It Might Have Been

by Unforgotten

Summary

When Charles dies in his seventies, he's pretty surprised to wake up in his fifteen-year-old body, nearly sixty years in the past—and even more surprised to learn Erik has come back, too. Together, they relive their lives, making sure they get everything right this time. They have to. After all, it's not like they're ever going to get another second chance...

Notes

This story is based on/inspired by Ken Grimwood's Replay, my all-time favorite book. The title is from "Maud Muller" by John Greenleaf Whittier.

So many thanks to: cygnaut for beta'ing the first couple chapters and giving me level-headed, kind advice whenever I so desperately need it; firstlightofeos for her unwavering support and encouragement when I whine about this story to her; gerec, whose unflagging enthusiasm for this story is more motivating than she knows; and everyone else who's been so patient as I struggle with this one. I really appreciate it. <3

This is more or less compliant with X1, X2, XMFC, and parts of DoFP. It will borrow from other X-Men canons, including X3, XMA, and the comics, but will not be compliant with them.
Finally, there is no particular updating schedule for this fic. Many thanks to all my readers for being so patient through occasionally quite long delays. <3

**UPDATE May 2019:** This fic is currently on hiatus. I do intend to come back and finish it at some point, but I'm feeling REALLY monofannish re: the MCU right now (*Endgame* gave me a million feelings, ok, and almost as many urgent fic ideas), so it might be a longer gap than usual. Thank you all again for your patience!
Charles died in the shower at the age of seventy-three.

When he came to, he was in bed rather than sprawled on the bathroom tile. More to the point, nothing hurt—not his head, not his shoulder where he'd wrenched it on the way down. He wasn't groggy, didn't feel especially drugged, but even before he'd gotten that far in his assessment, he knew he wasn't in any hospital. He'd spent enough time in hospitals to be certain of that much. Even on the occasions he'd been so doped up that everyone around him seemed like blow-up dolls for all he could sense of their minds, there had always been a silence underneath everything else that gave it away.

Upon opening his eyes, he noticed several things at once: he was in a passingly familiar bedroom, and he had one hell of an erection. He hadn't had an erection like that in decades. Not with the Viagra. Not even with the injections. He would remember if he had. He'd have taken a picture.

He reached out to touch it, and even through the sheet and whatever he was wearing underneath it, the contact sent a jolt of pleasure through his groin. It was something he hadn't felt in so long—not like this, not as anything more than the faintest sensation; even Hank's serum years ago had gone no farther than to restore function—that it took him a moment to identify it as what it was. It took a moment longer than that for him to realize what else he could feel, the shifting of the top sheet against his legs and the blanket wrapped around his left calf where he must have kicked it down in his sleep.

He pushed himself up with his arms, as he had done for so many years that it had long since become second nature. This time, however, his legs moved on their own without waiting to be moved. Within the space of a second, he had gone from lying on his back to sitting off the side of the bed, the carpet tickling the bottoms of his feet.

Charles wasn't certain he remembered how to stand until he had already done it. It was a heady, almost dizzy feeling to realize how high up he was. He took one step and then another, half-expecting to fall to the floor again, only harder this time.

By the time he made it to the dresser against the wall, his headiness had been replaced by a sick twisting in his stomach. This had to be a dream. Either that or an illusion. It couldn't be real, no matter how real it felt.

Charles had had dreams like this before, mundane dreams where he'd walked across a sun-warmed lawn or wandered through the halls in old and well-worn slippers, but they hadn't been lucid dreams. He had always, in the moment of dreaming, believed wholly in his own joy. He'd never questioned, and always been the worse for it upon waking.

But he'd never been able to see through an illusion, either. Never in the moment, even enough to form so much as a hint of suspicion. Realization had always come later, after it had ended.

Whatever this was, it was real.

Well, what else was different, beside that everything below the waist was in apparent working order? Charles looked down at his hands and found them smooth, unblemished. His arms were much too skinny, and when he reached up, he found that he had a head full of hair, more than enough to run his fingers through, and not a thin spot to be found.
Charles had sometimes, over the course of his life, wondered—idly and without intent, an exercise in contemplating the limits of his abilities in ways that he would never willingly use them—if it would be possible for him to not only control another person's body, but transfer his consciousness over and take it as his own. Could it be that, when he died, he had forced someone out of their own mind so that he himself might live?

At this thought, it was only grabbing the top of the dresser that kept Charles upright on legs which now threatened to give way beneath him. He barely noticed his erection wilting as he tried to think of some explanation, any explanation other than that one.

He was too busy panicking to feel anyone approaching until the bedroom door opened and a young girl's voice said, "When are you getting up? I'm bored."

Charles may not have recognized the room or the body he was in, but he knew her at once, the moment he turned around. He would have known Mystique in any form if given more than two seconds to scan the minds of anyone present—but he would have known Raven in this one anywhere, even if he'd only glimpsed her out of the corner of his eye.

"You're always bored," he managed after a moment, out of instinct more than anything else, too surprised to check first to make sure it was the kind of thing he would have said to her when they had been children together.

"Come on, Charles," she said, one part pleading to two parts exasperation. "Let's do something." A glint of calculation in her eyes, and then: 'I'll even let you read to me if you want to."

"You'll let me read to you, hmm? You really must be desperate. Ha." Charles could only hope the thread of panic in his voice came off as the sort of teasing note she seemed to expect from him. He couldn't remember exactly how they had been together before Erik and that beach, before Trask Industries and everything that had followed, but as he scrambled to remember the way things had been, he thought it felt right. "Look, I need a little more time to finish waking up. I feel—strange this morning. But if you'll give me half an hour alone, we can do whatever you want to do for the rest of the day. Promise."

Raven tilted her head ever so slightly to the left as he spoke. "Okay." Her eyes flashed yellow, the way they always had erratically when she was young, tired, or not focusing well enough. "Hey, what happened to your voice? It's different."

"—What?"

"Your accent. It changed. How come?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Actually, he had a good guess. Speaking patterns did change over a lifetime, often too slowly and subtly to notice until you happened to run into someone you used to know. This Raven had presumably seen him just yesterday, what had to have been well over fifty years ago.

"It did."

Well, it wasn't as if Charles could offer any explanation that wouldn't make her think he'd completely lost his mind. Better not to try to explain it at all. "Let's talk about it later, shall we? Shoo now. We agreed on half an hour, and the timer doesn't start until you're out of here."

Raven gave him a dirty look—brotherly teasing was one thing, being shooed evidently quite another—and flounced out. As soon as the door had closed behind her, Charles rushed over to the desk by
the window, digging through the mess there for any scrap of paper with a date on it. After a few minutes, he'd come up with several newspapers and his acceptance letter from Columbia. The latest date on any of them was June twentieth, and while that could have been weeks ago for all he knew, there was no denying the year.

Neither was there any denying what he saw when he looked in the bedroom mirror to find himself skinny, dark-haired, and freckled, exactly as he had been fifty-eight years ago.

The year was 1948, and he was fifteen again.

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Charles had come back on a Monday. The following afternoon, he sensed someone coming up the drive and opened the front door to find a messenger from Western Union standing there with a telegram.

"Who's it for?" he asked, though he assumed it was either for Mother or from her. She had always preferred telegrams over telephones, likely because they made it more difficult for people to argue with her pronouncements. She was out of town at the moment, from what Charles had been able to suss out from Raven, and though Charles' fifteen-year-old self had surely known where she had gone and when she expected to return, it was not information he'd retained.

Bored and slightly annoyed, the messenger read off the address label as quickly as he could: "Raven Darkholme, care of Charles Xavier, 1407 Graymalkin Lane, Salem Center, Westchester County, New York."

"I can take it," Charles said, running a mental check to make sure Raven was still occupied elsewhere and wasn't about to demand to see her message. There wasn't anyone in 1948 who ought to have been contacting her to begin with. She had scarcely known anyone besides Charles at this age, too wary of other people to approach them even on the few occasions they'd gone out. She'd spent so many of her earliest years on the run and hiding, terrified of the consequences if she were ever caught...

Charles opened the envelope and scanned the contents; disbelieving, scanned them again.

ARE YOU THERE QUERY RESPOND AT ONCE

MICHAEL XAVIER

Several long seconds went by, Charles frozen in place, unable to do anything but stare. Finally, he managed to say, "Can you wait a minute? This needs an answer."

It turned out his answer had been prepaid, but once Charles was standing by the table in the hallway, a pen poised above the reply form, he couldn't think of what he should say. What he wanted to say. Anything. Something sour twisted in his stomach; though it was the last week of June, his hands were cold. He had ten minutes to write twenty words or less, but all he could think was that this much, at least, should have been over. He hadn't processed everything about this situation yet—he had barely processed anything about it, had been clinging to the knowledge that if his school and all his work for the last thirty years was gone, then at least his sister had been returned to him—but if he'd had the time to get this far, he would have thought that he was done getting phone calls from a number which changed on average twice a week. He would have thought he was done hanging up or refusing to answer the phone if he'd already received a call from that number and previously logged it in his contacts as 'No.' He would have thought he was done seething, every time.
But now he knew that he wasn't done. He couldn't be done with any of that, because Erik was here. His Erik. Magneto. He was here. He had to be. It was the only possible explanation, for Michael Xavier didn't exist, and never had. That was nothing more than the alias Erik had always used to gain access to Charles' hospital room whenever he'd been admitted.

If this had all happened even six months ago, Charles would have known what to say. It would have been easy. 'Come home,' he'd have replied. 'We have all the time in the world to make things right.' He barely remembered being that person, the one who had seen Erik as the man he hoped he could be rather than the one he feared he would become. Being used and left for dead did wonders to clarify one's perception, it seemed. All Charles wanted now, and all he would ever want from Erik, was to be left alone.

Well, there was no chance of that, but still, Charles had to try.

NO BUT I AM STOP DO NOT COME HERE

PROF X

When Charles made it back to Raven, he told her it had been a salesman at the door. Later that night, when he was alone in his room, he took the telegram back out of his pocket and burned it.

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It did no good, of course. Several days later, Charles was unsurprised to wake up in the middle of the night with the knowledge that Erik was in the kitchen.

Really, the only surprising thing about it was that Erik hadn't climbed in through his bedroom window. Maybe he'd learned something after all. The last time he'd shown up in Charles' bedroom unannounced had been three months ago, roughly a month after Alkali Lake. He'd evidently assumed a few weeks was long enough for Charles to get over it, and spouted off accordingly as if he were the one who'd been wronged. Charles had let him talk right up until the helmet came off, at which point he confiscated it and compelled Erik to leave. (He'd considered compelling Erik to turn himself in, but decided against it on the grounds that there were still a handful of Charles' secrets he hadn't told yet.)

When Charles made it down to the kitchen, there was a suitcase on the floor by the table, a jacket hanging over one of the small wooden chairs. Erik himself was at the stove, making pancakes with his sleeves rolled up.

"Erik," Charles said, more a sigh than anything that could possibly have been interpreted as a greeting.

"Charles," Erik said, in that same old ironic tone of his, as if he were laughing at Charles, or they were sharing a joke together. He glanced at Charles quickly, then turned away, not nearly as confident as he meant to put on; Charles wasn't even trying to read Erik's mind, but he couldn't have missed Erik's nerves from upstate.

He looked like shit. They may both have been nearly sixty years younger than they had been the last time they'd seen each other, but Erik looked by far the worse for it, his hair lackluster and coarse, skin dull, dark purple hollows under his eyes. He'd always been lean, wiry, but although he was still a teenager, he was also far skinnier than any growth spurt could have accounted for, his cheekbones standing out in sharp relief and casting shadows onto his face.

Erik had shown up here pathetic and bleeding on any number of occasions, but Charles had never
imagined seeing him like this. If a child had shown up on Charles’ doorstep in such a condition, he’d have called the police. Had, on no few occasions.

As Charles studied Erik, Erik eyed him in turn. Charles hoped he was too fascinated at the sight of Charles standing to notice that he was also very, very short. Even from across the room, Charles could tell that the top of his head barely reached Erik’s shoulders. He must have been missing a growth spurt or three; he was certain that Erik had never been that much taller than him. A few inches, yes, but Erik wasn’t a giant, and Charles wasn’t a dwarf.

"Mystique isn't here, if that's what you're after." Charles meant it to come out harsh, a dismissal of the type Erik was himself so fond of. It came out quietly, instead. It had always been too easy to speak quietly as half-past three in the morning, when it was just the two of them.

"So you've said." Erik looked at Charles head-on with a flat expression he couldn't interpret. He'd never been much good with facial expressions, and though he was better with Erik's than most people's out of the necessity created by that helmet of his, Erik controlled every part of his body well enough not to show Charles anything he didn't actively wish to, meaning Charles had no idea what Erik was getting at when he said, "I tracked Emma down while I was in Boston. She didn't know me."

"I wondered what you were doing there." In truth, Charles had filed away the return address on that telegram for future reference, but otherwise refused to speculate. It had been his default for a number of years, refusing to worry about where Erik was or what he was doing until it actually became relevant to something. Charles would never have had a moment's rest otherwise.

"I assume we're the only ones here, then?"

"I don't think we have nearly enough information to determine that one way or the other," Charles said, though this was another thing he hadn't really thought about. Now that he did, he could think of very few people he'd known in 2006 who had been born by 1948, and of the ones he'd known well, the only others he could think of were Logan, Hank, and Alex Summers. Logan would still be Jim at this point, while Hank and Alex would be very young children.

Erik set the last of the pancakes on top of the impressive stack on his plate, and took it over to sit at the kitchen table. After pouring what had to be half a bottle of syrup over it, he began eating, scarcely taking the time to chew his food as he put it away as quickly and mechanically as always.

There was no point in trying to continue a discussion with Erik while he was eating, so Charles sat down across from him and waited, somewhat irritated at the interruption, but more than a little relieved as well for the opportunity to collect his thoughts.

"How did it happen for you? I mean, what were you doing before you woke up here?" he asked when Erik had just about finished.

"Don't act like you don't know," Erik said, mopping up the rest of the syrup with his last bite of pancake and stuffing the entire dripping mess into his mouth before jabbing toward Charles with his fork. "Don't pretend you're not responsible for this. It reeks of one of your little schemes." He swallowed, then continued with his mouth empty. It wasn't much of an improvement. "There's a lesson here, right? You're trying to prove some sort of point."

"—Excuse me?"

The Master of Paranoia continued: "Well, it's not going to work. You may as well send me back now."
"What? Do you think I've been hiding a time travel device in the basement?"

"I don't know what you have down there," said Erik, with the same general snappiness as every other time he'd commented on the transition to synthetics Hank had hassled Charles into giving the go-ahead for sometime in the late eighties.

"Well, I wasn't. Believe me, if I'd had one, I'd have used it a long time ago. And I'd never have brought you along." For the first time since his arrival here, Charles considered how easy, how simple it would have been to manipulate a younger Erik some fourteen years down the road. "All I know is that I died—an aneurysm, I think—" stroke, stroke, I'm having a stroke, that was what he'd thought at the time, panicked and confused when the worst headache he'd ever experienced had exploded into being behind his right eye, "—and the next thing I knew, I was waking up here, in my childhood bedroom." Erik didn't need to know that Charles had been in the shower at the time. That he'd known he ought to call for help but had been unwilling to be found like that, naked and wet and stranded, and had for that reason attempted to transfer back into his chair first. That he hadn't made it that far. Erik didn't need to know any of that, any more than he needed to know that Charles' last thought had been his name. "That's it, and that's all. I have no idea how we ended up here. I don't know what's going on. If there's a conspiracy against you, I'm not a party to it."

Erik gave him a hard look. Charles gave it right back. After a moment, Erik said, "It happened the same way for me. I died, and when I woke up, I was here."

Charles fervently hoped Erik had died in some sort of humiliating circumstance as well, preferably on live television—though if Magneto had been posturing in front of cameras somewhere the other day, Charles would likely have been aware of that at the time.

"So, here we are. Both of us." Charles felt so weary. He'd spent the last few months raging at Erik inside his head, planning the things he'd say to him if and when they met again face to face. Things he couldn't have gotten across over the phone even if he'd been willing to take Erik's calls. Yet now that they were sitting across from each other, it seemed like too much effort. He was so tired. As always, it was worlds easier to hate Erik when Erik wasn't in evidence. "I died, and when I woke up, I was here."

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Erik sniffed, but failed to come out with anything immediately, which was disappointing. They'd been here three days, after all; it usually took Erik about three minutes to come up with a completely unacceptable course of action, which he always put into motion immediately.

"I don't know what your plans are, if you have any," Charles continued, feeling it out as he spoke. "Either way, I have no desire to spend the next sixty years fighting with you."

"I don't want that, either," Erik said.

It was nothing he hadn't said before, generally in the context of, 'I wouldn't have to keep stabbing you in the back if you would stop getting in my way whenever I'm trying to blow up national monuments, kidnap and murder your students, and/or commit genocide on the entire human race minus those members of the human race who happen to have an X gene.'

"I want to make sure you understand what I'm getting at," and Charles was only just starting to catch on to the direction he was going himself, "because we have such an opportunity here. This can be our second chance, if we let it be. We know everything that's going to happen for the next fifty-eight years. We can change it all, for mutantkind and for ourselves. We can change everything."

"You're trying to seduce me," Erik said, and that, too, was a sentiment he'd expressed before—except no. Whenever he'd said that in the past, (in the future, so many times), he'd always said, 'Stop
trying to seduce me.'

Charles had never actually tried to talk Erik into coming back. Not seriously. Oh, he'd hinted over
the years. He’d fished in an obvious (and, evidently, annoying) fashion, yes—but he'd never
committed himself. He’d never said, 'Please come home.' He’d always known what Erik's answer
would have been. He hadn't been willing to set himself up to face Erik's refusal. It had hurt badly
enough the first time Erik had turned away from him.

Now, Erik leaned forward, tense and waiting, forearms braced against the table. When Charles gave
in and peeked into Erik's mind for any sort of direction, he found only silence, expectant and total
and knew then what Erik's answer would be if he asked now.

He knew too that he shouldn't. If he said anything significant, anything true to Erik, it should be,
'You found me when I was vulnerable and exposed, and instead of seeing me, your lover and your
friend, you saw a weapon, armed and ready. Instead of waking me up and taking me home, you
aimed me at the target of your choosing and left me to die. You left all of us there to die, and it's no
thanks to you that most of us got out. No, that thanks belongs to Jean for her sacrifice. You deserve
nothing from me, and that's what you'll get.'

Even now, Charles didn't know if Erik felt any remorse for what had happened at Alkali Lake. He
didn't know how much he'd regret if he asked, how much more than that he'd regret it if he looked.
But although he remembered that betrayal, although it would stay with him as long or longer than
that first ever betrayal on a beach in Cuba so long ago, it hadn't happened yet. None of it had. It had
all been erased. The future now could be whatever they wanted to be, what Charles had always until
recently wished it were: he and Erik, building their future side by side, together.

If their future was written in water, their past now was written in sand. All they had to do was wash
it clean and write something new.

Charles hadn't realized until this moment that he'd been holding a trump card close to the vest, all
these years. Words he would never have said, never even thought of using unless he had a chance
like this, the only chance he would ever have.

He couldn't believe he was doing this, when three minutes ago he had only wanted Erik to leave. He
couldn't believe he'd ever thought he would do anything else. This had always been where they were
headed, from the moment he'd realized Erik had come back too.

"We're brothers, you and I," Charles said, though they had done such terrible things to each other
over the years. "We want the same things," though they never really had. "I want you by my side,"
and he wasn't at all sure he was capable of meaning that any longer, until he'd said it and realized it
was as true as ever it had been, even as it was more foolish than it had ever been before.

Erik looked at him without speaking, long enough for Charles to wonder if he had misjudged, even
though he knew he couldn't have.

Then he said, simply, "Yes."
An Early Thaw

Erik had killed Sebastian Shaw a thousand times since 1962. Sometimes he knew he was dreaming and sometimes he didn't, but either way there had always been a sense of impatience beneath the fear, threading through the hatred and satisfaction. The conviction that he'd done this already, that it was ludicrous, a waste of his time to be doing it again—that much ever remained, even when he couldn't recall just why.

He remembered why this time, waking up from his own death to find himself strapped down on a table with Shaw looming over him, holding a scalpel in his hand as he tsked and shook his head.

"Erik, my boy," he said in that familiar disapproving tone, as if he were a parent scolding small child. "You know that—"

But Erik had no interested in hearing what either of them knew. 'You know I'm only doing this to help you.' 'You know this will make you stronger.' 'You know you shouldn't have attacked me/ tried to run/killed another one of my "associates."' He'd heard enough of it toward the beginning of his life to have the least desire to listen to it at the end of his life as well.

His restraints weren't metal, of course. It didn't matter. One twitch, and the scalpel wrenched itself out of Shaw's hand; two, and it was joined by several handfuls of its fellows from inside a nearby cabinet; three, and they twisted and welding into something quite a bit sturdier; four, and the result wrapped itself around Shaw's throat, a serpent constricting slowly, slowly. Once Shaw had been backed against the wall—he still looked almost amused at Erik's efforts; it hadn't yet occurred to him what trouble he was in—the scalpels were joined by a dozen other implements, each of them piercing through one of Shaw's extremities even more slowly, until he was pinned to the wall like a mounted insect.

Slowly. Shaw started to look alarmed about halfway through. Slowly. It couldn't have been more than a minute or two before Shaw lost consciousness, though to Erik it felt like far longer. Slowly. It took minutes more for Shaw to die. The scalpels would have stayed in place without his ability, but Erik didn't dare let go until the blood had stopped pumping through Shaw's veins, gravity the only force that would move it now.

With Shaw dead, Erik turned his attention to his restraints, setting to them with the single blade he hadn't used on Shaw. He almost didn't know why he bothered, for this would all disappear in a moment. Shaw, the room, all of it. Later, if there were a later and this wasn't one final horror for him to face in the moment of his death, he'd remember this only in snatches if he remembered it at all, and dismiss it in annoyance as he had with every other of these dreams.

But even once he had freed himself, Erik remained. So did the scenery: the corpse slumped against the wall; the edge of that hateful table digging into the back of his thighs; the dim, caged light overhead sending out crisscrossing shadows across Erik's hands. It was every small, dirty, windowless room in which he'd ever been trapped, and the thought begin to creep in along with the claustrophobia: This might not be a dream at all. He remembered dying so clearly, how annoyed he'd been that it was happening now. There had been so much left to do, not least hunting down the recent rumors of a mutant Cure to their source, and stamping it out if they were true. Charles hadn't yet thawed to him after their last spat, which he was certain to eventually since he always had before. He would be haunted by Erik's death, all the more because they hadn't yet made it up. Erik couldn't even feel vindictive about it. It tasted only sour.

It took Erik only a few minutes to decide that if he was to remain in this dream, he at least was not
willing to remain here. It was time to move on.

He found three men in the next room, human all. Easily enough disposed of, thanks to all the metal they carried. Shaw had been arrogant to allow that; it was what had eventually allowed Erik to escaped, after he'd tried and failed and tried and failed to kill him. He'd promised himself then that he'd find Shaw again and finish it, one day.

When Erik left that house, he took with him all the cash the dead men had been carrying. The first thing he bought was a newspaper, paying three cents to learn the day's date. Seeing that it was the Boston Herald didn't tell him anything he hadn't already known; he'd identified the city by its bones before he'd so much as strolled out the front door. Individual structures might rise and fall, but Boston had never known the warfare that the Europe Erik had known as a child had experienced, and so the underlying structure remained the same.

Next, he bought a fedora for twenty dollars, a double-breasted suit for seventy-five, and several lesser suits for thirty apiece. The double-breasted especially was pricey for 1948, but Shaw and his cronies had been flush, and he still had more than half his cash left by the time his shopping expedition was finished.

This much was automatic, a series of reactions Erik had long ago committed to instinct. When he found himself somewhere he wasn't meant to be, he determined where he was and dressed himself accordingly. That he'd found himself in the late nineteen-forties wasn't worth any deeper consideration until he'd managed that much. Once he was dressed in one of the thirty dollar suits, the others carefully packed in his brand-new vintage suitcase, that was when he could let himself think about what this meant, and what to do next.

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A few days, a train journey, and one reunion later, Erik followed as Charles led the way through the halls of the mansion. Charles' childhood bedroom turned out to be one floor below and on the opposite side of the house from the room Erik had been most accustomed to entering through the window over the last few decades. Of all the things in 1948 that Erik had taken in stride, this was the one that came closest to throwing him (though it shouldn't have, since he'd tried the other bedroom before the kitchen only to find it stale, dark, and cluttered full of sheet-covered furniture).

But never mind. Erik had never hesitated in his life, and he wasn't about to start now and be left standing on the threshold. So he followed Charles inside, letting the door click shut behind him.

Neither of them had said much since Charles' offer in the kitchen. The silence seemed louder in this small space than it had in the kitchen or the hallways. It seemed to echo off the walls. It didn't help that Erik felt almost as though he were standing here with a stranger, a floppy-haired teenager with chapped lips and skinny arms, as far as it was possible to get from that old bald man who could probably bench press several Eriks.

"You look exhausted," Charles said at last, though how he could tell was beyond Erik, since his gaze was presently fixed on something to Erik's right. Perhaps he'd only just noticed a fascinating smudge on the wallpaper. "You should try to get some sleep. We can talk more later."

"We should talk now," Erik said, stepping toward Charles, who moved quickly away, as if he thought Erik meant to kiss him. (Erik would have done, if Charles had given him even the slightest encouragement. It had been nearly three years since their last time, and he'd missed Charles sorely. Charles had come to visit at least once a month while Erik was in his plastic cell, but even then, Erik had missed him more than he had during the decade he'd spent underneath the Pentagon and had no visitors at all.)
Erik kept moving, walking over to Charles' desk instead, as if that had been what he'd intended from the start. He began rifling through Charles' papers, knowing it would irk him, but that he wouldn't admit it lest Erik think there was anything important among them. There wouldn't be, of course, not this early in the game, and not with Charles having had enough forewarning to lock away anything sensitive, but old habits.

"Talk about what, exactly?" Charles asked.

"My conditions," Erik said. "I want to be headmaster, to begin with."

"Absolutely not."

"But it's my turn."

"You don't get a turn."

Erik hmphed, more for effect than because he cared about being headmaster. (He suspected he'd expire of boredom within a week; controlling teenagers surely didn't require the same steel needed for leading the Brotherhood.) He picked up the newspaper at the top of the stack on Charles' desk, examined the headline as if he cared about the Berlin blockade. "You do intend to start the school again."

It wasn't possible that Charles Xavier would intend to do anything that didn't include the school. Erik couldn't imagine a future where he didn't. Yet Charles said, "I don't know. I haven't decided. Honestly, I haven't really thought about it."

"Start thinking about it," Erik said. "You're the one who said we could change things. I thought you must have some sort of plan."

He glanced at Charles, who looked rather sour, as he usually did when Erik pushed him. Probably he already regretted that offer of his, but he hadn't taken it back, and Erik wasn't about to let up.

"I suppose you have all sorts of plans already worked out," Charles said.

Erik considered burying his plan under such minutiae as how full his stomach felt now, how heavy his eyelids were, and how much he wished to have at least the option of his helmet back, but in the end he said, "We should take care of Stryker, first." He'd take forty more years' worth of nightmares if he got to kill Stryker for a second time, knowing it was real as it happened. "We should get Trask, too." Even if Charles balked at Stryker, surely he'd have to admit the necessity of ending Trask Industries before it began. He knew as well as Erik did what they had done, to Mystique and every other mutant they could get their hands on.

"Oh, for—we're not killing anyone."

"Yet."

"We're not killing anyone," Charles repeated, clearly considering that statement alone an argument worthy of winning the day, or at least the discussion. "It wasn't necessary before, and it won't be this time. We have plenty of time. We have all the knowledge we need to avoid having to do that."

Erik thought that unlikely. Assassinations had always been expedient and highly effective at removing problems in his experience. "Is that so."
"Yes. We could buy Trask Industries in its youth, direct its research toward...I don't know. Curing cancer. Researching genetic diseases. Something that has nothing to do with mutants at all. And that's just one option. I'm sure there are plenty more, if we actually look for them instead of defaulting to murder."

There really was no trying to talk to Charles when he got stuck on killing and murder, and how Erik shouldn't. He'd probably been stewing about it for the entire last few months, just waiting to have the chance to have his say about it again.

Erik considered digging in, but decided to move on for now. It wasn't as though either Stryker or Trask were likely to do much damage before the early sixties, anyway. He had time.

"How long will it take for you to open the school again?" he asked, moving back to the one thing Charles himself was certain to do, whether he would admit it yet or not. "A few weeks?"

Charles snorted. "More like a few years. In case you haven't noticed, I'm fifteen years old."

"I don't see what that has to do with anything," Erik said, not about to admit that he'd been even a little thrown by that. Anyway, it didn't matter. Erik still had full use of his mutation, meaning Charles would have his as well; there was nothing to stop them. They could do anything, regardless of their respective ages.

"Well, for starters, I won't come into my inheritance until I'm twenty-one. That's another six years. Well. Five. I've a birthday coming up, I suppose." He sounded remarkably ambivalent about his birthday, as if he hadn't yet caught up to the fact that he didn't need to fret over each one the way he had since he turned sixty. "There's not a chance of doing anything with the house until then. The renovations alone will take at least two years. So that's seven years, minimum, before we can even think about opening out doors."

Somewhere in the middle of all that, Charles had stopped sounding so sour, his face softening into thoughtfulness instead. But instead of feeling vindicated, Erik found himself stuck on, "Seven years."

"Yes."

"And what do you expect me to do in the meantime?"

"I don't know," Charles said. "Something constructive, I should hope. At any rate, we both have plenty of time to decide what to do. For right now, you need to get some sleep before you fall over."

Erik wanted to protest, but it was true he hadn't slept since his arrival a few days ago. A catnap on the train, when his compartment had been empty, and that was all. Even youth could only make up for so much. And if Charles were offering a truce, well, Erik would take it, just as he'd taken Charles' offer an hour ago.

It wasn't until he'd crawled into bed and Charles had left, clicking the door shut with a finality it hadn't seem to have previously, that it occurred to Erik that Charles hadn't said anything about joining him.

*****

Nearly twelve hours later, Erik tracked Charles down by his wristwatch. He found him in a library on the third floor. If memory served, it would still be a library fifty years from now, unless Charles had moved it since the mid-90s.
Charles was sitting on a sofa in the middle of the room, nose in a book. There was a young girl with him, blond and vaguely familiar-looking, though Erik couldn't place her. When Erik came in, she startled, jumping up from the sofa and glancing between Erik and the library's other door as if she meant to flee.

"It's all right," Charles said. "Raven, this is Erik. He's the boy I told you about." Erik could imagine what Charles might have told her about him. "The one who's like us. Erik, this is my sister, Raven."

He said it pleasantly enough. There was no overt challenge in his tone of voice, or in his expression when he looked at Erik. Nevertheless, it was clear a line had been drawn in the sand, with Erik on one side and Charles and Raven on the other.

As if Erik would have any use for such a skittish child. He could tell from the merest glance that this blonde creature wasn't anyone he'd known. Mystique hadn't been skittish in decades, and even when she had been jumpy for a few years in the mid-70s, she'd still been lethal. He couldn't imagine this girl shooting a man, much less strangling him with her feet. Mystique's entire body was a weapon, no matter if she was at rest or in motion.

Nevertheless, distasteful though it was, Erik said, "Hello."

"Hi," the girl said, still with an eye on the other door.

At least she had sense enough not to trust someone the moment she met them, just because Charles had told her it was safe. "Raven. Tell me, is that your real name?"

"Erik!" came Charles' voice inside his head, a snake's rattle that Erik paid no attention to.

Raven gave him a narrow look, then said, slowly, "Yeah. Why, is that yours?"

"No." Erik ignored the choking sound Charles made at this, and the heavy, red sensation inside his own skull, as if Charles was too indignant to bother putting his objection into words.

"Well, what is it then?"

Erik thought about it a moment, then said, "Max."

He could have said something else. Charles had surely expected as much, judging by the way he sagged back against the back of the sofa, massaging his temples. But Magneto wasn't needed here, not yet. Max was just as true, which was fortunate since Erik had never lied to her and wasn't about to start now.

"Okay," Raven said. She looked between Erik and Charles, clearly seeing that there was something going on beneath the surface, but not knowing what. She'd always been observant; it was part of her gift.

"Erik, why don't you show Raven what you can do?" Charles said, the most resigned he'd ever sounded when speaking of Erik's gift, including the many times Erik had used it against him.

Well, Erik had never needed his audience to show enthusiasm. (In fact, they usually didn't, which had been his objective to begin with.) From his pocket, he took out a ball of metal, the one he'd been adding to since Boston, a penny here, a button there, even the 5 Reichsmark he'd driven through Shaw's skull in his other life. This, he levitated above his palm, letting it take on various amorphous shapes until he finally decided on one in particular.

When it was done, he offered the result to Raven, floating it toward her, until she reached out and
took it, and smiled. "Oh, it's a cat," she said.

"A kitten," Erik said. It was a tabby kitten, in fact. He'd taken a great deal of care with its stripes.

Raven admired it a few moments more, turning it around in her hand, then stepped toward him, holding it out as though to return it.

"Keep it," Erik said. "It's yours."

"Okay. Thank you. It's pretty." Raven looked at it a moment longer, then put it in her pocket.

Erik felt oddly deflated once she had, though didn't know what other reaction he could have expected, what significance that shape could possibly have had for this girl. This wasn't his partner of so many years. This wasn't Mystique.

Raven looked him up and down, as if revising whatever estimate she'd made of him before. Then, no longer looking as though she intended to run if he so much as glared at her, she said, "Are you hungry? We have lots of food in the kitchen. There's even a pantry. You can have as much as you want. Here, I'll show you."

And with that, she was off, waving for Erik to follow.

Perhaps there was something of Mystique in her, after all. Erik couldn't remember how many times she'd eyed a new recruit to the Brotherhood, only to declare that they needed to eat. Maternal she had not been, but she'd always been adamant about making it explicit that no one would ever be punished for eating when they were hungry, or even when they weren't.

Erik glanced at Charles, who didn't look quite as constipated as he had before, though he also didn't look particularly happy.

"Watch yourself with her," he said in a low voice once they'd followed Raven out into the hallway.

Erik didn't bother to argue. It had never done any good to tell Charles that he'd never made Mystique do anything she didn't want to do. It wouldn't do any good now, either.

*****

The next several months in that house were a surreal time. Erik saw little of Charles or Raven—so little, in fact, that he initially suspected Charles was both avoiding him and causing Raven to do the same, and never quite stopped suspecting it even after he'd adjusted his sleep schedule and begun inserting himself into whichever space they happened to occupy during the day. (Adjusting his sleep schedule was a process that took a few weeks in and of itself; all his body wanted was sleep and fuel followed by more sleep.)

When Erik slept, he slept alone, for Charles had shown him to his own room that first night. It had been a moment far removed from its counterpart in their former life. In the summer of 1962, Charles had done it with a wink, a smirk, and the understanding that Erik's clothes would be the only things staying there; this time, he seemed uncomfortable and stiff, and managed to make it quite clear that, while, Erik didn't have to sleep in this particular room if he didn't care for it, he certainly wasn't welcome to sleep in Charles' again.

In mid-August, they moved to a three-bedroom apartment in the city, where Charles was to start at Columbia. By then, Erik had begun to wonder if Charles would ever warm up to him properly.

Before he'd died, Erik had begun to think that Charles truly was done with him this time, that he'd finally done something so terrible that even Charles would turn away from him. Now, he sometimes
wondered darkly if he'd been right. Probably Charles had regretted his offer from the moment the words left his mouth. Perhaps the only reason he hadn't kicked Erik out again was so that he could keep an eye on him.

New York City was a welcome distraction for the first few weeks. Erik had never spent more than a few days at a time in this city, and had never quite lost the initial fascination that had so amused Charles when they'd first gone recruiting here. But familiarity bred contempt, and what had held true in that other life did not follow here. Erik was bored of it, all of it, every molecule of every scrap of metal in the city, by the time Charles had been in school for two weeks. He was even sick of spending all day riding the subway, which had never before failed to enthrall him.

One afternoon, after Charles had gotten home but before school had let out for Raven, Erik rapped on Charles' bedroom door, then opened it.

"Can't you knock?" Charles asked irritably, pulling his hand out of his pants, which irritated Erik. He had been lying on his back, but now sat up, looking flushed in a way Erik was determined to ignore (at least until he was back in his own bedroom with the door locked).

"I did."

"Next time, why don't you at least pretend to wait for my permission before you barge in?"

Erik had never asked Charles' permission for anything, and he wasn't about to start now. "We should talk."

"About what?"

"If we're going to open the school, we need to get started."

Charles groaned and lay down again, this time with his arm flung over his eyes. "Not this again," he said. "Erik. Yes. I have every intention of opening the school, but it's going to take time. Right now, I'm going to school, to get the education I'll need in order to educate anyone else."

"You've had an education already," Erik said. In fact, Charles had been working on his fourth PhD the last time they'd talked about anything as mundane as their personal lives.

"Not here, and not on paper. There's no fast-forward button. I'm getting tired of hearing about it every single day."

"I haven't said anything about it since the first day."

"No, but you've been actively projecting it for a solid month." Before Erik could deny it, Charles lowered his arm and looked at him, more thoughtful this time. "You need to find something to occupy yourself with. You could go back to school."

"I'm not going back to school." The prospect was too tedious to bear. Erik would rather take up Nazi hunting again; repetitive it might be, but it would still be more interesting than going to lectures and writing papers. And it would be less infuriating than trying to obtain a higher education in a year when many universities still had Jewish quotas. If Erik wanted to do it, he'd stamp down anyone who got in his way, but he didn't.

"Well, then, you could get a job." As if Charles had ever worked a day in his life. At Erik's flat look, he said, "Maybe not. But you can't spend the next seven or eight years doing nothing. You have hobbies. Maybe you could build some bookshelves."
Erik had done woodworking off and on for most of his life, enjoying the way his ability to manipulate metal allowed him greater facility in making those things that were carved by metal tools or held together with metal fasteners. His father had been a carpenter, as well, and though Erik didn't remember him with any clarity to speak of, the smell of wood shavings had always made him feel nostalgic as little else could.

But he couldn't spend seven or eight years building bookshelves, not even if he meant to make one for every room in the mansion. Even if he could, he didn't want to. They could buy bookshelves anywhere.

"Maybe I could build Cerebro instead," Erik said.

Charles said nothing. For once, Erik found it very difficult to read his expression.

"We're going to need it if we intend to have students at our school." This wasn't the first time Erik had thought of it. He never hesitated, but he'd been reluctant to bring this up, not knowing how Charles would react—but now that he had, he wasn't going to back down. "Unless you intend to restrict recruitment to New England."

After a long moment, Charles cleared his throat and said, "Fair enough."

"I've started on the plans already," Erik said. There were unfinished blueprints on top of the dresser in his room, his own half-remembered recollections, and not nearly complete enough to start his work. "I'll need your input to go any further with them."

"Of course you will," Charles said. Once, he'd been ridiculously enthusiastic anytime he'd needed Erik's help in calibrating Cerebro; now, he seemed more resigned than anything. "Well, let's see them, then."

Erik went to retrieve them, and by the time he returned a few minutes later, Charles was sitting at his desk, and had brought in a kitchen chair for Erik.

"You've gotten it all wrong," Charles said, taking the first sheet of drafting paper and spreading it out over the desk's flat surface.

Erik rolled his eyes. Charles' jokes had never improved. "You haven't even looked at it."

"Well, now that I am, you've gotten it even more wrong," Charles said, and began erasing what must have been the most offensive of the errors.

They sat in silence for another hour, Charles erasing and making notes, Erik watching for the most part. It wasn't as companionable as it ought to have been, and the moment Raven slammed the front door shut, Charles declared them done for the day, racing out to the living room to show much more interest in how her day had gone than he usually seemed to.

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"Wait up," Erik called to Charles' back, lengthening his strides to catch him. It was a gray February afternoon, snow a heavy threat in the sky above, though none had come down as yet. It wasn't as though they needed any more of it; New York was an abominable place to inhabit in the winter, made all the worse when what snow they had received never melted, merely sat there growing dingier by the day until new snow fell to cover it.

Each day when he came to escort Charles home, Erik failed to be entirely certain why he had ventured out of doors—at least, until Charles noticed him, as he did now, slowing down until Erik
caught up, shooting him a grin as Erik drew abreast of him.

It wasn't really astonishing, in this day and age, for two young men who were friends to walk with their arms draped over one another's shoulders, or even arm in arm—but it was astonishing to Erik, and had been for the past few weeks, ever since Charles had first started allowing it. In fact, Charles had initiated it.

Up until the new year, Erik had more or less been waiting for Charles to warm up to him on his own. He always had before, but then, there'd always been a buffer of time and distance between them. Charles could hardly start missing Erik when they lived together (though Erik thought he missed Charles more now that he was one room away at night than he ever had when there were thousands of miles between them).

Now, instead of waiting for Charles to make a move, Erik had taken action, insinuating himself into Charles' daily life much more actively that he had before. For the most part, this involved making breakfast for both of them every morning, and escorting Charles home from Columbia on weekday afternoons. In addition to trying to draw Charles out about plans for their greater future, Erik had started focusing on their present and the immediate future, reading the paper every day so that he might comment dryly upon 'current' events. This had led to many reminiscing sessions, during which Charles often had much more to say than Erik did, largely because he remembered more than Erik did, having had access to the news in a way Erik hadn't the first time he'd lived through this decade. Before now, Erik had never bothered to learn what he'd missed, so while he knew the broad strokes, quite a few of the details had passed him by.

Charles had been guarded at first, as he'd been more or less since June. It had taken Erik weeks to draw the first unguarded laugh out of him, no matter how dry his quips about no longer so historical figures. But the colder the weather had gotten, the more Charles had thawed toward him, and if he had yet to look at Erik with that soft-eyed expression of his, well, if things kept going as they were, they'd go to bed eventually, and Erik would get it then.

"Oh, you will, will you?" muttered Charles, clearly having picked at least that last thought up from Erik's head. That was another thing he'd started again recently, reading Erik's surface thoughts in order to comment upon them. It was a habit that had often made Erik nervous in their past life; he'd been surprised to realize how much he'd missed it.

Though they'd been walking at a steady pace, Charles now stopped, and, grabbing Erik by the arm, dragged him off the sidewalk and onto the footprint-covered lawn in front of the Xavier Building. (Donated to Columbia by Charles' great-great grandfather, a fact Erik had somehow never known in their previous life, and which he'd given Charles hell about for weeks after learning of it.)

"Where are we going?" Erik asked. "Have you decided to give me the grand tour?" Charles had refused to give Erik a tour of the building seven or eight times, and had since resorted to rolling his eyes whenever Erik brought it up.

"It's amazing, actually," Charles said in a conspiratorial tone, the likes of which Erik hadn't heard from him in years. Probably not since the last time he'd decided they should try something new and exciting in the bedroom, come to think of it. That must have been at least five or six years ago.

"What is?"

"There are all these people, all around us, and yet none of them have the slightest interest in what we're doing. Their eyes slide right off us. It's as though we weren't here. Isn't that strange?"

This was all the warning Erik received. It was all he needed. He might not have remembered world
events as well as Charles did, but he remembered their first kiss as well as anyone could have.

It had happened on the second week of their recruitment trip, in a tiny little nothing town in Arkansas which nonetheless had a well-populated saloon containing, among other people, an extremely skittish mutant whose mutation involved a literal green thumb—marvelous enough, as Charles said, but ultimately useless for their purposes.

They'd been on their way out when Charles stopped in the small pocket of space inside the door and said, "No one can see us." That was all he'd said before he'd pulled Erik into a kiss, in public in 1962, the knowledge of Charles' power even more heady than the knowledge of Charles' lips against Erik's own.

Now, Charles pulled Erik into another kiss, not their first but their first in years, so different and yet so much the same as their first kiss so long ago. They kissed until Charles had dropped his books in the dirty snow and Erik's feet had chilled inside his boots. They kissed until neither of them was fit to be seen in public, and they both were shivering despite their layers.

Only after the first snowflakes had begun to fall did Charles say, "Let's go home." He had some of them in his hair already. Erik didn't know why he'd always so violently resisted the concept of hats.

"Let's," Erik said. If they hurried, they'd have nearly forty-five minutes left to warm each other up before Raven got home. He intended to make the most of them, presuming Charles didn't change his mind on the way there.
In the bunker underneath the house in North Salem, Charles looked down at the Cerebro helmet Erik had just handed him. "You're certain it's not going to set my hair on fire?" It wouldn't be the first time. "Or short out the power for half the county?" It wouldn't be the first time there, either.

Erik gave him a flat look, unamused even though Charles found himself highly amusing. "It shouldn't."

"Good to know." Charles studied the helmet for a moment longer. It was huge, a monstrosity on par with any of the helmets Erik had worn throughout the years, and bristled with antennas covering every inch of its outer shell—not at all like the sleek, modern thing Hank had last designed for him in the 90s. "Well. Shall we?"

It was the sixteenth time Erik had decided he had something and dragged Charles up from the city for a test run. Despite the occasional dramatic side effects, they had yet to come close to a working version of Cerebro. It had been a far more finicky project than they'd thought it would be when they'd first started out: not only had they had to change the design significantly to make up for being unable to excavate a more streamlined space for this; not only had they had to change the design even more as they substituted part after part for components that did not yet exist in the early nineteen fifties; but, as it turned out, neither of them had remembered Cerebro's design with the degree of accuracy required to rebuild it.

The end result was that this Cerebro wasn't a round empty chamber closing out the rest of the world. Instead, it was an army of enormous boxy computers stacked from one end of the bunker to the other. There were even more electrical cords underfoot than there had been the last time Charles had been here, before he'd been eaten alive by finals over the last few weeks. It was all very claustrophobic compared to its predecessors, an effect which was somehow even more pronounced at Erik's work station by the door.

With the knowledge that he was about to resemble nothing so much as a porcupine, Charles sat on the chair across from Erik, then placed the helmet on his head. Once it was settled on his head, he gave the thumbs up in Erik's direction, and waited for something (or nothing) to happen.

He'd been relieved when the first few test runs failed, more ambivalent about anything to do with Cerebro than he'd been since the seventies. The next few times, after he'd adjusted to this life and had more time to heal from the wounds of the other, he'd been hopefully, certain each new attempt would be the time that paid off. But even he could only hold out hope for so long, and for the last year or so, he'd gone into the room expecting nothing much, and been unsurprised when nothing (or a singed look, last February) was what he got.

This time, he was focused more on what this ridiculous thing felt like—wondering if the weight of it alone would give him a migraine, or if it would have been too much to ask for Erik to include holes for his eyes, for goodness sake; every other version of the headpiece had at least had that much—than on what it was supposed to do. So when the entire world—everyone, everywhere, all at once—erupted into light, he was stunned. Overwhelmed and subsumed by a hundred million minds with neither warning and preparation, it took a minute for him to remember who he was, and where, and what he was doing.

It took longer than that to force himself back to an awareness of his physical body. His back felt stiff,
and his legs. Perhaps it had been more than a minute, after all; even his fingers felt stiff, though that could have been explained by the way he had Erik's hands gripped so tightly within his own. Upon noticing this, Charles forced his fingers open, batted Erik away. This wasn't a seance, and besides, he wasn't entirely certain even now if he wanted Erik here for this, now that it worked.

Charles looked away from the light long enough to ground himself in the physical world. These were his feet, braced against the ground. These were his arms, skin rising in goosebumps to the chill of the air, quite a few degrees cooler underground than in the rest of the house. These were his hands, clenching and unclenching, then finding Erik's hands once more, and more gently than the last time.

Once he was as certain as he could be that he wasn't going to lose himself, he turned back to all those minds, so bright and so, so beautiful. Most of them were human, of course, but indistinguishable from mutants at this level, in this moment. It had always been so, and Charles had wished for much of his life that he might share this moment with Erik: That beyond mutant or human, beyond even the ability to produce fertile offspring together, they were one, and they were the same.

But no matter how beautiful everyone all together, Charles was here for something else. He stopped letting everyone in and narrowed his vision, seeking mutants alone this time.

He started from North Salem, where there were, of course, only two. From there, he expanded his awareness farther and farther out, until he found Raven, home alone in New York City this weekend, and then others. While he found them mostly in ones, isolated points of light against a darker background, the three of them weren't the only ones who'd found each other—for he found them in twos and threes and fours as well, and a group of sixteen in Massachusetts, for some reason.

They were, in the end, many fewer both in number and percentage than they had been the last time Charles had used Cerebro. He couldn't help but notice it, how much further they had to go. Yet they were, too, so many more than he'd grown used to, these past few years. He hadn't realized until seeing them how disconnected he'd felt without this, how isolated and insulated with only Raven and Erik and a lifetime of shared memories to prove he wasn't alone. He hadn't felt like this since he was a child, who hadn't even recognized his own loneliness until he'd walked into the kitchen one night to find a little girl so much like him.

*There you are,* he wanted to say. Perhaps he did say it, though if he projected, it couldn't have gone far enough for anyone other than Erik to have heard. That had been one of his conditions, firm: That the Cerebro Erik built must not be designed with anything other than looking in mind. That whoever used it would be able to see, but not affect whatever it was they saw. *I found you. Hello.*

Some time later, Charles pulled the helmet off, set it down on the table as his eyes readjusted to the fluorescent lighting of the bunker...no brighter, surely, than it had been when he'd first put the helmet on, yet to him it seemed it was. And that wasn't the only thing which had changed, for he now found that he didn't mind Erik being here so much after all. He'd been here the first time Charles had ever used Cerebro, hadn't he? And hadn't he bristled with just as much anxiety that other time as he was doing now, even if it had a different cause?

"Well?" Erik asked brusquely—though he surely knew the answer by now, given that their previous test runs had all been over within five minutes, whereas this one had lasted long enough for tear tracks to dry on Charles' face.

Charles tried his utmost to keep his expression serious, make Erik worry for a minute or two, but broke out in a grin despite himself. "It'll do, for a start."

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"It's the third house on the right, I think," Charles said. "Yes. This is it."

Erik guided the car into the driveway behind a beaten-up station wagon. As they got out of the car, Charles did his best to smooth the wrinkles of his suit. Maybe they should have stopped to freshen up after all, but even if he'd suggested it, he doubted either he or Erik would have gone for it. They'd been waiting, they'd been working toward this moment for too long to be willing to wait even a few minutes longer.

"Remember to let me do the talking," Charles said, checking the angle of his hat in the rear view mirror.

"If you insist," Erik said dryly, which really meant he would say and do exactly as he pleased.

"Follow my lead, at least. I've done this before."

"So have I."

But this wasn't the same thing as when they'd recruited for the CIA, so long ago now. And it wasn't the same as when they'd hired the teaching staff, though Erik had been there for that much more recently. But all Charles had the time to say, before he rang the doorbell, was, "You've never had to deal with parents."

In truth, it wasn't the parents who concerned Charles. He'd met with hundreds of parents, could navigate them in his sleep. No, the question was how Erik would act, now that they were here, now that they were doing this. He'd spent a lifetime attempting to recruit Charles' students for the Brotherhood or worse—would he work together in step with Charles in this, or go his own way as he so often had in that other life?

By the time they got to the door, Charles had pushed this concern aside, long enough at least to get them into the house. He had to improvise a bit—the script was different now that he was in his early twenties than it had been when he was old and using a wheelchair—but most of the steps were the same, and it wasn't long before they were sitting in the living room with the Delaneys and their daughter, Patsy.

From what he'd found through Cerebro, Charles already knew that Patsy's mutation was a visible one: webbing between her fingers and toes along with rubbery patches of skin on her arms, legs and torso. None of that was visible now, however, as she was wearing jeans and a long-sleeved flannel shirt she'd pulled down to cover her hands.

He knew, too, that she'd left school six months ago. Walked off campus during lunch one day, and refused to go back. Her parents had been good about it, better than most; they'd allowed her to stay home so long as she studied her schoolbooks, which had had nothing to do with what people would think if they saw her differences, and everything to do with their relief at seeing her smile again now that she didn't spend every moment at home dreading going back to school.

Charles had chosen this family carefully, so Erik's underlying assumption that all human parents of mutant children were horrible would be immediately challenged. As he handed Patsy the brochure they'd brought—the big, shiny one rather than the smaller, more discreet version that would wind up attached to bulletin boards around the country to attract many of their runaways—he murmured an aside to Erik: This is the best part.

And, as he watched parents and daughter page through it, he saw an expression blooming on her
face, one he'd seen so many times throughout the years: It was hope.

"Well? What do you think?" Charles asked, once they'd had a chance to look through the entire thing.

"It's amazing," Patsy said. A quick glance at her father, then back to the section about their art classes, which she seemed inclined to linger over. "But...it looks expensive."

Charles was ready for this particular objection, but before he could speak, Erik spoke up for the first time: "There's a scholarship program."

There was, in fact. The first time Charles had opened the school, he'd been caught with his pants down on this subject, as it had never occurred to him to worry about tuition or whether or not anyone could afford to pay it. As it had turned out, most people had a deep suspicion of anything that looked too good to be true; and for most parents, an enormous mansion converted into a free boarding school counted.

Patsy glanced at her mother, this time, then looked at Erik. "How does that work?"

Here, the script demanded mentioning the various programs based on income levels. Instead, Erik said, "If you're a mutant, you get a scholarship."

"Based on your income level," Charles added, but neither of appeared to be listening.

"—What's a mutant?"

Erik dug into his pocket and brought out a handful of change. "It means you're like us," he said, letting the change float into the air above his palm, letting it melt together and shift into a new form, which appeared to be that of a dolphin. "It means you're not alone."

Charles couldn't help but think that Erik was showing himself to be a bit of a one trick pony, here. He also couldn't help but see Patsy's delight as Erik offered her the small figurine; or her parents' shared glance, the one that said they'd do whatever they had to do to give their daughter this opportunity.

For the next hour or so, Charles discussed logistics with Patsy's parents, while Erik continued showing off to the girl herself. By the time they left again, Charles thought that of all the relief in the room, his own had been the greatest.

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1963

Charles had been taking his free period during the same forty-five minutes for the past year or two, so he wasn't at all surprised when Erik strode in five minutes after he'd sat down, pulled up a chair next to him, read over his shoulder for a minute, then said, "You should come with me next week."

To Dallas, he meant. They'd been having this argument every day for weeks; they'd been having versions of it periodically for the last fifteen years.

"You should stop asking," Charles said. "It's as if you believe my answer's changed since the last hundred times I've given it."

"You can't tell me you don't want to save him."
"I can't tell you anything." But Charles was barely paying attention to this conversation, for reason other than having trod down this road together so often that he could have done tasks much more mentally challenging than grading essays while keeping up with Erik. This time, he was too busy glancing at his wristwatch, trying to remember—had it been 1:30 pm or 2:30 pm when the news had broken? The former, he thought, but it was amazing how much you could question the details of a day you had once so clearly remembered when you couldn't just look it up.

He'd have questioned the date itself, if Erik hadn't been so certain of it, too.

The discussion which Charles was barely a participant in went on for another fifteen minutes before Erik gave up on him, and settled back in his chair with a huff. By the time the knock came on the door, he seemed to have forgotten he was brooding, at least long enough to reach over and filch a handful of peppermints out of the jar on Charles' desk.

"Come in, Hank," Charles said. It was 1:56 pm, and he knew already, and had known for a few minutes now. He could hardly have missed the shock wave running through the mansion if he'd been asleep, much less awake and waiting for this.

The door had begun to open before Charles spoke, Hank standing in the doorway before Charles had finished saying his name. His eyes were red. He cleared his throat, and didn't speak.

"What is it, Hank?" Charles asked. He hadn't expected to have to ask—he hadn't had to ask the last time, when they'd watched the original news reports together along with Alex and Sean, on the same television they'd watched the coverage in the days leading up to the missile crisis the year before. The boys had wheeled it into Charles' room when he'd arrived home from the hospital, and there it had stayed, through all those long dark years.

"It's the president. President Kennedy."

Erik had gone still the moment before; now, his voice rang out, sharply, "What about him?"

"It's, um." Hank was holding his glasses in his hands, and now he looked down at them, as if he'd forgotten what glasses were for, or that they belonged on his head. "He was—he's been shot."

"What?"

There was a rush of air as Erik stood. Charles could feel the sudden chill in his gaze, but he didn't turn his head to look back at him, or reach out to touch on any of his thoughts. Instead, he kept his eyes on Hank, and said, "My God, how terrible. Is he all right?"

Hank cleared his throat again. "No one knows, but it sounds," and here his voice cracked, "—it sounds bad."

"Thank you, Hank," Charles said. Though he knew Hank would wish to stay, to receive what reassurance he could from the professors he had so admired (and, in Erik's case, somewhat hero-worshiped) since coming to the school after graduating from Harvard, and though he would have wanted to give that reassurance on any other day, now he only wanted to get Hank out of the room. He gave Hank a mental nudge suggesting they had indeed said something (though Hank would never be able to recall exactly what it had been, and would blame this blank spot on shock and grief, if he considered the matter at all) to set his mind slightly more at ease, and sent him out the door again.

When he had gone, Charles turned to the bookshelf behind him and turned the radio on, dialing the volume down enough that he'd have to strain to hear what was being said. Then, he stood and turned
He'd expected Erik to be looking at him as if he were something vile, but the expression on Erik's face was cold and hard. It was the way Erik had looked at him on the beach. It was the way Erik had always looked at him when he was about to turn on his heel and walk away.

"I had to," Charles said. "You wouldn't listen to me."

"Today isn't the fifteenth," Erik said.

"No."

"Today is the twenty-second."

"Yes." When Erik didn't say anything in return—when he only kept looking at Charles like that, the expression Charles had most loathed in that other life—Charles said, "I had to. You wouldn't listen."

"So you decided to play God," Erik said, and now the ice was cracking, enough to let his fury through. Charles would have expected this to be a relief, but it wasn't; he'd never been sure what Erik would do, when his anger roared through him the way it was roaring through this room.

"We agreed a long time ago that we wouldn't try to change everything," Charles said, and they had, he wasn't lying about that. He'd never lied about his opinion about this, either, never done anything other than slip into Erik's mind earlier this month to make one small change about the date. "You don't know what would have happened if you'd gone. You aren't even sure what happened the last time, and you were there."

"You had no right," and of everything Charles had expected, it wasn't the betrayal in Erik's voice now. "You had no right to make up my mind for me."

He'd had every right. If Erik had gone to Dallas, there was no guarantee he could have saved Kennedy. There was no guarantee he wouldn't have been arrested again, bringing unwanted attention onto their school. It had been invaded once, fifteen years ago or forty years from now; the school and the students here, the legacy they were building, their first and foremost responsibility was to protect it. That started and in many ways ended with staying under the government's radar as much as possible.

Charles hadn't wanted JFK to be assassinated for a second time. He'd hoped that if Erik weren't there to bend the bullet, they'd get lucky.

Before he could say any of that, the phone rang. It was Raven, out in California; she was crying, understandably distraught. There was no way to put her off the way he'd done with Hank, and no way to keep Erik from leaving, not without invading his mind further.

Please don't leave the premises, Charles projected, at the same time as he was trying to tell Raven that everything would be all right. You need to be seen here today.

Erik wouldn't be anyone's first suspect, not this time, but between his ability and whatever record had been kept of that purchase...there could still be questions, at some point over the next year or so, depending on what happened.

While Charles was on the phone, the confirmation came in the news: John F. Kennedy had died. Events unfolded exactly as they had before: Lee Harvey Oswald's arrest and subsequent murder by Jack Ruby, days of unending news coverage, none of which mentioned Erik. None of it had before, either, but this time it was because there was nothing to mention. Charles spent those days counseling
terrified students and teachers, and fielding phone calls from the kinds of parents who always wanted to withdraw their children from the school whenever anything terrible had happened.

Erik didn't leave, as Charles had suspected he might, the only time he'd truly feared that Erik would simply walk away for good this time. But he did move his belongings out of their shared bedroom, sleeping in truth in the room they'd spent years pretending was his. He spent months ignoring Charles, being cold toward him when they had to speak. It wasn't until the summer of 1964 that he finally began to soften, not until the winter of 1965 that he moved back in with Charles.

All of this was better, still, than what had happened the last time. And the world went on.

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1967

Charles went to bed as usual that night, and woke up to his head bobbing against the window, Erik's hand resting warmly on his knee. He straightened up slowly, taking in these surroundings, the furthest possible thing from his warm bed in his immobile house: Erik to his left, one hand on the steering wheel; a pillow wedged between his side and the door; darkness all around except for the headlines shining on the road ahead.

"—Are you kidnapping me?" Charles asked, incredulous. Erik hadn't kidnapped him since the 90s. He'd never had to, not in this life.

Charles couldn't make out Erik's expression in the dark, but the smugness he was projecting said enough, even before he said, "Whatever gave you that impression?"

Charles should probably have objected. He probably should have insisted Erik turn around and drive them home. Not only was it the middle of the spring semester, it was the middle of the week. They couldn't just run off on a Tuesday night to return God knew when. It had been one thing for Erik to have a complete disregard for Charles' schedule in that other life, when he'd known so little about it, and when Charles had been obliged to take whatever time Erik had to give him if he wanted any time with Erik at all; it was another thing entirely for Erik to flip the bird to both of their schedules, no matter what had happened. It wasn't as if Charles mother had never died before. The only thing which had changed was that he now knew that, just as nothing he'd said or done in that other life had brought them closer together, nothing he'd left unsaid or undone in this life had done it either. It had been painful once, but he'd reconciled himself to the fact long since.

Yet, instead of pointing out any of this, not wanting to go over any of it again, or argue with the exaggerated care Erik had taken with him for the past little while, Charles merely said, "Well, I hope you found someone to cover our classes."

"I covered mine."

"Ha, ha." Charles repositioned his pillow and leaned against it, closed his eyes again once he had peeked at Erik's mind to be certain that, yes, he had in fact made certain both their classes would be taken care of for the next several days. "Wake me up when we get to our mysterious destination, would you?"

He thought he knew where they were headed, and, when he woke up a few hours later to the rising sun and the sense of Erik's rising irritation, immediately knew he'd been correct.

"What's the matter? Don't tell me we're lost."

"I'm not lost," Erik said. "I just can't seem to," and trailed off in grumpy bewilderment, unsurprising
for a man who hadn't slept all night and had grown accustomed to his sleep these last several
decades.

A few minutes later, they came to a stop in front of a dilapidated structure which might once have
been a cabin. If it had ever had a roof, it had long since collapsed or blown away; vines had crawled
up the outer walls. If Charles remembered correctly, several saplings had also taken root in the space
which had been (would perhaps be again?) the kitchen.

"This is it," Charles said, to put Erik out of his misery. "Is it like you remember?"

"When you said you'd had it renovated for us, I assumed you meant you'd made it accessible," Erik
murmured. "I thought you were trying to spare my feelings."

Charles wasn't at all certain where Erik had ever gotten the idea that Charles would have gone out of
his way to spare Erik's feelings about that. He certainly didn't recall ever having done so. "Not so
much." He opened the car door and got out. There had been few moments in this second life which
had echoed any moment in their first life so clearly.

("When you said you had a cabin, I assumed you meant something rather larger," Erik had said in
1976, the first time they'd ever come here.

"I hope you're not disappointed," Charles had replied, transferring himself from the passenger seat
into his chair, pleased with Erik's thought process, which had been a dry recollection of the time
Charles had informed him he had a house they could all stay at—without mentioning that it could
have swallowed seventeen ordinary houses—paired with relief that now they wouldn't have to spend
their times together looking over their shoulders and wondering if this would be the time Erik would
be recognized. He'd been on the FBI's Most Wanted list since the "bombings" of several Trask
Industries laboratories the year before. They had not, of course, been bombings, and while Charles
knew he ought to have condemned them more strongly than he had, it was hard to completely
condemn any endeavor which had led to Erik dropping traumatized children off at his doorstep.)

"It's a lovely gesture, anyway," Charles said now. He approached the front door until a raccoon leapt
out from it and ran past him, at which point he scrambled to retreat in reverse. "We could fix it up
again, you know. There's nothing to stop us."

On their way back, Charles drove, while Erik got some shut-eye. Rather than return directly to the
school, they spent the weekend in the city, in the apartment they'd once shared with Raven, making
good use of their old beds in-between ventures outside. It wasn't quite the flavor of nostalgia that
Erik had intended, but it cheered Charles immensely all the same.

They returned to the cabin that summer, for a month and a half in-between their recruitment trip and
the beginning of the fall semester. Erik rebuilt the cabin from the ground up, while Charles
supervised, handed him things, and made trips down to the hardware store. For the first few weeks of
this endeavor, they shared a tent; for the entire summer, they shared an argument about whether
they'd had two bathrooms before, or if the second one Erik swore he remembered had actually been
a closet. Charles burned and peeled and burned and peeled until, for the first time in either life, he
had something resembling a tan, startling Raven terribly when she came to see what they were up to
toward the end of August.

That summer, it was easy to forget the world outside, what had been and what would be coming,
bearing down on them so quickly now. The last time the Vietnam draft had come around, Charles
had closes his doors, having had them open for barely a semester; as of now, the Xavier-Lehnsherr
Academy for Gifted Youngsters had been open for ten years. They were established in a way
Charles couldn't have dreamed of in that other life. More importantly, their knowledge of the future
had allowed them to better prepare for what was coming, so that they could batten down their hatches before the storm. There was no chance what had happened then would happen again, yet as the months and years marched on, Charles found that that was the nightmare he remembered the most often in his dreams.

But he had no nightmares that summer, and the only moments he recalled in his dreams were the sweet ones, from both of the lives he'd lived. Erik, on his back under the sink in their apartment years before, always determined to fix any leaks himself rather than letting Charles or Raven call the super; Erik, shedding helmet, boots, cape, and *Magneto* every time he crossed this threshold, the one place in the world that had always been meant just for them.

And most of all, Erik, staying by his side day after day, so that they'd had more days together by the early 1950s than they'd had over the forty years before that, so that they'd had more days together by now than either of them ever could have imagined, once.
Every New Beginning

2004

Of all the changes great and small between that other life and this one, there was this: Charles read the paper in bed every night as he waited for Erik to finish up his work and join him.

In that other life, he'd read the paper first thing every morning, and between the extra time he'd taken in the bathroom and refusing to rush his breakfast unless something somewhere was actually on fire, he'd nearly always had the time. He'd have had the time in this life, too, if he'd made it, but he'd found that it worked better to get up and go in the morning, and have something left to look at in the half an hour or so he spent with his bedside lamp on.

He could have left off reading the paper entirely, but he liked it. As the years passed, he'd found that reading news he'd already lived through once was like re-reading a favorite book from childhood: you recalled a scene or two, here or there, but most of the journey was a rediscovery of the details of a story it turned out you'd remembered vaguely at best.

Of course, Charles already knew what tomorrow's biggest news story would be, not because he remembered it—he actually didn't—but because it had been all over the television all day. And now, he found that he could barely focus on what the paper actually contained. He was too busy wondering...

"Erik?"

Erik, seated at the desk in the corner, nearly obscured by stacks of binders and other papers as he hunched over his laptop, grumbled something that might have been, "Give me a minute."

Instead of pointing out that he'd said the same thing twenty minutes ago, Charles returned to his paper. When he still couldn't concentrate on the news, he grabbed a pen from his bedside table and started on the crossword. There was, after all, very little point in trying to drag Erik to bed before he was willing to go. The days when Erik had been the one haranguing Charles about his sleep were long gone, and had been since 1972, which had been the year they'd founded X-Corp this time around.

In that other life, it had eventually occurred to Charles that running a school for mutant teenagers was like bandaging a paper cut on one's pinky finger while hemorrhaging everywhere else: There were mutants all over the globe who needed support, protection. Many of them were adults with jobs and families; many more were children too young for Charles' school, or adolescents who couldn't attend for one reason or another. There had been no organization which focused on providing support to mutants specifically, and so X-Corp had been born.

When Charles had first broached the subject in the summer of 1971, Erik had wanted to know why he hadn't done something like that before. It had taken Charles half an hour to convince Erik that, no, he wasn't lying: X-Corp had existed for twenty years before they died, with twenty-three offices around the globe. That Erik hadn't noticed was a combination of several things: the first, the tunnel vision which had only allowed him to see injustices rather than the forces working against them less violently than he; and the second, the care Charles and the board had taken to keep X-Corp operations under wraps—especially from Magneto, who would have been the worst possible visible supporter of their cause.

In this life, though, Erik had taken X-Corp over from the start. By 1974, he'd stopped teaching in
order to run X-Corp full time, a move which Charles had long had mixed feelings about. On the one hand, he missed Erik when he was gone, which was often, flying out to open yet another branch or whip an existing office into line while Charles stayed home to teach his classes and run the school. But while there was a part of him which greatly missed Erik's presence in a classroom just down the hall, there hadn't been any denying the obvious: While Erik had seemed content enough teaching, now he was driven, in a way that previously had resulted only in loss of life and the destruction of property, and now resulted in snappishness and sleepless nights, and thousands of lives changed for the better.

Charles gave it another five minutes, until the wavering impression of Erik's mind against his own suggested that his vision was beginning to blur. "Come to bed."

"In a minute," Erik said. "I have to make a call first."

"At one in the morning?"

Erik glanced at the clock, grimaced as if the Earth's rotation had been developed that way simply to cause him difficulty. "It's not one in L.A."

"Oh? Your employees are fine and dandy with being berated at home at ten o'clock at night?"

Sometimes this logic worked, and sometimes it didn't; tonight, Erik huffed and began moving papers around and closing binders, and shut down his laptop. When he was done closing up shop for the night, he headed into the bathroom for his nightly ablutions, last of all brushing his teeth.

Charles had meant to wait until Erik slid into bed beside him to bring it up, but there was something about listening to Erik spit into the sink—disgusting, always sounded as if he were hawking up phlegm instead, and he never, ever did it quietly—and something about having listened to Erik spit into the sink on thousands of nights just like this one. By the time Erik was gargling mouthwash, Charles couldn't help but simply say it:

"Let's married in San Francisco this weekend."

There came a little choking, more spitting, and then Erik emerged from the bathroom with a frown. He didn't say anything, until he had undressed and climbed into bed, and then what he said was, "No."

"What?" Charles had expected Erik to go for this. They'd never explicitly talked about marriage, but when the ruling about Massachusetts had come down last year, Charles had more or less assumed they'd be going there to be married shortly after same-sex marriages began to be performed later this year. "We've lived together for fifty-six years. Is there something you want to tell me?"

"Only that I'd prefer to remain married for longer than six months."

"Were you planning on divorcing me? I'd say an annulment isn't going to fly..."

"You don't remember this," Erik said, dryly amused. "How it ends."

"And you do?"

"There were less reading materials in prison than you might imagine," Erik said. "I kept up with the news."

When he put it that way, it wasn't really that surprising that Erik would remember something Charles didn't, this time; at this time in his first life, Charles had been focused entirely on issues pertaining to
mutantkind. Mutants had been publicly exposed in the early aughts, and it hadn't been what he'd always hoped it would be, their human brethren welcoming them as friends, as neighbors and family members; hostile politicians along with Magneto and other terrorists had made it so that the public perception of mutants was overwhelmingly that of monsters in their midst. Charles hadn't had any time or energy to pay attention to anything other than public relations on the one hand, and protecting his students on the other. The days when he had read the paper, in those last few years, it had tended to go in one ear and out the other.

"So how does it end?"

"The court strikes them down later this year," Erik said.

"Ah." Charles considered asking what Erik thought about May, in that case, but he didn't need to; Erik was already cataloging all the metal in their bedroom, trying to decide if any of it would do for a pair of wedding rings. "None of that, now," he said as he reached to switch off his bedside lamp. "We've had this discussion."

Said discussion had been going on since 1950 or so, and Erik had never paid even one iota of attention to Charles' insistence that, yes, sometimes he needed the handles of the bureau (for instance) to remain there—and, since Erik had misshaped lumps of metal stashed in every space in the house he inhabited with any frequency, he had no need to take anything of Charles' anyway.

Sometimes, however, Erik came to similar conclusions for his own reasons, and he now dismissed all the metal in the room as less than meaningful enough to serve.

There was plenty of meaning to be found in this room, in this bed; Charles reached out to stroke Erik's side, grateful as ever that Erik chose to sleep naked.

"Perhaps I'm too tired," said Erik, dryly again, as he turned toward Charles. "It's one in the morning, remember?"

"I remember," Charles said.

It had been a long time since they'd been able to make love most of the night without paying for it in the morning, but in this case, it was more than worth it.

***

They married in the third week of May. They drove instead of taking the train, just the two of them on a road trip for the first time since they'd last personally recruited students together, some eight or nine years before.

They invited none of their friends or family, preferring to have strangers as the witnesses—for there was no one among their loved ones who knew how much more there was to the story, what it truly meant for Charles Xavier and Erik Lehnsherr to exchange vows after a lifetime spent together. That the pretty tale where they'd met as young men by the purest chance, and spent the rest of their lives spearheading the cause of mutant rights, education and support across the globe was only half the story. No one else knew the full history leading to this day, and having anyone who thought they did present would have rang false.

When they returned from their honeymoon—two blissful weeks of nothing except each other, other than that mutually-understood hour or so per day where Charles called the school to see how things were going and Erik dashed off a dozen or so emails regarding various cases he was micromanaging—they held a wedding reception. Charles put himself in charge of the guest list, ignoring Erik's many
and varied objections, which began with "You know I like the Wolverine even less now that he's Jim with the boring skeleton; scratch him," and only became more unreasonable from there. Raven and Irene came, of course (a relationship Erik had insisted would last for no longer than six months, which had instead spanned thirty years and counting); Jean and Scott attended along with their girls, Rachel and baby Hope (neither of whom had ever been born in that other life, or perhaps even considered); and so many others, people they'd known in that past life and people they'd touched only in this one.

It was the best kind of party, featuring good food and drink, well wishes, and emotional toasts from the most unlikely people (including Erik, which was a surprise to everyone who'd never seen him posture in front of a camera in a much more ridiculous getup than what he was wearing tonight).

Later that night, when they were on their way home, Charles said to his husband, "That went well, don't you think?"

"It was fine," Erik said.

"I think we've done well," Charles said, meaning so much more than just the party.

***

2006

Two years later, it all came to an end on another drive.

They were on their way to the cabin upstate for their annual post-graduation trip. It had always been Charles' best method of unwinding after the school year's end, and this time he and Erik both would be unwinding from something else—an entire lifetime, relived. For this was the last day either of them remembered from that other life, because it was the day they'd died. Everything beyond today would be new, a future they couldn't predict because they hadn't yet lived in it. If the present was new enough, if they'd changed the world so that it was scarcely recognizable (at least for mutants) from what it had been before, it was still a milestone. The milestone. And that meant something.

The Xavier-Lehnsherr Academy for Gifted Youngsters had opened in 1955. Their doors had never closed, not once in fifty-one years—for, in this life, the school had been well-established by the time of the Vietnam draft. More importantly, their knowledge of the future had allowed them to better prepare for it, battering down their hatches in advance for a storm which had done very little damage to the school in this life, compared to what it had done in the last.

Other storms, they had managed to avert altogether. By the mid-1960s, Trask Industries had become Xavier Industries, swallowed in a hostile takeover so that the laboratories which had existed in that other life had never existed in this one. By the mid-1980s, William Stryker's course from distrust of mutants to paranoia and hatred had been altered so gradually that no one who knew him could have suspected that his neutrality on the subject had anything to do with any stimulus outside of having fathered one.

Things hadn't always been peaceful. There had been times when such violence had been leveled upon mutant populations that they'd been forced to step in. And there had been times when the two of them had nearly been torn apart due to disagreements on how they should handle certain problems: JFK had been nothing compared to their fight about whether or not Jason Stryker would attend their school, and that itself had been a mild tiff compared to their row over how to handle Jean Grey's burgeoning power.

It had long ago become clear just how different a world they were living in than the world that had
been before. Most of the time, Charles spent little time thinking about the past, or how they'd gotten here; there was enough to focus on in their present. But today the journey behind was nearly all he could think of, along with anticipation for the future.

"I can't wait to listen to some new music," he mused after a while, although most of what had come out over the last few years had seemed new enough to him. "See some new movies." Truthfully, the upcoming event he was most interested in was going to see Gabrielle Haller speak in July, but since Erik had always blackly suspected Charles had a crush on her, it was probably better not to bring that up. Not unless he wanted to listen to Erik sulk for the rest of the drive and half of the weekend.

"What was that one you're looking forward to?"

"Rocky Balboa," Erik said.

"What's it about, again? Maybe I'll go with you."

Erik sniffed. "You refused to see the other five."

"Oh, those. No, I don't want to see that. You'll have to go by yourself."

It began to rain, just a little at first, barely enough to bother with the windshield wipers—then, a few minutes later, a sudden downpour so that they needed to go from nothing to full speed.

"Would you mind," Charles began, meaning to say, 'putting your hands back on the wheel, and for God's sake slow down a bit too.' What came out instead was, "Ahhh," more gasp than anything else, an unbidden response to the sudden stab of pain behind his right eye. Headache, the worst he'd ever had—but familiar, too. Charles knew what this was. You didn't forget pain like this. He'd last felt this when he'd died, all those years ago. "No," he said, clutching his head in his hands. "Oh, no."

"Charles?" Erik's voice was sharp, his concern sharper, cutting into Charles' skull. "Are you all right?"

"No, no," Charles said, or meant to say. They'd stopped moving at some point, which had hurt, amid a loud squealing sound, which also hurt. Everything hurt, added to it. But now Charles could feel something he didn't recall having felt the last time he'd died. Beneath the pain, there was something else. Pulling at him. A tide, bigger than him, stronger than he was, dragging him away.

He held on as long as he could, but little by little and finger by finger, with the vague awareness that Erik was talking to him, demanding something from him, begging him for something he couldn't make out and hadn't a chance of giving, he had to let go.

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???

When Charles came to, his headache was less vicious, but everything else hurt. Something smelled foul, and his mouth tasted worse. He opened his eyes and everything was too bright. When he looked down, it took a minute for what he was seeing to register; when it did, he reached up to flush the toilet. It was much too loud, which didn't help, but after a few moments Charles braced himself against either side of the toilet bowl and forced himself to his feet. He went up too fast, and had to grab onto the sides of the sink to keep from going back down. The dizziness didn't subside, so it took him a few minutes to recover enough to look at himself in the mirror.

What he saw there came as little surprise. He was young again. Had hair. His eyes were red, his cheeks blotchy. He looked older than fifteen, this time, and one hell of a lot younger than seventy-three. He was sweating as if he'd just run a marathon, and there was a patch of something that might
have been vomit on his shirt.

He washed his hands, tried to think. It was harder than it ought to have been, considering he wasn't dead or dying. Thinking hurt, confused him. Even trying to figure out which of the two toothbrushes on the shelf were his seemed to take forever. Eventually he decided he had a fifty-fifty chance of being right, and picked one at random for the sake of getting that taste out of his mouth.

When he made it out of the bathroom, Raven was there, waiting for him. She stood up from the couch quickly, and said, "Here, let's get you back to bed."

"Erik," Charles said, after a long, blank moment of looking at her. "Where's Erik? I need to—I need to talk to him."

Please let Erik not have come back while he was driving, on his way to the house to work on Cerebro. That was where he was most likely to be, if Raven still lived with them. He'd spent years commuting back and forth from the city to North Salem and back again. Please let him not have had an accident. Erik had never had an accident, but this was different.

"Erik who?" Raven asked. "Who's that?"

"You know him. He lives here," Charles said, eventually. He had the feeling she'd been waiting for him to talk for a minute or two. Reeling, he reached out and grabbed the door frame, leaning heavily against it. "—Any idea how much I've had to drink?"

Raven peered at him. "Charles, you've been sick with the flu for days. Maybe you need to go to hospital after all."

"Absolutely not. I just had a CAT scan and an MRI three weeks ago. I'm fit as a fiddle. In excellent shape for a man of my age," Charles said, and shuddered so violently that his teeth clanged together—and that was the last he would ever recall of that particular conversation.

***

Understanding came slowly as Charles' health improved. During one of his lucid periods, he noticed that there only seemed to be two bedrooms in this apartment. During another, he wondered why there were no random balls of metal strewn about the living room. Erik had always been fiddling with something whenever he was thinking, and Charles and Raven had forever been tripping over the results, in the days they'd lived here together.

Eventually, Charles remembered there had only been two toothbrushes in the bathroom, even though Raven was still here. He remembered, too, that he had never been this sick in his second life—but he had been in the first one. Once, when he'd been at Oxford. Then he'd had pneumonia a few times after he'd been paralyzed. That had always been nasty.

His telepathy came limping back on what he would later decide was his third day back. It confirmed what he had already come to suspect—that this was not the apartment he, Erik and Raven had shared in New York. This was the flat he and Raven had had in Oxford while Charles had been working on his first PhD in that other life. In that first life. It had to be. He'd never gone to school outside of the states in that second life, opting instead to remain at Columbia, close to home while they prepared to open the school.

And Raven—she was different, too. For one thing, she hadn't left the flat since he'd been here, so far as he could tell. He had the feeling she didn't go out often, or at least not alone. This was a direct contrast to the Raven he'd known most recently, whom he'd actively encouraged to finish highschool
and develop friendships with people who were neither him nor Erik. The Raven who had, when she was nineteen, had a screaming fight with him when he didn't like it that she wanted to move to California to live with some friends, and then had gone anyway. She had written to him, and telephoned, and stayed in contact with him for all their lives, all the way up to personal computers and email. He'd loved her very much, and now she was gone. In her place was this stranger he had once known, and had never really understood.

"I'm sorry I scared you," he told her, the first day he managed to make it to the breakfast table under his own power. Breakfast for him was dry toast, ginger ale. "I didn't mean to. I must really have been ill."

"You really had me worried," Raven said. "But you're feeling a lot better now, huh?"

What she didn't ask was who he'd meant when he'd asked about someone named Erik—but the question lurked underneath the surface anyway, along with an odd jealousy Charles couldn't put his finger on for a while. When he did, he'd rather have not. Raven had had a little crush on Erik in their teenage years, he now recalled. Charles had been disgruntled about it at the time, and Erik had made a few snide remarks about how, give the girl an actual choice...

Well, that was uncomfortable. Charles didn't want to think about it any longer. "Do we have a newspaper around here? I'd like to catch up on what's been happening in the world."

A newspaper was produced. Charles barely glanced at the headlines or any of the stories. He had eyes only for the date at the top, which was the one thing he hadn't managed to pick up via either reasoning it out or picking it up out of someone's head. Most people didn't tend to carry the year around at the top of their conscious mind, after all.

The year was 1955, and he was twenty-two. At this time in his second life, Cerebro had been functioning for two and a half years, and they'd been in the middle of recruiting the teaching staff, just weeks out from recruiting their first students. Now, everything they had built so carefully in that second life was gone—not even razed to the ground, for none of it had ever been in the first place. Charles didn't know if they could do it all again. He didn't know that they should. All he did know was that he needed Erik to hurry up and get here, so they could figure it out together.

***

Charles expected to hear from Erik within a few days. To some extent, he was surprised not to have heard from him by the time he was well enough to worry about it. But days went by, and then weeks, and no word. Charles called the house in North Salem every day in case a telegram had come for him in his absence, and still nothing. At the three week mark, he became suspicious that Raven might have thrown some correspondence away, and felt guilty for days after peeking into her mind and learning that no such thing had transpired.

A month went by. Two. Charles couldn't help but make up worst-case scenarios. Perhaps Erik had come back in the middle of some fraught situation, and, too shocked to react, had been badly hurt, or even killed. Or perhaps Erik hadn't come back at all this time; maybe Erik as Charles knew him had been lost, replaced by his younger, more foolish self.

Charles bargained. If he got through the day without thinking about Erik even once, there would be a telegram waiting when he got home from campus. If he went out for a pint on Friday night instead of rushing home immediately, he'd find Erik sitting on the couch, irate at the very idea of Charles having fun without him. If he slept in on Sunday morning, as long as he could, Erik would be beside him under the covers when he awoke. He knew it was absurd to think like this, that it had no basis in reality, but he still couldn't make himself stop.
It was edging up on three months when the letter arrived, forwarded from North Salem. He'd never
expected a letter, had never inquired about anything other than telegrams, or else he would have
known it was coming, and not been shocked to find it with the rest of his mail.

He barely glanced at the return address; all he could see was his own name and the address, which
had been his and Erik's for so long, written in the hand he knew so well.

The letter was two pages, front and back. That was long for Erik, who'd always been as close-
mouthed in his personal correspondences as he'd been long-winded in front of the cameras or in
emails to his subordinates. He'd never written Charles a note when a post-it would do, never sent a
letter when he could get away with a telegram. What on earth could he have to say now that would
require so many words?

Charles was so relieved, so elated at hearing from Erik at last, that he'd read three paragraphs before
he registered any of it, what Erik was actually saying about where he'd been, whom he'd been with.

Charles stopped reading, then, standing in front of the cracked-open door to the flat. He reached out
and pulled the door shut, then carried the letter over to the couch, where he sat. He gave himself a
minute, his joy and relief now joined by the first stirrings of grief, before he unfolded the letter and
began reading it again from the first line:

Charles,
I'm not coming this time...
Dear John

From the side of the highway to a dim little room: Erik's eyes had barely begun to adjust to the darkness when there came a tugging on his arm. He looked down and saw a shadow, which after a moment became the outline of a young girl, no older than three or four.

"What is it?" Erik asked her, his mind working to determine where and, more importantly, when he was. It was obvious what had happened, that he had died and gone back again, but although the pain and the pressure had gone, the afterimage of Charles lying still under his hands remained, refusing to be blinked away long enough for Erik to take stock of his surroundings.

"I want another story," the girl said, or rather whined, in Polish. Later, Erik would think that was when he knew. "Please, Papa, please?"

In that moment, Erik forgot Charles entirely.

He'd had children, once. In that first life, there had been Anya, followed by Wanda and Pietro, and then, decades later, Lorna. That not one of them had existed in the life he'd spent with Charles had been Erik's only true regret, though he'd never had a civil relationship with the twins, nor known Lorna well.

This girl wasn't Wanda, and she wasn't Lorna. There was only one person from any era of his long life she could be.

Erik cleared his throat. He tried to remember what Anya had looked like, compare her face to this girl's. But the memory, ancient and fragile, this precious thing he'd shied away from for a hundred years—it crumbled at the slightest touch of his hands, so that there was no chance of unfolding it to see it clearly.

"What kind of story would you like, Schatz?" Was that what he'd called her? Another thing he couldn't remember, not with certainty.

"A scary one," she said with gusto, bouncing up and down and taking Erik's arm with her.

"A scary one, hmm?"

"Yessss!"

"You won't be frightened?"

"Noooo!"

"All right."

Later, Erik would never be able to recall what story he ended up telling her. Whatever it was, he told it slowly, cross-legged on that thin scratchy mattress, stopping often to ask her what she thought would happen next in order to give himself the chance to think, to catalogue the sound of her voice. Even after she'd fallen asleep, he didn't look away from her face. He couldn't, even once he'd fallen silent. He knew he needed to get up, orient himself, decide upon some course of action. Yet all that happened was that, after a few minutes, he reached out and smoothed her wild hair back from her face, lest she wake up with a mouthful of it in the morning.

He didn't move until a familiar voice came from behind him: "Max? When are you coming to bed?"
Erik stood, careful not to jostle Anya awake. He turned, and the person he'd known he would find was standing in the doorway, watching him. His former wife and the mother of three of his children in that first life, Magda had been an old woman the last time they'd met; now she was barely more than a girl, her hair dark again and her face unlined. There was a softness to her expression that would have been disarming if Erik hadn't known how quickly and thoroughly her feelings for him would change.

"I was telling her a bedtime story, that's all," Erik said. The defense came to him automatically, even after a lifetime.

"Do not be too long," Magda said, and then disappeared from the doorway again.

Before Erik followed, he turned back to his daughter; leaned down to smooth her hair back again, what must have been the seventh time, and kissed her forehead.

In the other room of their small apartment, there was another mattress, as thin and scratchy as the other, though larger. When Erik lay down, the woman who had turned on him the moment she'd found out about his mutation snuggled up next to him, draped her arm over his chest, and lay her head on his shoulder. After one frozen moment, Erik wrapped his arms around her shoulders. She didn't seem to have noticed his tension, the way he scarcely dared breathe lest she realize something was off.

"I am sorry you had to spend all day looking for that boy," she said. "I know you had other things you wanted to do today."

It was only a lifetime of not saying 'Was that today?' about various world events that kept Erik from saying it now, shock rocking through him as he remembered that day, still so clear in his mind after all these years and both of the lives he'd lived.

Anya had died on a Monday, after Erik had spent the entire previous day helping their neighbors search for another man's missing son. Hours searching the fields, dragging the river before dark—all that, and in the end it turned out that the idiot child had been hiding in someone's barn after breaking something of his mother's, and had fallen asleep there for hours, not hearing the search going on outside. The result had been most of a day lost, the last day Erik would have had with his daughter—and the next day, the very men he'd searched with had been the ones who'd tried to keep him from her as the fire raged.

The theft of that last day had tasted sour for all of Erik's life. It still did, but for the first time there was something else to consider, a new meaning of that day: Whatever else it had been, it was also clear marker in time, letting Erik know exactly what would happen tomorrow.

"Are you all right?" Magda asked.

Erik had gone too long without answering, had gone even more rigid when he'd meant to do the opposite. Now, he breathed in deeply, and said, "I'm fine. It's fine. I just want to go to sleep."

Magda agreed to this readily enough, and it wasn't long before she was asleep. Erik wasn't, his mind racing, flitting from one option to another in a way he wasn't accustomed to—he'd always been quick to decide on a course of action, swift in enacting it once he'd made up his mind, but now he found himself dithering. First, he thought he should take Anya and go now, be miles away from here by the time the sun rose, smuggle the both of them into New York within the next two weeks—but then he remembered the twins, who must already have been conceived, and knew he had to stay. Then, he thought he'd be vigilant the next morning, seek out the source of the fire before it began and snuff it out—but he'd never known what had caused it in the first place, and there were too many
ways it could go wrong. On and on, and in the end he knew only one thing: Whatever it took, Anya could not be in this building tomorrow.

Despite his intention to stay awake until he'd thought of a fool-proof solution, Erik eventually dozed off anyway, too physically exhausted not to. When he awoke, it was still night, and there was a three foot tall shadow hovering by the bed.

"Any?" he said. "What are you doing up?"

"I want to sleep with you," she said, sniffling.

"All right." Erik scooted away from Magda to give Anya room to squeeze between them.

Anya had just about stopped fidgeting when Magda stirred and said, in a sleepy voice, "Did you have a bad dream?"

"Uh-huh."

"Did Papa tell you a scary story again?"

"Nooo!"

"Good girl," Erik said.

This was enough to earn him a light smack on the arm. "What is wrong with you? You know she cannot sleep if you tell her scary stories right before bed!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Erik grunting, stashing away that knowledge for future reference, just one of the things he'd forgotten about his eldest daughter. "I don't mind having her here. Go back to sleep."

"I would not be awake in the first place if you had any sense," Magda said, but in any case, it wasn't long before both she and Anya were asleep again, and not long after that before Erik followed them, much as he meant otherwise.

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In the morning, Erik woke up to the smell of something burning, crackling in the heat. He threw off the covers and was halfway across the room before he realized nothing was on fire after all; there was something cooking on the cast iron stove along the far wall, that was all. Magda was standing there, her back to him as she stirred something in the pan.

He glanced around the room, then into the next one, where he found that Anya was having what appeared to be a rather intense conference with her dolls. Then, eyeing Magda with distrust, he said, "Good morning."

"Good morning." she said, and when she turned around to look at him, she gave him a tired smile. "I know you do not like sleeping in, but I did not think it would hurt to let you stay in bed a little longer. You did say you were tired."

"I was," Erik said, although he couldn't have woken up all that late; if the sky had grayed at all outside the window, he couldn't tell. It wasn't as if he had to catch a plane, or make any early phone calls, or check his email; everything he'd had to worry about in that other life had been wiped away, replaced with one concern, and one alone. "Thank you."
"You still have time to eat before work," Magda continued. "You will not be late."

"—I'm not going to work today," Erik said.

Magda turned again to face him, and this time the look on her face would have frozen Erik's blood in his veins as a young man. "What do you mean, you are not going?"

Thankfully, he was no longer a young man, and he'd seen her do so much worse. He was thus able to improvise:

"I'm not feeling well." He cleared his throat, an *ahem* that didn't seem to impress her one bit.

"You do not look like you are dying to me."

For one mad moment, Erik wondered what would happen if he said, 'Actually, I died last night, and our daughter will die today if I don't stop it.' What she would say if he added, 'I also don't remember where I work or what I do there, so you may as well give it up.'

The moment passed. "I have a bad feeling about today. I need to stay home."

"What do you mean, a bad feeling?" Without moving an inch, she gave off the impression that the next feeling he experienced just might involve being advanced upon by a displeased woman with a wooden spoon in her hand.

Erik glanced at the stove. Had this been the source of the fire? He'd never known what had caused it in that first life. It had never mattered, wouldn't have made any difference to the outcome. Now, he'd have given much to know for certain from where the danger would come. "Actually, we should go out," he said, upon spotting a basket on top of the cupboard. "We'll have a picnic. It'll be fun."

"Are you crazy?" Magda asked, her voice rising. "You cannot skip work. You will be fired!"

"That's not going to happen." Erik didn't care if it did.

"No, it isn't."

Magda turned back around to whatever it was she was cooking. "You are going to eat breakfast, and then you are going to work." Her tone said she would brook no argument. "Anya, get in here. It is time to eat."

***

Breakfast was a tense affair, consisting of porridge with bread.

Once seated, Erik reached for his spoon, not about to let Magda's glares change anything, or hunger interfere with his newly made plans for today. The spoon was thus floating half an inch off the surface of the table before he realized what he was doing. He snatched it out of the air, then glanced at Magda.

She hadn't gasped or screamed; instead, she was speaking to Anya, quietly but firmly. "You will eat everything in your bowl."

"I don't *like* porridge."

"That is too bad for you," Magda said. "You will like it less if it gets cold."

Largely repetitive, this debate went on for a few more minutes. At first, Erik was grateful for the chance to collect himself, to remember that he would have to be careful with his mutation going forward. It had been a lifetime since he'd been in a situation where he'd had to lie low, keep from
drawing attention to what he could do with metal instead of displaying it front and center. The knack of hiding would have to come back to him quickly. It would have to become second nature again, for the next nine months or so.

Finally, though, he grew tired of hearing it. "I have a surprise for you today," he told Anya, "but first you must do as your mother says."

"What surprise, what surprise?" Now Anya, who'd previously been slumped down in an impressive sulk, bounced up and down in her chair.

"Eat your porridge, and you'll find out," Erik said.

"Max," Magda said, but this objection was easy to ignore in the face of Anya's repeated questions about whether one, then two, then six bites of her porridge was enough.

***

Later, Erik would never remember precisely what Magda's final objections were, or what he said to make her stop arguing, to get the three of them out the door. She'd stopped fighting it by the time they left, but she hadn't been convinced; the suspicion was obvious in the way her lips were pressed together, the wary expression in her eyes when she looked at him. That she thought he'd lost his mind would have been obvious even if she hadn't made certain to say it five or six times.

Anya, on the other hand, was delighted to be going on a picnic on a day when Erik would otherwise have gone to work. She skipped along by Erik's side, one of her hands in his while she held her doll in the other. She chattered more than enough to fill the strained silence between her parents, telling Erik all about what her dolls had been up to that morning. Erik listened absently, taking in few of the details in favor of absorbing the way she sounded when she was excited about something, the way she tripped over words and kept having to backtrack.

Not long after they'd started out, the cobbled street became a little dirt road, flanked by pastures in which a number of cows were grazing. Anya's chatter trailed off as she wandered closer to the fence to get a better look; Erik wandered with her, but tightened his grip on her hand lest she dart underneath and be trampled or gored to death.

They didn't walk much farther after that. They'd gone far enough to be safe unless the entire town went up in flames—and so although part of Erik wanted to just go, keep on walking and see where this road would take them, he diverted them off the road as soon as they came across an unfenced field containing a large tree. It seemed as good a location as any for a picnic.

Erik had carried the basket; Magda had, all unwillingly, brought the blanket, which she now helped him spread out in the shade beneath the tree.

"What do we have here?" he said, with a wink at Anya as he lifted the top of the basket and peeked inside.

Anya, who'd had to be coaxed into having ten very tiny bites of her porridge, was more than content to eat several thick slices of bread, with a generous helping of homemade jam.

"Isn't this nice?" Erik asked Magda a little while later, when the food had been put away and they were watching Anya and her doll explore whatever there was to be found in the grass. Even Magda couldn't deny that it was a beautiful day for a picnic: Sunny and bright, with a gentle breeze to keep it just this side of too warm. Of all the things that Erik had resented about the day his daughter had died, he'd never before thought about how obscene it was that it should have been on a day like this.
Now, watching her play, he could think of little else.

"I do not understand what we are doing," Magda said, smoothing her skirt down nervously. Her eyes searched his face, as she had every few minutes since they'd set out; Erik didn't know what she expected to find there, but he'd always found it beyond endurance to be watched like this, to be so closely observed by a person so anxious about whatever they were seeking from him. "Are you having trouble at work again? Is that what this is about?"

"—No." Whatever trouble he may have had at work a century ago, there would be no recalling it now.

"Max...you cannot lose your job. Not again"

"I'm not going to lose my job." Then, because he couldn't be sure he wouldn't, he added, "And if I do, I'll get another one."

He didn't recall the specifics of anywhere he'd worked while he and Magda were married, but he was quite certain that whatever he'd done had involved manual labor. Such work was surely easy enough to come by for a strong young man, especially one who had a certain way with metal, which might present itself as a greater strength than expected, or a special touch with the machinery.

"We cannot afford for you to be out of work," Magda said. "Not even for one day, Max."

"We'll survive."

For a long beat, Magda was silent. Then she sighed and said, "Max, I am—I might be—what is that?"

Erik followed her gaze, which now was fixed on the village, where a black curl of smoke could already be seen, rising above the rooftops.

"Something appears to be on fire," he said, and if he sounded less than sincere, if there was relief in it rather than the concern and surprise he had been trying for, she didn't seem to pick up on it.

When Magda insisted they collect Anya and their belongings and head back into town, Erik put up no resistance. By the time they made it there, that little curl of smoke had become an angry cloud. The closer they got to their apartment, the thicker the haze became, acrid, stinging Erik's eyes and burning at the back of his throat, and the more firmly he held onto Anya's hand.

Before they came to their street, Erik had had little doubt that this fire was the one he remembered; when they came around the last corner and saw black smoke pouring out of their building, the mob of people working to put the fire out before it could spread further, there was no room for doubt remaining.

***

In his dreams, Erik had seen Anya die countless times, and had saved her only twice.

The first time had been the night after he'd killed a man, one of many, a former SS officer Erik had thought was alone in the house; his daughter with her blond hair and pale features had looked nothing like Anya, yet her screams had followed Erik into the dark long after he was out of range to hear her. They'd stayed with him, taken root inside his head, and when he'd judged that he'd gone far enough to make it safe to sleep, it had been Anya he'd seen there. She'd screamed, too—but this time, he'd been fast enough, strong enough, ruthless enough to get to her in time. When she was safe, he'd embraced her fiercely; he had been weeping when he woke up, and kept weeping until he
The second time had been a week after he’d torn down a lab owned by Trask Industries. There had been mutants there, children. It was nearly always children, whose parents had been convinced—little ‘convincing’ actually needed for too many of them—to let them be taken. One girl had looked very like Anya, and though Erik had dismissed the resemblance immediately, it had lingered until he thought it gone. Then, he'd dreamed that the girl had been Anya after all, pulled not from the fire but from a cage. Halfway through the dream, he’d remembered: This girl couldn't be his Anya, who would by then have been an adult, perhaps with children of her own. But knowing beforehand it wasn't real hadn't helped, hadn't made waking up to a world where she’d been dead for longer than she'd lived any better.

This time, the third time, Erik knew what he'd wake up to. He'd never dreamed of Anya in this life; the debt had come due, that was all. He hadn't saved her. They hadn't gone to a neighbor's house after the fire had been put out. Magda hadn't spent half the afternoon weeping over the loss of the few photographs they'd had of their small family; Erik hadn't spent that time impatiently comforting her as he tracked Anya's every movement, nor had he checked every few minutes after she'd fallen asleep to be certain she was breathing. None of it had happened. When he allowed himself to wake up, he'd find Charles next to him, as he had on thousands of other mornings. It would be the first of any of them he'd wish otherwise.

So focused was Erik on these hateful facts that he dismissed others as mere noise, echoes of a dream that hadn’t yet finished with him: the firmness of the mattress beneath him, when the bed he and Charles shared had always been too soft for his taste; the blanket's rough texture, an irritant after so many years of smooth sheets; the lack of a warm body next to him, when Charles slept in whenever they were here, and had never known how to keep to his own side of the bed; the murmuring and bustling of other people, when they'd rarely had visitors at the cabin, and never before noon.

"Max," came some more noise. "Max, get up. You cannot be late for work."

Someone poked his shoulder, hard. The blanket was ripped away, letting in the cold. Erik opened his eyes, and there stood Magda—not the old woman who'd hated him, but her younger self, this girl Erik barely remembered.

"You have to go to work today," she said in a soft voice, almost pleading where yesterday she had been demanding.

"Yes, yes," Erik said, scanning the room for Anya as he got up. He found her a few feet away, still sleeping. Worn out from the excitement of yesterday, probably. "I'm going. Stop worrying."

"Do not tell me not to worry," Magda said, and though she seemed less tense already, they weren't halfway through breakfast before she was once again weeping over lost photographs.

***

So, Erik returned to work.

As it turned out, he worked in a warehouse, loading and unloading boxes. He was late the first day, and stumbled through every aspect of the job, acutely aware of the pitying looks from the men he worked with—but as much as it grated, it served his purposes, too, and he swallowed it.

Here, the fire worked with him, rather than against: his supervisor assumed it had started before his shift; his coworkers assumed it was the shock of losing his home that made him at first so clumsy, as if he'd never before worked with his hands and his back, and certainly never done it here. As a result,
Erik had more leeway to re-learn the work than any of the recent hires, who were indeed quickly fired if they couldn't or wouldn't pick it up quickly.

The memory of working there didn't come back to him, but once Erik had put in a few days at the warehouse, it no longer mattered. He'd learned how to do the work well enough to keep his job without help from the other men, and that was enough.

And soon enough, this life, the one where he worked twelve hour days, six days a week, and came home to Anya and Magda—all of it began to seem normal, while both of his past lives receded.

Charles would have had something to say about this, as he had in the early years of their second life, whenever one of them had remarked on how strange it wasn't that they shared an apartment with each other and Raven, that they both were back in school. He'd have gone on about how the mind is made to adapt, to find familiarity in even the strangest environments, or the most unlikely developments. But nothing he could possibly have said would have prepared Erik for what he would find here.

***

By the time they moved into their new apartment several weeks later, the only part of the act that didn't seem normal was pretending as though he were no more than human. Hiding his powers was nothing that hadn't been necessary the last time, before he and Charles had opened the school and brought the reality of mutants out into the light—but then, he'd at least been able to relax when he was at home. Now, he had to be as guarded there as he was at work.

It wasn't easy. Time and again, he found himself slipping, checking himself, glancing quickly at Magda to see if she'd noticed. Somehow she never seemed to, even when he'd done it right in front of her and she couldn't have missed it.

When he could manage it—no more than one night out of three, as his work left him exhausted at the end of the day—Erik lay awake in bed until he was certain Magda was asleep, then melted down a few coins so he could piece them back together in the dark. Once, this had been an absent-minded ritual he'd done throughout the day, calming him and increasing his focus; now it was his only outlet, and merely made him chafe a little less the next day.

There was nothing for this, either. He would simply have to bear it for another few months until the twins were born.

Or so he thought, until one night a week after they'd moved, when he was putting together a new kitchen table. The wood wasn't much, cheap and rough, but it would do well enough for its purpose. The trouble, once he was finished with the sanding and had dragged all the pieces inside, was with his tools. Where he'd more or less mastered utensils, now he found himself fumbling with the hammer and screwdriver, dropping the nails and screws onto the floor.

Worse, Magda kept glancing at him from across the room. Some days she was quick to have an opinion on whatever he was doing, but other days she seemed content to keep her feelings to herself, and supplement them with curious looks. Although she'd surely seen him put together furniture before, she seemed fascinated by this. She'd paused in her mending when Erik came in the door and hadn't picked it up since, preferring to watch this whenever she wasn't glancing out the window to keep an eye on what Anya and the neighbor children were doing outside.

It was distracting—and, because he was distracted, not only by Magda but by keeping track of the location of Anya's hair clip at the same time as he was forcibly containing his mutation, Erik did something then that he had never done in either of his previous lives, and would never do again in
any life: He smashed his thumb with the hammer.

"Goddamn it." Erik jumped to his feet, waving his hand around.

Magda rushed over from the window. "What did you do?"

"What do you think I did! I hit myself with the hammer!"

"Oh. Why did you do that?"

"I didn't do it purposely." Erik had always thought people who screamed and howled over banging themselves with a hammer were being melodramatic, reacting more to the foolishness of having done it in the first place than to whatever moderate pain they might be experiencing. But no. It hurt. He felt even more foolish as he allowed her to take his hand between her own and examine his thumb, as if he were a child who'd fallen and scraped his knee. "It slipped."

It hadn't slipped so much as he had, for a single moment, lost track of just where his hand was in relation to the hammer's head—but he wasn't about to try to explain that. Let her think him a clumsy idiot. It didn't matter. It paled to what she'd think if she knew—

"Well, you should have stopped it," Magda said. Having been assured that his death wasn't imminent, she let his hand go, and regarded him with much the same expression she'd worn weeks ago, when she'd told him to go to work. "What has gotten into you? You are never going to finish anything if you do not do it your way. We need a table today, not in three weeks."

The pain was already less than it had been, though it still throbbed viciously; in that moment, Erik hardly noticed. He'd forgotten his foolishness; he'd nearly forgotten she had seen him do something foolish.

"My way," he said.

"Mm-hmm. With the—" Magda made a so-so hand gesture, encompassing Erik, the table, the metal tools scattered around.

"With the," Erik repeated.

"With metal," she said. "The thing you do. It is safe now. No one is going to see you but us."

"—All right," Erik said, when it became clear she expected him to say something. There was nothing else he could have said. 'You knew, all this time?' would have been idiotic. The answer was apparent in the next few minutes anyway, as Magda returned to her mending and Erik returned to his project. She showed not one jot of surprise when he took her at his word and used his mutation to maneuver hammer, screwdriver, brackets, nails, screws, and finished in a quarter of an hour what might have taken hours if he'd continued with only his hands.

Magda knew. She'd known all along. Before the fire. Perhaps before Anya. Long enough, at least, that when she dropped her thimble a little while later, and Erik handed it back to her from across the room, she plucked it absentmindedly from the air as if she'd done such a thing a thousand times before.

***

This was the story Erik had told himself for two lifetimes: Once, a young man had married a young woman, and hidden a part of himself from her. He'd tucked it away until, one day, there was a fire, their daughter trapped within the building. When the young man had tried to save her, a mob of their
neighbors had barred the way, so that his power had erupted, tearing down everyone standing
between himself and his daughter. But he'd been too late, and afterward his wife had called him a
monster. The young man left then, and was an old man before he learned his wife had given birth to
two more of his children in the fire's aftermath. The old woman she'd become had never hesitated to
stand between him and his grandchildren, as well.

That was the story, old and well-worn, unquestioned until now. Erik hadn't wanted to question it,
had never thought back to their life before the fire if he could help it. There had been no point.

In the days after learning that the beginning of this story had gone differently after all, he couldn't
help but think back to the way they had been, once. Memories he had never sought out came back to
him during those long, repetitious shifts at the warehouse, and their beginning became something else
altogether.

Once, there had been a young man, who'd run into a young woman he'd known in childhood, while
on the trail of something else. He'd thought she was beautiful as a girl, and time and pain had done
nothing to change that. Though he'd had a mission, he'd agreed to meet her again the next day, in the
same place in the market they'd first bumped into each other. At their second meeting, he'd brought
her a bouquet of wildflowers, and married her less than a week later. Not long afterward, she
discovered something about him he'd tried to keep from her, glimpsed the monster he'd determined to
keep leashed. Instead of leaving him, as the young man had feared she might, she had stayed, and,
seeing his prickliness on the subject, had left it alone most of the time.

The fire and Anya's death had still happened. Magda had still left him, kept the twins from him,
hated him. But somewhere along the line, Erik had forgotten exactly what had caused her to so
loathe him, had remembered the cause as his mutation alone.

Now that he remembered otherwise, he couldn't help but recall so many other things. The way she'd
teased him when they were children, and laughed when he blushed; the way he'd gone out of his
way to show off whenever she was near, while pretending he didn't see her. How they'd lain
together, the day they'd found each other again, she knowing barely more than he did, each of them
more than willing to learn the rest together. The day after that, when she'd asked him to stay with her,
and he hadn't been able to imagine doing anything else. The days she'd told him she was pregnant;
the day she'd miscarried what would have been their first child, and the day Anya had come into the
world, wet and wrinkled and screaming.

Erik had forgotten all about him, but there had once was a young man who hadn't realized that
everything they had would fall to ashes. And for the first time, he began to remember what it had
been like to be that young man.

***

A few nights after Erik had smashed his thumb, when his thumbnail was several shades less purple
than it had been, Magda was brushing her hair before bed. Though Erik had witnessed the ritual
every night, it now came with a weight it hadn't before, and where Erik previously had only been
impatient with the extra time it took for Magda to be make herself ready for bed, now he found
himself caught by the image, cataloguing it as he still did with Anya every day.

"What?" Magda said when she caught him staring, sounding more annoyed and tired than she did
amused. She didn't care to be watched either, and had snapped at him for it a few times over the last
few days.

Erik was as tired of himself as she sounded, and perhaps it was that which led him to say, "Let me
help you with your hair."
He had no specific memories of brushing Magda's hair—most of what he'd remembered was either the big moments or the broad strokes. But as she handed him the brush and he settled on the mattress behind her, it had the feeling of something he'd done before. It was as familiar as telling their daughter a story. It was older than that, a knowledge not of his mind but of his hands, which seemed to know exactly what to do even as they relearned the way Magda's hair felt between his fingers.

Magda had been nearly done by the time Erik offered his help, and it wasn't long before she leaned back against him. He set the brush aside and wrapped his arms around her middle, and this seemed familiar too. Even more familiar was Magda's little sigh when he kissed her shoulder, and the way they moved with each other after that, revisiting what they had once learned together.

***

"You did not pull out," said Magda, when they had finished.

It took Erik a moment; it had been a lifetime since he'd last concerned himself with birth control of any kind. "—I'm sorry. I forgot."

Magda was quiet for a minute, but then, when Erik had nearly drifted off, she said, "Would it be such a bad thing?"

"What?"

"If we had another baby. Would that be so terrible?"

"Another one? Don't we have enough trouble already?" Erik teased, so that she wouldn't know that he knew—for if she were talking like this, then she must at least suspect something. "You have met our daughter."

Anya had turned out to be quite the troublemaker, the ringleader of every other child her age in their new neighborhood. Few days went by without someone's parents complaining to Magda about her. Fewer days went by that Magda didn't expect Erik to have a little chat with her. Magda wasn't satisfied with these, either, insisting that he was too soft on her, which Erik didn't help by laughing about it as soon as Anya was asleep. He found it difficult to get worked up about the mischief she got herself into.

"I do not think it would be so bad," Magda said.

"Perhaps not."

"I think you would like another baby."

"Maybe."

"I would like another one," and although Erik thought she might go on to tell him then, she didn't say anything more that night.

***

The following week, Magda began looking wan and pale in the mornings. Erik said nothing. Instead, he waited, as he had grown used to waiting. He went to work in the morning and home again at night, spending as much of each day with his daughter as he could, and spending his nights by Magda's side.

One night, he was sitting at the kitchen table after dinner, sanding some pieces of wood he intended
for a cabinet, when Magda came up behind him. She watched for a minute—somehow less grating
than it had once been, and Erik positioned himself in such a way that she could have a better view of
what he was doing—and then said, "I know what you should make next."

"I know what I'm going to do next." Erik glanced around to make sure Anya wasn't within earshot.
"I thought someone might like a dollhouse."

"Well, you will want to make a cradle first," Magda said. "I think that will be more important."

Erik had been preparing for this moment ever since he'd come back. He'd planned to act surprised.
He hadn't realized that he'd find himself forgetting to act entirely, as he turned around to look at her.
"Really?" he said, a grin splitting his face without his permission. Then, "Are you sure?" although he
was more sure than it was possible for her to be.

He reached for her, lay his hand on her stomach for just a moment, then pulled her onto his lap.

"Yes," Magda said, giggling when he kissed her neck. She had a ticklish spot there, and a mole he
couldn't resist; as importantly, she couldn't kick him from this angle. "Yes, yes, I am sure."

***

Over the course of Erik's life, there had been moments when the entire trajectory of his future had
changed in an instant. One such fork in the road had come on a beach in Cuba. Another had come at
Alkali Lake. Another, happier one had come when he was a young man, who'd met a girl he used to
know when he'd been hunting the man who killed his mother.

This wasn't like that.

It would never seem to Erik as if he'd changed his mind about taking his children to Charles after the
twins were born. There was no one moment when he decided to stay. There wasn't even one single
day when he realized he'd already made the decision. When he finally acknowledged it to himself, it
seemed like something he had known for a very long time indeed—

And something he'd been avoiding for quite some time, too.

Once he'd acknowledged it, he had to acknowledge something else, too: That he had to tell Charles.

It took him weeks to work himself up to it, to take a detour on his way home from work one night to
buy ink and paper.

Once he paid for his purchases, he took a second detour—this time to a meadow outside of town,
where he picked a bouquet of wildflowers. When he arrived home and handed them to Magda, he
felt again the way he had, so long ago. As if, having found each other again, they could make
something good from out of the ashes.

That night, telling Anya another story as Magda listened in the doorway with her hand resting on her
stomach, Erik thought they'd made something good indeed. Perhaps they would be able to keep it,
this time. He knew more, now. He was older, wiser. He knew what tomorrow, what all the years to
come would bring.

The next afternoon, he took out the ink and paper, and began to write. Magda watched over his
shoulder for a few minutes, then said, "What are you doing?"

"I'm writing to an old friend," Erik said. He didn't try to hide what he'd written thus far; Magda
couldn't read English, though she wanted to learn to speak it, and knew a few words already.
“Someone I met when I was in America. I promised I would write to him, but I haven't until now. I've kept him waiting far too long.”

“You will have a lot to tell him, then,” Magda said. She was showing by now, the curve of her stomach able to be felt against Erik's side.

“Yes,” Erik said, and stayed up writing long after she'd gone to bed, until it was done.
"I was right," Erik said, shifting his son from one arm to the other. Not that this was news to anyone by now; what he'd known since the beginning, Magda had believed since he'd convinced her they could afford to hire a midwife. It had taken that woman only a few moments, on that first visit, to declare that what she felt when she laid her hands on Magda's belly made sense only if there were two babies instead of one. In that moment, Erik had let out the breath he'd been holding for weeks. In the months between then and now, Magda had more or less forgiven him for telling her she was too fat to be having anything less than twins in the first place...but perhaps he shouldn't have reminded her.

"You were guessing. I am not going to give you credit for that," Magda said. She didn't seem inclined to snap at him for pushing the point. Hours of labor now over and done with, the midwife gone with her payment, she had eyes only for the two newest people in the world, or at least in their part of it. The first of these was the girl, held in her arms; the other, the boy, held in Erik's. They were red and prunish, and about half the size Erik had expected. He'd known, of course, that they'd be getting infants, and that twins were likely to be even smaller than the average newborn...still, he hadn't expected them, somehow. It was a strange thing to see them like this, when he'd only known them as adults in his first life.

They were asleep now, the both of them, exhausted from the work of being born, screaming about being born, being examined, being washed, being fed for the first time. This was surely one of the few quiet moments any of them would experience for the next several years.

(Or perhaps the next several decades. Erik hadn't forgotten the trouble the twins had once caused within the Brotherhood, fracturing it to pieces before their departure. Nor had he forgotten the bridges he'd burned in retribution, back when neither he nor they had known of their relationship. There had been no fixing it, in that life; in this one, nothing had yet been broken.)

Have you given any thought to names?" Erik asked, unable to wait any longer.

They'd spoken of names a few times, when Magda had still thought they were having a single baby; after that, she'd refused to discuss it, saying there was no point in talking about it until they knew the baby's sexes. Erik hadn't had a chance to direct her toward the names he wanted, the ones they'd had in that first life.

Magda looked at him with a somewhat distant expression. "Do you remember my cousins?"

"—Should I?" Where he'd had a small family, she'd had a very large one, none of whom Erik remembered. Perhaps some of them had been among the group of children who'd gathered to tease them, one of the times he'd gotten up the nerve to talk to her. They could all have been her cousins, or none of them, for all he knew.

"My mother's sister had six children. The middle two were twins, a few years older than me. A boy and a girl—are you sure you do not remember?"

A shiver ran through Erik's body; goose-pimplles rose on his arms. "Wanda and Pietro."

"So you do remember." Now Magda was weeping, a little: though she'd had more to begin with, her family was all gone, too.

"...I remember Wanda and Pietro very well."
In the end, it was no more than half a lie.

Magda wept for a little while longer. What had once annoyed him, Erik now knew how to handle; he stayed with her, stroking her hair, remarking on the twins' features. He amused himself by claiming Pietro looked just like her, when in fact he'd grow up to look like Erik's twin.

For the first time, he found himself wondering how it must have been for her in that other life, going through this alone while still grieving for Anya. He wondered, too, how many of her tears were due to grief, and how many to the relief that comes from not being the only one who remembers.

***

A few hours later, it was morning, or close enough, and Erik fetched Anya home from the neighbor's house. For all her whining and crying when he'd had to leave her, she whined more when he attempted to shake her awake now. In the end, he gave it up and carried her home, something he usually tried to avoid; he had yet to rid himself of the shade that came upon him whenever he did—the momentary conviction, until he witnessed her take a breath or otherwise stir, that this wasn't a living child at all in his arms. Sometimes, she slept so deeply that they might have been back there, he having just pulled her out of the cabinet in which she'd hidden during the fire...

This morning, though, she whined enough to keep the shade at bay, and when he laid her down in her own bed, she sat up a moment later. "Where's Mama?" she asked. "I want Mama."

"Let's go see her, then. She's in the other room," Erik said, and, when Anya dashed past him, "—Be careful."

He needn't have worried. Instead of launching herself into Magda's lap, Anya came to a screeching halt before the rocking chair where Magda was currently feeding Pietro.

"This is your little brother, Pietro" Magda said, beckoning Anya closer, and nodding at the crib next to her. "And that is your little sister, Wanda."

Still Anya hung back.

"It's all right," Erik said. He picked up Wanda from her cradle, sat down in the armchair next to the rocking chair so that Anya might see her, too.

For her part, Anya inched forward a little more, eying both babies with no little suspicion. How could she have foreseen this completely unexpected turn of events? They'd only told her twenty or thirty times over the past few months that she was going to be a big sister, that she would have to share them.

Erik waited for Anya to say something, do something. It didn't take long; she wasn't exactly lacking in opinions at the best of times, far less when some travesty was occurring.

"They're ugly," she said, stamping her foot for emphasis. "Take them back."

It was only several lifetimes of control that kept Erik's response sober. (Magda didn't fare so well, giggling audibly.) "I'm afraid it's too late for that. We're stuck with them now."

Anya's expression said what she thought, very clearly: 'That stinks.'

As for Erik—if he hadn't been sitting, he might have landed on the floor, for it had just occurred to him that, of all the things that had never happened, he'd somehow failed to prepare himself for the sight of Anya meeting the twins. They'd been separated in his first life by a gulf barely seven months
wide—an eternity, the blink of an eye. He'd known this was coming, but knowing had not prepared him.

A minute later, he put Wanda back and set about making breakfast, but his mind kept returning to that moment for the rest of the day, and would keep returning to it for the rest of this lifetime and beyond.

***

A year passed, and another, and another after that.

Every month or two, Erik received a letter. At first, they were postmarked from the U.K. After a few years, it changed to New York. Once or twice a year, he wrote back with as much news of his own life as he thought Charles would care to hear. He intended to write more often, but self-consciousness along with guilt made his letters stilted; between that and all the distractions his new life provided, it was easy to forget until it had been six months, or eight, or twelve.

After he'd finished furnishing their apartment, he continued making furniture—chairs, tables, bookshelves, cabinets. Anything that occurred to him, anything he might be able to sell. What had killed time over stints in various safe houses in that first life, the hobby he'd amused himself and Charles with in his second life—now it was something he could do well enough to charge a good price for.

For the first couple of years, Erik's burgeoning furniture business supplemented his income from the warehouse. It meant his wife and children ate better; it meant they could have new clothes and shoes on occasion, not just cast-offs and hand-me-downs, kept until they were outgrown by everyone or too worn even to be mended any longer. It meant that by the time the twins were both walking, they could move to a larger apartment on a better street.

It meant all of this, and still there was money remaining, enough to set aside a good portion against the day they would immigrate to the U.S. Neither Magda nor Erik wished to stay here, where people who should have known better still blamed them for the war and gave their children dirty looks in the street for having had the bad judgment to be born to a mother who was Romani and a father who was a Jew.

When the twins were three, Erik finally convinced Magda to allow him to quit his job. He moved his workshop out of their home and into the back room of his own shop space. There, he spent an hour every day filling orders, and another few hours experimenting with design and function. During the summer months, he often brought Anya with him for a day; during the school year, he sometimes brought the twins—at least, once they were past the stage of grabbing everything he told them not to touch and eating everything he told them not to put in their mouths. Even then, two were at least six times the managing of one, and so on those days Magda often came to visit him at lunch time, taking the twins back home with her when she left. Erik got less work done by far any day his children were with him, but he never enjoyed his work more than when they were.

It was a smaller, quieter life than any Erik had lived before. He had no plans, no ambitions any greater than his family's future. No one could have been more surprised than he at how content he was to remain that way. No one could have been more complacent.

***

One day, shortly after the twins started school, Magda came to see him at his shop. She brought a lunch, as she often did. After they'd eaten together, he showed her his current project, a puzzle box for children. He'd made unique ones for Anya, Pietro and Wanda for their birthdays the previous
year, and had later discovered there was a market for them. A small market comparable to other things, enough so that each one he sold could still be unique in its design, which pleased him.

Before he had half-finished demonstrating how you could open this one if you were its owner and knew the trick of it, Magda, who had been nodding along the way she did when she was waiting for an opening to talk about something else, jumped in.

"Maybe we should have kept those cradles you made," she said.

"What?" They hadn't had the room to keep the twins' cradles, not once they were old enough not to need them anymore. It hadn't been anything close to an argument. They'd agreed. But now Magda was looking at him like she was expecting something. As usual, it put him on the defensive. "Why?"

"Why do you think?"

"I have no idea. Perhaps you should tell me and save both of us the aggravation."

But then he noticed the way Magda's hand rested against her abdomen, remembered what she'd meant the last time she hinted around about cradles. Suddenly, his hands were cold, and there was a roaring sound in his ears, loud enough that he barely made out her answer:

"We are going to have another baby."

Spots erupted in front in Erik's vision, painting the world black.

A minute later, he came back to himself to find he was sitting in a chair he'd finished the day before. His head was between his knees, Magda's hands warm on his back.

"Would you repeat that?" Erik asked when he couldn't sit there letting her rub his back any longer.

"After that, I am not sure I should." Magda sounded worried. She often sounded worried—about Anya, the twins, all the things there were to fret about when you had children; about money and his work, much he made and how much they spent; about any food, ever, that was wasted in their house, no matter how well-fed the five of them were—but this was the first time in quite some time she'd seemed to lack confidence in him. It grated more than Erik would have imagined, just a few years ago.

"I'm fine." His hands clenched into fists where Magda couldn't see. He forced them open again, turned to face her. "You're pregnant. We're having another baby."

"Yes." She smiled at him hesitantly, still unsure.

Erik smiled back, an expression as false as the grin he'd worn the last time had been true. "That's wonderful."

"You are happy?"

"I'm surprised," Erik said, and pulled her close so he wouldn't have to continue smiling. "That's all. There's nothing for you to worry about."

***

There was so much to worry about. As soon as he could, Erik ushered Magda out the door—she needed to go home and lie down before the children got out of school—meanwhile, he needed to finish today's work if they were going to be able to afford another baby—yes, he thought they could
afford a baby—couldn't they talk about it later?—and spent the remainder of the afternoon trying not to think about it.

In the end, he gave up on the puzzle box an hour before he normally would have closed up shop. Instead of heading home early, as he usually would have done on such a day, Erik went to the bar down the street. There, he ordered a beer, and then another, and another after that. By the time some of the men he'd once worked with (who'd often invited him to go drinking after work, and teased him good-naturedly about how he always turned them down) arrived, he'd had enough to begin feeling it; by the time he left, hours after that, he was unsteady on his feet. He fumbled his way back to his shop, thinking he'd get more work done before heading home. By the time he began to sober up, it was well past midnight, and he'd managed to ruin the puzzle box he'd intended to finish. It would have been easy enough to fix the metal he'd twisted; there was nothing he could do to mend the splintered wood.

He expected Magda to be waiting up for him when he got home, as she'd waited up for all his late nights at the shop and all but his latest shifts at the warehouse. He spent the walk home starting a row with her inside his head. Why was she so worried about how much he'd had to drink? Did she have to be such a dreadful nag?

But when he arrived home, the apartment was completely dark. Magda, like the children, had long since gone to bed. When he lay down beside her, she didn't so much as stir.

The next morning, no longer even remotely interested in marital conflict in the face of a raging headache and tedious sensitivity to light, Erik offered no explanation for his lateness. Magda didn't ask, though she surely noticed how little he ate, how short he was with Anya and the twins when they began squabbling.

Over the next few months, Erik took more and more orders, stayed later and later at the shop in order to fill them. He threw himself into woodwork the way he'd once thrown himself into X-Corp, pushing himself to do better, more intricate work with every commission. Where he'd once been driven by a cause greater than himself, now he was driven by something else. He kept himself too busy to think about it, and yet it shadowed his every waking moment, and haunted him in his dreams—murky impressions he didn't try to piece together in the morning, that cast a pall over him for the rest of the day. His sleep began to suffer, as did his relationship with his children, whom he found himself snapping at more and more often even as he saw less and less of them.

Magda, meanwhile, took to watching him like her vocation, the way she watched and worried when she thought something was up, when she was gathering intelligence before she confronted him about it. Erik didn't like being watched any more now that he understood it.

Every so often, he found himself snarling at her about something else in advance. When she snarled back, that was all to the better. Where they'd rarely fought before, now they clashed a few times a week over the most insignificant matters. Dread wound around Erik tighter by the day, and there was no hiding it. There was no running, as he might have done in another life. If he'd wanted to, he couldn't have abandoned his family now. His feet wouldn't have moved. His legs would have obeyed him. There was nothing for it but to stay and to endure, knowing already how it all would end.

It was guaranteed to come to a head. Anyone could have seen it coming. Erik would have avoided if it he could have. He saw so clearly what he needed to do to make things right again in their household, and yet—when he decided to start making it home at a decent hour, he'd look up to find it was already long after dark; and when he told himself he'd speak more softly the next day, he found himself shouting regardless.
Between petty arguments, Magda grew larger and rounder. Erik hadn't been able to keep his hands off her when she'd been pregnant with the twins. Now, he could barely stand to look at her, to witness the evidence of what they'd done.

***

A few months after all this began, Magda woke him in the middle of the night, nudging him and murmuring, "Max. Max."

Erik came fully awake in an instant. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"The baby." She guided his hand to her belly, as she had for the twins, as she surely had for Anya before them. "He is kicking."

For a moment, nothing happened, and Erik thought he might be spared this for another few days or weeks. As he was about to pull his hand away, he felt it, like a muscle twitching against his palm. In the months to come, it would be more like someone shoving at him from beneath a layer of blankets. Even now, it couldn't be mistaken for anything but what it was.

When the movement had ceased, Magda ran her hand up his arm and whispered, "Did you feel that?"

Later, Erik would wonder that she'd shared it with him at all, as tense as things had been between them. Now, he had room only for grief—that whomever he'd just met would be taken from him along with all the rest.

"I couldn't have missed it."

When they'd been expecting the twins, they'd often talked long into the night, Erik staying up to keep Magda company when the twins were too active for her to get much sleep. That had to be what she'd expected this time. She had every right to expect what he had every duty to give—and yet, he couldn't do it.

He rolled out of bed, grabbed the trousers and shirt he'd worn yesterday from the floor. "I think I'll go in early today."

"—But it is three in the morning!"

"I have a great deal of work left to do. There's no reason not to get started."

***

That afternoon, Erik closed up shop early and went back to the bar where he'd spent the evening a few months before. There he stayed through the afternoon and evening, kept on drinking until every other customer had already stumbled out. Then he found himself eying the barkeep, feeling watched in turn even as the other man set to cleaning up, seeming to pay no particular attention to Erik—but looks could be deceiving, and Erik was nowhere near sober enough to decide whether or not the other man was going to try something. When he was done with his current beer, he paid up, and then, remembering how useless he'd been when he'd tried to work the last time he'd gone out to drink, headed home instead.

This time, there was a light on in their apartment when he arrived. When he staggered from the front room into the kitchen, Magda was sitting at the table, her hands curled around a mug of coffee which had long since grown cold. That was, strangely, the physical detail Erik would remember most clearly later—that she'd gone so far as to make herself a cup of coffee, but hadn't drunk any of it
while waiting for him. That whatever steam had been rising from what she'd brewed in the beginning had long since melted away by the time she said, "Where have you been?"

"Out."

"It is four in the morning. Where were you?" She hadn't been this sharp with him in years—not since the day of the fire, the weeks afterward when they'd had nothing but each other and Anya. She'd been frightened then, worried they'd be out on the street if things went south for Erik at work, if her friends grew tired of a second family crowding up against them, if if if if. Magda was someone whose worry never quite abated, no matter how well things had been going for them in the last few years. Like Erik, she had never forgotten how quickly and totally they could lose everything that mattered. Like him, she sometimes woke up gasping in the middle of the night, dogged by nightmares that were less dream than memory.

Usually—when he was clear-headed, not half-drunk and stewing—Erik knew just what to say, what to do to calm her down, to soothe her fears. When she'd learned they were having the twins and had feared they couldn't handle two babies, when he'd wanted to quit his job and she'd feared his woodworking wouldn't be enough to keep food in all their babies' mouths—he'd always managed to find the right words to say to lessen her worries, to convince her that they could do anything if they did it together.

Now, he had nothing, and little patience for her fears when he was the cause. "I was at the bar. Can't a man have a few drinks without getting the third degree?"

"Since when do you go out drinking? Since when do you not come home?"

"I'm home now."

"You were not here at dinner, you were not here when I put the children to bed. I did not know what to tell them."

"I will never miss dinner again," Erik said. "Let it go."

She didn't let it go. "What is wrong with you lately?"

"—I don't know what you mean. Nothing."

"Do not tell me nothing is wrong. You have not been home before dark in weeks. You have been a jackass for longer than that. You made Wanda cry three times last week! And those were the only days you even saw her."

"Wanda always cries!" Always, in this life and the other, Wanda had always been the most sensitive of Erik's children. He often wondered and worried about what was going to happen when her strange powers manifested once more. "Can I help it if I'm tired at the end of the day? Maybe you should tell your children to be a little quieter in the evenings."

"It used to upset you when they were quiet!"

"Not anymore," he said—and although he'd been ready for another row a moment before, now he found himself deflating, come too close to truths he hadn't wanted to think about, about how none of this could ever last. "I'm sorry. I've been—tired, that's all. I'll try to be better." When Magda didn't say anything, he added, "I'm going to bed now."

And so he did. He was sober enough to undress and lie down in the dark without stumbling against anything, sober enough to lie awake for a while waiting for Magda to come to bed. Sober enough to
notice that it had been a while and she still hadn't, and to listen and realize what the muffled sounds from the kitchen were.

Erik had been turning away from his family, turning his back to her for months; part of him wanted to pretend he didn't hear, and to continue pretending in the morning.

A greater part, however, wanted to go to her. And, once he'd gotten up and stood standing in the doorway watching her—she whom he'd loved briefly in one life, and come so simply to love again in this one—he saw not only the pain he'd caused her, but the gulf he'd driven between them. He could go to her now, convince her everything would be all right, the way he'd convinced her of other things...but, this time, it would be built on a greater lie than ever before. The gulf would between them would remain. They would never stand on an equal ground, not unless Erik did something he had never once so much as considered before.

"Magda," he said from the doorway, once he had gone back to the kitchen. "I need to tell you something."

She looked down at him, her eyes red and her face streaked with tears. "I already know."

"I sincerely doubt that."

"You do not want this baby." She said it like it was something that would drive them apart even more thoroughly, but could no longer be kept in the dark. "After I told you, that is when this started. That is why you never want to be home with us anymore."

No fool, his wife—she'd figured out everything, except the reason why. "Magda—"

"Well, that is just too bad. There is nothing you can do about it."

"I know."

"Four is not that many more than three," she added, which was precisely what Erik had told her about the difference between three and two, years ago. "We can afford another baby, Max."

"I know." Erik had meant to pull up a chair, lean over to take her hand. Instead, he found himself sinking down onto the floor next to her, so that he was on his knees, looking up at her face, cast in shadow at this angle, this hour. "Magda...I'm not the person you think I am."

"I think you have turned into a drunk. I think I am going to have to yell at you again tomorrow."

Erik had never felt so sober in his life. "I'm sure you will. Now, humor me and listen..."

Over the next hour or so, he held many things back, but still told her far more than he'd ever expected to: About the lives he'd lived, unwillingly thrown back on a day still more than forty years into their future; that they'd been torn apart, he and she, in that first life, and he'd only in this one been given the chance to make it right. After her first few objections—that he was crazy; that he was never going to drink again if this was the kind of tale he came home with—she went quiet, and listened for a long time, until he ran out of words.

When he did, they were both silent for a minute, his head in her lap, her hand stroking his hair.

It occurred to him, halfway through: If she didn't believe it, she might leave him. If he'd tried her patience too much, if this were the last straw. For all her worries about how they would make everything work together, she'd done just fine without him in that first life. She didn't need him. She'd carried and delivered and raised the twins all on her own, lived an entire life where he'd been
nothing more than the occasional nuisance.

"Well?" he said, when he couldn't bear the suspense a moment longer. "Don't you have anything to say?"

She was quiet a few moments before she finally said, "This is how you knew we were going to have the twins."

"Yes."

"And this is how you knew about the fire."

"Yes." Erik had spent weeks and months, there at the beginning, wondering if she would interrogate him more about his 'bad feeling,' but she never had. Eventually, he'd decided she must have forgotten it in the shock and upheaval. Tonight, tired as he was and less sober than he'd thought when he'd began to tell this story, he'd still managed not to breathe a word about that day.

In the next moment, his efforts hardly mattered. "What happened?"

"Magda," Erik said. "Nothing."

Another effort that meant little, if it meant anything. Even at his best, he might not have been able to keep himself from glancing toward the bedroom Anya and Wanda shared; and Magda knew him well enough that she couldn't have missed it, even at her worst.

Stricken, her hand flew up to cover her mouth.

"Magda, it's fine," Erik said. Nothing could have convinced him to describe what it had been like to come upon Anya in the cabinet she'd hidden in, to carry her body out of that house. "She's fine."

Still, he wasn't altogether surprised when Magda got up and headed to the girls' bedroom. A few minutes later, he followed, and found Magda sitting by Anya's bed. She was very quiet, didn't even seem to be crying, though she ordinarily did at the slightest provocation—when she was sad, or angry, or happy, her tears were always Erik's first hint that something was going on. Wanda had come by it honestly.

After a while, Magda began to pet Anya's hair, and Erik had never been so grateful that their eldest daughter slept so heavily, except for when she had nightmares.

It was a very long night.

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For the next few days, there was a subdued atmosphere in their house. Erik came home on time, returned to teasing the children; Magda kept very quiet, though she went back to watching him at least as intently as she had been before.

One morning, after the children had been ushered off to school and before Erik headed out to the shop, Erik found her in the living room, standing with one hand on her belly and the other resting on the back of the rocking chair he'd made her when she'd been pregnant with the twins. She was looking at it, the same measuring way she kept looking at him. Perhaps it had occurred to her that he could never have done such fine work if not for many decades' worth of practice. Perhaps she missed the young man she'd been. Perhaps she'd have preferred him.

"What I keep wondering," she said when she spotted him hovering in the doorway, "is what that
"Isn't it obvious?"

"Maybe you really do not want him, and that was all you could think of to distract me."

Erik stepped toward her, took her hands. "I want him," he said. "Very badly."

"Then what is the problem?"

What he'd tried not to think about these past few months, while able to think of little else. "I'm going to lose you."

"What?"

"It's going to happen again," Erik said. "In 2006, I'm going to die. When I wake up, you'll be gone. All of this, everything we've made together. All erased." Magda and the twins would surely be in America by the next time he came back. Anya would be in the ground. This one, whoever he might be in this life—if he were born alive, if he survived to adulthood—mutant or human, boy or girl, twins again or only one—it would be as if he'd never existed, because in that life he wouldn't have. "I can't bear the thought of losing you. Any of you."

Magda opened her mouth, about to tell him this was the stupidest thing she had ever heard. Erik knew exactly what she looked like, when that was what she was going to say. Then she seemed to think for a minute, and what she said, reconsidered, was, "It is not that I do not understand what you are saying. I do, Max. But think of what you have told me. We will both live to be in our seventies, at least. Our children will live to grow up. And the rest of the world, it will get better and better."

"—That's not at all how I described the world," Erik said.

"Then you do not listen to yourself very well. Maybe you did not notice that you spent half an hour telling me about your school, where children like ours can go, and learn, and be safe." She shrugged. "Maybe you will lose us, yes. But whatever happens later, you are here with us now. And you should be with us, for as long as you can."

She, who only remembered living once—she had no idea how quickly the years could pass, how soon it would be before the both of them looked back and found that this entire lifetime had been spent. But Erik found he didn't want to argue with her about this. Not now. Not today, when he made his own hours, when he was ahead on his orders, when the two of them were together in their home, and could simply be together, even if only for a moment.

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By the time they immigrated to America, Nina was past toddling and on to walking. This was even more unfortunate on the boat than it had been on dry land; as it turned out, Magda was prone to violent seasickness, and so it was up to Erik to corral the children throughout the journey. If he wasn't checking up on Anya, he was fussing at Wanda or yelling at Pietro. No matter what else he was doing, he tried to keep one eye on Nina, to keep her from going overboard to speak with her new dolphin friends, and tried to check on Magda every hour or so. Over those weeks, he managed less sleep than he ever had before, stretched thin in a way he hoped never to repeat.

They'd been in New York for months before he felt rested again. By then, they'd rented a house and a shop space, all six of them settled down into a new life. In the end, the transition was easier for the children than for Magda, and easier for Erik than for any of them. He'd spent a lifetime in the general area, after all, and even if he'd only lived in the city proper for a few years with Charles, he still knew
its bones, better than any other city on Earth. In many ways, it was as if he'd come home after a long trip abroad. In his first life, he'd have been discomforted by the idea; in this one, he welcomed it.

Though he already knew how this life would end, he'd managed to stop letting it rule him in the months before Nina's birth. It kept him up nights sometimes, came to visit him in his dreams and on dreary morning walks to his shop, he kept it to himself for the most part.

While his children were still young, there was really only once that it came upon him again so strongly. It was about six months after they'd arrived in New York. The twins had manifested their gifts several weeks before, Pietro's making him even more difficult than he'd been already, and Wanda's even stranger than he'd remembered. It was this strangeness which caused him to wonder something that he couldn't put out of his head, no matter how hard he tried.

Finally, one Sunday morning, he asked Wanda how she'd like to go on a walk in the park, just the two of them, and perhaps get burgers, or even ice cream cones. Wanda jumped at the chance—to Erik's delight, all four of his children seemed to love the chance to get him all to themselves on occasion, and so he'd made a habit of singling someone out every so often, none of them more often than anyone else. It was supposed to be Anya's turn this time, and Erik pretended not to notice Wanda sticking her tongue out at her older sister, or Anya rolling her eyes in response.

Before they'd reached the ice cream stand, Erik steered Wanda off the sidewalk and onto the grass, where they were unlikely to be in the way, or interrupted.

"Wanda," he said, very seriously, "I have to ask you something, and I need you to tell me the truth."

"Am I in trouble?" she asked, looking guilty in that way that meant she'd recently done something she shouldn't have, and resentful in that way that meant she'd known this outing was too good to be true.

No," Erik said. "And you won't be—but you must be truthful with me, you understand?"

She nodded.

Then, praying she'd say yes, that cause and resolution could be so easy, Erik asked, "Wanda, did you do this?"

"Do what?"

"I promise I won't be angry." Erik had never begged any of his children, but he was close to pleading now. "If you're responsible for all of this, I need to know."

"I didn't do anything."

"Does the Brotherhood of Mutants mean anything to you?" If she'd remade reality, repressed the memory of the first one, surely that would ring a bell.

"No!"

"You're sure?"

"I didn't do anything! It was Pietro!" Her eyes were shining now, tears of fury.

In that first life, Erik would have had no hope of distinguishing between righteous indignation and enthusiastic lying. In this one, he'd gotten up with her at night, soothed her a thousand times, changed her diaper a thousand more. He'd told her bedtime stories uncounted, explained to her so
many of the things it turned out no one came from the womb knowing. He'd wiped her nose when she had a cold, and sat up with her night after night when she'd had whooping cough, sick for weeks longer than her brother and sisters had been—so sick he'd had to swear up and down to Magda that she would live, though he hadn't known for certain if she'd ever had it in that other life. He knew her as well in this life as he hadn't in that other, and looking at her now, there was no doubt in his mind she was telling the truth.

"All right," he said. "All right. I needed to know. I'm sorry."

"Good," she said, so viciously that something very weird had certainly happened somewhere around here in reaction to her.

"How about that ice cream?" Erik asked, putting all the cheer he could manage into his voice, though she'd just shattered his last hope, the only one he'd ever dared have.

By the time they made it home, Wanda had eaten a burger and two ice cream cones, more than happy to capitalize on the situation. After she ran upstairs, to gloat it over Anya or to be sick or both, Erik found Magda out back with Nina, half-studying for her citizenship in-between glancing up to see what Nina was doing with the neighborhood rabbits.

"Did you have a nice walk?"

"It was fine," Erik said, sitting down next to her. He hadn't told her what he'd been hoping for, and he wasn't in the mood to fight about it now, though he couldn't help but feel a bit guilty, keeping such a thing from her when there was so little he ever kept from her now. "Do you want me to quiz you?"

"Yes, please," Magda said.

And so Erik did, as he helped her to keep an eye on their youngest daughter, whom he had never imagined up to a few years ago, who had never existed before and never would again.

There was little point in bringing it up again anyway. It wouldn't have done a thing to change the way this was all going to end.
Not long after lunch, the bell rang above the door. Erik set down his tools, removed his goggles, and headed out to the front room.

"Don't touch anything," he warned over his shoulder on the way.

There was little chance of Nina doing so—she was much too occupied with the rabbit on her lap and the cat draped across her shoulder to concern herself with cutting her hand off with Erik's saw while she was alone in his workshop—but instead of pointing this out, as Anya would have, or rolling her eyes or making a face, as Wanda and Pietro would have, she said only, "Yes, Papa."

When Erik came out from behind the counter, there was a man in a suit studying the kitchen set displayed in the window.

"Can I help you?" Erik pulled out an order form from beneath the counter, and, since the customer's back was to him, snatched the pen with his gift instead of fumbling for wherever it had rolled.

There was little enough chance the man would want to buy the kitchen set. Word had gotten out since he'd set up shop here, and while the pieces he kept out did sometime sell, most people preferred to customize. (Unless they were window shopping, in which case he wanted them out as quickly as they'd come in. He wasn't going to waste what time he had on that nonsense.)

"Hmm, I don't know," said the man. He had a British accent, and his tone was wry—as if there was some joke here Erik were being included in, yet missing, somehow. "I don't suppose you know how to make a better table than this one? One that doesn't wobble?"

And sometimes, Erik wanted pain-in-the-ass customers out as quickly as the non-customers, regardless of how much they might be willing to spend once they'd spent an hour insulting his work to try (and fail) to bring the price down.

"No," he said flatly, long since cured of the need to argue about the quality of his work. "You'll have to try somewhere else."

"Oh, that's a shame. I was so looking forward to my very own non-wobbly Eisenhardt original."

The man began to turn around. In that moment, Erik caught up with the joke. By the time he was in profile, Erik had crossed around the counter. By the time they were facing each other, Erik was close enough for an embrace—and Charles embraced him in turn, and just as fiercely. It must have been at least a minute before they separated, Erik's painfully wide grin matched by Charles' own.

"What is that on your face?" Erik asked, though he'd meant to start by asking why Charles had taken so long to come, when Erik had been back in New York for going on two years now.

Charles stroked the mustache. "Don't you like it?"

"It doesn't even match the drapes," Erik scoffed (then remembered Magda, and wished he hadn't). "It's hideous."

Charles laughed. "I'm not the only one who's changed. You didn't tell me you'd gotten fat! Polish food must agree with you."

It did...though there'd been a dearth of sausages in Erik's diet lately, ever since the children had
started asking why they didn't keep kosher the way everyone else in the neighborhood did. Magda had been willing to learn to make different meals, nearly as invested as Erik in having their children ground themselves in this larger community, even if it wasn't truly hers; what she hadn't been willing to do was make one dinner for Erik and another for everyone else, or have him underfoot in her kitchen to cook for himself.

"Nina!" Erik called. "Get out here, I want you to meet someone!"

Shortly after, Nina appeared with the cat on her heels. She'd left the rabbit in the back, remembering discretion in the one instance she needn't have.

"Charles, this is my youngest, Nina. Nina, this is Charles Xavier, an old friend of mine."

"Hi," Nina said, in such a low voice that no stranger without telepathy would have made it out.

"Hello there." Charles crouched down a bit and offered her his hand. She glanced at Erik, who nodded, then shook it, a little limply. "What a marvelous gift you have."

"Gift?" Another glance at Erik, as the cat spun around her feet, purring like an engine, and you never would have known he was the same battle-scarred feral who hissed and ran from anyone who came within ten feet of him when Nina wasn't there.

"It's all right," Erik said. "He's like us. You don't have to hide from him."

"Certainly not," Charles agreed.

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About ten minutes later, the bell above the door rang again—a continuous sound that went on for a good fifteen seconds, and came with a warm June draft even though the door didn't appear to be moving at all.

"Knock it off."

By the time he'd gotten to 'it,' Pietro materialized in front of them. "Fiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiine."

"This is my son," Erik said. "No doubt he already knows who you are."

"Charles Xavier," said Pietro chipperly. "President of X-Corp. Whatever that is."

"Most excellent. I'm very pleased to meet you, Pietro."

"Where are your sisters?" Erik asked.

"They'll be here in ten minutes." Pietro stressed this in such a way that everyone be aware of what a trial it was to be burdened with such sluggishness on a daily basis. "So, Charles—"

"Mr. Xavier," Erik said.

"—Charles, how come you know my name? My dad didn't tell you my name."

The next few minutes should have been deeply annoying to anyone who wasn't used to Pietro, but Charles seemed to enjoy it. By the time Anya and Wanda came in, he had that same intense, yet soft expression Erik had seen so many times before, the one that meant he'd made a connection with some young mutant, whether someone they were trying to recruit or an existing student.
Charles greeted Erik's elder daughters with the same warmth with which he'd greeted Anya and Pietro. After he shook Anya's hand, he said, a whisper beneath the surface of Erik's mine, *She's beautiful, Erik. They all are. I'm so happy for you.*

He'd said as much in his letters, but Erik knew him too well to believe it. Various others in each of their lives might have considered Charles Xavier a saint, but Erik knew better. He always had.

"All right," Erik said. "That's enough visiting. You all have chores to do, and I want them done quickly so I can close up."

"I'm done," Pietro said, the moment Erik had finished speaking. "Can I go?"

"No. Run home and tell your mother we're going to have a guest for dinner."

"Oh, I didn't mean to—" Charles began, but Pietro had already sped off.

Three minutes later, he rematerialized. "She wants to know who, and why you didn't say anything about a guest this morning."

"I didn't *know* this morning." Before he could add any more, Pietro had gone once again. Erik resigned himself to a game of telephone. Sending Pietro always seemed to be the most convenient thing, but you always ended up wishing you'd simply called.

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Chores done, the children ran ahead while Erik finished the locking up—Nina with them, Anya designated to watch her on the way home lest she run off after some new friend. For the first time in over a decade, Charles and Erik were left to have a private conversation in each other's physical presence.

"It's your accent," Charles said, as they began to walk.

"What is?"

"It's not that they're embarrassed. They're teased at school sometimes. They're worried about being teased outside of it, as well. It's a defense mechanism."

"You've been snooping."

"It's not snooping when you're thinking about it as loudly as you were."

Erik supposed he had been. It still grated, even months after the fact. Over the past fall and winter, it had gradually come to his attention that his older three children were finding excuses not to be seen in his shop. Why that was, he hadn't known until now, not for certain—but ever since it had, he'd required them to help out three days a week after school. Sweeping, dusting, mopping, that sort of thing, and he always made sure there was plenty for them to do.

His accent. Erik could code-switch as well as anyone; he chose not to because of the story. He'd spent most of his life in Poland, as far as anyone else knew. Unless he wanted people to ask questions, he needed to sound like it.

Now, though, he found himself slipping—because he was speaking to Charles, no doubt. Somewhere along the way, in those first few lives, he'd started to sound very much like Charles himself, at least when he spoke English.
"God help them if they ever utter such a thing to Magda," he said. "I'll have their hides."

"—I don't think that's likely. They're as careful with her as you are, from what I can tell. Perhaps I shouldn't have said anything."

"Perhaps you shouldn't have." They walked in silence until Erik remembered one topic he'd always wanted to bring up with Charles—a topic for which a page from an awkward letter would not have sufficed. "Let's talk politics."

"Politics? What about politics?" Charles sounded confused, as well he should; Erik had rarely had any patience to discuss such things in their other lives, not unless they involved mutants—and at this stage, they wouldn't, and were unlikely to for another decade or two.

"Tell me," Erik said, making certain to look at Charles face, "what do you think about Kennedy's second term?"

The look on Charles' face was good enough that Erik knew he'd been right to save the question for this particular moment. "—Ah. I can explain."

"Doing a good job, is he?"

Perhaps it should have rankled, Charles going back to save the life of the man he'd unilaterally decided to let die during their second pass of the sixties. As it was, many things that would have seemed important in that life had receded against the daily concerns of this one, so that having been wrong when he'd told Magda that the American president was to be assassinated had not resulted in much other than amusement on Erik's part and some slight confusion on hers.

"I always regretted it, all right?" Charles said, somewhat testily, the way he always was admitting fault (or, rather, being confronted—Charles Xavier never admitted anything so crass as fault).

"I know," Erik said—he'd been there for all the decades Charles had periodically tried to justify it to himself by pretending as if he were trying to justify it to Erik. Even once Erik hadn't cared anymore, he hadn't been willing to back down, hadn't been willing to let Charles think he'd won a victory.

"I had the chance to do it over, so I took it. It didn't have a thing to do with you."

Erik would have had more to say about that, except they'd arrived.

"Erik!" said Mrs. Feldman, who lived in the house to the right of theirs. She was trimming the rose bushes at the edge of her yard, as she so often seemed to be when Erik came home from the shop.

"Who is this?"

"This is Charles Xavier, an old friend of mine. We knew each other as boys," Erik said, somewhat awkwardly—partly because friends was the least they'd been, but mostly because Mrs. Feldman's husband had died in the first World War, and the rest of her family had disappeared into the second. It seemed a cruelty, sometimes, to remind her that he and Magda had known each other as children and found each other again; to imply he'd found a second such person had to be even more so.

"Yes," Charles said, stepping in so smoothly there was little doubt he'd been in Erik's mind: "We met a few years after the war."

Erik gave him a sharp look, which neither he nor Mrs. Feldman seemed to catch.

"Well, that's wonderful," she said. "And what do you do, Charles?"
For the next few minutes, Charles gave her the sanitized version of what he did at X-Corp. Instead of going to bat for young mutants, he gave at-risk youth a leg up, and so on. The spiel he gave was very close to the one Erik had given when it had been his job, except Charles didn't seem grudging about it the way Erik always had, not knowing why he needed to explain it to people for whom it would never have any relevance unless he happened to be suing them.

Once, Erik would have felt nothing but impatience at having to stand here and listen to this—but now he knew what it was to be old, and to be alone. So he let Charles and Mrs. Feldman chat until she said, "Well, I shouldn't keep you. It was lovely to meet you, Charles."

"Likewise," Charles said, tipping his hat before then went inside.

Erik hadn't spent a moment of his life worrying about how it would be to have Magda and Charles in the same space, until he led Charles into the kitchen, and there they were, the three of them.

"This is him?" Magda asked. "This is your Charles?"

Before Erik could find a way to object to this characterization in a way that didn't indicate that Charles had once been his something, Magda had come forward to embrace him, nearly as tightly as Erik had himself. She whispered something in his ear that Erik couldn't make out, and Charles said, "It was my pleasure, of course."

Magda stepped back, still beaming, and said, "Dinner will be ready in a few minutes."

Erik knew his cue when he heard it. He went to round up the children—the twins playing outside with the neighbor kids, Nina in the backyard with her friends, Anya holed up in her room with a book; it never took them long to disperse, even when he sent them home as a group—had them wash their hands and faces, and then herded them into the dining room.

It hadn't bothered him when Charles told Mrs. Feldman about the work he was doing with X-Corp. It shouldn't have bothered him when Charles told Magda about all the same things over dinner, without having to use euphemisms for any of it. Yet, the longer that meal went on, the more Magda's good food tasted like ashes. Erik had never told her much about the work he'd done in that second life; he'd told himself it no longer mattered, that he had no time for it, had dismissed it whenever it crept into his thoughts.

It had been his life's work, once, and Charles had picked it up without so much as asking if it would be all right. That Charles had mentioned it in his letters did not seem to matter now that he'd come into Erik's house to take credit for all of it.

When dinner was finished, they visited a while longer in the living room, the discussion drifting to talk of Charles' school—he'd founded it again in this lifetime, but had left Hank to run the day to day; he'd sent Erik innumerable pages about the subject, as if he hadn't lived through the process for himself, too—and then to the exploits of Erik and Magda's children. The segue was so natural that Erik might have believed it, had he not seen Charles direct conversations to this place at least a hundred times.

He'd never expected to be on this end of such a meeting—not before today, not even before dinner. But now, Erik was not in the least surprised when Charles said, "Pietro and Wanda are welcome to attend, of course. In fact, we have two spots waiting for them in September, if you'd like."

"We'll get back to you," Erik said brusquely, with a glance at Magda, who was giving him one of her looks—the one that said he shouldn't be rude to their guest, even one who had come to visit him under false pretenses.
"All right," Charles said, as smoothly as if he'd expected Erik's reaction. He probably had. "I should be going. It's getting late." He rose from the easy chair, dug into his pocket for his wallet, from which he took two business cards. These he handed to Magda, not to Erik. "One will reach me at my office. The other will get you the admissions office at the school."

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After they said their goodbyes—Magda had hugged Charles a second time, insisted that he come see them again, and soon—Charles donned his hat, and Erik walked him back to the train station.

In his past lives, Erik had never been lost for something to say to Charles. No matter how terrible things had been between them, time and again in that first life, even on occasion in the second—when there were no sweet words to be had, there had always been accusations, even those he knew to be untrue. It shouldn't have been difficult to say, 'You're rubbing my face in it.' It shouldn't have been difficult to say, 'If that was all you wanted, you might as well have sent Hank.'

But now, much as something beneath the surface was roaring for a fight, the same awkwardness that always seemed to permeate Erik's attempts at letter writing had found its way between them in the flesh. It took nearly half the walk for Erik to seize upon, "And how is—"

And there he halted. What was Charles' latest fling called? There'd been a new name in nearly every one of his letters over the past few years. Patrick, Steve, Susan, John, Eddie, and more. He'd had by far more boyfriends than girlfriends, which was why Erik wouldn't have asked over dinner, had he been so desperate as to resort to smalltalk then; the precise nature of their relationship was one of the few things he'd kept from Magda. (That, and his precise body count when he'd been Magneto.)

"Ben," Charles said lightly, evidently not finding this halfway as awkward as Erik did. "We've been together for six months now."

Four letters, then. No wonder Erik hadn't remembered. But he was committed now. "And how is...Ben?"

Charles glanced at him, a neutral expression Erik would once have seen through to its truth in an instant, but which now seemed a part of some long-disused language. "He's on assignment in London at the moment. He's a reporter, by the way."

"I know that." The details, which Erik had largely skimmed to begin with, were nonetheless beginning to return to him. Ben, the brilliant reporter, with whom Charles got along smashingly. Ben, who Charles had been seeing for six months when the usual lifespan of his relationships was usually more like six weeks. Perhaps they'd stay together for the forty years that remained. Perhaps they'd even get married, when that time came around again. Who could say?

Charles made a sound, easier to translate, something between laughter and a snort. "Oh, I very much doubt it. He's planning to break it off as soon as he's back in the states. I bought him a present for his birthday last week, you see. It's made him think I'm getting too attached."

"Are you?" Erik asked. 'Completely allergic to commitment, but I suppose we'll see where it takes us.' Now he remembered.

"Not as such." Impossible to tell if Charles were lying. "Is there a reason you're so interested?"

If Charles had asked any other way than frankly, Erik would have bristled, demanded to know what the hell he'd meant by that. "No. What did my wife say to you?"

"In the kitchen? She thanked me for taking care of you, that's all."
"—As if I needed a keeper."

"I daresay she knows you well enough by now to be able to judge that for herself."

The air seemed to have cleared. Erik had no intention of examining why. They were coming up on his shop again now, but rather than pass it, he found himself saying, "Come in for a drink."

"That sounds lovely. All right."

Inside, Erik poured them each a sip from the bottle he kept under the counter. There were seats aplenty, and soon they'd both found one next to each other.

The alcohol burned down Erik's throat, sent out warm tendrils through the rest of his body. Evidently, it worked just as well for Charles, who had soon loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. It hadn't been obvious how stiff and awkward he, too, had been until he'd topped off his glass several times.

"You were good before, you know," Charles said, glancing around at the evidence of Erik's work, the pre-made pieces and all the custom orders waiting to be picked up. "You were good before, but your work really has become incredible."

Erik shrugged. "It's the difference between a hobby and a job."

In his other lives, he'd spent the occasional weekend putting a project together, when he was inspired or motivated or even bored; in this life, it was his business, the thing that put food in his family's mouths. You couldn't help but improve at something when you spent a minimum of thirty hours a week doing it.

"I may put in a commission."

"If you must."

"I mean it. Your work before was competent enough. But this—this is art."

What had been uncomfortable when it began was now unbearable. Erik didn't need Charles' praise to know what his life was now.

"Stop," he said.

Charles must have remembered what that tone meant, or been reminded through his telepathy, which Erik could now feel, the same sleepy, engulfing presence that had always come to visit when Charles had been drinking. Either way, he left it alone, or seemed to, sipping at his glass for a long minutes before setting it back down and saying, "Do you remember the chess set you made me for my birthday?"

Erik gave him a flat look.

"Different subject, I promise. Do you remember it?"

"Which one?" Erik had made Charles chess sets for most of his birthdays in their second life; there was nothing you could buy the man, and by the time the current chess set was six months old, Erik had begun to tire of its flaws jumping out at him every time they sat down for a game.

"The first one," Charles said. "The one you made when I was sixteen. When you were still trying to butter me up so I'd like you again."
"—That wasn't the first one," Erik said. "There was the one I made when we were forty."

It had been the only one he'd ever made in that other life, when he'd had less patience for pastimes like improving upon functional objects just because they were clumsy. It had stayed in their cabin when they were there and when they weren't, a year-round resident where the two of them were mere weekend visitors.

"I remember that one, too," Charles said. "I liked both of them. You should make me another one."

Erik sniffed, and topped off his glass. He hadn't been here in a long time; from the moment he'd arrived at Anya's side in this most precious of lives, he'd rarely so much as even thought about looking back. When he thought he might be in danger of it, he'd set Charles' latest letter aside until two or three more had come.

Now, though, Charles was here, and the past beckoned, more inviting than it had ever been before.

He said, "Do you remember the time you caught your sister and her friends smoking on the fire escape?"

This particular anecdote was most memorable not because of that, but because Charles had hit the roof, during which one of the other girls, who'd also been drinking, had tried to put out her cigarette on the curtain. Charles had then spent an hour ranting about how the entire building could have gone up, in addition to the evils of smoking (half of which were common knowledge to very few others, back then).

"Ha! I remember you defending her. You always were a dreadful influence. Say, do you remember the time..."

_Do you remember_ wasn't a game Erik had intended to play, today or ever. It was unexpectedly good to pour them both another drink, and another after that, as they talked and argued and laughed, reminiscing through the night.

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When Erik returned home, hours later, Magda was waiting up for him in their bedroom.

Swaying in the doorway, he wondered if she would be angry with him, if she would think he'd been unfaithful—later, he'd remember she didn't know, but for now he struggled to think of the words that would express the truth, that they'd merely talked, in a way that would have seemed impossible earlier this evening, and seemed even more unlikely ever to happen again. Not to mention how angry she'd been, the last time he'd come home like this, when he'd come so close to losing her completely.

But she looked up from her book, and set it on the nightstand, and she didn't look angry. "Did you have a good visit?"

"Charles decided to take the late train. We waited at the shop. There may have been brandy."

"Mm-hmm," said Magda. "Come to bed. I want to see if you will stagger, or if we will be able to talk."

Erik did as she bade him, and if he stumbled a little when stepping out of his pants, either she didn't notice or chose not to. When he lay down beside her, she snuggled up to him, then said, "I know you hate it, but I think we should let them go."

"Do you," Erik said, instead of 'Let who go?' Then he remembered the places Charles was holding at
the school for Wanda and Pietro.

"I know you do not want them to go anywhere, to be away from home—but I am thinking it would be good for them to spend time with others who are like them."

"What's that supposed to mean?" For a moment, the old suspicion, a rising ugliness undeserving of this Magda, in this life.

It dissipated when she swatted his arm lightly. "Oh, do not be like that. I only mean...it would be good for them to be understood at their school. It would be good for them to have help. They need more than we can give, I think," Magda said, and as usual Erik felt smaller and meaner for have suspected anything at all. "It was good that we came here," and here she didn't mean the U.S., nor even New York, but this neighborhood. Here, their Jewish-Romani children were surrounded by other Jews, had access to a far greater wealth of heritage than they ever would have in Poland. "It is a good thing, but...I think perhaps they need more, now."

"Perhaps," Erik admitted. "We're not going to make any decisions tonight."

Even as he said it, he knew what the decision would be, tomorrow or next week, when she finally insisted they talk it through. And she was right, he hated it. Hated the idea of his children leaving when they were grown, hated even more the idea of letting any of them go now.

"And who knows? Maybe the house will be so empty you will want another baby after all."

"Magda—"

"I did not say you would! I said only maybe."

She was kissing his neck now, her hand sliding down his chest, and it was with some surprise that Erik realized what was going to happen now, assuming his body would cooperate after how much he'd had to drink.

"We're not making that decision tonight, either," he said, though it was another decision already made. They had Nina to prove that the pull-out method didn't work, and so although Magda had objected, he'd had a vasectomy not long after they'd moved to New York.

"I know that," Magda said. "Do you think I am foolish?"

"Very," Erik said, knowing it would drive her to nip him, which she did. Not long afterward, his body began to respond to her, a welcome surprise.

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When Magda had fallen asleep, naked beneath the covers, Erik lay there for a while, then got up. He dressed in the flannel pajamas Magda had given him several birthdays ago, and went out into the hall. He hadn't checked on any of the children on his way to bed, out of fear he'd accidentally wake them up, that they'd then hear whatever row he had with Magda. Now, he peeked into Anya's room, then Pietro's, then Wanda's, some part of him never believing they were here until he'd seen them for himself.

Last, he went up the stairs to the attic, where Nina slept.

Though he'd been willing to add on another bedroom to the house, she'd nearly cried when he'd suggested it, claiming the attic room was perfect and wonderful. In fact, what it was perfect for was staying up long after her bedtime with little chance of anyone noticing until they were halfway up the
stairs. Before Erik reached her door, he could hear her speaking, though not make out what she was saying. When he opened it, he was not at all surprised to catch her curled up on the window seat, having a very serious discussion with an owl.

He flicked the light on, a twitch of his hand. Nina froze, caught in the act.

"What are you doing up?"

"I'm sorry, Papa, but he came to see me." Nina turned around, already in pleading mode. Going by every other discussion they'd ever tried to have with her about this, she'd start crying in a minute or two. "I couldn't just tell him to go away."

Time and again, they'd made it clear she could tell her friends just that after eight. Yet Erik found he didn't have it in him to scold her tonight. "Fifteen more minutes," he said, knowing as well as she did that it would be at least another hour, and that the person yawning the hardest at the breakfast table in the morning would be neither himself nor Magda. "Then I want you to close that window and go to sleep."

"I will. Thank you, Papa!"

On his way back to the room he shared with Magda, Erik could feel the years that were coming, so many fewer already than when he'd first arrived in this lifetime. The future settled around him, time a suffocating weight. The twins would leave them for Charles' school, Anya would follow them to college just a few short years from now. Nina, too, would flee the nest someday. There were nearly forty years left on the clock, yet it wouldn't be long before these best years were a memory. It would happen more quickly than anyone else knew.

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That fall, Wanda and Pietro enrolled in what had in another life been the Xavier-Lehnsherr Academy For Gifted Students. At first, Erik insisted they be day students, coming home to sleep in their own beds every night; after the subsequent mutiny, with backing from not only Magda, but a Hank McCoy with a backbone, they began boarding during the week, coming home on the weekends (a condition from which Erik never budged, no matter what trips their class took into the city on Saturdays and Sundays).

After graduation, Wanda joined the X-Men. This was less dangerous a prospect than it had been in the lifetime where the Brotherhood had opposed them, but Erik nevertheless held his breath every time she was away on a mission, not letting it out until she'd called home afterward to let them know she was safe.

Pietro, on the other hand, became a professional thief, casually sauntering into the most heavily guarded museums for no apparent reason other than showing off. Eventually, he was caught, and Erik was thus forced into planning his first jailbreak of any life. (When he'd run the Brotherhood, he'd never bothered, since anyone stupid enough to be caught was unworthy of the cause; Magda, however, forced his hand by swearing she'd divorce him if he didn't do something.)

Anya was a hippie for a while, long hair and beads and protests (but not, Erik chose to believe, marijuana or free love). After the Vietnam War ended, she went to law school, then to work for the ACLU. She had a keen, hard sense of justice, and everyone who knew her parents claimed she came by it honestly.

To the surprise of no one who knew her, Nina went to veterinary school, then to live in the middle of the wilderness. There, she practiced her craft on any animal brought to her, as well as the many forest
creatures she found on her own. She called to them, or they called to her about their pain, and those who never healed right stayed with her for the remainder of their lives.

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Magda rarely asked questions about Erik's previous lives. She was more interested in the life they had, the one they were living in together. She didn't want to hear about what it had been like for them to be apart. She approved of Erik's success in the stock market, was less anxious about it than she'd have been if she thought he was guessing. Sometimes, she wanted his insight on things that were going to happen—not the violent, terrible things, the ones she said she'd hear enough about on the news when they came to pass, but the things that could touch their family, change the direction of their lives in any way. But that was her limit, most of the time.

One day, when they were old again, all their children long since out of the house, all but Nina raising their own children (two, five, six, eight, and they hadn't had to have more children of their own for the price that would someday be paid to rise ever higher; sometimes, Erik thought he should never have bothered with the vasectomy, that giving Magda a dozen children couldn't have made what was coming any worse), Magda waited until after dinner, when they were standing together at the sink, she washing and he drying, and said, "You used to be so angry."

"Was I?"

"When Anya was little. Before the fire. Surely you remember this?"

"I suppose."

"I was just remembering, earlier today," she said. "Did you know I used to be certain you would hurt someone, some day?"

"That doesn't surprise me." What did, looking back at the man he'd been in that first life, was that he'd stopped long enough to try for a family to begin with. He doubted that young man would have stayed with Magda and Anya much longer, even if it hadn't been for the fire. And there was no chance it would have worked if he'd come back to them first, before the life he'd lived by Charles' side, the life that had taught him whatever small measure of patience and kindness he could now claim.

"Not only that. I used to worry you would kill someone. It was my worst fear." Magda handed Erik the last plate, then began on the utensils. "After the fire, you were different. For years, I thought it changed you."

"It did."

"Not our fire. Not the one I remember."

"Mm-hmm," Erik said, unsure where this was going, or why they were talking about it after all these years, when he'd thought they were doing the dishes.

"You used to be so angry. Then you were not angry anymore. It was like a dream come true."

"What are you getting at?" He was beginning to grow impatient—and, deep down, to become afraid. Exactly what had she thought of, or seen, or only just now realized? Which of the things he'd kept from her was about to come out into the light?"

"I am getting at nothing. I was remembering, and I did not think I had ever told you how glad it made me. I thought you should know. That is all."
They finished the washing up, and then Magda headed into the bedroom. Erik knew he was meant to follow her, but all he could think was that the time was so close now that even Magda, who had so often told him he was a fool for dwelling on the future when it was so far away—even she could feel the end, bearing down upon them. Two years, that was all that remained, so few days and hours and minutes left it might as well be no time at all.

"I'll come to be in a minute," he called to her, to hold her off from coming to see what he was up to. He went picked up the phone in the living room and dialed a number he'd learned by heart a decade ago.

As the phone rang on the other end, in whatever town in Illinois or Iowa it was located—Erik could never remember exactly where, out of irritation at Charles having moved so far away right when he most needed to be figuring out a way to keep them both here—he thought about what Magda had said. About how wrong she was, to claim he was angry no longer. He was angry still, as he always had been, not a young man's raging inferno but an old man's burning coals, lying far beneath the surface. If they appeared to have been extinguished, in reality they'd only been waiting to be uncovered again. The closer he came to the day he would die, the closer the fire came to the surface, and even he didn't know what he would do when they came out into the open air again.

"Hello?" came the sleepy Midwestern accent that always made him want to grind his teeth.

Erik didn't bother saying who it was—they knew each other's voices by now, and Ray seemed to have even less desire for small talk than Erik did, if for different reasons. "I need to speak to Charles. It's important."

Twenty minutes later, he brushed his teeth, dressed for bed, and after several hours of lying awake in the dark, fell asleep beside Magda in the bed they shared, as he had on so many nights before.
On his third sixtieth birthday, Charles met a man.

He arrived at the bar early in the afternoon, planning to relax for a few hours with drinks, perhaps find someone to go home with later in the evening. He was between relationships again, and very much not looking. If he was looking for some connection, he only wanted a bit of one—enough to warm him for an evening and no longer.

He'd first discovered this particular bar a time or two in his first life. He'd liked it then because it was truly accessible in an era during which few places were—but due to his position at the school, he hadn't been able to visit as often as he'd have liked. Realizing some years ago that presiding over X-Corp gave him considerably more freedom in where he could be seen, he'd long since become a regular in this life, dropping in whenever he arrived back in New York from wherever he'd been.

Today, he found himself visiting with Joe, another regular, whom he would not be going home with. They'd slept together once, a few years back, but it had been awkward enough that it would never happen again. There was simply no way for Charles to explain that it hadn't been awkward for any of the reasons Joe thought it had been. 'It's not that you're using a wheelchair, it's that you are and I'm not, and I find that confusing,' was not a sentiment liable to go over well.

Charles hadn't meant to start looking for prospects until later in the evening, and so he never felt change as it rippled toward him—not even when that change said, "Hi."

Charles turned around on his stool to see someone he'd never noticed in here before, a red-haired man who looked to be in his late forties or early fifties. "Hello."

When the man realized he was being given a once-over, he blushed, his face going nearly as dark as his hair. "Can I—can I buy you a drink?" he asked. Now he was not only red, but beginning to sweat. Without quite meaning to—and in places like this, he'd always previously calculated every move for the result he wanted—Charles began to smile. "You're very handsome."

Compliments in this place were more likely to be about Charles' lips, which might then see use in the bathroom, or the alleyway outside. It was the sweetness of the contrast that made him look farther, made him read beyond the surface the way he rarely bothered to for dalliances any more. What he found then was just as sweet, and so very, almost painfully earnest—

Charles had always loved easily. It was easy when you saw people the way they saw themselves. He'd loved so many of the same people in three different lifetimes, for all the ways they changed and all the ways they never seemed to. Never once had he found it difficult to be charmed, to see the light inside of another person no matter how deeply they might have thought it was buried.

He'd never found it difficult to love, and yet over three long lives, he'd been in love once, and only once. He hadn't thought it would ever happen again, that he would always associated falling with certain flashes, sense memories that had never before been added to: the smell of salt, which he associated also with grief and partings; the hard slap of the water as he'd dived beneath it—

A heady rush of joy, of recognition, where in one moment everything had been as it was, and in the next moment it had all changed. Charles had never considered it might come to him again, or bring with it new flashes to carry with him: a quickly shrinking rectangle of light from the door, where someone else had just come in; their reflections, hazy in the glass behind the bar; how very dry the roof of his mouth had become, without the ocean to wetten it.
"I would like that," Charles said, barely noticing when Joe tipped him a wink and went back to his drink. "Very much, in fact."

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The man's name was Ray, and he spent the next couple of hours telling Charles about his ex-wife. In ordinary circumstances, this would have been a bad sign; in ordinary circumstances, Charles, who was now sixty for third time and had now lived one hundred and sixty-nine subjective years, would have taken it for the red flag it had always been before. Despite everything else, he'd have had the sense to walk away.

But it was different this time. Charles had rarely met anyone who as deep and abiding a desire to be understood as Ray did. That Charles could provide this understanding within moments wasn't something he could explain, and so he listened instead, and by listening gained a greater understanding than Ray could have imagined.

It was an old story, and in many ways a familiar one: That of a man who loved his wife and his children, but who never should have married a woman. Ray had only gradually come to realize this over a number of years. He'd spent a further few years trying to make his marriage work and denying his attraction toward other men, until he could deny it no longer. It all had come out in the most explosive imaginable way it could without his wife actually catching him with another man (which she couldn't have, as Ray had never been with another man—but he'd become increasingly careless about where he left certain reading material, to the point that although Ray himself didn't quite realize he'd wanted to be caught, Charles knew that he had. To him, it was clear as the sky outside on this beautiful July afternoon).

The divorce had become final six weeks ago, and Ray had bought a plane ticket to New York City. He'd always wanted to visit the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty—and there were other places to visit, too, much easier to find than in the small town he'd come from. If his wife had divorced him for wanting something he had never had, there was no reason he should not now have it. Although he didn't say so, it was clear to Charles that he needed to experience it to be certain he wanted it, that it wasn't some fantasy that had grown in his mind that could never be equaled in reality.

"The Empire State Building, hmm?" Charles said, having already noticed that Ray hadn't yet gone to any of the tourist attractions he'd planned on. He'd checked himself into his hotel, then come nearly straight here, after considering several other bars. How strange it was already to think that if he'd gone somewhere else, they might never have met...how much stranger it was to think this was the first time they ever had. "Let's finish our drinks, and then we'll go."

That wasn't what Ray had meant by telling Charles any of it—but of all the things he didn't understand about his presence here, earnest and honest as he was trying to be, his own skittishness was one of them. If Charles went back to him to his room now...he wasn't sure precisely how it would go, but chances were it wouldn't be enjoyable for either of them.

So, although Charles had visited the Empire State Building several times in his first and second lives and would otherwise have had little interest in doing it again, they went. It wasn't, to his mind, that much of an experience—a long wait in a long line, followed by some wandering around at the top in a crowd of other people, who for the most part found the view rather more exciting than he did—but somehow getting to see Ray's reaction to it made it better. And on the way back down, the anticipation began to build...

By the time he'd escorted Ray back to his hotel, it was getting dark, but it was still light enough for Charles to see the hesitation on his face. It wasn't so much skittishness, now, as it was the knowledge
that if this went forward, everything would change.

"Aren't you going to invite me up?" Charles asked.

Even with his telepathy, he still wasn't certain what the answer would be until a moment later, when Ray gave it, turning beet red in the process of saying, "Did—do you want to come in?"

When they were in the elevator, away from prying eyes, Charles brushed his fingers against Ray's hand, the first time they'd touched; although Ray made no sound, the touch spread through his body, lighting up every limb.

Inside the hotel room, Charles thought to himself that perhaps it would be better to go slow. Only he'd never learned how—if he'd kept his partners in this life at arms' length from the beginning, it was only because they hadn't struck him the way Ray had, the way only Erik had before him. He didn't know that he was capable of anything other than diving straight in.

And so, instead of letting Ray take the lead, sticking with only what he thought he was comfortable with, Charles turned, and kissed him, and backed him up against the door. That went on for a few minutes, as Charles felt it, along with Ray: the now-certain knowledge that he really had been missing something, for all these years; that if other men wanted women the way he wanted Charles now, then the way they all seemed to obsess over sex the way Ray never had finally began to make sense...

Eventually, Charles went to his knees. Afterward, they made it over to the bed. Ray's education went on for the remainder of that night and much of the next morning—and the next evening, after they'd returned from an afternoon involving a visit to the Statue of Liberty.

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Ray stayed in New York for three days.

Charles didn't accompany him to the airport. He didn't even have second thoughts about letting him go, so that he was forced to speed across town to catch him before he got on the plane. At his grand old age, he was beyond the stuff of romantic comedies. Anyway, there was work to do. Important work. Even if it had been done already in other lives, it had not yet been done in this one, and that made it doing.

It wasn't as if he wouldn't see Ray again; they'd already arranged for him to visit in several months' time. This time, he'd stay with Charles. This time, it would be more than a brief dalliance, would be the continuation of something they both knew they wanted going in.

As far as the long term went, Ray was exceedingly unlikely to agree to move to New York: his entire extended family lived in the same small town, and if most of them disapproved of his homosexuality, Ray still had no intention of removing them from his daily life. And Charles couldn't move to Illinois. He'd been based in the state of New York longer than any other person save one had ever lived; more importantly, he couldn't run X Corp from the middle of nowhere.

Love was one thing, but the sort of passion that would have required he immediately change everything, without considering the consequences of his whole life—that sort of thing, Charles firmly believed, was for the young and impulsive.

It was for this reason that, when the clock in his New York office turned to 10:20 a.m., the time Ray's plane was scheduled to depart, and Charles realized that whatever he'd thought before, a long-distance relationship simply would not do, he did not take immediate action. He finished the day's
work, then returned to his apartment in the city, the one he stayed in when he was here. It had never seemed very much like a home, but it had never mattered before, not the way it did now.

The next day, having slept on it, Charles called Ray at his home.

Several hours later, he began making the necessary preparations for his retirement.

He questioned himself often, in those next few weeks, saw so easily all the ways this could go wrong. Yes, their connection had been strong on both sides, and yes, Ray had agreed that he should come. Yet Charles knew better than anyone how a person's feelings could change when they were out of his presence, when he'd have no way of knowing about it or bracing for it. By the time he'd deplaned an hour away from Ray's hometown, he was convinced that this was going to go sideways somehow, that he'd arrive at Ray's home with his rental car and all his suitcases, only to discover that, despite nightly hours-long telephone conversations in the interim, Ray no longer wanted him.

By the time he found the sorry little apartment complex in a town no larger than a sneeze, all Charles had to see was the stairs leading up to apartment 2A to become completely certain he would not be welcome here. But as suspicious and somewhat alarmed as stairs still left him in this life where they provided no true obstacle, there was nothing to do but climb them, and hope for the best.

He'd expected to have to knock on the door, but he must have been spotted pulling into the parking lot below, for by the time he reached the top, the door to the apartment was already opened, and there stood Ray, waiting to greet him with welcome and joy.

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The next thirteen years of Charles' life weren't what he'd long planned or imagined for this life. He'd once thought he would keep on with X-Corp right up until the end; instead, he set about grounding himself fully into the sleepy Illinois town of Ray's birth and life. It would actually have been easier if they'd had to hide their relationship, as Charles and Erik had had to until around this time in their second life; as it was, every person in that town knew exactly who Charles was. Enough of them blamed him for the dissolution of Ray's marriage that venturing out of the small house they had purchased together never quite became an entirely comfortable prospect. Never mind his reception at family events, and of these there were many—one for every holiday, one a month for any family birthdays occurring within that month, and four or so each for Thanksgiving and Christmas. But the more accustomed to him everyone grew, the better Charles' shielding got, and the less he had to hear negative whispers or thoughts. After a year or two, it seemed almost normal to have become so fully absorbed into another person's family, even one that was not entirely thrilled about having him.

It didn't take long for Charles to become somewhat bored during the days. Ray, after all, hadn't retired, and didn't plan to until he was 65. Although Charles had explained his telepathy and background with the school and X-Corp in his first days in Illinois, he had never explained that this was not his first life but his third, and thus could not point out that if Ray waited until he was 65 to retire, he and Charles would never be retired together.

By the time Charles himself was 65, he had, to his own great surprise, written a book. Nonfiction, an anonymized account of many of the teen mutants whose cases he'd overseen in this life; retirement or no retirement, mutants across the globe were still being revealed to the public for the first time, and needed as many voices in their favor as ever they had before.

After the first book, he wrote another, this one dealing with evolution, the paths it had taken to create their kind, and the paths it might take in the future Charles doubted he would ever see. More than one reviewer called it an ephemeral work, without having any idea how true that was; the future beyond 2006 was nothing but ephemeral to Charles, a mirror trick that would fade away the moment
he came close to it.

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For most of his adult lives, Charles had had twenty to thirty claims on his time at any given moment. Running the school, dealing with public relations for mutantkind: These things had consumed his life, even when he'd been able to share the load with Erik or others. Running X-Corp, managing his own cases while overseeing everything else that went on, as well as continuing to monitor the school: This had consumed him as well, so much so that he'd rarely so much as slowed down in the decades since founding it for the third time.

In this new, slower life, there were only three claims to his time: Ray, his writing, and, increasingly, Erik.

On one night of many, not long before the end of that third life, Charles was reading in bed—one of the many books he'd always meant to read in his other lives, yet never found the time for before now—when the phone rang. It had rung around this time of night three and four times a week for the past few months. Charles no longer retained much hope that it would be one of Ray's children, or a wrong number. Every once in a while, he got lucky, but more often...

Ray's voice, a soft murmur from the living room. Then Ray appeared with the cordless, his hand over the mouthpiece as he said, "It's your friend."

There was some faint disapproval in his voice, still; Ray had never liked Erik. It wasn't quite jealousy, even though Charles had admitted to having had an affair with Erik some years before, without being able to include the context behind it. It was closer to a judgment, Ray's opinion that if he had been able to keep it in his pants until he'd been divorced, then Erik had had no business running around on his own wife. Charles had never found a way to explain that it hadn't been like that; he'd often wished he'd given Ray the same story Erik had come up with, the one where they'd known each other as boys. Sometimes, he even wished he'd told Ray everything, but it was a bit too late for that, wasn't it, after more than a decade together.

If it was unfair to Erik for Charles to have claimed he'd cheated on his wife with Charles, then it was even more unfair to claim that Erik was now suffering from dementia—but Charles had thought of no other way to explain the constant phone calls. The last thing he wanted was for Ray to suspect that Charles was now the one having an affair.

"What is it now?" he asked, once Ray had passed the phone over and gone out to the living room to give Charles some privacy. "Nothing's changed since the last time you called, you know."

Erik was quiet, no sound but his breathing for long enough for Charles to regret his irritation. Then he said, abrupt as he ever was, these days, "Only because you haven't done anything else in the meantime."

"There's nothing left to do," and it was true: Charles had done all he could. All that was left was to talk Erik down when he grew agitated enough to call. There was that, and there was the waiting, and that was all. "I realize you prefer to brood about how terrible everything is, but for my part, I would prefer not to think about it until I have to."

In another life, they'd had such huge differences in philosophies, had constantly clashed, their actions and counter-actions affecting nearly every mutant who had lived in the decades in which they'd clashed. Now their only subject of debate was writ small: Charles' life, and Erik's, approaching another possible end.
Still, Erik's reaction was exactly the same now as it had been back then. "The great Charles Xavier, putting his head in the sand as usual," he said. From there, he went on, getting more and more wound up, more and more vitriolic. Old words, an ancient sentiment, even if the reason Erik was going at him was different this time. As if Charles were against him and not simply objecting to his methods (or his habit of calling every other night at Charles' bedtime).

Once, Charles had been more or less used to it. Not so much now, and tonight he found himself more defensive than usual. That, perhaps, was why he didn't simply pull out a crossword to fill in as Erik ranted and railed, as he had earlier this week, and last week, and the week before that.

Instead, he waited for Erik to stop for breath—it didn't take long; Erik wasn't used to going on and on in the same way he used to, either—and then said, "That's all nonsense. I've done my best. I think you know that. Anyway, you're thinking about it all wrong."

"How is that?" Erik's voice was low and dangerous, not to mention a little hoarse.

"All you ever seem to focus on is what's going to happen when it ends," Charles said. When they might die again, be thrown forward from their starting point, everything from this life erased just as everything from the last life had been. A person could go mad dwelling on it, and at times it appeared Erik was trying to. "Have you ever considered that this life might have been a gift?"

"A gift," Erik repeated flatly.

Not for the first time, Charles wished he knew what Erik was thinking, could judge whether he was getting through to him or merely giving him more ammunition. It had been a constant question in that first life. He hadn't missed it. "Yes. For heaven's sake, Erik, you've gotten to spend fifty years with your family, and all you can think about is how it might end? It's bound to end either way! I want to stay here as much as you do—" Stay, and grow older than he'd ever been before. To see Ray grow old in his turn. To know that when he died, it would be in the usual linear way, and that those who had loved him would be allowed their grief. To know that all the things he'd done in this life had actually mattered, had really happened outside of his perception and Erik's. "—but even if we can't, how can you not realize that there's nothing in this world that doesn't end eventually?"

More harsh breathing; sometimes, one wondered if Erik wasn't working himself up to have a heart attack before they could die in the usual way.

"Yes," he said, finally. "I see."

Before Charles could say anything more, there came a click, then the dial tone.

It had been, he thought ever after, a fairly good speech. But although it was hard to gauge Erik's exact reaction without being able to read his mind, or at least see his face, it would have been harder not to understand the dismissal for what it was. He might as well have said 'You're no use at all.' Perhaps he'd tired of saying it. Perhaps he was saving it up for the next time.

As it turned out, there was no next time. Erik didn't call again. After a week or two, Charles had returned to a tentative enjoyment of quiet evenings at home, uninterrupted.

The next time Charles saw Erik was on the day he died.

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A Saturday in June, 2006. Early afternoon, now. The day had begun beautiful but would soon turn to rain, if not in the city then on a highway an hour or two north of here.
Charles had died in the shower and he'd died by the road. This time, if all went the way he meant it to, he and Erik would both live in the hospital room they'd occupied since the night before.

He hadn't heard from Erik in eight months, hadn't seen him in person in three years. In those three years, Erik had lost a great deal of weight. He was no skinnier than he'd been in other lives, but the effect of the weight loss had left him looking by far more gaunt.

It didn't help, either, that he'd had his head shaved for this. He and Charles wore matching hats made up of electrodes, which they'd worn all day and slept in the previous night.

Erik seemed calmer than the last time Charles had met with him in the flesh, and by far calmer than the last time they'd spoken. Part of that was because he'd shielded his mind; the other part was surely because of Magda, who'd stayed long past visiting hours last night and arrived long before they'd begun this morning. The two of them were conversing in low voices. Charles tried not to listen, especially as most of what he'd caught of the conversation thus far was of a painfully mundane and personal nature: stocks, life insurance, as any gravely ill family man might.

Charles could have brought Ray along, but he'd left him in Illinois. He'd lied about what he intended to do in New York that day. Ray had believed him, of course; easy enough not to question a keynote speech at a conference when Charles had been invited to so many and usually accepted a few each year. Easy enough for Charles to leave it at that, despite the uneasy sense, growing over the past few days, that he ought to bring him, after all.

Only what would he have said? What reason could he have given for needing hospitalization when he had no symptoms? He'd never told Ray about his other lives, and after nearly thirteen years there had seemed to be no way to broach the subject in the time he had left.

And so, as Erik and Magda spoke in low tones, all there was for Charles to do was what he needed to be doing anyway: monitoring the minds of the medical staff and scientists milling not far from the room, to be certain none of them had begun to question the legitimacy of the proceedings. They would have, of course. None of the physicists or neurosurgeons Charles had met with had ever believed him. Eventually, he'd given up trying to convince them through words and explanations in favor of other methods of persuasion.

The one thing everyone he'd ever spoken to had agreed on was that there was little they could prescribe to fix the problem if it could not be duplicated. As it could not, there had been nothing to do but wait for this day, and to make certain that the best minds in any potentially-related field were here. If their strange dual deaths were what sent them back in time, then surely preventing their deaths entirely would prevent the time travel as well.

So far, there had been nothing outside of the normal range in any of their tests over the past weeks. The only abnormal measurements from the past twelve hours had been Erik's blood pressure, which had spiked well above normal levels...but along with everything else, Erik was understandably wary of hospitals, and the way he looked at the nurse when she came to check it every hour left little doubt as to the trouble.

Eventually, the hour came. The minute was fast approaching now. Erik and Magda had been sitting in silence for most of the last quarter hour, but now Erik said, "You haven't eaten. Go down to the cafeteria for lunch. It's going to be a while; you won't miss anything."

Erik's lies to his wife must not have been nearly as believable as Charles' lies to Ray, for she gave her husband a sharp look, then turned to Charles. "Is this true?"

"Of course it is," Erik blustered.
"I did not ask you."

Charles thought for a moment, caught between their gazes, and chose the middle ground. "You should go," he said, supposing it had a better connotation than 'You shouldn't be here,' which had been his first instinct. 'I'll do you good to stretch your legs.'

Magda looked from him to Erik and back again. "You are both liars," she said, neither reaching for her purse nor making any other move to leave her chair.

Not long afterward, the experts and doctors trooped in. Behind them, the nurses and the crash cart. Every one of them was serious, grim (except the ones who were excited, but could you really expect physicists not to be, considering what their machinery might tell them in the next few minutes?), and Charles was glad he'd done it this way. He didn't think he could have borne it if any of them had been scornful of what he had told them was going to happen.

Five minutes, now.

Erik was still trying to get Magda to leave, almost cajoling now—but if she hadn't been willing to go before the army of doctors arrived, she certainly was going nowhere now, and made sure to say so.

Four minutes.

Suddenly, Charles knew—he'd been wrong not to bring Ray. The last thing he wanted to do was die alone. He reached for the phone by the bed, no longer monitoring what everyone else was thinking. No one would lose focus now; there was enough momentum to take them through the next ten or fifteen minutes at least, and by then it would be over, for good or for ill.

Three minutes.

He went through the procedure to dial out, more arduous than he'd remembered. Or maybe that was just the clock, the seconds passing so quickly now.

Two minutes.

A phone rang on the counter of a hardware store deep in the heart of Illinois. It rang a second time, a third, a fourth. Perhaps Ray was in the restroom, perhaps assisting a customer.

One minute.

The activity in the hospital room had reached a fever pitch, but although Charles realized distantly that he should hang up the phone, brace himself for what was coming, he was unable to—and was rewarded.

"Bob's Hardware," said Ray. Charles had never heard anything as beautiful as his voice.

'I love you.' That was what Charles meant to say, in lieu of everything he hadn't had the time to say, everything he'd been too afraid to explain before.

But before he could speak, the pain came, and though he'd died like this twice before, he never could have braced for this, pressure and pain behind his right eye like nothing he'd ever felt (for if he'd felt it twice before, no person could take the reality of such pain with them; it would always be muffled in memory). It left no room for anything else.

People were speaking over him, moving him, doing things to him. They were trying to save his life.
"Is anyone there?" Ray asked. His voice was tinny, barely audible, the phone hanging from the bedside table. Charles had dropped it, or else someone had taken it, and there'd been something he'd meant to say, but as loud as the commotion was in the room, his pain was so much louder, drowning out the rest.

"Ray," Charles said, and then he died.

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"No," Charles said, coming to. "No, no. Damn it, no."

A woman's voice, behind him: "Charles? What's happening? Are you okay?"

Charles turned, and saw Moira, and that was when the chaos inside and the sounds from outside, the smell of salt water filling his nostrils, all combined to make sense. He knew where he was, and when, and what was happening, more quickly than he had in either of his other relived lives.

And why shouldn't he? There was no other place he'd returned to in his dreams as often as he'd returned here.

"No. I would have to say I am very much not okay," he said. He turned away from her and walked out of the gaping hole in the side of the Blackbird, careful not to trip over debris as he went, and stepped onto the sand that had been the setting of ten thousand nightmares.

There were the others, all eying each other, as if waiting. There was the submarine. As Charles considered it, he felt Shaw's presence in his mind wink out almost before he'd remembered it was there. It didn't seem such a terrible thing as it once had, that particular murder. What did it matter, really, if Erik killed for the third time a man he'd already killed twice?

"Erik," Charles said, and walked toward the submarine, past Hank and Alex and Raven and Sean, past Angel and Azazel and Janos, friends and enemies, children all, these strangers from another life. He walked past them, out of the light and into the darkness, seeking out the one person he did know, the man he'd not been close to for a lifetime, the only person in existence who would remember everything he remembered, whose memories made every other life real.

He'd never set foot inside of this place before, but still he knew it: the rows of controls in this first room, the lush comfort of the second, and beyond that...

Before he made it past the controls, he could hear it, drowning out the waves against the shore: a heavy, wet thumping sound, and with it someone's labored breathing, almost a sob.

Charles reached that last doorway, and this time he did brace himself.

Inside, Shaw lay on the ground, dead. Erik stood over him, kicking him in the head. He'd been at it for a few minutes, at least; Shaw's skull was in ruins, would have been unrecognizable as such if it hadn't still been attached to his body.

Charles reached Erik's side, touched his elbow. "Erik," he said.

Erik stopped. Charles tried not to see the scene before him, but he couldn't help but note that Erik's boot was shining wet. There were shatters of white on it too, and several large gray globs.

"What happened to him, in the last life?" Erik asked. Charles tore his gaze away from the ground, but Erik's face was no reprieve, even more impassive than his voice. Had he really thought Erik might be weeping? "I've always meant to ask."
"Emma," Charles said. "Without you, she ended up taking matters into her own hands."

"Good for her. Now, leave me alone."

"...I can't. I'm sorry, but I can't. Erik, the missiles. They're going to fire."

For a moment, Erik didn't react. Charles reached for the words to snap him out of it, to make him realize that there was no room for this, not in this time and not in this place; that he'd have to deal with his grief when Charles would, after this danger had again been neutralized.

But before he could speak, Erik nodded crisply. Without looking down, he turned around. Without looking back, he headed out of the sub. Charles followed, treading back out to the beach of so many nightmares. It felt like yet another dream, a strange sideways version of what had happened before, which would surely end the same way it always did.

They'd been in the sub longer than Erik had been in it alone the last time—that, or Charles had forgotten how quickly it had all gone. He'd no more than glances at the ship in the water when the missiles fired.

"Erik," he said again, but Erik had already raised his hand.

The missiles stopped, not even halfway between the ships and the beach.

"Well, let's go home," Charles said, but although he'd expected the missiles to fall immediately, they stood in the air instead, waiting. He glanced at Erik. "Hurry up and drop them. I don't want to be here any longer than we have to be."

"I'm thinking." The missiles began to turn. "Have you considered that this might be a gift?"

"...What?"

"Perhaps this lifetime is a present for us," Erik said, and now he was anything but impassive. He grinned under stone-cold eyes, his lips peeled away from his teeth in a rictus of pain. "Maybe we're meant to try it my way, this time."

Charles laughed, one sharp bark. "You can't be serious."

For a moment Erik blurred before him—he who'd been Magneto in that first life, who'd lived peacefully as a teacher and then as a father in the next two. He couldn't possibly be reverting, not now. He couldn't mean it. He was in shock, that must be it. It had to be. "And you are? Go home? What home?"

"New York, for starters," Charles said, with the distinct feeling, the moment he said it, that he'd stepped wrong, all wrong, the way he always had and always would every time his dreams brought him to this dreadful place.

Erik looked at him. The grin had gone, but what it had left behind was nothing, and that was worse. "I'm sorry, Charles. I won't be going to New York."

He turned back to the missiles. A flick of his wrist, and they flew at the ships. Before Charles could so much as reach for him, he was thrown backward, launched into the air by the buckles on his flight suit. He landed on his ass in the sand, and discovered he could not rise, for those same buckles held him in place no matter how he struggled.

"Erik, don't!" he said, and he barely had a moment to register that the missiles seemed to be moving
awfully slowly before—

A gun fired from behind him, again and again, deafening claps of sound.

Once, Erik had slapped these bullets away like gnats, heedless of where they might go. Now, he stood as still as stone or any other dead thing as bullets bounced off his back, his legs, his shoulders, his helmet. How he could still be standing, Charles barely had time to wonder, for then one of the bullets hit something else.

The missiles fell, and so did Erik: to his knees as blood gouted from the hole in his neck.

The force on Charles' buckles left, and he leapt forward. Knelt by Erik's side as he collapsed on the ground.

"No, no, no, no," Charles heard someone say, and would only later realize the speaker was him, just as he was understanding that Erik, while he may or may not have been in shock, had most certainly been in complete control. "Don't you dare leave me here alone."

He reached for Erik's neck, pressed down on the wound with both hands. After a few seconds, the bleeding stopped.

That was good, wasn't it? That it had stopped?

"We have to get him to the hospital," Charles said to the others. "We'll get him to the hospital and he'll be fine. Someone get that blasted thing off his head so I can tell him so."

In the end, it was Raven who reached down and tugged the helmet off Erik's head. Gently, even as she quietly cried, knowing already what Charles had not yet allowed himself to know. Later, Charles would suppose that he'd known it too, but had hoped to have the chance to offer some measure of comfort in Erik's last moments, so that he wouldn't have to die alone.

The helmet rocked back and forth where Raven dropped it, as Charles reached out. But no matter how hard he tried to locate Erik's mind, he found himself reaching for nothing, grasping at air—

For Erik had already gone.
Charles couldn't shake the feeling he'd been here before. It was too familiar, half-remembered from some fever dream. The steel floor rocked beneath him. The shadows from the containers stored here loomed over him. The others spoke in whispers around him. Sometimes they spoke to him. He rarely answered them when they did. Half of what he had was for the sailors on this vessel, to dissuade them from entering Storage Compartment 3B, or crossing paths with any of the others when they ventured out to use the bathroom. The other half was for Erik, who lay on the stretcher someone had found in the ruins of the Blackbird. It was familiar, too, made of a coarse, military-grade fabric. Charles could imagine exactly how a person would feel after lying upon it for hours. But of course Erik was not a person. Not anymore. He had been a person for quite a long time before this, but now he was a corpse.

The American vessel upon which they'd stowed away had been cutting through the ocean for an hour before Charles spoke. He didn't hear what he'd said or know what it had been until someone brought him a towel and a washcloth, a bucket half-full of warm water, and a folded pile of clothing. The others, none of them keen on being in close quarters with Erik's body, had all vacated this corner of the storage compartment even more thoroughly than before.

A bucket, a washcloth, and clean water. Charles would never remember the moment he had decided this needed to be done. As far as he would ever recollect, the items themselves could have told him, for that was the first time he consciously realized what needed to happen now.

He dipped the washcloth into the water. Watched the dark patch spread, until the entirety was soaking wet. Raised it out of the water, wrung it out.

Erik's face and neck came first. The water in the bucket turned pink, then red. Then someone—Hank, Charles saw, to a lack of surprise; it had always been Hank who'd stepped up for the more unpleasant personal tasks, in that first life—swapped in a new bucket, with a new washcloth.

Once Hank had gone, Charles removed Erik's flight-suit. Perhaps there were prayers that were supposed to be said. Charles didn't know them. For a few minutes, as he wiped away the rest of the blood, some of which had trailed almost to Erik's hip, he said nothing. It would have been disrespectful to say what he wanted to: You complete idiot. You utter fool. Once the blood was gone, when there was only sweat and a little sand remaining, it became different, somehow. It was difficult to be as angry with Erik when he looked so much like himself.

"Your wife should have been the one to do this," Charles said. "Perhaps she was, in another life. She's doing it right now, maybe. I'll bet she knows how it's supposed to be done. Your children are there, or on their way. Your grandchildren, too. They'll sit shiva for you. It won't be anything like this."

Charles hadn't the first idea if he believed that those other lives went on without them in them. He suspected he didn't. He went on anyway, as he washed and dried Erik's body, as he dressed him again in clean clothes: "I'll tell you so, the next time we meet," he said. "And then I'll tell you what I thought of this stunt of yours."

He hadn't the first idea, now that he thought of it, if Erik would come back. All the physicists and other experts he'd talked to, and there was still no hard data on how this thing worked. Perhaps by dying early, Erik had broken the cycle—for himself, at least. Perhaps the next time Charles came back, the only Erik he would find would be the original version, an Erik who would remember nothing from their other lives. He was all but certain that was what Erik had wanted.
When he was finished with Erik's body, someone came to see him. Hank again, Charles thought, until he glanced over and saw that it was Raven, instead. He'd nearly forgotten she was still with them, this time. He didn't know how. Without Erik to extend his hand, Shaw's people had had no reason to invite her along when they vacated the beach; without Erik, what was she to do but come home?

She sat down beside him. She was still blue, her eyes swollen and puffy, like bruises. She looked nothing at all like the Raven Charles had known in his third life—the Raven who'd been so resentful, right from the beginning, of the ways he'd changed without here. She looked even less like the Raven he'd known in that second life, when it had been the three of them in the early years, she and Erik and he, sharing that New York apartment.

Still, it was to that second Raven to whom Charles felt he was speaking when he said, "I'm sorry. I know you loved him, too."

"Yeah," she answered, and dissolved into tears again. He moved to put his arm around her, hesitated—Erik might be clean now, but Charles was anything but, streaked with blood and sweat and drying sand—then did it anyway. She needed him, this Raven. She'd been five minutes away from walking away from him forever, from becoming Mystique to Erik's Magneto, and yet. That seemed like it was something that had happened in yet another fever dream, at least until she stopped crying and said, "They would have deserved it, you know."

After she had said that, he didn't quite dare to look at her again, just in case he saw Mystique looking back at him.

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Eventually, landfall. Sometime before then, Charles allowed the boys to place Erik's body in a body bag. They were gentle with him, careful, and he wondered what it mattered whether they were or not. It wasn't as if Erik were going to complain. When Hank—of course it was Hank; in his first life it had always been Hank, right from the beginning—helped him get to his feet and guided him to a room where there was a shower, Charles didn't resist. He was vaguely aware that he was beginning to smell, and that it was worse in that claustrophobic space below-decks. He was as vaguely aware that he did feel a bit better after he'd peeled off the flight-suit and scrubbed himself beneath the spray for long enough for the crusted blood and sand that had managed to get into every crevice to disappear into the drain together.

Someone had located clothing that fit him. He was halfway dressed before realizing it was his shirt and trousers; someone must have gone through the Blackbird as they'd waited for the boat. That must have been where Erik's civilian outfit had come from, as well.

When he arrived back at the storage room, clean and as clear-headed as he was likely to get without a good night's sleep, he found the others waiting for him. Looking to him for their direction. He had no particular desire to provide it—

But no particular desire, either, to stay here and be detained once they arrived at dry land.

"All right," he said. "Here's what we're going to do."

He was fairly certain he hadn't done this before. If he remembered little-to-nothing from the fugue state between the beach and the hospital in that first life, he did recall some of the others' memories, and he was fairly certain it had been Moira who'd led them. Occasionally, she'd asked something of him ("Charles, I need you to make those men not see us. Can you do that?"), but he didn't remember the requests or his compliance from his own point of view. What he remembered was his own pale,
sweat-covered face, and the sailors who had all turned away just long enough not to see them as they’d trooped past.

This time was different.

For starters, he said, "I'll need you to stay here, I'm afraid," to Moira, and then took everything.

Hank made a small sound, Raven went very still, Alex and Sean shared a glance, but when Moira said, "I'll stay here. Who are you, again?" not a one of them made a peep.

It wouldn't stop the authorities from finding them. But the consequences hadn't been as dire as they could have been, in that last life, and if Charles had never blamed Moira for his paralysis and didn't intend to blame her for Erik's death, he also didn't see the need for complications. Any unknown factor had the potential to be a complication, and he already had Raven to contend with.

After they were off the ship, it only took one phone call to procure a van—one large enough to give them all somewhere to sit without having to put Erik's body in the trunk. Alex drove, Raven spotted him as needed, and Charles didn't offer to drive because he suspected they would end up in a ditch somewhere if he did.

They arrived in Westchester some 40 hours after they'd left Cuba. Everyone was exhausted; everyone was starving; everyone had been snappish with everyone else for hours.

They buried Erik in a far corner of the estate. Charles watched the boys dig the hole, as he'd watched them argue peevishly for hours now, feeling very much as if he weren't here, as if this sequence of events could not have happened. It felt like a dream. Could it be anything other than a dream?

As Hank—who with his strength had done the last two-thirds of the work—packed down the last of the dirt, Charles felt it coming, the moment when all their eyes would again turn to them.

Before that moment could come, he turned around and began walking toward the house.

"Charles?" Raven said.

"Let him go," said one of the others—which, it hardly mattered.

Charles went inside, found a bedroom, and, not even certain it was his own, crept under the covers. It didn't take long for sleep to come, and he welcomed the darkness when it did.

***

Charles woke with the sun in his face, shining through open curtains, to the peace that comes when one had slept deeply for many hours. The peace was shattered a moment later, when he remembered —

He had died and gone back again. Erik had died, too, and now he was gone.

The two days before he'd lain down had felt like a dream, but rising from that bed was like a nightmare made real. Every muscle in his body ached. He had no recollection where the bruising up and down his arms had come from.

It could have been worse for him, physically. Should have been. Charles had spent years in that first lifetime futilely imagining the way it might have gone better on that beach for him—ways he might...
have kept Erik, ways he might have stopped him without losing his mobility. He'd never considered
that there would be a price to be paid either way—that, no matter what, he would lose Erik, and that
the more he kept (Raven, his ability to walk), the more of Erik he would lose. He would live the rest
of this life without him, and here was the thing, the most terrible thought, and if he'd had it yesterday,
then it still hadn't had the horror it had for him as he thought of it now:

What if Erik didn't come back next time? What if, in the next life, the Erik Charles found was exactly
like these others, not remembering any of the lives he'd lived before, but knowing only what had
happened in the first one? Then Erik would have succeeded in what he'd been trying to do on that
beach; then Charles would be forever and more starkly alone than he had ever previously imagined.
If they'd spent the last life apart, at least they'd been able to write one another. It had never quite felt
like putting a letter in a bottle and tossing it out to sea, for Erik had always written back eventually.
They'd rarely met up, but it had happened, and they'd always seemed to end up reminiscing about
past lives when they did.

If there was no one who shared your memories, how were you to prove to yourself that you had ever
really lived? If there was no one else who remembered what had happened, how could you ever be
entirely certain you hadn't gone mad?

Such questions were enough to drive you mad on their own, if you simply sat there letting them.

Charles glanced around the room. There was nothing on the dresser, on the bookshelves; all that was
visible in slightly open closet was a brown leather jacket on a hanger. He remembered it from
lifetimes ago. So this had been Erik's room. It made sense; this had been the first bedroom he'd come
to, and Erik had always preferred to be as close to an exit as possible. His finickiness over hotel
rooms had been at least a third of the reason Charles had had their old cabin fixed up for them.

Charles had scrubbed the blood and sand from his hands, but he thought he would always feel them.
That, and the rasp of Erik's stubble against the wet cloth...

He got up, walked out into the hallway. He stood there for a long minute, trying to get his bearings,
to remember where his own room might be.

It had been the better part of three years since he'd been in this house, and the 1962 version was
about five remodels from what it had been then. Some part of him felt he should know this,
regardless. He'd grown up in this house, spent most of two adult lives here. Perhaps this, too, could
be contributed to shock, the fuzzy-headedness that had plagued him all the way from Cuba. Hadn't
he seen it in so many others, when his job had been to help them? So many traumatized children,
meeting the world blankly for days or weeks until their surroundings finally felt safe enough for them
to come out.

Eventually, he gave up. It wasn't as if he needed a nap in his own bed, not after all the hours he'd
slept already. So he looked for the others. Found them in the dining room, so that was the way he
went, one foot after the other. Raven and the boys were huddled together at the table, speaking
together in low voices, concentrating intensely on their discussion.

Somehow, Charles was unsurprised when he heard the words 'school,' more than once.

He didn't know how long he stood there before Hank turned his head, the first to notice him; then the
others' gazes followed, and Raven stood up quickly.

"Charles, you're awake," she said. She was still in her blue form, but pale and wan as the others just
the same. If Charles had been able to summon any interest, he'd have asked how long he had been
sleeping, and if any of the rest of them had bothered to do the same.
As it was, he looked at them, and he thought of the school, the one he'd built first with Hank and then with Erik and then alone. He thought of it, and it wearied him, and he could not think of the last time anything had made him feel so tired. Despite the lives he'd lived, he thought he hadn't been this exhausted since those long terrible months after what had happened at Alkali Lake; but he'd been so young then, and the tiredness had been fueled by anger and betrayal, months of raging at Erik inside his head, so that when Erik finally deigned to appear there was nothing left to say to him.

Now, though. Now, he wasn't angry.

He was simply, he realized, done.

Charles looked at the four of them, and then he turned and walked away.

Raven hurried after him, brushed her hand against his elbow to try to stop him. "We're talking about what we should do," she said. "Now that it's over."

Charles didn't turn to face her, this sister who'd been breaths away from a betrayal that might not have even had the chance to enter her mind, this time. "That's nice," he said, awake enough now to have remembered every specific of the floor-plan in the first 1962. He took the next left, picking up the pace.

"We're, um," she said, keeping up easily enough; she'd always been stronger and faster than him. "We're going to have a funeral." She stopped talking for a second, no doubt for Charles to query, as if perhaps there had been some other death while he had slept. "For Erik. We're going to try to get a rabbi to come."

"That sounds lovely," Charles said, although to him it sounded incredibly, dreadfully sad. Erik, who'd had a wife and children and fistfuls of grandchildren just yesterday, not to mention scores of friends from the neighborhood in which he and Magda had lived for nigh-on fifty years. Erik was to be mourned by four people who'd known him for barely six months and a fifth he'd spoken to only to shout at for years, in a service led by a rabbi who'd never even met him. "I'm afraid I won't be able to attend."

"Charles—" and he'd never done this to her, not in any life, if his telepathy had been a wedge between them he'd never done it purposely, but Charles could bear no more of this, and so he said,

"You're going to stop following me. You're going to go back to the others."

And Raven did.

A minute later, Charles came to the garage. Whatever else might have been different in this house, one thing remained a constant throughout all years and all lives: neither Charles nor his late stepfather before him knew a damned thing about the internal workings of cars. And so there had always, no matter what else was going on, been a mechanic coming in twice a week to service them, and to make certain they were driven, at least a little. Charles chose almost at random: minutes after he'd walked into the garage, he roared out of it again in one of the Ferraris with a full tank of gas and the knowledge that wherever he decided to go, he should be able to get there without a mechanical breakdown of any kind.

For now, 'anywhere but here' sounded like a fine destination.

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Charles had been heading westward for four hours and was well into Pennsylvania before he realized where he was going. Once he did, he began to plan his route consciously. There were
highways that didn't exist yet, other back roads he'd nearly forgotten—but he'd navigated this part of the country many times across all decades of his past lives, and there was no doubt he'd get where he was going.

He thought he might have to stop at a motel along the way—thirty wasn't twenty, and it was somewhere in his thirties when he always stopped being able to pull all-nighters or drive more than twelve hours in a single day, even if he was forty years younger than he'd been just yesterday—but a building excitement kept him going. Eighteen hours after he'd left, he pulled into a familiar driveway...

And immediately backed out of it again. Ray and he didn't live in this house, not yet. Someone else did, as evidenced by the yellow tricycle in the yard and the relative lack of care that had been taken with the side garden, where tomatoes plants drooped over their cages, leaves browning and flies buzzing all around.

Charles had known that, of course. He'd been aware all along that they couldn't simply go back to the way they'd been yesterday. But knowing was one thing, the habit of years another. Now he drove slowly through streets he recognized, and didn't; how much this town was to change over the next forty years. He tried to remember where Ray's family had lived while he was growing up, recalling that his parents had moved during his sophomore year at college. There had been a fire, and the story Charles had always heard at family gatherings was that it had taken temporarily moving out so repairs could be done for them to realize how much they'd hated the place.

But had it been on Lisbon Street or Duncar Avenue? For a few minutes, Charles couldn't recall, his mind seeming fuzzy around the edges once again, partly from lack of sleep, but mostly from the aftershocks of everything that had happened. (Erik, lying still and cold in the blood-soaked sand...already Charles knew that this nightmare would supersede every other, flash into his mind at odd moments for as many years and lifetimes as he had left.)

It came to him a few minutes later that it had in fact been on Claremont Street, but by then he'd remembered that this was Wednesday, and Ray would be nineteen, and Ray had worked at the grocer on Wednesday, Saturday, and Friday afternoons from the age of fourteen to the age of twenty. In the summers during high school and college, he'd worked there nearly full-time, putting himself through school after the knee injury in his junior year of high school that had kept him out of college football (and would have kept him out of Vietnam when he graduated college, if he hadn't already been married with a young daughter by then).

The grocer was easy enough to find, although it had long since become a pawn shop by the time Charles had moved here. It had a green awning, a cardboard sign meticulously advertising a sale on pears, a display of which could be seen inside the window. Charles found himself noticing all the small details, all the little touches, his sight sharpening as it had on the beach, as it always seemed to when something was about to happen.

Inside, he took a cart and went down the aisles, choosing the sixties' counterparts of the kinds of foods he'd liked to make as recently as last week. His hearing had been heightened too, and he could hear Ray's voice a few aisles over. It was different—his accent, his tone; you couldn't help but change as you lived, whether you embarked upon many lifetimes or only the one—but in every way that mattered, it was him, and Charles knew him.

It wasn't until he went to ring up his groceries, and Ray came away from stocking shelves to bag them, so startlingly, incredibly young, that Charles began to wonder if he'd made a mistake here. Because while his heart had jumped the moment Ray came into view, (or honestly even before that, from the first note of his voice), Ray's face showed no recognition at all. Of course it didn't. From his
viewpoint, they'd never met. Charles was a customer, interesting only because he was a stranger in a small town which didn't see that many outside of the crowds that came in for football games played at home. If a part of Ray took note of Charles' lips, his eyes (and a part of Ray did, even now, decades before he'd first begin to understand his sexuality), no part of him did so consciously, and no part of him even seemed to realize how often he was glancing toward Charles in-between shoving tins of fruit and tuna into paper bags.

"Do you need help out?" Ray asked, once the groceries had all been returned to the cart in bags, as Charles was digging through his wallet to pay the cashier. It was clear from the way he took the handle of the cart in hand that he wouldn't take no for an answer, at least not easily—and that was fine, for Charles had no intention of declining.

"Yes, thank you," he said, and led Ray out to the car. It took almost no time for Ray to lift the bags and place them into the backseat, and in those few seconds, Charles saw the possibilities, and he wondered what on earth he could have been thinking.

It was clear from the briefest glance into Ray's mind that he had not yet impregnated the woman who would be his wife for more than thirty years. If he had, Charles wouldn't have stood a chance at getting Ray to come away with him, not without rearranging his memories to suit himself; Ray had too strong a sense of duty to be swayed that easily.

As it was, though...Ray might not even realize the truth of his attraction to men, but it wouldn't take much for Charles to make him see. Seducing him would be easy, an exercise of which the end result was not in question. A week, maybe two, and Charles could have him in some hotel room, or even in the backseat of this car. Despite the inherent danger in relationships like theirs in these days, he thought Ray would be up for it. He'd never been a coward, Ray. Only blind to certain truths about himself, as so many people are for so much (and sometimes all) of their lives.

Charles could seduce him. They could be happy together, as they'd been for the last thirteen years. It would be easy; they'd have so much more time this time.

The last bag landed in the backseat, and Ray smiled at him. It was a pleasant smile. It was the way he smiled at strangers; Charles had seen it before, when he'd dropped by the hardware store at the end of the workday to accompany Ray home.

"I appreciate it," Charles said, and reached into his pocket for several quarters for the tip.

If his hand trembled, pressing the coins into Ray's hand, Ray didn't appear to notice. "Thanks," he said, and directed the cart back into the store, not looking back even once.

It was probably better that way. It meant there was no chance he'd see Charles watching him walk away. No chance he'd ever guess how close Charles was to weeping.

For no matter what he could have with this version of Ray, he'd never be the one Charles had last seen yesterday, which was now a lifetime ago—the Ray who'd kissed him sleepily as he'd rushed off to catch an early morning flight; the Ray who always felt a little relieved when Charles left (because it meant he'd have the house to himself, something he'd rarely experienced in his life), but always more than a little relieved upon his return. Charles had liked it, too, sometimes, getting to be the one who came and went, the one who was missed when he was gone, and welcomed upon his return.

He hadn't realized he would be unable to bear not having been missed at all.

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He stopped for gas two hundred miles west of there and with five bags of groceries still in the backseat. If it had been summer, the meat would have been rotting already; as it was, he was able to gather all the perishables together and dump the bag in the nearest garbage bin.

There was a pay-phone, and, not even knowing what he would say, Charles used it to call the house. The ringing at the other end seemed to go on for an age before someone picked up.

"Charles? Charles, is that you?" Raven, sounding more teary than angry. He'd thought she would be angry; he'd thought controlling her for even a few seconds had to be the unforgivable thing.

"It's me."

"Where are you? We've been worried sick."

On this day in another life, Charles had been the one who was worried sick—at least, when he'd been able to think past the drugs they'd been pumping into him. When he'd been able to think of anything past the first surgery and the next one, the best case scenario the doctor had presented him with, and how little that man seemed to believe it in the snatches of thoughts he'd been able to pick up through the morphine.

"I didn't want you to worry," he heard himself say.

He must have sounded just as indifferent from the other end, for the teariness threatened to turn to actual tears when Raven said, "When are you coming home?"

"I haven't decided." He left off the end of the sentence, which was, 'if I'm coming home.'

"We, um." Raven took an audible breath. "We had a funeral for Erik. It was nice."

"I'm glad," Charles said, and there it was again, the indifference.

"We're planning things. We started before you left, while you were...while you were sleeping."

"What sort of things?"

Privately, Charles decided, right then and there: if Raven meant to hare off on her own, build the Brotherhood (or Sisterhood, as it were) of Mutants again, the way she and Erik had done in that first life...if that was what she wanted to do, he wouldn't try to stop her. Even the idea of disagreeing with her about it was beyond wearing.

"You know what you've been talking about? A school for mutants, for everyone who was too young to recruit for the CIA?"

A pause, long enough that it was clear he was expected to have an opinion, make some statement. "I remember."

"Well, that's what we're doing. We can't—Charles, we can't let this get us down. We can't give up just because Erik...we can't let them win."

"I see."

"You should come home. There's so much work to do here."

Indeed there was, and how could she know he'd already done that work? Thrice over, he'd done it. There was no denying the good he'd done in those other lives, the good he could now do again, the difference he could make, had made, over and over again...
"I agree," Charles said. "There's a great deal of work to be done." Raven gasped in what might have been relief, but Charles wasn't finished. "But I won't be a part of it. I've done enough. There's work to do? Fine. Someone else can damned well do it this time."

Before Raven could offer a rebuttal, he hung up the phone. He went back to his car. He turned the key in the ignition and pulled back onto the road, driving west once again.

He had no idea where he was headed this time, but it didn't matter, as long as it was away.
The Slow Path (1)

By the time they started home, Charles thought he might be working on a migraine. By the time they were halfway there, he was certain of it. Still, experience had taught him to keep his shields up until they'd pulled off the main road, no matter how much he desired the slight relief that would come when he let them down.

"It's cloudy out today, thank goodness," he said, because the baby had slept on the drive to town and was therefore refusing to sleep on the drive back. If no one talked to him, he might get bored. Charles, who had spent the first twelve years of his life alternating between boredom and incredible loneliness, and still sometimes dreamed of being back there in the dark, could not bear the thought. "I might have had to pull off the road otherwise, and then where would we be?"

He wouldn't have pulled off the road, not for anything—shields up until they were away from civilization, that was the rule—but it was something to say, and it was true he was grateful not to have the sun in his eyes.

David, of course, said nothing back. Nonetheless, he was paying attention, the way he always did in the car, where there were no toys or kitties to play with, or television shows to watch. When Charles glanced in the rear-view mirror, David smiled and waved back at him.

Eventually, they did make it. Pulling into the long dirt drive, Charles checked once more. Finally, they were out of the range of any strange minds, and so he could pull back his shields, letting them drop for the first time since they'd left this morning. He could do that here, and have David remain happy and safe in his car-seat.

There was, however, a familiar mind ahead. But David knew his aunt very well, and so there was no need to shield against Raven's mind.

Charles parked, let David out of his car-seat, handed him a box of cereal so he'd have the pleasure of 'helping,' then got the lightest two bags from out of the trunk.

"If you're here anyway, why don't you help carry in?" he asked when they got inside the cabin.

It was, perhaps, futile to expect a response to this request; David had spotted Raven before Charles had even opened the door, and now he dashed into the kitchen to find her.

"Hey there, little guy," Raven said, sweeping David off his feet and giving him a noisy kiss on the cheek. "What have you been up to today?"

The answer, broadcast openly, was a series of images: the passing trees from the car seat; the passing aisles from the seat of the grocery cart; the colorful, frightening faces of everyone who'd stopped to remark on what a beautiful baby David was (meaning everyone; it hadn't taken long for Charles to discover how much attention single fatherhood drew. In other circumstances, he'd have quite enjoyed it).

"Still not talking, huh? Well, that's okay."

Usually, Charles would have objected to this yet again being the first observation out of her mouth, but he was in much too much pain to quarrel today. "Raven, I'm serious. Would you mind bringing in the rest of the groceries? I'm not feeling well."

Raven peered at him. "Another headache? No wonder you're being nice."
"Raven, come on."

"Well, excuse me for wondering why you didn't say," she cleared her throat, and the next part was an exact mimicry of Charles' voice, causing David's mind to go rainbow-bright with surprise and delight, the way it always did when Raven was anything but her own blue self: "Why are you here, Raven? I don't want you here, Raven. Go away, Raven."

"—I've only ever said that first one."

"Sure, but you're always thinking the rest, so it counts."

"...I'm going to have a lie down." Surely it didn't count as losing if he was incapacitated. But even if it did, he would worry about it later. "Wake me before you go, would you?"

Raven said something, and it was long and a little mocking, but although Charles missed most of the details, he got the gist: she'd be glad to watch David for a while, and if he didn't go lie down, she was going to keep talking at him.

Grateful for the reprieve, Charles ducked into his bedroom. He closed the curtains, crawled into bed, pulled a pillow over his head, and remained there for the next sixteen hours.

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David had been an accident.

Charles had never aspired to fatherhood, especially once it had become clear he and Erik were stuck in what amounted to a decades-long time loop. He'd seen the grief Erik's family had brought him, twined so tightly around the joy there could be no separating them. There was a reason most of Charles' lovers in his last life had been men. He'd never had a strong preference for one sex over the other, but he knew a cautionary tale when he saw one, and so he'd found himself drifting toward people he could not manage to impregnate.

In this life, he'd taken no lovers at all. Instead, he'd focused on other things, on new experiences. He'd been a house painter, a construction worker, a janitor, a welder. He jumped at the chance to do anything with his hands that he'd never have dreamed of doing in his other lives. The act of learning such skills, none of which came naturally to him, had kept despair, if not at bay, then quieter than it would have been otherwise. He'd avoided alcohol and other substances that would only have compounded the pain while appearing to numb it. Somewhere along the way, he'd begun to heal. Some part of him—the part that remembered losing Erik, Raven, and his ability to walk in his first life; losing his school for a time, a few years later; losing the life he and Erik had built together, the second time around—had known he would. Some part of him had known he needed time more than anything else.

After a few years of wandering from place to place, he'd chanced to meet Gabrielle Haller. He'd met her in his last life, of course...met her and flirted outrageously, only to be turned down (much more firmly than necessary, but then he'd always been most attracted to the sort of women most likely to outright tell him to fuck off).

When he'd met her in this life, during a conference he'd not managed to attend in a previous life, he'd done no flirting, made no attempt whatsoever to get her into bed. Instead, he'd asked her about her work, and she'd picked up on how genuine his interest was. They'd met a few more times in more private venues, and one thing had led to another. Six months later, he'd just moved into his third new apartment since their mutual parting when she'd managed to track him down.
The telephone conversation that followed had been one of the most surreal of any of Charles' lives. Gaby had done most of the talking. The salient points had been: 'I'm pregnant; it's yours; I'm not keeping it, so do you want it or shall I put it up for adoption?' Charles had gotten in about seven words in total, four of which were 'you're sure?' (twice), and three of which were, 'I'll take it.'

Had Gabrielle fallen pregnant in a later year, Charles felt quite certain she would have terminated the pregnancy and he never would have known about it one way or the other. Remembering how it had gone with Erik, he wasn't sure if he wished things had turned out that way...

Until the first time he held David in his arms. In that moment, all doubt about whether he wanted a child of his own to exist in this life fell away. However it had happened, however stupid it was, Charles had never wanted anything more.

In the weeks following David's birth, however, doubts about whether he could do this grew and grew in Charles' mind. From the second week on, David cried constantly. Charles was given to understand that all infants cried quite often, but David...David cried quite literally every waking moment for most of the first few months of his life. He cried enough that his pediatrician eventually stopped being amused at Charles' supposed new-father jitters, and ordered any number of tests to be run. But they turned up nothing abnormal, and nothing changed.

After the first few months, David's small mind had developed enough for Charles to get the toehold that had been impossible when he was a newborn, with no frame of reference for anything that happened to him. Every day, he was able to make slightly better sense of what David felt than he had the day before. It wasn't long before two things became clear: David had been born with an active telepathic gift; and while some of his cries were based on hunger, tiredness, a desire to be held, most of it, by far, was based on fear. David hadn't been born with any of the defensive measures Charles had been able to begin building immediately when he had manifested at the age of nine. David had no idea what was happening to him, could neither filter out any of the minds around him, nor make any sense of their contents. It would have been overwhelming for Charles, with the experience of lifetimes; for an infant, it was torture, unexplained and unending.

Once Charles realized what was happening, he took everything he knew about shielding his own mind, and applied it to David's. But it had soon become apparent that to try to do that every waking moment was to doom himself to ceaseless headaches...and if David woke while Charles was trying to sleep off one of his migraines and David happened to wake up first, he'd be screaming and terrified yet again.

This time, the renovations to the cabin Charles and Erik had once used as a retreat from the world was a rush job: Charles paid the contractor three times the asking price, on the condition he and David could move in within two weeks.

At first, they had neither electricity nor a telephone line—but all Charles really noticed, in those first few weeks in May, was that David never cried with the same terror anymore.

By June, the power was on. In July, the telephone went in. In October, with the knowledge that winter would soon be rolling in, and unable to recall whether this would be a mild winter or a normal one, (though he was relatively certain it wouldn't be one of the truly awful ones), Charles finally called Raven, partially to let her know she was an aunt, but mostly to make certain there was someone who knew they were here, and who could check in on them from time to time.

***

Raven was still there when Charles woke at nearly noon of the following day. She'd made a mess of the coffee table, scattering pieces of paper everywhere. Charles needed to go no closer to see what
the marks she was ticking off so mechanically on the pages were: He'd been a teacher long enough to know what grading looked like.

"I put him down for a nap half an hour ago," she said before Charles could ask after David. "I know, I know, nap time isn't supposed to be until one, but he was really cranky."

"I'm sure he wouldn't have been if he'd gotten to bed on time."

"Look who's cranky now." Raven didn't so much as glance at him, though Charles could tell there was something weighing on her mind, and no chance whatsoever she would let whatever it was go. "Go eat something. Drink some coffee."

She was absolutely right, and Charles was absolutely unsurprised to get to the kitchen and see she hadn't made any extra of whatever she and David had had for dinner last night and breakfast this morning. She also hadn't bothered to put the groceries away in the cabinets or do the dishes, and so Charles did it all while his coffee brewed and his omelet and sausage links sizzled in the pan. By the time he'd downed his first two cups of coffee—he'd always preferred tea in his other lives, but parenting a toddler required the closest thing to injecting caffeine straight into his veins—and scarfed down his breakfast, he did indeed feel much better. The entire world seemed brighter, in the way it only ever did after he'd been in pain and it had miraculously passed over him.

He was thus far more amenable to Raven than he would otherwise have been by the time he returned to the living room, where she was still grading papers.

This amenability, however, quickly evaporated as she glanced at him and said, "You know, we should really talk."

"About what? Don't tell me to shave." Charles had spent the years before David with a three-day beard much of the time; since David, personal hygiene beyond quick showers and starting a new load of laundry whenever the unfolded pile in the basket by his bed grew dangerously low had gone the way of the dodo. "Not a word about the flannel, either."

"How long are you going to keep living like a hermit? Are you ever planning to ask for help?"

And here they were again. Raven never seemed to come here without some concern she thought she had to share. It was uniquely annoying to be on the other side of this nonsense; if Charles had had the room for it, he'd have felt some sympathy for every version of Raven who'd ever claimed he was smothering her.

"If I need help, I'll ask for it."

Raven gave him a look. She probably didn't realize she'd learned it from him.

"Raven. We're all right. Really."

"Really? Because as far as I can tell, you live way out in the middle of nowhere."

"Yes, and you of all people are aware of the reasons."

"If you came back to Westchester, we could help you."

"I highly doubt that," Charles said mildly, already aware no objection would prevent the rest of this steamrolling attempt from taking place.

"I've been talking to this telepath from Massachusetts—"
"Emma Frost is not going anywhere near my son."

This statement, at least, seemed to slow Raven down. "Wait, you know her?"

"Quite well. And let me assure you, there's nothing she can do that I can't."

"Ughhhhh," Raven said. "You are so, so arrogant, you know that, right? We've helped so many kids who have trouble with their powers, but you won't even let Hank so much as look at David. How do you know there's nothing anyone can do if you won't let anyone try?"

"I'm well aware of Hank's capabilities. This is outside of them."

This much was absolutely true—Hank had never been able to do much for Jean Grey's abilities, either. In every life, that had been down to Charles, leading by experience and example, exactly as he intended to do for his son.

"You don't know half as much as you think you do, and David's the one who's going to have to pay for it."

Raven had never gone so far as to say it in any of the conversations they'd had about this. Charles had always heard the meaning behind her words, but now he found annoyance morphing into pure fury. "I know more about helping young mutants with their abilities than you can imagine," he said. "I've forgotten more about running that school than you'll ever learn."

The Erik Lehnsherr Memorial High School had opened in the fall of 1965. From what Charles could tell—though he tried not to pay too much attention, because if he saw everything they were doing that he would have done differently, he'd be sucked back in; the last thing he wanted to do was to waste yet another life doing work that would once again be erased a few decades from now—Raven and Hank were doing a decent enough job. At any rate, they'd yet to be sued, and he'd not heard a whisper of any threat of them having to close their doors, the way Charles had had to do around this time in that first life.

Raven was looking at him with some mixture of shock and pity—and a new flavor of concern, sharp and loud enough Charles couldn't help but hear it. "What are you talking about? You've never wanted anything to do with the school."

"My point is," Charles said, "it isn't arrogance. It's not conjecture. It's not even naivety. I know the resources that are available, and I know none of them can do anything more for David than I'm already doing. He needs to be shielded from other minds until he's old enough to shield for himself. No number of tests is going to change it. No amount of poking or prodding is going to hurry the process. It takes as long as it takes. It'll happen when it happens."

He expected her to point out, yet again, that David was two and a half and not even talking yet. Then he could have pointed out that David communicated deftly enough through telepathy, and he'd talk when he was ready. Then Raven would have pointed out that he might learn to talk a little more quickly if he ever interacted with anyone besides the two of them. Then Charles would have made his usual promise to seek out someone for him to have play dates with, without any intention of doing so. And then Raven would have left, the both of them frustrated with the other.

But this time, Raven just peered at him. It was alarming, sometimes, what she could see from merely observing other people. She stared at him for the longest time, and then said, "What did you mean, you know more about running 'that school' than I ever will?"

"—I was just talking. Forget it."

"No," Raven said. "No, you meant it."
"No, I wasn't."

"Charles, I'm worried about you. You've been acting so weird ever since..."

"Since Erik was killed?" Since Erik had committed suicide-by-Moira on the beach—but even as tightly wound as Charles was now, he knew better than to put it that way. Not when Raven and the others all thought of it as something not quite so random as an accident, but not anywhere near as intentional as Charles remained convinced it had been. "Yes, I imagine it changed me."

But there had never been any point in trying to dissuade Raven from a subject she had decided to pursue, any more than there was a point in dissuading her from any course of action she'd decided on. "And now you're lying to me. Why? I don't understand."

There was a choice, here. He could send her away, whether she wanted to go or not. He could send her away and make her think they'd had a nice visit where she at least pretended to think he and David were well-adjusted instead of codependent (as if it were possible to raise a small child and not be codependent to some extent, no matter how many other people were available to help you). He could send her away, or...he could tell her.

Charles thought he'd done quite well at focusing on everything but the intense loneliness he felt every moment of every day—not only the loneliness inherent in rarely getting the chance to have a conversation with another adult, but the solitude of being in a world where no one shared his experiences or even knew he'd had them. He could have been surrounded by people and still felt isolated, could have taken a thousand lovers and felt completely alone. That was why he'd kept himself apart to some extent, even before David.

He'd never before considered telling Raven or anyone about his other lives. He'd known David would pick up on it, someday—it was more unlikely he wouldn't, as closely linked as they were; even now, Charles could feel the vibrations from David's slumber at the back of his mind, while Charles' own distress had the potential to turn his son's sleep to ominous dreams.

The other Ravens he'd known had been...there'd been Mystique, who'd been a stranger to him. then there'd been the Raven who was his younger sister and Erik's. Last, there'd been the Raven of his most recent life, with whom he'd never quite found a comfortable balance.

Then there was this Raven. She'd been minutes away from betraying him, walking down the road that would have led to Mystique. Instead, she'd turned out to be a completely different person in this life, even more than she had in the two before, taking on not Erik's original role but Charles' own. He'd spent years not contacting her, while she'd spent years worrying about him; she'd driven him crazy ever since he'd let her back into his life, but somehow they felt more like equals than they ever had before.

But when it came down to it, the deciding factor was that he was weary of being alone. God, he was so tired of being alone. And despite his bitterness toward this Raven for what she would have done, given the opportunity—bitterness he'd never chosen to recognize in his other lives; he'd always blamed Erik for everything that had happened, for turning her against him, for taking her away, and by so doing had made certain he could not even be honest with himself about the extent to which she shared in the blame—there was no one else he could even imagine confessing to.

"I know more than you do about running the school because I've done it before," Charles said. "Three times, in fact. Once with Hank, once with Erik, and once on my own—although Hank ended up as headmaster the last time. I hope you're using him correctly; I really can't overstate what a help he is when it comes to administrivia."
"...What are you talking about?"

"Time travel," Charles said. "Reincarnation, whatever you want to call it. I've been here before, you see."

"You're lying again," she said. "Or you're sick, or—or something." But she was peering at him again, so intently she couldn't have held onto her pink form if she'd bothered to wear it around him anymore. She couldn't have missed the fact that he wasn't lying—that he believed everything he was saying, even if he didn't expect her to believe it, too.

David's nap went very long indeed that day, for Raven had put him down before noon, and it was after four by the time Charles had finished explaining the rest. She remained skeptical of his story right up until he'd told her what had happened in that other life—how the beach had gone, how she'd chosen to leave with Erik. After that, she looked troubled, but no longer interjected to tell him he was crazy.

"That's...a lot," she said, when Charles had finished. "Charles, that's..."

"Yes," he said. "And it's all true. One hundred percent."

There were a thousand questions in her eyes, tens of thousands, but what Raven said next was, "I still think we could help David."

"Raven—"

"Just because you think you know everything doesn't mean you actually do. If this is the first time you've had David, then all you really know is some things that don't work, and other things that work halfway."

"We're doing all right," Charles said, but his heart was no longer in his argument. First time. Raven had said this was the first time—but in reality, it was the only time. David could never exist in any other life. Even if Charles could re-create the circumstances leading up to his conception, the chances of him doing so in a way that ensured the same sperm would meet the same egg...

"Not really. You're killing yourself, Charles. I'm really worried you're going to give yourself a brain tumor or something. What would happen to David then?"

"I'll think about it," Charles said. "Change the subject, please."

He asked this partly out of weariness, but partly because David had wandered into the living room, bleary-eyed and with tussled hair. He climbed onto the couch and into Charles' lap, and was asleep again within moments. He was prone to long, deep naps, as if to make up for all the sleep he'd missed in his first few months of life, but Charles didn't have the heart to dislodge him or make him wake up. His sleeping schedule was already ruined for tonight; what was another half an hour or so if they were going to be up until the morning anyway?

"Okay, so, tell me more about me in these other lives of yours," Raven said eagerly. "I want to know everything. Don't leave anything out."

Charles sighed, but did as she asked. To his surprise, he found himself enjoying it quite a lot more than he would have expected to, had he ever expected to have this conversation in the first place. He felt a bit whiplashed, but then there had always been a sense of whiplash when it came to the different versions of Raven. She was incredibly difficult to predict...and there had been no predicting, either, how much closer to her he would feel once the truth was out.
"Did you just compare my other self to a lizard?" she asked at one point—but she was laughing, not offended the way she could have been.

"I think the effect was deliberate," Charles said. "I'm not entirely certain, but it always seemed calculated to me. It was unnerving. You were like a different person."

It was funny, and it wasn't. Charles didn't like to think about Mystique. He liked even less to think about how Mystique would be the version of Raven he faced, starting with the next life. He hadn't faced that knowledge before, not really. He wouldn't have been willing to do it tonight, if it hadn't been the lesser of two evils.

He missed the other Ravens dreadfully at times, but somehow he thought he would someday miss this Raven the most, for being the one with whom he could laugh about herself.

***

Two months later—he couldn't allow Raven to think she could simply summon him to Westchester, even if she did have a point, so he let a little time go by first—Charles drove David down to the school, with the understanding that they would be leaving again the moment his head began to twinge.

"All I'm going to do today is get some base readings," Hank said as he placed a hat covered in electrodes on Charles' head. The sight was apparently the most hilarious thing David had seen in his life; he giggled silently, sending out spasms of mirth every time Charles sent him an image of himself in a funny hat. He had a very large compilation of such images in his head, for Cerebro had had many designs over his lifetimes; and if he'd never worn a hat to conceal his baldness, he certainly had done to keep his ears attached to his head during some winters. "This won't be the only session. We should really have a range of readings. If you could come back once a week for a while, that would be best."

"All right."

Loathe as Charles had been to try it, he would later admit this had been a good idea. Although the Hank of this lifetime didn't have same experience with Charles' telepathy he'd had in other lives, he learned quickly. Within a few sessions, he had an exact reading on how long and how hard Charles had to shield David from the world to call down a migraine upon himself. What had seemed like a necessary evil turned out, once Charles had begun the suggested exercises, to be something that didn't have to happen very often at all.

It helped, too, for David to be in a place where he didn't have to be shielded constantly. At first, Charles did shield him from receiving thoughts from others at the school, but from the third session or so, he was able to loosen up on the shielding preventing David from projecting to everyone else. There were other telepaths here, after all, if none as strong as David was at two and a half; it was nothing the students and teachers here weren't used to, and so did not need to be hidden.

The unexpected side effect of this was that, soon, everyone at the school knew David. Sometimes, people would come down to Hank's lab just to say hi. Over the first few sessions this happened, David grew more and more frustrated that he couldn't hear these new friends' thoughts. He'd never seemed frustrated when they ran their errands, but perhaps that was because they did errands in bulk, long enough apart for the cashiers they knew to have become strangers again to David. But they were at the school every week or two, and David soon came to recognize the teenagers (mostly girls) who came to see him.

So there was nothing for it but for Charles to lower the rest of his shielding as well during their visits.
At first, he targeted it toward whomever was in the room with them, more like letting an extra few people into the bubble than popping it altogether. Later, he expanded it to include the wing they were in; then, the entire school. Despite Charles' trepidation, the openness never made David scream, the way he had as an infant. He seemed to thrive on it, in fact.

Then, one day not long after his third birthday, David decided he hated Hank. He'd always seemed to like him well enough before, but on this day, Hank wanted a vial of Charles' blood for some further testing. Charles, long since fallen back into that old routine of being Hank's personal guinea pig, had allowed it with barely a thought.

David, though. If David could have killed Hank with a thought, he would have. Thankfully, they weren't there yet, and Charles brought his shields up in time to spare Hank a truly terrible headache. He could spare neither of them from the meltdown—not the kind of meltdown David had used to have, but a proper (albeit silent) tantrum, complete with crying, lying on the floor, projecting of visions involving Hank covered in several million fire ants, and kicking, so that Charles eventually gave up, slung David over his shoulder, and headed back to the car.

At the following week's session, David ignored Hank completely...

So completely that, half an hour after they'd arrived, Charles realized David had raised his own shield to prevent from having to hear any of horrible Hank's horrible thoughts.

"I'm terribly sorry," Charles said, trying not to laugh, "but I believe this is a breakthrough."

"It certainly is," Hank said. He didn't sound as if his feelings were hurt, though Charles suspected he'd have had to drop a nuclear bomb directly on the house to hurt Hank's feelings this week. His mind was practically shouting about the good news Raven had told him the day before, the news Charles was most certainly not supposed to know about yet: They were expecting a baby. Charles hadn't even previously realized they were seeing each other, that was how out of the loop he'd been in this life, how laser-focused his attention had been elsewhere.

"Perhaps all he needed was one good enemy," Charles mused, biting back the urge to wonder aloud how long it would be until Raven knew ten times as much as he did about child-rearing. There'd be time for that later, when he wouldn't be in hot water for snooping. Anyway, his first priority was going to be to decide what, if anything, to tell Raven about Kurt, when she inevitably asked if she'd ever had children in her other lives.

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Over the next few years, Charles sometimes found himself wondering the first thing everyone else always seemed to want to talk to him about: What would it take to get David to talk?

It wasn't a top priority; he had no intention of throwing his son into stressful situations to see if it would shake something loose. David could communicate everything he needed to with his telepathy. All he needed for the rest, Charles believed, was all Charles had needed before David had been so much as a thought. All he needed was the gift of time.

If things had gone differently, perhaps that would have proved to be true.

But it wasn't one good enemy that spurred David to speak out loud for the first time, just shy of six years old. In the end, all it took was one bad fall.
Charles was on his way down from cleaning the gutters when it happened. Later, he would suppose he'd knocked some wet leaves onto the rung he slipped on, or else he hadn't wiped the ladder down well enough before climbing up in the first place.

Either way, the result was the same: he slipped, tried to steady himself, overcorrected, and went over. He brought the ladder with him. It landed on top of him with a clatter that nearly drowned out the other sound, the ugly SNAP that came the moment his feet hit the ground.

For a moment, Charles was certain he'd broken his back. Then the pain came, pressure cuffs around both his lower legs, and he knew he'd broken something else, instead.

David, he said. Come here, please.

There was no need for this; David had sensed his distress immediately, and was out the back door nearly before Charles had finished calling for him. He stopped short in the doorway, his eyes going wide as he took in Charles' position, prone on the ground.

"I need you to go get the phone," Charles said. He was astonished by his own calmness, the steadiness of his voice. "Dial 9-1-1, then bring it to me."

David nodded, and dashed back inside, his mind a field of clear, sharp panic.

Charles braced his hands against the windowsill, tried to pull himself up—and sank back down with a scream he barely managed to muffle by biting his lip. He tasted blood in his mouth as he tried to calculate the chances the phone's cord would stretch far enough to get it out the door. He was fairly certain it wouldn't. He supposed he'd have to shout, and hope the operator could hear what he said. That, or use his arms to drag himself into the house. Either way, it would be doable. It had to be.

Inside, David had picked up the phone, and he'd dialed. He brought it as close as he could, which wasn't anywhere near the door.

Dragging it was to be, then. Or so Charles thought, until—

"My dad's hurt," David said, the first words he'd ever said out loud, and proceeded to answer all of the operator's questions about where they were, and what had happened.

The ambulance arrived half an hour later, five minutes after they first heard the siren. David rode with Charles to the hospital, where Charles instructed the nearest nurse as to Raven's telephone number. Raven arrived an hour and a half later, which was around the time the X-rays had shown Charles would need surgery for both ankle breaks. Both had to be stabilized with plates and pins, and he couldn't help but wonder if it would have been somewhat less barbaric a process if he'd broken himself in, oh, say, 1999 instead.

The surgery occurred the next morning. Charles woke from it in two splints, which were replaced by casts a week later.

There was no going back to the cabin, of course. It wasn't equipped for a wheelchair, even a temporary one. The school wasn't much better, truthfully, but it still took less than a week to make the modifications to Charles' bedroom, and to make the nearest bathroom safe for him.

He was in the casts for eight weeks. Every day followed the same pattern: he'd wake up, transfer
over to the chair, roll himself to the toilet and then out to the kitchen. By the time he'd been up for an
hour, his legs would be aching (the first two weeks), his toes swelled up like little sausages (all
eight). He ended up spending most of his days with both feet elevated up on five pillows, waiting for
his toes to become wrinkled again so he could venture out of his room for another hour. He'd never
slept so much, hadn't gotten so much reading done in any other lifetime.

He hadn't missed the walking dreams, which came to him every few nights, dreadful old
acquaintances he'd once been so glad to be rid of. He woke in tears from each one, convinced for the
first few waking minutes that he would never walk again.

Sometimes, he thought the same thing during the day, too.

"You are really good at that," Raven said one day, after having witnessed him perform such
miraculous tasks as transferring himself from his chair to the couch and back, and drive through the
hallway backward while holding a cup of coffee in one hand. "You weren't kidding."

"Decades of practice," Charles said. "It's like riding a bicycle."

He doubted anyone had ever been quite so miserable about returning to bicycle riding, but he
managed not to say so. The last thing he'd ever wanted was pity, from anyone. It would be worse
coming from Raven, when Mystique had only ever regarded his chair with scorn.

***

After the ankle breaks were healed enough for Charles to work on becoming weightbearing again,
the real fun began. Once the casts came off, a physical therapist began coming to the house for four
hour-long sessions each week. At first, the exercises she gave him were delightful, every new session
proof that he was going to be capable of doing everything he'd done before, baby step by baby step.
After two months of sessions, Charles began to grow impatient and a bit bored—proof of how far
he'd come—but kept them up for several more months anyway. You couldn't be too careful.

At first, he walked with a standard walker, then with a cane. Once he rid himself of the cane, he had
every intention of moving himself and David back to their cabin...

Until David broached the subject one day at breakfast. Breakfast time for the students and teachers
had been over for an hour, so it was just the two of them in the dining room.

"Dad?" he said. In retrospect, this should have been Charles' first clue.

"Yes?"

"When are we leaving?"

"Next week, probably," Charles said. He'd taken another few bites of pancake before he realized
something was wrong. Part of it was that David was moving his food around the plate with his fork,
seemingly all out of appetite—David, who'd have had pancakes for every meal from the age of
eighteen months to four years, if Charles had let him. The rest of it was that David had spoken the
question. Even now that he talked to other people, he almost always communicated telepathically
with Charles. They both preferred it that way.

Now, not only was he holding back his thoughts and emotions, but he was actually shielding them
from Charles. He'd never done that before, not once in all his six years.

"What's wrong?" Charles said, but even without coaxing it out of him, he thought he knew where
he'd gone wrong. "Do you not want to go home?"
Ever since they'd come here for Charles' convalescence, they'd still spent a great deal of time together. David came to see him for hours every day, and showed Charles his experiences from across the house at least once per hour. But they were still spending far less time together than they had been. It could only be natural, when there were so many other people and things around now to take up David's attention. By now fully capable of shielding himself as much as necessary, he'd spent the past four months blossoming while Charles was laser-focused on his own recovery to notice.

Once, Charles had been terribly worried David would be lonely with only him for company. Now, it was clear he'd been absolutely right. It was only the timing he'd been wrong about. David had friends now, a multitude of them. To take him away now...

David hadn't answered the question. He was breathing hard, blinking fast, near tears. He was such an empathetic boy, worried about nothing more than causing other people pain.

If he'd thought about taking David somewhere where he would have friends, people other than Charles to lean on, the mansion was the last place Charles ever would have chosen. There were too many ghosts for him in this house, enough that he didn't know if he'd ever be entirely comfortable here again. But it was the right place for David. That much was clear.

Charles rephrased the question. "How would you like to stay here?" he asked. "We can, if you'd like."

The answer involved a resounding YES as well as the most enthusiastic hug Charles had ever received. There was no doubt in his mind he'd done the right thing.

***

For the first five years they lived there, David was something of a mascot to the older children—too young to attend classes with them, but always in the middle in whatever activities were going on. He was also something of an idol for his younger cousins, of whom there were now three, two of whom were old enough to follow him around for hours.

When David was twelve, he finally began to attend classes as a proper student. At that point, still a mascot to the older children, he became a leader to those in his year. He knew all the school's hidden places, had long ago discovered all of its secrets. He was gregarious and easy with nearly everyone he knew, as if making up for the years he'd spent without any company his own age.

Often, watching him with his friends, Charles wondered what he could have done differently. He couldn't think of much, though...and if David's first few years had been lonely, he'd at least had Charles. And the later years of his childhood were better than Charles' had been, for David had many friends, and never had to put all his eggs into a single basket.

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Around the time David started classes at Raven and Hank's school, Charles went back to school as well, with the intent of seeking the answers he'd failed to find in his third life.

This time, he didn't just seek to read the minds of physicists and neurosurgeons; this time, he went back to school. Before David graduated, he completed a PhD in Physics and was well into his M.D. His M.D. was followed by a residency in neurosurgery, beginning the same year David entered his sophomore year of college. In those years, he was as focused as he'd ever been on anything, certain that if he looked hard enough, using his own hands and eyes and mind instead of relying on secondhand knowledge and perception from others, he would find the pattern—and that if he found the pattern, then he would be allowed to stay here, with David. He was driven, as he'd never been...
driven before. For several decades, there was nothing else in his life except for his studies, his work, and his son.

Sometimes, he thought of Erik. If he were to succeed in staying here, in this life, he would never see Erik again. But he had grown more and more convinced, as the years went on, that he might not anyway: Erik had died out of the usual order of things, and so who was to say whether he would be back the next time?

If Charles had known for sure Erik would be back, it wouldn't have changed his course of action. Not knowing made it that much easier to pursue his goal, that was all.

***

Charles was five years into his residency when David called Charles to tell him some very good news: he and Sarah, the woman he'd married several years before, were going to have a baby.

"That's splendid," Charles said, and they spoke for half an hour longer before he had to be in at work.

That day, he helped repair not one but two aneurysms—one that had ruptured and one that hadn't, yet. Afterward, he found himself thinking of how many aneurysms he'd repaired in the past few years, and how little insight it had given him into what had always to he and Erik in June of 2006. There were new procedures being developed, but somehow he doubted they would tell him anything he hadn't already learned.

In all honesty, nothing in his studies and nothing in his work had given him any insights whatsoever; he knew no more than he had known the last time, when he'd had a clean MRI the night before dying with a team of medical professionals working on him.

In the meantime, although David and Sarah had been married for two years now, Charles had met her on only a handful of occasions. He'd barely made it to the wedding because of his work schedule. He'd missed birthdays, holidays...

He had, he realized, fallen into the same trap Erik had. The one where all that mattered was to stop what was going to happen fifteen years from now, when what should matter was to make the most of the time he had. 'Maybe it's a gift': that was what he had told Erik, what he'd proceeded to forget for himself.

So, Charles dropped out of his residency, and then bought a house in the same town David and Sarah lived in. He would spend the next decade and change being there for his son, and for his grandson or granddaughter, and he'd do his best not to look back.

***

Baby Charlotte—called Charlie for short—was nearly three weeks old when David called Charles in near-tears.

"What's wrong?" Charles asked, for it was obvious something was; he lived across town, but could still feel David's distress from the moment he picked up the phone.

"She won't stop crying," David said. "The doctor says there's nothing wrong, but she's spent every waking moment crying all week."

"—I'll be there in half an hour."
Charles thought he knew what this was, and he was not mistaken: the moment he got to David's house and included little Charlie within a mental shield, her wails quieted, and she began to grow less purple than she had been.

"She's a telepath, like you," he said, more for Sarah's benefit than for David's; when they were in the same physical space, the bulk of Charles' and David's communication was in the same form it had always been. "She'll need to be shielded from other minds until she's able to do it for herself."

They both had questions, quite a few of them, although it was Sarah who voiced most of them. Charles answered, pulling the answers from David's childhood as accurately as he could. Although he wasn't privy to their half of the silent parts of the conversation, he could tell when David was filling Sarah in on aspects of his past.

He saw the answer forming in David's mind, immediate and total, and remembered exactly what making that decision had been like, twenty-five years ago, when David had been the screaming unhappy infant, and Charles had been the parent who knew he would do anything it took to help him. But the situation this time was different. There was no need for the two of them to quit their jobs and go live in isolation in the woods, and so Charles said:

"No, no, none of that. You have me to help. I'd be happy to babysit, as often as you need me."

"That would be wonderful," Sarah said, which for Charles was a tremendous relief. He'd felt her trepidation in response to his seemingly impulsive decision to uproot his life and career to be close to them; he was quite certain David had spent many nights reassuring her that Charles wasn't going to be the kind of nightmare father-in-law who came over every single day to let the both of them know they were doing everything wrong.

Charles had done his best to counter her fears by refraining from inviting himself over more than one night a week, and apparently it had worked. By the time Charlie was three months old and Charles had bought the house four doors down so he would be available on a moment's notice, Sarah never seemed to worry about it at all anymore. As Charles had the baby for forty-plus hours a week until she started school, this was a very good thing.

***

On his fourth sixtieth birthday, Charles met a man.

This time, he wasn't a regular at the bar, but in the end it hardly mattered. He was sitting in the same seat, speaking to the same person (even if Joe didn't remember either Charles or the very, very terrible night they'd had together in Charles' third life), at the same time and on the same day as before. Part of him didn't believe it would happen the same way—nothing had ever happened in exactly the same way in his other lives. Perhaps Ray would recognize him from their one brief meeting thirty years ago. Or perhaps Charles' posture or expression would be minutely different enough that Ray would find someone else to pick up, or head to the next bar.

Anything could have happened, anything could have changed things, but in the end, Ray came in, and came over to him, and said, "Hi."

"Hello," Charles said, trying to sound casual, as if he didn't know exactly how big this was, as if he didn't precisely where it was headed, if only he could make absolutely certain nothing happened to change it.

Ray began to turn red. "Can I—can I buy you a drink?" He was beginning to sweat, too. "You're very handsome."
Hard to say who was the most nervous, in that moment: Ray, who didn't remember their past history together, or Charles, who did.

"I would like that very much," Charles said, because while he didn't remember precisely what he'd said the other time, he knew it hadn't been, 'I've been waiting a lifetime to hear you ask that question.'

***

After Ray's life story and Charles' abbreviated life story (now "I'm retired and live down the street from my son and his family," rather than the euphemised spiel about X-Corp), they left the bar together again. Visited the Empire State Building once more. Went back to Ray's room, and if Charles went slightly off-script once they got there—it was quite literally impossible for him to behave entirely as if it were their first time, impossibly of him not to make love to Ray as if he hadn't had the chance in thirty years—well, Ray had no way of knowing that. He certainly didn't object.

For three days, Charles let himself be subsumed, because there was something else he knew that Ray didn't: He couldn't follow Ray back to Illinois, not this time. Even if he hadn't been needed to help with baby Charlotte, he couldn't have left David now. This was the only life he'd ever have with his son, and there were thirteen precious years remaining on the clock. So, whatever he and Ray were to have together, it would have to happen every once in a while, the visits they'd once planned in that other life. Perhaps they'd make a long distance relationship last, or perhaps they'd grow apart. The latter was by far the more likely, for Ray was a man who'd spent most of his life missing something, and now desired to commit even more wholly than he knew. If he couldn't have Charles completely, he'd find someone else eventually. Charles was braced for it; what mattered, he told himself, was that he'd have Ray for a little while.

Unfortunately, he'd been telling himself for decades that he'd have his son for a little while, that he'd been right when he told Erik that what he had, no matter how temporary, was a gift. He'd told himself and he'd told himself, but here so close to the end, it was a very hard thing to convince himself of.

The morning Ray left, Charles went home. It wasn't the loss it could have been, if he hadn't braced himself for it...but he'd found that time only dulled grief so much, when it came to certain losses.

Days passed, then weeks. Ray and Charles spoke on the phone every other night, planning Ray's next visit. This next time, he'd stay at Charles' house, and he'd be here for three weeks. Charles was looking forward to it and dreading it at the same time. How much worse would it be to watch Ray leave the next time, when it was three weeks instead of three days?

One evening, several months before Ray's next visit, Charles called him, but no one picked up. *Already? He's found someone else already?* Charles thought—irrationally, because there was no proof, no evidence whatsoever anything of the sort had occurred.

Irrationally, but he called three more times before he gave it up for the night and turned in. If he hadn't been going to have Charlie the next day, he'd have opened a bottle of bourbon to see how much it would take him to get roaring drunk.

The following afternoon, there was a rap at the door during Charlie's naptime. A solicitor of some kind, probably. Charles would have ignored it, but if they kept knocking, she'd wake up and be cranky the rest of the day. So he rushed to the door, feeling quite sour about this on top of everything else, and wondering somewhat peevishly if it were all right to shout at the Mormons or the vacuum salesman as long as you removed the memory afterward, (most certainly not, but he was most certainly tempted).
It took him a few seconds longer than it should have upon opening the door to realize the reason Ray hadn't answered his phone last night must have been because he'd been at the airport, or on his way to the airport...because now he was standing on Charles' doorstep. No clearing it with Charles ahead of no time, no asking permission; he'd just come, no less than four suitcases with him, and oh, Charles had always known he was brave.

"I've been waiting for you. You can't imagine how long," Charles said, and it wasn't what he'd said before, wasn't what had worked the last time, but it was clear from Ray's mind that he could have said nearly anything without ruining this moment. "Please, come in."

***

Ray had been with him in New York for about a year when Charles started to think about telling him about his other lives.

It didn't happen the way it had with Raven, the confession slipping out in the aftermath of an argument. It was nothing like the way it had happened with David, to whom understanding had come only slowly, in dribs and drabs from his earliest childhood. It was, instead, a conversation that occurred only after Charles had given it a great deal of thought. If all of the other most important people in his life knew, then he thought Ray should as well; and there was a part of him that felt as though something would always be missing in their relationship if Ray were not also allowed to know the breadth of their past.

Charles waited until one night after they had made love. It wasn't a special occasion. They hadn't had an argument. Ray hadn't asked any questions about the subtext of some of Charles' family discussions. (He had wondered, the same way another version of him had wondered about Charles' relationship with Erik—but he'd been an intensely private man for most of his life, and even if he had opened all things to Charles, he still was not one to pry when it came to other people's business.) There was nothing different about this night than any of their other recent nights together. Charles had been thinking of telling him for a while, and now he felt as though he might be ready. That was all.

"Have you ever wondered," Charles asked, "if we might have known each other in another life?"

Ray wasn't one to laugh at silly questions, or answer even the most startling ones quickly. He thought about it fully before he said, "No, I don't think so."

"Ah." Charles hadn't really expected otherwise, but he'd wanted to ask, just to hear what the answer would be. Part of him had hoped Ray would remember something, would pick up on some echo of what they had been to each other, before. "I do, sometimes. All the time, really. Every day."

If he'd waited for Ray to ask why, he would have been waiting all day, not because Ray didn't care, but because he assumed people who wanted to tell him something would do it without being hassled. In this case, at least, he was right.

"There's something I should tell you," Charles said, and he hadn't been this nervous in this life about launching into the unknown when it came to Ray. Until now, there had been nothing truly unknown to launch into. They lived in a different state than they had in that other life, and there had been no David then...but geographical location meant less than nothing, and all Charles had had to know was how close Ray had been with his ex-wife's family to know he and David would get along very well.

Perhaps the way he felt now was how Ray had felt, offering to buy an attractive man a drink for the first time in his life. Perhaps it was how he'd felt when he'd first told his life story to a stranger, laying down all his cards onto the table because if he was going to do this, it was going to be fully.
It was terrifying, all the more so because Ray wasn't a stranger, because he hadn't been one since the first moment Charles had laid eyes on him, on his third sixtieth birthday.

Charles spoke for a very long time. About Ray himself, about David, about Raven and Hank and everyone else who had changed so much or so little across his long life. He spoke about Erik, too, though to this Ray he was nothing more than a name. He laid out all his experiences and all his fears, placing them in Ray's hands more totally than he ever had with anyone else. Even Raven, who'd had so many questions over the years. Even David, who'd had so much of it for himself.

When he finished, he waited to see what Ray would say. It would be nothing bad; Ray's mind had gone soft, thoughtful, the same as it had both times Charles had told him about his telepathy.

"Okay," Ray said, as he had for the telepathy conversations, and then, "That must have been hard."
Thinking it was only going to get harder, Charles said, "I suppose."

***

The last thirteen years went by in a flash. Faster than Charles' years as a surgeon had, more quickly even than the years he and David had lived at the cabin. One moment, Ray had just come to him to stay, and baby Charlie still needed her father or grandfather to shield her mind at all times; the next, Ray had been there for over a decade, while Charlie had long since learned to shield for herself (and newly begun to insist on being called Charlotte, for it now annoyed her tremendously to be called by a boy's name). In addition to being a grandparent, Charles was also a grand uncle a few times over, as Hank and Raven's brood of three boys and one girl had begun to have babies as well.

Those years were good years, the best of any of Charles' lives. But they were years full of dread, as well—for the clock was ticking, and he now knew exactly what the last years of their third life had been like for Erik. Over and over again, he told himself what he'd tried to tell Erik: That this life was no less a gift because it was going to end. He refused to spend his last years spiraling ever downward until he could see nothing besides the dark.

Perhaps he'd be alone again later, but for now he wasn't. That was a good thing. It was what he clung to whenever he was tempted to wallow in despair. Sometimes, when he woke up in the middle of the night and watched Ray's silhouette as he slept beside him, it only made him feel worse, a hollow ache that left no room for anything else; during the day, however, it worked, at least enough to remind him to go find something to do, or better yet someone he loved to talk to, so he wasn't left with nothing to do besides dwelling on it.

Still, they say all good things come to an end—and this particular ending was on a very strict schedule indeed.

***

It was the last Saturday in June of a year Charles had wished would never come.

Everyone closest to Charles knew what was going to happen this year—but he'd realized early on that he wouldn't be able to stand it if they all knew exactly when it would be, and so he had told them there would be nothing to worry about until the first week of September.

There'd been no reason for any of them to disbelieve him, so of course they'd all taken him at his word. All except David, who'd seen everything, who'd known it all since before he'd spoken his first words.

_Are you sure about this?_ David asked as they arrived at the cabin. _There's still time to change your_
There wasn't that much time. What time there was, Charles didn't have the intention of wasting by driving all the way back home. *No, no. This is the way I want it,* he said, though he didn't want any of this, and never had.

For several hours, they sorted through the boxes still stored in the cabin—pieces of their life here they'd never gotten around to either getting rid of or taking home. Every few minutes, Charles found some toy or other object with memories attached, or David did; they shared the memories with each other until Charles felt as if he could close his eyes, open them again, and be back there with a David who had only just learned to crawl, or walk, or sing his childish delight into Charles' own mind.

When there was only a little time left, Charles said, *Let's go for a walk.*

There were a number of trails within walking distance of the cabin. He chose the one that went around the pond. They had walked here often when David was young, to feed heels of bread to the ducks that lived here in the spring and summer. They'd also made numerous attempts to fish, although they'd stopped after the first time they'd caught something (David had cried; Charles had felt more than a bit queasy during his eventually-triumphant attempt to detach the fish from the hook so he could throw the poor thing back). Today, they'd brought nothing except themselves—not even the time, for Charles had pulled off his watch and left it on the hood of his car on the way.

They walked around the pond once, watching the ducks, wondering if they were perhaps the descendants of the ones they had fed together so many years ago.

Halfway through the second circuit around the pond, it began to rain, a gray rush dancing across the water's surface. It had rained on the highway, it might have rained in the hospital room, and now it was raining here.

*It's nearly time,* Charles said, though he didn't really need to; David remembered this as well as he did.

When David had been very small, Charles had always insisted on holding his hand whenever they were close to the pond. His greatest fear had been that he'd get distracted for a minute, look back and find David had gone into the water and drowned, all alone.

Now, without being bidden, David's hand sneaked into Charles' again. Charles had never been so grateful for anything, and clung to it even before the pain came, after another half-circuit around the pond.

*Dad?* David said, alarmed. He'd known what was coming, but it hadn't been real until now. Charles could feel his panic, but as he fell to his knees, there was nothing he could do about it, no comfort he could even attempt to offer. This was exactly what it had been every time before, pressure and pain behind his right eye. Once again, it stole everything from him: speech and thought and everything that had ever mattered. It was he who was drowning, as alone as everyone is at the end, and David who begged him to stay.

He begged in vain, of course.

***

When Charles came to, he hadn't the first idea where he was. A bed, in a dark, musty room—but not a room he recognized.

He threw the covers back, bolted out of bed, and it was only once he was standing that he realized he
shouldn't have been able to do so. Not if this was 1969, as it should have been if this were the same pattern as before. Not if this was after the beach. He shouldn't have been able to feel his legs—not this well, as if he'd been sitting cross-legged for a while before getting up.

He thought, *I've gone somewhere else.* For a moment, he wondered if this could be one of the many apartments he'd lived in before David. Maybe he'd gotten lucky. Maybe Gaby Haller was going to call him in a day or two, to tell him she'd fallen pregnant, to ask if he wanted the baby...

A huffing snore came from the bed. Charles turned slowly, slowly, to look. There was a man in the bed—tall, thin, dark hair, the line of his back somehow very familiar above the blanket tucked around his waist.

"Erik?" Charles wondered, but knew that was wrong even before he spotted the pair of glasses on the nightstand on the other side of the bed.

There were pins and needles in his legs, a sensation that did not seem to be going away. The inside of his head was full of a silence that would have been deafening, if it hadn't also been fuzzy around the edges.

On the near nightstand, there was a black box. Charles opened it and found what he had only a moment ago realized he would: a glass bottle filled with an amber liquid, an assortment of syringes, and a tourniquet. If he'd seen them a few minutes ago, he wouldn't have been anything other than disgusted, but now the old need rose inside him, shocking in its ferocity. The addiction would always be with him now, in every life going forward.

He was tempted. He could administer the serum to himself now before everything came back, muffle his telepathy and his senses and his grief, for weeks and months and years. It would be so easy, as it had been before.

There was another sound from the bed. This time, Hank sat up, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes with one hand and slapping around for his glasses with the other. "Charles, what is it? What's wrong?"

Of all the wrong things, here was another: Not Charles' brother-in-law, but his sometimes-lover. Not the father of his nieces and nephews, but his partner in rebuilding the school after their first attempt had failed. Not his doctor, but his drug dealer.

Despite Hank's concern, Charles didn't realize he was weeping until Hank climbed out of bed, threw on a pair of filthy trousers, and came around to see him.

"Do you need another dose?" he asked, his hand warm on Charles' shoulder, and unhesitating, as if he'd asked this this way many times before. Probably he had. Charles didn't remember enough about these years to recall for himself. "Or did you take too much?"

"Neither," Charles said, although he was tempted. God, he was tempted. "Would you bring me my chair, please?"

"...What? Why?"

"Because I need to get in touch with someone, and I can't do it like this," Charles said.

"Um." Hank nudged his glasses up on his nose. "If you mean Raven, I don't think that's really the best idea..."

"Not her. Just do it, would you?"
There was no way into Hank's mind to see what other objections he clearly had; whatever they were, though, he did as asked, and Charles was left there, in the room they had shared sometimes. He was left staring down at the rest of what they'd shared, the serum Hank had developed to help them: to quiet the pain in Charles' mind, to put him back on his feet and to shrink Hank's.

David was gone. Charlie, too. Not one of Hank and Raven's children and grandchildren would ever be born. The rest of the family that had grown around Charles for the past forty years had gone, too. Ray was married to his wife again, raising a daughter and terribly, quietly unhappy for reasons he wouldn't manage to work out for several more decades. Raven was Mystique, pursuing a laudable goal by way of deplorable methods, and if he'd once laughed with Raven about her, this was not even remotely funny now.

By the time Hank returned, pushing before him a horribly-constructed wheelchair layered with years' worth of dust, the pins and needles in Charles' legs had begun to recede, a tide rolling back from the shore. Everything below his waist had begun to weaken, and he had to hold onto the sides of the nightstand to remain upright.

Hank parked the chair behind him. Charles fumbled back for the armrests, first with one hand and then with the other, and then plopped down. It wasn't a good transfer—it was dangerous to move so fast. He knew it from the physical therapy he'd had after breaking his ankles; he knew it from the forty years he'd spent using a wheelchair, so long ago. If Hank hadn't applied the brake, perhaps he'd have landed on the floor, but as it was he merely landed in the seat of the chair, safe and sound.

"I assume you've been keeping up the maintenance on Cerebro?" Charles asked, though he wasn't sure he could assume any such thing. They'd been such a disaster together in these years. He couldn't remember how, exactly, they'd finally dragged themselves back out of the darkness.

"Yes, of course, but...you know what happened last time."

Charles did not have the faintest recollection of what had happened last time...but as his legs had gone, Hank's mind had returned, and he was remembering it in its full pathetic detail. Evidently Charles had ended up screaming hysterically, the last time, until Hank had had to sedate him; he'd then taken large and frequent enough doses of the serum to remain nearly comatose for most of the next two weeks.

"That's not going to be a problem. Not this time," Charles said. But by the time he'd managed to drag Hank down to the subbasement, he'd begun to be frightened anyway. Not of the pain he'd experienced in Hank's moment, but of something else. That niggling little worry he'd had, on and off over the years, the one where the answer shouldn't have mattered, since he'd been going to figure out a way to keep this from happening again.

"I hope you're not going to contact the person I think you're going to contact," Hank said. He meant Erik, of course, and of course the clearest image in his mind was of Erik on the beach. Not the Erik who was clearest in Charles' mind—Erik with a hole in his neck, Erik bleeding out onto the sand—but the one who'd turned his back on Charles, who'd taken Raven's hand and left the rest of them there to live or die or be captured.

Charles knew exactly where Erik was. What he didn't know, what he didn't even have a guess for despite all his studies, was which Erik it would be. A day ago, he hadn't known which he wanted it to be. The looming shadow of the upcoming loss of his own family had made him think it would be better for Erik if he had managed to do what he had been trying to do, after all.

Now, though. Everyone else Charles loved had gone. He could never get them back. If he'd
previously thought he could bear the idea of Erik being like the rest of them if it meant the Erik he'd known was at peace...well, he'd been wrong before, but never quite this wrong.

"Yes, I mean him," Charles said, sitting before the Cerebro chamber door. "But...perhaps we should try tomorrow, instead. That sounds like a better bet."

It wasn't as if Erik were going anywhere, after all.

But it wasn't tomorrow, and it wasn't the day after, either. In the end, it took Charles nearly three days to get up the nerve to find out which Erik, exactly, he would be dealing with in this fifth life.
From the beach to the dark: Erik woke and knew it wasn't over. He reached out and found resistance to his left, concrete rough against his hand. After a minute, still unable to see in the darkness, he stood, and nearly tripped over something on the floor. This turned out to be a pair of slippers, which found their way onto his feet with startling ease, guided by a sense memory from lifetimes ago, returned now as if he had never discarded it.

He followed the wall, fingertips tracing the bumpy surface, until he came back around to his sleeping mat again. He wasn't surprised to find five walls of equal length. Nor was he surprised the air familiar, too: dank and stale, without even a hint of the circulation his other cells had provided.

Erik reached out again—up and out, this time. As a younger man, he hadn't yet had the range to sense the knives in the kitchen a hundred stories above, had never picked up on so much as the shadow of the guns carried on the ground level. Now he could, and did.

He considered what he might do with all of that metal. He could wrench it toward himself, provoke them. It wouldn't take much to lure them down here with their hateful plastic guns. Perhaps it would work, this time. Perhaps he wouldn't be forced to exist with the knowledge that Anya was in the ground and Nina would never be born, while Shaw had been permitted to live out his vile life over and over again.

Or perhaps he would wake up again, somewhere else the next time. Somewhere worse, where people he'd once known would be milling around, wanting things from him, talking to him, telling him he ought to be grateful for everything he'd been allowed to experience.

But it was quiet here. After the first few years, they'd rarely wanted anything from him. When they had, they'd never taken him from his cell awake; they'd always tranquilized him, plastic needle from a plastic rifle. Once, there'd been nothing he hated more than the helplessness of it, waking up hours or days later with a foul taste in his mouth, bruising inside his elbows, and a headache that sometimes lasted for more than a week. Now, he thought that even if they weren't quite finished with him, the alternative would be worse.

Erik lay back down on the mat, and sought oblivion again. It didn't come. Instead, alone in the dark, he wept.

***

Some time later, the light came on. Either it was morning or they wanted him to believe it was; there had never been any way for him to be sure. Time passed strangely in isolation. Sometimes, it had seemed as though the light had been left on for half an hour or less; sometimes, it seemed like the dark went on for months or years.

Not long after, his breakfast came rattling down from the ceiling in its tray. For several 'days,' this was the routine: lights on, three meals at regular or irregular intervals, lights off again. The guards who brought his food never attempted to speak to him. Erik had no interest in them, either.

After an lifetime or an hour or a week, when it was pitch black again, there came a whisper to shatter the silence: Erik? Is that you?

Perhaps if he didn't answer, he would be left alone.

Erik? Please say something. I can't tell which—talk to me, please.
For an hour or a moment or a minute or two, Erik didn't answer. Then he said, in a voice dripping with loathing—for Charles, for himself, "Leave me alone, old man."

_Oh, thank God._ With the words came a sigh into his mind, a relief so strong it was nearly enough to make him forget the rest. _I'm sorry I've left you there so long. I, only—look, we'll be there to get you in a couple days, all right? I only need—I need a little time for the arrangements. But we'll be there soon._

"I don't want that. Don't you dare come here," Erik said.

Maybe Charles didn't hear him. More likely, he had, but had unilaterally decided to do what he wanted. That would be more like him. Either way, there was no response.

Erik hadn't believed Charles would listen anyway.

***

In the middle of the third period of light after Charles' intrusion, everything went dark for a minute.

The timing was wrong; Erik had been fed only once during this 'day.' When he cast his gift upward, he found the motion above had ceased—not in the way it did when the kitchen wasn't in use; knives and other metal objects hung at odd angles, as if being held by persons unmoving—and knew Charles had come for him.

A moment later, the lights hummed back on, grayer than they'd been before, an untrustworthy flickering. After ten minutes or half an hour, there came a knocking on the glass above. Erik looked up to see a dark-haired man gesturing at him. He'd expected Charles, but what he'd gotten was Hank, and it was Hank's hand proffered him after he had slammed his foot into the glass, scattering the pieces to the five corners of the cell. He hauled Erik up with his right hand with the same casualness with which anyone else might have picked a coat from off the floor. In his left hand, he held a gray remote control with a dial on it.

This version of Hank and he had little to say to each other, and so they didn't speak on the (long, long) elevator ride up to the ground floor. Nor did they speak as they passed through the statues: military personnel, guards with holstered guns, civilian workers of various types. They were nearly to the car blocking the entrance to the parking lot across the street before Hank said, "Now, look, I didn't think this was—"

Erik ignored him, crossing the street in long strides toward the car. The windows were tinted, but the left rear window was open, and when he got close enough to see inside, he was not at all surprised to find Charles Xavier—not as he had been on the beach, but with long greasy hair, dark circles under red-rimmed eyes, and his hand to his temple. His brow was creased in concentration, but when he saw Erik, the wrinkles there smoothed out, just a little.

Erik wrenched the door open—with his hand or with his gift, he would never remember which—and bent down, until their noses were nearly touching.

"I told you not to come," he hissed.

"This isn't the time," Charles said.

"The hell it's not."

A moment later, Erik found himself seated inside the car, which was now moving at a crawl in D.C. traffic with Hank behind the wheel. Furious, he turned to Charles, now sitting beside him. "I told you..."
not to come," he said. "I told you to leave me alone."

Charles looked at him steadily, through watering eyes. It was this more than his actions that made
Erik's senses sharpen with rage, every line of metal around as clear to him as every iota of it had been
on the beach. Down to the eyelets on Charles' shoes, and most certainly including the wheelchair in
the trunk.

"For how long was I meant to 'leave you alone'?" Charles asked. "A week, a month? A year?" He
didn't sound as impatient as he should have, or irritated. Instead, his voice was calm and measured as
he stared at Erik with anguished eyes. "Were you going to give me a call when your time was up?
Or was I supposed to check in on you every twelve hours, in case you'd changed your mind?"

"I'd have left when I wanted to," Erik said, leaving out the method by which he'd have done it. "You
know they couldn't have held me."

Now Charles' expression softened, the sorrow replaced by something else. "I know." He reached a
hand toward Erik, seeming to be aiming for his hand, then diverting at the last moment to brush the
hem of one of the long arms of his shirt. "It's you," he said. "You're really here. I scarcely dared
hope, you know."

The car, which had been going between two and three miles per hour, came to a complete stop
behind a long line of other vehicles that were also stopped. Erik couldn't think of anywhere he
wanted to be less than in a traffic jam with Charles—Charles, who was, at present, barely able to
prevent himself from crying over his legs (and perhaps over that boyfriend of his, too, if Erik had
wanted to be fair, which he didn't), when Erik's entire family had gone, children and wife dead or
scattered, Nina and his grandchildren voided, forever.

"Hope, Charles? What is there to hope for? Enlighten me, please, because as far as I can tell there's
not a single fucking thing."

The metal all around them seemed to shimmer as he waited for Charles' answer, certain it would be
something as inane as the last advice he'd allowed Charles to give him.

Instead, Charles stared at him some more, and this time the awe had gone, to be replaced with
something else. If Erik had thought Charles looked sorrowful before, now he looked nothing less
than broken, as if he were reflecting everything Erik felt. It was the most infuriating he'd been in at
least a decade, but before Erik could say anything more, Charles said, "I had a son." His breathing
was harsh, hands balled up and white knuckled against his thin thighs. "His name was David. I lived
an entire lifetime without you, and in it I had a son. What's there to hope for? I don't have the faintest
idea. But I'll tell you one thing: I don't give a damn about my legs. Actually, make that two: I loved Ray dearly. As much as you
love Magda. As much as you ever loved me. So I'll thank you to stop being an ass about him now
that he's gone."

They sat there for a long minute, not speaking, nothing moving either inside the car or out of it.

Then, Charles said, as softly as he'd yet said anything, "I'm sorry about your family. And I'm sorry
you didn't get what you wanted. If you must go, there's a bag in the trunk with some clothes in it. I'd
suggest you wear them if you don't want to look like an escaped convict."

***

Erik hadn't known what he was going to do until Charles said it, not consciously. If Charles hadn't,
he might have made the journey without thinking of it, surprising himself by where his feet took him.
As it was, he found a public restroom a few blocks down, and dressed in what Charles had brought for him: dark blue trousers, a black turtleneck, a brown leather jacket, well-broken-in shoes that slid onto his feet like old friends. Then he stopped at the next bank he saw to ask for directions. From there he was left with a walk of several hours, and all he could think of was Magda.

Magda, holding his hand in the hospital, letting him be strong for her even though they both knew which of them was truly the stronger. Magda, enticing him into bed mere hours before they'd left the house together for the last time, claiming, 'The machines, their readings will be wrong if you are still this tense when we get there.' Magda, holding their fourth and fifth grandchildren several decades before, laughing and saying to Anya, 'Of course it is fate that you would have twins.' Magda, allowing a snake to slither around and around her forearm, smiling and apparently unafraid of Nina's new friend, although she would spend three hours in the shower after they had gone outside again. Magda, saying, 'Well, you will want to make a cradle first.' Magda, on many nights throughout their lives, at the end and on the very first day, the first words she'd ever said to him, saying, 'Are you coming to bed?'

Magda, who had raised Wanda and Pietro just outside of Washington, D.C. in that first life.

The irony had never occurred to Erik before now—that he had spent so many years imprisoned, with Magda and the twins a few miles away. He hadn't known about the twins until much later in his life, so although he'd known the timeline, the connection had never seemed as real as it did now that it was relevant again.

He'd been to this house once or twice, in that first life. Not often enough to recall the way, but more than enough to recognize it when it came into view. It seemed smaller and shabbier than it had the last time, but then, he'd been angry the times he'd come here in his original life—to find Pietro and Wanda, errant Brotherhood members he hadn't yet known he was related to; then to rage at Magda when she'd conspired with them to keep his original set of grandchildren away from him—and hadn't slowed down enough to take note of the surroundings.

Now, still angry, but not with anyone who lived in this house, he walked slowly to the door. He stood in front of it for several minutes before raising his hand to ring the bell.

No one answered, but there was a car was tucked away behind the closed garage door, so she must have been home.

He rang the bell again.

This time, there came a voice from inside: "Just one minute! I am coming!"

A rush of footsteps from the back of the house. Then the door was thrown open, and it was Magda, so much younger than she'd been the last time Erik had seen her. Her face was flushed, free of the wrinkles she had gained through the years; her hair, which had long since gone white, was dark again. He must have woken her from a mid-afternoon nap, for she was wearing a robe, tied in front of her at the waist—

And she was at least six months pregnant.

***

As the end of his life with Magda approached, Erik had begun to have terrible dreams. He'd long been finished dreaming about Anya's death, but as his own death had approached, the memories had come back in his sleep, as clear and as close as they had ever been. The dark haze of smoke around him, stinging his eyes and burning his throat; other sounds, screams and cries from strangers and
from Magda; Anya's body in his arms, heavier than she had ever been in life. The dream had lost none of its power for having been gone for decades; in fact, when it reared its head again, it was even worse, for Erik had seen his daughter grow up, come to know who she was, or would have been, if it hadn't been for the fire.

There'd been another dream, too. In this one, Erik came home to Magda and his three children, not long after they'd come to New York. It was a quiet evening together each time—but with a growing sense of dread, as though he'd forgotten something. Finally, at dream's end, he always remembered, suddenly, that someone was missing. He'd turn to Magda, who was beside him washing the dishes while he rinsed, or brushing her hair in their bed, or knitting a hat for him or a pair of mittens for Pietro, who'd always been misplacing his fifty or more miles away. With an unbearable urgency, he'd ask her, "Where is Nina?" And she would look at him, with such a soft-eyed expression, the way she looked at him after they had made love, and say, "Who?"

When Erik dreamed of Anya, he had always woken weeping quietly, rarely waking Magda. When he dreamed of Nina, Magda often had to shake him awake—for there was nothing quiet about his weeping then. She would wake him, and he would tell her about the dream, and she would say, 'No. It did not happen like that. Of course I know Nina. She grew up in this house, yes? She and her friends, in and out all the time. Here is a picture of all of us, do you see it? Of course there is a chipmunk on her shoulder, even though I tried to tell her her friends did not belong in a family picture. There is a cardinal on your head, so you can see you were not much help. It did not happen like that. Do you need to call her?"

Each time, brittle and raw, he'd say he didn't, there was no reason to wake Nina at such an hour—but he always found an excuse to pick up the phone sometime the next day. Nina never knew the reason behind these random calls, but she was always happy to hear from him, and had plenty of news about what was going on there—which forest creatures had newly arrived, which had gone, and which had become permanent residents. Erik was always happy to let her do all the talking, just so he could listen to her voice, and know she was still there, for now.

***

Erik knew the child Magda was carrying was not his, that it could be no one he knew. Still, he couldn't keep the question from forming on his lips, as if it had always been there, waiting to be spoken:

"Nina?" he asked. "Is that...?"

"—There is no one by that name here," Magda said. She might as well have said 'Who?' "You must have the wrong house."

But she was looking at him, the same way she looked at an oddly shaped puzzle piece when she knew she had seen its mate, but could not remember where she had put it.

"Magda," Erik said, "it's me."

It took her another moment, another sign that while he'd seen her yesterday and every day before, for fifty years, it had been well over a decade since she'd seen him, and he had changed in that time. Then she paled, and said, finally, "...Max?"

"Yes."

"Why are you doing here?" She did not look happy to see him, now growing even paler. Her hand on the doorframe was white at the knuckles.
"I wanted to see you. To see how you are."

"I am fine."

"Can I come in?"

Magda hesitated, then said, "Yes, all right."

Inside, she led Erik into the small kitchen, so quickly he barely had time to glance at the pictures hanging on the living room walls—pictures featuring a dark-haired young girl, a silver-haired young boy, with and without Magda and a man Erik didn't recognize. Once there, Magda pulled a smaller photo off the fridge and laid it face-down on the counter; a motion she meant to be casual, and one that would only have struck Erik as such if he hadn't already seen it featured the same boy and girl from the living room.

The way she glanced at the kitchen clock, however, would not have struck him as casual in any life.

"When are you due?" he asked.

"The end of June," she said.

What month was this? Erik didn't even know the year. "I see."

"We have been trying for years now. I was not sure if I could. It has been such a long time since I was—it has been a long time since Anya." Her voice wavered on Anya's name, slightly. Once, Erik remembered, she had sat by their living daughter's bedside and wept for hours upon learning about the fire. "I am older now than I was then. That made it harder. But it happened after all."

"Yes," Erik said, and where he'd been angry before, now his fury had been dowsed with something colder, darker, deeper.

"Years ago, I remarried. My husband, he will be home very soon."

So that was why she had glanced at the clock three times already.

"And you? How have you been?" Magda asked.

Less than a week ago, they'd been old together, married for more than fifty years. For the last few years of this life, Erik had been imprisoned in the next closest thing to a tomb. But there'd been something between those two things, and if Erik would never remember much about what had happened on the beach the second time, the recollection of waking to see Shaw lying prone on the submarine floor, of being filled with a black fury—he'd closed his eyes on the person he loved most in the world, only to open them to the person he'd most loathed in every life—so there was nothing left to do but lash out.

"I got him," Erik said, because Magda had always known what he was, what had happened to him before he'd come back to her. She'd always known, and she would remember now. "Shaw. I went after him, and I got him."

"Good," Magda said, with an unexpected vehemence that made the color begin to come back to her face.

"That was...recently. I've been...at odds since. So I wanted to see you. I hope I'm not intruding."

Magda hesitated. Erik could hear the words she was debating on saying—'You are,' she'd have said
in the context of last week. She had never failed to speak her mind where he was concerned, but now he could see her weighing every word, trying to decide how he would react.

Fifty years ago, at the beginning of his third life, he'd thought she had hated him. Hated him for what he'd done to her neighbors and friends when they'd tried to keep him from going into that burning apartment. Now, as he noticed the block of knives on the kitchen counter—not noted when they'd come into the room for the simple fact that he couldn't feel them—and the way she'd inched closer to them during their conversation, he knew it had been something else. Not hatred, not anger. Either of them would have made her loud; Magda had never failed to raise her voice when she wanted to, even if she had always cried during their worst argument. But there was no chance this Magda would shout at him, or begin to cry. If she didn't hate him, after all, then Erik could finally see the truth of what had been between them in that first life.

She wasn't going to yell at him, and she wasn't going to cry, no matter what he said to her. She was too frightened of him for any of that, or to do anything other than answer him levelly while making certain she was within reach of the ceramic knives.

"You are not intruding," she said, finally. "I do not know what you want. That is all."

"I don't want anything," Erik said, and it was a lie, the most blatant he'd ever told her—but then, there was nothing he wanted that this Magda could or would give him. "I'm sorry to have troubled you. I'll go."

***

Erik was halfway down the block when a yellow schoolbus screamed to a halt across the street. Out of it came a gaggle of children, among them a dark-haired girl and a silver-haired boy. About half of them crossed the street in front of the bus, leaving Wanda, Pietro and another girl on Erik's side of the street. The other girl was in what seemed to be an intense discussion with Wanda; the bus had no more taken off again than she said something loud that included the word 'Polack'—Erik didn't quite catch the rest of it, but they'd dealt with enough of that shit years ago for him to be certain of that part—and flounced away.

Wanda muttered something darkly to Pietro, and the girl slipped, threw her arms in the air, and fell on her ass in an enormous mud puddle that had not been there a moment before.

"Who's dirty now?" Wanda called, loudly enough there was no question of what she'd said. "HA!"

Then, triumphant, Wanda and Pietro headed down the street, toward their home. Erik watched them go, his feet planted on the sidewalk. Once or twice, he moved to follow them—then remembered these weren't his children, and they didn't know him. If he approached them, they'd see only a stranger, one who was strange and intense and, probably, frightening.

Perhaps, down the street, Magda, who'd glanced at the clock so often, was now peering through the blinds, waiting to see if her children would come home without him, safe from the monster she'd always desired to protect them from in that first life—in this, the only life she knew. Perhaps if he came back in a month, none of them would be here anymore. Perhaps, if he'd alarmed her enough, they'd be gone as soon as tonight.

Erik didn't watch them go into the house. He couldn't. When they reached their yard and turned, he turned, too, and walked blindly away.

***
In the hills of Virginia, there was a Brotherhood safehouse. Erik didn't recall the location of most of the others, scattered around the country and the world, but this had been the first one—the one they'd purchased in early 1963, the one he'd convalesced at following the first time someone had broken him out from beneath the Pentagon—and the one he'd used the most, in that first life.

He walked until he was out of the suburbs, then hitched a ride with a truck driver headed that way. After he was dropped off at the edge of the small town nearest to the safehouse, he walked another five miles, until he came to a rusted chain stretched across a narrow dirt road. Five minutes later, he came to the house, a dilapidated structure in the middle of a small clearing. Its once-white paint was peeling, part of the roof was caving in, but this particular safehouse had never been breached from outside, and so what Erik felt upon seeing it was a sense of relief so strong as to be crushing. Here, he could have the solitude he'd wanted when he was beneath the Pentagon. No guards to interrupt him. No Charles come to save him. It was all he wanted, all he could imagine wanting.

***

In that first life, Erik had always spent his stints at any of the safe houses first doing the needed maintenance, then practicing woodwork in a back room (or shed, in this case; it depended on the layout of the property). This time, he set buckets and large pots beneath the various leaks, melted every metal tool in the back shed so nothing there could remind him of what he'd left behind, and called it done.

The next few weeks went by in a blur. He slept as much and as often as he could, ate from ancient, dented tin cans in the pantry when the ache in his stomach grew too loud to be ignored, and read and re-read books that had been left lying around by some former occupant. He absorbed about one word in every ten, and could not have offered a summary of any one of them even after the third or fourth time he'd turned all their pages.

A few times a day, a car would pass by the chain at the beginning of the road. Erik paid little attention to the whispers of metal at the back of his mind—until the day one of them stopped. The chain moved, and the car did, and then the chain was returned to its former position.

Erik thought it must be Raven, and was five steps out the back door before he realized he'd also felt something else. When the car stopped in front of the house, Erik had turned back. By the time he'd come around the side, his visitor was up the front steps, rapping on the door.

"Erik," said Charles. "Erik, I know you're here. Would you let me in, please?"

"Last time I saw you, you would have had trouble with stairs," Erik said, some hot sickness unfurling in his stomach. An unwanted rescue from his cell had been one thing, but this? This was beyond the pale, even for him.

Charles—standing, somehow, though he'd brought the chair, too, folded up behind the driver's seat—turned to him. His eyes were as red and mournful as they'd been at their brief reunion, bringing back the same anger. Erik had thought it was extinguished. Every time he'd tried to bring it back up, over these last few weeks, he'd remembered Magda saying, 'You used to be so angry. I used to worry you would kill someone. It was my greatest fear'; every time, he'd found the once-burning embers had been doused with water, stirred, and doused again. All that was left was the ashes, cold and wet, clinging to him when he dug for what they had once contained.

All it took was one look at Charles Xavier, who couldn't leave well enough alone, for the ashes to once again erupt into flames.

How dare he come here?
Then Charles, apparently oblivious, said, "I'm sorry to intrude, but—I was hoping I could stay here for a while. If you'll have me."

It wasn't what Erik had expected. Wasn't Charles saying that Erik was killing himself, just more slowly this time. That he should return to Charles to the house in Westchester, to help reenact another mockery of a life, as if either of them thought it meant anything in the long run.

Some part of him had always known Charles would come to find him—Charles, with his hope in one hand and his arrogance in the other. But here was Charles, who had been weeping recently enough that he was still leaking, often enough in recent days that his eyes were red and raw.

'I had a son.' That was what Charles had said in the car weeks ago, the thing Erik had barely heard over his own grief. 'I lived a whole lifetime without you, and in it I had a son.'

Erik had thought about it, a little, during his time here. It was better than thinking of Anya and Nina, gone forever; it was better than thinking of Magda and the twins, lost to him from this lifetime on. (It was better than thinking that if he hadn't been so hasty, he might have gotten to them when they were half the age they were now, so much better than thinking how it might have been if he'd gone to them in 1962.) He'd wondered what else had happened in his absence, what kind of world Charles had shaped without him. Somehow, it hadn't occurred to him Charles was feeling the same grief, that the time he'd lived between the beach and the dark had been something real. That it had changed him from the person Erik had once known, perhaps even more than they had both changed when distance had been the only thing separating them.

It hadn't occurred to him, either, that his own death had, for Charles, been something just as real as the rest of the life Erik had skipped—not a last-ditch tactic of minutes, but a consequence spanning years. His head was less clouded now than it had been then; he could see it all over Charles' face. Charles had always been so easy to read in moments like this. He was looking at Erik as if he'd never seen him before. As if he were trying to match reality to memories a lifetime old. If Erik had tried, he couldn't have helped but recognize it. It was the way he'd looked at Anya, before the fire and for years afterward. Charles' face, unguarded, was a reflection of Erik's self in that long-ago moment. As much as Erik hadn't wanted him here moments ago, he couldn't deny him now.

"Stay if you like," Erik said. "It makes no difference to me."

"Thank you." Charles opened the front door, picked up his suitcase, and went in.

After a minute, Erik followed.
Someone You Used to Know (2)

It was very late, and it was raining. Charles lay in the dark on Erik's terrible couch and listened to the drumming of the rain on the roof, and the constant *plink, plink* of water dripping into this pot or that one. Every so often, he considered getting up to check them, to see if any needed to be dumped out the back door—but Erik didn't seem to care if they flowed over, and so Charles wasn't certain he needed to care, either.

He'd been here for three nights, and had yet to sleep any better than he had back at the house. He knew he would lie here for another few hours, telling himself that if he stayed completely still, sleep would come. Eventually, the sky would turn gray through the window. By the time the sun was completely up, he'd be in a fitful sleep, which would be broken too soon—if not by his own mind, then by the creak of rusty hinges and loose floorboards as Erik went from the bedroom to the back door on his way to the outhouse.

As he had been on every other night, Charles was tempted. It would be the work of minutes to crack open the black box he'd packed in his suitcase, to inject himself with more than a maintenance dose of the serum. Three and a half lifetimes hadn't been long enough to make him forget how long and how deeply he'd been able to sleep, back when he'd considered the recommended dosage to be more like the recommended minimum. But he also remembered it hadn't been restful sleep, in the end—and besides, he only had enough for a few more weeks at the base dose. Best to ration his supply.

Still, Charles must have fallen asleep earlier than he had on the other nights, for it was still dark when he started awake again. He was on his feet before he registered the sound that had woken him so totally, causing adrenaline to flood through his limbs: in another room, someone was crying out.

If some part of Charles, sleeping, had thought 'David,' the voice coming from behind the bedroom door was far too deep for him to cling to such a hope for even a second.

He walked toward the door, stubbing his toe on a bucket—it didn't hurt so much as startle, as no sensation had ever been more than distant below the waist after the beach, no matter how well his lower body functioned on the serum—and skirting two others on the way. He opened it and whispered into Erik's room, hesitating only once he'd reached the bed. There, Erik's shadow was thrashing, and he was gasping out groans or sobs, lost somewhere far darker than another rainy night in the mountains.

Once, Charles would have known what Erik was dreaming. He'd have known whether it was preferable to wake him, or direct his dream into some other, kinder direction. If he were dreaming of Shaw, it was better to wake him brusquely, then pretend to go back to sleep himself; if he were dreaming of the beach, then it was better to guide his subconscious away, for to wake him from such dreams had always been to invite a terrible quarrel...and, in that first life, an early end to whatever already too-short time they'd intended to have together.

What kind of dream this was, two lifetimes later, Charles hadn't the first idea. He couldn't guide Erik away, couldn't gauge the danger—could do nothing but decide between waking him and walking away.

There was, of course, no chance he'd do the latter. He couldn't. He'd never been able to leave Erik alone and suffering in his dreams.

"Erik," Charles said, so loud in that little room, without a fan running, traffic humming distantly, or anything but silence beyond the two of them. "Erik, wake up. You're having a nightmare."
Erik didn't wake up. This, too, was normal enough; he'd always slept lightly, unless he was in the
grip of something like this.

"Erik," Charles said, more sharply this time—but still nothing. He grabbed Erik by the shoulder,
shook him, hard. "You're dreaming, Erik. Wake up."

It did the trick. Erik sat up in bed, as quickly as Charles himself had stood up from the couch a
minute before. His breathing came in stutters, still.

Charles drew his hand away, waited until Erik's breathing began to level out. It had never taken long
before, and it didn't now. Then, relieved this hadn't been an argument sort of dream, he said, "Right,
then. I'll just lie back down."

Before he could turn away, a hand grabbed him by the wrist, its grip firm and hot.

"Don't," Erik said. His voice was an undertow, cold and swift enough to drag anyone down with
him—even if Charles hadn't heard him before, there would have been no doubt he'd been weeping in
his sleep.

Don't go? Don't leave me here alone? Once, Charles could have parsed which one it was, with or
without his telepathy. He'd have known what to do, what to say—

Or maybe not. He'd seen enough in Washington to have an inkling of how badly Erik had taken his
advice, toward the end of their third life. He'd had the sinking feeling, for weeks afterward, that he'd
left Erik alone and suffering in something that hadn't been a dream at all.

"All right," he said. "I won't. Scoot over."

Erik scooted toward the far wall, and when there was enough room, Charles lay down next to him,
in the warm dent his body had left there.

He didn't expect to sleep any better than he had the last few nights, and he wasn't wrong there. He
lay there listening to Erik's breathing, which at first seemed nearly as self-conscious as his own, but
eventually tapered off into regular, even breaths, interspersed with the occasional grumble.

At least listening to Erik was better than listening to the many, many leaks in the living room and
kitchen. And lying next to him like this, even if it felt like a betrayal—and might seem like a betrayal
to Erik, too, in the morning—was better than lying by himself in that other room, half-wondering if
he'd dreamed Erik up in entirety...if perhaps he'd found the original in Washington, after all, and
everything since had been nothing more than wishful thinking, a psychotic break of his very own.
(As if he'd ever have come up with anything close to this, the two of them rotting together in an old
safehouse that could come down on their heads at any moment.)

An eternity later, dawn crept in through the window, draping a gray light across the room, and
Charles drifted into a troubled and fractured slumber.

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The trouble had started just a few minutes after Erik had left them. They'd both watched him go.
Once he'd disappeared around a corner, Hank began to fidget. He drummed his fingers on the
steering wheel. He polished his glasses with his shirt. He adjusted the rear view mirror. He adjusted
the side mirror. He turned the radio back on and immediately decided he wanted a different station,
until he'd gone through them all and decided the original station would do after all.

Charles paid little attention to any of this, noting the actions but not the motivation behind them—he
was, at that moment, useless for anything where cause and effect both occurred in this lifetime—and so he wasn't prepared when Hank said, "Charles...who is David?"

Charles stared at Hank's puzzled eyes, staring him down from the rear view mirror. "He is—he was," he said, and stopped. It was one thing to speak of David to someone who'd never met him. It was something else to speak of him to the uncle who'd loved him nearly as much as he'd loved his own children. Charles could bear the first thing, but now he found there was no chance he could bear the other. "No one you'd know."

"You told him you had a son, that his name was David. But you don't have a son. I'd know if you did. You'd have mentioned it before now. You mention Raven at least three times a week. You couldn't go seven years without saying your son's name, if you had one."

"I didn't, before," Charles said, so faintly he would later realize there had been no way for Hank to understand the warning to be found there.

"For that matter, who is Ray? You said you loved someone named Ray, but I've never heard you say that name, either." Hank was beginning to sound increasingly agitated. Nothing disturbed him more than facts that didn't fit together to form a sensible whole. He was averse to confrontation most of the time, but once he'd decided on a discussion he wished to have, he could not be dissuaded until he'd had it. "You don't call anyone. You don't write to anyone. No one comes to visit, and you never even leave the house. I don't understand any of this. It doesn't make sense."

"Nor will it, I'm afraid."

Charles ought not to have done what he did next, but he could see no other option, either then or later...and in the end, did it really matter if Hank remembered what he'd said to Erik, when he remembered nothing that had happened in any life but this one? When this, too, would someday be gone?

"Well, he hasn't changed," Hank said, after Charles had taken all of the details, replaced them with a generic argument composed of every political opinion he could remember he or Erik holding in that first life.

"No," Charles said, although Erik was the only thing capable of change. "I don't know what I expected."

The drive back to Westchester passed more quietly than the drive to D.C. had. Hank had had arguments on the way down, all the reasons they shouldn't be involved in such a foolish jailbreak. Now, he had little more than 'I told you so,' and if he no longer remembered the names he shouldn't have heard, he shouldn't have heard, he could see enough from Charles' face in the mirror to know when not to rub it in. There was little else for them to talk about—Charles couldn't for the life of him remember what they'd ever had to talk about in these years—and so neither of them said much of anything, all the way back.

By the time they arrived, Charles already knew he wouldn't be staying. Not for long, anyway.

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Charles woke a few hours later, sticky and alone. The rain had gone, leaving only the sun, shining squarely on the bed from the bare window. He'd thrown off the blankets sometime during the night, or Erik had, and now finished kicking them away from his legs so he could stand up. The inside of his head felt just as off-kilter as it had since he'd come here—from the serum, and from the grief that barred him from sleeping and dreaming alike.
There came a sound from the other room, a displacement of air. For a moment, Charles almost wondered, but then a door closed, almost the same sound, and he knew it must have been a door the first time, too. Was he hearing things, or merely processing ordinary sounds oddly? There was no way to tell without asking Erik how many doors he'd just closed. It didn't seem worth the bother, and so he was left with nothing in particular to do other than sit there, deciding between lying down to roast some more in the pursuit of another few minutes' sleep, or going out to the outhouse and then attempting a nap on the couch. The latter would probably be better—from the crackling in his head and the shakiness in his legs, he'd have to take the serum soon if he didn't want to have to beg for Erik's assistance.

From the other room, a murmur. Erik talking to himself? Then a sharp laugh, and surely there was nothing for him to laugh about, unless he were cracking up. Hopefully that wasn't it. He was liable to tear the house down around both their ears if it were. Wouldn't that be a sorry way for them to meet their sixth life.

More murmurs, but this time the voices overlapped. So Erik wasn't alone out there, after all—or Charles was the one who was cracking up. It couldn't be an unlikely possibility. He hadn't had a decent night's sleep since he'd died, after all. It was bound to take its toll eventually.

Charles opened the bedroom door, just a crack. Out in the living room, there were figures milling about. Sleep deprived, having spent the last month blind to anything but his own grief, it took a moment for Charles to realize he knew them.

Then he was spotted. One of the figures froze, then disappeared; there was another of those sounds, a displacement of air behind Charles, this time accompanied by the smell of sulfur. Charles turned around, but there was nothing to see but the bed in the corner. He turned around again, and now his visitor was back in the main room, tapping Raven, who was in what seemed to be a heated discussion with Angel, on the shoulder.

"What?" she said.

Azazel cleared his throat, then said, "Your brother, he is here. Why is this?"

"What?" she said, and turned to look. Her expression when she saw Charles, still standing in the doorway, now having allowed the door to swing more fully open, was some mixture of...annoyance, distress, maybe even guilt (though that last might have been projection on Charles' part, remembering how the last Raven had responded when he'd told her of what she'd become). "Charles, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Maybe it's Emma," Angel suggested. "She's fucked with us before."

Then the back door opened, and Erik stepped inside, still fastening his fly, which answered the question of 'Where has Erik got to?' quite neatly. He looked up, and came to a halt.

"What is he doing here?" Janos asked, jabbing his thumb at Erik.

"I don't think it's Emma," said Raven. "Erik, what's going on? We thought you were in prison!"

"I thought we decided to think he was dead," Angel said.

Distantly, it occurred to Charles that he would have found this reaction immensely amusing, under other circumstances (or in a much earlier life). He'd always been under the impression Erik's original Brotherhood had held him in much higher esteem than what could be presumed by the stink-eye Janos was giving him, or the way Azazel and Angel were whispering together.
"...I escaped," Erik said. "No thanks to you," which wasn't quite fair, considering Mystique had been the one to rescue him in that first life.

"Uh-huh. And you brought him here why?" Raven asked, with a significant glance toward Charles.

Erik glanced at Charles, and if they'd barely talked since Charles had arrived, and if it they had felt like awkward strangers for the last few days, this look did a great deal to assuage that. It was a look born of confusion and the white of Erik's eyes. It was a look that said Erik was just as much at a loss here as Charles was.

That much would have become apparent a moment later anyway, when he said, "Charles has—" He swallowed. "Decided to—" One last look in Charles' direction. "Join us."

"I certainly have not," said Charles. The various Brotherhood members exchanged glances. "We're here for...other reasons."

"What reasons?" Raven's arms were crossed over her chest, her expression closed to him. Charles was starting to feel the minds around him through the haze that was usually there, and what he found in hers now reminded him he'd lost Raven, too.

It wasn't that he'd forgotten, exactly. It just hadn't been at the forefront until this moment.

"They're not important," Charles leaned heavily against the door jamb, his legs trembling beneath him, hoping against hope that he wouldn't lose his balance before he had the chance to move somewhere safer. "I'm afraid you haven't caught us at our best. Why don't we sit down? I'd love to catch up."

Raven looked at him for a moment. Judging, deciding. Her people—and Charles now knew this first Brotherhood had always been more hers than it had been Erik's—stood with her, waiting for her word. Her mind was working, working, and Charles was still at that terrible in-between place where he might fall at any moment, and still lacked any control of his returning gift. All he was able to get were the barest snatches out of any of their minds, most of them meaningless.

"I don't think so," she said, distrust flickering in her yellow eyes, and behind them. "Let's go, Azazel."

"No," Charles said. As they clasped hands, he stepped forward—

Toppled forward, hitting the ground with a thud and a bucket on the way, so that he found himself drenched as well as prone. By the time he looked up, a bare second later, they had gone. They must have been gone as he fell, for he hadn't even heard the displacement of air this time. All that remained was the smell of sulfur, already fading.

"You can't go there," Charles said, staring at the place they had been. Even as he said it, some part of him acknowledged that it was a very good thing Raven had not been here to hear him. It would only have sent her that much faster to that place.

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"We have to stop them," Charles said, after Erik had brought him his chair, and he had gotten himself into it.

Erik hadn't responded as strongly to the Brotherhood's presence as Charles might have expected; now that they were gone, he was back to seeming mostly blank, as if there were nothing that could get to him enough to make him care.
Blank or not, though, he picked up on the panic in Charles' voice, and said, gruffly, "What's wrong with you?"

"I saw something. Before they left." One concrete building, then another, each surrounded by an electric fence. Anonymous enough, unless you knew. "In Raven's mind, just for a moment." Erik didn't ask, but there was a certain sharpness in his mind when he was paying attention, and Charles was grateful to feel it now. "Trask Industries." Where all of them but Raven would be killed, leading to Raven's subsequent capture. She'd been experimented upon for years, in that first life, and Charles hadn't even known until years after her escape. "They're going there. I saw it."

"When?"

"You're know better than I would."

"...What year is this?"

"1969."

Erik, who'd gone rigid when Charles said the name, seemed to relax. "Then we're all right. Nothing happens until 1971."

"You're sure?"

Erik looked at him, an expression from lifetimes ago hooding his eyes. "They were mine," he said, and Charles remembered Erik had always loved most those things he feared would be taken from him.

"Well, at least we have time. What are we going to do?"

It wasn't truly a question. Charles had always felt a heavy responsibility for what had happened at Trask Industries. Not least because he'd been drugged to the gills during the years it had been in operation in the 60s and 70s. He'd put his head in the sand rather than pick up and go on, and it was other mutants who had suffered...and mutant children who'd suffered the most terribly. Their children, the ones who might have been his student in that first life, some of whom surely had been in the lives that had followed. If he'd had the luxury of turning his back in his fourth life, it had only been because there had been others to pick up the slack. Who was here now to do it? Hank wouldn't, at least not without a push. Raven wouldn't, for she hated and distrusted him, and now always would. There was no one else but the two of them.

"I don't suppose you'd go along with killing them all," Erik said, darkness dragging his voice low. He'd been a peaceful man for two lives running. He'd been a peacekeeper and a teacher, a father and a law-abiding man. Still, Charles could see it, the shadow of the man he'd once been. Perhaps Magneto had always been there, underneath everything else. Waiting until he was needed once more.

"No," Charles said—though in his heart of hearts, he'd always had trouble being sorry for a certain small percentage of the deaths Erik had wrought, long ago. "No. We'll find another way. A better way."

They'd not had a real conversation since Charles arrived on Erik's doorstep. Later, he'd think how fitting it was, that this was what started them talking for hours. Bringing up options, keeping some and discarding the rest. Planning, strategizing, one of them raising their voice whenever the other was being particularly idiotic. It was familiar, and comforting because it was familiar.

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The missiles fell, and so did Erik. How they had come to be here once again, Charles couldn't quite remember—but he was certain the sequence of events had been a natural one, one terrible moment following another, until this was the inevitable end.

"No, no, no," he said, pressing down on the hole in Erik's neck with his hands, praying the bleeding would stop, certain it would if only he could put enough pressure on the wound. For a moment, Erik's hot blood pulsed and spurted over his fingers, painting his hands in red; then the bleeding stopped, but the stain remained. The air was full of salt and iron, and Charles' own voice saying, "No, no, no damn you, no."

But he'd never been able to talk any sense into Erik when he was alive, and the man was no more tractable now that he wasn't. The truth came to Charles, a blow delivered as if by sledgehammer, or hurricane: Erik was gone, and this time he wouldn't be back. Where that second piece of knowledge had come from, there was no telling, but there was no doubt that it was true. There Erik lay, so pale and unmoving, and soon he would be stiff, as well, and begin to rot, and the rot was all there would ever be again—

"Charles," Hank said, grabbing him and yanking him to his feet. His grip on Charles' arm was like a vise, and he began to shake him in the air, until Charles' toes were barely brushing the sand. "Charles, you're dreaming. Wake up."

Then the beach was gone, and Charles' eyes gasped open into the dark. Someone was moaning there, and it was only later he realized it had been him.

"Wake up," the voice said. That it wasn't Hank after all took Charles a moment to think through. "Erik?" he asked, still not entirely certain and still half in the dream, not yet able to believe what had seemed so real only moments ago had been nothing but a vision.

As Erik's hand moved away from his shoulder, Charles reached out, wrapped his hands around Erik's wrist. Not tightly, as Erik had grabbed him the night before. Just enough to feel the hairs on one side, the veins and softer skin on the other. Erik's pulse fluttered against his fingertips, the only proof Charles could have accepted that he hadn't bled out on that beach for the second time.

"It's me," Erik said. They stayed there together in the dark, Charles' breathing slowing down until their rhythms matched. Then Erik said, "Let go."

But the objection came a minute too late to sound sincere. Charles looked, saw that it was and it wasn't; here in the darkness of this bed, the same honesty was between them that had always been there. There was desire there, too, as there had always been desire between them. Charles hadn't expected it—he'd thought it was gone after a lifetime of getting over Erik followed by a lifetime of mourning him—but still he saw it clearly...and saw something else, as well. There were others between them, this time, a wife and a partner who couldn't be dismissed as easily as their moral and political disagreements once had been.

So he said, "All right," and he forced his fingers open, and he drew his hand away from Erik's wrist.

For a moment, there was silence, so total that for a moment Charles didn't recognize it for what it was. Their breathing in this small room was no quieter than it had been the night before. But tonight, Charles' ears weren't full of cotton, nor was he blinkered. Whatever Erik was thinking, he should have been able to tell what it was, as he had a moment ago. Except—

There had been moments like this before, mostly in that first life. Moments when Erik's mind went white and still and quiet, moments that heralded he was about to do something, and even he had no
idea what that something was going to be. If Erik didn't know, then there was no chance of Charles
knowing—but the silence had always served as a warning. If Erik had been bare-headed on the
beach—either; both—Charles would have seen the blankness and known it for what it was. He
knew it now, and braced himself for whatever Erik was about to do.

A sigh, sound returning as Erik's mouth sought and found Charles' own in the dark.

The kiss was heated, and lasted just long enough for Charles to begin to respond. Then Erik pulled
away.

"Don't," Erik said.

"I didn't. I wouldn't have," Charles said, and Erik kissed him again.

Ray, Charles thought, and then, Erik. There was no pretending Erik was anyone else, no mistaking
him for any other. He was himself, that was all: a shadow, a phantom, a memory come back to life,
not at all what Charles had thought he would be, and the only thing he ever could have been.

The kiss soon turned to more, or was more from the moment it began, downing men clutching at
each other in the warm dark waters. Even as they sought release together, Charles knew this was a
bad idea: that they were moving too quickly, that they might not even want this from each other
anymore. That even if they would someday, they didn't yet—but it was too familiar, too nostalgic for
him to force Erik or himself to slow down. After all, hadn't it been like this in their first life, when
Charles had had his school and Erik his Brotherhood? Hadn't it always been just like this, whenever
they chanced to meet alone?

Afterward, Charles expected to lie awake for a long time after Erik drifted off to sleep. He'd have
been surprised to learn otherwise, had he remained awake long enough to realize what was
happening.

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In the morning, Charles woke with a sore throat, and when he said, "Erik?" the gravel in his voice
was as painful to hear as it was to say.

When he winced, it wasn't from the pain, but from the memory of what they'd done. It had been a
mistake. It had almost certainly been inevitable, too, but a mistake nonetheless. The ghosts of their
others had seemed to dissipate during the fact, but now Charles could take little comfort in what they
had both needed hours before. Whatever it had been to Erik, it had been too soon for Charles, far too
soon. He had only to register the ache in his chest to know that much.

He transferred to his chair, wheeled toward the door. It had been a tight squeeze coming through the
night before, but he managed not to bang his fingers against the door jamb this time.

In the kitchen, he found Erik heating up something foul-smelling.

"Don't make me anything, please," Charles said, when it became clear Erik didn't mean to say good
morning, or do more than grunt in his direction. "I'm not fond of vomiting in the morning."

Erik ate standing, gulping down beans out of a can as mechanically as he ever had. When he was
done, he finally looked at Charles, and said, brusquely, "Are you ready?" He'd always been like this
on the morning after any of their trysts in their first life. It surprised a fondness from somewhere
below, a gentler sun warming Charles behind his eyes for a moment or two before he remembered.

"By all means, let's go," Charles said, cheerily as he was able.
He picked up the black case on his way out. It wouldn't do to leave such materials where the Brotherhood could get at them—and besides, he reasoned, he might need another dose sometime, and might not want Hank poking his nose in.

A moment after he thought this, Charles was suddenly certain of something he'd only realized years post-serum in his original, largely bungled life: He was never going to walk again. He'd done the last standing of his life in this shabby little cabin. Part of him craved the serum and always would, but it no longer seemed to matter. It didn't even matter that the stairs were going to pose a problem in a minute, that he'd never get to the car across the rough ground without help. He was done, that was all.

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In the car, Charles sat with his eyes closed, listening as Erik started the engine and turned them toward the road. He knew the way, as he always had, leaving Charles free to be carried along until they got somewhere.

They'd left the winding dirt roads behind and were on the still-winding highway when Erik said, out of the blue, "You said you had a son."

Charles thought of Hank, whose mind he'd invaded just so he wouldn't have to explain David. Speaking of him had seemed an obscene thing then. It still seemed a terrible thing now, so Charles considered telling Erik about how he really felt about his legs, instead. How he'd thought, when he'd broken his ankles, that being temporarily disabled was an adequate enough preparation for what using a wheelchair permanently would be like; how the two things couldn't have been any more different, now that he was here again. He considered telling Erik how it had been, to wash his body for burial, to see him lowered into the ground. How it had been not to know if he would ever return for Charles to tell him anything.

He'd stored up so much to tell Erik, for there was no one else who would remember, or even come close to understanding.

After a long silence, Charles said, "His name was David."

He spoke for a long time, telling David's story to an old friend and a stranger. It seemed he'd spent a lifetime saving up the words.
They walked together, the boy and he. Charles' feet were light, and his heart soared. He had not thought they would be together again, yet here they were. There was no need to wonder how this had come to pass. It did not matter that, however long he thought of it, he could not remember the boy's name. The boy was dark-haired, red-cheeked, Charles' own. All there was, simply was.

What happened? the boy came to ask, after a time. How did it happen?

Charles thought about it for a long while—minutes or hours or days, as they walked through the school's hallways, so much longer than they'd ever been before, and with so many more doors. At last, he admitted, with a great reluctance, I'm not certain I understand the question.

What happened? the boy asked again. How did it happen?

I don't understand.

Something changed in the boy's face. For a moment he seemed to be another person entirely, one blue eye fading to green. Then he was himself again. Who am I?

You're my son, of course. Something huge and dark rolled under the words, a grief and loss that seemed incongruous when the boy was here. Charles found the name, the one that had been at the tip of his tongue all the time they'd walked together: You're David.

Who is David?

They came upon a door, on the left. It looked like all the others, but Charles knew what it contained. He stopped there, the boy by his side.

Open it.

I'm not sure... Charles said, fearing the rolling dark, held at bay for years by the work but never far away. (What was the work that kept the grief away? He couldn't quite remember now, as he hadn't quite known the boy's name before.)

Open it.

Charles did. Behind the door, he found it: David's birth and life, their days at the cabin and the ones at the school and the ones where he had remembered that if he was a father then he should be a father during those last years. The last time he and David had walked together in that life, the familiar path around the duck pond—

The boy dismissed this, all of it. Earlier. What happened? How did it happen?

Charles closed this door, walked to the next, the boy on his heels. This one opened to Erik collapsing on the beach, and the life they'd lived leading up to that moment, Charles' final years of surprising joy countered by Erik winding tighter and tighter, certain to break—

Earlier. Before that.

Another door, and behind this one was the first life they'd relived, the one where they'd been together, gotten everything right—

I don't care about that! What happened? How did it happen?
A fourth door, and Charles' first death behind it, his collapse in the shower in a Saturday afternoon. The astonishment, the fear—but the fear hadn't been entirely new. It had been caused, initially, by what had happened at Alkali Lake, in that first life, with Erik and Mystique and Stryker.

He expected to leave again, to open a fifth door, to keep going back and back and back. He expected to relive all the mistakes he'd made in his first life, the ones he'd rectified in so many lives since. But after a moment or a lifetime, the boy's voice said, sounding much smaller than before, *Tell me about that.*

What Charles remembered most clearly was the betrayal, the stain it had left on his heart for years and even decades—

*Not that. Tell me about Stryker, Jason Styker. What happened?*

Charles didn't remember it well, as he always had difficulty remembering what had happened when he had been influenced by an illusion. Still—

"Find all the humans," and even in the illusion, there'd been a rising sense of panic, although he hadn't known why, and had been unable to do anything but what he was told. And before that, it had been "Find all the mutants," and while that hadn't been a betrayal in the same way, hadn't been a betrayal from anyone he'd loved, the panic beneath his surface had been by far worse—

*No, no. Jason Stryker. What happened to Jason?*

The boy's mental voice was more strained than before; Charles' remembered panic must be bleeding over. He wanted to comfort him, meant to, but instead he found himself walking down the hall again. Only this time it was different, no longer a part of the school—darker, industrial, dank-smelling.

*We shouldn't be here, he said. This isn't a good place, especially for children.*

They'd taken his children. They'd hidden them here, and Charles had been useless to save them, entangled as he was by—

They stopped at another door. This one was already open, and from within, a voice, which Charles only recognized as his own a minute later, said, "This is your son. What have you done to him? Your own son."

*I didn't,* Charles said, *I wouldn't,* and only then remembered he'd been speaking of someone else's son. William Stryker, terrified of his son and what he could do, had done a terrible thing, a horrifying thing. Whether it had been a lobotomy or even worse, Charles had not managed to learn, but Stryker had stripped away the parts of Jason that were Jason, in favor of a weapon he could wield against all who were like him.

*No,* the boy said. *No. No. He loves me, my father loves me, he's loved me all these other times—*

*Of course I love you,* Charles said, and remembered, fleetingly, how in every life he'd paid a visit to William Stryker to make certain, just to be absolutely certain he would show no threat to any mutant, and especially not to the one who had always been the most vulnerable.

*It was you? That was all it ever was?*

Charles wasn't certain what the boy meant. The hall where he stood seemed to spiral around him, fading as it went, until he was standing in the middle of some gray void. Beside him, the boy was weeping, and Charles could think of nothing but to embrace him, and say, *I'm so sorry.*
Charles came out of it the way he always seemed to in their sessions: sluggishly, feeling as if he'd been drugged rather than accompanying his newest pupil into another of his illusions. He sat there blinking for what seemed to be a very long time indeed, waiting for his office to pull together into something less unreal.

After a few minutes or an eon, there came a sound from the chair opposite his own. Charles looked up, and saw that Jason was wide-eyed, his usual pale pallor now gray, moisture shining on his cheeks.

What had happened in the illusion? Charles couldn't remember, as he could rarely ever remember, although it seemed to be on the tip of his tongue, maddening.

Whatever it had been, he'd obviously overtaxed the boy. Asked for too much from him.

"If I pushed you too hard, I do apologize," Charles said.

Jason wiped his face, and in the next moment he no longer seemed raw, but distant, cold. "May I be excused?"

In ordinary circumstances, Charles would have pressed him for more, in order to have some idea of what had happened. There was part of him, this time, that wished to keep Jason here until he got to the bottom of things, and never mind if he was fifteen, vulnerable in the way only fifteen-year-old mutants could be.

But there was a difference between being diligent and being cruel; he could always ask Jason for a summary the next time.

"Of course," he said. "Try to relax and have a good weekend, yes?"

Jason was out of his chair after 'of course,' out the door by 'weekend,' but Charles thought nothing of it. This session had been Jason's last class of the day, and it was Friday, after all.

It was also Charles' last session of the day. He collected his things and headed out, stopping by the headmaster's office to give Hank a progress report on his way.

When he and Erik had visited the Trask Industries facilities back in 1969, they'd returned to the house in Westchester with eleven traumatized young mutants in tow. Those eleven had been the first class of version two of Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, which in that first life had not reopened its doors until 1974 or 1975. Erik had stayed for a few months, long enough for another few teachers to be hired, then slipped away one night; Charles had stayed as headmaster for three years, until Hank had finally grown confident in himself as Charles' successor. Once Hank's star had risen, Charles had bought a house twenty minutes away, and moved in the moment the renovations had made it possible for him to live there alone. He still taught, but not genetics or philosophy; in this life, he taught Hank's students how to master their powers. The method varied from student to student, and so most of his sessions were one-on-one. He held a biweekly group session, the main purpose of which usually ended up being bragging rights for the participants, but most of the work was done in classes of one.

On his drive home, Charles turned the day's last session over and over. He'd met with Jason Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and each of their three sessions had left him feeling as though he were missing something vital, something he needed to know. But try as he might to recall what
illusion Jason had brought him into, he hadn't broken his way in yet.

He was distracted enough by this not to realize he had company until he wheeled into the living room and found there was a man there, reading a paperback novel on Charles' own couch.

"Erik," Charles said, forgetting Jason in his gladness. "I didn't know you were coming."

He never did. Although Erik showed up a few days a year, he never wrote, never called or telegrammed; these seemed to be methods of communication they'd left behind in other lives, for Charles never went out of his way to contact Erik long-distance either. He'd found he did all right on his own; and whenever he began to feel more lonely or isolated than usual, it seemed Erik must have been feeling the same way, for that was when he was the most likely to show himself.

Charles hung up his coat and scarf, set his briefcase on the counter. Erik lay the paper aside and rose to help with dinner, which he'd already begun making prior to Charles' arrival. By now there they had a pattern to these visits, which involved Charles largely supervising Erik's efforts, while telling him about everything that was happening with the school, or at least everything different from what it had been the last time he'd come.

Erik, for his part, usually had little to tell. After he'd left, he'd gone back to his life as a hermit, and was now living in the woods somewhere in Pennsylvania. (In, Charles understood, a much sturdier little house than the one they'd so briefly shared in the Virginia mountains.) He seemed to think Charles didn't wish to hear about his garden, or the cost of stocking his pantry for the long dark winter days when he was snowed in. Charles was of two minds about it: on the one hand, he wouldn't have found it boring, and found Erik's embarrassment to be rather silly; on the other hand, it would have reminded him of the years he and David had spent in the cabin upstate, and for this reason he tended not to try to draw Erik out.

Erik didn't need to be drawn out, anyway. Every discussion of now turned to their past lives eventually. After an hour or two of reminiscing, they always went to bed. Sometimes it was a comfort, and sometimes less so, but Charles never felt as miserable about it as he had the first time. It was a connection they both needed, so that even though they spent most of their time apart, they needn't feel so alone.

On this particular day, Charles found Erik looking at him oddly, not long before the food—a stew consisting largely of home-grown vegetables—was finished.

"What?"

"You're quiet tonight."

"Am I? Well, I'm tired, I suppose," Charles said.

He'd have thought nothing more of it—some weeks were more tiring than others, and why should it surprise anyone that he would be more tired when Erik came at the end of the week than when he had the sense to show up on a Sunday—if Erik hadn't given him an even odder look once they sat down and Charles started telling him about recent events at the school.

"What is it now?"

"You've taken on Jason Stryker."

"Yes, and?"

"You're a fool," Erik said, a pronouncement. "What were you thinking?"
Perhaps Charles should have seen this coming. Jason had never been a neutral subject between them. If he'd thought about it before he'd spoken, he'd have known this was coming. He'd have been able to think of a rebuttal for any objection Erik might have. "I was thinking I know more now than I knew then."

"Are you impervious to illusions now?" Erik asked.

"I have more experience than I did the first time," Charles said. "It'll be all right."

"It wasn't all right the first time," Erik said, which was truly rich from a man who'd once refused to believe Charles could have a legitimate reason for turning any student away. "You said you couldn't help him. You said it wasn't good for either of you to keep trying."

In their second life, they'd had a terrible quarrel when Charles had directed Jason to enroll in Emma's school instead of theirs. Erik had assumed it meant Charles didn't trust him, even after several decades building their new life together—hence the quarrel. Charles had assumed his objection this time would be more of the same, but instead he was repeating Charles' own arguments from lifetimes ago.

"I don't recall asking for your opinion."

"You've been too out of it to say anything without prodding. How long did you say you've had him?"

"I didn't, and it's been a week. Three sessions so far."

"There you have it. Not even a week. In a month, you won't be able to make it home under your own power."

"Oh, come on," Charles said. "It wouldn't be that bad."

"That's not what you said the last time."

Charles barely managed not to say he'd been exaggerating the last time. He hadn't been. He remained incredibly susceptible to illusions now, as much as he'd ever been. He found it as difficult to completely re-enter the real world as he ever had. Yet, the moment he'd seen Jason's name come across his desk...

"The last time I had him as a student, I hadn't raised a child with similar issues. It will go better this time," Charles said, knowing it was a mistake to put it in such a way, that Erik would immediately jump on it to say there was a difference between being unable to shield one's own mind, as David had been, and being unwilling to learn ways of protecting oneself that didn't involve hiding in a world of your own creation for every possible waking moment, as Jason tended to do.

Instead, Erik looked at him for a long minute before saying, "He's not your son."

"I fucking well know that, don't I?" Charles snapped, and a part of him felt more wobbly than he had since he'd gotten home, as if there was something more to Erik's words, some connotation he ought to be able to grasp. It was on the tip of his tongue, and some part of him thought he ought to chase it, that there was something very important about what Erik had said, something he was missing. "Do you think I can't tell the difference between the two because David was telepathic?"

"He's not your son," Erik said again. "You don't have to hurt yourself to try to help him."

"That's not what's happening."
"You can send him to Emma, like you always have before. He'll be fine there."

"He'll be fine here. Perhaps you should visit your own children every so often before you seek to lecture me," Charles said, knowing it was dousing an already fraught situation with gasoline and holding a lighted match directly over the lot, and already far past giving a single damn.

They never did make it to bed. They didn't even manage to finish eating. A few minutes after the recriminations began—and there was plenty there, on both sides—Erik stormed out, with the parting sentiment that if Charles insisted on killing himself, well, that was fine with him.

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Charles fumed, long past both what should have been his bedtime as well as the time he would actually have gone to sleep if Erik had come to bed with him. He told Erik off at length inside his head while he cleaned up in the kitchen, and while he completed his bedtime ritual, and while he worked out with his hand weights after he got back out of bed again around one.

He fell asleep, tired and angry, at some time well-past two. He woke around six, still tired but no longer angry in quite the same way. All weekend, he thought about what Erik had said, truly considered whether he had a point.

Charles hadn't been entirely unaware of the reasons behind this life's decisions. He hadn't wanted to run the school itself for any length of time, hence his recruitment of Hank to take charge of it...but he hadn't been able to turn away from the young mutants whose powers truly were out of control. He'd helped them in other lives, but there'd never been anything else, no residual guilt driving him to do it. Perhaps there was, now, but what of it? It didn't mean he was doing anything wrong.

Over the next week, he met with Jason for three more sessions, and left each one as fuzzy-headed as before. Now that Erik had pointed it out, Charles couldn't help but notice his delayed reactions, how difficult it was to think through even simple matters for an hour or two after each session. It wasn't as bad as Erik had claimed, wasn't likely to do any permanent damage as far as Charles knew. But however he tried, he couldn't remember what he and Jason had talked about during their sessions, or what they did when Jason drew him into his illusions. He had no concrete evidence he was helping, and Jason seemed a great deal less communicative than he had the last time. Perhaps he was picking up on the same thing Erik had, whatever vibe Charles was putting out. It was impossible to tell, because Jason was as immune to Charles' abilities as Charles was vulnerable to his.

In the end, Charles did exactly what he ought to have done without having to be told: He spoke to Hank, and set in motion Jason's transfer to Emma's school in Boston. He'd do well there, as he'd done well there in other lives, for Emma was neither susceptible to illusions nor stumped by sullen teenagers whose minds could not be read.

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Half a year later, Erik still hadn't come back to see him, and so Charles bought a postcard and some stamps. These sat on his counter for a few weeks, until he stopped feeling vaguely annoyed every time he saw them. Until it felt less strange to think of writing Erik again. He'd written Erik so often, in their third life. Like letters in a bottle, and almost as rarely answered.

Well, one was all Erik was getting, this time.

Charles got tired of seeing the postcard on a Wednesday. He jotted down a quick note, the first words that came to mind—You were right. Happy? Come back, please.—and dropped it in the mailbox on his way to the school.
The following Tuesday, he arrived home to find Erik in his kitchen, making a casserole.

This time, he stayed the night.

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The years passed, as they always had. It wasn't long until Charles realized he was getting older. Not old, not yet. But older. It didn't come as the surprise it had in his first life, but still managed to leave him wistful, contemplative. It left him more so when he realized his sixtieth birthday was fast approaching once again. He already knew he wouldn't go to Ray. Not this time. Not ever again, most likely. He wasn't gone in the same way David was gone, existing nowhere but in Charles' memories; he wasn't here as Raven was here, passing him quickly by in the hallways whenever she happened to have brought new young mutants to Hank's doorstep; no, Ray was something in-between, not physically present in any part of Charles' life, but not forever out of reach either. Charles doubted he could bear to meet him all over again, as if he were a stranger.

And besides, there was Erik. He came more and more often these days, and his visits now spanned days rather than hours. Whenever he had gone again, the house seemed both smaller (thought it was nowhere near small) and shabbier (thought it was in good repair). It took Charles longer than it should have to acknowledge any of this even to himself, but once he had, there was nothing for it but to bring the matter up with Erik.

He'd meant to do it after they'd gone to bed. Erik was always the most pliable there. But the after-dinner chess game dragged on longer than it ordinarily did, inviting commentary:

"What are you doing?" Erik asked. "You'd think you'd never played before."

"Say what?"

"That move was illegal."

"Oh, sorry," Charles said, moving his bishop back to where it had been, and moving a knight instead.

"...Now you've put yourself in check."

An examination of the board proved this to be true.

"Sorry again." Charles moved his knight back, and after some consideration, moved a pawn. "I've been...distracted. Tonight, and lately, I suppose."

"I see," Erik said, sounding no less irritated—but now he was studying Charles more closely than before.

Well, there was nothing for it but to speak up. It was no good waiting for Erik to ask. Fishing games made him irritable; they'd only end up quarreling again. Besides, the longer Charles waited to say anything, the longer Erik would have to brace himself for some approaching doom, and it was never a pleasant experience to ride along with.

"I've been wondering if you'd be willing to consider staying here. With me." Charles tried to glance at Erik's face, but he couldn't. He'd instinctively retreated from Erik's mind, and couldn't reach out for that again, either, as much as he wanted to know what Erik thought of this. "I know, I know we both have our reasons...but it's been more than twenty years. I should think that would be long enough. It has been for me." He took a deep breath, then added something that seemed like it might be quite foolish, but which had been coming into his mind more and more often as of late: "We were married
to each other, too, once, if you recall."

Even more irritated was not how Charles had hoped Erik would react, but when he dared to reach for Erik's mind, irritation was what he found.

"You think you've been waiting for me," Erik said.

"Haven't I?"

Even asking threw the last two decades into a different light. Erik had nearly always been the one to come to Charles in this life, Charles nearly always the first to pull away. It had been something like this in their third life, too, Erik moving on with his family, Charles lagging behind. He hadn't fallen for Ray so late because Ray had been the only other man he could love; he'd fallen for Ray then because he was a man he could love, when he'd been ready again.

"Even if I haven't, does it matter?" Charles said. He reached across the chess board for Erik's hands, held onto them tightly. "We've got fifteen years left to this life. Let's spend them together."

"If you insist," Erik said, even more dryly than before—but no amount of irritation could hide the relief underneath it, and by the time they'd made it to the bedroom, the irritation had very nearly gone.

***

As everyone else in the world grew concerned with Y2K, Charles and Erik began to speak of next time. Later, neither of them would be able to recall who had been the first to bring it up—only that one of them had. After a while, it became something of a mantra. Next time, they would do this. Next time, they would do that. Next time would be better, because they would be together to make it that way. Next time would be a blank slate, so much brighter than this life, which had begun in the shadow of their losses, lived beneath the specter of their grief.

By 2006, Charles was more than ready to leave this particular life behind. There was only the matter of dying left to be dealt with.

"I could make you sleep," Charles said, a few weeks ahead of time. "It would be painless, this time."

"What about you?"

"I'll take a tranquilizer a few minutes beforehand."

So it was that his fifth death found Charles sitting upright against the headboard in their bedroom, Erik's head on his lap, his fingers sifting through Erik's thick gray hair. The pain came again, as it had come four times before, pain and pressure behind Charles' right eye—but this time, it seemed further away than it ever had before, as if it were happening to some other version of himself. As if it were something he had no need to be concerned about.

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When Charles came to, he realized almost immediately that he ought to have been concerned, after all.

He was sitting upright in another bed, in far worse lighting—but it took only a moment to recognize his surroundings. He and David had lived here for years, after all—but he and Erik hadn't gone to the cabin together in lifetimes.
Erik was here with him now, pacing back and forth between the bed and the table. At first Charles' heart leapt—they'd expected to come back in different locations, for it to take hours or days for them to be reunited—but then Erik turned to him, and spoke, and Charles' joy turned to horror.

"I did what needed to be done," said Erik, his fists clenching, unclenching. "Our people are better for it, whether you'll admit it or not."

One glance into Erik's mind, one moment's consideration of the apparent topic of discussion would have told Charles what had happened, but he didn't need either. Where there had been big changes in both of them over the lifetimes, there had also been small ones—the way they held themselves around each other, the way they looked at each other, the way their voices changed during an argument.

Had he really thought Erik seemed like a stranger, at the beginning of the last life? He hadn't known what a stranger was until this moment.

"Why are you gaping at me?" Erik demanded, and there it was again, strain bringing out a touch of Irish into his inflection—

But ever since his lifetime with Magda, Erik had slid into a Polish accent during quarrels.

"Get out," Charles said. Erik—this earlier version of Erik, this true stranger—opened his mouth to object, and Charles steamrolled over him, unable to listen to a single more word. "Take that helmet of yours and leave."

Seconds later, Erik had gone, slamming the door behind him. Frigid air sneaked in the door in the moment it was open, but when it reached Charles, it could make him no colder than he was already.

Later, it would always seem as if he'd sat there for hours, trying to understand what had happened, why Erik hadn't come back with him. Thinking of Erik, who perhaps hadn't died at all, this time—Erik, his Erik, who might wake in an hour or two to find he'd laid his head down on a corpse's lap.

He picked up the newspaper on the bedside table, was not at all surprised to see the story on the first page was about the Trask Industry bombings of 1976. Bombings that hadn't been bombings; bombings that had led to Erik's placement on the FBI's Most Wanted list, more than a decade before the TV show first aired.

For lack of a better course of action, Charles picked up the paper, skimmed over the story, trying to understand. It wasn't the easiest reading, for his hands shook, and the words flowed into him and out again, like water.

It felt like an age—but it couldn't have been more than five or ten minutes before the door banged open again. In trudged Erik, covered in snow from his feet up to mid-thigh. He was still wearing the helmet. He still looked furious. But he was completely different, and Charles knew before he spoke so much as a word.

"There you are," said Erik, his Erik. "You smug bastard. You would come back in your nice warm bed, while I—why are you looking at me like that?"

"Come join me in the nice warm bed," Charles said.

"...It won't be nice if I join you like this," Erik pointed out, with a gesture to his lower half. "Besides, I need a shower."

"Please," said Charles.
Erik grumbled, but he pulled off his boots, peeled off his pants and his socks, and got into bed. He only seemed to register the helmet when Charles reached for it. They took it off together, and Erik dropped it to the floor on his side of the bed. Charles, meanwhile, pulled him closer, so he could kiss him desperately the moment Erik faced him again.

They'd not kissed quite like this since the time in the Brotherhood safehouse. Then it had been Erik who had demanded something, Charles who had given it despite knowing better. Now their positions were reversed, Charles begging, Erik yielding.

Erik had brought the chill in with him from outside; Charles found it as soon as his hands strayed down to Erik's thighs, which were still damp, and radiating cold. But before too long, they had driven the cold out together, and lay next to each other, panting.

"What was that about?" Erik asked, catching his breath first. Still flushed, he looked so much younger than he had this morning—but Charles had never before realized how different, how changed he also looked from the way he'd once been. He supposed the same must be true for himself as well.

"I'd rather not talk about it." It had been like the worst of his nightmares, and some part of Charles wondered if speaking about it might not make it remain even longer, like a bad dream you were foolish enough to recount to someone before it could dissipate in the morning light.

"Tell me."

Charles knew he would get no rest until he did. And it wasn't as though Erik didn't have the right to know. "When I arrived here, I was in this bed—but you were here with me."

"...I came back in two feet of snow."

"Yes, yes. It was you, but it wasn't; it was you as you were in our original life. You didn't remember anything, any of our other lives. You were just like everyone else. I sent you away, and then you came back to me, as yourself."

Erik considered this. "I die after you do. A few minutes later. I follow you, every time. Perhaps I come back a few minutes later, as well."

'But the beach. We came back at the same time then,' Charles nearly said—then remembered he didn't know how long he'd been in the crashed jet,regaining his bearings before he'd gone into the submarine. He didn't know how long Erik had been in there alone, at what point in the process he'd gone from being a young man in a nightmare to being an old man in a far more terrible dream.

"That makes sense," he said instead, and stored this new knowledge away in his heart, in case this ever happened again. "Yes, that must be it."

They stayed in bed for most of the rest of the day, making love twice more, nearly as desperately. They spent hours looking through the newspapers their younger selves had brought, inspecting the paperwork Charles had lugged here in his briefcase, to get their bearings, and to refine their much-discussed plan for how to conduct themselves in this life. Next time was now this time, and things were going to be better.

***
The pain was gone.

Jason Stryker opened his eyes to find himself in his childhood bedroom. It was a sudden, jarring transition, as it had been the last time, when he'd come back as a six year old. He hadn't been prepared then. Always before, he'd gradually realized he'd been reincarnated again, a slow awakening as his brain developed enough for him to remember all he'd been. Around the age of two or three, he always had some idea, but it wasn't until four or five that he truly comprehended what he was, what he would be again.

From downstairs, voices. His mother's, high and strained; his father's, low and carrying, "Your freak of a son—" Outside, snow was falling.

By the foot of the bed lay a backpack. Inside it were his schoolbooks, and schoolwork with dates on it. Between this and the rest of the evidence—his father was home, but where he had rarely been home on weekends, he'd always come home for Christmas—he determined it was winter break. He had turned thirteen over the summer, manifested a few weeks before, on the last day of seventh grade. For the last few reincarnations, his father had been proud. The first time, though. His father been angry, the first time; he'd been ashamed.

Before he'd spoken to Professor Xavier, Jason had managed to convince himself that the first life hadn't been real. Then he'd learned that it had all really happened, and he'd learned there was an underlying pattern, which he hadn't noticed before because it had always started the same way for him, and always ended in 2006. The new lives started every seven years, and now that the pattern had caught up to his life, he'd always start seven years after the last time.

Even this might have been okay—it explained why it had changed last time, why he'd come back all at once in his first grade classroom, late late late...but still too early to hide himself inside the really real world, the one he made—if it hadn't been for the other things he'd learned. His father really had hated him; he'd hated him so much, he'd—

As raised voices crawled up the stairs, Jason reached for the real world again. For the first time, it was here with him, at the beginning. Winter melted away, in favor of a bright sunny day in June. It was a memory from another life, one he'd saved up to treasure.

Behind the podium, Jason gave his speech, valedictorian. In the crowd, his parents beamed up at him. Later, they'd insist on introducing him to everyone they knew in the crowd, so they could brag about him; still later, they'd go out to dinner, the kind of place even a general couldn't afford easily. It had been a good day, a perfect day. There had been other days like it in his lives since, but no day had been as shining in memory as this first graduation. It would bolster him, it would lift him up. It would shield him from everything he didn't want to think about, and for now he would let it.

Later, he would decide if he needed to do anything—and if he did, then what.
"Fast Forward"

"Hank, please calm down."

"I am calm!"

Hank was not calm. Anyone looking in would have seen the contradiction easily: Charles sitting behind his desk, fingers steepled in front of him; Hank looming over him, growing bluer with every word spoken.

"All right," Charles said. "Since you're so calm, go ahead and have it out on the furniture. When you're done, we'll discuss this rationally. With our inside voices."

In response, Hank grumbled, then roared, then, finally, shouted. He didn't quite get around to smashing Charles' desk—he'd always preferred to smash people, but no matter how angry they'd been at each other, he'd never in any life gone after Charles—but he did surrender control completely, fur sprouting out of his skin, muscles out of his shirtsleeves, feet out of his shoes.

When he was finished both shouting and growing, he took the very deliberate steps he'd always taken to get himself back under control. Deep breaths that might have seemed menacing had Charles not known him so well, and an intense low voice that was the result of him reining his volume in.

"You can't. Charles, you can't bring him here. Not after what he's done."

"And what has he done?" Charles asked—not for the sake of being condescending, but in case he'd forgotten something else that had happened in their first life.

"He's a murderer," Hank said. "He's killed people—and before you say, 'he'd killed people before we met him,' let me remind you he's killed people recently."

Bombings that hadn't been bombings, traumatized mutant children found on their doorstep a day or two later.

"I remember," Charles said. "I also remember that they—" meaning Erik and Raven, for they had been a team in these years, and had remained so for the rest of that life, "—had their reasons. However short-sighted they might have been, they didn't do it for a lark."

"Innocent people died," Hank said, which was true. The outer levels of any Trask Laboratories installation had always been staffed by people ignorant of what went on further inside. "He's a criminal, he's on the run—and you want to let him run here? Why? What makes you think this is going to do anything but ruin everything we've been working for?"

"He's changed," Charles said.

Flatly: "He's changed."

"Yes."

"He's changed that much in two and a half months."

"Absolutely," Charles said, though even now Erik hadn't changed in any of the ways Hank meant. He was willing to compromise, but only because he'd seen it work. If it hadn't, they'd have lived out the same conflict in the last few lives they had in the first. "He's not the same person anymore. You'll see. Besides, he's growing a beard. No one's going to recognize him. Even if they do, it's not as
though we can't handle it."

"He left us on that beach to die," Hank said, which was what he'd always said when he was about to capitulate on the matter of Erik. "He's a loose canon. He's not safe."

"Neither are you. Neither am I. Neither are most of our students, come to that."

"You know that's not what I mean."

"I know," said Charles. "And I trust you'll do everything in your power to make him feel welcome here, despite your misgivings."

He believed nothing of the sort, of course, but one had to try.

***

"Hank despises me," said Erik a few nights later, after he'd hung his shirts in Charles' closet, brushed his teeth with a newly-purchased toothbrush, and climbed into bed.

Although they'd agreed to give it a few days before Erik followed him home, the bed hadn't seemed quite right before he was in it, and Charles' relief at their reunion by far outweigh his own trepidation at Hank's objections. "He hated you before. Give it time."

"This is different," Erik said—Erik, who'd never before given an indication of caring what Hank thought. But then, it had been a very long time since he'd been distrusted on sight. It had to be unnerving. "Hating me when I'm here all the time isn't the same as hating me when I'm here twice a year."

"Well, we'll have to prove him wrong," Charles said, and sidled up a little closer to Erik. He still wasn't over those few minutes in the cabin, when he'd feared this Erik was lost to him forever, that he'd ended up with the same Erik Hank was so concerned about. "It shouldn't be that difficult. More a matter of waiting him out than anything else."

Still, he lay awake for a long time, thinking about it. In their first life, Hank had been resentful of Charles' dealings with Erik, at least at first, though he'd made nice when he had to. But that had come later than this, too. In this life, they'd reopened the school several years ago; the specter of those years when it had been Hank and Charles alone her could not yet have lifted. Anything with the potential to set them back would surely lay a shadow over his heart. So it wasn't a stretch for Erik to think he'd have more difficulty being accepted here, this time.

"It won't be that hard," Charles said to the quiet of their room, long after Erik had fallen to sleep. "It can't be."

***

Several months later, Hank had begun to relax a smidgen. Erik claimed he couldn't see it, but Charles was quite certain it was so. Hank couldn't be on his guard forever. People didn't work that way, didn't remain keyed up for years on end without signs of danger (or an excess of paranoia) to spur them on. Eventually, as Erik remained a presence at the school without destroying everything Charles and Hank had worked for, Hank would come to accept him.

By now, Charles felt confident Erik and Hank could get along for at least a few hours without killing each other, and so he finally made the appointment with his lawyers, the one he'd already been through in several other lives. It went off relatively painlessly, for by now he knew exactly what their objections would be, and was able to counter them with ease.
He was on his way home when it happened, around seven or eight in the evening. The rain was coming down in hard little slaps; Charles was just happy it wasn't snowing yet, as it was supposed to after midnight. He'd liked snow well enough in some of his other lives—especially the one he'd shared with David, where he'd come to appreciate the joy in building snowmen and starting snowball fights in a way he never had previously—but until the life before this one, he'd forgotten how much more inconvenient it was to navigate through while disabled. Let it rain.

How would Hank react to this news? Charles still wasn't certain, was on the fence about even telling him before another year or two had passed. Maybe he'd take it better in 1978, 1979. Maybe even 1980. The start of a new decade always felt as if it would be the harbinger of great change. Erik would have proved himself by then, no matter how often he claimed he shouldn't have to.

Charles came to a sharp turn in the road. He slowed down automatically, paying very little conscious attention to the road—after all, he'd driven this route a thousand times. Ten thousand. He knew it as well as he knew this car, the little red thing that had usually been his first choice, and had always been the first vehicle Hank modified for him after the beach. He knew it as well as he knew his own face, staring back at him in the mirror at every age.

Later, he'd admit to himself he hadn't slowed down as much as he should have, that he hadn't accounted for the possibility of black ice.

But that was only later.

It happened very quickly. One moment he was on the road, in full control of the car, thinking about how he could convince Hank and Erik to get along, and how and when to tell Hank about the changes he'd made to his will. The next moment, he was sliding, too fast, far too fast, with no chance of being able to stay on the road—

There was no sound, no impact, no pain. In the end, all Charles saw was the tree.

***

When Charles came to, he knew at once that he was in the hospital. He knew even before he'd opened his eyes, before he'd remembered he'd gone off the road. The inside of his head was never this quiet anywhere else, not even when he'd been on the serum.

There was still no pain, and although he knew there ought to have been, Charles couldn't bring himself to feel as concerned as he should have about the tree. Instead he felt...surprising good. Thank god for morphine.

He soon fell asleep, waking up to a certain extent whenever a nurse came to check on him, but otherwise drifting along quite pleasantly.

When he finally woke up properly, Erik was there, sitting beside him in a plastic hospital chair. He was asleep, his head pillowed on his crossed arms.

"Erik," Charles said, seconds or even minutes later—time was a bugger when you were this high. He reached out, ruffled Erik's hair. Funny, Erik had gone gray overnight. Charles' accident must have given him one hell of a scare; Erik had always gone gray within six months of his fiftieth birthday before, but that wouldn't be for another four and a half years. "Erik, wake up."

Erik looked up, awake in an instant. "Charles?" he said. He reached for Charles' hand, hesitated. "Is it—are you—"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine," Charles said, and didn't think to wonder how it was that he wasn't much more
gravely injured than he seemed, why he didn't seem to have even a single splint or cast. "Is the car totaled?" He'd liked that car, never so much as scratched it before. It hadn't had that many more years left in it—in the other lives in which he'd relied heavily upon it, it had had the tendency to give up the ghost by 1980—but he'd been attached to it, all the same.

Erik laughed, a harsh, ugly sound. "You could say that."

There was something there. If Charles had had access to his telepathy, he'd have already known what it was. He'd always had this sort of trouble with narcotics. Using telepathy when he was this drugged was like trying to see in the middle of the night, while blindfolded—without even having the dubious trade-off of being able to walk for his trouble.

He couldn't simply pick it out of Erik's mind. Instead, he had to think about it. He thought, and he thought, and, after a few long, tiring minutes, it came together. "What year is it?"

He willed Erik to say '1977,' but what Erik said was, "1983."

"I died, didn't I? I died."

"Yes."

"Oh, Erik." Erik's hand had found his, and Charles squeezed his fingers, a lump forming in his throat. He'd spent an entire lifetime, once, wondering if Erik would come back to him when the time came; it had never once occurred to him that it could go the other way around. "I'm so sorry. I never meant to leave you alone."

"It's fine."

"It is not fine." There was nothing more isolating than to live a life like that; even when you found a family, even if you told them, you were still set apart. Charles had loved his son, his granddaughter, he'd loved that version of Raven, the family and the life she'd made...but some part of him, deep inside, had never been entirely certain any of it had happened until he'd found Erik again, and been able to share it with him. "I know what it must have been like for you."

"You haven't the faintest idea," Erik said, distantly, and then: "It's over. You're here now. We're here together."

If Erik wanted to think positively, well, Charles wasn't going to argue, not when the little strength he'd had when he'd woken up had already drained away. "All right. So what am I in with, anyway? Pneumonia again?"

Something about this seemed wrong, but the exhaustion seemed right. Charles had been hospitalized with pneumonia a number of times in both the lives he'd spent paralyzed.

"Hardly. You've been shot in the chest."

"Shot? Are you sure? When did this happen?"

Erik gave him a look. "1983."

"Evidently," Charles said. It was coming back to him, fuzzy-headed as he was. It was one of the matters he'd been sure to take care of in every lifetime. There was a girl named Jane who attended the school in the early 80s. Her mutation wasn't one of the dramatic or even dangerous ones. The ability to fade into the shadows, if you weren't specifically looking for her, and if the sun weren't too bright. The tendency to disappear into them even when she meant not to. In that first life, Charles had
made certain ill-thought-out implications when he'd first met with her parents; namely, he'd implied his school was a place mutant children went to 'get better.' Of course, they did get better there, in every life...but in a different way than he'd allowed some parents to believe.

Most people either came around eventually, or decided they didn't want to know too much and turned a blind eye...but Jane's father, upon discovering the deception, had somehow managed to stalk Charles for several weeks without his noticing, before confronting him outside the public library. He'd had a gun, Charles had been regrettably distracted that day, and so he'd ended up in surgery, while Jane's father had wound up arrested. If it hadn't been for William Stryker several decades later, he'd have forever been Charles' top 'worst parent' story. In every lifetime since, Charles had made sure to come into contact with him at least once, in order to plant a deep-seated aversion to violence deep within his mind. In all the lifetimes since that first one, the worst Jane's father had done was make a scene.

They could have talked about it, but Charles had already convinced Erik not to kill the man once, in their first lifetime. There was really nothing else to say, provided Erik had no intention of killing him this time.

"You don't, do you?" Charles asked.

"Don't what?"

"You're not...going to..." and Charles didn't know why he had to be slipping away now, but he really couldn't stay awake more than a moment or two longer, "hurt him...?"

He was under again before he heard the full of Erik's response, but later he would be fairly certain he'd said, "If you insist."

***

The next time Charles woke up, Erik was still there. Judging by the changed light from the window, it must have been hours, but somehow he doubted Erik had made it down to the cafeteria in the interim, or gone any further from the bed than the bathroom (and then only once he really couldn't hold it anymore). He considered saying something about it...only it was always difficult to send people away again, when you were in a hospital bed. Even if you knew they would come back, there weren't many things lonelier than waiting for the moment when one visitor would return, or another one would arrive.

So instead of insisting Erik do something Erik would most likely refuse to do anyway, Charles said, "So what did you get up to, for the past thirty years?"

Erik straightened his spine and regarded Charles for a moment, once again seeming distant. Then he came back, his gaze sharpening, and said, "I stayed at the school as headmaster for a few years. Then I went into politics."


"I was a senator for a while." Erik said it casually, like it was no big deal, as if Charles' concerns were beneath his notice. "In 2006 I was in the middle of my second term as President of the United States."

"Excuse me, what?" Hallucinations were a very rare side effect of morphine, weren't they? Charles had never had that kind of reaction, but there was a first time for everything. "I thought I heard you
say you were the president."

"Yes."

Charles squinted at Erik's face. It was completely neutral now, closed off in a way so as to tell Charles nothing. Erik had always had one hell of a poker face when he was trying. It had never been fair. "You're joking, right?"

"No."

"You couldn't have been the president. You're not a natural born citizen, which you would have had to be. So you can give up on trying to pull my leg."

This line of reasoning was comforting, but Erik's unwavering expression was not. "The Constitution's been amended before," he said.

"Have you ever even been a citizen?" Charles was all but certain Erik had never bothered to be naturalized, except perhaps in the life he'd spent with Magda.

Erik waved his hand dismissively. "It was irrelevant by then."

"You're making this up." Charles peered at Erik's face even harder, not sure whether to scoff, laugh, or have a panic attack. He needed more morphine for this. Hell, he needed a Valium. Did they make Valium yet? "Right? I mean, you couldn't have been."

"Couldn't I?" Erik asked.

"No. You're a dreadful liar. And you're trying to hide a smile. Don't think I can't see it."

Erik's face was, in fact, made of stone, damn him.

"Oh, come on. Admit it. You're having me on just because I can't read you at the moment. There's no way you could have been elected president." Searching Erik's face didn't turn up any more hints than it had previously. "Right?"

This might have gone on for some time if someone hadn't said, "What are you doing here?"

Charles and Erik turned to see Hank standing in the doorway. He was carrying a vase of flowers and had a stack of cards two inches thick tucked under his arm.

"Visiting," Erik said.

"Well, get out. The Professor's not well. The last thing he needs is you harassing him."

Charles sighed. "Not this again," he said, as much to himself as to either of them. If he'd had the chance to think this far ahead, he'd have thought he was done with this much nonsense, at least.

Hank set down the flowers and the stack of cards. "I'm serious. You need to leave now," he said.

"Hank, it's all right," Charles said. "Erik and I have just had a very productive conversation," (a glance at Erik's face just then was rewarded by a twitch at the corner of his mouth; proof he'd been lying, Charles had known it all along) "and he'll be coming back with us when he's discharged. To stay, this time."

"—You can't be serious," Hank said flatly, adjusted his glasses on his nose. "This is Magneto we're talking about. He's a terrorist, Charles. He's killed people. He's—"
"Here we go again," Charles muttered to Erik, as Hank ranted on.

Erik, for his part, seemed surprisingly unopinionated in this matter.

***

"Hank keeps looking at me oddly," Charles said several days later, the day before he was to be discharged. "He seems to think I've lost my mind."

What had been Erik's favorite source of complaint three days ago was apparently of no concern to him now, for he hadn't mentioned Hank's visits or Hank's objections, not even once. Charles hadn't expected a reaction this time, and was surprised at Erik's little start of guilt at Hank's name. Erik was nothing if not cool on the surface, so it was nothing Charles would have noticed if they hadn't taken him off the morphine in favor of something that left his mind a little clearer, while giving him just enough connection with his body for him to stop periodically forgetting he had, in fact, been shot.

"What was that about?" he asked.

"What?"

"You know what."

"I haven't the faintest idea what you mean," Erik said.

A day or two before, Charles would have let it go. He'd have fallen asleep before he could get an answer, and even if he'd stayed awake, his telepathy wouldn't have been any more help than Erik's face was. Now, though, he was getting flashes every few minutes from whoever was here with him: Erik's guilt, Hank's fear. He got a similar flash now: a glimpse of blue and Erik—

"You and Hank?"

"Charles—"

"You and Hank?"

"You were dead. I assumed you were finished with him," Erik said, not a little snidely.

"I'm certainly not finished with you."

A nurse interrupted them then, to check Charles' blood pressure for the fifteenth time that day, and to ask him the usual questions. In a little while, someone else would come, to change his dressing, and empty the urinal into the toilet.

Before then, though, Charles intended to get some answers.

By the time the nurse had gone, Charles found he wasn't angry, not really. Probably it had been good for the two of them to find some comfort in one another after he'd been gone. The last thing he'd ever wanted was to leave Erik alone, and as for Hank—Hank had been quite dear to him, too. In more than one life. In more than one role.

Besides, if the two of them had been sleeping together, maybe they'd actually been getting along. That much, at least, was a comforting enough thought.

"I'm not angry," Charles said. "I was just...startled."

But Erik had gone distant again, and Charles didn't need his telepathy to know this had nothing to do
with whatever had happened between Hank and he. This was something else.

"I think you should tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Whatever I missed. Whatever it is you don't want to talk about. You should tell me."

There came another flash then, for a moment and then gone: darkness and flame and a far away terror, and a woman's voice saying, '—petty god—'

Whatever had happened once Charles had left their previous life, it was over now. Still, goose pimples rose on his arms, and his mouth was too dry to allow him to swallow.

"Tell me," he said. "What on earth happened?"

Erik remained as he was, staring off into the distance. Charles recognized that look now for what it was, a sign that Erik was somewhere else, somewhere far worse than here. He still seemed to be there when he finally spoke:

"As I said before. I was headmaster, to begin with."

"But not president," Charles interjected. "I'd like to be clear on that, please."

"No," Erik said. "Not president."

"Thank goodness. Please continue."

Erik did.
Headmaster

Charles poked his head into Erik's new office on his way out.

"You'll be all right while I'm gone, won't you?" he asked.

Erik had already wearied of Charles' continuous concerns about Hank's feelings on the matter of his presence, and didn't bother to hide it. "I'm not planning to mount Hank's head on the wall today."

"Yes, well," Charles said, adjusting the scarf around his neck and glancing at his wristwatch. "If he tries to start something, don't rise to the bait. That's all I'm trying to—good lord, it's almost two o'clock. I have to go. Behave yourself, please."

He left. Erik followed the track Charles' wheelchair took idly—down the hall to the elevator, down another hall to the garage, past this car-shaped hunk of metal and that one until it stopped and was folded up and placed behind the driver's seat—and then forgot Charles' errand entirely as he returned to his work. There was a great deal of it, and it was excruciating; as he'd had no college degree of any kind at this point in his first life, he'd for some reason agreed to be used as a teaching assistant. So far, this meant grading papers, but not essays; later, if Hank ever quieted down about how he had no business being around the students, it might mean supervising classes during exams. Erik had never thought he would look forward to that, or to going back to college in the fall, but two months of math quizzes had changed his mind.

The rest of the afternoon passed tediously, without Charles to gripe to. Hank must have been in a better mood than usual, for he only passed by Erik's office five times, and only made a point of staring in the open door twice. Eventually, though his attention wandered every other answer, Erik finished with this stack of student papers. As Charles wasn't here to drop another stack on his desk, he declared himself done, and locked up his office for the night.

The first time he'd been a partner in running the school, there'd always been something else to do, no matter how much work he finished. Once he'd taken charge of X-Corp, the type of work had changed, but there had still rarely been an idle moment. Now, even the slightest contact with a student was enough to raise Hank's hackles, and Charles kept insisting what he needed was more time.

Erik intended to give it another month at the most, and that long only because it was important to Charles. But he couldn't live like this much longer, skulking through the hallways of a house that had once been as much his as it had been Charles', and he didn't intend to.

For now, however, he skulked into Charles' private library, and hid there with a book for several hours.

***

It began to rain, then to sleet, then to snow. Charles still hadn't returned. The advent of this weather meant he might have ended up taking a room at a hotel instead, if he had been too far from the school when it started. By midnight, Erik was certain this was what he must have done, and went to bed without him, disgruntled only that he hadn't bothered to call.

At half past six in the morning, the doorbell rang. It woke him, but he made no move in that direction. Charles' suggestion, this time, and one Erik had to admit was sound enough: That he should lie low for at least the next few months, until his (beardless) face had stopped appearing in the
newspapers.

He got out of bed, showered, headed down to the kitchen for breakfast; eating in the cafeteria among the students was another activity he was not yet permitted to indulge in. 'Just for now,' Charles kept saying. 'Until it's safer.' When Erik protested, it became, 'Perhaps if you'd blown up fewer buildings'—but Charles had confessed to ambivalence on the matter lifetimes ago, and so this particular criticism failed to make whatever point it was trying for.

It wasn't until shortly before noon that Erik picked up on the sound and feeling of news, sweeping through the building. He'd grown accustomed to it in his second life, but on only a few occasions had it sounded or felt quite like this. Although all the students should have been in class, there were clusters of them in the hallways, speaking quietly. Half were openly weeping. For a moment, Erik felt as though he'd fallen sideways through time—as if this were once again November 22, 1963, as if this were the day he'd discovered Charles had never intended to allow him to interfere with Dallas this time.

But this wasn't 1963, and there had never been anything in February 1977 that would have caused this.

He was about to walk up to the nearest huddle to demand to know what had happened—but then he caught half a sentence, "I can't believe the Professor's—"

Erik stopped where he was, irritation at not knowing something replaced by something else. Instead of approaching the student huddle—a method of information gathering that wasn't always accurate, since the only things that spread faster than news in this house were unsubstantiated rumors—he went in search of Hank McCoy. He wasn't difficult to find, the only person in the house who wore glasses with springs in the joints, so they wouldn't snap into pieces every time he decided to grow.

He found him in Charles' office, a minute or two after a notice had come on over the sound system:
"All students and faculty, please report to the auditorium for a assembly at 11:50. All students please report..."

"I'll be there in a minute," Hank said. "I just need to find—"

"What happened?" Erik said.

Hank looked up. His eyes were rimmed with red, but no less distrustful than they had been yesterday. He stared at Erik for a moment, then said, in a bizarrely flat and uninflected tone, "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. I should have told you. It's been...a bad morning."

"What happened to Charles?" Erik said.

"There was an accident," Hank said. "His car ran off the road sometime last night. There was nothing the paramedics could do. He was already—they said he was already—"

He finished the sentence, but Erik didn't hear the words, and never would learn exactly what euphemism Hank had chosen to couch it in. Instead, he heard a roaring in his ears—a tide, a pulse, a lie—and sagged against the doorframe.

When he next registered Hank's expression, even bleaker than it had been before, his hands had gone cold.

"You're wrong," Erik said. It wasn't Hank's fault he didn't realize. The poor fool had lived only one life, and so he did not know Charles Xavier had always lived to be seventy-three, and would live to be seventy-three this time, as well.
"They needed someone to go down to the morgue this morning. To identify the..." Hank took off his glasses, polished them on the front of his shirt, put them back on his face. "I'm not mistaken. I wish I were." Whatever paper he'd been looking for, he found it in the next few seconds, then made to go around Erik. "I have to get to the assembly. You can stand in the back, as long as you don't...you can stand in the back."

"As long as I don't talk to any students," Erik said.

"Yes," Hank said. "As long as you don't do that."

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The assembly involved a large number of platitudes and reassurances (from Hank), and even more weeping (from the students). Erik stood along the back wall, trying to think. He needed a plan, a strategy; he and Charles had had one, but it required the both of them, and now he was on his own. Yet even knowing Charles would be back next time didn't keep him from dwelling on how he had gone to sleep last night, had slept peacefully alone in their bed while Charles had been dying, or already gone. Perhaps he'd been killed instantly, but perhaps he'd had hours to experience the agony—and Erik would have thirty years to wonder which it had been.

Erik didn't realize the assembly had ended until Hank was once more standing in front of him. He blinked, and realized the students had already filed out, and the lights dimmed.

"I don't mean to be insensitive," Hank said, sounding almost apologetic, as if feeling regretful would make whatever he was about to say less so. "But I'm going to have to ask you to leave this house after the funeral."

Erik heard himself ask, "Did Charles make it to his meeting?"

"What?"

"Was he on his way there, or was he on the way back?"

"The way back, I think. Why? Does it matter?"

"It matters a great deal. You'll find it's my house, and I'll stay as long as I please."

"...What?"

"Charles went there to change his will," Erik said, and turned away. "All this belongs to me now."

Yesterday, he'd have felt vindicated to leave Hank gaping like a fish behind him as he exited the room.

Today, it seemed a hollow victory, when Erik wasn't certain whether he wished to stay or not.

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"Oh, come off it. You were always going to stay," Charles said, as if Erik hadn't walked away often enough yet for him to have internalized the idea that it just might happen again.

"I wasn't certain."

"Well, what about our plan?"

"You were supposed to be there," Erik said. "Without you, everything seemed..."
"Pointless? I've been there, admittedly."

"Gray," Erik didn't intend to elaborate, had grown used to keeping his most private thoughts and feelings to himself. Then Charles squeezed his hand, and he remembered he wasn't alone—not anymore, not in this life. "As if there were things that mattered, but I couldn't reach them through the haze."

"Ah. I've been there, too."

"Then something happened."

"Something usually does, does it? Do go on..."

***

Two days later, Charles' funeral.

Afterward, Erik had no more than returned to his office—to accomplish what, he didn't know; it wasn't as if the prospect of grading yet more papers held any more importance than it had several days before, when it had already had very little—when from behind him someone said, "Um."

Erik turned, and it took a moment for him to take in the person in front of him: a girl, twelve or thirteen years old. She looked at him as if expecting something.

"What do you need?" he asked, when the silence became uncomfortable.

The girl glanced at his face, glanced away. "If anything happens, can we go with you?"

Over the past few days, the rumors had continued to sweep through the school, despite Hank's attempt at reassuring the student body everything would go on as it had before. Children weren't fools; they knew who had been the true heart of this place, just as many of them knew how unsteady the foundation of their families and their lives had become the moment they'd manifested their powers. Of course they couldn't be placated so easily.

Some of the rumors suggested the school was to close at the end of the year; others, that it would close suddenly in a week or two; still others, that it would be taken over by one three-letter government agency or another. Not one of the rumors indicated the students knew to whom Charles had left his legacy in this life; not one of the students could yet know things would indeed go on as before, no matter who ended up heading the school in the end. There was no reason this girl should have come to Erik, of all people.

Erik looked more closely at her now, half expecting her to change forms, to become Mystique. He kept expecting her to show up here, had been expecting it ever since he'd blown whatever rendezvous they would have had after his time with Charles at the cabin. But instead of a flash of blue, there was only a thin, pale girl, one he'd noted at the edge of things in the cafeteria and in the halls. Instead of irritation, he saw fear. And on her wrists, he saw fading ligature marks—

Then he recognized her.

"You were there," he said.

"Yeah." She saw where his gaze had gone, and fidgeted with the cuff of her shirt, pulling it down to try to cover the marks.

Surreal as it seemed, she wasn't from the group he and Charles had saved from Trask Industries in
1969 in their last life. She couldn't be. She could only be from one of the ones he and Mystique had liberated, at the tail end of 1976, a few months or five lifetimes ago.

Erik couldn't remember her name. He couldn't recall if he'd ever known it in the first place. Getting to know the mutants he'd rescued had always been a far lesser priority in his first life than bringing justice to the ones who had imprisoned and hurt them to begin with.

"Nothing's going to happen," he said, raising his voice when he saw the shadows moving outside the door, and knew who they must belong to: this girl's companions, the ones who'd accompanied her here. She'd held their hands, or they'd held hers, as they left that hateful place; they'd still been doing it when he and Mystique had dropped them off on Charles' doorstep. "You heard Professor McCoy. The school's going to stay open. It's going to go on, just as it always has before."

This was evidently less than comforting to a group of traumatized children who didn't have half a dozen lifetimes to prove this. The others—two boys and a girl, all a few years younger—gathered behind her as she said, "But what if it doesn't?"

"If it doesn't, you can come with me," Erik said, the decision unmade until he said it, and unchangeable once he had. "Now, remind me of your names."

The older girl was Denice, and the younger ones were Marsha, Billy, and Juan; Erik spoke with them for a while, learning their stories in a way he most likely hadn't in his first life, and hearing what they had been doing since they'd arrived at the school. They were behind in some subjects, but were being tutored and catching up quickly; their strides in mastering their mutations were not as great, for they were each to some extent still hesitant and fearful—and likely to remain so for years, if not the remainder of their lives.

"Remember," Erik said, before shooing them out of his office, "I'm Professor Eisenhardt. You don't know me from anywhere else."

"I don't get it," said Billy.

"It's his secret identity," Marsha explained.

"Yeah, like Superman!" said Juan.

"...More like an X-Man," Erik said, and for a moment it seemed as utterly ludicrous as it would have if he'd been Magneto again, saying the same thing. Perhaps Charles, too, would find it absurd, someday. "Now, I have work to do, and so do all of you."

A few minutes later, they went, leaving Erik to his plans.

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"Actually, I find that very sweet."

"You would."

"I'm glad you were able to connect with them. You needed it, and so did they. Remember how good you were with the students, our second time around?"

"...You're only saying that because you haven't heard the rest."

"Well then, tell me. I want to hear about you and Hank, specifically. Don't think I've forgotten..."
The next day, Erik went to find Hank McCoy. He hadn't made himself difficult to locate; he was in Charles' office, looking over some paperwork with a distressed expression. When he noticed Erik standing in the doorway, he looked back down, took off his glasses, looked at them blankly for a moment, then put them back on his face and nudged them up the bridge of his nose. He turned a page in the ledger in front of him and said, "I've spoken with the lawyers."

"And?"

"I can't challenge the will." Hank took off his glasses again, polished them on the front of his shirt. "Or rather, I could, but I wouldn't get anywhere."

"Yes," said Erik. Foolish as it had seemed to him before, Charles had always insisted on updating his will, as early as possible and as often as necessary in every life; surely he'd had some idea how to make sure the contents would stick by now.

"It's almost too convenient," Hank continued, and Erik saw the danger in his tone, as he'd seen it everywhere, ever since he'd followed Charles back to the school. "Charles dies in an accident not an hour after he updates his will? You're lucky I saw your face when you learned the news. You're luckier that I know what shock smells like. You're luckier yet that they couldn't find anything wrong with the steering or the brakes."

Charles had thought Hank would come around in time, but what Charles had forgotten was that they were the only ones who could view the past as if it had happened in some other life. Hank had lived only one life, and he knew what he knew: Erik was a monster, not to be trusted.

"Feel free to get to the point," Erik said, and if there was no point in pretending to be harmless, then there was no reason, either, not to put a little dry threat into his own words, even if it seemed more than a bit ludicrous to be trying on this particular mantle again. "I don't have the time for prattling nonsense."

"What you do have is a fortune. And this house. You'll probably use it to raise an army." Hank put his glasses back on, met Erik's eyes. "I hope you'll send the students home before you bring it here."

There was the danger, in that last sentence; if Erik didn't send the children to safety, then Hank would make him, or die trying.

"A fascinating suggestion," Erik said. "But of little use to me, I'm afraid. You see, I was planning to use it as a school. I doubt an army would fit."

"Excuse me?"

"As you told the students: The school remains. Charles' legacy, as well. All that changes is the headmaster's name."

Hank said, flatly, "You want to be headmaster."

"No." He'd once thought he did, but never like this. "But it would seem it's my turn."

"You'll have to find a new deputy headmaster," Hank said. "That much is going to change, too. You're out of your mind if you think I'm going to answer to you."

"You're going to help me. As you keep reminding Charles, I'm a fugitive. It'll be some months before my face is more or less forgotten." Had Charles and he thought a beard and an excellent set of false
papers would do it? Had they ever really believed remembering to wear long sleeves would be half the battle here? If a handful of children could recognize him, then so could anyone else who knew how to pick up a newspaper. "And I'll need my degree before I can head the school without raising questions. In the meantime, you'll serve as temporary headmaster."

"I stayed for Charles. I won't stay for you."

"Oh, but you will," Erik said. "If you leave, then I'll be alone with the children. You can't have that, can you?"

In the end, it seemed Hank couldn't.

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The part Charles so wanted to hear about had happened on the first anniversary of his death. By then, Erik had completed his first semester at college, taking half again as many credits as he needed to, in order to complete his degree quickly; by then, things had more or less settled, the way Charles had insisted they eventually would. When Erik had a free hour, he'd shadow Hank, watch him work. His method was different than Charles' had been, but the results were familiar all the same, lighting up long-neglected corners memory.

It was a bad day, the way all the anniversaries were bad days. Though Erik hadn't consciously kept track of the date, he knew it the moment he woke. The knowledge was a shade, hanging over him all day. He skipped his morning class, lest he drive some metal object into the instructor's head, then proceeded to make several of the students cry shortly after the minute of silence, which made him wish he'd attended his class after all.

By now, he was accustomed to the anniversary of the fire, to the birthdays of his children and grandchildren, born and unborn, living and gone; he hadn't expected the twenty-third of February to join them, for he knew Charles' absence was not permanent. Surely a temporary grief should be easier to bear than the temporary joys had been, but his heart didn't seem to agree. He suspected this anniversary would stick until he didn't need it anymore, just as the anniversary of the beach once had.

By mid-afternoon, he'd given up on the day, and retreated to his room. What had so briefly been his and Charles' room, which Hank hadn't dare to so much as suggest he vacate for something smaller. A few hours later, he emerged from it again, having found and drunk the bottle of wine an earlier Charles had left at the back of a dresser drawer, having since determined it wasn't nearly enough to get him through the night.

The liquor cabinet was in Charles' personal study, which had remained locked since his death; Erik found the light on, the cabinet open, and Hank lying on the sofa. He'd been having a bad day, too, evident in his rumpled clothes, and in the fact he hadn't come to check up on Erik even once all day. (He now seemed to believe in Erik's intentions, but was not yet convinced of his competence.) He had a glass of brandy in his hand, which he waved in Erik's direction.

"This was Charles' favorite," Hank said. "We should toast his memory."

From anyone else in this house or this life, the sentiment would have grated. But only Hank had known something of what Charles was to Erik, and only Erik knew what Charles had been to Hank. There was as close to an understanding between them on this matter as there would be on any other. So when Hank poured him several fingers of brandy, Erik accepted the glass, and sat in the armchair across from him.
Toasting Charles' memory turned to reminiscing—mostly from Hank, for by the time Erik had thought any of his memories through long enough to decide if they had happened in this life or in another one (or if they had happened in this life, whether they'd happened yet), Hank had started speaking again. The time Charles had done this. The time he'd done that. How selfless he'd been. How strong. How saintly.

It had gotten a bit fictional and more than a little tiresome by the time Erik said, "And he was good in bed, too."

Hank did a spit-take then, and hacked and pounded on his chest for several minutes. He'd already been a little blue around the edges, some combination of drink and the hour; by the time it became clear he wasn't going to choke to death, he was as large, furry, and blue as he got. "I hope you're not making a pass at me."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Erik said—though there was a thought, now that Hank mentioned it. It had been a long time, and Hank's blue form was several times as appealing as his other one. "My point is: If we're going to make such an exhaustive list, we shouldn't leave that out."

"I don't think I want to talk about that...that aspect of my relationship with Charles," said Hank.

Erik laughed. "If you were sober, you'd have denied it entirely."

"...I don't know what you're talking about."

"There it is." Erik sipped the last of his brandy, then reached for the bottle, poured himself another several fingers. Now he was well on the way to making something happen. He could feel it in the air. A fight, a fuck; it would be something to take him out of his head long enough to get through to tomorrow. There was a chance it would ruin their fragile peace; there was a greater chance they'd pretend it never even happened in the morning. "You've always preferred to hide, haven't you?"

And that was when Hank—

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"All right, that's enough," Charles said, with his hand over his eyes. "You don't really need to tell me all the details."

He'd get them anyway, once his telepathy had fully returned; still, the only reason Erik had been willing to discuss this in the first place was that once he was past this, he'd have to admit to everything else.

"We destroyed your armchair," Erik said.

"Charming."

"It was your desk, the next time."

"Delightful."

"It wasn't anything like what we have," Erik said, though there was little chance Charles could have doubted it.

"I never imagined it was. Hank isn't...the later we come back, the more afraid he becomes. He didn't go off the serum until the late nineties, in the first life, and even that much must count as a miracle. To ask him to reach for more in a relationship with another man...well, I don't know if he's ever been
capable of that." So saying, Charles patted Erik's hand—not earnestly, but idly, as if he, too, was only talking about this because he feared the rest. "Anyway, I told you he'd come around, and he did."

"Yes."

Charles became earnest after all, taking Erik's hand in his own. "Now, tell me. Please. You're holding something back. Don't make me wait until I've collected enough of these flashes to piece it out for myself."

"I earned my degree. I took my place as headmaster." Even without Charles there, it had seemed easy to take on that role, just an inch or two away from other work he'd once done. "It was all the same as before, or close enough."

"But then something changed. What was it?"

Erik sat there, remembering. After a minute, he became conscious that Charles had asked him several more times in the interim.

"Then," Erik said. "In 1981—do you recall the nightmares Jean Grey used to have?"

"Of course."

"That's how it started. She began to have them again. Night after night, she woke the house with her screaming..."
On that particular night, Erik lay fully dressed on top of his bedspread, waiting.

There were times he thought this particular life had to be a farce. This occurred to him most often on days that began with him pulling blue hairs out of his mouth, or on any day that included him standing behind a microphone stand and lecturing fifty bored mutant teenagers about the importance of the dress code...but there were few days it didn't cross his mind at least once.

There were some nights, lying awake in bed after midnight, when he found himself imagining how Charles might react to the absurdities, when he finally learned of them. He still hadn't decided if sleeping with Hank off and on was more or less ridiculous than the idea of him performing Charles' former duties as headmaster. The latter seemed by far the more ludicrous to him, probably because he couldn't remember Charles calling many assemblies. When Charles had wanted people to tuck in their shirts, all he'd ever had to do was think it across the house.

On the bad nights, it occasionally occurred to Erik that perhaps Charles wouldn't be back. Charles had always seemed to be the instigator, dragging Erik into a new life as soon as he had gone himself; that he'd gone so early and Erik was still here seemed as if it could threaten the way of things. Perhaps Charles wouldn't come back, the next time; perhaps there would be no next time at all. But although this seemed likely in his worst moments, there was something in Erik that couldn't truly believe it. Losing his family had been terrible, was a wound that still ached and always would; losing Charles as he'd lost them wasn't a possibility that seemed real to him. Charles had been the constant, always, through every life. That he wasn't here right now didn't change that much. It couldn't.

His absence certainly did create problems, however. At seven minutes to one, Erik jerked awake the moment one began.

First, there came a tremor, which caused the change on top of the dresser to rattle without permission. Several seconds after Erik made it out into the hallway, the next began, this one strong enough it might have knocked him over if he hadn't preemptively levitated several inches above the floor.

By the time he made it to the girl's dormitory, his hair was plastered to his head and his clothes to his body. Sweat dripped into his eyes, and he wiped his forehead with his shirtsleeve.

He was about three strides away from Jean's room when she began to scream. He threw the door open. Welts rose on the wallpaper, then began to smoke. In the bed, Jean thrashed and moaned; every minute or two, she screamed, a shrill, strange sound that sounded neither like a girl's nor a woman's, immediately followed by gulping sobs that sounded like they belonged to a girl much younger than fourteen.

Erik had been standing there for seven screams and four tremors more by the time Hank came skidding down the hallway, half-blue and all-ragged, but thankfully fully clothed.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

"Staggering," Hank said. "We can't all float."

"Well, get in there."

Hank gave him a sharp look, the one meaning he couldn't believe Erik was scared of a little girl. "Yes, your highness," he said, adjusting his glasses and heading in. He pulled up a chair, the one that always stayed by Jean's bed these days, and said, "Jean. Jean, you have to wake up."
Sometimes Hank had to shake her to break her out of it; this time, she came awake within moments. For a few minutes, the two of them spoke in low murmurs, she confiding her dream to him, he comforting her in that awkward Hank way. Anyone who didn't know better might have taken them for father and daughter, looking in. It was the reason Erik had never been able to go in for himself; it was the role he would not have been able to take on if he'd wanted to. He was here as a headmaster, a teacher, a guardian—nothing more.

Around the time the temperature had settled and the wallpaper had gone back to normal, Hank got up, put the chair back against the wall, and exited the room (making no effort to keep from bumping into Erik along the way; surely Charles had never had to deal with such disrespect). Erik waved to Jean, who waved back, then turned over to face the wall; then he closed the door, and he and Hank walked out of the girl's dormitory. Every door had a light on underneath it, and so they rapped on each one without opening any, telling the students inside to go back to bed.

When they were back in the main hallway, Hank said, "We need to try something else."

"Perhaps," Erik said.

"Waiting it out isn't working. She's getting worse."

"I'll think about it," Erik said, but what he was thinking about for the next little while was the last time this had come up, so long ago.

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"We need to try something else," Erik had said, in 1981 in a much different life. "You're not sleeping, I'm not sleeping. The girl can't be making it through her classes. What did you do last time? Maybe you should try whatever it was now, instead of going for historical consistency."

"I already did. It shouldn't be a problem anymore." So Charles was going to pretend he hadn't noticed the barb. Well, that was fine; Erik no longer liked arguing about JFK, especially when he was this tired. It was enough to bring it up every so often, so Charles would neither forget it nor imagine Erik had. "Now, tell me about your latest case."

Perhaps Erik should have seen this for the evasion it was, but when there was a choice between talking about Charles' work or his own, there was very little contest. Today, it had been the girl in Kansas, the one who could foretell exactly where and when the tornadoes would touch down, days before the storm. Her foster parents had seen it for the gift it was—and sought to profit from it. They'd made millions playing psychic while all but imprisoning the girl...and now she was free again, and the X-Corp lawyers were going to ensure every cent of it became hers, and that her parents spent the rest of their lives in prison.

It wasn't as immediately satisfying as Erik's previous reaction to such things had been. It was slower, and would leave the girl's parents breathing at the end of it—but the judgment would create a precedent, and Erik had come to an appreciation of the way all the small things were building up to something larger and stronger. In the past year or two, he'd finally begun to think this could work, where before X-Corp some part of him had always feared he and Charles would have to part again, someday.

So Erik spoke (and then vented) for a long while, and they talked about their plans, Charles' and his, for the hundredth time, for the thousandth. Eventually, they stopped talking, and slept instead.

Another week or two passed, and as you rarely realize some pain has lifted until you suddenly realize you haven't felt it in a while, Erik one day realized he hadn't woken to a minor earthquake
“What did you do?” he asked, as he and Charles were on their midway walk around the grounds, something Charles insisted on after lunch each day it was neither actively raining nor snowing.

Charles didn’t bother to ask what he meant; in those days, he was in and out of Erik’s mind as often as he pleased. They were as easy with each other as they had ever been or ever would be, finally healed from the wounds of their first life, not yet aware of the lives to come. So it wasn’t surprising when he didn’t ask what Erik meant. What was surprising was when he said, “We don’t need to get into all that.”

“Why not?” For the first time in years—for the first time since their quarrel about the Stryker boy—Erik found himself considering that there were still any number of gaps in his knowledge. Charles might have known everything about him, but the reverse was far from true.

Still, he knew Charles well enough now—so much better than he’d ever known him in their first life—to practically hear him think of and discard any number of rejoinders before he admitted, instead, “Because you won’t like it, and I’d rather not argue. I fixed it. Can’t we just leave it there?”

“When have I ever left it there?”

Charles made a sound that meant ‘never.’ They finished the first lap around the house, then started another. Charles always claimed walks helped him think, but they both knew the truth was they gave him more time to figure out how to win.

Eventually, Charles said, “Jean is very strong. Her gift...there’s always been something strange about it. As though it’s something apart from her core self. She’s not strong enough to control it now.”

Erik took this in, looking for the weak spots. He considered attacking the idea anyone’s gift could be separate from them—but going on the offensive immediately was what he’d have done when he was Magneto, and he’d long since learned to (attempt to) the complete information prior to going on the offensive. That was what he and Charles owed to each other, now that they were true partners.

“When will she be strong enough?” he asked instead.

“Never,” Charles said, with a wince; so he’d been hoping for the attack, after all. “That’s why I’ve blocked her from accessing part of her gift.”

“You’ve what?”

“I had to. She’s a danger to herself, a danger to others.”

“Do we have any students who aren’t a danger to someone?”

“Not like this,” Charles said. “Erik, she’s stronger than I am—or will be, soon. She frightens me. I had to. It’s almost the same thing as Jason Stryker.”

Erik had just been thinking about that past quarrel, when his own defensiveness and guilt had been enough to blind him to what was best for the child in question. “This is nothing like that.”

“It’s exactly like that. This is about what is best for Jean, nothing more.”

“It’s about what’s easiest for you. You must have tried for another solution last time. How long did it take before you decided the best response was to hobble her?”
"I tried for six months, before. Six months, and all that happened was that she got stronger."

"So you decided two weeks would do, this time?"

"You're the one who said I should just do what I did the last time," Charles countered.

"Yes, because I didn't know what you'd done."

They'd stopped walking around 'how long did it take before.' Now they stood in the path, arguing circularly for what must have been another ten or fifteen minutes. Once or twice, Erik spotted movement out of the corner of his eye; each time, whichever student or teacher it was took one look at the way they were standing, and decided it would be better to go the long way around.

Finally, Charles said something that cut through the rest:

"You'll have to excuse me if I'm not exactly keen on taking advice about how to handle Jean from the person responsible for her death."

So they were back here. Every time Erik thought they had moved past it, here they were again, showcasing him at his worst, holding it up in front of him so he couldn't avoid his reflection in some dark mirror. That this time it was Charles who was in the wrong didn't seem to change things; it still left Erik with the nearly unbearable desire to lash out, or to walk away—to go bury himself in his other work, and come back when he pleased, or to stay gone if he didn't.

Instead, he thought of Jean, the young girl he'd barely known in that other life, and knew only slightly better now. He thought of her, and of her strength, and of what had happened at Alkali Lake, both what he'd witnessed for himself and what Charles had told him decades later, when they'd spoken of it for the first time, as terrifyingly raw and honest as they'd ever been with one another.

Finally, Erik said, honestly again, and if he didn't construct the words in order to cut, he wasn't particularly regretful to know they might: "And if she hadn't had the greater part of her powers taken from her as a child, perhaps she might have lived."

Charles' face went pale, where before it had bloomed blotchy and red as they quarreled; so this had never occurred to him. Without another word, he turned around and walked away, quickly toward the house.

In the right or in the wrong, Erik had nearly always before been the one to storm away at the end of an argument. He took there, watching Charles' back, uncertain of what to do with this. Some minutes after Charles had disappeared inside, he shook himself and went to his office, and spent the next few hours calling various X-Corp offices, checking up on recent cases, making certain everything was being done that should be done at each of them.

The next day, an opportunity came for him to spend three weeks in Lisbon, whipping the office there into shape. Erik didn't usually like to be gone for longer than a few days, a week at the outside, but this time he jumped at the chance. By the time he returned, Charles was willing to speak to him again—in a quiet, subdued way that wasn't anything like the way he'd been after any of their other quarrels.

His first night home, Erik woke to the bedroom rattling around him. The other side of the bed was empty. Several tremors later, he was in the hallway. Jean's screams were audible even this far from the school's dorm.

This repeated most nights for the next year. First the tremors became worse, both stronger and more frequent; around the eight month mark, they began to diminish. At two years, they were occurring
no more than once or twice a month. By the time it had been five years, they were gone entirely. Between daily sessions with Charles in the morning, and targeted practice in the wake of her dreams at night, Jean had grown into her power. It was the first time she did, but hardly the last.

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"I think we should send her to Snow Valley," Hank said. "I'm sure Ms. Frost would take her."

The reason why stretched out between them. "Perhaps."

That was almost certainly what would have to happen. It had occurred to Erik from the first night that he would be phoning Emma Frost before long. He didn't know why he hadn't yet; at times, he wondered why he'd taken Jean Grey on as a student in the first place, when he'd filtered every other halfway-powerful telepathy to the Massachusetts Academy.

The next day was a Saturday. Erik found Jean reading alone out on the grounds. She'd been alone in the beginning, too, not out of shyness but out of the natural wariness so many young mutants brought here with them—but she'd remained alone since then because of the nightmares.

At Emma's school there would be other telepaths. None quite like her, but close enough to appreciate her, perhaps.

Once, Erik had ripped Charles to pieces over what was best for her. Now, it occurred to him, Perhaps she would have friends there, and he turned away from the thought. Later, he wouldn't be sure why, what force had driven him to do it differently.

"Hello, Jean," he said.

"Hi, Professor Eisenhardt," she said, looking not so much wary as resigned. There were dark circles under her eyes, her long hair visibly tangled. "Am I going to be expelled?"

He wondered what she'd seen in Hank's mind; she'd have seen nothing in Erik's, for he'd had lifetimes to learn his mental shielding, and for all her power she didn't yet have the subtlety to read his mind without his knowing.

"No," he said. No one ever got expelled, but everyone always worried about it. "We're discussing options, but that's not one of them."

"What are they?"

"Come to my office during your free period on Monday," Erik said. "We'll discuss it then."

***

"Tell me about your dreams," Erik said in their first session. If Charles had ever told him what had been in them, he didn't remember; as for Hank, he'd never managed to get much out of the girl except she'd had another nightmare, but was fine now.

There came a push inside his skull, a slight one he deflected easily. You'll find you can't trespass here so easily, he thought.

Much more collected than she had been on Saturday morning, Jean gave no sign of having heard this. "They're not always very specific. Sometimes they're just...impressions." She paused, glanced at Erik.
"Don't worry about what I want to hear," he said, because you didn't have to be a telepath to read that look. All you had to do was to have raised children of your own. "I'll need the truth if I'm going to help you."

Jean looked at him straight-on, then said, cool and clear, "You can't help. I don't think anyone can."

Except Charles had, somehow. If Erik had been less preoccupied with his own affairs the last time, he might have known how. If he'd paid more attention, he might have remembered at least the gist of what Charles had done. He'd have known if he had any chance of doing it, or if it would be better to send Jean to a telepath after all.

"Tell me anyway," he said.

She looked at him for a long time, weighing, deciding. "They're not usually very specific, but they're always the same thing."

"Which is?"

"There's always darkness, and fire. And at the end of it, there's always death."

Erik knew what it was to dream of death. "Who dies in your dreams?" he asked, thinking she'd say her parents, her friends, perhaps a pet she'd once had.

She looked at him again and said, "Everyone."

***

"There's someone else there, sometimes," she said, a few days and two nightmares later. Erik had begun going to sit with her himself when the house shook and the wallpaper sizzled, but she was closed off in the wake of her dreams, and it hadn't done anything except make him more likely to dream of his own daughters.

"A man or a woman?" Erik asked, for lack of anything more useful to say. He'd begun to think these sessions were a farce, as well; he was neither a telepath or a counselor, and all he was doing was grasping around in the dark.

"A person," she said. "He says he's a god. I don't know, maybe he is. Maybe he's the god of death, since he likes it so much."

Adrenaline flooded Erik's limbs—this was something important. He vaguely recalled something Charles had said, one late night, when he'd been working with Jean for months and had been coming to bed exhausted, with circles under his eyes.

'Sometimes I think there's someone else in there with her,' he'd said. 'Some other personality—oh, don't look at me like that. I know how it sounds. I don't really believe it, either. It's just that sometimes...' If all the rest was long since gone from memory, that much at least had been strange enough to remain.

"This person," Erik said. "Does it feel like he's a part of you? Or is he a part of the dream?"

Hank would have had an conniption. Charles would have stepped in and taken over the interview. Neither them would have considered Erik anywhere near sensitive nor subtle enough to come near this the right way.

As for Jean, she thought about it, going inward the way she did when she was considering a
"No," she said. "He's not from me. He's from outside."

She said it plainly, as she said everything; as if there was no question Erik should believe her.

"He says if I go to him, he'll set me free. We'll rule this world together, and I'll be his queen."

***

Charles had never once given any indication Jean's dreams had been anything but internal, a manifestation of the untapped power inside of her he greatly feared. Still, Erik couldn't shake the thought that Charles might not have given Jean's dreams the credence they deserved. In their first life, he'd simply papered over that part of her; by the second, he'd have long since decided his old assumptions were fact, much the way Erik had once decided Magda had hated him for being a mutant.

There was a part of Erik that disliked doubting Charles' word on this, so long after they'd put the matter to rest between them; there was a greater part that took a spiteful pleasure in it. If Charles weren't going to be here, then perhaps having been wrong was what he deserved.

Either way, if Charles had been wrong, perhaps something new might happen now. Erik hadn't known how much he craved something new until he thought of it; once he had, he could think of little else.

Whatever his motivation, the next time Jean came to his office, he had a world atlas out on his desk.

"Do you know where he's contacting you from?" Erik asked,

She considered it, as she considered everything. "I think so," she said. "I can't remember right now, but...I think so."

"Look through this." Erik turned the atlas around, so it was right side up for her. "See if it helps."

She opened it, looked carefully at each page before turning to the next. North and South America didn't result in a reaction, nor did Europe. She turned to Africa, and began to turn the pages even more slowly. She stopped, finally, at the map of Egypt.

"There," she said, pointing to Cairo. "He's there."

"Good girl," said Erik.

***

"Do you want to go to Cairo?" Erik asked, several days later.

There were practical considerations. Hank would have to know, he'd almost certainly object to Erik leaving the country with a student. But the girl herself was the first hurdle.

"I shouldn't," she said. "It's not safe."

"You'd be with me. Don't pretend you don't know who I am."

She had to; she couldn't get into Erik's mind without brute force, but she knew everything about everyone else here. She'd have seen what had happened to Denice and Marsha, Billy and Juan. She'd have seen what they'd seen when he'd torn their prison to the ground. Through their minds, it
was closer to Jean than it had been to Erik in lifetimes. Erik Lehnsherr was much more formidable a prospect than Max Eisenhardt had ever been.

"I'm not sure," she said, but he could tell she was thinking about it, and he knew what the final answer would be. Jean wasn't a girl who flinched away from what was necessary. In one life, she'd held back the waters when the dam broke, until her comrades were clear of danger. If she'd never have to do such a thing in this life, the underlying courage remained.

***

"You can't take a student to Egypt," Hank said.

Erik had already thought of a lie he would accept. "I've learned of a telepath there, one who's conquered similar dreams. He won't come here, so we'll have to go to him. It's our best chance."

"...You'd have to get permission from her parents."

"Yes," Erik said. "You might want to contact them."

Hank's look of impending anxiousness was replaced by one of impatience. "I'm not your secretary. You can make a phone call."

"Yes, but do you really want me to?"

Hank considered this, likely remembering the near-disaster that had been their first meeting with Jean's parents. They were of a particularly loathsome type, open and vocal about wanting a cure for their child's affliction. If a cure could not be found, then they'd accept repression, at least enough so they would never have to see evidence of her gift when she visited home. There was very little chance they'd balk at letting her leave the country.

"No," Hank said finally. "No, I'll do it."

"Superb," Erik said, and resumed his plans for the journey.

***

From North Salem to Cairo was a flight of more than ten hours. It might have seemed shorter if Hank hadn't insisted on coming—but if four years had been long enough to convince him of Erik's sincerity and relative lack of violent intentions, he still had no intention of allowing Erik to leave the country with any of their students without an escort.

Eventually, they landed. Erik waited until Hank was finished speaking over the radio, then said, "Now, Jean."

Hank slumped over the control panel, fast asleep; Jean and Erik hurried out of the Blackbird, and away from the landing pad.

"How long do we have?" Erik asked.

"He'll wake up in about ten minutes," Jean answered, but absently, as she rushed them toward a busy street. Erik didn't protest this; the sooner they were lost among the crowd, the better. "I'm still not sure this is a good idea, Professor."

"If Hank's angry at anyone, it'll be me."

"That's not what I meant."
Jean walked briskly, as if she had been here before, and Erik followed, down one street and then the next. Eventually, they ducked behind a building, and walked out onto a large patch of bare ground.

"He's here," Jean said.

"Where?"

Jean raised her hand, held it palm-down above the dirt. The ground beneath Erik's feet gave a single shudder, enough to make him reach out for a wall or door frame that wasn't there. The earth yawned open before them, creating a tunnel leading downward. Jean lowered her hand and approached it. She pulled a flashlight out of her jeans, and turned it on as she climbed in.

Erik followed her once again, and if later he would think he ought to have put a stop to it right there (before they'd left New York or before he'd asked her about the presence in her dreams or before he'd decided he didn't have to be a telepath to help her as it had taken a telepath to help her in other lives), all he could think in the moment was that here, finally, was something new.

***

The tunnel led after a few hundred feet to an open place, a sort of cavern. It wasn't natural, smelling of must rather than cave, and the floor was so covered in piles of boulders that they did more climbing than walking on their way to the altar.

For it was the altar that was their destination. Large and made of a gold alloy, it drew the eye even before they were close enough to see the figure that lay upon it. He lay still as death, malevolent as life, and for a moment Erik was tempted to grab Jean by the shoulder, turn the both of them around, and go.

But Jean stopped a few yards from the altar, close enough to see the figure's blue complexion, close enough to see the heavy armor Erik hadn't quite been able to identify with his gift. She raised her hand, and said, "Wake up."

The figure's eyes opened in the flashlight's beam; he sat up, slowly, blinking off his sleep, however long it had been.

"Who are you?" Erik asked, going back to what he'd meant to ask whatever pervert they found all along. "Why do you keep interfering with my student?"

The figure did not so much as glance at him. Instead, he gazed at Jean, before speaking in a terrible low tone in a language Erik didn't know.

*His name is En Sabah Nur. He says, "I knew you would come to me, my nestling,"* said Jean. What she might have been saying to En Sabah Nur, Erik didn't know, but it was clear they had exchanged thoughts of some kind when she said, "He's my teacher."

En Sabah Nur said something else aloud. He dropped from the altar to the floor, and began to approach them.

*"He will serve you well as a bodyguard once I have released you from your shell."

"What does that mean?"

"It means we shouldn't have come here," Jean said, and although Erik was standing behind her and could not see her face, it was clear from the trembling in her voice, so unlike the coolness of her thoughts, that she was weeping.
"Stop," Erik said. How considerate of the man they'd come for, to wear so much metal. Erik clenched his fist and grasped—

And found his mind skidding over the armor, one or the other too slippery to allow purchase. When he reached into his pocket for the coins he'd brought with him, it was the same thing; instead of shooting toward their target, they fell from his fingers to the dirt.

Erik meant to move then, to stand between his charge and her nightmare if he could do nothing else—but although his feet moved for him, they were sluggish, and he was able to offer no resistance when En Sabah Nur swept him out of the way with an irritated motion of his arm. It was as if he were swatting away a fly, and Erik slammed into the nearest pile of boulders.

En Sabah Nur went to Jean, took her by the throat. She dropped the flashlight then, but somehow Erik could still see it all: The tender expression on the monster's face as he tightened his fingers, bit by bit.

Erik struggled to his knees under some great weight. He made it to his feet many seconds later, when Jean's face had begun to grow blue and puffy. All along, he gripped En Sabah Nur's armor with his gift as between slick, sweaty fingers, squeezing as hard as he was able.

In the end, this was the result of all his struggling: En Sabah Nur glanced at him as if he were a passing irritation. He turned back to Jean and raised high in the air, then threw her down again, dashing her skull open on the nearest outcropping of stone.

***

"I'm going to kill you," Erik promised, and if rage had been enough to break the chains, he would have kept his vow in the next moment. As it was, he grinned the promise at En Sabah Nur as the rage passed through him and over him, red wave after red wave, as he tried to take a step forward to finish this.

Instead, it was En Sabah Nur who stepped forward, until he was standing just in front of Erik, looking at him neither as fiercely as an enemy nor as tenderly as he'd looked at Jean before. When he spoke, it wasn't aloud, and reverberated everywhere.

_You are a warrior, a fighter. Perhaps you would rather enter my service._

The words curled inside Erik's head, fingers reaching where they had no right to be—and suddenly he knew where the resistance had come from before, so he could neither stand nor use his powers.

"No," Erik said.

_What would convince you to serve me, my child?_

"Nothing."

He retreated into his mind, behind his shields, but it was no use; the tendrils breached them easily, a power old and dark seeking his answers. For a moment, Erik saw Charles' face, but only for a moment. Then the faces he saw were those other precious ones, lost for so long now: Magda when she'd still loved him, the twins when they'd known him always; Anya when she'd been five and twelve and fifty-five, Nina when she'd been at all.

"They're gone," Erik said, laughing and choking. "They're gone. If you could give them back to me, I'd follow you to the ends of the earth—but you can't. No one can."
The fingers paused on Nina a moment, and Erik heard a ghost of a thought, of a possibility, of how it would have been to have dominion over the beasts of the field—and for the first and only time in any life, he felt relief that Nina wasn't.

*I can offer you revenge, my son,* En Sabah Nur said. *By my side, you'll cut down the armies of men, and build a better world over their bones.*

A lifetime ago, in the early fires of his grief, Erik might have found this appealing. To allow himself to be used would have meant he didn't have to deal with the reality before him. But although the loss of his family throbbed now, strongly as it had in years, the wound raw and red with the scab newly torn off once more, he could see clearly enough to remember no one was at fault for what had happened to them. There was no one to blame, no one to punish. There was no death he could mete out and call it justice. In the life before this one he'd spent years and decades drowning in grief, long past the time when he could have allowed himself to move on. The endless grief had been all he'd had left to give to any of them. It had been all he could do for Anya beneath the ground and Nina with only he to remember her; it had been all he could do for Magda and Pietro and Wanda, who never knew and would never know how much he loved and missed them still. He'd mourned his family already, and his loss was an old and bearable pain.

"There's nothing you can give me," he said, and it was as if he were thinking through sand, everything obscured so he had to merely hope his mouth would say what he intended. "There's nothing."

*What's this?* Other memories began to surge forward. Other faces. Charles at every age, over and over; Charles in a closed casket, and if Erik grieved for him, too, it wasn't quite the same, for even in the first rush of it he'd known Charles would be back next time. *Next time...*

There was a fresh danger in En Sabah Nur's tone, something new and wondering.

*I will offer you something else instead, my son,* En Sabah Nur said. *When I return for you, my horsemen will be at my side. Through you, I will become more than I've ever been. I will rule not just this world, but all worlds to come.*

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Erik asked. "I'm not going to help you. I'm not going to do anything for you."

But there was no point objecting to it any longer, for by the time he'd finished speaking, En Sabah Nur had stepped back, and then vanished.

And Erik was left alone with his dead.

***

Erik went to Jean, limbs moving easily now, but no less heavy. He lifted her in his arms, her head supported by his shoulder, her legs hanging off to the side. Somewhere along the way, he'd forgotten how much heavier a dead child was than one who was still living; now every terrible step reminded him.

It had been the afternoon when they'd arrived; now it was evening. With the ruined side of Jean's skull pressed against him, Erik was able to carry her all the way back to the Blackbird without anyone questioning him along the way. He'd never be certain what he'd have done or said if someone had; the possibility didn't even occur to him until the hatch of the Blackbird opened and he found himself face-to-face with an irate Hank McCoy.
"I can't believe you left me behind. What if you'd needed me?" Hank said, then stopped, eyes widening in realization and horror as he took in the sight before him. "Oh, my god."

***

No other flight had ever been as bleak.

At Erik's urging, Hank put the Blackbird in the air immediately. Only later would Erik think about what that might have meant regarding how much trust had grown between them, on Hank's side at least.

As the plane began to roll down the tarmac, Erik went into the medical closet. There he found a blanket, and wrapped Jean in it. Then he sat with her, saying nothing. There was nothing to say. There was nothing in him at all. He was emptied, hollow.

Eventually, it occurred to him that it was a grave insult, to sit with her and say nothing, feel nothing. He went toward the front of the plane and sat down. A moment after he did, Hank came out of the cockpit.

"We're on autopilot," he said. "An alarm will sound if anything—if I need to do anything. Now, tell me what happened."

Erik did, starting from the beginning, the figure Jean had seen in her dreams. He wasn't sure why he hadn't told Hank to begin with. Perhaps he'd thought, if the figure in Jean's dreams were real, it would be something he could handle. There was no reason he shouldn't have been able to handle anything. He'd thought he could defeat anyone living, as old and as experienced as he was. He hadn't known he would be coming up against something even older.

Hank listened until Erik was finished speaking. How much sense he made, Erik would never be certain; whatever Hank had to say about it, he missed that, too, although it seemed to go on forever, and he heard himself responding in the spaces between.

Then Hank, large and blue again, went into the cockpit, and stayed there. Erik remained where he was, looking down at the rusted patterns on his hands, seeing only what had stained them.

They were still a few hours away from North Salem when a voice said, from behind him, "It's dawn in Cairo."

Erik turned. Jean was standing there.

"Jean?" He stood. "What—how—"

"What happened?" she asked. "I don't remember."

She began to weep. Erik went to her, and found there were still clots of blood and specks of bone in her hair—but the side of her skull was round and whole, as if it had never been otherwise at all.
"Hank," Erik called. Only later would he realize it had come out more like a scream. "Hank, get over here now!"

Hank rushed in from the cockpit like a great blue hurricane—then stopped, looking as struck as Erik was himself. "Jean," he said in a wondering voice. "I thought you said she was..."

"You saw her, too. You know she was."

"Where are we?" Jean asked. Tears still glided down her cheeks, but her voice was so calm and collected she may as well not have noticed.

Hank glanced at Erik, then said, "We're on the Blackbird. We'll be home in a few hours. In the meantime, would you let me give you a quick medical exam? You've had a head injury, so I'd like to make certain you're all right."

"Okay," Jean said.

A few minutes later, she was sitting on the fold-out table in the medical closet. Erik had pulled the bone shards and clotted blood out of her hair as gently as he could, and now he parted it at the point of impact. Her hair was sticky and dark with her blood, but there was no other evident of what had been done to her, not even the hint of a scar. If it hadn't been for the other evidence, it might as well not have happened.

As Erik examined the back of Jean's skull, Hank moved briskly through the rest. He checked her pulse, listened to her heart and lungs; he looked into her eyes and ears and nose; he even did a reflex test. Then he said, "So far, so good. I'm thinking of a number between one and—"

"Sixty-two."

"That's correct." Hank took out a roll of medical tape. "Now, using only your telekinesis—"

The medical tape zoomed out of his grasp. It did a circuit of the closet, nearly braining Erik along the way, then tucked itself back into its place in the first-aid kit.

"You appear to be in perfect health," Hank said. "Why don't you go make yourself comfortable in the passenger compartment while we clean up here?"

"Okay." Jean left. If she was at all shaky on her feet, Erik couldn't tell.

Erik hadn't really imagined Hank would leave it at that, so he wasn't surprised when Hank said in a low voice, "Do you have any idea how lucky you are?"

"How lucky we are," Erik said. "You came with us, after all."

"You lied about why we were coming here. You left me behind in the Blackbird so I couldn't stop you."

"So you couldn't try to stop me. You'd never have managed to do it," Erik said, needling Hank out of habit even though all he could see was Jean, lying on the floor of that cavern; Jean, sitting before him, live and whole again.

It must have seemed a lackluster effort even to Hank, for instead of bristling (literally), he sighed and
turned his attention back to repackaging the medical equipment back into the bag he'd retrieved it from. "We'd have had to tell her parents she died in our care. And we'd have had to close the school," he said. Erik couldn't tell from the way he said it which Hank would have considered the worst outcome; if he'd been even slightly less exhausted, he'd have asked, just to find out if Hank even knew for himself.

When they came out of the medical closet, Jean was seated next to a window. "None of us are lucky," she said. "Maybe it would be better if we landed now. Maybe we'd be all right if we were all under the water."

"We'd drown." The hairs on Erik's arms stood up as he said it, for of the three of them, he was the only one who knew she'd died just that way in another life.

"Mm-hmm," Jean said, and returned to her blankness, the absence that was only noticeable now that some of the relief at her survival had begun to fade.

Erik glanced at Hank, who looked just as disconcerted.

"The facilities at the school are better. I'll run more tests when we get home," Hank murmured. All that was left was to pass the hours until they got there.

***

They arrived in Westchester just after two a.m. in the morning. Erik had expected the house to be dark and quiet, but there were far too many lights on on their way to the infirmary, where Jean was to try to sleep for a few hours before the more invasive tests began.

Still, he thought nothing of it until someone stepped in front of them. It was a freshman, a mutant named Annie, who Erik had only spoken to once or twice.

"What are you doing up?" he asked. "Go back to bed."

"I don't have a bed here. Unlike you, I'm not interested in playing house."

"Mystique," Hank said, a split second before Erik caught up. "What are you doing here?"

"I need Erik," she said, shifting into her blue form in order to grab him by his upper arm and haul him into the nearest corner.

"Take care of Jean. I'll be there in a minute," Erik said to Hank. "What is it?"

"Have you seen the news?"

"I've spend the last day and a half out of the country, so no." Or had it been longer? He had no true sense of how long he and Jean had been beneath the earth together, even once En Sabah Nur had gone. It could have been hours, or days. If Hank had volunteered any information in that regard, Erik hadn't caught it.

"There's a...situation. Someone's gone public."

"Someone?"

"One of us. Another mutant. It's all over the news."

Erik stared at her for a long moment, trying to remember anything else like this that would have
happened in the 1980s. Nothing came to mind; it hadn't been until later in the next decade that the human mainstream had begun to learn of mutants, despite the greater and greater numbers of mutant children who had manifested yearly in every country. This had never happened in that first life, so it couldn't be happening now, not without a reason.

Then he remembered En Sabah Nur, who'd wanted Erik to join him, to that they might conquer the world together.

"...He's not blue, and wearing armor," he said.

It wasn't really a question, and Mystique saw it, as she'd always seen everything beneath the surface, as adept at reading faces as her brother had ever been at reading minds. Her yellow eyes slitted, her formerly-businesslike aspect growing icy-cold. "What do you know about this?"

"We freed him. Yesterday," (Or had it been?) "In Cairo."

"Why did you do that?"

To teach whoever had slithered his way into Jean's mind a lesson. To solve her problem with her gift using the only path that had shown itself. To try something new instead of retreading the ground they had tread already. To spite Charles, who'd died and left Erik behind without so much as consulting him; to show him he wasn't half as vital as he'd always considered himself to be. All of that. None of it. Did it really matter now?

"I don't remember," Erik said.

***

A few minutes later, they were in Erik's office, which had a small television in addition to a radio. On the screen, En Sabah Nur was laying waste to landmarks in various cities across the globe. In some of the videos, there was one mutant with him; in others, two; in what appeared to be the latest, three.

"He's looking for something," Mystique said.

"Followers," Erik said. "Disciples."

"Yeah, I figured that out already. There's someone new with him every few hours. How many do you think he'll want?"

"Four," Erik said, without pausing, without thinking. It was a reflex, an instinct, as if he'd absorbed as much of En Sabah Nur in the dark as En Sabah Nur had of him. "It'll be four. Then he'll head here."

"...Well, I guess I came to the right place then," she said. "You'd better start explaining, now."

For the second time in twelve hours, Erik found himself telling the story: Jean's dreams, the journey they'd taken to quiet them. En Sabah Nur and that dark place beneath the earth. How Jean had died there, how she'd come back to life again on the plane. He didn't admit as much to Mystique as he had to Hank—she was a stranger, as much as unknown now as she'd once been his right hand—or at least he thought he didn't, and the story therefore went more quickly.

"So we're killing him, then," she said, in the same tone she'd probably used when she'd said, 'So we're blowing them up, then,' when they'd first discussed the matter of Trask Industries.
"What else would we do?"

She shrugged, the careless motion of one blue shoulder. "Find him. See if he wants the same thing we do."

"Which is?"

Now came a sharp look, eyes slitted again. "Don't pretend you'd been playing house so long you've forgotten the cause."

"I've been playing house longer than that," Erik muttered, thinking on all his past lives. "I've forgotten a great deal indeed."

"You know, it didn't surprise me when you left. I always knew you would."

This was news to Erik, and he nearly startled, remembering: There'd been a time, early in that first life, when he'd been entirely certain, as well, that he'd return to Charles someday. He'd dreamed of it, every once in a while: Arriving at Charles' front gate, with a suitcase in hand. Walking up the driveway as if he had every right to be there, as if it were right for him to be there. He'd never come to Charles so baldly, not once in that first life, yet he must still have let enough slip to Mystique that she'd known.

"I really thought you just needed to get it out of your system. That you'd come back to the cause once you realized you weren't going to be able to make it work with him."

"I wouldn't have," Erik said. "Even if Charles hadn't died. I wouldn't have."

He was looking for it, and so he saw it: the slightest pause in Mystique's expression, the closest she was likely to come to a flinch. "We'll never know now, huh?"

Erik didn't answer her; he'd just realized something. He stood there for a moment, watching the muted footage on the small television; then he turned and left the room, heading briskly toward the infirmary.

"Where are you going?" Mystique asked, though she was beside him, keeping pace as if nothing had ever separated them at all.

"He's coming here," Erik said, and walked faster.

***

"You're out of your mind," Hank said, once Erik had filled him in. "We can't trust her."

"Either she goes or you do. I need you here," Erik said.

"That's flattering." Raven would have been hurt, the Mystique of later days would have been spiteful; there was no telling what this one meant by it, or what she would do about it later.

"Jean trusts Hank. She doesn't know you," Erik said, then turned to Hank. "Besides, would you really trust the two of us to be alone with her?"

The sideways look Hank gave him over the rims of his glasses was answer enough.

"It won't be for long," Erik said. "Just until we're certain it's safe."

And that was how it happened that all the students save for one were sent away in the night. The
staff went with them, but the other adults at the school in these days were teachers and chaperones, not secretly soldiers beneath those masks—which was how Mystique came to be sent with them, charged with their protection.

For a moment once Hank had agreed, Erik had thought she might not do it, if only because he'd abandoned her before asking for her help; but in the end, perhaps he shouldn't have forgotten that the children had always been the most important part of the cause in the first place. (And perhaps they'd both forgotten it, once—but that had been a long time ago, and Erik no longer quite remembered the person he'd been, even as he so clearly remembered the things that he had once done.)

***

Jean lay on an infirmary bed with her eyes closed. Their harsh whispers might have woken her...if she'd been sleeping to begin with, which she likely hadn't.

"You can get up, if you'd like," Erik said, once everyone else in the house had gone, and the place was strange and quiet in their absence. "You need to prepare yourself anyway."

Jean sat up, looking no less blank than she had for the last few hours since she'd come back to life.

Erik had also prepared, the best he could. He'd called Alex Summers, who was now on his way back from Virginia, and almost certainly would not make it in time. He'd gone to the top shelf of the closet in his room, where he'd found the artifact he'd had on when he'd arrived in this life, that he'd been wearing when he'd bled out on a beach, several lives ago now. The helmet now sat upon his head, so he wouldn't be caught again by the subtlety of En Sabah Nur's telepathy.

Hank kept glancing at Erik as he arranged his arsenal on the opposite mattress. There were several large plastic guns with shoulder straps, several small plastic guns, and one or two medium-sized plastic guns.

"Did you come by your arsenal before or after I moved in?" Erik asked.

Hank swung the largest of the guns so that it lay against his back. The motion was smooth and practiced enough to make it clear that he'd kept up at the gun range (or somewhere else—the construction of the Danger Room six months after Charles' death had seemed early to Erik, but as he hadn't been here for its first rendition, he'd thought perhaps he'd remembered wrong. Now, he thought the potential for mutiny had perhaps been under his nose all along). "We all need our hobbies."

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They discussed where they ought to wait, which room or set of rooms would give the best strategic advantage when En Sabah Nur arrived.

"What do you think?" Erik asked Jean during the proceedings, not because he meant to make a decision based on what she had to say, but because he wanted her to say something. She was so quiet, too quiet, and at this point there were no tests they could run that didn't run the risk of interruption.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "It's here anyway. Inside me. I can feel it."

"Nevermind," Erik said. "We'll go to the Danger Room."

"We won't make it," Jean said, looking calm and cool and empty. "He's here."
The moment she finished speaking, En Sabah Nur and his entourage appeared in the hallway, outside the open door.

"My queen," he said, inclining his head toward Jean.

"You," she said in a flat voice, unlike anything it had been after her death, or before it. She slid off the bed, walked halfway to where En Sabah Nur stood, and stopped. "Do you know what you've done?"

"I have freed you from your imprisonment," said En Sabah Nur. "Together we will rule over this world and all those to come."

Jean stood there, looking at him. When she spoke again, her voice was cool and steady. "I was meant to sleep for a few years yet—but you have woken me while my host is still a child."

Erik and Hank exchanged a glance. Hank stepped forward, then flew back against the wall at the twitch of Jean's fingers. Erik made to step forward in his turn, but the helmet ripped itself from his head, and he was sent sprawling as well. By the time he rose to his feet, Jean was speaking again, and now an alien rage shuddered inside his head, as hot as Jean's voice was cold:

"Do you know what I am? Do you have the slightest idea of what you've done? I have lived longer than this rock has orbited its sun. I have devoured galaxies. I have dwelt within suns, and left them to go dark when I was finished with them. I have died once and thrice and a thousand times, always coming to rise again in my host's maturity."

"You're old," En Sabah Nur said. "You're beautiful, and strong. Together, we—"

"Petty god," Jean said, her voice now as cold and bright as the stars, "you tread on dangerous ground. I am the Phoenix. I align myself with no one—much less an inferior creature such as yourself."

At this, En Sabah Nur's face turned dark. "If that is your answer, then I'll be forced to—"

Then his hands went to his throat, and he began to make gagging noises. He rose in the air, an inch and then a few, his face turning darker and darker, his feet kicking at the empty air below. His people rushed forward, only to rise in the air next to him.

"Forced to what?" Jean said. "Forced to die? These bodies of flesh are so very fragile, and you—you cannot leave your temple so easily, can you? You need your altar for that, the trappings of the earth. Of the two of us, I am ever, ever freer. All you can do is burn."

At these words, the air between Jean and the five who struggled before her filled with a rush of flame. It passed through that part of the room in a moment. When it had gone, Erik's face was red and painful, Hank's fur was singed, and En Sabah Nur and his people were no more than five piles of dust between Jean and the door,

As for Jean, she stood where she had been. She was unmarked—and unclothed, for everything she'd had on over her skin had burned away.

For a moment, the room was filled with silence, where before it had been filled with a certain heaviness of expectation. Before, Erik had been unable to move; now, he wasn't certain he wanted to, what he would find in Jean's face if she turned to him and Hank next.

She saved him the trouble of deciding: before he could move or she could turn, Jean let out a breath, and fell to the ground in a dead faint.
Together, Erik and Hank had moved Jean back onto the bed, covering her from neck to toe with the bedsheets. Now, Hank was covering her scalp with small white electrodes—the kind Erik and Charles had both worn in the last minutes of a long-ago life. Then, they’d seemed an idiotic proposition, and left Erik with a vague medical anxiety underneath the rest, as anything designed to measure and record anything about him always had. Now they left him with a similar feeling, and a similar dread.

"What have I brought back here?" he murmured.

"I was there. You didn't cause this," Hank said—not reassuring but correcting, a scientist in full discovery mode. "This is something else. Monitoring her brain waves should hopefully give us some clue of what's happening...it helps that we have a baseline for her."

They almost never kept such records of a student, but when Jean had first begun to have her dreams, Hank had insisted they run every test available. Erik hadn't been about to explain how he knew she didn't have a brain tumor or an aneurysm, so he'd allowed it, and and taken a certain satisfaction in Jean's completely normal results.

They had more of her normal sleeping values than anything else, and she was sleeping now.

"What do you think we'll find?" Erik asked.

Hank shrugged. "I don't know. If we're lucky, maybe whatever caused her behavior is gone now. Maybe it's over, and things will go back to normal."

He didn't sound like he believed it. Remembering the way Jean had looked and sounded—as if she was no longer herself, had become some other that had been incubating underneath for perhaps her entire life—Erik didn't either.

"It's never over," he said.

Yet things at first appeared as if it might be, after all. Jean's sleeping scans mapped closely to the baseline scans from months ago, the ones taken on nights when she hadn't thrashed and burned up her room in the night; and when she woke in the morning, she seemed herself, with no memory of what had happened.

"Where is everybody?" she asked, first thing upon waking. "It's so quiet. Did I...did I do something?"

"We sent them away," Erik said. In fact, he'd had a call from Mystique an hour ago to let him know they'd arrived at their destination, one of the Brotherhood's few safe houses large enough to fit fifty-odd teenagers, if thirty-five or so of them slept on the floor. "For when he came."

He didn't have to elaborate on who he was; he probably wouldn't have had to even if it hadn't been on the uppermost level of his mind, waiting for Jean to take it.

"Did he?"

"Yes," Erik said.

"Oh."
"But he's gone now."

Erik thought she would ask what had happened, but instead Jean just nodded. "Okay. Where are my clothes?"

"They met with an accident," Erik said—the usual euphemism in that house for anything lost or destroyed by a student's errant powers. He patted the folded change of clothes on top of the dresser, which he'd had Hank retrieve from Jean's room a few hours ago. "I'll let you get dressed."

He went out into the hall and closed the door. When Jean called for him, he went back in.

She was fine for the rest of the day, and the next day. Hank tracked her brain waves the entire time, and they never wavered from values within a normal range. After the third day, Erik called back the other students (and was more than slightly shocked when Mystique brought them back immediately, each and every one). After the fourth day, Jean was allowed to sleep in her own bed again.

After a week, everyone else had settled back in their old routine. After two, Erik had begun to think that Hank might be right.

He should have known better than to let his guard down.

***

It all came to a head nearly a month later. Erik had called Jean to his office again, this time for a follow-up discussion—the seventh or eighth one they'd had since Cairo. Hank was there, too, supposedly because he thought a medical opinion was needed, but mostly because he had been very clear about not trusting Erik's judgment in the matter of Jean any longer. He had only recently started to be polite about it.

"Have you had any more dreams?" Erik asked.

"Everyone dreams," Jean said. Usually, she would have just said she hadn't. Perhaps it should have been Erik's first warning.

"I mean, have you had any more strange or upsetting dreams? Any that seem to come from outside of yourself?"

"That's no concern of yours," Jean said, haughty and cold.

The hairs on Erik's arms rose in warning, but there was nothing to do but go on. "Of course it's my concern. I'm your teacher. I'm responsible for your welfare."

"Does an insect concern itself with a star's welfare?" she said. "My doings are beyond your understanding. You will now cease in your meddling. I will not have my host interfered with."

Erik and Hank exchanged a glance. Then Hank made to leave the room quietly—but froze halfway between his chair and the door.

"I will not submit myself to any more of your tests," Jean, or the thing that was inside Jean, said. "I have wearied of camouflaging myself within this body. You will cease in your meddling, or else suffer the consequences."

"What consequences?" Erik asked, standing up.

"You will cease, or you will burn." She said, her voice dark and low. "I have seen into your mind,
where my host could not. I know what you are. Compared to myself, you are no more than an infant—but old, old compared to most of the others who scurry around this rock. What should it matter to you, what happens in this one life? The few years that remain for you will soon be gone again. You've hidden me away in most of the others. If you allow me to have this one in peace, perhaps I will allow you to live out the rest of your days. You can number them as easily as I."

Erik thought about it for a minute. "I don't know why it matters," he said. "But I'm here, so something has to."

He stepped toward Jean, reaching out for all the metal in the room—

And then there was a whoomph, and a blast of heat, like nothing Erik had ever felt, and for a moment he was breathing it in, heat and fire, darkness and death, filling not only him but the room, racing out into the hallway—

And then he was gone.

***

When Erik came to, Mystique was there, talking to him. He missed most of what she was in the middle of telling him as he took in the little room they were in, the tv monitors all around, and the blueprints of some unknown building on the table in front of him.

"The children," he said, for she'd taken them, he'd given their care over to her, and if he couldn't save Jean or Hank, then maybe he'd at least succeeded in this one place, in this one duty. It would be several minutes before he'd remember that Mystique had returned with the children weeks ago, that every one of them had been in or around the building when he had burned. "Tell me they're all right."

"They're fine," she said. "It's the rest of us that I'm worried about. Toad's threatening to quit. I'm pretty sure the twins are planning to assassinate you. You've got to do something."

"...What?"

"Stop brooding over that," she gestured at the newspaper in Erik's hands; he hadn't previously realized he was holding something, "and lead, or I'm going to have to take over. I know you don't want that."

"No," Erik said. "No, of course. Will you give me a moment to collect my thoughts?"

"Sure. She crossed her arms, and remained standing there, her eyes boring into him.

"Give me the room," he said, and she sighed, rolled her eyes, and went, slamming the door of the command room as she went.

For a command room was exactly what it was. One of the few they'd had in that first life, in the decade and a half or so in which the Brotherhood had been a semi-functional affair made of more people than just the two of them. One of the times where they'd had a house that had been converted into a headquarters, which had heating, plumbing, and a non-leaking roof.

Jean's fire had seared through Erik, and now whatever would have happened in that life was a moot point. It no longer mattered, exactly as she'd suggested.

It no longer mattered, but Erik would have to live with it for this life, and the next, and all the rest after that.
He stood there for a long few minutes, getting his bearings, sending his gift out to find out what he could about the layout of the house.

Then he looked down at the newspaper in his hand.

NEW YORK TEACHER SHOT BY STALKER announced the headline on page seven. Erik read it, read it again, folded the paper and tucked it under his arm.

He'd never know what had happened to the school, to the children. He'd never know what had happened to Hank, or to Jean herself. He'd never know, perhaps, what had happened to the planet. There was nothing he could do for them now, as there had been nothing he could do for his family once they had gone. But Charles was back, and of all the things Erik could do now, all the possible avenues he could go down, there was only one option.

He went out into the hall, in the direction of the front door.

On the way, he paused by the open door to the kitchen, where Mystique seemed to be reading several Brotherhood members the riot act. They were both facing away from Erik. The woman had long, dark hair, the man shorter, silver hair. They'd been thirteen the last time Erik had seen them, and ignorant of him as both a father and a person; they'd be twenty-seven now, still unaware he was their father, but seething in more than enough hatred to make up for it.

Still, if either Wanda or Pietro had turned around while he stood there, Erik would have found it nearly impossible to walk away.

But they didn't—possibly because they'd both always been stubborn, too stubborn to turn around to see him there when they caught Mystique rolling her eyes in his direction—and after a minute, Erik walked on. Out the front door, down the street until he managed to flag down a cab, and then to the airport.

On his flight, he had more time than he'd ever desired in which to dwell on lost things.

***

Now Charles, very much shot by stalker and very much on the mend—the newspaper article had been several weeks old, though the paper itself was neither stained nor creased enough for Erik to be certain how long his past self had been brooding on it—took Erik's hands in his own. He rubbed them for some time, seeming to think; he'd spent the whole second half of Erik's story looking as though he wanted to say something, but now that Erik had stopped talking, Charles seemed to have forgotten how.

"I haven't forgotten," Charles said absently. "That's—Erik, I don't even have the words for that. Are you certain you didn't die in a gas leak? Perhaps you developed a surprising case of dementia. I know you never did before, but there's a first time for everything."

"You can look for yourself soon enough."

"I'm not certain I want to," Charles said, though his expression had darkened often enough during the telling that he must have seen some of it already, in bits and flashes. "So there's a dark god sleeping beneath the earth, and it's just out of luck that we never woke him. And Jean..."

She'd always been something of a contentious subject between them; even once they'd made up on the matter, neither of them had ever brought anything to do with her training up to the other without some degree of caution. Perhaps Charles was reaching for that caution now—or perhaps he was reaching for something else, as evidenced in the next thing he said:
"Did I ever tell you about the recurring dream I had, after she died?"

"No." They'd almost never spoken of the period between Alkali Lake and the first time they'd come back. It wasn't like other memories, other experiences; this was the thing Erik had done that had broken them, that could only have been repaired by something as strange as the lives they'd lived since.

"I used to dream of her beneath the water. Not her body, but her essence. A shadow gliding beneath the lake. I forgot all about it once the two of us began to—I forgot all about it, but it weighed heavily on my mind in the months after her death. I'd dream of her, and I'd be so happy, to know she was still there, in any form...and then I'd wake up, and the grief would be all the worse when I remembered it wasn't true."

Erik knew something about dreams; he suspected he was to burn in some of his own, going forward. "You'll see her again when we go home," he said. "It'll be just like it always has."

"Yes," Charles said, but he was to remain pensive for quite some time. "Though I wonder what would have happened if we hadn't..."

***

Shortly before his seventeenth birthday, Jason left home.

This time, he wasn't leaving in the shining daytime, for boarding school or college; this time, he snuck down to the garage in the dead of night, after his father had stopped screaming at his mother about how not only was Jason a freak of nature, but he'd also failed three subjects and was on his way to summer school if he wanted to graduate on time.

He was halfway down the street in his father's car when the house lit up in the rearview mirror. It didn't matter now. If the cops pulled him over, he could get out of it, the way he always had. If anyone questioned his presence anywhere, he could make them see the name and dates he wanted them to see on his state ID. That he didn't have a driver's license and hadn't been behind the wheel of a car since his last loop didn't matter.

He'd known for years that Professor Xavier wasn't coming to change his father's mind this time—he'd called the school to ask for him around the time he turned fourteen, and they'd told him what had happened; then he'd managed to find a copy of the obituary for himself, which wasn't hard even without computers once he knew to look for it—but he'd still thought, somehow, that if he was a good son it would make a difference. His father had loved him, been proud of him in so many other lives. It couldn't have all been because of the Professor.

But nothing he'd said or done had made any difference, and it had gotten harder and harder to wrap himself in his own real world. Too much white noise, bleeding in from outside; too much contrast between that world and the one everybody else believed in, the one where Jason was whenever he wasn't concentrating.

Then, a few weeks ago, there had been a mutant all over the news. It hadn't been like the news Jason remembered from any of those other loops. It had been...violent, frightening. He'd been glad his father wasn't home when it had aired. But now he was, and he was worse than he'd ever been before. Bad enough for Jason to know there was no point in trying anymore.

There was no point in trying, but he wanted answers anyway. So he drove all night and through the
next day, stopping for gas and food when he needed to, a little surprised when he never grew tired enough to have to pull over for a nap.

He drove and he drove, and then he was in New York, and then he was in Westchester, and then he was turning into the long drive in North Salem. The gate was closed, but not locked; he got out of the car, opened it, drove through, stopped long enough to close it again, and then drove up to the front of the mansion.

He knocked on the front door, and there was no answer. He rang the doorbell, and there was still nothing. He didn't think anything of it; it was the middle of a Wednesday, so everyone was probably in class. Someone would come to see what he wanted eventually, and then he'd find out where Magneto was, and then he'd find out how it had happened, what had changed to make it happen, and what he could do to change things back to the way he wanted them (needed them) to be.

He rang the doorbell several more times, and that was when he heard it: A pop, and then a whoosh, like someone letting out a breath.

Then the door opened in front of him, and he burned.

***

Jason opened his eyes, and he was sitting in a hard metal folding chair. His father sat beside him, others behind him; in front of the chairs were grassy green hills spotted with gravestones.

Seven years, every seven years. He'd been twenty when his mother died, in that first, false life. He hadn't known, then, that he could hurt people by keeping them with him in the real world for too long. He'd known he had to tell them to eat, to sleep, to relieve themselves; he hadn't known that he could do all that and still drive his mother mad enough to do what she had done.

Before the service began, Jason's father wrapped an arm around his shoulders, then whispered into his ear: "This is your fault."

Jason was twenty again, and for the first time he thought he could have been wrong about which was the false life and which was the real one. Nothing had ever been as real or as terrible as this, and so he lived there for an hour, and then another, and another after that.
"You know he can't stay here," Hank said, a few weeks later.

He meant it, of course he meant it...but a month ago, Charles had still been fighting the same battle with a much rawer, more panicked Hank. This Hank had kept largely mum on the matter of Erik while Charles healed at home; this Hank, after his first surprised reaction in Charles' hospital room, had chosen his moment. He'd even gone to the trouble of making an appointment with Charles, a full week after he got back to his office hours.

"I know no such thing," Charles said.

Hank had looked resigned when he came in; now, as he met Charles' eyes, it was with pity. "I know you've never stopped wanting him to change. But this isn't going to be different from all the other times. You're just going to get hurt again."

Charles had readied his speech about how Erik would be no danger to the students, going forward; he was prepared to swear up and down that he'd read Erik's mind and knew he had changed. What he hadn't prepared for was for Hank to be concerned even more concerned for Charles' welfare than he was wary about Erik.

"It'll be all right this time," Charles said. "Really."

***

He tried to tell himself the same thing, but it was difficult going when Erik was so morose and far away, and when Charles himself had been so recently reminded of his own failings. He'd never thought Jean's dreams had meant anything other than the obvious: That her power seemed too dark and deep for her, too frightening, causing her to conjure up a boogieman in her dreams. But it had turned out the deep, dark power and the boogieman were separate entities after all. Even now, in Cairo, the power she and Erik had awakened in that other life must lie beneath the ground. Even now, that strange burning entity lived in Jean, and Charles was no longer certain it had ever truly integrated with the rest of her in other lives, as he'd once thought it must have. Here he thought he'd understood all those other lives, and yet he'd missed so much over the course of each and every one.

In that first life, Jean had first come to the school in early 1980. The dreams had begun in mid-1981, a year and some months later. They'd come back in 1983 this time, and so Jean's power had been repressed for going on two years. It was therefore up to Charles to decide whether to leave her as she was, or reverse what he had done in order to re-do the work of other, more recent lives.

"Leave it alone," Erik said, when Charles broached the subject to him. That seemed to be the entirety of Erik's opinion, now that things had settled down. Leave it alone, and leave him alone too, except for those few days when Erik himself chose to unburden his troubles onto Charles.

"Perhaps," Charles said, but even in considering it, he knew he was wrong, as he'd been wrong in that first life. Jean deserved the chance to choose for herself in every life, whatever that might involve. They would simply have to stay out of Cairo—and that would be easy enough, since allowing Jean access to her own mind did not necessitate allowing a monster access to her.

A month and a half after they'd arrived at the mansion, when Charles was well, for all intents and purposes (still sore, at times; and he remembered enough to know he would always have some stiffness in that shoulder no matter how long he went to physical therapy), he called Jean into his
"I have something to discuss with you," he said, and proceeded to tell her what he'd done, several years ago (leaving out everything he'd learned from Erik, of course; it was his job to help her navigate her powers, not to scare her to death). "I've come to believe I ought to have allowed you some choice in the matter, rather than making the decision for you. If you'd like, I can remove the block, and we'll start again."

Jean thought about it. She was old enough to see the violation in what he had done, but young enough and enough in awe of him to forgive him in an instant—or at least, to believe she did. "Yes, please," she said.

"It'll be hard," Charles said, remembering all the sessions in those other lives—for he'd worked with Jean in every life. Even in the life where he'd raised David and refused to have much responsibility in the school, he'd still taken her on as a student for private sessions. Jean was the closest thing he'd ever had to a daughter, the closest thing he'd had to a child of his own in all lives but one. He'd lost her in that first life, when she'd given up her life to save his and the others', and he'd never forgotten. Even if she would never remember, he'd never stopped owing her. "But we'll get through it."

***

"We'll get through this," Charles said, this time to Erik, after the house had stopped shaking, and everyone except them had gone back to bed.

"We always do," Erik agreed, but he was far away, as he always seemed to be far away.

They lay down next to each other. Charles tried to sleep, for a little while—but that was difficult enough these days, and made more so by the relentless path of Erik's thoughts.

"You should figure out what you want to do, and do it," he said. "You can't keep going around this way. It's exhausting. Not to mention very bad for you."

"Mm," Erik said, neither agreement nor argument—and that was concerning enough in itself.

"You don't want to teach again, I suppose," Charles said. He'd have had to be much worse than he was at observation not to have noticed how much Erik had disliked running the school. He hadn't hated it, exactly; it had been like a chore that someone had had to do, and since he was the one who was there, he was the one who had taken it up. Teaching hadn't been his calling in their second life, either; action was much closer to his forte. "Perhaps you could head X-Corp again."

"Perhaps," Erik said, a more lackluster agreement than Charles could have hoped—but better than nothing, all the same.

***

Some months after they'd come back, Erik announced that he wasn't going to teach, and would in fact be resurrecting X-Corp. Amused as well as relieved, Charles let him pretend it had been his own idea.

In rebuilding, Erik chose different cities for the X-Corp offices than he had before, and different cases to focus on. He'd never liked returning to the things he'd done already. Charles had once felt the same way, but in settling back into running the school, he found he didn't mind it nearly as much as he might have. Perhaps it was because he was no longer bereft, as he had been for so much of his fourth and fifth lives; perhaps it was because he'd spent long enough away that it all seemed new again, at the same time it all seemed familiar, an old and well-worn dream he hadn't revisited in far
A year went by, then two, then three. There was something to be said for living through events you'd lived through before, with the only change being that the one you'd shared it with before was here beside you again—and since he'd been with you before, it wasn't all that much of a change, really.

They could have gone on like that for that entire lifetime. Perhaps things would have gone differently later, if they had. Certainly there would have been less distrust between the three of them, in the end. Or perhaps there wouldn't have been. Perhaps whatever chance they'd had had been gone long ago, when Charles and Erik had cleaved together, not knowing there was another.

At any rate: Nothing changed until it did.

***

One day, the doorbell rang around five o'clock. Assuming it was a delivery, Charles stayed at his desk, racing through the essays he was grading; for Erik would be home from Albuquerque in an hour or so, and they hadn't seen nearly enough of each other as of late. It would be good to be able to spend time together without work hanging over his head.

A few minutes after the doorbell had gone silent Hank came to Charles' doorway. "You have a visitor," he said.

Though he couldn't have forgotten the broad strokes of history, Charles had long since found that the day to day could still surprise him, even in these years that were not so far off from his first life. He was therefore surprised, but not shocked, when he discovered it was Jason Stryker who'd come to see him. Older than he'd been the last time Charles had seen him, and so much younger than he'd been the time before that, when he'd been as much a prisoner at Alkali Lake as Charles himself had been.

"Jason," Charles said warmly. "Come in."

Jason did. He closed the door and sat in front of Charles' desk. He'd sat in the same place during their sessions, several lifetimes ago. Then, he'd been a boy. Now, he was a young man. Somehow, he didn't look all that different.

"What can I do for you?" Charles asked.

***

They walked together, the boy and he. It had been such a long time since the last time. Charles could no longer remember how long. Was the distance measured in miles or in years? He couldn't be certain, but thought it might have been both, or might have been yesterday.

_I don't suppose it matters_, he said.

The boy didn't respond for a few long moments. Then, _Why was it different?_

Charles thought. He'd always believed in giving the boy's questions true consideration, no matter how simple and insignificant they might seem—and this question's importance was clear in the boy's tone, in the way he looked at Charles, in everything. _What was what different?_

_The last time. The last loop. You left, and then—_

_I left? Left how?_
You died. It was in the news.

Charles remembered now. He'd been in an accident; he'd gone too soon. He'd left Erik to go through something terrible alone—something Charles could have forewarned him about if he'd ever bothered to look twice at what he thought he knew.

I'm sorry, he said.

You left, and something happened. There was a blue man. Then there was a fire. An explosion. Something.

They stood in front of a door now. Charles felt as if they'd opened it before. He reached for it now, then stopped, his fingertips a hairsbreadth from the doorknob. Are you certain you want to do this?

Open it.

Charles did. Behind the door were all the things Erik had told him, the events Charles had pored over so often he might have lived them himself. Erik's grief at Charles' passing, the way their shared grief had brought he and Hank together; the years they'd spent running the school together. How he'd tried to help Jean by taking her to Cairo, and how it had been her body he'd brought back. How the monster he'd awoken had followed, only to be struck down by whatever had been inside Jean, which had struck down Erik in its turn—

Not just him, the boy said.

What do you—

And then it all went away.

***

It took a moment for Charles' mind to catch up, to make sense of what he was seeing.

He was back in his office. In front of him sat Jason Stryker. Behind him stood Erik, his hands on Jason's arms, keeping him from reaching upward—for on Jason's head sat Erik's old helmet. Charles had no sense of the chain of events here, of what had happened when, or who had done what, and so this particular image was even more bizarre than it might have been otherwise.

"What the hell is going on here?" Erik demanded.

"I," Charles said. His head was swimming, as it had always done when he'd been under the influence of an illusion. "I'm not quite sure."

Had he been in an illusion? Thinking now, however, slowly, he thought he had. He could even remember a little of it. He'd never been able to remember before, but then he couldn't recall ever having been interrupted before (save once, and then it had been Ororo and Kurt who'd come for him, and others who'd carried him out of that place; even now, he could remember perfectly the way he'd been used, the terrible things he'd nearly caused to happen).

"...Have you always taken it from me before?" Charles asked, as he remembered what they had been talking about. "You must have, you—oh."

That was the moment he understood. Or thought he did. Was fairly certain. He'd never been able to enter Jason's mind, nor pick up even the strongest surface thought or emotion...but for all Jason's talents, he was no mindreader. Charles could think of only one way he could have known to ask the
"Jason," he said. "Have you been with us all this time?"

"What?" Erik said, more confusion than disbelief; all he was thinking of was how he'd come to Charles' office to find him blank-faced under Jason's power, and had rushed to get his helmet to stop it before it went any further. For a moment, Charles was annoyed that that was all Erik could think of: but then he remembered that the illusion had been for him alone, and so of course Erik hadn't been there. Hadn't seen what Charles had seen, hadn't heard what Charles had heard, hadn't been trying to answer the boy's strange questions.

"He's been reliving his life as well," Charles said. "Haven't you, Jason?"

Jason stared at him, stubborn as he'd always been when denied the use of his gift. The best thing had always been to wait him out—but Charles simply couldn't. They had all the time in the world, but he couldn't.

"He knew I died early, last time" he said to Erik. "He knew it was different from our other lives. He—I think he may have been at the house when Jean killed you." Later, he'd realize how baldly he'd said that, where he'd avoided acknowledging it non-euphemistically before. "He asked about an explosion, or a fire—I suppose she might have taken out the entire building, after all. I'm assuming you saw it from a distance?"

This last was said to Jason, who shook his head.

"Well then, what did happen?"

Jason didn't speak. It was Erik who did, and he who understood this part first, with a mere glance at Jason's expression in the shadow of that helmet. "She killed him, as well. If he was anywhere near the mansion, he would have burned, too."

This time, Jason said, "Yes. That's what happened."

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They talked for a while, sharing their experiences, Charles and Erik speaking at length, Jason speaking in clipped answers if not monosyllables. It went on long enough to verify that Jason had relived just as many lives as they had, despite the fact that he'd died six months before they had in that first life.

"I'm so sorry about your father," Charles said. "I don't know what may have happened," and he wouldn't, for Jason had never been interested in discussing his father, "but I didn't have the chance to visit him the last time. It can't have been pleasant for you."

Jason shrugged this off. "Can I go?"

Charles and Erik exchanged a glance.

*Keep him here,* Erik projected, a mildness underscored with razor blades; his protectiveness of Charles was stronger than it had been in lifetimes...or maybe Charles just thought so because he hadn't been able to feel what Erik was thinking when they'd still been at the hospital.

"Of course you may," Charles said. "But we'd like to keep in touch, if at all possible—you're the only other person we know of who's experiencing the same phenomenon we are. Perhaps, if all three of us were to undergo testing, we could discover the cause. Perhaps we could discover how to stop
"I don't want to stop it," Jason said, the first thing he'd said that had seemed to have any passion in it.

"Oh?"

"I want to go back. I want to stay there this time. In the good one."

Charles didn't ask which life Jason wanted to go back to. It wasn't a question he'd ever have dared to ask Erik, if he hadn't already known. It wasn't a question he'd ever need to ask himself. "I don't know if that's possible," he said. "But there's so much none of us can know. I suppose we'll just have to wait and see."

***

After Jason had gone, Erik said, "I can't believe you're comfortable having him out in the world."

"He's neither our student nor our prisoner, Erik. We can't make him stay. And even if we could, then what? We'll all die again at the appointed time, and none of it will matter."

"You sounded more optimistic about our chances when the boy was here," Erik said, with an undercurrent of a familiar strange sorrow: that Charles Xavier should have become so jaded, when once he had been so irrationally hopeful in all things. "And what's to stop him from walking back into your office the next time I'm out of town?"

"He'd no danger to me," Charles said. "He wanted information, and now he knows I'll offer it to him freely. I have nothing to fear from Jason Stryker. I never have."

"There's the Charles I know," Erik muttered.

Once, he'd have been offended, would have assumed that Charles seeing nothing to fear from Jason Stryker was some sort of jab at Erik. Once, he'd perhaps have been right to assume it...but it didn't even seem to cross his mind now. Not that Charles saw, and when he looked, he realized couldn't remember the last time Erik had deliberately shielded his thoughts, or given any serious attempt to keep something from him.

They'd changed so much, over these lifetimes. It sometimes seemed an absurdity that they could have changed so much, when so little ever seemed to, otherwise.

***

Their original plan for this life had been to live in it. To make the best of it in the wake of the tragedy of the last life, and the pall it had left over them both. But now there was a third person in the mix, and although Jason would come to the school no more than one or twice each year, and not even that until the late nineties, the knowledge of his presence was at the back of Charles' mind all the time. If he hadn't known that Jason was with them—if he couldn't have known until the events of the last life followed by the events of this one—then what else hadn't he known? What other chances had he let slip through his fingers because of his own complacency?

What, above all, had he missed? And was there anything else?

Charles realized he had in fact missed something else a few weeks later, when speaking with Hank. He and Erik had planned to make use of Hank's lab for their attempts; and Charles had planned to do what he had to do to make Hank overlook it. Whether that meant lying to him or modifying his memories, they'd do what they had to do.
"I'm not ready to say you were right about Erik," Hank said softly. They'd begun their conversation as a discussion of the curriculum, but of course it had become about Erik. Every discussion they'd ever had when Erik had in the vicinity always had, in every incarnation. Charles could only imagine how horrified Hank would be if he knew he and Erik had been an item in the previous life. "But I am...relieved, I guess."

In that moment, Charles saw something he ought to have seen from the beginning of this life. In one life, Hank had been his student and Erik's, and little more; in the third life, he'd been a stranger, and Charles' brother-in-law in the next; in the last two, he'd been Charles' lover and former lover, stuck in the co-dependency they'd inhabited after the school's closing in that first life, or in those terrible years when they'd barely dared breath less the house of cards go tumbling down. In none of those lives had they ever had the chance to re-establish what they'd had in that first life, once they'd been sure of the school and of each other.

Once, Hank had been Charles' dearest friend in the world. As dear as Erik, as dear as Raven. Before now, Charles had rarely thought about it—and he'd never imagined that one day he'd feel as though he was once again talking to his friend from long ago, the one who'd spent most of a lifetime by his side, winning when Charles won and losing when Charles lost, and caring about and fighting for the same things always.

"Yes," Charles said, and made a decision. "Hank...Erik and I need your help. But first, there's something I ought to tell you...ought to have told you as soon as we got here, I suppose."

***

"That is," Hank said, rubbing his spectacles on the front of his shirt, as he'd stopped to do at least fifteen times during the course of Charles' story. "That's...I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll help," Charles said.

"Of course. You'll have to tell me what we've tried before. I suspect telepathy would help speed up my understanding of the situation."

If Charles hadn't been reading Hank at that very moment, he wouldn't have had the slightest idea what Hank meant. As it was, his face grew hot as he thought back and said, "We haven't tried anything before, I'm afraid." Before Hank could ask, he clarified: "Neither Erik nor I has ever brought you into our confidence in this matter. The roads we've tried, we've walked more or less alone."

It seemed like such an incredible folly—especially now, with Hank looking at him, with Hank understanding. Charles tried to tell himself that Hank wouldn't have understood in any of those other lives. Not truly. He tried to tell himself Hank hadn't been the person he could have told, not until now. Yet what Hank was thinking seemed, now, to make sense—that they should have built on the knowledge base of each lifetime, so that coming to Hank now would be the pinnacle of everything they ever could have learned, rather than just the beginning.

In that first life, Hank had always been the friend most likely to tell Charles when he had well and truly stepped wrong. (Less likely to do so than Erik, granted, but Erik had been somewhere between lover, friend, and enemy back then...and Erik had also been less likely than Hank to be right.) Now, though, he simply sighed, his mind settling into the mode where what mattered was the experiment, and the results, and not so much what had come before.

"We'd better get started now, then," Hank said, and he and Charles went down to the subbasement, and began.
Tests, tests, and more tests. Charles was there for all of them, Erik there whenever he was around, which was about a quarter of the time in the eighties, rising to better than half the time in the nineties, and nearly all the time in the aughts. It seemed to be equal parts ambivalence about remaining in a lifetime that didn't have much in the way of highlights—comparatively; the work he was doing was good work, but the sort of thing Erik could do by rote at this point—and based on his actual availability. As monotonous as running X-Corp could be, it still required a great deal of effort to get off the ground properly, and even more time to get it into such a shape that Erik didn't feel obligated to babysit it around the clock. But once Erik could leave X-Corp in other hands in order to be present for Hank's work, he did.

It didn't take much for Charles and Hank to decide to bring Jason Stryker in, as well; it took the better part of the nineties to get him to agree. He was difficult to locate, for one thing; anyone whose mind resisted Charles' abilities the way Jason did was all but impossible to find through Cerebro, and Jason so rarely left a forwarding address. Charles was reduced to detective work: that is, to hiring a private investigator every few years. It wasn't nosiness, or he told himself it wasn't; but every few years, he'd send Jason another letter, asking him to come up. (Initially, the letters also inquired about his welfare, but eventually Charles started cutting that part out; Erik seemed convinced that it came off as false and self-serving. As Jason was clearly quite wary of further contact, Charles eventually gave in.)

Charles became accustomed to wearing electrodes on his head, more than he ever had in any previous life—even the one where he'd had PhDs in physics and neuroscience, and had experimented upon himself. Hank ordered every test Charles had ever thought of, and when they'd been through the gauntlet some twenty times, began to come up with tests of his own. There were MRIs and CAT scans aplenty, and a slew of others, from treadmill tests to a physical every other week. And then there were the tests of Charles' telepathy—enough of them and invasive enough that they would have been unnerving if anyone but Hank had been performing them.

It might have been immensely promising, if Hank had ever found anything. But even with his brilliance and dedication, there was simply nothing to be found. Every potential anomaly was found to be mundane in origin (or as mundane as one could consider any element related to a mutation; but in the end, they documented nothing related to Charles' mutation that led them to believe it was the cause of their predicament, and though Hank was quite bold in braving Erik's prickliness and distrust to test his mutation just as thoroughly as Charles' had been tested, they found nothing there, either).

So by the time Jason Stryker submitted to Hank's questions and tests, he was more or less the only hope they had left. All three of them had an unspoken suspicion that Jason might have been the root cause of their predicament, whether consciously or less so; but by the time Hank had finished with the many tests of Jason's very strange mutation—tests that left Hank and Charles reeling in confusion at times, while Erik sat under his helmet at the table, documenting everything—they'd found nothing there, either. In the end, it made sense. Jason had been dead when this had all begun, after all. He couldn't have been the catalyst, not the first time; how he'd been pulled back in time with them in the first place when he'd already been gone was a mystery. The only theory they ever came up with was that perhaps he'd been sent back in the moment he'd died, months before Charles and Erik had...but they already knew that he'd died on the same day, at the same hour that the two of them did. In all lives but the first, Charles had been the first to go, and Jason the last.

"We don't even know what we're looking for," Hank said as he disconnected Jason from a number of instruments for the eleventh or so time. "If there's something there, it may come to one of us later." By this he meant himself or Charles, the ones who understood their results with the most clarity. "One of those things where you don't know what you know until you know it."
He'd said that before. It had been more promising years ago, when they hadn't known how much they would know by now, without having anything remotely close to an answer.

***

In-between Hank's tests, there was the life they lived, which went by more quickly than it had ever seemed to before. Charles ran the school; Erik headed X-Corp; Jason did who-knew-what when he wasn't with them (but whatever it was, he drove a shiny red car, and wore an expensive suit every time he came; Charles suspected the stock market, if not the lottery, while Erik thought—with more grudging admiration than strictly necessary—that Jason was probably using his mutation in lieu of gainful employment.)

After a time, though neither of them had expected it, and they could never be sure if Hank was making any progress, a hope began to grow between Charles' heart and Erik's. It was a more fragile thing than it had been in some of their other lives, neither as bright as the joy that had resounded through the first life they'd relived, nor as expectant as the end of the life in which they'd whispered "next time" to each other so often.

Twenty-three years from the day Charles had woken up in the hospital until the day all three of them were together in Hank's lab, hooked up to a dozen different machines each, with dozens more at standby. Twenty-three years, and once again it seemed like everything had changed. Even though they had no true reason to suspect that they wouldn't die again, just as they always had before, it seemed like something was different. There was a strange calm, where there had never been one before.

There was a calm, between Erik and he. Though they rarely spoke of it, there was an understanding: that even if they died again, they would seek each other out; that even if they weren't together in the next life, they would still find each other, be available to each other. The worst that could happen would be that they'd wake up in 1990, and have to navigate it as they had navigated all those other times.

To his later sorrow, Charles never thought about whether it was a calm shared between more than just the two of them. Hank was worried, but hid it beneath a veneer of concentration, focused on making sure that if they died after all, it wouldn't be because he'd missed anything. As for Jason, he seemed calm enough, and so Charles took him at face value, as he'd always had to in the few times they'd known each other throughout all the lives they'd lived.

There was calm, and then, in the end, there was the pain, and the beeping of various machines. There was Hank's voice as he worked frantically over Charles' body, and there was the pain.

From somewhere else came a voice, Erik's: "See you there, then."

And then there was the darkness and the tide, and nothing.

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When Charles came to, he didn't imagine for a moment it might have worked, even though Hank was still looming over him, big and blue and blaring with worry. This Hank hadn't just watched him die; this Hank had only witnessed him stop speaking in the middle of an animated conversation, going a little blank and slumping a little in his chair.

"Charles?" he asked sharply. "Are you all right."

"I—yes, I'm fine," said Charles. "I just…I thought I heard something. If you'll excuse me..."
"Of course."

Charles wheeled out of his office, taking in the minds all around him, catching up. It was the first time he'd come back to the school proper, he realized; it was the first time he'd had so many minds around him when he did (unless you counted the beach, and all the military men aboard the ship—but they hadn't known him, not the way everybody here did, and so even though Erik had been there, and the others, this was still something different, something either more or less than it had ever been before). There were so many minds here, and he knew and loved them all; if Erik had been here, too, it would have been as if he'd gone back to the last 1990 he'd lived, rather than having gone all the way back to his original life.

If Erik had been here...well, but he would be soon, though heaven knew where he was at the moment.
Gifts

Whatever calm there had been in that room departed with Charles. Hank, working over his body as others had done in past lives—as Erik himself had done in that second life—began to speak, begging Charles to stay. As if it would do any good. As if it ever had.

Impatient with waiting—if it was going to happen, let it happen—Erik watched until he was certain it was over, that there would be no hoped-for reversal. Then he turned his attention away from Charles' body, and watched Jason Stryker, instead. His face and posture said no more than usual. Even now, he turned inward. Charles had always said he suspected the boy lived almost entirely within himself. For his part, Erik had never been given reason to doubt it.

When it had been over for several minutes, Hank finally stopped his ministrations. He draped a sheet over Charles' face, then turned to the two of them, looking not only bereft, but stunned.

"He's gone," he said, as dully as if this were the first time Charles had died.

"Yes," Erik said tersely. It was beginning for him now. The pressure had begun to build. It had never been as sudden a process for him as it was for Charles; there was always a minute or two, in the beginning of his death, when Erik felt as if he ought to be able to stop it, or to resist, somehow. In one life, he'd spent those minutes trying, even as he swore to his wife that it would be all right...but in most lives he hadn't tried, had spent those minutes impotently raging instead.

He must have grimaced, or made some sound, because that was when Hank moved as if to approach him.

"Don't touch me," Erik said.

Hank faltered, hands outstretched. "We can still try—"

Erik shoved him away by the buttons on his shirt, the buckle of his belt. "Leave it alone."

Now that it had failed with Charles, he could think of no worse fate than if Hank were to succeed with him. It had been one thing to go on alone when he'd been all but certain Charles would be back; it would be quite another to know Charles was lost for him forever, and would be going on without him in the lives yet to come.

"But—" said Hank, ever the physician, and so Erik shoved him again, harder this time, until his back slammed into the far wall. He kept him there until there were spots in front of his eyes and a roaring in his ears, both building with the pain until they drowned out the world.

At the end, when Erik could hold him back no longer, Hank came to him anyway. He couldn't help it. He was one of Charles', after all, too naive or too something else to simple allow a death, even of someone who'd once been an enemy, even of someone who wanted no part of the life Hank meant to bestow on him.

Luckily, it didn't matter. There might have been nothing Hank could do anyway, but even if there had been a few minutes ago, such a chance was long-fled now. There was nothing he could do, and so he might as well begin work on the boy, who couldn't possibly mind it if he remained in this life without them.

Erik would have told him so, but even as the thought came to him, he lost sight of Hank in the blackness.
From Hank's lab to a surprisingly tidy bedroom: Erik woke, and had no damned idea where he was. The place would have needed to be in disarray or at least smell less clean if it were meant to be a Brotherhood hideout; other than that, there was no other clue to be seen, and this was no place Erik remembered from any recent life.

From the other room came the sound of running water. So someone was here with him, making use of the shower. No chance of it being Charles; the bathroom wasn't accessible, and the only wheelchair within range was a model Charles had never used, a few apartments down.

Beneath the covers, Erik was naked. It was this discovery that led to a new, unpleasant thought: That there was no reason to think he wasn't with Mystique. The timing was right, more or less. Charles would surely love this, when he heard.

The water cut off. By then, Erik had glanced around enough to notice something else: This wasn't a bedroom, after all, but a studio apartment, with a counter between Erik and the kitchen, and the bathroom door right next to the fridge.

The door opened, letting out a cloud of mist. A young woman walked through it, toweling her hair. She had Japanese features, black hair that fell halfway down her back, and small, pert nipples. There was a drop of water at the top of the left one, threatening to fall; by the time it had, Erik still hadn't quite placed her, but was aware of a mounting interest below the waist.

"Hey, you're still here," she said, raising an eyebrow. "I was pretty sure you'd be gone by now. I mean, I gave you plenty of time to make a break for it..."

Erik stared at her, then gaped.

"I'm kind of glad you didn't, though," she continued. "We were really good together last night, you know? I feel like morning sex might be even better."

"...Certainly," Erik said, though he'd meant to do and say no such thing a few seconds ago.

Of course, a few seconds ago, he hadn't yet recalled where he knew her from. The fact of her context within his first like had made all the difference, it seemed.

She finished toweling herself off quickly, then slid back beneath the covers. Afterward, when she was contorted around to close the clasp on her bra, Erik couldn't help but mutter, "You're Suzanne Dane."

"Um, yeah?" she said, giving him an odd look. It seemed he was forever to receive such looks from everyone he interacted with at the beginning of a life...but for the first time in any life, found he wasn't irked in the slightest. "And you're Erik Lehnsherr. We established that last night. Remember? While you were hiding in my closet?"

"Oh, that's right," Erik said, though in truth he recalled those events so vaguely they might have been a story someone else had told him several hundred years ago—and one that hadn't seemed terribly important then. Even in that first life, he had put their dalliance out of his mind long before he realized it might have meant something.

He would have been suspicious of her in that first life, he thought. Would have crouched inside that closet of hers, coming up with a thousand scenarios in which she might betray him. Now, all he could think of was that she, like Magda before her, was carrying his child. Lorna, whom he'd fathered in what so often felt like some dream. Lorna, whom he hadn't learned of until she was seven
years old, and he himself had fewer than ten years left to live. She was the child of his he'd had to put
out of his mind in that third life, when he'd had Anya and Pietro and Wanda and Nina. She was the
child he'd never quite forgotten about, nor quite dared to anticipate...not least because he'd never
quite been able to remember the month and year of her birth.

She was the last of his children, and she was on her way.

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"I'd like to see you again," Erik said when he, too, had gotten out of bed and begun to dress. It was
another thing he hadn't known he meant to say until he did. He'd never once thought of Suzanne
Dane with any sense of longing, with or without the bitterness that had once tinged his memories of
Magda. But half an hour in her bed had made him think he did like her, after all, and as more than a
means to an end.

She'd been pulling on a clean pair of jeans, pulled from a dressed drawer; how she hesitated, glanced
at him. "I don't know."

"We could go out for coffee," Erik said. "Or not, if you prefer."

"I'm in grad school. I'm working two jobs. I don't have time to date."

"whoever said anything about dating?" Erik asked, and was punished (or, perhaps, rewarded) by
another raised eyebrow.

There was little point, after all, in telling her what else she'd have to find the time for, soon enough.
He had no idea how she'd done it before, what changes a baby had heralded for her plans. They'd
had barely any contact in that first life; the times they had seen each other, Erik wouldn't have cared
enough to ask. He'd only met Lorna herself a handful of times in all. His daughter, with hair that
marked her from mutant at birth, and whose mutation mirrored his own: She'd been a miracle, but
he'd been too wrapped up with his own concerns to see it, or to give her the time and attention she
was due. Well, this was another chance, the last real chance he'd ever have; one way or another, he'd
take it.

When he left Suzanne's apartment—through the bathroom window, so as not to be spotted by any of
her neighbors who might be wandering the halls—Erik had her phone number in his pocket.

But there was another number he needed to call, first.

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He found a payphone down the street. He dialed collect, counting on the number not to have
changed since their last life. It hadn't; Charles' voice came on, saying he'd accept the charges for a
call from one Michael Xavier, and then he was there.

"Oh, thank goodness. I was beginning to worry. Where are you? When can I expect you?"

"About that," Erik said.

"...Yes?"

"I've just met Lorna's mother again."

"Ah."
"It complicates things. Between us."

"I see that," Charles said, in a tone that was as sympathetic as Erik could have desired; and although he searched for the resentment, so he might resent Charles in his turn, he found none. "Where did you say you were?"

Erik glanced around, but nothing about the nearby apartment buildings screamed any particular city. Where had he been, that he'd needed someone to hide him? He sent out tentacles of inquiry, looking for the innermost bones of the rest of the city, which might be found five miles from her, or ten, or twenty. What he discovered was a skeleton he couldn't have forgotten, a place he'd been many times across his lives, whether he'd consented to go there or not. "I'm outside D.C."

"All right," Charles said, sounding thoughtful, the way he did when he wasn't actually giving Erik his due attention.

"I'm going to stay. Try to make it work with Suzanne. If that's all right with you."

He had no idea he meant to give Charles a veto until he did...but Charles, far from sounding torn, sounded even more thoughtful when he said, "Yes. Yes, that's all right with me—but there aren't going to be any takebacks, you understand?"

"...No."

"I mean that once I hand up this phone, I won't take you back. Not until the next time. You've got to be all right with that, if you expect me to be all right with this."

If Charles had been there, he could have read Erik's mind and understood that Erik understood the concept of 'takebacks' perfectly well; what he didn't understand was why Charles didn't seem to give a damn.

"Fine," Erik said. He considered demanding an answer to the question...then, deciding he'd likely find out sooner or later, he decided to let it go. Charles wasn't the only one with a preoccupation.

They spoke for a while longer, brainstorming about what each of them remembered from this point in their first life. When they disconnected, Erik began to plan his next move.

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Erik soon found he had access to much of the Brotherhood funds that had accrued over the decades, thanks to the identification and bank cards he'd been carrying in his wallet when he arrived. Finding and furnishing an apartment nearby was thus easy work; and after that, there was nothing pressing for him to do except see Suzanne sometimes, and wait for her to learn what he'd known since the first.

They saw each other once or twice a week. Coffee, usually, with the occasional dinner and a movie. If Erik sometimes had to pretend he wasn't already aware of how some film ended, he remembered fewer of the details less of the time than he would have expected.

The more he saw Suzanne, the more he found he liked her. She was cynical, sarcastic, capable—and when she finally came to tell him what he'd known for weeks, she seemed more than willing to go it alone.

"It's yours," she said over coffee at a somewhat out of the way coffee shop they'd not been to together before. "I'm keeping it. You can decide how involved you want to be."
"All right," Erik said.

"Take your time figuring it out. Once you decide, and this kid is here? That's it. You don't get to go back and forth. You don't get to change your mind later. You can decide, but I'm going to hold you to it, whatever you go with."

The expression on her face said it clearly: she expected him to go, had never believed he was anything other than a temporary presence in her life.

"I want to be involved." By now, she knew of his grown children, Wanda and Pietro; she knew, too, of their estrangement, and so he added, "I want to be closer to this one than I am to my other children. I want to be there for every possible moment."

At this, Suzanne looked a little startled, then a little as if she wished she could take it back. When Erik asked her, a month or two later, if she wanted to move in together, she turned him down; when he asked what she thought about getting married, a month or two after that, she all but laughed in his face. Not long after, she said she thought it would be better if they ended things now. Perhaps he should have seen it coming; she'd thought they were temporary from the beginning, and he'd often felt even older than he was, lying next to her.

Around the time Suzanne had two months left to go, Erik considered having his apartment renovated, so he could talk someone else into moving in with him. Yet when he broached that subject on a visit to Salem Center, Charles, too, laughed in his face.

"Not I, my friend," he said. "You're not the only one who's waiting for someone. It's my last chance, too, and it won't be much longer."

Still, Charles wasn't opposed to going to bed together, while he waited; and so they did, a familiarity that went back and back. Once again, Erik managed not to ask who or what Charles was waiting for. Charles, in return, managed not to rub it in his face too terrible.

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Nine months after Erik's arrival in this life, Lorna was born. There was no doubt this was the daughter Erik recalled, for she had a head full of bright green hair from the first. To his relief, Suzanne displayed neither disgust nor apprehension, upon laying eyes on her daughter for the first time; she was nothing more than exhausted, and nothing less than tender when holder their daughter to her chest. It was the most beautiful sight Erik had seen since Nina's birth, so long ago.

Lorna had the grace to be born in the summer, the least hectic part of the school year. For the first few months of her life, Erik visited her at Suzanne's apartment as often as he could. When Suzanne went back to school in the fall, Erik took Lorna for two mornings and two afternoons every week, along with Sundays.

In his now copious free time, Erik found himself excruciatingly bored, lost at sea. As a result, he found himself picking up hobbies he'd never before considered. Knitting. Cooking above and beyond the competency he'd earned in his other lives. He volunteered at an animal shelter for a short time, having been assured it would change his life; it ended up being the least fulfilling work he'd ever done, though he did end up with a cat out of it, a whining, striped thing that warmed his lap in the cold months and woke him up to be fed at five sharp every morning.

Once Erik was fed up with the animal shelter, he began to discreetly seek out mutant teenagers to mentor, sending them along to Charles if they needed more than a few hours' a week help. They
weren't that difficult to find, once he began to pay attention to which of them hovered most often around Lorna's baby carriage while pretending not to have noticed anything different about her; they became even less difficult to find once he'd settled into the neighborhood enough to be kept comprised of the gossip.

And, in the end, though he'd never expected it, Erik took up the reins of a hobby and once-vocation he'd given up lifetimes ago. Lorna loved the figures he carved for her mobile, and the ones he carved for the shelf by her bed, when she was a little older, especially when he found he could weave in strands of iron and other metals. This work, along with the rest, brought him a peace he hadn't known for many years indeed.

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Around the time Lorna was toddling, Erik ran into someone he knew in the supermarket.

"Max?" asked an old, familiar voice, one he still heard in some dreams. "Is that you?"

Erik turned, still holding a box of Fruit Loops in one hand. "—Magda?"

"I thought it must be you." Magda was just as he remembered her: gray-haired, with just as many laugh lines in her face as she'd had at the end of the life they'd spent together. Erik was gladder than he could have imagined to see them, to be able to believe she'd had nearly as much joy in this life as in that other, even if there had been even more of the grief. "And this must be your granddaughter!"

"My daughter, actually. Lorna."

He found himself telling Magda some of the story. When he was done, she said, "She looks so much like you. And so much like our Anya. Do you remember?"

Of the many things he remembered about Anya, one was that she hadn't looked a thing like him. She'd been the image of Magda, always, into her teen years and beyond. But there was no chance Erik could say that—not to explain how he knew it, and not to tell any of the stories about how alike the two had truly been. So all he said, in the end, was, "Yes. I remember Anya very well. Yes."

Erik had never once imagined he might walk down the aisles of a supermarket, blankly adding items to his cart while he and Magda recalled Anya together. Stubborn, bossy Anya, who'd lived so little of the life she should have, except for once. Charles remembered Anya as a teenager and an adult, and that had always been good; but only Magda in any life remembered Anya as she had been, their little girl who'd died in that fire. Erik hadn't known how greatly he'd yearned to talk about her, to share those stories, until they did.

In the end, though it grieved him not to be able to speak of the twins in the same way, or to speak of Nina at all, Erik walked back to his car with a shopping cart full of things he didn't need, a standing invitation to visit Magda at her home, and a light heart.

***

Just a week or two later, Erik picked up the phone when it rang. He expected it to be Suzanne; she called at least three or four times every day he had Lorna, inquiring about the pickup or dropoff time, and sometimes offering to let him keep her for the night.

"I can't believe you!" a woman, not Suzanne, said. "She's younger than I am! What's wrong with you?"

"—Who is this?"
"Your daughter. You know. The one you had with someone your own age," Wanda said.

Erik couldn't recall Wanda ever having taken the initiative to contact him before. Not in that first life, and not in any subsequent life in which he hadn't been there from the day of her birth. He'd tried, in the life after the beach and the life after Jean, to no result. Neither she nor Pietro had ever been interested in having a relationship with him, with or without the history of the Brotherhood between them. Erik had long ago resigned himself to it, or at least had believed he had.

So instead of snapping back at her, as he would have in that first life, and as he had despite himself in some of those others, Erik said, "How would you like to come by and meet your sister?"

There came a little more bluster, and a little wobbling, too—if this version of Wanda wouldn't cry where he could see her, the tendency had far from forsaken her, and Erik still knew the signs. In the end, Wanda agreed she would like that, even if he was a dirty old man.

"When you come, bring your brother," Erik said, and spent the next few weeks over-cleaning his apartment, and wondering if it would seem more or less than what they would be expecting from him.

In the end, they came quite often, Wanda and Pietro. If they had sidelong looks for Erik at first, they brought Lorna gifts every time; and despite the iciness that blew in with them on the first few visits, they soon thawed, so that the four of them settled into a familiarity that struck a few of the chords from a life long ago.

In the end, it was a short life, but among the brightest of them all, and with the most unexpected of treasures.

***

On his seventh sixtieth birthday, Charles met a man.

He'd been waiting for this day for nearly three years; he'd been waiting, without knowing it, for the last few lifetimes. He'd waited with great joy and no little trepidation...for he wasn't sure until the day arrived whether his meeting with Ray would reap the same results it had in other lives. Things were different now than they had been the other times. There was no telling how the fact of the wheelchair might change things.

Ray, when he walked into the bar, the way he always had and always would, was just as Charles remembered him: Frightened, determined, brave beyond the telling. This time, his initial gaze passed over Charles, who was sitting at the lower bar instead of his old stool...and so Charles took the liberty of making certain Ray noticed him. Nothing else. Nothing further, nothing more than that...for while he'd by now forgotten when and how he'd learned that an artificial regard was worth than indifference, he had in fact learned it, in some life.

For a moment after noticing him, Ray faltered. It seemed to go on longer than it had the other times. Charles didn't dare to look in his mind, to discover if it was merely an additional shyness or something dreadful like pity that held him back. He didn't dare to look, but it must have been that same old shyness after all, for in the end, Ray came to him, just as he had the other times, and said, "Hi."

"Hello," Charles said, and looked at him, and smiled.
For the third time, Ray offered to buy him a drink. From there, Charles showed him the city, then took him back to his apartment and showed him what it was like to make love to someone he truly desired (though not before he’d shown him what it was like to be on the receiving end of a blowjob, just inside the door). If this first time was a touch more awkward than their other first times had been—if there was a greater learning curve because Charles was teaching Ray not only how to touch a man, but how to touch one who was paralyzed from the waist down—in the end it was no different, not in any of the ways that mattered.

"Stay with me," Charles said, on Ray's second day in the city. "Stay here, and be with me."

It was a change of script, and a risk…but as long and as patiently as Charles had waited, he didn't want to wait anymore, not even knowing how sweet the outcome would be.

He needn't have worried, not even as little as he had; for even as he asked, he saw the answer, shining in Ray's mind. Maybe it would have been the same in any life, no matter which of the details had been changed.

***

The next few years were much the same as they'd been during the first life Charles and Ray had shared together. They remained in New York for several months, then moved back to Ray's hometown in Illinois. Charles had already retired in advance of meeting Ray, and so this time there were no loose ends left to wrap up; and he had no interest in writing another book, for he'd said all he had to say in the books he'd written in that third life.

Instead, he read voraciously, and, when Ray was at work, began spending more and more time on the phone. Just as in that other life, the person he spent all that time on the phone with was Erik…but their conversations were by far less tense than they had been back then. Erik spoke largely of Lorna, how quickly she was growing up; Charles spoke much of the doings of Ray's family, much of which had likely occurred in the same ways in that previous life, but which had long since been forgotten.

Even more than they spoke of their present matters, they spoke of the past, of the other lives they'd lived, and the people they'd known and loved there. They spoke, too, of the lives waiting for them in their future, and of what might happen to the cycle. They would come back in 1997 next time, and live a mere nine years before dying; the time after that, they would come back in 2004, leaving them with only two years…and that was if they came back a second time. There was no way to be certain they would come back for a loop that wouldn't last at least the seven years they always jumped forward; the next time might be well and truly the last.

As for what would happen after the next loop, or the one after that...neither of them truly believed anything waited for them, after. When the loops were finished, they would be, too. Sometimes it was strange to think of it ending, after all these years and lives; more often, it was comforting, to think there would be an end, at last.

***

These years Erik spent with Lorna, and Charles with Ray: They passed as quickly as a breath, followed by another, a few heartbeats in-between. One moment, Erik looked down at his newborn daughter, and Charles turned toward an old love; the next, that daughter was in the tenth grade, and that old love had spend the last thirteen years becoming something subtly and beautifully different than it had been in other lives. One moment, there was well over a decade remaining to them, along with the knowledge that if they didn't use it wisely, it would be gone from them forever, leaving them with empty hands and hearts; the next, the day of their deaths was drawing near, and they were discussing whether or not they ought to be together, on the last day.
"I think I'd prefer it if we agreed to meet next time," Charles said, half-expecting Erik to argue, fully expecting to give in if Erik did.

But Erik didn't argue. "Next time," he said, sounding distant—moreso than he had during their other discussions surrounding this particular topic. "I'll see you there, then."

"As long as you don't trip over any more lovers, I assume," Charles said.

"Yes," Erik said, and sounded more distant than before...or perhaps merely more sad.

***

On the day of he died, Charles lost some time. He didn't know how it had happened. One minute, he was reminding Ray that he had a doctor's appointment today—which he didn't; it was simply an excuse to be out of the house, for he had no intention of allowing Ray to be the one to find his body, much less to be a witness to his death—when there came a knock at the door. Charles went to answer it, and the next moment, he was outside by the mailbox, his eyes fixed on the end of the empty street, his hands gripping the rims of his wheels so tightly his hands ached even after he released them.

There was no time to worry about it, however, even if Charles didn't remember ever having been this fuzzy-headed ahead of his death; there was only an hour and a half remaining. So he went back in the house, kissed Ray goodbye, and would have dragged him into bed only last time if his eldest daughter hadn't been on the way over with his grandchildren. That was better, though, for Ray if not for Charles; it meant that if this life proceeded without them, Ray wouldn't be alone when he heard the news. He wouldn't be alone; that could only be a good thing.

So Charles got into his car, and drove away. He didn't get quite as far as he'd meant to in miles; he still felt a bit woozy, and so once he was out of town, he took one little road, then another one, getting himself lost even more swiftly than he'd originally intended to.

Eventually, he came upon an out of the way nook beside an out of the way barn, in enough disrepair for it to be unlikely for him to be interrupted. He parked his car in the shade, and sat there, waiting.

It wasn't long.

***

When Charles came to, his head had cleared, and someone was shouting at him. He was delighted to open his eyes and find that it was Erik. Erik, as he had been before the first time they'd died; Erik, bareheaded and bristling with a head full of barbed wire and suspicions.

"...Why are you looking at me like that?" this Erik demanded, after he'd called Charles naive four or five times, and used the word "complicit" on enough occasions that it no longer seemed like a real word.

"I'm waiting for it," Charles said, which was only the truth.

Erik, however, came to the conclusion that Charles was merely trying to distract him. Instead of pushing for an explanation, he went on with his venting—and on, and on, until suddenly, Charles could feel it. For the first time, he could feel something shifting inside of Erik: the tide, bringing in the older, other version of him. Bringing the Erik Charles had shared so much with, even in all the lives in which they hadn't been together.

Charles could feel Erik coming, so he raised his hand in a 'stop' gesture. When Erik stopped talking,
more because he needed to take a breath than because Charles had motioned for silence, Charles said, "Bend down here, please."

"What now?" Erik asked. "You can't think I'm going to go to bed with you before I've had my say."

"Hush," Charles said, laughing, and placed the tips of his index and middle fingers to Erik's lips.

In the next moment, Erik was there, washed up on the shore by the storm. As it happened, his face changed, and his eyes. Instead of the somewhat amusing but very tedious old friend Charles hadn't seen in a while, he was now the dearest and most beloved person Charles had ever known. This Erik not only knew Charles; he'd always known Charles, and followed him through life after life.

"...What's happening?" Erik asked.

"You were being obnoxious," Charles said, though that had actually been fairly mild, for the Erik who had also been Magneto. That sort of display had once been par for the course; the Charles who'd loved him had never considered matters to be truly dire until Erik was throwing buildings or vehicles around, or putting Summers' men in casts.

Erik was still bent down, his lips moving against Charles' fingers as he spoke: "I see."

In the relative quiet, Charles took a breath, then another, and took in his surroundings, as the reality behind them settled in his mind. He could see Erik doing the same, see him feeling so much of the same things.

Still, Charles recalled the scent of iron, the sick feeling of sand and blood between his fingers, and had to ask: "All right?"

Erik's gaze darkened...then he nodded curtly and said, "As well as can be expected."

"All right," Charles said again. He thought of Ray for a minute, as Erik was thinking of Lorna, and of the fragile ties he'd re-formed with his family. Together, they remembered them, and then put them aside, as together they began to discuss how best to proceed in this life. They'd discussed it to death over the past few years, but no discussion beforehand was ever equal to what came afterward, for even when they knew exactly what was coming, they still never knew quite what to suspect.

Yet of all the things Charles remembered, and spoke of with Erik, he gave not a moment's thought to the minute or two he'd lost, earlier that day, and in another life.

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