered your voice," he hissed.

She had to admit he had her there. She placed her palms on his desk and inhaled deeply. "If it had been up to him, Charles, Erik, and those kids would still be rotting in your basement and you know it."

McCone's eyes flicked down to the letter and back up to her. "I take it this means Lehnsherr has his children?"

Moira started at the question – to be honest she hadn't actually expected McCone to remember. Or care. "It does."

"And they're all right?"

Fondness for her boss bloomed in her chest at the question. "A little beat up. A lot scared. But whole."

McCone nodded and glanced at the letter again. "I'm sure Xavier can more than afford it, but if they need… any resources, any doctors or therapists… we'd be happy to help."

It took a moment for the words to sink in and when they did, her features softened. "That's very generous."

McCone snorted in derision and held up the letter. "It's the least we can do."

He looked frustrated and Moira finally allowed her anger to dissipate to a simmer as she took in the lines on his face and the bags under his eyes. "Sir?"

"Stryker's on leave. 'Family emergency."

"My ass," she snorted as McCone's eyebrows rose. She had the decency to look slightly sheepish at her choice of words.

A determined look settled into McCone's features and he stalked around the desk, taking Moira by the elbow. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"I'm the director of this goddamn place. I'll be damned if they can keep me out of his office."

xxxxxxx

The scotch burned his throat as the amber liquid glided past his tongue. Four o'clock really was too early to be imbibing, but frankly, Charles was beyond caring. It had been a trying night and an even
more trying morning.

If he wanted to get sloshed before cocktail hour, then he damn well would.

At least, that's what his younger self would have said. His younger self. The thought floated past as if it had been such a long time since his more wild and carefree days. Truth be told, barely a year had passed. Just last May, he was chugging a yard of ale. Now, he was a father, and a professor (in the loosest sense of the word), and somehow fighting off an insane society with a particularly vicious vendetta.

Getting absolutely tanked might be out of the question, but a healthy buzz couldn't hurt. He ran his hands through his hair and stared at the piece of paper in front of him, flattened out on the wood of the desk.

Moira had taken the original note, but not before Charles had written it down word for word. As if he didn't have it memorized the moment he laid eyes on it.

"It's not chance that your children were so simply found, Mr. Lehnsherr. It's chess. I can assure you, they won't all be that easy."

Yours,

W. M. S.

"How's that for a magic trick," he muttered. The bastard had had the audacity to sit across from him at a table. To look him in the eye. To breathe the same air.

Charles closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. That line of thinking would get him nowhere.

"Daddy," Daniel cried from his spot under the desk by Charles' legs.

"Yes, my love," Charles answered, leaning back to observe the fort his son had built out of books pulled down from the lowest shelves. "It's wonderful."

A creaky floorboard drew his attention to the door and his eyes widened as he found one of the newest members of the family hovering hesitantly in the entryway.

"Pietro. I thought you were with Raven in the kitchen getting chocolate milk."

"I was," he replied as he inched further into the room. "I drank it all."

Charles smiled. "Did it taste good?"

And a genuine smile graced the boy's face as he nodded enthusiastically, pushing the door open wider to reveal Wanda hiding behind him.

"Well hello, there," Charles replied, smiling gently and beckoning them in. "No need to hesitate. This is your home now."

The twins shared a glance and moved closer to the couch to sit down. Daniel, hearing the new voices, was already halfway out from under the desk and babbling about his fort, no doubt.

"Where's your father?" Charles asked simply to get them to talk because he already knew that Erik was roaming the second floor, hoping to run into his wayward children, yet trying not to look like he was actively seeking them out.
"I dunno," Pietro replied and Charles sent a They're in the study Erik's way, before focusing on the children in front of him once more. He was about to ask if they were finding the house too confusing, when two tiny words tumbling from Wanda's mouth halted whatever sentence had been forming on his tongue.

"Raven's blue."

"She is," he replied, biting his lip to keep the chuckle at bay. "So is Hank."

"Are they always blue?"

"Hank is, but Raven can change what she looks like. Naturally, though, she's blue. Just like you, naturally, have green eyes, Pietro, and you, Wanda, have red hair. Ow, Danny, no. We don't throw," he replied when the boy heaved a book at his knee.

Daniel pouted and went back to building his fort as Pietro leaned forward, whispering conspiratorially, "Can you do anything?"

Charles glanced up to find Erik in the doorway and he exhaled audibly with relief.

Thank God. Just in time.

Feeling a little overwhelmed? The metal-bender shot back with a smirk.

"Pietro." Erik bent down a placed a kiss on the boy's head before turning to the girl and doing the same. "Wanda."

"Papa, Raven's blue."

Erik grinned and sat next to Charles across from the twins. "I noticed."

Charles leaned in and placed a furtive hand on the other man's knee. "Pietro would like to know if we can do anything."

And the boy looked so hopeful, so desperate, so eager to belong somewhere – to not feel like an outsider – that it took all Charles had to not wrap his arms around the child and whisper that everything would be okay. Instead, Charles merely said, "Think of a number between one and a million. Don't tell me. Just think it. Both of you."

The twins looked confused, but they each mentally jumped around for a bit (after all, one and a million was a large gap to traverse), before settling on a number.

"Okay, Pietro first. You've got your number?" He nodded skeptically and Charles promptly announced, "Seven hundred and ninety three thousand, five hundred and sixty two."

Pietro's jaw dropped.

"Wanda, your turn. You've got one?"

"But you – "

"Hold on, Pietro, love, it's Wanda's turn." Charles stared at the little girl and offered a wink, before announcing simply, "Eight."

"How did you do that?" she yelled, both joyous and flabbergasted, as she jumped to her feet, showing more life, more exuberance, than she had since Charles first laid eyes on her.
"And no, Pietro, I didn't cheat," Charles said and the boy's jaw dropped further.

"But I didn't say anything!"

"You thought it."

And it all clicked. He could see recognition dawning on both of their faces as they stared at him with some gentle balance of fright and awe.

"You can read minds?" Wanda asked.

"I can," Charles replied. "And so can Daniel, one day, when he's old enough."

The twins turned their hopeful gaze on Erik and Charles could feel the pleaseletusbelikehim hovering at the edge of both of their minds.

"And you, Papa? Can you…?" Pietro trailed off, bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet.

In lieu of a reply, Erik merely stretched out his hand and brought the paperweight over from Charles' desk.

"How did you do that?" Wanda whispered as the piece of metal came to rest in her palm and she shrieked as it molded itself into a flower in front of her eyes.

"I control metal." And just to show off, he levitated Daniel by the metal pieces he had sewn into his clothes when he thought Charles wasn't looking.

"Vati!" Daniel laughed as he was slowly lowered into Charles' lap.

Was that necessary? Charles wryly thought, wrapping his arms around the struggling boy.

Our son seemed to enjoy it, Erik shot back, squeezing his thigh, before leaning forward and steepling his fingers. "I think the real question is, what can you do?"

Wanda and Pietro shared a look before Pietro jumped to his feet and grabbed Erik and Charles' hands.

"Come on!"

"Where are we going?" Erik chuckled as he allowed himself to be dragged out of the room.

"Papa, you gotta see how fast I can run."

xxxxxx

Wanda had always been told not to use her power, but when she got angry or upset or scared, things just… happened. And when things happened, the bad men came.

She had been called "dangerous," "freak," "monster," in so many different languages that it was really all just noise at this point. But being called "special"… that was a new one.

She liked Charles. He was nice. And he gave good hugs. Papa was nice too and she looked at him like he was every hero she had ever heard about rolled up into one.

It didn't make her want to use her powers though, no matter how safe she felt with them.
With her index finger, she traced the marks up and down her arms – the marks the bad men made whenever something happened around her. She really wanted them to go away, but she looked at Papa's arms and saw he had scars too, and decided they weren't really all that bad.

She could hear Pietro laughing loudly as he went running by the window again. He liked to show off, but she couldn't blame him. If she knew just how to make her power work, she'd show off too. His confidence was annoying, but for the longest time, he was all she had in the world.

"Oh." She paused in the doorway to the library when she found Moira and an older man sitting by the table.

"Hello, Wanda," Moira said sweetly.

She liked Moira, too. Her hugs weren't as good as Charles' but they came close.

"Hi," she said shyly, stepping back towards the door.

"You can come in. Did you want a book?" Moira stood from the table full of papers and made her way over to her. Wanda nodded.

"Charles read me Dr. Seuss yesterday."

Moira laughed. "I don't know if we'll find any Dr. Seuss in here – maybe in Danny's room. But we can look, right?"

Wanda nodded and allowed herself to be led over to a back section of the wall, even as she eyed the man at the table surrounded by paper.

"This is Mr. McCone. He works with me."

He gave her a smile and she released the breath she had been holding. Which was good, because she was starting to get dizzy.

"You look like your father," Mr. McCone said and she smiled because it was nice to look like someone other than Pietro.

"Aha!" Moira cried as she pulled The Cat in the Hat down from the shelf. "Apparently Daniel has had an influence on the selection." She held it out for Wanda and the girl took it reverently. "Perhaps your daddies can read it to you."

Wanda frowned. "Daddies?"

And Moira got very pale, which seemed strange. "Daddy. Sorry. Your Papa."

Wanda wanted to ask what she meant – for how could anyone have more than one Papa? – but the sound of her name echoed in the hallway and she ran as fast as she could away from Moira and the troubled expression on her face.

xxxxxx

One day into fatherhood and he'd lost his daughter already. This didn't bode well.

"Wanda!" Erik called as he walked quickly down the hall, his wound protesting with every long stride he made. Hank would have to redress it. Without looking, he could tell he was bleeding through the bandage.
"Right here, Papa," her tiny voice replied as she came out of the library, a book clutched to her chest and a frown on her face.

He tamped down on his panic and resisted the urge to demand why she had wandered off – she was home, and she could wander wherever she'd like to – but his desire to not be overbearing was conflicting greatly with his need to know where she, Pietro, and Daniel were at all times.

"What's wrong, mein schatz?" he asked instead, taking in her confusion.

"Nothing. Moira's in there with a Mr. McCone," she replied, gesturing back to the library. "I'm going to read."

He nodded and watched her go, quelling the fleeting desire to follow her and, instead, made a mental note to check on her later. He might be obtuse when it came to some emotional matters, but even he could tell that something was bothering her.

Sighing, he glanced towards the library door and made his way to it. He had known of McCone's arrival within seconds of Azazel teleporting him there. Charles had stopped mid-laugh and looked towards the house, simultaneously sending him a mental note that the CIA director and Moira had arrived.

"…son's at West Point, but Charles and Erik will never condone going after him to get to Stryker," he heard Moira say.

And his respect for McCone grew tenfold when he replied, "They had no problem going after Lehnsherr's children to get to him. Maybe it's time to stoop to their level."

"I agree wholeheartedly," he said, drawing Moira and McCone's attention to him.

Moira stood and gestured to the papers strewn across the table. "I was just showing him what we found at the club."

"Stryker's off the grid. He must have known that little stunt this morning would give him away."

McCone sighed and rubbed his eyes before giving Erik a gentle smile that looked odd on his sharp features. "Your daughter looks well enough."

Erik nodded. "She's adjusting better than I had hoped." But before he could comment further, the door burst open and Pietro came stumbling into the room.

"Papa, you missed it – oh." He fell silent as he took in the company.

Erik chuckled and patted the boy's head. "So is my son. Pietro, this is Mr. McCone. He helped us figure out where you were."

And the boy's eyes widened as he edged closer to Erik's side. "He did?"

Erik nodded and flushed with pride as Pietro offered McCone a wide smile and a hearty "Thank you."

McCone cleared his throat and nodded. "My pleasure. I should head back. There are a few things I have to tie up at Langley before my wife yells at me for missing dinner again."

And Erik, never one to ask for a favor, found the words leaving his lips before he could really process them. "You'll come back? To help us go through all this?"
Even McCone couldn't hide the surprise on his face. "Sure. I'll be back tomorrow, if that's all right."

Pietro pressed closer to his side and Erik absentmindedly ran his fingers through his hair. "Perfect."

As if sensing his presence was requested, Azazel popped into library, startling all and looking entirely too eager as he sidled up to the CIA director.

Mc Cone took his arm with a resigned sigh. "You enjoy this, don't you."

Azazel smirked. "Dah."

Pietro's voice was awestruck as he tugged on Erik's shirt. "Papa, your power is great, but I think the red man's is my favorite."

xxxxxx

"Did I miss the director?" Charles asked as he entered the library, the smell of sulfur still lingering in the air.

Moira nodded. "Just." She looked nervous as she eyed the two men in front of her, her weight shifting from foot to foot as she bit her bottom lip. "I think I may have done something stupid."

"You? Stupid? Never. Ow." Erik rubbed the back of his head where Charles had smacked him. "You've been spending too much time around me."

"Never." Charles grinned, as he turned back to Moira. "What is this potentially stupid thing you think you may have done?"

Moira's eyes flicked down to Pietro and she tapped the side of her head. Whatever it was she had to say, it was not meant for small ears and, pressing two fingers to his temple, Charles dove into her mind.

"Aha!" Moira cried as she pulled The Cat in the Hat down from the shelf. "Apparently Daniel has had an influence on the selection." She held it out for Wanda and the girl took it reverently.

"Perhaps your daddies can read it to you."

Wanda frowned. "Daddies?"


Charles eased out of her mind and couldn't help but chuckle at the worry that still clouded her features. "Not ideal, but not the end of the world." He projected the scene for Erik and watched as his eyes glazed over, and then widened at the implication.

"Definitely a conversation I had hoped to put off for a bit," he replied and something ached in Charles' chest.

He knew Erik wasn't ashamed of him. Quite the opposite, in fact. The pure love that blazed in his heart and in his thoughts burned like a beacon in a night sky. But Charles couldn't help but feel slightly guilty for making this already rocky transition harder for Erik and his children. His children.

Erik had as much claim over Daniel as Charles did, but the same could not be said for Wanda and Pietro. Charles wanted to claim them. He wanted to love them. He did love them, because they were Erik's. They may not feel that way about him in return, but he was okay with that.

"We should talk to her." Erik's voice cut through his thoughts.
"Both of us?"

"Of course."

And something heavy dropped in Charles' stomach because, as much as he told himself he was okay with not having the place in the twins' lives that Erik had in Daniel's, outright rejection was not something he looked forward to.

xxxxxx

The piece of popcorn bounced off the tip of his chin and he groaned as Daniel clapped his hands.

"You're throwing it wrong. Do it again." Alex threw the dishtowel at Sean, who ducked in time for the cloth to fly over his head and land on Daniel's.

"I'm not throwing it wrong, you're catching it wrong."

"You both suck," Raven replied from her perch on the counter as she stirred butter into the mashed potatoes. "And you're teaching my nephew horrible manners."

"Suck!" Daniel cried as he pulled the towel off his head.

"Says the one who teaches him a new curse word every day," Hank mumbled from his place at the table as he poured over one of the files brought back from the club.

"Suck' isn't a curse word. And you're supposed to be on my side." Raven pouted and Alex snorted. She had him absolutely wrapped around her finger.

Sean continued to throw popcorn at Alex's open mouth, making some but missing most, as they clumsily prepared dinner. There was a roast in the oven (leave it to Bozo to be as good in the kitchen as he was in the lab), and vegetables in the steamer. Daniel was in the highchair because literally tying him down was the only way to keep him out of trouble.

"What do you think of Magneto's pups?" Alex was genuinely curious.

"I think they're adorable. If a little quiet," Raven replied.

"I gave Pietro my Captain America t-shirt. We bonded," Sean proudly announced.

"Hank, what about you?"

The fur-ball shrugged but didn't lift his eyes from the page in front of him. "I think it depends on how they react to the conversation at hand."

"Could you be any more cryptic?" Raven slid off the counter and held the spoon out for Alex. "Does this need salt?"

Alex opened mouth and promptly started coughing. "Ew God, yes," he replied as Raven stuck her tongue out at him. "And what conversation are you talking about?"

Hank sighed and finally made eye contact. "I overheard Charles and Erik talking earlier. Apparently, Moira let slip that Wanda had two fathers, which of course confused her, so now Charles and Erik are talking to the twins about the exact nature of their relationship."

Sean had let another popcorn kernel fly, but it bounced off the side of Alex's head and fell to the floor. Even Daniel seemed to pick up on the abrupt change in tone as he stared wide-eyed at the rest
of the occupants in the kitchen.

Alex hadn't spent too much time with the kids, but it would break his heart (and Erik's) if this new information changed the precarious balance they had formed. He wanted to like the twins – hell, he did like the twins – but if they hurt what the Prof and Erik had… Well. Alex would cross that bridge when he came to it.

"You know, if this conversation doesn't go the way we want it to, no one's gonna wanna eat," Sean stated as Raven cleared her throat and turned to add more salt to the mashed potatoes.

"We will continue to cook and these will be the best damn potatoes you've ever had."

"Damn!" Daniel yelled.

"Oh for Christ's sake." Raven looked skyward as Alex chuckled. "It's like he knows which ones are the bad ones."

"He is a telepath," Hank replied.

Alex was trying to be happy, he really was, but the letter that morning had rattled them all. Sean was trying too hard to prove he was fine but Alex could see every forced laugh and every fake smile. Sean was good, but he wasn't that good.

_They won't all be that easy._

There were more of them out there and Alex needed to do something. Anything. He couldn't save them all, but if only they had a way to give them the advantage…

And _holy shit _why had he not thought of his before? Better yet, why hadn't the Professor? Or Hank?

"Bozo…" Alex began, a smile growing on his face. "How good's your memory?"

xxxxxx

Between the two of them, Charles was the one who could never hide his emotions. He fidgeted. He paced. His face was an open book for anyone to read.

And today was no different as he stood at the foot of the bed that the twins sat upon and listened as Erik tried, unsuccessfully, to broach the topic of conversation.

_How do you explain to two seven-year-olds that their father is engaging in something that is illegal? That who he loves could literally put him in jail?_

Erik sat on the edge of the bed as Wanda and Pietro stared at him wide-eyed, _The Cat in the Hat_ abandoned between them.

"Liebling, I know something's bothering you. What is it?" Erik asked Wanda as she picked at the comforter on the bed. Charles crossed his arms and then quickly uncrossed them, in case the stance could be construed as anger or disappointment.

He really needed to stop over-analyzing.

"Moira said I had two daddies. I don't think she meant to, but she did."

Erik sighed and glanced at Charles.
Just tell them. Rip it off like a band-aid. If it doesn't go the way you want it to, you're still their father.

And what are you? Erik shot back.

The man who loves you.

Erik glanced at him a second longer, love and protectiveness shining through his eyes. What they had was sacred and Erik didn't want anyone to taint it, even his children. Especially his children.

"And Danny called you 'Vati' yesterday, Papa. I know what that means," Pietro mumbled.

"Wanda, Pietro..." he placed a hand on each of their heads. "Danny called me 'Vati' because I am his 'Vati.'"

"But I thought Charles was."

"Biologically he is. Do you... Do you know what that means? 'Biologically?"

Wanda and Pietro nodded, though Wanda looked more confident than her brother.

"Charles is... Charles..." Erik trailed off and Charles came up to stand behind him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Like a band-aid.

"I love Charles," Erik blurted out. "I love him very much. Like a husband loves a wife, that's how I love Charles." He held up his left hand and the ring on his fourth finger to prove his point, as he used his power to make Charles show its pair on his.

I'm the wife in this scenario, aren't I.

Erik bit his lip to hide his smile, even as the twins' wide eyes flicked between the adults.

We can dole out titles later.

"So you're married?" Pietro's tone was curious, not judgmental and Charles could have cried at the relief he felt.

"No," Erik chuckled and his own happiness was evident in the crack of his voice. "No, we're not married. Not officially. Are you okay? Do think it's...?" Weird? Abhorrent? Unethical? Hateful? "Darling, calm your mind."

Erik lifted his hand to grip the palm still pressing into his shoulder, before bringing it to his lips and pressing a gentle kiss. Charles went a little wobbly for he didn't think he would ever get used to the feeling of Erik's lips on his skin, no matter how chaste.

"Do we have to call Charles 'Daddy'?

"Not if you don't want to," Charles replied quickly. He figured the reprieve would sound better coming from him and Erik gave him a look that was half pained and half grateful.

The twins nodded as a gentle knock sounded on the door, and everyone looked up to find Raven standing there, shuffling her feet back and forth.

"Dinner's ready."
The ball was in the twins' court. But Charles had never been very good at sports.

Well, they hadn't run screaming from the house. That had to count for something, Erik mused.

He stood by the wall in the dining room – for the table in the kitchen had become too small now that the twins had joined – and watched as Sean and Alex set the table, while Raven brought in dishes steaming from the oven.

"Well, we've lost Hank to the bunker." Charles announced, as he entered with Daniel on his hip. "Raven, please make sure he eats. Eventually."

Raven nodded and stuffed a spoon a little harshly into the mashed potatoes. She had been unusually quiet since she came to interrupt them and Erik had no doubt that word had spread about the nature of their conversation. He narrowed his eyes in Sean and Alex's direction. They were worse than twelve-year-old girls when it came to gossip.

"How long do you think it'll take him to rebuild Cerebro?" Alex asked.

"Between Hank's photographic memory and Erik's magnetic prowess, I have no doubt we'll finish it in record time." Charles flashed him a proud smile and Erik flushed, still not used to the idea of someone being proud of him.

"Papa, where should we sit?" Wanda tugged on his shirt and her eyes were so much like his, he was startled for a moment.

"Wherever you'd like, liebling." But that tranquil moment of just watching his daughter as she bit her nail and surveyed the table was broken as his son came tearing into the room, his hair sticking up in a million different directions.

"Papa, lookit, Sean let me have peaks!"

Erik narrowed his eyes and Sean blanched. "You get to help him get it out of his hair."

"Yes, sir."

Erik tried to remain stern, but there was only so much composure one could keep when one's son looked like a hedgehog.

Eventually everyone settled (everyone save Hank, who seemed to be rebuilding Cerebro from memory down below), and dove into dinner. Charles sat at the head, Erik to his right, Wanda to his left and Alex next to her. Pietro sat to Erik's own right with Sean on the boy's other side. It was close enough for him to hear Sean say, "Dude, you look awesome," but just far enough away for him to be unable to physically harm the teen. He settled for another glare. Truly, the amount of pomade in his son's hair would take weeks to remove.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. Daniel was easy compared to this.

"Daddy, please pass the potatoes."

His head snapped up at the sound of Wanda's voice and the entire table seemed to pause. The entire table, save for Charles who continued to cut broccoli up into tiny pieces for Daniel. Erik's mouth opened but no sound emerged. His eyes met Alex's because someone needed to tell him that he hadn't just imagined that and he gently nudged the adorable, oblivious, perfect telepath in the side
and cleared his throat to dislodge the rather large lump that had formed.

"She's talking to you, Charles."

"What? Oh."

And Erik watched as comprehension dawed on that lovely face. As his throat worked and his vision clouded as her words sunk in and he reached a shaky hand out for the dish that started it all.

"Of course, love."

If it was possibly to quantify bliss, Erik was pretty sure he just found it in spades.
Worries

Chapter Summary

In which Alex teaches Wanda a lesson.

The warm water lapped at her forearms as she blindly rooted around the bottom of the soapy sink for the fork she was pretty sure she had missed in the evening's scourge.

"Come on," she muttered. "I know you're in there."

"Talking to the cutlery again?" Alex asked as he hopped on the counter next to her and Raven shot him a glare.

"Only because it's taking you boys forever and a day to clear the table." That was probably a little harsh and most definitely an exaggeration, but frustration was getting the best of her.

"Hey! We're done!" Sean called proudly from the door.

"Great, and it only took you an hour," she bitterly replied, before yelping triumphantly as she held up the wayward fork.

"What's got your scales in a knot?"

She rolled her eyes. That didn't even make any sense. "You can't knot my scales."

"I'm sure Hank would like to try," Alex cheekily replied.

"You're an ass."

"But a clever ass."

She ignored him and ran the sponge over the final piece of silverware, remembering fondly and somewhat apprehensively as every fork and every knife froze with the following sentence: "Daddy, please pass the potatoes."

Charles and Erik spent the rest of the meal grinning like loons and sharing ridiculously loving looks when they thought no one else was watching. What they failed to realize was that in a house full of children, someone was always watching.

That uneasy feeling settled into her stomach again and she braced her palms against the counter. "I don't like it."

"Huh?" Sean picked up a dishtowel and began drying what she had washed. "What don't you like?"

"Things are going too well. I don't like it. Something's bound to blow up sooner or later."

"Why do you always look at me when you say that?" Alex looked miffed and Raven sheepishly grinned.

"I didn't mean anything by it – You were just in my line of vision."
Which was apparently not enough reassurance for Alex, who proceeded to launch into a lengthy explanation of how he was not the one to set fire to the curtains in the study, while Sean not-so-casually reminded him that, yes, but he was the one who ignited the professor's wheelchair.

Her fears were lost in the following conversation, washed away in a sea of hilarity – the kind only Sean and Alex could bring.

xxxxxx

He was still getting used to the routines – the traditions and expectations that fatherhood left in its wake. A splash of bathtub water was wondrous; the quiet of his son's rapt attention, beautiful. So it was with a warm tightness in his chest that he accepted the proffered book that Daniel dropped at his feet as he glanced up expectantly with those oh-so-blue eyes.

"This one tonight?" he asked as he picked up The Runaway Bunny.

"Read!" Daniel clapped.

"But Vati reads this to you."

"Vati can share for one night," Erik murmured and Charles started, not having noticed him leaning up against the doorjamb. Only then did Charles realize that the pulsing feeling of love protect keep on the edge of his psyche was radiating from Erik.

"Well. Only if Vati doesn't mind," Charles quietly replied.

"Read!"

"I don't think Vati would deny that boy anything." And there was something in Erik's tone that pulled Charles' attention away from the boy in front of him. The metal-bender's face was remarkably soft as he gazed at Charles and the boy now tugging impatiently on his trousers.

"Everything all right, love?"

Erik's eyes snapped to his. "Perfect."

"Daddy, I'm all ready!" Wanda announced as she tripped into the room wearing another one of Erik's t-shirts. The pulsing warmth coming from Erik throbbed as he gazed on his daughter, and it took Charles a moment more to realize that, yet again, she was addressing him.

"Good." Charles clapped his hands together and tried to ignore the crack in his voice. "Daniel has picked out our entertainment for the evening. Wanda, darling, do you know this one?" He held up the book and the little girl shook her head. "Well, I think you're in for a treat."

She looked cautiously optimistic, as if constantly aware of tempering her excitement. Which was a concern no child should ever worry about, in Charles' mind. He plastered on an inviting smile, which turned genuine when Erik leaned down with a pained grimace and placed a kiss on his daughter's head.

"Daddy, please pass the potatoes."

It had been playing on a loop in his mind ever since dinner and, try as he might, he couldn't stop the goofy grin that settled on his face whenever those five words danced in his head.

"Where's your brother?" Charles asked.
"Raiding Sean's closet," Erik replied with a horrible attempt at annoyance. The crinkles around his eyes gave his grin away, but then his gaze turned soft, and Charles felt the familiar touch on the edge of his mind, as light as a gentle rap of knuckles on a door.

*Is this what the rest of our lives is to be like?*

Charles' chest constricted and he inhaled sharply, all else fading away as he stared at the man leaning in the doorway.

*God, I hope so.*

xxxxxx

A few months ago, if you had told Erik Lehnsherr that he had two children, he probably would have fled from his Caribbean hideaway in the middle of the night, taking nothing but his wallet and a bottle of scotch. And possibly Raven.

As it were, he left with not much more when Hank showed up at their New England hotel and told them Charles needed help.

Funny, what being in love does to you.

He sometimes envied the lack of responsibility some of his acquaintances had. Before, he concerned himself with his wellbeing and that of his team's (and the occupants of Xavier Manor, but no one needed to know that). Now, he had those fears and then some, with Wanda, Pietro, and Daniel taking root in the top tier along with Charles.

Yes, he envied a lack of responsibility, if only to make the constant worry go away. Worry of Wanda controlling her powers. Worry of Daniel being taken away from him. Worry of Pietro and his insistence on bonding with Sean.

Meanwhile, he still received postcards from Janos in that damn Caribbean hideaway, which Azazel mockingly hangs on the icebox whenever he pops in.

A noise to his left drew him from his musings and he turned to see Pietro stumble from Sean's room with a different Captain America t-shirt on. Erik wondered how many the kid actually had before he reminded himself that he should absolutely not care how many superhero items Sean keeps in his wardrobe.

Pietro had yet to notice him standing there, as he tugged at the hem of the shirt in order to see it better. The boy was still getting used to him as "Papa" and knew he was not the only one to notice Pietro's silence after Wanda called Charles "Daddy."

"Hello, Papa," Pietro mumbled (his hair still in spikes, much to Erik's chagrin).

"Hello, Pietro." He ran a callused hand over the smooth skin of his son's cheek. "Go on in. Charles is going to read you a story."

The boy's eyes brightened before he checked himself. "Papa… if I'm not… if I don't want to…"

"Charles understands," Erik replied, saving him from the admission. "As do I."

"Truly?"

Erik softly smiled. "Truly."
Pietro nodded and padded into the nursery, before climbing onto the bed and settling in next to Charles. Erik continued to watch from the doorway, despite the invitation in Charles' face as he glanced up and raised his eyebrow questioningly. Erik shook his head and took up his post in the doorway, watching as Charles groaned when Daniel jumped into his lap, before opening the story in front of them and quietly beginning to read.

"He takes command of a room quite well," came the whisper beside him and Erik jumped before meeting Moira's mirthful gaze.

"Indeed, he does," Erik replied, his eyes drifting back towards Charles. "No doubt it's what makes him a great teacher."

"And father."

Erik nodded. "And father. Something you wanted, McTaggert?" It came out slightly harsher than he intended, but the pain meds Hank gave him were wearing off and irritability was settling in. He expected a snappy retort – after all, their verbal sparring was quickly becoming the stuff of legend – but what she responded with took him completely off-guard.

"Enjoy these moments, Erik. Not everything is a race. Stryker will still be there in the morning, so for now, enjoy tonight."

He wanted to thank her, but he couldn't stop staring as Charles set the book aside and rubbed ointment on Pietro's chafed ankles. She was right, of course. Though he'd never admit it, she usually was. He had lost half of his life in his pursuit of a goal. And what kind of goal would it be if it cost him the only good in his life?

Yes, he needed to thank her. But by the time he collected himself and turned to face her, she was gone.

xxxxxx

You're next. Charles sent to Erik as Pietro hissed. "Sorry, love." The telepath gently rubbed the particularly sensitive skin around the boy's anklebone, letting the antibiotic ointment absorb into the angry red marks.

What do you mean, "I'm next?"

Your wound. It needs dressing.

"All set," he announced aloud as he patted Pietro's calf and slid off the bed. "Wanda, darling, slide under here." He lifted the covers up as Erik came further into the room to tuck his children into bed.

"Daddy!" Daniel squealed as Charles picked him up and slung him over his shoulder, carting him off to the adjacent room where his crib was kept.

"Bed time, little one."

Daniel pouted for the briefest of moments, before plopping down amidst the covers and tugging the stuffed rabbit close to his chest. Charles held back his chuckle as he smoothed the hair away from his son's head. It still took his breath away – the similarities between them. To think that he had made this person… well. It was enough to make him forget his years of genetic study and focus on the miracle of it all.

"Ahem."
Charles turned to find Erik eying him from the doorway with a soft smile on his face. It still looked out of place on his hard features, no matter how many times Charles had seen it in the nursery, or the bedroom, or even over the breakfast table. He didn't think he'd ever tire of it.

They retreated silently through the twins' room, with Charles gently running a hand over Wanda's head as they passed the bed. He did not blame Pietro for not adapting to this newfound family dynamic as quickly as his sister. In fact, Charles had been expecting much worse, so he would take whatever he could get. Even if it was semi-distrustful glances.

Erik allowed himself to be lead down the hall and into the other wing, his fingers tangled loosely yet securely in Charles'. It had been a slow process, the transformation of his room to their room. A toothbrush here. An outfit there. And then one night, Charles returned to find Erik sprawled on the bed, out cold and breathing deeply, and that was it. He never left.

Charles helped him remove his shirt, sensing his discomfort at the movement and wishing he could ease his lover's pain as he settled on the couch.

"Lean back."

"You don't have to coddle me."

Charles grinned as he grabbed his glasses and the first aid kit from the bedside table. "I like coddling you."

The dressing was not as blood drenched as it had been earlier in the day, but it was still more than Charles would have liked.

"You're making a habit of this."

Charles shot the metal-bender a questioning glance as he unwound the bandage.

"Stitching me up," Erik elaborated.

"Well, we can't very well let you bleed out," he began as the last of the dressing fell away. "I'd miss you terribly."

The muscles of Erik's abdomen jumped as Charles disinfected the wound and Erik huffed out a breath – a laugh he tried to turn into a cough.

"Ticklish, darling?"

"No," Erik replied, almost petulantly. Charles grazed the pads of his fingers across the other man's navel and the shiver that ran through him had absolutely nothing to do how sensitive his sides were.

Charles hid his grin and set to work re-bandaging his torso, taking note of the jump in Erik's pulse and the shallow breaths he let escape through loose lips.

"Something bothering you, love?"

Erik shook his head and focused on the ceiling, giving Charles a lovely view of his exposed throat. They were still in the exploratory phase in the bedroom – something Charles was very much enjoying, but also very much wanting to move beyond. An entirely devilish smile spread across his face and he used Erik's distraction to slide from the couch to the floor and open the metal-bender's legs.
"What – what are you doing?" Erik asked, as Charles settled himself between his knees, taking great delight in the fact that the other man was no longer able to hide the effect Charles was having on him.

"It's easier to work from this angle," Charles innocently replied, before sliding his hands under Erik's bottom and tugging him forward. Erik groaned, half from pain, half from something else entirely, as Charles went back to work wrapping the gauze around his body.

"It's a shame that you're injured," Charles said after a moment, his gaze never breaking from the task in front of him, despite the fact that Erik's arousal was pulsing against his mind. "You can't imagine the things I want to do to you."

"God, Charles." Erik moaned and shifted on the couch as Charles' fingers ghosted up his thighs before moving to his hips, away from the desired point. "You'll be the death of me."

Charles bent down and brushed his lips across Erik's navel. "But what a way to go."

He barely registered the fingers in his hair before he was being gently, but forcibly, guided to Erik's mouth where they crash together with little finesse but plenty of passion.

Charles eventually pulled away, lips bruised and face flushed, before leaning in and taking Erik's earlobe between his teeth.

"Come, darling," he whispered. "Let's put you out of your misery."

xxxxxx

Alex coughed as smoke rose in the air and he brushed the back of his hand across his watering eyes to better survey the destruction in front of him.

This had become his morning routine: locking himself in the bunker while the rest of the house's occupants either slept or made coffee. He was getting better, able to knock down a mannequin with barely a moment's notice, but sometimes… Sometimes he just needed to let loose. As evidenced by the rings of flame that wound around the room like a corkscrew.

Charles would hurry around with the fire extinguisher but still commend his power. Erik would clap him on the back and ask why he didn't blow up more. Such was the differences between the ideologies of his two parental figures.

The door creaked open, startling Alex. He hadn't expected anyone down here for another hour at least – usually Charles, hurrying him up to the kitchen to eat – which was why he was completely caught off guard when he was met with the green-eyed stare of Wanda as she hovered in the doorway.

"Hey, squirt, you shouldn't be down here. It's dangerous."

She bit her lip and took one step further into the room. Her hair was still sleep-rumpled and Erik's t-shirt hung well past her knees. "I thought Daniel was 'squirt."

"Anyone under 5ft is 'squirt," Alex replied.

Her wide eyes took in the circles of flame licking up the walls. "Is it dangerous down here because you're dangerous?"

Alex's mouth quirked up. "Depends on who you ask." His smile faded as she continued to stare at
the dancing tongues of orange. "Do you think I'm dangerous?"

Finally her gaze met his and she shook her head. "You can't be dangerous. You made pancakes."

He chuckled loudly. Leave it to a child to have such simple, yet profound logic. "What can you do?"

"Nothing," she quickly replied, her gaze finding her bare feet.

"Nothing?" Alex ignored the flames for a moment and crouched down in front of her. "Now I have a feeling that that's not true at all." He placed a finger under her chin and gently tilted it up until wide, watery eyes met his and immediately he panicked.

He was good with kids. Well, good with Danny. But this was a girl, a girl who clearly needed someone, and Alex was 99.9% positive that he was not the solution to her problems.

"Why are you crying?" he tried.

"Because I can't control it."

Now they were getting into familiar territory. "Can't control what?"

She blinked and a fat, hot tear spilled onto her cheek. "The bad thing," she whispered.

Alex internally seethed with anger. Anyone who took this little girl and made her think that one of the most beautiful things about her was bad deserved to be beaten and punished, and then beaten some more.

"Come 'ere, squirt." He guided her to the other side of the room and handed her an umbrella. "Go ahead, open it up."

With a confused frown, she did so, and Alex hit a switch on the wall causing the newly-installed sprinkler system overhead to spring to life. Wanda shrieked with laughter as the flames slowly died and steam rose to the ceiling.

"That's what my power looked like when I first came here. It was all over the place," he started as he took the umbrella from her and folded it up. "Now… You see that target all the way down there?"

He pointed to the dummy that Erik had riddled with bullets just days prior.

"Uh huh."

"Good, stay there and don't move."

She nodded gravely as he moved to the center of the bunker, gathered his power, and sent a beam of plasma right to the center of the bullseye. Behind him, Wanda clapped enthusiastically and he crouched down in front of her once more, blinking water from the sprinklers out of his eyes.

"I can do that only because I practiced. Because the Profess – Charles – I mean, your Daddy helped me. You will never – ever – be punished here for using your power. Unless you use it to intentionally harm someone else. Which I know you'd never do. Got it?"

She nodded and her lower lip wobbled.

"Good." He smiled. "Your turn."
Erik frowned as he slid into the seat across from Charles at the kitchen table and counted the children present, realizing he was one short.

"Where's our daughter?"

Charles smiled softly. "Being trained by our son."

xxxxxx

Hank growled and Raven narrowly avoided another piece of scrap metal that fell from the scaffolding above.

"It's not going to fit in here."

"I told you that yesterday," she sing-songed. "Alex and Erik offered to blast out the basement. Charles has been wanting to remodel the bunker for years."

Hank gave another irritated growl and ran his hands through his fur. "Even if we did get the space, I can't precisely… there are coordinates and equations… I need…"

Raven bit her lip to keep from smiling. "Hank, are you trying to admit that you're not all-knowing?"

He hung his head as if shamed and Raven barely contained a snort. "Maybe."

"That you're only human and you might need," she let out a fake gasp, "help?"

"Yes," he grumbled.

She laughed and slid off the tabletop. "Moira offered to do some sleuthing at Langley. I wish you'd take her up on it. If there are any blueprints to be had, they'll be there."

"I really don't mind," Moira piped up from her perch in the corner, but her eyes never left the stack of files in front of her as Sean hovered mere feet away. "These bastards have lawyers, doctors, politicians…" she muttered, trailing off as she lost herself in the world of the H.S.S. once more.

Better her than me, Raven thought. She wasn't sure she'd be able to contain herself if she had to wade into those disgusting waters. So she kept her eye on Hank where he hung upside down from a bar, trying to piece Cerebro back together with that brilliant brain of his. It was some sort of relaxation technique he picked up on television.

The door opened a moment later and Erik strode in with Daniel on his hip. "Sean, I told you to go help Pietro get that crap out of his hair."

Sean jumped and squeaked out something like acquiescence before booking it from the lab. Erik smirked and Raven knew that he delighted in terrorizing the youngest of their brood. Well, youngest save for the new additions. Though Pietro looked adorable with the pomade, Erik was right. It would be a nightmare to remove.

"Is he comfortable like that?" Erik asked, pointing up at Hank.

"Don't ask," Raven muttered. "He's admitting that he's not all-powerful. He needs a moment."

Erik nodded as if in sympathy and Raven wanted to laugh. Erik Lehnsherr didn't have a sympathetic bone in his body.

"If I just had this one component…” Hank mumbled before climbing down the scaffolding and
grabbing his rough blueprints once more.

"Vati, up!" Daniel cried, pointing up where Hank was perched.

"Absolutely not."

The baby didn't seem to acknowledge the negative response as he squirmed out of Erik's arms and toddled his way over to the base of the scaffolding.

"Stubborn, just like his father," Erik murmured.

"Yeah, both of them," Raven replied, before bending and scooping the baby up in her arms and blowing a raspberry on his cheek.

"Ray, no!"

"Make sure he eats," Erik said over the loud laughing of his son as he pointed up at Hank. Raven nodded and watched him go over to Moira and read over her shoulder.

Remarkable though it may seem, this unlikely ragtag team was coming together. Raven chuckled quietly and shook her head as she glanced once more at the baby staring pensively back at her.

"Reading my thoughts?" she whispered, and was only slightly surprised when Daniel nodded in return. "Figured. It was only a matter of time."

Daniel smiled and squirmed out of her arms, heading for the scaffolding once more.

"No you don't, little man." She picked him up and plopped him back into Erik's arms and it was to the metal-bender's credit that he didn't even break concentration as he read the page Moira held out for him.

She was worried, of course she was. But she was also comforted by the fact that as long as Erik and Charles lived and breathed, she could sleep easy at night. But before she could dwell too much on her saccharine thoughts, the door opened and McCone stood there, looking a shade of green only achieved through teleportation.

"McCone, to what do we owe the pleasure?" Erik asked, sliding off the edge of the table and meeting the Director in the doorway.

McCone held up a folder, "For you," and a cardboard tube, "For Dr. McCoy."

Erik turned to call up for Hank, but the blue teen was already jumping down to the floor, sending his glasses askew.

"Is this what I think it is?" Hank ripped open the tube and a role of blueprints fell out. "Oh my God it is."

McCone smirked as Hank walked back to his table without raising his eyes from the paper, before returning his focus to Erik who was looking at him… oddly. It was praise and surprise and wariness all rolled into one enigmatic look.

"You didn't see me do that," McCone intoned.

Erik raised an eyebrow. "Do what?"

The Director smiled and clapped a hand on Erik's shoulder before turning and heading for the exit.
"You're a good man, McCone."

"Don't tell anyone," he replied. And then he was gone.

xxxxxx

"There see?" Charles quietly said as he ran the brush through Pietro's soft hair once more. "Good as new."

The little boy eyed himself in the mirror and ran a hand over his flattened, wet hair. "I'll miss my peaks."

"Well, perhaps next bath time you can have some more."

Pietro's eyes brightened considerably and he nodded, before turning pensive once more.

"Charles?"

"Yes, my boy?"

"Wanda calls you 'Daddy.'" Not a question. Merely a statement.

Charles inhaled and waited to see where this was going. "She does."

Pietro looked down and tugged on the towel wrapped around his body. "Are you mad at me because I don't?"

"Of course not!" Charles crouched down and placed his hands on Pietro's shoulders. "Of course not, darling. I am... not your father. You can call me Charles for the rest of your life and I'd be perfectly content with that."

"What if I change my mind?"

Charles shrugged. "Then you change your mind. If you decide that you do see me as another father figure in your life, then wonderful. For I will always view you as a son."

Pietro's eyes snapped from the towel to Charles'. "Really?"

"Of course," he whispered, brushing the wet hair off Pietro's forehead. "I will be as there for you as I am for Daniel, or Alex, or Sean, or Hank, or Raven, or Wanda. You are all mine. And I am yours. In whatever way you'll have me."

Charles could feel the throb of relief radiating off of the boy and he gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze before ruffling his hair once more. "What say you to getting into pajamas?"

Pietro nodded, but still kept quiet, and Charles could see the telltale wobble of his lower lip. Choosing to ignore it, he led the boy into the nursery and tucked him into bed.

An hour later, he made his way downstairs, past the lab where Hank worked feverishly and past the library where Raven curled up like a cat with Jane Austen. He followed the bright spot in his mind like a buoy in a storm until it led him to the study and the man sitting behind the desk, pinching the bridge of his nose.

*Rough night?* Charles sent and Erik snapped to attention, his tension immediately draining away and a tired smile taking its place.
"Better now," he replied.

"What's that?" Charles asked, nodding to the papers on the desk.

"McCone got it drawn up for me. You said…" Erik trailed off and cleared his throat as he busied himself shuffling the forms. "You said that if anything ever happened to you, I would get custody of Daniel."

Charles nodded as a slight fear settled in the pit of his stomach. What if Erik no longer wanted the job?

"I figured," the metal-bender continued, "that it's only right if I return the favor." And with that, he held up his own *Last Will and Testament*. "Not an easy thing to come by when you're a wanted murderer, but it helps to know the director of the CIA." He gave a tight smile. "They're yours if you want them."

Charles felt his eyebrows hit his hairline. "Wanda and Pietro?"

Erik gave an out of character roll of the eyes. "No, my other children. Of course Wanda and Pietro," he finished with a fond smile.

Charles stepped forward and ran a finger over the embossed deed. "Of course I want them."

Erik nodded and covered Charles' hand with his own. "Good. I'm glad." He tugged Charles toward him, leading him around the desk, until he sat and Erik wrapped his arms around his neck from behind, letting his fingers rest against his abdomen.

Memories of the night before came unbidden to Charles' mind and he smiled, blushing faintly.

"You know, Moira said the strangest thing to me yesterday," Erik said after a moment.

"Hm? What was that?"

"She said, 'Enjoy these moments. Not everything is a race. Stryker will still be there in the morning, so for now, enjoy tonight.'"

"She's smart, our Moira."

Erik hummed in agreement in his ear as they both gazed on the forms in front of them.

"You realize that it will be a lot harder to keep under wraps with three small children, right?"

"What will?" Charles sleepily asked, closing his eyes against the feel of Erik's arms around him.

"This," Erik replied, squeezing slightly. "You and I. What if someone asks them where their mother is? Or even worse, where there father is, and they answer with, 'Which one?"

Charles opened his eyes. Erik had a point.

"Charles, we could be arrested for this, and then where would we be? Where would the children be?"

Charles' heart hammered in his chest as Erik's words struck home. They were playing with fire and they both knew it.

"Listen to Moira, Erik. Enjoy tonight."
Erik let go and crouched down, spinning the chair around so they were face to face. "How can I enjoy tonight when tomorrow could be our last?"

Charles felt the blood leave his face and the weight of the ring on his finger burn a brand into his skin. He cradled Erik's face in his hands in an effort to alleviate the panic in his eyes.

"Come back to me, love. Come back."

"In the camps," Erik began and stopped, swallowing. "In the camps, we were all labeled. And I don't mean…” he held up his left forearm even though Charles knew what he was referring to. "Do you know what a pink triangle stood for?"

Charles closed his eyes and nodded, feeling hot tears prickle his lids.

"Can we be so selfish as to leave our children parentless?" Erik whispered. "It's only a matter of time. Someone will find out and they will come. Not because we are mutant. Or dangerous. But because we are homosexuals. And they will hate us for it."

Charles kept his eyes closed, leaning into Erik's touch as the other man carded his fingers through his hair.

"More than they already do."

"Erik, don't." Charles shook his head and leaned his elbows on his knees, feeling sick. "Don't."

"I will sign my children over to you and you sign your son over to me, but eventually, we will have to face the fact that this home, this family, we've created cannot withstand the scrutiny of the world beyond."

Charles felt the press of Erik's lips against his head and listened to his footsteps across the carpet.

He managed to wait until the door clicked shut behind him, before the first sob escaped his lips.
Nightmares

Chapter Summary

In which nothing goes the way Charles thought it would.

*He wouldn't...He couldn't...*

But he could because they would. And he must because they will.

Charles had been accused of many things – naiveté being chief among them – but he remembered the news reports. Remembered the way the anchor calmly described the men being rounded up and tested, as if for their betterment, with the same monotonous tone and inflection that he used to deliver the weekend's weather report. The procedure was simple: show them pictures of naked men and then electrocute them, to further drive home the notion that no, you should not find this attractive. You should not love this. You will never be happy with this.

He didn't watch the news for a month after that. And he felt the same desolation now as he did then.

*You should not find this attractive. You should not love this. You will never be happy with this.*

With heavy footfalls and an even heavier heart, he made his way upstairs, turning his back on the darkened study.

xxxxxx

Sean liked stability. It had nothing to do with his frequently compromised mental state and the constant need for level surfaces – just a strong desire to keep things normal. Happy. Content. Routine. But this…

This was not routine.

*Notgood notgood notgood notgood.*

"Dude, DEFCON 1!" Sean harshly whispered as he shook Alex awake. "Maximum defense readiness!"

Alex groaned and blindly waved an arm in the air, nearly catching Sean upside the head. "What the fuck are you talking about? Gobacktosleep," the blonde mumbled as he rolled over and buried his face in his pillow once more.

"Dude! No joke! We have a hell of a problem here!"

"Is the mansion under attack?"

Sean frowned. "No."

"Has someone died?"

"No."
"Injured? Maimed?"

"No!" Sean snapped.

"Then shut up and go back to sleep," Alex hissed, rolling over again and pulling the covers over his head.

With his frustration rising, Sean yanked the covers back, ignoring Alex's yelp of protest.

"The Prof and Erik are sleeping in separate rooms." The words tumbled out of his mouth in a rush and a weight lifted off his chest. He needed someone to tell him that everything was fine. Routine. Normal.

Alex blinked his eyes open, looking oddly alert for as groggy as he had been just a moment prior. "What?"

"Erik is in their room. The Prof is in Erik's old room."

And if he hadn't been sure before, the look on Alex's face certainly confirmed it: this was anything but normal.

Alex sat up and rubbed a hand over his face. "Did they fight? Did you hear anything?"

Sean shook his head. It was all quiet on the western front when he stumbled downstairs at 3am for some ice cream.

"You don't – you don't think he'll leave again, do you?" He hated the note of true fear that crept into his voice. As the youngest, he figured he was allowed some leeway on the manliness scale. And the proud pats on the back of the head that Charles managed to sneak in when no one was looking were evidence of this. But still. No one wanted to consider the possibility of Mom and Dad fighting.

"Come on," Alex groaned, kicking off the covers and pushing himself up. "They'll be up soon. We'll wake Hank and watch them at breakfast. See if anything looks off."

Sean shook his head. It was all quiet on the western front when he stumbled downstairs at 3am for some ice cream.

"You don't – you don't think he'll leave again, do you?" He hated the note of true fear that crept into his voice. As the youngest, he figured he was allowed some leeway on the manliness scale. And the proud pats on the back of the head that Charles managed to sneak in when no one was looking were evidence of this. But still. No one wanted to consider the possibility of Mom and Dad fighting.

"Come on," Alex groaned, kicking off the covers and pushing himself up. "They'll be up soon. We'll wake Hank and watch them at breakfast. See if anything looks off."

Sean nodded and padded after Alex as he made his way into hall, feeling slightly comforted that the worry in his chest was etched on his big brother's face.

It was an image he would cling to later in the day as they opened Hank's bedroom door to the sight of Raven's naked body curled up next to him.

"Whoa!" Alex immediately backed up into Sean, who promptly clapped a hand over his eyes.

"Dude! Not cool! Put a sock on the door or something!"

xxxxxx

As the three boys made their way to the kitchen, Alex was warring with wanting to give Hank a high five and wanting to smack him upside the head for jumping Charles' little sister.

"The Prof is gonna murder you. You know that, right?"

If it was possible, Hank's blue fur paled. "You think?"

"He'll at least have you thinking you're a fairy princess for a few hours," Sean snorted up ahead.

"My retinas have been scarred for life. Thanks for that."

"The Prof is gonna murder you. You know that, right?"

If it was possible, Hank's blue fur paled. "You think?"

"He'll at least have you thinking you're a fairy princess for a few hours," Sean snorted up ahead.

"My retinas have been scarred for life. Thanks for that."
"As has your brain, with all that shit you smoke." Alex was trying to direct attention to Sean to save Bozo a little face, but all joking stopped when they entered the kitchen to find Charles sitting alone at the table, forlornly staring into a half-empty mug of tea.

"Prof? You all right?"

Charles started and looked up at them with bloodshot eyes. "Fine, why? How did you all sleep?"

Alex felt Sean nudge him in the side. The Professor was deflecting and they all knew it. After all, it was a technique they were slowly beginning to perfect to get away from their father figure's ridiculously knowing glances.

"I made coffee. I figured someone who drank it would be up soon," the Professor said, sliding his chair back and needlessly gesturing to the pot on the counter.

There was no doubt in Alex's mind just who Charles was hoping for.

"Sweet," Sean said as he ambled over to pour himself a mug, while Hank remained ramrod straight next to him, practically oozing guilt as his eyes glanced at Charles before darting away again.

Alex bit his cheek to keep from laughing. He shouldn't have found it so amusing, what with the Professor looking hungover/suicidal, but the situation was just too good not to benchmark and tell the children about for years to come.

"What about you, Prof? Did you sleep well?"

Alex rolled his eyes at Sean's blatant fishing. Of course he didn't sleep well! The man's eyes were so dark, it looked like he went six rounds with Cassius Clay.

"Fine, Sean. Thank you." Even his voice sounded wrecked.

Alex cleared his throat and busied himself making a bowl of cereal. Charles was definitely out of it seeing as he hadn't even asked them why they were awake. It was a good two hours before any of them usually saw daylight (unless Hank was working in the lab which usually meant he hadn't even seen his bed yet).

But Charles just sat at the table, staring into a cup of tea that was probably cold, and looking as morose as Alex could remember. At least since Erik had come back.

"Morning, all," Raven announced as she entered the kitchen with Daniel perched on her hip.

Hank flushed an even deeper indigo and this time, Alex couldn't bite back his chuckle – until Raven's eyes narrowed to yellow slits and his laughter abruptly stopped. He had seen her roundhouse kick and he knew he wanted no part of that.

"Daddy," Daniel whined as he reached over Raven's shoulder for his father. Charles finally showed a spark of life as he immediately reached out and allowed Raven to deposit the baby in his lap.

"Hello, my boy."

Raven stared her brother with a frown on her face and Alex wanted nothing more than to wave his arms, point at Charles, and yell, "See? Something's not right!" Instead, he slumped down into the chair across from the professor and stabbed his spoon into his unsuspecting Cheerios.

"Where's Erik?" Raven innocently asked.
"Still in bed, I would imagine," Charles mumbled before realizing his mistake and stiffening, the tension seizing his shoulders like metal under Erik's practiced hand.

Raven seemed to take pity on him and didn't ask why he was imagining instead of knowing. It felt like the old days – when Charles mourned the loss of his legs and the two ghosts that seemed to haunt every corner. Alex didn't like it one bit.

"Are your kids gonna be blue?" he heard Sean whisper to Raven and she promptly replied with, "I hate you."

Alex wanted to laugh. He needed to laugh, but the way Charles was absentmindedly stroking Daniel's hair made his chest hurt.

Raven and Sean's quiet bickering abruptly cut off and the slight shiver in his spoon told him that Erik had finally arrived. He turned in his seat and couldn't help the rush of grim satisfaction when he saw that Erik looked just as bad, if not worse, as Charles.

"Morning." His voice was gruff and hoarse, which normally would prompt Sean to make some vaguely inappropriate comment on their sex life, but he was remarkably silent, staring wide-eyed as the older man made his way to the coffee pot and slowly poured himself a cup.

The sudden screech of Charles' chair against the floor made everyone jump and even Charles himself seemed surprised to find himself standing.

"Erik? A word?" He came around the table, placed Daniel in Alex's lap, and strode out of the room, not even bothering to look and see if Erik was following.

Alex's gaze met Raven's over the cereal and he watched the pain and worry line her face as her eyes followed them out of the room.

"Told you. DEFCON 1," Sean mumbled around a mouthful of Frosted Flakes.

xxxxxx

Charles' heart thudded in his chest the closer he got to the study, with the steady beat of Erik's footsteps behind him the only thing that kept him going. For once, he was thankful for Erik's bluntness – the door was barely closed before Erik was blurtling out:

"You didn't come to bed last night."

Charles sighed. "Forgive me for needing a moment to process what exactly happened last night. Speaking of which, what did exactly happen?" He shoved his hands in his pockets to hide the trembling of his fists.

Erik remained rooted to the floor by the door, as if ready to flee at a moment's notice. "We have to consider some things..."

"I can protect them. Protect us," Charles said, jumping right to the point.

"How?"

He tapped the side of his head and Erik scoffed.

"What are you going to do? Mindwipe everyone they come into contact with? Follow them around like a mother duck, ready to pounce the moment someone asks them about their family? You can't do..."
He was right. Charles knew he was right. But Charles was also getting desperate. And stubborn.

"They should be proud of who they are," Erik continued. "Of who we are. I don't want someone telling my children that their fathers are doing something wrong. Who are they to judge?"

Charles remained silent for a moment, collecting himself. He saw where Erik was coming from but that didn't stop the sharp sear of anger from slicing through his chest.

"Then how is pretending that this," he gestured harshly between them, "isn't real helping to make them proud?"

And finally Erik's stoic façade cracked and anguish flashed across his face. "I do not want to be taken away from my children. Being mutant and proud is all well and good until it affects those that depend on you."

"I depend on you!" tore out of Charles' chest and he pinched the bridge of his nose to reign himself in. "You couldn't have come to this conclusion months ago? You're being noble now? Nothing's changed. Homosexuals were just as reviled in 1962 as they are in 1963. Why – ?"

"Nothing's changed?" Erik cut off. "There is a little girl out there calling you 'Daddy' and a little boy calling me 'Vati!' What happens when she calls you that on the playground or he calls me that in the grocery store? Are we going to lock them away from the outside world?"

Sometimes Charles wished he could. It would be so much easier to never have to subject them to the harsher workings of the human race. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Moira enter, assess the situation, and beat a hasty retreat. It was almost comical, but the laughter that bubbled in Charles' chest was anything but amused. It was tinged with hysteria and he bit down hard to contain it.

"Fine. Go then." Charles nodded in an attempt to harden his heart against what he felt he had to do. "Leave."

Erik's head shot up. "What?"

"It's what you want, isn't it? Or did you expect to stay here and we'd just pretend that we're really good chums."

Erik looked as though Charles had slapped him. "It's not what I want but you have to stop living in a fantasy!"

"It's a fantasy you built for me!" he fired back.

And just like that, the dam broke.

xxxxxx

Everything in the kitchen stopped as the voices down the hall ebbed away. Raven sucked in a breath as her eyes flicked to the now-awake Wanda and Pietro, who had frozen with their spoons in their hands.

"Is that Papa and Daddy?" Wanda quietly asked.

Pietro looked to Sean for reassurance. "Are they fighting?"

"They're not fighting," Raven quickly replied, before Sean could make the situation worse. "Just
discussing loudly."

Another yell caused everyone to flinch.

Moira cleared her throat and asked more loudly than necessary what everyone's plans were for the day. Pietro excitedly launched into a monologue of how he was going to test his powers on the grounds, and he was so animated that he and Wanda didn't even notice the next two times Charles and Erik raised their voices.

xxxxxx

Erik closed his eyes a moment before the door slammed shut. He deserved it, he knew he did, but it didn't make it any easier to take.

Hurting Charles was the absolute last thing he wanted to do, yet he had succeeded anyway in stupendous fashion. He didn't want to leave, but Charles was right. He couldn't have it both ways. Either stay and be together or leave and... don't. He needed to protect them and he only hoped to God that some day Charles would understand and forgive him. It was part of the plan. A hasty plan - a rudimentary, desperate plan - but what else could he do?

The thought alone made him ill and he braced his hands on his knees until the wave of nausea passed.

The rest of the day was not much better. Erik worked in the lab on Cerebro while Charles pored over H.S.S. files with Moira. They threw themselves into their respective tasks with gusto, because what else could they do? Erik wanted a world where he could be whatever he was and love whomever he wanted. Unfortunately, the world had different plans for him.

As they approached dinner, he was almost convinced they could keep up the charade – pretending that everything was all right yet never seeing each other in some masochistic effort at self-preservation. He naively thought they were succeeding too, until Hank paused mid-hammer and fixed Erik with a piercing look.

"Don't make me regret bringing you back."

The words echoed around the cavernous space, condemning him until they died off into nothingness.

Hank went back to work and Erik made a decision.

xxxxxx

Moira might claim that this was none of her business, but this was Raven's family, and she was going to meddle as much as she damn well pleased.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" She demanded as she banged the door open to the nursery.

Erik immediately brought his free hand to his lips and silently shushed her as he cradled Daniel in his other arm. She wanted to be mad at him, she really did, but the look of utter desolation on his face as he returned his attention to the sleeping child in his arms sapped whatever fire had been smoldering in her chest.

"You cannot do this to him," she whispered. "Or to yourself."

He looked up at that. "He asked me to."
"Because you broke his heart!" she immediately clamped a hand over her mouth as Daniel started to stir.

Erik gently ran his fingers through the baby's hair until he settled once more. "I'm protecting this."

She reached out and placed a hand on his tense shoulder. "But at what cost?"

He closed his eyes and, in a rare moment of tenderness, tilted his head and rested his cheek on the back of her palm.

"I cannot begin to quantify it."

xxxxxxxx

*This is stupid. This is stupid. This is stupid.*

That about summed up Alex's opinions on the matter. He was prowling the first floor, searching any and every room for the professor so he could talk some sense into him. Raven had taken Erik, and Alex, Charles. Together, they hoped to put a halt to whatever ridiculous ideas had gotten into the so-called adults' heads.

Hank said it was something about the Professor and Erik being… you know. Alex had no problem with it, but he knew he was in the minority where the rest of the world was concerned. And yeah, he got where Erik was coming from – the man was just trying to protect his family – but he didn't like the way he was doing it.

Surely, with a little more time and planning, they could find a solution that didn't end in tears.

He opened the door to the formal living room, a room he never entered considering his blood stain was still on the carpet, and finally found the professor staring out the window with his hands shoved into his pockets, the slump of his shoulders proof enough that he had already given up.

"Charles?"

The older man turned and gave Alex a grim smile. "How are you?"

"Seriously?" Alex's eyebrows hit his hairline. "How are you?"

Charles sighed and even the grim smile faded. "Not now, Alex."

"Then when? He's leaving. Now seems as good a time as any!"

Charles rounded on him and Alex stumbled back a few steps. "What would you have me do?"

"Anything! Fight for him!"

"I have been fighting for him since the moment I met him!" Charles never was one to yell and his voice echoed off the cavernous ceiling, taking all of his strength with him.

"I don't think he wants to go," Alex continued more quietly. "And I *know* you don't want him to leave. We can – we can work this out." He hated how young and stupidly optimistic he sounded.

"Erik's made it pretty clear that we can't."

Alex could hear footsteps on the stairs and Raven's distant plea of "*Erik, wait!*"
"You won't even say goodbye?"

Something in Charles' blue eyes shuttered and Alex wasn't sure if it would ever be seen again.

"I did it once. Don't ask it of me again."

xxxxxx

Ten minutes.

That was how long it had taken Erik to pack all of their belongings: his, Wanda's, and Pietro's, into two duffle bags and his breath hitched as the front door clicked shut behind them.

"Papa, where are we going?" Wanda asked as she struggled to keep up with Erik's long strides.

"Home."

"But we are home," Pietro said just as Wanda cried out, "But I don't want to leave Daddy!"

The pronouncement cut something deep in Erik and he slammed to a halt, causing the children on either side of him to stumble slightly.

He swallowed hard and prayed for steadiness as he forced the words out between reluctant lips.

"You cannot call him that. Not anymore. I am your father. Just me."

Something akin to panic passed her features and she yelled, "No!" as an electric shock went through Erik's palm where he gripped her hand tight, up his arm, and straight through his chest, causing him to abruptly release her. He looked at her in shocked wonder and immediately she burst into tears.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. It was the bad thing. I did the bad thing."

Erik dropped to his knees in front of her, the pain in his hand all but forgotten as he cupped her cheeks in his palms. "Wanda, Wanda, leibling, look at me."

She shook her head, causing more tears to fall as she heaved out a sob and whispered more apologies.

Erik tried to soothe her, running his hands through her hair and telling her he was fine, but it was Alex, of all people, who finally caught the girl's attention.

"Wanda!" he called from the front stoop where the rest of the children had gathered to watch the grim departure. "What did I tell you?"

She hiccupped and sniffed, wiping her nose on her sleeve. "I am special. I am loved."

"And what else?" the blonde prompted.

"I am me and no one can take that away," she finished clearly. Strongly.

Erik had never been prouder in his life.

He glanced up to find Alex staring at him. "Don't let her forget that."

He nodded and allowed his eyes to drift to the window he could not see through and search blindly for the man he knew to be there.
I love you, he thought as hard as he possibly could. He didn't expect a response, but after a moment of painful silence, it came.

I know.
Chapter Summary

In which Charles visits Emma and Alex visits Erik. One is more productive than the other.

It surprised no one when word of Stryker's untimely death filtered down through various CIA outlets. There was no doubt in anyone's mind as to the hand behind it, but the note that followed two days later confirmed any lingering suspicions:

*We're fine.*

Unsigned.

xxxxxx

This had started out as a good day.

McCone removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. As much as he disliked Stryker, he had rather hoped to use him as an asset. Or at least dispose of him using government-sanctioned methods.

"Is he going to be a problem?" the director wearily asked.

"Who, Erik?" Xavier shook his head as he stared at the open file in front of him detailing the way Stryker was conveniently crushed in his own car. "Not anymore."

McCone had to hand it to Lehnsherr. He knew how to make a murder look like an accident. *Years of practice,* filtered through his mind and he shook his head. He'd really rather not know.

MacTaggert had informed him of Lehnsherr's departure – rather, she had demanded that he not bring it up in front of Xavier. Apparently the other man was taking it somewhat hard. Understandable, the two seemed to be close friends.

"We're really at a dead end then. Stryker was our way into the HSS. The rest of the names we have are either aliases or they're dead." McCone sighed and tossed his glasses on the file in front of him.

MacTaggert and Xavier were quiet for a moment before the younger man's tired gaze found his.

"I'd like to speak to Miss Frost, please."

McCone rubbed his eyes. Yes, this had started out as a good day.

xxxxxx

She was wearing black. She hated black.

Emma picked at a loose thread on her cotton top with disdain, hoping to unravel the whole sorry excuse for an outfit with just one tug. She had given up on her nails ages ago. Clearly, the CIA took no pride in personal care and a manicure would be deemed completely out of the question.
She was **bored.** And itching for some entertainment.

But never did she dream that her entertainment would show up in the form of one Charles Xavier.

The door groaned open and there he stood, in all his cotton glory. But something was different – a something she couldn't quite pinpoint without her telepathy, but which could still be deduced by the bow of his shoulders and the darkness of his eyes.

"Trouble sleeping, sugar? You know they make pills for that."

His mouth twitched in a sad excuse for amusement as he entered. **Odd.** That usually would have produced at least a chuckle. She waited for the other form to appear in the doorway, but the guard outside closed the heavy door behind the professor.

"Watching me like a hawk, huh?" She nodded towards the windows, to where she expected Magneto to be glowering, but Xavier's features darkened further.

**Ah.** And the penny dropped.

"He's gone, isn't he." Her voice was quiet but Xavier practically flinched, confirming her suspicions. "Well, you can't fault him that. He's a runner, sweetheart. Can't commit to anything unless it's killing."

"I'd like to think I know him better than you do."

"Yes, I suppose you do have a more…" she trailed off and flicked her eyes at the two way mirror, to the men she knew to be watching on the other side. "intimate knowledge."

She triumphed in the brief flash of fear that settled in the man's eyes, fear that was quickly replaced by something harder. Something fiercer. Something she had never seen there before, even when he stood in this very same room and threatened her life.

He shoved his hands deep in his pockets and stood on the other side of the table. "You will tell me everything you know about the HSS and I won't move from this spot until you do."

She let out an unladylike snort. "Oh honey, you'll be here a long while. I'm stubborn."

"And I'm something else altogether," he quietly replied.

She could read anger and desperation and pain without even touching his mind. If it was true what she deduced and Magneto really did leave… Well.

Emma didn't doubt Xavier one bit.

xxxxxx

Moira paced back and forth on the other side of the glass, her gaze never wavering from the scene in front of her, as she attempted to ignore the annoyed looks McCone shot in her direction.

"Will you stand still? She can't do her mind thing in there."

"And neither can he," Moira replied.

"I know I don't know him as well as you do, but I've gathered that if he says he won't move until she gives up intel, we might as well pull up some chairs, because we're gonna be here a while."
Moira sighed and finally pried her eyes away from the rigidity of Charles' shoulders. McCone had a point.

So with a huff of resignation, she pulled up a chair and waited.

Raven wasn't the murderous type, but every time the kitchen door opened and Daniel looked up expectantly, hoping to see Erik, Raven's homicidal tendencies became more and more prominent.

"He's not coming back," she stated, perhaps a little too harshly, as Sean looked just as hopeful as Daniel.

"You don't know that," the redhead mumbled.

"I do, actually. I lived with him for six months," Raven yanked the icebox open and gripped the jug of orange juice tightly. "When he sets his mind to something, he just… plows on, no matter the collateral damage."

"Forgive me for thinking he had set his mind to us," Alex spit out.

"Don't talk about this in front of Charles," Hank warned. "He doesn't need to hear you debating on whether or not Erik is coming back."

"He's not." Raven replied, just as Sean said, "He is."

She wanted to berate him, to tell him that there was no point in getting his hopes up, but she just didn't have the energy. If thinking that Erik would return helped Sean sleep at night, then more power to him. Still, those damn hopeful glances broke her heart piece by piece.

"He should have been back by now," Alex said, bringing about a much needed topic change. "You don't think anything happened at Langley, do you?"

"McCone's on our side. He's fine," Raven replied as she sat down at the table and handed Daniel a plate of cut up bananas.

It was odd for the house to be this quiet. There was no laughter, no pounding footsteps, no screaming children. No bedtime stories read in Erik's rough voice and no muffled noises that Raven would prefer not to think about coming from behind the closed bedroom door.

The house needed laughter and warmth and love, if only to keep it from feeling like a mausoleum. Raven sighed as she stared at the forlorn baby in front of her.

Their home was getting colder and colder by the day.

She drummed her fingers against the table and shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "What are you doing?"

Charles cracked an eye open and observed the woman in front of him. "Reciting The Iliad."

She raised her eyebrows. "In Ancient Greek?"

"Of course," he replied and closed his eyes once more.
"You're really gonna stay here?"

"For as long as it takes."

"You'll be here quite a while."

He smiled. "Luckily *The Iliad* spans ten years. And then there's always *The Odyssey*."

She resisted the urge to groan as she examined her nails once more. Patience had never been one of her strong suits, but Xavier seemed to have it in spades. It also didn't help that she had "Palisades Park" stuck in her head ever since her last night in the Hellfire Club.

Any longer and she'd crack.

"If I were to give you a name…"

His eye peeked open.

"… would I be able to negotiate a new outfit out of it?"

Xavier smiled and, damn him, he was cute when trying not to be smug.

"I think that can be arranged."

xxxxxx

Charles needed a hot shower and a stiff drink. Not necessarily in that order.

"Job well done, Professor," Moira murmured as she placed a hand on his back. "Nathaniel Ralston. McCone is going to send over a file as soon as it's compiled."

Charles nodded and let the bag he was carrying drop to the ground in the foyer. "Who knew that you'd only have to tempt her with a white outfit and a pedicure to get a contact."

Moira's chuckle ricocheted off the marble, drawing Charles' attention to the sheer silence suffocating them. The house was quiet – too quiet – and he frowned at the lack of footsteps or screaming toddlers.

"Where is everyone?"

Moira shrugged. "Dinner?"

"No," Charles began as he moved further into the house. "I don't smell smoke so they can't be cooking."

"I'm going upstairs," Moira announced. "Call me when dinner's ready. Or if the kitchen's on fire."

"Will do," he replied as he tried not to think about the three empty places at the table.

Eight days. It had been eight days since Erik and the children had left. One hundred and ninety two hours. Eleven thousand five hundred and twenty minutes. And each moment he felt more lost than he had in the moment before. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Erik had promised him forever and then reneged on the offer. But Charles had faith. Some days his faith seemed stronger than others, but he held out hope for the man who seemed to never have enough.

He nudged the door to the study open and stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of Raven, Hank,
and Sean standing in front of his desk, arms crossed, as if ready for a stiff wind. Or a fight.

"What's this?"

"An intervention."

Charles frowned and cocked his head. "Forgive me, I thought I'd been doing pretty well all things considered."

"Yeah, too well!" Sean blurted out and promptly snapped his mouth shut.

"Ah. I see." Charles shut the door and sauntered over to his chair. "You think that I'm not hurting enough or," he held up his hand as Raven opened her mouth to interrupt, "I'm hurting so much that I'm about to lose my mind if I keep on hiding it."

"Something like that," Hank mumbled.

"I assure you, I'm fine." He sat down and leaned back, hoping to convey the air of nonchalance the children believed him to lack.

The kids looked at each other and then back at him, and he wondered ever so briefly which one would be brave enough to contradict him and, yes, of course it would be Raven.

"You can't be. It's impossible. There's no way for you to be perfectly fine after what you two had."

Charles scoffed. "I said nothing about being 'perfectly' fine. There are varying degrees of 'fine' and I am one of them."

He wanted nothing more than to let the topic drop, but if the determined look on Raven's face was anything to go by, he had a feeling this would not be ending anytime soon.

"You're being naïve."

"And you're out of line. He'll be back."

"Charles, he's left you twice now!"

That stung. As if Charles needed the reminder. The hurt must have shown on his face because Raven immediately backed down, looking contrite despite how enraged she was. He could be mean and vindictive. He could say, "I guess I should be glad he didn't take you with him this time," but reminding her that Erik wasn't the only one to leave the first time around would do no one any favors.

"He's scared."

Sean scoffed. "Erik isn't scared of anything."

Charles almost didn't want to correct him, lest he mar the look of awed terror on the teen's face. Sean seemed to both admire and fear Erik in equal measure, and letting him know that one of the most powerful mutants in the world still had very human feelings would knock him off the pedestal that Sean had placed him on.

"Sean, think about it. Erik has lost his father, his mother, his wife, his daughter, and once, he even lost me. He left because he thinks he's protecting all of us and, yes, I realize that leaving now defeats the purpose of my previous statement, but he means well. He's scared of loving, because everyone he's loved, he's lost."
The three across from him were silent, and even Raven seemed to have calmed down enough to think logically. Yes, Charles had hope, yet explaining the situation merely served as a harsh reminder that Erik was no longer there. That his side of the bed was cold. That his children, their children, were now one parent short. But Charles tried not to dwell on that, because to dwell would mean to drown. And he couldn't afford that. Not now.

"Where's Alex?"

The kids looked at each other, but no one said a word. It took Charles a moment longer than it should have to register the immense guilt radiating from all of them. And a moment longer than that for the other shoe to drop.

"Oh you didn't. Tell me he didn't."

Hank sighed.

"He did."

xxxxxx

When Erik opened the door to the small West Village apartment with a $20 bill in hand for the Chinese food deliveryman, the last thing he expected to find was Alex on the other side. Nor did he expect Alex's fist to connect quite so brilliantly with the vulnerable flesh right above his cheekbone.

"Fuck," he groaned as he stumbled a few feet back into the apartment, the $20 bill fluttering slowly to the ground. He took a little delight in watching Alex wince and shake his hand, moving his fingers against the pain that no doubt coursed through his limbs. "How'd you find me?"

Alex cocked an eyebrow and held up the note Erik had sent days prior. "Are you really that moronic? Your letter had a return address."

His heart hammered against his sternum, and he wasn't entirely sure his body would sustain him long enough to see this through. "Does Charles know…?"

Alex's gaze hardened. "No. We threw the envelope out before he could see it."

Thank God.

Erik straightened and opened his jaw, gingerly touching the tender skin with the pads of his fingers. "Nice hit."

Alex shrugged. "You taught me well."

Erik tried to quell the flash of pain in his chest.

"Where are the kids?" Alex looked around the small hall and Erik watched as his eyes took in the small pairs of shoes near the door and the pictures of Crayola stick figures taped to the wall.

"Watching Bugs Bunny."

"How domestic."

Erik nodded, not liking at all how powerless he felt. "They, uh, they probably shouldn't see you. They'll get confused."

Alex's gaze narrowed, but he nodded all the same. Erik had to give him credit for that. For putting the children's wellbeing above his own desire to pummel Erik's ass. He nodded towards the door off the hall that lead away from the family room, where the television was blaring afternoon cartoons.
The room was small – a sad excuse for a study compared to the oak paneling and Persian carpets of the Xavier Mansion. But the West Village was a far cry from Westchester and all Erik could offer was a small table, a pile of books, and two wooden chairs.

"You didn't make it very far."

"What?"

"I expected to have to track you down to Belgium or Czechoslovakia. I didn't think you'd still be in the country, let alone the state."

"I couldn't. I tried but… I didn't make it onto the Turnpike." His cheek was beginning to throb and he regretted not filling up the ice cube tray when he emptied it that morning.

"You're still in Charles' range."

"I know."

"He thinks you'll come back."

"I know that too."

Alex raised his eyebrows, asking a question while issuing a challenge. "So? Will you?"

Erik didn't have an answer and so he did what he did best. He deflected.

"I'll be right back," he muttered as he fled the study, tripping over a wayward toy as he stumbled into the living room.

"Papa…" Wanda began, entirely too serious for her own good. "The coyote is not very smart. The roadrunner keeps blowing him up. You think he'd learn by now."

Yes, you'd think he would. Erik's conscience was running amok, making him slightly queasy as he patted his daughter on the head and continued on into the kitchen.

A bag of frozen peas would have to do and, grabbing two, he made his way back through the clutter two seven-year-olds managed to make in a week, through the hall, and into the study.

"Here," he said as he tossed one bag to Alex. "For your hand."

The teen grunted something that might have been "Thanks" as Erik sat down in one of the uncomfortable chairs and gestured for Alex to do the same.

"I prefer to stand, if it's all the same to you."

Erik shrugged and hissed as the cold peas pressed against his swollen cheek. "Are you here to bring me back?"

"No," Alex flatly replied, as he gestured to Erik's cheek. "I did what I came to do."

"Then why are you still here?"

Something in the teen's face darkened and Erik immediately straightened in his seat. "I just want to know why."

"I don't have to explain myself to you."
"Yeah, actually you do." Alex's grip on the peas was white-knuckled as he began to pace the tiny room. "Because you spent months letting us believe that you loved us and then you just threw it all away because you got spooked. So, yes, you owe me an explanation. And Raven, and Sean, and Hank. And you owe Daniel and Charles a hell of a lot more than that."

Erik's rage burned. "How dare you. How dare you presume to know how I feel! To know why I did what I did!"

"You promised!" Alex's face was flushed as he hurled the accusation back at Erik. "You promised not to leave him if he promised not to erase you!"

For a moment, Erik was struck dumb. He shook his head and blinked, all anger gone. "How do you know about that?"

"Because he projected it to the whole goddamn house during a nightmare!" Alex continued to pace, hands clenched into fists at his side. "This is the second time you've allowed kids to pick up the pieces you left behind. And frankly, I'm done cleaning up your messes."

Erik felt as though he had been slapped. And though he technically had, the pain he felt had absolutely nothing to do with the physical ramifications of Alex's punch. And because he was feeling so vulnerable, he asked the question he told himself he wouldn't ask, like picking at a wound that would not heal.

"How are they?"

Alex scoffed. "How are they? Daniel looks up every time the goddamn door opens, hoping it's you."

Erik physically flinched at that, but Alex plowed on undeterred. Or perhaps just unsympathetic to Erik's emotional state.

"Charles looks fine. He sounds fine. He even says he's fine, but that's because he's convinced you're coming back. And when he realizes that you're not, I'm not sure he'll recover."

Alex fell silent, as if to allow his words to sink in and inflict as much pain as possible. The bag of peas Erik had been holding had lowered to his knee, where his hand limply lay.

"Look, I know you think I'm just some dumb kid, but I know why you're afraid. And all I have to say is this. We didn't care. What you and Charles had, we were fine with it. And we should have been the only ones who mattered."

Erik swallowed hard and ignored the wetness pricking the edge of his eyes. I want to tell you. I want to tell you everything.

"You're still in Charles' range. I don't know if you're here to tease him or torture yourself, but either way, don't come back. With a little time and distance, we'll be just fine without you. We did it once. We can do it again."

Alex's words were like a gavel coming down on a guilty verdict.

And as Erik sat there, listening to the door slam behind his final connection to the life he left, he felt like someone was about to lead him away to an execution he didn't have the strength to face.
His knuckles were throbbing but he didn't want to let himself focus on the pain too closely. If he did, he'd have to deal with the warring desires to go back and finish the job, or apologize for smashing his fist into Erik's face.

"Shit," Alex muttered as the last remnants of sulfur faded into the night. Azazel dropped him off on the edge of the property, leaving him with a smirk to trek up the ridiculously long driveway alone.

The house loomed dark and unforgiving against the midnight black sky and he cursed whichever Xavier forefather thought to build it at the end of an interstate.

The time passed quickly, however, as he fought to not think about the other half of the family that he left in that West Village apartment. He missed Wanda and her Dr. Seuss books, Pietro and his Captain America t-shirts. Hell, he even missed Erik's surly disposition at the dinner table that disappeared whenever he clapped eyes on the Professor.

Alex sighed as he pushed the front door open and trudged into the house, feeling his anger spike again.

"How dare you. How dare you presume to know how I feel! To know why I did what I did!"

"You promised!"

"I'm afraid he promised a great many things, Alex," came a voice from the open study door and Alex nearly jumped out of his skin as a light clicked on, illuminating the Professor sitting in an armchair with a weary look gracing his already tired features.

"I didn't – I thought…" Alex trailed off and immediately felt shame fill him as the Professor leveled a knowing look at him. "I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize. Just please leave a note next time." His smile was soft and Alex marveled at the man's ability to hide so much behind such an innocent expression.

"I didn't mean to keep you up."

The Professor shrugged. "I figured you were all too old for a curfew, but that won't stop me from waiting up for you to come home."

Something warm bloomed in Alex's chest and he was horrified to find his throat getting tight. "I appreciate it."

Charles knew where Alex had been. And Alex knew Charles knew. The question was, who would broach the subject first?

A few beats of silence and, finally, Charles spoke. "The children?"
Of course. Wanda and Pietro were neutral territory.

"They're safe. And have an affinity for cartoons, now."

Charles chuckled, but the sound broke Alex's heart. He waited for the inevitable follow up: "And Erik?" but it never came.

"Off to bed with you. It's late."

Alex nodded and turned, wanting so badly to tell Charles to just reach out with this mind. Erik was there. Erik was waiting, but for what, Alex wasn't sure. It was getting to be too much, watching two people he cared about completely self-destruct. He wanted it to end and end now, but when he turned to speak, Charles abruptly cut him off.

"Please don't tell me where he is. I can still feel him on the edge of my mind and, frankly, that's temptation enough."

Alex whispered, "Okay," and put one foot in front of the other, trying to ignore the fact that for the first time in days, Charles actually looked breakable.

xxxxxx

Erik growled in frustration as he waved a newspaper in front of the stove, hoping to contain the smoke from the twins' burnt breakfast to the kitchen.

"Papa..." Wanda looked at him judgmentally from the living room.

"What?" he replied as innocently as he could, but innocence had never been his strong suit.

"Did you burn the pancakes again?" Pietro loudly complained from the couch.

Erik sighed. Charles was so much better at this.

"Who wants bagels?"

"I want Raven's waffles."

"Well we can't have that, now can we!" Erik snapped, resting his palms on the counter and letting his head hang. "I'm sorry, mein schatz, I didn't mean to yell." He glanced up into the living room to find Wanda and Pietro staring at him wide-eyed on the couch.

"I want to go home," Wanda whispered and Erik's resolve crumbled a little bit more.

He usually followed that frequently voiced desire with, "We are home," but it was getting too tiresome, too hard, to keep the charade up. To pretend that this dingy apartment felt more like home than the warm fires of the mansion. That it was better to be a party of three instead of a family of nine.

He swallowed hard and dropped the newspaper on the counter, as he headed into the living room and gestured with his hands for the twins to budge over so he could settle in between them.

"What did I tell you?"

"It's not goodbye forever," Wanda whispered.

"Right." Erik turned and looked at Pietro. "And what else did I say?"
"That no matter what happens, Charles will – "

"Daddy," Wanda corrected and Erik cleared his throat, trying to ignore the emotions that one word brought out in him.

"Daddy will welcome you back with open arms," he amended for Pietro, who mumbled, "You told us not to call him that."

Erik sighed and ran his fingers through the soft hair at the back of the boy's neck. "I know. It was a stupid to say." He didn't elaborate further, only admitted he was wrong, which frankly, was hard enough. He couldn't explain himself. Not yet. Because the first explanation was owed to Charles and Erik only hoped he got the chance.

"But what about you? Will Daddy welcome you back with open arms?"

Erik sighed as he glanced down at his entirely too inquisitive daughter. "We'll see."

The twins were about to protest, he didn't have to be a telepath to see that, so he clapped his hands and stood, holding out one to each of them to pull them off the couch.

"I say waffles at the diner on the corner. They aren't Raven's, but they're better than bagels."

"Or burnt bagels," Pietro muttered and Erik pretended not to hear.

xxxxxx

Raven bit her lip as she creaked the bedroom door open, tiptoeing over the discarded clothes and fighting against the maternal warmth that bubbled up at the sight of Alex passed out face first on his bed in his jeans and t-shirt, his still-sneakered feet hanging just off the edge. A soft snore filled the air and she clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her giggle.

She knew he had come home late, but she'd never admit to waiting up. She left the role of mother hen to Charles. Which was another reason why she now found herself trying to figure out the best way to wake him without incurring his rather notorious wrath.

Last night, she had at least expected yelling, followed by what she hoped would be a dramatic declaration that Charles was going to track Erik down and bring him back, ending in a romantic reunion of epic proportions.

She really needed to stop reading those romance novels left by the former maid.

"Alex," she hissed, gently prodding his shoulder. "Wake up."

He groaned and rolled over, his arm flopping across his eyes as he continued to snore.

"Alex, wake up." She shook his shoulder and he blindly swatted her at with his hand.

"Whaddyawayant?"

She plopped down next to him on the bed and pulled off his sneakers as she spoke. "I want you to sit up and talk to me. What happened?"

Alex kept his eyes closed, but lifted up his swollen hand. "I punched him in the face. That's what happened."

Raven arched an eyebrow. "I'm impressed he let you live."
Alex snorted. "You and me both."

Raven stood and began folding his haphazardly strewn clothes. "And what did Charles say?"

Finally Alex sighed and opened his eyes, though his gaze remained on the ceiling. "He asked about the kids. And then told me not to tell him where Erik was. He can still feel him, so he knows he's not far."

Raven felt her anger bubble. Why would he do that? What right did Erik have to stay in Charles' range?

Before her rage could burn too far out of control, though, the door nudged open and Sean stood there as Daniel toddled in in nothing but a diaper.

"Oh my God, go away!" Alex groaned and rolled over, burying his face in the pillow once more.

"He needs to be changed," Sean said as he ducked the pillow Alex blindly threw at him. "Hey! It's not my turn and Hank's been locked in the lab for the past 24 hours."

"You're such a baby," Raven muttered, scooping Daniel in her arms and inhaling the scent of baby shampoo. "And I don't mean you, munchkin."

Sean had the decency to look miffed.

Erik usually got up with Daniel. Got him changed and fed and happy before Charles had even blinked an eye open. But Erik wasn't here and that routine was distinctly lacking. Functional, but broken. Like a stool with a short leg or a bike with a bent wheel.

"Come on, little man," Raven murmured as she stood, ushering Sean out of the room and leaving Alex to his sleep.

A new routine would have to be established and soon. But the trouble was…

A hole had been left that not a single one of them could even attempt to fill.

xxxxxx

Sean considered himself a roll with the flow kinda guy, but baby poo was just one flow he could not roll with.

"So…” he began. "Did he find him?" Being the youngest, he always felt out of the loop, and the curiosity that had been battling with his inability to change a diaper finally reached the surface.

Raven nodded and grabbed Daniel's hand where it was attempting to reach for a strand of her hair. "He did."

Sean waited a beat, because really the suspense just wasn't fair, before he burst out with, "And what happened?"

"Alex punched him."

"What do you mean 'Alex punched him?'"

Raven looked at him like he had grown two heads. "Alex's knuckles connected rather harshly with Erik's face."
Sean stopped walking. *Holy. Shit.* "Alex punched Magneto?"

"Don't call him that," Raven muttered.

"Whatever." Back to the subject at hand. "And he's still alive?"

Raven gestured back to Alex's room like Sean was a moron. "Clearly."

"Dude."

Raven continued on down the hall and Sean jogged to catch up. He knew Alex had balls, but *whoa.* He was afraid to even *look* at Erik the wrong way, lest it be interpreted as sass and he spend the rest of the evening with fishhooks hovering near his head, threatening to gouge his eyes out.

Or something like that.

"Is he – ?"

"He's not coming back, Sean!" She snapped as she rounded on him so quickly that Sean bumped into her before stumbling back a few steps. "He left us. He is not coming back so stop asking if he is. You're upsetting Daniel. Hell, you're upsetting *me.* And God knows what you're doing to Charles."

Sean felt as though he had just swallowed a golf ball. "Okay. Sorry." He cleared his throat and rubbed at the phantom lint in his eye. Because, yes, that was the *only* thing causing a suspicious wetness to gather there.

"I didn't mean to yell," she murmured and he shrugged.

"Whatever."

"Sean – "

"I said, 'whatever!'"

Yeah, he'd always been a roll with the flow kinda guy. Sure.

xxxxxx

Moira grimaced as she took a sip of coffee. It had been decidedly weak since Erik stopped making it, but she'd be damned if she voiced that opinion.

"Nathaniel Ralston is our man. He orchestrated the attack on your home," McCone said as he placed a picture down on the top of the file that Charles and Moira had been perusing.

"That's him." Charles' voice came out like a growl and Moira lifted an eyebrow in surprise. "I don't remember much from my incarceration, but I remember that face."

McCone rolled his eyes with precise derision. "They went to the same country club."

"Of course they did," Moira muttered.
"What do they want?" Charles flipped a page and inhaled sharply as a picture of McKittrick and Ralston at some political benefit caught his eye.

"Well, when they failed to get you, they moved on."

"To whom?" Charles' gaze hardened and McCone tossed his glasses on the table and let his forehead rest on his steepled fingers.

"To Erik."

Everything in the room seemed to freeze as those two words lingered in the air. Moira risked a glance in Charles' direction to find the man staring still as stone at McCone.

Charles cleared his throat, but that didn't stop his voice from cracking. "Who knows this?"

"No one, but you."

Moira's heart felt like it was thumping in her throat as she waited for the inevitable meltdown. She watched Charles as if he was a time bomb, waiting to implode on a spark of denial, anger, and fear. But instead, ever-cool and collected Charles Xavier merely whispered an "Excuse me" before pushing his chair back and striding out of the room.

"He'll be fine," she found herself saying, more for herself than McCone's benefit, if she were honest.

"MacTaggert."

"He's okay, they were close. That's all."

"MacTaggert," McCone repeated a little more sternly and she closed her mouth before she revealed just how close Charles and Erik were. "Some files went missing."

She frowned. "What?"

"When I said that we were the only ones who knew, I'm not sure that's entirely true."

Moira's ears began to ring and she found herself holding her breath. "When?"

"About two weeks ago."

And suddenly it became clear: He knew. Erik knew they were after him. And that's why… She let her thoughts trail off as she shook her head. That infuriating, stubborn, stupid, noble man.

Still… She looked at the door Charles had just exited through and decided not to voice her suspicions, because ohgod what if she was wrong?

xxxxxx

"Are we gonna have to stay with Mrs. Lenkowitz again?" Wanda pouted as Erik tried to wrestle her into a shirt.

"Why can't we stay with Daddy?" Pietro complained and it took Erik a moment to realize that was the first time Pietro had called Charles that of his own volition.

He finally got Wanda's head through the sweater and sighed as he was faced with matching frowns gracing the faces of his two children.
"I told you, I have to do something and then we can go back."

"But you're gone a lot. Why couldn't we have stayed with Daddy?"

Erik sat down on the floor and faced the twins. "We've been over this, liebling. I have to take care of something – something Daddy doesn't know about and wouldn't understand."

"It's a surprise?" Pietro asked, bouncing on the balls of his feet as if always a second away from flight.

"Sort of."

"A good one?"

Erik ran a hand down his face. "Eventually. Hopefully, yes."

That seemed to appease Wanda who stepped forward and settled herself in his lap. He placed a kiss on her head and marveled at how far she had come. She used to be afraid of her own shadow, silent as the night, and now she chattered on about anything and everything. Even showing him the things she moved and the plates she broke with her power. It was still untamed. Still unfocused – she'd need Charles for that – but she was no longer ashamed. And that was the common goal Erik and Charles took very different paths to achieve.

"Come on," he cleared his throat and placed one last kiss on her head. "Up you get. Mrs. Lenkowitz is waiting."

"Her cookies taste like cardboard," Pietro whined. "And her cats hate me."

"Maybe if you stopped pulling their tails, they wouldn't scratch you." Erik arched an eyebrow at his son and he cowered.

Wanda tugged on his trousers until he bent down low enough for her to whisper in his ear. "She smells funny."

"I won't tell if you don't," he whispered back conspiratorially.

Wanda graced him with one of those smiles that took his breath away as he opened the door to usher them down the hall. He knocked once on the door to apartment 3D, and the little old lady with the kind face appeared a moment later, fawning all over the two children in front of her. She reminded him enough of his grandmother that he felt comfortable leaving his children in her care, and the resemblance was so striking that he felt like an 8-year-old boy all over again whenever she turned her pointed gaze on him.

"You work too hard. You're all skin and bones."

He couldn't exactly tell her that he was so wirey because he spent his time away running and fighting, always sure to wipe the blood from his hands before he kissed his children hello.

"I'll be back," he murmured, placing a kiss on Wanda's head and then Pietro's. "Be good for Mrs. Lenkowitz."

"Yes, Papa," they chorused.

"I love you," he said, willing his voice not to crack, as it was wont to do any time he set off from them.
"Love you," they replied, already distracted by the blare of cartoons Mrs. Lenkowitz had ready for them.

"You be careful," the older woman said, narrowing her eyes in an entirely unsettling way. As if she knew what he was setting off to do. He nodded and gave her a tight smile of thanks, mumbling something about being back soon.

And just as he turned to go, he felt tiny arms wrap around his waist and the hot press of Wanda's breath through his shirt as she buried her face in his back.

"Come back."

Not *Come back soon*. Just *Come back*.

And Erik swallowed hard as he walked out of her embrace, wondering if the ruse of safety he had attempted to keep up wasn't really for their sakes, but for his own.

xxxxxx

Charles wasn't entirely sure how he ended up here, in the back seat of a car speeding its way towards Maryland.

All he knew was that Moira had burst into the study babbling something about a lead on Ralston before she was ushering him through a hurried goodbye with Daniel and having Azazel transport an equally bewildered Alex, Raven, and Sean to Langley. Only McCone seemed to be in on whatever had lit a fire under her and the two of them were sharing infuriatingly knowing looks in the front of the unmarked vehicle.

Charles reached out with his mind to Raven in the car behind them. *Everything all right?* 

*Sean's arguing with the agent about what radio station to play, but other than that, we're fine.*

Charles snorted and McCone frowned at him in the rearview mirror.

"I'm sure you realize that whatever secret code the two of you are working with, I can easily lift your meaning from your mind." Moira turned in her seat and glared as Charles shrugged. "Merely stating the obvious."

McCone sighed and tightened his grip on the steering wheel. It was these little nuances that Charles picked up when he was staying out of people's minds and relying on body language instead.

"There's going to be a raid."

"Of what?"

"Ralston's compound," Moira supplied, "As the CIA simultaneously raids the HSS headquarters in DC."

Charles felt his eyebrows hit his hairline. "Well, well, well, Director. You have been busy."

There was a current of urgency humming in Moira's mind. A steady beat, like a pulse, that sounded strangely like *Erik, Erik, Erik* but Charles figured that was merely his own desires being projected back out.

"We brought the children because, let's face it, they wouldn't let us take you without their going along as well," McCone wryly replied, before sobering and meeting Charles' gaze in the mirror. "But
"it's up to you whether they take any part at all."

"I appreciate that," Charles murmured, and he did. Truly. He respected a man that put his children's safety above the advantage their abilities would give the CIA.

"We want to end this today," Moira stated, and Charles could tell just by her tone that she was referring to something more than just the HSS. The steady thrum of *Erik, Erik, Erik* in her mind grew louder.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the cool glass, attempting to block out the name that had been branded on his heart ages ago. It was bad enough that Charles could still feel him on the periphery of his mind, which in itself was odd.

New York should have been out of his range by now.
"Not that one!"
"Dude, your taste in music sucks."
Raven reached forward without taking her eyes off the scenery and smacked Alex upside the head.
"Ow! What? It does!"
"Telling a trained CIA operative he has poor taste in music is almost as bad as telling Erik that he's whipped."
"It was one time," Sean moaned and Raven couldn't help but grin.
Even the CIA agent seemed to be struggling to keep a straight face as he focused on the stretch of road in front of them. Alex reached for the radio dial again and the agent surprised him by smacking his hand with remarkable reflexes only found in places like Langley or MI5.
"He clearly wasn't whipped enough," Alex muttered and the smile slid from Raven's face.
"Don't do that," she quietly replied.
And when Sean reached forward, letting the sounds of Lesley Gore's "It's My Party" fill the car, no one had the energy to complain.

Charles didn't expect his directive to go over well, but he didn't exactly anticipate that amount of profanity in response.

Hell no.

Bullshit we're staying in the car.

Don't be an ass.

Charles raised his eyebrows. While I won't resort to the Anglo-Saxon to make my point, you will remain in the car until we're through. Do I make myself clear?

No, came Alex's blunt response.

Charles sighed and shook his head. "Mr. McCone, do you have children?"

Mc Cone raised his eyebrows in the rearview mirror and nodded. "Two. A boy and a girl."

"Are either of them teenagers?"
"My daughter is fifteen and my son is twelve."

"Oh good, then perhaps you can explain to me how you get them to do what you say."

Moira laughed and Mc Cone scoffed. "You're the psychic. You tell me."

Even Charles couldn't help but chuckle as he returned his eyes to the road and the passing scenery. They had left the Chesapeake Bay Bridge back miles ago and were slowly winding their way through the Maryland countryside.

"And who's to say Ralston will even be home? Do we just go up and ring the bell?" he asked sardonically, to which he could practically hear Moira's oft-repeated accusation that the children were rubbing off on him.

"Oh he'll be home," Mc Cone began as he turned the car off the highway. "He's throwing a party."

"Shame I left my tux at home."

"Actually, it's in the trunk." Moira turned in her seat and beamed at him and he could only stare at her in reply.

"You know, you have an annoying habit of being five steps ahead of me. For a telepath, you have no idea how frustrating that is."

xxxxxx

Mc Cone was finding it more and more necessary to remind himself that Xavier was just another asset and Mac Taggert just another agent.

As Director of the CIA, he couldn't have favorites or form attachments because any decision he made could cost the life of any number of people around him. So, no, he couldn't view Xavier as a friend. No, he couldn't view Mac Taggert as something more than an agent. And no, he could not be worrying about the children in the car behind them and whether or not the decision to involve them was hastily made on his part.

No. He was the Director of the goddamn CIA. He did not have crises of conscience.

He wasn't supposed to care that Lehnsherr left and took his children with him. He wasn't supposed to wonder how Xavier was coping with that abandonment. And he certainly wasn't supposed to deliberately ignore the obvious signs that Lehnsherr and Xavier were more than they were letting on, no matter how many times Mac Taggert tried to deflect his attention.

No. He was the Director of the CIA, for Chrissakes. He didn't care about shit like that.

And he was resolutely going to ignore the knowing look Xavier was shooting him in the rearview mirror.

Damn psychics.

xxxxxx

"Mrs. Lenkowitz?"

The older lady looked up from her crossword puzzle and her hair, which looked way too blue to be real, wobbled on her head.
"Yes, child?"

Wanda bit her lip, suddenly shy under the attention. "My Papa's coming back, right?"

Mrs. Lenkowitz looked briefly alarmed. "He better. I've got my bridge game tonight." Her pointy glasses fell further down her nose as she peered down at Wanda. "Why do you ask?"

Wanda shrugged and glanced at Pietro who was lying on his stomach on the floor, chin propped up in his hands as Elmer Fudd tried once again to catch Bugs.

"Sometimes he says goodbye to us like it's the last one."

"Don't be silly," Mrs. Lenkowitz laughed, but it didn't reach the wrinkles around her eyes. "He'll be back in time to make you another box of that horrible macaroni and cheese. He does know there are other food groups available, right?"

Wanda frowned. *She* didn't mind the mac and cheese. "Did he tell you about the letter?"

And at that question, the smile (and almost the wig) slipped right off of Mrs. Lenkowitz. "How do you know about the letter?"

Pietro was still engrossed in the cartoon, but Wanda lowered her voice and beckoned the old lady forward. "It's in his sock drawer. I'm not supposed to know that but I do."

"Do you know what's in it?"

Wanda shook her head, knowing it was only to be sent in case of an emergency, and Mrs. Lenkowitz exhaled audibly, returning her focus to her crossword. "You're too young to worry about stuff like that."

"I know it probably says you're supposed to take us back to Westchester. If something happens."

Mrs. Lenkowitz huffed and put down her pencil. "And what's in Westchester?"

"My other Daddy," Wanda replied.

The wig fell off that time.

xxxxxx

Sean was entering a blissful REM cycle involving fireworks, skinny dipping, and chicken pot pie when he was rudely jolted awake by a car door slamming shut.

"Oi, some of us are trying to sleep."

"Get up, you lazy ass," Raven snapped through the open window.

Sean groaned and pushed himself into a seated position, blinking blearily at the sunny summer day outside. "Where are we?"

"On the farm skirting Ralston's property," their nameless agent chauffeur replied.

Sean blinked again and, sure enough, a cow was staring at him from across the road. "Dude. That's a cow."

"Well spotted, Sean," the Prof called through the window. "And to think I was worried about your
education." He smiled a smile that could only be described as "cheeky," to use one of the Prof's own words, as he opened the door, causing Sean to nearly tumble out onto the gravel driveway.

Moira and McCone already seemed to be pouring over maps laid out on the hood of their car and Alex was petting a black lab that was circling his legs.

Accepting the proffered hand, Sean allowed the Prof to hoist him to his feet before an older woman with weather-beaten skin smiled and handed him a glass of lemonade from a tray she carried.

"Oh. Thanks," Sean said. "You live here?"

"I do," the woman replied, nodding back to the farmhouse and the stables beyond.

"It's pretty." Even if it did smell like horseshit.

Sean, be nice.

I'm a gentleman!

The Prof smiled next to him and held out his hand. "Charles Xavier, how do you do?"

The woman practically melted as she took his hand and it was all Sean could do not to roll his eyes. No wonder the great Magneto was putty in the Professor's hands.

"Charles! We need you!" Moira called and Charles jogged away, leaving Sean with the lingering sense of holy shit he always felt when the Professor did something as simple, yet as miraculous, as jogging.

"He your brother?" The farmer's wife asked.

"No, he's my father," Sean replied without really thinking and the woman blanched.

"Your father?" she let out a low whistle. "They start younger and younger these days."

xxxxxx

Seeing the look of eternal optimism masking the immense ache that lurked beneath Charles' austere facade of calm made Moira want to break down and tell him all she knew. Her facts and her fears. Her truths and her theories. Her hopes that Erik was being a foolish idiot, but a noble one.

Yes, she wanted to tell him all of these things, but instead she mustered up the image of a truck with unmarked Russian tags and poured all of her focus and all of her nervous energy into that.

"How many people can you cover at one time?" she asked without much introduction when Charles skidded to a halt in front of them.

"Depends on proximity," Charles shrugged. "And the amount of minds I'm shielding them from."

"Wait, you can make people disappear?" McCone asked, and Moira laughed. Oh if he only knew the width and breadth of all that Charles could do.

"I've seen him do it," she replied instead, a little underwhelmingly.

"There will be anywhere from two to five hundred people in attendance."

"Big difference between those two numbers," Charles replied.
"Most of them don't know you or the darker workings of Nathaniel Ralston's extracurricular activities. You wouldn't have to shield all of them."

Charles looked confident but Moira could see the crack in the mortar. Physically, he could probably wipe the minds of Ralston's guests ten times over, but emotionally... he was already unstable. He tried to hide and he did a good enough job, but Moira was there immediately following Cuba. She was in the hospital. She knew what Charles Xavier looked like when he was broken, but projecting himself as whole.

It was a master class in acting and she thought, somewhat bitterly, that if this whole genetics business had fallen through, he'd have found a calling spouting Hamlet to some simpering ingénue.

"And how many of us are going in?" Charles shot her an odd glance as his question brought her back to herself.

You're far away, Agent MacTaggert.

No farther than you disappear to.

He raised another eyebrow but said nothing, as McCone ticked off the particulars.

xxxxxx

"So it's to be you and me again, is it," Charles said sometime later, as he and Moira made their way over to a shaded elm in an effort to kill time before the zero hour.

"We make a good team," she replied and promptly flinched. Charles could practically feel her kicking herself for the slip and that mental hum of Erik, Erik, Erik that had quieted since their arrival, briefly flared again. "And you look good in a tux," she recovered and he snorted.

"No one wears a gown like you do, love." He watched as she took a seat on the low-hanging branch, before sliding down the trunk himself and settling in on the sun-warmed grass.

He watched as Sean played a lazy game of catch with the farmer's dog and Raven allowed Alex to push her in the tire swing tied to the tree across from theirs. It was almost perfect. Almost serene. If he closed his eyes, he could almost pretend that this was a typical Saturday afternoon and any minute, he'd hear the shriek of his son's laughter or the annoyed-but-not-really yell of Sean's name in Raven's voice for something Alex probably did anyway. Yes, if he closed his eyes, he could pretend that any moment, Erik would settle down on the grass next to him and rest his head on Charles' thigh. Letting his guard down as only he could when he knew Charles was the one keeping watch.

The throb of want that that image caused stole his breath and he opened his eyes to find Moira watching him, as if she were the telepath and his thoughts were laid bare like a book for her to read.

"I won't break, Moira."

"But you can," she responded quietly. "And you have. And the glue that usually keeps you together is in short supply around here, I'm afraid."

He sighed and focused on the children once more. Sean laughed as the dog enthusiastically licked his face and Raven shrieked as Alex pushed her higher.

"They're not coming," he stated firmly.

"We'll tie them to the tree if we have to."
They were just kids. They deserved as much of a reprieve from the dangers as Daniel or Wanda or Pietro.

"You really think you can end this today?"

"McCone has every confidence. Now that Stryker's gone, he seems to have the Agency back under his command."

"I suppose we should send Erik a gift basket or something for that," he replied, and God help him, he couldn't keep the bitterness from his voice.

Moira threaded her fingers through his hair and he leaned into her touch.

"Someday, you can thank him for the rest of us."

He didn't have the emotional energy to glean her meaning.

xxxxxx

Raven inhaled as she watched her brother exit the house, adjusting his bow tie. It was an odd sight, to be sure. He looked so out of place on the front porch of the farm in a suit tailored on Savile Row, but she had to admit, he wore it well.

Dusk had long since settled and she had been tracing constellations with Sean when the telltale creak of the door hinge directed her attention elsewhere. Soon, the party would be starting and her brother would be heading once more into the breach. She smiled when Moira exited a moment later in a deep purple gown and rolled her eyes when Charles gave her a suggestive once-over evident from twenty paces away.

How different would her life be if Moira hadn't walked into the bar that night? If she hadn't accosted Charles and filled his head with fantastical ideas? Hadn't given life to things he had only hypothesized? She'd probably still be sleeping on his couch somewhere while he taught the smartest minds the world had on offer. She'd probably still be blond. Still be afraid. Still think the moon shone out of her brother's ass, which she still did frankly, but her expectations were slightly more realistic. He was less her superhero and more her guardian angel. A role that seemed to suit him better anyway.

Yes, she owed a lot to Moira. Even if, without her, Charles would never know what it felt like to not have the use of his legs. And, perhaps more devastatingly, he would never have known Erik.

"Shall we?" she heard him distantly ask as he held out his arm, which Moira gladly took as an agent fitted a pin that no doubt held either a microphone or a camera or both onto her brother's lapel.

Raven approached and Charles immediately held up his hand. "Don't bother arguing, Raven. You are staying here and that is final."

She swallowed through the lump in her throat, for once, having no desire to argue. Instead she reached up on her tiptoes and placed a kiss on her brother's cheek. "Be careful." She reached over and squeezed Moira's hand. "You too."

Charles seemed thunderstruck, as if he had been prepping himself for much more resistance, but Moira merely smiled and squeezed her hand in reply. "I'll take good care of him."

Raven nodded and stepped out of the way as another agent pulled a sleek black car into the driveway.
"Knock 'em dead, Prof."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence, Sean," Charles replied as he opened the door for Moira. Alex approached a moment later and shook his hand, surprising everyone (most of all himself) when he pulled Charles into a hug and let go with a gruff, "Be careful."

"You too," Charles replied before turning his attention to the house, as he opened the driver's side door. "Mrs. Coleman! Save me some of that cherry pie!"

"You got it Charles, dear," the farmer's wife replied and Raven shook her head. That was her brother – always making friends.

She leaned her head in the window after he got settled and took hold of his chin, forcing his gaze to meet hers. "Don't be a hero. There is a little boy expecting to hear a bedtime story tomorrow night and we all know no one does the voices like you do. You hear me?"

Charles smiled softly. "Loud and clear."

She braced her hands on her hips and stared until the taillights faded away into nothingness. With a heavy sigh, she turned to find McCone watching her.

And if the fierce determination on his face was anything to go by, Raven knew her brother and Moira were in good hands.

xxxxxx

Can you hear me?

"Of course I can hear you," Moira replied.

"That wasn't aloud, dearest."

"Oh." She frowned. Yes I can hear you?

Better. What about you, Director? Can you hear us?

This is entirely unsettling, came McCone's response and Charles huffed out a laugh.

Tell me about it. Reaching out that far meant he was acutely aware of Erik on the edge of his psyche, and it was thoroughly distracting. His range must be getting better, if he could feel him all the way down here.

Charles drove the car through the tree-lined road that separated the Coleman's farm from Ralston's compound. Rows of cornfields spread out on the right while a high brick wall hid the contents of the left.

"I should have worn a different dress," Moira muttered and Charles felt miffed.

"Why? It matches my pocket square."

"But doesn't exactly give me easy access to my weapon." She hiked her dress up to reveal the gun hidden in her garter belt.

"Don't tease, love, ow!" He rubbed his arm where Moira had smacked him.

Children, came McCone's weary admonishment across their connection. Moira flushed as Charles
barked out a laugh.

*Sorry, sir. We'll behave.*

Growing up in the lap of luxury, not many things fazed Charles Xavier. But when he finally turned the corner into the driveway of the Ralston compound, his eyes widened and his foot eased off the accelerator. The sliver of the house that they could see at the end of the drive left much to the imagination, and Charles knew his imagination was probably not doing the mansion justice.

"Holy shit," Moira muttered. "Finding him in there will be like finding a needle in a stack of needles. Or a racist in a pack of racists."

"Telepath, darling," Charles gently reminded.

Moira still didn't look too comforted.

xxxxxx

Alex had an annoying habit of biting his nails when he was nervous. Which meant that in moments of high stress, he could be counted on to most reliably wear his feelings on his sleeve.

Tonight was no different. He continually paced the 24 steps between the swing and the railing on the Colemans' wraparound porch, with McCone shooting him a worrying glance every time he passed by the screen door.

"Summers, stop wearing a path in the floorboards and come in here."

Alex pulled the door open with a creak and stood awkwardly in the kitchen surrounded by serious looking men in serious looking suits.

"Do me a favor and listen to this." McCone shoved a pair of headphones at him. "We bugged various parts of Ralston's manor a few weeks ago. If you hear anything suspicious, you let me know."

Alex took the headphones and slipped them on his head, hoping to convey a sliver of the gratitude he felt towards the Director for keeping him busy.

"Can I have a pair?" came Sean's quiet voice from the doorway and it was to McCone's credit that he handed another set over with a word.

xxxxxx

"If I smile anymore, my facial muscles are going to start to atrophy," Moira managed through clenched teeth, while still managing to keep up the perfect façade for a couple who passed and nodded.

Charles handed her a glass of champagne and whispered in her ear under the pretense of placing a kiss on her neck. "If I have to listen to one more story about President Kennedy's golf stroke, I'm going to get Erik to warp every golf club within a hundred mile radius."

Moira smiled even through the pang she felt on Charles' behalf.

Anything? came McCone's voice.

Nothing. I'm having issues tracking Ralston down. Moira shot him a concerned glance but he shook her off. It's probably nothing.
Charles, you can hear from here to South Carolina. You should be able to feel Ralston in his own house.

He pulled away and placed a kiss on her hand. We might have to do this the old-fashioned way and look for him on foot.

"Director!" Alex shouted as he yanked the right side of the headphones off, leaving the left pressed into his ear canal. "I think we have a problem!"

Moira led the way into a quiet study off one of the larger sitting rooms. It was empty save for a man smoking a pipe by the window.

Something's off.

What? Moira replied, as she slid her fingers through his and allowed him to push her up against a bookcase.

He's singing a song in his head. On loop. As if he's trying to keep me from hearing anything but that.

"So what are you saying?" McCone demanded.

"When – when they attacked the mansion, they had helmets that blocked telepathy. I just heard someone there at the party mention a helmet. I can't imagine any other helmet they'd be talking about." Alex kept his gaze on the director and not on Sean because he knew if he so much as glanced at the younger boy, all of the panicfearragepanic simmering below the surface would bubble to the top and he'd snap.

And it was in everyone's best interests if Alex did nothing of the sort.

"Can you get a read on him?" Moira asked as she threaded her fingers through Charles' hair and he shook his head against her neck.

Moira was about to suggest they drop the make-out ruse and walk around the room when McCone's voice exploded into both of their heads.

He's got a helmet, Xavier. He can block you.

The thought came through right as a throat cleared behind them and Charles felt Moira stiffen in his arms.

"The great Charles Xavier. So good of you to join us."

Xavier, you have to get out!

Charles swallowed as he turned and pushed Moira behind him, coming face to face with a man who could only be Nathaniel Ralston.

Noted, he sent, right before he severed the connection.
"Xavier? Xavier!" McCone held his head for a moment, before pointing at a young agent with another set of headphones. "Tell them to take DC. Now!"

The young agent frantically nodded and began yelling, "Operation: Casa Loma is a go. I repeat Casa Loma is a go!"

Alex was momentarily thrown – the Motel Casa Loma was where he, Charles, and Erik stayed when they came to get him out of prison. It was weird, his first night out. He didn't want to have much to do with anybody, yet they were patient. They taught him the rudimentary basics of chess and took him to a greasy spoon across the street at midnight when they found out he'd never had pancakes.

Finally he allowed his eyes to find Sean in the chaos and he immediately wished he hadn't. The boy was pale, too pale, as he stood there with his headphones hanging limply from his fingers. At some point over the last few minutes, Raven had joined the fray and she came forward to take the device out of Sean's hand and usher him into Mrs. Coleman's waiting arms. The farmer's wife muttered something about hot cocoa and Alex almost wished he could join them. Wished he could let himself be coddled, even though he was only a year older than Sean.

Instead, he pressed the headphones back to his ears and listened for any mention of Charles Xavier to come crackling over on a wave of hope.

Charles could tell Moira was about to reach down for the gun strapped to her thigh, but his hand on her wrist stopped her.

"Come now, Xavier. I heard you were the loquacious type. Surely, we can find a topic that interests you."

Charles remained silent, attempting to mentally feel out any chink in the other man's armor, but the aesthetically tiny cap the man wore seemed to seal out his telepathy indefinitely.

"Shame what happened to Stryker," Ralston continued, as if he were carrying on a dialogue. "Your friend Lehnsherr does nice work. He'll make a lovely addition to my collection."

Charles felt his anger spike but the only outward sign was the throb of his jaw muscle. Moira, on the other hand, visibly bristled and Charles reached out once again to wrap a comforting hand around her wrist.

"Really, Xavier. I think we both know she's not your type."

Something inside Charles snapped and he rendered the man with the pipe, who had given up the ruse of looking out the window and now stood at Ralston's shoulder, unconscious. How dare that man presume to have any insight on what he and Erik had? How dare he… Charles trailed off when Ralston pulled out a gun and pointed it at them both.

"How about now?" Moira mentally snapped as her hand inched towards the hem of her dress.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a voice growled from the doorway and Charles' heart soared and then plummeted when the gun pointing at him, pointed at Erik instead.
Chapter Summary

In which Charles and Erik attempt to discuss things like adults and McCon makes a deduction not many people know.

There were very few things that frightened Erik Lehnsherr. But this, he thought, as Charles' wide eyes stared at him with a mixture of elationhopeohgodpanic this was the stuff of nightmares.

"Charles," he breathed, "what are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" the infuriating man replied and all Erik wanted to do was wrap him up and carry him away to someplace secret and safe.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go. Charles was supposed to be back in Westchester, drinking tea, and reading Proust. Not in Maryland with a gun pointing at his head. That was precisely what Erik had been trying to avoid. That was the reason… That was why…

Scheiße

Calm. Can you take the gun? Charles' voice floated into his mind like a cool hand on a feverish forehead.

He could probably call every piece of metal within a three-mile radius to him, but the gun – the gun which at any moment could move from his chest to Charles' – eluded him.

It's plastic. Or titanium. Something I can't move.

Ralston let out a low chuckle as his gaze found Charles' and Erik hated him for it. "What a pair you make. Even when apart, you still manage to work in tandem."

The man wore a cap similar to one Erik had seen once before, in the mansion on a night when Alex lost more blood than he could spare and Charles left them all with nothing but an apology and a son to take care of.

"My own design," Ralston continued, gesturing to both the cap and the gun. "With you in mind, of course. Our mutual friend Mr. Stryker was kind enough to tell me all about you. Well," he paused, his eyes finding Erik's with a look of almost praise, "I suppose I should say our dearly departed mutual friend."

Erik's blood pumped through his veins as his anger rose, but he tried to limit his outward signs to a flare of the nostrils and a clench of his jaw.

Keep him talking, he thought as loudly as he possibly could.

"More of an acquaintance than a friend, actually," Charles replied without missing a beat. "If I recall correctly, he wasn't very fond of my magic tricks."

"Oh, but I am," Ralston replied, nodding to his unconscious cohort on the floor. "Rather impressive, Professor Xavier."
"Not quite as impressive as that, I must say," Charles said, gesturing to the helmet. "It takes a very strong thing indeed to keep me out."

Erik watched the exchange as the feeling of lead in the pit of his stomach grew heavier and heavier. Charles could certainly hold his own and look relaxed doing it. Only someone who knew him as well as Erik did could tell just how tightly the telepath was wound. His weight settled in the balls of his feet and a vein in his temple throbbed, but other than that, he could have been lecturing on the genesis of opposable thumbs for all the composure he showed.

Erik dragged his eyes away from Charles to Moira, who ever so slightly nodded towards her leg and of course Erik had latched onto that particular piece of metal the moment he entered the room. With a barely discernable nod, Erik wrapped the tiny gun in his power and undid the snap on the holster. If Moira felt it, she gave no notice.

What are you doing? Charles’ voice rang out in his mind and Erik tried not to flinch.

Nothing you need to concern yourself with.

Finally those blue eyes found his; the eyes that had haunted his dreams and left him yearning for a resolution he didn't think he deserved. There was no voice in his head or movement of Charles' lips, but Erik caught the message all the same:

I'm always concerned for you.

xxxxxx

Sean was all for sweets in the middle of the night, but the hot chocolate that Mrs. Coleman was gently pushing into his hands was doing him no favors.

"Drink up, dear."

He glanced around and realized just how many CIA agents were littering the poor woman's house. "I hope you're getting paid for this."

Mrs. Coleman let out a chuckle. "Very well, I assure you. A farmer's wife could always use the money."

Sean finally took a sip and hissed through the burn on his tongue. "Where's your husband?"

"Oh he died in the war," she stated plainly, as if the hurt had dulled from an intense ache to a rather unfortunate fact.

"Korea?"

"France."

"Oh." So it was that war.

He took another sip, remembering to blow on the steaming chocolate first, but he jumped as the woman placed a comforting hand on his knee.

"I'm sure your father will be just fine."

Sean nodded and peered into the kitchen where Raven stood over Alex, who sat hunched over with a pair of headphones pressed to his ears.
"Yeah."

For all of their sakes, Sean hoped she was right.

Moira tightened her grip on Charles' wrist as the garter holster holding her gun into place snapped open.

*If he gets fresh, you tell me,* Charles said in her mind and Moira pinched the delicate skin inside his forearm. *Ow.*

*How can you joke at a time like this?*

*Because if I think about the fact that Erik is here and there is a gun pointing at his head, I will lose what little composure I have,* he replied.

Moira soothed her thumb over the reddened skin she pinched. *Point taken.*

But before she could hike up her hem to help Erik manipulate the weapon, a helmet-clad man grabbed the metal-bender from behind, knocking him to the floor.

"Erik!" Charles launched forward and Ralston turned the gun on him, causing Moira's heart to catch in her throat and Charles to keep his place.

"Ah, ah, ah, Professor. Stay right there, if you please."

Erik and the newcomer battled it out on the floor, landing kick after punch after scratch. Moira could practically feel Charles vibrating beside her with the need to go to him, but the barrel of Ralston's gun kept him firmly by her side.

"What do you want?" Charles bit out, all formality gone.

"Well, it used to be your son, but then you so graciously agreed to take his place. I would have preferred if you had stayed, of course, but Mr. Lehnsherr continues to prove himself very resourceful," Ralston drawled as Erik molded a sconce into a bludgeon and knocked his opponent out. "Oh well done."

Erik managed to spare him the briefest look of loathing before his gaze found Charles and he nodded as if to say, *I'm fine.* He stood panting, with blood running down the side of his face and a fresh bruise blooming around his eye.

The gun, which Erik had lost control of during his fight, had landed on the floor and Moira thanked the CIA wardrobe gods for putting her in a gown long enough to cover it.

*D.C.'s been taken. Xavier, can you hear me? The HSS headquarters has fallen.* McCone's voice filtered through all of their minds through Charles' connection and Moira swallowed hard.

Erik must have heard it too, because something akin to triumph settled into his features. It was almost over. Soon they could all go home.

"Why do you want us?" Charles asked again and Moira knew he was stalling. Because any minute someone could walk through that door and tell Ralston that his plan had failed and then they'd have a pissed off megalomaniac with a mind no one could penetrate and a gun no one could stop.

"Why?" Ralston chuckled. "Why not? You might think you're the next stage of evolution – oh yes,
Xavier, I’ve been to your lectures. Don’t look so shocked. – But the truth is, you’re not." His chuckle faded and his expression turned stony. "You're nothing more than a blip on the radar. An anomaly that no one need know about."

"So what do you plan on doing then? Eradicate all of us? All of us currently living and those of us yet to be born?" Charles’ voice dripped with disgust and Moira itched to grab the gun by her foot.

She could see the letter opener floating over from the desk and she spared a glance for the metal-bender, who looked entirely too innocent, which probably should have been Ralston's first clue that something was amiss. Still, even if Erik imbedded the sharp object into Ralston's back, the man would still have enough control of his faculties to pull the trigger in his hand. She had to make a move for the weapon beneath her gown, but before she could the door opened and Ralston turned and Moira knew that this was it. She needed no telepathic abilities to know that the man coming into the study was here to tell Ralston that headquarters had fallen, that the CIA was in command, and that the three captives were no longer of use to them. Moira knew this and shared a look with Erik that seemed to say he knew it too.

Without thinking or hoping, she dropped to the floor, but she wasn't fast enough. Ralston must have seen the gun. Or he sensed the letter opener behind him. Either way, a shot rang out and, once again, both she and Erik were responsible for the bullet that pieced Charles Xavier's skin.

xxxxxx

Raven squeezed Alex's shoulder as the blond tensed under her palm. It was the third time in a minute that he had leaned forward and pressed the headphones to his ears, thinking he heard something that would inevitably turn out to be a false alarm.

Word had come in from Langley that Operation: Casa Loma was a success. But if the HSS truly had been taken, why was no one charging into Ralston's estate and arresting the bastard? Why were Charles and Moira left to fend for themselves? Why –

"Oh God, Director!" Alex yelled, cutting off Raven's stream of consciousness and standing so abruptly that the chair toppled over into her shins. "He's hurt. Someone's been hurt."

'What?' She snatched the headphones from his hands and pressed them to her ear as Moira's voice crackled over the connection.

"Charles, stay with me. No! Don't close your eyes."

Her respect for McCone had been growing over the weeks, but she wanted nothing more than to throw her arms around his neck when he ordered they be extracted without even bothering to listen for confirmation himself.

"Get them out of there now!" McCone yelled and five CIA agents bounded out the door, before the sentence was fully out of his mouth.

Raven stood frozen as the screen door snapped shut. She couldn't move, couldn't even feel, as the blood pounded through her veins in a rhythm she wasn't sure she'd be able to handle much longer.

"Charles, goddammit, you don't get to do this!"

She frowned, feeling as if she were outside of her body and watching from a distance as she held the headphone back up to her ear and listened to the voice once more.

"Charles, no!"
"What's wrong?" Alex's fingers closed around her wrist and she swallowed, cursing how small and fragile her voice sounded.

"It's Erik."

It wasn't that Alex was disappointed, per se, at hearing Raven utter Erik's name – after all, if you had a hostile situation, Erik was definitely a man you wanted on your side – but frankly, Alex's knuckles still hurt like a bitch from where his first connected with the older man's jaw and he wasn't exactly looking forward to the retribution he had coming when Erik finally stopped moping and manned up.

Then again, if anything had happened to Charles… Well. Let's just say Erik was a man you wanted on your side.

He walked to the front door, catching a brief flash of taillight as the car carrying five CIA agents rounded the bend, and cursed the fact that he didn't think to hide in the trunk. By the time he turned around, Sean had joined Raven at the table and pressed his head close to hers in an effort to hear something. Anything.

It was weird. With Erik gone and Charles dealing with that, Alex had become the de facto leader and he wasn't entirely sure he wanted the role. Leaders were calm and collected, always knowing what to do to keep everyone else safe. Alex was furious and freaking out, and fuck if he knew anything about safety.

He picked up Sean's discarded hot chocolate and took a sip, well aware that McCone's eyes were following his every move. The Director was most likely remembering the remnants of a statue of an old man smoldering in the yard, and Alex took a deep breath and let it out slowly, determined to prove that he wasn't that kid anymore. That Charles, and begrudgingly Erik, had made him more than that.

"You all right, son?"

Alex nodded, but McCone opened the creaky front door and stepped out on the porch, gesturing that Alex should follow. The door closed behind them with a clack and Alex stared into the night sky, trying to prove that his shaking was from the cool air and not from nerves.

"Those are some of my best men," McCone murmured, indicating the five agents that just jumped into the car. "They'll get him back."

Alex had every reason to believe that the CIA trained capable men, and who was he to doubt their Director, but still. He felt as if everything, from every nerve in his body to every leaf rustling in the breeze, was humming with the need to bring Charles back. Maybe Erik too, but definitely Charles.

And sure enough, fifteen minutes later (fifteen minutes that McCone spent standing by Alex's side), the car that had gone peeling out of the driveway turned back into it, followed by another that had carried Charles and Moira off earlier that night.

"Raven!" Alex found himself calling before he even registered bounding down the stairs. The front door banged opened and soon enough, Raven and Sean were at his side.

The car skidded to a stop and Moira hopped out of the front seat, as men in suits poured out of the others. A general cacophony of "Watch his arm, that's it," "Take his legs," filled Alex's senses and he watched in a kind of paralyzed horror as Charles was lifted from the car and carried into the house. He was conscious, and cursing, and then apologizing for cursing, so Alex had to assume he
was relatively okay, but his attention was solely focused on the man he didn't see.

Alex glanced through the window into the backseat, to where Erik still sat with Charles' blood all over his hands, feeling a swell of do something rise within him. Erik wasn't allowed to freeze up, not after everything he had done. And if Alex had to act like a de facto leader, then Erik was sure as hell not going to act like a child.

"Come on, let's go. You're doing him no good back there."

Erik looked at him as if he'd grown three heads and Alex opened the door.

"Seriously, get your ass out of the car."

Alex waited a moment. Then two. And holy hell Erik actually did.

xxxxxx

Hank glanced at the clock on the wall as he prowled the foyer. Well, he liked to think of it as prowling. Really he was just chasing Daniel through the house. Daniel, who thought that running up, tugging on Hank's fur, and running way was just about the most amazing thing since peanut butter and bananas.

"Danny, no," Hank growled, but the toddler had long since learned that Hank's growl was nothing to be scared of, which was really unfortunate for Hank, because the growl was pretty much the only thing he had going for him in terms of discipline. He was what Raven liked to call a pushover in the timeout department.

Daniel let out a peel of giggles as he dashed towards the kitchen once more, nevermind that it was nearing one in the morning and he should have been in bed hours ago. Nevermind that Azazel had received a phone call and left him alone without so much as an explanation. Nevermind that the child deserved some sense of normalcy, which Hank was finding harder and harder to guarantee.

Because Alex was the best at checking for monsters, Charles at reading stories, and Raven at singing lullabies. Except when they were in German. Those belonged to Erik. And none of them were here, so Hank figured that letting the kid run around until he passed out was the best course of action, and seeing as he hadn't heard a single word from anyone since they left in an unmarked vehicle that afternoon, chasing Daniel gave Hank an excuse to prowl. Or pace. Or walk in circles because he was too damn worried to stay still.

But he didn't have to wait long: the sound of gravel being crunched under car tires filtered through the open window and a moment later, the front door burst open as Raven yelled.

"… can't believe you refused to be taken to a goddamn hospital!"

"I've had enough of hospitals thank you very much," Charles moaned as Erik supported his weight – wait, Erik? Hank cocked his head, sure he was seeing things, but no. That was definitely a bloody Erik, dragging an equally bloody if not more so Charles through the front door, trailed by a livid Raven, a tense Alex, a frightened Sean, and a frustrated Moira.

"You were shot!" Raven yelled once more, but Charles ignored her in favor of smiling at Hank.

"Ah, Dr. McCoy. I trust there were no problems?" Charles asked, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the entire left side of his body was covered in blood. "Did Daniel make it to bed?"

Hank could only gape at the scene before him, his worry disappearing as utter confusion took its
place, and of course Daniel chose that moment to run into the foyer, tug Hank's fur, and yell, "Tag!"

"Ah," Charles sighed. "That would be a 'no' then."

"You're an idiot," Raven muttered once more as she stalked past her brother and picked up Daniel. Though Hank wasn't entirely sure whom she was addressing.

Because if they were talking about prize idiots, there were definitely more than a few contenders present.

xxxxxx

Charles was warring with several desires at present. The first was attempting not to faint from blood loss. The second was punching Erik for leaving. And the third was snogging him senseless for returning. The fourth had something to do with demanding an explanation for, well, everything. But really, the fainting, punching, and snogging took precedence.

He moaned as Erik lowered him to the couch and he really should not have been thinking how good he smelled, especially when Erik was covered in a mixture of his blood and someone else’s.

"Stop being a baby," Moira murmured as she began to unbutton Charles' tuxedo shirt to survey the damage.

"I know I was only shot in the arm, love, but it still bloody well hurts!" He tried to smile, though it came out more like a grimace that he tried not to turn into a pout when Erik backed away to the wall, looking like he wanted nothing more than to kick everyone out of the room. Moira, meanwhile, looked on the verge of crying.

"It's really not that bad, Moira. We just need to get it out and stitch me up. Stop radiating guilt."

She looked up as if she had been caught and he placed a comforting hand on her own, stilling her attempt to undress him.

"I don't need to be a telepath or a psychoanalyst to make the connection. This is not Cuba. I can still walk. Neither was your fault. Stop fretting." He allowed his eyes to drift to Erik, because God how could he not? But the metal-bender remained staring at the floor, even as the muscle in his temple throbbed.

I think he wants me to go, Moira thought as loud as she possibly could. I can practically feel his glare through my gown.

Charles smiled. I supposed there are words to be had. He swallowed hard, not entirely sure he was ready for them. Whatever they may be.

Do you want me to go?

He thought about it for a moment. He really did. And eventually he managed a nod as he placed a kiss on her knuckles. Go check on the children and make sure Alex hasn't destroyed anything. And that Sean hasn't consumed the entire contents of the icebox. He's a nervous eater.

Will do, Professor. She stood and flicked her gaze to Erik ever so briefly as she shut the door behind her, leaving them, finally, alone.

Charles waited, even as the silence became unbearable and the thump of his heart intolerable, because surely one of them would break, and Charles was damn well not going to let it be him. Even
if all he wanted to do was bury his face in Erik's chest and demand that he never ever do that to him again. Of course, it all made sense now. Charles had read Erik's grand plan in Moira's mind on the ride home. Her worry caused her to broadcast her theories loud and clear and again, Charles was hit with the sudden urge to throw things at the other man's head and then kiss all of his bumps better.

"Just what the hell did you think you were doing?" Erik finally growled.

"Well, if we're keeping a running tally of gunshot wounds, I figured it was my turn," Charles replied.

"You stupid, arrogant man!" Erik stalked forward and took over where Moira left off unbuttoning Charles' shirt. "You could have gotten yourself killed."

"Me?" The horror of seeing Ralston's gun move from his chest Erik's came back full force. "I knew you had something up your sleeve when you left, but had I known that this was your grand plan, I would have locked you in the attic."

"I..." Erik trailed off and gaped. "You knew?"

"I had my suspicions from the beginning, but as of an hour ago, yes." Charles narrowed his eyes and leaned forward to ease the shirt off with a groan. "You should have told me."

Erik scoffed. "Would you have let me go alone?"

"Of course not!" Charles yelled, finally snapping as the past two weeks of hurt and heartbreak overrode his desire to keep a cool head. "What was the first thing I said to you? 'You are not alone!'"

"They were after me, not you, and I didn’t – "

"Didn't what? There is no me and you. There is us," Charles retorted. "You tell me these things. I'm the first one you tell."

And it was as if his words had struck Erik dumb. He sat there on his knees in front of the couch, Charles's bloody shirt laying limply in his grip and he stared at the man as if seeing him for the first time.

"I wanted to take care of this and then come home," Erik swallowed. "I needed an excuse to… to leave. And I'm so sorry I hurt you. Please know it was only for your own protection. I thought... I don't know what I thought." Erik closed his eyes, letting a tear slip, as he bowed forward and placed his bruised cheek on Charles' knee.

"If I could swing my arm, I'd punch you," Charles said a little more quietly.

"You're right-handed."

"I was rather hoping you wouldn't remember that fact," Charles murmured, gently touching the cut above Erik's eye as the other man hissed. "You need stitches."

"You're one to talk." Erik summoned over the first aid kit kept nearby and began disinfecting a pair of tweezers.

Silence fell and Charles watched the methodical way Erik worked. As if he had spent half his life stitching himself up, and he probably had, Charles thought with a shudder.

"You're a stupid man, you know that, right?"

Erik arched an eyebrow at him. "Says the man who still managed to get himself shot even when I
broke both of our hearts in an effort to prevent that very thing from happening."
"Your plan was far from foolproof," Charles murmured, cupping his cheek.
"Oh? And why is that?" Erik asked, even as he leaned into Charles' touch.
"Because I always knew you'd come back."

xxxxxx

Erik inhaled sharply, unable to offer anything by way of contradiction or affirmation. Instead, he took Charles' arm gently in his hand and leaned closer, examining the wound.

"Don't move."

Charles snorted, even as he gripped the armrest, bracing himself for the pain. Erik dug the tweezers in and Charles moaned, but luckily for him, the bullet wasn't too deep and it took Erik little time to grab it and pull it out.

"How long have you been planning this?" Charles panted as Erik began stitching him up.

"Since McKittrick. Not this exactly, but I've seen what killing does to you, Charles. And though you are quite capable, you are not that man." He paused and glanced up into those oh so blue eyes. "I didn't want to make you that man."

"So you left." It was said without malice. Without accusation. Yet it stilled Erik's hands where they hovered over Charles' skin. He deserved not even a fraction of the forgiveness Charles' gaze graced him with.

"I left," he finally replied.

"And the children? Why'd you take them with you?"

_The children._ Erik wondered if Charles missed them the way he missed Daniel. The tiny glimpse of boy that Erik saw in the foyer was not enough – not nearly enough. "I had hoped, perhaps somewhat naively, that you would forgive me once you were aware of my reasons. I knew they would not. I couldn't leave them. Not when they had been left by so many. If anything happened to me, there were strict instructions that they be brought back to you."

Charles looked somewhat placated by that. Indeed, the first words out of his mouth when they got his bleeding body in the car were "Where are the children?" and he looked none too pleased when Erik informed him they were with his neighbor of all of two weeks.

"So all of that 'the children can't have two fathers, 'they'll take them away from us'… that was all an act?"

Erik snorted and returned to stitching Charles up. "Well, I can't imagine it will be pleasant, but it certainly isn't enough to keep me from you."

He wanted to continue patching Charles up until he was no longer bloody and bruised. He wanted to repair every broken piece of him and ward off all potential hurts. He wanted to stay with him for as long as it took to prove that he wasn't going anywhere, but Charles did the mending for both of them with a hand on his wrist and four simple words:

"I'm so very glad."
"Dude, if you ask me that one more time, I might have to kill you."

Sean stabbed the spoon in the carton of rocky road ice cream and glowered at Hank. He knew the fur ball was only curious, but frankly, Sean had no desire to relive the most awkward car ride of his life.

"He refused to go to the hospital?"

"He doesn't like them," Raven replied.

Alex hopped off the counter and ignored Sean's cry of distress as he dug a spoon into the ice cream with all the stealth of a sneak attack. "Gee, I wonder why?"

"Don't be an ass and lay off my comfort food."

"It's our comfort food, as the Professor would say."

Sean threw his spoon at the blond, who ducked in time, leaving it to clatter against the countertop with a resounding *clang* that made Daniel jump.

"Sorry, little man." Sean patted the kid on the head and went to get another spoon from the drawer.

"Back to the car ride," Hank instructed.

"Ugh, you and the car ride," Sean moaned as Raven launched into the tale. The Prof and Magneto wouldn't talk to each other, despite the fact that Charles' head was resting in Erik's lap, so Moira made the Prof recite some Latin shit over and over as Erik occasionally muttered, "Stay awake, Charles." The tension could be cut with one of Alex's plasma beams and Sean sat in the front of the car, squished next to Raven as Alex drove, quite convinced he understood everything that Charles was saying. But really, he was pretty sure that was the delirium talking.

"Daddy…" Daniel whined as he toddled over to the door and stood on tiptoes to reach the handle.

"No, sweetheart," Moira murmured. "Daddy and Vati are talking."

"Dude, so wrong thing to say," Sean muttered as Daniel's eyes lit up like fireworks and he started banging on the door chanting "Vati! Vati!"

"Now you've done it." Alex hopped off the counter again and Sean hugged the ice cream carton to his chest just in case. "We might as well let him go," he began as he opened the door for the toddler. "Who knows? Maybe the Prof and Erik need a referee."

Charles heard Daniel before he saw him and the way Erik quickly hid Charles' bloody shirt under a pillow made a rush of *love him* pulse brightly in his chest.

Sure enough, two seconds later, a *thud* echoed on the door to the study, followed by a "Hold on, hold on," soothed in Raven's voice. The door opened and the baby was across the room as fast as his tiny feet could carry him and flinging himself into Erik's arms as the metal-bender laughed and smiled a smile bright enough to light New York.

"My Bärchen, how I've missed you."
"Vati," Daniel mumbled into Erik's neck, as the older man inhaled the baby's scent.

Charles was practically knocked sideways with the fierce burn of love protect keep rolling off of the metal-bender and he wouldn't admit to having to swallow hard and clear his throat before he'd trust his voice.

"He's been waiting for you," he quietly murmured and Erik opened his eyes over the little boy's head, staring at Charles as if the rest of the room had faded away. Charles vaguely registered Alex and Sean standing in the doorway, sharing a carton of ice cream between them, and Raven and Hank standing shoulder-to-shoulder, blue on blue against the bookcase. Moira rounded out the crowd, gently taking Charles' arm in her hand and examining Erik's handiwork.

Charles wanted nothing more than to snap a photograph and keep it in his wallet, despite the fact that everyone looked positively wrecked. Only one thing would make the moment even better, and, fate being what it was, he didn't have to wait long.

A pop sounded a moment later chased happily by the "Poof!" that left Daniel's lips. Charles and Erik both turned to find Azazel standing in the middle of the study with Wanda in his arms and Pietro held by his tail. The boy kept squirming in an effort to meet his father's gaze before finally getting his absolute elation under control in time to yell, "That was AWESOME!"

Azazel lowered him just before his squirming became too much and he dropped the boy altogether.

"Daddy!" Wanda wriggled out of Azazel's grasp and flung herself into Charles' arms, and he grunted against the pain as he hoisted the little girl into the air.

"Hello, my love."

"Hi, Papa," Pietro waved to Erik as he meandered at a much more reserved pace to Wanda and Charles.

"Pietro," Charles nodded.

"Daddy," Pietro replied, his eyes widening slightly when he saw the wound on Charles' arm. "What happened?"

Charles wanted to tell him that he was fine, that it was nothing to worry about, but Pietro had just called him Daddy. And all other words save that one became superfluous.

"He's fine," Moira managed, when she seemed to realize Charles wouldn't be replying. "He just had a little accident. He'll be just fine."

Charles cleared his throat and met Azazel's bored gaze, as he lowered Wanda to the ground and placed a hand on Pietro's head. "How did you know to get them?"

"I got phone call," Azazel grunted in reply.

And before the "From whom?" finished leaving Erik's lips, Wanda's hand was shooting into the air, before she snatched it back, looking somewhat sheepish.

"I opened the letter I knew it was in your sock drawer and I'm really sorry but I saw the phone number and Mrs. Lenkowitz was fixing her wig and just wanted to come home don't yell," poured out of the little girl's mouth with hardly a breath and she stood there panting in the middle of the room looking as if the house was about to come down on her.
"You called Azazel," Erik repeated. "Uh huh."

"From Mrs. Lenkowitz's apartment."

"Uh huh."

Erik cocked his head and studied her for a moment, as if not sure whether to reprimand her or praise her, before Charles' snort broke the silent battle of wills.

"Well, Erik, I think she might be your daughter after all."

"Please." Erik smiled as he gently tipped Wanda's chin towards Charles. "That pout's all yours."

xxxxxx

Alex bit back a curse as he tripped over a toy fire truck and hopped on one foot to the top of the stairs. Though no one was around to hear him curse, he already owed the swear jar, like, fifty bucks and he frankly didn't want to take the chance because he was pretty sure "motherfucker" was worth at least twice as much as "shit."

He limped down the stairs, pausing every now and again for the sound of little footsteps, but nothing came. Everyone slept soundly.

Everyone save Alex, who seemed to metabolize his adrenaline rushes as caffeine, so while the day's excitement had Sean, Raven, and Hank absolutely comatose, Alex drifted through the house a little bleary-eyed, but still very much awake.

He filled a glass with water and nudged the door from the kitchen to the back patio open, expecting to collapse in one of the three lounge chairs, only to find one of them occupied.

"As much as I don't like to think about your bedroom activities, I definitely did not expect to find you down here tonight."

Erik raised an eyebrow as he lifted the tumbler of scotch to his lips. "Moira finally convinced Charles to take some morphine. 'Passed out' doesn't even begin to describe his current state."

Alex chuckled and gestured to the other chair, as if asking permission to take it. Which was weird, considering he all but demanded Erik be evicted from the premises when he first arrived. And now here he was, asking if he could join him.

"By all means," the older man replied, before holding up the bottle of scotch at his side.

Alex studied him for a moment, before tossing his water in a nearby bush and holding the glass out for Erik to fill. The alcohol burned, but he closed his eyes and savored the aftertaste, before opening them once more to stare at the night sky. He wanted to be mad at the man next to him, but…

"You wanted me to find you. The return address on the envelope, you wanted me to find you."

Erik grunted but didn't confirm it.

"You knew I wouldn't tell Charles."

"I knew one of you wouldn't tell Charles. I didn't know it would be you. Frankly, I would have preferred Sean or Beast. Someone whose right hook I didn't perfect."

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"I knew one of you wouldn't tell Charles. I didn't know it would be you. Frankly, I would have preferred Sean or Beast. Someone whose right hook I didn't perfect."
Alex chuckled. "That's your own damn fault."

"Don't I know it." Erik managed a smile as he gestured to Alex's knuckles. "How's your hand?"

"How's your face?"

"Touche."

Silence descended once more, but Alex just couldn't let it go. Here was a man he hated not 24 hours ago. And yet…

"You wanted to be in Charles' range in case anything happened to him."

Erik regarded him for a moment, before quietly replying. "To any of you."

He should have picked up on the signs. Like how a man who spends a lifetime honing his espionage skills does not just leave a return address. Or how when two people have what Charles and Erik did, you don't just throw it away.

Erik raised his glass to his lips and the moonlight caught the glare of a particular piece of metal, causing Alex to chuckle.

Erik frowned. "What?"

"Nothing."

Perhaps the most obvious sign of all…

Alex had been so busy storming out of the apartment that day, he didn't even bother to notice the ring still residing on Erik's fourth finger.

xxxxxx

Two hours later, after putting a slightly tipsy Alex to bed, Erik pulled back the covers on the bed he missed too much and slid in next to the man he could never miss enough.

Charles rolled over and mashed his face into Erik's chest and Erik chuckled, leaning close and letting his breath ghost across the other man's cheek.

"I wasn't lying when I said all I wanted was a lifetime of this."

Charles mumbled something incoherent and Erik pulled him tighter, not thinking one bit that it sounded remarkably like "I know."

xxxxxx

It took three days for McCone to slog through the bureaucratic paperwork and show up at the mansion with a full report on the dissolution of the HSS.

Azazel seemed to resent being treated like a glorified taxi, except when it came to McCone. He took special delight in the particular shade of green the Director turned whenever they teleported, and Erik especially seemed to find the whole thing thoroughly entertaining.

*Darling, your schadenfreude concerns me,* Charles sent Erik's way, as he greeted the Director and offered him some waffles.
Of all the things that should concern you, it's the schadenfreude that takes the top spot? Erik shot back as he flipped another perfectly golden waffle onto the stack, much to Daniel's delight.

"Waffles!" Daniel cried and Erik smiled at the boy as he simultaneously winked at Charles.

"Where's MacTaggert?" McCone asked as Raven handed him the bottle of syrup.

"Packing," Charles replied. "With the threat of the HSS gone, it seems a little silly for her to stay."

As much as Charles might want her to. He had come to love her like a sister, and the thought of her heading back to Georgetown made him feel like he was closing a chapter on a particularly harrowing, but ultimately thrilling and wonderful book. Still. He had a sneaking suspicion that Azazel wouldn't mind picking her up occasionally. And for far different reasons that he did McCone.

"S'up, Director," Sean greeted as he stumbled into the kitchen and held a plate out blindly for Erik to fill.

"Lazy ass," the metal-bender muttered.

"Swear jar!" Raven, Alex, Pietro, and Wanda cried immediately.

"What? This is bullsh – "

"Erik, it would be in your wallet's best interest if you did not finish that sentence," Charles wryly replied, as he watched Erik mutter under his breath and dig in his pockets to place a dollar in the jar that Raven had neatly labeled SWEAR JAR and Daniel had then scribbled all over.

"Quite a system you've got here, Xavier," McCone remarked, looking like he was attempting to hide a smile.

"Yes, well. We hope to make it a school one day."

McCone nodded, looking impressed. "If you need any help with the certification, you let me know."

Gratitude swelled in Charles' chest. "Thank you, Director. I appreciate that."

His mind was abuzz with all the plans they could get started on. Hank was still ensconced in the bunker, remodeling it for a state of the art infirmary (because as much as Charles wanted to deny it, clearly an infirmary was the first thing they needed to invest in), and Cerebro. Then there would be the certification and more students and a lifetime of Erik, Erik, Erik. It was a pretty heady realization for only 9:03 in the morning.

Charles shook his head as they finished their waffles, intending to lead McCone and Erik into the study to go over the report when a small voice erupted from the other side of the table.

"Papa, he took my waffle!" Wanda cried, reaching over Pietro's head for the fork he held aloft.

"Pietro," Erik began wearily, but a crack sounded and Pietro yelped, dropping the fork to the table with a clatter.

"Wanda," Charles said firmly. "We do not use our powers against each other."

"Sorry, Daddy," she quietly replied, even as the blood drained from Charles' face.

Because there it was: the very excuse that Erik had used, laid bare in front of the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. "Papa," she had said. "Daddy," she had replied. Both within a breath of
each other, ostensibly outing their illegal family unit.

Charles held his breath and the silverware shook with Erik's mounting tension as every eye in the kitchen bounced between Wanda, Charles, Erik, and McCone.

But McCone merely raised an eyebrow and gestured to the file in his hand.

"Shall we?"

xxxxxx

*Something's not right. It's too easy. Something's wrong.*

This rather morose loop played over and over in Erik's mind as he followed Charles and McCone down to the study. They were conversing about something important probably, but Erik's thoughts were still in the kitchen and with the "Shall we?" that seemed entirely too good to be true.

It took a good minute into their arrival in the study to realize the Director was addressing him.

"I should thank you for your… Well. I don't know if 'restraint' is the proper word. You did break both of his legs and puncture his lung."

"Ralston?" Erik asked, attempting to catch up with the conversation.

"Oh God, please don't tell me there's another," McCone muttered.

"No," Charles intervened. "Just Ralston." Right? He clarified in his mind and Erik wanted to roll his eyes.

"He shot Charles," Erik simply replied, as if those three words were explanation enough.

McCone sighed and dropped down on the couch, pinching the bridge of his nose. "You boys cause me more stress than my doctor says I'm allowed."

"Lucky for you, we'll be out of your hair soon enough." And he smiled the smile that Pietro said made him look like a shark.

They spent the next hour reading of the raid; of the play by play and the blueprints; of the arrests and the casualties.

"There will always be outposts," McCone warned. "Satellite complexes. We took out the heart of them, but there will be more."

Erik pulled a dossier closer to him, listing Ralston's life history. "Is there anyone else like him we should be aware of?"

"Stryker has a son. William Jr," McCone replied and Charles nodded.

"We'll keep an eye on him."

And as much as the thought of other mutants in danger angered him and as much as he wanted to defend his rights to the death, all he wanted in that moment was for McCone to leave so he could race Pietro around the house, and help Charles teach Wanda how to focus, and read Daniel a story because he promised he would get better at the voices.

But there was one thing tugging at the back of his mind and as McCone stood to leave, it hit him:
"What of the suppressant serum developed for each of us?"

McCone paused and nodded towards the door. "Sitting in a cooler in your foyer."

Erik's eyebrows hit his hairline, because even he wasn't sure he'd give it up, if he were in McCone's position.

"Thank you, Director," Charles said as he stood to shake the other man's hand.

McCone nodded and held his hand out for Erik. "Good to see you back, Lehnsherr. Rumor has it you're a better man that everyone gives you credit for."

Erik arched an eyebrow as Charles pressed the ghost of a mental kiss against his temple.

"I wouldn't go believing rumors, if I were you."

**The End.**
Epilogues

Chapter Summary

In which time passes.

1963 rolled over into 1964. Cerebro was rebuilt and the mansion gained another member: a boy with dark hair and even darker glasses, who brought Alex to his knees when Charles walked him through the front door.

Scott was a cautious boy, curious yet quiet those first few days. He was never found far from Alex's side and, being only four years older than the twins ensured he had a constant tail in Wanda and Pietro.

McCone kept his promise to help rush the certification paperwork and Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters was born. It was a title that was often argued over: Charles wanted to share the moniker, but Erik would have no part of it, for security reasons more than anything else. Still, he took great delight whenever anything broke, claiming that it wasn't his name on the school, so he didn't have to fix it. More often than not, though, he could be found ten minutes later with a toolbox next to him.

Not even a year after filing, Xavier's School got its first student: a ten-year-old girl with flaming hair, who flushed scarlet every time she caught Scott staring at her. Little Ororo Munroe followed soon after Jean and, at six-years-old, she rapidly became Pietro's number one accomplice, much to Charles' dismay.

Erik found himself looking around the dinner table wondering how this had become his life. How he had gone from an orphaned murderer to having six children under the age of twelve in his care. But as Charles shared a private joke with Danny and Sean attempted to fling potatoes at Pietro, he realized there was nowhere else he'd rather be.

1966

Two years pass before the first incident.

A phone call pulls Raven from her slumber, and she stumbles down the steps to find the study door ajar and the desk lamp throwing light on the tired, yet hard faces of Charles and Erik. Neither of them is wearing a shirt, but they stand with the sort of dignity Raven only sees on the television or in the lecture hall. She hears Erik say something about "satellite postings" – something she had heard McCone predict years before – before the names Ralston and Stryker make her stomach lurch involuntarily. Those two men had almost cost her her family once before. She closes her eyes and hates that they still haunt her in death.

When they open once more, Charles is staring at her, regarding her for a moment before he beckons her in. She goes, padding across the expensive rug that Ororo spilled chocolate milk on not three days ago, and lets her brother wrap an arm around her as the two fingers of his other hand reside firmly on his temple, listening to McCone's words as they filter through Erik's mind.

Two years, it's been. Two years of introducing new faces and healing old wounds. Peace, save for the occasional hiccup. During a pool party for the twins' last birthday, Scott had asked Charles and
Erik where they got their respective scars. Sean nearly fell out of his chair at the question, as Raven, Hank, and Alex warily eyed the older men, trying to gauge their responses. Charles plastered a smile on his face and chuckled something about not listening to his parents when he was younger. Raven could tell that the answer was not exactly satisfactory, but Scott let it drop.

Erik hangs up the phone and he and Charles share a look. A look that Raven knows all too well.

Sure enough, Charles has to sit the children down two days later, the children who were too young to remember the first time this happened, and explain in cautious detail that there are people out there who mean them harm, but that both he and Erik (Papa, Vati) will protect them.

He then explains that the injuries Erik came back with are the result of a rather reckless motorcycle accident. Raven rolls her eyes at the lie, but Pietro and Scott murmur something that sounds like "Awesome," and she realizes that they should hang onto their ignorance for as long as they possibly can.

1967

Wanda is really good at keeping her temper. Daddy practices with her on daily basis, and Alex does it when Daddy can't. Sometimes Papa joins them, but not to teach, to learn. He has anger issues too, which makes Wanda somewhat happy.

Yes, she's really good at keeping her temper, but sometimes… sometimes she just can't help herself.

"Your Dad is a faggot!"

She sees red and vaguely registers her name being called by Jean, but the little boy who spoke those horrible words is already flat on his back in the sand, and strong hands are gripping her shoulders and spinning her around to stare into wide, blue eyes.

"Wanda."

"I'm not sorry," she immediately says, and Daddy's eyes twinkle even as his lips purse in a frown.

"Wow," Jean mutters as she stares at the playground, and every man, woman, and child frozen in place. "Professor, is that you?"

"What does that mean?" Ororo asks, tugging gently on Daddy's shirt.

"It's a bad word," Wanda spits out and crosses her arms defiantly across her chest.

Daddy sighs and kisses her forehead, but doesn't reprimand her. She expects that will come later, after they've gone back to the mansion and have ticked off yet another local playground that they're not allowed to frequent. Maybe Daddy and Papa will finally relent and just build one in the backyard, instead of trying to make them interact with the outside world. The outside world is stupid anyway.

Papa crests the hill with Danny, Pietro, and Scott bearing ice cream cones and all four stop dead at the sight of the playground before them. Papa quirks an eyebrow at her, but he's not angry. Wanda can tell. Instead, his eyes find Daddy's and he tries to hide a smile, before handing Wanda her ice cream and patting her on the head.

"I leave you alone for five minutes…"

Yes, Wanda is really good at keeping her temper. But even she has bad days.
Alex swallows as he stares at the letter in his hands. He knew it was coming. He had been expecting it for quite some time. That still doesn't stop the sharp stab of fear that slams him somewhere deep in his chest.

"Alex?" The Prof asks, and _goddammit_, Alex shouldn't let that get to him, but that's all it takes: his own name said in his mentor's caring voice to create the first crack in the dam.

He holds the letter up and shrugs, going for nonchalant yet failing. "I got called up."

The way the Professor's face pales tells him that he's been expecting it for some time too. Alex knows his circumstances are special. He knows that his criminal record has probably been overlooked in favor of his… advanced weaponry, for lack of a better term. He also knows that Charles could make all of this go away in the blink of an eye. Could convince the War Department with a breath that Alexander Michael Summers was never on their lists to begin with. But Alex also knows that he could never live with himself if he allowed Charles to do that.

And he loves that Charles knows him well enough to not even ask the question.

1969


"Vati?"

Erik rolls over and places a finger to Danny's lips, before reaching out and hauling him into bed next to him, careful not to jostle Charles. At eight, he's too old for this, but Erik knows that these days are numbered, so he savors them while he can.

These midnight visits have become a habit that Erik is loathe to break. Ever since Alex bid them farewell and hauled his standard issue Army pack over his shoulder, Danny has been tiptoeing into their bedroom after a nightmare and burrowing his face into either Erik or Charles' chest.

_Bärcchen_. Erik smiles fondly and places a kiss in Danny's dark hair. Alex's departure created a homecoming of sorts for everyone else. Hank returned from his post with the Defense Department, working remotely from the bunker to be closer to the family should anything happen, and Raven returns in between assignments from McCone. She has a flare for espionage that gives Charles minor heart attacks.

"He's gonna come back, right?" comes Danny's quiet voice and the question makes Erik ache, because even as he doesn't want the children to worry, he knows that he and Charles spend every waking moment praying to any god that will listen that Alex will come home to them.

Erik wants to promise Danny that he will. But he also knows he wouldn't be able to bear the accusing look in his son's eyes if it became one more promise on top of many that he's had to break.

"I hope so," he says instead and, while it's not ideal, it's good enough. Daniel sighs as he slides his cold toes under Erik's calf and presses his face into Erik's neck. This, now, is what Erik lives for.

Charles shifts and Erik knows he's awake. Sure enough, an arm comes around him a moment later, pressing Erik closer and gently cradling the back of Daniel's head.

_This is the third time this week._
Erik knows this. Knows that the nightmares are becoming a more frequent occurrence. Perhaps they should hide the television, for surely the reporters aren't helping any. Moira and McConie send them regular updates anyway that can't be found on the evening news.

*I'll put the television in the basement tomorrow,* Charles thinks and Erik smiles.

*I'll cancel The New York Times subscription in the morning.*

It won't bring Alex back, but it's something, and Danny doesn't come crawling into their bed for another two weeks.

Erik misses it just a little bit.

1970

"Dude."

Sean watches as Charles and Erik do their utmost to restrain Hank and Scott as they struggle to get to the bunker.

"Absolutely not!" Charles groans as he holds Scott, while trying not to knock off his glasses. At 17, the kid has half a foot on Charles, yet the Prof is surprisingly strong and keeps the teen's arms looped behind his back.

"He's my brother!" Scott yells and Hank roars as Erik pins him to the ground.

"If you get in that jet, I will fuse it to the ground, do you understand me?"

Hank struggles for a moment longer, before grunting something that sounds like "Fine."

Sean watches all of this with wide eyes, and shares a look with Jean, who's guarding the door to keep a lookout for the younger ones. The phone call came from McConie not half an hour ago: Alex had been shot down over enemy territory and there was no word on his condition. Dead, alive, injured, captured. And Hank and Scott thought it would be a great idea to jump in the jet and go look for him themselves. In the middle of a warzone.

Hell, even Sean knows that's a dumbass idea.

He also knows that it's only happenstance that he didn't get called up as well, and it's a sobering realization. Alex is hurt, possibly dead, and Sean could very well be in his place. His mind goes blank and he doesn't flinch as Scott punches the wall, because *holyshit,* he's pretty sure he just grew up, even though he's a few years late to the party.

He doesn't joke as Charles pulls him aside and tells him to look after the children and he lies perfectly when Scott asks where Charles and Erik went in the jet, because he knows this might very well be the most important task he's been given since he jumped through a pair of bomb bay doors.

And Scott and Hank believe him when he says that Erik and Charles went to see McConie, because he's Sean, and Sean is usually too high to take anything seriously.

It should sting, and it does a little, but it's a reputation he's built for himself.

Still, it's worth it for the look on everyone's faces when Erik and Charles return the following evening with Alex limping between them.
Raven announces she's pregnant on a Thursday and Charles spends Friday in Cerebro trying to get a lock on Azazel.

Hank takes it better than expected. They aren't together and haven't been for a while, but Erik still feels a certain fatherly urge to make sure the Beast's all right after Raven drops that particular bombshell. Hank assures him he's fine and dives snout-first back into his latest project. Erik leaves him to it and moves on the next patient on his list.

Charles has been in Cerebro for the past 18 hours and frankly, Erik is one minute away from walking in there and literally pulling the plug on the whole damn thing, but as he turns the corner, he finds Raven sitting on the floor outside of the pristine, metal doors with her knees tucked up to her chest. She looks up as he approaches and rolls her eyes. "Get in line. I've got first dibs."

Erik glares at the metal doors, knowing he and Raven are out here for every different reasons: Erik is cranky because he misses Charles, while Raven probably wants to pummel him. They are silent for a moment and Erik contemplates going back to playing Monopoly with Danny and Ororo, before deciding to sit down and wait it out.

"This protective streak is getting a little old by now," she eventually mutters.

He bristles a little, because if he had the power to use Cerebro, he'd probably be hunting down Azazel too. "Tough, because I'm pretty sure your brother is hard-wired this way."

She spares him a glance and he raises an eyebrow, as if daring her to contradict him. She doesn't.

"It wasn't planned."

Erik snorts. "No kidding." He catches her look and immediately feels bad. "Sorry." It can't be easy for her. She's certainly old enough, but she's not married (or even in a relationship) and now she has a child on the way. He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "Do you… do you want to talk about it?"

She shakes her head, but living with Charles has made Erik more perceptible to the things people don't say. So he waits, knowing the words will come eventually and they do.

She tells him of the visits, of Azazel taking her to Langley and of how one thing led to another. He wants to scold her as all big brother/fatherly figures are wont to do, but he bites his tongue and lets her finish, all the way up until she tells him of the doctor's appointment that confirmed her suspicions.

He's about to open his mouth and offer something he hopes resembles advice, but a pop and a thud on the other side of the metal door cut off whatever he was about to say. The doors slide open with a hiss and Charles stands over Azazel who lies on the ground holding his jaw.

"What the hell…?" Raven starts and Charles merely shrugs.

"Raven, love, your life is your business, but that had to be done. And now I need some ice for my hand."

Erik doesn't know whether to kiss him or snap at him for getting to Azazel first.

1972
"Daddy" has somewhere evolved to "Dad" or, when Pietro is feeling particularly cheeky, "Pops."

Charles sighs into his tea and winces slightly as a door slams overhead. Being in the house with this many teenagers makes him feel like a fuddy-duddy, which is not entirely fair seeing as he is only 38. Yet, his temples are graying and his knees are aching, and there are things that he just doesn't understand. Like how Jean could still be mourning the breakup of The Beatles two years after the fact.

He sighs again and returns his focus to the newspaper, yet keeps an ear on the pounding of footsteps and the loud laughter of their son as Daniel goes sprinting past the open door, heading for the kitchen.

"Slow down," Erik gruffly calls from his place behind the desk and Charles hears the distant, "You got it!" Daniel shoots back, even though his pace remains the same. At 11-years-old, he is Charles' double with Erik's cheek.

Erik groans in frustration and drops the red pen in his hand, taking off his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. "Tell me: How is it that the man with the PhD in Genetics is teaching English while the man with no higher education is teaching Physics?"

Charles snorts as he turns a page of the Sports section. "Because you have an affinity for dropping things off of high surfaces." His eyes find Erik's over the paper and he quirks a brow. "Plus there's something wrong about you explaining the deeper meanings of a Bronte novel."

Erik looks slightly miffed and Charles bites his lip to keep from laughing. "The dropping things I'll grant you, but I can understand the deeper meanings of a Bronte novel."

"Have you even read *Jane Eyre*?"

"No."

"My point."

Erik growls something and focuses back on the tests, brandishing his red pen as one would a sword, even as his glasses slide deliciously down his nose. Age suits him, as do the accoutrements that come with it.

Charles clears his throat and forces his eyes back to the paper, but he doesn't register the words in front of him. Wanda's hesitation lurking outside is too distracting.

"Wanda, what is it?" he calls.

She pokes her head into the study and smiles the smile Charles knows she uses when she wants something. "I'm heading out with some friends."

Charles hears Erik drop the red pen again.

"Friends?"

Wanda rolls her eyes, a perfect imitation of Raven. "Yes, Papa, friends."

The door opens slightly further as, "I'll be back around 10:00, loveyoubye," tumbles out of her mouth.

"Absolutely not. You are not leaving the house like that," Erik says and Charles braces himself
because they're off to the races.

Wanda's jaw drops in indignation. "There is nothing wrong with this outfit!"

"Except that you're missing a third of your skirt!" Erik snaps back.

Charles clears his throat and calmly folds up the newspaper, before standing and exiting the room.

"Bad time?" Pietro asks as Charles gets to the hall and shuts the door, barely muffling the shouts behind him.

"Run away, my boy. As fast as you possibly can."

Pietro beats a hasty retreat, clearly not needing to be told twice.

_Coward_, Erik thinks hard at him.

_She has your temper_, Charles replies. _I know when I'm beaten._

2011

Charles' breath hitches as Erik slides a ring on his finger for the second time in his life.

"I told you I'd wait decades."

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